**A person in a white shirt

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

# Copyright

**For the Future**

by

Angela White

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[A screenshot of a video game

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**Our Life After War**

The future isn’t carved in stone;

The survivors have secret schemes.

Nuclear ashes have made them bitter,

And left them with shattered dreams

Setting sail was hard;

The apocalypse winds had no rival.

Adrian’s Eagles guarded them,

During a constant fight for survival.

They mourned their dearly departed,

Barely avoiding fate.

Preparing for the future,

While riding the waves of hate.

Now on their way to a dystopian stand,

No longer open to one and all.

Under siege by old enemies,

This might be humanity’s last call.

# Chapter One

**Recharging**

December 23rd (12/01AW)

**1**

**“I**’ll meet you in the mess.” Marc kissed Angela’s chilly cheek, then stepped back, waiting for her to go below. The stiff wind blew gray streaked curls over her shoulder.

Angela knew why Marc was arranging to be alone on the breezy deck. She went below, guard on her heels. Even with the thick sweater over a long sleeve shirt and jeans, she was still cold. She’d just needed to view the sky, and Adrian, for a brief moment.

Neil unzipped his Eagle jacket as they descended into the warmth of the ship. He was glad Angela didn’t want to stay topside where his shield couldn’t penetrate the decks of their boat.

Guards stared at Neil’s injuries as they went by; his bruises were ugly right now, but his heart was finally healing. He nodded to them and kept his chin up.

Marc waited until Neil and Angela disappeared down the stairs, listening to the soft lap of the ocean and the faint call of a seabird. He turned, letting Adrian’s mental profanities slow while he scanned. All Marc found was beautiful blue water and the gritty apocalypse sky. He rubbed his rough fingers together, scratching at a hard spot. He didn’t like to hurt Angela’s soft skin with rough patches.

Marc snickered at himself. *I’ll give her time to recover, then I’ll light her up until she glows.*

“That son of a bitch!” Adrian swung around to scream at Marc directly... He finally realized the man had turned and was staring at him with a bored expression. “What?!”

Marc linked their minds. *Record what happens next.* *It’s vital to the future of every species on the planet.*

Adrian was helpless to fight the job or the alpha order. He pulled out his notebook, nodding to Sadie. “Grab my damn pen, then go below.” He didn’t want Marc targeting the girl. She needed to get out of sight.

Sadie hurried, also hoping Marc didn’t pay attention to her. *He scares me.*

Marc glared at the mercenary girl to keep that edge, wondering why Angela had let Sadie live. The UN fighter wore their ragged, faded uniform and a blue Mohawk over wild eyes that said the minute her gifts were restored, she would start causing trouble. Marc narrowed in on her shaking form, reading her fears and very little hope for the future beyond survival. *Adrian will help her with that...* Marc clicked it in place. *She doesn’t care about his feelings. Angela wants the girl when he finishes training her.*

Satisfied with that discovery, Marc rotated, gesturing to Theo through the flapping plastic and dirty glass of the bridge. *Turn on your radio.*

Theo held up the mike to indicate he already had. His watch glinted off the window and the calm water. The ship was docked, but the bridge was never allowed to be empty. Too many lives depended on that station to leave it unmonitored, but this was a mandatory moment for everyone else–even those on duty and their kids. Radios would carry Angela’s words to the few areas that couldn’t go unguarded.

In the bridge with Theo, Grant and Ray slowly moved into the elevator. Neither of them had been cleared for stairs. They were in sweatpants and long robes, and still chilled by the wind. They’d come up for a check in with their temporary captain. Grant hadn’t been cleared for that duty either, but he insisted on helping. Ray respected that.

Adrian stayed linked to Marc as the man went down dim stairs and joined a crowd in the hall. They all took the corridor to the mess. None of them chatted or smiled.

Adrian settled onto a stool, enjoying the breeze while he waited for things to start. He swept the crowd for friends and enemies, detecting the new bonds that had been forged. Many of those were strong. *He’s winning over my army!*

Sadie didn’t go below when Adrian started working. She lingered, observing and yearning for what she’d had. *I miss my gifts. If I had them, I could at least see what he’s seeing.*

Adrian was aware of her unhappiness. Even distracted, female moods always registered on his male radar. “You can read it while I write. Just give me a couple minutes to get flowing first. If I don’t record this, our new alpha asshole will come back up here blowing fire over both of us.”

“It’s cool.” Sadie leaned against the wooden rail to wait. She didn’t want Marc glaring at her again.

Adrian soaked in the sights and sounds of Safe Haven through Marc’s mind. He hadn’t been away for very long yet, but he still missed them. *It was foolish of you to get rid of me when Angela needs every hand she can get for shifts.*

*It’s all covered by the people you overlooked*. Marc didn’t say who. Adrian would find out on his own.

Adrian scanned the packed galley, refusing to stare at Angela while he was linked to Marc. He didn’t need to make the situation worse. He also didn’t think about Conner. If he did that, he’d start screaming again, or begging Marc to spare the boy. There was no point in either; Marc wouldn’t change Angela’s plans.

Marc moved to the center of the wide room. Most of the noise faded. “This is an historic moment.”

Magic invaded Adrian. His hand began to move across the paper, getting it word for word.

Marc waved. “The Boss.”

The camp clapped as Angela stood from the corner table where she’d been waiting and resting. It took a minute to fade.

Adrian forgot his promise not to stare. Her curls were loose, wild. Her lean, hard body filled out the jeans in pleasing ways. Her skin was almost glowing. *She’s beautiful*.

Marc nodded. *Yes, she is.* Her recovery was going well. He was supervising it personally.

Angela cleared her throat, tugging her sleeves down to stop the chill from fooling everyone about her health. The new power inside was glowing, not her. “I picked my fighters from those who were going to die, with a couple exceptions. I didn’t tell them; I couldn’t because I didn’t know we were going to get sick.”

The crowd stared at Neil in reproach. They knew he was the reason she’d been distracted.

Neil didn’t react. Standing his normal post behind Angela, he was watching everyone. It was easy to believe the rumor that he now had his full memory back.

Angela refused to shift all the blame to Neil. “I was tired, and weak from the beach fight.” She dropped her head. “I didn’t want anyone to know how bad it was. If I’d recharged, like William suggested, I might have been able to see it coming.”

Marc sighed. “We’re all guilty of that, to a point. We were consumed with personal issues. We forgot the biggest rule the war taught us: survival must come first.”

Heads nodded; people accepted their role and the weight of that guilt.

Angela lifted the hand without a shiny new bracelet, also refusing to let her people carry any more of it than she had to. “We can’t know everything that’s coming. None of us can predict every potential future. Please don’t hate me for not being able to save everyone. I did what I could.”

“We’re sure you did.” Jeff was torn up about Doug and Romeo, but he didn’t blame Angela. He blamed the people who caused the war. Jeff tugged little Roy further under his arm, smiling down at the nicely plumping boy.

Roy grinned around his sucker.

As far as Jeff knew, Roy didn’t understand that Doug and his brother were gone. He didn’t know if that was better or worse; he just knew it didn’t feel right to pretend nothing was wrong, though that’s exactly what he was doing. He wanted Roy to be happy.

Angela kept going, ready to face the ugliest part. “I didn’t give anyone time to get set or ask questions–I attacked as soon as we ascended. They did me proud by following my lead.” Her eyes went glassy. “We lost people in that first battle. Their souls went into the judging chamber. When there’s a well open, the souls will be judged and sent where they deserve.” Angela delivered hard looks, targeting their loved ones. “I have no say in that; neither do you. Their actions during life will determine where they go. If they are deemed good, they’ll be sent back to live again.” Angela paused to take a drink of the hot tea Thelma had brought to her. Her throat was still sore.

Adrian switched to shorthand to get it all. He was capturing the mutters and gasps of camp, as well as their fear and anger. Nothing was closed to him right now; he was determined to get it all. His hand stilled as he waited for Angela to resume the meeting.

“The Messenger was in that first room. We surrounded him with shields...and killed him.” Angela waited for the shocked reactions to fade, then continued. “As a special soul, he didn’t go into the judgment chamber. He will be absorbed back into the Creator, hopefully making Him aware that someone has breached the weigh station.” She shrugged. “Maybe He will come back and kill us all–everyone else has tried. Or maybe He’ll come back and discover that we’ve changed.”

Witnesses liked hearing that even though it wasn’t entirely true. They had plenty of issues. The difference was that they were actively working on them, not just giving lip service.

“I wasn’t able to bring everyone back. All I was able to do was change the number of people required for each room, but when I got to four, it wouldn’t go any lower. As we cleared each area, some of us couldn’t leave. Robes appeared. Those souls were given the most important job of all–they’re judging humanity. Don’t grieve for them. They see everything you do. Make them proud.” Angela sank onto the bench, knees shaking. She’d had a workout before this, then walked to the top deck with Marc. She was tired again despite her healthy appearance.

The crowd muttered, feeling guilty for making her do this so soon.

Marc stood next to her. “Questions? Thoughts?”

“Do you think it will work?” Jennifer had little faith. Her hand came up and tucked her robe tighter. She felt very exposed, but the medics hadn’t cleared her yet for anything but a wheelchair ride to this meeting. “Not all dogs respond to a whistle.”

Angela snorted, while her people frowned at the wording. She also had little faith left. “If not, I’ll think of something else. I won’t give up until we confirm our purpose, our exact origins and history. We deserve to know.”

Most people nodded and exchanged comments with those closest.

“Anyone else?” Marc was eager to be done so he could break the connection with Adrian.

“Are we able to visit?”

“Can they come down here and visit us?”

“Can we trade places?”

Angela shook her head. “No, to all of those. The ascensions were only allowed because the Messenger decreed it. When he died, I lost the ability to go up, and they can’t come down. I’m sorry.”

Grieving loved ones began to cry again.

Angela hated lying, but she and those left above had agreed it was best if their loved ones moved on. They wouldn’t if they knew they could visit anytime she approved it.

Marc hid his frown as he spoke to Adrian. *Make sure you get that part. It was a hard choice for her, and she has to carry it alone. I want her courage noted.*

*You got it.* Adrian scribbled faster.

Angela leaned against Marc’s hip. “We lost more people as we cleared the other two rooms. Four more went into the judgment chamber.” Angela was giving them these details as a punishment for herself against the lies she’d felt it best to tell. Marc knew the full truth and it would be recorded, but her people wouldn’t get to read it for a long time. The final battle would be over, and she would be gone by then. They wouldn’t be able to badger her to set up visitations, to dig for a way to trade, to change the room rules again, and then finally, to beg her to kill someone and send them up in place of their friend or family member. She refused to put them, or herself, through that.

Marc agreed with her choice. He thought he could develop the skill to ascend on his own, but he had no desire to go up there again. He was still furious over the first trip. “Any other questions or thoughts?” Marc kept it going. Angela was playing up the weakness a little, but she really did need to rest. After this, they would start putting people down for recharges.

Samantha cleared her throat, acutely aware of unfriendly gazes hitting her and Neil from all directions. “When will we get an answer?”

“The Messenger told us it would take his soul a long time to reach the Creator. He always knew; he just couldn’t escape from the weigh station and he didn’t want to be absorbed. Everything they did up there was his idea. We gave him what he wanted least–we sent him home.” Angela’s voice rose in pointed triumph as she nodded to Marc. “It will take three years. We’re right on schedule for the Creator to return for our final battle, if He decides we’re worth fighting for.”

Marc shoved Adrian out of his mind.

Adrian finished writing out the scene.

Sadie read it over his shoulder, growing more confused with each word. She struggled not to ask questions until he was finished.

Adrian stopped writing, mind spinning with the implications. *Everything is tied into three years now, not four anymore. We’ve used one of them.*

Sadie plopped down at his feet. “The true Creator?”

Adrian nodded. Letting her read this had been a mistake. *If I can’t convert her now, I’ll have to kill her. The UN can never...*

Adrian’s face went blank.

An ominous wind blew over the deck, bringing chills to her skin. Sadie immediately got up and put distance between them. She knew that look from her time with the UN. It said terrible things were being considered. She didn’t want to be involved if it meant crossing the power couple here or the UN, and she already sensed Adrian might do both.

Adrian didn’t react to her exit, mind offering the option he’d refused to consider until now. *If the good guys don’t want me, the other side absolutely does.*

**2**

“Come on.” Marc held out a hand. “It’s time to get everyone settled.”

Angela crossed her arms over her chest, keeping the new bracelet covered. Her bond with the other King had solidified overnight. “I don’t wanna go to bed, Mommy.”

The slowly clearing crowd in the mess laughed with them.

Angela stood, smiling at Marc. “Thank you...” She smiled brighter. “Can my cabin be last?”

Marc nodded, drawn.

Angela tugged him down for a soft kiss.

Most people were happy for them. A few stared in longing or jealousy.

Brittani cleared her throat. Her foot tapped.

Angela and Marc broke apart so the row of people could get by.

Marc tucked her under his arm, appearing happy. Inside, he was chaotic as he tried to cover everything at the same time.

Angela could feel his stress. She waited until they were last in the line now headed for the cabins or the infirmary. “Pick one and store it in a row. The top level is most important. As you add them, swap and switch until it feels right.”

Marc immediately began to do that.

Neil trailed the couple through the emptying hall. He’d proven his loyalty by going undercover to hear Adrian’s secrets on the floatie. He was trusted with their lives, but it wasn’t enough. *I want my real place back.*

Angela nodded to Molly as they walked by. The black clad fighter was finishing a shift on guard duty here. Quinn was taking over this area now.

Molly shot an ugly glare at Neil. She hadn’t forgiven him.

Neil kept scanning for trouble. He refused to be distracted during this duty.

Marc finished his mental aligning. “I can’t wait to get a moment alone to update all these.”

“Yeah, about that.” Angela shrugged. “You should do it when you think of it. You’re covering a lot more than you ever have. Forgetting and missing things will happen unless you record it right then.”

Marc dug into the updates, starting from the top. His grid had expanded into more than just a tracking ability.

Angela motioned to Wade, who was waiting for the elevator. “He’ll roll with us for a minute.”

Tim pushed Wade’s wheelchair over. He was glad to be out of the infirmary. They’d still been doing constant shifts, even after Angie and the others ascended. Tim was eager for real time off, but Marc had made it clear the descendants were going to get recharged before there would be relief for anyone else.

Marc got to Wade’s name on his mental list. He glanced over to find that nervous man on his right. Angela was now walking behind them, in the bodyguard’s place. The feeling was indescribable.

Angela enjoyed his happiness. She sought nothing in return for it though, unlike the man who’d mentored her. Angela paused by the next set of dusty steps. “I’m okay, but I need to be still for a couple minutes. Do you mind?”

Marc shook his head, aware of her tactics. He stored the act for later use if needed. “Not at all. Wade and I can chat.”

Wade swallowed. “Uh, okay.” He glanced up at Tim. “They’ll get me back.”

Tim’s shoulders drooped under his Eagle jacket. He sighed. “Back to the infirmary it is.”

Marc didn’t laugh. It wouldn’t be long before the entire ship of hard working heroes got a break. Many of these people were pale, red-faced, green, or blue. They were also shaky, apt to stop and spit up leftover fluid, and to run for the bathroom when the diarrhea hit. The worst effects were over, but none of them were fully recovered yet except for a few descendants.

Angela sat in a chair to flip through the folder she was carrying.

Neil slid into the shadow of the long, dark velvet curtains, two feet from Angela. He skimmed the paper on top of her stack as she opened the folder. *Eagle Teams List.* Every position was filled in.

Neil frowned. *Adrian was right. She doesn’t want leadership anymore. She really is training Marc to do it.*

Wade waited for Marc to speak, refusing to think of anything bad. He was feeling better now, but Morgan hadn’t cleared him to walk yet. The blue scrubs weren’t bad. They showed off his big body, but not walking made him feel weak.

Marc gestured. “I’ll be returning a duffle bag to you.”

Wade relaxed as understanding fell. He shook his head. “I’d rather they were delivered.”

Marc’s pleasure at Wade’s survival switched to anger. “That will cause trouble in my camp.”

Angela ignored Wade’s quick glance at her. She supported Marc’s choices so far. Even if she didn’t, she would mention it when they were alone, not in front of witnesses. She had more respect than that.

Wade’s face tightened. “Your camp, huh?” He lifted his chin. “I gave an answer.”

Marc grunted. “Fine. But you go along too.”

Wade grinned, sunken eyes twinkling. “Awesome!”

Neil swallowed a laugh to enjoy later.

“It’s not funny.” Marc glared between them.

Angela closed her folder. “Wade’s like Billy, and Seth. In past lives, he was the King’s deadly fool.”

Marc filed that under the man’s profile.

Wade rotated the chair to stare at Angela.

Angela shrugged at his hurt surprise. “You’re causing chaos. Don’t blame me for your choices.”

Wade scowled. “It’s not all for entertainment.”

Angela didn’t need her gifts to blast him with harder anger. “But it could have been handled differently!”

Wade dropped his chin. “Yeah.”

Marc was mollified by her support and by Wade being punished. Angela rarely used that tone on senior men. “I’ll be down shortly. Wheel yourself back to the infirmary–no elevators.”

Wade pouted. “Tim would have waited.”

“I know.” Marc offered an arm to Angela. “Ready?”

Angela took his big arm without caressing it like she wanted to. Marc had a unique style of leadership, but it had been effective for eleven days. She wasn’t going to interfere unless she needed to.

Wade used his weakened arms and began pushing himself down the long corridor to the wheelchair ramp. His mutters faded as he got out of sight.

Angela wondered if the no elevator rule applied to her as well. This time she did handle it like Adrian–she tested Marc’s line. Angela veered toward the shiny cages of convenience.

Marc steered Angela away from the easy ride. “It’s a lovely day for a walk.”

Angela shrugged. “Okay.”

Marc went back to his mental grid as they reached the stairs and had to wait. They’d caught up to the slower individuals going to the recharge cabins.

Angela saw recovering patients who shouldn’t be walking yet in her opinion, but no one was offering or accepting help. Angela slowly moved out from under Marc’s arm, frowning.

*He got the okay from the medics first. Morgan said it would be a good test of who’s recovered enough to be in their cabins without supervision.* Neil didn’t want her to be upset with Marc’s leadership. Since she really was hunting for a successor, Neil wanted this trial period to work. He didn’t want to adjust to yet another new leader.

Angela moved down the stairs at a slow pace, glad they’d caught up to the crowd. She really did need the recharge Marc was insisting on.

Neil moved next to Angela before Marc could wave him into the open guard position instead of a subtle escort. Marc was distracted and there were a lot of people around them right now. Most were like her–in recovery. Their scrubs and robes marked them different from the camp members who were wearing shorts and cut off shirts. Some were even in bikinis. The lower level swimming pool was open.

Candy appeared in the hallway below, head turning, searching.

Angela tensed.

Neil slid in front of Angela and pressed her against the wall by moving backwards.

The crowd instantly began scanning for a threat.

Marc found Kyle at the bottom of the steps. He nodded.

Kyle stepped into the hall to meet Candy. “It’s not a good time.”

Candy’s mouth opened.

Kyle scowled at her. “Follow the rules!”

People glared at Candy, instantly pissed at her for disturbing their peace.

Candy flushed. She stomped off, one hand cradling the large stomach protruding against her jean jumper. The other clenched into a fist at her hip.

Kyle resumed his post as Marc and Angie went by. *That won’t work again. Next time, she’ll make a real scene.*

Marc nodded at Kyle’s warning. Candy was being handled in stages. As long as she followed the predicted pattern, it would be fine. If she became a wildcard, he would have to think of something more drastic. His options were limited because she was five months pregnant with twins.

The delivery crew came around the corner.

Angela scanned the busy floor as Marc took a stack of trays so one of the boys could go right back to the kitchen for another load. Everyone now on this deck was under recharge orders. Marc had temporarily moved them here once he picked who needed to go first. Except for a few, the infirmary patients were also here. The rest hadn’t been released yet. They would be with the second batch of recharge patients. Marc had marked off eight days for this. The Adrianna was docked until New Year’s Day.

Two dozen men and women carried bags into cabins, unpacked kits, chatted with guards, and watched each other for instructions. Angela enjoyed the warmth of so many bodies moving through the wide hall.

“Everyone gets a tray and a care package.” Ivan handed bags to everyone who walked by him. He liked the new guard post centered between the exits. It gave him a perfect view of everything, including the other two posts where James and Peter would soon take their places for the shift. “Get settled in your assigned cabins. Names have been put on the doors. No whining. We’re here to rest and recharge. You don’t have to like your bunkmate to sleep with them.” Ivan pushed a bag into Angela’s hands as she and the others chuckled at his wordplay. “Come get a bag and find your cabin. Take a tray. Get settled, eat, go through your care package. Everyone is on downtime until dinner trays are delivered. If you don’t like these entertainments, each room has a box with more options, but these bags were packed by the boss.” Ivan didn’t tell them Marc had done it while Angela supervised. That had been a fascinating hour of listening to her help Marc narrow down the needs of their people.

“You have one put aside for yourself?” Marc wanted Ivan recharged and back to work as soon as possible. He would be in the cabin by this station as soon as everyone else was settled. Daryl was already in there.

Ivan sighed. “It’s in my cabin, along with a tray and a copy of Pink’s greatest hits.”

Marc gave him a puzzled look. “What’s a Pink?”

Ivan’s mouth dropped open. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Yes.” Marc kept walking, shaking his head.

Ivan flushed. “I’ll bet he’s an Aerosmith fan.”

Angela snorted. “Try the Eagles and Rammstein.”

Now Ivan wore a quizzical expression.

Angela followed Marc, also shaking her head. Ivan had a lot to learn about the layers of a human soul. It was possible to like two polar opposites. It happened often. Ivan needed to understand the outside rarely represented what was on the inside.

Marc filed that under Ivan’s mental profile. The constant link into her mind had been Angela’s idea. He’d balked at first, but as usual, she’d been right. He didn’t have to feel invaded, but he was still able to get all the important parts. It was a perfect setup for him.

Marc wondered if she was missing her gifts yet. He glanced back at Ivan.

Ivan shook his head. *No sign of that so far.*

*And her cracks?*

*No change.*

Marc resumed the walkthrough, satisfied he was doing right by her.

Angela knew their communication had been about her. It was a bit frustrating to not know what it was, but she didn’t ask or complain. It was worth it to not have a link to Adrian anymore. *And if I really wanted to know, Marc would tell me.*

Marc smiled at her. “Always.”

Angela tugged him down for another short kiss.

“Yuck!”

“Ew!”

Kids barreled toward them from their cabins.

Marc rotated as he dropped, arms opening.

Angela was happy when they piled on him like they used to do with Adrian. It also hurt her.

“I can’t do four days of just eating and sleeping.” Brittani glared at Angela from near the guard station at the opposite end of the hallway.

Angela smiled innocently, pointing at Marc.

Brittani’s glare switched targets.

Marc ducked into the nearest cabin. “Let’s help Amy and Samantha get set.”

Debra tapped Brittani’s shoulder and gestured.

Brittani stuck out her tongue and followed the snickering deaf woman into the cabin they were sharing.

Angela was satisfied with the way Marc had arranged things. He was controlling the game for the moment. It was a good sign. Moving a lot of people into the right places with the right words, or lack of them, wasn’t easy to keep track of. She knew.

Courtney entered the large cabin she was sharing with Samantha and Amy, smiling at the little girl. They were both digging through their care packages.

The other kids turned down blankets, held pillows, and gathered garbage.

Marc nodded to Courtney.

Courtney slid aside so Marc could exit, wondering what he thought of her.

Marc couldn’t answer the pregnant woman. *I haven’t made up my mind yet.*

Jennifer glared at Marc as he stopped in her cabin doorway. Pam snored softly from the other bunk. Marc kept walking, happy with his setup. The next cabins were empty until the kids finished settling people in. He’d given them that job just now without anyone catching it. Not even Angie had, though she didn’t always think about things right when she noticed them. Unless he asked, he wouldn’t know for sure.

Angela followed Marc, observing the interactions. For four days, these people would be shoved full of food, water, medications, energy, and rest. Vitamins and medical checkups were included, as well as grief counseling. As long as no one got too bored to tolerate it, this plan to boost their recovery would work. For the descendants, there would also be a recharging session. They would sleep after that, then be ready to trade places with the other twenty-four souls who needed this treatment.

Molly and Monica both smiled at her over the chocolate bars from their bags.

Angela chuckled as she walked by. Both females were having their periods. Chocolate always made that better.

Angela spotted Wade coming through the far doors. He had the cabin across from Brittani and Debra. Wade was covered in sweat, but he looked proud of himself for pushing his own wheelchair.

Allison came in behind him. “I’ve got your tray!” Allison waved with her free hand.

“I’ll be there.” Angela kept a happy expression. *Maybe I can drug her tea...*

Marc sniggered. “Do you need anything?”

Angela shook her head. “Neil will see that I’m fed, watered, and given time to grow.”

Marc’s face went blank for a brief second. Then he grinned. “Deal.”

Angela frowned as he kissed her cheek and left. “What was that about?”

Neil acted like he hadn’t heard her. *She doesn’t want leadership anyway...*

Angela stomped on his foot.

Neil flinched. “Hey!”

Angela waited for him to straighten up. Then she stomped on the same foot again.

He hobbled backwards. “Stop that!”

People were staring, laughing.

Angela stomped a third time, missing as he figured out it was coming and moved.

“What’s your problem?!”

“Marc can get away with manipulating me; you can’t!”

Neil stayed out of range. “He told me not to let you in on everything. He knows you won’t rest if your mind is full of his plans.”

Angela was forced to accept that answer. She grunted, daring him to get in stomping distance.

Neil staggered toward her cabin. “Come on. He wants you settled and now so do I.”

Angela held up a hand. “Wait. There’s a–”

“Nice try.” Neil turned around. He bumped into a delivery crew.

Stanley juggled his stack of trays.

“Look out!” Gus tried to catch the trays.

They landed in Neil’s arms.

Juice and applesauce splattered across Neil’s face in cold shocks. Tuna ran down his shirt.

The witnesses burst out laughing.

Angela closed her mouth on the warning. *Karma*.

“Tell me about it.” Neil pointed at the cabin. “Let’s get you settled.” He led the way, removing his shirt to keep most of the mess contained. It wasn’t the first time he’d finished a shift half naked and covered in something. *At least this is only food.*

Descendants snickered at his thought.

Angela went into the cabin, mind switching into a lower gear. She moved to the bed, growing hazy.

Neil hurried over to pull the thick blanket down before she could lie on it.

Angela dropped out immediately.

Neil felt it when her mind shut off*. I don’t like that*.

He covered her up, then went to the doorway, motioning to Ivan.

Ivan tossed him a bag of the large t-shirts they’d gathered for people to wear while relaxing.

Neil donned one of them, then started unpacking Angela’s stuff. He would be here while she recharged, which meant he also had to deal with Allison. Neil nodded at the woman who hadn’t taken her eyes from Angela. Now dressed in flannel pjs, Allison was sporting pink slippers and had a pink hairbrush in her hand. *I wonder why Marc put her with the boss...*

“That’s spooky.”

Neil put a stack of books on the table by Angela’s bed. “Jealous?”

Allison snorted out surprised laughter. “Well, yeah.”

Neil scanned her thoughts. He found a few troubling items he would report to Marc, but none of them were dangerous to Angela. Allison didn’t target females.

The door opened wider as Dog padded in. He immediately went to Allison.

Allison stopped brushing her hair. She stared at the large wolf, grip tightening on the brush.

Dog’s lips drew back... A low growl rumbled in his throat.

Allison’s face tightened. “I’ll shove this brush up your ass, mutt. Don’t fuck with me.”

Dog lunged; he snapped the brush out of her hand. It cracked into two pieces.

“Stomp on that!” Neil hurried over to the large spider that had fallen from the brush. “That’s a Brazilian Wanderer. I wonder how that got on board.”

Allison gaped in shock as Neil killed it.

Dog sat at her feet, sniffing her leg. *She smells okay. I got it in time.*

Neil cleaned up the corpse and the pieces of the brush. “Good, boy!” He gave Dog a quick rub as he went to the hall to report it.

Allison swallowed the bile in her throat. “I’m sorry. Thank you.”

Dog jumped up and ran his tongue across her face.

Allison recoiled. “Gross!”

Dog kept licking. *She had bacon for breakfast!*

Allison laughed as he kept going; his tongue tickled her cheek. “Stop it!”

She wiped her face with her shirt as he sat down. “Men! They save your life and then think they’ve earned the right to lick you!”

Dog curled up on her slippers. *Is this better?*

“Aw, man.” Allison drew in a breath and reached down to pet the beautiful animal. “If only you guys weren’t so cute. It’s hard to stay mad.”

Neil noted that reaction from both of them as he returned*. Marc can use that to help her. And she was brave. The Eagles can use that to train her.* Neil checked on Angela’s breathing, then settled into the chair at her side with his notebook. He left the door open so he could help if Ivan needed it.

Allison dug out a comb, not moving her feet. She liked having the wolf there. *I feel safe. What an odd sensation.*

Neil also stored that. He now understood why Marc had put Allison in this cabin with the boss. He wondered how many other cabins would yield little details for their new guardian. *Was it Marc’s idea?* *If so, the man’s a lot smarter than the Eagles ever gave him credit for.*

# Chapter Two

**Round One**

**1**

**Z**ack met Marc at the far exit of the cabin hallway, surveying the large duffle bag he was carrying. “Updates now or get them from the next shift?”

Marc held out a hand for the sheet. “Give me the short.” Marc nodded hello to Jayda. Both Eagles were in full gear, smudged and sweating.

Jayda returned the gesture but stayed quiet. *I can’t believe Marc put me on official duty with the point man.* She was sure Ralph and Daisey were just as surprised. They had a two-hour shift coming up. Marc was using new people in standard positions and it was working.

“Ramer is sedated. Stanley is with him. When he wakes, Jayda will take over protecting the brig until her relief shows up. Theo said he’s fine on the bridge while Grant recharges. We’re docked in full. The tow line has some wear, though. Theo wants you or Grant to make the call on changing it.”

Marc scanned the cabin where Ray and Grant were already snoring in their bunks. “We’ll check it again before we set sail. What else?”

“The first daily water test came back good. Air quality is good. There are only three residents left in the infirmary. Morgan is examining them now to determine when they can return to their cabins. The new arrivals are settled in; Panaji is keeping them company while he finishes his recovery.” Zack scanned his paper and handed it to Marc. “There are notes on there about some calls we’ve heard. And that’s it from me. I think Jayda has a few items she picked up while we did rounds.”

Jayda froze.

Marc waited for her to get over being put on the spot. He waved Wade over.

Jayda cleared her throat. “Midnight is Christmas Eve. People are talking about it.”

Marc skimmed the notes. *We got a call from Brandon. He’s telling us what we already know about William. I also picked up calls from the detention center. They’re searching for us.* Marc slid that paper into his pocket and lifted a brow. “What else?”

Jayda took a quick look at Zack.

Zack nodded, standing stiff. “This is how we do it.”

Jayda respected that. “Timmy caught Cathy and Zack flirting. He’s furious. No one’s seen him all morning.”

Marc sighed. So much for that family having a distant peace. *I forgot about the possible wild card to my plan–Zack*. “Got it. Anything else?”

Jayda sucked in a quick breath. “I’d like to be reevaluated for the Eagles. I wasn’t given a fair shot last time.”

Marc studied the woman, detecting the changes and also the weaknesses. “I’ll consider it.”

Jayda smiled. “Cool. That’s it.”

Zack was embarrassed that his antics had made it onto the radar of leadership. He met Marc’s eyes. “I’m sorry for the extra stress.”

Marc’s lips twitched. “Give it a couple hours. People will have other things to gossip about.” He focused on the wheelchair bound man now at his side. “Right?”

Wade flushed. “Definitely.”

Zack scanned for Marc’s guard and didn’t find one. “I’m off duty soon...”

Marc didn’t want a distracted bodyguard. “I’ve got that covered. You can push the wheelchair.”

Zack’s drooping face lit up. “I’ll find you when my shift’s done.”

“We’ll be at the memorial.”

Moods sank at Marc’s words. He’d been going there daily to add names to the inscription.

Zack moved off, motioning to Jayda.

Jayda took his right and got out her notebook. She could feel orders coming that would speed them through the end of the shift. *I wish I could go with them.*

“Jayda?”

She spun around, hope replacing her exhaustion.

“Ivan needs an XO after the recharge. Your name is number three on his list.”

Jayda wasn’t sure if that was good or bad, considering he’d never pick her. “Thank you for telling me.”

Marc had expected more happiness. “You do realize that’s a coveted job?”

“I do. And I want it, but I’m just his quota fill.” Jayda followed Zack down the long hall.

Marc filed that. If she was right, Ivan would lose the job he hadn’t actually gotten to perform yet.

Ivan stomped down the hall, bringing tension. He’d witnessed all of it and read thoughts to see if she was starting trouble. He extended his final list to Marc. Jayda’s name was at the top.

Marc put his initials next to it. He didn’t apologize. “It’s my job to be sure.”

“I’m not mad at you.” Ivan stored his paper. “She’s acting like a woman scorned.”

Marc wasn’t sympathetic. “Well, she is probably carrying a grudge about you moving out.”

“And the *humiliating* public dump.” Wade flashed teeth to remind Ivan he was a senior Eagle who could say whatever he wanted.

Ivan went back to his post without rising to the bait. He was tired of being the center of attention. He needed time to think and he couldn’t do that right now.

Marc frowned at Wade. “Being in recovery doesn’t give you a free pass.”

Wade flashed those hard teeth again. “Eagles face the danger. Free passes are for pussies.”

Laughter echoed down the hall.

Marc opened the door and held it; his chuckles sent good vibes in every direction. “As long as you know it.”

“I do. I’m prepared to face the consequences of my actions.” Wade pushed his chair through, ignoring the pain in his weak muscles. “Plus, I get to enjoy the memory as each item is delivered. Then, if I survive in *any* physical capability, a sympathetic Eagle has offered to...tuck me in for the recharge.” Wade leered up at Marc. “It’s a great time to still be alive.”

Marc groaned. “This will be ugly.”

Wade grinned. “Can we do Adrian first?”

Marc grunted. “No. Let me savor the buildup.”

“You’re the boss.” Wade grimaced at his own sarcasm this time.

Marc returned the blow as he walked down the hall, expecting Wade to keep up. “Let’s start with Doug. The incinerator is warmed up.”

Wade’s good mood hit the ground. *Sorry, Doug. She got tired of waiting. Pretty sure Peggy was thinking of you though. She kept trying to twist my hair into dreads.*

Marc lifted his chin and kept walking. *I know how to kill a cocky mood; I also know how to build one up. By the end of this walk, Wade will belong to me and Adrian won’t ever be able to take him back. By the time we reach the island, I’ll have his army, without using a single charm. All it takes is giving them the place in history they’ve already earned, but he didn’t deliver.*

**2**

“Theo did an excellent job on this.” Wade admired the memorial while Marc added another row of names.

Marc grunted, being careful. The camp had been told adding these names with the laser was delicate and had to be done a few names at a time. Marc just wanted people to keep coming by it, to keep remembering their lost shipmates.

The sculpture of two children crying and an angel above them had been taken from the gift shop on the entertainment floor. Theo had welded it to a base and added copper flowers with a diamond waterfall background. It sat in the lounge where Sabrina had died. They’d also added benches for those who wanted to pray here, though the chapel was getting the main flow as everyone went to offer thoughts to the souls now running the weigh station.

Marc stood. The only good thing was the removal of their predicted bad seed, Dion. The worst of the losses, in Marc’s opinion, were Doug, Ozzie, Donald, and the three kids who would have been their twin trackers and a keeper. Marc had placed people into those positions while Angela was gone, but it wasn’t enough now. Their descendant power had gaps.

Wade frowned as he realized Marc didn’t have a guard. “Who’s got your six?”

“You do.”

Wade snorted. “Not in this condition. It’ll take something special to get me out of this chair.”

Marc paused at the exit. He leaned against the wall.

Two shadows leapt from the bookshelf onto his shoulders.

Wade stared in surprise as Tonya’s cats sank their back feet into Marc’s hood and laid over each shoulder. Their tails twisted around his arms and each other; purrs came from their throats.

Marc moved into the hall. “They’re hitching a ride.”

Wade shoved after Marc, laughing. “I thought they were your protection for a minute there.”

“They are. My next guard is waiting at their stop. It’s a twofer.”

Wade wasn’t sure if Marc was joking. He scanned the wide hallway, trying to see who was in the area with them.

Zack appeared next to Marc, a little out of breath. He eyed the two cats on Marc’s shoulders and grinned. *All pussy likes Marc*. “Shift change is complete.” Zack took over pushing the wheelchair.

Wade looked up at Marc as they kept pace. “We’ll do his next.” They’d just finished burning the first box.

Marc gaped. “You want to do it when they’re together?”

Wade nodded, taking advantage of Zack’s confusion. “That’s why I asked you to handle it.”

Marc scowled. “You know I won’t let them beat up someone in a wheelchair!”

Wade chuckled.

Zack pushed the chair to the recharge cabins, bad feeling popping up. *Why do I feel like I should brace for something?*

“Because you should.” Marc groaned again. Timmy was in the hallway, talking to Cathy. The tall, stocky boy was being told their flirtation was over. “He just came out of hiding!”

Zack paused. “Are you guys talking about my son?”

Wade opened the duffle bag on his lap and pushed the chair over to Cathy.

Zack followed, curious and a little nervous.

Marc hung back, not worried over this first revelation. It was the next one he was braced for.

People smiled and laughed at Marc’s protectors, but none of them tried to touch the alert cats.

Cathy caught sight of them together, coming her way. She tensed.

Wade held up a white stocking. “I found it in my sheet.”

Cathy flushed deep red. Her wild hair fell over her cheek as she took the stocking and shoved it into her pocket.

Zack’s mouth dropped open. *How did her stocking get left in Wade’s sheet?*

“You visited the wrong cabin in Ciemus.” Wade smiled at her. “I didn’t mind.”

Cathy’s stiff body went rigid as she realized Wade was outing their affair. “Stop.”

Wade realized she had lied to Zack and herself. He twisted around to look at Marc.

Marc nodded, adding all of it under their mental profiles.

Wade glanced up at Timmy, who was flushed and getting angry as he figured it out. “She thought I was your little brother.”

Cathy stared at the ground as camp members and Eagles glared at her.

Wade pushed backward, forcing Zack to move. “I’ll cover my own chair. You have shit to settle.”

“You lied!” That was really the only thing Zack was mad about. He’d already known his sons were making the rounds of Safe Haven women. Until recently, he had only been proud.

“I forgot.” Cathy didn’t want to talk about it in front of all these witnesses.

Zack’s eyes narrowed. “How do you forget the difference between a boy and a man?”

Cathy blushed again. Her voice lowered. “I was...distracted.”

Wade grinned. “Yes, you certainly were.”

Zack glowered at Wade. “How could you do that to an Eagle?”

“Wasn’t hard.” Wade shrugged. “I kissed it.”

Cathy couldn’t help the laugh. “I thought it was hard.”

Wade’s grin widened. “Thank you.”

Witnesses were laughing and frowning at the same time. Marc was among them. He did a quick scan to make sure the guards were at their posts. He saw his private security switch places. He gave Trinity a satisfied nod as she vanished. So far no one knew who had these slots except him and Kenn.

“Did he have to wine and dine you, or did you just spread for him?” Zack’s jealousy spewed. “Come on, tell me what it takes to get in there.”

Cathy’s hand came up to her hip. “He followed orders and didn’t speak a single word. You couldn’t do that if your life depended on it.”

Zack mimicked her gesture, hand going to his hip. “Can so.”

“Prove it.” Cathy had no idea how he would do that; it just seemed like the thing to say.

Zack gestured. “Okay, give me an order.”

“Get off my ass!”

Zack groaned in frustration. “Then roll over. You’ll do it for anyone else!”

Cathy snorted amusement, enjoying the blunt foreplay more than she would admit. “Jealous?”

So was Zack, but he wasn’t afraid to be embarrassed in front of the camp. He’d already done that and worse. “Yes. I want to be bossed around too!”

Cathy realized things were edging into seriousness. “What about Allison?”

Zack shrugged. “Allison who?” He glanced down at his penis. “Do you know an Allison?”

“That’s me, you jackass!” Allison came out of the cabin next to them, heavy object in hand.

Wade saw the book and knew Zack would be able to duck it. He shoved his wheelchair forward, hitting Marc in the leg as Allison threw the book.

Marc staggered into Zack, putting him directly in the line of fire.

The book hit Zack’s head in a loud smack that sent him to the ground.

“Nice.” Wade smiled at Allison. “You busy later?”

Allison blushed and went back into the cabin.

Marc scanned again; he found Ivan and Jayda near the opposite exit. They were ignoring the drama and discussing the notes Zack had given her. Marc could feel her trying to find a way to thank Ivan for the XO slot without embarrassing either of them.

Wade turned his chair toward them while Zack glared at Cathy.

Marc sighed. *Cue the embarrassment in three...two...one...*

Wade nodded to Ivan as he stopped by them. He smiled at Jayda. “I found it in my pantleg.” Wade extended her leopard bra, folded.

Jayda flushed deep red.

Ivan’s face went from polite to hurt. “Well.”

Wade waited. This was part of the danger. Ivan was armed.

Ivan scanned Jayda’s bra and then her guilty face. “While we were together?”

Jayda sucked in a breath. “That’s none of your business.”

“Excuse me?!”

“We weren’t exclusive.” Jayda tucked the bra into her pocket, chin lifting. “You wanted me to sit quietly until *you* felt like having sex. I had other options when you were busy humping the boss’s leg.”

Ivan was forced to accept that truth. They’d never discussed being exclusive. He’d assumed it because they’d shared a cabin. He glared at Wade.

Marc moved to Wade’s side despite wanting to stay out of it. Ivan was going to do something stupid here; everyone felt it coming.

“Am I still your XO?” Jayda needed to know where they stood.

Ivan snorted. “Sure. I’ve always wanted an unfaithful whore to boss around.”

People gasped.

Wade grabbed Marc’s arm and shoved upward.

Marc punched Ivan. Marc frowned. *How’d that happen?*

Ivan hit the ground.

Wade kicked him in the balls. “Now you don’t have to worry about it for a while.”

Marc stared at his arm; he frowned down at Wade.

Wade shrugged. “You were about to do it anyway.”

Marc snorted. *True.* “Are we done here?”

Jayda stepped forward. “Hang on.” She eased into Wade’s lap and kissed him.

Wade wrapped her up tight and put love into it.

Marc cleared his throat. “Come on, Romeo. We have other Juliets waiting.”

Jayda slowly stood. “Thank you for defending my honor.” She kissed Wade again, then straightened. “If that date falls through, I’d be thrilled to find time for your special service.”

Wade laughed. “Awesome.”

Jayda flashed a glare at Ivan, then went back to the guard desk to sign out. Her shift here was over. She would be in the brig for the next few hours.

Courtney had observed it all from the hall outside her cabin. *I didn’t know he was servicing Jayda too...* Courtney swallowed unexpected jealousy and went to the guard station at the opposite end to get permission to leave. Little Amy was already out of the juice she liked.

Marc watched Courtney leave. *When I get time, I may try to search ahead for that conclusion.*

Wade joined Marc, arms hurting. “Can I have a new pusher?”

“Absolutely.” Marc waved Debra over. He took the tray she was carrying, ignoring her snigger at the cats still riding on his big shoulders. “Give Wade a shove to the bridge.”

Debra immediately saw it as Marc wanting to discover if she was strong enough physically. She didn’t scan his mind to verify it. She didn’t want him to know she wasn’t completely sure about him yet.

Ivan glared at Wade as he stood, but he stayed back. *Even hurt, top level men are hardcore. I want that!*

Marc filed it, along with everything else. *Be careful what you wish for...*

Wade paused by the door, grinning again. “The show isn’t over.”

“Of course. What was I thinking?” Marc rotated to observe, files open and ready as Cathy and Zack’s argument got louder.

“It’s wrong!”

“Says you, but those boys are legal. Maybe you should ask them what they want.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?!”

Cathy shrugged. “I have no idea, but I can’t seem to lie anymore.” She went toward her cabin. “Let me know where we stand when you know.”

Wade smiled at Cathy. “I may have a date later. If not, you already know I’ll roleplay any age you like.”

Cathy shocked herself. “I’ll think about it.”

Marc wasn’t sure if he should laugh, scold, or take notes.

Zack didn’t like the competition. “I want you.”

Cathy smiled. “Good.”

Zack wanted to be clear where they stood now. “I’m a father and an Eagle. I don’t want a relationship unless it’s perfect. That’s why I ended things with Allison.”

“You did?”

“He did.” Allison’s bitter voice echoed from the cabin.

Zach stared at Cathy. “Can you handle that?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’re getting older by the day.”

“What?!”

“Your body is rotting as we speak. I don’t want old man junk in my stuff.”

“That’s… That’s…”

“Gross? I know, right?”

“Insensitive!”

“That too. I don’t go around sticking saggy boobs in your face.”

“You’ll do what to my face with your…” Zack tried to think. “I am not old. I’m only 36.”

“I rest my case.”

“That isn’t old. Wait until I’m seventy.”

“Sex at seventy? Oh. My. God. That is beyond stale. Penicillin probably grows on it at that age.”

Zack decided to start fighting back. “What about you? Those things are already drooping.”

Cathy laughed. “You still want them.”

“Well, yeah.” Zack snorted. “I like ‘em saggy.”

“Really? I might go braless, like Jayda.”

Across the hall, Ivan’s attention swung to Jayda. He didn’t see Missy opening a cabin door. It smacked him in the face.

Ivan slid to his knees, moaning and bleeding.

Courtney hurried over to him while everyone else laughed. “Are you okay?”

He grunted, slowly standing. “I think so. Just don’t take off your bra.”

Courtney handed him a tissue and retreated to avoid the steady flow of blood.

“You gonna live?” Jayda was fighting the need to check on him and then kiss his pain away. She really did enjoy time with Ivan when his mind wasn’t full of the boss.

Marc and Wade watched Ivan stand. People scowled at the man for his behavior.

Jayda stiffened as Ivan placed one hand on her wrist. The other kept the tissue over his nose.

Ivan met her eye. “I was wrong to dump you that way.” He shrugged, letting go. “But I really did think we were exclusive. In my mind, you cheated on me and I’ll always feel that way.” He walked away, regaining his respect.

Jayda sighed. “Hey.”

Ivan stopped, shoulders stiff. “Yes?”

“If my other plans fall through, I’ll be in the mess after my shift–if you want to work on job stuff.”

Ivan resumed walking. “Maybe. Don’t wear that bra.”

Jayda chuckled. “No worries. The ladies are swinging free today.”

“What...” Ivan tripped over his feet and bounced off a door frame. He landed at Neil’s feet.

Neil had come to see what the yelling was about. He scanned and found Marc at the end of the hall.

Marc lifted a brow. *Is she awake?*

*No.* Neil dropped the bag of garbage he’d collected onto Ivan’s chest. “Thanks.” Neil went back in.

Missy stomped over to Ivan and smacked him on the forehead. “Hey! Keep this hall clear. There are dangerous people here.”

Ivan groaned as everyone laughed harder. “You got that right.”

Wade searched. “I don’t see your shadow.”

Marc nodded. “Good. If you spot them, they lose the job.”

The cats on Marc’s shoulders rose in tandem and jumped to the window ledge next to them. They stalked down the hall.

Ivan scrambled up, clearing the path.

Missy nodded, going back into her cabin.

Neil frowned at the cats. “Fine, but be quiet or I’ll shove you through a porthole.” It was surprising that Angela hadn’t woken with all the noise happening just feet away.

The two cats entered the cabin and jumped onto the bed. They curled up together between Angela’s ankles and began purring.

Dog peered at Neil from his perch on Allison’s leg. He’d followed her into her bunk. *What?*

Neil rolled his eyes and shut the door.

Wade wheeled himself through the exit, then let Debra have the chore. He winked at her over his shoulder.

Debra pushed faster, already sweating.

Marc followed.

“I’d love to have a link in or a translation for this one.” Wade glanced up at Marc. “Please?”

Marc sighed. “Fine.” He was almost looking forward to the final tally now. Wade wasn’t ripping couples apart, though the peace had been chipped. He was reminding Safe Haven’s males that their women weren’t satisfied.

Marc assumed Angela’s breeding tree was responsible. They only had nineteen kids now, with five pregnancies that should add another seven precious souls. If their population didn’t start breeding immediately, they wouldn’t have a generation to take the place of the elderly who would die naturally in about twenty years. Then they would have to mandate breeding laws. Marc already knew he couldn’t do that. He believed Angela couldn’t either, so she’d started the tree, encouraging multiple branches to seed in hopes that some of them would take root. Marc wondered if she knew the relief Eagles were all using condoms, according to the stories they told each other.

*She doesn’t want the relief sources breeding.* Debra didn’t look at Marc. She was struggling a bit with the uphill grade of the hallway as they neared the ramp to the top deck.

*Why not?* Marc scanned rooms for trouble as they walked by.

*They’re a last resort for...accidentals.*

Marc frowned as he added clues. *Was Wade’s an accidental?*

Debra shrugged. *He’s only thinking about me right now. Not sure.*

Marc remembered Wade’s words of reliving each moment. “This isn’t awkward at all.”

Wade went blank. *I’ll enjoy it later*. He flashed a quick smile at Debra.

Debra had picked up the pattern. She glared.

Wade pushed away the guilt. “A little faster?”

Debra huffed, but she did it.

“That’s it, baby.”

Debra almost tripped.

Marc felt thick sexual tension fill the hall. “God, Wade!”

Wade chuckled. “I told you I have skills.”

Marc held the door to the ramp. “I thought you meant as an Eagle.”

“I have those too.”

Debra nodded. Observing Wade in the cage was what had led to their private moments. He was almost as good as Marc.

Marc felt her warm regard and slowed a bit to avoid it.

Wade sulked. *They all want Marc.* *Angela should put him into the breeding plan; she’d have more babies than this ship can hold.*

Debra blushed. *Yep*. She pushed faster.

Marc laughed, tension broken. “Not a chance.”

Wade squinted against the sunlight as they reached the top deck and guards snapped to attention. “Good. I can’t take the competition.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.” Marc scanned the men and women coming on duty as Debra pushed her lover up the ramp toward her boyfriend. *This should be ugly.* Marc went to the bridge, aware of minds flying but mouths not talking. Debra was telling Theo before Wade could.

Marc stayed back so Wade couldn’t use him to beat on Theo, who was paling to match the color of his white pants and shirt.

Wade waited patiently, enjoying the view from higher up. When he felt a pause, he tossed Theo a book from his duffle bag.

Theo’s eyes widened. “I gave this to you.”

Wade nodded. “I used it.”

“You learned sign language?”

“The parts I needed.” Wade leered. “Friendship, freedom...*orgasm*.”

Anger came into Theo’s face. He pointed at the door. “Get out, both of you!”

Wade frowned. “Were you exclusive?”

Theo snorted. “No, but that doesn’t matter. She cheated on me!” *Whore!*

Debra’s tears fell over the steps.

Wade put a hand on her wrist. “I did this to free you, not to hurt you.”

Debra wiped away her tears. *I know*. She signed.

Wade looked at Theo for the translation.

*“Thank you for caring about my happiness.”* Theo glared at Wade. “If you cared about her happiness, you wouldn’t have seduced her.”

Marc snorted.

Wade grinned.

Theo’s face tightened. “I see.”

Debra stared at Wade. *I’d do it again*.

Wade chuckled. “So would I. You busy later?”

Debra’s chuckle was sexy and sad.

“Maybe you two should date.” Theo wasn’t used to feeling jealousy. He didn’t know how to handle it.

Wade pointed at Debra. “You’re allowed to be happy; he doesn’t have to agree to what you want, but you don’t have to settle for him either. Do you understand?”

Debra slowly nodded. She turned to face Theo, hands lifting.

Wade signaled Marc now, needing the translation.

Marc was following it in everyone’s mind. Opening a private line to Wade was simple for him.

Debra sucked in a breath, hoping she wasn’t about to lose everything she’d built.

Theo’s face tightened at the three short sentences.

*I don’t want to be exclusive. I won’t get married. I never want kids.*

Theo and Wade stared. Neither of them had considered that she felt that way about children, though Wade had figured out she wasn’t the marrying kind.

Debra wasn’t done. *I refuse to have a child I can never talk to, a baby that might suffer my weaknesses. I’m flawed. Safe Haven needs healthy kids. I can’t give you, or anyone else, a family.*

Wade’s grip on her wrist tightened in comfort. “You could adopt...”

Debra sniffled. *I’ve thought about it; I want to be an Eagle first so I can keep them alive.*

All three men respected that choice, but Theo was hurt as well. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Debra’s hands flashed. *I couldn’t. You rescued me and nursed me back to sanity. I owed you any relationship you wanted.*

Theo was crushed. “So you don’t love me.”

Debra moved by Wade. She slid into Theo’s arms and kissed him.

When she finally moved back, Theo was staring in need and confusion.

Wade chuckled. “Yeah, she hits me that way too.”

Marc didn’t turn from the window. “Everyone hits you that way.”

Wade shrugged as Debra chuckled and Theo frowned. “I believe in spreading the love.”

Theo glared. “You call this love?”

Wade immediately nodded. “Yes. Now she’s free to spend time with you or anyone else. And you understand you assumed a lot without ever asking what she wanted.”

Debra left the bridge. She’d taken advantage of the Safe Haven rule on female freedom, but there would still be a price to pay. She, and others, would now have reputations as whores. Jayda had already been called it aloud. *Not fair! If the guys had an affair, they would be bragging and slapping each other on the back. They’d even ask for tips on how to...* Debra’s walk evened out; her heart calmed. *We’re acting like we did something wrong, so everyone has to treat us that way. What if we act like we feel–we’re free to love whomever we want...?* Debra kept walking, disappearing down the ramp.

Marc stared after her. “Oh, that’s not good.”

Wade waited for Theo to yell or Marc to scold. When neither came, he gave them the truth as he saw it. “Unless the couple is exclusive, and both people have acknowledged that, it isn’t cheating. Debra wants to be single and have friends when she’s in the mood to visit. She really does want to be an Eagle more than anything else.”

Theo stared. “I thought we were building something. I wanted a family with her!”

Marc cleared his throat. “You gave that up when you pushed Candy away.”

Theo scowled. “My own kids.”

Wade snorted. “We’re probably all sterile now. Fate tried to give you a gift, like with me and Courtney, but you refused it.”

Theo sneered at Wade. “Candy has Conner.”

“She didn’t back then. Now, you need to decide what the future holds for *you*, either way.”

Theo realized everything he had been planning hinged on knowing that. “I need a fertility test.”

Marc opened his book and wrote it down. “See Tonya after the recharge.”

Wade grunted. “If you are sterile, don’t go chasing after Debra just because it’s suddenly okay to not have kids. Leave her be for a while, like Marc did with Angela. If it’s meant to happen, it will. If not, there are other women, fertile and sterile, you can try with.”

Theo’s pale face now had red circles over his cheeks. “Why do you care about it? She was just a quick fuck to you!”

Wade’s voice finally reached anger. “No, that’s how you view her–as someone to hide or screw on your schedule. You haven’t brought her into camp life, or helped her make friends, or even guided her into our society at all. She earned every bit of it on her own, even with an Eagle as her man! She isn’t pissed about your selfishness, but I am. Debra is a wonderful woman. You don’t deserve her.” Wade pushed his chair toward the door. “And it wasn’t quick. She likes to roll around for hours. It’s in my top five memories of all the women I’ve ever been with.”

“You son of a–”

Marc stepped in front of Theo. “You have the conn.”

Theo immediately retreated, swallowing his fury.

Marc followed Wade, now approving of how this was being handled. *Another batch of secrets are out in the open. That’s good for the future.*

# Chapter Three

**Twice the Fun**

**1**

**M**arc followed Wade down the ramp from the bridge as he went to the rear of the Adrianna.

Wade dug through the duffle bag on his lap.

Debra had waited, enjoying the beautiful view of restless blue and white water in every direction. She fell in to push the wheelchair.

Neither man spoke to her. Their minds had already moved on to the next part of the show.

Debra refused to think about anything that had happened; she just enjoyed the feel of finally being free of a burden that had weighed on her for months.

“I see he has a shelter set up.” Wade scanned the front of Adrian’s ship for movement. The half a tent and a tarp provided a sunless cover, though it wouldn’t do much against the stiff wind up here.

Marc saw a crossbow come out of the duffle bag in Wade’s lap and snickered. He took a fast glance at the flag flapping above them to determine the direction of the wind. He pushed Wade into the optimal position for his shot.

Debra stepped back to observe, not sure what was happening.

“I guess he’s below.” Wade pulled out a pair of bright pink panties and shoved an arrow through the crotch.

Marc chuckled. “Remind me to never piss you off.”

Wade scanned Adrian’s ship again, enjoying the cooler temperature even though it stank like salt. Below deck was a lot warmer to help their recovery patients. “Do you think you could call him up here?”

Marc laughed. “Maybe not with a straight voice. If you want it to be a surprise, you’ll probably have to wait for the shot.”

Wade checked the watch he had strapped back on this morning with a feeling of completeness, then shook his head. “I need to get to the mess in the next few minutes.”

Marc sighed, clearing his mind of the amusement. It didn’t take much–just thinking about the things Adrian had done was more than enough to brew the anger. *Get up here on the deck!*

*I’m on my way.* *Is there a problem?* Adrian was already running.

*Just you answering. I was hoping you’d had that next heart attack. Get up here!* Marc felt Adrian wince and was pleased with the job he’d done. *Telling the truth makes things so much easier.*

Wade sighted in on the only doorway he was able to reach from where they were.

Marc tugged Wade’s shoulder to the side stairs.

Wade refused to grin, concentrating. As an Eagle, he’d been taught to do the job first and celebrate after it was done.

Marc stared at the fading, flapping flag above them, wondering how their homeland was doing. He refused to give it away.

Adrian ran up the stairs, mind flipping through plausible causes for Marc’s urgent tone. He’d been below, having a drink and an epiphany. Now he was in battle mode.

Adrian shoved through the side door to the outside steps, taking the fastest possible route. *Is it Angela? Are we under attack again?* Adrian reached the top landing.

An arrow slammed into the wooden rail by his head.

*Under attack!* Adrian ducked, retreating. His feet missed the step.

Adrian fell backward. He rolled down the stairs and hit the side wall. He bounced into the rail of the ship and then over it. “Help!”

Adrian hit the chilly water and went under.

Marc tried to stop laughing so he could see if Adrian surfaced.

Wade shoved the bow into Marc’s hands. “Hold that, will ya?”

Marc watched Adrian’s head break the top of the water. The former leader fired something and hit the side of his ship. *A grappler.* Marc was still chuckling as Adrian began hauling himself back to his boat. The small winch wouldn’t pull him all the way up, though. It would be another wet climb. Marc turned to Wade. “Can you do that again?”

Wade held up a small box. “Let’s find out.”

Debra eased closer for a better view, snickering.

Adrian reached the first deck; they could see his body shaking as he shoved himself over the rail.

Sadie appeared on the steps. She saw Marc first. “What gives?”

Marc and Wade both shrugged at her. *No idea.*

Wade’s brows went up as he scanned the blue hair and pretty skin. “She’s too hot for Adrian. And too young.”

Marc and Debra both snorted.

Wade laughed. “Yeah, well, it’s true, even coming from me.”

Sadie spotted Adrian shivering on the deck near the stairs and scowled. “What’s all the noise? I’m trying to sleep down there!”

“Marc shot at me.” Adrian slowly stood, surveying the arrow as salty water dripped to the deck.

“I didn’t hear a gun.” Sadie scanned. “With what?”

Adrian pointed. “Panties.”

Sadie stared at the silky undergarment. “Why?”

“I don’t know yet.” Adrian grabbed her wrist when she would have gone up to check it out. “They’re probably boobytrapped.”

Sadie scoffed, pulling away. “Boobytrapped panties. Sure.”

Adrian followed her up, head swiveling; he automatically reloaded the grappler.

Sadie let him go first as they reached the top, in case he was right. She scanned Marc and Wade, then narrowed in on the bow. *He did shoot panties at Adrian! What an odd fellow.*

Marc frowned at Wade.

Wade grinned wider, shrugging.

Adrian saw Marc’s amused chuckles, then Wade’s gloating grin. He relaxed as he realized his reaction hadn’t been planned. He flipped a finger at them as he yanked the arrow free. Adrian felt the bump in the material and pulled out a note, trying not to shiver as the breeze hit his wet clothes and skin.

*Nancy left these in my tent. I kept her happy the entire time you were banished. The entire time.*

Adrian’s mind spun. *It might not be my baby…*

“He gets it.” Marc called the shot. “Now.”

Wade hit the button.

*Pop! Pop!*

The firecracker in the panties exploded.

*He was right!* Sadie shoved Adrian out of the way as hard as she could.

Not expecting it, Adrian flailed as he hit the rail and went over. Again. “Son of a….!”

The splash was drowned out by laughter. Marc was doubled over. Wade was almost crying.

Sadie glowered, hands coming up to her hips. “That was mean.”

Wade grinned, sending a wave of interest. “Hiya!”

Sadie blushed, slowly smiling back.

“God, Wade!” Marc motioned Debra toward the wheelchair. “Get him down to the mess before he breeds that one too.”

Behind them, Sadie went to see if Adrian had snagged the boat.

In the water, Adrian held onto the grappler and gasped for air, but he didn’t try to climb up yet. *I’ll stay here for a while, where it’s safe.*

A pair of pink panties with the crotch blown out floated down and landed in the water next to him.

“On second thought…” Adrian started climbing, almost able to hear Marc laughing.

**2**

Debra’s amusement kept the mood upbeat as she pushed Wade’s chair, but it prevented the conversation Marc wanted to have. *Give us a minute.*

Debra let go of the chair and walked away.

Marc strode by, making Wade push it himself.

Wade reached for the wheels. “Hey!”

Marc held in more laughter about Adrian’s accident to share with someone later. He didn’t know who that would be yet. The corridors down here were eerily empty, but the recharge was the reason, not an illness. That crisis was mostly over now. They just had to recover and handle the side effects.

“Why did you send her on?” Wade assumed it had been a mental order. He’d been reliving Adrian’s expression and missed it.

“I have questions to ask and a scold to deliver.”

Wade stopped pushing, glad for the break even though it hadn’t been long this time. His weak arms were already sore. “Get it over with, then.”

Marc leaned against the wall without dusty pictures, scanning the wheelchair bound Eagle. He didn’t like everything he found in Wade’s mind, but most of it was great. “Tell me why Angie approved this.”

Wade flushed. “What?”

Marc snorted. “*You* didn’t put this together.”

Wade stiffened. “I’m a smart guy. I could have.”

“You are, and maybe, but you didn’t. Did you?”

Wade slowly shook his head. “The boss helped me arrange the order so it would fall the way she wanted.”

“After you insisted on them being delivered, right? That shit with me was an act. You and Angie already had that conversation.”

“How did you figure it out so quick?” Wade knew Marc was smart, but he hadn’t expected this level.

“She was genuinely pissed at you, but she also likes to give other people the credit. Always being the genius makes her feel isolated.”

“What actually gave it away?”

Marc grunted. “It smells like her other plans. Each stop has given us something she wanted.”

Wade frowned. “What did she get out of Adrian’s?”

Marc sighed. “My mood is better. And it’ll last all evening when I replay it, no matter how tired I get.”

Wade smiled. “I like her a lot, you know? She cares about her man, even when it goes against what she wants.” Wade delivered the first serious tone of their walk. “You’re a lucky guy.”

Marc nodded. “I know.” He did. “But that doesn’t work on me.”

Wade tensed at the scold. “What doesn’t work on you?”

“Distraction and flattery.” Marc glowered. “I’m not Adrian. Don’t use it on me anymore.”

Wade nodded, not about to lie. “I’m sorry.”

“Good. Now tell me what problem she found so I can help her fix it.”

“No.” Wade began pushing the chair again. “She doesn’t want you in on it yet. You have bigger issues. She has this one covered.”

Marc grunted, following. “Tell her she’s missing a part of her breeding tree.”

Wade stopped; he looked back. “You are smart.”

Marc shrugged. “If she makes too many happy matches, we won’t have fighters to take back for the final battle. They’ll refuse to leave their loved ones.”

Wade grimaced. “That’s what she said, almost word for word. She didn’t miss it. She offered to bet me that you would get it before our deliveries were done.”

“What did you just lose?”

Wade chuckled. “Nothing. I’d never take a bet against her.”

Marc held the door to the mess open. “Good to know.” He spotted Kenn and Courtney standing together, talking. He narrowed in on their quiet conversation.

“He’s coming to out us both.” Kenn didn’t want her to be hurt. He also didn’t want this scene. A dozen curious camp members were here to witness this newest humiliation, along with half the kitchen staff.

Courtney stepped closer to him, drawn to his full Eagle gear, his strength, his gifts. He made her feel safe. “Why do you think I came here, to you?”

Kenn felt the need to protect her. Then he replayed her words and realized Wade really had slept with her. *I thought it was bs to cover*.

Courtney locked eyes with Marc, arms crossing over her robe. *I really doubt it’s Wade’s baby.*

Marc shrugged at the brunette. *You should talk to Kenn again if you really believe that. No need to wait for the birth to sort out the future.*

Kenn was listening. *I won’t fight her, but I want to be the dad.*

Courtney stiffened.

Marc studied Wade. “So, what’s happening here? Are you sabotaging Kenn or using me to beat on him?”

“Neither, actually.”

Marc’s face fell. “Aww.”

Wade spotted Courtney in line at the drink counter. “Excuse me.” He pushed over to her, ignoring the frowns from everyone.

Marc gave Wade space, but he stayed close enough to help if it was needed. He almost hoped Kenn got nasty. He would still enjoy hitting the man as much as he ever had.

Wade looked over his shoulder. “Remember when I said it would take something special to get me out of this chair?”

Marc nodded.

Wade slowly stood. Then he knelt at Courtney’s slipper clad feet, taking a box from his pocket. He smiled up at her shocked face as he opened it. “Will you marry me?”

Courtney stared at the ring, and at him. “What do…?” She tried again. “What is…?” She frowned at her confused brain. “Why?”

Wade took the ring from the box and placed it in her palm. “I want to be your husband and have your babies.” He grinned. “You’re beautiful, smart, sexy…” His voice dripped desire. “It was so hot, I forgot the condom. That’s never happened to me.” He tossed that unopened package toward Kenn’s feet. “Here. You need it.”

Kenn kicked it away and stormed toward the door.

Tonya appeared, expression saying to suck it up. She’d nursed him through his gunshot wound and then avoided him. She leaned against the wall by the door now, blocking his exit. She’d come for an extra juice. The first had been spilled down her robe, leading to the t-shirt and shorts James was eyeing as he walked by. Her stomach bump glared at them in the pale mess lights.

Kenn stopped, but he refused to turn and watch. “Why do you even care?!”

Tonya delivered a surprise none of them had thought about. “Her baby might be family to mine. Lying about it is wrong.”

Across the mess, Jennifer paled.

Kyle got her out of there. She’d just been cleared to join the camp. He gently tugged her thick robe shut as she settled into the chair, voice rough. “It’s different for us. They don’t understand.”

Jennifer clutched Kyle’s hand as he pushed her toward the recharge floor.

Wade didn’t look away from Courtney. “I have a high place here; as you know, I’m a great fuck.”

Courtney sniggered against her will. “This is some marriage proposal.”

Wade shrugged. “Just covering what matters.”

She sighed, emotions smacking into each other. “Can I think about it?”

Wade slowly stood, still smiling. “Of course.” He put the ring box in his pocket. “Are you busy later?”

Anger crossed her face. “Yes, but I’m sure you won’t have trouble finding company.”

Wade grew serious. “I won’t. That’s the rest of my proposal, Courtney. I’ll be loyal to you.” He flashed a dark glare toward Kenn’s stiff shoulders. “No matter how much you nag me.”

She snorted, hand clenching around the ring. “Are you capable of being with just one woman?”

Marc had the same question.

Wade nodded. “For you, I can be.”

Courtney couldn’t resist smiling back. “I’ll let you know in a couple days…okay?”

Wade pressed a kiss to her cheek, then got back in the wheelchair. “Take all the time you need.”

Marc wasn’t sure he approved. *Wade used this moment to assert a parental claim. So did Tonya. Kenn already did that, in the middle of a crisis… What does Courtney want?*

Marc saw her eyes go to Kenn in longing.

He shook his head. “I won’t approve this union, and neither will Angela. Work it out some other way.” Marc left the mess before any of the shocked people could reply.

Marc’s shadow eased closer as they strode through the empty corridor. “Why won’t Angela approve it?”

Marc gave an honest answer. “Because Courtney doesn’t love him. She wants Kenn.” *Or maybe someone with that level of status...*

Ian frowned. “But if they’re both willing to settle…”

Marc grunted. “Settling causes problems. Those two have a match somewhere, probably on this ship, but we haven’t found them yet.”

“So you are in on the breeding tree.”

Marc nodded. “Angie wanted Wade’s honor tested.”

Ian chuckled. “That was well played. He didn’t suspect a thing.”

Marc wasn’t sure about that, but he didn’t voice the thought. Wade’s mind was an interesting place. Marc understood why Adrian had made him an Eagle.

“If Courtney goes to the camp, your choice could be overturned.”

Marc shrugged. “And then she’ll live with the consequences, but for now, she’s been told no. That gives her a little time to figure out if love might come into it later.”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because the child is a descendant, no matter which of us popped the egg.” Kenn joined them from the shadows. He’d followed Marc instead of facing more of Tonya’s anger.

Ian jumped, hand dropping to his gun.

Marc sighed, stopping. “Easy.”

Kenn leered.

Ian scowled back, but it held no heat. “When do I get classes with you so I can learn to eavesdrop?”

Kenn spoke to Marc. “He didn’t catch that clue.”

Ian lifted his chin. “I knew about Wade before the Boss.”

Kenn was disappointed, but he believed him. He took a paper from his book. “Ian, you’ve been promoted to leader of the special protection team. Congratulations, asshole.”

Ian stared at the paper, smile filling his face. “Really?”

“You’ve done well. Both bosses are pleased.” Kenn handed Ian a small notebook. “The schedule for the first day is in there. It starts at dawn and ends at dusk. Be ready.”

Ian put the items into his Eagle jacket. “Who made the final choice?”

Kenn gave the real reward. “I did. You’re a badass. I want you in training under me.”

Ian almost cried. To cover it, he glowered at Kenn. “Suck up.”

Kenn shook his head, walking away. “Rookies!”

Marc interrupted the coming good natured shouting match. “Let’s see how the garden’s doing. We need to make sure it has what it needs to grow.”

**3**

Angela jerked awake. She found Neil staring at her.

“Everything okay?” Neil got ready to shout mentally for Marc.

Angela squinted at the other bunk. “She’s having a nightmare.”

Neil scanned Allison’s still form, frowning. She appeared peaceful.

“She learned to hide, even in her sleep.” Angela yawned. “Make a noise. Wake her up.”

Neil clapped his hands.

The loud jolt brought Allison upright in the bunk. “What?!”

Neil went back to his notebook. “Keep your nightmares to yourself.”

Allison flushed. “Stay outta my mind!” She gestured at Angela. “You might have woken her.”

Neil snorted.

Allison settled down, frown set in place. “What happened to you?”

Neil didn’t answer.

Allison turned her back to him and tried to return to sleep. She didn’t say thank you for interrupting the nightmare. She knew she’d go right back to it. Sometimes, it was easier to get it over with.

Angela sighed. “Maybe if you tell us it will go away.”

Allison froze. “I thought you were asleep.”

“*I was*.”

Allison flushed at Angela’s pointed tone. “Sorry.”

“Would you like to talk? I can send Neil out.”

Neil frowned. “No, you can’t.”

“No, but thanks.”

“Yes, I can.” Angela pointed at the door. “Get out.”

Neil turned the page, bringing up clouds she would have to work to get through. “I’m scared of you, but Marc terrifies me.” Neil wrote down the color of her new bracelet and shut the book. “Go back to sleep.”

Angela sagged against the bed, yawning. “She’s right. You’re an asshole.”

Neil shrugged. “And yet, you both feel better with me here.”

Neither female denied that. Neil was the best fighter in camp; it sucked that he was also a lying murderer.

Neil flushed this time at their almost identical thoughts. He stood. “I’ll be in the hall. Try not to kill each other.” Neil slammed the door, drawing a frown from the hall guard. Ed had replaced Ivan, who was peering from his cabin with bloodshot, narrowed eyes and a lump on his cheek that matched the one on his forehead.

Neil slumped into the chair by the guard station, staring at his feet instead of into the open door where Samantha and Amy were sleeping.

Ed didn’t scold or ask what had happened. Duty over the boss was coveted, but it was also hard. Angela wasn’t just a camp member who would follow orders and behave. She was the leader of Safe Haven Refugee Camp. Handling her was work.

Neil sighed. “She’s okay. It’s my conscience.”

Ed patted him on the shoulder. “Suck it up; you earned it.” Ed went to do a quick round of the hallway.

Neil grunted. *I am, but if I’d known it would be this hard, I might have gone easier on some of you when you screwed up.*

Neil scanned the cabins and found almost everyone sleeping or resting. The care packages were scattered and the mood was good. Neil narrowed in on the nearest cabin, curious about what Marc and Angela had put in them. He saw toys and snacks, but there were also notebooks, schedules, and textbooks. *Keeping them working too. Smart.*

Neil swept the next cabin with an open door. He spotted the History of the Descendants book in Tommy’s hands and moved on. That cabin was occupied. When Tommy finished, he and Ivan would be able to discuss the book, keeping them content.

Neil found the next open door and narrowed in on care package contents. It was mostly baby books and items. Neil knew Samantha had gotten one of those as well.

The next cabin door closed. Harry had just gone in to give the first grief counseling session. Neil hoped it helped Brittani. They needed her to recover.

The two cabins across from her were full of kids who had crashed from the sugar in their packages. They were sprawled across the beds, floor, and each other. It was sweet, but it was also what they needed. The kids had missed having fun and being with their mentors. Right now, every cabin around them held someone special to their hearts and futures.

Daryl nodded from his open door, aware of Neil scanning. He didn’t interrupt, but he did wonder when Neil’s punishment would come.

Daryl stared at Brittani’s closed door for a moment, then went back to his bunk and tried to rest.

Neil kept scanning, trying to give Angela time to work on Allison or go back to sleep. Either was fine, so long as he wasn’t the target of her displeasure.

The last cabin with an open door was dark. Neil could feel Kyle in there protecting Jennifer and her bunkmate while they slept. Anyone who entered that cabin better have a good reason. Autumn was also in there, resting with her mom. Neil could feel the baby’s active mind running, but she was being quiet too, so Jennifer didn’t move. *She missed her mommy.*

Neil scanned the far hall, nodding to the guard on the door. He saw the man dip into the shadows and knew someone was coming. His hand dropped to his gun.

Daryl rose from his bunk.

Kyle came to the doorway.

Ed came back over and stood by the guard station where he could hit the new alarm Kenn had rigged up.

Zack’s three sons entered the hall with smiles at people and no idea they were targets of a dozen men and women who relaxed at the sight of the boys.

Timmy went to the longest couch and dropped his kit.

Ed frowned at the freshly showered teens. “What are you doing here?”

Eric smiled. “Marc sent us up to watch the game. He said it was time we learned to play cards.”

Daryl joined them in the hall. “What game? There’s a game?”

Eric stared at Cathy as she stuck her head out to see what the problem was and if they needed help. “The poker game you Eagles will have once everyone crashes.”

Eagles smiled and snickered.

“Marc’s sharp.”

Neil nodded at Ed’s comment, rubbing his arm in memory. “You have no idea.”

Charlie came through the far hall. He grinned at them. “Game starting early?”

Chuckles replaced the tension with a good vibe; people settled into full sleep. The ship’s walls lightened another color as it absorbed the moment. For now, things were okay.

Everyone onboard relaxed for the first time in weeks.

# Chapter Four

**You’re the Leader Here**

**1**

**O**ne deck below, Marc felt the mood shift and was glad he’d thought of it. The Eagles hadn’t stolen much downtime since they set sail. It was well earned.

Marc walked through the mini jungle that Samantha and her garden crew had started, seeing a lot of items they hadn’t had in a while. The ceiling was open, providing bright sunlight that heated the drafty room. The scent of fresh growth filled his nose. He could almost hear the plants getting sturdier, bigger. Samantha wasn’t here now. The garden was empty of people, but Marc made a note to tell her she was doing a great job.

Most of the harvest would be gone in the first week, but the camp would have great memories and a nice health boost for that week. More importantly, Samantha and her crew would perfect the methods for a larger operation on the island and boat once they docked. All the rooms they weren’t using right now would be converted, including the swimming pools on the top deck. Those would make great gardens once they dug soil to fill them. The same was true of a lot of the ship areas. All they had to do was be careful of the weight limit, but with them offloading things to use on the island, adding the soil would bring them back to even. Angela was a genius for having thought of it. The island was small, but she was finding ways around that.

“Hello? Marc?”

Marc’s shadow faded away.

Marc turned. “I’m over here.”

Emma joined Marc, proud of her complete Eagle outfit even if it was only the rookie set. She wasn’t sure how she felt about Marc being in charge, but until he did something wrong, she was keeping her thoughts open. “Kenn sent me to get a shift change approval.” She held out a paper.

Marc took it, frowning. Kenn had full authority to do this. That meant this one was special. “You want to work with the kids.” Marc understood now. He stared at her, detecting fresh makeup and curled hair. “You’re a cougar.”

Emma flushed so bright red that Marc thought her head might explode. He softened his tone. “Why?”

Emma swallowed the humiliation. “Why am I a cougar or why do I want to work with the kids?”

“Both, if you’re willing to answer.”

“I’m not.”

Marc shrugged. “One of us will dig in; you can’t work with the kids unless you’re approved.”

“I said I wouldn’t answer. I didn’t say you couldn’t look.”

Marc’s lips thinned. “I’m too old for you, right?”

Emma gave a curt nod. She wasn’t attracted to Marc at all.

“What about my little boy?”

Emma grimaced. “Yuck.”

Marc dug into her mind to be sure she meant that. He understood attractions to those who were younger, but there was a line. If she crossed it, she was a danger to his herd.

Emma held still and tried not to resist as Marc roamed through her secrets. She did have a few, but they were nothing compared to other people. She flashed a few of those, not sure if he knew.

Marc grunted, still searching. *I knew about those. Who else in case I missed someone?*

Emma had no problem letting Marc know who she considered a threat or a future problem. She flashed Kendle last, waiting for him to deny it.

Marc sighed, withdrawing from her mind. “We all know about that one. Angela says she isn’t a danger anymore.”

Emma snorted and walked away. She didn’t ask for her official clearance; she knew she had it. *I’m not a pervert. I like teenage boys who remind me of my youth. They’re of legal age and we’re all consenting. It’s our business.*

Marc considered her thoughts as she left, agreeing but hating it. Humans did that often. The midlife crisis had been joked about, but it wasn’t funny and even women went through it. *Everyone hates getting old; no one wants to die. Those two truths are universal.*

**2**

“It’s empty.”

Morgan smiled at Marc from the neat desk of the infirmary. “Every single cot.” His relief shot out, hitting his mentor. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

Marc’s mood lifted as cleaning products smothered his nose. “Yes.”

Marc joined Morgan at the desk, but he scanned the wide room. They’d left the walls out to keep a larger space in case they had to go through it again. The entire area had been cleaned, though there were a few bags of garbage and some clutter to be taken below. It looked and smelled good in here for the first time in weeks.

“I hear there’s a poker game…”

Marc chuckled. “We’ll be there for it. Are you finished?”

“In about one minute.” Morgan went back to writing in the folder.

Steps sounded in the hall behind him; Marc recognized Tonya’s fast walk. He nodded to her through the window as she went by, but she didn’t see him. Tonya was followed by Courtney and Wade, who were chatting. Tension rubbed off as they rolled by.

Morgan sighed. *I guess that didn’t go well.*

Marc realized Morgan had known Wade was going to propose.

Morgan shrugged, closing the folder. “He asked me if I thought she would say yes.”

“Did you?”

Morgan stretched as he stood, spine cracking. “Nope. She doesn’t want him the way he wants her.”

“Does he really want her, though?” Marc couldn’t help the doubt. “He’s a playboy. I delivered the proof.”

Morgan chuckled. “Let’s talk and walk, okay? My legs need the movement.”

Marc was happy to oblige. He’d just been trying to give Morgan a break before the next shift began.

“Wade’s a bit different than the rest of the female servicers.”

Marc’s lips twitched. *That sounds wrong, no matter how many times I hear it.*

“I know, right?” Morgan locked the door and activated the alarm. “It also gets me hard. I love it that the women have the freedom to pick us now.”

“Even though you can’t roam anymore?”

Morgan snorted. “It’s the reason I don’t want to roam. I never thought I’d be one of those guys, but I am, and unlike Neil…or even Jeremy, I’m not ashamed of it.” Morgan met his eye. “Because she isn’t. If Pam acted like it was wrong, that would be different.”

“And Shawn?”

Morgan’s face darkened. “We’re having a lover’s spat.”

Marc laughed. He suddenly saw Morgan in a new light. And then he realized he’d underestimated him. “You knew this would happen. How did you know?”

Morgan kept a blank façade and a closed mouth as they walked.

Marc blasted into his thoughts, but there was only an empty room with a lot of spiders. “Interesting.” Marc studied the block. “The spiders are the secrets.”

Morgan let them change into what they really were, impressed. “She told us to work your mind so your gifts would grow. I don’t think she understood how tall an order that was.”

“She knew; you’re the one who underestimated me.” Marc grunted. “You’re an alpha.”

Morgan grinned. “Since childhood. Like your mate, I learned to hide it really well. Adrian taught me it was okay to be myself; Pam proved it with our tryst.”

“You are a magic using killer who likes threesomes.” Kenn came through a nearby door to join them. “And you’re proud of it.”

Morgan chuckled, nodding. “I love my life now.”

Kenn’s brows creased. “What was your life before?”

Morgan’s body went stiff; a cold wave floated through the corridor. “Hell.”

Neither man asked for details.

Kenn handed Marc a folder. “All arranged by strengths, with possible weakness solutions at the bottom. It covers all our army and most of the camp too.”

Marc stored it in his jacket. “Anyone stand out?”

Kenn shrugged. He’d been going over the folders when he had time, but today had been his first chance to really read them. “Ivan, Brittani…and Missy.”

Marc wasn’t surprised. Those three had strong mental gifts. Not all the descendants could do what they could. “And the bridge?”

“Theo has it covered for another hour. Grant and Ray will cover a shift then, with the engineering team.” *What’s left of it, anyway*. Kenn tried not to think bad thoughts. It was amazing they hadn’t lost more people.

Marc led them toward the ramp, hoping the cleaning crew found time to sweep and dust here soon. Their corridors were getting grimy. “I have one more stop and then we’ll hit the cabins.”

Both men were fine with it. Being off duty to help Marc with something was a rare moment neither man wanted to miss. Marc hadn’t told them what it was yet, though. It kept them both alert.

Marc knew. He was doing it so the crash after a shift wouldn’t kick in. He needed them wide awake.

Marc opened the door to the converted animal area. The smell of horse shit almost made him gag. He saw a group of people in the rear, feeding the chickens. The angry clucks and pecks told Marc their animals didn’t like them or the setup. “Any eggs?”

Charlie shook his head, slapping at a big rooster that kept darting in to peck at his ankles while he tossed feed. If not for the Eagle gear they were all wearing, he would be bloody. “And he’s riding them constantly. It isn’t for lack of breeding.”

Attitudes dropped. No one liked how nature was set up. What might have been a necessity in the beginning was now a constant reminder of the cruelty that was their world. *It’s hard to expect civility when we’re surrounded by nature hurting and killing itself off all around us.* Marc sighed. “Anyone have ideas on what might help?”

Silence echoed for a moment as people considered.

Emma cleared her throat, trying to restore the good mood. “Have Dog talk to them; test for fertility.” She cracked a smile. “Make a chicken spa?”

Chuckles floated through the area… Marc felt the air shift. The animals settled down, not pecking or clucking as aggressively. *Interesting*.

Morgan nodded, also catching it. “Someone tell a joke.”

Everyone looked to Kenn.

Kenn frowned. “I’m not the camp clown.”

Charlie grinned. “Smurf balls.”

Emma snickered. “Swamp bunnies.”

Kenn shook his head, sighing. “I guess I am.”

More laughter settled the animals another notch. Several moved away from them to peck at the feed.

“Give me your best shot, Marine.”

Kenn didn’t mind the order, but he scanned the young company. “My best is raunchy.”

Marc shrugged. “So?”

The dirty, sweaty teens grinned eagerly.

Kenn sighed. “You asked for it.”

Everyone waited for something great.

“Marc fired dirty panties at Adrian and knocked him off his own boat.”

Laughter spewed from everyone who hadn’t known. The loud noise ruined the calming mood of the animals, but the people barely noticed through their amusement.

Kenn shrugged at Marc’s frown. “I told you it was raunchy.”

“Wade did that, not me.”

Kenn grinned. “Then he made sure you got the credit for it. He’s good.”

Marc grunted. “Based on his love life, I’d have to agree.” He spoke to Charlie. “Is everything set for Santa’s visit?”

Charlie nodded. “Emma’s going to help me deliver it all.”

Marc recognized the mistake he’d made as Emma’s cheeks went pink. *Shit. He acts so old, I forgot about Charlie. I have two sons here.*

“I’m glad you had a senior moment.” Charlie waved to Emma. “Come on. You can load my sack.”

Marc stared after them, mouth dropping open.

Kenn chuckled; the other boys gasped at Charlie’s bravery.

“You know he meant the gift bag, right?”

Marc nodded at Morgan’s comment, but he couldn’t help feeling like that was a problem about to happen and he’d unknowingly encouraged it. He focused on Kenn. “Do I need to be worried?”

Kenn was surprised Marc was asking him; he didn’t lie. “Maybe. He had a close moment on our run where he almost didn’t come back.”

Marc sighed. “Scared of parenthood and marriage?”

Kenn shrugged. “Scared of being with someone he doesn’t love for the rest of his life.”

“I didn’t know that.” Marc’s worry grew. “I thought he loved Tracy.”

Kenn signaled to Morgan. He didn’t want to be the one to say it.

Morgan frowned. “He was in lust. Seems like it’s fading.”

“Great timing.”

Kenn shrugged at Marc’s sarcasm. “Is it ever a good time for a breakup?”

Marc scowled. “He’s thinking about breaking up with her?”

Kenn back peddled. “No idea; just comparing heartaches. His cheating would be as rough on her as if he ended it.”

Marc let out an ugly curse.

Kenn took pity. “I think he’s too young for Emma, though by a hair. I doubt she wants either of your sons.”

Marc scowled. “Then why did she blush and go all breathless?”

“She’ll be near her target while they deliver the presents.” Morgan snickered at Marc’s relief. “She’s hot for Mike. She’s not hunting anyone else.”

“Can’t you two do something?” Marc didn’t think before he spoke. “She can be turned to the adult side; I’m sure of it.”

“Maybe *you* should try.” Kendle laughed from the shadows. She’d just changed places with his guard. She wasn’t supposed to be seen yet, but she couldn’t help it.

Kenn and Morgan were impressed with her exchange of posts. Neither of them had spotted her doing it.

Marc was annoyed; he put it in her file with a note for her to be removed from this job because she’d been seen now. “We’re working on a serious problem here.”

Kendle stiffened at his angry vibes even though she wasn’t in his mind to catch whatever thought had caused it. “Then you’re coming at it from the wrong direction. Try to think more like your…fiancé.”

“Angie would never…” Marc couldn’t finish that sentence. *Yes, she would, but she would make sure we got something out of it*. Marc fell into the zone. *What could we get from that relationship?*

Kendle had already been dwelling on it. When Marc struggled, she gave him a hint. “What does Safe Haven need more than babies?”

“Fighters.”

Kendle smiled at him. “Excellent.”

It didn’t mean as much coming from her. Marc stored that difference with the others on his mental lists, frowning.

No one spoke, letting him work it through.

Morgan didn’t think he could figure it out, so he didn’t try. He just enjoyed being out of the infirmary.

Kenn had a guess, but he waited to see if he was right.

The others slowly trailing them to the stairs didn’t know what they were talking about. They just liked being around Marc and Kenn.

*Mike isn’t going to be an Eagle… Emma probably isn’t either…* Marc flashed to John and Anne, to how Anne had taken a few weeks of classes to draw in the more timid individuals. *Who’s the target this time?*

Kendle connected mentally, but she didn’t help him. She had faith that Marc would get it on his own. The only reason she knew was because she’d overheard Angela and Wade discussing it before everyone got sick.

Marc’s shoulders stiffened. He turned to Morgan. “How many cougars are on this ship?!”

Morgan shrugged, glancing at Kendle. “Any idea?”

Kendle slid into the shadows as they reached the ramp. “Nearly all the Ciemus women, though they’ll shift to a more...aged diet if the food is appealing. A quarter of our regular camp. And a few of the Eagles. I’d say better than half our female population prefers younger mates.”

Marc’s unease grew. “And none of them are fighters yet.”

Kendle shook her head, vanishing into the employee hallway. “But they will be when…”

Marc scowled. “I don’t like your lesson!”

Kendle’s chuckles faded away.

Marc waved a hand at Kenn. “Dig through the notebooks again. She’s got one on this; find it.”

“Now?” Kenn was eager to serve in any way Marc needed.

“After the recharge. I’m not ready to see what rule she wants me to make.”

Morgan frowned at the tone. “You’re the leader here. You don’t have to make any rules if you don’t want to. Not that I’m encouraging you to go against her, you understand? We just know things are different with you.”

“How so?”

“You don’t kill at the drop of a hat.”

Marc blocked his thoughts about tossing the cougars overboard. “Yeah, let’s go with that.” He opened the door to the cabins before they could ask or elaborate. He didn’t want to talk about it right now. “Everyone ready?”

The Eagles nodded. They’d been stuffed with water today. They were almost sloshing.

“Who’s first?”

Kenn frowned at Morgan. “Angela, of course.”

Marc shook his head. “She’s last, per her orders.”

“You can overrule that.”

“He’s right.” Kenn also wanted Angela healthy again.

“I can, but I won’t.” Marc turned to Morgan. “Why are you pushing me to go against Angela’s orders and rules?”

Morgan shrugged. “Hazing? Testing your line?”

Marc snorted. “We’ll do Pam as soon as we finish with Jennifer. I need her to help me keep *you* in line.” Marc led them to the first cabin, where a glowing cheroot winked at them in the darkness. Kyle’s vibe was ugly. “Get out.”

Kyle stood against Marc’s order for a few seconds; he left with a glare at Kenn and a stiff nod to Morgan.

Marc sighed. “Shut the door and lean against it so he can’t get in.”

Kenn frowned, but obligingly blocked the door with his big body.

Pam, Jennifer’s bunkmate, didn’t wake up yet. Neither did the infant at Jennifer’s side. The babies weren’t getting a recharge. No one could bring themselves to cause them so much pain when they didn’t need them as fighters.

Marc gently moved Autumn to her bassinet.

Jennifer curled onto her side, body tense. “How does it work?”

Marc motioned Morgan to the chair by the bed. “We drop our mental guards and connect. When the flow evens out, we’ll shove energy at you from three sides. When you’re full, we’ll break the connections.”

Jennifer slowly sat up. “I’ll probably scream; he won’t like it.”

Kenn braced harder–the door and himself. He didn’t enjoy a woman’s pain anymore. Now, it reminded him how bad he’d been and how far he had to go to make up for it.

Marc pushed into Kenn’s mind. “Let that wall down. I don’t care about your fantasies.”

“You say that now…” Kenn lowered his wall.

Marc tensed. “I see.” He cleared his throat against the anger. “We’ll come back to that. Morgan, let it drop.”

Morgan did, grinning. He only had one thing on his mind right now. It was shielding all his other secrets.

“Ah, man. She can’t do that yet.”

Morgan’s grin grew wider at Kenn’s groan. “So? I can still think about it.”

Marc chuckled. He’d felt the same way while he recovered. Now, he couldn’t wait for Angela to be healthy again so he could love her until they were both spent. “Jennifer…” Her shield wasn’t lowering.

She tried not to shake. “I’m sorry.” Fear was filling her mind with images of Cesar. *But there’s three of them this time!*

Marc grunted. “Get him back in here. She’s not going to relax enough.”

Kenn opened the door.

Kyle’s furious face was inches away.

Kenn retreated, ready to fight. Kyle’s body language was dangerous.

“Stop it; get over here.”

Kyle obeyed Jennifer, but he glowered at all of them. He shifted his gun belt aside and settled on the bed with her, wrapping her up tight. He kissed the top of her head. “It’s okay. Shhh...”

Marc hadn’t realized Jennifer was still that scared of men. He added it to her file, along with a mental note on how he could help her. “Ready?”

Jennifer nodded against Kyle’s chest. She dropped her mental walls, now concentrating on how good he smelled to her, how hot his touch was against her skin.

Marc ignored it in favor of getting done. He connected all of them at once.

Everyone groaned, gasped, or grunted. It was an awkward moment, but none of them had big secrets that he could see. Marc knew that was likely to be different in other cabins, but this one was clear. He shot a glance at Pam. *Sort of*. He made another mental note, then dug into the job. “Let it flow evenly. See how it’s connected, how it makes a neat square between us? That’s a good flow. Don’t try to adjust it yet. The scrolls said a full minute is good. I’ve chosen two minutes, so I’ll have time to dig into everyone for trouble.” Marc was trusting them with his plan.

No one argued or even disapproved. Everyone in Safe Haven was tired of being caught off guard. Privacy was a concern, but not in this moment.

“While we’re waiting, how about I relay Adrian’s accident?”

Chuckles and agreement made the flow of energy stronger. As Marc replayed it and the mood lifted, the flow strengthened.

*It’s like blood pressure.* Marc was fascinated, but he had to move on. A lot of cabins were waiting. “On my count, we start pushing energy into her. Do not stop until I tell you to, no matter her reaction.”

Everyone braced for ugliness.

Marc nodded. “Now. Hard and steady.”

Jennifer arched, lips clamping shut to hold in a cry.

“Stronger; she can take it.”

Jennifer whimpered.

Kyle glared at Marc. *You could give her time to adjust.*

“No, I can’t.” Marc pushed harder. “She’s almost full. Give it your all now.”

“Ahh!” Jennifer’s yell carried through the door and walls.

People waiting for a recharge frowned, becoming concerned.

“Ahh! Ahh!”

The screams made the ship go dim.

Standing in the hall by the cabin, Tonya patted a wall. “It’s for a good reason this time.” She was unaware of a nearby guard observing. “Try to help her if you can. She needs this.”

In the cabin, Jennifer froze.

Kyle tensed. “What’s wrong?”

She stared at him. “It doesn’t hurt now.”

“Good.” Marc shoved the last of the stream at her and broke the connection while Morgan and Kenn did the same.

Jennifer looked at Marc. “What happened?”

Marc shrugged, winded. He fought to control his breathing, aware that Kenn and Morgan weren’t having the same issue because they hadn’t been sick. “Something blocked your pain; not sure what.”

Kenn opened the cabin door to clear some of the heat. He found Tonya running out of the hallway. He locked in on her thoughts

*I’m late! I forgot!*

Kenn’s mind spun. He tried to lock it down so no one would know what was going on with her. He took the bottle of water Morgan handed him. “One down, eighteen to go.” Even a few residents who weren’t descendants, like Courtney, would get this special treatment.

Morgan nodded. “Pam? You’re next, Baby.”

Marc went to Pam, wondering if Shawn and the rest of the kill team was having any luck with their side plan. Retraining Conner to be one of the good guys wasn’t just a challenge. Marc was sure it was impossible. *And if I’m right, he’s not coming back here–ever.*

The door opened. Missy shoved her way in.

“What are you doing?” Morgan wasn’t sure how he felt about the little girl, but he knew they didn’t need chaos right now.

Pam stiffened as the girl climbed into the cot with her.

“You has to work; Shawn’s busy. It’s my job.”

Pam was too surprised to resist as Missy surrounded her with a mental barrier.

Missy clenched her fists. “Okay. I’m ready.”

Marc realized the child’s emotions were going to protect Pam from the pain.

Jennifer shuddered. “It’s a painkiller that almost works. It doesn’t block it.”

Kyle stroked her hair and held her tighter as she continued to twitch.

Morgan watched Pam slowly curl an arm around the child, surprised and warmed. He’d heard Missy could be nice; he just hadn’t witnessed it himself. His toe still sometimes hurt where she’d stomped him.

In the hall outside the door, Neil listened, heart thumping. Samantha was about to go through that. *Will Marc let me in like he did Kyle?* Neil hoped so. He didn’t mind duty over the boss or this hall, but he didn’t think he could handle being away from Samantha while she was screaming.

“Ahh! Ahh!”

Pam’s shouts filled the hall.

Neil winced as it continued, head turning. He caught a shadow leaving a cabin... Neil turned his head back and concentrated on Charlie and Stanley, who had just come into the hallway with bags of gifts. He was in on the comings and goings of the camp, and he was grateful, but it was hard to work between two such powerful leaders.

Neil marched to Angela’s cabin before Marc came out and growled at him for not being there, but he already knew what he’d find.

He went in and shut the door, bringing up his cloud wall. *Maybe I can fake a heart attack if he comes to this cabin next.*

# Chapter Five

**The Good One**

**1**

**“L**et’s hear your complaints.” Angela settled on the edge of the hard desk in the cleared storage room. “Hit me with it.”

No one spoke; they slammed her with thoughts.

Angela grunted. “Now, send those thoughts to each other. All descendants here will provide links to the person on each side of you.” Angela had quickly gotten them into a circle on the mat covered floor, alternating gifted and non-gifted. “Keep the really bad shit to yourself. We don’t have much time.”

Angela glanced at the clock on the wall, then back to the women she’d summoned here through Charlie. “That’s it. Now hold it. Say just what you told me, nothing else.” Angela moved to the rear layer of heavy, dusty mats she’d struggled to put out when she arrived. “We’re too weak for a real lesson yet. I’m going to demonstrate. You’ll stay linked. When the time’s up, we’ll go back and follow orders.”

The women in the room grunted, muttered, and shifted restlessly at the complaints. They were hearing how demanding they sounded, how ungrateful.

Angela took the proper stance on the mat, glad she’d been able to gather enough energy for this. “Memorize these moves through your links. Go over it step-by-step until our first alarm sounds.” Angela began to demonstrate, sucking up the discomfort to control weak limbs that didn’t want to cooperate. “This is level one.”

“I like that!”

“We can do that as a team?”

The women began to get into it as they watched Angela roll over the mat, draw her weapon and end up in the right place for a great surprise double shot.

Angela sucked in air. “One minute. Run it through.” She couldn’t give them the full two minutes rookies were supposed to get, so she was keeping them linked. When one person replayed the moves wrong, the others corrected it.

Angela scanned the doorway, hoping things were going well with the recharge. Marc was healing, strengthening, helping, and digging for those tiny details they needed. Some of their highest people still had drama to be unloaded before they landed on the island. She sent him good wishes and got back to work. “This is level two.”

**2**

“Marc?”

Marc stopped at Pam’s pain-filled voice. Missy and Morgan were offering comfort, but it was clear the power transfer had been hard on her.

“Did you see?”

“Yes.” Marc sighed regretfully. “No, you can’t have children. I’m sorry.”

Marc left the cabin, shutting the door.

Kenn had already moved to the hallway, not wanting to hear Marc give the answer Pam had been dreading. “You think it was from our bout of radiation or right after the war?”

Marc shrugged, taking the bottle of water from Charlie, who was also delivering gifts into pockets when people weren’t looking. “Both, maybe.” Marc scanned the hall and found things mostly peaceful. The edge of tension coming from Angela’s cabin was to be expected. She and Allison had things to discuss, and Neil was a good target for their anger.

Marc nodded to Ray, who had come to his doorway. “You guys are next.”

Ray grimaced. He went back into the cabin to wake Grant.

Morgan came from the cabin behind Marc. “She sent me out.” He shut the door. “Missy will stay with her until we’re done.”

Marc put a hand on Morgan’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Morgan nodded, voice gruff. “Me too. I told her it doesn’t change things for me.” Morgan shrugged. “No idea how Shawn feels.”

Marc stored those notes, frowning. “I got the impression *you* want kids.”

“Yeah. A whole house full.” Morgan waved it off. “But I want *her* more. You understand.”

Marc did. He gestured at Ed, the center guard. “Put Pam down for grief counseling.”

The door opened again. Missy came out, shutting it with a sharp tug. “Jennifer calmed her. I can keep helping you.” She scanned Marc. “I’ve got enough for both of them.” Missy marched into Ray and Grant’s cabin. “Get in the cot together. We can do this at the same time.”

Marc grinned. “You heard the little lady.”

Morgan and Kenn chuckled, following her in and closing the door.

At the far end of the hall, Charlie eased down the steps to the office right below them. He made sure he wasn’t followed, ducking behind furniture as people moved toward the cabins to help their friends and family. Angela had kept him busy passing messages between his shifts. She hoped the recharge would be good for everyone and keep Marc occupied long enough for her to hold a quiet meeting, but it wasn’t working.

Charlie opened the door and slid inside the storage room. “He’s almost on cabin three. Missy’s helping things along.”

Angela grunted as Allison pulled her to her feet. She wiped blood from her lip. “Tonya, Cathy–go now. Run through the employee hall for your workout. Do *not* get caught.”

The two disheveled women straightened themselves and left, breathing hard. Angela’s demonstration included participants, though she was the only one with marks so far.

“Let’s move on. Level five.”

Charlie left, eager to keep tabs and keep delivering gifts. Emma was delivering items to the camp cabins. His own bag was almost empty for this floor. He was glad his mom was doing the fast version of her lessons. It cut off half the time the Eagles normally used.

Charlie shut the door and slid into the shadows, preparing for his next stop. He spotted Jeff coming through the hall and went dim. Jeff was strong enough to sense an extra shadow.

Jeff grunted as he went by, but he didn’t give the kid away.

Charlie knew he’d been caught. He jogged to catch up with the man. “How did you know?”

“You locked your thoughts. Most of us scan for that now.” Jeff shrugged. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t have known you were there. Good work.”

Charlie’s chin lifted. “You going up to help with Kimmie?”

“With Roy. Kimmie has Cody and Missy.”

Charlie laughed, pointing at the line of pajama clad kids gathering outside the large cabin. “And a few more.”

Jeff smiled at little Amy as she pulled away from Samantha to join the other kids outside Kimmie’s cabin. The western UN kids had grown close. It had hurt them, and him, to lose so many of them.

Charlie slid a small gift into Jeff’s pocket while he was distracted, then went to meet his dad as the recharge team came from Ray’s cabin. It was only a new watch, but Charlie was sure it would be well received since the man didn’t feel like he belonged here now. Gifts always helped that feeling. It showed the people in charge honestly cared. “You ready for food yet?”

Marc shook his head, yawning. “We’ll take five now, before we do the kids.” Marc scanned the impatient children and bored adults who were just arriving and hadn’t heard the screams yet. Ray and Grant had bitten down on most of those; Marc hurt for their pain, but he was also thrilled. They were the happy couple they appeared to be, with no ulterior motives or skeletons that he’d found.

Missy came out and took Marc’s hand. She shot excess energy into him; blue sparks danced along the connected skin.

Marc sucked up the discomfort. It was nothing compared to the sessions he was doing. “Thank you.”

Missy pranced into the kid cabin, where Kimmie was now waiting nervously. “We want to do it all together. We’ll help each other.”

Marc held the door for everyone to squeeze in, aware of the heat and the smells of so many bodies. “Works for me.”

Cathy and Tonya burst into the hall through the employee door. Tonya was coming to give support to the descendant kids that she and Kenn had sort of adopted; Cathy was here for Leeann and the bonus points.

Marc didn’t scold them for running, but his hard stare did.

Both women slowed, fading into the cool, calm facade of Eagles.

Marc nodded and shut the door.

**3**

Neil tensed as the door opened, braced to take Marc’s rage.

Tonya shut it and leaned against it, grinning.

Neil let out a sound of relief. “Switch time?”

Tonya nodded, moving toward a chair. She smirked. “He even ordered me to lock the door and not let anyone in until you come back from helping Samantha.”

Neil groaned. “He’ll hate me again for this.”

Tonya shrugged. “You’re already on his shit list. Probably won’t change much.” She stared at him. “While we have a minute, tell me why you had Adrian’s conditional banishment revoked.”

Neil sighed. “He conspired against Marc.”

Tonya snorted. “He’s been doing that since Marc and Angela joined this camp. Tell me the real reason.”

Neil decided to trust her with the truth. “When Adrian found out I’d killed for personal gain, he assumed I would do it for his. He tried to buy my loyalty.”

“Fair enough.” Tonya settled into the chair he’d just left, enjoying the warmth on her back. “I’d forgotten how hard it is to run when I’m fat.”

Neil frowned. “You’re not fat; you’re pregnant.”

Tonya shrugged. “I was fat as a little girl. Didn’t slim out until I hit teenage years. Running sucked then too.”

“I’m surprised Angela has you doing it at all.”

Tonya pushed off her shoes to reach a saggy sock. “It’s good for me right now, as long as I don’t push it too far. She knows I won’t. I want the baby.”

“And Cathy needs the workout because she...” Neil stopped, not sure if Tonya knew.

“I do. I confirmed it for her. She has cancer. So does Allison, Molly, Pam, and Monica. Plus, Allison can’t have kids.”

“Neither can Pam.” Neil had been monitoring the details as Marc found them. He tested a theory. “We really do need that breeding tree to work.”

Tonya stared at him, sock in hand. Her eyes narrowed.

Neil knew she was deciding if he could be trusted, if she needed to do something about him. Neil was surprised to feel a chill. “You’ve spent too much time around Kenn.”

Tonya slid the sock back on. “Around Angela. She’s ruthless. I admire that.” She leaned back, staring at Neil. “Tell me why she didn’t kill you.”

“I don’t know.” Neil really didn’t.

“You assume she has plans for your demise?”

Neil shook his head. “No. She needs me alive for something.”

Tonya considered that, then nodded. “Okay.”

Neil’s frown grew. “Why is that okay?”

“Because that means you’ll be punished, then let back in. If you earn your second chance.”

“It’s not my second. That came with joining this camp.”

“Maybe, but I was bad and they’ve forgiven me. Maybe you’re strong enough to do it too.”

Neil was shocked at the conversation. “Why do you care?”

Tonya met his eye. “Your fiancé is on my team, Neil, and I love my team–more than I love Kenn. I’ll do anything for them, including protecting their mates.” She gave him an understanding huff. “I’m no saint either. How can I help you?”

Neil wasn’t sure what to say. “How long do we have?”

“All night after this is finished; get back to me.”

Neil chuckled. “I may do that.” He hadn’t realized how smart Tonya was. *But I should have. Adrian hid her light because of his anger about Joe. Justified or not, he deprived the camp of a valuable mind.*

Tonya blushed. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever thought about me.”

“How do you know?”

Tonya snorted.

Neil laughed. He opened the door, resuming his sullen face. “Do not open up for anyone.” He shut it, not laughing again as she flipped him off. He turned around to find Marc and the rechargers coming from the kid cabin. Neil took his place in the line by Samantha’s door, nodding to Wade.

The kids came out and joined the line to support Amy and Samantha.

Courtney opened the door. She spoke to Wade while the kids barreled in. “You don’t have to do this.”

Kenn glared at the man. “Yeah, we’ve got it.”

Wade leered at her. “I like holding you.”

Courtney flushed, but she opened the door wide enough for his wheelchair.

Wade stood, leaving it. He hobbled in and sank down on her bunk. “This should bring back fond memories.”

Courtney sniggered, ignoring Kenn, but she felt his jealousy. She wished it was more than petty male ego crap. She snuggled into Wade’s big arms. He was a good man, but she needed something else. She didn’t like that side of herself, but she’d already faced it upon discovering her attraction to Kenn.

Kenn gloated. *She means my descendant side. She didn’t even like me until my gifts popped.*

*Is that true?* Marc dug in to find out.

Courtney assumed the recharge was starting and didn’t try to fight the mental invasion.

Marc added notes to his file, opinion of her swinging in the other direction. He’d assumed it was love, not protection from a man with a high place in camp. “Wade can give you that.”

Courtney flushed as Wade tensed. “He’s short one thing.”

Kenn enjoyed the moment. “He’s not a descendant.”

Marc’s tone hardened. “Isn’t he?”

Wade groaned. “I was hoping I didn’t have to do this yet.” He snapped the lock.

Marc watched as Wade’s power rushed over him and Courtney, creating a barrier that even Angela might have trouble breaking through. Marc snorted at that thought and went back to studying their newest descendant. “How long?”

Wade shivered at the sensations. “A week. I was scared to die; I made the deal.”

Kenn frowned, working through his dismayed surprise. “What deal?”

Wade rubbed Courtney’s tense arm. “It behaves or I never open the cage. I hadn’t yet.”

“When were you going to tell the boss?”

Wade frowned at Marc. “She knows. She was trying to save my life when the door showed up. I assumed you knew too. I’m an alpha.”

Kenn watched Courtney melt into Wade’s arms, anger rising.

Marc took that moment to connect them and get her recharge going. All of them heard Kenn’s thought: *At least Tonya wants me for me.*

Marc nodded. “Use that to kill the jealousy and let’s get this done. There are a lot of cabins waiting.”

Wade kissed Courtney’s cheek. “He’s too reformed for you.”

Courtney shuddered as the pain started. “So are you, *Eagle*.”

Wade held her tighter as he connected them mentally. “You sure? Take a look.”

Kenn winced.

Marc groaned. “Wade!”

Wade laughed as Courtney giggled. “See? It’s not all good in there.”

She snorted, then tensed. Real pain sank into her bones and lit them on fire. “Hold me!”

Wade clutched her close and tried to protect her from the pain.

Marc and the others shoved at full strength, now getting nothing but a bright glare.

“Is he blocking it?” Morgan hadn’t witnessed that yet.

“Just shielding his thoughts from us.” Marc allowed it. Wade wasn’t corrupt despite his words and desires. Anything he was hiding wasn’t that bad or he would have told Angela already.

“What makes you think he hasn’t?” Kenn didn’t like being blocked.

Marc sulked. “I hate it when you do that.”

Kenn smirked and pushed in more energy. He didn’t want the woman, but the baby was important to him.

Morgan frowned at him. “If it’s yours.”

Neil cleared his throat. “I, uh, might be able to help with that.”

Marc finished the recharge and broke the connection before turning. He scanned Samantha’s tense form. “How?”

“Descendant babies respond to their father’s touch, even before birth.” Neil gestured at Cody. “Touch him like you would a stranger.”

Marc tried to clear his mind as he placed a hand on Cody’s shoulder. A blue spark ran up Marc’s arm and vanished.

Neil gestured. “It’s non-invasive and you know right away.”

“William told you?”

Neil nodded at Marc’s dry question. “Watch.” He placed a hand on Samantha’s stomach. Two blue sparks appeared, but only one ran up his arm.

Wade gazed at Courtney. “It’s up to you.”

She nodded against his chest, shifting. “Let’s get it over with.”

Wade placed his hand on her mostly flat stomach.

Nothing happened.

Marc frowned, waving at Kenn.

Kenn splayed his big hand over her entire gut.

Nothing.

Neil shrugged. “A little too soon maybe. William said two months along is usually far enough.”

“We’ll try again in a couple weeks.” Marc was thrilled to have a way to know. He rubbed Cody’s hair as he spoke to Samantha. “You ready?”

She nodded, buried against Neil and under kids who were careful of her large stomach. “I don’t have any secrets left.”

“I hope that’s true.” Marc connected them and dug in.

Neil realized Marc was searching to discover if she knew more about the murders. He relaxed. She didn’t. There was nothing to find.

Marc increased the energy flow a lot slower with Samantha, trying to avoid sending her into labor.

Samantha swallowed the pain until they hit full strength. Then her screams echoed through the hall and deep into Neil’s heart.

*I’m going to find a way for her to have this next time without the pain.* Neil blocked harder, trying to help her as she gasped in air to shout again. *All I have to do is even our levels.* He looked at Marc. “Permission?”

Marc shook his head. “That doesn’t come from me; talk to the real boss.”

“Thank you.” Neil was grateful. Marc could have shut it down right here.

Marc broke the flow, weariness setting in. “Why would I protest? Samantha’s the good one.”

With that, Samantha was cleared. Neil kissed her pale cheek. “I love you.”

She shuddered and moaned. “Same!”

Neil tugged Amy up closer to them. He hugged her into their circle, creating a family bond that blocked out the other people in the cabin.

Everyone observed it in surprise and a bit of longing. Neil had his family covered; they were happy.

Marc sighed, heading for the hallway. “Five-minute break and we’ll move on. Someone let Debra and Brittani know they’re next.”

“I’ve got it.” Cathy went that way.

Marc scanned the hall and cabins, catching a sense of urgency and happiness. He chose not to chase it down since it wasn’t bad. He stepped into the bathroom for a minute of relief. He’d consumed a lot of water now, with more waiting.

Cathy motioned. *Go now!*

Debra slid into their cabin, with Brittani on her heels. They shut the door as the rest of the rechargers came from Samantha’s cabin.

Cathy breathed a sigh of relief. *That was close.*

**4**

“You have to go now.” Angela stood up, letting go of Jayda. “Pull up that shirt.”

Jayda gasped in air as she limped off the mat. She tugged the shirt up to cover the bruise she could feel forming from Angela’s knee across her chest and neck.

“You did better than I expected.”

Jayda’s chin lifted. She eased out, trying not to be seen. She ducked into the same shadows Charlie had used, seeing an Eagle coming.

Jeff sighed as he walked by her. “She’d better teach you guys how to react to surprises or this won’t work twice.”

Jayda pouted as she hurried toward the cabins. She made a note to mention it to Angela, then she smoothed her face and mind. Her recharge session was coming. If she wasn’t careful, Marc would know what they were doing.

She brought up the mental images Angela had given them at the beginning of the lesson, wincing. Some of them were supposed to concentrate on their losses. A couple were supposed to think about their anger. *I chose to use sex because Marc isn’t attracted to me. I can’t get in trouble there.*

Jayda shut that mental door and opened one where she and Ivan were kissing. Her pulse sped up; a smile graced her lips. *I liked his kisses.*

Marc frowned at her as she entered the hall. “Keep that to yourself.”

Jayda frowned on the outside; inside, she felt her sense of worth increase. She slipped into Ivan’s cabin.

Marc gestured. “Let’s do this.”

Still shaking from her recharge, Brittani climbed in with Daryl and wrapped him up as Marc began slamming him with energy. He was a man. They weren’t giving men any adjustment time. *I’ll let the boss know that.* Brittani let the feel of Daryl against her heat up the room, mind covered with a layer of truth.

Daryl chuckled even though the pain was coming through now. “I want you too.”

Brittani kissed him. When he began to shout, she swallowed his pain and used it to protect his nerves as much as she could.

It wasn’t enough. By the time it was over, he was shouting and she was crying against his cheek, making it look like their tears had merged.

Ivan glared at Jayda as she edged closer. “I don’t need it.”

Jayda shrugged. “Okay.” She didn’t crawl into the cot with him, but she didn’t leave either.

Marc broke the connection, turning to Ivan. He sucked in air and controlled his energy flow, getting set to do it again.

Morgan swayed on his feet.

Kenn put a hand on his elbow, lending some of his nervous energy.

Morgan didn’t feel any pain. *Kenn and I are the same level.*

Kenn nodded to acknowledge it. He liked how that felt.

So did Morgan, though he would never admit it. Anger made his voice rough. “Let’s get it rolling.”

Marc connected them, sending a clearing blast that settled the pressure and allowed them to work quicker.

Ivan cramped up.

Marc didn’t stop. He hadn’t used this version on the women. He wouldn’t unless it was life or death, but he wanted the men to be able to take it if it happened on the battlefield. “Give it your all.” Marc blasted him.

Ivan began screaming at the heat.

Jayda marched to the cot and dropped down on top of him. She gathered him close, not sure what else to do.

Ivan held onto her, almost sobbing at the pain.

Marc followed Angela’s instructions and went beyond Ivan’s full limit. Angela said he could take it; Marc wanted to see what would happen.

Morgan opened Jayda’s mind to Ivan so he would have her protection.

Ivan groaned at the feel of her emotions. “More!”

Jayda kissed him, hoping it would work for them too.

Ivan’s body tensed... He sagged under her.

Marc broke the connection. “It expanded a little. Note that and get a medic...” Marc stopped as Morgan began checking Ivan. “Duh.”

Ivan groaned, lashes fluttering. “I don’t want any more.”

Marc leaned against the door, exhausted. “How many cabins are left?”

Morgan staggered into the nearest chair. “Two, I think.”

Kenn nodded, not tired yet. “Four sessions total.”

Marc sighed. He opened the door and found five females waiting outside Wade’s cabin. “Oh, God!”

Wade’s chuckle floated from Courtney’s door. “Be right there.”

Marc held the door for the flushing females. “Wade, I’d like to talk to you later.”

“Sure.” Wade hobbled toward his cabin, beaming at the women. “What’s the topic?”

Marc grunted. “You know damn good and well.”

Wade chuckled. “I’d be happy to share some secrets.” Wade wrapped an arm around Debra, who was shivering. “Come here, sweetheart. We need to warm you up.”

Marc, Morgan, and Kenn watched in shock as Wade deftly positioned all five women, then crawled between them. When he was finished, only the spot by his head was clear.

Marc sighed. “Ready?”

“Room for one more?”

Wade smiled. “I left you a spot.”

Courtney stepped by Marc, fingers twitching. She sat, holding Wade’s hand.

Marc saw Wade’s expression change for an instant, then it was gone, replaced again by the playboy.

“I’ll need someone to stay with me afterward...”

The women all chuckled.

Marc recognized the tactic. Wade was scared and hiding it. *What does he have to be afraid of?* Marc knew it wasn’t the coming pain. He’d seen Wade take hits in the cage that might have killed a weaker man.

Wade met his eye as the sweaty women shifted for comfort. “Please don’t tell them. I never would have told them.”

Marc paused. “I hate this part. And *I* already know.”

“But I don’t know how to block the others! I didn’t unlock it for this reason!” Wade couldn’t help begging. “Please. I’ve never mentioned it. I’ve never thought about it around them. This will crush another team.”

Marc understood the concern, but he didn’t know how to block Wade’s rookie mind for him. *Kenn won’t care, and Morgan understands, considering the emotions he’s hiding...* “Send your...harem out and take the full pain alone. We’ll keep your secret because you haven’t mentioned it or thought about it around them. I respect that.”

Wade relaxed. “Thank you.” He grinned. “Ladies, you’re amazing. I’m sorry.”

The females reluctantly left, most casting frowns at Marc.

Marc grunted. “I’m protecting your secrets, but they’re mad at me. You must have mad skills.”

Kenn joined the amusement, but he was curious who Wade had feelings for. He couldn’t think of anything else that fit.

Morgan waited for it to be done, not looking forward to his own moment of revelation. Like Wade, he’d smothered his desire for someone else’s woman. In the end, he’d come to adore Pam. She was the future, but he couldn’t help the way his heart thumped whenever Jennifer got close to him. She and Kyle had no idea; he hoped it would stay that way forever. Recharging her had been hard because he’d kept part of his mind locked.

Kenn eyed Morgan and Wade, shaking his head. “What a bunch of liars.”

Marc winced, reminded of Theo’s words. *We’re all liars here in Safe Haven.* He shook it off. “Let’s get this done. I’ve got another cabin waiting after this, then a long shift.”

Kenn met his eye. “I can take some of it...if you want.”

Marc nodded. “Thanks.”

Kenn grinned in relief. He hadn’t been sure, despite all the good words from Marc lately. “Cool.”

Wade braced as the three men stepped toward him. He didn’t look at Morgan, whose respect he cherished even more than Marc’s. “I really am sorry.”

Morgan put a hand on Wade’s shoulder as Marc connected them. “Please remember that when you view mine in a few days.”

# Chapter Six

**Make Room**

**1**

**“C**an we hurry?”

Angela frowned at Kendle. They were already running through the drafty hall. “Go on. It’ll cover my arrival.”

Kendle took off without worrying over Angela’s safety. *She has more power than anyone else here. She’s covered.*

Angela watched Kendle run to help a friend with their recharge, then she ducked into the privacy of the bathroom. She only had a few minutes left until Marc got to her cabin.

“I’m on the last bag.” Charlie kept going by the bathroom.

“See you later!”

Charlie grinned. “Yes, you will.” They were going to play chess again. Then he and Tracy were meeting to go over wedding plans with Candy. He’d had a good day.

Angela enjoyed Charlie’s happiness. Playing Santa was fun.

Angela flipped on the light and splashed her face with water from the faucet. She dried, watching her skin in the mirror. The power underneath had been fighting for release during her workout. The training had helped her, but not enough.

*May I visit you soon?*

Angela nodded into the mirror even though it wasn’t a doorway. She knew the other King was observing. “I may bring a friend.”

*As you wish. Call me.*

Angela snickered at the private joke.

The King left her as footsteps sounded in the hall.

Angela climbed into the supply cabinet. She shut it as the bathroom door opened.

“Who keeps leaving these lights on?!” Zack paused. “Well, while I’m here.” He spotted the empty toilet paper holder and rotated to the cabinet. He opened the door.

Angela smiled at him. “Hello.”

“Oh, hell!” Zack gaped at her, hand covering his thumping heart.

Angela stared back. “Did you need something?”

He grimaced. “Toilet paper. I just shit myself.”

Angela handed him a roll.

Zack took it, questions forming.

Angela tugged the cabinet shut.

Zack hesitated. “...can I help you with something?”

“No; thanks.”

Zack waited for her to speak again. When she didn’t, he glanced down at the toilet paper, then over at the empty stall. He put the paper on the roller, then went back to the cabinet. He opened it. “Where did she go?”

He glanced around but nothing moved, not even the door. *Is she gone?*

Zack reached out and swiped inside the closet to make sure.

Angela slapped his hand.

Zack staggered back. “Why?!”

Angela shut the cabinet door again.

Zack heard footsteps run by. “Is that your shadow?”

“Shh...”

Zack heard the steps slow and realized he was blowing the cover of a very well hidden Eagle. He went to the sink to wash his hands.

Ian opened the door. “Anyone in here?”

Zack snorted.

Ian swept the small room, nodded to Zack, and left.

Zack shook his head. “Rookies never catch the tone of a snort.” He dried his hands. “Did you ditch him?”

“Nope.”

“Who’s he searching for?”

“No one–just clearing the ship for Marc.” Angela emerged from the cabinet, thrilled with her experiment. The ship liked games. It had covered her presence. “Thank you for helping with Cathy.”

Zack frowned at her in the mirror. “Yeah, what’s her deal?”

“She’s trying to live a little before she dies.”

Zack grunted. “Cancer too?”

Angela nodded, joining him at the sink. “Zackary?”

He turned to her, not liking the tone or his full name from her lips. “Yes, Boss?”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “Are you an Invisible?”

**2**

“Coming in.” Kendle didn’t wait for an answer. She slid between Morgan and Kenn, ignoring Marc.

Tommy glared at her. “Why are you here?”

Kendle sat on his cot, then forced herself to crawl onto his body and hug him. She was terrified of being rejected. “I had to come.”

Tommy let her stay. “But I don’t *need* you.”

Marc was proud of Kendle and dismayed by a brief flare of jealousy. He motioned at Kenn. “You connect us this time. Morgan will do it for the last two sets.”

Both men liked getting to practice.

Kenn connected them easily. “Let the flow even out; then we’ll give you energy hard and fast.”

Marc smiled at Tommy. “You’re getting special treatment because I need you.”

Tommy didn’t ask what for; he was just glad to hear those words from anyone, and with Kendle lying on his chest, the chaotic mind he’d been fighting since waking in the infirmary started to settle down.

“I’ll stay overnight if you like. I’m off duty until dawn.” Kendle waited, braced for pain.

“What about Quinn?” Tommy couldn’t handle any drama.

“He’ll whine for a minute, then be glad he knows where I am while he works and sleeps.”

Tommy sighed, enjoying her warmth too much to refuse. “This doesn’t change anything.”

Marc cleared his throat. “Yes, it does, but you can talk about that later.” He waved.

All three rechargers hit Tommy with a strong wave of energy.

Tommy’s normal human body should have filled up in seconds.

Nothing happened.

Tommy waited for pain.

Marc increased the strength, but there was no reaction. He let go, breaking the connection.

Kenn stared at Tommy. “What was that?”

Kendle sighed. “Me. I think I blocked it.”

“You didn’t know you’d have to be open too.” Tommy understood. “I’ll be okay.”

Kendle nodded, letting go of the block, but she didn’t leave.

Marc and the rechargers connected.

Tommy arched at the first contact. His energy banks refilled in seconds.

Marc kept going, following Angela’s suggestion.

Kenn and Morgan also kept going, but they watched for Marc’s signal to stop.

Tommy screamed.

Kendle’s arms tightened on him. “Just a little more...”

Tommy bit his lip to hold in the shouts.

Kendle shuddered. “Stop now.”

Marc kept going.

Tommy’s scream ripped through the halls.

Kendle rose, anger growing. “That’s enough.”

Marc kept going. *She cares for him. Interesting. Angela was right again.*

Morgan lifted a brow.

Marc stared at Kendle. “He’ll figure it out about thirty seconds after we connect you to help him.”

Kendle buried her head against Tommy’s wide chest. “He already hates me. What’s one more layer if it saves him some pain?”

Tommy was already fighting the fire. “Tell me.”

“She wants to use Wade’s...method of suppression.”

Tommy’s body went rigid under her.

Kendle held on tighter as Marc increased the stream again. She refused to move when Tommy cramped up and tried to push her away.

Marc broke the connection. He held the door for Kenn and Morgan. “Can I give you a word of advice, Eagle?”

Tommy grunted through the lingering pain. “I’m listening.”

“Love her when she wants it and find a distraction when she’s busy. No man on this ship can get her full attention; be happy with what she wants to give.” Marc shut the door, not saying the rest of that statement. They all knew who she wanted, and who didn’t want her. Keeping her occupied was a favor to Marc.

Marc spotted Zack coming down the hallway, with Angela on his back. “What the hell?!” He stomped to her cabin and opened the door.

Dog and both cats fled down the hall and vanished.

Tonya jerked awake. She spotted Zack and Angela, and threw her hands up. “I only dozed off for a minute!”

Angela laughed, holding up a roll from the mess. “I wanted a snack.”

Marc chuckled, anger gone. She’d been with Zack; it was okay.

Zack slid her onto her feet by the cot. After nodding to Marc, he moved toward the door. He fought not to look at Allison.

Allison watched him with open want and pain. *What did I do wrong with him? He said it was him, not me, but I know better...*

Zack stopped. “Is the job done now?”

“Yes.” Angela settled onto her cot. “And you’re sure she can be trusted?”

Zack nodded, shoulders stiff. “I am. She’s one of us under all the female power crap.”

“Fine.” Angela patted the bed, smiling at Marc. “Sit by me while I have my roll and Zack explains to Allison that everything with Cathy is a job we gave him.”

Allison stared. “Really?”

Kenn and Morgan dropped into chairs, content to wait since this was the last cabin.

Morgan was tired. He was dreading the next recharge session. He was on that list.

Kenn grunted. So was he, and so was Tonya.

Tonya rose from the chair.

Kenn put a hand out, barely touching her arm.

Tonya glanced down at him, emotions in a flux.

Kenn spoke silently.

Tonya pulled away and left. She didn’t slam the door, but the silence echoed as if she had.

Kenn sighed. He looked over to see Zack kiss Allison. He was happy for them and miserable for himself.

Cathy peered into the cabin as Tonya left; she saw Zack wrap Allison up and lay her on the cot. She got up and slammed her door shut.

Kenn assumed this was all for a good reason. He started trying to figure out why.

Marc waved him toward Allison. “Get it by the time we finish with her or I’ll be disappointed.”

Kenn dug in as Marc connected them all.

Like with Tommy, it didn’t take long to fill Allison’s energy banks, but Marc kept going with her too, hoping to push back the cancer eating at her body. Angela had done this for John; they knew it could at least slow it. Marc thought it might even do more because they were stronger now.

Allison screamed into Zack’s mouth. “Fire!”

Zack groaned with her. “Almost done. Hang on.”

Allison’s screams blasted through the room as she tore her mouth away.

Marc let go of the cancerous thread he’d tried to tug out. He sent full strength energy at her, studying the place where the cancer met her lifeforce. He wanted to slice it off, but he didn’t know how to cauterize the wound afterward. Descendant medical knowledge was limited.

Allison shuddered, crying. “Do it again! Pull harder!”

Marc was impressed and horrified that she was so scared the pain didn’t matter. “I can’t. I don’t know how to plug the wound if you start bleeding.”

“Fire?” Morgan was also studying the cancerous mass. He’d remained connected. “Angela’s fire hand after a hard, steady pull?”

Marc linked back up, shifting the x-ray-like image to view the other side. “No. See how it’s wound into her intestine? It might rip her apart.”

“Then we have to kill it.” Morgan considered known descendant spells. “Ice? Warts used to fall off when frozen.”

“What effects will it have on the other organs? We aren’t good enough to just get the spot we need.”

Morgan scowled. “We can’t freeze her organs. Okay. No burning, melting, blowing, flooding...” Morgan let go. “I’ll work on it.”

Marc studied the pulsing tumor. “We have to make it sick, from something in her blood.” He studied Allison’s hopeful face. “How do you feel about being our test subject?”

“Honored, scared, pissed.”

Marc nodded. “With every right. Tonya wants to start with food instead of chemicals. We’ll need you to come to the lab once a day so we can examine how it reacts to each food.”

“No more pain?”

Marc shook his head. “Not unless it gets worse.” He realized the pain did matter. *She’s tough*. “We need you in the Eagles. Fight hard; follow the diet she gives you.”

“I will.” Allison forced a smile through the shakes. “Thank you for helping me.”

“It’s my honor.” Marc regarded Kenn, brow lifted.

Kenn finished emptying his water bottle and belched. “Well, Cathy is thinking about sneaking into Wade’s cot later, so I assume we’re teaching her and the other cougars that Safe Haven’s men are not a threat.”

“And?”

“We’re saving the teenagers from being sex obsessed before they reach real manhood.”

“Why go to the trouble?”

“We need kids. It’s the breeding tree.” Kenn instantly started stressing over Tonya. She could have kids; all the men would want her, and Angela would encourage her to breed again after this*. With James, maybe, since they have a spark.* “Damn you!”

Angela met Kenn’s eye. “Maybe it’s time to make an honest woman of her.”

He laughed harshly. “She won’t say yes right now!”

“She might.” Angela pulled up her memory of him leaving for Charlie’s manhood quest. “If *he* talks to her.”

Kenn realized his entire future was in the hands of the horny teenager he’d abused for years. “He’ll love this.”

Angela nodded, letting Marc cover her up against the coming chills. “Let him enjoy it.”

Kenn grunted as Marc connected them. “I will. When’s his wedding?”

“A couple weeks.” Angela gestured. “Open the door.”

Kenn did.

Charlie grinned at him. “Boo.”

Kenn flinched. “Damn it!”

Charlie laughed, joining Angela in the cot.

Angela tried not to cry as Charlie crawled into her arms. She held him, memorizing the good moment to use as a buffer.

Marc shoved until he was drained, but nothing happened.

Kenn frowned. “Is she even getting it?”

Morgan understood what was happening. “Her banks were empty and they’re huge. She dwarfs the rest of us.”

Marc went to the door, refusing to ask for Adrian’s help. He opened it, scanning the hall. “Who wants to help the boss?”

People came from all the cabins; the hall door opened. Camp members entered, determined to do their share.

Marc’s heart warmed, but he also grew nervous. *How do I connect so many individuals?*

Wade staggered to Marc. “Use my draw.” Wade gave him a sympathetic glance. “Mine is like Adrian’s.”

Marc frowned as he connected Wade. He settled near Angela as Wade went back out into the hall. He didn’t have to be near them to be useful.

Angela and the others waited for Marc’s connections, nodding to each other, smiling. Her love still washed over them even without her gifts.

Kenn supplied cover for that. “Stop using it while we’re trying to refill it!”

Angela grunted. “Yes, Dear.”

Witnesses snickered as Kenn flushed.

Marc let go of his tension and opened all the connections.

Morgan knew the camp residents needed instructions, but he wasn’t sure if it was allowed. The descendants didn’t want non-magic users having too much information.

Angela grunted through the connection. “That stings. It’s working this time.”

Everyone braced for secrets, for her pain.

Angela held onto her son and pretended the war hadn’t come.

Kenn noticed her chosen location was their old apartment, though he wasn’t in that picture. Marc was.

Marc and Charlie enjoyed that image until they realized she had shadows hiding in the curtains, under the bed, in the closets.

Angela didn’t change anything, though she refused to let the fantasy go into motion. Her mind was the one place where she could have everything she wanted. “Hit me.”

*She did that so I won’t feel her pain.* Marc realized it as he sent the first angry blast of energy.

Angela arched. “More!”

Marc hesitated.

Kenn sent him an image of her kissing Adrian.

Marc’s rage flared, but knowing she wanted to be punished dampened the fire. “How about we do it this way?” Marc shoved his love at her.

Angela moaned.

Witnesses shifted uneasily. They approved his tactic, but it was still hard to feel.

Marc only cared about finding the energy to get her filled up. He concentrated on his obsession with her, not afraid of her detecting that it had grown since he’d become Byzan.

It wasn’t enough. Her energy bank was a gaping pit of empty.

Marc grunted. “Make room.” He glared at Ivan.

Ivan, twitching from his own recharge, slid against Angela with a groan. “Hang on. This will hurt.” Ivan connected his desire to Marc’s. His desire flashed for everyone to see, but Ivan didn’t care. His feelings weren’t a secret; the only surprise would be how strong they were. That still shocked him.

Angela screamed as Ivan’s energy slammed into her. Combined with Marc and Charlie, it was strong enough to penetrate the darkness around her heart. She screamed again as energy rushed in.

Kenn and Morgan shoved hard, trying to get it over with.

So did everyone else who knew to do it, hearts hurting as her pain rang through the room and filled the hallways.

Kids were pulled from sleep. They gathered outside the crowded cabin, muttering. They didn’t like the alpha being hurt.

Angela’s shriek ripped through everyone.

Marc hesitated.

Angela flashed him an image of his dream, where she was a hag being followed by the dead.

*I’ll never let that happen!* Marc broke the lock on his reserve and flooded her.

“Ahh! Ahh! Ahh!”

Tonya and the other women in the hall tried to comfort the kids.

The children allowed it, but their angry attention never left the doorway holding Angela. Even Pam came from her misery, leaning against the wall. Her puffy eyes watched, worrying.

“We’ll never get it like this.” Morgan kept trying, but Angela’s energy bank was barely registering a change. *And she’s still screaming. I can’t take that for long.*

“Make room!” Kyle’s bark broke the connection and caused angry bodies to turn in his direction.

Kyle was carrying Jennifer. His face said it wasn’t his idea and he didn’t approve.

Jennifer waved at Marc. “Keep them under control until I get the door open. I’ve never done this before.”

People settled in, eager to view what Jennifer could do.

Eagerness changed to frowns as she kissed the tense man holding her.

Marc sighed, shaking his head. “Close the door. Kids don’t need to see this.”

Jennifer couldn’t access the mental door while she was nervous, and the only way she ever fully relaxed around other people was by concentrating on her link to Kyle.

Kyle refused to move. His hands clenched at his side; his face tightened.

Jennifer moaned.

As Jennifer’s desire flooded them and lit up the room in a bright glare, Morgan left. Light shined from under the door as he shut it. *I can’t take that either.* He spotted Wade staring into Samantha’s cabin. She and Neil were still together. Amy had left the door open when she came out to help. Morgan recognized the mirror of his desires. *But unlike me, Wade has a shot.*

Wade glowered at him. *No, I don’t*.

Morgan nodded. “Okay. So when’s the poker game start?”

Wade winced as Angela screamed again. “When we all recover from that sound.”

**3**

“Make room!”

This time, it was Jennifer’s bark that cleared space for Kyle to march through.

Morgan spotted his clenched fists against her small body and forced a blank expression.

Kyle kicked the door shut; Jennifer locked it.

Pam leaned against the wall, chuckling.

Morgan tucked her under his arm and led her toward the poker table. “Do you know how to play?”

Pam sighed. “Too well. I got tossed out of a casino once.”

Morgan chuckled. “Card shark?”

“Without knowing. After they told me, I avoided those places.” She laughed. “I was hell in online rooms for a while though.”

Morgan loved to gamble. He pulled out a chair for her. “Show me some stuff I can use tonight while you’re all crashed.”

They both froze as Angela’s whimper floated from her room.

“She’ll be better after this.” Pam already was. Marc’s magic was potent.

Morgan didn’t tell her it had taken all of them combined and then Jennifer’s special touch to help the boss. Gossip would fill her in later.

Pam settled in the chair. She let the crushing pain show. *Morgan wants Jennifer; Shawn may not come back alive from his run. I can’t have kids. Misery follows me.*

Morgan knelt at her feet. “I’m sorry.”

Pam ran a hand over his rugged cheek. “I knew when we got started. I’ve always known.” She showed him their last moment together before the sickness.

Morgan winced at the mental images. In his mind, it wasn’t Pam.

“Shawn knows too. We talked about it once.”

Morgan was ashamed and concerned. “I never wanted anyone to know. It doesn’t matter.”

“Not to her, but it does to me.” Pam sniffled. “I thought it was just a quick moment. A lot of the guys fantasize about random women in camp, but now... I thought you were mine. I know I’m only renting Shawn, but I thought…”

Morgan held Pam while she sobbed, heart breaking. *What can I do? I can’t stop the way I feel*. “I made a choice, Pam.” He tilted her chin up and began wiping away her tears. “I could have tried, like Adrian, and ripped people apart for something I can *never* have. I’m an honorable man who walked away.” He leaned in. “That doesn’t mean you’re renting me. I love you. We’re a couple. Nothing has changed.”

She sniffled again. “I can’t give you kids.”

Morgan refused to think the truth and hurt her more. “I have orphans.”

Pam hated pity and feeling like she wasn’t loved as much as someone else. “I don’t think we should see–”

Morgan kissed her. For a brief instant, passion erupted from both of them.

It died as Jennifer’s moan rolled through the hallway.

Morgan stood. “I had to open my locks tonight, to help everyone. In a couple days, those nails will go back in and you’ll never view another sign of it.” He turned toward the far door. “Don’t throw me away, Pam. I need you more than you know.”

Pam watched him go, certain it was because of Jennifer’s pleasure spiking. The noises said she liked whatever Kyle was doing.

Kenn joined Pam at the table. “She did it on purpose.”

Pam stared at him as he began shuffling the cards, sliding them around like a pro. “Did what?”

“Got loud.” Kenn fanned the cards. “She knows how Morgan feels. She always has, I would guess.” Kenn shrugged at Pam’s dismay. “She had to open up too; she’s letting her anger show. She doesn’t want anyone but Kyle. It scares her to know others want his place.”

“Cesar hurt her–a lot.” Pam had been there for Jennifer’s wedding talk. “She’ll always be scared of men.”

“Maybe. Angela hasn’t had full time with her yet.” Kenn shrugged. “Neither has Marc. Jennifer can still recover.” Kenn felt bad for Pam. He met her eye. “How can I help you?”

Pam drew in a ragged breath. “Can you make me forget this?” She smiled sadly, on the edge of sobbing again. “I was so happy…”

Kenn put a hand on her wrist. “Never without permission.” He sent a light wave of calm.

Pam relaxed, shoulders sagging. “Thank you.”

Kenn felt the attention on them as Angela’s cabin emptied; he wasn’t concerned. “Accept his choice to be with you and live with the sour feeling in your throat, like many of this ship’s people do.” He let go and went back to fanning the cards. “Or be alone for a while and try not to go crazy while you wait on them to change.”

“What if Marc says yes?”

Kenn nodded. “Of course, but he won’t. Marc doesn’t believe in blocking the pain.”

“He would if it was him…” Pam realized Marc had gone through this. “How did he survive it and come out on top?”

Kenn sucked in air. “Boo-ya.”

Pam understood that was the thread she needed to follow. She studied Marc as he emerged from the cabin.

Satisfied he’d done right by her, Kenn stood. He regarded Marc. “You done with me for the night?”

Marc nodded. “Duty at dawn?”

“You got it.” Kenn headed for his bunk in the camp hall below this one. He didn’t speak to anyone.

Marc sighed. “Kenn?”

Kenn stopped. “Yeah?”

“Tonya’s crying in the mess, alone.”

Kenn went that way.

“It’s nice of you to help him.” Ralph paused by Marc as the others went to the lower deck.

“Maybe. He doesn’t deserve her.”

Ralph chuckled. “We feel the same, but she loves him.” Ralph smiled at Daisey as she went by.

“You tell him yet?”

Ralph cackled. “Don’t nag me woman!”

Daisey clucked, heading for the ramp.

Marc laughed with them. He liked the older couple.

“We’re moving in together.”

Marc clapped him on the shoulder. “Nice.”

Ralph enjoyed the male bonding moment. He’d missed being around the Eagles. “We’re also getting hitched as soon as the boss approves it.”

Marc and the others clapped or cheered, sending good vibes through the hall of restless, recharging witnesses.

Charlie came from Angela’s cabin. “Do you know when? We’re planning our wedding; we can help with yours.” Charlie stayed with Ralph as he returned to the camp deck.

Ivan came from Angela’s cabin next, covered in her thick scent and the feel of her against him.

Marc understood the torment Ivan was carrying. He hated him for it.

Ivan leaned against the wall, brewing and stewing.

Wade came toward him.

Ivan punched him.

Wade staggered back and slid down the wall.

Ivan nodded in satisfaction and marched out of the hall.

Wade let frowning women help him up, bell rung. *Ivan has a terrific uppercut*. “I think I need to lie down.”

Marc chuckled as the hens clucked over Wade. He peered into that cabin and found Kendle sleeping on Tommy’s chest. Tommy was holding her tight and pretending to sleep.

Marc tugged the door shut and went to the poker table. He shook his head at Pam.

Pam crossed her arms over her chest. The tears were gone; determination was in their place.

Marc felt her need, but he denied her again. “Ask the other boss. That’s not my department.”

“But you won her over!”

“No. I always had her. Trying to get someone to love you more never works.”

“I can’t share.”

“Not even mentally?” Marc shrugged. “If a man here said that, the females would set him straight in a heartbeat.”

Pam knew that was true. “I deserve a full man, not one who’s only half mine.”

“You have *two* men.”

Pam scoffed. “Shawn will be gone as soon as Missy grows up. I assumed…”

“You would get to grow old with Morgan.”

She nodded stiffly.

“And then the cancer diagnosis came. Now, you found out there won’t be a happy future for you, and you’re fighting for some way to save yourself.”

Tears rolled over Pam’s cheeks. “I hurt so bad.”

Missy came from the kid’s cabin and forced her way onto Pam’s lap. She hugged her, not talking.

Pam held onto the child, not realizing what Missy was offering.

Marc did. *Missy wants a mom.* He immediately encouraged that. “She loves you because you love Shawn.”

Missy’s grip tightened. “And she’s nice. We could be friends.” Missy paused. “If she can like me. I’m awful bad sometimes.”

“You are not!” Pam cried harder. “Of course, I can like you.” She sobbed again. “And then I’ll lose you both.”

Missy put a hand on Pam’s wet cheek, ignoring Marc’s denial of telling her the truth. “No. When we go home, Shawn and I will lose *you*.” Missy hugged her again. “But you save my Shawn. I couldn’t love you more.”

Marc left the table before he started bawling. *Why does this all have to hurt so much?*

His demon was fast to supply the answer. *Because it’s the apocalypse; I thought you knew.*

# Chapter Seven

**I Should Have Known**

**1**

**“C**an we talk?”

Tonya jerked out of her misery to find Kenn standing in the mess doorway. She quickly scrubbed her face.

Kenn saw she had the glow setting activated on her flashlight on the neat counter. He slowly approached and slid onto the stool next to her. “What can I do?”

Tonya didn’t feel like talking about it because she didn’t have an answer. “There isn’t anything. I either have to get over it, or we have to move on.”

“Does it help to know that she only wants a descendant? It really doesn’t have anything to do with emotions.”

Tonya thought about it. “Maybe.”

Kenn watched smoke roll out of her ears as her fast mind added up clues and chose her next option.

Tonya stared at him. “How do we encourage her and Wade as a couple?”

Kenn chuckled. “Wade already did that for us.” Kenn stood, holding out a hand. “You are invited to the game, you know.”

Tonya took his hand, ignoring the way her body lit up at the contact. “I know. Neil is saving me a seat.” She let go and turned toward the door.

Kenn frowned, following. “Neil? Why are you spending time with Neil?”

Kenn was distracted before she could answer. Charlie hurried by, going into the mess.

Tonya saw it. “Go on. I’ll see you up there.” She kept walking.

Kenn knew he should stay with her, but Charlie had information he needed.

Charlie rifled through the neatly stacked counters and cabinets, taking a few items. After he stored them in his bag, he left a note on the counter to let the kitchen staff know. When he turned around, Kenn was leaning against the door.

He stared at the boy, seeing his body was bigger now, sturdier. He wore Eagle clothes and gear, and he kept his chin up. He wasn’t afraid to make eye contact.

Charlie paused, tension coming into his frame. “What?”

Kenn relaxed his body language. He didn’t realize he’d been threatening. He was just nervous. “I need you to do something for me.”

Charlie scanned Kenn’s thoughts. He saw it was possible to get a lot of amusement out of this, but he didn’t want to stretch things out because that would hurt Tonya and she didn’t deserve it. Charlie moved around him and out into the hallway. “Walk me up to mom’s cabin. I’ll let you know by the time we get there.”

Kenn fell into protection mode as the boy’s eyes went glassy and the hum of raw power filled the hallway. He hadn’t realized Charlie would need to use his gifts. *But Angela knew. She gave me permission for this by telling me to talk to him*. Kenn wondered how many others were picking up on the subtle clues in her words and orders. She may not have her gifts right now, but she was functioning as if she did. So far, it was holding, even with the Eagles. Kenn doubted more than half a dozen individuals knew at this point. Considering how many mind readers were on the ship, it was amazing.

Charlie scanned the viable options as they walked; he saw things that could and would go wrong on many of them, but only two gave Kenn the happy ending that he and Tonya were hoping for. The first one, removing Courtney, would never be honestly considered by any of them. Charlie frowned. *Except Neil...* The boy looked up at Kenn.

Kenn shook his head. “I would never do that. I’ve been a lot of things, and I still am several of those, but I’m not a murderer.”

Charlie went back to his exploration of the final option.

Kenn didn’t snoop in Charlie’s mind. He paid attention to the duty. Charlie was roaming free for the most part, but now that almost all of the recharge patients had crashed out, that left a lot of opportunity for stupid people to do stupid things.

An instant before Charlie began to speak, hair stood up on Kenn’s arm. *He’s got something and it’s good, but I’m going to hate it.*

“You have to bond with them again. Everyone who has hurt their mate or spouse has to reconnect with them or break the final bonds and let go. There is no other way around the chaos and misery that comes from heartaches. If bonding can be reestablished, then trust might regrow. There’s no guarantee. The love that brought the couple together will no longer be enough to sustain the relationship. There must be something else that holds them together.” Charlie came out of the daze, but he waited before speaking. It was important that Kenn got this part on his own.

Kenn dug in. *What’s the one thing that Tonya and I have never shared?*

Jeff strode by on his way to collect a few things for the kids who weren’t sleeping yet. His Eagle jacket, freshly washed, glinted at Kenn.

Kenn groaned. “She’s pregnant! I can’t train her to be an Eagle right now!”

Charlie shrugged, voice pointed. “Why not? My mom is.”

Kenn swallowed a nasty remark as they reached the recharge hallway. The noises were loud, but good, telling them the worst was over.

Charlie smiled and nodded at people as he went to Angela’s door, chessboard in one hand, goodie bag in the other. “Tonya is very loyal to the dream now. Don’t forget to consider that.” Charlie slipped in and shut the door.

Kenn scanned the crowded lounge at the far end of the hall. The poker area held a long brown couch, a long, wide table stacked with drinks and snacks, and five round tables with chairs. The center table was the only live game going. The others were filled with rookies who wanted to play with the senior men and women. There were other decks of cards, but none of them were being used.

Kenn also saw stacks of dusty books on the wall shelves and garbage cans that were getting full. The carpet was covered in a fine layer of dirt. The cleaning crew would have a few hours work here once these recharges were finished. Kenn assumed Marc planned to have them clean between each session. He hoped so. If not, the job would be twice as ugly and take twice as long. He refused to think about the smells. *Someone has gas.*

He spotted Tonya on the couch with a book. She had her legs curled under her red sweater and appeared to be content. Kenn left. *I need to think.*

“Tonya! Want to sit in for a few hands?”

None of the dozen people waiting for a spot at the table got upset at Wade’s offer. Tonya had earned the right to go first.

Tonya smiled at all the five seat poker table occupants. “Thank you, no. I’ll crash soon.”

Wade shrugged. “Okay. Who’s next?”

Monica stood, eager to spend time at the table with Jayda, Wade, Theo, and Marc. She slid into the chair and waited for Wade to count out a stack of chips.

“Here ya go.” Wade smiled at her.

Monica blushed. *He’s cute, even with that bruise.* “Distraction doesn’t work on me; deal the cards.”

Wade chuckled with everyone else, but he kept smiling at the dependable woman who had been trusted with protecting their kids.

Monica’s cheeks grew redder. “I’m going to beat the pants off you.”

Wade’s mouth opened.

“Don’t give him openings like that!”

Witnesses groaned and laughed at Marc’s comment, including Wade and Monica.

Wade dealt the cards smoothly, flipping them across the table with skill. All the Eagles spent a lot of their downtime playing cards.

Marc’s eyes narrowed. He’d only been in the game for two hands and Wade had won them both. “What did Pam teach you?”

Wade chuckled, ignoring the sore jaw. “Nothing yet, but I’m always–”

“Don’t give him openings like that!” Pam went to the bathroom as everyone laughed. Jennifer’s spell had let her nap and then Kenn had helped her mood. Now the crash was coming.

Morgan knew. He’d been surprised when she got up at all. He waited by the bathroom door for her to come out, certain she would be ready to try full sleep now. Knowing you were going to die was awful, but Missy had actually given Pam a little peace. Her death would save Shawn’s life–it was a worthy way to die when it could have been so much uglier.

Morgan locked up those feelings. He would get Pam settled, then rejoin the people here or do a shift on duty. He wasn’t ready to sleep yet. He’d walked the top decks, hoping it would wear him out while he tried to seal up his secrets, but none of it had worked. The day had been too emotional on top of their crisis. He hadn’t recovered yet either.

Neil came from Angela’s cabin. “The Boss said she wants to hear more of that.” Neil went to the last table with chairs open for those waiting to play. “She’s beating the snot out of him.”

“Getting tired yet?”

Neil frowned at Marc. “Not that I saw.”

Marc shrugged. “She had her four-hour nap earlier.”

Eagles stored those words, certain it meant something.

Marc frowned. “Who didn’t ante?”

Wade gestured at Monica. “I distracted her.”

Monica flushed at the laughter as she tossed in a chip.

“Pot’s good.” Marc jerked a thumb. “One.”

“Ohh!”

“He’s dangerous!”

Those waiting to play assumed Marc had a good hand.

Neil could see from where he was sitting. Marc was trying to fill in a straight on either end. Neil glanced over Marc’s shoulder and found Tonya looking back. Neil motioned to the chair across from him.

Tonya smiled, getting up.

“Two.” Theo discarded his choices. He scanned the cabin where Debra was stashed and crashed, then pushed away the need to go care for her. *Wade covered it.* He glowered at the man.

“Three.” Monica discarded, realizing they all knew that meant she had a pair.

Jayda dropped four cards. “Hit me hard.”

Wade rubbed his jaw. “I already took one for that team.”

People snickered, taking quick glances toward Ivan.

Ivan glanced up from the book he was reading at the table nearby. “He’s stalling so you won’t know he’s bluffing.”

“Hey!” Wade gave a hurt look. “I thought you were on my side.”

Ivan stared, brows crossing. “Why would you ever think that?”

Wade shrugged, grin widening. “They say you always hurt the one you love.”

Laughter flooded the hallway; descendants and normals alike relaxed, shifting into deeper, healing sleep.

Wade dropped one card into the pile.

Marc stared. “You are bluffing.”

Wade waved. “Come find out.”

“I will.” Marc tossed a chip. “Opening bet’s five.”

“Call.” Theo tossed in a chip, yawning. He’d done a full shift on the bridge before coming here.

Monica put in a chip without showing her eagerness. She was playing poker with descendants; she refused to think about her cards.

“I’m out.” Jayda dropped her cards into the pile. She went to the couch behind the table and stretched out as the hand went on.

Molly hurried over, but she stayed quiet, observing.

Wade tossed two chips. “Cost ya five more to see ‘em.”

“Call.” Marc and everyone else tossed in chips. Marc gestured. “Let’s see ‘em.”

Wade splayed four jacks with an eight backup.

The audience cried out, sure Wade had won the hand.

Marc flipped his cards. “Beats my straight.”  
Neil looked over, interrupting his words to Tonya. *He filled in that straight...?*

Tonya waited, content and getting sleepy. She scanned for Kenn and didn’t find him. He was sleeping in different places each day now; she didn’t know if he’d already crashed somewhere. She sighed miserably and turned her attention back to Neil.

“That beats me.” Theo dropped the cards and picked up his cigar.

Monica put down four kings with an eight for backup.

Shouts filled the hall.

Marc’s hard tone cut through the din. “You cheated.”

Monica nodded. “But you can’t prove it.”

“She is an Eagle!”

More mirth smothered bad dreams and lifted moods. The ship’s wall brightened.

Neil stared at Tonya. *Did she just rub the ship?*

Tonya’s shoulders tensed.

Neil brought up his clouds.

Tonya frowned. “Let’s start with that. Cloud walls tell us someone is lying now. We know it for what it is–a shield.”

Neil lowered his wall, hoping he could really trust her. “I don’t know how to do anything else.”

Tonya’s eyes glittered. “You’re not dirty enough; I am. I’ll give you new walls.”

Neil waited, not sure what price she might demand.

“Nothing, Neil. It’s FND.”

Neil’s brow puckered. “For who?”

Tonya glanced toward Angela’s closed door.

“I should have known.”

Tonya nodded. “Yeah, you’ll need that quick brain. You got by with it for now.”

“But punishment will come.”

“Of course.” Tonya leaned in, using hand code to keep the message private. *If you train her team and you make Samantha happy, she’ll take it easy on you. If you really earn it back with the camp, Marc, and the Eagles, she might even like you again.*

Neil sighed. *What re-earns her trust?*

Every descendant there turned toward Neil with hard eyes.

“That’s what I thought.” Neil had already known he couldn’t earn it back. With Angela, when you lost it, trust was gone forever.

Tonya stood. “I’m glad you understand the mountain you’ll climb for nothing.”

Neil shrugged, cheeks red as everyone kept listening. “It’s the right thing to do–it’s what an Eagle does.”

“Eagles face their mistakes.” Tonya grunted as she stretched, eyes going to the man coming into the hall.

“Can we set some time apart to work?”

Tonya nodded at Neil. “I’ll send you a location and time in a few days.”

“Thank you.”

“Good night.”

“Same.” Neil watched Tonya stop by Kenn. Their XO stared at her with regret and hope.

Tonya shook her head. “Not yet; still thinking.” She walked to the ramp.

Kenn took the opposite hall down to the camp area so she didn’t feel pressured. He was sleeping there because the camp liked it, but he would stay away from her until she wanted to talk. Tonight had been progress.

Kenn wondered how Angela’s time with Charlie was going. He didn’t know it, but Angela was giving him a final evaluation for his wedding. Tracy would get hers during the second recharge. Kenn doubted the moment would be pretty, but he thought tonight’s game and chat might go over without Charlie even recognizing what was going on. Tracy wouldn’t get that lucky.

**2**

“Tracy’s a lucky woman. You’ve become a strong, independent, trustworthy young man.”

Charlie gaped at his mom. “Where did that come from?”

“Check.” Angela moved her rook forward to block his king’s retreat. “I just wanted you to know how I feel.”

Charlie studied the board, searching for an escape. “I feel the same.” He backed his king into the corner–the only place left. “I do wish you liked Tracy more.”

Angela grunted, taking his king. “So do I; we’ll all adjust. Checkmate.”

“Reset?”

Angela nodded even though she could feel the crash coming. The time with Charlie was priceless. “Try to copy what I just did to you.”

Charlie ran through the seven moves she’d made. “How are things with you and dad?”

Angela smiled. “Really good.”

Charlie swept the pawns back into place while she worked on the other pieces. “And Kenn? Adrian?” He frowned. “Ivan?”

Angela chuckled. “I’m all good now.”

“Would you tell me if you weren’t?”

“Right now, I would. Too tired to hide it.” She smiled softer. “Besides, I trust you.”

“Do you miss Adrian?”

Angela winced. *Direct hit.* She slowly nodded. “A little.”

Charlie’s voice lowered. “Dad will give you time with him if you need it.”

“Yes. I don’t. ...yet.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay.”

Angela moved her pieces like he had, wondering why he was asking personal questions. It occurred to her that he was doing his own evaluation. Why would he do that? *To protect me, Marc, Tracy, or himself?*

Charlie reddened. “Actually, I’m trying to act like you. Check.”

Angela chuckled, relieved. “I can live with that.” She sighed. “Up to a point. Only follow the good, smart stuff, okay?”

“I’m trying. Checkmate.”

“Nice.” They began resetting the pieces again.

“Tracy really wants you to like her.”

Angela didn’t answer.

Charlie sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Angela put a hand on his wrist. “I love you. I’ll get used to her. Don’t worry over it.”

Charlie smiled. “Thanks, mom.”

Angela’s grip tightened. “Are you sure?”

Charlie nodded, shielding his thoughts from her. “I had a couple moments of doubt, but I’m good now.”

“What happened?”

Charlie hoped it wasn’t too much honesty. “I got laid.”

Angela laughed out loud. “You sound like Wade!”

Charlie blushed, head shaking. “Nope, but I aspire.”

Angela faked a cringe. “No!”

Charlie leaned back, enjoying the moment. “I needed this.”

“Me too.” She moved a pawn out. “Are you nervous?”

Charlie shrugged. “A little.” He grinned. “Dad and the guys have me covered.”

“Bachelor party?”

Charlie nodded again, cheeks going dark. “I even get to have a beer. He said only one, but hey.”

Angela was glad the guys were getting along; she didn’t overrule that choice. When you were getting married at fifteen, a beer during the bachelor party was the least of the waiting problems. She hid her concern and smiled at him again. The youth from the war now matured faster than pre-war teens. The old days, where thirteen had been the cusp of real manhood, were about to make a comeback.

“Are we part of the breeding tree?”

“Of course.” Her voice lowered. “I’ve searched, but there’s darkness. Watch out for her.”

“I will. You’ll warn me?”

Angela grunted, voice thick with misery. “As long as it benefits the camp, yes.”

Charlie knew she’d just given him the honesty only Marc and Adrian got from her.

Angela sighed. “I could never say that to Marc without it causing a fight.”

Charlie considered that. “Does it mean you’re corrupt?”

“It means I’ll do anything for these people, over my family and my lovers.”

Charlie was stunned by the honesty this time. “Wow.”

Angela nodded, moving her knight out. “It’s why Adrian picked me. He knew when I committed to the dream, I would give my all, in every way.” Angela’s pain flashed over both of them.

Allison stirred, lashes fluttering.

Dog peered at them from Allison’s side. He’d come back up as soon as the screaming stopped.

Angela locked it up.

Charlie reached over and hugged her.

Angela held him, but she didn’t cry or let that misery out again. The loss of her babies would sink them with her tears.

The door opened; Marc and Wade entered, carrying Mike and Mia.

Angela’s misery threatened to suck them all into the abyss as she realized Marc had known and planned on it*. I have to keep it locked up better.* She sniffled as she took the sleepy, cooing infants. “Thank you.”

Marc kissed the top of her head. “Should I leave Wade in here too?”

All of them broke out laughing, startling the twins.

Angela grinned at Charlie. “They need to be changed. You can help.”

Marc and Wade left while the good vibes were flowing and the smells hadn’t been released. Marc shut the door, proud of how smooth that had been.

Wade sniggered at Marc’s expression as he walked back toward the game they’d paused. He flashed a smile at Jayda, who had lifted her chin and scented the air like she smelled danger. “You need an escort to bed?”

Jayda giggled.

Ivan scowled at Wade as the senior Eagle helped Jayda to her feet.

Wade glanced over. “Ivan can have my spot; I kept it warm for him.”

Fresh laughter spewed through the hall.

Wade took Jayda’s arm, yawning. “About time for me too...”

Jayda knew he meant it. She dislodged her arm from his and kissed him on the cheek without a purple bruise. “I left a warm couch for you.”

Wade smiled gratefully. Of all his lovers, Jayda was the closest to understanding what drove him.

“I’ll walk you down.” Neil joined her. “I need to get an update before Marc sends me.”

Marc closed his mouth. He’d been about to order that.

Molly glowered at Neil. “Someone good can have your seat.”

Neil hurried Jayda from the hall so the mood didn’t sink.

Jayda allowed it. “Getting out of his sight?”

“You know it.”

“Why does Molly hate your guts?”

Neil frowned. “Angela said you were smart; figure it out.”

“I know all about your lies; I just don’t know what you did to Molly.” Jayda studied him as they walked. “She’s really very nice–to everyone.”

Neil knew that. He grunted. “I think I scared her.” He held the door to the stairs, sweeping for trouble. He stepped back, letting her go first. “I’ll handle it.”

“Okay.” Jayda didn’t want to get involved. She’d felt she should ask because Molly was a teammate.

Neil was pulled in. “How did it go?”

Jayda grunted. “Weak, looking like an old hag, she still beat our asses.” Jayda showed her newest bruise. “And it was only a demo!”

Neil chuckled. “Welcome to the Eagles.”

“I know, right?” Jayda grinned. “It’s a hell of a rush.”

“Did she use kai?”

Jayda shook her head, yawning. She’d done a double duty shift today to prove herself, but she couldn’t wait to get comfortable and drop out like a rock. “She said we’d get into that next time, but just the opening set.”

Neil again swept the hall at the next door before letting her go on. “I could help you get very good at kai.”

Jayda paused, hand coming to her hip. “Why?”

Neil sighed, deep and miserable. “FND.”

“Ah.” Jayda shrugged, leaving. “Set it up; I’ll be there.”

Neil watched until she made it into the cabin, then shut the door. *Angela was right; she is smart.*

Neil did a fast round of the camp deck, nodding to the guards. James, Peter, and Quinn were on duty here and had things under control. Almost everyone was sleeping. It was midnight and the last weeks had been hard.

Neil went down a deck to check on the entertainment floor.

He found it empty except for the sauna zone. Three tubs were occupied. Neil made a note of who all was there, then marched up the opposite stairs so he could do a fast check of the brig. He didn’t interrupt the couples. The hot tubs had become known as an adult pleasure center. Marc knew. He said it was a small price to pay to keep Eagles from humping in the halls. Neil had laughed, but the ring of truth under it bothered him. *Why are people so wired for sex first and thinking last?*

Distracted, Neil didn’t see Ian come from the brig.

“Hey, Neil.”

Neil dropped into a crouch, hand going for his gun.

Ian laughed, hard.

Neil slowly stood, flushing in humiliation.

Ian’s amusement faded. He stared at Neil with open dislike.

Neil walked away. *They all want my place.*

Ian went to his next check in spot, making a note in his book. If Neil wasn’t very careful, he would still lose it all. The camp loved him. They’d supported him against Adrian and so had the Eagles, but that was where the support ended. *Neil fucked up; his job needs to be given to someone who would never lie to the boss, who would never betray the dream for a mate. Neil and Kyle have both failed that test and Angela knows it. She’ll slide the rest of us into those slots, where we belong.*

Neil, not far enough away to avoid it, caught that in full. His heart dropped into his shoes. *I need more than Tonya’s shield. I need a miracle.*

Neil thought of the weigh station and bowed his head. *I really am sorry for all the pain and misery I caused everyone.*

Thunder rolled above the ship.

Neil sighed. “Yeah, I know I deserve this. That doesn’t make it any easier. I miss being the good Neil.”

Emma came down the stairs behind him. “We all miss the good Neil.” She paused by him, expression thoughtful. “Is he dead?”

Neil slowly shook his head, not sure why he was answering the cougar at all.

“Then let him out soon or things will get ugly for you when training restarts.” Emma kept going down the stairs. “I’m doing a check for Marc. We’re 5-by so far.”

Neil’s lips thinned at the subtle reminder he wasn’t needed anymore. He turned on his heel and went back up to the poker game. *Samantha and Amy still need me. That’s enough.*

# Chapter Eight

**I Might Kill Them**

**1**

**“I**’m out.” Theo stood up, yawning. “Good night.”

More individuals rose from the table, going to their cabins and bunks.

Rookies waited to be waved into the empty seats, but their attention followed Theo as he went down the hall. Some were curious where he would sleep. Others admired his body.

Theo didn’t notice. He paused by the neat cabin where Debra was sleeping, alone. Her bunkmate was currently snoring in Daryl’s arms.

*If she gets mad, I’ll deal with it.* Theo slid into the empty bunk.

Debra lifted her head, ready to throw something at him. The feeling of being safe that hit convinced her to leave him alone. She shut her eyes, sure that he’d be gone before she woke up. Debra crashed.

Wade tossed his garbage and strolled to the couch. He’d played a few more hands to show he had stamina, but he really wanted to rest before his next chore. He curled onto his side, putting his back to the game and tables. *Wish I had someone to nap with who actually wants me for me.* Kenn’s thought was eating at him a little. Wade smothered his loneliness and tried to rest.

“Good night.” Monica and Molly headed for the camp cabins. They were both on the next recharge list. Before that, they had duty as guards and den mothers.

Men’s attention followed the two sexy women as they left, but no one catcalled or made lewd comments.

Marc heard a cabin door open. He turned to see little Amy stagger from Samantha’s cabin. She scanned for a clear path.

*Where’s she going?* Marc watched, ready to react if there was a problem.

Amy pushed by rookies being waved to the table. She ducked between Morgan’s legs and slid up onto the couch.

Wade didn’t open his eyes. “Raincheck, sweetheart?”

Amy slapped his leg. “Move over!”

Wade jerked up, quick reflexes grabbing the girl before she fell. He held her there, not sure what to do.

Amy held her arms out, yawning.

Wade melted. “Okay.” He tucked her under his big arm and slid down on the couch. “Don’t pee on me.”

“Won’t.” Amy crashed right back out.

Wade ignored the surprised, touched people watching him. He felt the child’s comforting aura surround his mind. *That’s nice*. He drifted, no longer lonely.

“Whose deal is it?” Trent was eager to play while a few senior Eagles were still up.

“Neil’s.” Kyle came from Jennifer’s cabin. He gestured at Morgan and then Neil, who was coming down the hall. “Let’s play the rookie level.”

Neil joined them, thrilled to be included. “Sounds good.” He scanned, seeing who was here and who had crashed. Neil spotted Amy and Wade. He smiled. “She’s a good kid. He needs that.”

Marc snorted. “Really?”

Neil took the empty chair. “He’s lonely. Amy senses that and tries to heal it. That’s how the UN found her. She came to them–to help the other kids.”

“By herself?” Marc was amazed.

“Yep. She hid when the draft came.” Neil’s voice didn’t change as he delivered the rest. “Her father hid them in the basement and went to help defend their local police department. The mother got drunk and passed out. Looters came through after the draft trucks. Amy hid while her mom was raped and murdered. She was alone with the body for weeks before she heard a UN transport go by with other kids like herself. She followed.” Neil’s eyes went over the now lightly snoring girl. “It’s a miracle she survived.”

“Seth told us he went home and searched!” Jeff came from the kid cabin where he’d been dozing in a chair. “He told us he went back for her!”

Unease flowed through the hall, making people shift restlessly. No one liked finding out Seth had lied.

“Why would he do that?!” Samantha had woken the instant Amy left her side. She couldn’t stop her anger either, shouting. “How could he do that?!”

Neil winced. Samantha hadn’t known the full story either. “He heard Safe Haven on the radio and hoped they were already there. When he realized they weren’t, he decided they couldn’t have survived and left them for dead.”

Many people thought of Kenn; he’d done the same thing to Angela.

Jeff wanted to hit something. He hadn’t been this mad in a very long time. “He deserved what he got and then some!” Jeff gestured at Neil. “You’re off my shit list. Deal me in.”

Neil shuffled the worn cards, waiting for the next reaction. He hadn’t expected support. He wasn’t trying to earn it by telling them the truth. “I just wanted everyone to know she’s been through a lot. Be nice to her and you get the same in return.”

“And when there’s a problem?” Marc already knew Amy wasn’t settling down much.

Wade rubbed Amy’s arm. The conversation had brought alertness back to his brain. “Neil and I will cover it, along with Jeff, Kenn, you, the boss, and anyone else who has the patience.”

“She won’t get out of hand as long as we give her outlets and love.” Neil gestured toward the kid cabin. “All of them need it. Safe Haven can help.”

“We have to protect these kids.” Wade hugged Amy tighter, heart captured. “We only have nineteen of them left!”

Everyone winced as their Romeo’s voice cracked.

Silence echoed.

Marc went to the drink counter and got a bottle of water. He downed it, waiting for someone to speak or break the tension. *I’m not doing it. You broke the mood; recover it.*

Ivan came from the showers. He walked to the cabin where Wade should have been. “I’m taking your bed.”

Wade’s chest rumbled. “No worries. I’m usually covered for three hotties on a cot.”

Laughter exploded down the hall, settling the uneasy vibes.

Marc opened a direct line to Ivan while scanning to discover who could hear them. *Good job.*

*He’s an asshole.*

*Yes, I am.* Wade didn’t want Marc to think he was hiding it.

Neither did Morgan. He met Marc’s eye and nodded.

Marc’s lips twitched. *Anyone else already into my private line?*

A dozen hands went up.

Marc stared in surprise as Amy’s little hand lifted. *I thought she was asleep.*

Neil chuckled. “She’s good at that. The Eagles can take lessons from her.”

Anger flared, turning Marc’s eyes red. “Did she give *you* lessons?”

Everyone tensed.

Neil began dealing the cards. “I studied her methods; she didn’t know until the very end.” Neil subtly watched them all, ready to jump over the table and protect the girl. He saw Wade’s hand tighten on Amy, but he didn’t know exactly why.

“The very end?” Marc locked down on his rage, not wanting to bring Angela from her cabin.

“She sensed it.” Neil knew this had to come out; he set the deck down so that his hands were empty. “I had a moment of doubt. My wall slipped.” Neil stared at the cute girl. “She showed me how she survived, how she was abandoned.”

“And you snapped.”

Neil shook his head. “I followed through.”

Marc’s attention swung to the shivering girl now trying to burrow under Wade’s arm. “Did *she* know that would happen?”

Wade deftly rolled, sliding the child behind him, where she was completely hidden between the couch and his big body. “Does it matter?” Wade let the ugly side of him show. “She deserved justice; Neil gave it to her.”

Marc was surprised by Wade’s reaction. “If she triggered him, we need to know.”

Neil recovered from his own shock at Wade’s defense. “Why? We have a lot of dangerous individuals on this ship.” Neil slowly sat back, leaving himself open now that Amy was covered. “If you want to beat on someone, I’m right here.”

Marc scowled. “Do you really think I would hurt her?” Marc scanned the faces and found more than half who weren’t sure. He stiffened. “That’s not fair. Angela has killed thousands and you don’t view her that way.”

“We know she’ll die for us.” Wade’s voice was still ugly. “We only know you’ll die for *her*. With you in charge, we don’t feel covered.”

Marc’s anger faded. He sighed. “Okay. I’ll work on that.”

People stared, not expecting him to be reasonable.

Marc shrugged at them. “Angie isn’t just rubbing off on you.” He studied Wade, aware of the man’s thick mental wall covering the child. “She has to face it; you have to make sure she knows it was wrong.” Marc held up a hand before anyone could protest. “I don’t need to be involved if you really think I’d hurt her.” Marc’s lips curled. “But it’s cruel to make our enforcer do it.”

No one liked the thought of asking Jennifer to punish the children she adored.

“I offered to do it so she didn’t have to.” Marc’s anger flowed over them. “It’s me or Jennifer; you’re not shoving this one off on Angela just because it’s hard.”

Shame came now as they understood the boss had ordered their kids cleared and Marc was doing it so Angela didn’t suffer.

“What happens to the kids you can’t clear?” Wade still hadn’t moved; neither had Amy. Her little heart was pounding against his back.

“That’s up to the boss.”

“Obviously.” Neil sneered. “What did she decide?”

Marc grunted. “She didn’t. She said it’s either a camp choice or the Eagles will handle it.” He picked up the hand Neil had dealt.

Neil scowled. “That’s when you volunteered! You saw this coming. You knew.”

Marc grimaced. “It’s not easy to face these moments even when you know the outcome. I owe her another apology.” Marc scanned his cards. “I don’t want the Eagles handling these ugly chores anymore. She said you all wouldn’t take it well if I removed that duty. I told her I could get you to agree in about ten minutes. I still have...” Marc checked the wall clock. “Three.”

“We haven’t agreed to anything.” Wade shifted into a sitting position that still hid the little girl. “What happens to the kids we can’t clear?”

Marc let his misery show. “They’ll have to be locked up. Either we handle that mentally or they have to go into the jail.” Marc’s anger flashed out again. “Do any of you want to see kids in our brig? ‘Cause I sure as hell don’t.” He gestured, cards in hand. “I don’t even like it that Ramer is there, away from us.”

Kyle felt Jennifer wake. “She’s not doing it. The boss isn’t doing it. No jailing. Marc locks their gifts and removes memories where he needs to. Agreed?”

Everyone looked at Neil or Wade before speaking.

Wade and Neil spoke at the same time.

“How will they be cleared?”

“Tell me about the clearing.”

“He wants to search my mind and see how dark I am.” Amy’s voice came from behind Wade. “Do it now.”

Wade shrugged at Neil’s questioning glance.

Marc ignored her protectors. “Come on out. We have to touch. I’m not as good at it as Jennifer or Angela.”

Amy slowly peered over Wade’s shoulder.

Wade rose, bringing the girl. He knelt between Neil and Marc, but he didn’t remove the hand around her waist.

Neil noted the position and recognized the handoff set up. If things went bad, Wade would block Marc while he got Amy out of here.

“I guess I should like it that you’re all so scared of me.” Marc glowered. “But I don’t.”

Amy stared at Marc. “I’ve been bad.”

Marc locked up his heart. “Show me all of it.”

Amy lowered her mental walls, shivering.

Wade and Neil prepared to lose their place in camp, and maybe their lives, to defend her.

Marc moved slowly, glad Angela had warned him how twitchy they would be over the remaining kids. He extended a hand and waited for Amy to touch him.

Amy sighed as she did it. “You feel good.”

Marc didn’t smile. “You don’t. All that darkness is swallowing your light.”

Amy nodded, tears welling. “I miss the fights; I miss my friends.” A tear dripped down her cheek. “They made me bad and I liked it.”

Marc dug in. “Show me the rest. We’re almost done.”

The witnesses were relieved to hear it. They were all following Amy’s memories. It was ugly. When they came to Jeff’s role in the fighting, heads swiveled to him in disapproval.

Jeff shrugged, voice hard. “The boss said to get them back to Safe Haven alive. We ran the options. That one worked.”

Marc kept digging, finding a black thread that kept appearing and vanishing. He grunted. “I already know. Stop hiding in the dark.”

Amy sucked in a breath. “I knew what he was thinking. I wanted it. I helped Neil kill them.”

“By showing him how you survived?”

Amy sniffled, tears rolling in thick streams now. “I pushed him into it.”

“Did he know?”

“Yes.” Amy’s love for Neil crossed her face. “He protected me.”

“And you protected him. That’s why you couldn’t come into the light.” Marc withdrew. “Now, you can. We all know.”

“I’m sorry it makes you angry.”

Marc, and everyone else, was reminded that deep down, Amy was just a child no matter how evolved or mean she’d been forced to become.

“Actually, it makes me sad that you had to go through all that. Angela feels the same way.” Marc ignored Wade’s flinch as he held out his arms.

Amy slowly climbed Wade’s shoulder and let Marc settle her on his lap.

Marc smiled at her. “Would you like those memories to go away for a while?”

None of them had expected him to ask the kids what they wanted. Even Amy stared at him, tears pausing.

“You haven’t broken any rules in Safe Haven, have you, other than this issue with Neil?”

Amy shook her head, almost smiling. “Like it here.” She grabbed a stale pretzel from the table. “Good eats.”

Marc chuckled, shifting so she could also reach the popcorn. “Safe Haven is a place of second chances. Anger is hard for anyone to control, but descendants are dangerous even without it.” Marc took a bite of the pretzel she held up. “Do you like normals?”

Amy crunched, head bobbing. “Caleb is my bff.”

Almost everyone laughed.

Neil and Wade waited for the final outcome.

“What about adults?”

“Tonya is good. She has kitties!” Amy held up another pretzel.

Marc shook his head. “Popcorn.”

Amy giggled as she shoved a piece into his mouth.

Wade finally rose from his crouch, watching in amazement as Marc bonded, openly, with the introverted child they’d been scared to let leadership evaluate.

“Any other adult normals you like?”

Amy shrugged. “Don’t know anyone else.”

Marc got to the last question, the one that mattered most. “Do you want to hurt anyone on this ship?”

Amy thought about it. “Some of the camp...”

*No!*

*Don’t!*

Wade and Neil both tried to stop Amy from exposing the rest of it, but it was too late.

“They think about hurting me. I might kill them.”

Marc wasn’t surprised. “If they hurt you?”

Amy shook her head. “If they hurt my family. Or the alpha.”

Marc tensed. “Someone in the camp is dangerous to Angela?”

Amy shivered. “I don’t know them. I see it in my dreams, when I walk.”

“What do you see?”

“Someone else is walking too; they hate the alpha, but they also fear her.”

Every adult head turned toward the cabin where Kendle was still with Tommy.

“Not me.” Kendle’s hard voice came from the cabin. “We all know I hate her; I also love that cruel bitch, so don’t get hung up and miss the real threat.”

Marc studied Amy. “Is there a way you can show me what you see?”

“So you can kill them?”

Marc winced even as he nodded. “That’s what this is all about, Amy. You have to turn the job over to me now.”

Amy relaxed. “Thank you.” She hugged Marc.

Marc froze as the tiny girl shoved powerful images into his mind, replaying a dream that she didn’t understand but she knew meant trouble.

“Those are the normals.”

Marc stored the sound of the voices and the shape of their shadows. “They’re scared of us.”

Amy sighed, still hugging Marc. “They should be. Even some in this room think we should rule the world.”

“And if they push us?” Marc needed to confirm that even the kids knew it was coming.

“There will be another war!” Amy slapped the bowl of popcorn, sending it flying. “No more war! Stop it!”

Marc held the girl as she cried, patting her little shoulder while hot tears rolled down his neck. “Is that war already set, Amy? Show us what’s coming...”

Amy stiffened. Darkness shot out of her and vanished as old magic took over. An adult voice full of fear came from her little mouth. “War between us and them will send mankind over the edge of extinction. We will not survive the final battle. Both sides will lose and nature will reclaim what was always hers.” Amy sagged against him.

Marc brought up his shield, preventing anyone from reaching them. “Ten seconds. Count it.” He began shoving in energy to replace what she’d lost and allow her gifts to grow.

Amy screamed, arms becoming a vise around his neck.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

Wade and Neil alternated a fast count off, both furious that Marc had tricked them into getting her out of their reach.

“Ten.” Neil was standing against Marc’s shield, eyes glowing. “Drop it.”

Amy’s balled up fist against Marc’s chest tightened. “Take them away.”

Marc stopped pushing energy. He kissed the top of her head. Magic flowed over the child, easing her mental pain.

Amy stared up at him. “I still remember.”

Marc chuckled. “When you go to sleep, it will fade. With each minute you sleep, more of it will go. When you wake up, those places will be hazy.”

“I’ll still know Neil and Sammi and my Wade?”

“Of course. You just won’t be able to pull up anything from the war or the west.”

She frowned. “What if I want it back?”

Marc shook his head. “I’ll never do that. Those memories are awful. They locked you in darkness. Years without them will let you be filled up by Safe Haven’s goodness. When you do finally remember, you’ll be old enough to handle it.”

“I won’t be that Amy anymore.”

“Exactly.” Marc lowered his shield and let Neil whisk her away.

Amy waved at him over Neil’s shoulder. “Thank you, Alpha.”

Marc froze for an instant before smiling. “It was my honor.”

Neil stopped at Samantha’s cabin.

Samantha took Amy, glaring at everyone. She soothed the calm child and her own nerves.

Neil scanned the other doorways and found females watching him, Marc, Wade, and the hall exits. The women had been ready to react too.

Marc turned back to the game that had been forgotten. He gathered all the cards for a fresh hand. “All our remaining kids need to be made available for the same evaluation. I want it done by the time our recharge is finished. We’re already a day in; get it set up, pick a support system, and see Ivan for booking. If they want to do it together, that saves time, pain, and energy.” His voice hardened. “Don’t make me come to you again in a moment like this. She was terrified because you were; it didn’t have to be handled this way.” Marc shuffled the deck, glad it was over. “Who’s ready to play?”

Neil glared at him. “You’re an asshole too.”

Marc glared back. “Are you pissed because I’m finally acting like Adrian? Really?”

“Yes! No.” Neil stomped over to the table. “Deal the damn cards.”

The tension broke as Morgan and Kyle scooted back in to play. They’d eased out to help in the fight, though neither man had been sure whose side they would end up on. Amy was too cute to allow her to be punished. The direct recharge wouldn’t have been allowed.

Neil caught Wade’s eye. “Empty seat here.”

Wade shook his head, moving down the hall. “I have a short duty waiting. Later?”

“Absolutely.”

The mood shifted; desire floated through the hall. It thickened into waves of need that coated the man walking by open doors toward the exit. Women in curlers, hiding guns behind their backs, nodded to him or smiled, letting him know they were interested.

“Damn it, Wade!” Marc shook his head as everyone laughed. “It got stronger!”

“He just proved he’ll protect our kids, even against you.” Morgan almost wished he’d done it now. That type of ego boost was amazing. “To him, it’s just who he is. Wade’s deep, man. Almost dying broke a lock for him. All the goodness he was hiding is glinting in the darkness, snagging them left and right.”

“We know. He’s reeling in too many.” Kyle was already tired of the camp drama about Wade, though the story of Adrian being knocked off his ship was great.

“You should see how many he throws back.” Morgan snickered. “He was limping when we left Ciemus and that was before his battle with death.”

“What’s so different about him?” Marc got ready to make mental notes so he could find a way to copy it for the rest of their people. “We’ve had a lot of good men come, and go, through this camp.”

Morgan shrugged. “Maybe he’s like you and has a stronger draw than the rest of us. Maybe he’s a genetic fluke. No idea. I just know he’s different, in a good way.”

“Okay.” Marc finished the slow deal he’d been doing. “One of the rookies should run for a check in. The boss is still up and getting restless...” Marc shrugged. “Never mind. She’s sending Charlie. We’re all good.”

Charlie came from Angela’s cabin, falling in behind Wade. “I’ll walk with you.” He grinned. “We can chat.”

Wade sniggered as Marc groaned. “Be happy to share some tips.” Wade held the elevator; they vanished together.

The laughter finished breaking the tension. The recharging women who’d gotten up to help defend Amy went back to their bunks and let sleep claim them.

So did Angela.

Everyone felt it when she crashed. She’d napped earlier for almost four hours, then got up for food and chess. Marc assumed she would nap at least that long again.

His demon scented the air. *You’re still upset. What’s the problem?*

*Her sleep schedule changed.*

*What does that mean?*

*Maybe nothing.*

*Any other changes?*

Marc sighed as the men at the table with him began to discard cards, pretending they weren’t listening to his inner conversation. *Nothing I can directly identify.*

*I’ll watch for you.*

*Good.* Marc shifted his attention back to the game as the betting started. “So, Trent, did you tell Neil you were the one who locked him in the bathroom?”

# Chapter Nine

**That Loose End**

**1**

**“I**s anyone in here?” Mike hesitated as he reached for the latch. He could hear breathing.

“Me.”

Mike followed faint noises to a rear stall.

The animal area had been three long, wide employee cabins for maintenance workers. The Eagles had removed the walls, added stalls, and hung shelving, racks, and cabinets that were filled with everything they needed to care for their small herd of three cows, four sheep, eight chickens, two roosters, and five pigs. None of the animals were breeding yet, but they were eating and getting fatter.

Leeann was sweeping out the crud while their lone horse munched contentedly on oats. Mike assumed she’d fed the horse out here and smiled. “Good job figuring that out.”

Leeann kept sweeping. “I didn’t want to get kicked. He’s mean.”

The horse snorted and moved away from the teenagers.

Leeann didn’t seem the same to Mike. Her hair was now shortened to her shoulders and her once bright eyes were dark with internal thoughts. Her thin frame was filling out, getting stronger. *She’s cute. And lonely.* Mike watched her, wondering if she liked not having her gifts.

Leeann huffed. “Stop staring at me. I’m the same.”

“No.” Mike looked away. “The adults aren’t scared of you now.”

She dropped the rake. “This doesn’t work.”

“We use shovels.”

Leeann grabbed one from the wall rack.

“Why are you in here alone?”

Leeann grunted at the heavy load she’d scooped. “I have to make up for my mistakes, so Marc will give me my gifts back.”

Mike frowned. “I thought he just took your memory.”

“That too.” Leeann paused, frowning. “I have hazy spots now where someone used to be. People say I tried to run away, but I don’t remember that.”

“I do. I’m glad you’re...better.”

Leeann didn’t answer.

“You should be sleeping.” Mike got a shovel and began helping.

“So should you.”

Mike shrugged. “My brothers are getting drunk in dad’s old room while everyone is busy. I didn’t want to tell on them, so I came here.”

Leeann looked at him for the first time. “Are you different too?”

Mike shook his head. “Not that I know of. I just don’t like drinking.”

She made a face. “Me either. It makes people change.”

“Yeah, and causes trouble.”

Leeann studied him for another minute, then she shrugged. “You can stay. Be quiet, though. I don’t want the guards to know we’re here.”

“Because they’ll send us to bed?”

“Yes. I need to do this so I can sleep.”

Mike didn’t mind. He dug into the messy stall.

Observing from the doorway, Ian was satisfied the kids weren’t getting into trouble. He eased away.

Ian stopped, catching another shadow backing out of the opposite entrance. He narrowed in. *Emma. What’s she doing down here?*

He stayed, using his training to go unnoticed.

Emma watched the two kids with longing. She recognized the moment. *Angela set this up*. *She wants them together.* Emma understood. Their ages were closer; their interests were still similar. They could finish growing up together and maybe have a normal relationship, if not a normal life.

Emma saw Mike’s arms flex with new muscles under his black garb. He wasn’t dressed as an Eagle, but it was easy to pretend he was. *If only real Eagles didn’t scare me!* She’d gotten dozens of offers, but she’d refused them all.

Emma turned away, fighting the loneliness. *Running out of safe targets in this camp*. She really did have an age line and Marc’s youngest son was way below it. Mike was almost too young, but he’d been the last unclaimed teenager beyond Timmy...

Charlie came through the hallway, checking things off on a clipboard.

Emma’s lust flared. *It’s good Marc didn’t grill me about his oldest boy. Charlie is my type. I just have to get him away from Tracy.*

Charlie’s smiled faded as he picked up the vibe. His body responded, but his heart blocked it. “I was just teasing my dad. Not a chance.”

Emma’s face fell. “Too old?”

“No.” Charlie walked by her. “I’m already bonded to someone.”

“But you could break those...” Emma stopped as Tracy appeared in the hallway. Towel around her wet hair, water dripped onto the floor as she stalked toward them.

Emma waited, chin lifting. “You’re not married yet; he’s fair game.”

Charlie grabbed Tracy’s arm. “I said no. Don’t.”

Tracy jerked away. She marched up to Emma, snarling as she spoke. “I’ll make sure the boss knows I can’t trust you as a teammate!”

Emma paled. “Don’t do that.” She turned to leave. “I’m sorry.”

“You will be!” Tracy grabbed her by the hair.

Emma’s fear response kicked in. She spun as she swung.

Tracy staggered back from the shoulder hit; her feet slid in the water she’d dripped.

“No!” Charlie lunged toward her. He missed.

Tracy fell face down, smacking into the floor with her stomach and chest.

“Tracy!” Charlie scooped her up. “Get a medic!”

Ian hurried around Emma. “Quicker to take her there.” He spotted red blooming on Tracy’s pajamas. “She’s bleeding.”

Charlie began shoving healing energy into her as he ran. “Help! Mom!”

Ian followed, scowling. “She probably just cut her leg when she fell. What’s the big deal?”

“She didn’t cut herself!” Charlie ran up the steps, panicking. “She’s pregnant!”

Ian stopped. “Oh.” He changed direction, heading for the recharge cabins.

Behind them, forgotten, Emma stared in surprised disapproval. *Tracy’s pregnant... Which means she broke the age laws!*

Emma wasn’t sure what she should do. *I wouldn’t have hit her if I’d known.*

“You won’t be in trouble for that. She attacked you.”

Emma spun around to find Wade behind her, leaning against the wall.

Wade didn’t grin or smile like he normally did with women.

Emma got her breath back and scowled at the bruised man. “Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

“Yes, I should, but the boss asked me to handle a loose end before I crash.” Wade’s tone deepened. “You’re that loose end.”

Emma ran.

Wade stared in surprise. “Well that didn’t go as planned.” He waved at the guard. “Stop her!”

Quinn saw Emma, running full out, and Wade standing still, giving an order. *I hate these Eagle choice moments.* Quinn tackled her.

Emma went down under his big body; she immediately started screaming. Piercing shrieks echoed through the hallway.

Quinn pulled her onto her feet and shoved her toward Wade as the man jogged to them. “That’s all you. I’m on duty.”

Wade sent out a calming wave as Emma kept shouting. Her shudders and shakes made him very angry. “Easy, honey... Shh... It’s okay.”

Emma slowly calmed. *They didn’t hurt me. No one hurt me. I’m okay.*

Wade slowly lifted his hands. “We had to know.” He gently rubbed her shaking arms. “You were never going to tell anyone. Even Angela couldn’t get through your walls. I’m sorry.”

Emma hated him and Angela at that moment.

“I would too.” Emma was pale, with wild eyes that filled her pretty face. Her hair blew in the draft, covering a fresh bruise on her shoulder that Wade knew had come from a kai session. He filed that information for later. Wade set her away from him so he could make eye contact. “We want to help you. Please, let *me* help you.”

“I’m not having sex with you!”

Wade chuckled, ignoring her panicked shout. “Good, cause my sheet is full. Can we just talk?” He sighed. “I don’t get much of that.”

Emma’s attention was snagged. She looked at Quinn, who wore an apologetic expression, and then back to Wade. “The boss set this up.”

“No. She saw it coming and sent me to help you.” Wade held out his arm. “We have a table reserved at the mess.”

Emma swallowed. “We’ll be alone?” She knew it was closed at this time of night.

Wade nodded, not sure that she would agree. Her fear of being hurt had been well hidden, but it was loose now. It was coating her like a shroud.

Emma sucked in air, forcibly controlling the shakes. “Okay.”

Wade smiled. “I’m proud of you.” He held his arm out further. When she hesitated, then slowly put her hand through his arm, he blasted her with a wave of pleasure.

Emma stiffened, fighting it.

“I’m not seducing you. That’s the normal reaction when you make an alpha feel good.”

Emma let him lead her toward the nearby mess. “What’s it like when you make them feel bad?”

Ice came down the hall, cooling the air. Papers and signs riffled in the stiff breeze.

Wade sent his mind to better thoughts. “Let’s not find out.”

“Agreed.” Emma tensed, slowing them as a shadow broke away from the wall.

Gabe fell in on Emma’s other side when Wade motioned him there.

Emma forced herself to keep walking. The two men surrounding her were huge; fear shoved into her brain.

“Fight it. We’re almost there.” Wade pushed out another wave of comfort.

Emma kept walking, heart thudding in her chest. “Do it again or I’ll never make it through that door.”

Wade blasted her, hating the person or people who’d taught her to be so afraid.

Gabe stayed close and kept his mouth shut. He was just the muscle on this one, sent by the boss on a quiet FND request. Gabe was honored to have been asked, especially since he’d only been with them since Ciemus.

Emma entered the darkened room, scanning for exits and threats. The empty tables cast heavy shadows over them. Emma tried to be brave, but it was hard. *They took me into the barn; it felt like this.* Even the smell of fresh bread was a trigger. *One of them had just eaten. I can still smell the cherries. I can still taste them on his mouth!*

Gabe took his post at the door.

Wade led Emma to the far corner, where a single candle was burning at a small table.

“Have a seat.” Wade let go of her and pulled out her chair.

Emma sank down, glad she was able to sit; her legs were shaking. “What happens now?”

Wade sat across from her. “We talk. I dig in and find the moment you became terrified. We set up those moments again, giving *you* the advantage this time. You slowly lose those fears and become capable of real self-defense.”

Emma stared at him.

Wade waited for her to get her emotions under control. He loved this part of his job. Helping free people from mental nightmares wasn’t as satisfying as killing, but it was in the top three best moments as an Eagle.

“I thought she sent you to remove me.”

“She did, Emma.” Wade put a hand on her wrist as she tensed again. “You can’t keep hunting teenage boys. The Eagles will no longer allow our sons to be abused either. You’re the example.” He sent a light zap into her arm. “Do you accept this correction from your team?”

Emma frowned in confusion, barely feeling the pain. “I’m on Angela’s team.”

“As soon as the recharge is over, the team lists will come out. Neil and I agree to take you on as a rookie, along with two others.”

“No way!” Her tension eased a little as she considered what that meant. “She accepted me as an Eagle...and put me on one of the highest teams.” Her tension returned in full. “But she can’t really give that to me, because I’m a cougar.”

Wade nodded. “You can stay a rookie and keep fishing shallow waters until the boss cuts your line, or you can take the loving punishment from your new team and have a clean slate. Angela thinks you’re strong enough. Are you?”

Emma wanted to say yes, but she was terrified.

Wade knew. He wanted to comfort her, but once they’d passed the threshold on that door, he’d become an Eagle again. He studied her, storing her thoughts and reactions.

Emma sucked in a harsh breath. “Yes. Do it.”

“Repeat after me: I accept this loving punishment...”

Emma began repeating it.

Wade slapped her, lightly, then leaned back. He blew out a breath. “I’m glad that’s done.”

Emma opened her lids and her clenched fists. “One hit?”

Wade’s voice hardened. “One *tap*. Do you need a hit?”

Emma quickly shook her head. “I’m not that stupid.” She rubbed her cheek. It stung, but it was far from what she’d expected. “Now I stay away from the boys. What else?”

“Nothing until training starts and the lists come out. As a first test of your compatibility to our team, you can’t tell anyone before then.” Wade waved off her coming excuse. “We understand descendants hear some of your thoughts. So don’t think about it.”

Emma nodded. “I’ll try hard. And I’ll work hard. Thank you for the chance.”

“It’s my honor.” Wade leaned in, voice softening. “Now, let’s dig into those bad memories and banish them so you can compete in the cage.”

Emma tried to be brave. “That’s why I joined. I don’t want to be afraid anymore.”

“I’ll make you so deadly that other people are scared of *you*. How’s that sound?”

Emma did smile this time. “Even Eagles?”

Wade shrugged. “Most of them. Some of us can’t be scared anymore. We can only be horrified or terrorized by someone else’s pain.”

Emma’s fast mind flashed a connection to Samantha. Her mouth opened.

Wade shook his head. “Don’t go there.”

Emma understood it was true. “It fits.”

Wade growled.

Gabe peered in and found Emma snickering. *Wow. He’s good.*

Wade flashed a quick hand message at the rookie. *Pay attention. Someday, you might be doing this*.

Gabe turned back to his post*. I can’t wait to help save the day or the people. This is where I belong.* Gabe felt the cage rattle and strengthened the mental lock. *Not yet, my powerful friend. I want to do it on my own first. Then you can come out and we’ll play together.*

Wade glanced over at Gabe. *Interesting. I wonder if the boss knows...* Wade chuckled at himself and turned his attention back to Emma. “So, who’s the bastard I wish I could go back and kill for you?”

Emma paled. “Three of my brother’s friends.”

Wade made a note: *Three or more challengers*. “We can do this quick and hard, or slow and–”

“Hard, fast, and soon. I want this done by the time the recharge is over.”

Wade chuckled. “The boss was thinking a few weeks.”

Emma swallowed her fear. “The boss faces every challenge head on, at full speed.”

Wade studied her. “And you want to be like the boss.”

Emma snorted. “Who doesn’t?”

Wade considered his own needs at the moment and caved to temptation. *If it works out, it’ll be good, and the boss will be happy with me. And if it fails, no one gets hurt–not even me because she’s not my type.* “We’ll have to spend a lot of time together. People will think I’ve gotten serious about one of the many women I’m servicing.”

Emma flushed. “You’re not. We’ll know.” She saw his small disappointed flash and slammed pieces together. “You want a buffer who pretends.” She chuckled. “I can do that. Consider it my thanks for helping me.”

“Awesome.” Wade yawned. “We’ll start after my recharge. If you decide you’d rather do the few weeks instead, let me know by then or I’ll already have plans made around it.”

Emma stood up, sensing he wanted to be alone now. “Thank you.”

Wade shrugged. “It’s what Eagles do for people who deserve another chance and just need a hand. Your turn will come to mentor someone. Remember how this felt so you can reach them. Without that, your plan is sunk before it ever sets sail.”

**2**

“You dragged me from a hot poker hand to wipe off her leg and slap on a bandage!” Morgan slammed the infirmary door. He motioned to the guard at the hall post. “She’s fine. Pass the word up so the boss will sleep.”

Quinn hurried off as Morgan took his post until he returned.

Morgan was glad he’d been able to pass that message. Tracy might have lost the baby if it had been worse. Her chest had a huge bruise where she’d landed, but her giant breasts had offset some of the damage.

He spotted Ian coming from the elevator.

“Morgan, good.” Ian jogged over to the guard station. “I’m one person light. Can you scan for me?”

Morgan did it quickly, reading the name in Ian’s thoughts. He turned in a circle, head shaking. “She’s not on the...” Morgan frowned. “We can’t scan well through the ship. Check the top deck.”

Ian immediately marched that way, frowning. *Please, Candy, don’t jump on my watch. They’ll never put me on point duty again.*

Morgan scanned for another Eagle to send as backup. He scowled as he caught raised voices. Someone in the hot tub area was having a domestic moment. Morgan concentrated. *Marc, time for rounds. Start with the entertainment floor.*

*On my way.*

Morgan relaxed. Marc would handle it. Their substitute teacher was very good at his job, even when people didn’t want him to be.

Dog appeared at Morgan’s side. *Who do I help first?*

Morgan considered. “Top deck... No. We were all pulled from the recharge cabins.” Morgan scowled. “Go guard the boss.” Morgan keyed his mike as Dog took off. “Security check in, now.”

The radio lit up, out of order.

Morgan groaned in frustration and tried again. “Security check in, from top level, down.”

“Bridge is clear.”

“Recharge zone is clear.”

“Camp cabins are clear.”

Morgan scanned the voices, listening for hidden tension.

“Bathrooms, deck two, clear.”

“Infirmary, clear.” Morgan let go so the check in could continue.

“Entertainment floor, now clear.” Marc’s voice was hard.

“Cargo area, clear.”

That was all of their primary areas, but the ship had multiple rooms and passages that weren’t being guarded right now. Morgan kept scanning as Wade joined him.

Wade didn’t find any problems.

Neither did Marc. He came from the elevator and joined the tense Eagles.

Morgan grunted. “I’m sorry. False alarm... I guess.”

Marc shook his head. “I felt it too. I was on my way down the stairs to the entertainment area when you called. One of the men spilled a drink on his date and she slapped him. I sent them all to their cabins.” Marc went to the top ramp to verify their captain was okay. Terry was only doing a short shift while Theo rested, and he had a guard that had just checked in, but Marc also wanted to scan Adrian and be sure that man wasn’t causing the bad vibes they were all still picking up.

“What’s going on?” Quinn had just switched shifts to come help.

Wade went to the elevator. “Morgan’s twitching. Run a complete check of this deck, then cover any empty posts. If they’re full, report to Marc.”

Wade gave the same order to every Eagle and rookie who appeared. *If there’s a problem, we’ll find it.*

**3**

“Candy?” Ian hurried toward the woman leaning against the rail at the rear of the ship. The top deck was dark except for a few lanterns near empty guard posts. They’d decided it wasn’t needed up here right now except for the bridge. Ian now wished they’d put someone on the rear posts. “Hey!”

Candy didn’t move from her hard stare at Adrian. He was standing by his wheelhouse, looking back. “Why won’t he talk to me?!”

Ian took her cold arm and tugged her away from the rail. “He’s not allowed to talk to any of us or Conner will pay for it.”

Candy came out of her teary daze. Her anger rose. “He didn’t do anything wrong!”

Ian gestured to Adrian.

Adrian walked down the ramp and vanished into his ship. Ian didn’t want Adrian reading their lips or body language. “Candy, I have a message from the boss.”

She stiffened, becoming aware of how close he was standing. “Loose ends?”

Ian retreated, frowning at her. “You can have answers after we set sail again, or you can spend your time in the brig until we reach the next port. We’ll row you to land and you can do whatever you want from there.”

Candy’s tears coursed over her cheeks in angry waves. “I don’t deserve this.”

“No, but you’re dangerous. You won’t obey the rules. You’re up here trying to communicate with the traitor. You don’t care about the dream or the future–you just want your toy.” Ian pointed at the ramp. “Go to the camp cabins and settle in for two weeks or go to the brig.” His tone deepened into stone. “Don’t make me insist. You’ll probably go into labor and the boss won’t be happy.”

“I don’t care what she wants! I don’t care about those sheep! I want Conner!”

Ian waited, letting her get it out of her system up here. Angela had warned them these scenes with Candy would be ugly.

Candy realized Ian wasn’t going to cave. She scrubbed at her face so she could see to walk. “Two weeks! Then I want off this boat.”

Ian snorted. “Where are you gonna go?”

“To find Conner. He’d do it for me.”

**4**

Wade shut his lids and leaned his head on his hands. The check in was clear. He’d come back to the mess for that few minutes alone he still needed. *Lock it up. You had to open it for this; you don’t have to examine it. Lock it up.*

“Easier said than done.” Marc entered the mess and shut the door, not commenting on Wade’s harsh flinch. He joined the man at the counter.

Wade waited, hating this part of the job. He normally enjoyed removing people when the orders came down. “What’s the verdict?”

“I want him dead.” Marc shrugged, shifting for a better spot on the stool. “I decided not to do it.”

Wade breathed a sigh of relief. “I didn’t want to do it.”

“I didn’t want to order it. I wanted to do it myself.”

“Why did Angela give you the choice? She had to know you might go the other way.”

Marc snorted. “Kendle is still alive. Angela knew the odds were good on my final choice.”

“Still.” Wade dug deeper, needing this connection to someone above his level. “How do you accept those choices and then let them go, even when you don’t agree?”

“I didn’t before. Now, I see farther; the image has more details. As you evolve, the visions will change.”

Wade wasn’t sure he wanted to go higher. “What about the cracks?”

“No changes, so far. She’s holding steady.”

Wade frowned. “I meant yours.”

Marc lit the last smoke in his pack. He inhaled and passed it. Almost everyone was sharing their last stashes of tobacco. “She isn’t giving me those choices.”

Wade noticed the evasion and let it go. “So only mass murder...”

“As far as we know.” Marc blew out smoke, head spinning. “Your past doesn’t matter in that count. Only the choices you make as an alpha can open that door.”

“Is that why I’m getting attention all of the sudden?”

“That, and your loyalty. Plus, the females and kids have approved you. This last check lets you go higher if she approves it.”

“The final Eagle level.”

“Yes. She and Adrian adapted it for descendants.”

“Do you have a chart? Or something that shows what all of us are and what we can do?”

“Still working on it.” Marc wrote Wade’s name in his book. “Would you like to be in on the research?”

“You know it!”

“Cool. Make a list of names and what you know they can do. I have Neil and a couple others doing the same. When you get everyone scanned, I’ll set time for all of you together, to work out the chart and information we want known.”

Wade frowned. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Angie did. She forbade us from making books about our kind except for medical, and even that almost fell into the wrong hands when we fled the mountain.”

“Maybe we can lock the books...” Wade lowered his voice. “The kids used art spells to protect their cabins.”

“Yes.” Marc stood, eager to get back to the recharge floor. “You coming?”

Wade took the hand up.

Marc slammed into his mind, going deeper than an average scan. He came up with the same thoughts he’d found before.

Marc let go and turned toward the door. “You have my permission to do that to everyone you scan. So do the others.”

That told Wade the others were also descendants. He immediately began trying to figure out who Marc and Angela trusted that much. Wade paused. *That means I’m on their good list. I’m in!* The feeling was incredible.

Marc enjoyed Wade’s waves of pleasure until they reached the recharge cabins. He felt a new wave of tension as they stepped into the hallway; his hand dropped to his gun.

Wade did the same, scanning closed and open doors.

Both men paused as they saw Quinn staring into the cabin where Kendle was sleeping on Tommy’s chest.

Marc and Wade flanked him, hoping they didn’t need to drag him out.

Quinn didn’t look away from Kendle.

“Are you okay?”

Quinn shrugged at Marc’s query. He tilted his head in concentration. “Do you think we’re having a sexual revolution?”

Marc wasn’t prepared for the question. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

Quinn shrugged. “Ralph mentioned it earlier. He’s lived through two of them; he thinks this is the third.”

“This?” Wade was definitely interested in the topic.

“You and your...harem, the women having multiple partners, openly. Everyone talking about the breeding tree. He said we’re living it, but only a few of us are enjoying it.” Quinn’s lips twitched. “Then Daisey smacked *him* on the ass.”

Marc wasn’t sure where this was going. “Does it bother you that they’re free to do what men always have?”

Quinn shook his head. “Not counting my jealousy, I think it’s awesome.”

Marc’s tone hardened. “Will the jealousy be a problem?”

Quinn sighed. “She told me I’d have to share. The surprise is with who. I was braced to compete against Adrian...”

“And now?”

Quinn’s tense shoulders relaxed. “I get along with Tommy. We don’t have to compete. We can still be friends if I smother my jealousy.”

“Can you?”

Quinn studied the couple, judging how much it bothered him. He sighed, turning toward the poker table. “For a while. I already know they’re a better couple, but I also know she doesn’t love him, so I’ll probably push her too hard at some point. I am a dumbass, after all.”

Men chuckled, understanding. Men had been doing that for centuries, but love didn’t allow another choice. It insisted they do anything for a chance, no matter what they had to suffer or how long they had to wait.

Quinn handed Marc a sheet of paper, falling into update mode. “It was a false alarm. The ship got a fast patrol and all posts are covered.” Quinn’s voice lowered. “You know we had a public scene in the hot tub area. That might have sent the bad vibes.”

“Makes sense. We’re all on the edge right now. Keep going.”

“One patient in the infirmary. Tracy swears she slipped coming from the shower. Hit a corner of something and got a few stitches in her leg. Charlie’s with her.”

“Morgan kept her there?”

“Just for another hour.” Morgan joined them. “I didn’t want her falling again. The painkillers hit some people hard. Charlie will get her back to her cabin.”

Marc took Morgan’s report. He scanned it quickly.

*We need to talk.*

Marc chuckled as if it was something funny and put the paper into his notebook. “Tell him the wedding’s in a week. He can wait that long to hold her while she sleeps.”

Other people laughed, distracted.

Marc scanned the closed doors and calm mood on this deck. He frowned at a small sense of unease coming from Angela’s cabin. He searched for Neil.

Angela’s door opened; Neil emerged, scowling. “How do you stand her?!” He gently shut the door.

Marc snickered.

Neil joined them, grunting. “Should have known you would think it’s funny.”

Marc’s amusement fled. “No, what’s funny is you think I don’t know.”

Neil, and everyone else, tensed.

Neil kept his mind blank. “Know what?”

Marc scowled. “She’s not in there, is she?”

Neil stiffened. “What?”

“Is Angela in there?”

“Uh, in where?”

Marc gestured, getting angry. “In her cabin, Neil. Is Angela in her cabin?”

“As far as I know.” Neil nodded, happy with the wording.

“As far as you know? You were just in there!”

Neil shrugged. “Anything could have happened since then.”

“It’s been ten seconds!”

“I know, right.”

Marc’s eyes narrowed. “Neil?”

“Yes, Boss?”

Marc grunted at the innocent tone. “Where did she go?”

“Who?”

Marc realized Neil wasn’t allowed to give a straight answer. He marched toward the cabin, ready to key his radio for a search.

Marc opened the door.

Allison peered at him through the lamp light. “Everything okay?”

Dog peered up from Angela’s ankle.

Marc scanned Angela’s face and body. Her breathing was normal, as was her position, but... Her pulse was pounding. “What’s going on in here?”

Allison scratched at a new rash on her arm. “She’s having nightmares.”

That explained the pounding pulse. Marc sent a blast of calm that brought peace to Angela’s face and posture. A smile curved her lips.

Marc left, giving Neil an apologetic glance. “She’s tricky. I’m trying to stay ahead of her.”

“That’s a tough job.” Neil picked up the cards. “Are we still playing?”

“I need to hit the head, then I’m set.” Marc walked that way.

“Same.” Morgan glared at a rookie. “Don’t put your cold ass in my hot seat while I’m gone. I don’t need your bad luck.”

The rookie flushed, sitting down as people laughed.

“I’m crashing.” Wade crawled onto the couch, groaning in relief. “If any service calls come in, take a name or handle it yourself.”

Marc was still chuckling as he finished in the stall and came out to wash his hands.

Morgan was leaning on the sink, waiting for him. “Charlie thinks Angela sent him down there on purpose to be in the right place for it to happen.”

“She did. We agreed this was the best of all the possible outcomes we studied for him and Tracy.”

Morgan regarded Marc in the mirror as he washed his hands. “To lose the baby?”

“Just the opposite. This is the only one that saves our grandchild.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Tracy decided that not having the baby will free Charlie from his commitment. He knows and thinks it should all be her choice. Angela and I are showing them it’s more serious than that, now, while she’s strong enough to handle it. If she trips going down the steps, like she’s planning, the baby won’t survive.”

Morgan wished he’d scanned her deeper. “She’s not that strong now.”

“I plan to give her a private recharge... Unless you have a cover I can use?”

Morgan considered. “I can say she has a cold. No one wants to be around sick residents right now.”

Marc used the dryer on his hands. “Not sure how people will react to that.”

“Should be fine as long as they can see her resting, not bleeding.”

“Agreed. Then I can add her to the second recharge. Seeing her out so soon will calm people.”

“That’s good. Charlie and I stopped the bleeding. She should be okay as long as she doesn’t get into another fight.”

Marc sighed. “What triggered it?”

“No idea. Tracy only said she got angry. I assumed she overacted, but Charlie wants Emma charged with assaulting her. The guards said Emma was provoked.”

“Emma was Wade’s other intervention.”

Morgan grinned. “He’s a riot. How does he keep them all from killing each other?”

Marc went to the door. “No idea, but I want lessons.”

Marc stopped, bursting out laughing.

Morgan joined him. Wade was already covered in little bodies. Half their kids were piled on him and the couch, wrestling for room.

“He’s like the pied piper.”

“Maybe he is one.” Marc went to the table and sat. “Whose deal is it?”

Seats filled; rookies leaned in to observe.

Marc felt Wade crash. All the kids on and around him relaxed. Little grunts and snores began to echo. *This is nice.* Marc knew not to get used to it. *It’s probably just a calm before the next storm.*

# Chapter Ten

**Don’t Throw That Away**

December 24th

**1**

**“T**ime to get up. It’s a new day.”

Conner opened his eyes, instantly furious all over again. He jerked upright from his uncomfortable bedroll on the deck as Jonny dropped a kit by him. Everyone was sleeping up here. Safe Haven had dumped the bodies from this ship, but there hadn’t been time to clean it before the illness set in. The lower decks were reeking.

“Clean clothes, rations.” Jonny brushed brown hair from his face, wishing he’d had it cut before they left. “Go easy on it. That has to last you.”

Conner opened it, hoping food would quiet his stomach. “For how long?”

Jonny shrugged, going to stand by the rail to enjoy a cigar. He hadn’t smoked before coming to Safe Haven; now he craved tobacco in almost any form. “A week or so.”

Conner’s upset stomach lurched; he stared at the calm ocean. “We’re that close?”

Jonny grunted, sharing the excitement and the dread. “We’re about to slide into hell again, but this time, we have a *known* traitor with us instead of an undercover spy.” Jonny pinned him with a harsh glare. “Why did you follow in your dad’s footsteps? We all liked you.”

Conner clammed up.

Jonny studied the sullen boy, wishing he could dig into Conner’s mind.

“I can let you in, but you won’t like what you find.”

“I don’t expect to. You’re a Mitchel.”

Conner connected them, showing Jonny his desire for Candy. “It outweighs everything else. You guys never understood; it isn’t a choice. When we bond to someone, we *have* to have them.”

“Maybe you need a jail cell.”

“Why? She loves me. I love her. Why is it wrong?”

“Age, spells, honor. Lots of reasons.”

“I’m legal now; I didn’t need a spell.” Conner didn’t have a defense for the honor. He’d slipped in to make a claim before she gave birth. There was no honor in that. *But I still got her.* *We’re going to be happy together at some point.* Conner’s arrogance faded as the rest of the kill team joined Jonny by the rail. *Or maybe I’ll be dead. They mean business.*

Drew leaned against the rail and faced Conner. “Lee was a good friend. He’d be horrified by your relationship with his wife.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s wrong.” Conner knew the rules of the camp.

Drew shifted his tool belt higher on his lean hips. “What about manipulating the camp so they’d accept it? You planned that, down to the exact words.”

Conner realized they’d been given information by someone close to him. “Who told you that?!”

Greg met his eyes. “Your father, when we threatened to banish you the first time. He said you had a plan; we watched you carry it out.”

Conner didn’t respond. He was trapped and he knew it.

“You broke the age laws.” Shawn glowered at him. “You know the Eagle punishment for that.”

Conner slid the cookie back into the bag. No sense eating them just to throw them up. He slowly stood, bracing.

The four men observing him were impressed. They’d expected more whining and denials, not someone set to face the music.

Drew lunged forward and punched him. The other men followed.

Conner took all four hits without falling. Then he slid to his knees and puked.

Conner gasped in air, thinking of the single moment he’d shared with Candy. “It was worth it!”

His moral board sniggered. That was the reaction of an Eagle. The boy sounded just like Kyle at that moment.

Drew helped him up and gave him a gentle shove toward the locker. “Cleaning supplies are in there.”

Conner went to get them, groaning, but he didn’t feel hatred toward the men. He felt bonded to them. *I’m definitely a Mitchel. If we aren’t hunting a woman, we’re beating on someone or getting beaten on ourselves. It’s what we do.*

“Looks like it might rain.” Greg refused to think bad thoughts; he didn’t want to put a jinx on the run.

Shawn was feeling the same. “We’ll go below if it starts. The wind might clear it out.”

Jonny watched Conner start cleaning. “We have a nice setup down there if we need it.”

Drew grinned. “Thank you. I took a class in decorating haunted ships for suicide runs.”

Chuckles filled the deck.

Conner swallowed bile and envy. *I want to be like them and then no one will ever be able to hurt me again.*

“That was quick.”

Greg shrugged at Shawn’s comment. They’d all been watching Conner’s expressions, like they did with any rookie. “He’s a Mitchel. Of course, he wants to be one of us.”

Conner glared. “You’re not descendants. How do you know that?!”

The men chuckled.

Conner went back to cleaning. *It won’t always be this way*. He listened to the Eagles talk, fuming. He was also worrying. It was eating him up to not know if Candy was okay. *I have to get off this boat.*

Shawn saw the furtive glance. “Go on. You won’t get far, but you can try.”

Conner’s shoulders slumped. “What do you want me to do?”

“Watch, listen.” Greg glowered. “Become trustworthy very very fast.”

“How do I do that?!”

“No idea, but it’s the only thing that will save you.” Jonny moved into the wheelhouse and turned up the volume on the radio so they could hear it out here on the open deck. Loud static echoed.

Jonny stared at his tall, bulky reflection, hating his dull brown features. He’d always wanted to be blond and blue. *Like the damn Mitchels. Or even Greg. His brown hair has glints of red and yellow. Even Shawn’s brown hair is long and has thick curls. Why can’t I be like them?*

The men began setting up an Eagle course, joking and chatting.

Conner watched them. He recognized a workout course. *They’re training? Now?*

“Rookie lessons, Eagles, and you’d better remember them.”

The other three men laughed at Greg’s imitation of Kyle, of the way he liked to start their lessons.

Greg’s chest puffed out. “Eagles are men and women who care about the future of their country. So much that they are willing to sacrifice their lives for it. They are not afraid to get involved and can easily tell wrong from right. Eagles are not thieves. Some of them may have been in the past, but no longer. An Eagle can now be trusted with a life, the only possession that has any true value.”

Shawn took over. “Eagles have hope and suspicion in equal amounts. They believe in the truth when it’s called for, and silence when it’s not. An Eagle helps, plans, searches, and defends without being asked, and no payment will ever be taken. They are strong and loyal defenders of those around them.”

Drew loved this part of his new life. “There are a lot of reasons to join my Army. Worry over the future, a need to belong to something you can depend on, but it comes down to a simpler fact. We all want to be better than we are–mentally and physically. Humans are an ever evolving species. Before the war, you were something else. Now, you’re an Eagle in my Army and I’ll accept nothing less than your best. There is no room in my army for slacking off. If you can’t cut it, get out now.”

Jonny forgot about his petty desires for a moment, bonded through the words he now believed in more than anything else. “America comes first with us. Not that shit to enforce laws that hide greed, but only for the greater good–the survival of our country. The continuation of America is all I care about and there isn’t anything I won’t do, any one person I won’t sacrifice, to make it happen. Be sure you want this. It may be your life that I take to save theirs.”

Conner dropped the rag. “I know why you’re doing this. It won’t work on me.”

The Eagles ignored him. They liked repeating that very first lesson, but it was also a way to get in the mood for training. Kyle said it made it easier to remember if they heard it from their own mouths.

Greg took his second turn in the rotation. “An Eagle is the only line of defense between the camp and this hostile new world. Extreme force is necessary and will be used at my discretion, no matter the age or condition of the threat. Mercy in this new hell comes from death and hardly anything else. Be prepared to not only face it, but to also be the one pulling that trigger. Lives are not to be taken lightly but they will be taken.”

Conner was angry, but he was also drawn. He wanted to be like his dad enough to start memorizing the lesson as the Eagles kept reciting it.

“We’re writing history, here and now. In this new world, we are the first military power. As such, we are duty bound to each other and the lives we come in contact with. Their needs are our needs, and we will always take care of them before ourselves. We are the guardians, the shepherds of the remaining American flock, and everything we do, all that we are, is for them, for Her. We will be closer than any army was before, more in tune with each other and the environment. Because of that, we have an edge. Knowing what’s coming will save us.” Shawn knew that was true. It had saved them repeatedly.

“I’m going to ask you to do things you’ll hate me for and yourself as well. Do them anyway. The motions we make now, are waves we’ll ride later, when there are more of us. You’ll have doubts and questions, and moments of weakness when you think you’re about to fail and maybe cause the fall of these goals, my goals.” Drew loved this part; he identified with it more than the rest. “Accept it as hard duty and learn to live with your demons. Talk to me, I am here for that, but more so, talk to each other. The old saying of not letting one hand know what the other is doing does not hold with us. We will be a family inside the Safe Haven community and there will be none tighter than these first teams. You are more valuable than anyone will realize or give you credit for, and if the camp finds out about the things we do on missions, you’ll be run out or worse. You must be sure. There is no going back.” Jonny pointed at Conner as he took over the rotation. “None of you were where you belonged in the old world and you felt it every day. In this new world, in this moment, you are exactly where you should be, and I need you.”

Magic flowed out, reaching into Conner’s heart with brilliant golden light.

“Before the war, you were something else. Now, you’re an Eagle in my Army and I still have a place for you. That hasn’t changed.”

Conner realized that was meant for moments like this one. He went back to scrubbing. *I want to be with Candy and enjoy a real life. Why is that asking too much?*

The Eagles sensed it when he began to tune them out. They switched to the rookie sets, being careful not to put them too close to the railing. If someone went overboard, they weren’t stopping.

The men started the set, laughing about how hard it had been the first time. Now they breezed through it without a pause or a misstep.

After three runs, Greg scanned for Conner and found him in the wheelhouse, using the radio.

Shawn sighed, moving that way. “Boss called that one right.”

Greg followed. “Doesn’t she always?”

Conner saw them coming and keyed the mike again. “I’m Conner Mitchel. I’ve been kidnapped. I need help!” He struggled to keep ahold of the mike. “Dad! Help!”

Shawn hung up the mike while Greg shoved Conner toward the deck.

Conner braced to be hit again.

Jonny pointed. “You missed a spot.”

Conner stomped to the mess, glaring at them, but he was relieved when the Eagles went back to their workout. *I got a call out; maybe my dad heard.*

The radio lit up.

*“Where are you? We’ll help a Mitchel.”*

*“We need your location.”*

*“A Mitchel was just on the radio!”*

The four Eagles exchanged satisfied glances. Angela’s plan was going according to schedule.

“Ready for sets?”

Conner glanced up at Greg in surprise. “Me?”

“You are a rookie.”

Conner was confused. “You beat me and now you want me to run sets.”

“Yes,” all four men answered together.

Conner slowly approached the buff, lethal Eagles. “I don’t know what to do.”

Smiles met his admission.

Greg’s tone was pointed. “That’s why we’re here, kid. Someday, you may be the anchor for a lost rookie. Remember this moment in your life; it’s where you made the final call.”

Conner paused. “The final call on what?”

Shawn waved it to Jonny, who was enjoying this. Shawn and Greg had done it too many times now to still be so eager.

Jonny met Conner’s eye. “Being one of us or being our enemy. You’re either good or bad; make your choice.”

Conner straightened, cool Mitchel attitude falling into place. “I’ll get back to you on that.” He went to the bedroll he’d been given.

The Eagles watched him sit down and face the ocean.

Greg shook his head when Jonny would have tried again. “The boss timed this one; be patient. It will all work out.”

**2**

“Congratulations on making it to level one, Eagles. You’ve proven absolutely nothing. You may think because you’ve reached level one that you can slack off, but exactly the opposite is true. I know what your purpose is in this hard new world, but I’m not sure that you’re strong enough to pull it off.” Greg stifled a yawn. He still believed in the words, but he was tired. “This is where you prove it–to me and to yourself, but more importantly, to the camp depending on you to be perfect. If you don’t spend the time drilling and practicing, sweating, and hurting, then you’re going to disappoint them and ruin the future we’re trying to build. This is the point where if you have any doubts left about giving this your all, you should take off that jacket and walk. Do it right now.”

Shawn was missing his Eagle jacket right now; the ocean breeze was cooling as sunset neared. “Your rookie sessions drilled into you how important it is to be on time. Level one is going to teach you the same thing, with your timing. If you shoot too soon, you’ll get a teammate killed. If you shoot too late, you’ll get yourself killed. Your timing must be impeccable. The only way that happens is constant repetition. I’m going to work those muscles until you think they’ll fall off, but by the time level one is done, your brain will have the pattern down so well you’ll be able to do it even when jerked out of sleep.”

Jonny grinned as he took over. “I’m also going to hit you. Your teammates are going to hit you. You’re going to hit them. If you are afraid of physical confrontation, this level will help you conquer it. There’s no shame in being scared, but you have to be able to react anyway to be an Eagle. If you pass level one, you’ll have the basic fighting skills that will allow you to survive battles in my army. You will often hear: Remember your training. This is the moment they’re talking about. Remember these lessons and it will keep you alive.”

Drew was getting restless, but he still gave the words the fire they were meant to have. “Self-defense class for the camp is different than what you’ll learn in my army. You can cry off at any point there; blood gives you a free pass. In the Eagles, if you don’t bleed, you’re not really one of us. That sounds harsh, but it’s all about mentality. If you know you’re going to be hit and you’re braced for it, prepared to react after it, it’s not that bad. You won’t really understand until you reach a certain point. We call that the moment of recognition. It’s when you understand pain goes away, but failure stays with you forever, and you’ll do anything to keep from failing. That moment there, ladies and gentlemen, is what makes you an Eagle–not a minute sooner and not after. The recognition moment is everything.”

All four men paused in the oral recitation of the level one opening lesson. They found Conner leaning against the rail, listening.

Greg motioned toward the obstacle course they had adjusted. “Level one is a faster repeat. Care to join?”

Conner didn’t want to give in, but he was bored of looking at the ocean and the words had gotten to him. He recognized his father in them. He moved toward the men, but didn’t get too close. “What do you want me to do?”

“Rookies go in the middle until they’re ready to join.” Jonny pointed.

Conner was relieved to not have to run it yet even though he was sure he wouldn’t have trouble. He stood in the center of the scavenged obstacles as the four Eagles got set at various places around the long oval course.

Greg gestured. “Every 7.5.”

The other men grunted. That wasn’t level one, but they were already bored with these sets. Conner wouldn’t know the difference. Usually there was no half. They preferred even numbers because it was easier to remember. Greg was giving them a workout. All three men responded by straightening into Eagle form as if they were running it in front of Marc or Adrian.

“Go!”

Conner only watched them run it one time before he began trying to figure out where he should join in. The men were moving fast, with a new person joining the line every 7.5 seconds. Conner saw an opening and took it.

The four men around him automatically adjusted to a five-man run, shortening their steps.

None of them were surprised when Conner ran it the first time without falling or knocking anything over. He was clumsy on landings and dives, but much like his father, he adapted almost instantly.

They ran the course again, not stopping or talking.

It was hard for Conner after the third run. He was aware of the men slowing the pace for him, but he couldn’t help not being as fit as they were.

The Eagles enjoyed some of the relief that came with just working out their bodies, but because of the lower level, it still allowed too much time for their minds to wander.

*Beep! Beep! Beep!*

Drew shut off his alarm, coming to a stop. He slid out of the way so Jonny didn’t slam into him.

The rest of the men did the same, forming a quick line to the side that Conner was able to complete as he watched them. He knew where he was supposed to go.

Greg turned toward the wheelhouse. “It’s time for a check in. Bring the rookie.”

Conner didn’t resist as Drew and Jonny each took an arm. They weren’t rough, but it was obvious they were going to keep him from reaching the radio again.

Shawn brought up the rear, heart hurting. *This is where I find out if I’ve lost someone I love.*

Greg turned on the radio in the wheelhouse as Conner was put on a stool in the corner. Drew and Jonny stayed between him and the console.

Static filled the wheelhouse. Greg adjusted the channel. “We’ll do home first and get it over with.” He was also terrified of what they might hear. They had left before the crisis was over.

Greg keyed the mike. “This is UN ship 0186 hailing the unidentified vessel in sector three. This is the UN. Please respond.”

The radio crackled back at them.

“This is trap team... Damn it! I forgot our number again. McCleary is putting the passengers back to sleep. We had to stop for engine trouble, but it’s almost repaired now.”

Greg swallowed a laugh at Neil playing a UN flunky. “Do you need assistance with your cargo?”

“Negative. We’re keeping their sleep schedules tight.”

“Copy. We’ll see you at the center.”

“Copy, out.”

Greg flipped to the Eagle channel and keyed the mike once.

Neil’s voice echoed back. “All your doves are alive.”

Relief went through the kill team.

Greg blinked back tears. “Copy. Do not change their feeding schedule.”

“Copy. Out.”

Greg adjusted the channel.

Conner glared at Jonny. “He didn’t ask about Candy!”

Jonny chuckled. “Your doves are alive, kid. Read between the lines.”

Conner flushed. “So don’t change their feeding means... We’re on schedule.”

Greg nodded at Drew’s impressed look. “That’s why he’s getting this chance. He’s just as smart as his father.” Greg didn’t mention the other part of the code. If they’d radioed not to change the *sleeping* schedule, it would have meant Conner wasn’t joining the lessons yet.

Jonny huffed. “Is he also as disloyal as his father?”

Greg shrugged, adjusting the channel again. “We’ll find out in a few days.”

More static filled the wheelhouse. Greg tried to clear it so they could hear.

*“Come in ship 1003.”*

*“This is 1003. Say again?”*

*“You are to patrol the next sector. Get on it.”*

*“It’ll take us half a week to reach that zone.”*

*“You’re the only ship in that area.”*

*“Copy. Same map?”*

*“Affirmative. We picked up a call between an unidentified vessel and ship 0186. Verify those are ours.”*

*“And if not?”*

*“Sink them.”*

The static grew too loud to hear anything else.

Greg and Shawn checked their maps.

Conner watched, staying on the stool. If he tried anything right now, these Eagles might toss him overboard.

Shawn frowned. “No way to know what their next sector is, but I’d guess we’re in it.”

“Speed up?”

Greg shook his head at Drew. “We just reported that we’re on schedule. And we’re flying. We’ll be there in time to intercept.”

“How long?” Conner was eager for even a glimpse of their boat.

“Less than five days.” Jonny scanned the fuel gauges. “Enough juice to get us there?”

“Yep. I think they refueled right before Kronus came down. Too bad we can’t switch the camp to this ship.” Shawn was impressed by the vessel. “It even has guns.”

“I say we get ready early.” Drew didn’t want to spend the time drilling lessons anymore.

Greg’s tone dropped into the leader he’d always been. “We do it by the plan; no deviations.”

Drew nodded, disappointed. He understood why they had that rule. He just didn’t want to wait.

“We have some toys to make.” Greg gestured. “We’ll give the rookie a lesson on blowing shit up, then get back to the sets.”

“What about the patrol ship? Won’t they find Safe Haven?” Conner didn’t know if he was supposed to help them or stay out of their way when it happened.

Greg shrugged. “Depends on you, kid. You’ll be in range of Adrian, Candy, and a UN patrol at that moment. The choice will be all up to you.”

**3**

“I can’t run it that fast!” Conner gasped in air, sliding out of the run. The Eagles had moved through level two and three very quickly. It was almost dark now. *Level four is kicking my ass. I thought I could do this easier.*

Greg and the others didn’t stop or answer him; they kept flying through the sets. The obstacle course for this level had huge gaps to jump. It was fun for them.

Conner sucked in more air, disappointed with himself. *I can do this*. He counted the four seconds, then jumped back in the line.

Greg and the others adjusted for him, but they didn’t slow. When they caught up to Conner, they went around and kept going.

Conner fought to control his body like they did. It wasn’t as easy as it appeared. He hurled himself over the next gap, arms flailing...

Greg grabbed him by the shirt and shoved him away from the rail as he came by.

Conner bounced off a pallet and sprawled on the deck. He stayed there as the men jumped over him and kept going. “I can’t do it...this fast.”

“You can if you concentrate.” Jonny slid out of the set to clear room. “You’re letting mental crap cloud your mind. When you do sets, it’s time for an empty brain.” He extended a hand.

Conner let Jonny pull him up, but both males stayed out of the way. With only three in the run, Drew, Shawn, and Greg were now zooming along.

“How do they do that?!”

Jonny chuckled. “Empty mind, kid. It allows us to just react. We have to be able to do that on a moment’s notice when something goes wrong.” Jonny counted, then jumped back in. He loved this level.

Drew slid out as he came around, not as content as the others. He went to the rail, scanning the darkening sky while he got his breathing under control. In another hour, it would be full dark. The sense of bad things coming invaded Drew’s gut. He looked over at Conner.

Conner was surveying the wheelhouse, where the radio had been shut off.

“He can’t help you; he’s lucky he’s alive at all.”

Conner snorted. “Yeah, luck. Let’s go with that.”

Drew frowned. “Conner?”

“What?!”

“You can’t be an Eagle if we can’t trust you. The UN will betray you. Your dad will sell you out to get what he wants. We’re the only possible friends you have. Don’t throw that away.”

Conner didn’t answer, but he did try to see it from their point of view. He understood why Angela and Marc had done this. He just didn’t think it was needed.

Drew knew what Conner was thinking. It was what had been in his mind when he’d joined and realized how much work was involved. “Are you sorry you learned how to ride a bike?”

Conner glared. “This isn’t a bike.”

Drew saw Conner grimace and understood his bruises were hurting. “Your kit has a small supply of pain relievers.”

“You didn’t take any yet.”

Drew realized the boy was trying to be as tough as them. He dug a bottle from his pocket and flashed it. “We all have our own.”

Conner snickered, relieved. “I thought you were supermen.”

Drew stored the bottle. “Compared to you, we are.” Drew locked eyes with the stubborn boy. “But we’ll give that to you. Once you go through it, you’re done, and nothing can take it from you.”

“What about the traitors we’ve had?” Conner’s voice lowered to a grumble. “When my dad was leading.”

Drew shrugged. “Safe Haven can only do so much. If it’s all darkness inside, the light can’t get through.”

“And this run is to discover if I’m light or dark inside?”

“No. This run is to save everyone, Conner. If we don’t get into the detention center and give some special help, even Angela won’t be able to get us out of this one. Candy will die. She’s normal. The UN hates normals.”

Conner was shocked by Drew’s revelation, and furious. “You said she has a plan!”

“She does. We’re it.”

Conner considered that. Then he turned back to the set the others were still running. “Show me level five.”

Drew followed him, hiding a smile. *Angela’s always right. If she ever loses her gifts, we’re screwed.*

# Chapter Eleven

**I’m Not Broken Yet**

International Detention Center

**1**

***“S****hift change will commence in five minutes. Have your reports ready. Check out of your station on time.” The generic computer voice spoke calmly to all those living in the floating complex. “Shift change will be followed by lunch and training drills. Do not be late to your next zone.”*

Joel pushed a button to mute the speaker. He resumed his perfectly straight stance in the middle of the command center. Everything he needed was here, except for the oxygen that was pumped in. Unless there was a problem, he rarely left these three rooms.

The main door opened.

Joel held out a hand.

Jordi placed a ledger in it. “All clear for the last round of checks. Two more ships arrived overnight from Europe. Nothing on the Adrianna yet.”

Joel scanned the notes. Jordi gave him the basics orally, but the lower level man didn’t always see the crucial details. “We have a patrol boat checking on an unknown ship?”

“We do. Got lucky to have someone out that far.”

“Looters...”

Jordi nodded, sure Joel’s lip was curled even though he couldn’t view the man’s stern face. “We’ll make sure they follow rules once they arrive.”

“Perhaps. What do we know about the unknown ship? Is it the Adrianna?”

“We believe so, but they’re too far out to be sure.”

“This indicates they’ve been stationary for a while. It means our trap teams failed.”

Jordi sank into the second seat. “Probably. That call could have been a good fake.”

Joel wasn’t surprised. “Keep training with the enforcers. They have to be ready to lock down that entire ship.”

Jordi snorted. “Never going to happen, but I’ll work them as hard as you want.”

“Good.” Joel studied the view of water through the glass. “How are you coming with the Brady child?”

Jordi tensed.

Joel grunted. “I see.”

Jordi shrugged, head shaking. “She’s feral, man. I say we turn her loose on anyone who needs a punishment. She’ll get her workouts and you’ll have one less mouth to feed.”

“No. Bonds with anyone?”

“Not that we’ve been able to find.”

Joel’s brows drew together. “Not even her twin?”

“No, but they’ve been apart for over a year now. We do expect it to kick in when they’re reunited.”

“On which side?”

“Unknown, though her need for revenge may push it. As long as we keep her from making the connection to her father, it will swing our way.” Jordi had viewed that future many times.

“Never forget about the wildcards.”

Jordi frowned at the mild scold. “What wildcards? Even if Safe Haven has escaped our trap teams, when they come here, we’re ready.”

Joel turned to stare at his cousin. “Are you sure?”

*Damn. I’m not. I don’t know why, except that Safe Haven, the Mitchel, has always slipped out of our reach. This trap feels too obvious for such a high level prize.*

*You’ve shown me it works.*

*It does. They sail in; we open fire and lock them down. We knock them out and clear the ship.*

*But?*

*I don’t know. Something’s hinky.*

Joel scowled. “I hate that expression.”

Jordi swallowed. “I’ll keep scanning for changes.”

Joel turned back to the window. “Keep me informed.”

“Yes, sir.” Jordi left. When Joel was in this mood, it was best to stay clear.

Joel was glad when his fidgety relative was gone. He liked to be alone. The command center held basic furniture and had no decorations, only signs and rules for anyone who came in. He didn’t have personal items on display. In fact, he didn’t have those things at all. He had no need for sentimental trinkets. “They don’t get me. No one does.” Joel glanced at the drawer in his desk, where a folder of images and profiles waited for him to obsess over. “Except maybe you.”

Joel glanced at the control panel.

The speaker reactivated. A human voice echoed.

“Shift change is now underway. Do not dally. Move to your next area and read the waiting report. Do *not* leave your assigned zone for any reason.”

Joel checked the time. “Fifteen seconds early. Someone will pay for that.”

**2**

Jordi paused outside the prison corridor. *I hate coming down here.* He straightened, assuming a confident, angry air. He preferred to act like Joel even though he wasn’t on the same level.

Guards snapped to attention as Jordi entered.

Four fully enclosed blue cells sat across from each other in the center of this wide square section of the complex. Rails separated the troops from the prisoners, but they were only for a grip if the section needed to be detached. Rails didn’t stop their captives during these corruption sessions. Only the gas did.

The shift leader hurried to meet him. Kane smoothed his brighter uniform, now wishing he’d taken the time to iron it. Jordi hated them being messy until after the shift. “All chairs are filled now, sir. We’re ready for a session.”

Jordi caught the uneasy tone. He swept the troops manning the consoles and doors, frowning at some of their wrinkled uniforms and too-long hair. “You were late changing shifts.”

Kane knew better than to lie. “Yes, sir. Three seats.”

“By how long?”

“Almost two minutes.”

Jordi glared at them.

The troops shifted nervously. As an alpha, he had the power to correct them in any way he saw fit.

Jordi pointed at the farthest cell. “Let her out.”

Kane paled. “For how long?”

“Almost two minutes.”

The guards stiffened, muttered.

Jordi prepared to do battle. “Now.”

The cell buzzed open.

Shields came up; muscles tensed. Breath came out in short bursts as the room went cold. Ice crystals began forming on the walls, panels, clothes, gear.

Hands slid to batons...

Jordi brought up his shield.

More ice crackled through the cells, bringing moans and complaints from the other occupants.

A small girl with long black hair stepped from the cell in a tattered uniform that still held blood from other sessions. Her red orbs marked them all as she scanned for targets.

Jordi stayed still as the guards retreated. No one hated session time more than Cate Brady.

Ice crackled louder... Chunks broke off and flew through the room.

Guards used plastic shields to deflect them, ducking the bigger pieces.

Small spears formed from ice on the walls. They shot out in all directions, bouncing, pinging, impaling. Blood dripped.

Cate’s nose went up; she sniffed.

Jordi saw her malicious smile. *She’s magnificent. My finest work.*

Cate lifted both hands; the walls rattled.

Jordi frowned at her. “You’ll drown.” Few of the souls in this complex knew how to swim. That was intentional.

Cate let the lock slip a little more, making the complex creak. “I want out!”

“I want you to work harder.”

Cate’s anger rose into a wall of ice that began to climb Jordi’s shield.

Guards took posts near the doors, ready to run. Those who’d been injured stayed down.

“Harder!” Jordi kept her attention on him and his shield so she didn’t sink the complex. “Or you’ll never get out.”

Cate let go of the lock. Tiny ice shards slammed through Jordi’s shield and stuck in his hands, wrists, arms, and chest.

He staggered back in shock.

Cate blasted him again, hitting him in the face this time.

Jordi fell onto his knees, staring at her through the blood. “Magnificent.”

Cate drew her rage in, face returning to that of a sweet child. She swept the horrified guards fleeing from the room. Then she looked up at the camera in the corner. Her eyes glowed red. “I *will* get out.”

An instant later, thick white gas flooded through the vents, thawing them to let the sleep mixture in.

Cate snorted, staying still until the gas had covered her from view. She slowly walked back to her cell, fists clenched. “That’s the last time you play with me; I am not your friend.”

**3**

Joel switched off the camera. The higher level troops were already on the way there, but she wasn’t escaping yet. She also wouldn’t be punished for hurting Jordi or the others. The child needed to be cruel to serve her purpose. Punishing her would be counterproductive.

Joel replayed the action in his mind, discovering where Jordi had been wrong about a lack of bonds. “Hatred counts. You won’t make that mistake again.” When a child like Cate Brady bonded with someone, death usually followed. Jordi was lucky she hadn’t killed him. “And why didn’t she? What is she waiting for?”

Joel had a contingency plan in place, though there was no guarantee it would work. Cate was the strongest documented descendant born out of a lab; she was incredibly gifted. The UN had only had her here for a few months before losing control of this complex to him, but they had encouraged her violent streak in that time. So had Joel when he took over. *Her family reunion will be wonderful.*

Joel walked to the smallest room. He shut the door without pushing the button, enclosing himself inside his den. “Light. Files.”

The lights flickered on. The computer activated. *“Which files do you wish to view?”*

Joel stood in the same manner in the center of the small cubby. He was the same no matter where he was or who was around. “Laura Shalet.”

*“Shalet, Laura, file open.”*

“Read it aloud.” Joel concentrated on the details, not the words.

*“Laura Shalet. Sixty-five years of age. Eldest living member of the Shalet branch of descendants. Wanted for fourteen murders. Five failed attempts to capture, resulting in the elimination of each trap team. Last known location: Mexico, in 2006. Level 4 hazard.”*

Joel studied the pictures. The tall, muscled blonde woman sneering back wasn’t a top target, but he still wanted her. “Let’s try again.” Joel concentrated.

His grid shot out, forcing through the water like a dull knife through metal. It punched, sawed, ripped.

Joel paused in place, fighting to keep it still. The water didn’t like his invasion.

Joel drew more energy from his banks and fought for another hundred miles. His grid snapped out, slicing this time. He pinpointed Mexico and shoved in another burst of energy.

Dots began appearing on his grid. Colors sharpened into focus. He narrowed in on three of them. Descendants together were always checked, but these three dots all glowed blue, marking them as alphas. Joel used his last bar of energy to zoom in, body shaking from the effort...

He saw the sneering face he wanted; she turned toward him, going pale.

Joel smiled at her. “Anywhere you go, Laura. I can find you anywhere.”

Laura flipped him the finger. She vanished from his sight an instant later, dimming her twin nieces. Then they vanished from his grid.

Joel slowly returned, not snapping back like he’d done as a rookie. The rebound from so far was nasty.

Joel sat, body trembling. He got farther every time. “Dispatch a flight team to central Mexico to pick up the trail of Laura Shalet.”

*“Affirmative. Which flight team do you wish to assign?”*

Joel scanned the list. Many of them were dead or occupied. Those remaining weren’t good enough for this target, but they did need the practice. “Assign team J; send Toshi for backup and transport.”

*“Order recorded. Do you wish to change default gear or message?”*

“No. Update file and close.” Joel shut his lids, not fighting the shakes, sweating, or upset stomach. His cubicle was designed for these moments. Joel refused to let anyone view him rattled or weak.

Joel forced shaky legs to stand. His obsession was driving him out sooner, but he was already recovering. Being so high a level gave him an advantage. “And a weakness.” He opened the door with his hand. *When I figure out how to expand my energy banks, I’ll be the perfect descendant. My parents would be proud.*

Joel went to his desk and sat. He took out the paper folder that was getting worn from handling. He opened the cover and leaned back, almost in control again, though he was drained. His energy banks recharged overnight, but he hadn’t learned to expand them yet.

Joel stared at the dark haired warrior practicing on the deck of the Adrianna. One of the refugees had brought it along from their short stay with Safe Haven. “I can’t wait to meet you, Jennifer Reece. Your gifts will ensure my great destiny.”

**4**

Cate sat in her little chair. She adjusted her apron and picked up her teapot. “Everyone ready for a hot drink?”

The frowning instructor held out her cup with shaking hands. “That was mean.”

Cate filled her cup with steaming water. “He was rude. Never interrupt tea time.”

Valerie shrugged. She waited to be offered milk and honey.

Cate shook her head. “No sweets for you today.”

Valerie’s face fell. “I lost weight. I’m in better health.”

“You wanted them to punish me because you’re scared that I’ll kill you.”

Valerie didn’t deny or reply.

Cate stirred her cup. She sipped, staring at her prey.

Valerie felt death coming. She was almost relieved.

Cate sipped loudly. “That’s yummy.” She glared at Valerie. “They put you here so I would kill. They tempt me to kill, every day, with their stupid exercises.”

“You know...?” Valerie was suddenly babbling and couldn’t stop it. “They’ll gas you after you sink that ship. Then they’ll flood this complex and kill us all. It will sink with no evidence!” Valerie slapped her hand over her mouth.

Cate kept sipping her tea. *I can kill her now. Is that what I want?*

Cate watched the woman shudder. Her captors wanted their thief gone. “Drink your tea. Be good and you can have honey tomorrow.”

Valerie sucked in a fast breath. She wasn’t sure if she should say thank you or try to push the child into doing it. This punishment was supposed to be a death sentence... but Valerie didn’t want to die. “I’m sorry. I can’t help being scared.”

“If you were nice to me, we might become friends.”

Valerie thought about Jordi. “You hurt your friends.”

Cate paused. “Was he really my friend?”

Valerie slowly shook her head. “No. He pretended to get you to do what he wanted.”

“I need friends who understand how wrong this all is. Do you?”

Valerie shook her head again. “I believe in the one world order.”

Cate sighed, shoulders falling. “Go to your room or I’ll hurt you.”

Valerie fled to her small cardboard doghouse. She dropped the frayed flap and shivered in the dark.

Cate let a few tears roll even though the camera could see them, dripping crimson tears. “If I have to kill everyone in this complex, I will.”

The speaker crackled in her cell. “Do it now, little one.”

Cate wanted to. She began to make a fresh cup of tea instead. *I’m not broken yet.*

“Stop fighting, little one. Your brother will pay if you keep testing me.”

Cate threw the cup at the camera. “Liar! He’s not here! Liar!” She smashed through the table; debris flew across the cell.

Guards outside the cell retreated, opening the main door to clear an escape path.

Cate opened her power, eager to be done with captivity. *If we all drown, Joel will never get what he wants.*

Green gas flooded her cell.

Cate dropped to the floor. *I didn’t know they had another color.*

Darkness took over.

**5**

“She’s ready.” Joel pushed the log button on his folding keyboard. “No more sessions for prisoner #4.”

*“Order, recorded.”*

The door opened behind him.

Joel’s lips thinned. “You shouldn’t be here.”

A young boy crawled into Joel’s lap.

Joel sighed. He tugged the keyboard closer and began to type the orders he couldn’t speak aloud now.

“Soon, Daddy?”

“Yes.” Joel controlled his impatience with the bonding moment*. Everyone needs their own little monster to command.*

Joel replaced the folder, obsession knocked back a notch. He locked the desk and dropped the key into his shirt pocket. Then he lifted his son.

Joel stared at the boy, seeing his own wild, multi-colored hair and two-toned blue eyes. Except this boy wasn’t corrupt. He also wasn’t good. He was on the brink of that choice; he had to be handled carefully. Joel tucked the child onto his hip and rose. “Let’s get you settled.”

“I wanna stay out here.”

“No. Follow the rules.”

“Okay.” Joey held still while his father tucked him into the cot next to his larger bed. He took the teddy bear. It was the only toy his father let him have. He spent his time studying or observing training sessions that he wasn’t allowed to join yet because his gifts hadn’t presented. Joey wasn’t sure if he ever wanted them to. His father was closed off, but dutiful. *He makes sure I have what I need... Does he love me?*

Joel realized the time had come for the next stage–a true bond. “As much as I can love, yes.”

Joey didn’t look away. *It’s only real love if you would die for me.*

Joel enjoyed the feel of the soft shirt and slacks as he sat in the hard chair by his son’s cot; he knew Joey and Jordi did as well. It was the only concession to the rules that he allowed. He wanted everyone to know they were important on sight. Sometimes, a family name wasn’t enough. *And no one knows our name anymore. We used to be as feared as the Mitchels. I will change that with this assignment*. “I will consider your words.” Joel had several family members in this complex, including Jordi, who was now in the med bay, but a cousin wasn’t the same as a son.

Joey smiled. He shut his lids as his father picked up their nightly book and began reading.

“And so, the Creator had no one to give him glory for the amazing new thing he’d built in only six eons.” Joel’s voice automatically changed to that of a dry teacher. “The six days translation has always been wrong. It was six eons.”

Joey nodded, memorizing the inflection and emphasis Joel put on the words.

“To ease his loneliness, he made a companion from the earth and heavens. Emerging with wings and a white glow, the docile creature worshiped the Creator. And there was peace.” Joel paused, waiting for questions.

Joey shook his head. “Not this spot.”

Joel resumed the story, fast mind rushing ahead to have answers ready. “Over time, the angel began to understand he was different than God. Michael grew sad. When God asked why, the angel said he needed someone like himself to feel complete. God immediately pulled another angel from the heavens. The trio observed the earth and the animals there, but discord soon set in again as the angels realized the earthly forms had mates and children. They told God they couldn’t be happy without families of their own.”

“Why didn’t he kill them, or tell them they were created to please him and not the other way around?”

Joel encouraged the boy’s forming mind. “Why do you think?”

“He loved them too much to tell them no.”

“Yes, and it cost him everything.”

“So...love is a weakness?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s why you’re afraid to love.”

“I’m not afraid of anything. I have goals to achieve.”

“What about after?”

Joel considered it. He finally shrugged. “Perhaps, but only with you. I have no patience for a true family.”

“Not even a mother?”

*Ah.* “Perhaps you should listen to the rest again. You’re missing the deepest lesson.” Joel found his place in the story. “God was soon alone again as the angels began to love and breed. Disappointed, God decided he too would take a mate. He chose a special element from the earth and another from the heavens. The angel who emerged was powerful and dutiful to her job. She birthed God’s children. Each was odder than the last. Over the eons, not being with other angels took a toll. She began to crack; darkness entered her heart.”

“During their relationship, God also stayed restless. His children did not satisfy him. They were not like him; they were vain, selfish, needy. After the fifth attempt with the angel woman who now refused to speak, the Creator devoted his time to the earth. He turned the planet into an incubator, using his hair, blood, skin. He watched in fatherly concern as spores flourished and new animals rose from the erupting ground. He lovingly built a huge garden and began filling it with special life. This was to be the nursery for mankind, who would then spread themselves throughout the worlds he created. Watching them grow was the only thing that brought him happiness.”

Joey yawned. “Recharge coming.”

“Tell me the deepest lesson first.” Joel shut the book he’d taken from the commander here when he slaughtered him.

“Mothers are bad. Fathers are bad. Love is bad.”

“Yes. There is only power.” Joel slid the book into the desk and locked it, then resumed his seat. “We’ll finish next time.”

“Will you stay here?”

“Of course.”

Joey snuggled under the blankets, bracing for pain.

Joel hit him with hard, strong blasts, pulling from what he always kept in reserve.

The child bit into the blanket to hold in the screams. His father didn’t seem to feel anything through their bond. *So we don’t have one. He would leave me behind if it meant not achieving his goals.*

“Yes.” Joel felt a tiny pang. “But I would hesitate now. That’s something, yes?”

Joey nodded, comforted by that. “Keep trying.”

“I will.” Joel put a hand on his son’s arm and let his mind wander.

Joey enjoyed the mental and physical connection as he drifted off. *But I’m still not satisfied. This must be why the Creator left.*

Joel stored that observation and how it felt to the child. He kept the boy here for this reason. Joel had been byzan so long he’d forgotten what normal emotions felt like. This little boy was keeping him human.

*But he can be replaced. There’s no true love in my heart for anyone. Only darkness lives there.*

# Chapter Twelve

**Not the Daddy**

December 26th

**1**

**“W**here ya headed, Neil?”

Neil gestured toward the top deck, where camp people and Eagles were enjoying the beautiful weather. “Rounds for the boss.”

Allison fell in step.

Neil frowned. He needed to be alone right now.

Allison held in a snicker as they took the same hall, and then the same steps.

Neil caught her amusement. He realized they were headed to the same place. He grunted. “You could have just told me.”

Allison’s face clouded over. “Yeah, and you could have stayed an honorable man.”

Neil winced.

Satisfied she’d shut down his snarky attitude, Allison delivered a small concession. “I wasn’t sure at first. I’m Invisible, remember?”

Neil sighed. “I think this is going to be a rough day.”

Allison nodded. “It is, for you.”

Now Neil frowned. “What do you know?”

“She decided on your punishment.”

Neil’s nuts drew up into tight little balls. “Are you allowed to tell me?”

“Nope.” Allison slid into the shadows near the top of the steps. She opened a utility door most people didn’t notice because it was painted the exact same shade as the green walls up here. She held it for him. “Come on. Keeping us waiting will only make it worse.”

Neil followed her into the utility corridor, heart starting to thump.

Allison led him to the large, empty room that Angela had assigned for moments like this. When he entered, she did too, locking the door.

The room was dusty, unused. Neil added it to his mental map of the ship that he and many of the others were still memorizing. There were hundreds of rooms and passages on this boat.

Neil scanned the women standing around, glaring at him. Angela wasn’t here. *I might be in trouble.* All eight females were sweaty, disheveled, and in full gear despite them being on rest and recharge time. He didn’t comment on it. The mood was too serious for a joke or even a scold.

Tonya pointed to the single chair against the wall. “Let’s talk.”

Neil sat, understanding Tonya had tricked him. “I guess we won’t be working on my mental walls.”

Tonya snorted. “We might get to that another time. Right now, I have questions.”

Neil’s eyes narrowed as he caught her thoughts. “She left the choice to you, because you’re unbiased.”

Tonya nodded. “But I asked my team to help with this moment.”

Neil scanned the women he’d given secret kai lessons to for the last few weeks. “A jury of my peers.”

“Exactly. We’ve gotten to know you.” Tonya rose, hand supporting her growing stomach. She leaned against the wall. “Would you do it again?”

Neil didn’t pretend ignorance. If he lied here, or pretended he didn’t know why this was happening, he was lost. “Yes, but with a change.”

“What change?”

“I would get permission.”

Tonya’s face relaxed. “That’s exactly the right thing to say.”

Neil sighed. “I mean it. I never thought she’d agree.”

“If she hadn’t, would you have gone against her?”

Everyone frowned at him as they waited for his answer. Tonya was in charge of this moment, but it was important that Neil understood she had their full support.

Neil quickly shook his head. “That’s why I didn’t think to ask first. I assumed she would say no and I knew I wouldn’t go against her.”

“Again, exactly right.” Tonya’s tone hardened. “Now for the most important question. Ready?”

Neil braced even though he already knew what was coming. “Go on.”

“Are you willing to let Marc lock your gifts to prove you aren’t a threat?”

Neil had already asked himself that question. “No.” He stared at the tile floor. “I did it to protect my family. I can’t do that if I’m locked.”

“And therein lies the problem.” Tonya motioned to Francesca. “You’re first, Rookie.”

Francesca flushed. She stood, brushing her short dark hair away from her face. She approached Neil. “Do you accept this loving correction from your team?”

Neil smiled in relief. “I accept it with gratitude.”

Francesca’s punch was hard and ugly. She caught Neil on the jaw and knocked him off the chair.

Neil slowly pushed up and got back into the seat, vision blurry. “You’ve been practicing.”

“Yep.” Francesca returned to her place as Tonya waved the next teammate forward.

“Show him our love.”

Neil relaxed so the blows wouldn’t do as much damage.

Monica tagged Neil in the ribs, putting heat into it.

Neil grunted, heart easing with every hit. *She chose not to remove me. Thank you, Boss.* He took each hit without anger, letting the pain heal his mind and his heart.

The women delivered his punishment without hatred, each hoping they never had to do it again. With the exception of Molly, they all liked Neil now; hitting him hurt them too.

When he staggered from the room to resume his rounds, no one asked Neil about his newest set of bruises, though it was obvious they were fresh. If it had been important, Neil would have mentioned it to leadership. The camp members who saw him assumed Marc had felt like beating on him again. The Eagles knew it for what it was–Neil had been corrected and forgiven.

Neil’s surviving teammates only wondered who had delivered the beating they were relieved to have avoided being assigned. For them, it was over.

**2**

“Can I talk to you?”

Kenn paused before nodding. He held the door to the lounge he’d been about to enter. Courtney was dressed in a blue pantsuit that clung to her curves. Her hair was long and shiny. Kenn could smell the shampoo she’d used today. He examined his feelings, searching for the previous attraction, but there was nothing. *I don’t want her.*

Courtney entered. She was feeling bad. She wanted a father for her child, and she wanted to be safe. It didn’t have to be Kenn, but she did feel an attraction for him. It was hard not to when power oozed off him without him even knowing it. He was a good man now, one who would defend his mate against anyone. *Except, he doesn’t want me.*

The memorial lounge was sparkling clean and smelled like polish, telling them the crew had been here recently. They both liked that. It was important to remember all they’d lost, and to honor it.

Courtney went to the memorial, heart breaking as she read all the names again. *I miss every one of them, but especially Doug and Ozzie.*

Kenn knelt by the statue, pulling tools from his pocket. Marc had sent him here to add the last set of names. *Did he know she wanted a minute alone with me?* “What’s up?”

Courtney flushed, not sure how to ask for what she wanted.

Kenn spotted her red cheeks. “Should I just read your mind?”

Courtney nodded. “Please.”

Kenn did. He relaxed, chuckling. “I thought it was something hard.” He waved her over.

Courtney stepped into his reach. It had only been a couple days since they’d tried this, but she’d felt different this morning. She was almost sure it would work.

Kenn placed his big hand over her small stomach bump. A bright blue spark immediately ran up his arm and vanished.

*It’s mine.*

*It’s his.*

They stared at each other.

“Well, then.” Courtney walked toward the door. “Thank you.”

Kenn frowned. “That’s it? Thank you?”

She stopped with her hand on the knob. “I don’t know what else to say.”

Kenn grunted, standing. “That makes two of us.” He approached her slowly, now very aware of how intimidating he could be to females. “Would you like to talk?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. I need to think.”

“About Wade?”

She sighed. “I have to tell him no.”

“Why?”

“He’s not the daddy.”

“You already suspected that.”

“Yeah, but now...”

“Now it’s real because it’s been confirmed.”

“Yes.”

Kenn didn’t like her unhappiness. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“I believe you.” Kenn placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll be there for you as much as you let me.”

She stiffened. “But you’ll never be the mate I need.”

He dropped his hand. “No. My heart will always be Tonya’s.” Kenn took the opportunity to ask something that had been bothering him. “Why does it have to be a descendant?”

Courtney gave him the truth. “I want to be on the winning side. I’m not one of you. If I have a mate who is a strong magic user, I might survive the coming war.”

Kenn scowled. “What coming war?”

She lowered her voice. “Between you guys and the normals. We all know it’s coming. I just want to survive it.”

Kenn’s unease grew. *That’s not good.* “Let’s chat.”

**3**

“Jennifer will be sent to me for personal training, starting today.” Marc didn’t need to look up from his notebook to see Kyle’s glare; it was burning a hole into his forehead. “Problem?”

Kyle dropped into the chair across from Marc. “What kind of training?”

“The type I gave Angie to get her over her fear of men.”

Kyle stiffened. “I’m working on that!”

“No, you’re not, or she wouldn’t still be so afraid.” Marc delivered his own glower. “You don’t want her around other men long enough to learn. Explain yourself.”

Kyle’s hard façade crumbled. “She’ll leave me. They all want her, and...they aren’t all killers!”

Marc sat back, studying the mobster. *That’s the reason I brought him in for this moment instead of just assigning Jennifer to it.* “I’ve always been uneasy about your relationship.”

“Because of her age.” Kyle didn’t back down. “She’s legal. We’re married!”

“No, because of your tendency to be possessive.” Marc delivered another blow. “I don’t think she ever had a choice.”

“That’s not true!”

“You’re very defensive, Kyle.”

“You’re very rude!”

Marc chuckled without humor. “I can be, but this has nothing to do with me. It’s all about you holding her back.”

Kyle’s anger and fear filled the small office that Marc had chosen for his daily meetings.

Marc didn’t dig into Kyle’s thoughts. The recharge had already revealed the issue. Now, it had to be solved. “Have her meet with me once a day until *she* decides she doesn’t need it anymore.”

“No one else?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“What?!”

Marc pinned the man with red orbs. “You’re pushing your luck with me. Angela may put up with your attitude over Jennifer, but I won’t! Keep pushing. It will get ugly.”

Kyle didn’t bring up the rough training sessions he and Jennifer had been doing with their new gifts, nor the run they’d been assigned to. He only had one thing on his mind. “She’s my wife! I’m protecting her.”

The door opened, preventing Marc’s sarcastic reply. Jennifer entered. She sat in the empty chair next to her husband. “I’m here for my first session.” She didn’t look at Kyle. “Please go away.”

Kyle stormed from the room, slamming the door. If she was willing, he had no ground to stand on.

Marc smiled at the nervous teenage mother. “I’m already proud of you.”

Jennifer tried to smile back. It came out as a grimace. “I hate going against him.”

Marc studied her. “Because you owe him?”

“Because I love him...and he’s right to shield me from the men on this ship.”

Marc studied her. “You really think you’re in danger from Eagles?”

Jennifer shrugged. She didn’t want to say it again.

“What makes you feel that way?”

She dropped her head. “They stare at me; they think things.”

“About having sex with you?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes. Mostly it’s replacing Kyle. They aren’t his friends even if they pretend to be.”

“Have any of them done anything? Made moves or plans?”

“Not that I know of.” Jennifer understood his point. She sighed miserably. “I don’t know. It *might* be all in my head.”

Marc wouldn’t confirm that. “If you think you’re in danger, I will always take that seriously.”

Jennifer was relieved to hear it.

“I need you to do something for me.”

“Sure.” She brightened, expecting work.

“Spend time with Wade.”

Jennifer blanched. “The camp whore? No thanks.”

Marc stared at her.

Jennifer couldn’t take it. “Okay.”

Marc grunted. “Fear just made the choice for you. Do you like how that feels?”

Jennifer shook her head, tears starting to roll over her cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

Marc saw it all in that moment. Jennifer would always give in to keep men calm. She’d been abused too much to fight back on her own unless it was a matter of life or death for her family. “I want to help you.”

“I know.”

“Will you let me try?”

She nodded, wanting to be totally free. “I’ve made progress.”

“I believe that. No one ever sees this side of you.”

“Kyle knows it’s an act. He wants me to be safe and happy.”

“I believe that too. Despite the grilling I gave him, I only found love in his heart for you. He honestly thinks you’re in danger.”

“Because I think it.”

“Yes. But that doesn’t mean you’re wrong. I’ll dig into that and try to make all of us feel better. Until then, will you spend our meeting time with Wade?”

“Why?”

“Because he knows women better than I ever have. I’ve asked him to help several of our females with the same issue, including Emma. She’ll probably be at some of your meetings with him.”

That made Jennifer feel better, like he’d known it would. “Okay.”

“Thank you. It’s very brave of you to try to overcome this.”

Jennifer finally met his eye. “You guys can really make it go away?”

Marc nodded. “Most of it. Angie only has the nightmares left.” Marc shrugged. “I can’t do anything about those. Your mind still has to sort it out.”

“She isn’t scared at all anymore unless these people are in danger.” Jennifer’s shoulders straightened; her chin lifted. “I want to be like that.”

“Good. We need you as strong as possible. Being our enforcer is demanding work. Your fears have to be conquered for you to do the job.”

Jennifer stood, wanting to tell him another secret. She left before she could.

Marc sighed. He already knew. He opened his notebook to Morgan’s last medical note.

*Jennifer is six weeks pregnant.*

Marc sighed. She couldn’t go on the run to rescue his daughter. *That mission no longer has an enforcer.*

**4**

Pam didn’t talk as she followed Tonya to the infirmary. It was time for her first food dose. She’d volunteered, like Allison, but she didn’t feel like discussing the odds that it would work; she had no faith.

Tonya drew her closer and put an arm around Pam’s thinning shoulders. She didn’t offer false hope, just comfort.

Pam hugged her back, grateful.

Morgan was waiting for them. He held the door.

“Will it hurt?”

Tonya shook her head. “No. No tugging on you or the others.”

Pam smiled, relaxing a little. “Cool. Where do you want me?”

“In the chair is fine. You don’t need to get undressed or lie down.”

“Cool.” Pam sank down next to Tracy. “Hi.”

Tracy kept her attention on the floor. She’d just finished getting a checkup. “Hello.”

“Feeling better?”

Tracy nodded, but she didn’t add details that would be lies. Pam was a teammate. That was forbidden.

Pam didn’t push. She understood not wanting to converse during a medical moment. *And being in here again is giving me the creeps. I hope this is over quickly.*

Tim handed Tracy a sheet of paper. “The boss wants you in the recharge area as soon as you pack a bag from your cabin. Charlie will be here in a few minutes to escort you.”

“Okay.” Tracy drew in a breath as she shifted toward Pam. “Will you be my maid of honor?”

Pam stared. “What?”

Tracy shrugged, cheeks turning red. “I don’t have friends here. You’re a teammate.”

Pam felt bad for her. She reached over and put a hand on Tracy’s wrist. “I’d be honored.”

Tracy tried not to cry. “Thank you.” She got up and walked from the room.

Pam shared a worried glance with Morgan and Tonya.

Tonya shrugged, handing Pam a small paper cup with thick orange liquid. “I’ll mention it to the boss. Drink that.”

“Good.” Pam frowned at the cup. “What is this?”

“I’m calling it vitamin C slurry.”

Pam held her breath and downed the small drink. She chewed the grit, trying not to spit it out. It didn’t taste bad, but it felt odd enough to confuse her palate.

“You can go.”

Pam tossed the cup in the trash. “That’s it?”

Tonya nodded, writing the time and the amount of the dose. Tonya felt out of place with her white coat and all its signatures. She missed her Eagle gear even though she’d just had it on an hour ago. *I’m an Eagle first, a healer second. That’s who I am now.* “Old studies imply cancer hates vitamin C. I’m working with it as the base and adding a few things I think might boost the effect.”

“Oh. Okay.” Pam smiled at Morgan, pretending things were fine between them.

Morgan kissed her on the cheek. “Things *are* fine between us.” Before she could protest, he kissed her on the mouth.

Pam was immediately distracted.

Tonya left them alone, unable to take the pain. *Kenn cheated on me. I still can’t believe he did that.*

Tonya saw Courtney coming down the hall. Kenn was next to her. She glared at both of them, then stormed down the opposite passage.

Kenn sighed.

Courtney didn’t like his misery. “What can I do?”

“Nothing. She’ll never forgive it. The baby will be a daily reminder of my betrayal.” He noticed their cleaning crew still hadn’t made it to the hallways, where a new layer of crud was starting to stick to the carpets, but he didn’t plan to complain. They’d gotten the camp areas, the recharge hall, and all bathrooms on the ship done. That was good progress as far as he was concerned. The smells in those places had been growing rough.

Kenn put a hand on Courtney’s elbow as he escorted her into the infirmary. “She’s here for a checkup.”

Morgan noted the physical contact; his lips thinned. “Did Tonya just see you?”

Kenn let go and left.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Morgan smiled at Courtney. “How’s our little mom-to-be?”

“Queasy. Kenn said you might be able to give me something for it.”

“I think we have a few things.” Morgan began searching his notes.

Courtney watched Kenn walk down the hall, mind full of unpleasant thoughts about their chat.

Morgan read her mind without guilt, still curious as to why she wanted a descendant mate. When he found the answer, Morgan wasn’t surprised. *We all know it’s coming. The only unknown is when.*

**5**

Tracy entered the cabin, then shut and locked the door. Their cabin was small and held four bunks they were sharing with two guards who made sure they weren’t having contact before their wedding. Tracy was glad to find it empty. She leaned against the door, no longer holding in the tears. *I almost lost my baby!*

She slid to the floor and let guilt have control. She hadn’t realized how much she wanted it until it was almost too late. If not for Morgan and Charlie’s magic, she would have. *I’m so sorry!*

The bathroom door opened; Charlie came out with a bag in his hand. “I got her toothbrush...” He dropped the bag and rushed to her, sending healing orbs.

“I’m okay; stop.” Tracy tried to quit crying.

Charlie connected to her, unable to take her anguish. “Shh... It’s okay.” He wiped away her tears. “We’ll be more careful now, right?”

She nodded, holding onto him. The strength of her feelings was still a surprise.

Charlie felt desire rushing in and tried to shut it down. She was in no state to fool around even if they were allowed, which they weren’t.

Tracy needed a distraction. She tilted her mouth up.

Charlie kissed her once, hard and quick, then stood. “Come on. Let’s get you recharged.”

Tracy didn’t protest, though she wanted to. They would be married soon and then he could give her any comfort she wanted.

Charlie helped her up and retrieved the bag. “Do you want to stay in this cabin after the wedding?” Charlie distracted her with future plans. Inside, he made a mental note to ask his dad for advice. Tracy was unstable. He could see it now. *She needs help that I don’t know how to give.*

**6**

Marc felt the danger before the office door opened; he slid his hand to his weapon.

“There you are!” Bob staggered into the small room with a bottle in one hand and a gun in the other.

Marc sighed. Grief was eating at some of Safe Haven’s members. Bob had sunken eyes and a two-week beard that didn’t hide his agony. His clothes were filthy; his ashy boots left stains on the carpet, telling Marc he’d been down to the incinerator room again. The first two times they’d found him passed out there, Marc had left him alone. The last time, he’d added the man to grief counseling, but it hadn’t worked. *Maybe another session will help.* Marc shook his head at Ian, who was about to knock the man out with a nasty head blow from behind. “Let him go.”

Bob was drunk enough to not fear them. “You let her die!”

Marc hated the flash of shame that accusation produced. “We couldn’t save everyone. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t good enough! I want my daughter back!”

That was a common shriek among the women. This was the first time Marc had heard it from one of the men. It seemed to hurt more. “I can’t do that. I wish I could.”

“The higher level can.” Bob kicked the door shut, spilling beer down himself.

Ian immediately pushed it open and entered the room, ready to grab him since Marc didn’t seem to want the drunk hurt.

Marc nodded toward the chair. “Sit. Let’s talk.”

Bob stared stupidly. “Talk? I don’t want to talk to you. I want you dead!”

Angela appeared behind him.

Marc tensed, ready to react.

So did Ian.

Angela placed a gentle hand on Bob’s arm. “Take me instead. I’m the boss. It’s my fault.”

Bob tried to spin around. He fell against the wall and slid down it. The bottle fell at Angela’s feet.

Marc held up a hand when the guard would have rushed the man. “Give her a minute.”

Angela knelt in front of Bob. She watched tears roll over his cheeks and drip onto his shirt. It didn’t appear that he’d changed clothes at all since his daughter died. His filthy clothes hung on him, telling her he wasn’t eating either. “I understand.”

Bob slapped her.

Angela’s head snapped back.

Marc stood now, furious. “Do that again. I dare you.”

Bob screamed at them, using insults no one had thought he was capable of. When he finally ran out of steam, everyone was pissed except Angela. She cried with him, mourning his dead child and her own.

“I want you both gone!”

“We feel it.” Angela slowly wrapped her arms around the man. “We understand your pain. You won’t be punished for this.”

Bob cried in her arms. His sobs were awful.

Angela took every second into her heart and held tight to it. *I deserve this for not being able to save them all.*

Marc frowned. “Get him to the infirmary. Light sedation until I decide his fate.”

Angela helped Ian get the drunken father up. “Come on. I’ll stay with you while the medics get you settled.”

Bob let her stay close.

Marc didn’t sense real violence in the man, just pain, but he still stayed on their heels to be sure Angela wasn’t in danger. *He’ll pay for hitting her. I don’t care what she says about no punishment.*

Angela felt it. She frowned over her shoulder.

Marc looked right back, waiting for her to pull rank. She could and he would submit, but it would be proof that he really wasn’t in charge.

Angela played dirty. “If you punish him, it’ll hurt me.”

Marc scowled. “That’s not fair.”

Angela turned her attention back to Bob, content she’d won that one. “After you feel better, I’d like you to join the Eagles.”

Bob shuddered. “Never. Your army caused this. If you hadn’t gone up there, it wouldn’t have happened!”

“Do you really believe that?”

Bob refused to answer.

Angela guided him into the infirmary and took him to a cot in the far corner. “Bob needs some sleep, a shower, food, and more grief counseling.”

“I don’t want your help!” Bob shoved her.

Marc punched him.

Bob dropped onto the cot.

Marc shrugged at Angela’s disapproving expression as she pushed herself off the floor. “What? You said he needed sleep.”

Angela liked it that Marc was defending her, but she didn’t show it. She motioned to Tim, who had duty over the infirmary right now. “Try to give him a break. He lost the last member of his family. The grief has control.”

Tim nodded. “I’ll try to reach him.”

She sighed. “Get him to join the Eagles or he won’t make it to the island.”

Marc didn’t ask how she knew that without her gifts. It was obvious. *If he hits a woman again, I’ll shove him overboard and I don’t care who gets upset.*

Descendants who caught the thought agreed with him. Training was one thing; abuse was a crime.

Angela let Marc escort her back to the recharge deck. She didn’t tell him she’d spotted Bob staggering down the steps and followed. It was better if their shadows and open guard thought she’d felt the threat. *But I didn’t.* This was the first time she’d really missed having those gifts. Marc hadn’t been in real danger. Bob had been too drunk to be a threat, but when he sobered up and was let loose again, that might change.

“We’ll cover it.”

Angela nodded at Marc’s platitude, aware that he was sending soothing energy at her. *Good. I miss my babies too. I understand the grief that makes us do reckless things.*

Angela climbed into the bed, glad he hadn’t noticed her sweaty back. She’d just had another training session with some of her team. Seeing Bob had been pure luck while she tried to sneak back here. “I love you.”

Marc kissed her cheek. “Nice try. Stay in bed this time.”

Angela chuckled. “Can’t get anything by you.”

Marc’s eyes narrowed. *If only that were true.*

# Chapter Thirteen

**You’re Conflicted**

**1**

**“T**he first set of recharges are done. Please clear your cabin and report to your assigned place in the camp living area. Those who have duty on the next shift need to get there now.”

Grant’s calm voice over the PA system caused a flurry of activity. Lights began flashing all over his monitors as residents opened doors, shut off lights and equipment, or did the opposite to start their shift. The cruise ship’s command center showed everything going on, including video, though they weren’t using it yet. With only one person on the bridge, the cameras were too much of a distraction.

Grant lifted his glasses and scanned the ocean. They were still stationary, but the water was pushing debris toward them. The most recent waves of it had sea birds on the piles, letting all of them breathe easier.

Grant checked his personal radiation patch. Nothing registered. He flipped on the Geiger counter.

Silence.

*That’s good, right?* Grant didn’t like how paranoid he was now, but almost dying had changed him.

Ray sensed Grant’s mood shift, but he didn’t offer comfort. He was on duty. Chatting wasn’t allowed because he might miss something important.

Ray moved closer to the ramp that led to the deck, reacting to Grant’s nervousness even though there was nothing in sight to imply a threat.

The guard below them saw Ray and began scanning the deck and the ocean.

Ian was honored to be protecting their bridge today. He swept harder... *Did that debris pile move...?* Ian stepped closer to the rail, using his binoculars. He zoomed in on the center of the long, narrow trash parade.

A hand shot up and grabbed a bird. Both vanished.

*Holy shit!* Ian keyed his radio. “Boss to the top deck.” He didn’t bother acting like it was an ordinary call. There was no need to lie to the camp anymore.

Eagles on the top deck joined Ian, scanning for what he’d seen.

Ian wasn’t totally sure what he’d witnessed, so he didn’t tell them. He waited for the boss.

Angela appeared at the top of the steps, flanked by Kyle and Neil. Marc was sleeping. Angela didn’t call him.

Ian pointed. “Someone’s alive down there. I saw a hand.”

Guards chuckled around him, sure he was imagining things.

*And that’s why I didn’t tell you*. Ian kept scanning.

Angela took the glasses. She made a motion behind her back to Neil.

Neil sent his gift over the pile. “It’s a woman...and a child!”

“You’re kidding, right?” Kyle scanned for himself, using his new gifts in a rare display. He frowned. “That debris isn’t random.”

Angela agreed. She could see places where the garbage had been secured together. “Who wants the run?”

A dozen hands went up. The Eagles were getting bored.

Angela went toward the bridge so Ray could protect her. She didn’t want Marc getting upset if he found her in the crowd. “Neil, pick a three-man crew and go get them. Be nice.”

Neil chose three Eagles and hurried to the cargo area for gear.

“Why don’t they see us?” Grant had been listening to the conversation below. “Why would they stay there rather than make contact?”

Angela had ideas, but she chose to wait until they got the real story. “Go tell Neil to take the darts. They may be feral, depending on how long they’ve been hiding.”

Ray gave the order to a rookie using hand code. He wasn’t leaving the bridge.

Angela nodded her approval. Ray was one of the most dependable Eagles they had. *I’m looking forward to Grant joining the army next. I expect big things from him too.*

Grant studied the debris field coming closer on the tide. Much of it would go by the front of the ship, but that slightly wider center area was going to smack into the front hull. “I can turn on the loudspeaker and try to make contact.”

Angela shrugged. “I doubt you’d get an answer.”

Grant added the clues. “Because they would have already tried to make contact?”

“Yes. They know we’re here; they’re hiding–from us.”

Ray frowned at her answer. “Does that mean they’re a threat?”

“Doubtful. Their actions imply fear.” Angela watched from the entranceway. “If they wanted to damage our ship, they already would have.”

Neither man liked hearing that.

Grant scowled. “What can we do about that for the future?”

Angela got out her notebook and wrote it down. “If you come up with a solution, I want to hear it.”

Grant immediately began trying to think of something that would work.

Angela saw a shadow come up the ramp and go unnoticed by the guards who were watching the debris pile. She almost cried. “I can’t.” She moved back, making a fast choice. “Ray, I can’t do it this time.” She slid into the elevator and shut the door.

Grant stared in confusion.

Ray pulled his gun and moved in front of Grant. He pushed him backward with his body until their Captain was up against the elevator.

Bob appeared on the stairs outside the plastic covered doorway. He’d snuck by the medics and rookies during the excitement.

Ray lifted his gun. “Go back to the infirmary right now! I won’t tell you twice.”

“Where is she?! I saw her come up here!” Bob ripped the plastic down and entered the bridge. He was sober this time. “I’m going to send her to hell.” He lifted the knife he’d stolen.

Ray fired one kill shot. *You don’t get a wound from me. When I use my gun, someone dies.*

Blood sprayed across the clean windows and new plastic that had been put up this morning.

Eagles flew toward them as Bob dropped to the floor.

Grant stared at the mess.

Ray reloaded the single round and holstered, not fazed. Angela had given him enough warning to be ready. “Boss.”

Angela came from the elevator. She stayed back as Marc and the Eagles filled the bridge.

Marc saw her behind Ray. He scanned their thoughts to discover what had happened.

Angela didn’t meet his eyes. *I couldn’t do it.*

*You should have told me you sensed something.*

*I didn’t.*

*You could have called me.*

*I couldn’t let you do it either, Marc.*

He let the anger out. “Why not? Isn’t that part of my job?”

Angela pointed.

Marc glanced down at the deck and found a small group of camp members watching them. Everyone in that group was normal. They were staring in surprise and confusion.

“If they think we’re executing individuals who speak out against us, we’ll lose them all.” Angela was still on the edge of crying. “It had to come from someone the camp trusts.”

Ray realized he’d been set up to take that fall.

Marc waited for Ray’s anger.

Ivan snorted from behind him. “You obviously still don’t get the way this works.”

“I get it fine!” Marc gestured. “She didn’t tell me. Again!”

“With good reason.” Ivan understood why she’d handled it this way. “If she’d told you, it would be your bullet in Bob’s heart and the people down there would go right back to how it was in the mountain. It had to be one of them.”

Marc tried to find another angle. “She could have told an Eagle.”

“She did.” Ray gestured to Ivan. “Boss needs an escort to the recharge deck; get on it.”

Ivan immediately took Angela’s arm and led her into the elevator.

Marc glared at Ray for a moment longer, then accepted the truth. *I really don’t get it, after all this time. What am I missing?*

“We don’t know either.” Kenn joined the crowded bridge, scanning the gory mess. He avoided stepping in it or touching the splattered plastic. “But we’re all rooting for you.”

Marc snorted. “Sure you are.”

Kenn frowned at him. “What’s your problem today? You’re not usually so...rattled.”

“None of your business!” Marc left, taking the stairs to the deck to watch Neil’s rescue.

“He’s nervous.” Grant recognized the tone. He paid attention to Marc a lot more than the other alpha males here. “Never seen him act like that.”

Kenn helped rookie Eagles lift the body so it could be put into the bag Molly had brought up. “I have.”

Grant frowned. “When?”

“Anytime he’s about to be caught in the wrong.”

Understanding flew through the bridge. The second half of the recharges were coming. Marc still had a secret.

**2**

“Why are you even with him?” Ivan slammed a hand on the button, stopping the elevator. “Why do you put up with that shit?! You’re the boss here. You’ve made every choice based on what’s best for the future of these people and he knows it! He’s keeping secrets too! Why do you stay with him?!”

Angela lit a smoke, letting him rant. She’d heard this from more than one person over the last nine months.

Ivan let out a ragged sigh. “I’m sorry for yelling. But it doesn’t change the truth. He doesn’t deserve you or the job you gifted to him.”

She leaned against the wall, lids closing. “I started this ugly habit when I was twelve. Marc always hated it.”

Ivan frowned. “That’s not an answer.”

“It is; you just don’t want to hear it.”

“No, I don’t. How dare you try to tell me this is your fault! You didn’t make him that way. You didn’t corrupt him.” Ivan waited for her to argue.

Angela blew out a cloud of smoke. Then inhaled another.

Ivan yanked the cigarette from her hand. “You’re burning it up!”

Angela opened her eyes. A tear rolled over her cheek.

Ivan broke. He put the cigarette back between her shaking fingers, swearing. “I hate that.”

Angela puffed on her smoke. “I have helped corrupt him. But your anger isn’t about his unwillingness to accept my decisions.”

Ivan tensed. “Don’t do this now.”

“You asked why I stay with him. You opened the conversation.”

“Don’t.”

Angela shivered at the feel of his sudden fear after all the heat, power shuffling underneath in a bid for freedom. “You know what his secret is. You both hope, and don’t hope, that it will break us up. You’re conflicted.”

Ivan’s mouth dropped open. *I refused to think about it! And she’s locked! How does she know?!*

Angela held the smoke out. “Drag?”

Ivan took it even though he didn’t smoke.

“Inhale light or you’ll choke.”

Ivan sucked in a huge lungful and blew it out, filling the elevator with thick smoke. He didn’t cough.

“Wow.” Angela took it back. “Never seen that before.”

He frowned. “I have excellent lungs.”

“And a sharp brain.” She inhaled, mind now swimming from hitting it so hard and fast. “So why are you conflicted?”

Ivan stared. “You know why.”

She didn’t look away. “Say it.”

“No.”

“Coward.”

Ivan’s remaining anger faded; desperate fear took its place. “Yes.”

“Say it and be done. That’s an order.”

Ivan couldn’t refuse. “I hate him.”

“And?”

His fists clenched. “I want to be like him. So you’ll love *me* that way.”

“There we go.” Angela knocked off the cherry and ground it out on the dirty carpet. She hit the button to restart the elevator.

“And that’s it?”

She nodded. “You’ll face it now and come to terms with the truth.”

“What truth?”

Angela pinned him with icy blue eyes. “You will never get what you want the most. You will serve this job with everything you have and never be truly happy.”

Ivan’s mind spun with those facts. *I’ve always known it. Now, I have to face it.*

“I’m sorry.”

Ivan sighed. “So am I. I don’t know how to stop wanting you.”

“You can’t. Fate offers me temptations at every turn. For it to work, the pull has to be strong.” Angela stored the half cigarette and took a step toward him. “Will you go with me when I snap?”

Ivan gave a curt nod. There wasn’t a choice for him. “Ten minutes notice and to know where you are.”

It was almost a mirror of what Marc had said to her when they’d first joined Safe Haven. “He’ll find that out tonight when we do your recharge.”

“No, he won’t.” Ivan slid in front of her so he could clear the path first. “He has his own shit going on. He won’t even notice yours.”

“And the next time he asks you about my cracks?”

Ivan stiffened. “What cracks? I thought they’d healed.”

Angela put a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you. And fuck you.”

Ivan understood completely. “Stay close. I’ll shoot at the drop of a hat for a chance at that future.”

Angela relaxed. “That’s exactly what I needed to hear.”

He scowled, body lighting up at the feel of her hand on him. “Why?”

“Because you may have to when I snap, to get me away from Marc.” She dropped her hand. “He’ll try to help me. I need to believe you’re capable of getting me away from these people before I hurt anyone.”

“Even if that means me shooting Marc?”

“Yes. These people mean everything to the future.” She pushed down the grief and anger. “As long as he doesn’t die in the process. No one can die.”

Ivan ignored the opening elevator door. “How are you hiding all this from him?”

Angela stepped around and moved down the hall. “What makes you think he doesn’t know?”

Ivan followed, snorting. “I’m still alive.”

Angela didn’t reply as they joined a small group going to the recharge cabins. She brought up Neil’s clouds and acted like everything was fine.

Ivan followed her lead, using the spider trick he’d copied from Morgan, but his mind continued to work on the puzzle. He knew Angela didn’t want to leave Safe Haven. He also knew she didn’t have her gifts right now. *Does that mean locked individuals can break free on their own or does she think we’ll make it out there without her power?*

Ivan began making plans to cover them in case that was how it happened.

**3**

Marc watched the rescue team guide the small skiff to the debris pile that had smacked into their ship and stopped. The entire front of the Adrianna was now smothered in garbage. Marc hoped the ocean removed it from their path before they had to leave.

He narrowed in on the woman who rose up and began pelting the team with garbage. He scanned her thoughts, wincing, but he didn’t find danger beyond a slightly unstable edge that was to be expected considering the situation. Marc was very curious as to how the woman and her daughter had gotten into that situation.

Marc saw the child dive at Neil and bite his leg. He already understood how they’d survived. He was shocked, impressed, and angry they’d been forced to go through such an awful ordeal.

Marc moved toward the ladder, sure Neil would bring them to the side where they’d launched one of their small emergency skiffs from the clever holding pen. He saw Neil send a wave of calm. He was impressed when the little girl kept biting him. *She’s a survivor. We need her.* Marc sent out his alpha pull.

The woman and her daughter immediately calmed. They got into the small boat without further trouble.

*Thank you!* Neil held the girl as the Eagles with them steered toward their ship. His ankle throbbed.

Bernice studied their rescuers with hard brown eyes, calmer but terrified these men weren’t the good guys they were claiming. All their words about being safe went in one ear and out the other. *I’ve heard that before.*

“Not from us.”

Bernice shuddered at the beaten up man’s demonstration. “Magic user!”

Neil grunted, holding the child out from his body as she immediately began attacking again. “Not all of us are bad.”

Bernice grabbed for his gun.

Neil twisted, shoving the child into Ian’s lap. He overbalanced and fell out of the boat.

Bernice grabbed the oar and smacked him in the shoulder.

Marc sent a stronger wave of calm, trying not to laugh.

The wild females turned to stare at him this time.

Marc shoved into both minds. *Safe Haven.*

Bernice glared at him.

The little girl smiled.

Marc waved at her. When she was cleaned up, she would be cute. Her mother, even covered in filth, was gorgeous. *Safe Haven’s women will hate these two. I’ll need to make sure they aren’t picked on.* Marc keyed his mike. “Wade, please escort Jennifer to the top deck.” She was at a lesson now, her first one with the camp playboy.

“Copy.”

In the rescue skiff below, Kyle let go of Neil’s arm to glare up at Marc.

Neil flailed. “Hey!” *Splash!*

Marc snickered.

Kyle grabbed Neil and hauled him back into the boat. He glowered at Quinn, who was steering. “Get us back to the ship. Now.”

Marc waited at the top of the ladder, still sending waves of calm whenever the tension became violent. These new people would need a lot of care. Jennifer was perfect for the job.

Wade escorted Jennifer to Marc’s side and waited there to provide security. He searched for Marc’s guard and found Kendle in the shadows. He nodded to her.

Kendle ignored him, watching everyone around Marc. She’d been sleeping when Bob threatened him. *If I had been up, he would have died right then. Angela’s kindness will get Marc killed some day.*

Wade scanned the small crowd of camp members on the deck. He spotted Samantha and Amy, along with several other females. He stayed by Marc and Jennifer and didn’t glance in that direction again.

Neil shoved himself up the ladder with the little girl on his back, wincing as she dug her ragged fingernails into his skin. He tried to keep up light, calm chatter about the camp, but he got no response. Other than shrieks and grunts, the child hadn’t spoken at all.

Wade was there to offer Neil a hand as he reached the top.

The little girl jumped to the deck and took off running.

Jennifer swung the child into her arms. “Stop now. You’re safe.” Jennifer sent a light zap when the girl tried to bite her. “Quit it. Your mom needs you to behave so she doesn’t get tossed overboard.”

The child froze. “Please.”

Jennifer’s heart broke. “Don’t make me be mean. I hate doing it.”

The girl nodded. “My mommy.”

Jennifer pointed. “She’s coming up the ladder right now. Can you count to twenty?”

“Yes...”

“By the time you get to twenty, she’ll be right next to us.”

“One. Two. Three.”

Jennifer rubbed the girl’s filthy, thin shoulder and stayed out of the way as Kyle and the other Eagles brought the woman onboard.

Morgan and Harry were waiting with sedatives, water, and their kits.

“Right here.” Morgan pointed to a table near the rail. He smiled at the woman. “I’m a medic. Can I help you?”

Bernice slowly nodded. She pointed at her daughter.

Morgan understood. He went to the child in Jennifer’s arms, lips thinning at her automatic retreat*. That’s not fair! I’ve never threatened her; I would never hurt her. How do I make this go away?*

Jennifer realized she hadn’t covered her reaction.

Morgan tried to smile. *I don’t expect anything from you, ever, in any way. Please, can’t you forget it?*

Jennifer sighed. *I’ll try.*

*Thank you.* Morgan turned his attention to the little girl. He held up a sucker.

She snatched it and shoved it into her mouth. “Ugh!” She tossed it. “No lemon!”

The wet sucker slapped Neil in the neck and stuck there.

Morgan held up a red one. “Cherry?”

The girl took it; she kept this one.

Neil pried the sucker off and flipped it over the rail. He joined Wade, getting out of the line of fire as Marc approached the woman.

“I’m Marc. Welcome to Safe Haven.” He held out a hand, judging her state of mind.

Bernice shivered at the wind on her wet skin. In the water, it was only cold at night. “What do you want?”

Marc lowered his hand. “Just to help you. We’ll let you off at the first land we come to. You’re not a prisoner. You won’t be hurt.”

Bernice wanted to believe them. She also realized there were too many to fight. “Help how?”

“Food, water, clean clothes. Medical care, protection...” Marc saw her eyes light up. *That’s her trigger.* “Whatever you were hiding from...?”

“Pirates.”

Marc’s stomach tightened. *Wasn’t expecting that*. “We’ll talk while the medics help you both. Okay?”

Bernice sank into the chair, body aching, mind swimming. “Hurry or I’ll pass out.”

Marc saw her ribs poking through her skin and assumed any food she’d found in the debris pile had gone to her daughter. The little girl was horribly sunburnt but not starving. The mother’s skin was loose and red, telling Marc she hadn’t had regular meals in a while. “Have you been in the water long?”

“A week, maybe a little less.” Bernice took the water bottle from Harry. She started to give it to her daughter.

Morgan was already treating the child. She was sucking down a bottle of Gatorade so fast that he had to stop her so she wouldn’t get sick.

Bernice drank the water gratefully, also forcing herself to go easy so her stomach would keep the gift.

Harry handed her a protein bar. “Munch on that while I do my stuff.”

Marc waited for them to calm another level on their own, eager to hear their story. He waved off the curious Eagles and camp. “Go on about your business. Nothing to see here.”

People snorted but did as ordered.

Wade fell in step with Neil as he went below to get changed. “All set for your recharge?”

Neil shrugged. “As far as I know.”

Wade caught the tone and scanned for Neil’s worry. He frowned. “I thought Samantha would do that for you.”

“I told her no. She went through it herself, and with Amy too.” Neil waved it off. “It’s not really needed anyway. I’ll be fine.”

“Someone will be there; don’t sweat it.”

“Okay, I won’t.” Neil met Wade’s eye. “Thank you–for Amy.”

Wade grunted. “Same. It would have been hard to protect her on my own, but I was going to try.”

“Same.”

The men chuckled. The moment defending Amy from Marc, even though it hadn’t been needed, had strengthened their bond.

“Can I ask why?”

Wade shook his head. “Nope.”

“Okay.” Neil didn’t push. He was just glad someone had been on his side. “Thank you, no matter why. She’s a sweetheart, not a monster.”

“Yep.” Wade heard Samantha’s light steps behind them. He took the next hall, moving away from Neil and the rest of the group. “You’ve got a wonderful family, Neil. Keep protecting them. They’re worth it.”

Neil watched Wade go. *I thought we were just talking about Amy...*

Samantha caught up to Neil. Amy ran ahead, joining the other kids moving to the camp cabins now that their recharge was complete.

She inspected his face. “Rough training session?”

Neil grunted. “Hard lessons.”

Samantha crossed her arms, moving on to something that had been bothering her. “Why is Wade avoiding me?”

Neil frowned, wincing at the soreness. “I didn’t know he was.”

She leaned in. “I’ve done something, maybe. Does he think it was my idea?”

Neil shook his head. “You were fully cleared during your recharge. If Wade has an issue, it came from something else.”

Her frown grew. “So he does have a problem with me.”

Neil sighed. He kissed her cheek. “I’ll find out. Don’t get upset.”

Samantha smiled at him. “Thank you. I can’t be the reason your team is uncomfortable.”

Neil understood. “No worries. I’ll dig into it.”

“Carefully?”

“You know it.”

# Chapter Fourteen

**I Always Knew**

**1**

**“E**veryone gets a care package.” Trent handed bags to people walking by his post at the main entrance to this hall. Everyone being recharged was in street clothes right now. It was odd to see the senior Eagles in jeans and tank tops. The females were in skirts, shorts, dresses. Trent’s eyes almost couldn’t accept the change after only viewing them in Eagle gear. “Get settled in your assigned cabins. Names have been put on the doors. No whining. We’re here to rest and recharge. You don’t have to like your bunkmate to sleep with them.”

Molly pushed a book into Trinity’s hands as she and the others chuckled at the copy of Ivan’s words on the first recharge day. The hallway was crowded, but it looked and smelled good. *The cleaning crew did an excellent job. I’ll make sure Stanley gets a good word from the Eagles for volunteering.*

“Come get a bag and find your cabin. Get settled, go through your care package. Everyone is on downtime until dinner trays are delivered. If you don’t like the entertainments, each room has a box with more options, but these bags were packed by the boss.” Trent scanned the other guard posts, frowning upon finding them empty. The Eagles assigned to those stations were about to be late. “Get a bag; get settled. The second recharge is about to begin.”

Brittani appeared in the far doorway. She slid into the guard post and got ready for her shift. She still had flour on her hands that she began cleaning off while scanning the cabins.

Molly nodded approval. Brittani didn’t say much. Molly respected that. She spotted Emma coming down the hall with Wade. They were chatting lightly and appeared to be ignoring everyone else. *Good. We don’t need a repeat of his hijinks.*

Wade glanced at Molly, brow lifted. *You sure? Most of them were laughing.*

Molly rolled her eyes. *Get in your post.*

Wade chuckled. He nodded to Emma, who was only here to collect the kids. Children were roaming the area, reluctant to go below to the camp area. He took his post; the Eagle took over the man.

Molly watched his face go blank and his body language turn hard. *I want to be like that*. Molly swallowed her thoughts and paid attention to her job. Having the center guard post meant she was in charge of this shift. “The second recharge has now started. If you are not assigned here, get out.”

Molly began glaring at those people.

The hall quickly emptied; recharge patients entered their cabins. Molly’s bark was worse than her bite, but not by much.

Angela gave Molly a nod as she sank into the lounge chair. She picked up a deck of cards and began vaguely playing with them while she waited. She didn’t waste time considering the clothes, makeup, or the unshaven faces of her army. During downtime, none of that mattered.

Kenn watched her from his cabin. “My bunkmate isn’t here.”

Marc snorted from the next cabin. “Neither is mine.”

Neil and Kyle entered the hall, both hurrying.

Before they could offer excuses, Molly glowered. “You’re late.”

Both men paused at her hostile tone.

“What gives?” Kyle didn’t have a problem with her.

Molly tapped her watch. “You both know better than to be late. No beer for you.”

“Aww.” Kyle slipped into the cabin, nodding at Kenn. He didn’t hate the Marine anymore, but they would never be good friends.

Neil joined Marc, not looking at Molly again. She was still upset with him. He understood. He just wasn’t sure how to fix it yet.

Marc lifted a brow. “Your new bruises didn’t cover it?”

Neil shrugged, dropping into one of the chairs. “She punished me for the first mistake.”

“Ah.” Marc shoved off his boots. “Well go out there and let her have another turn then. She’ll feel better, I’ll laugh, and it’ll be over.”

Neil thought about her angry swing. He shook his head. “She can get me later.”

“Coward.”

“Yep.” Neil was glad Marc seemed to be in a good mood. His eyes narrowed. “The last time we were in a cabin together, it didn’t go well.”

Marc shrugged. “Went fine for me.”

Neil sighed. “Yeah.” He began removing his boots and gear. “You want the shower first?”

“Nope.” Marc lifted the beer Molly had given him and took a sip.

Neil chuckled as he went into the bathroom. “Figures.”

In the hall, Molly copied the names of those who were here, frowning when she realized they were still light. She keyed her mike. “Charlie, Gus, Kendle: Get your asses to the recharge cabins!”

Garbled answers came. Two of those people hurried into the hall, flashing apologetic smiles as they entered their cabins.

Molly waited for Gus, trying to be patient. Angela had told her to be a hardass because this set of recharge patients was more stubborn than the first. She was following orders. “How long, Gus?!”

“Five seconds.” Gus came down the steps at a fast jog and flew into the hall. He ducked into the first cabin, nodding at his bunkmate, Jeff.

Gus was still in Eagle gear. He grabbed his kit and went into the bathroom to shower and change. He was looking forward to this part of the recharge. He enjoyed being around the other men here. He was learning new things daily.

Jeff didn’t really know Gus, but he knew Angela wanted him to be content with his place in camp. Jeff planned to help with that if Gus was in the mood to talk later.

Molly copied the final name, then gestured at Angela. “They’re all yours, Boss.”

Angela motioned to the girl sitting in the corner, waiting for the call. “You have the first shift.”

Kimmie rose and walked calmly through the hall. It was obvious she was too young for the job. That didn’t stop her from entering each cabin to make sure people were settled and had everything they needed.

Angela listened to the voices, but her mind was on the recharge. She wasn’t doing it; she couldn’t with her gifts locked, but they still had to cover that with the camp. She’d chosen to have her most promising students each handle a moment here. Then they would all come back later for the recharges. Jennifer would direct things from there. Once she connected them, Angela would be able to control most of what came up, if it was needed. For everything else, she wanted to use Jeff. He just didn’t know it yet.

“I do now; thanks.”

Angela snickered. She didn’t mind Jeff keeping track of her thoughts. In fact, she didn’t mind it from most of the residents on this floor. With the exception of one, all of them were loyal to the dream, and to her.

Angela felt attention on her as she sat at the table and played with the cards. Kenn’s was the hardest. She looked at him.

Kenn tried to smile. *You seem better... It’s nice.*

Angela snorted at his attempt. *Keep dreaming.*

Kenn flushed.

“What was that about?” Kyle hated being away from Jennifer. He knew she had work to do, but it still sucked. It added a harsh edge to his voice. “Are you giving her shit?”

“No.” Kenn tried to go to sleep.

Kyle scanned for Jennifer and Autumn. He found them in the mess, enjoying a snack with a few of the kids and the pregnant women. She felt happy. Kyle withdrew. He scanned for Wade and dug into his mind to discover how their session had gone.

Wade shoved him out. *Ask her yourself.*

*Just tell me!*

Wade brought up a mental wall and refused to answer.

Before Kyle could keep it going, Kenn rolled over to stare at him. “You know they’re planning an intervention, right?”

Kyle snapped his mouth shut.

Kenn stared. “What happened to you and Neil? ...did I rub off?”

Kyle considered that, then shook his head.

Kenn waited for the mobster to collect his thoughts, not in a hurry for the recharge. He didn’t fear the pain. He feared the reaction to his secret.

Kyle forced himself to admit the truth. “I took advantage of her. She deserves better than me.”

Everyone who’d been worrying over Kyle relaxed.

Kenn actually snorted. “Every man in this camp either wants to be Marc or you. She couldn’t ask for a better mate.”

“I trapped her...”

“No. She loves you. Any fool can see that. Love isn’t wrong. It’s just hard when you’re terrified of losing someone who means everything to you.”

Kyle was stunned that Kenn understood.

Kenn rolled back over and shut his eyes. “Wake me when it’s time. I need to prepare.”

“So you can block or lie?”

Kenn didn’t answer.

Kyle locked down on himself, outwardly assuming the cool control of an Eagle. Inside, he was terrified. This recharge would force him to face the truth. Jennifer was right. Most of these men wanted her and his place. *They’re not my friends.*

Kimmie appeared in the doorway. Her eyes were bright red. “Let’s play a game.”

Kyle nodded stiffly. The girl had been given this job by the boss. If Kimmie wanted to play a game, it wasn’t for entertainment. *I’m guessing it’s a distraction. I’m okay with it.*

Kimmie smoothed her blue jumper, loving the new clothes they’d all been given. It made her feel cared for, wanted. *And these jobs from the alpha make me feel needed. I can’t wait to grow up and do more for her.* “Him too.”

Kyle sat up on the bed as Kenn sighed. “What game?”

“Darts.” Kimmie shut the door to reveal a dart board hanging on the back of it.

Kyle started to get the bag of darts from the end table.

“Not with your hands.”

Kyle sulked as he understood. “I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can.” Kimmie dared him to lie again. “So can he. So can I.”

Kyle almost didn’t breathe at having a secret exposed.

“Let’s play.” Kimmie waved her hand.

The bag of darts sailed through the air and dropped into Kyle’s lap.

Kenn rose, interest growing. “Practice. Yeah!”

Kyle was startled into a chuckle. “You first.”

Angela listened to the mild thumps against the door, satisfied. Safe Haven held a lot of power that had to be trained and kept occupied or it would sink them in every way. Kimmie would keep Kenn and Kyle busy while she worked.

Angela stood up. She went into the first cabin and shut the door.

Silence fell among the three females. Tonya, Tracy, and Candy stared at her nervously.

Angela went to the only empty chair. She sat and leaned back, hands crossing over her stomach. “Ladies.”

“Boss...” Tonya hoped she was wrong about why Angela was in here already.

Tracy refused to look at her future mother-in-law.

Candy glared. She opened her mouth.

Angela frowned. “Are you breaking the deal you made?”

Candy shook her head, dismayed at the trap.

“Then shut up.”

Candy flinched at the mild order. She snapped her mouth closed and glowered.

Angela pointed at Tonya.

Tonya grunted. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“It can’t go on this way. It’s his baby; he cheated. Make a choice.”

Put on the spot, Tonya went with her heart. “I still want him. I need time to get over it.”

“I can work with that.” Angela turned her attention to Tracy. “What about you?”

Tracy wanted to act ignorant, but she also wanted Angela’s respect and that wasn’t given to cowards. “I’m pregnant with your first grandchild.”

Tonya and Candy stared at Tracy, pulled from their own dramas.

“And?”

Tracy sighed. “I love him more than the baby. I thought if I had a miscarriage...or an abortion, it would get him off the hook with you and the camp.”

“Killing a baby won’t do that!” Candy was shocked that Tracy had even considered it.

Tracy pointed. “Didn’t she tell you to shut up?!”

Candy slapped the bed next to her leg. “Fine!” She opened the comic book Charlie had dropped off for her.

Angela waited, studying the woman who had captured her son’s heart.

Tracy’s cheeks reddened. Her hand slid over her stomach. “I’m sorry. I don’t feel that way now.”

“Keep going.”

Tracy realized the time for hiding and half-truths was over. “I want a happy family with your son and our child. Please give us your approval.”

“You have it now. Your wedding is in two weeks.” Angela stood and moved toward the door. “Conner’s wedding to Candy will take place in thirty days. Tonya’s wedding to Kenn will probably be around the same time.” She opened the door without replying to the frowns. “You three have a lot to discuss. Keep the door shut.” She left before they could answer.

Angela tugged the door closed, catching sight of Marc snoozing in the recliner in his cabin. She moved to the next room, not ready to face his secrets yet. She had a good idea of what they were, but it wouldn’t change anything for her. She would always love him, even if he did want her job. Being byzan left little room for sharing control. Now that there were two of them on this ship, precautions had been put in place.

“You lied to us.”

Angela sank into the chair next to Zack. Theo was sleeping; double shifts were keeping him worn out. “Byzan repel each other. If I’d kept my gifts, he might have started cracking or our love might have taken a hit.”

Zack frowned. “Why did you let him become byzan at all?”

Angela sighed. “He had to understand how this feels; the difference was going to split us up.”

“What happens when you’re unlocked?” Zack was one of the few individuals who knew.

“We’ll have to prove them wrong about it or one of us will have to leave.”

“So it might have split you up anyway.”

“Yes, but there wasn’t a choice. Marc will grow into a powerful, wise leader. We needed that.”

“We need you.” Zack’s bond with her lit up.

Angela grunted. “No, but thank you.”

Theo lifted his head. “What did he offer?”

Angela chuckled while Zack frowned. “You’ve improved.”

Theo didn’t like being left out. “Don’t stall.”

Angela’s fake amusement fell to the floor. “He offered to talk to Marc about it for me.”

“Oh.” Theo sat up, beautiful body bare except for boxers. He kept the blanket over himself out of respect. “Why are you here when you have other people to handle right now?”

Angela laughed at him.

Theo flushed at the ugly sound. “Oh.”

Zack pinned Theo with a hard glare. “You didn’t hear anything we just talked about.”

Theo scowled. “I don’t need you to tell me that!”

“How would I know? You lied to all of us for weeks.” Zack popped open the beer Molly had given him. “Let’s talk about that.”

Theo snorted. “It’s none of your business!”

Angela stood up. “Okay. You’re out of the Eagles, effective immediately.”

“Hey! Wait!”

She paused with her hand on the knob. “Yes?”

Theo caved. “I enjoyed the attention. And I wanted the time with Debra.”

Angela didn’t move.

Zack glared at the man. “She’s got shit to do. Spit it out.”

Theo’s face darkened. He forced out the words. “She was starting to notice the other men in camp. I couldn’t compete. So I held onto her with sympathy while I got myself in shape.”

“And now?”

Theo sighed, not hearing any forgiveness in her tone. “Now I’ve lost her anyway.”

Angela sighed. *I really hate this part of my job.* “You never had her, Theo, not the way you wanted. Her ban on kids isn’t new. She’s always felt that way. You should have talked to her about it.”

“I know.” His anger and fear faded. Misery took its place. “Tonya did my test this morning. I’m sterile. I’ll never have a child.”

“I’m sorry.”

Theo’s voice dropped into the pain he was carrying now. “Me too. I didn’t mean to take advantage of her. I just...” He sucked it up. “I was jealous. I didn’t know how to handle it.”

Angela let go of the knob. She looked at Zack.

Zack scowled. “What?”

She nodded toward Theo.

“Ah.” Zack met the engineer’s eyes. “I’m a descendant. She unlocked me during the first recharge set.”

Theo frowned. “How long have you known?”

“Since we set sail. I wasn’t going to unlock it at all, but she convinced me I’m needed.”

Theo shrugged. “She’s never wrong.”

Angela left the room while they were talking, glad the meetings were going well so far. These secrets were small, but they still had to be cleared and preferably before the recharges started. If they weren’t hiding anything, they would be able to hide it. Angela snickered at her word play and continued to the next cabin. She didn’t look at Marc as she slipped inside the room Trinity was sharing with Kendle. “Ladies.”

Tension filled the hall.

Marc got up and came to the doorway.

Molly glared at him. She was feeling fairly confident about being able to subdue Kendle if it came to that.

Marc snorted. “If it does, *you* can’t handle it.”

“Stay in your assigned cabin.” Molly acted like she wasn’t nervous about Angela and Kendle being shut in together. “You’re off duty right now.”

Marc leaned against the frame, listening to the conversations around them. He didn’t hear Angela or Kendle yet, but he knew it was coming.

So did everyone else. Peaceful chats and snoozing paused as they all waited for the chaos to start.

In Kendle’s cabin, the silence was holding.

Kendle stared at Angela, hating her as much as she ever had.

Angela glared back, wishing she could kill the woman now and be done with this charade of reform. Kendle was still fully dressed, with a full tool belt of weapons. Angela wasn’t afraid. She was angry. *I hate seeing her in those clothes. She dishonors the job every second she wears Eagle gear.*

Trinity tried not to make eye contact with either of them. She was suddenly regretting volunteering to bunk with Kendle.

Angela sat in the chair by the door. She crossed her leg over her knee and stared.

Kendle flushed.

The heat in the room increased. Trinity wanted to take off her robe, but she knew movement right now wasn’t a good idea.

Kendle’s fear and anger brought the heat up another level.

Trinity began to sweat.

Angela waited, trying to be as patient as she had been in the other cabins. But her heart wasn’t in it.

“Just tell the truth, then.” Kendle couldn’t ignore Angela’s unspoken command any longer. “Let’s have it all out.”

“I want you dead.”

“Same!”

Trinity froze as rage came from two sides and met in a harsh mix of danger.

“Why didn’t you kill me?”

“I’d lose Marc.”

“So it was never about Pitcairn.”

Angela snorted. “Like I need you to settle one tiny island.”

Kendle’s humiliation flamed up her face, turning it bright red. “I always knew.”

Angela shrugged.

Kendle’s anger increased.

Trinity shook her head at Angela. *Why are you pushing her?*

Angela didn’t look away from the angry dog she was kicking. “What do you know about that island, Kendle?”

Kendle crossed her arms over her chest and locked down on her mind. “Nothing.”

“Liar. *Coward*.”

Kendle’s fury rushed out, bringing the temperature up again. Sweat rolled over her neck. “Slam you!”

Angela chuckled without humor. “You get one more chance to come clean and then all protections you’ve enjoyed will be gone. I’ll tell Marc everything. He won’t have any mercy when he finds out you betrayed him. Again.”

“Why don’t you just kill me?! Evil bitch!”

Angela stared.

Kendle’s control snapped. She punched the wall repeatedly, not stopping until blood was smeared over the bright paint.

Outside the cabin, guards gathered. Marc shook his head when Molly would have entered. “Not yet.”

Molly flashed an image of Angela’s near death on the beach.

Marc winced. “I know. But wait. She’s getting something we need.”

Molly frowned. “What?”

“The truth.” Marc sighed. “Kendle has been lying about something. Angela is uncovering it.”

“She’s in danger.”

Marc snorted. Even without her gifts, Angela was deadly. Marc’s pride spoke up. *I helped to make her that way.*

Molly put her ear to the warm door, scowling as she tried to listen.

Angela kicked the door with her boot heel. “Mind your own business!”

Marc laughed as Molly flinched and hurried back to her post. *That’s my Angie.*

Kendle caught his thought. Her rage overflowed, taking the last of her control. “I hope you all die on that island! I hope the pirates there slaughter every single one of you!”

Trinity sent out her snare gift and slammed Kendle’s face into the wall. “You traitor!” Fresh blood joined the smears.

Kendle fell onto the bed, groaning and crying. “I hate you all!”

Angela nodded to Trinity. “Very nice. You’ve been practicing.”

Trinity shrugged out of her sweaty robe, attention staying on Kendle. “Say the word and I’ll finish it right here while you watch.”

Kendle tensed, preparing to defend her life. She knew she’d lose, but she wasn’t going out without a fight.

Marc also tensed, determined to not interfere.

“No.” Angela stood. “Safe Haven will clear the island. Kendle will help us.”

“Why would I do that now?!”

Angela opened the door. “Because *he* wants it.”

Kendle saw Marc watching from the cabin across from hers. His face was stunned. She knew anger would come next. Kendle began crying. “Just kill me now.”

“All in good time. For now, give Trinity every detail you held back from us.” Angela’s voice hardened. “If you refuse, she’ll beat you against the wall until you’re a bloody pulp.”

“Not if I fight!”

Angela’s body language changed. Fresh waves of heat rolled through the cabin, dwarfing what Kendle had produced. “Marc could never be with someone who lacks honor. How can you not know that?”

Kendle sobbed. “I do know it, but I don’t care! None of you mean anything to me!”

“Did it occur to you that he might get hurt trying to clear an island without all the information?”

Kendle shook her head; blood dripped from her nose. “He’s byzan. He can’t be killed by pirates.”

Angela sighed, anger fading. “Your moments with me should tell you we all have weaknesses. You endangered Marc’s life.”

“I did not!”

“Kendle.”

Kendle wiped more blood from her nose. “I did not. I only endangered you and your farm of exotic humans.”

Angela gestured to Trinity. “We need those details and she needs to face the truth. Call for help if you need it.”

Trinity settled against the headboard, face filling with eager anger. “I won’t. I know exactly how to handle her.”

Kendle braced for more pain. *You can’t break me that way. Ethan tried and even he couldn’t do it.*

Trinity shoved into Kendle’s mind and began flashing images of Marc trying to save people on the island and then dying for them.

“No! I won’t let that happen! Stop it! No!”

Angela shut the door, satisfied. She didn’t look at Marc as she moved to the next cabin.

Eagles got out of her way; doors shut in hopes they weren’t next.

Marc watched her in growing respect and desire. *She’s a badass and I love her with all my heart. No other woman will ever have a chance with me.*

“No!” Kendle’s pain echoed through the ship, bringing comfort to those who had been waiting for her punishment. A debt like hers always had to be paid.

# Chapter Fifteen

**Hard Head**

**1**

**C**harlie stiffened as Angela entered the cabin he was sharing with Panaji. He paled as he realized it was his turn. *Mom’s clearing out the trouble before the recharges.*

Angela smiled at Panaji. He and Charlie were only a few years apart. It showed in the boardgame open between their beds. Angela thought Sorry was appropriate for the moment.

Panaji’s dark skin glowed with good health. He smiled at her, delighted to belong somewhere he wasn’t hated for being different. *Here, everyone is odd.*

“Do you have secrets from us?”

Panaji shook his head, frowning. “No need for keep secrets. I’m good.”

Angela waved at Charlie. “Make sure that isn’t a lie.”

Charlie frowned. “Why me?”

“Secrets are easier found by a friend.”

Charlie accepted that answer. He dug into Panaji’s mind, being gentle.

Angela watched, worrying and proud at the same time. Charlie was strong. He was also kind. That didn’t usually make for a stable descendant because it was hard to pick which one mattered most.

“He’s clear.” Charlie waited for his turn.

“Just get it out and it’ll be over.”

Charlie grunted. “Easy for you to say.”

“Not really.” She sat by him and put a hand on his wrist. “No one likes baring their soul, boy. We do it for the greater good, but mostly, so we can be free. Secrets block the light.”

Charlie was glad he only had Panaji in here for this moment, but he knew other descendants were listening and recording every transgression that was revealed. “Tracy’s pregnant. I was willing to let her...get rid of it.” He sucked in air. “I don’t want to get married. I love her, but I’m...”

“Scared of being tied to someone you may not love as much when you’re older.”

He nodded stiffly. “It’s exactly what I said I’d never do or feel.”

“It’s life, Charlie. We don’t always get the choices we wanted. What makes us adults is how we handle it.” She patted his wrist. “You’ve done well. Since your manhood quest, you’ve changed–for the better.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.”

“Because you’ve been lying to the camp and to your fiancé.”

“Yeah.” He let out a miserable sound. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Have you tried talking to Marc about it?”

Charlie sorted. “Dad thinks I made my bed and now I should sleep in it.”

Angela took a chance. “What about Kenny?”

Charlie gaped at her. “You can’t mean that.”

“I do, actually. He’s different now, and he’s in part of the same boat as you, just flipped. Maybe he has insights that could help clear your choices.”

“Maybe.” Charlie hadn’t realized Kenn had been sent to him for his own good too. He’d thought it was all about Tonya. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Good. In the meantime, people have the truth now. You’ll deal with the consequences. So will she. In time, the camp will forgive and forget–for both of you. As long as there are never lies again. Do you agree to this deal?”

“I do. Thank you.”

Angela gave him a fast hug. Then she looked at Dog.

The wolf whined.

Charlie and Panaji both frowned at the thoughts he delivered.

*I miss running in the wild... I love my cats. I wish I had a mate. I’m not happy.*

“Dog!”

The wolf whined again at Charlie’s surprise. *I do my jobs; I love my human family. I’m sorry.*

Angela left the cabin while Charlie comforted and scolded the wolf. She didn’t know what had been said, but Marc would fill her in after he got over his shock. Marc had also thought she was only handling problem people.

Marc stared at the door, heart hurting. Dog’s happiness was important to him. *I’ll figure something out. Dog has been too good to me to allow his misery to continue.*

Angela drew in a deep breath and blew it out before entering the next cabin. It had already been a long day and she didn’t have her gifts to support her when she became weary.

Marc sent a light blast of energy.

Angela held in a moan, not wanting to be distracted, but Marc’s even power was now pure pleasure. She couldn’t get enough of it.

Marc snickered as she vanished into the cabin holding her next targets.

Neil chuckled. “You two are great together now that Adrian’s out of the way.”

Marc’s happiness fell to the floor. “If only.”

Neil shrugged, glad of the painkillers he’d taken. “At least you don’t have to see him every day; it could be worse.”

Marc grunted. “True.” He motioned at the stack of games. “Pick one.”

Neil chose the chess board, aware that something was bothering Marc. His emotions were rising and dropping faster than Neil could keep track of.

“Let it go.”

Neil began setting up the board on the small folding table. “I will, but she won’t. This cabin might be last on her list, but she will get to you. Might as well come clean now and save yourself her anger.”

Marc dropped into the chair, lips clamped shut.

Neil shrugged. *Angela will get it out of you. I hope it isn’t bad.*

Marc brought up a wall of clouds.

Neil immediately began to worry.

So did everyone else who’d been listening. If Marc was scared, there was a big reason for it.

“You’re making her handle it this way. Why did you wait for the recharge?”

Marc flashed a hand code to Neil in hopes that it would stay between them.

Neil’s mouth dropped open. “You’re lying.”

Marc laughed.

Neil brought up his own cloud wall. *I never would have guessed she’s locked.*

Marc flashed another message, unable to help feeling proud. *Angie doesn’t need her gifts to lead. She’s a powerhouse all on her own.*

“No! I don’t have to tell you shit!”

*Thud!*

Marc winced. Kendle still wasn’t cooperating. He got up and shut the door to keep from interfering.

**2**

“Is Trinity killing her?”

Angela snorted, sinking down on the edge of the bed by Gus. “No.”

Gus opened his mind and waited for the boss to rip out his guts.

Angela shook her head. “Out loud.”

Gus scowled. “She’ll hear it.”

“She’s busy playing with her new toy.”

Gus realized this wasn’t going to be as quick and painless as he’d hoped. “Fine.” He sucked in a deep breath to get it all out. “I hate it here. I’m lost without Brittani. She was the only reason I came!”

“Okay.” Angela focused on Jeff.

Gus’s frown grew. “Okay? What does that mean?!”

Jeff sat up, not liking the boss sitting next to a man three times her size who was yelling. He reminded himself that Gus had saved her life not that long ago.

Angela sighed. “It means you’re in the clear now, as long as you don’t lie anymore.”

Gus crossed his big arms over his huge chest. “I didn’t lie.”

“Ah, but you did. You joined the Eagles in good faith.”

Gus grumbled. “I had to do something. Watching her and Daryl would have eaten me alive without a distraction.”

“And now?”

“I’m better, but I still hate it and...I want her as much as I ever did. I’d do anything to get her back. Your Eagles don’t mean anything compared to that.”

Jeff now understood why he and Gus had been put together. When Angela’s sharp gaze centered on him, he couldn’t resist the order to come clean. “Same, but my heart died in a hundred foot fall in a war that never should have happened.” Jeff’s eyes blazed. “I still hate you for that.”

Now Gus sat up, not liking Jeff’s attitude around the boss.

Angela spoke to both of them, not in danger. They were honorable men. “Safe Haven has jobs for people who are not Eagles. You can’t be one of them if you’re just playing the role. I’ll expect you to resign or fully commit. There is no compromise on this.”

The men nodded, glad their secrets were in the light, but also sorry for it. Now everyone would know they weren’t really part of the dream.

Angela stared at Jeff again.

“What?!” He couldn’t help the defensive reaction.

“I need something from you.”

Jeff shrugged. “Does anyone ever tell you no?”

“No! I won’t do it!”

*Thud!*

They all winced at the ongoing battle between Kendle and Trinity.

Jeff didn’t repeat his question. He knew the answer. Plenty of people disagreed. None of them had won or gotten their way. “Why does it have to be so hardline with you? Can’t you compromise?”

Angela stood, going to the door. “I could, but we’d all be dead inside a year.”

Jeff dropped his chin and forced out the words even though Kimmie was listening intently. “I’ll get her to bond with someone else, with someone who isn’t holding onto a ghost. I’ll try to move on.”

“Good.” Angela opened the door. “Make up your minds about the Eagles by the time your recharge is over, gentlemen. Or I’ll remove you publicly.”

Across the hall, Neil tensed. “Open the door. It’s our turn.”

Marc waved a hand; the door opened and banged against the wall.

Neil frowned at him. “Are you a threat to her now because you think you’re the boss?”

Marc slapped the pawn over that he’d just taken. “Quite the opposite. I can’t wait for her to take it back. You’re all ungrateful, childish and...and...”

Angela entered the cabin.

Marc sighed. “In time, I won’t want to give the job back.”

“I know.” Angela dropped into his lap and rested her cheek on his chest. She could hear his heart thumping. “Get out, Neil.”

As soon as the door was closed, Angela gave him the truth. *I’ve never felt closer to you than I do right now.*

Marc finally understood. She’d always felt this way and fought it every step to do the right thing for their people–all of them. *We’re bonded through this. No matter what happens, she understands me. She’s my kind. Kendle will never have this... Unless she commits mass murder.*

Marc saw her in a new light. Thanks to the secret Angela had dragged out of her, he now knew what Kendle had planned. *If Safe Haven dies on that island, it will be Kendle’s fault. She’ll achieve byzan status...* Marc stiffened. “She’s trying to slaughter them all. She meant it.”

Angela nodded against his chest. “She planned it months ago, Marc. She wants them all dead so she can be on our level. She doesn’t want any of them spared.”

“Not even the kids?”

Angela shrugged. “Not that Trinity has found so far. If she’d shown any remorse, the thuds wouldn’t be as hard.”

Marc listened to that chaos, aware that Kendle was in a lot of pain now. He hardened his heart. *We’ll never be together now. She’s willing to let kids die, my kids. She just lost me forever.*

Kendle’s haunted scream echoed without a thud. She’d heard him.

Angela smiled and held onto her man, satisfied that union would never happen. Once you hurt Marc, he shut you out, but when you threatened his family, he became violent. Kendle might actually need protection from Marc. “I’m sorry it had to be this way.”

Marc held her, enjoying the feel of their bare skin where clothes weren’t between them. “Me too, but she made her choices and plans. Now, we’ll do the same.”

**3**

Neil went to keep Wade company while Marc and Angela had a few minutes alone. Neil knew they weren’t having sex because lust wasn’t flooding the hall and Kendle wasn’t burning the ship, but bonding in other ways was still important. *Like with me and Samantha. Sex is dangerous for her right now, but we still enjoy holding each other.*

Wade stopped snooping in Neil’s mind. “You okay?”

Neil scanned the hall, aware of quiet sobs now coming from Kendle’s cabin. “I think so. She hasn’t gotten to me yet.”

Wade shrugged. “Those bruises say she has.”

Neil’s mood lifted. “You think?”

Wade nodded. “Once the rest of the team has their final say.”

Neil felt it coming. He turned in time to meet Molly’s fist with his face.

Molly shook her hand, grunting. “Hard head.”

Neil blinked, vision going dim. “Hard hit.” He staggered to his knees. “Solid.”

“Suck up.” Molly went back to her post.

Wade helped Neil up. “Feel better now?”

“Uh, no!”

Wade and Molly chuckled at Neil’s groaned answer.

Neil took the chair when Wade pushed him toward it. He’d been hit a lot today.

Samantha appeared in the far hall. Both men felt her arrival and her anger.

“Keep her busy for a minute, will you?” Neil slipped into the bathroom to clean up his split lip before Wade could protest.

Wade motioned to Samantha so she wouldn’t yell at Molly. “He slipped out for a minute. You need something?”

Samantha frowned at the curt tone. “Amy.”

“Haven’t seen her.” Wade keyed his mike, bringing up thicker mental walls. “Anyone got eyes on Amy?”

The radio crackled. “She’s at the playground. Just wandered in alone a few seconds ago.”

Samantha moved toward the steps without thanking Wade for making the call. *Why is he so rude to me? Is it all over Neil?* She stewed on it as she left.

Wade let out a deep sigh. *This isn’t going to go well.*

Molly had caught all of it. She stared at Wade in disapproval.

Wade flipped her the finger, with a grin.

Molly snickered against her will and put it from her mind. *I have my own drama. I don’t need his too.*

Neil came out of the bathroom, frowning. “There’s an empty bed in the cabin next to you. Who isn’t here?”

“It’s for me.” Molly kept an even tone. “She let me do a shift.”

“Oh.” Neil slowly approached her. He stayed alert in case she tried to hit him again. “Can we talk?”

Molly scanned and found no reason to deny him. “What do you want?”

Neil sighed. “I’m sorry. For lying, hiding, and for scaring you in that elevator.”

Molly hadn’t expected him to handle it this way. The surprise opened her mouth. “Would you have hurt me?”

Neil shook his head. “Never.”

“You hurt Becky.”

Neil winced. “Yes.”

“And the difference?”

“You’re not a threat to my future.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Molly drew back like she was turning around; she swung as hard as she could.

Neil smacked into the wall. He bounced off it and landed on the floor at her feet. He looked up at her in surprised pain.

Molly kicked him in the ribs, enjoying his grunt and Wade’s surprised respect. “I don’t like you, Neil. I never really have, but you scared me. Now that I know you didn’t mean to do it, nothing has changed.” She kicked him again. “Are you sure you won’t do it again?! What if I do this?!” Molly kept kicking.

Neil stayed down and let her get it out of her system. He’d taken worse blows in the cage, but it still hurt his pride not to fight back.

“That’s enough.” Angela was in the doorway. “You’re disturbing the locals.”

Molly snorted; she went back to her post, wiping Neil’s blood from her hands. “That felt good.”

“Still scared?”

Molly considered, then nodded. “He didn’t fight back, so yes.”

Angela gestured at Neil. “Daily training time with her until that fear is gone.”

“Yes, Boss.” Neil groaned. “In a few days, okay?”

Angela ignored Molly’s protest and Samantha’s angry stride coming back through the hall. “Start right now; get to the gym–both of you. Take the elevator.”

Molly wanted to argue, but she wanted to face Samantha even less. “Fine!” She marched off.

Wade helped Neil up a second time. “You okay?”

“No, but I’ll live.” Neil rose and assumed his confident air. “The den mothers went to collect Amy. Get Samantha settled, will you?” He limped off.

Wade motioned to Monica, who had come from the cabin she was sharing with Molly. “Samantha needs an escort to the playground; get on it.”

Both females frowned, but they couldn’t argue with Angela watching. They shot ugly glares at Wade as they left.

Angela scanned the people and the cabins, deciding they might as well get busy. “Someone tell Jennifer we’re rolling early. Recharges start in ten minutes.”

*Thud!*

Angela sighed. “And send up a medic for Kendle. She’s getting blood all over the floor.”

**4**

“How are things up here?” Ian entered the bridge. He nodded to Tommy, who had duty over Grant while Ray ate and showered. The bridge had been cleaned up again and reeked of their sanitizer. Bleach delivered a rough odor, but it still worked as well as it always had.

Grant yawned. “Quiet.” He lowered the glasses. “How are things down there?”

Ian shrugged. “Loud. They’re about half done with the second set of recharges.”

“Already? It’s only been a couple hours.”

Ian nodded. “It’s going faster now that they know how to do it.”

Grant wondered if Jennifer’s presence had sped things up. He’d been hearing how strong she was since joining Safe Haven, but Kyle kept her so secluded that only a few individuals had actually gotten to view proof of that so far. He’d been ill when the incident in the infirmary with Adrian had happened, but he remembered her healing him in Ciemus. *I’ll never forget what she did for me*. “Any messages?”

“Nope.” Ian lingered, sensing Grant was getting bored and a bit lonely. “You need anything?”

Grant sighed. “Just keep visiting. I missed conversations during our crisis. The medics were too busy.”

“Understandable.” Ian scanned the guards on the deck below, aware of Tommy doing the same. The guard wouldn’t converse with Grant during his shift. It was an Eagle rule.

“How’s our new guest and her daughter?”

Ian snorted. “Wild. Morgan sedated them. The mood swings whenever they see magic use are...extreme.”

Grant grunted. “More people who hate descendants. Lovely.”

“Yeah.” Ian hoped the woman settled in. She was beautiful. “We’ll work on it.”

Tommy took a fast glance down the ramp, at Quinn.

Quinn was staring up at him.

Tommy nodded.

Quinn returned the gesture, face tightening. *I think we just agreed we can do this.*

Ian kept his thoughts on the job and not what was happening below. As far as he knew, Quinn and Tommy were not descendants, but he couldn’t be sure. People he’d thought were like him before now had already proven that assumption wrong.

Ian left the bridge, trotting to the rear of the ship for a visual check on their other boat. He didn’t see Adrian or his little friend, but he felt at least one of them watching. He strolled to the steps, not communicating with them.

Ian nodded to Quinn, but he didn’t stop to talk. Ian didn’t know what to say to Quinn these days. His jealousy over Tommy and Kendle had been expected. His acceptance without a scene hadn’t been. Everyone was still waiting for the blowup on that one.

A shadow lunged at Ian’s feet.

Ian staggered as a cat wrapped around his leg, sinking in claws. “Stop that! Bad kitty!”

A second furry feline jumped onto his back and began to climb up.

Ian shuddered at the painful punctures, but he tried to keep walking. Tonya would kill anyone who harmed her cats and they needed the mousers, but... “You two better learn to be nice.” He lifted the cat from his leg by the scruff of its neck and dropped it into his arm. The other feline settled onto his shoulder, purring.

“Don’t suck up now. I know I’m not your favorite.”

Guards chuckled at the sight of Ian walking through the hall with a cat on his shoulder and another in his arm.

Ian stroked the soft fur, refusing to feel bad for it. He’d had pets as a child. *I missed this.*

Both cats purred louder.

Ian glared at the guards. “Yuck it up now; you’ll get your turn.”

The laughter died as the big cats eyed another ride. Men got out of jumping range.

Ian paused by the door to the mess. “She left scraps out for you, I think.”

Both cats flew to the floor and began yowling.

Ian sighed as he opened it for them. “I don’t care what anyone says–you guys understand everything we say.”

The cats vanished into the busy mess.

Ian kept going, leaving the door cracked so they could get back out. Litter pans had been placed in random areas of the ship and so far, there hadn’t been any surprise piles, but cleaning up after them was still rough. So was cleaning up after Dog, who was using a sandbox near the playground. He’d refused a litter pan with a scornful glare that Ian had memorized. “He understands everything too. Now if we could just get them to teach us their language...”

Ian paused by the brig that was still dirty. Stanley was sleeping off his double shift. When he rose, he and the cleaning crew would get right back to work. When they finished, Stanley would come here and keep Ramer company. Except when he received other jobs, he hadn’t broken from that routine at all. Eagles respected him for it, though they still avoided him because of his clumsiness.

Ramer was standing at the door to his cell, watching Jayda practice her knife skills. He looked over. “Hey, Ian.”

“Ramer.” Ian hadn’t been close to the man, but he felt bad for him. Addictions of any kind were hard to fight.

Ian joined them, aware that Jayda hadn’t lost her concentration. Every one of her throws were good.

Jayda was cute in full gear, though Ian thought she was more attractive with her hair down rather than in that tight bun. He wondered if she and Ivan were still spending time together, but he knew better than to ask. *I’ll watch and see, and then I’ll know.*

Jayda felt Ian scanning her. She ignored it. *Not my type. And even if he was, I’m on duty.*

“She’s solid.” Ramer smiled at her. “Tell Marc she’s ready for the next level of training.”

“Neil.” Jayda retrieved her weapons. “Neil is my trainer.”

Ramer frowned. “Neil can’t be trusted alone with women.”

“Not true. It was just Becky.” Jayda moved back a little farther, but she didn’t get in Ramer’s reach. He was dry now and looking better, but she wasn’t taking chances. “Besides, I can throw faster than him. We already had a contest.”

“You beat Neil at knife throwing?”

Ian’s incredulous tone made her frown. “Do you think he took a dive?”

Ian shrugged. “Never heard of him doing that. Also never heard of him losing a knife contest to a rookie.” Ian smiled. “You must be good.”

Jayda tossed her blade and stuck it directly in the center. “I’m great at darts too.”

Ian spoke to Ramer. “How much longer you got?”

Ramer sighed. “A few days, I think. I lost track of time.”

Ian scowled. “You haven’t asked anyone?”

“No.” Ramer didn’t say he’d been scared to.

“I’ll find out if you like.”

“Cool.” Ramer went to his cot and tried to find a comfortable position. He’d been given books and a handheld game, but they’d lost appeal. He was tired of being caged and growing eager to regain his place now that the drug haze wasn’t making all his decisions.

Ian left the brig, content that Jayda had things under control. He went to the infirmary next. He glanced through the window and found it empty. “Where are our guests?”

“Marc moved them to the quarantine zone.”

Ian flinched at Ivan’s voice right behind him. He spun around.

Ivan laughed at him.

Ian wondered what Ivan really thought of him, but he didn’t ask or send the thought. Ivan was the highest guard here after the Special Forces teams, and he spent more time guarding the boss than either of those groups. If Ivan didn’t like him, Angela would hear about it and Ian didn’t want that to happen. He was busy earning her respect. He’d made progress he was happy with, but he didn’t know where he stood with her. Until he was sure, he wouldn’t push.

Ivan was still chuckling. “I’ve been on your ass since you came from the bridge.” Ivan kept walking.

Ian scowled, but he didn’t follow. He went into the infirmary to make sure everything was locked up. He ignored the bit of disappointment that the new woman wasn’t here. He’d been hoping to at least learn her name. *I’ve never seen a woman that beautiful.* Ian wondered if the women on their ship would be jealous. He decided they would. *We’ll have to make sure she has a friend to talk to.*

Ian’s mind stayed on the new arrival as he finished his rounds and then strolled back toward the recharge cabins. *I wonder if she likes normals. I don’t have a gift. I can’t compete with the men who do.*

Ian wished he was a descendant. *Bet she’d like me then. Everyone wants a magic user for a mate. They’re the future. Normals are the past.*

# Chapter Sixteen

**You First**

**1**

**A**ngela held tight to Charlie as he screamed. Jennifer and Debra were having no mercy on their recharge patients. Angela understood the females were limited and wanted to get it all done as quickly as possible, but his pain was still one of the worst moments she’d experienced. His body was covered by kids, the whimpering wolf, and Marc, but it wasn’t enough.

“Make room.” Kenn entered the room and sat on Marc’s side of the bed. He took Charlie’s hand and added his support.

The pain receded a level.

Jennifer and Debra shoved harder; the pain increased until his screams echoed through the hall again.

“A little more.” Marc didn’t like it either, but he wanted his son’s energy banks to be bigger. Charlie hadn’t used his gifts much, so his bank was small. As a father, Marc was worried about his future.

Jennifer broke the connection gently, unlike how she had done with the medics. Starting in the large cabin with Harry, Morgan, Tim, and Terry had been a good moment for her to figure out how it worked and to perfect the method. She’d caused them more pain than they had to experience while learning how to do it, but none of them had complained. Of the four, Morgan was the only known descendant and none of them had revealed any secrets that the camp hadn’t already known. Jennifer had allowed Morgan to keep his shield up over his thoughts about her, and she’d stayed back so she didn’t have to touch him. After him begging her to let it go, she felt bad for her words to Marc about all of the men on the ship being a threat. After only one session with Wade, it was obvious that the problem was with her, not Safe Haven’s Eagles. “Three-minute break. Our trio cabin is next.”

Kyle was there to hand her a bottle of water as she stepped out. He was proud of her for the work she was doing, but he couldn’t help being nervous. Some of Safe Haven’s most powerful descendants were involved in these recharges.

Jennifer rested against Kyle’s chest, a bit winded. Despite her own recharge, this was still demanding work.

Charlie kept a hold of Kenn’s hand as people left the cabin. “Stay for a minute?”

“Not right now. A minute isn’t enough for what you need. I’ll stop back after the recharges are over and you have a nap.” Kenn drew the blanket up over the shivering teenager, ignoring the wolf now growling at him. He moved to the door, aware of Angela watching from the hallway. He didn’t meet her eye. He hadn’t done it for her, though he liked the feel of her approval.

Kenn moved into the next cabin, where several individuals were gathering to help Candy, Tracy, and Tonya. He picked a spot along the far wall and refused to look at the beautiful redhead.

“Room for one more?” James entered the cabin, grinning at the shock and displeasure. He wasn’t afraid to fight for what he wanted.

Kenn stiffened. “You don’t need to be here!”

Tonya waved him over.

No one else in the cabin spoke.

Candy wasn’t sure why they were bothering to recharge her since she wasn’t a descendant.

Tracy just wanted it to be over so everyone would stop gawking at her in disapproval. Her pregnancy was known information now. All the stories from these moments were flying through camp, like they always had.

Candy frowned at Zack as he staggered in and dropped onto the edge of her bed. “What are you doing here?”

“Lee was my XO. As his widow, you deserve the support.”

Candy almost cried. She hadn’t realized that she had any status based on her relationship with Lee.

More Eagles came into the cabin. Everyone understood they were here to support the widow.

Watching from across the hall, Neil frowned. *My team didn’t show up to cover Samantha even though she’s Jeremy’s widow...*

Jennifer pushed her way into the cabin, hiding her fear. “We’re going to do all three of you at the same time. We’re going to push in power slow and easy, and as soon as you’re full, we’ll stop. If you feel a contraction, we’ll try to handle that too. Everyone get set. One minute to connection.”

Some people snickered at Jennifer’s wording. Others tensed, bracing for pain or listening to it.

James took Tonya’s hand as Kenn came to her other side. More people staggered into the cabin–the medics, and camp members Tonya had made friends with over the last months.

Tonya’s cats came through the door next and curled up on her feet.

Cody, who had snuck out of the kid area, ducked under guard hands meant to grab him. He ran over to Tracy’s bed and climbed up next to her.

Tracy didn’t question it. They would be family after the wedding. She was glad to have someone here for her other than Charlie. If it had only been him, it would have been proof that she was an outcast.

Kyle eased his way into the room and took the chair next to Tracy.

Jennifer scowled.

So did Charlie.

“I’m supporting my old teammates by being here.” Kyle’s eyes glowed bright red. “Anyone who reads more into this than what it is has their own issues to worry about.”

Now in the doorway, Angela lifted a hand to stop another protest. “Kyle was my team leader. She’s about to be my daughter-in-law; he’s showing me respect. He stays.”

Charlie opened his mouth to protest anyway.

Jennifer glared at him. “If I can tolerate it, so can you.”

“I’ve got it covered!”

“Tracy’s needs are supposed to come before yours, even when it sucks.”

“I can handle it!”

Tracy didn’t like the arguing. “Just let Charlie do it.”

Jennifer shrugged, not really wanting Kyle to help her anyway.

Kyle stayed in the chair, already sure what would happen.

With all three females covered in cats, kids, and Eagles, Jennifer began connecting them.

Standing in the hall because there wasn’t room in the cabin now, Debra added her power to Jennifer’s and made the final connections.

All three pregnant females groaned at the feel of so many powerful descendants in their minds. Candy felt her energy swing to full almost immediately. She clenched her fists as the pain increased and as tears began to roll over her cheeks.

Tracy couldn’t take the pain. She shrieked as Jennifer increased the strength of the flow. Cody and the others tried to block it for her, but it wasn’t enough.

Charlie broke. He waved to Kyle.

Kyle moved over and took Tracy’s hand.

The pain dropped to a tolerable level.

Jennifer increased the strength again. *I really hate that skank.*

Everyone in the room looked at her.

Jennifer flushed, but shrugged. “We’re not supposed to lie anymore, right?”

They were snickers and snorts that quickly faded as the three women screamed in tandem.

Out in the hall, people waiting for their own recharge quickly went back into their cabins and shut the doors. If Jennifer wasn’t having any mercy on the pregnant women, she wasn’t going to have mercy on anyone else either.

Jennifer broke the connection as all three energy banks hit full. She staggered out into the hallway, hating for anyone to see her weak. That part of her pride would never change.

Kyle leaned down to whisper in Tracy’s ear.

Charlie heard it. He got up and stormed from the cabin.

Tracy tried to smile through the shudders and shivers. “It’s okay. I want to marry him.”

Kyle smiled back. “You two are good together. I just wanted to make sure you were willing.” He got up and left, going straight to Jennifer as she stood out in the hall. He didn’t want her to be upset.

Jennifer couldn’t hold on to her anger. She was too busy and too tired for more drama, and she honestly respected Kyle for having the courage to do this openly. “Your recharge is coming soon. You should go get ready for it.” She slid into the next cabin.

Candy covered up and immediately dropped into a heavy sleep.

Next to her, Tonya pulled her hand away from James and regarded Kenn.

Now bonded with her even more, James scowled. “He’s not your man anymore. But I could be. Why won’t you give me a chance?”

Tonya sank down under the blankets. “I can’t do this right now.”

James started to protest. Now that she had been recharged, he didn’t understand why she couldn’t have a conversation.

Kenn lunged over and yanked James up by his arm. “Get out!”

James shoved Kenn off him.

Kenn punched James in the mouth, knocking him to the floor between the beds. He grabbed the dazed soldier by the back of his shirt and dragged him out the door. He managed to snag the knob and close it behind him.

Marc, Neil, and Wade grabbed James before the fight could start. Marc shoved James down the hall. “You have duty over the camp right now; get there.”

James wasn’t about to argue with Marc. He stomped off, casting ugly glances over his shoulder at Kenn.

Theo stuck his head out the door, pale and shivering from his recharge. “Things okay out here?”

Marc waved him back into his cabin. “All in a day’s work for an Eagle.”

Everyone snickered.

Theo went back into his room, followed by Zack. They were both eager to sleep.

Next to them, Molly closed their cabin door. She and Monica had been first on the recharge list. Monica was sleeping heavily. Molly was trying, but she kept being drawn into alertness by the drama going on around her. She hated to miss anything, but she was exhausted after her first workout with Neil. He’d stood there and let her beat on him until she was too tired to keep swinging. Then he’d gone over the kai levels with her.

Charlie also went to bed. He didn’t think he’d ever been so sleepy and that included during his manhood quest.

Dog went to Marc’s cabin and jumped up on his bed. He curled into a circle and whimpered.

Marc chuckled.

Debra did a fast check in with the guards, then followed Jennifer into the cabin with Jeff and Gus. Old teammates were already in there, as well as Brittani, who had just left her post to offer support.

Jeff was also an Eagle widower. More teammates pushed into the cabin to lend their support.

Jennifer stayed by the window, hating how it made her feel to be so crowded. *When Wade gets done with me, I won’t be afraid of anything.*

Standing in the hall, Kyle caught the thought and winced. *Great. She’s depending on the camp whore to get her through this. That can only go well.*

People around Kyle scowled, but no one scolded him. Everyone understood the fear of losing someone dear to them. As long as he stopped holding Jennifer back, his thoughts weren’t going to get him in trouble.

Gus didn’t say anything as Brittani sat on the edge of the bed and wrapped her hand through his. He was honored and relieved that he had someone here to help him at all. He hadn’t been an Eagle long enough to have teammate support.

Trinity appeared in the doorway.

Jennifer motioned her in despite Gus shaking his head. “You need all the help you can get in a moment like this.” Jennifer then glared at Brittani, daring her to refuse the order.

Trinity took the chair on the other side of Gus’s big body; she didn’t look at Brittani.

Brittani glared at her the entire time.

“Making connection in three, two, one.”

Both men groaned at the feel of it. Being connected to so many people at once was uncomfortable, but having them shove power in at mismatched levels was impossible to ignore. Both of them moaned as Jennifer increased the stream.

Jeff had never thought to hear himself scream, but his mouth opened and the sound came out, shaking him to his foundation. *I didn’t think pain meant anything to me anymore.*

Kimmie pushed her way through the people to reach his side. She climbed onto his chest and held him tightly, crying with him.

One of Angela’s new rookies, Francesca, took his other hand.

Kimmie’s head snapped up, eyes glowing red.

Francesca stared back. “You need a mother, not a lover.”

Kimmie lifted her hand to send fire.

Jeff slapped her on the butt. “Bad girl.” He pointed at the door with a shaky hand.

Kimmie stomped from the room.

Angela met the girl in the hall and directed her over to the lounge table before she could wander off and get in trouble. “Hang around. We’ll talk.”

Kimmie dropped onto the couch, arms over her chest.

In the cabin, Francesca let Jeff see she was interested.

Jeff wasn’t, but he wasn’t rude enough to say so. He refused to think about anything except how much he still missed Crista.

Francesca understood he wasn’t ready, but that didn’t change how she felt. She’d been watching him since he came back to Safe Haven.

Brittani and Trinity observed the moment with shame, realizing they were acting like children.

Gus relaxed as he saw the women weren’t going to fight over him. Then Jennifer increased the strength and his shrieks mixed with Jeff’s as their energy banks were refilled.

Debra moved toward the next cabin while Jennifer broke the connection. Despite being alone for so long, her energy banks were large. She wasn’t winded yet.

Kyle handed Jennifer another bottle of water as she came out, waiting for her to speak. He wasn’t sure what to say after watching her do all this on her own. Marc and Angela weren’t helping her, though they were both standing by in case they needed to. Kyle knew Angela had planned to have Jeff help too, but it wasn’t needed. Jennifer and Debra had it covered.

Debra took the chair next to Kendle while the cabin was still empty. She studied the battered castaway with sympathy. Then she dug in to Kendle’s mind.

Kendle didn’t have the strength left to resist. “Trinity got it all. You don’t need to do it too.”

*I’m not here for that.*

Kendle’s swollen lids opened. “Support?”

Debra nodded. *You don’t have many friends.*

Kendle snorted, then groaned at the pain. “I’m surprised anybody would care about me at all.”

*Friendship and caring about someone are two different things.* Debra pointed.

Charlie, Kenn, Quinn, and Tommy entered the cabin. All of them were frowning. They were clearly pissed at her, but they were putting it aside for this moment. Most of them assumed Angela still had hopes to reform Kendle since she hadn’t been moved to the brig or even mentally locked up again.

Kendle stiffened as the males surrounded her or joined her on the bed. Tears tried to rise as the feeling of being wanted washed over her. She very rarely felt that way and after her revelations, she was stunned. “I don’t deserve this.”

Brittani joined the males. She smiled at Kendle’s fresh surprise, being gentle as she sat. Kendle’s face, neck, and arms were swelled, bruised, and almost a match to Neil’s. “I told you I was going to help you.”

Kendle sobbed. She was as broken now as she had been after Luke rescued her from Ethan’s cave.

Trinity came back in and took her place in her bed, bracing to handle it all alone.

Jayda ran down the hall and ducked in. She dropped into the bed next to Trinity and wrapped her up tight.

Gus joined them, taking the chair.

Trinity held on to Jayda, also grateful for the show of support. Their time dealing with Kronus had bonded them.

Jennifer took Trinity’s other hand, motioning to Debra. “You do this one.”

Debra connected them and refilled both energy banks in less than a minute. She didn’t push in extra for either of them though. Trinity didn’t need it and Kendle wasn’t worthy of it.

Marc watched from across the hall, not feeling guilty that he wasn’t supporting Kendle this time, and yet satisfied that she had enough people there. When her screams mixed with Trinity’s and echoed down the hall, Marc shut his cabin door.

**2**

“Do you want him to get kicked out?”

Kimmie slowly nodded. “We’d be alone again, with no rules.”

“So he can be yours, or so you can kill again?”

Kimmie frowned. “Both.”

Angela sighed. “That’s not love. If it was, you wouldn’t want him to be removed from our camp.”

Kimmie tried not to cry. “I’m sorry. I miss it.”

“I’m not mad at you. I know you also miss your friends.”

Kimmie sniffed. “Yes. Darren and Wallace were my boys.”

Angela smiled. She opened her arms to the girl.

Kimmie crawled into her lap and enjoyed being held. She didn’t think of blood when someone was holding her.

“Starting after the recharge, you’ll get time with the Eagles, in the cage. Okay?”

Kimmie nodded, relaxing. “Thank you, Alpha.”

“It’s my honor.” Angela hugged her again, then set the girl on her feet. “Amy needs you to be strong. Can you help us with her? She’s very restless. We’re worried she might hurt herself.”

“Like Leeann?”

Angela sighed. “Yes. Try, for me?”

“I will.”

“Good. Go see if you can get Amy to sleep. Samantha is tired.”

Kimmie was happy to have a job to do. She skipped down the hall, swat from Jeff already forgotten.

Angela had wondered about their bond. Now she knew it was the fighting and blood. Jeff could have a relationship without Kimmie harming the woman. All she had to do was convince him that he was ready. *Safe Haven needs your DNA, Jeffrey. And we will get it at some point.*

Jennifer moved into the cabin that Kenn and Kyle were sharing. Angela didn’t join them. A small crowd was already following. The men were covered.

When the hoarse shouts began, Angela wasn’t surprised by the need to go in there anyway. She got up, muttering.

Everyone looked over when she entered the cabin.

Angela ignored them as she sat between the two men and held her hands out.

They both clasped a hand, gritting teeth and groaning to keep from shouting again.

Kenn was shocked at Angela’s support. He tried not to squeeze her hand too hard as pain ripped through his body. *Thank you.*

Angela didn’t answer. She was trying to send compassion since she didn’t have any love for Kenn. That emotion was easier to feel for Kyle.

*They’re full.* Debra gestured at Angela. *Keep going?*

Angela nodded, curious if it would work on Kyle. He was a different type of descendant.

“It will.” Jennifer shoved harder, concentrating. She sent a huge blast.

Both men screamed.

Debra joined her, using the last of her energy.

“That’s enough.” Jennifer ignored the ugly thoughts in both men, not wanting to expose Kyle’s jealousy or Kenn’s fantasies.

Angela already knew. “Get it over with so we can move on.”

Jennifer grunted. “Still obsessed with you. It’s deep.”

Angela shrugged. “Not new information. Is it a threat?”

“No!” Kenn tried not to scream again. “I’m not that man anymore!”

Jennifer nodded. “I believe him.”

“Good. And Kyle?”

Jennifer didn’t meet his eyes. “Jealous, scared, obsessed... And still worried he’s damned for all the lives he’s taken.”

“Well, we all have that concern.” Angela stared at Kyle. “Why are you scared?”

Kyle wanted the pain to stop. That would only happen when he came clean. “I trapped her; she’ll leave me at some point.”

“Never,” the women both answered together.

Kyle tried to smile, but the pain overwhelmed him. He shouted once more and then shoved his hand into his mouth to muffle the next one.

“What about the jealousy and obsession?”

Jennifer faced the truth. “It matches mine. He’d kill for me or over me. I feel the same.”

“Is that going to be a problem, on either side?”

“I don’t think so.” Jennifer broke the connection. “Unless they try to take his place. That will cause both of us to snap.”

Angela was glad to have that settled. “We’ll remove the guard on you two now.” Angela left the room, not responding to Kyle or Jennifer’s frown. They hadn’t known they were under guard. It hadn’t been a constant thing. Angela had ordered it only recently because Kyle’s obsession had seemed to be growing.

Angela moved into Marc’s cabin, nodding to Neil when he stiffened. “The whole truth, and nothing but, so help you.”

“All my walls are down.” Neil squinted at her over purple skin and a split lip.

Marc leaned against the bed with his arms over his chest. “What?”

“I love you.”

Marc’s hard expression eased. He smiled. “Truly, madly, deeply?”

She stared at him, not smiling back. “With all my heart. The truth won’t change that.”

His stomach churned. “You already know.”

“Of course.” She slid into his arms. “So does everyone else. Don’t hold back; get it over with so she doesn’t have to hurt you.”

Marc wanted to protest, but everyone else had gone through this now. It was only fair that he did too. He sighed, kissing her head. “I will.”

Angela led him to the bed and held the blanket. Being recharged took a lot out of you. She knew. Marc would need to sleep, whether he wanted to or not.

Marc pushed off his unlaced boots and got in bed.

Angela covered him with the blanket and then her body.

More people came in, taking places in chairs, along the walls and in the bed with them.

Neil didn’t want Samantha here for this, but he didn’t protest when she came in.

Wade moved to the opposite side, so he wasn’t so close to Samantha.

Amy crawled into Neil’s arms and held him as tight as she could. “We got you.”

Neil was warmed even though he was starting to shake. Being hit was easy compared to having the world know all your secrets.

Cody and Charlie joined Angela with Marc on the bed. Everyone else stood around him and Neil, waiting for Jennifer and Debra to start.

Jennifer drew on her reserves and opened the connection. Thick white clouds blocked her entry. She glared at Neil.

Neil shook his head. “They’re not mine.”

Attention turned to Marc, who had tensed at the invasion. He reluctantly dropped his walls.

Jennifer wasn’t surprised by the rage in Marc’s mind but nearly everyone else was. “You first.”

Marc grunted as the pain started. “I don’t want to give the job back. I’m still planning to kill Adrian...and Kenn. I hate Ivan too, though not enough to kill him yet.”

“And?” Jennifer was ready to be done; she didn’t have enough energy or patience left to be gentle, even with Marc.

“...I miss my time with Kendle.”

Angela hated that, but she’d already known. It wasn’t news to her.

“Is that all of it?”

Marc groaned. Pain slapped him in thick waves. “No!” He clenched his fists. “I’m planning to go against Angela about the reset.”

Angela hadn’t known that one. She immediately began plans to make sure he couldn’t succeed.

“Good. Now you.” Jennifer glared at Neil. “Let’s hear it.”

Neil shouted as she increased the strength. He knew it was a punishment as well as a recharge. “I murdered them, knowingly. I lied about being a descendant, for the entire time I’ve been in Safe Haven. ...and I miss Jeremy so much it hurts all the time. I never tell Sam. I don’t want her to hurt over me too.”

Jennifer waited, certain he had more secrets than Marc.

Neil opened his mind as much as he could stand to with the pain coming in. “I want my place back; I’ll do anything to get it, even kill for the boss.”

Jennifer broke the connection without trying to stretch either man’s energy banks. She was too tired to do it. “Am I finished?”

Angela nodded against Marc’s chest. “You’ve done well. Let Debra top you off before you crash.”

Debra flushed under the surprise that she wasn’t exhausted yet. She sent a stream of energy into Jennifer.

“It doesn’t hurt.” Jennifer smiled at the deaf woman. “We’re the same level.”

Debra and Jennifer left the cabin together, marveling at that surprise.

Angela stayed with Marc as Charlie left and Cody was taken back to the den mothers. When he drifted off, so did she.

On Marc’s feet, Dog relaxed. *I’m glad they skipped me. My secret might have caused a lot of trouble.*

Jennifer stuck her head back in the door, glowering at the wolf.

Dog dropped his snout to Marc’s leg, hoping she left.

“Dog.” Her tone was full of warning. She’d never used her gift on an animal, but she would try if he didn’t tell her what he was hiding.

Dog’s tail tucked under his leg. *I had a bond with the ants...*

Jennifer frowned. “Why would that cause a lot of trouble?”

Dog whining. *I brought some of them onto the ship before we sailed. They’re living in the garden.*

Jennifer was shocked. “How did we miss that?”

*I hid them under the floor*. Dog whined. *I’m a bad wolf.*

Jennifer laughed. “You’re kind. There’s nothing bad about that.” She came in and rubbed his ears. “How many?”

Dog whined again. *Fifty-one.*

Jennifer groaned this time. “Bad wolf!”

Dog covered his head with his paw. *I’m so ashamed. First, the cats and now the ants. I need help.*

**3**

“Got a minute?”

Angela nodded, playing with the cards while she protected the sleeping residents. She was the only one here now, other than the three guards who all frowned at Kenn.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.” She shrugged, hard eyes going to the doorway where Kendle was sleeping. She’d also been sedated. “We can’t help what we want, only how we react to it.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

Angela sighed, eyes going back to the cards. “You want to know why she isn’t in the brig.”

“Or dead.” Kenn took the chair across from her. “Neil said he’d handle that type of chore for you.”

Angela shuffled and started dealing; she searched for the right words. “She’s on my team...”

Kenn peeked at his hole cards and flipped a chip into the middle. “So?”

Angela anted and put the deck down. “If one of them screw up, they still get my support.”

“Five’s the bet.” Kenn dropped a chip into the center. “This wasn’t a screw up. She planned to let us all be killed so she can be byzan.”

“Call.” Angela added a chip and picked up the deck. “How many?”

“Two.”

Angela flipped two cards. “Dealer takes none.”

Kenn frowned, distracted. “You haven’t even looked at your cards.”

She gave him a pointed glance.

Kenn gestured. *I know you’re locked*. “Don’t try that shit on me.”

Angela chuckled. “I called.”

Kenn discarded again, frown growing. “You’re not keeping her on your team because of them. It’s for Marc.”

Angela held up the deck. “How many?”

“None. I filled in my ace high straight.” He flipped over his cards. “I win. Give me the truth.”

Angela began turning her five cards over. “It’s not time for her to go yet. I don’t have a better answer.”

Kenn scowled at her and then the cards. “How did you get four aces with a queen backup?”

Angela leaned back and shut her lids. “I inherited a refugee camp. The aces came with it.”

“You cheated!”

She shrugged. “You taught me.”

Kenn sputtered.

Angela made a motion that shocked him. Kenn got up and went back to his cabin, refusing to think about it.

Angela went back to playing solitaire. When Kendle’s punishment came, it wouldn’t be from her and it would be absolute.

# Chapter Seventeen

**Eagles Don’t Hide**

**1**

**“I** need help with this box...” Conner straightened, head turning. “Do you guys hear that?”

Greg stiffened. “An engine?”

Conner grew hazy as he searched the black water where it met the dark sky.

The kill team didn’t wait for his confirmation. They knew what it was. Their deck was covered in a level seven training course that the men jumped over in their haste.

“Kill that lantern.” Drew hefted a crate from a stack near the wheelhouse.

Jonny doused the lantern, then ran to help.

Greg tugged on Conner’s arm. “You’re in the middle.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Sleep.” Greg punched the boy in the temple. He caught him as he fell. Greg made sure he was breathing, then hurried to the crate. He’d told Conner it would be his choice here, but he hadn’t been able to give him the truth. He wasn’t trusted enough to make the right choice.

Greg took the assembled rocket launcher and waited for his spotter.

Drew calculated the distance. “In ten seconds.” He pushed Greg’s arm over an inch. They didn’t know the terms to use, but they didn’t need them. They’d practiced it dozens of times before leaving the Adrianna.

“Five.”

The patrol boat sped toward them, using radar. Greg knew they couldn’t be seen any other way with the lantern out. He’d made sure nothing on the ship would give them away so they would have these few seconds.

Greg blew out a calming breath. He fired as Drew called it.

The rocket flew through the salty air with a loud shriek. It slammed into the patrol boat and exploded.

Bodies and debris flew into the air; fire lit the sky. Heavy smoke rolled into the night and faded away on the breeze.

“Get us over there.” Greg began to reload. “We need to verify there are no survivors.”

Shawn guided the ship, using light hands. He kept the speed slow, hearing debris hitting the waves. Greg’s hit had been solid. The patrol boat was going under while the topside flamed.

“I see the Adrianna.” Jonny scanned the other directions with his heat sensing glasses.

Greg was gratified to know it had been a one hit kill. He stored the launcher. “Head for the detention center.”

Shawn nodded from the wheelhouse.

Drew was watching the patrol boat as it finished sinking. “Do you think they had backup?”

Greg shook his head. “No. We heard the call. They were the only patrol out this far.”

Conner groaned, waking. He held his head as he sat up and looked around; he found the flaming, sinking wreck. “I missed it?”

Greg doubted the camp had heard the explosion, but that wasn’t his concern. This mission was all that mattered. “Yep.” Greg came over to stand by him, attention on the glowing cruise ship ahead of them.

Conner saw it.His panic returned.

Greg stepped closer. “Don’t do it, boy.”

Conner sucked in a huge breath. *Dad!*

Greg wrapped his big arm around the boy’s mouth, but he couldn’t stop the mental calls.

Shawn pointed. “He’s there.”

Conner spotted Adrian on the deck of his dark boat. He stared in longing. If not for the glow of Safe Haven, the ship wouldn’t have been visible at all.

Adrian had a beard and a hard expression that said he wasn’t done fighting for what he wanted. The Eagles weren’t sure if they approved or not, though they were all curious how he’d gotten moved off the cruise ship.

Conner didn’t care about any of that. *Help me!*

*Make our family proud on your first run, son. I’ll be here when you get back.*

*You knew!*

*Marc used it to hurt me. Now he’s using it as a test of your loyalty.*

*I hate him.*

*Hurry home and help me make him miserable.*

*...I could join the enemy.*

*You could, but you’d destroy my dream and you’d lose Candy.*

*Not if I take over.*

Adrian saw the cracks. *Damn. Conner is partially corrupt.* Adrian motioned to the Eagle holding his son. *Turn him into one of us. Do whatever it takes*.

Greg nodded.

Adrian stared at his son. *I love you. I believe in you. Be strong.*

*Why? So I can come back to being treated badly and kept from the woman I love?*

*No, so you can take your place at her side, openly, with a hero’s run under your belt. Angela gave you a chance, like she did Charlie. Please don’t throw that away. With her, you only get one.*

Conner imagined how that could go and slowly nodded. *I’ll try.*

*Good. I saw Candy recently. She’s fine, just pissed because she doesn’t know where you are.*

*It’s a test for her too?*

*Yes. Will she pass?*

Conner paled. *Maybe not. I reeled her in hard. I gave it my all.*

Adrian winced. *I’ll see what I can do to help her.*

*Thank you.*

The connection broke.

Greg let go of the disappointed teenager, but he stayed ready to knock him out again. Greg was a bit disappointed. He’d hit Conner hard enough to keep him out until morning. *Damn Mitchels.*

Conner watched as the two ships fell behind them. He was still watching when they faded from view. After another long minute, he turned to the four men who were also staring in longing at home. “What are you guys getting from this?”

“Respect, a set place in camp.”

Conner ignored Jonny’s rookie answer. He turned to Shawn. “Tell me.”

The Eagles immediately used the bonding opportunity.

“I’m earning credits to force Angela to save Pam with lifeforces when the cancer gets that bad. If she can’t, the credits will be used to save Missy from her next mistake.”

Jonny frowned. “I didn’t realize we were telling the truth. I’m helping gay men gain more progress in the Eagles.”

No one had known he was gay. They all stared in surprise.

Jonny shrugged. “I followed in Ray’s hard steps–exactly what Adrian wanted.”

Drew sucked in a breath. “I’m Marc’s spy. He put me on the meal crew to watch Brittani. He used to be worried about her loyalty. Now, I’m his spy here.”

Conner was shocked. “I can’t believe you admitted that.”

Drew shrugged. “I’m a rookie, but even I know how important trust is.”

“Fine. What are you getting out of it?”

“Besides doing FND for Marc?” Drew grinned. “It gets me the pick of our female groupies. That’s always nice.”

The other men laughed.

Conner glanced warily at Greg. “What about you?”

Greg lifted his chin. “I want something I can never have. I volunteered for this run, hoping I might die out here before anyone finds out what it is.”

No one spoke after that.

**2**

“You’re thinking bad thoughts.”

Adrian nodded. He was. Seeing Conner, hearing his own thoughts in Conner’s mind, had sent him to bad places.

Sadie moved next to him, surveying the dusty couch. *Why did they bring furniture?*

Adrian slid onto his side, taking the entire couch before she could get the courage to come closer. He’d come to the bowels of this ship to think.

She frowned at his block. “If it’s bad, won’t Marc hear it?”

“I can’t talk to you right now.” Adrian rolled onto his back, hands going under his neck.

Sadie noticed he hadn’t brought his writing tools to this cargo room. “What about your job?”

Adrian sighed. “What did the UN do when you talked too much?”

Sadie frowned at him. “Sorry, I can’t talk to you right now.”

Adrian’s lips twitched. She was uneducated, but smart. It was a fascinating, confusing mix. “You can take a nap on me if you want, but don’t try anything.”

Sadie snickered. She was tempted. She’d already slept next to him once and found the experience enjoyable. She hated the beard, though. It made him appear old.

Adrian felt her appraisal, but he didn’t react. He had other things on his mind.

Sadie sat on the bench across from him, struggling to figure out what was going on. The mood here had changed; she was sensitive to that even without her magic. Her mouth opened.

“Shh...”

Sadie got up and left the room. Then she left the bottom deck. She’d had a lot of trouble with this lesson upon being drafted.

Sadie went up to where they’d spent last night. She scanned the two bedrolls, and picked his. She settled into the blankets. Her mind roamed the various situations, trying to figure out enough to stay alive.

On the rear of the huge cruise ship, Ivan paused. He didn’t see Sadie, but her thoughts were wide open. Ivan realized Sadie had been the recipient of Adrian’s mental lock when the trap team ambushed him. *Two locked, corrupt, selfish descendants are alone on that ship together.* *What could go wrong?*

Ivan went back down to join the poker game.

**3**

The second night poker game was finally winding down. It was 2am.

Angela was in the small office at the far end of the hall, available if they needed her. She didn’t feel like celebrating. The secrets they’d uncovered were worrying her, especially Kendle’s. She had suspected it since their ride to the shore where Kendle had been dreaming of pirates with glowing green eyes. Now they knew the UN had support. She was going over her plans to make sure she had it all covered. She’d expected the UN to have descendants. And she’d assumed they would be powerful. *I wonder if Adrian has gotten any information from Sadie...*

“Got a minute?”

Angela waved Jennifer in, not liking the girl’s grim face. “Shut the door.”

Jennifer did. Angela was using the same office that Marc had for his meetings during the first recharge. It smelled like it hadn’t been cleaned yet. Jennifer controlled her stomach when it lurched.

“Health or Kyle?”

“Autumn, sort of.” Jennifer sat, swallowing a groan. “I want permission to wipe her memory before she finds out who her real father is.”

“And?” Angela had already known the parents were talking about that option.

Jennifer flushed. “I’m pregnant.”

Angela sighed. “Wedding night?”

Jennifer flushed darker. “I think so.”

“Congratulations.”

Jennifer frowned. “I thought it was forbidden. I came in here braced for a punishment.”

Angela shrugged. “Talk to Marc. That’s his department right now.”

Jennifer’s scowl grew. “You really are on a break.”

Angela closed the folder. “What do you need from me, Jennifer? You don’t need to beat the bush this way. Just ask.”

Jennifer lowered her voice even though the door was shut. “I want to go on the run anyway. I need an evolution.” Jennifer slid over a sheet of paper. “I made some notes. I think if we do that, we can cut recovery time in half for the descendants.”

Angela skimmed it, then put the paper into her notebook. She studied Jennifer, judging the issues and the result.

Jennifer tried not to squirm. She’d told Angela so it had come from her and not one of the medics or even Kyle, who had already been clear about not wanting her to go.

“What if you lose the baby?”

Jennifer’s face darkened. “Fate.”

Angela stared.

Jennifer let out a sound of frustration, but she didn’t speak.

Angela leaned back in the chair. “What did you see that makes you think you aren’t coming home?”

Jennifer paled; her hands clenched into fists. “You shouldn’t know that.”

Angela chuckled without humor. “I didn’t get this job based on gifts, Jennifer. I recognized the tone. Tell me what you saw that made you come here today to handle your daughter’s future as if you won’t be here to do it yourself.”

“It’s not just me.” Jennifer pushed into Angela’s mind and replayed the images. “I’m not sure if it means anything since it was a dream.”

Angela’s throat went dry. “Yes, you are.” She viewed the death in dismay. “That’s no dream.”

“And I would never do that!” Jennifer closed the mental connection. “I assume I lost a battle. That’s the only way I would ever kill Kyle–I was forced to. I’d like to talk to Missy. She’ll be able to slow it enough for me to discover what happened before that moment.”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“But Marc’s daughter needs us.”

“We’ll cover that. You and Kyle weren’t meant to go on this run. We picked the wrong crew.”

Jennifer let those words soothe her. Angela would handle it from here. *Now I just have to tell Kyle he can’t go either.*

**4**

“Samantha thinks you don’t like her.”

Wade spit beer across the empty poker table. Everyone else had left half an hour ago. Wade had lingered, stewing over his lonely future. He’d been thinking about how to keep avoiding Samantha.

Neil’s eyes narrowed. *She was right. There is a problem*.

They were both off duty, but too restless to sleep yet. Many of the senior men and women were having that issue, especially after Kendle’s revelations. For the moment, most people were more concerned with the island than the detention center fight that was coming.

Wade tried to cover. “Why would she think that?”

“You never talk to her now unless you have to and even that is...curt. You’ve switched shifts twice to avoid her. Women notice shit like that.” Neil waited, hoping it wasn’t anything he couldn’t fix.

“There’s no problem, man. All in her mind.”

“You sure?”

Wade nodded, speaking the truth. “I don’t have a problem with Samantha.” He sucked it up. “Assign me duty with her. I’ll make sure she knows.”

“Awesome. You can cover my off day. She’ll be at the playground, doing paperwork. Her cover is babysitting.”

Wade nodded calmly; his heart pounded. *I’m going to be alone with Samantha, without my old walls.*

“You look a little green. Feeling okay?”

Wade shrugged. “Just one of those days.”

Neil wondered what had made Wade so uneasy. He realized it was their conversation. *Why would he be*… Neil stiffened.

Wade chugged his beer, concentrating on the taste and not his thoughts.

“I’m crashing now.” Neil slowly stood up, voice not quite steady. “Catch you later.”

“Sure.” Wade watched Neil’s rigid shoulders vanish down the hall. He sighed. *One more moment like that and Neil will dig for the truth.*

Wade stood up and went to find Marc.

**5**

“No, I won’t do that.”

“But it will destroy our team! You have to take it away.”

“No, you have to deal with it.” Marc grunted, zipping up. “We all have baggage, Wade. We all have secrets that smother us. You’re not one of the kids. I can’t lock you up. As soon as you see her, the lock would snap. Memory charms never hold on adults.”

“He can’t find out.”

Marc went to the sink. “Does he know already?”

Wade sighed. “He knows something’s wrong and it’s connected to Samantha. He only needs one more clue and he’ll have it.”

“So?”

Wade’s frustration grew. “So?! He’ll flip out and so will she! No one will trust me!”

Marc shut off the water. “Wade, did you do anything wrong?”

“Just feeling this way is wrong!”

Marc shook his head. “We don’t get to pick who we love. If we did, only rich, beautiful people would ever get together.”

“You’re acting like this isn’t important and we both know it is!”

“I’m forcing you to accept that you’re in love with a teammate’s woman, with his *fiancé*.”

“She agreed to marry him? See?! They don’t need this.”

Marc cleared his throat, but refused to say what he really thought. “You can let him find out or you can tell him, but Safe Haven doesn’t keep many secrets. You know that.”

“Yeah.”

Marc shrugged. “He may not figure it out. You keep it locked up really well.”

“This damn recharge screwed me. I can’t keep the door shut now.”

Marc understood. “Several people are having that issue, but secrets let darkness fester. Even if it causes trouble, most of them are better off being revealed.”

“Can I ask Angela to do it?”

“This answer came from her. I wasn’t sure either. She is. She wants it faced and put behind us.”

Wade sighed, miserable. “Get ready to put me on a new team.”

Marc looked at him in the mirror as he dried his hands. “Or maybe we’ll move Neil around. You haven’t done anything wrong. This moment right here proves you don’t want to destroy what they have.”

Wade’s hope died. “It won’t matter. They’ve suffered a lot. One hint of an invasion from any direction will bring up their walls. It might make them isolate again and they’re just coming back out.”

“Samantha and Neil will be fine. So will you, but keep hiding it if you think you can. Then you don’t have to face it yet.”

“Eagles don’t hide.”

Marc laughed bitterly. “If only that were true.”

*“This is your Captain speaking. All recharges are finished. The Adrianna will get underway on New Year’s Day. There will be a celebration on the top deck. Everyone is invited.”*

Cheers echoed through the ship. Being tethered in the middle of an ocean was unsettling. They couldn’t wait to be moving again, even those who were afraid of what was coming next. Attacking the detention center seemed like suicide to the rookies and most of the camp members.

Marc waved at Wade. “Do a quick round and come back for a few more hands of poker. You’ll feel better.”

Wade scowled and left.

Marc returned to his cabin, now thinking about Angela and how she’d handled this set of recharges. He settled into the bed, hand resting on Dog’s warm body.

Mike entered the hall, being quiet so he didn’t wake the sleeping patients. He tapped on Marc’s door and opened it.

Marc’s lids snapped open.

The wolf’s head lifted.

Neil rolled over. “I’m off duty.”

Marc waved for the boy to go on with his report.

Mike kept his voice down. “The kill team checked in. They passed us an hour ago.”

Neil stiffened, now listening intently.

Marc got his notebook from the end table. “Go on.”

“They removed a patrol boat; we’re clear to head out.”

“Good. Did you acknowledge it?”

“No. You told me not to answer any calls during the recharges.”

“Nice work.”

Mike stared at Marc. “I’m surprised we didn’t hear it.”

Marc shrugged. “The wind was with them. It carried the noise away.”

“But the fire from it was visible.”

Marc trusted Zack’s youngest son. “That’s why no one was allowed on deck after dark for the last few days. The bridge faces away and the guard posts are blocked by the bridge.”

Mike was honored by the trust. He vowed to never break it.

Marc stored the notebook. “You’re off duty for the next two days.”

“Cool.” Mike left as quietly as he’d come.

Marc went to the door. He spotted Angela in the small office at the end of the hall. He nodded to her. *We’re on schedule.*

Angela pointed.

Marc chuckled. He went back to bed. His plan was solid. The kill team would infiltrate while the Adrianna was on the way. When they arrived, a new fight for survival would begin. Until then, training would be the priority here. Nothing would be allowed to interfere with their fighters getting ready, not even personal drama. These recharge moments had strengthened gifts and energy banks, and settled a lot of the remaining drama while revealing the rest of it. The only person who hadn’t come clean willingly was Kendle, but Trinity had gotten the details from her. *We’ll be okay this time.*

Marc forced himself into slumber before Neil could start asking questions about the kill team.

Across the hall, Tim slipped into Kendle’s cabin and shut the door. Grief counseling didn’t stick to regular hours anyway, but Angela also hadn’t wanted anyone to know she was taking pity on Kendle with a therapy session.

Kendle sat up in the bed, groggy but not out. “It won’t help.”

Tim shrugged, sitting in the chair by her. “What the boss wants, she gets.”

Kendle’s eyes narrowed. *And that’s the problem*.

Tim swept the messy cabin and frowned at the pile of blankets where Trinity should have been. He made a mental note, then turned back to Kendle. “Let’s chat.”

Kendle snorted, then winced at the pain. “Sure. About what?”

“Luke Johnson.”

Kendle immediately got defensive. “What about him?!”

“Tell me how he died.”

Kendle teared up. “Why?”

“So I can help you accept it.”

“It’s been one hundred and eighty-five days! I’ve accepted it.”

“No, you haven’t. You still think you can be with him at some point.”

Kendle’s fists clenched. Trinity had dragged that out of her too. “I know I can’t. I just miss him.”

“Lying to me doesn’t help you.” Tim leaned forward and put a hand on her ankle. “Let me help you. These secrets rot your soul as bad as any illness.”

Kendle knew she didn’t have a choice. “I want the reset.”

“So you can go to the island then and meet him all over again?”

Kendle swallowed sobs. “I miss him!”

“The reset won’t work, Kendle.” Tim hated this part of the job. “If you went back there, without the war setting, your meeting would change.”

“So?!”

“So he wouldn’t have felt like you were a damsel in distress. He wouldn’t have given you a second look.”

“You can’t know that! He loved me! We were meant to be together.”

“No.” Tim braced. “He was destined to get you to America, then die.”

Kendle sobbed. “Not true!”

“It is. Time travel is definite. If you change the events, the results are different. The war allowed him to love you. Without that, you two never would have been a couple.”

“How can you be sure?!” Kendle needed that hope; she hated Tim for trying to destroy it. “You aren’t a physicist. You don’t know.”

Tim cleared his throat. “Actually, I am. Or I was. What you want will never be possible. Accept it and move on or it will destroy you and all you hold dear, even Marc.”

He handed her a painkiller that he knew was strong enough to knock her out when it took effect. He wanted Angela to be able to sleep without worrying, but as a medic, Tim also felt bad for Kendle. He hated seeing her beaten and bruised. Her lids were so swelled she was in a constant squint. One of her orbs was solid red and it wasn’t from magic. Tim wondered why she hadn’t tried to heal herself, but he didn’t ask. Now wasn’t the time.

Kendle hadn’t known Tim well enough to like or hate him before. That had changed. She knew he wanted to help her, but he couldn’t. *None of them can. I’m too far gone.*

Kendle broke down, unable to speak through the tears and misery.

Tim clasped her hand and stayed with her until the tears stopped and she fell asleep. Angela had been very clear about Kendle, but Tim wasn’t sure he could follow through. If she didn’t recover, someone else would have to plant the idea in her mind. *I can’t be a party to her suicide, even if it saves this camp. I’m not a killer.*

Outside the cabin, Brittani caught that thought and approved. She also wrote it in her report. Tim would never be a full Eagle now. Those who couldn’t kill on command couldn’t do this job.

**6**

“I can’t see you anymore.” Gus waited for tears or shouts, wishing he’d refused her invitation. He’d tried to enjoy the hot tub, candles, and wine, but his heart wasn’t in it.

Trinity’s face iced over.

Gus stood; warm bubbles ran over his big body.

Trinity ducked under the water and screamed.

Other couples in the tubs around them stopped what they were doing to stare.

Gus backed away, feeling like he’d dropped water on a mogwai and created gremlins.

Three other couples were enjoying the hot tub. They were all normal. They watched Gus and Trinity, worried. The couple didn’t notice their shared glances of concern or their movements toward the steps of each sauna in case they needed to get out of the crossfire. There were no Eagles around right now to help them. No one was supposed to be here.

Trinity stayed under as long as she could, using her mind instead of her emotions. She’d known Gus didn’t meet her for romance, but she’d tried one more time to reach him. *It didn’t work.*

Trinity broke the surface, slinging water across the walls and chairs. She sucked in air. “Thank you...for telling me.” She wiped her face, showing bright red orbs. “Anything else?”

Gus shook his head, a bit stunned at the display. Brittani had always hidden who they were.

“Well I’m clearly not her.” Trinity picked up her glass and saluted him. “Good luck in your impossible quest.”

Gus understood he’d been dismissed. He slowly walked to the lockers, casting confused looks over his shoulder.

Tiffany drained the glass and poured another. She flashed her glowing orbs at the people who were staring. “What?!”

Heads swiveled away from her.

Trinity turned the jets on high and leaned back, face the color of the wine they’d been enjoying. Her mood soured with every second that passed. She watched Gus duck into the bathroom to change... Trinity dropped the glass into the water and climbed out of the tub. She strode naked from the room, trailing thick water prints and waves of anger.

Gus came out, scanning the empty tub. He found the watery prints next, but he didn’t follow them. He went toward the nearest guard station. Marc needed to know Trinity might be dangerous to Brittani right now.

“She’s not.” Wade walked by him. “She’s dangerous to you; that’s why she left. Stay away from her for a while.”

“I plan to.” Gus watched him go.

Wade felt it, sensed it, and respected Gus for not asking. So he offered. “There’s a late poker game about to start in the recharge area, if you’re interested.”

Gus grinned. “Sounds great.”

“You’ve got time to check on Brittani and verify she’s okay.”

Gus sulked. “I don’t want to see them.”

“If you’re playing poker, leave that shit here.” Ivan joined them. He wasn’t in the mood. “Otherwise, get some sleep and join Kenn for duty at dawn.”

Gus was torn. He wanted time with the senior men, but he didn’t think he could stand to see Brittani and Daryl together. “Dawn it is.” He marched toward the camp cabins.

Ivan sighed. “After the recharge, we’ll work on Gus. He and Brittani still have to be able to fight together. If they can’t, one of them will have to be removed from the Eagles.”

Wade knew Ivan was right. “Any idea which one?”

Ivan shook his head. “We know Brittani’s powerful, but Gus is still unknown. I’d bet that means he’s even stronger.”

Wade sighed. “He’s hiding it, like everyone did at first.”

“I think so too.” Ivan shrugged at Wade’s guilty expression. “The old world taught us to keep it under lock and key. Getting us to leave the door open after that is hard.”

“Actually, it’s already covered for those two.” Zack fell in step, finished with his check of the top deck. “Angela gave them an ultimatum. Gus just chose the Eagles.”

Wade frowned. “Them?”

Zack grunted. “Jeff resigned.”

# Chapter Eighteen

**No More Babying**

**11:59 pm**

**1**

**“H**appy New Year!” Marc moved away from the fuse he’d just lit.

The camp clapped and blew party horns as vivid fireworks exploded above the cruise ship. The ocean glinted at the sailing refugees with ominous views of wet darkness. The waves were too rough for them to be on deck; it was dangerous up here, but the celebrating people didn’t care.

Marc held Angela, enjoying the moment. The last ten days of recovery had been hard on all of them, but they’d accepted their losses and they were trying to move on. In the morning, Eagle training would officially restart. Not long after, everyone would find out that Angela’s gifts were locked, and the drama would begin. Marc wasn’t looking forward to it.

Ivan waited for a staggering couple to go by before leaning in. “It’s not a secret anymore. You two can’t act that well.”

Marc flushed.

Angela chuckled, guessing what Marc had been thinking. “I told you they wouldn’t have a big problem with it. They all know I needed the break.”

Marc frowned at Ivan. “How many do have a problem?”

Ivan shrugged. “A few stressed camp members wondering if it’s permanent, but that’s it.”

Marc paused as another group walked by.

“Happy New Year!”

“Right back at ya.”

Angela stayed under Marc’s arm, refusing to look behind them. Marc was still rubbing it in to Adrian that he’d been banished, so he’d held the party on the rear deck.

“It was to avoid bad memories.” Marc kissed the top of her head. “They needed a break too. Adrian was right about camping away from the ugliness.”

Angela nodded. The last week and a half had been smooth, thanks to Marc finally taking his place. When she was ready to come back, they would be an unstoppable team.

“You already are.” Kenn joined them, looking thinner and sober.

Marc scanned him. “I’ll settle them down before I call it a night. Do we...” Marc rotated toward the bridge, concentrating.

Kenn prepared to run and handle whatever it was. He’d been doing that since Tonya broke things off. Most nights, he barely had the energy left to shower and crawl into his bunk. It left nothing for the voice in his mind to feed from.

Marc relaxed. “It’s okay. Just a blip.”

Angela studied Ivan’s face to discover if she needed to follow up. She didn’t need her gifts to lead Safe Haven. It certainly helped, but she’d learned how to handle the people without her power first. Watching for facial cues and body language was just good leadership skills.

Marc didn’t comment on her thought. “Theo caught something on the radar. It’s gone now. He thinks it might be a glitch in the system.”

“But you’ll...?” Ivan fell silent when Angela held up a finger.

Marc fell into a deep scan of the surrounding water.

Ivan shelved the question he’d been about to ask. It was easy to forget that Marc was a genius too. The Eagles were still following up on him, and occasionally second guessing his decisions, but it had been respectful so far and Marc had tolerated it. When his answers fit, the respect had gone up and the need to question him had lowered. A few more weeks like this would see all of them with full faith in his ability to lead.

Ivan opened a private line to Angela. *Are you okay?*

Sadness flew across her expression. It was gone before Ivan could blink.

*It’s not bad yet.*

Ivan hadn’t expected a different answer, but he was still watching her. He had no doubt she would pretend to be fine even if she wasn’t. *Do you have any FND work available?*

Angela shook her head. *I have nothing running. I can add you to the list if you like.*

*The list?*

*Of people who are bored and would like to see action in the next fight.*

Ivan grinned. *You do have a project. Good.*

Angela’s amusement fell to the damp deck. *I’m going to kill them all. Will you help me?*

*You know it.*

Marc blinked, breathing calming. He yawned. “All clear.”

Angela relaxed, mentally storing Ivan’s name. Her front line was already moving into place. Her main force was being assigned as they volunteered. Those in the rear were as safe as she could make them from the fight that had to happen. They weren’t ready for it, but that hadn’t mattered the entire time she’d been in this camp. When shit hit the fan, they took the hit and sent it right back. Somehow, it was always enough.

Marc hugged her, aware of a light tension that hadn’t been there before his scan.

Ivan left, wondering if they would ever be able to fish from the ocean again. The air had stayed clear, but the water batches they were filtering had been dirty every time. The camp was getting a lot of chlorine from the bleach treatments. Kenn and Marc had rigged up several filters for the mess and for drinking water, but fishing was out of the question right now.

Marc watched Ivan move through the thinning crowd of partiers who were now getting hit by the sadness that always came from the end of a year. Their thoughts would go melancholy if he didn’t distract them. People would cry, argue, throw up, and start it all over for the next few days if left alone.

“Is Ralph ready for them?”

Marc realized Angela was stewing, which meant she also needed a distraction. “Yes. The kids are playing with Christmas toys; Daisey has her guitar out. The adults will have a fun, peaceful evening without drinking any more than they already have.”

“And the rest of them?”

“Have the Eagle deck to roam. There are cards, arm wrestling, training talk, and a few other entertainments. Anyone is welcome.”

“And the rest of those?”

Marc pointed toward the front of the ship. “On duty.”

“Excellent.” Angela hadn’t told him how to handle the camp tonight, just that he needed to.

Marc loved how that felt.

So did Angela. She was good at teaching and Marc was good at learning.

“Are you all set for the wedding?”

Angela snorted at Quinn’s question.

Marc shook his head at Quinn when the idiot stopped by them, eager to babble. Marc turned Angela toward the stairs, away from that group of partiers. “Would you like a workout?”

Angela grinned up at him. “Really?”

Marc took them to the stairs. “Morgan cleared you a couple hours ago.”

“After I beat him in a 50-yard dash?”

Marc laughed. “Yes.” The morning workouts in the gym had grown from them to more than four dozen men and women who wanted to be clear they were ready. Many of them had looked rough for the first few days. A couple of them still did, but it was a miracle to view Ray and Grant limping along the courses at all. Everyone offered encouragement when they fought to finish time regulations against doctor’s orders. The recharges had gone well, but Tonya had warned everyone about the after effects. They were still trying to preempt some of it by boosting immune systems with extra food and sleep.

Neil followed the power couple down the steps, finally releasing the invisible shield he’d kept over them, on Marc’s order, for the last hour. Marc had been giving him tests, working his gifts, but he couldn’t change the shape. He’d been able to change the color, and then to make it invisible, but his shield was still that annoying round bubble no matter what he tried. He assumed they just couldn’t change the shape. He’d spent a lot of time trying.

“Tell me who wins the matchup Angela is going to offer.”

Neil immediately began scanning.

Angela walked a bit ahead, letting them work. Marc was exploring Neil’s gifts. Apparently, the trooper had been blessed. He had mental and physical power, though the physical was still weak. If Marc kept working him, that would shape up quickly. Angela suspected Marc wanted Neil to be her personal guard.

“I do.” Marc also wanted to help Neil; he still enjoyed being friends with the trooper, but he wasn’t going to interfere. Whatever final punishment Angela chose would be enforced. He didn’t believe for a minute that a beating by her team was the end of it.

“That had not been revealed.” Neil knew Marc didn’t want Angela in matchups yet.

Marc rolled his eyes.

Neil sighed. “Looks like the boss, with help.”

Angela snickered.

“Angie...”

Angela’s demeanor turned hostile. Her expression didn’t change; her light steps didn’t switch to stomps, but Marc felt her rage. “Fine. If you get hurt, it’s on you.”

“As it should be.” Angela kept that rage around her, giving Neil a nod. He had added the help part by guessing, but he’d known it would anger her and let her drive to win. Neil was working on her now, trying to get her to take back over. Angela loved him for it. And she hated him. *Marc can do this job. Have some faith!*

Neil’s shoulders drooped.

Angela’s chin lifted. “Make sure you tell him you did it on purpose. He thinks you’re still a good guy who just made a mistake.”

“I am.”

Angela snorted. “You’re a manipulative son of a bitch. Embrace it. That’s the only way you keep your place and your family, and honestly, you should already know that.” Angela left the two men in the hall, glaring at each other, while she entered the large gymnasium. Over the last week, Marc and the Eagles had transformed it into a massive workout setup with mats in the center for personal workouts and lessons.

Everyone paused, turning toward her.

One glance at her pinched face told them all she wasn’t happy.

“Matchups?”

Eagerness flew through the gym at her suggestion, bringing the three dozen men and women toward her. It had been almost a week since the faint excitement of the recharges; they were more than bored.

“Volunteers?” Angela scanned the lifted hands and picked out the first set. “Kyle and Jennifer against Daryl and Tommy.”

All four of them grinned and teased each other as they got into position.

“Level one.”

The beautiful dance began. Angela enjoyed it, but she loved having Adrian’s job even more. When he’d first shown this to her, she’d wanted it back then. *And now it’s mine*. “Level two.”

Kyle and Jennifer advanced, striking at the same time.

Daryl and Tommy met the attack with defensive ducks and shoves that kept them from being hit.

“See how they work together?” Angela moved around the mat, pointing out things that the rookies needed to memorize. “His feet are never away from hers. Their bodies move in all directions, but their feet give each other the clue so they can center when they spin.” Angela waited for the end of that set, then called the next. “Level three.”

Jennifer and Kyle took the offensive right away, forcing both men back to the edge of the mat. Jennifer, because of her smaller size, put more heat into the hits than Kyle needed to for level three. Wade’s sessions had been very productive.

“See how she adjusts for her smaller size? All Eagles do that, no matter the sex. If you’re built smaller, you have to hit harder, hit *smarter*.” Angela walked the crowd, pointing out details. “Her partner doesn’t take the heat for her; he lets her handle herself even though he worries she might get hurt. Each member of your team must be able to cover their own position. If you do it for them, they’ll be screwed the first time you aren’t there.” She waited for the change moment. “Level four.”

Everyone saw Kyle’s frown, but he didn’t hesitate to move forward as real hits began to land.

Jennifer took the light hit from Tommy and delivered a nasty hip shot of her own. “Don’t hold back because you know me!”

Tommy grunted, head rocked back. He swung again, hitting her like he would anyone else, though he aimed for her good shoulder instead of her face.

“Switch out!” Angela marched onto the mat and took Tommy’s place. “Go do laps!”

Tommy left the ring, grumbling. He found it very hard to hit women, for any reason.

“Level four, restart.”

Daryl felt badass with Angela on his right. When she punched Jennifer in the mouth, he swung on Kyle.

Kyle ducked and swung, nailing Daryl in the cheek.

Daryl hit the ground.

Angela swung around and nailed Kyle in the nose, drawing a trickle of blood.

Jennifer grabbed Angela by the arm and spun her around.

Ready for it, Angela let the momentum add heat to her punch.

Jennifer hit the mat.

“Level five.” Marc took over, forcing himself to do the job. *I don’t like this part of it. I never will.*

Angela ducked and spun, giving her partner a hand up as she went.

Daryl frowned as she switched him to match up with Jennifer.

Kyle stared at Angela, waiting for her attack. He also hated this part of training and she knew it.

Jennifer waved at Daryl. “Bring it on.”

Daryl laughed as he and Angela advanced.

Everyone winced as the men swung; the women went down.

Angela and Jennifer helped each other up, both bleeding.

“You good?” Angela was, so far, but Jennifer had been recovering more slowly from her bout with radiation sickness. The recharges, combined with pregnancy, had taken a lot out of her.

“For another level.” Jennifer wiped away the blood and took her spot. “Just forgot to duck.”

Angela snorted. “Same here. I wasn’t sure if they would do it.”

“Me either.” Jennifer nodded at Daryl. “I respect that.”

“Me too.” Angela waited for Marc to call it.

“Level six.”

Angela and Daryl advanced, both swinging hard.

Jennifer ducked too late and took Daryl’s hit on her bad shoulder. Her cry echoed through the gym.

Angela went for Kyle’s stomach while he was distracted by Jennifer’s pain.

Jennifer shoved herself forward, also going for Daryl’s gut.

Her hit bounced off, spinning her around. She landed on her ass with a grunt.

Daryl shrugged. “Rock hard, baby. I’m back in shape.”

Everyone laughed, but the amusement fell as Marc motioned. “Jennifer, out.”

Jennifer left the mat, angry with herself for making noise. She always kept a shield over her stomach now. The hits weren’t going to hurt the baby, just her.

Kyle grunted as Angela’s stomach hit landed at the same time as Daryl’s shoulder blow. He immediately fired two hits that dropped his opponents. He followed up by wrapping a big arm around Daryl’s neck.

Angela stared up at them, detecting the real anger in Kyle’s stance. “Convince her to quit or get over it.”

Kyle let his XO go, stepping back. “I’ve tried both. It doesn’t work!”

Jennifer tugged Kyle’s arm to get him off the mat before he got in trouble. “Let’s do laps with Tommy.”

Kyle went, casting ugly glares at Daryl.

Jennifer sighed. “I won’t quit. You have to teach me to be better than them if you don’t want to see me take a hit.”

“You’re not ready for this.”

“When will I be ready, Kyle?” Jennifer stomped to the empty side of the gym. “When my husband gives me permission?”

Kyle followed her. “It’s not like that!”

Marc lifted a brow at Angela.

Angela wiped away the blood and took her spot next to Daryl.

Marc sighed. “I don’t know how to get us over this one. None of the men want to hit women and it pisses us off when someone does.”

“We can’t just match women against women. Our enemies don’t fight that way.”

“I know. I just don’t know what to do about it.”

“I do, but you’re not going to like it.”

Marc rolled his eyes. “Yeah, that’ll be a first.”

Chuckles broke the tension.

Angela motioned all of her trainees forward. She’d been working with the females on this ship and before they set sail. These were the strongest so far. “We have to show them we can take a hit and get back up. If we don’t, they’ll never really accept us. It’s exactly what we discussed before everyone got sick.”

Jennifer ignored Kyle’s low plea, joining Angela and the others on the mat.

Men grumbled throughout the crowd.

“Button it!” Marc didn’t like it either, but he trusted Angela to get them over this hurdle.

Silence fell as nervous females joined Angela in a straight line.

Angela studied them, seeing weakness and also the desire to prove they were able to be Eagles. “*My* rookie sets, level one.”

Half the women grinned and assumed their positions. The other half frowned, realizing she wanted them to use the training lessons she’d given them, not Adrian’s. Their secret training was about to become public knowledge.

The few men who had viewed those lessons scowled, bracing for ugliness.

“Anyone can leave the mat, at any time.” Angela didn’t add more.

None of the girls left.

“Let’s get to it.” Angela took her place, sliding into the middle position. She looked at Marc. “We switch every forty-five seconds, with a repeat of level five after level six.”

Marc nodded, also bracing. He’d observed some of her private training in Neil’s mind. It was quick and hard.

Angela knelt. “One... Two!”

All seven women rolled to the right, then rolled to the left, hands mimicking holding their weapons.

Angela rose, leading them with two short lines flaring out on either side. She moved forward two steps, then spun around, gun hand up. She mimicked firing two shots, then rolled again to the right.

Her team waited for her to get two seconds in, then followed, one by one until they all ended back in the line they’d started.

“Level two.” Marc was trying to time it and still watch all of them and the crowd for problems.

Angela hefted her imaginary shield, missing the actual weight of the bags they’d trained with. Her arms still felt weak, like she didn’t have muscles there anymore. She used her gun and shield to shove an opponent away so she could shoot them. She spun around and repeated the motions in two more directions before her team followed her lead. This was how she’d trained them, making them repeat it after a single showing.

The newest members of her team, Francesca and Cathy, did the best they could to copy her. The senior teammates shoved and tugged to correct them, but no words were spoken. Angela had told them a team worked best without talking during the action, to adjust to working in silence.

“Level three.” Marc braced.

Angela began hitting them.

The women hit her back–all of them.

Angela was proud of her team when they didn’t pull punches. The men had to understand they were fighters too. She swallowed the blood from Molly’s hit and also from Kim’s, ducking and spinning out of the circle to get them from behind. She banged their heads together and spun again as Kendle and Allison reached for her.

Kim stayed down, moaning.

Molly rose on shaky legs, vision blurred. “I hate it when she does that!”

Angela didn’t have time to laugh with the men. The remaining women surrounded her, swinging brutally as medics helped Kim off the mat. Angela took three hits, but caught the fourth, shoving Kendle back by her fist. Angela swept, hard. Knees crumbled on two of the women.

Angela suffered two more hits while delivering two of her own, one with each fist.

Kendle hit the mat.

Allison landed on top of Kendle, moaning.

Angela fell, taken down by a leg sweep from the rear. She punched as she fell, hitting an ankle.

Molly dropped, grunting.

Angela smashed her fists into the squirming pile of females, hitting a chin and then a boob. It was impossible to aim with so many of them on the ground.

She kicked out behind her, getting Jennifer’s knee.

Jennifer fell backward, but she kicked as she landed, getting Angela in the chin.

Angela’s head snapped back. Pain went through her jaw as her teeth slapped together. Blood filled her mouth.

Kendle shoved free of the pile and dove over Angela. She stayed there, tensed, as blows rained, trying to reach Angela.

Everyone tensed, not sure if this was the moment where the fragile peace with Kendle snapped.

Kendle took the blows that were harder than the level required, hoping Marc would see it and stop hating her as much. He hadn’t spoken to her since her betrayal came out.

Angela recovered slower than she liked. She sucked in air as Kendle winced and grunted above her. “Now.”

Kendle rolled, freeing Angela to come up swinging. She got Allison in the neck with a sharp right and Molly with a rough left, while getting Jennifer in the thigh with her boot.

Kendle grabbed Angela’s offered hand and took her place by the boss as the other women ran or dove at them.

Hard swings stopped the rush as Angela and Kendle punched fast left and right, alternating in perfect tandem.

“Level four!” Marc got into the training. “As you can see, the female team is two levels above the rookie men already, in these lessons. Angela chose to fast track them so they could take your hits during coed training.” *I just didn’t believe it was possible. She knew. She’s proving all of us wrong.*

The blows were ugly now. The crowd wanted them to stop.

The female fighters didn’t. This outlet was needed. All of them had been worrying about training.

Angela ducked Cathy’s rush and lunged forward, wrapping her up in a sleeper hold.

Cathy immediately tapped out.

Angela let go and rolled, missing Allison’s foot, but not her knee as she dove forward.

Angela’s breath rushed out. Anger took its place, but there was no magic there to blast out, no demon to control. Angela was grateful. She slammed her head into Allison’s chin.

Blood splattered.

“Make them stop!”

Marc wasn’t sure who had yelled, Zack maybe, but he ignored them. “Level five!”

Allison limped to the edge of the mat, dripping blood.

Morgan was there to meet her, medical bag open. He was very familiar with this type of care. His only complaint was Angela’s hand code order not to use magic.

Angela and Kendle pushed hip to hip, balancing off each other as they both delivered sidekicks to stomachs.

Marc almost understood her choice to spare Kendle now. *She’s showing us we can fight alongside people we loathe.*

Molly tapped out as she hit the mat, gasping for air.

Jennifer ducked the swings that came with the kicks, nailing both women in the knees.

Angela went down. She fell into Kendle and used the island woman’s braced leg to climb up and punch Jennifer in the mouth.

Blood flew across the mat.

Jennifer stood up, orbs glowing red.

“Stop it!” Quinn shoved over to Marc. “Call it off! She’ll be hurt!”

Marc grabbed Quinn’s arm and swung him onto the mat.

Angela and the other women attacked.

Men winced at the beating Quinn took, even from Kendle, who he’d been trying to protect. The three remaining women kicked, punched, and stomped until Marc made the call.

“Level six!”

Morgan and Harry dragged Quinn from the mat as the three women stood and rolled, almost in tandem. Allison and Molly, still breathing rough, returned to the mat, lining up and wiping away more blood.

They all rolled again, bringing up gun hands that fired headshots while their other hands drew knives that stabbed into imaginary chests. They stomped forward, layered in sweat, blood, and triumph. It was beautiful to the Eagles. They clapped and whistled.

Quinn missed it as he puked into the waste can in the corner while the distracted medics tried to bandage his arm.

Marc saw camp members and hall guards come into the gym, worried and grumbling. He decided to let them stay. They needed to have faith in all of their defenders, not just the men. “Level five!”

The women heaved in air and resumed the formation for the previous level. Angela stayed in the center, taking the most hits, protecting Allison this time as the other fighters attacked.

“What are they doing!”

“Stop that!”

Camp members ran to the mat and were restrained by everyone gathered there.

The females in the center didn’t notice as they swung, ducked, grunted.

“Level seven!” Marc hadn’t viewed this level before. He didn’t know what to expect as the women stopped and lined up. They’d already exceeded the limit of pain required to be an Eagle as far as he was concerned.

Francesca and Cathy pulled away from the medics and rejoined their team. So did Kim.

Angela stepped forward, leading them like she had in their quiet training sessions. “9mm!”

The women brought the weapons into their personal area–the workspace–while hitting the magazine release button. They all remembered to keep their index fingers across the front to provide guidance to the mag well.

The Eagles in the crowd clapped.

“.20 gauge shotgun!”

Kendle ignored everything except her training. She brought the stock under her armpit for support, while turning it upside down so the loading port on the bottom faced up. She grabbed four shells from the rear of her belt in a claw grip, trying to keep the front two as even as possible. She slid them into the port, then repeated to load the last two shells. She hit the bolt release and let it go, bringing the gun up to fire.

“A peacemaker .45!”

Allison put it on halfcocked so the cylinder would spin freely. She laid it in her hand, opened the loading gate and pushed the spring loaded rod to eject the empty casing. She put in a new round and repeated that four more times. Marc had taught them to leave the hammer down on one empty chamber because Peacemakers didn’t have a safety and the hammer took a lot of hits in a real battle.

Camp members calmed, understanding it was a demonstration and not an actual battle.

“M-4 rifle!”

All of them got it right despite having to remember the beer can grip and tug after seating the magazine to make sure there wasn’t a failure to feed.

“MK32!”

The girls drew chuckles as they acted like the imaginary grenade launchers were almost too heavy for them to lift, crank open, and reload with the large shells.

Angela struggled to remember what came next, almost out of energy. It had been a very long five minutes.

“...level eight!”

Kenn ran onto the mat, firing a paintball gun.

Angela ducked into a ball as her team surrounded her with their bodies.

Kenn tossed the other gun onto the mat by their feet.

Francesca and Allison decided they’d only been trimmed and lunged for the weapon.

Allison came up with it. She fired at Kenn, who deftly moved aside.

The pink paintball hit Quinn in the leg as he leaned over the waste can. “Hey! I’m puking here!”

The crowd dissolved in laughter.

The team on the mat rolled to keep Angela covered as Kenn stepped to the side, gun lifting.

Francesca fired again, hitting the mat by Kenn’s feet.

Kendle growled. “Switch!”

Francesca tossed the gun to Kendle, who immediately fired.

Angela couldn’t see, but she knew it was a miss by the moan of the crowd. “Watch that crossfire, ladies!”

Marc grinned. *She sounds like Kenn did yesterday working with Gus and Ivan. Same words even.*

Kenn ran forward in a head-on assault, firing at their legs.

Women panicked and jumped aside, leaving Angela open.

Most of those observing expected her to be hit or bring up her shield.

Angela rolled backwards and gained her feet as paint splattered where she’d been. She waited until he fired again, judging as she dropped to the mat.

Kenn did the same as Kendle fired at him.

Stray paintballs smacked into the wall and the crowd.

Kenn fired at Angela as she ran toward him. She threw herself into the air, taking one hit in the knee. She landed on Kenn’s arm; her legs went around his, tripping him.

Kenn fell forward, grunting in surprise. He hadn’t expected her to get this close.

“Gun!”

Kendle tossed the paintball gun.

Angela caught it and fired into Kenn’s upper shoulder, twice. She held it to his heart.

“Level nine!” Marc waited, impressed by what she’d been able to do with the females. It was obvious the women had still been training, even during their rough times.

Angela grunted as she helped Kenn up. “Thank you. It was fun.”

Kenn laughed. “Yep.” He went to the empty place next to Marc to enjoy the rest of the show.

Angela pointed at Neil. “Every ten seconds.”

Neil winced. “Not as worn out as you all are now. Please. It’ll ruin the great mood you’ve built.”

Angela took her place in line. “No contact, every ten seconds.”

Neil was pacified that she’d chosen no contact. In their conditions, someone might get a real injury or even die. The highest levels were ugly. “One.”

The girls began the kai levels in normal speed, alternating sweeping to the left and right as their arms punched out in the two opposite directions. It would have delivered four fast hits to dual opponents.

Men in the crowd began to glare at Neil. It was obvious who had shown them these moves.

“Two.” Neil studied the hard air kicks from the same leg. Three chest hits in rapid succession, followed by a solid punch, could take the breath out of almost anyone, no matter their size–especially if it was in the same place every time. Landing in a crouch and taking a deep breath was preparation for the next call. “Three.”

Wide, swinging uppercuts came next, while advancing with pat steps that give them more force. Eight of those alternated, with knees to the stomach and groin. “Four!” Neil got excited as they switched to the more complicated level.

Angela punched left, leaned over and kicked backward, then repeated it twice more. Her body screamed, but her mind and heart cried out for more.

“Five!”

They punched left this time and kicked forward, repeating it three times. Their limbs were an unsynchronized blur, but Neil was still proud of them. *They’ve practiced!*

The women dropped to the mat, kicking and punching; they rolled again, gaining their feet. They fell into the first kai stance. “Hu-ya!”

“Six.” Neil wasn’t sure they could go much higher. Only half the women on the mat with Angela knew the next level.

The women ran forward, kicking high for chins. They let the momentum carry them, coming down swinging.

“Pause.” Neil lifted a brow at Angela

Angela leaned on her knees, gasping in air as the women around her did the same. “You know...what I need. Look at their faces... Make the call.”

Marc swept the women.

Neil and the Eagles scanned each other.

Every man there who understood nodded.

Neil was proud for them. “We recognize your equality as Eagles. As of this minute, there will be no more babying or special treatment.”

“Thank you. We will honor what we’ve earned.” Angela’s voice hardened. “Team meeting in the pool room, fifteen minutes.” She limped off the mat. “That’s for everyone.”

# Chapter Nineteen

**We Never Miss**

**1**

**A**ngela lowered herself into the cool water and kept going, walking and bobbing on the bottom until her lungs forced her to come up for air. Her body soaked in the water like a sponge.

She broke the surface and forced her limbs to keep her afloat as she twisted around to see where she’d ended up. She swam to the nearest side and held on with only her nose above the gently lapping water.

The other bruised, hurting women joined her in the pool, following her lead of dropping pants and ripped shirts to enter in bra and panties.

Allison was glad she’d chosen to wear panties today. She moaned as the water covered her. “Yeah, baby.”

Men chuckled. So did the other women. Those who hadn’t battled sat in the chairs or on the floor; some lounged against the wall, but none of them stared in lust. The looks were all respect for the beating every female had taken in that lesson. They were dotted in ugly welts and bruises, blood, and scrapes like claw marks. It was clear the girls hadn’t pulled any of their punches.

Angela motioned toward the men and women letting them have the pool. “We prefer to share.”

A few people got up and dove in or used the stairs, but all of them avoided the bruised women, giving them the respect that was usually reserved for the male teams.

Angela shoved herself up onto the side of the pool, leaving her legs in the water.

People glanced away from her mostly naked body–not because it wasn’t right to stare but because her scars and injuries were hard to view. She’d been shot, stabbed, beaten, sliced, restrained. Her body showed every encounter she’d handled to keep them alive. Tension faded into confidence. She was always ready to die for them. She had come from a terrified woman and worked her way through every area of camp life.

Angela admired her army. The room was overflowing with the ability to kill. “Let’s have an oral lesson.”

People smiled, nodding; they got comfortable.

Marc took the opposite wall so he and Angela both had a view of the door at each end of the room.

“What did you learn from our demonstration? Just call it out and I’ll verify or deny.”

Trent had been thinking about that. “Never underestimate someone based on size or gender.”

“Good. Who else?”

Gabe had also been expecting a lesson. “You’ve all been practicing and getting together when no one saw you. By the way, how is that possible? Some of you have been under heavy guard for months.”

Angela chuckled with the other snickering women. “Should we tell them?”

Jennifer shook her head. “How can we keep doing it if we tell them our secret?” She splashed water toward Kyle, who was sitting in a chair a few feet away. “Just kidding. I vote yes.”

“So do I.”

“Me too.”

All the girls agreed. They waited for Angela to reveal it, not entirely sure how the men would react.

“Obviously, we practice a lot alone. At night, we always have empty areas that weren’t heavily guarded. We took advantage of that and practiced sneaking in and out for the double benefit we’ve been trained to take when we can.” Angela paused, hoping it would go well. “The rest of the time, we’ve been using our shields on each other or blending in. We hid in curtains, behind bleachers, in closets while you showered, in crates while you came through on patrols. Basically, we were never where we told you we were going to be. And yes, a few of the senior men either knew or suspected. They chose not to tell our mates, our family, our kids.”

Silence had fallen through the pool room. Everyone scanned for ugliness coming, fully expecting trouble from people like Marc, who’d thought everything was covered.

Angela didn’t meet Marc’s surprised, angry eyes. She didn’t have to look to know he was pissed. “We also had help from the kids. They needed the practice and the energy release. They’ve gotten very good at using their shields to camouflage us.”

Kyle cleared his throat. “Well, we just learned something else from the lesson.”

Weak chuckles floated over the lapping water.

“What else?” Angela tried to keep it moving.

Kenn also tried to help. “Girls are mean!”

Laughter soothed some more of the tension.

Neil finished it off. “We learned it’s not good to be in the crossfire.”

Even Marc sniggered, scanning Quinn and Ralph, who had been hit with paintballs. Marc sucked up his fading anger and did his job. “Neil and Jeff did an excellent job with the kai classes.”

Angela nodded. “Jeff has agreed to be our second camp kai instructor. He doesn’t need to be an Eagle for that.”

People clapped, including Neil, who was being worn thin again with classes, guard duty, and making amends.

“It was sloppy. Even though we practiced, a lot, we’re rusty.” Jennifer didn’t like being anything but perfect.

All the females nodded.

“Agreed. That will get better now that we aren’t hiding anymore. When we make mistakes, the men will correct them so we don’t have to learn it the hard way.” Angela stood, taking the towel Ivan offered. “What else?”

“Teamwork saved you.” Tommy couldn’t help trying to get people to see that she had good points too. “If Kendle hadn’t covered you after the chin hit, you would have lost.”

“Yes. It doesn’t matter to us if we like you, love you, or hate your guts; we’ll always protect a fallen teammate. It’s how we’ve trained. What else?”

“Never interrupt a lesson.” Kendle glared at Quinn as everyone else snickered.

Quinn got up and left the pool room.

“What else?” Angela was waiting for someone smarter than the others to get the main point of her lesson, but she didn’t think about it so the descendants wouldn’t have an advantage.

“You were outnumbered...” Ivan paused, working it aloud like she and Marc had been forcing him to improve upon. Communication in a leader was essential.

Angela rooted for him, sure he could get it.

“But the odds can’t beat great training! Even outnumbered, it is possible to win.” Ivan smiled at her, thrilled by how she worked his mind too.

Angela wrapped the towel around her now that she’d dried most of her hair. “That’s the main lesson here–not female equality. Many of you have worried about the number of opponents we’ll be facing, or about the fact that there will be other descendants. I need you to understand none of that matters. Even outnumbered, we will win. I’ve seen it. So has Jennifer. After what you’ve watched from us tonight, you now know we have a shot.” She grinned coldly. “When it comes to dealing out death, Safe Haven only needs one chance. We never miss.”

Angela motioned to Morgan. “Show everyone your newest evolution.”

Morgan flushed as he stood, not comfortable yet with public displays. He put a hand on Kim’s arm, and the other on Kendle’s foot. She was floating next to them.

Blue light swarmed the women, healing their injuries simultaneously.

Witnesses clapped.

Kendle went under, sputtering. She hadn’t been listening.

Everyone laughed.

Morgan shot another stream at the nearest woman.

Francesca smiled at him as her aching injuries faded, vanished. “Thanks.”

Morgan grinned.

Pam cleared her throat. She was in a chair next to Kyle.

Francesca swam away from Morgan.

Morgan frowned at Pam.

Pam shrugged. “What? She’s on the hunt and you’re already on my wall.”

More laughter floated over the gentle waves.

“Next two, see the medic.”

Morgan stayed still, conserving energy as Angela had him heal all the women.

“Clearly, I’m also working our healers.” Angela smiled as he handled her injuries without touching her ankle as she walked by. He still had to be close, but it was another layer of progress. “Very nice.”

Morgan stared.

Marc cleared his throat. “That one’s on *my* wall.”

Angela laughed with the others, going to where Marc stood in the doorway. “Your turn. Tell them what I want after the pool party ends.”

Marc concentrated, connecting fifty minds at the same time. *Boss says hot chocolate and cookies in the mess.*

People cheered.

Marc followed Angela from the area, motioning to Kenn to keep things under control. Half-naked men and women in a pool together wasn’t always a good idea.

Angela led the way to their stateroom to get clean clothes. She listened as they walked.

“Are you okay?” Marc sensed she was stewing on something.

“I think so.” She sighed. “The clock in my mind started ticking while I was in the pool.”

Marc grimaced. “It’s only been a couple weeks. We’re not ready for more craziness.”

“I know.”

Marc held the door for her, spotting Dog waiting in the next hallway through the window. “Why am I not picking it up?”

“I think it’s coming from a level you can’t access yet.”

“The other King?”

Angela shrugged. “Might be the higher realm. Might not be either. I don’t know.”

Marc swept their cabin, then held the door for her.

Dog sat outside as their personal guards settled into the shadows.

Angela sighed, face hardening. “It’s Conner. He doesn’t know I’m locked, and he doesn’t trust you. He’s screaming for me.”

“What’s happening?”

“He just realized he really is being handed over to the UN at the detention center. The kill team is three days out.”

“They made great time.” Marc frowned. “I should go make sure his dad doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Angela yawned. “I’ll meet you in the mess for that hot chocolate.”

Marc waited until she was settled, then left the room. He took Dog along. Ivan had duty over Angela right now, along with Kyle. Even she wouldn’t get by both of them.

**2**

“Can we talk?”

Adrian glanced up from his blank notebook page. “About what?”

Sadie shrugged. “Don’t care. Just bored again.”

Adrian considered.

Sadie asked questions she’d been stewing on. “Why are Mitchels wanted so bad?”

Adrian stared at her. “You were sent after me without knowing why?”

She shrugged. “It was a job. I couldn’t refuse.”

“What do you know about me?”

“Not much. I heard you’re the only one who can call our kind together.”

Adrian grunted. “True, as far as we know.”

“I also heard you can’t be taken in a fight unless it’s by our kind.”

“Not true. Anyone can be caught off guard.” Adrian swallowed the anger. “Like Marc did to get me off the ship. No magic needed.”

“How did he trick you?”

Adrian sighed. “I thought we were making peace, that we were almost friends.”

“Descendants don’t have friends.”

“Not true.”

“You have friends?”

“Yes. Many of the individuals on that ship still believe in me.”

“So why don’t they help you?”

Adrian was forced to admit the truth. “They are. This is a punishment. If I suck it up and tough it out, I may be forgiven at some point and let back in.”

“Not if Marc has his way. I saw his face. He hates you.”

“True.”

Sadie rubbed her stomach. “Food soon?”

Adrian pointed at the snacks he’d gathered and placed on the small table. “Pick two. We’ll eat a full meal later.”

Sadie rushed to the table and grabbed the two protein bars.

Adrian understood the choice. They were thick, dense. It felt like more food. “Drink water with those or you won’t shit for a week.”

Sadie did, dropping crumbs all over her dirty shirt.

“Tomorrow, we’ll hook up a shower of some kind.”

Sadie paused in chewing. “Do I stink?”

Adrian nodded. “So do I. We’ll handle it together.”

Sadie’s face darkened. “Okay...”

“Not like that. I meant we’ll build it together. We’ll bathe alone.”

“Oh.”

Adrian hid a smile at her slightly disappointed tone. “Tell me about the detention center.”

Sadie froze, mind going blank.

“That’s what I thought.”

She slowly recovered, shaking away the haze. “What?”

“You’ve been told not to give information, right?”

She paled. “There were rules to follow. I did.”

“So anything is off limits? Like do you all sleep in one room or have your own?”

Sadie’s face slowly relaxed. “That’s okay. Just…”

Adrian watched her face go blank again. It was almost like she’d been hypnotized to forget everything if she thought of the triggers. “Sadie?”

She didn’t respond.

*Okay, that won’t work*. “Let’s talk about the room you slept in.”

Sadie smiled brightly. “The walls were yellow. I liked it.”

“Because it looked like the sun?”

“Yes.” Her face shuddered again as she forced out words. “I didn’t see the sun for a long time.”

“Me either. I was underground.”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I worked for them. Your boss is my old boss.”

“Oh.” She stared, mind clicking in loud thumps. “That’s why Marc hates you?”

Adrian grunted. “Among other things.”

“We were told not to talk to you because you have a charm gift.” She frowned deeper, shoving the other protein bar into her pocket. “But that’s locked now, right?”

He nodded, not responding to the guilt. The charm was a part of him. It couldn’t be locked up.

“Good. Then I’ll know it’s real.”

Adrian’s brow went up. “What’s real?”

“The bond we’ll have after this trip is over. I don’t want it if you don’t mean it.”

“Who said we’ll bond? We’re enemies.”

She shrugged. “It’s what happens when people are alone.”

“True. And sometimes, they end up hating each other.”

“Yeah.” She sighed, sinking onto the dusty couch. “Why did you betray your people?”

“A woman.”

“Ah.” Her face blanked out again.

Adrian waited for her to recover this time, curious how long she would stay like that.

Sadie shut her lids and lay down on the couch. She went to sleep.

Adrian snickered. *Just when I think I’ve got her pegged.* He went back to his stories and recording, but he was very aware of the sleeping girl in the room. If he could get that bond with her, the one she clearly wanted but wouldn’t ask for, he could force Marc’s hand. *Then I’ll trade her for Conner.*

Sadie pretended to sleep, but her mind went right to her gifts. She wanted them back; the lock could be forced. She just didn’t know how yet. *I’ll keep working on it. And when I get them back, I might kill the Mitchel and claim the reward. If the UN won’t pay me for that, I bet Marc will.*

*Dad?*

Adrian froze. Conner’s frantic voice in his mind was unexpected.

*Are you there?*

*Yes.*

*He’s really giving me to the UN! I can’t go back into the labs. I need help!*

Adrian hated the crushing fear. *Calm down. Tell me where you are.*

An angry blare of static energy flew through the room, blocking the connection. Jennifer’s fury washed over Adrian, stinging him. *You are about to break a rule. Do you wish to proceed?*

Sadie cringed into the couch and buried herself under the dusty cushions.

Adrian’s own anger rushed out. *That’s my son! You have no right to do this!*

Jennifer opened a line to all three of them. *The next time you communicate without permission, I’ll set fire to Adrian’s ship and send pictures of it sinking.*

*You can’t do that! He didn’t do anything wrong!*

Jennifer’s tone was harsh. *I mean it, kid. If you love him, don’t do this again.*

*Angela! Angela!* Conner tried to get help from the only other place he thought it might come from.

Jennifer laughed. *Yell all you want kid. She can’t hear you.*

The line went dead.

Adrian growled. *Marc! I know you can hear me, you bastard. Answer me!*

Marc laughed.

Adrian let his rage loose. *If you turn Conner over, there will no longer be a bond that keeps me from doing ugly things. Save my kids or face the consequences.*

Marc’s rage flashed out, searing Adrian’s skin.

Adrian fell to the floor, groaning, but his anger only increased. *I mean it, Marc. You’ve targeted my children. I’ll do the same to yours.*

Sadie flew from the room, refusing to be stuck down here when Marc sank the ship.

Marc had been waiting for this moment. *I’m telling Angela you said that. It should sever the last of your bonds since my kids are also her kids.*

*No!*

Marc cut the line between them, enjoying the moment. He listened to Adrian’s begging, gratified that the defiant tone was now gone. Using that bond with Angela would keep Adrian in line until they reached the detention center, but Marc knew all bets would be off at that point.

*Angela! Angela!* Adrian screamed for her, but there was no answer.

On the Adrianna, Angela stopped sipping her chocolate, turning toward Marc as he came back into the hall. “Everything okay?”

Marc relaxed his body language. “Just handing out an ultimatum to keep our guests under control.”

Marc was proud of her when she accepted that without asking questions. She was strong enough to cut ties with Adrian for the good of everyone else. Adrian couldn’t say the same. Angela would always be Adrian’s weakness now. Marc intended to use it every chance he got.

“What details did Trinity get from Kendle?” Marc hadn’t wanted to ask before now so she wouldn’t think he cared about Kendle, but it was important. He’d also tried to give her time to make more plans for it.

“Pirates took over the island. They released a biological weapon that caused the rage sickness. She and Luke escaped, but he was infected.”

“So he did die at the site of the plane crash?”

Angela nodded. “When the women couldn’t save him, Kendle sent them away and put him out of his misery. She was thinking about blowing her brains out when you found her.”

Marc kept his thought to himself and changed the subject. “What about the rest of our revelations?”

Angela chuckled. “Are you asking me for an update?” It had been days. She was impressed that he hadn’t asked sooner, though she assumed he’d filed each one mentally as they were revealed.

Marc snorted. “Yes.”

Angela got her notebook out. “Our new residents are Bernice and Crissy. Pirates took over their town. They hid in a refuse pile near the dock and fell asleep. When they woke up, they were at sea. Both females will fully recover, though the mother will take longer. She hadn’t eaten in almost a week. She gave everything to her daughter. Bottles of water were shared. They’re terrified of magic. Ivan put them in the camp area, with a guard who’s a descendant. She’ll need to adjust, but the little girl won’t be a problem. I put her with Kimmie.”

Marc chuckled. “Is she still mad about Jeff and Francesca?”

“Yes, though Jeff still isn’t interested.” Angela flipped the page. “Zack is a descendant. I told him to keep it quiet for now. Molly and Monica seem to be in remission. The recharge didn’t affect Pam.”

Marc sighed. He didn’t have faith in the food therapy either, but he also didn’t know what would help.

“Everyone has had a grief session. Tim says it helped some of them. We’ll schedule another when it gets bad.”

Marc approved, but like with the cancer treatment, he didn’t think it would work. You couldn’t take sadness away. It had to fade on its own.

“All unborn babies are fine as far as we can tell, even Courtney’s. Kenn has been verified as the father.”

Marc grunted. “We all knew.”

“Yes. Gus broke up with Trinity. He’s not in my breeding tree now. Neither is Jeff, Ivan, Morgan, Shawn, or Tommy. We’ll need to change that.”

Marc still wasn’t sure if he agreed with how that was happening. He understood the issue, but he preferred to let nature take its course. Again, he kept his thoughts to himself. It was a lot easier now that Angela was locked.

Their guard frowned. Neil didn’t like Marc keeping things from Angela. He wanted Marc in charge, but only with Angela at his side. If he kept things from her, it would endanger the entire ship

Marc frowned at Neil.

Neil stared, daring him to bring it up. *I’ll tell her everything and she’ll take back over now.*

Marc was forced to let it go.

Angela felt the tension. She chose to ignore it. “We have Candy now working on two weddings. Charlie and Ralph decided a double was a good idea.”

“Any other takers?”

“No, though Ray is considering asking Grant to marry him. He’s scared of public reaction.”

“Should he be?”

“No. In fact, people would be happy for them.”

“Good. Next?”

Angela swallowed the urge to glare at his tone. Giving up leadership wasn’t as easy as she was pretending. “All the children were cleared. We removed the memories from before they came here, but none of their gifts.”

“How is that going?”

“Well, so far. They almost seem like happy kids.”

“Good.”

“The daily lessons between Wade and the scared females are gaining followers. All my team wants to join them.”

“Granted. And great.”

“Last thing I have: Jennifer is pregnant. I pulled them both from the run.”

Marc didn’t tell her that Morgan had informed him two weeks ago. “Kyle told me last night. We talked to Cody and searched his mind. He couldn’t give me a starting point. I was going to stop it anyway.”

She looked over at him. “So you can go yourself?”

He nodded tensely, expecting an argument.

Angela shrugged. “Once we reach the island and clear it, that might be possible.” Angela brought up a mind of spiders as she mentally assigned herself to that run. It would let her leave without it being abandonment.

Marc didn’t like how easy she’d agreed, but he didn’t dig into her thoughts to find out if she was hiding anything. *Trust matters.*

Neil snorted as he went by them to clear the hall.

Marc’s frown grew.

Angela conjured more spiders and pretended to be absorbed in the sight of the ocean through a nearby window. If Marc knew what was coming, he would do anything to stop it, even endanger her herd. *And I’ll never allow that. I love Marc, but Safe Haven means more than our love. I’ll give up anything to protect them, including my family.*

# Chapter Twenty

**Personal Issues**

**1**

***“S****hift change has now ended. Anyone caught outside their area will be harshly disciplined. Shift change is now over.”*

Joel didn’t look up as the door opened. He did silence the computer.

Jordi joined Joel at the little table, hands full of paperwork for the shift updates. He was fully healed now, but no longer allowed around Cate Brady.

Joel still wondered why she hadn’t killed Jordi. Cate couldn’t have friends unless they were preapproved. It was hard enough to corrupt a descendant without giving them someone to talk to about it. *What do I have to do to get her on my side?!*

“The woman was alive in her cubicle. She was transferred to our jail to await execution.” Valerie had been ordered to kill Cate, but she hadn’t been able to follow through because she liked children. It had really been a temptation to get Cate to kill in self-defense, but that too had failed. Now, they were threatening the other kids in the detention center. That tactic had always worked in the past. “She’s cooperating, but still only causing injuries.”

Joel resumed his cool, quiet confidence. “That will change when her family arrives. She’ll understand they abandoned her, and she’ll fight for us.”

Jordi sensed his cousin was in the mood to talk; he took advantage of the rare moment. “Where did they get her?”

Joel allowed the questions and gave honest answers. “Her mother was taken by the US government when she went in to deliver. They’d been watching her because of incidents with the fetus during gestation. The second child was a surprise. Rebel descendants rescued her shortly after the birth, but they could only get the girl out with her. They cared for Julia and Cate until just before the war.”

Jordi was shocked. “And let them go?”

“Julia was adamant about getting to her other child. She was making too many waves. She traded the girl for the boy. The scientists erased her memory, and that of her son, then sent them out.”

“Why? He’s a descendant, according to the files.”

“One without power. At the time, we didn’t understand the twin connection.”

Jordi frowned. “I still don’t.”

“Twins are born with one child’s gifts locked. When they reach puberty, both of them will evolve, with gifts. It’s a bit unpredictable.”

“Can they unlock early?”

“Yes, through traumas or permission from an alpha. The labs tried to force that a few times. It works, but the child is immediately corrupted. It’s safer to let them evolve on their own. After the war, Julia fled to Safe Haven. Her whereabouts at this moment are unknown.”

“Do you think she’s still with them?”

Joel frowned. “No. I think she died in their mountain. Our spies have no images of her after that.”

In the small cubicle, Joey listened to the meeting from his cot, teddy bear clutched tight. He was supposed to be sleeping right now, but the sound of the door opening and the shift change computer had jarred him back into alertness. *I was born in the labs too.* He’d been brought here with the other kids that had been gathered by the UN. He’d met his father when Joel took over this detention center.

Jordi went on with his updates. “The trap team missed Laura Shalet in Mexico, but they found Tobias Dormer and his two wives. All three of them are heavily sedated. We believe they were on their way to join Safe Haven when captured.”

Joel shrugged. “After twenty years on the run, I would imagine any safety looks good. Perhaps they can be swayed to our side.”

“Maybe. But his wives are normal.”

Joel frowned. “Well, we can’t have that.” He gestured for Jordi to continue.

Jordi scanned the notes. “Another ship came in from Europe overnight.”

Joel’s brow lifted. “Update from that zone?”

Jordi read it directly from the file. “We are in control of 80% of the population. All infrastructure and businesses are operating under UN orders. We’ve had two large riots, but they were brought under control with only thirty-eight deaths. The enforcers in Europe are more careful than those we have here.”

“Our forces are not meant to protect lives.” Joel frowned. “Do they still believe the United Nations is in control?”

“Yes.” Jordi sneered. “They’ll find out descendants have taken over as soon as the extermination of the normals commences. That’s not for another month in the eastern zones.”

Joel’s frown grew. “Why so long?”

“They don’t have all the missing UN leaders accounted for yet. Our people on that side of the pond are waiting until they do. The normals still have more numbers than we can control in some places.”

“Yes, they always drag their feet and let someone else assume that first risk.” Joel sighed. “After we finish here, perhaps we will return to England and remind them all who the real power is.”

Jordi didn’t say they were lacking enough fighters for a move like that. When Joel wanted something, he got it. “The ship matching the callsign of our missing boat from the shore fight with Safe Haven is a day out. They’ve called in twice now asking for a reward.”

“A reward for what?”

Jordi gestured. “They swear they have a Mitchel on board. Conner.”

Joel immediately sent out his gift to find the ship. “Play the call.”

Jordi hit buttons on the table console; the computer crackled. *“This is UN ship 1086, calling the international detention center. We are on our way in with a hostage. Please advise on the reward for Conner Mitchel.”*

Joel found the ship easily enough, registering five warm bodies on board. Only one of them glowed. “Scavengers who got lucky to find him there.” Joel immediately dismissed the normal men. He brought his site back. “Send out our greeting party when the ship arrives.”

“What do you want me to do with the men?” Jordi already knew Conner was the only important person on that boat.

Joel considered. “We’re low on normals for training and servant positions. Give them a job and a reward for bringing him in.”

“I got the impression they want to drop him off and leave.”

“That will not be allowed. I want that ship in our fleet, and we can’t let people know our location.”

Jordi snorted. “Our location is not a secret.”

“True, but no one leaves here without my permission and I haven’t given it. If they insist, kill them.”

Jordi got up and left, able to sense Joel’s weakening control over his anger. Cate Brady was still refusing to kill and become corrupt; it was pissing him off.

Joel leaned his chair back and shut his eyes. He was doing a lot more searching than he was used to. *I’m tired. I’ll rest now.*

Joey waited until his father was snoring softly, then he snuck out of the small den. He didn’t have to sneak through the halls, however. He was able to go anywhere he wanted to without fear. The guards were terrified of his father. Joey had no gifts presenting yet, though the whispers in his mind were coming more often. He wasn’t a threat; his father was.

The guards he passed made a note of it and went about their business. He was right. No one wanted to challenge Joel over anything, let alone something as unimportant as his son having an adventure.

Joey walked straight to the jail and entered. The one powerful guard nodded to him and then went back to observing the monitors. Alexander was old compared to everyone else here, though he barely looked sixty-four. His gifts kept him young, but he was limited. As a beta, he was far down the chain in this hierarchy. Alexander didn’t care. *I’m not here for a place in Joel’s army. I have my own goal.*

Joey stopped in front of the only cell without a window in the door. He tapped on it. “Are you awake?”

Cate slapped the door. “What do you want?!”

Joey wasn’t sure what to say. Everything was recorded in this complex and he didn’t want to get in trouble with his father. He stood there, trying to think of something safe to say.

Cate’s gifts rushed over him and then shoved into his mind, exploring the locked doors in his mental halls as well as his loyalty to his father while she confirmed who he was. She knew he wasn’t supposed to be here. She immediately liked the boy for breaking his father’s rules.

Alexander frowned, observing the forbidden communication. *Joel won’t be happy.* The man made a mental note to pawn off the job of telling him to someone else, then went back to studying the monitors. New cadets had come in overnight. He was always assigned here alone when rookies were brought in. Joel didn’t want his alpha pull turning the guards.

The five firewalkers were thin, starving. They wouldn’t be much help until they recovered. Everyone here was on rations, so that would be a while. The other three descendants were in better shape. Enforcers always got the best food and gear. They were more valuable than the rest.

The console beeped. Alexander opened the message from Jordi.

*Welcome duty in two hours.*

Alexander grimaced. They only used him for welcome duty when they had a person who needed convincing, or someone they wanted him to kill. He never knew which it was until he met them*. Ah, destiny. Why art thou such a heartless bitch?*

Joey turned toward him. Destiny was a huge question mark in his brain. He was still trying to understand it.

Alexander shrugged. “Personal issues.” He frowned at the boy with bright blue eyes under reddish blond curls. “Your father will be very upset with you.”

“I know.” Joey waited for the man to tell on him.

Alexander went back to studying the monitors. Joel had been very specific about dealing with his son. Only simple sentences were allowed. Anything else, like putting a hand on the boy for any reason, was a death sentence.

“He’s scared of your dad.” Cate wondered if she could cause them to fight. “He’s stronger. I can feel it.”

Joey snorted, voice filling with awe. “My dad is byzan. No one else on the planet is that strong.”

Cate leaned against the door, eyeing her totally empty cell. Even her tea set had been taken. “He has the special draw. Byzan don’t have it.”

Joey studied Alexander now, intrigued by the thought of anyone being able to stand up to his dad.

Cate immediately encouraged that tiny rebellion. “I bet Alexander would love you if you were his son.”

Alexander stiffened. *She’s too smart for this*. *Joel will never corrupt her.* “Cate.”

Cate tensed. “I’m sorry.”

“Good girl. Enjoy your forbidden visit and behave. I don’t want to hurt your little friends again.”

“I don’t have friends! I hate them all!” Power rushed out of her cell; it struck Alexander in the chest.

He slumped over onto the desk.

Joey gawked. “Is he dead?”

Cate snorted. “He’s sleeping. Never lasts long on his kind.”

“Oh. Okay.” Joey went to the desk and hit the button to open her cell.

Cate stayed inside. Despite her bravado, she couldn’t take it when they hurt the innocent kids being held here. She always gave in and did what they wanted. She watched Joey enter her cell.

Joey didn’t understand why the guards were so afraid of her. She seemed like any other child to him with her round face and bright blue eyes. Her hair had been cut off, but it was growing back in a wild way that made him want to touch it.

“You look like him.”

Joey smiled at her. “You don’t. Pretty.”

Cate didn’t know what to say in response. No one was nice to her here. She almost started to cry.

Joey hurried over and took her hand. “It’ll be okay.”

Cate shook her head, but she didn’t pull away. Human contact was foreign to her now. She barely remembered the mother who had sold her. “When I kill for them, the whole world will be in danger.”

Joey didn’t understand most of what was happening in this complex. “Why? The world is already dead.”

Her voice lowered to a whisper. “If I kill, then I evolve; they’ll make me do more things.”

Joey had been listening to his father’s conversations and putting pieces together. “Like make the war go away?”

Cate nodded. “And then they’ll take over that world without a fight. Back then, no one believed in magic. They didn’t know how to fight it. Your dad wants all the normals gone.”

Joey kept a hold of her hand. “Why don’t they want to keep things like this? My dad is in charge right now.”

“He’s not. One big group is still fighting.”

“Safe Haven.” Joey frowned. “My dad has ugly plans for them when they get here next week.”

“Safe Haven is coming?!” Her heart jumped. “They’re coming to rescue all of us. I knew my brother wouldn’t forget about me.”

Joey was sorry to disappoint her. “They’re not the heroes. They’re coming to kill all of us. That means you too.”

Cate screamed. Her loud shrieks brought guards who didn’t know how to handle it.

Joey hurried out of the cell. He ran straight back to his father’s den and shut himself inside the small room, shaking.

Joel flipped the switch to activate the knockout gas in Cate’s cell. He was more than satisfied. The guards could have told her, but she wouldn’t have believed it. Coming from an innocent boy, the blow had been much harder. *Now she’ll kill for me...or for my son. All I have to do is point at Safe Haven.*

**2**

Tobias Dormer and his wives observed the guards through the cell window. They’d been taking turns observing, but the screams had drawn them all to the door. The drugs had their gifts locked, but not their family bond. It lit up in silent communication.

*I felt a byzan.*

*There’s a lot of power here*

*We have to get out and warn people.*

*There’s no way out of here unless we kill. You know that.*

Tobias nodded. *But not you two. When the time comes, I’ll handle it.*

The trio watched the guards and the single monitor they could see from where they stood. The screen showed a little girl being gassed.

*Are they killing her?*

*I don’t think so.*

*She must be special.*

*She feels good. They haven’t been able to corrupt her yet.*

*Why are they bothering with children? They have enough power here to conquer this side of the world.*

*I don’t know. When we escape, maybe we’ll find out.*

*What about the others here?*

*If we can take over the command center, we’ll have access to the files. If they’re good, we’ll spare them.*

*Maybe Safe Haven will be here by then.*

Tobias moved back to the cot and sank down, knees and spine popping. *Our time will come then.*

*How can you be sure?*

*They’re twitchy. Something is going to happen soon. Keep watching. Find out why they’re scared.*

The women did as ordered. The trap team had captured them at bedtime, when they were tired from a day of pulling their needs from the land. The sleep spell had gotten all of them before they could retaliate. Then they’d been drugged.

Daniella rubbed her sore arm and glowered at the guards. *When we get out of here, you’ll pay for what you’ve done.*

Her sister shook her head, brown eyes almost glowing. *Let Toby handle it. You can’t kill or your gifts will unlock.*

Daniella knew her sister was right, but fury burned brightly in her heart. *I’ll try...*

Anna hugged her. She understood how hard it was to fight the temptation. If not for being rescued from the labs years ago, they would both be corrupt and working for these very individuals. The scientists believed they were normal. The girls had always known they were descendants, but they’d refused to accept their gifts. They’d chosen to remain Invisible.

Tobias was aware of the dilemma. He also wanted to remain good. He’d spent twenty years on the run to keep from being corrupted. He’d even refused to have children so they couldn’t be used against him. *But you’re pushing me. If you go much farther, I’ll let my evolution continue. And I’ll achieve it by slaughtering everyone in this complex.*

The older man tried to sleep, hoping the drugs wore off soon. He expected the boss here to come for them. When the torture started, he wanted to be ready to do battle. “Rest, girls.” It would take team work to survive and that couldn’t happen if they were too tired to fight.

**3**

“Why are you doing this?! I was supposed to be part of the team! I can fight!”

Greg ignored Conner’s shouts and pleas. He tied the boy up and hefted him over his shoulder.

“My dad will kill you for this!”

Greg put Conner in the chair in the bridge, then went to the console, where Shawn was monitoring the radar. “They’ve got us by now.”

“Yeah. We all felt the scan.” Shawn was glad Conner wasn’t using his gifts on them. That was the only thing that might sink the run. Angela had promised he wouldn’t because it would get him banished and force him to be away from Candy, but Shawn hadn’t been sure that would be enough.

“It was strong, like Angela.”

“Yeah. I’m not sure she planned on that.”

“The scan came from a byzan.” Conner struggled as Greg came back over with a gag. “No!”

Greg did it quickly, not liking the job, but he knew it was needed for the moment. Conner hadn’t decided which side he was on yet. “They’ll take you in, Conner.”

*What do I do then?!*

“Pick a side and follow through.” Greg used the syringe from his pocket.

Conner slid out of the chair as the drugs took effect.

“Are we all set?” Greg scanned his teammates.

They all nodded, but now that they were only an hour away, nerves were settling in.

“Let’s practice.”

All the men brought up a thick cloud wall at Greg’s order.

Greg began slapping and hitting them, and taking hits in return. The kai motions here were violent and well-studied. No one lost their wall.

Greg assumed that was why they’d been chosen. Using Neil’s clouds was genius. The detention center descendants wouldn’t know they were being infiltrated until it was too late*. Or until they threaten an innocent.* Greg sighed. *We have to avoid that situation as long as we can.*

“Won’t they read it in his thoughts when he wakes up?” Drew was more worried than he’d let on in front of Conner.

Greg shrugged. “Maybe.” Greg shoved a fresh mag into his gun and stored three more in his pockets. “Assuming they let us in at all.”

Drew smiled. “That’s why we have Conner.”

Greg shrugged. “Yes, but if they already have enough power, they might just sink us. Angela said that was a possibility.”

The men nodded. The fast meeting with her about it during the illness had revealed any number of things that could go wrong, but they’d still accepted the run.

*I guess we’re crazy*. Greg pulled on his coat, missing the Eagle jacket that had been left behind. *At least this is a worthy cause*. Crazy for nothing would have been staying on the Adrianna and hoping someone else could do this. Greg knew he was capable of it. He also trusted his teammates to hold up their end of the mission. It was Conner who worried him.

Angela thought the boy would give them all up, then change his mind at the last minute when it mattered the most. Greg was worried he wouldn’t come back from the dark side. Now that he’d felt the power from the person scanning their ship, Greg wasn’t sure about success in that area. *We may have pushed him too hard.*

Conner had been given all seven levels of Eagle lessons while they’d been out here, but he’d only responded to a few of them. He had joined the workouts because he was bored. *Please, Conner, prove you’re one of us. I don’t want to kill you*. Greg straightened and went to the front deck to repack the training gear. *But I will. Angela gave me that chore personally and what the boss wants from me, she gets.*

**4**

“It doesn’t look anything like I expected.”

Shawn grunted his agreement. He studied the single above water structure, searching for weaknesses. He didn’t find any place to hide a fleet of ships, but it was obvious from the radio calls that the UN had one.

Drew was very disappointed. “I thought it would be a floating city.”

Greg and Jonny ignored them in favor of collecting Conner. They’d sailed right up to the dry dock attached to the large, round bubble-like platform that stretched the length of their ship. No other boats, or people, were in sight.

“I guess we wait until they send up a doorman.”

The rest of the team chuckled nervously at Shawn’s joke. Their hearts were pounding; their fingers were ready to pull triggers. Everything depended on them being let in.

“We can hit that spot, but I don’t think it will do much.” Greg was now studying the entrance with Conner’s limp weight over his shoulder. He didn’t think the boy was still knocked out, however. “It’s an airlock. If it floods, they can lock it off and let it float away.”

“Won’t that trap everyone below?” Drew patted his pocket of mags for comfort.

Shawn shrugged. “I think underwater pods like that are detachable. The next one probably floats up.”

The kill team searched for weak spots while they waited.

“Should we call them again?” Jonny hated being out in the open.

“Something’s happening.” Shawn pointed toward a small ripple of bubbles near the front of the large pod. The ocean parted as it rose, sending out huge ripples of white capped waves that smacked into their ship and the dock.

As the pod began to rise, it revealed a small town of more pods and tunnels. Those didn’t rise far, but it did allow a door to come above the water line.

The door opened. Alexander waved as he emerged, glad he’d remembered to bring his sunglasses. Staying underwater wasn’t good for him. Neither was this job. He’d been knocked out by Cate’s sleep spell, then woken with chemicals by a sniggering medic. *I feel like shit. If these people aren’t needed, I’ll enjoy frying them.*

Still hanging over Greg’s shoulder, Conner tensed; he forced the gag out and sucked in a breath, fighting the drugs.

Greg immediately assumed it was something bad. “Tell me now, kid, or I’ll drop you overboard while you’re too hazy to swim.”

Conner didn’t care about the threat. He shuddered.

Greg narrowed in on the older man approaching the ramp that was lifting to connect with their ship. No guards were in sight; he was wearing a cocky smile. *Why does he seem so familiar?*

Conner formed words through the drug haze. “Because he’s a Mitchel.”

Alexander moved up the ramp. “Gentlemen.” He lifted his glasses and scanned their hostage. “If you’ll hand over my nephew, we’ll discuss business.”

Alexander wasn’t bulky or intimidating at all. He wore a fading UN uniform that held no weapons. His dark blond hair and blue eyes assessed them all ruthlessly as he approached. Greg retreated. “Pay us first.”

“There is no reward for Conner Mitchel, only Adrian.”

“Maybe not here.” Greg went back toward the bridge. “Guess we came to the wrong place.”

The rest of the team followed Greg, hands on their holsters.

“Wait.” Alexander scanned deeper, getting thick mental clouds. He frowned. “Those tricks won’t work here. Release your blocks and your captive.”

Shawn delivered a hard stare. “What do we get?”

“What do you want?”

Shawn gestured toward the open door of the pod. “Safety; food and water. Ammunition.”

Greg frowned at Shawn. “You weren’t supposed to tell them we’re low on ammo!” Greg spoke to Alexander. “We still have enough to kill you and your nephew.”

Alexander quickly tired of the negotiations. He waved a hand.

The sleep spell hit them all; Drew and Jonny dropped immediately.

Shawn yawned but stayed on his feet.

Greg stared back impassively.

Alexander grunted. *That’s a first.* “Give Conner to me. Then we’ll discuss payment or death for you and your friends.” He lifted his other hand. “You don’t want to know what this one does.”

Greg slowly put Conner on his feet, but he kept a hand on the quiet boy’s arm. “We need a job.”

Alexander scowled. “And you thought threatening me would get you that?”

Greg shrugged. “We were told you guys pay for descendants. Didn’t know he was family.”

“Fair enough.” Alexander stepped onto their ship. “What skills do you have?”

Shawn didn’t like it when the man walked right by him without any fear. *Damn Mitchels.*

Alexander chuckled without humor. “Like I haven’t heard that before.” He stopped in front of the pale teenager staring back with the same blue eyes. “Your father is Adrian. I can feel him on you.”

Conner wasn’t sure what to say. He hadn’t expected to find a relative here, only threats that would use him up.

“We’ll do that too.” Alexander scanned him. “While it’s happening, you’ll be fed and cared for. Sound okay?”

Conner drew in a breath. “If you kill them for me. I demand it for my capture!”

Alexander clucked. “Don’t be petty. They caught you; that’s *your* fault, not theirs.” Alexander waved toward the detention center. “Your unconscious men will stay here for now. The boss will decide if you can stay and what we’ll pay. But keep your weapons handy. This is not a safe place you’ve come to.” Alexander put a hand on Conner’s arm and led him toward the ramp. “Tell me about your father.”

“He’s with Safe Haven.” Conner spat into the rippling water. “He won’t leave them.”

“Interesting. I heard he’s chasing a skirt again.”

Conner sighed. “Isn’t he always?”

Alexander chuckled, mood improving. “Yes. It’s good to know he hasn’t changed.” Alexander pushed a button near the wet door to lower the ramp. “What can you tell me about Safe Haven?”

“A lot.” Conner glared over his shoulder at the following kill team.

Alexander directed him inside. “Don’t worry about them. After the reset, all normals will be removed. That includes them.”

The kill team didn’t ask questions or act angry about that information. They studied the complex as they went inside.

“Did you hit them with something?” Alexander wasn’t getting anything from their thoughts but clouds and wanting payment.

“I tried. I’m not sure it worked.” Conner fell into the role of victim. “They kept me weak on purpose and I was drugged a lot. I want them dead!”

“All in good time.” Alexander took them to a large intersection of tunnels. He hit a series of buttons on the wall keypad.

The pod began to sink.

Greg memorized that code in case they needed it later.

So did Shawn.

On the deck of their ship, Jonny subtly hit the control on his wrist alarm.

Below them, the bomb activated and began to countdown.

# Chapter Twenty-One

**Mind Games**

**1**

**“P**lease follow me.” Alexander moved off down the windowless tunnel without waiting for a response.

The wide reception area didn’t have a desk or a guard. There were only four cameras, one in each corner, near the ceiling. Greg and Shawn noted that, along with the lack of decorations. The plain white walls had a single blue stripe along the middle, but that was it. It said these people were dead serious.

Conner stayed on Alexander’s heels. *I’ve never had an uncle who was nice.*

“You still don’t.” Alexander held open the first door they came to, ignoring Conner’s frown. “In here.”

The kill team entered last, scanning for security.

“We don’t use many guards here.” Alexander hit a button on the console; the door shut and locked. “If you misbehave, you’ll be gassed. If the violation is bad enough, you won’t wake up.” Alexander gestured to the table.

Conner sat at the end; Greg and Shawn sat at the far corner, now scanning the vents above them. Like the reception hall, this room was devoid of unneeded furniture or decorations. It held this table, eight chairs, and the same four-camera set up as in the reception hall.

Alexander joined them at the table. He clasped his hands in front of him. “Well, here we are.”

Conner waited to be spoken to; he hadn’t forgotten his time in the labs.

Greg cleared his throat. “What happens to us now?”

“You’ll be transferred to a holding cell.” Alexander’s stare hardened. “First, you give information.”

Shawn grunted. “About what?”

“Where you got one of our ships, how you captured my nephew; everything you know about Safe Haven.” Alexander smiled coldly. “Just the basics.”

Shawn crossed his arms over his chest and shut his lids. “Wake me when it’s time to eat.”

Greg frowned at him, then turned back to Alexander. “Good help is still hard to find.”

“Yes.” Alexander opened a drawer under the table and took out a tablet. “Let’s start with the ship. How did you get it?”

“We traded up when we escaped from the Adrianna with our cargo.” Greg stretched, body sore. “It was dead in the water with a full load of fuel.”

“What happened to the crew, the captain?” Alexander typed in the answers, word for word.

“Safe Haven’s alpha ordered the kids to kill everyone.”

“And that would be Angela, Adrian, or Marc?”

“Angela.” Greg shuddered. “She’s evil.”

“I doubt that, or she’d already be here working for us.” Alexander typed in more notes. “And what of the angel who came to visit?”

Greg didn’t lie. “He was killed on the Adrianna.”

Alexander glanced up. “And the other one? Orin.”

“Also dead.” Greg shrugged. “Angela didn’t want the competition.”

Alexander typed some more. “We have ways of knowing if you lie.”

Greg grunted. “She said she tried to take over that realm. It didn’t work.”

That got Alexander’s attention since it was Joel’s plan too. “She tried to ascend?”

Greg sneered. “She took a nap on the deck. When she woke up, she told us all a good story.”

“I take it you don’t believe that’s possible.”

“`No. I also don’t believe they were angels. Everyone knows you descendants play mind games.”

Alexander resumed typing. “How did you get away?”

“They had an outbreak on board. Security was light.”

“And you took advantage. Perhaps you might be useful here.” Alexander glanced up at the small camera in the far corner.

There was no answer.

Alexander shrugged. “More information, please. Tell me about Safe Haven.”

“What do you want to know?”

“How many people; how many descendants and their levels.”

“Almost three hundred. The illness took a big chunk. About half are descendants. Most are betas or Invisibles.”

“But not leadership.” Alexander felt Joel’s interest and dug in. “Tell me about the council.”

Greg ran through them in his mind. “There are fifteen of them now. Angela is the strongest, but Marc’s gifts have grown since she stopped babying him.”

“Yes, we’d heard she was trying to keep her mate pure.” Alexander sneered. “She should have known that’s not possible for our kind.”

“I don’t know about that; she kept us apart.” Greg frowned, tone hardening. “She didn’t want her descendants to hurt the normals.”

“Again, not possible. Keep going.”

“She has an enforcer and several fire walkers.” Greg shrugged. “I think that’s what they’re called.”

“Any trackers or hunters?”

“Not that I know of. They have three alphas, at least.”

“What about nature manipulators?”

“A few, but I don’t know their levels. Like I said, she kept us separate.” Greg studied their host. Alexander Mitchel was in his sixties, judging by the lines on his weathered skin and the edge of gray coming into his blonde hair, but he put off an air of menace that said not to be fooled by his age.

Alexander read the note that popped up on his screen. He frowned. “Tell me about Jennifer Reece.”

Greg yawned. Like Shawn, he was honestly tired. They’d spent the entire trip here running drills and going over lessons. “She’s the enforcer.”

“How strong is she?”

“Very, from the stories I heard about her snatching Adrian’s soul.”

“She can do that? Interesting. What did Adrian do to earn it?”

“He wouldn’t leave Angela alone.” Greg thought of the many times Adrian had crossed a line with Angela. “Her chosen mate finally put his foot down and insisted on banishment.”

Alexander grunted. “And yet, he’s still with that camp.”

Greg shrugged. “Leadership decided he was too valuable to kill.”

“Leadership?”

“Angela. She makes the rules. Everyone else jumps when she snaps her fingers.”

“He charmed her, like all the others.” Alexander glanced at the camera again. This time, the light went off.

“We’re done for now.” Alexander closed the tablet and stored it in the drawer. “You two will remain here until someone comes for you. The boss will decide if you’re employable. If not, you’ll be sent out in a much smaller boat. The UN ship belongs to us. Thank you for returning our stolen property.”

“Sure.” Greg yawned again. “Can we get some grub while we wait?”

“No.” Alexander waved at Conner. “Come along.”

Conner followed him from the room. He’d been reading thoughts of those around them while the team was debriefed. He assumed his turn would come next.

“There’s no need for that with you. As a descendant, you are required to submit to the alpha here.” Alexander led him down the hall to Joel’s den. He lowered his voice. “Don’t lie and don’t provoke him.”

Conner nodded nervously. “I follow orders.”

“What were you doing with Safe Haven?”

“My dad got me out of Little Rock. He stayed, so I did too.”

Alexander opened the door, but he didn’t go in. “Good luck. If this goes well, I’ll see you after.”

Conner entered the perfectly neat room, scanning for exits. He found two doors and a tall, thin man with different colored eyes watching him. Terror ran through Conner. *Byzan!*

Joel chuckled. “I so adore that reaction.” He swiveled his chair back to the console. “Join me, Conner Mitchel. We have things to discuss.”

Conner took the chair next to Joel, keeping a tight lock on his thoughts. Danger was everywhere here.

“Your father is Adrian.”

“Yes.” Conner tried distraction. “I didn’t know I had an uncle alive.”

“Drop your mental shield.” Joel didn’t feel like wasting energy to force it. He felt the boy’s fear; he used it. “Don’t make *me* do it.”

Conner obeyed. He’d never felt this kind of menace. Safe Haven’s descendants tried to encourage light; Joel was all darkness.

“Yes. It’s my latest evolution.” Joel scanned Conner’s current thoughts and his memories at the same time. He had multiple mental files open. He skipped over the men now in his holding area and went straight to Jennifer.

Conner frowned. “Why her? She’s only an enforcer.”

Joel chuckled. “Youth always misses the obvious.” He kept scanning.

Conner didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t sure why Jennifer was a target, but he didn’t try to figure it out. Only two individuals in Safe Haven mattered to him.

“I see.” Joel immediately began to work that angle. “Perhaps your mate can be spared.”

Conner leaned forward. “And my dad?”

Joel shrugged. “That will depend on him. But your mate is normal. Her children will not be allowed to live.”

Conner frowned. “Can we make a deal about that? I’ll lose her if I have anything to do with it.”

“You do not need to be involved. She will believe you are innocent if I so will it.”

Conner had to be satisfied with that. “I’ll do whatever you want in exchange. I can’t live without her.”

Joel sighed. “Mitchels and women have been a thorn in our sides for decades.”

“I’m sorry.” Conner knew it was the right thing to say when the feel of menace began to fade.

“Your gifts are strong. You’ll use them for me.”

“Sure.” Conner frowned. “On who? I have a tough time hurting little kids.”

“That’s because you are one. Time will change that.” Joel waved off his protests. “I have adult prisoners refusing to give the location of support sites and chains of resistance. They don’t fear pain.”

Conner’s chin went up. “My alpha pull always works. Safe Haven never used it, but I have.”

“That’s how you survived in Little Rock until they came for you?”

“Yes.” Conner thought of the ugly months he’d spent there. “But he wouldn’t have come for me at all if not for Angela. She knew he had a son.”

“Mitchels and women are a pain in the ass.” Joel grunted. “Still, it brought you here, so something useful may have come from it.” Joel was already bored with the teenager. “Alexander will get you settled.”

The door opened behind them.

Conner quickly got up and left, glad to be away from the man. Joel put off a feeling of dangerous insanity. *He isn’t trying to seal his cracks. He’s widening them, intentionally.*

Joel nodded even though the boy was gone. “Yes, I am. If there’s a level above this one, I will reach it, no matter who I have to sacrifice.” He glanced toward the small room, where Joey was sleeping off his daily recharge. Joel’s expression darkened. The tiny bond with his son had remained the same since his creation. A year here hadn’t changed it all. *I’m not capable of love. I only crave more power.*

**2**

Jordi tapped on the door of the debriefing room and opened it. He found the two new men sleeping.

Jordi scanned them while they were unaware, picking out the details he needed to confirm Conner’s story. The boy’s words had matched so far, but Jordi had been sent to make sure.

White clouds and spiders greeted him at every attempt*. They’ve been tormented. I almost feel bad for them.* Jordi slammed the door.

Greg and Shawn woke with startled jerks, hands going to their guns.

“That’s better.” Jordi sat where Alexander had and opened the same tablet.

Greg wiped sleep from his lids. “Is it chow time?”

Jordi chuckled. “Soon. We have one last piece of business to handle.”

Both men tensed. The eager tone said ugliness was coming.

“Conner said you two are liars, about everything. Would you care to change your story?”

Greg relaxed. “Got no reason to lie, though you do.”

Jordi snickered. “Yes, I do enjoy mind games.” He drew two sheets of paper from the drawer. “Sign these loyalty oaths and you’ll be allowed to stay.”

Greg didn’t hesitate. “What are the rules?” He scanned the paper as he signed it.

“It’s all on there.”

Shawn frowned at the few brief sentences. “All it says is to do whatever we’re told.”

“Exactly.” Jordi waited until they passed the papers back. “Your teammates outside are being brought in. As soon as they verify your story and sign their loyalty oaths, they’ll join you.”

Greg stretched, subtly watching the man’s eyes crawl over their guns and gear. “They’re rookies. Expect attitude.”

Jordi snorted. “That will be beaten out of them here.”

Greg shrugged. “We’ve certainly tried enough. Only fair you guys get a turn too.”

Jordi laughed this time. “You’re funny for a normal.”

Shawn snorted. “You should hear him after a few beers.”

Jordi’s amusement faded. “No drinking here. No smoking, no drugs, and no unauthorized contact.”

Shawn scowled. “No women?”

Jordi shook his head. “We do not approve breeding or relationships. Our supplies are too low.”

“And you don’t want more normals.” Greg could feel that clearly, even without the warning they’d gotten from Alexander upon being brought in.

“No, we don’t.” Jordi finished typing. “But we understand you have value, in ways.”

Greg and Shawn stood when Jordi did, following him from the room.

“We’ll get you settled in the barracks after mess. For now, stay where we put you and keep your mouths shut. Despite your value as workers, accidents can happen.”

Greg and Shawn began memorizing the layout.

Jordi knew, but he didn’t interrupt them. He felt something hinky. He was storing details to figure out what it was.

“Are there fights here?” Shawn flashed an embarrassed look at their guide. “We miss watching and betting.”

*Ah. That’s the hinky*. “Once a week. Not for another five days.” Jordi surrendered to the bond. “Most of us enjoy that. No need to be ashamed.”

Shawn grinned. “Cool.” He slapped Greg on the shoulder. “Good idea to bring us here.”

“Maybe.” Greg gave Jordi a questioning expression. “Depends on what they want us to do for the room and board...”

Jordi smiled, letting his own eagerness show. “Our fighters need running targets in the training sessions. You’re it.”

**3**

The mess hall of the complex was only a long, narrow hall with tables and benches. Signs outlining rules littered the blue and white walls, making it cluttered. The residents were quiet, though they stared as Jordi led them in. No one spoke to him.

Shawn didn’t think they were allowed to. The room hadn’t been full of tension when they entered, but that was changing. *They’re scared of him*. Shawn glared at the vending machines. “I thought you said chow time.”

Jordi chuckled. “We use this delivery system to be sure ration totals are obeyed. I assure you, it’s real food.” He led them to the row of tall, narrow machines. He placed his hand on the scanner.

*“One ration.”* The computer spit out a small white box that looked like an old fast food container.

Jordi opened it to reveal a hamburger.

Shawn grinned, sniffing. “Beef?”

Jordi nodded, taking a bite. He spoke while chewing. “We have freeze dried meats of all types.” He gestured for them to get one.

Greg did, wondering if the scanner would hold their prints. He didn’t ask.

Shawn tore into his food as if he was starving. It was gone before Jordi could lead them to a nearby table.

Greg held his out.

Jordi frowned. “No sharing. One ration per person.”

Greg shrugged. “Sorry, Dude.” He ate slower. “Mmm. Tastes good.”

Jordi also ate slowly, enjoying the meal. “We only get burgers twice a month. You came at the right time.”

Shawn belched. “Drink?”

Jordi pointed at a lone dispensing machine. “Two a day. Use it wisely.”

Shawn immediately went to the machine and pulled both bottles of water. He gulped them down while the residents watched in surprise, longing, or disapproval.

Jordi frowned at Greg. “Is he a problem?”

Greg snorted. “Just a pig. Feeding him hasn’t been easy.”

“Ah. Well, our ration system isn’t forgiving.”

“He’ll adjust.” Greg finished his burger, glancing around. He saw uniforms of three distinct colors and people of many more shades. It appeared all the races were represented, as well as most big countries. “Nice army.”

Jordi chuckled. “These are workers, like you, but with gifts. The army is in training until dusk. They eat on a different shift.”

“And get more rations?”

Jordi nodded. “You’re smart and funny.”

“Does that mean I can get a better job?”

“Maybe.” Jordi studied him closer, seeing huge arms and a body that had been taken care of. “You trained them.”

“Yes.” Greg frowned. “Until the bitch took over, I liked my job.”

“What changed?”

“She brought females into the Eagles. None of us liked that.”

“We have women here, in fighting positions and in authority. We do not discriminate in any way.”

Greg shook his head. “Figures. Just don’t ask me to like it.”

“As long as you do your job, no one cares what you like or hate.”

“Fair enough.” Greg belched. “Excuse me.” He went to get a bottle of water.

Shawn took his seat. He studied Jordi. “So when do we start working?”

“In the morning. Assignments come through overnight.”

“We won’t have the same job every day?” Shawn guzzled the second bottle and crumpled it.

“Not unless you’re a fighter or a trainer.”

Shawn leaned in. “I get bored easy. Keep me busy?”

“We can do that.” Jordi decided Shawn would be good at training too. “They also get larger portions.”

Shawn grinned. “Perfect.” He sat back and swept the mess. “Is it okay to talk to people?”

“Friendships are not encouraged.”

“Okay. It’s cool.” Shawn rubbed his aching stomach. “Anything I can do to earn another burger?”

Jordi started to say no. Joel’s voice in his mind made him agree. “Yes.”

“Awesome. I’m in.”

“Without knowing what it is?”

Shawn shrugged. “A man’s gotta eat.”

Jordi chuckled. “Is food all you care about?”

Shawn leered at a nearby woman, who flushed and quickly glanced away.

Jordi laughed. “I see. Perhaps company can be arranged. If you’re good at your job.”

“Whatever you need me to do, I’ll get it done according to orders.”

Jordi leaned forward. “What was your job in Safe Haven?”

Shawn’s face turned to stone. “Executioner.”

“Excellent. We have a prisoner waiting for that. Each removal pays an extra ration of food and water.”

“I’m your man.”

“Even if they’re female or children?”

Shawn shrugged, eyes now on the remainder of Jordi’s burger. “A man’s gotta eat.”

Jordi followed mental orders and pushed it over. He watched Shawn gobble it down.

Jordi felt Joel leave his mind and breathed a sigh of relief. “You’ve been cleared for duty. Let’s get you both cleaned up and in a uniform. After that, you’ll be assigned to a bunk.” Jordi motioned toward the kits they were wearing. “Any weapons in there?”

“Of course.”

“What kind?”

“Guns, knives, explosives. We’re traveling light.”

Jordi shook his head, but he didn’t make them surrender those items. Many of their trainers had access to weapons the rest of the troops didn’t. During a fight, the instructors passed them out and then collected them when it was over. Even the explosives could come in handy. “Are they homemade?”

Shawn nodded. “Is there a storage locker or something for items like that?”

“Yes, but you don’t have access to it yet. Keep your toys. With all the mind readers here, we would know if you were planning something stupid.”

Greg rejoined them, bottle of water only a third gone. “Okay to take this?”

“Yes, but never stock or hoard. We don’t allow that here either.”

“I’ll finish it while we walk.” Greg had been watching the others in the mess line up at the door and assumed it was time to go.

Jordi approved. “I have a feeling you two might fit in here.”

Shawn grinned. “That is the plan.”

**4**

“How long have you been working for the UN?” Conner had told Alexander everything. He hadn’t had a chance at hiding anything from a byzan anyway, but he was also furious with Angela and Marc. And things here didn’t seem that bad. He’d already been fed, given a shower and clean clothes, and now, he was getting time with a relative that he hadn’t known existed.

“Almost six months. Before this, I was in South America, hunting fugitives.”

“Have you always worked for the bad guys?”

Alexander grunted.

Conner wasn’t sure what that meant. He was distracted as they reached a wide room at the end of the long corridor. A row of cells lined the wall, all with a tube going into the top. The jail was small and cold, with only half a dozen guards who watched Conner. Their hard glances warned him not to disobey. “Prisoners?”

“Yes. Joel wants you to interrogate one of them.”

“Okay. The Mitchel pull is hard to resist when it comes from someone who isn’t corrupt yet.”

Alexander’s scowl returned. “So he decided you’re okay. That’s not good.”

Conner frowned. “Why?”

“Because no one leaves here unscathed, kid. If you’re not corrupt now, you will be before this is over. He’ll see to that.”

Conner straightened his shoulders. “It doesn’t seem so bad here; maybe I’ll like being corrupt.”

Alexander led him to the first cell. “See if you still feel that way after we’re done here.”

Conner swallowed, approaching the cell. He peered inside to find an old man and two identical middle-aged females. They all stared at him in fear and anger that he knew would be ugly if they could reach him. All three people automatically assumed he was a traitor.

They were still in the clothes they’d been captured in; the jeans and long sleeve shirts were torn and ragged at the hems. It was obvious they hadn’t had new clothes in a longtime. *Or a shower*. Conner’s nose wrinkled as the smell hit him. The cell was empty, without a cot or even a pot to piss in. Conner was glad he was being treated better.

“You have ten minutes. After that, Joel will revoke your clearance.”

“I won’t need that long.” Conner sent out his alpha pull, layering it on thick. *I’m not going back to Safe Haven.* *When they come here, I’ll try to trade for Candy. If I can’t, I’ll take over and force them all to do what I want.*

The weakened captives had no resistance to Conner’s draw. The Mitchel magic hit them and sank in deep. They immediately lowered their mental walls and let Conner see everything about where they’d been and with whom.

Conner sent it all to Joel, directly. He knew the byzan leader expected it.

Alexander stepped back to allow him room to work, mind spinning. *Joel may have cleared him, but this boy isn’t pure.* Alexander felt an unwilling bond forming and tried to shut it down. *Nephew or not, he’s my ticket to Adrian and that’s all I care about. If it’s the last thing I ever do, I will kill that bastard.*

# Chapter Twenty-Two

**It’s Not Safe**

January 4th

**1**

**G**reg scanned the row of descendant fighters lined up across from him and the rest of the kill team. The training room was a perfect square with two doors and a row of monitors protected by a security booth that was staffed with two twitchy guards in full gear. The plexiglass windows of the booth were stained and dirty. It was obvious they didn’t clean them until they had to.

*Probably not until there’s too much blood to see through*. Drew noted the four cameras in the corner. He assumed the guards were also recording these moments for later evaluations.

Bright lights in the ceiling let them view all twenty fighters they were supposed to beat. *Should have brought more help.* Jonny smirked at Joel’s disbelieving glare.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

Standing behind the plexiglass booth, Joel’s lip curled at Greg’s comment. “Because you lied about being able to train my army?” He was here to observe and to take their lifeforces when they were proven liars or weak. Joel had spent the night searching for fugitives; he needed a fast recharge.

Greg snorted. “Because they’re going to get hurt.”

“Look at them.” Shawn gestured, agreeing with Greg’s assessment. “Sloppy stances, distracted expressions, and no live rounds. It won’t go well for them.”

Joel shrugged. “Then they’ll have received a valuable lesson.”

“If they survive.” Drew was ready to kill. He hated all these people.

Joel scanned Drew’s new bruises. “Problems in your bunk?”

Drew nodded. “That’s why you have three men in the med bay right now.”

“They were healed and reassigned overnight.” Joel stared at the four men. “I assume you all worked together on that.”

Jonny shook his head. “I woke up as it ended.”

“Same.” Greg shrugged at Joel’s disbelief. “We were all high level in Safe Haven. Your army is made up of boxers, and rookies who want to be boxers.”

“The report said magic was used.” Joel scanned them again. “I don’t see serious injuries.”

Greg didn’t respond. They’d already said enough. The leader here wasn’t going to believe them without visual proof.

“No, I won’t.” Joel motioned them to start. “Until I see it, it didn’t happen.”

The kill team hadn’t met the boss here until now. Like Conner, they sensed his status, but it didn’t change how they reacted. Their training had toughened them to surprises. Greg swept Joel’s thin, hard form that held no weapons or even muscles that he could see. *I wonder if he can fight*. Greg shrugged. *I guess if you have unlimited power, you don’t need to.* “Level five, Eagles. Go!”

Shawn crouched. Greg moved a step back.

Jonny and Drew rushed forward.

Joel watched in shock as the two front men began grabbing his fighters and tossing them to the two rear men. His troops were stunned. Almost no one fought back.

Bodies hit the ground, some beyond help. Others fell with minor wounds and cuts; they got up to try again.

Joel lifted a hand. “Change it up.”

Jordi flipped the color display on the wall to bright red. Magic use had been authorized.

Greg grunted, flipping a female fighter over his shoulder. He didn’t watch her land or react to her shout of pain. He ran forward with his team and began delivering punches to jaws, throats, and chests, preventing spells from being thrown.

Shawn slammed his elbow into an unprotected stomach and punched a beefy ankle as he went down–something snapped.

Screams filled the air.

Greg staggered as he was hit with a fire spell, but he managed to stay on his feet. He swiveled to find his attacker.

The woman who’d thrown the spell ran behind the plexiglass.

The guards in the security booth with Joel cringed out of the way; they knew what was coming.

Jonny ducked a flame spell and bounced himself off the surprised fighter. He immediately spun and slammed the man’s face into the wall.

The man dropped at Drew’s feet.

Drew leapt over him and launched himself at the last line of fighters all trying to gather energy for shields.

Greg joined him, delivering hit after hit that disabled their opponents.

In the booth, Joel snatched the cringing woman by her neck and drained her lifeforce. “No cowards here!”

The wounded, shocked fighters forced themselves up and back into the mob of swinging, ducking, shouting fighters that now had the four men surrounded. Even being knocked out was better than Joel’s anger.

The kill team rotated, getting their backs against each other. They held arms for balance as they all spun out with kicks to throats. They followed it with kicks in the opposite direction. Neil’s kai training was brutal.

Magic flew through the mob, hitting fighters and the kill team. The sleep spell dropped almost everyone.

Greg withstood it like he had on the deck of the ship; he stalked toward the woman who’d fired it.

Faced with his rage or Joel’s wrath, the woman fled out the training room door.

Jordi went after her without being told.

Joel scanned the room, mind spinning*. Four men disabled twenty of my fighters. They aren’t my most powerful, but still…* He lifted a hand before the fighting could restart.

Silence fell other than moans and grunts as people got to their feet.

The kill team stayed back-to-back, waiting for their next order.

Bruises glared at them; eyes glowed bright red. The troops here had already disliked them for being normal. Now, they hated them.

Shawn scanned the training room. It had gone from messy to bloody. He straightened in pride. *That’s what you get with us.*

Joel was impressed, and annoyed. “You will teach them to defeat you. Start now.”

Greg waved Shawn toward the females that had retreated. “They won’t let me touch them now.”

Shawn did as ordered, flashing a bruised smile at the six wary, bloody females. Greg had disabled all of them. The rest of the team still hesitated when fighting women; Greg didn’t. “Come over here and I’ll give you tips. Just words to start.”

Joel scowled at Greg. “I don’t want them babied!”

Greg ignored him, motioning to Jonny. “Take the other half and start them on the first level of Kai.” Greg and Drew went to the center of the blood splattered floor. “Watch us. Your trainers will narrate the important parts.”

Joel didn’t repeat his order, curious.

Greg and Drew started with the first level of Kai, while Shawn and Jonny explained it to their group and got them into the right positions.

“Magic does very little if you’re fast enough. And you risk hitting your own people.” Shawn pointed at the half dozen bodies on the ground. “Disable your opponent first, then hit them with your spells. While you’re fighting, always gather energy to have ready. It takes too long in a fight with people like us.”

Joel settled into the only chair, content the men had proven their worth. He made a note on the tablet to upgrade their status. *Move them to the highest ranked fighter barracks. If they survive the night, they’ll train our real army.*

Joel ignored the bloody fighters and the bodies. These really were rookies. He’d arranged this training matchup to discover if the four new men had been telling the truth, but it had exposed a huge weakness. *Two of my females ran*. “Work the women harder. I can’t have them running away during a fight.”

Greg grunted at Drew’s leg sweep, jumping. “Shawn.”

Shawn crouched.

The women retreated. One of them eyed the door.

“Get mad or you won’t survive this.” Shawn lunged forward and began delivering light hits that did no real damage. “Get those shields up!”

Greg and Drew paused to watch Shawn. He was a whirlwind anytime he fought, but he was also working off the frustration of being here away from Pam and Morgan. It was a little scary. Drew wasn’t surprised when one of the women dropped to her knees.

“Please don’t!”

Shawn glanced at Joel.

Joel let his eyes glow red.

Shawn hit her in the jaw and knocked her out.

Magic slammed into his spine.

“That’s my mate!” An angry fighter ran toward Shawn, hands lifting to fire again.

Shawn rotated, swinging.

Joel observed in pleasure as Shawn got the fighter in the throat. The crunch was audible.

The body dropped to the floor.

Joel clapped. “And that is how we deal with those who break the rules. There are no unapproved relationships here!” Joel flipped the display color. “Lesson is over. Get to your next station. Remember this session. There will be another.” He didn’t bother to call for a medic.

Joel went to the new men, who were staring at the body. He stopped in front of Shawn. “You have a lot of anger. I assume it blocked his pain spell?”

Shawn shrugged. “Pain just pisses me off.” It really did. The sensation on his bare arms had sent fury through him. “I reacted as the situation called for.”

“I agree. Even my kind must have honor. He hit you in the back.”

“The only dirty fight is the one I lose.”

Joel chuckled. “Well said.” He waved at Jordi, who had just entered, appearing refreshed. “See to them. My notes are on file.”

Jordi hurried to the tablet. He let out a belch. “She tasted good.”

Joel’s laughter followed him out of the training room and down the hall.

Jordi scanned the notes. He smiled. “Excellent. Showers first, so you don’t contaminate our fighters. Then we’ll get you new clothes, rations, and a supply kit. Follow me.”

The kill team lined up as they left. All of them saw Conner and Alexander coming down the hall. None of them spoke to the teenager, though they noticed he appeared happy and cared for.

Conner glowered. “Why haven’t they been disposed of?!”

Jordi snickered. “I think he’s holding a grudge.”

“Aren’t we all.” Greg snatched the clubbing stick from Jordi’s belt and hurled it at Conner.

Alexander grabbed it out of the air right before it hit. He frowned.

Greg shrugged. “Problem?”

Jordi laughed. “No wonder the boss gave you guys a status upgrade.” He got his stick back from Alexander, ignoring the man’s displeasure and Conner’s shock. “Let’s get you guys settled.”

Conner waited until the kill team was gone, then turned to his uncle. “Thanks. I wasn’t ready for that.”

Alexander peered into the training room. He saw the blood and bodies. “I wonder how they’ll do in their new quarters.”

“What do you mean?” Conner scanned the exits and security panels by most of the doors. He had gotten everything Joel wanted from their prisoners. He hoped they weren’t executed, but it was a small price to pay for his deal to keep Candy. “Is it a bad place?”

Alexander moved down the hall, motioning Conner to follow. “It’s fine if you’re a descendant.”

Conner chuckled. “Good. They need to be put in their place.”

“I would think you’d want them to do well, since you all came from the same camp.”

Conner shook his head, angry. “They didn’t want me with Candy. She’s a widow of one of their normal teammates. They picked on me, and my dad.”

Alexander opened a door. “Tell me more about him.”

Alexander’s room was small, but furnished. Conner relaxed in the comforting atmosphere. The long grey couch and curtains over the one window matched, as did the blanket on the long, narrow cot. Pictures of angry men and women adorned the walls, but none of them were Mitchels. These individuals all had dark hair and dark eyes. Conner didn’t ask who they were. He already knew they were former prisoners his uncle had executed. *Mitchels like to keep trophies. Most of us prefer it to be the mates of the men we kill, though. He’s a little odd.* Conner took the seat he was directed to. “I already did. Then you scanned my thoughts. What else can I tell you?”

“Will he come for you, even if Safe Haven doesn’t?”

Conner sighed, anger fading. “I hope so…”

“But you aren’t sure.”

“No.” Conner hated it that that was the truth. “He wants Angela. He doesn’t care about anyone else.”

“Not even his youngest son?”

Conner grunted. “If I was his only daughter, I’d say yes. But me?” Conner tried not to get sad and seem like a weakling. “I doubt it.”

“Alexa Mitchel is confined. She’s never getting out.”

Conner shrugged. “It might distract him, if he thought you’d trade for her freedom.”

“I see.”

The small table between them held a bottle and cups, showing another difference from the rest of the complex. Joel didn’t want his troops or trainers drinking. *Alexander must not be either of those even though he greeted us when we arrived.*

Conner liked his new uniform. It gleamed in the window reflection. He was glad Alexander had pointed him to this seat because of the fascinating view. The ocean was murky right now, but Conner was sure on a calm day it would be like gazing into an aquarium.

Alexander sat in the plush chair across from the boy. He handed him a drink. “What other weakness does he have? Kids? Animals? Sexy women who look like the one he can’t have?”

Conner thought about Kendle. He shook his head. “Not the other women. I know that for sure. As for the kids, I doubt it. He turned them over to Angela when he was banished. He never tried to make contact with any of them.” Sadness came in anyway. “Even when I was shot in Little Rock, he only had time for his own health and for her.”

“So he doesn’t really care about the future of Safe Haven? We’ve been told his herd is his priority.”

“He used to, but Angela’s done an excellent job with that. He isn’t needed anymore.”

*There it is. Our kind has to be needed or it eats at us.* Alexander motioned. “Drink up. You’re welcome here.”

Conner downed the drink, eager to get drunk and chat. *I’ve never had a real family before. This might be great.*

Alexander kept a shield over his deeper thoughts, like he always did when he had a plan going. *I just found a weakness I can use to eliminate both of you. Then maybe I’ll go to Hawaii and finish off the one Adrian loves the most.*

“Why do you hate my dad?” Conner hadn’t heard a thought, but he felt the menace and knew what it meant.

Alexander lit a cigar. He spoke while puffing on it. “He took something from me. I want it back.”

Conner knew instinctively what it was. “He can’t bring back the dead; none of us can.”

Alexander wasn’t angry. He smiled, thinking of Joel. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that. My alpha is…determined. When he reaches the next level, anything might be possible.”

Conner gave him a puzzled look. “I thought byzan was the highest level.”

“So did I. Now, thanks to Safe Haven, we all know there’s more. Joel will achieve that.”

“Or die trying?”

“No, boy. Or he’ll slaughter us all. Those cracks Angela is fighting are nothing compared to Joel’s. If we want to survive, he needs to reach that next level. If he doesn’t, no one on this planet will be safe.”

“Why does he want Jennifer?”

Alexander stared at him. “He told you?”

Conner shrugged. “I can add clues. He didn’t ask about Angela. Usually everyone wants her.”

“Jennifer is special.”

Conner snorted. “Yeah, but how?”

Alexander furthered their bond with more truth. “Her true gifts don’t lie in enforcing or even her spells. She has a very high IQ. The highest ever documented on a ten-year-old, I believe. Joel assumes that will have grown. He wants it for himself.”

Conner’s brows came together. “She can’t give him her brain.”

“No, but he can take her lifeforce and consume it. With that level of intelligence, fully unlocked, he’ll be able to ascend and take over up there too.”

“Oh.” Conner kept asking questions so it would distract him from that unsettling thought. “I keep hearing rumors about the great reset. Do you guys have all three time keepers?”

Alexander nodded. “Though it’s two time keepers and a time master. Little Cate will break soon and kill. Then her gifts will evolve. With that will come the ability to master time. Joel will work her until she has control over every second that has ever passed.”

“Sounds…dangerous.”

“Oh, yes. Many things can go wrong.”

“But Joel wants it.”

Alexander’s lips tightened. “And what he wants, we give him so we survive. Don’t ever cross him, boy, not without a perfect plan.”

**2**

“You shouldn’t be here. It’s not safe.” Cate wondered if Joey had gotten in trouble for his first visit, but she didn’t ask. If she reminded him that he wasn’t allowed, he might not come again, and she was already looking forward to his forbidden visits.

Joey ignored the frowning guards and acted like they were alone, but his little heart thudded. His dad knew he’d been sneaking out. Eventually, there would be a price to pay for it.

The guards recorded his presence, then ignored him right back. Everyone assumed Joel cared for his son. They didn’t want to die just for chasing the boy off.

Cate scanned the cells around her again, but she still wasn’t encouraged by what she found. The older, tired descendants had been on the run for a long time and they were weak even after having a full day to recover. *They can’t help me*. She refused to think of the ship on the way here, too scared of what would happen then. Even at her young age, she didn’t want to die. “Did you hear me?”

Joey leaned against Cate’s cell. “My dad won’t hurt me.”

Cate crossed her arms over her small chest, also leaning against the door. “Your dad is evil.”

“Yes.”

“Are you?”

Joey shook his head. “Not yet. I don’t have my gifts because I haven’t made that choice.”

Cate frowned. “That’s not how it works.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You only have to accept the power.”

“By being bad.”

“Is that what they’ve told you?”

“Yes. If I want my power, I have to be corrupt or I’ll never be in control of it.”

“That’s a lie. I have my gifts and I’m in control.”

“My dad doesn’t lie to me!”

“Your dad is evil. Evil people lie, even to their family.”

Those words sank into his mind. Joey didn’t want to examine them. “What does he want you to do?”

“Kill.”

“So you can do the reset.”

Cate got angrier. “I don’t have to be corrupt to use magic. I told you that.”

“Maybe I can find a way to get you out of here.”

Cate smiled. “You’re too nice to be his son.”

Joey scowled. “That’s what he says!” He ran off.

Cate heard footsteps coming and assumed that’s why he’d fled. Now that she knew Safe Haven was coming here to kill everyone, she was considering making a deal with Joel to save her life. And the lives of the other captives…and Joey. Against her will, a bond was forming. She liked him.

Five big men came in, carrying three bodies that were dumped into a large cell next to Cate. She scanned, seeing them through the eyes of the other prisoners who had a window in their cell

The men who dumped the bodies glared at the guards and got the same in return. They were very out of place in their long brown pants and flowing tops. Their swords and gun belts were also an odd mix. They all had sun darkened skin, earrings, and other jewelry that also set them apart from the UN troops.

They left without talking.

Cate scowled. “I hate pirates.” They only came inside when they had a valuable prisoner or unwilling descendant fighters. The rules here were strict. They didn’t even have holidays or off time except for sleeping.

Cate listened to the movements in the other cells around her, little mind growing with adult thoughts. *Maybe I can get them to help me kill Joel. Then we can all be free.*

**3**

“Are we free to leave?” The pirate leader kept his hand on his gun as he waited for Jordi’s answer.

Jordi pushed the button to move the top pod above the angry ocean. “Yes. Stay with the rest of the fleet. You are not being punished for a few rogue members.” Jordi glared at the man. “But we would like to know where they’re going with five of your ships.”

“I don’t know. I was providing support to the flight team. When the target approached us for a ride, we grabbed her and the girls. I didn’t know five ships were gone until I returned.”

“But you think they’re going to Safe Haven.”

Toshi gave a curt nod. “We all fear what happens when we finish this job for you. As normals, our future is limited.”

“We have a deal in place. You have faithfully spread the rage illness for us.” Jordi frowned, hating it that the pirates were allowed to dress how they wanted when they came here. It set a bad example. “Soon, you’ll start distributing the cure and you will get to keep those profits.”

Toshi kept his hand on his sword, loathing his fear of these people, but he couldn’t deny it. Magic terrified him and his men. If not for the rewards, he might have already deserted too. “Yes. We helped you bring down the survivors of the nuclear war. Those alive now are the strongest, fittest.”

“You’ve done well. We will not violate our deal.”

Toshi left, but he wasn’t comforted. As a normal, he had no way to verify they weren’t being lied to. And he suspected they were. The UN had only used diseases they could cure. Now that stage two was finished, normals were the weakest of those survivors. *And that puts us on the bottom rung. When we have no more use, why wouldn’t you eliminate us? I certainly would.*

Joel swept the barracks monitors as Jordi joined him. He was listening to a few private conversations, as well as keeping track of Jordi. His gifts allowed him to be spread in several directions, but he was still frustrated by the limits. Joel scanned the leaving pirates, getting all their thoughts and concerns too. “Update me. Them first.”

“Toshi said he doesn’t know why they have deserters or where they’re going. I picked up thoughts of safety, but no location. All I could view was water.”

“Safe Haven.”

“Probably, but that won’t work out for them. As soon as Safe Haven sees the ships, flying their stupid flags, the descendants there will attack.”

“Good. Keep me informed.”

“Of course.” Jordi saw the small door in the rear of the room shut. He lowered his voice. “They brought in Laura Shalet.”

Joel swiveled around, eyes lighting up. “And her nieces?”

“Yes. They were drained from killing the flight team. They’re in holding, waiting for your interrogation.”

“Excellent. Schedule it for tomorrow. Let them stew overnight.”

“4pm?”

“Make it 5pm. I want to watch the new men in their training session.”

Jordi frowned, drawing on his courage. “About them, sir. They’re dangerous. Letting them roam free might not be a good idea.”

“But it will prove their loyalty.” Joel stared at Jordi. He scanned the new, almost resentful thoughts. “Are you jealous of them, cousin?”

Jordi forced a curt nod. “They’re better trained. The women are all watching them.”

Joel snorted. “After today’s session, the females are scared. They’re watching them for an attack.”

“Maybe.” Jordi didn’t push. Joel didn’t have a boss, but he did have an equal who was covering the eastern half of the planet. Jordi didn’t want to be there when Joel finally decided that man wasn’t needed anymore. The fight might kill everything living within a hundred miles. Joel’s power was like nothing Jordi had ever witnessed, even during his days of schlepping in the Hawaiian lab for the US government.

“Our ships?”

“A day out. The refueling went well. They’ll be here before Safe Haven.” Jordi sighed. “I need to talk to you...about your son.”

Joel already knew; he’d just scanned the man. “I’ll handle that when the time comes.”

“But they’re forming a bond. You said we can’t allow that.”

“Are you questioning my decision?”

“Of course not!” Jordi retreated. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do.”

“It pains me that you think I don’t know about his adventures.” Joel turned back to the monitor. “Get out.”

Jordi left, but he didn’t run. That type of display would get him killed on the spot.

Joel nodded as the door shut. “And you’re already on your last pass, cousin. One more question of my choices could be....unpleasant.”

Jordi marched down the hall, bringing up his strongest mental shield. Inside, he was fuming. Joel wouldn’t take advice from anyone. He hated to be questioned, but things were not going according to plan and Safe Haven wasn’t even here yet. The five ships they were now down weren’t a big problem; the men on those ships were. This center had no captains in residence, to prevent desertion. Without those five missing crews, the fight against Safe Haven might not be as easy as Joel was expecting. Their enforcers were strong, but they hadn’t done enough fighting against their own kind face-to-face, let alone from inside this complex. The training sessions proved that.

*And that kid!* Jordi had hated Conner on sight. He’d scanned him multiple times. All he’d gotten was visions of the woman Conner wanted, but he knew there was more. They’d also had a lot of new people arrive in the last few days. The new men seemed alright, but the descendant fugitives that had been brought in were definitely dangerous. *I feel like it’s all slipping away, and I can’t talk to him about it!* Jordi changed directions. *Maybe Alexander can get through to him. I certainly can’t.*

**4**

“You can’t get through all of us!”

“You’ll pay for hurting our friends!”

Greg stepped in front of his team. “We were following orders.”

The two dozen UN men and women had surrounded them almost as soon as Jordi dropped them off. They were supposed to rest until the next training match, but word had already spread about the first session. *They hated losing to normals.*

The barracks they’d spent last night in had been long, narrow, and full of rookies who hadn’t stood a chance against them. This room was identical, even down to a single thin sheet over each narrow bunkbed, but the fighters here were killers. Their powerful scans and glowing eyes had kept the kill team on edge from the minute they’d been put in here.

“Your kind isn’t supposed to hurt us!” One of the angry fighters advanced, bumping into Greg. “We hurt you!”

Greg felt that dangerous rage inside flare up. He sighed. “I’m sorry we hurt your friends.”

“You have to pay for that!”

“Sorry isn’t good enough!”

Greg motioned behind his back, using Eagle code. “In five seconds, things are going to get ugly. Will your boss be okay with this, considering we have another training session in three hours?”

A few of the angry fighters immediately went to their bunks.

The rest retreated a step, but they weren’t going to let it go.

Greg held up a finger. “One...”

Shawn sighed, not sure killing these fighters would go over well for them either.

“Two...”

Drew and Jonny braced for impact. They were looking forward to another release.

“Three...” Greg eased his team into the empty corner that held a monitor and a wall dispenser where they’d received sheets for their cots. The wide bathrooms would have been a better place for this, but the line of fighters between them and that door was too thick to get through without bloodshed.

The main door opened. “What’s going on here?!” Jordi had felt the tension as he went by and welcomed a release. He marched to the middle of the now cringing crowd, sending his displeasure. “There is no unauthorized fighting!”

He delivered a second blast that took everyone to their knees, including the new men. “You will follow orders or suffer my wrath!”

Greg groaned with everyone else; he flashed another message to his team. *He goes first when it starts*.

Jordi sent a third blast of his rage. “Get to your bunks–now!”

Everyone fled to their beds, shoving each other and the kill team to get out of the line of fire. When Jordi was pissed, no one was safe. As Joel’s cousin, he was powerful, unstable, and protected. The entire family was crazy. Without that, they wouldn’t have been able to take over the complex.

“If this happens again, rations will be cut and individuals will be put in isolation.” Jordi waved at Greg. “Don’t miss your next session; don’t even be late or you’ll be removed.”

“We’ll be there.” Greg dropped onto the bed next to Shawn. “Will you?”

Jordi gaped at the man. “You have too much confidence.”

Greg snorted. “There is no such thing. As a descendant, you should already know that.”

Jordi left without responding.

Greg hid a smile. *I think he’s jealous of our skills. I can use that.*

**5**

“You shouldn’t be here.” Alexander frowned at his uninvited guest.

Jordi scowled. “Neither should he.” He glared at Conner, scanning him. “He’s not asleep. He’s listening.”

“I’m aware.” Alexander fired a thick sleep spell; Conner’s body relaxed on the spare cot. “I need more information. Joel gave me permission to get it any way I saw fit.”

“So you’re having a sleepover?”

“Let’s go with that.” Alexander didn’t invite Jordi to sit. “What do you want?”

Jordi took the chair across from him anyway. “The cracks are bigger. We have trouble coming and he’s cracking.”

Alexander chuckled. “Is that it?”

Jordi glowered. “Isn’t that enough?”

“No. Who did our looting friends bring in?”

“You won’t help me, but you want information from me?”

“You want me to conspire against the alpha. I won’t do it–not for you and not for him.” Alexander looked toward Conner, but he spoke to Jordi. “Get lost. I just cleaned and I don’t want that smell in here when he fries you.”

Jordi stormed from the room, furious.

Alexander waved a hand to shut the door. “He’s gone. You can stop faking now.”

Conner slowly sat up, only a bit dazed. “Why didn’t you tell on me?”

Alexander shrugged. He poured a small shot of the expensive whiskey and downed it. When he glanced over at Conner, his watering eyes gave the appearance that he cared. “We’re family.”

Conner grinned. He laid down and really tried to go to sleep.

Alexander poured a second shot and kept his thoughts locked.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

**I Was Assigned**

January 7th

**1**

**“G**ood morning, Ladies.” Wade entered the mess, hands full with folders, a notebook, and a mug of coffee that he’d made in his cabin. “Having a good day?”

Jennifer and Emma converged on him.

“What’s going on?”

“Why aren’t we in the training zone for this?”

“Why are there three of you?”

Wade sat his items on the counter and dropped onto the stool. He waved in the other two men who were lingering in the hall.

Morgan and Tommy reluctantly joined him, keeping Wade between them and the two nervous females.

The men were in downtime gear, showing off huge arms under their black tank tops. The two women had chosen full Eagle gear, including guns, knives, and melee weapons.

The mess tables had been stacked to one side overnight, to be ready for this. A crew would clean up and put it all back when this lesson was over. Then the cooks would come in to get breakfast going. Other than the five of them, and the boss, no one was supposed to know what was happening in here for a while. Training sessions and morning chores had everyone else occupied.

Wade made notes in his book and sipped his coffee.

Jennifer stopped Emma when she would have repeated the questions, but her heart was thumping. *I didn’t know Morgan would be here.*

Morgan’s expression darkened. “I was assigned; I didn’t ask for it.”

Jennifer scowled. “Assigned by who?”

“The boss.”

Jennifer snorted at the evasive answer. “Which one?”

Wade finally swiveled to meet her eyes. “Does it matter?”

Jennifer slowly shook her head, fear growing. Knowing Morgan wanted her made this harder.

Wade studied her. “Maybe that’s why he was assigned to this lesson.”

Jennifer understood her coming demand for Morgan to leave wasn’t going to be honored. “It’s not right.”

Wade shrugged, ignoring Morgan’s muttered curse. “You have to trust your teammates. If you can’t...”

Jennifer’s chin lifted. *I can do this. It’s only two hours, and I feel Kyle out there, waiting for me to call on him. I’m safe.*

“Yes, you are.” Wade studied Emma, who had paled upon seeing the three of them. Her color hadn’t returned. “You can do this.”

Emma nodded, swallowing. Wade had promised to help her. *I have to believe that. I can’t spend the rest of my life in fear.*

“Good.” Wade opened his notebook. “You both assume our cool Eagle attitude in the training zone. We’re doing this lesson in the mess to rattle you.” Wade used a wave of his hand to close, and then lock, all the exits.

Both women retreated a step.

“We are using three against two. We will roleplay an assault, and teach you to fight through the fear.”

“No way!” Morgan got up and stomped to the door. “I’m not doing that.”

Wade grunted. “Marc said you’d have an issue.” Wade pinned him with cool eyes. “Is she right? Are you a threat to her?”

“No!” Morgan’s cheeks were red, expression tortured. “I just.. I can’t do that to her, man. She’s already scared of me!”

“So?”

“So I can’t take that!”

“Because you want her.”

“Yes!” Morgan punched the door. “Let me out!”

“No.” Wade shoved into Morgan’s mind. *This is where you prove to yourself that you can still train her and remain detached.*

“I always did that! Until the damn recharge, no one ever knew!”

“Exactly. Lock it back up and do your job, *Eagle*.”

Morgan rested his head against the door. “You’re killing me.”

Jennifer hadn’t expected Morgan to be so upset. *That’s not lust or fear of liking it. He honestly doesn’t want me to be afraid of him.*

“Now that we’re clear, let’s get set. You two are the supposedly defenseless mess crew; we’re the drunken passengers determined to have a good time. There will be words, light pawing, pulling at clothing, etc. However, there will be no magic use at all. You need to be able to defend yourselves without it.”

Emma hated her jealousy. “I don’t have any power.”

Wade stared at her.

Emma’s heart thumped. “What does that mean?”

“The boss believes you’re an Invisible. We’ll find out today.”

Emma smiled, distracted. “Really?”

“You show all the signs. She thinks your fear today might snap that lock.” Wade glanced at Jennifer’s pale face. “She wants you to keep yours locked up so you have more physical skills.”

Jennifer huffed. “You guys are huge, and you’re the best fighters here after Neil and Kyle. There’s no way I can win.”

“So faced with a situation like this, you’ll just give in and let yourself be hurt?”

Jennifer was flooded with old images of doing that to appease Cesar’s anger. “It kept me alive.”

“We know, and we’re grateful you made it through, but that’s not good enough now, is it?”

She slowly shook her head. “I want to be free–really free. I hate being scared of anyone.”

“Are these hard lessons worth that outcome?”

“Yes. I just don’t see how it’s possible.”

“I do.” Morgan didn’t turn around. “We saw you during the fight with the troops. You had your witch, but you made the choices and you followed through. You didn’t need your magic to be lethal.”

“I had surprise...and anger then.”

Morgan sighed. “Are you pissed at me for feeling this way?”

“Yes!”

“Then use it. Make me pay.”

Wade was proud of Morgan, but he didn’t let it show. “No death, ladies. And no matter how it feels, we will *not* rape you. Clear?”

Both females nodded, retreating another step.

Wade stood up. “Guns off. Put them by the door.” Wade removed his first. “No one dies here. Say that.”

“No one dies here,” they repeated.

Neither tone was sure.

*And that’s why we’re removing weapons. These two are lethal; they just don’t believe it yet.* Tommy joined Wade by the door, not sure if he could do this either, but the conversation had helped him. He didn’t want to be scared anymore either.

Wade frowned, realizing Tommy had also been sent for a specific reason. “What are you afraid of?”

Tommy sucked in a breath. “Magic.”

Emma was relieved to have it spoken aloud.

Wade sighed, dropping his gun belt. “It seems we all have fears to conquer.” He strode toward the females. “Let’s roll.”

**2**

Kyle waited outside the locked mess door, fuming. It was a struggle not to blast through with his new gifts. Connected to Jennifer, he suffered through every grunt, cry, and panicked thought that went through her mind–including her fear of all three men.

Kyle’s fists clenched as Jennifer went down again with Wade’s big body pinning her there. *I’m going to kill him the instant these doors open.*

“You’re supposed to be in a training session with the kids.”

Kyle had just finished his shift of shadowing Angela through rounds and meetings. He hadn’t expected her to follow him here, but he should have.

Angela didn’t flinch from his glare. She gave him one of her own. “If you’d done this for her, I wouldn’t have to.”

“I thought it was Marc’s idea!”

“So does he.” Angela sat in the hall chair, a little out of breath. She was pushing herself hard to get back in shape.

The hallways had been vacuumed recently. They could both smell the carpet powder that was supposed to kill any fleas their animals had dropped. Tonya and a few others were currently giving all three of those a dip. Dog was tolerating it, but the cats were being handled with armored gloves. Angela had helped with the first one, but she’d left when Tonya had protested how rough she was being. Angela didn’t think she’d been rough at all. Cats were supposed to be held by the scruff of their neck. They weren’t supposed to wrap around her arm like a scarf and dig in all twenty claws. “You’re about to destroy your place in camp.”

“You’re doing that!” Kyle’s eyes turned red. “You should have told me they’d be alone!”

The door opened behind him.

Wade came out first, wiping blood from his mouth. He nodded at Kyle and Angela, and kept walking. “We made progress. Gotta report to the boss.”

Wade saw Angela’s lips tighten, but he didn’t comment on it.

Kyle glowered at Morgan, who was now strapping on his gun belt.

Morgan left by the opposite exit.

Tommy and Emma left by the same door, chatting. For her, the session had been another level of confidence. For Tommy, it had sunk more of his. Emma’s gifts hadn’t unlocked, but they would. They’d all felt her locks rattling as she struggled. *I’m never going to be one of them. Maybe I should leave.*

Jennifer emerged from the mess with a thoughtful expression and a split lip. She smiled at Kyle. “I’m okay. Thank you.”

“For not interrupting?” Angela knew the couple needed a push here.

“Yes. I needed that. All three of those guys are honorable. It’s nice to know for sure.”

Kyle growled; he stomped away, angry without having a reason to be.

Jennifer sighed. She sat next to Angela and smoothed her wild hair. “Our men are going through a crisis of confidence.”

“Yes.”

“Is it because the females are doing so well in training?”

“Partly. They’re feeling unneeded. But it’s more than that. Safe Haven’s first Eagles had to be corrupted to do the ugly jobs. Most of the women aren’t, and neither are the newer Eagles. The senior men see those good souls and they know deep down that their mates deserve someone better.”

Jennifer huffed. “I don’t feel that way.”

“Never thought you did or I wouldn’t have put you and Morgan together today. Most of the women don’t feel that way either, but a man’s ego is fragile.”

Jennifer wasn’t surprised that Angela knew, though she was curious who’d told her. “So what happens now?”

Angela stood. “We have to show them they are needed, for those corrupt souls, or they’ll leave us and wander the wastelands to find their own kind.”

Jennifer’s fast mind added the clues. “They might join the UN!”

Angela kept walking. “The UN won’t exist in a few more days, at least not on this side of the planet. We’re going to kill them all.”

Jennifer let her go, happy to hear that and also sad. *The senior men aren’t the only ones who are corrupt...* Jennifer’s mind flashed the solution. *We have to show them who we really are now. They think we’re all good, that we have only light inside. Wow, are they stupid.*

**3**

“I’ll be in here most of the day.” Marc flashed a charming grin at the woman entering the office near the mess. Because of Jennifer’s comments about being in danger, he’d chosen to stay close in case she was right. “Wanna stay and break in the couch?”

Angela snickered. “Yes, but I have a medical checkup in the infirmary, an appointment with Tonya to have blood drawn for her follow-up, a meeting with Bernice and her daughter, a tour of the now organized cargo area, and then time watching the kids to give the den mothers a break.”

Marc narrowed in on the item he considered most important. “You’re not meeting the new people alone, right?”

“No. I have three guards, all agreed on by Kenn and Debra. Those two are doing an excellent job.”

“I agree.” Marc let her switch topics. He had faith the security teams were solid, but he’d also scanned the new residents. He didn’t think they were going to be a problem. Even the Cayman refugees were settling in. It was time they met Angela. Marc was just showing his concern for his mate.

They both paused, laughing at the sight of Dog stalking down the hall. Every few feet, he lifted his paws and tried to shake off the bath he’d just gotten.

The wolf chuffed indignantly at their amusement. *The things I’ll do for my pussies.* Wet prints followed him as he vanished.

Angela kissed Marc on the cheek, then left, followed by two obvious guards and one in the shadows who was under orders to not be seen. All the Eagles who got that order were thrilled with the challenge.

Marc scanned his waiting list and grimaced. “She got the better end of the deal.” He picked up his pen. “Let’s roll.”

James, on duty outside the office where Marc was holding his meetings, waved at Gus. “You’re up.”

Gus sat across from Marc, thoughts blocked.

Marc smiled. “What can I do for you?”

Gus drew in a breath. “Give me permission to leave.”

Marc stared, surprised. “You want to leave Safe Haven?”

Gus nodded. “I hate the rules and most of the people. I’m no good to you here.”

Marc scanned the man, easily getting through his mental walls. “You don’t want to be here for the wedding.”

Gus sighed. “No, and I don’t want to see them together afterward.”

“What about Trinity?” Marc already knew, but he had to ask.

Gus snorted. “We broke up.”

“Brittani doesn’t need you, but we do. Please reconsider. A lot of people are fighting that feeling. You’re not alone.”

Gus was wearing Eagle gear; he’d promised to commit, but Marc had known it wasn’t going to last. He hadn’t had time to figure anything else out yet. Jeff’s resignation had been expected and planned for. The kids responded well to him and he was great at kai. Gus was a different story. He wasn’t fitting in because he refused to bond with anyone.

“I’ve been thinking about it since we set sail. I’m not happy here.”

“Well I obviously can’t give you Brittani. Isn’t there something else that might allow you to be content?”

Gus shrugged. “Not that I’ve thought of.”

“When was the last moment you were happy here, even if it was only for a minute?” Marc wasn’t giving Gus up without a fight.

Gus grimaced. “When I saved the boss.”

Marc understood. “Training restarted this morning...”

“I know. It’s not enough.”

Marc tried again. “Can I schedule you a meeting with Angela? This really isn’t my decision to make.”

“About me leaving?” Gus frowned. “Coming to you was a formality. I don’t need permission to leave... Do I?”

Marc shook his head. “No. I meant your unhappiness. Angela is very skilled at fixing that.”

“Why do you even want me here? Brittani’s the power.”

“Some of it, but we never pacified you, Gus. We honestly need you. I assume Angela has a plan. That’s why I’d like you to speak with her before you make a final choice.”

“Okay. But it won’t matter. After this next battle, I’m leaving.”

“I’ll make sure the right people are told. In the meantime, I need an extra guard on the training session that Angela will probably hold later. Do you mind?”

“I’ll be there. Thanks.” Gus left, mind chaotic. He hadn’t expected Marc to care.

Marc wrote it in his notebook, then waved. “Next.”

Wade entered. He handed Marc a sheet of paper as he sat. “That’s the plan for their fear of men.”

Marc skimmed it as he spoke. “You spent the full two hours with them?”

“Yes. Good idea to send them together. They leaned on each other.”

Marc wasn’t used to Wade being in street clothes. He inspected the man’s huge arms and chest, a bit jealous. Marc had lost some of his mass while ill. He pushed it away with a mental note to work on that. “We’ll start using this with all of them. I know it’s hard, but try to keep it quiet for now. Some of our women don’t think they have a problem.”

“I’m good. Anything else for me?” Wade hoped so. He was still depressed about Courtney’s choice. She’d refused to marry him. He understood; the baby wasn’t his, but he needed to stay busy for a while.

“Actually, yes.” Marc handed Wade a copy of their manifest. “I need everyone checked out.”

Wade sulked. “We still have traitors onboard.”

“I don’t have proof of that, but Bob’s attack was unexpected. I want all the bases covered.”

“I can do that. It will take a while, though. This is a lot of people to go through.”

“You’ll have help. Neil’s on it too.”

“Cool. When should I start?”

Marc checked his notes. “Now, in the play zone.”

“You got it.” Wade left before he could ask for more work. He was already overloaded with shifts and training. *Wait. Neil asked me to watch over Samantha at the play zone...*

Marc felt Wade’s unease and let it go. Unlike Gus, Wade wasn’t considering leaving Safe Haven. He just needed to figure out what type of future he wanted here. “Next?”

James held the door for Candy, then shut it.

Candy didn’t beat around the bush. “It’s been two weeks. Where’s Conner?”

“Before I answer that, I’d like your permission to remove the charm he put on you.”

“No.” Candy stared. “I was willing. I still am.”

“I see.” Marc scanned her, trying to discover if she meant that or if the spell was making the choice. “Can you prove that?”

“No.”

“Then it might be the charm.” Marc waved a hand.

Candy scowled. “I said no!”

Marc frowned. “My asking was being polite. You didn’t really have a choice.” He scanned her again. “Now, why do you want to know where he is?”

“I love him.” Candy didn’t feel different. “And I like his protection. When he gets home, I’ll ask him to put it back on me.”

Marc shrugged. “If he comes back.”

“What does that mean?!”

“It means we gave him a test. If he passes it, he’ll be a hero and your relationship will be approved.”

“And if he fails?”

“He’ll be dead.”

Candy began screaming.

Marc let her, monitoring her for medical issues. She needed the release, but only if it didn’t cause her labor to start early. Candy seemed innocent and normal in the blue jean jumpers she liked to wear now, but her hair bothered Marc. *There’s no colored swatch. When that comes back, I’ll know she’s happy again.*

Candy realized Marc wasn’t paying attention to her demands and insults. She slapped the chair arm. “Hey!”

Marc looked up. “Yes?”

“I want him here!”

“Then I suggest you follow the rules and be patient.”

“I can’t!” She sniffed as sadness hit. “I miss him.”

Marc didn’t like her being upset. “I saw him with us on the island the last time I searched. It hasn’t been that long. Stop panicking.”

Candy drew in a deep breath, glaring at him. “Can you prove that?”

“No.”

Candy knew Marc wasn’t going to budge on whatever he had Conner doing. “When will we know for sure?”

Marc glanced at the clock on the wall. “Roughly forty-eight hours.”

She paled. “The detention center.”

Marc nodded. “Think good thoughts. And don’t talk about it or the happy ending you want won’t ever happen.”

**4**

“Did you talk to Wade?”

Neil frowned. “I did. There’s no problem. He’s just tired.” Neil swept the clean cabin and Samantha’s glowing skin. He admired the rounded body under her sweatpants and loose white top, but he didn’t make a move even though they were alone. *I want her, but I can wait until it’s safe.*

Samantha brightened. “Okay. Good.” She watched him dress, wishing they could have showered together. His bare chest vanished under his black Eagle shirt. She sighed. *A couple more months and then I’ll get my body back. And I’m attacking him as soon as I’m cleared.*

Neil studied her in the mirror. “How do you feel about Wade?”

Samantha shrugged, brushing her hair. “He’s lonely, I think. He uses the sex to keep it back. Other than that, he’s nice, good.”

“Do you think he can be trusted?”

Now Samantha frowned. “Of course. Why? Has something happened?”

“No, just collecting your thoughts.”

“Okay.” She cleaned out the brush. “Who else do you want to know about?”

“All of them, Sam. All of them.”

She turned slowly, chills coming over her arms. “What’s going on?”

“I need it for the deep scans Marc requested.”

“And that’s all?”

“As far as I know. He said you can help.”

“Sure!” Samantha was glad to have something to do. Even the garden was becoming too much for her huge body. “When do I start?”

Neil checked his watch. “Go to the picnic table in the play zone as soon as you finish here.”

“Okay.” Samantha farted. She flushed. “Sorry.”

Neil chuckled. “You gassed me.”

Samantha giggled. Neil was funny when he was in a good mood.

He hugged her carefully. “I love you.”

Samantha melted against him. “I love you too.”

Neil kissed her head. “How are your nightmares...about Jeremy?”

Samantha stiffened for an instant. Then she relaxed, sighing. “It’s been a little while since I had one. Should I feel guilty for that?”

“No. He’d be proud of you for starting to recover.”

Samantha snuggled closer. “I think so too.”

“Good.” Neil kissed her. Then he pulled on his Eagle jacket. “Kenn had me off duty today, but I’m sure Marc will put me on rounds anyway. I’ll stop by if I have time.”

Samantha went to the shower as he left, eager to let the warm water beat on her for a few minutes. Her spine was always sore now. “I never knew being pregnant hurt so much.” She rubbed her restless babies, filled with love. “But it’s worth it. Momma loves you both, no matter how bad you make me ache or stink.”

**5**

Wade scowled as he spotted Samantha in the play zone. He forced his mind into a better place as he went to the picnic table and sat across from her, painfully aware that Neil wasn’t here.

The playground was crowded with excited children fresh from a workout with Jeff. The swings and slides had a constantly rotating line of kids, all laughing and talking to each other. *They look happy. That’s awesome.*

Guards stood in the corners and the shadows, frowning at the noise. It was hard to hear anything except shouts and laughter, but they didn’t ask the den mothers to quiet the kids. Laughter was infinitely better than when they’d been ill.

“Hey, Wade. Having a good day?” Samantha peered up from her notebook.

“That, I am.” He smiled at Amy.

Amy waved. She slipped from the swing...

Amy curled up and landed on her butt.

Wade reached her an instant before Samantha and the other women.

“Are you okay?”

“Amy? Are you alright?”

Amy sucked in air. “Hi, Wade!” She pushed onto her feet and went back and smacked the swing. “You hold onto me this time!”

Samantha drew in a breath to calm herself, trying to unclench her stomach muscles. “I just lost a few years.”

Wade chuckled. “Same.” He saw Samantha’s pinched face and put a hand on her arm. “Come on. Sit.”

Samantha let him help her to the table, wincing at a knot in her lower back.

Wade got her settled, worrying when her face didn’t ease. “Should I get a medic?”

Samantha shook her head, finally relaxing as the knot eased. “It’s Braxton Hicks.”

“False contractions so soon?” Wade scanned the kids again, then sat. “Shouldn’t you have four months to go?”

“No. Because two parents are descendants, this pregnancy will only go to seven months, according to William.”

“So you’re...” Wade stiffened. “We only have eight weeks!”

Samantha chuckled. “Easy, we’ll give you a shot. You won’t feel a thing.”

Wade snorted at her. “Aren’t you nervous?”

She nodded. “Terrified.”

Wade saw she really was. He leaned in. “What can I do?”

She dropped her eyes. “Don’t listen to my screams when I give birth. I know you think I’m weak. I don’t want that to get worse.”

Wade stared at her.

Samantha flushed. “I’m sorry. I’ll try harder to be worthy of Neil. I know the teams mean everything.”

Wade blinked. “I don’t think you’re weak. I never have.”

Samantha frowned. “Then why are you avoiding me? I couldn’t think of anything else.”

*Damn*. Wade smoothed out his face. “I’m not avoiding you.”

Samantha scowled at the lie.

Wade leaned back, becoming cool. “It has nothing to do with you. I wanted to tell you that. I’m just having a rough...week.”

Samantha’s face fell. “I’m sorry you don’t feel like you can trust me.”

Wade groaned. “This isn’t going well.” He placed a hand on her wrist, steeled against it like every time he had to touch her. “I think very highly of you, Samantha. I have an issue I’m working through. Stop thinking it’s you, because it isn’t.” He let go as she nodded.

“Okay.” She studied him, now trying to figure out his issue.

Wade slammed another wall in place. Then he covered it in clouds.

Samantha’s eyes narrowed.

*Oops!* Wade changed the wall to spiders.

Samantha shuddered, easing out of his mind. “Fine. If you want help with something, I probably would.”

Wade realized she now assumed it involved one of his lovers. “Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Samantha scanned the kids and went back to her notebook. “I’ve listed all the camp men. There’s only forty-two of them, so it’s not much, but at least it’s a start.”

“That’s good. I have the mess, brig, and infirmary people done. Here’s the sheet.”

Samantha glanced up. “Ramer cleared?”

Wade nodded. “He’s almost dry now. He’s being released by Jayda and Ivan, with warnings to stay away from all drugs and alcohol or he’ll be put right back in there.”

“That’s great. What about...”

Neil studied them from the entryway of the small playground, studying tones, looks, body language. It was all innocent, on both sides as far as he could see. If Wade had a thing for Samantha, it wasn’t showing.

*But I caught a flash, didn’t I...?*

Neil left, mind spinning.

**6**

“Got a minute?”

Marc shook his head. “Not if it’s about your love life.”

Neil paused in the doorway. “You know.”

“And I’ll tell you what I told him. I won’t wipe his memory. You’ll have to work it out.”

Neil realized it was true. *Wade’s in love with Samantha.* “I didn’t know he came to you.”

“The recharge screwed with some people. He never would have let it show.”

“I want you to put them together.”

Marc gaped. “Excuse me?”

Neil’s lips thinned. “Don’t play innocent with me.”

Marc’s surprised expression faded. He shook his head. “I’m not your pimp.”

“I’m trying to heal our family.”

“How?”

“She misses Jeremy–a lot. So do I. We’ve discussed searching for another...friend.”

Marc sighed. That had been his first thought upon discovering it, but he’d refused to interfere. “Make sure you’re not messing with Angela’s breeding tree.”

“I will.”

Marc wrote in his book. “I’ll put the three of you on the same chores. No explanation will be needed. But only if *all three* of you agree.”

Neil frowned. “I have to tell her first?”

Marc nodded. “Do this the right way. She doesn’t need the drama right now. In eight weeks, she’ll give birth to Safe Haven’s first descendant twins. I do *not* want her blowing early.”

“Neither do I.”

“Good.”

Neil’s bruises were almost gone, except a large yellow one on his cheek. Marc wondered who had delivered it.

Neil grimaced. “Cathy. She’s like an ox.”

Marc noted that in his file. Strength was useful in several ways, not just for fighting. Marc checked his notes. “Where should you be right now?”

Neil sighed. “I’m off duty for the day–Kenn’s orders. He had me switch out. I picked Wade.”

“Yeah, we can’t have that.” Marc pushed into Neil’s mind, still disliking the clouds that always seemed to be there. *She’s doing another secret training session. Get up there and help.*

Neil scowled. “You’re not supposed to know about that.”

“Yeah. And I might not if the thoughts weren’t slapping me.”

“What thoughts?”

Marc stared at him. *The normals. Everything they see is making them twitchier. She might be in danger*.

Neil immediately left, trying not to run. He settled for jogging, a bit angry that Marc wasn’t coming too.

Marc was concerned, but he couldn’t stay with her all the time or it would destroy their trust*. Besides, Ivan is there. He’ll kill for her as fast as I will.*

Marc got back to work. “Next?”

# Chapter Twenty-Four

**I Already Do**

**1**

**“I**’m ready for your updates.” Ivan entered his post on the camp floor as Jayda left it. The small booth had been reinforced overnight to give them more protection during a problem. These cabins and halls matched the ones above, but they weren’t the same. The furniture was, as were the bright walls and various appliances, but it lacked something the other decks didn’t. Ivan wasn’t sure what that was, but it mattered. Being down here was almost like doing duty over the brig.

Jayda handed him the sheet.

Ivan stored it. “Orally.”

Jayda pulled it up in her mind, frowning at being put on the spot. “Zack’s oldest boys were caught stealing whiskey. Marc gave them both three days in the brig. Trent is on duty there until I relieve him. Gus hasn’t been reassigned yet. Brittani is doing guard duty over the captain. Gabe has the rookie handbook now. We got it back from Gus when he resigned.”

Ivan made notes as she talked, also scanning the fifty or so camp members who were still here instead of enjoying the sunny top deck or the entertainment floor.

“Cathy is also in the brig, visiting Timmy.”

Ivan scowled. He made another note. “Keep going.”

“Food and water levels are going down. We’ve asked the cooks to go easy and we’ve upped the water filtration schedule. We’re now cleaning more than we’re using, but that just started. It will be a while before we have a true reserve again.” Jayda tried to remember the rest, aware of the hard glares Ivan was getting from some of the camp. Clifford was glaring openly, as if he was daring Ivan to protest. Jayda slid over to block the eye contact between them. “James threatened Kenn in front of witnesses. Kyle suspended him from the Eagles. He’s now getting drunk in a bar on the fun deck.”

“I think the boss has plans to remove him from the Eagles permanently. Keep going.”

“Dog is doing rounds of the ship, but he keeps whining. It’s making people uncomfortable.”

“I’ll tell Marc when I see him. That’s his migraine.”

Jayda frowned. “Dog is sweet. He let the kids maul him for an hour today.”

“Yeah, he’s sweet until Marc tells him to attack and then there’s blood.”

Jayda shrugged. “Sounds like he follows orders.”

Ivan caught her tone. “Who *isn’t* following orders?”

Jayda gestured toward the small lounge area where Charlie and Tracy were working on wedding plans.

Ivan didn’t see… His eyes narrowed. Emma was in a chair nearby, staring at Charlie in longing. As he watched, Tracy’s head snapped up.

“Get lost! Skank!” Jennifer’s favorite word was now traveling through her teammates.

Emma flushed. “I’m just sitting here!”

Tracy’s anger filled the lounge, drawing attention from the camp. They stilled, scenting the air for danger.

Emma stood up, glowering. “I’m more like him than you are. I’m Invisible. You’re…*normal*.”

Charlie stood, scowling at Emma. “Go away.”

Emma saw Tracy’s hand lift. She ducked.

Tracy’s spell landed on Ralph as he came down the hall.

Ralph staggered, groaning.

Ivan and Jayda hurried over to break up the fight before it got worse. Ivan growled at Emma.

She didn’t need words. She fled.

Tracy leaned back, sighing. “I’m sorry. Tell him I’m sorry.”

Ralph shook it off, glad the spell hadn’t been strong. “We’re good. Just aim next time.”

The descendants chuckled.

The normals didn’t. They cast ugly glares at Tracy and went into their cabins or they left. The hall emptied quickly. Two more magic users had been confirmed.

Ralph joined Ivan and Jayda, waving off offers to take him to the infirmary. “It was cold for a minute. I’m good.” He lowered his voice, hoping only the two guards would hear. “It’s getting worse. Every time they view a demonstration, their fear and anger grow. We need another meeting.”

Ivan wrote it all down. “I’ll tell Angela.” Ivan scanned him. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Ralph grinned. “Takes more than ice to hurt me. I was born in Alaska.”

They all chuckled because it was expected, but none of them felt it.

Tracy opened her eyes to find Charlie staring at her stomach. “I’m sorry.”

Charlie understood her jealousy. “She was asking for it.” He held out his hand. “Let’s go see how the chapel is shaping up. Candy’s there now, getting it ready for the double wedding.” Charlie flashed a grin at Ralph, trying to bring back the good mood. “You want to come along? It’s your wedding too.”

“I sure would.”

Ivan waited until they were gone, then motioned at Jayda. “We’re almost alone now. Spit it out.”

Jayda sighed. “Not while you’re on duty.”

“Fine, but I don’t plan to talk to you when I’m off duty.”

Jayda snapped her mouth shut and walked away.

Ivan watched her go, now wondering what she was going to say. “Jayda.”

She stopped but didn’t turn. “What?”

“Tell me now. Please.”

“I miss you.” She left the hall before she could say more.

Ivan sealed it up and tried to concentrate on his job. Guarding the normal camp members was meant to help them adjust to having descendants around, but Ivan knew that wouldn’t happen here today. The few people still observing him from their cabins didn’t want to adjust. They wanted him gone.

**2**

“I thought you were planning your wedding.” Kenn frowned. “Could have sworn I just saw you down there.”

Charlie grinned. “The hens were clucking. I slipped out for a minute.”

Kenn sniggered. “We’ll make a man out of you yet. I’m on rounds for Marc. Come along?”

Charlie fell in step as Kenn reached the top deck. They both paused to watch Grant drill the new sailing crew on how to dock with another ship. His loud, commanding voice was so different from what they usually heard that it was a bit of a shock.

“Never approach another vessel straight on! The waves sloshing between the two boats can do a lot of damage. We’ll come in along the side, keeping at least twenty feet between us. As we slow, we’ll ease closer. Never approach another vessel at full speed, even from the side. The force of the water can sink them both.”

Kenn shook it off and moved up the ramp. The top landing was starting to fade in the constant sun; small bits of paint were chipped, peeling. Kenn still wondered if they’d brought sealant, then put it from his mind. They had more important things to worry over right now. He nodded to Theo in the bridge, aware of Ray and Brittani lingering as guards. “So what’s up?”

Charlie frowned. “You already know.”

“Yes, but you have to say it, kid. That’s the way it works in your mom’s Safe Haven.”

“I’m scared of getting married.”

Kenn blew out a sigh. “I know the feeling.”

“Mom said you might be able to help me.”

“I know, but you won’t like it.”

“Never stopped you before.”

Kenn flushed. It made his words harsh. “If you don’t want her enough to commit, there are others who do. I’m learning that the hard way.”

“Oh. You mean James.”

“And every other fertile sack of balls on this ship. Tonya can have kids and she’s respected. They want her. If I had married her before now, I wouldn’t be going through this.”

“But she’s pregnant…” Charlie got it all at once.

Kenn nodded at his expression. “You gave me the bonding idea and I will try it, but it might be too late.” Kenn put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “If you really don’t want her enough to marry her, then let her go to someone who does. It’s the right thing to do.”

Charlie stored those words, still surprised that he trusted Kenn’s advice. “Thank you.”

“I need to scan Adrian’s ship. Feel like keeping me company?”

“Sure.” Charlie followed him to the rear of their ship, spotting two battling forms on the front of Adrian’s boat. He and Kenn observed the training session in silence, both uncomfortable about it but not sure why.

Adrian’s darker, smaller ship was like a guard following them, but it gave off no comfort or sense of protection. The tarps he’d put up made it seem like a stolen vessel with unworthy individuals at the helm.

*Adrian looks rough.* Kenn scanned the woman. *But she doesn’t. He’s taking care of her. Good. Maybe that will keep him out of trouble.*

After a minute, Kenn turned toward the ramp. “Come on. They’re just killing time.”

Charlie wasn’t sure that was all they were doing, but he was glad. The sparks between Adrian and his guest were dim, but they were there. *My mom won’t like that; Dad will love it.* Charlie moved on to something else that was bothering him. “Why doesn’t mom want the reset?”

Kenn stopped. “What do you know about that?”

Charlie shrugged. “Not much. I heard his recharge secrets. He’s going against her on something. It got my attention.”

Kenn resumed walking, but he kept his voice down as they passed Zack and Allison, who were enjoying a date at one of the small tables near the railing. “I assume it’s because of me.”

“You?”

“Her life sucked before. No one would want to go back to that.”

“I’m not sure that’s enough.” Charlie shrugged at Kenn’s pointed look, being honest. “She’s suffered a lot since then, for these people. I think it’s because something bad might happen to them.”

“Worse than what we’ve all suffered already?”

Charlie nodded, whispering now. “Some of us think descendants will control that world if we go back to it with all these memories. We don’t like the normals anymore than they like us.”

“That makes sense.” Kenn added the boy’s thoughts to his own questions and files on that topic. “So tell me why your dad does want it.”

Charlie snorted, tone becoming bitter. “That’s easy. He plans to find his kids and rescue my mom from you.”

“I assume I’m dead in that happy picture.”

“Yes.”

Kenn sighed. “He’s smart. It’s what I would do if I were him.”

“I thought you’d be mad.”

Kendle came from the shadows. “Mad? He’s thrilled your dad keeps showing his true self. He hopes your mom will forgive him.”

Kenn and Charlie both scowled at her. Kendle’s face was healing; her bruises had faded, but she was an outcast again with their kind. The camp didn’t know, so they weren’t treating her to the same coldness the Eagles were. The only time they spoke to her was during training, where she continued to prove she belonged.

Kendle lifted her sore chin. “I’m on downtime. I can go where I want.”

Kenn thought about Angela’s coded message after the poker game.

Kendle’s face reddened, but she still smirked. “He’ll never do it. Deep down, Marc loves me.”

Kenn stepped in front of her and leaned in before Charlie could make a scene. “But will that hold true when you betray him again? He’s in charge now and he likes the job. The next time you fuck up, he’ll pass a death sentence.” Kenn moved by her, grabbing Charlie’s arm so he had to follow. “Be very careful, Kendle. You were already on borrowed time. I sense that debt is about to come due.”

Charlie glowered at Kendle over his shoulder. “She’s unstable too.”

“Too?”

Charlie pulled away from Kenn’s big arm. “Tracy isn’t doing well. I think the pregnancy is causing it.”

“We’ll let your mom know. She wants that grandchild. She’ll help her.”

“Cool.” Charlie followed him into the ship. “Where to next?”

“A drop off and a lesson check in, then I’m done for the day.”

“Awesome. We can plan your training session with Tonya.”

Kenn grunted, but didn’t argue. If Tonya really wanted to be an Eagle, even now, there were ways.

Kenn spotted his next target. He pulled a book from his pocket and stopped by Gabe, who was the shift leader for the guards on this deck. “If anyone sees this, you’re out of the Eagles.” Kenn kept walking.

Gabe read the title: A History of the Descendants, and quickly shoved the book into his pocket until he was off duty.

Charlie snickered. “You love doing this.”

“Yep. It’s better than it was for Adrian because I’m not on the outside anymore.” Kenn led the way to the steps, skipping the elevators that only camp members and pregnant women were using now. He wanted to stay in shape. “Jeff is working with Francesca. Your mom wants to know if there’s a chance for that relationship.”

Charlie followed Kenn’s lead in softening his steps as they approached the training zone. Both males stopped as they spotted Kimmie in the doorway. Tears were running down her cheeks.

Kimmie turned toward them. “I can’t have him anymore.”

Kenn knelt in front of the little girl, aware of Charlie’s surprise again at how much he’d changed. It felt good. “You want him to be happy and safe. That’s better. And when you get older, there’s a chance.” Kenn wiped away her tears. “I’d like to have some…art, for Tonya’s cabin. Will you do it?”

“Yes.” Kimmie’s little hands tightened into fists as she struggled with herself. “Tell her to stop stalking him. He doesn’t like her being so forward.” Kimmie marched down the hall toward the play area where Cody and Missy were already working on art projects for Marc and Angela.

Kenn chuckled. “She’ll be hell on wheels when she grows up.” Kenn peered into the training room. He found Francesca hanging on every word Jeff said but not really paying attention to them. He made notes in his book, then waved to Charlie. “Come on. The hens aren’t clucking anymore. You need to get down there.”

Charlie sighed, not arguing. If Kenn was right, Tracy would be swept away by someone else while he was trying to fight marriage.

“Why don’t you want to, really?”

Charlie didn’t have an answer. “It’s just…” He sighed. “I don’t believe a piece of paper makes that much difference. We’re a couple. It should be enough.”

Kenn shook his head. “It’s like listening to myself in the mountain.”

Charlie scowled. “So? What changed it?”

Kenn pointed at the line of men hanging out near the chapel, pretending to be waiting to talk to Tim, who was their new preacher now that Marc had removed him from the Eagles. “That.”

The chapel was small and somber, with dark wooden panels lined in prayers and prayer books. The men waiting to talk to the new preacher inspected the women in line and the few helping Tracy with her plans. But mostly, Tracy.

“A piece of paper means she’s yours. Without it, all’s fair in love and war.”

**3**

Gus fell in step with Angela as she marched down the hall. “I’m your open guard. Can we talk too?”

“Yes, but keep up. I’m late.” She increased speed.

Gus frowned, hurrying. “I think it’s time for me to...” Gus paused as she jogged down the steps to the quarantine zone. He ran to catch up. “Like I was saying, my time here isn’t...” He scowled again as she took off running.

Her shadows flew by him, casting dark looks.

Gus also ran, enjoying his new body. Being in this camp had helped him in that way. He was in the best shape of his life right now.

Angela opened the door to their QZ, plastering on a smile. “Hi! I’m Angela.”

Her shadows followed, using the other guards in here for cover.

Gus paused in the doorway, scanning the new arrivals. The cute little girl was eating and getting a checkup from Harry. Her mother... Gus’s eyes widened. *Wow.*

Angela relaxed, feeling the spark. *You’re not going anywhere, Gus.* She strode over to Bernice with her hand out. “It’s great to have you here.”

The QZ was part of the cargo area that wasn’t needed now that it had all been organized. Beds, tables, chairs, and supplies had been brought in a week ago, but they hadn’t thought to use them for a long time.

Bernice shook with her, frowning, leery. “Thank you for helping us.” Her attention went to Gus.

“It’s my honor.” Angela waved at him. “Don’t worry about his size. He’s one of us.”

Gus slowly came to her side, aware of how he’d been tricked.

Angela lifted a brow at him.

Gus snorted, but his attention stayed on the new woman. *I’ve never seen someone that beautiful.*

Bernice blushed under his hot gaze.

The guards around her shuffled restlessly, now sensing she’d chosen Gus as a mate for the new woman. They were disappointed, and hoping she got to them soon. Everyone, minus a few hardheads, wanted to be part of her breeding tree. They assumed she was making happy life matches.

Angela let go of the woman’s hand and motioned to the empty chair. “I have another meeting near here. Is it okay if Gus fills you in on how things work?”

Gus frowned.

Bernice nodded slowly. “Is he a magic user?”

Angela’s face became icy. “We’re the future, Bernice. If you really want to be safe, make friends with us. We’re not the enemy, but we can be if provoked.”

Gus scowled at Angela. “You’re scaring her.”

“I meant to.” Angela stood.

“Why? She’s clearly been through enough.”

“So I don’t have to kill her. Why else would I handle it this way?”

Gus realized Bernice held a bias toward descendants. He immediately vowed to get her over it. He sank down in the chair and smiled at the nervous woman. “Don’t worry. I’ll help you.”

Bernice couldn’t resist his smile. *He’s brave to say that to the leader here. He’d be a good friend to have.*

Every descendant male in the room crossed Bernice off their mental lists and went back to the hunt.

“That was slick.”

Angela jumped at Kenn’s voice in her ear.

Kenn put a hand on her wrist before she could grab her gun. “Easy.”

Angela recovered, relaxing. She smiled.

Kenn let go and retreated, instantly wary. “Please don’t.”

Angela took pity and didn’t kick him in the nuts. She turned down the hall, sure he would follow. She heard the steps of her guards.

Kenn caught up to her.

Angela increased speed.

Her followers assumed there was trouble; they kept hands on their weapons as they ran behind her.

The halls ahead of them cleared. People immediately started to worry.

Angela kept her mind blank and the speed fast. When more guards fell in with them, creating a small crowd of running Eagles, she went to the ramp to the top deck. Sweat began to run down her neck.

Kenn dug into her mind to find out where the problem was so he could get there first.

Angela hurried up the last set of steps...then immediately turned for the stairs to take her back down into the ship.

Kenn scowled as he found the answer. “You could have told us you wanted a workout!”

Angela laughed, out of breath. “Didn’t ask.”

Eagles started to go back to their restless roaming.

“Last one...to the training zone....shovels horse shit!” Angela increased speed.

Eagles grinned and hurried to catch up, except for Kenn. He detoured toward the infirmary to check on Tonya.

Kenn slowed his breathing so his gasps for air didn’t give him away. *Angela was right to give us another workout. If we have to run anywhere, we’re screwed.*

Kenn spotted a tall shadow lurking outside the infirmary door. Rage flared, but Kenn controlled it, remembering Angela’s words about Kendle. Kenn went right by James. *You’ll fuck up too. I have faith.*

Kenn verified Tonya was in the lab and had a guard, then marched down the hall to the training zone.

James glared at him; he was surprised when Kenn kept going. He didn’t think about his plans so Kenn didn’t catch them.

In the lab, Tonya sighed. She’d caught it all.

Peter came over to her. “Things okay?”

“Not really.” She put down the slide, glad they were alone. “I created a problem by accident. I need some advice on how to clean it up.”

Peter already knew. He slid a hand to his gun.

“I don’t want him dead!”

Peter shrugged. “But that’s what it will come to. Those men aren’t Neil and Wade. They’re not going to share–ever.”

“I don’t want that...” Tonya’s eyes widened. “Wade and Sam?”

“No. Wade, Neil, and Sam.”

Tonya smiled. “Good for her.”

Peter chuckled with her, but he was very aware of James standing outside the door. *He’s not a descendant so he can’t hear us. As soon as you say the word, I’ll remove him.*

“Why would you do that? You served with him.” Tonya knew that was a strong bond.

“He’s going to break our code.”

“What code?”

“The one where we never steal another soldier’s woman. The only penalty for that is death.”

Tonya thought of what Kenn had done to Marc. She paled. “He’s not safe, is he?”

Peter shook his head and resumed his post. “That type of betrayal can’t be erased or forgotten.” He smiled at her. “Even if the woman is worth dying for, we *never* break the code.”

Tonya blushed. “Thank you for protecting me.”

Peter resumed his stoic expression. “It’s always been my honor. I just didn’t know it until I came here.”

**4**

“Wish we could be up there fighting in the cage.” Amy ground her crayon to make the thick dot she needed. “Can’t member it, but I know I’m good at it.”

The other kids were at the playground or lunch; Angela had asked these four to do this. Pam had volunteered to protect them, mourning not being able to have any of her own. Unlike Angela, who had avoided children after losing her baby in the mountain, Pam still wanted to be around the kids. She hoped their laughter would help get her through the rough days.

Kimmie nodded. “You were, but I like you better now. You’re nicer.”

Amy smiled. “I member you saved us from the bad men.”

“I always will.” Kimmie scanned her picture. “This one’s done. Is it okay?”

Cody and Missy scanned it, nodding. They knew she was keeping them busy. Kimmie was really the best at this.

Kimmie sighed. “We’ll get another chance to help them.”

Cody pointed at her drawing. “These will help.”

“Yes.” Missy held up her own. “Good?”

Cody grinned at her. “Perfect.”

Kimmie focused on Amy. “Do you like having those memories gone?”

Amy immediately nodded. “Got a good family; I have to be good too.”

Kimmie was thinking about letting Marc do it for her. She and Cody had refused, but it was hard to be different. *Alone.*

Cody took her hand. “We have each other.”

Kimmie pulled away. “You’re Invisible. And your father is the alpha. I don’t have a family. You’re nothing like me!”

Cody flinched from her anger.

“Stop it!” Missy threw her crayons at both of them. “None of that matters.” She shut her lids and clenched her fists. “We serve the alpha and the future. If we fight each other, we all die.” Missy didn’t stop the tears that rolled from under her lashes.

Cody and Kimmie both hurried to comfort the girl.

Standing in the corner, Pam was proud of Missy. Her heart warmed again. *My daughter might have been like her...*

Pam almost cried as she realized what Missy had been telling her all along with the bonding moments. *I can still have a daughter.*

Missy gazed at Pam over Kimmie’s shoulder, eyes lit up with hope. *Can you love me, in time?*

Pam smiled, tears welling. *I already do.*

# Chapter Twenty-Five

**I’ll Provoke You**

**1**

**“E**agle tryouts are beginning in three minutes. If you’re late, you’re out. Level tests in kai will be held immediately following the tryouts.” Angela let go of the mike as she joined Neil and the other men who were supervising. She paid attention, as did the others, though they’d been through it all multiple times. It was important that the rookies saw what was expected.

This gymnasium was the largest and crowded with people. Many were here for the tryouts; others were here to observe and maybe gather their courage to do it next time. The rest were camp members and those who weren’t allowed to take this evaluation right now. Neil didn’t look at Samantha. He refused to be distracted.

Neat and nervous, all the rookies were quiet as they waited. When Neil waved, they gathered loosely around him.

“Front line, drop to a knee.”

A few men and women lowered themselves awkwardly at Neil’s order, but the rest followed slowly, drawing frowns from the instructors who immediately let their displeasure be heard.

“Move like your life depends on it!”

“Do you want this?! Act like it!”

Neil hid a grin. “Front line, on your ass!”

Those kneeling dropped.

“Second line, to your knees!”

These rookies moved faster than the first, eager to avoid more yelling.

Neil waved. “The third line stands. In big groups, this is how we line up, in a half circle. There is no fourth line. Pick a spot and get there.”

Angela did grin. She knew deep down Neil loved this job. Like the other Eagles, he was eager to discover what their new rookies could do.

“This is a three-hour evaluation where only the best will make a team and keep those jackets. You want it or you wouldn’t be here, but I’m not sure any of you should be. Convince me.” He jerked a thumb. “By impressing them. These are your instructors. You are in three groups. You’ll stay that way. First group, follow Kyle.”

Kyle immediately moved toward the weapon area.

Rookies rushed to catch up.

“Second group with Wade.”

Wade went in the opposite direction, aware of jittery female rookies surveying him while wondering if he would give them a break because they’d gotten naked together. *Not a chance, Ladies.*

“Last group, with Angela.”

Angela took over, leaving Neil free to evaluate. She began to repeat what all the instructors were saying right now. “There are seven parts to this evaluation: guns, fitness, hand-to-hand, alertness, other weapons, and communication. Fail two, you flunk.”

Trent frowned. “You only named six. What’s the seventh?”

“Since you noticed that, you go first.” She led the way toward the running course, where Dog was waiting impatiently. “Pass and you’ll get an answer.” She rubbed Dog’s ears.

Trent tried to copy her; he snatched his hand back as Dog growled.

Angela shrugged. “You’re not an Eagle yet.”

The running course was an empty space around a long row of mats. It was lined with red tape to show the boundaries.

She held up her stopwatch. “Dog runs this course four times in less than two minutes. You’ll each have two attempts. On your mark, rookie.”

Trent flushed, but crouched to get a great start.

Dog sniffed the man’s leg, then lined up.

Angela lifted a brow.

“Now!” Trent took off.

Dog yawned.

Angela snorted. “Show off.”

Dog took off like a shot, drawing mutters and confidence that he would quickly overtake Trent.

Around the gym, the rookies began their challenges at the same time. Neil floated through the room, making notes and recommending places on teams based on what he saw.

He lingered near the gun test first, where Francesca was shooting blindfolded. It reminded him of Angela’s tests, but Francesca didn’t have her fire. The shots were okay, but far from perfect. *She’s not ready*.

He moved toward the cubicle where Wade was giving the alertness test. The portable cubicle was bent and worn; it was one of the few that had survived the entire trip. They’d been using it when Angela first joined. The test was a simple image with a hundred different items jammed in together to create chaos on the optics. It was impossible to memorize them all in twenty seconds, so the instructors only counted the dangerous items in the image, like guns and knives.

“Time.”

Gabe scowled as he came out. “Three knives...a rifle... I needed a few more seconds.”

Wade shrugged. “You got four out of a hundred. It could be worse. Next.”

Neil kept going, not laughing. He might have in the past, but he was humbler now, more compassionate. *It’s amazing that murder made me a better man. I have no idea how it happened.*

Neil scanned Trent, aware of how far behind Dog he was now, but the time was still better than expected when he crossed the finish line.

Angela clicked the watch. “2:15. Fail. Next.”

Neil waited for Trent to complain like Gabe had.

Trent rested his hands on his knees and tried to get his breath back. “I’ll beat it...next time.”

Neil went to the weapon area for his next rotation. He took out his notebook and recorded what he thought so far.

Cathy fired her last shot and immediately began to reload.

Done, Francesca scowled. *I forgot to reload. Damn it!*

“Two hits at fifty feet. Fail. Next.” Kyle waited for her to whine about the distance.

Cathy moved aside, face blank.

Neil and Kyle both noted it. Even Francesca hadn’t complained. So far, the women were more determined than the men.

Neil’s head turned as Allison smiled at Zack, who was on duty here. *Okay, not all of them.*

Zack ignored her.

Allison’s face fell. When Wade motioned, she went into the cubicle.

Neil doubted she would do well. She wasn’t concentrating on the test, only on Zack.

Zack shrugged. *I told her. She didn’t listen. That’s her fault.*

Neil went on with his rounds.

Angela clicked the stopwatch. “2:36. Fail. Next.”

Ed moved out of the way as Stanley lined up. Many of the rookies and the Eagles smirked.

Stanley’s cheeks turned red.

Angela didn’t doubt what would happen. “Go!”

Stanley and Dog took off. Everyone but Angela was shocked when Stanley pulled ahead of the wolf for the first circle. He fell behind as they went around the turn and then matched Dog for the final fifty yards. It followed the same pattern on each circuit. They crossed the finish line in a dead heat.

“1:56. Pass. Next.”

Stanley grinned at the surprised expressions and whispers. “See, I can–” He fell over the mat and slammed into the floor.

Angela sighed; she stepped over him. “On your mark, Rookie.”

James frowned. “Now.” He took off running before Dog got set.

Neil noted that as he went to Kyle’s area. It was set up for guns right now, and backdropped by a vest wall to catch the slugs that missed the targets. Crates sat under a long table that held a huge stack of mags for the airsoft pistols they were using. Safe Haven couldn’t afford to waste real rounds even though they would soon start making their own. By the time they went home, they hoped to have enough ammunition to fight that final battle. The rest of the weapon area was ready for stage two, where the rookies would demonstrate their skills with knives, hatchets, and other small weapons. Those were still in the crates, along with extra targets and more airsoft pellets if they were needed.

“Go.”

Debra fired four shots in rapid succession and stopped. She didn’t need the rest.

“Four bulls-eyes at fifty feet.” Kyle nodded to her, impressed. “The first pass. Next.”

Debra reloaded the weapon and moved to the end of the line, chin up.

Standing with the other observers around the walls, Samantha was proud of the deaf woman. Debra had worked hard in their lessons and she’d obviously been practicing. Samantha was certain Debra would get a good placement on one of the teams.

So was Neil. He swept the rest of the gym. Across from these training areas was another small booth where their radio men would test the rookies on codes and callsigns. Neil missed Mitch in that regard. He’d been the best–even better than the operators Neil had worked with as a State Trooper. Nearby, the cage waited. It had been enlarged from their first uses; the welded steel glinted wearily in the bright lights of the gym, waiting for the blood that was always spilled there. Three blue mats lined its floor, all stained from previous use. Some fluids wouldn’t come out, no matter how much they were scrubbed.

“2:01. Fail. Next.”

James scowled at Angela. “It’s only one second!”

Angela ignored him, nodding to Jayda. “On your mark.”

James started to argue.

Dog growled, loud enough to bring the other areas to a stop.

James flushed. “Fine!” He went to the wall by Tonya and crossed his arms over his chest.

Tonya moved away from him and went to stand by Samantha.

James’s face darkened. He kept himself in place by a hair.

The evaluations resumed, but the senior men were now distracted. James was putting off bad vibes and he was only a few yards away from Angela.

“I’ve got it.” Kenn went to stand by Angela, providing an open guard.

Angela immediately felt better. So did almost everyone else.

Kendle’s lips thinned. She entered Wade’s cubicle with her mind full of anger.

Wade sighed, not catching her thoughts, but her bitterness was clear. “Twenty seconds. Memorize everything you can.”

Kendle snorted, but she did as he said. She doubted she would get put on a team now, but she still wanted to prove that she had what it took. *I just don’t want it.* She scanned the cluttered poster, noting what she considered important.

“Time.”

Kendle came out. “Five guns, a grenade, three knives, two rifles...and a small timebomb under the table.”

Wade was surprised. He nodded at her. “Twelve of one hundred. Pass. Next.”

Neil continued to do rounds, staying alert as those who’d had their moment got bored, restless. They stopped paying attention. *If they can’t concentrate for two hours, they have no business being Eagles.* Neil added to the temptation. “Results from this will be posted tomorrow. Don’t forget to stick around after the evaluation. Angela is taking her final kai test. Then the descendants will have a training session on the top deck.”

Observing from a corner table while he labored on paperwork, Marc’s lips thinned, but he didn’t forbid it. *This is where we discover if I can really handle it. I couldn’t last time.*

Angela glanced over at him.

Marc kept his eyes on his papers and refused to look at her.

**2**

“Tryouts are finished. Results will be posted tomorrow.” Angela let off the mike and moved toward the cage that had gotten a great workout during the hand-to-hand evaluations. It wasn’t done.

Marc took his place by the cage. He was calling the matches this time. All the waiting students were relieved he wasn’t getting in there with them, but tension was still flying through the gym.

Kyle met Marc’s eye. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

That was the first time the mobster had ever said those words around Marc. He didn’t respond. He understood exactly what Kyle was feeling, but he had faith the man would do his job. Over the last nine months, all the senior Eagles had given Angela private lessons and extra classes to catch her up. She was good, absorbing even the finest details; it pleased them to see her using a move later that they’d been able to teach her. This was her final test on those lessons.

“She’s ready...” Neil’s tone was also questioning. When she reached the upper levels of this test, he would take over for Kyle.

Again, Marc said nothing. This was a lesson for more than just Angela.

Everyone turned to look at her, including rookies, her team, her family, and a dozen camp members. With black boots, tight black pants, and a black tank top under her Eagle jacket, it reinforced the fighter image. Her long hair was in a tight bun. Her only jewelry now was the silver wrist bracelet. Her gear was light, perfect, and yet still wrong to the senior Eagles. It was a man’s uniform and should have downplayed her femininity, but it gave the impression of a sultry seductress.

“I’ll be in the cage.” Kyle’s mutter was thrown over his shoulder as he spun away, heart racing. He was about to rub against that and then hit it. *No way.*

Neil moved to the door of the cage to observe, unable to hide the admiration. He was glad when Angela walked by him like he wasn’t there. Right now, he might say anything. She was the warrior woman in Adrian’s vision now.

Angela stopped by Marc, waiting for him to acknowledge it.

Marc sighed. “I see what you’ve become.”

“And?”

“I won’t try to hold you back. And I don’t doubt the outcome.” He really didn’t. It was clear that she could hold her own against almost anyone. Now, she needed to prove she could do it like a male Eagle, with no concessions. Otherwise, the rookie females would think they could slide by this lesson.

Kyle met her eye with a pained expression.

She stopped in the doorway of the cage, able to feel his indecision. “I thought you had balls, Reece.”

Weak chuckles floated through the gym.

Kyle’s face tightened at her challenge.

Angela moved closer, hanging her gun belt on the cage hook. “I can make it easier for you.”

“No, you can’t.” Kyle grunted. “I remove enemies; I don’t beat on women.”

“I’ll provoke you.”

He snorted.

Angela gave him a cool smile. “With one sentence.”

She leaned close enough that Marc couldn’t hear the words she whispered. But he saw an angry, hurt side come out of Kyle that he never would have suspected existed. It was the side that could beat on a woman, and more.

Kyle’s fists balled up.

Angela nodded. “Pretend I’m her.”

Kyle’s head bobbed. He was aware that everyone was going to discover what he’d hidden since the war.

Angela dropped her jacket in the doorway. “We’re enough alike?”

Kyle grunted. “Especially the bun.”

Observing from nearby, Jennifer made a note to never wear her hair that way again.

Angela got set. “Then come give me a lesson to remember and be rewarded with the loss of her memory from your nightmares.”

Kyle still hesitated.

Angela waved a hand, voice becoming a cruel shrew. “For the love of your father, just do what you’re told!”

Kyle lunged, reaching for her neck.

Angela ducked to the right, spinning neatly as he corrected and lunged again. It was easy to see he had loathed his mother. Angela understood completely.

She ducked and spun to her right again, staying clear of the corner he was trying to force her into. Still in the grip of the past, he wasn’t using kai but a lumbering lunge that she had little trouble avoiding.

“Maledizione!” Angela surprised him by knowing the Italian curse. “You’re nothing like your father!”

Kyle’s lunges became almost frantic, face a mask of fury. Marc was glad she was staying out of his reach.

So was everyone else watching tensely, including Jennifer. *I’ve never seen this side of him before; he’ll hurt her.*

Marc assumed she knew what she was doing. He steeled his heart as Kyle finally succeeded in getting her trapped in the corner.

Angela let him get a hand in the air to slap her and then she swung. Hard and from the hip, she used the flat side of her wrist to rock his head back and pause his advance.

Blood dripped from his lip. She quickly swung again with her other hand. These blows were called movers. She used them to push him back and free herself from the corner.

Kyle charged right back with a roar. He was slowly waking from the daze but not fast enough.

Angela slammed her fist into his chin hard enough to cause stars across his vision. He staggered back a step; she followed, delivering a nasty uppercut to his jaw.

Kyle hit the mat with a heavy thud, drawing cheers from some of their audience.

Angela waited for him to recover. “Is it enough?”

Kyle was surprised to be looking up at her cool blue eyes. She stood over him like an indifferent goddess. Kyle felt real anger then. The rage was gone, but not the sense of betrayal. “You did this on purpose.”

“Of course. In this cage, we’re not friends, teammates, or even fellow survivors. You will not deny *me* the right to be here based on *your* weaknesses.” She glared. “No more holding back.”

“I can do that now.” Kyle rose without fear of hurting her. If he hadn’t done that during one of the rages he’d once been infamous for, he wouldn’t be able to do it now either.

Angela fell into the first kai stance.

Kyle watched her eyes. When they went right, he protected the middle and blocked her swing. He used her arm to twist her around.

She ducked out of his hold, sweeping at his leg. This was the basic matchup practice from the level one set.

Angela was leading the fight now, using the four basic moves; she switched them through the first few levels quickly. Unlike the men who were built for this, she had a limited amount of physical energy that she could expend, and she would need that for the higher levels.

Marc motioned people closer so they could view the exact moves and the damage they could cause.

Angela retreated, pausing for the first time as they finished level five.

Kyle wiped sweat from his brow. He wasn’t out of breath, but it had been a workout. He noted the same was true of her.

“Level seven.”

Kyle nodded.

Those watching murmured in surprise. Seven and above was brutal, and usually Neil’s baby.

Angela felt that shell of nerves break away as she ducked his first wipe. Her face was cold as she spun and dropped low. She kicked out, catching him in the back of the knee.

Kyle stumbled, not as limber as her but just as quick. He turned and connected with a heavy slap that echoed through the gym. Shocked mutters sounded as her head flew back. They watched her fist turn sideways as she swung, using the bone against his shin. Her other arm slammed down, elbow nailing the top of his boot where his foot wasn’t protected.

Ivan let out a low cheer as Kyle staggered. Like Marc, he hated this. Kyle was twice her size and weight. Ivan didn’t see how she could win, but he was rooting for it.

Angela rolled to her feet and immediately kicked again, missing as Kyle slid to her right. She staggered this time as he punched her, but she managed to duck his second hit and sweep with a locked leg.

Kyle fell forward; Angela slammed her fist into his temple.

Grayness rose up. Kyle tried to fight it.

Angela moved back, wiping blood from her mouth. “Switch out.”

Before she could offer a challenge to anyone else, Neil stepped into the cage.

Kyle crawled out of it.

The entire gym went still and silent.

Angela knew she couldn’t beat Neil at kai, and she couldn’t change the level yet, not with a fresh challenger. She chose the only option that would give her the win. *I’m taking him out.*

Neil only made one mistake. He let her have the offensive and with it, the first hit.

Her right fist came out in a hard blow that he blocked with his hand. She grabbed that wrist, twisting his arm and flipping him over her shoulder as she knelt. She followed it with her legs around his waist and an arm around his neck. She locked her grip, squeezing as he struggled to breathe.

The choke hold beat Neil; when she didn’t ease up, he sagged in her arms.

Angela put his head down gently and stood, voice expressionless. “Level ten.”

Everyone looked at Jeff. Level ten was a hit for hit matchup that only ended when one of them couldn’t get up. Jeff was their newest kai instructor. He had to prove himself too.

Jeff scanned the two men she’d defeated. *I won’t let her do that to me. She’ll get hurt.*

Angela’s hands clenched into tight fists. “Should I challenge Kenn instead?”

Mutters and frowns met her words.

“No.” Jeff removed his gun belt as Wade dragged Neil’s body from the cage. Morgan hurried over to help him now that he’d verified Kyle was okay.

Angela braced her feet.

*Slap!*

It was a light hit, a slow start. Her response told him it wasn’t needed.

*Thud!*

*Thud!* Angela frowned at the still softened blow. She leaned her weight into the next swing.

*Whap!* Blood sprayed from his nose.

Jeff swung.

Angela had braced; she only felt the heavy heat of his fist and then she fired back, always seeing Kenny’s face from the past when these moments came

*Thud!*

*Thud!*

They traded two fast, hard hits, both able to stay on their feet.

*Whap!* Angela hit the ground as the crowd muttered at Jeff’s hard hit. She spat blood from her mouth as she rose and swung.

Getting uneasy, Jeff let her next hit land, then gave her a full punch, catching the corner of her mouth.

Angela hit the mat again, gasping.

Jeff waited, heart hurting. He watched her get up with tortured eyes.

Angela pushed onto her feet, ignoring the calls for her to quit now, that it was enough. She swung from the hip, turning her wrist. It snapped his head back viciously and brought more blood that dripped to the messy mat.

Jeff let his fist fly, wincing as she hit the mat yet again. Everyone wanted it to be over now. She’d more than passed. Jeff glanced at Marc.

Marc grunted, shaking his head. “If she gets up, you keep going.”

Angela climbed to her feet, ignoring the pleas for her to stay down. She doubled her fists and leaned into an uppercut that might have broken the jaw of a weaker man.

Jeff swung harder and had to look away as blood flew from her mouth and nose. She landed in it.

“That’s enough!”

“Call it!”

“She passed!”

The Eagles and the camp were getting pissed.

Angela didn’t have the strength to hit him again, but she refused to stay down when she knew she could take one more blow. She met Jeff’s eyes. “Slam you.”

Jeff’s final blow took her to the ground and kept her there, struggling to remain conscious.

Marc was glad it was over. “That’s a pass.”

The crowd cheered.

Angela waved off the people who rushed in to help her, including Morgan, who wanted to heal her before the cut over her eye lost too much blood.

She rolled onto her knees and used the cage to pull herself up. She searched the silent, frowning, respectful witnesses. “Next?”

Everyone laughed, tension broken.

Her heart swelled with pride as another cheer sounded and grew to include them all. Angela breathed a sigh of accomplishment as Morgan approached her. *Now, I’m a full Eagle.*

Morgan gently put a hand over her cut, working on that first. “You always were. We saw that even when you didn’t have the skills to back up that fire. Now, you have both.”

Jeff joined them, unable to fight the need to check on her. She’d taken hits from him that the rookies were scared to and the senior men always avoided.

Angela smiled through the blood and Morgan’s healing orbs. “Thank you, for doing what the rest of them couldn’t.”

Jeff swallowed his apology. She clearly didn’t want it or expect it. “It’s my honor.”

“And?”

Jeff sighed, now understanding what she’d meant when she’d said she was depending on him for the rest. He had foolishly thought she meant the recharges. “You send ‘em; I’ll beat on ‘em.”

“Excellent. Jayda, you’re up.”

# Chapter Twenty-Six

**No Other Choice**

**1**

**“A**ll descendants not on duty should be on the top deck for a training session. We will be at the International Detention Center soon; get to your training class so you’re ready to defend this ship. Grant, out.”

Jeff picked himself up off the mini-cage floor. “That’s it for today. It’s almost evening mess for you. We’ll meet here at the same time tomorrow.”

Instead of running to the mess, or to the play areas, where the younger children were, the eight kids surrounded Jeff.

None of them spoke; it was eerie to the few people observing the session.

Jeff wiped the blood from his face, then tossed the towel to Kimmie, who was also bloody but smiling. “I don’t know. If she plans to use you guys in that fight, she hasn’t told me.” He’d been sent here after the kai tests in the big gym. Stanley’s crew had needed to get it cleaned, and the kids had been scheduled for a workout.

“She doesn’t.” Cody knelt to retie his shoes. “She’s giving us an outlet.”

“Maybe, maybe not. With Angela, it’s hard to guess.” Jeff hoped the kids were right. He didn’t see the need for them to fight this time. “The adults can handle it. You guys have to protect the rest of the camp while it’s happening.”

Given a job, the kids relaxed and joined the den mother escorts who were waiting at one of the open doors to the gym.

Jeff turned and spotted half a dozen camp members watching through the opposite side of the long gymnasium. None of them were happy. In fact, several of them appeared angry about the cage matches they’d just witnessed.

Jeff got angry too. He knew it wouldn’t help to let it show, however. *We need them to accept our differences, but I don’t think that will ever happen.* Jeff cleaned up and left the smaller gym, going to the magic lesson now. The kids might not be part of the coming fight, but he was.

Other descendants joined him in the hall on the way to the top deck. Jeff also saw a few normals in the small crowd. He didn’t think it was a good idea to let them view more magic use, but it wasn’t his choice to make. *It’s starting to feel a lot like in the mountain with Jimmy and his idiots. I don’t like this.*

Several descendants nodded at his thought. Everyone was starting to feel uncomfortable again, though weariness was keeping it under control right now. Many of these people had gone through a duty shift, rookie evaluations, a kai test, and now they were going to use their gifts. Marc was making sure all of them could sleep tonight; their tired, sore bodies would insist.

Morgan and their other healers had helped people when their tests were over, but a few had refused. Jeff was one of those. He was enjoying the feel of it. He wasn’t restless for the first time since they’d set sail. *I needed this.*

Francesca fell in step next to Jeff; she didn’t talk.

Jeff caught her freshly washed smell. He was immediately distracted.

People around him chuckled and moved faster to give them a moment of privacy.

Francesca didn’t want that. She’d taken Kimmie’s advice. Moving too fast would ruin her chances. She jogged away from him, making sure to wiggle her ass.

Jeff sighed. It had been a while now, but he still missed Crista. *A quick roll might be welcome, but nothing more.*

Francesca smiled over her shoulder.

Jeff leered, trying to let her know it was physical.

He felt eyes burning holes into him. He stopped and turned, frowning. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Kimmie came out of the shadows, full of tears she was trying not to shed. “You’re mine.”

“No. Not until you’re older.”

“You’ll have someone else by then!”

Jeff felt grief rise up. He let Kimmie see how damaged his heart really was. “Not for a long time. And even then, I’ll always belong to Crista. You can’t fight a ghost.”

Kimmie began crying.

Jeff walked away, though it was hard. *I’m doing the right thing.*

Kimmie ran to the kid’s area, sobbing.

Everyone was proud of Jeff, though they didn’t like the little girl’s pain. Morgan tossed an arm around the man’s shoulders. “I’ll keep you company.”

Jeff laughed, shoving him away. “Thanks.”

Morgan stayed by the loner, wondering if Jeff would ever really be happy with them. His losses had reinforced his belief that he deserved to be alone. *I wonder if Francesca can help with that. She’s clearly willing.*

Morgan jogged toward the front of the larger group. “Hey, Franny. Wait up.”

Francesca snickered as Morgan put an arm around her shoulders; she let it stay, able to guess why he was doing it. “Just don’t make Pam think you’re cheating. No one wants to see your nuts rolling down the steps without you.”

Walking ahead of them, Pam laughed. “Don’t make me come back there.” Pam was tired, sore, and pleased with herself. She had passed her kai test, though she was only at level one officially. No one had matched Angela, but she’d had a lot more time and practice than the other females and rookies.

Jennifer and Kyle joined the group.

Pam’s amusement fell to the ground. Jealous anger swirled over the crowd.

Determined to recover the mood, Morgan winked at her. “I enjoyed you beating my ass today in the cage.”

Jennifer sniggered. He’d easily won, but she’d done well enough to pass.

Kyle scowled.

Morgan kept trying. He refused to avoid her like Wade was doing with Samantha. “Next time, I’m wearing a cup.”

Jennifer’s laughter floated over everyone, settling the nerves and the start of the bad mood.

“Very nice.” Marc joined them from an employee door. “Let’s see if you can all hold that good mood while we work.”

Nerves flooded back in, changing thoughts from personal dramas to the coming lesson.

Marc moved through the group and up the steps, wondering if Angela would...

Angela joined them, out of breath and disheveled.

Marc chuckled. “Did you have a good workout?”

“Been running about everywhere I go.” She sucked in air. “Gonna get in shape even if it kills me.”

Marc led them to the top front deck, scanning the bridge for Grant and his guards.

Many of the rookies who didn’t have gifts were already up here, but they stayed along the rear of the ship to watch while congratulating each other. The results weren’t out yet, but this group knew they’d done well enough to pass.

Marc handed Angela his notebook. He had chosen to do this session now because they were tired from the evaluations and kai tests. He wanted them to be able to fight at the end of a grueling day. Those who couldn’t, would be worked harder than those who could. “You’re good enough; sit this one out and take notes for me.”

Angela pretended to scowl as she found a nearby table, but she didn’t argue. Marc was right. Everyone else needed the practice. This would let her discover who needed more help and where.

Angela scanned and noted they were short a few individuals. Gus was with Bernice, helping her and her daughter get moved into the camp cabin hall. All the kids were below; Marc had refused to let them join this time. Trinity was on point duty over the ship with Dog and Samantha, who was too pregnant for any of the things they’d done today. Everyone else was up here, including Kendle. Angela didn’t look at her as Marc got things rolling.

“Stand where you want. Sit if you want. Just bring up as many layers of your shield as you can and hold them.” Marc brought up one, then two more.

Brittani immediately showed off by bringing up five layers. She didn’t break a sweat. She also didn’t bring up the other three she was capable of. She didn’t know how long Marc would make them hold it and the last three were a serious energy drain.

The few normal camp members who’d followed came up the ramp last and stood huddled together near the first row of lifeboats to watch.

Charlie also felt like showing off this time. He brought up four shields and sent them out to cover the normals.

All of them cringed.

Angela frowned. “He’s making sure you don’t get hit in the crossfire. Deal with it or go below.”

Charlie dropped the shields as all of them moved toward the ramp. “Cowards.”

Descendants nodded at his mutter.

Charlie brought his shields back up over just himself.

Daryl managed two layers and stopped. He hadn’t fully recovered his will to use his gifts.

Brittani stepped closer and smiled. “For me?”

Daryl strained, fighting the nightmares. Being under the layers now reminded him of being ill.

Zack connected to Kenn. *Tonya is up here.*

Kenn scanned; he found her lurking behind the group. She had a shield up.

Kenn didn’t protest, though he wanted to. She was learning to use the gifts from their child to protect them both. It was good. *But I feel bad for it. She shouldn’t have to do that. It’s my job to keep her safe.*

Tonya gave a small shrug. She didn’t tell him she’d felt left out when she got the order to skip this lesson.

Kenn’s expression softened. *You’re always one of us.*

Tonya grinned. She immediately brought up a second layer and laughed at the feeling. *This is so cool!*

The ship under them rumbled; it increased speed.

In the bridge, Grant reduced their speed to compensate. “Easy, girl. We’re on a schedule.”

Ray snickered.

On the deck, Angela waved him down.

Ray’s good mood fell. *I’m on duty. Why does she want me down there?*

Angela patted the chair next to her as Ray came through the shielded people. “We’ll chat.”

“About what?”

“Your future.”

Ray swallowed his nerves and sat next to her, hoping she would get distracted. He didn’t want to talk about the future. *I can’t have what I want the most. There’s no need to discuss it.*

Ivan was in the corner under the bridge, protecting the bosses instead of participating. He connected to Ray, then he connected Angela so the pair could have a private conversation.

Marc nodded at Ivan, glad he’d thought of it. Angela liked being busy and she was great at multitasking. Hopefully she wouldn’t feel left out of this too. Marc eyed Tonya and chose to let her stay. If she had a contraction, everyone up here would feel it.

“Give it more energy.” Jennifer helped Kyle and kept his attention on her and not Morgan, who was covering Pam in layers of his shield while she did the same for him, or Wade, who was working alongside Neil. Kyle was still angry at her trainers about the fear he’d picked up from her. Jennifer was glad he hadn’t caught the underlying tension. His anger and jealousy were blocking it so far.

Kyle strained. His gifts were different, harder to direct and control.

“You haven’t had them all your life. You’re afraid to trust.”

Kyle let go and walked toward the ramp. “I’ll be back when I can concentrate.”

Marc signaled Morgan. *Attack him.*

Morgan stepped away from Pam, unhappy with the order. He fired a weak spell at Kyle.

Kyle staggered as pain hit his spine. He spun around, searching for his attacker.

Morgan fired again.

Kyle ducked and brought up a single shield at the same time. Then he fired through it.

Jennifer clapped; Morgan fell to his knees from the blast of pain. He hadn’t brought up a shield. He hadn’t thought Kyle had that type of power.

Kyle fired again.

Pam caught it and sent it back with her displeasure.

Kyle groaned as his shield fell and her anger swarmed over him.

Pam followed it up with a layer of shielding over her mate.

“Get your shield back up!” Jennifer knew it was only a lesson, but she still didn’t want Kyle to get hurt.

Pam and Morgan fired together, through their shields like he’d done.

Kyle let go of his control and caught both blasts. He absorbed one and fired the other back, fueled by his anger.

“Very good.” Marc stepped between them. “Now bring up those layers.”

Kyle brought up a second shield, and then a third. He strained to pull enough energy for a fourth.

“Use your emotions.” Jennifer was glad when Marc stayed between Kyle and Wade. *Someone grabbed my ass in the lesson.*

Kyle growled. Energy streamed into his shields, expanding them. They kept growing until everyone on the deck was inside it. Then it rose up to the bridge.

“Can you hold it?”

Kyle nodded curtly at Marc.

Marc gestured. “Who else can do the bridge?”

Shields began rising. A few made it to the top of the glass windows, but most didn’t.

“That’s interesting.” Angela turned toward Ray. “So, when’s the wedding?”

Half the shields fell; people turned to gape at them.

Ray flushed. “We’re not. Stop staring at me. I’m not doing it.”

Angela’s brow arched. “It’s what you both want. Why not?”

Ray pointed at the gawking faces. “Because of that reaction.”

Angela chuckled. “They’re surprised because they didn’t think you would ever get over Dale. They just realized grief can be conquered.”

Ray cleared his throat. “Are you sure? I won’t cause problems here. I’m honored to be an Eagle. That comes first.”

Angela patted his hairy wrist. “You have our blessing. Be happy. Grant is a good man and he loves you.”

“I love him.” Ray saw descendants nodding, smiling, and relaxed. “Now I have to get him to agree.”

Angela laughed. “A lot of people have that issue. See. You fit right in.”

Ray was warmed. He hugged Angela. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” She gestured toward the ramp. “Ignore the few individuals who may not like it. They aren’t the majority.”

Ray scanned the few normals standing at the edge of the ramp to observe. Several were frowning at him now. Ray sighed. “I knew it couldn’t be that easy.”

“Life never is; do it anyway and enjoy your three years with him. When we go home, you’ll be with us.” Angela scanned Marc’s notebook and crossed Ray off his list.

Ray went up to the bridge with bright cheeks.

Grant regarded him curiously. “What was that all about?”

Ray shrugged. “Later, okay? I need to think it through.”

Grant smiled. “Whatever you want.”

Ray’s heart pounded. *Hope you feel that way later.*

Charlie moved closer to Tonya during the lull. “Can I talk to you?”

Tonya nodded, releasing her shields. She followed the teenager to the rear deck. They both saw Adrian and Sadie observing the lesson. They were sitting on the rail, passing a canteen and longing looks that the Safe Haven people ignored. Knowing Adrian was locked up, and over there, pleased most of his former army. The rest feared the disruptions he might cause if he was allowed to rejoin them. As long as he didn’t, they were satisfied.

Tonya turned back to Charlie. “What’s up?”

“I’d like to show you something from my time away from camp.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“Because you’re unhappy. I want to change that.”

Tonya snapped it together. “Kenn asked you to talk to me.”

“So did my mom.”

Tonya glared toward Angela. “I don’t get her at all.”

Charlie chuckled. “She’s hard to figure out if you don’t know the secret.”

“What secret?”

“She wants everyone to be safe and happy, and she’ll do absolutely anything to make that happen.” Charlie smiled at his mom. “She’s the alpha.”

Tonya sighed. “So what’s the plan? I forget it and take him back?”

“That’s your choice to make. I just want to show you something I found while we were out together.”

“Fine.”

Charlie connected them, trying to use a private line. *He hated hitting me. Because he was distracted, I got in deeper and found this. It beats against his good side.*

Tonya heard Kenn’s thought as if he’d spoken.

*I don’t deserve to be forgiven.*

Tonya scowled. “What does that mean?”

“He’s self-defeating. You know what that is?”

“Sort of. It means even when he’s doing something right, his mind thinks he’s evil, so it makes him sabotage himself...” Tonya got it. “He did it on purpose to screw up our relationship!”

“The brain is a scary place anyway, but when you’ve made the mistakes he has, and then you weren’t really punished for it, thoughts like that eat at you. He sees me and mom, and he remembers those ugly moments as much as we do. We’ve moved past it because he has changed, but he hasn’t. Until he forgives himself, Kenn will always be self-defeating.” Charlie stepped closer. “He wants you to be happy. He’s staying away right now because he thinks there might be a better match for you with someone who hasn’t made the same mistakes.”

Tonya didn’t want to be swayed, but she was. *I have my own mental issues over my mistakes. I know what he’s going through.*

Charlie scanned the shields and the straining faces of the descendants. “None of us have much time, Tonya. Three years will go by fast. Do you want to spend that time being angry and hurt, or do you want a chance at happiness?”

“I can’t just forgive him!”

“I know. I couldn’t either, but I have managed to let most of it go–because I got even.”

Tonya chuckled. “Wow. You’re telling me to take him back, and punish him like he thinks he deserves.”

Charlie was impressed. “He’s right. You are a genius.”

Tonya almost cried. “He thinks I’m smart?”

“So does everyone else. You’re not the same person anymore either.” Charlie walked her back to the front deck. “Think about it?”

Tonya nodded. When Kenn met her eye, she gave him a smile.

Kenn grinned. His shield expanded, going above the bridge. It wrapped around the entire top deck, like Kyle’s had.

The camp members observing the lesson scowled and muttered. It bothered them to see the descendants use magic, but this could have been a good moment where they felt protected. As soon as the hits had begun and the descendants resisted them, the mood dropped again. The normal residents, with a few exceptions, couldn’t take a single hit by any spell. Knowing the magic users could added yet another difference to be jealous of, and of course, to fear. The huge shields just reinforced the fact that they were in danger.

Marc missed it in his satisfaction. “Jennifer will now attack each of you, using her enforcer gift. Fight it as long as you can. When she gets you, sit out and we’ll see who’s the strongest among us.”

Clifford went down the ramp into the ship, expression dark. *I’ve seen enough. They don’t need us at all, except as slaves. Kendle was right.*

Over in the far corner by herself, Kendle swallowed a triumphant grin and brought up another shield.

**2**

“I’ve made my choice.” Jayda handed the signed sheet to Ivan as he came down the ramp with the rest of the tired descendants. It was almost evening mess; they’d been working all day.

“Walk with me.” Ivan scanned the page, vaguely aware that he stank. He hadn’t expected magic lessons to make him sweaty, but all of them were covered in layers of it. Marc had kept at it until everyone could lift their shield over the top of the ship. The odors were rough, but the mood was good. They’d just proven to themselves, and to each other, that they had a chance in the coming fight even if the detention center troops were all enforcers. Safe Haven’s descendants were skilled, but they were also strong. Marc’s lessons on holding their shields while being attacked was brilliant. Everyone approved. “I’ll make sure your name is posted.”

“Cool.” Jayda smiled at Wade as he went by.

Ivan’s lips tightened. Inside, jealousy rose. “You busy later?”

Jayda was caught off guard. “Uh, no. Why?”

“Dinner. Maybe a dance after.”

Jayda was shocked. “I thought you hated me.”

“I do!”

Jayda chuckled at his confusion. “Okay. What time?”

Ivan frowned at Wade’s back. “Whatever’s good for you.”

“How’s 8pm?”

“I’ll be by your cabin then.” Ivan faded into the shadows as Angela and Marc came by.

Jayda’s happiness flashed out, making Marc’s mood lift. He studied the sexy black woman as she walked away.

Angela slapped his arm, smiling. “Wrong ass.”

Marc laughed. He tucked her under his arm as he connected them on his private line. *I think she’s an Invisible too–about to unlock.*

Angela nodded. All their people were, technically, but opening that lock was difficult. It usually took severe trauma to access those gifts. The camp members who were jealous of their power didn’t need to know that misery might give them access. Peace wouldn’t be possible if they started hurting each other intentionally. Not to mention how many of them would immediately become corrupt.

*Yes. They have to become Eagles first, and gain their honor. Before that, it will only cause misery for all of us.* Marc kissed her. “We’ll handle it when the time comes.” He sent a small flare of interest.

Angela grinned as her body lit up. “Should I make an appointment with the medics for clearance?”

Marc chuckled. “Please do.”

Angela blushed at the heat in his tone. “What are you doing right now?”

“Uh... I’m clear until after dinner.”

Angela slipped out of his embrace. “I need my back washed...if you can keep up.” She took off running.

Marc laughed.

Ivan grunted, frowning. “Shouldn’t you be running after her?”

“No, but you should.”

Ivan took off, muttering.

Jennifer and Kyle caught up to Marc.

“What are you doing here?” Jennifer knew Marc had been waiting for Angela to be ready for an intimate moment with them both at the same level.

Kyle sniggered. “She’s going to the bottom shower instead of their cabin.”

Jennifer frowned. “I don’t get it.”

Marc slipped into an employee hall and disappeared.

Kyle led her into the same narrow hall. “There’s a line of people already there. Camp shower time is now. He’ll be at their cabin five minutes ahead of her just by walking.”

Jennifer laughed. “That’s mean.”

Kyle’s mirth faded as fast as it had come. He stared at her flushed, sweaty face and wild, dark curls. “I’m sorry.” She’d done well in the cage against Morgan, though she’d only been tested on the second level of kai. He wasn’t looking forward to her going higher.

Jennifer distracted him. “Did Neil take a dive at the end, with Angela?”

Kyle’s lips clamped shut, but his eyes sparkled.

Jennifer chuckled. “So did you.”

Kyle shrugged. “We couldn’t let the others discover they don’t have a chance. If the Boss can do it...”

“So can we.” Jennifer approved. “It was a good day.”

Kyle sensed her leading up to something. He tried not to stress over it, hoping it wasn’t what he feared the most.

Jennifer leaned against the cool wall. “I have something to tell you.”

Kyle braced for heartbreak. “I deserve it. Go on.”

Jennifer took his hand and placed it over her flat stomach. “I’m pregnant. That’s why Marc pulled us from the run.”

Kyle stared, dumbfounded.

“Are you okay?”

Kyle couldn’t speak. His mind was in chaos.

“Kyle?”

Kyle stared*. She’s pregnant... I’m going to be a father!* Kyle kissed her.

Jennifer kissed him back. *I love you. Forever.*

Kyle held her close, being careful. *And even after. We’ll always be together.*

*You can’t promise that.*

*Yes, I can. Even death won’t separate us. Our love is immortal.*

Jennifer moaned as desire flooded her. *Take me. Right here.*

Kyle did.

**3**

“New Eagle teams will be posted tomorrow afternoon, in the mess.” The radio crackled with Theo’s calm voice. He’d just taken over for Grant. “Do not trample each other getting to the bulletin board. Team leaders will attend a meeting tomorrow evening to pick their XOs. Theo, out.”

Marc laughed at Angela’s expression as she entered the cabin and saw him.

Angela chuckled as she realized he’d known the showers would be full. “Score one for the boss.”

Marc grew serious. “You’re the boss. I’m a good substitute.”

Angela moved into his arms. “Can’t we both be in charge?”

Marc reluctantly shook his head. “No. I serve at your pleasure.”

Angela sighed. “Thank you.”

Marc wrapped her up against his chest. “It’s my honor.”

Their small, plush cabin was filled with gear and the training tools they’d both been using to recover from their illness. Angela especially hated the chin up bar that Marc had installed, but she was using it. *One day, I’ll be able to do those damn things!*

The rest of the cabin was neat. The cleaning crew was taking advantage of them being busy. All the cabins on this floor were now sparkling and smelled like lemon Pledge.

“What happens when I take back over?”

“I’ll adjust.” He nuzzled her jaw. “Keep me busy, okay?”

Angela chuckled. “I have a job for you now if you’re interested.”

Marc pushed his hard body against her. “You name it.”

“Make me forget everything for an hour, Marc. Make me remember how it felt to be just us against the world.”

Marc held her back, surprised by the tears. All thoughts of sex vanished. “Angie?”

She let the tears roll. “Bad things are coming. I can feel it. I’m scared again.”

Marc’s stomach churned. “I was hoping you hadn’t noticed.”

“I had another nightmare.”

“You don’t sleep much anymore.” He pushed, carefully. “Do you know why?”

Angela shivered. “A new evolution is building. It might snap the locks.”

Marc didn’t like the sound of that. “How much higher can you go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can I scan you?”

Angela nodded.

Marc dug into her thoughts. The visions of Kenn had been replaced by Adrian the last time he’d done this. Marc braced to discover things he wouldn’t like.

He found images of Kendle.

Marc pulled out of her mind. “You said she’s not a problem anymore. You insisted we keep her in training.”

“I know...”

“But?”

Angela sighed. “It’s probably just my emotions.”

“Your feelings about her are bothering you maybe.”

Angela bobbed her head. “I can’t hate someone in my camp. She and I have to settle our differences.”

Marc chuckled uneasily. “You gonna cut me in half?”

Angela held him tighter. “Only if there’s no other choice.”

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

**You’re Weak Now**

January 8th

**1**

**“B**ring up those shields.” Jeff pointed at Kimmie. “Expand it. Cover your partner.”

Kimmie brought up a second shield, but it collapsed right away. So did the first one. She didn’t feel like working on a shield. Her heart hurt too much for anything but blood.

Jeff motioned to Amy “You’re up.”

Amy scowled at him. “I want a cage match.” Kimmie’s bad mood was rubbing off on all of them.

“Me too.” Kimmie sat on the gym floor. “No more shields.”

Jeff considered it. The kids had been well behaved and they’d done everything he wanted them to do. Working on shields was extra to tire them out. “Maybe.”

The kids all perked up, even the camp kids who weren’t as eager to view blood. Watching the UN kids fight was fascinating. Unlike the adults, the normal kids didn’t hate magic or even fear it. They understood it was another level of protection.

“I want all of you to bring up a double shield and hold it for one full minute. If you all do that, we’ll have a cage match.”

Half of the kids brought up a shield and began laboring on the second.

Amy slowly stood. “Can I help them?”

Jeff nodded. *She won’t be able to do much...*

Amy brought up two shields with no effort. She expanded them until all the kids were inside.

“Nice!” Kimmie used the energy Amy was now sharing through her shield. Her second barrier popped up.

So did all the others.

Amy regarded Jeff with red orbs. “Cage match now.”

Jeff chuckled. *She got me with that one.* “Okay. You go first.”

The two rookie Eagles helping him frowned, but they moved toward the cage, discarding weapons.

Amy ran into the center and crouched with her fists balled up.

Trent and Gabe entered together.

Amy rushed forward, kicking and punching.

Gabe went down to a vicious shin kick and then a nasty headbutt.

Jeff watched from the door, ready to intervene if it was needed. The little girl still got carried away sometimes, especially if she lost.

Amy nailed Trent in the balls and spun as he groaned. She kicked his ankle, bringing him down to her level. Then she headbutted him, hard.

Jeff glared at her. “No one dies.”

Amy shrugged. “He’s breathing. Hear the crying?”

Jeff sighed. “Does it always have to come to pain with you?”

Amy crouched, getting set to attack again.

Trent crawled out of the cage and rolled over, cupping his crotch. “I wore her down.”

Jeff snorted. He stepped into the cage. “Let Gabe get out before you go.”

Amy waited until the limping man was out and then she went into crazy mode.

Jeff was barely able to keep up with her as he slapped her hands away and deflected her kicks with his own. He only made light contact, letting her wear herself out.

Amy retreated for her next rush, eyes narrowing.

Jeff tensed. *She thought of something new. Shit.*

Amy lunged onto the side of the cage and dove onto his shoulders. She beat on him and kicked, hitting his nose, chest, and neck.

Jeff grabbed her and held her up. His stomach dropped at the triumph flaring across her face. *Mistake!*

Everyone watching winced as she kicked.

Jeff dropped her, staggering as little birds filled his sight. He turned his back to her, already knowing what she would finish with.

Amy didn’t do it. Her normal kick to the balls hurt. She liked Jeff too much to do that to him.

Jeff slammed the cage door shut and leaned against it, trying to get his breath back. “Anyone else want to go in there right now?”

Most of the kids shook their heads; Cody stepped forward.

Jeff tried not to vomit. *She rang my bell. Even Angela couldn’t do that during her kai test.* “Use your alpha pull.”

“I won’t need it.” Cody calmly entered the cage and brought up two shields.

*He unlocked!*

“Cool!” Amy attacked in a new flurry.

She bounced off the boy’s shield again and again. Her frustration spread through the gym, drawing attention from a group of camp members going by on their way to breakfast mess. They stopped and stared, fear growing.

*Even the kids are dangerous.*

Clifford nudged the woman in front of him. “Come on. We’ll talk while we eat.”

The guards were busy observing Amy, who couldn’t get through Cody’s new shield. They missed it.

**2**

“Is everyone enjoying the day of downtime?” Marc didn’t look up from the papers he was sorting through. Last night’s reports had been delivered. He was trying to skim for vital details before exhaustion insisted that he sleep. He’d taken the overnight shift again.

“No. Gus refused to join in any of the entertainments. He’s still escorting the new woman everywhere she goes.” Kenn was impressed with Angela for that matchup. *She knows just what a guy needs*. Kenn’s mood fell; he locked his thoughts.

The office desk was covered in papers and notebooks, along with results from all the tests and training they’d done over the last two days. Marc’s head was swimming with all of it; he was filing notes in his mind and his book as he went through each one. “Who else?”

“We told Stanley to invite Ramer to the poker game, but no one knows where he is.” Kenn slid that report over, wondering if Marc had gotten any sleep yet. “Stanley escorted him to his new cabin and went to get him a supply kit. When he came back, Ramer was gone.”

Marc frowned. “We have a guard on the infirmary and lab?”

“Two on each location. No sign of him so far.” Kenn didn’t mention James still lingering in that area.

Marc ran a hand through his hair and yawned. “As long as he’s not causing trouble, he served his sentence; he’s free to roam the ship like anyone else.”

“Noted.” Kenn handed over the next paper. “We have two reports of Adrian and his girl training on their top deck. A few descendants have caught thoughts from them. None of it is particularly bad or good.”

Marc put that one in his pocket to go over later. “Next?”

“Cody unlocked.”

Marc grunted. “I felt it. Keep that quiet until we need it. If the normals find out, they might...” Marc sighed at Kenn’s head shake. “They saw.”

“Yes. I put an extra guard on him.”

“Good.” Marc tried to act like it didn’t matter, but inside, he fought with himself. He’d hoped Cody would stay Invisible for a long time. He also wanted his son to have gifts now so he could defend himself if it was needed. “What level?”

“We’re not sure, actually.” Kenn’s voice lowered. “He used a shield that none of the kids could get through. Not even Jeff could when he tried. We’re assuming alpha.”

Marc made notes, both proud and scared. “What else?”

Kenn gave him the next paper. “This is the one you asked me and Neil to check on.”

Marc read it, stomach tightening.

*Her bracelet doesn’t come off. Neither does your necklace, ring, or the gun Adrian gave her unless there’s a lesson, and even then, the bracelet stays. It’s like she’s using the jewelry to camouflage something.*

“What makes you think that?”

Kenn shrugged. “She’s not a good liar. I asked her if the bracelet rusted, that I wanted to get Tonya one.”

“What did she say?”

Kenn frowned. “She didn’t. She immediately changed the subject.”

“Noted.” Marc gestured, still skimming the other papers. “Keep going.”

“The new team leaders decided to use the same test to narrow down their XOs. We’ll have those choices next week. They all think they have the final say.”

“They do, up to a point. What about the kids?”

“Calming, actually. Little Amy is still wild, but Kimmie and the others are settling in.”

“Did you talk to Kimmie about the artwork for the rest of the ship?”

“I did better than that. After lunch, the kids will be in a play zone with unlimited drawing supplies, cartoons, and snacks. As they finish each sheet, we’re putting them up, starting in the bottom decks so people don’t notice yet.”

Marc chuckled. “Well, they’ll be happy for a while. What about the rest of our kids?”

Kenn shrugged. “The den mothers are smothering them. The kids aren’t tired of it yet, but they will be soon.”

“We’re all glad to have them.”

“Not the camp.” Kenn handed over yet another sheet. “The normals are refusing to do duty over any descendant children, of any age. Clifford said they’re in danger.”

Marc’s eyes narrowed; anger filled the small room. “He threatened the kids?”

“No. He thinks the camp is in danger, from our kids.” Kenn shrugged at Marc’s expression. “I told him we would assign them to other duties. He asked to only have duty over normal kids. I told him no; we’re not splitting them up just because he’s biased.”

“Good answer.” Marc wrote a note in his book and sipped his now cold coffee. He started every day like this and he hated it, but that was the job.

“We scheduled the weddings after the detention center fight. Is that right?”

“Yes. How many now?”

“Three, maybe five.” Kenn dropped his head. “We’ll see who gets up the courage to ask and who’s stupid enough to say yes.”

Marc snickered. “Still scared of asking her?”

“Yes!” Kenn didn’t want to talk about it. “Debra’s been having trouble getting people to pay attention because she can’t yell at them. Permission to issue her a super-soaker?”

Marc laughed. “Granted.”

“Jayda chose a rookie team instead of Special Forces, but she refused to be the team leader without being picked by them. I told her she doesn’t get to make that choice. Then she hugged me!”

“Good. Angie has plans for her.”

“Personal team or security?”

Marc shrugged. “A bit of both, I assume. How is Neil doing with her?”

“She made level two, proficient right now.”

Marc drained his cup. “Keep going. I’m good so far.”

“I’m the father. We used Neil’s test. It’s mine.” Kenn tried not to be proud of that mistake. He hadn’t meant to get anyone pregnant, including Tonya.

“So Wade isn’t part of Angela’s breeding tree. Interesting.” Marc waited for more.

“He punched Ivan at evening mess and knocked him out. Jayda had just cancelled their date; he was distracted. Any idea what that was about?”

Marc rolled his eyes. “Payback. Ivan sucker punched Wade during the recharge and fled before Wade got in a return shot.”

“Well, he’s still out. Morgan is in the infirmary keeping an eye on him while he studies medical journals on pregnancy.”

Marc tried not to enjoy that. “Any other patients?”

“No, but several women have been by there today for meds to soothe stomachs.”

“Who?”

“Samantha, Jennifer, Candy...and Angela.”

Marc wasn’t surprised. “She’s stressed. She’s not pregnant.”

Kenn didn’t question it, though he wanted to know how Marc could be sure.

“Because we’re not having sex.” Marc’s voice dropped to a low growl as Kenn’s mind lit up. “Keep those thoughts to yourself!”

Kenn had to push. “It could have happened before the illness...”

Marc didn’t want that rumor flying through camp. “Morgan had Tonya do tests on all female patients. She’s not.”

“That’s good.”

“Why is that good?! She wants another baby.”

“She has other things to concentrate on.” Kenn didn’t flinch from Marc’s glare. “When we get to the island and things are calmer, it would be a better time.”

“That’s none of your business!”

“I disagree. The entire camp depends on her. What if she loses it again? It will kill her and our future.”

Marc scowled, but he was unable to argue that point. “Finish your updates.”

“Neil has the gift chart done. He’s still working on the descendant pregnancy book.” Kenn slid it over, glad he’d finally gotten the office printer to work. The image was low quality, but it was still better than hand copying a dozen of them.

Marc scanned the chart. “Are these confirmed?”

“Not all of them, but most. I assumed you or Angela would do the rest.”



Marc put the chart away so he didn’t get distracted. “Is that it?”

Kenn snorted. “No. Jeff offered to teach the rookies how to react to surprises. During the recharge, he caught several of them sneaking out to Angela’s meeting, or sneaking back.”

“Agreed. We’ll start on that after we clear the detention center.”

Kenn skimmed his notes. “Dog’s den is done. We nailed two large doghouses together and took out the wall between them. Samantha gathered dead leaves from the plants and Leeann brought in hay from the animal area. I thought it was nice.”

“But?”

“He pissed on it.”

Marc’s attention was captured. “Any idea why?”

Kenn shrugged. “Something about marking his new home. We cleaned it up while he supervised moving the ants.”

Marc sniggered. “I’ll bet that was interesting.”

Kenn’s brows came together. “We dribbled sugar water while he encouraged them like a worried parent. They’re all in the 200 gallon aquarium we were planning to use for fish.”

“They all fit?”

Kenn nodded. “They aren’t as big as the ones we were dealing with in the mountain.”

“Good.” Marc didn’t agree with Angela’s recommendation to let them live, but he assumed she’d developed plans around them. “What else?”

“Pam admitted she was the one who cursed Kendle.”

Marc lips thinned. “Is it still active?”

“She said it was supposed to last for years.”

“Not my problem now. How are we coming on resistance?”

“Not bad.” Kenn was proud to be supervising those quiet lessons. “No one is as good as the kill team, but in a fight, all our Eagles, except the newest rookies, can take at least two weak hits from almost any of Jennifer’s spells.”

“Excellent.” Marc was sure that would be needed when they reached the detention center.

“Camp members are openly avoiding us. Clifford seems to be their ringleader in all of it.”

Marc sighed. “We’re working on plans for that, but none of them are promising.”

“What about a second *save the normals* meeting? Maybe we’ll have another idea.”

“Schedule that for after the fight too, but only a few reps this time. A meeting that big will cause more stress.”

“Okay. Kyle and Jennifer are set to practice their new skills tomorrow. They’ll be all over the ship. We should hear some of their thoughts as they work on it.”

Marc made a note to help them if it was needed. “Let Kyle know I have a free hour tonight after evening mess if he wants it.”

“I will.” Kenn scanned for the next item, aware of the open door and people going by seeing him being useful to the boss. *It doesn’t feel as good as it did with Adrian. Or even Angela.*

Marc’s eyes turned red. “I’m sorry. Should I blow more smoke up your ass so it feels better?”

Kenn winced. He didn’t fight back; he moved on. “Candy is nesting. She’s cleaning her cabin right now–with a toothbrush.”

Marc let him change the subject, anger fading into weariness. “Make sure she doesn’t overdo it, but otherwise, let her. I’m told it’s normal.”

“Good to know.”

“Why?”

“Tonya is currently tearing apart the lab–reorganizing, scrubbing. We moved the litter boxes for her and then she kicked us out.”

“Even James?”

Kenn controlled his jealousy. “She told him she isn’t interested, but he’s still hanging around. I’m staying out of that as much as I can, but if he keeps it up...”

“I feel the same way about Ivan.”

Kenn kept his mouth shut.

Marc knew. The difference was that Angela was encouraging Ivan to lurk. “What else?”

“Cathy and Emma are still hunting young game. Emma is targeting Charlie now, according to the guards. Cathy has switched back to Timmy.”

“Did he join the Eagles?”

“Yes. Angela let him out of the brig long enough to do the evaluation.”

“They’re above the age limit, so there’s not much we can do unless Angela stiffens the new age laws.”

“She might. She doesn’t like Emma. She removed her from her team.” Kenn handed over a copy of the new teams that would be posted.

Marc wasn’t surprised about that either. “She tried to nail Charlie and got caught. She betrayed a teammate.”

“Oh, that reminds me. Is it a good idea for Brittani and Trinity to be on the same team?”

“Probably not, but Angela made that choice. We’ll see how it goes.”

“Okay. Uh... We finally have Panaji’s story. He was an illegal sneaking in on a container ship when the war came. Everyone else with him was a descendant, so that’s how he knew about us. Those people were all captured or joined the UN. He stayed there to wait for us.”

“Is he presenting gifts?”

“No, but we’re watching for it so he can be added to the training. All the new refugees are settling in well. We didn’t tell the camp about the Cayman cannibalism.”

“Good. They need a clean slate.”

“Yes.” Kenn sighed, voice hard. “So does Kendle, according to the camp. People are asking for her to be forgiven and let back into all parts of normal life here.”

“Angie was right again.” Marc explained when Kenn frowned in confusion. “She said she would punish Kendle so much that the camp would start defending her.”

Kenn grunted, stretching. His spine was sore. “Zack’s oldest boy isn’t all there now. His injury didn’t heal all the way. Zack’s down there now, spending time with him and Timmy. They still have a day left in the brig for the theft of alcohol.”

“Tell Zack to keep that under control. Drunks are not good for Safe Haven.”

“I already did.” Kenn knew Marc was thinking of Mitch and Matt. “We won’t let it get that bad.”

“Allison will help him too. She hates alcohol.”

“She hates men.”

Marc shrugged. “Maybe she has reason to. When Wade is finished with Emma and Jennifer, we’ll send Allison to him.”

“That works. Here’s the kid list. They’ve all had checkups now. All good or recovering nicely. So far, no side effects for them.”

“What about the adults?”

Kenn frowned. “Allison’s cancer seems worse since the recharge. Tonya has her on a specific diet, but so far, no dice.”

“Who else?”

Kenn sighed. “Theo is sterile. The tests are conclusive. So is Tommy.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. On the positive side, Quinn and Tommy are getting along.”

“Hopefully that will help them adjust.”

“Adjust to what?”

“Kendle’s next screw up.” Marc sighed. “Keep going. I’m ready to be done.”

“Missy asked if she could search ahead for us. I told her we don’t need it, even though we do. I’m not sure she believed me. You may have to make it clear that we don’t want her using that gift so the UN can’t track her.”

“That’s not why, but I will talk to her.”

Kenn frowned. “Why, then?”

“The normals, mostly. As soon as they find out she can slow time, they’ll want to use her.”

“And when they find out she can go backward too?”

Marc nodded. “Exactly. If there’s going to be a reset, it will be our doing and not until we’re settled on the island and have time to study the possible repercussions. We don’t have the time to do it now. I don’t want our special kids being targets.”

“Like Mike and Mia.”

Marc’s scowl took up his entire face. “How many people know?”

“All of our kind. Not sure about the camp.”

“I want another guard on them as soon as we’re done here.”

“I’ll cover it personally until we line people up.” Kenn shifted through the stack of papers. “We’re almost done.”

Marc waved, writing more notes in his book.

“Leeann’s locks are holding. She’s spending all her free time with the animals, but she’s avoiding the other kids who have gifts. She knows she has them too and that she was punished, but not why.”

“Is she spending time with anyone?”

“With Mike. He likes the animal work too.”

“As long as she’s not alone, it’s fine. What about your three? They’re descendants too.”

Kenn shrugged. “They don’t use it unless they’re threatened.”

“Because you told them Angela would remove them if they did?”

Kenn nodded. He and Tonya hadn’t liked doing that, but they also didn’t want their three orphans to incur wrath from the alpha.

“As long as it works, I’m okay with it.”

“Same. They need time to be kids, and to recover.”

“Are they talking yet?”

“To me and Tonya. Kimmie and Amy can get them to yell. So far, that’s it.”

“Hmmm... Send them to the normal kids classes next week. Maybe that will help them.”

“Okay.” Kenn wrote it down. “And last, but not least, Kyle is going to the rear deck now to have Adrian record how he became one of us.”

“Good.” Marc closed his book and gathered the papers into his folder. He locked them in the desk drawer. “Next updates are after evening mess.”

“You got it.” Kenn gathered his papers and went to the door. He hesitated.

Marc sighed. “Your name isn’t on the teams list because Angela refused. Talk to her about why.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Marc stared at the empty hall as Kenn left, almost wishing he wasn’t in charge right now*. I always hated the paperwork that came with leadership. It’s nice to know some parts of me will never change.*

**3**

Adrian sat back, thinking about all he’d just learned.

On the rear deck of the Adrianna, Kyle waited to be sure Adrian didn’t need anything else from him.

Adrian shook his head at Kyle’s motion. He didn’t need anything that the mobster could give.

Kyle scowled. “What happened to you?”

Adrian stared, miserable. *I fell in love and that warped my view on everything else.*

*You’re weak now.*

*Yes. Marc cut me off at the knees. I’ll never be what I once was.*

*Then you should do us all a favor and jump overboard.*

Adrian flashed an ugly grin. *Not until I have what I came for.*

Kyle frowned. *You’ll never get Angela.*

Adrian dropped his head back to the book.

Kyle stomped toward the ramp, furious with Adrian once again. *I should have helped Marc kill him.*

“Yes, but we didn’t trust Marc then.” Neil fell in step. He’d been protecting Kyle while he related the short, strange story to Adrian. Neil hadn’t known it was possible to split a demon or to invite one in. Jennifer had done both and succeeded. She hadn’t been happy with them only having half the gifts, so she’d showed Kyle how to accept a spirit that she approved. *If the others find out how to do that, it will cause chaos.*

Kyle grunted. “We’re using your walls and Morgan’s spiders. It’ll be enough.”

Neil hoped he was right. He was also glad his mate was a natural descendant so he didn’t have to make that choice.

Kyle wasn’t sure what to say. He and Neil were getting along, but there was a wall between them.

Neil sighed. “That’s my fault. I’m sorry.”

“For what you did or for screwing your teammates?”

“For not asking you to help me.”

Kyle stared at him. “Do you think I would have?”

Neil nodded. “I do now. I didn’t then.”

Kyle stopped before they got near the others who were enjoying the deck or on guard up here. “What changed?”

“You broke a huge rule.”

Kyle snorted. “I’d already done that with Jennifer.”

Neil shrugged. “I consider that love. Breaking magic rules to become one of us is huge.”

“Am I really, though?” Kyle let his bitterness show. “She shared her gift with me and I still feel like an outsider.”

Their old bond lit up. Neil smiled. “Same here. Maybe we can change that–together.”

Kyle considered it, but there wasn’t really a choice. “I’d like that. I miss...our friendship.”

Neil understood how difficult it was for the hard man to admit that. “Let’s get a beer and chat.”

Kyle snorted. “I need something stronger than a beer.”

Neil laughed. “Your wish is my command.”

**4**

**Special Forces Team #1**

Kyle, Daryl, Morgan, Ivan, Ray

**Special Forces Team #2**

Neil, Wade, Tommy, Emma, Trent,

**Level One Teams**

A-Angela (TL), Trinity, Brittani, Gabe, Harry, Kim

B-Jayda (TL), Debra, Stanley, Zack, Theo

C-Peter (TL), Pam, Allison, Terry, Quinn

D-Marc (TL), Ed, Ian, Cathy, Kendle, Panaji, Darren, Francesca

**Eagle Rules**

1.) All Eagles will put in two hours daily on training.

2.) All Eagles will serve four shifts a week on assigned chores.

3.) Eagles do not date underage members. Hunting the young is forbidden.

4.) Eagles are fully committed to the final battle. They will NOT stay on the island.

“I’m going to bed.” Kyle put the team list down and stood, reeling a bit from all the beer he’d consumed. The rookies were celebrating, but they were on the fun floor, monopolizing the biggest bar. Neil’s team had joined them up here, turning the evening into a good time that Kyle was sure he would pay for with a nasty hangover.

“Same.” Tommy nodded to Quinn, who was on duty in this area, then vanished.

Almost everyone else got up and left; Neil noticed Wade hadn’t moved. Neil saw his teammate’s unhappiness and sighed. *Might as well get this over with. If I’m wrong, she can rearrange the teams now.* “What gives with you and Sam?”

Wade stiffened. “What?”

Neil stared at his teammate. “You push her away every time she’s nice. Is it because you’re afraid of people thinking you’re seducing her?”

“I would never do that!”

“I believe you.” Neil offered wary comfort. “I’ve never thought that.”

Wade couldn’t take it anymore. He faced his friend, putting down his eighth beer. “Maybe you should.” Wade dropped his walls and braced for devastation. “I’m sorry. Please hit me until it goes away.”

Neil dug in for every memory, every conversation, every thought.

And found nothing bad. Wade had developed a crush on Samantha around the same time he and Jeremy were fighting over her, but he’d done the right thing and walked away without revealing how he felt. He’d never planned to tell her.

Neil spun on his heel and left the hall.

Wade dropped his face into his hands. “What have I done?!”

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

**Intervention**

**1**

**“H**as anyone seen my cats?” Tonya moved through the quiet ship, asking everyone she saw. “Does anyone know where my cats are?”

Ian frowned as she passed his post. “Have you...spoken to the wolf? He’s in the mess.”

Tonya switched direction. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Ian watched her go, trying not to encourage bad thoughts. It still boggled his mind that the wolf could communicate. He had been stunned when Dog gave him the order to send Tonya there, but he’d obeyed.

Tonya hurried down the steps; she found Dog sitting outside the mess. She smiled. “Have you seen my cats?”

*Yes.*

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Where are they?”

Dog nudged the mess door open.

Tonya entered, relieved. “I’m glad they’re eating...” She stopped, spotting an empty room except for Kenn. She automatically assumed he had arranged this. Anger rose. She turned to leave.

Dog growled at her.

Tonya recoiled.

Kenn was there to make sure she didn’t fall. “He did the same thing to me.” Kenn glowered at the bristling wolf. “I think he has a message for us.” Kenn was in a bad mood. Angela had told him he had to wait until after the detention center fight to find out why he hadn’t been put on one of the teams. Then she’d given him one of her inscrutable stares and walked away.

Tonya shivered. “He could have just told me.” She moved away from Kenn’s big body.

Dog sat, fur still bushed. He looked at Kenn.

Kenn sighed. He sat on the stool, motioning to Tonya.

Tonya perched across the counter.

Dog’s fur settled. *This is an intervention.*

Kenn rose. “I don’t have time for this.”

Dog growled again. It became a dangerous snarl that told Kenn he would get hurt if he tried to leave.

Tonya snickered. *I didn’t think he was afraid of anything...except Marc.*

Kenn dropped back to the stool. “Fine. Get it over with.”

Dog spoke to them both. *The kids do not like it when mommy and daddy fight.*

Kenn’s mouth dropped open. “This is about the cats?”

“Where are they?”

Dog lifted his snout. *They are afraid of being split up.*

Now Tonya’s mouth dropped open. “They think we’ll split them?”

Kenn snorted. “I don’t want those mangy animals.”

Tonya glared at him.

Dog growled.

Kenn shrugged. “Never liked them.”

Dog yapped, fur bristling again. *Liar!*

Kenn grunted, shaking his head. “Fine. We won’t split them up.”

Dog’s tail went straight up*. The kids want their parents back together.*

“They are not kids!” Kenn glared, hand dropping to his knife. “They are ugly, mangy cats that are only here to keep us clear of mice.”

Tonya frowned at him. “They’re my babies.”

Kenn pointed at her growing stomach. “That’s a baby.”

“I love them.” She smiled at Dog. “We won’t fight in front of them anymore. Tell them it’s okay to come out. We still love them.”

“They’re just cats!” Kenn couldn’t believe they were having this conversation.

Dog whined.

Tonya teared up.

Kenn caved, arms going over his chest. “Fine. No fighting around them.”

Dog waited, sure Kenn would give more.

Kenn glared back. “What?”

*Where will they sleep?*

“Ah, hell.” Kenn looked at Tonya.

Tonya wiped away tears. “Anywhere they want.”

Dog chuffed. *A deal has been made. The cats will come out of hiding, after the female picks her nesting place.*

Kenn and Tonya gaped.

Dog’s snout expanded into a wide grin. *I’m going to be a grandpa!*

“Oh, God.”

“Babies! Yeah!” Tonya went to Dog without fear now. She rubbed him all over. “Who’s a good boy? Are you a good boy? He’s a good boy!”

Kenn snorted. “You’ll have a wolf in your bed now.”

Tonya giggled. “That’s how I got pregnant.”

**2**

“Hi, Wade!” Samantha smiled warmly, ignoring his bloodshot eyes and the smell of beer. “What’s up?”

Wade lowered his hand; he’d been about to knock. “Is Neil around?”

“Can’t find him?”

“No, and we need to talk.”

“Is something wrong?”

Wade nodded. “Yeah, but I need to talk to him.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll tell him you came by, though, as soon as I see him.”

Wade flashed a sickly smile. “Thank you.” He went down the hall, shoulders slumped.

Samantha shut and locked the cabin door. She turned around, hands going to her hips. “All right now give. Why are you avoiding Wade?”

Neil lowered his shield. “I like it that you didn’t lie to him.”

“Quit stalling.” Samantha didn’t comment on his new shield level, but inside, she was impressed. Neil was practicing his gifts and getting good.

Neil patted the bed next to him. “Fate flipped us another wildcard.” Neil connected them as he spoke. “Wade’s in love with you”

Samantha opened her mouth to deny it; Neil’s images shut it. *Wade sees me that way? Wow. I look good in his mind!*

Neil chuckled, breaking the connection so she didn’t catch too much before he’d had a chance to talk to her about it.

“When did this happen?” Samantha frowned. “Never mind that. How do we fix it? You guys can’t be on a team like this.”

“I know. I was thinking...”

Her frown grew. “About?”

“Discovering if you were attracted to him.”

Samantha’s curses echoed into the hallway.

Neil let her go for a while, not hearing anything in her tones or detecting anything in her mind. There was no affair; she hadn’t known. Wade wasn’t making moves on her when he thought they were alone. *I have no reason to be jealous*. “Are you done?”

Samantha gave a curt nod.

“Good. I’m sorry I thought about it.”

Samantha realized Neil wasn’t upset. “Shouldn’t you be mad or something?”

He shrugged. “I would have been if it wasn’t innocent, but because it is, I considered the possibilities for a minute. Don’t be mad. I won’t do it again.”

“You miss Jeremy too. I forget that sometimes.”

Neil refused to let the sadness take over. “I’ll let Wade know we’re not mad, but you’re not interested...?” Neil wanted to be sure.

Samantha didn’t feel right keeping things from him. “I locked up that side of me after Jeremy died. I didn’t think I could get over it.”

Neil studied her. “Does that mean you’re ready to try?”

Samantha drew on her courage. “Maybe. If we go super slow.”

Neil caressed her cheek. “Will you give Wade an evaluation, without your walls up?”

Samantha sighed. “Are you sure it won’t get ugly? I can’t go through what we went through before.”

Neil shook his head. “I dug in deep. He’s been fantasizing about fitting into our lives for months. And I’m not competing anymore. You love me and you always will.”

Samantha grabbed him and tugged him in close. “You bet that ass!”

Neil kissed her, heart calming. He broke the embrace reluctantly, glancing around. “Is Amy with the other kids?”

Samantha stilled. “I thought so. Why?”

Neil stood up, reaching for his radio. “The den mothers told me to remind you it’s bed time. They think she’s here.” Neil keyed the mike. “I need a quick search for Amy. Anyone got eyes on her?”

Samantha followed Neil from the cabin, grabbing her jacket as she walked by the rack. Her gun was inside.

**3**

“Got a minute?”

Marc grunted. “This is getting old.”

Wade panicked. “Please. He knows, Marc! He knows!”

“Get permission first, from your family.”

That caught Wade’s attention. “I don’t have family here.”

“No?” Marc pointed.

Wade turned to find Amy peering around the corner at him.

Wade frowned. “What are you doing out alone?”

Amy shrugged, straightening. “Hunting you.”

Wade went to her and scooped her up. “I’ll bet the den mothers are going crazy.” He didn’t have his radio on.

Amy hugged Wade. “Why do you want to forget my Sammi?”

Wade winced. “I don’t.”

“Take me to the swings?”

Wade looked back at Marc.

Marc ignored him, returning to his notebooks.

Wade reluctantly took the little girl to the small playground down the hall.

“You can tell them. Theys won’t be mad.”

“I’m doing the right thing.” Wade helped her get settled on the swing.

Amy scowled at him. “It’s the stupid thing. We’re supposed to be together.”

Wade sank into the swing next to her. “I’m sorry. But you and I will always be friends, okay?”

“Good.”

“And as your friend, I need you to promise me something.”

Amy kicked out, trying to make the swing move. “Sometimes I run away because I’m mad. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Amy.”

She grunted. “Okay. I won’t do it again.”

“Are you lying to me?”

She giggled.

Wade zapped her, using his lightest touch.

“Ow!” Amy rubbed her arm, glaring at him.

“You will *not* run away again.” Wade didn’t use the alpha pull on her yet. He was hoping he didn’t need to.

“He zapped her.” Samantha stepped out of the shadows where she and Neil were listening. “She’ll hurt him for that.”

Neil gently pulled her back. “Wait.” So far, only he and Samantha were able to get Amy under control when she acted out. Marc and Angela, and Jeff, handled the girl, but even they couldn’t get complete agreement. Neil needed to know if Wade could.

“You hurt me!”

“You lied to me.” Wade let his eyes glow red. “Never, ever lie to an alpha.”

Amy cringed. “I’m good! I’m good!”

Wade held out a hand. “Prove it. Make the deal with me.”

Amy stared, lower lip quivering. “Don’t want to.”

“Because you’ll have to keep your word?”

She nodded, fighting not to cry. “Sometimes I have to get away.”

Wade relented. “How about if you come to me at those times? It’s not running away if someone knows where you are.”

Amy lunged over and wrapped her arms around Wade’s neck. “I will. I promise!” Magic swirled around them.

Wade patted her arm. “Come on. We need to get you back to the kid zone so your new mom can yell at you.”

“No! You make the promise with me.” Amy wiggled out of his hold and dropped to the ground. “Promise you not forget us.”

Wade groaned. “I can’t.”

“Then I take mine back.”

“You’re too young to understand.”

“But I’m not.” Samantha moved forward.

Wade tried to slam his walls into place.

Samantha was faster. She shoved in and began wallowing.

Neil held a hand out to Amy. “Let’s talk, young lady.”

Amy grinned despite his stern tone. She let Neil lead her out of the play area. “We’ve got a Wade now!”

“Shh...” Neil led her around the corner to give them privacy. “You’re spooking him.”

Amy snorted. “No, that’s what *you’ve* been doing.”

“Samantha...” Wade let her explore his thoughts of her, his memories. “I’m sorry.”

Samantha yanked open door after door with her name on it. Hunting; watching her stalk the deer herd. He’d found her glorious in that moment. Fighting with Jeremy and trashing the Jeepster. Wade had been rooting for them both. Her bee experiment... She saw him stare in longing. She felt the shift. “That’s when it changed for you.” She paused the replay. “What happened?”

Wade didn’t want to answer, but her expression was so friendly, so inviting! “You decided you were going to have them both.”

“So my...sluttiness?”

“Don’t do that!” Wade retreated because his voice went up. It was an automatic reaction to keep women from being scared of him. “I began to want you then, because we’re alike, but I controlled it and I never...”

Samantha put a hand on his arm to calm him. Wade felt her magic wash over his frayed nerves. He groaned. “Please stop; don’t do that.”

“Be very, very still.”

Wade retreated again, sensing what was coming.

Samantha brought up her shield and locked him in place. “Neil and Amy want me to check you over. You’re dying for it too.”

“You’re being forced! It isn’t right! Stop...” He froze as she stepped into the shield with him.

Samantha could feel the fragile hold he had on himself. “Calm down.” She stared into his eyes. “Ready?”

He shook his head, hands clenching. “Once you do this, you can’t take it back.”

“You don’t know yet.”

“I do, and so do you or you wouldn’t be this close to me.”

“I would if it were a team thing.” Samantha inched closer. “Are we compatible? Show me!”

Magic swarmed them, filling the bubble with bright light that both blinded and shielded.

Samantha toned it down. “Sorry. New and rusty.”

Wade felt his mental walls collapse. He stopped fighting as she roamed his inner thoughts, where he kept all his desires. “I’m sorry.”

“Show me the worst one.”

Wave gestured mentally. A file flew out and opened in front of her.

Samantha’s cheeks turned red. Her throat went dry. “That’s the worst?”

Wade nodded stiffly.

“Show me the best.”

“No. Stop it now. Enough damage has been done.”

Samantha stepped against him. “I’m going to check you out now.” She slid an arm around his neck and leaned against his hip.

Wade groaned, hands automatically coming up to hold her.

Samantha placed her head against his big chest.

Wade enjoyed the embrace; he also hated it because it made him feel bad. He waited for it to be over.

He saw movement and found Neil observing them. Amy was at his side, wearing a satisfied expression. Neil’s face was blank.

“I need you to kiss me.” Samantha moved against him before he could argue. “I’m too rusty to flip the lock myself.” She pressed her mouth to his.

Wade’s need flashed out and seared her from head to toe.

Samantha moaned as he kissed her, bolt shattering. Her hand pulled him closer; their tongues met. Lightning flashed.

Wade jerked away from her, breathing hard.

Samantha lowered the shield, hand coming up to her lips. She turned to Neil. “Are you sure? I can lock it up. So can he.”

Neil smiled at her, nodding.

Wade didn’t trust himself to speak. *I’ll remember that forever.*

Neil glanced down at Amy. “Let’s get you where you belong while mommy and uncle Wade get to know each other.”

“Daddy Wade.” Amy glared at them all.

Neil chuckled.

Wade blushed.

Samantha frowned. “You don’t tell me; I tell you.” Samantha pointed. “Get to the kid zone and apologize to the den mothers.”

“Okay.” Amy grabbed Neil’s hand. “Can I have a piggyback?”

Samantha smiled as Neil hefted the girl up with one hand and slid her onto his back. They galloped down the hall, spreading good vibes. “I love that little girl. It’s scary. It happened overnight.”

“Do you think she charmed you?”

“Yes, but in the normal way.” Samantha turned back to Wade, cheeks red. “Did she put a spell on you?”

Wade chuckled. He drew in a breath and lifted his hand. “You did.”

Samantha held still as he caressed her cheek, enjoying the chills. There was a tiny wave of guilt, but it faded, letting her be herself. “Are you sure you want to get mixed up with us?”

Wade offered her his arm. “It would be my honor, in any fashion. Our friendship is enough.”

Samantha shrugged. “I didn’t even know we were friends, so it wasn’t good for me.”

She snickered at the way that sounded. Then she paused. “Wait. What about all your service contracts...or whatever they are?”

“They’re friends, of a personal nature.”

“Ah. Well, aren’t your friends going to be upset or still sneak into your bed?”

Wade shrugged. “That depends on what I tell them. I may need help with that choice.” Wade settled her at the table, remembering their other moment here. He’d wanted to tell her then. “I can say nothing’s changed...” He smiled at her immediate frown. “I’d rather tell them I’m out of the service business.”

She stared. “Won’t you miss it?”

He shook his head, letting his real emotions show. “I want you and Neil. It’s all I’ve wanted for months now.”

“You want Neil too? Does he know that?”

Wade laughed. “Not exactly in that way. We both enjoy the closeness, the possibilities.”

“You watched him and Jeremy.”

Wade shrugged. “It was hard not to. They were very happy with you.”

Samantha smiled softly. “I was very happy with them.”

“I don’t want this, Sam, if it will cause chaos. Tell me to go away and it’ll happen.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because this can’t end well! It’s wrong! The camp will–”

“Wade.”

He stopped, tensing. “Yes?”

“Say it. I have to hear it to make my choice.”

He stalled, trying one last time to do the right thing. “Hear what?”

“Tell me you love me, you want me, and you’ll do anything to fill the empty place in my life.”

Wade broke. “I do love you! I’ve wanted you even when I shouldn’t! I... I need you!”

Samantha placed a hand over his. She let the sensation sink in and heal some of the darkness left in her heart by Jeremy’s death. “You’ll stay with us now. People will talk, complain. Can you handle that? It’s not easy.”

Wade couldn’t believe his luck. “This is really happening?”

Samantha chuckled. “It’s great you feel this way.”

“Great? Are you crazy?”

She nodded. “A little, but I know what I need to be happy. Your feelings are great because I have to have that level of need from my men. It’s just who I am.” She kept her hand on his wrist even when two rookie guards entered the park on rounds, staring in surprise at the heat between them. “So it begins.”

Wade put his other hand over hers, happiness flooding the area until even their witnesses began smiling as if they hadn’t disapproved at first.

Samantha slowly withdrew her hand. She laughed.

“What did I miss?”

“I was thinking it makes sense I’d be attracted to you. You’re the camp’s highest rated service provider. I just don’t get why you want me.” She gestured. “I’m fat, sleepy, and I need a shower.”

Wade came over to her and offered his arm. “Let’s get you a shower and a nap.” He helped her up and leaned in to whisper. “It’s sexy.”

Samantha blushed, laughing. “I should have guessed.”

Wade grew serious. “I love kids and they love me.”

“I noticed.” She caught his meaning. “I guess that means you’ll want a child of your own at some point?”

He nodded, afraid to reveal more.

Samantha sighed. “Angela said this is the only birth I’ll have because of the final battle. I have to go back and fight.”

“So do I.” Wade led her toward the door. “What about after the final battle?”

Samantha felt peace enter her heart. “This might work, if you’re really as nice as you feel.”

Wade’s cheeks turned red. “No feeling until a month after birth. Doctor’s orders to Neil.”

Samantha’s laughter filled Wade’s heart and let him hold his chin up as they passed shocked people in the hall*. I sure thought this would end differently.*

Samantha caught that thought. *I didn’t. When Amy wants something, she gets it*. “Let’s see how you’ve been living. Take me to your place.”

Wade stumbled, almost falling.

Samantha laughed. “I’m sure Neil or Amy will be by to collect us. For now, let’s get you settled with a meal and a nap.”

Wade frowned. “I thought having two men was about caring for your needs.”

“It is. I *need* you to be happy.”

Wade caved. “Whatever you want, Sammi.”

“Perfect.”

**4**

“That’s a lie!” Bernice pointed at Clifford. “The UN is not your friend. They sent the pirates to my island!”

Her shout stopped the argument between Clifford and Ian, who had been trying to get the camp to relax and go to sleep so he could join his new team in the bar. Everyone stared at her in surprise. During the time she’d been here, she hadn’t raised her voice once.

Ian gave her an approving nod.

Bernice took that as a sign to keep going; she didn’t yell this time, though she did wish Gus was here. He was getting her cabin ready right now. He’d refused to let her stay down here among the normals even though she was one. “The UN ship came to the harbor. They used a speaker to tell us they had food and water. We were dying. We came in the thousands.” Her voice broke. “The pirates sailed in and opened fire with their grenades and guns. My two sons were killed, along with hundreds more. Those who survived fled, but there were too many pirates. Only three hundred of us escaped into the jungle.” She tugged her daughter closer. “We split up to avoid capture when they came in after us. Another hundred died of exposure, thirst, starvation, injuries.” She shuddered. “Never trust the UN.” She led her daughter from the camp quarters, comforting the shaking child who was now reliving those moments too.

Ian didn’t rub it in. He resumed his post on guard duty, hoping that would be the end of this fight.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

Clifford wasn’t a bad man. He was just scared. Ian understood that. “I know. We all need to try harder to get along.”

The camp members who had been listening went back to getting ready for bed.

Clifford lingered near Ian. As the crowd cleared, he leaned in. “I have to protect them.”

“Not from us.” Ian automatically included himself with the descendants. “You need us and we need you. It’s a symbiotic relationship.”

Clifford grunted. “Until they don’t need you anymore.”

Ian refused to restart the fight. “Time will prove it. Until then, try to keep an open mind.”

Clifford walked away. *I don’t think I can do that. If you guys hadn’t popped up, the world wouldn’t have ended.*

Clifford went into his cabin and shut the door.

Ian noted it in his report. Leadership wasn’t spending time with the camp right now, but after all the deaths, the camp needed them to be. The faith that they were protected had taken several blows. He also noted Bernice’s defense, though it had really been her hatred of the UN. His last note was to tell Marc things were escalating. The normals were scared. Panic wasn’t far behind. *It’s almost like they expect to be betrayed in the next fight...*

Ian spotted Kendle going into the bathrooms at the end of the hall. Several camp women followed her.

Ian frowned. *She wouldn’t...* He sighed. *Yes, she would.* He made another note in his report to find out if Kendle was stirring things up to make Angela’s job harder. Even though Marc was in charge right now, this was still Angela’s camp and she was the real boss. Of course, Kendle would want that to go badly. She wouldn’t even consider how it might hurt Marc.

Jennifer entered the hall; she came straight to Ian. Kyle and the others were now sleeping off their grueling day and their downtime fun. Only a few descendants were still up.

Ian let her view his suspicions. He had his priorities straight. The island woman didn’t.

Jennifer nodded her approval. “I’m here to relieve you.”

Ian gave up the post early without argument. The camp needed to spend time with the descendants and Jennifer was nice.

Jennifer snorted. *Most of the time.*

She settled into the chair behind the guard counter and sent her mind into the bathroom to observe the interactions.

In the bathroom, Kendle felt the attention and kept her conversation safe; then she left to join her new teammates in the bar. But her mind spun with plans. *I’ll talk to them later, when everyone is sleeping. I’m getting good at finding my target.*

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

**Banished**

**1**

**“I** can’t believe I made Angela’s team!” Gabe was thrilled. He hadn’t stopped grinning since reading the list.

“Same here. What does she see in you?” Harry smiled to show he was joking.

Trinity laughed with them, also delighted to be on that team. *Now I’ll really get good with my gifts.*

Brittani didn’t join in their mirth. She’d made a huge concession just sitting with them when they’d waved her over.

Brittani scanned the large bar where rock music was blaring and level one Eagles were celebrating. It looked like almost all the new teams were sitting together, except for Special Forces. Those two teams were finishing their own party in the recharge hall with a poker game, beer, and a break from the newbies. Brittani wished she was up there too. She was a little jealous that Neil’s team had taken Emma and Trent, who were both on duty right now over the lab and infirmary. *I did better than either of them.*

Trinity frowned at her. “You get to serve with the boss. There is no higher honor.”

“I know.” Brittani sighed, deciding their new team should start out on truth. “I just didn’t want to be stuck with you.”

Trinity chuckled, a little drunk and in a great mood. “Same, but that means we’ll put this behind us and bond. We might even end up as friends.”

Brittani stared at her. “What?”

Trinity shrugged. “I’m tired of being unhappy, and I won’t wait on Gus anymore. If he doesn’t want me, others do.” She smiled across the bar at Panaji, who was delighted to have been placed on Marc’s team.

Panaji looked behind him, sure she was smiling at anyone but him.

Brittani gawked. “You two broke up?”

Trinity nodded, refusing to get angry again. “I think he might leave. Now that you and Daryl are getting married, he feels useless.”

“So that’s why he didn’t make a team.” Brittani had wondered about that, but she hadn’t felt like she should ask.

Harry was just glad the two strong women weren’t fighting yet. “Same with Jeff and a few others. If you can’t fully commit, you can’t be an Eagle.”

Trinity snorted harshly. “So how did Kendle get a slot?”

The mood crashed through the room. Everyone turned to glower at Kendle, who had come in and joined her team a few minutes ago. They all had the same question. No one was happy to have her as an Eagle, but they were furious she’d been put on Marc’s team. Since Angela had approved it, no one was allowed to complain.

Kendle got up and walked out, face bright red. She knew how they felt about her even without using her gifts.

As soon as she was gone, the mood swung back to high. Her teammates didn’t go after her, though Panaji felt bad.

Cathy watched Kendle slip into the dance club across the wide hall. Her eyes narrowed. *That can’t be good*. Only the normals were in that club, hiding from the magic users. Cathy gestured at Pam, who was at the next table over.

Pam shrugged, but she didn’t follow. She’d made a team. She wanted to enjoy it. The island outcast could wait.

Allison glared at Cathy.

Pam grunted at her. “Stop it. We’re Eagles now. You have to let it go.”

Allison glared harder. “She’s still hunting our boys. When she stops that, I’ll leave her alone.”

Pam knew it was true, but they didn’t need a scene right now. “The new rules will cover it.”

Peter and Terry nodded.

Panaji frowned. “Don’t understand.”

Terry filled him in, hoping Peter picked him as XO. “She’ll be removed from the Eagles if she’s caught crossing an age line.”

Panaji lowered his beer. “Fifteen is the line.”

Allison shook her head. “The age limit is about to go back up. The boss hasn’t said so yet, but we know it’s coming. If Cathy wants to be an Eagle, she’ll have to wait until Timmy hits sixteen, at least.”

“She won’t. She’ll quit.” Quinn was sure of it.

Peter shrugged, giving Cathy a friendly leer that he hoped would encourage her to hunt an older friend. “When she’s caught, she’ll go into the brig. If she does it a second time, she’ll be banished. Hunting our boys is no longer allowed.”

Allison lifted her beer. “To the new rules!”

Her team clinked and drank. Other teams followed their example.

“To being on Marc’s team!”

“And Angela’s!”

Bottles and shot glasses emptied; people went to get refills.

“Did anyone find out what the seventh test was?” That was bothering Peter. “We only took six tests, but we still made teams.”

Zack filled them in as he rose. “The boss’s approval. She’s been testing you on that all along.”

Zack avoided Cathy as he got five beers for his table. He had thought to be upset if he didn’t get team lead, but after discovering Jayda’s name there, he’d decided it was for the best. *My old team is dead. I wasn’t a good leader.*

Zack carried the bottles to their table.

Theo took one and popped the top, trying not to stare at Debra. She and Stanley were talking in sign language. Theo wished he’d tried harder with her. He shoved the thought away before she caught him stewing. “I noticed some of us didn’t make a team at all.”

Zack gestured. “All missing people.”

Theo frowned. “We have people missing?”

Now Zack scowled. “You hadn’t noticed?”

Theo flushed. “I had my own drama to worry about.”

Debra frowned at him, gesturing.

Stanley shook his head. “I’m not saying that. I don’t curse.”

Zack laughed. “It’s okay. We get the idea.”

Theo scowled at them all. “I’m a teammate. You have to treat me with respect.”

Debra snorted.

More laughter echoed.

Theo got up, taking his bottle along.

Jayda grabbed his wrist. “Sit down. That’s an order from your new team leader.”

The table quieted. It spread through the bar as everyone waited to see how Theo would respond.

“Why? So you can all make fun of me some more?”

Jayda shrugged, letting go. “Maybe. You have earned it, you know.”

Theo sighed, anger fading. “Yeah.” He dropped into the chair by Jayda. “All right. Get it out of your system.”

Debra lifted her super soaker and shot him in the face.

“Son of a–”

Stanley slapped his hand over Theo’s mouth. “No cursing!”

Jayda chuckled. “You’ll have to get over that, Stan. Just like you’ll have to conquer that clumsiness. Angela gave you to me for that reason. I plan to get rid of it, or you.”

Everyone listening realized Jayda was serious.

Zack frowned at her. “You don’t have that authority.”

Jayda patted the new patch on her jacket. “This says I do. Don’t think you can slack off because we’re friends or because I’m a woman.” She scanned the other tables, where witnesses were listening openly. “We’re going to be the highest team under Special Forces, even if I have to work you all to death to get us there.”

Challenges began echoing; the mood lifted and kept going.

Zack’s mind eased. He lifted his beer. “To beating the other teams!”

They all clinked again and drank, ignoring the challenges from the other tables. Zack filed the moment. *She just won us over by acting like a leader. This might work.*

Jayda nodded to Ivan as he appeared in the doorway of the bar. She’d cancelled their date because he had only asked out of jealousy. *When he can love me, I’ll be there.*

Ivan grabbed a beer and left, heart locked up. *That won’t ever happen. You’re not Angela.*

**2**

Neil saw Samantha standing in the doorway of Wade’s cabin as he entered the descendant hall. He joined her, peering inside.

Wade was crashed. From the dishes and packages, it looked like Samantha had fed him, sent him to the shower, and then got him into clean clothes.

“Then I made him take a nap. He hasn’t been sleeping well.”

Neil rested his head against hers. “So what’s the final verdict?”

Samantha sighed. “He’s Jeremy, with more confidence and some serious skills, judging from the number of women glaring at me right now.”

Neil chuckled. “I assume they saw a kiss?”

Samantha snorted. “Jealous bitches.”

Neil laughed. He’d missed the fire. And she was right; the women glowering at her were greedy, petty females who envied the happiness Samantha would get from this. “It’s not the sex. They all knew Wade was capable of real love. They just thought it could be with them.”

“He hasn’t been happy in a while.” Samantha took Neil’s hand as he led them toward their cabin. “He told me he kept doing it because it was expected and it made a great cover.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I said it’ll be months before he gets laid again, to remember those times more fondly.”

Neil’s amusement carried all the way to their cabin, where people were coming and going with boxes.

“We’re next door now, in the bigger room. This cabin will stay open.” His face darkened a bit. “Since we’re at the end of the hall, we’ll probably get privacy.”

“People won’t want to bunk next to us because they think we’ll have sex while I’m like this?” Her face wrinkled. “Gross!”

Neil slid a hand along her cheek.

Samantha jumped at the sparks, laughing. “Point taken. Maybe that’s for the best.” She looked around. “Are the den mothers bringing Amy by later?”

Neil snickered. “I told them daddy Wade had duty next. They almost shit themselves, Sam. It was hilarious.”

Samantha ignored the frowns and the laughs of the crew that Neil had gotten to help with the move. She stayed out of the way, hand rubbing her stomach. “They’re active today.”

Neil saw her stomach get kicked or punched from the inside. He winced. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

She chuckled. “Now he worries!” She held up a hand to stop his apology. “It’s not bad until one of them get me in the kidney or bladder. Even then, it’s kind of...muted, I guess. Hard to describe.”

“Like being drugged, but you can feel the pressure?”

“Exactly, just without the haze.” She stopped rubbing, sighing instead. “I need to snack on something. They’re hungry, I think.”

Neil pulled a candy bar from his pocket.

Samantha tore it open like an animal. “Chocolate!”

Even the crew laughed this time, unable to help it. Samantha gave off good vibes when she was happy.

Neil felt someone coming up behind him. “He didn’t sleep long.”

They turned to greet Wade, who had Amy on his back and a wary expression on his face. Neil waved toward Samantha. “Keep them happy while I get us moved?”

Wade grinned in relief. He’d been worried they might have changed their minds. “It would be my honor.”

Neil snorted. “Keep that in mind when she smears chocolate on your holster.”

Wade glanced down at Amy, who had slid from his back. “She isn’t eating anything.”

Samantha brushed against Wade’s side, trying to avoid the moving crew.

Wade snickered. “Oh. Wrong girl.”

Neil sniggered. “That’s what I kept saying, but she insisted we keep you.”

Wade pointed at the cabin while they laughed. “Don’t you have heavy boxes to move?”

Neil moved into the room, head up. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

Wade waited with the girls, meeting curious and disapproving stares with a blank façade and an excited soul*. I’m getting what I wanted the most. Please don’t let me die before I get to enjoy it for a while.*

Samantha caught the thought. She slid her hand into his. “Your new family feels the same way.” She was looking forward to them spending time together. *I feel better. That’s good...I think.*

Neil glanced at Wade. *She still gets sad about Jeremy; memorize that expression.*

Wade did, while placing his hand over hers. He sent a wave of calm and love. “What can I do for you?”

Samantha sighed, leaning against him. “You’re already doing it.”

Wade put an arm around her, and then the other around Amy. *I never want this moment to end.*

**3**

“Can I assume you’ve settled your...issues?”

The trio on the couch all answered Marc with smiles and nods.

Marc chuckled, walking by the large, box filled cabin. Amy was sleeping on the big bed while the three adults enjoyed hot tea and an action movie. They’d left the door open. Marc wasn’t sure if that was to keep people calm or to rub it in their faces. He didn’t care except that another drama had been solved. He was too tired to question the morality.

“It also solved a breeding tree issue.”

Marc held the door for Ivan, who had Wade’s fist print on his cheek in an ugly green bruise. “This must be one of the parts I don’t know yet.”

Ivan checked the hallway, then waited for Marc to go first. “Wade’s DNA has had a chance to spread.”

“But it hasn’t; Courtney’s pregnant by Kenn.”

“Then it will be with Samantha. Either way, he’s out of rotation, so others will have a chance now.”

Marc considered that. “Interesting.”

“The breeding tree or how her mind works?”

“Both, but also that nature didn’t give him a whole ship of kids. He’s certainly been around.”

“Yep. It’s almost like he isn’t fertile...”

“Damn.” Marc lowered his voice. “Is that confirmed?”

“Not at all, but she’s worrying over that.”

“And him being with Samantha...”

“Might be a mercy to him. Samantha and Neil have their hands full with Amy and twins coming. They need him, and he needs the family. They’ll be happy.”

“For a while.”

Ivan shrugged. “No happiness lasts forever. We have to enjoy them while they’re here.”

Marc went up the steps, mind sorting clues. “Who else worries her?”

Ivan paused, sighing. “Me. Jayda changed her mind and cancelled our date. I was...relieved. Angela knows I don’t spark with anyone.”

“You haven’t exactly spent time searching.”

“Fair enough. She’s keeping an eye on the activities of half a dozen men in camp: Morgan, Zack... She’s monitoring two Mitchels as well.”

Marc tensed. “Who’s lined up for those spots?”

Ivan gave Marc a knowing look. “Not her. Adrian has a companion right now; Conner will nail Candy as soon as she delivers. I assume just those two.”

“Yeah, that assumption might not be safe. Mitchels have a lot of kids... Wait. Adrian has a lot of sons and a daughter. Why would she...” Marc’s anger flared. He quickly shoved it down as the hallway began to warm. “Figures.” Marc got moving again. “She searches years ahead, soldier. Sadie is not who she has planned for that branch of her tree.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Adrian couldn’t stand a future with someone so young and nice. He likes them bitter and clever. Sadie is neither of those.”

“But she could be, in time.”

Marc grunted. “You’re very pessimistic.”

“Yep. It came from surviving the apocalypse and then joining the light. It gave me the wisdom to expect the worst.”

“And hope for the best?”

Ivan slowly shook his head. “The best would be me, with your fiancé and place in camp. I refuse to hope for that; I’m no Jody.”

Marc liked the honesty even though he hated the words. “Can you prove that?”

“No.” Ivan moved away to finish his rounds. “Time will. As long as you don’t kill me first.”

**4**

“She’s not good for him, for any of us. No one will survive.”

Marc tossed in the bed, dreams full of a spidery voice as exhaustion kept him under.

“She’ll sacrifice you. Kill her now, while you can.”

Marc grunted, straining to wake up. He recognized a nightmare.

The voice kept whispering. “Dump her overboard and go home. You have enough power to conquer the world. You don’t need her.”

“Never!” Marc jerked upright, scanning for the owner of the voice so he could rip them apart with his bare hands.

The cabin door opened. A small girl stared at him with bright blue eyes full of anger.

Marc sucked in air, heart pounding. He didn’t recognize the child, and yet, he knew her. “…mine.”

The girl cried silent tears, not moving from the doorway.

Marc was afraid to get up. He didn’t want her to vanish.

They stared at each other, both sending out waves of pain.

“Don’t kill me.” The girl cried harder. “I try to be good.”

“Where are you?” Marc was sure he already knew, but he needed to confirm it.

“With the bad people. If you kill them, you kill me.”

Marc tried to smile at the daughter he’d never seen before. She was a mirror of Cody, of himself, and of his long gone twin sister. “We’ll be together soon.”

Cate shivered at the ugly thoughts around her. “Be careful. You’re in danger.” She ran down the hall, sobs echoing like a ghost.

Marc concentrated, now determined to wake up. *Angie!*

A cool hand settled onto his brow. “Right here, Marc. Open your eyes and view the present.”

Marc saw Angela’s concerned face above him. He blinked, then glanced at the door. “Open it!”

Angela did, worried. He’d been thrashing around so much his blankets and pillow were on the floor. She opened it and scanned the hall.

Marc saw it was empty. He listened and found only normal camp sounds and no evil voice. “A crack.”

Angela sighed. “Sometimes nightmares are just…” She stopped as he shook his head. “Okay.” She sat next to him. “What did you see?”

Marc crawled into her arms and tried not to cry. “My daughter.”

Angela held him, sorry for his pain. “Did you talk to her? Do you remember the exact words?”

Marc nodded.

“Then she was dream walking and found you. Amazing.” Angela kissed his cheek and got him settled back in the bed with his pillow, but she didn’t cover him up. His body was layered in a fine sheen of sweat. “It won’t be much longer.”

“There was a voice.” Marc yawned, weary body pulling him under. “It was saying awful things.”

“About me?”

“I won’t crack. I’m solid.”

Angela chuckled, but inside, her fury grew. She had hoped Marc wouldn’t suffer the same torments that she had as a byzan because he wasn’t as corrupt. Finding out he also couldn’t have serenity during sleep bonded them further and brought a new edge of dislike for power into her heart. *I wish there was a peaceful way to reset it so only I would know. Then, we’d all be free to start over.*

“Not possible.” Marc clutched her hand, lids flying back open. “Stay?”

“Always.” She didn’t resist as he tugged her onto his sweaty chest. She listened to his rough breathing, his tiny gasps as he replayed the nightmare.

Her lock rattled.

Marc tensed.

She sighed. “Not yet.” The power inside settled.

Marc wrapped her up and went back to sleep.

Angela stayed with him until his alarm went off, but she didn’t sleep. She stewed.

**5**

“You need to become an Eagle.”

Sadie frowned at him over their breakfast of bean soup. “What?”

Adrian scraped the inside of the can between them and spooned it onto her plate. “If you were an Eagle, Angela and Marc wouldn’t hurt you. You’d be safe on that ship.”

“I feel safe here.” She scooped up the glop with her finger. “Around that many people who hate me, I’d have to watch my back all the time.”

“Not if you were an Eagle.” Adrian pushed harder. “They get three full meals a day and sometimes snacks.”

Sadie’s eyes widened over her full mouth. “Fwee?” Food flew across the table.

Adrian pushed his plate toward her, stomach churning. “Yes.”

Sadie wolfed down her last bite so she could start eating his leftovers. “You can train me.”

Adrian grunted. “We’ll start with table manners.” He ignored her embarrassed flush. “That’s not in Eagle training, but if you spit on their food, Safe Haven’s people won’t see you as anything but gross.”

Sadie belched. She washed the food down with water from his canteen, purposely spilling it on her shirt and the table.

Adrian stood up to avoid the splatters. “We’re limited on water. Don’t waste it.”

Sadie gestured at the small window, where waves were lapping calmly against the ship.

Adrian frowned. “That’s salt water. You can’t drink it. We need freshwater.” He pointed to the small filter he’d rigged up. “That works very slow, and it doesn’t get all the salt out. I repeat: don’t waste it.”

He sighed when she started to pour it out in defiance. “Would you like to be tied up for the rest of this trip?”

Sadie put the canteen on the table, shaking her head. Her mouth was too full to speak.

Adrian capped the canteen and put it on the shelf where he was keeping their meager food supplies. “I don’t mind defiance. Usually, it turns me on, but not when it endangers my life. Keep that in mind.” He moved toward the door. “I’m going fishing.” He left before she could spray an answer. “Clean up your mess when you’re done–all of it.”

Sadie flipped him the finger, but he was already out of sight. She finished his plate, using her fingers to get it all. He wasn’t a good cook, but the taste didn’t matter to her and aching guts did. Her stomach hurt all the time. Only food helped.

Sadie scanned for something else to eat. She spotted his notebook on the small folding table. She peered at the door. Then she went to the table and began to read.

*The Creator stayed restless. He loved his children with his angel mate, but they did not satisfy him. After the tenth birth, an odd life form that caused misery and tears, the Creator returned to his new project.*

*Earth had flourished under his hand, becoming a perfect incubator. He had observed in fatherly concern as the animals came from the dirt and sea; now, he used his own rib and created what he called a human man. Already assuming the man would cry for a mate, the Creator made one for him. Loved and protected, Adam and Eve lived peacefully. God even gave them a human helper, who kept the garden beautiful.*

*Not being with her own kind took an awful toll on the Creator’s angel mate. After the twelfth birth, upon discovering what had been created, she flung herself to the earth and became one with nature, absorbing and invading until she could not be removed.*

*Her children, uncaring of the Creator’s pain, also went down to earth. Until their mother’s escape, no one but the Creator had descended. Angels and mini-gods now invaded the planet.*

*(Adrian’s note: We’ve always translated angels incorrectly. They were giants, but not just in size. They were huge in every way.)*

*The Creator locked the garden, and let his angel mate stay with nature, hoping she would one day return to him, happy. He spared little thought for his kids.*

*Outside the special garden, things changed. Angels and their mini-god offspring battled for the planet, enslaving each other. Their children became more unstable with every birth. It spread to the animals, corrupting the peaceful planet. Only the special garden remained safe.*

*The fallen children grew bitter at the neglect. Lonely, they haunted the edges of the garden, seeking their father. And they began to hate Adam and Eve.*

*So did mother nature. She plotted ways to tempt Adam and Eve to become corrupt. She wanted the Creator to concentrate on her instead of his creations; she transformed her children so that they might be allowed into the garden.*

*Mother nature’s first attempt was with a bumblebee. The bee, like the other animals, was able to get into the garden. It quickly found Eve and stung her, making her afraid of insects.*

*The Creator was furious. He cursed the bumblebees so that anytime they stung a human, they would die.*

*The second invasion came from a skunk. It tried to bite Eve in hopes that she would die from the injury. The Creator cursed the skunk so that it would always smell. What had been a defense now ostracized that animal from all others on the planet.*

*The third attempt was a vulture. It landed on Adam’s shoulder and tried to peck out his eyes. The Creator made that animal eat only things that were dead.*

*Mother Nature, very frustrated that her first three attempts hadn’t worked, decided on a small mouse for her fourth attempt. The mouse quickly found a mate and bred. Then it bred again. Nature hoped the sheer numbers would drive Adam and Eve from the garden, where they would be unprotected.*

*The mice tried to overrun the garden. The humans were forced into the trees to avoid being killed. To protect them, the Creator brought forth a cat from the dirt and encouraged it to multiply. Within days, there were more cats than mice. Within a week, all of the mice had been eaten, including his child.*

*Now angry with his angel mate, the Creator let the cats loose into the rest of the world where they mocked nature’s attempts to control them. The cats were independent, indifferent.*

*Nature decided the mouse had been too small for what she needed. She turned her fifth child into a glorious lion and sent him to the garden.*

*The Creator, now expecting the attacks, made the mice so ferocious that they attacked the lion and killed it. After, all lions were afraid of mice.*

Sadie took a quick glance at the door to make sure Adrian wasn’t sneaking up on her. Finding herself still alone, she went back to reading.

*In the garden, Adam and Eve were content that they were protected and loved. They foraged food from the trees and the waters. Nature decided a water creature would be her next assassin. She sent her fish child into the garden streams where it bred in vast numbers and ate anything it found in the water.*

*As soon as the fish reached the garden, they were cursed; they began to stink. The odor was so noticeable that Adam and Eve were easily able to avoid the trap.*

*Mother Nature was furious. She created a poisonous spider.*

*The Creator combated it with several new birds that fed only on the spiders. Adam and Eve were once again protected.*

*Following his lead, Nature sent in a raven that had the power of speech. The ravens talked to Adam and Eve.*

*Not to be outdone, the Creator confused the languages so humans and animals would no longer be able to communicate. He laughed at his mate for her foolishness.*

*Nature tried three more times with a rat, which was a new form of mouse that wasn’t afraid of cats, and then a sheep, and even a monkey. In every case, the Creator was able to turn the animal against nature or against itself, and protect his garden.*

*The final attempt was a snake. Mother Nature made the snake sound enough like humans that Adam and Eve were fooled. It slithered into the garden where it corrupted their helper with thoughts of lust.*

*The helper mated Eve. The child born between them held half of his mother’s goodness and half of his father’s darkness, thus all humans became carriers of both good and evil.*

*The Creator was heartbroken. He banished all of them from the garden and destroyed it.*

*The angels and surviving mini-gods were thrilled; Adam and Eve had lost immortality, but instead of killing them as nature advised, the angels took them in and finished corrupting the Creator’s most precious creation.*

Sadie stopped reading, not sure that she could believe such a farfetched story. It felt more like the fairy tales she had read as a child than the story of human origins. She tensed as steps came down the hall.

Sadie flew out of his chair, not sure if he would be angry.

Adrian took her warm seat and picked up his pencil. When he began to write, Sadie allowed herself to relax. But she was also bored. She couldn’t help talking. “How can you be so calm with your son being turned over to the UN?”

Adrian kept writing. “He’s a Mitchel. We’re too valuable to kill.”

Sadie frowned. “What about your mates?”

“They don’t usually live long.”

Her unease deepened. “From being hunted, right?”

Adrian sighed, pencil flying across the paper. “From our betrayals. Never trust a Mitchel. All we do is lie.”

# Chapter Thirty

**It’s Our Destiny**

**1**

**“W**e are underway again, folks.” Grant hit buttons on the console while speaking into the radio. “You’ll hear some noise. Don’t panic; it’s me.”

Small cheers echoed from a few people. Everyone else began stressing over their next stop. Angela had told them they would be at the International detention center in two weeks. It had now been eighteen days, thanks to refueling from their reserves and changing the tow line. Grant had used those chores as training sessions, making them take twice as long.

Marc had approved it so they didn’t arrive at the detention center too soon. Angela had miscalculated during the illness; it was rare for her.

“The next Eagle training class is at 8am. Be there or be square.” Marc let off his mike and continued toward the top deck. He wanted to be up there in case Grant and Theo needed help with anything. He’d slept better with Angela snuggled against him. He felt better now physically. Mentally, he was a mess.

Neil trailed him, frowning. His stomach was upset. “Something’s about to happen.”

Marc grunted. He felt it too. “That’s why we’re going topside.”

Neil’s unease increased as they reached the top deck and moved toward the bridge. People turned to watch them. Most of them were normal. “What am I missing?”

Marc was asking himself the same thing. He motioned to Neil. “Go stay with Angela. She has duty over the mess.”

Neil hesitated, torn. “I’m almost sure it’s up here.”

Marc gave in and let him stay. Despite everything that had happened, he trusted Neil with his life. “Keep your eyes open.”

Neil scanned everyone, mentally as well as with his sight. Everything came back normal.

Behind them, a small group came up the ramp.

Marc felt Kendle’s hot stare. He turned to glare at her.

Kendle hurried over to him anyway, eager to talk without Angela around.

When he didn’t send her away, Neil stepped back to give them privacy like he would have done for Angela.

*Creak...*

“Look out!”

The long metal rail fell from the top of the bridge; it slammed into Marc’s chest with a heavy thud that drew a cry. It knocked him over the rail.

Kendle tried to grab him, but the pole caught her arm, dragging her overboard too.

“Help them!”

“Stop the boat!”

People shouted, pointing as two faint splashes echoed up.

Marc surfaced quickly, feet struggling against the current being churned up by the big boat. He wasn’t close enough to be pulled under; he dove repeatedly, hunting for Kendle.

Kendle was in a full blown panic as the heavy, icy water pulled her under. When something grabbed her ankle, she tried to jerk loose. The hold on her was tight; she fought as it yanked her down. Breath used up, the water began rushing into her lungs. She slammed her hands against whatever had her, choking.

Marc gave a huge pull... They broke the surface together.

Gulping a huge lungful of air, he turned her in his arms, holding her as she thrashed and fought to get free.

“Kendle!”

She didn’t realize they were above the water. She wasn’t breathing even though she was still fighting, but with his hands holding her up, Marc couldn’t even shake her out of the hysteria.

The boat was dangerously close now, threatening to pull them under. Marc did the only thing he could think of. He kissed her.

Kendle froze at the feel of lips on hers, shocked into calm by the sensation. She gasped in air. “Marc?”

He held her closer when she started to cough.  
“Just me.” He began kicking, moving them away from the current of the boat that was very slowly coming to a halt. “They’ll have us out of here in a couple minutes.”

Kendle looked around, not seeing the doomed liner from her nightmares, but a vibrant ship full of healthy people ready to save them. It was the rescue she hadn’t gotten before. *I don’t deserve their help.*

Marc felt her shame and dug into her mind as he brought up his shield against anything in the water.

Kendle had no defense ready against his scan. He saw everything she’d been hiding.

For one second, Marc considered drowning her.

Kendle paled, shaking harder. “Please! I love you.”

Marc lowered his shield and let go of her.

Kendle went under.

Marc swam toward the ship, ignoring her mental cries for help and the screams from the top deck of the boat. He couldn’t make out the words, but he knew the camp people were shouting for him to save her.

Kendle popped above the water, coughing and gasping. A rope slapped her in the face.

Kendle clutched it to her chest, holding her breath again as the waves rushed over her head. She felt the rope tighten and realized someone was pulling her up. She broke the surface again and blinked. She spotted Adrian hauling on the rope. *No!*

Marc climbed into the skiff someone had set loose for him; he flopped into it and watched Adrian pull Kendle up. He didn’t tell Adrian to let her drown, but he wanted to. *She’s banished! And locked!*

Adrian had figured that out when Marc dropped his shield and swam away. He didn’t know what Marc had found in her thoughts, but he was certain it was awful. *Marc doesn’t make a choice like that lightly.*

Kendle was too busy trying to hang on to worry over anything else yet. She clung to the rope and thanked god that Adrian cared enough to save her.

*Do you wish her gone for good?*

Marc stiffened at the question. This was the first time the Ocean King had spoken to him directly. He looked up to the deck of the Adrianna. People were pointing and shouting; some were even crying at having their fears proven valid. He sighed. “No, but I wouldn’t mind a hand getting back onboard.”

The ocean swelled under him, bringing the skiff to the emergency chute as if he’d steered it there.

“Thanks.” He tied the boat to the ladder and began to climb.

*It is my honor.*

On Adrian’s ship, he and Sadie pulled Kendle up to the stairs. They tied off the rope and rushed down to help get her onboard.

Kendle hung there, terrified to loosen her grip at all. She’d heard the Ocean King ask Marc if he wanted her gone, but then she’d banged into the side of the ship and missed the answer. She was waiting for the strong wave that would knock her back into the water.

Adrian grabbed her arms and hauled her onboard; she broke down sobbing. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Adrian held her, rubbing her cold arms while salt water soaked into his clothes. “What did you do?”

Kendle refused to tell him. She hadn’t forgotten that Adrian loved Safe Haven too. If he found out she’d been trying to get the normals to kill Angela, he might throw her overboard.

Sadie studied them. *Great. Another mouth to feed.*

On the Adrianna, Marc reached the top deck and was surrounded by guards before the camp members could reach him.

Marc felt their anger and fear clearly. He did the only thing he could think of–he shoved into their minds and showed them part of what he’d found. “Everything she said to you was a lie so you would turn on us. She wants this camp dead!”

Only a few of them believed him despite the mental images. Everyone knew magic users could make people see whatever they wanted.

Marc broke the connections, grunting. *Fine. If that’s how they want it, I’ll use their fear to keep control.*

Angela appeared at the top of the ramp.

Camp members swarmed her, some accusing her of masterminding the moment, while others begged her to let Kendle come back. Her quiet words in their dreams had created a bond.

Angela went to Marc and held him, heart thumping. Things were ugly, but all she could feel was relief that he hadn’t been lost.

Marc let her lead him below for dry clothes, aware of her not speaking to the angry, scared witnesses. *She’s waiting for me to do it.*

Marc connected them. *I don’t know what to say that will make it better.*

Her answer frightened Marc.

*Neither do I. As much as I want us all to coexist, it really might not be possible.*

*Because of us; because we’re different.*

She shook her head, glad for the senior Eagle guards who surrounded them to provide an escort. “Because they’re furious they aren’t like us. Nothing we say can change that. All my plans and plots mean nothing now. Unless something very good, or very bad happens, we lost them the instant you let go of her.”

Angela gestured as she led Marc to their cabin to get changed.

Those who caught it locked down on their thoughts while making plans. If Angela said to be sure everyone was guarded tonight, that more trouble was coming, it was.

Angela stared at Kyle as they went by.

Kyle nodded at her. He knew what was coming and who she wanted to handle it. This wasn’t the first time they’d faced this situation, but they’d definitely learned from the past. This time, mercy would not be given.

**2**

“Stay here.” Angela shut the door before Marc could protest.

Naked and wiping away salt water, Marc was forced to accept her order.

Angela nodded to Neil and Wade, who had stayed in the hall to guard their door. “Everywhere he goes, keep him in sight.”

Both men stood taller. No one liked her life being threatened; they were furious at Marc being in danger.

*They like him more than me.* Angela sighed. *Good. He deserves it.*

Angela heard Ivan and Daryl fall in step with her. She felt better having protection. Things were ugly right now. Angela waved off her female teammates. “You’re too twitchy. Find other posts and cover them.”

Brittani led them down the opposite hall, satisfied. She’d told them Angela didn’t want their help right now, but they’d refused to listen.

Angela went to the camp area, able to hear the arguments and feel the fear even without her gifts.

Camp members surrounded Angela as soon as she was spotted. They pushed toward her with shouts and accusations.

Ivan brought up a shield around her.

The cries grew louder.

Angela shrugged at them. “I feel threatened. Should I pull my gun instead?”

Some of the people retreated; most of them didn’t.

“You made him get rid of her!”

“Why was she removed?”

“You tried to kill her!”

Angela realized Kendle had been making friends faster than she’d accounted for. “Have you forgotten she tried to kill me?”

A few more individuals retreated. They had forgotten.

Angela perched on the edge of the guard desk, approving when Ivan kept his shield around her. The camp thought she’d done it. *I might have if I had my gifts. I didn’t know she was dream walking*. *These people are now terrified and that’s dangerous.* “Kendle was caught breaking the rules. Marc sent her to Adrian’s ship.”

“He would have let her drown!”

“Why is she being punished?”

“What did she do?!”

*And here’s the issue. I can’t tell them descendants can get into their dreams too. They’ll riot.* “Besides lying to you every time she could? She withheld vital information.” Angela didn’t want to tell them this part either, but she had no choice now. “She knew pirates had control of the island we’re going to, but she didn’t tell anyone. She wants us all to die so she can be alone with Marc.”

Silence fell over the crowd of thirty; it held for only a few seconds.

“I don’t believe that.” Clifford pointed, finger not quite touching the shield. “Prove it.”

Angela lifted a brow. “Marc showed you. You don’t believe the evidence.”

“We don’t want you in our minds!”

“It’s not right, what you can do!”

“Abominations.”

Ivan strengthened his shield. There were enough angry, scared residents here to overwhelm him right now.

Across the ship, descendants felt his concern and hurried their way.

Angela tried again, using guilt. “So you hate us because we were born different. We should all die and leave the world to you?”

A few more of the crowd retreated now. Her calm facts were making them feel bad.

She sighed. “I’m sorry you’re not like us.”

“Can you change that?” Clifford lowered his hand, eyes glittering with greed. “Can you give us your gifts?”

She shook her head, anger rising. “No. And even if I could, I wouldn’t.”

Fresh rage spewed from the mob.

“You do want us as slaves!”

“No, they want us gone. That’s been the plan all along!”

Angela’s heart broke. “I’ve sacrificed the most of anyone here.” Her voice rose. “How dare you!”

People cringed from her anger, expecting to be struck with spells.

Angela hit them with her misery instead. “After all I’ve done for you, it’s still not enough.” She shuddered, feeling a crack trying to widen. She could almost understand William’s actions now. “You are the Creator’s most beloved creation. Descendants were put here to help you, guide you, protect you.”

“It hasn’t worked!”

“There’s only a hundred and fifty normals left. Some protection.”

“And you think you’d have even that many if I left you in America?”

“Yes!”

“We would have been better off if you’d never joined!”

Angela’s anger snapped the lock on her gifts. Power moved through the air.

Ivan reluctantly stepped in between her and the mob.

The camp members felt the danger. Many of them fled into cabins, silently begging to be spared.

Angela fought the hatred and lost. “After all I’ve done for you… Ungrateful, whining, terrified sheep!”

It was the first time she’d ever let her true feelings show. Once out, it couldn’t be taken back.

Angela didn’t try. She shoved Ivan out of her way with her own shield as she brought it up. “If you want a war with us, you can have it. All humans will be gone inside a month if I take the other side.” Her red orbs blazed at them. “The UN would make me their queen. My kind will follow orders. Be sure you want this. It won’t end well for your side!”

“Angie.” Marc was in the doorway, still dripping, clothes hastily thrown on. He was flanked by a descendant team that wasn’t sure who they would follow when the slaughter began.

Angela shuddered again, fighting to do the right thing. “Lock me back up. Right now!”

Marc shook his head. “No. Fight it. You’re stronger than the hatred.”

“But I’m not. I can hear their thoughts, Marc! They think I’m the enemy!” Her tears became crimson as they rolled over her cheeks and dripped onto her shirt. “I lost a child! I sacrificed our kind in battles! All to save them!” Her control broke.

In a last effort not to hurt the herd she’d had for so long now, Angela connected to Adrian. *Help me!*

Adrian stiffened. He could only think of one thing that would cause her so much pain, and only one answer. *Come to me. You’re loved here for who you are.*

Angela got up and strode through the hall of cringing people, shield too strong for even Marc to get through. “Fend for yourselves now or just die the way you were meant to.”

“Angie!”

She kept walking, tears of anguish and fury still falling. “Leave me alone.”

Ivan stayed on her heels, heart pounding. He didn’t know what had to happen now or how to help her, but wherever she went, he was going too.

The radio crackled with Grant’s worried voice. “Boss, we have trouble up here.”

Marc keyed the mike, following, along with the descendants and many of the camp members. “What kind of problem?”

Grant cleared his throat over the radio. “Pirates. Four… No, five ships, all with heavy guns. We’re about to be under attack, I think.”

Many people hesitated now; Angela didn’t. “Perfect timing. Ivan, Jennifer, Neil.”

The three chosen defenders hurried to catch up, almost relieved that something had popped up to distract her.

“What about us?” Clifford wasn’t as angry now.

Angela waved a hand.

Clifford was knocked down the ramp.

Marc grabbed the man before he hit the bottom. “Let her get rid of the threat, like she always has. Then you can go back to ensuring that she won’t ever do it again.” Marc shoved him out of the way and ran to catch up.

So did the other descendants. Even in a moment like this, Angela had chosen to leave and then to fight the threat instead of hurting innocent people.

“They don’t deserve this.” Neil let his true opinion be known. “They *should* be on their own. We don’t need them.”

“We can’t abandon them out here on the ocean.” Jennifer brought up her shield as they reached the top deck. “We’ll deal with this and then we’ll send them away on Adrian’s ship, with him. He’s who they really love anyway. Let him have them.”

Neil and others grunted and nodded their agreement. Adrian had started this camp. He could cover it while the descendants went to the island and had peace.

The line of pirate ships on the horizon were in battle formation, but not in range yet with their guns. They sailed straight toward the cruise ship.

“Shields up!” Marc stayed with Angela as the three chosen defenders immediately smothered their ship in thick layers of protection.

Angela strode to the front of the cruise ship. She stood there, gathering energy from her hatred and pain as she waited. She began firing as soon as she was in range, not afraid of the guns lifting to kill them all. Her rage blasted through the air and all the layers of shields. It blew into the front ship in the form of white fire. Flames and screams shot into the sky.

Camp members cringed from the display, now fearing for their lives when she finished with the pirates. Even the descendants viewed her in trepidation. If she turned on them, no one was strong enough to stop her, not even Marc.

The radio in the bridge crackled with an incoming call.

Ray put a hand on Grant’s wrist before he could answer. “No.”

Grant sulked, but obeyed. He watched Angela’s next blast sail out in the shape of a hand. It swept through another ship, breaking it in half and setting both pieces on fire.

Angela didn’t give them time to surrender or negotiate. She sent her new wind gift into the water, creating a wave that grew as it traveled the calm ocean. The wave swamped the three remaining boats; they vanished and didn’t come back up.

Marc and the others observed in horror and triumph. She was back and she was pissed.

“There’s my Angie.” Marc took her side and waited to see if he needed to stop her from killing their camp.

Angela didn’t want to stop. She turned to him. Her eyes blazed.

Marc slowly shook his head. “Not for them. For me.”

Angela shrieked. Her pain carried into the ship. So did her anger. It stung them all, even the kids. The battle not to fall into full darkness raged in her mind.

Marc spotted Adrian on the deck of his ship. He unlocked Adrian, hoping the man could help.

Adrian immediately connected to Angela; blue light swarmed over her, easing the pressure.

Angela fought it. She didn’t want his comfort…but she couldn’t prevent it. Their bond lit up, soothing some of her agony.

*I know what that feels like. I’m sorry you had to go through it.*

Angela sank to her knees, feeling like she’d been slapped. “You knew this would happen.”

*Yes. I was a coward. I gave the job to you.*

“I can’t do it anymore. I don’t want to be the alpha. I want peace!”

Adrian didn’t hold back. He sent love and comfort in thick blue and gold streams that hit her in waves, drowning her rage. *Our kind is cursed. We can’t have peace.*

Angela shivered as the cool breeze began to chill her sweaty skin. “They’ve betrayed me. We can’t go back.”

*No, but you have to go on. Get them to the island. After that, you can leave.*

“So they’ll be safe.”

*Yes.*

“You still care for them, even after all they’ve done to you.”

*Always. They’re why I exist.* Adrian pushed more light, trying to heal her cracks. *They’re the reason you exist.*

Angela let go of the rage. Horrible misery took its place. “I never wanted any of this.”

*I know. You’ve been a rock. Locking your gifts was a good try, but it will never change who you are.*

“Stop.”

Adrian forced the words out; he hated hurting her. *Their lives are worth more to the Creator. If you kill them, or leave them out here to die, we’ll never be forgiven. You stand for all of us, Angie. And we need you.*

“They don’t love me!” Her shriek echoed into the ship again, along with her sadness. “I would die for them, and it’s not enough. It’s never going to be enough.”

*No. When we go home, we’ll fight for them and win. And then they’ll turn on us. We’ll all die for them. It’s our destiny.*

Angela sobbed, shield lowering.

Marc gathered her into his arms and mourned with her.

So did the other descendants. Adrian’s words were echoing in every mind. His gifts had aged in the brief storage.

*We were meant to save them, not ourselves*. Adrian walked Kendle down the stairs toward his den. *Lock me back up, Marc. I want her more now than I ever have.*

“No. Try being a good person for a change.”

*That won’t happen.* Adrian locked them all in the lower room. *When we get to the detention center, I’ll make a deal for Conner…and for her. Lock me up now while you still can.*

“Conner isn’t being sacrificed.” Marc didn’t want to tell the truth, but things had changed. “He’s a member of the kill team; he’s doing a job, even if he doesn’t know it. I was never going to let him die.”

Relief rolled over Adrian. “I don’t understand.”

“I needed a way to get an advantage over them…and I enjoyed hurting you. Conner is only in danger if he crosses the boss there and he’s too smart for that.”

Adrian tensed. *You know something–something even Angela doesn’t.*

“Yes.” Marc wiped away her bloody tears. “They have a byzan. When we get there, I’m going to be faced with an awful choice.”

Angela’s anger resurfaced. “They’re going to offer you a trade!”

Marc nodded. “My daughter…” He looked up at the pale teenager standing next to them. “For Jennifer.”

# Chapter Thirty-One

**Something Else**

**1**

**“W**elcome back.”

Kendle shivered, hurting and angry. Saltwater stung her rope-burned hands. “He locked my power! I don’t have access to my gifts!”

“Never seen Marc that mad and I thought I had pushed him as far as he could go.”

Sadie followed, listening while mentally complaining about having a guest on their ship. *A female guest.* She’d gotten used to it being just her and Adrian.

“Will you tell me?”

Kendle shook her head, slinging salt water. “No! Stay out of my mind!”

Adrian ignored her demand. He pushed in, marveling at how easy it was now. He found her thoughts of the island and the pirates first. He frowned. “You knew we were heading into a trap...”

When he got to the personal demand she’d refused to carry out, he snorted. “Figures that Marc would put out a kill order on me.” Adrian led her to their small changing area. “What else? That isn’t enough for Marc to lock and banish you.”

Kendle stood there, refusing to think about it.

Adrian grunted. “The hard way, then. Fine.” He blasted through her mental walls and saw everything she’d done.

Kendle shut her eyes, waiting to feel Adrian’s knife go across her throat.

Adrian scanned the conversations she’d had with camp members, detecting how she’d avoided notice from Angela by behaving while the boss had other things to worry about. Then he saw the dream walking and how she’d tried to get them to kill Angela. “You traitor!”

Kendle dropped to her knees, shaking.

Adrian wanted to kill her–not for Marc, but for the trouble she’d caused Angela. *And that’s not a good enough reason.* Adrian sighed, voice hard. “Get cleaned up.”

He left, stomping up the steps to get away from her before his anger made him do it anyway.

Sadie stared at Kendle. “You betrayed the alpha?”

Kendle nodded, slowly standing.

Sadie grinned. “Maybe we can be friends.” She followed Adrian, feeling better about their guest now.

Kendle let her tears roll, heart aching. She was already missing her gifts, but the pain of being banished by Marc was much worse. He wasn’t like Angela, who had given her a second chance. Marc would never forgive her. *I lost him!* Kendle’s sobs echoed through the ship.

**2**

“Is she better?”

Marc nodded at Clifford, who had stayed at the bottom of the ramp. “Adrian calmed her. She’ll stay up there until she’s under control.” Marc didn’t tell him that she was surrounded by nervous descendants who were growing even angrier at the drama the normals had forced them to suffer through yet again.

Clifford followed Marc as he went below. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.”

Marc grunted. “Kendle tricked you.”

“We knew she was trying to pull something.”

“So she told you what? That she loved all of you and that if Angela was gone, I would too?”

“She said there’s a way for you to share the gifts.”

Marc stopped. He frowned toward the rear ship even though he couldn’t view it from where he was. “Traitor!”

On Adrian’s ship, Kendle cringed at Marc’s anger. *I’m sorry!*

Marc waved a hand.

Clifford ducked.

The spell flew through the ship and slammed into Kendle. Her witch was ripped free; her power vanished in one permanent moment.

*No! Give it back!*

Marc grinned coldly at her panicked cries. “That’s permanent. No one can give it back. You wanted the normals to rise up against us. Now, you’ll be one of them forever.”

Marc held out a hand to Clifford.

Clifford slowly took it, scared that he was about to die.

Marc helped him up and let go. “Anyone who wants to leave can do so at dawn. Go spread the word.”

Clifford scowled. “But that’s open ocean!”

“So?”

“So, we’ll die out there without protection.”

“Yes. We were wrong to defend you. Do it yourself, like she said, or die. After today’s bullshit, none of us care which path you take, except maybe Adrian. And frankly, if he had to pick between you and Angela, I think you’re screwed there too.” Marc slammed the cabin door, leaving Clifford to deal with his own mess.

Marc sank down on the edge of the bed. Alone for the moment, he examined the new crack that had opened while Angela fried the pirates. *I wanted to help her wipe out this camp. What’s happening to me?*

Marc laid back and tried to push it all from his mind so he could think of a solution. He reluctantly opened a private line to Adrian. *How do I fix this?*

*You can’t. She just learned the hardest lesson of leadership.*

*What? That those she loves will always betray her in the end?*

*Yes. Even our mates hurt us. It’s human nature. Nothing will ever change it.*

**3**

“Please let her come back.”

“No.” Marc didn’t look up from his papers. He was handling his nightly chores like usual, but everything had changed. A line of nervous, angry people were still waiting in the hallway; none of them were speaking, but all of them were thinking about Kendle, about Angela’s display, and about leaving.

“Can I make a deal to buy her another chance?”

“No.”

“She’s been hurt, man. She needs our help.”

“No.”

Quinn let his frustration show. “I’m worried about her... You owe me a life.”

Marc scowled*. Didn’t expect that one*. “I’ve said no three times. I won’t change my mind.”

Quinn had to keep trying. “Angela would give Kendle another chance.”

“Angela isn’t in charge. She’s still recovering, which she needs now more than before, so don’t go waking her up. We just got her to sleep.” Marc studied Quinn. “Why are you on Kendle’s side? Was it the sex?”

Quinn flushed. “Among other things. I love her.”

“She’s corrupt.”

“I don’t care.”

Marc felt Quinn’s pain, but he refused to give in.

“Then will you send me to the other ship?”

“You’d have to be banished, and before you decide to do something to make that happen, let me remind you if not for Adrian saving her, Kendle would be dead.” Marc’s eyes glowed. “I’m not banishing people anymore. I’m *removing* them.”

Quinn’s fury filled the room, but he was normal. He couldn’t even throw a useless blast that wouldn’t have an effect on Marc. “You suck!”

Quinn left, slamming the door.

James opened it right back up, tone expressionless. “Next?”

Marc nodded. “Let them vent on me. If they do this to her, she’ll fry them all and I might help her.”

**4**

“How are things?” Neil stopped by Ivan’s post on the mess hall. It had been six hours since Angela’s snap.

Ivan shrugged. “Quiet, and segregated.”

Neil scanned the two hundred residents crammed in for the evening meal. He saw descendants sitting together on one side of the wide hall; everyone else was on the other side. Both groups watched each other, sharing glares and fear. Neil sighed. “This is bad.”

Ivan nodded toward the opposite door. “Probably about to get worse.”

Neil turned to find Angela and Marc entering. Angela’s face was puffy from sleep and crying.

Conversations that had already been struggling now stopped. Panic started to rise.

Angela slid into the empty center table.

Marc went to get their trays.

It was so quiet they all jumped when a cook banged a ladle against a pot.

Angela opened her notebook and began reading reports as if nothing had happened.

People slowly went back to eating, but their attention never left her.

Jennifer slid in next to Angela, with Autumn in her arms. Now she knew what the dream meant. In that future, Marc handed her over and the boss of the detention center immediately ordered her to kill her mate. Jennifer was terrified.

“Marc wouldn’t do that.”

“He would if he had to choose between me and his daughter. Any of us would.”

Angela patted Jennifer’s wrist. “It won’t happen. Now that we know, we’ll change that future. It’s not always set.”

Jennifer allowed Angela’s magic to ease her boiling guts, but her heart continued to pound. *If you leave, I want to come.*

Angela nodded, but she didn’t speak about it. With so many witnesses, any plans she made would become public knowledge for the detention center leader to pick up when they arrived. Instead, she tried to send out waves of peace that she didn’t remotely feel.

The other descendants followed her lead, letting their magic wash away more of the tension.

Marc was proud of them all. After finding out the herd they’d been protecting was about to turn on them, it had been amazing that only Angela had snapped.

Brittani’s mother smiled at Marc as she handed him the two trays, trying to let him know at least a few of the normals still believed the descendants were good.

Marc nodded to her, grateful. He felt Angela’s pain of course, but he had his own heartbreak over the betrayal as well. He’d only been in charge for a few weeks, but he’d come to love the job more than he’d ever thought possible. Being betrayed was unpleasant for him too.

Working the serving line next to her mom to keep busy, Brittani also smiled at him. She’d been shocked to learn what had happened, but she had faith that Marc would be able to settle things down. He was the one person she trusted completely. Brittani didn’t look at Angela. She respected her, and she feared her. Trust wasn’t the same thing.

Marc took the trays to the table, hating that. *None of you understand how isolating it feels to be so powerful. She tried as hard as she could to stay good and keep everyone alive. You aren’t being fair.*

Brittani flushed, as did several others, but none of them took it back. The time for lying had come and gone with Angela’s threats. Her parents were normal; Brittani was worried for them.

Angela got up and left the mess.

Marc frowned, hard gaze traveling the room. “If this is how it will be, she’ll go to Adrian’s ship. They’ll probably sail off into the sunset. Do you really think that’s for the best?”

Heads bobbed on the normal side. Most of the descendants weren’t sure.

Ivan stood up, showing his anger. “You put her in this position and now you’re blaming her because you can’t get exactly what you want!” He marched toward the door, following her. “I don’t know why she wanted this job in the first place. You doubting her makes it clearer. You guys aren’t the chosen people. I think you’re just ungrateful survivors she shouldn’t waste another second on.” Ivan left.

Charlie also stood, holding his hand out to Tracy. “He’s right. You guys don’t deserve our protection.” He helped Tracy to her feet. “When we get to the detention center, maybe you really will have to fend for yourselves.”

Fresh fear filled the room. Many of those who were against magic had forgotten there were still obstacles to face. A few of them wanted to apologize or go after Angela.

Marc grunted. “Leave her alone; you’ve all done enough.”

More guilt flooded the hall.

*Use that.* Adrian was keeping track of everyone now.

*How?*

*Tell them the truth, like I would.*

*I don’t have the words.*

*I’ll give them to you. Just don’t let them leave the room in this mood. If you do, you really have lost them.*

Marc cleared his throat. When heads turned toward him, he felt the right words pop up without Adrian’s help. “If she wanted you as slaves, you already would be. If she wanted to abandon you, she already would have. This has to stop. None of your jealousy or grief matters–only survival does and you’re endangering that. If she gives up on this camp, we’ll all die. The UN will take over the world. Do you think they care about normals? Or betas? Or Invisibles?” Marc gestured. “Who saved us from the government?”

“Angela.” Ray was clear on that and he wanted everyone else to be as well. “We all fought, but without her plan, we wouldn’t have won.”

“She gave herself up to Donner.” Jeff knew her intentions had always been to protect the herd, even when she couldn’t. “She also tried to make peace with Cesar’s people when they came for us.”

“She gave Kendle chance after chance to prove she was good, that she belongs here.” Tommy felt his own pain ease as he spoke. “I care for Kendle, but even I can tell she’s no good. And yet, the boss let her stay because she felt bad for everything Kendle’s gone through.”

“She should have let her die on the beach.” Pam glared; she was furious. “You all remember what it felt like to see Kendle stab her, right?”

“Then she had Charlie heal Kendle.” Morgan’s voice hardened. “Because she’s good. She cares about all of us, even those who hurt her.”

Daryl swiveled the stool he was on. “She went up the mountain alone so none of us would be hurt in that fight. It cost her a baby.”

“And she can’t have any more now. That’s a high price to pay.” Harry stood up. “Not to mention she almost died protecting us from Kronus and Orin, while she was sick.” He moved toward the door, tone disgusted. “You all owe her your lives. I think an apology is in order.”

“She won’t accept that now.” Marc wished it could be so easy. “She thinks they’re all against her and she knows you’re all terrified of her. Imagine how that feels. An apology won’t solve it. You have to prove you trust her.”

“But we don’t.” Clifford chose to be brutally honest. “We don’t trust any of you now.”

“I understand, I do, but that means we can’t have a mixed camp anymore. When we reach the island, you guys can either drop us off or drop yourselves off, but we’re splitting.” Marc held up a hand at the descendant protests. “There is no other answer. The normals won’t accept us because we’re different. All their old words of tolerance were lies. We can’t have peace, and it’s *their* fault.” Marc left the room with Adrian applauding in his mind.

The other descendants also left, except those with normal mates or family. They stared between them and the door, unable to make that choice.

*Will it work?*

*I don’t think so.* *Your words were right, but I underestimated the problem.* Adrian grunted in Marc’s mind. *Those few who are torn will convince the rest or finish the split.*

*Angela was right. Unless something really good, or really bad happens, Safe Haven will disband and scatter in the wind.*

*Yes.*

Marc frowned. *Shouldn’t you be upset about it? You sound…relieved.*

*I’m not, but this would be worse on Pitcairn. It’s better now, while they still have to see each other. Once on the island, the two groups would isolate themselves and restart the old conflicts on that tiny speck of land. It wouldn’t end well.*

*Will this?*

Adrian sighed. *I’m not sure.*

*What about Kendle?*

Adrian’s anger was clear in his answer. *She’ll stay here until the alpha decides she should die.*

*Good.*

Adrian didn’t detect any softening in Marc for the island woman. He realized those feelings were gone. *It wasn’t love.*

Marc grunted. *It could have been, but she betrayed me.*

*She should have killed me during our Cayman adventure.*

*Yes, but that’s not where she screwed up the most. I could have let that slide in time.*

*So what was it?*

*This is my camp now!*

Adrian understood. *When Angela gives the word, I’ll remove her.*

Marc’s rage lashed out. *When I give the order! Angela will never do it.*

Adrian frowned. *Are you sure? She hates her.*

*Hate isn’t enough. Angela is good inside. I’m the one who isn’t.*

Adrian was shocked, but he couldn’t deny it. The connection to Marc was showing huge cracks that no one on his ship had guessed at.

*Ivan did.* Marc hated him for that.

*Won’t Angela see them now that she’s unlocked?*

*Yes, but I have it covered.*

*Will you tell me how?*

*Why would I? You’re as big a traitor as that bitch below you!*

The connection broke.

Adrian stayed on the top deck, quick mind adding the few clues he’d been given. When he figured it out, he locked down on those thoughts so no one else would get it. When Marc snapped, Adrian didn’t want to be anywhere near him. *He’ll make Angela’s moment with the pirates look like a training session. He isn’t just byzan anymore. He’s becoming something else.*

Marc calmed his mind and his heart as he went toward the ramp to the top deck to check on their captain and scan the radar. Angela had discovered his plan to go against her on the reset, but it had taken a lot of time. With this secret, she wouldn’t know until it was too late. *And I’ll use all her little toys to shield me.* He glared toward the infirmary he was passing, seeing Kenn and Ivan on duty. *She’s not going to sacrifice herself for these people ever again. I’ll see to that with every breath I take.*

**5**

“Will you unlock me now?” Sadie gave Adrian a bright smile. “I’ve been good.”

Adrian didn’t open his eyes. “You had no other choice.”

Sadie’s smile faded. “You haven’t been, but he unlocked you.”

Adrian didn’t answer. He’d missed his gifts; he was exploring the new levels and the doors in his mind. He was also trying very hard not to plot against Marc.

“Please?” She came closer. “I’ll sleep with you, willingly.”

Adrian couldn’t help but be tempted. It had been a long time since he’d slid into someone.

Sadie took his silence as consent. She began unbuttoning her shirt.

Adrian willed his heart to get involved. *We could train her, maybe even be happy with her in time. Can’t we at least try to let Angela go?*

Sadie’s shirt hit the floor.

Adrian’s lids popped open. He sucked in a breath. “You’re beautiful.”

Sadie blushed, hand going to her pants. “I feel the same way about you.”

Adrian’s mood dipped. *No, you don’t*. “Stop.”

Sadie wasn’t sure what she was doing wrong. “Don’t you want to?”

Adrian nodded, throat dry. “A lot, but I can’t. You’re an innocent kid. This is wrong.”

She frowned, not ashamed to be standing almost bare in front of him. “Why is it wrong?”

“You’re not the one I really want. And I still wouldn’t unlock you afterward. Get dressed.”

Sadie snatched her shirt from the floor, but she wasn’t angry despite the rejection. “You’re a good man.”

Adrian snorted.

Sadie had to try again. “When *will* you unlock me?”

“When I can trust you.”

Sadie had to accept that. She left, buttoning her shirt.

Kendle came down the ramp; she saw Sadie’s state of undress. Her face tightened. *I should have known.*

Sadie gave a smug smile even though it wasn’t true. *The normal won’t know*. “Let him sleep. He’s tired now.”

She pranced by Kendle, still buttoning her shirt.

Kendle went to Adrian anyway. She wasn’t sure if he could help her, or if he even would, but she had to try.

“I won’t cross Marc for you.”

Kendle dropped into a dusty chair. “What about your girlfriend? Will you cross him for her?”

“No. I just told her that.”

Kendle realized Sadie had fooled her. More anger and fear sank into her heart. “You have to help me.”

“I did. I saved your life when he let you go.”

“That’s not enough!”

Adrian understood, but there was nothing he could do for her. “You made your choice; you had a second chance. You blew it.”

“So did you! Why didn’t he lock you up again?! Why are you forgiven?”

“You’re a fool if you think that.”

“Then why?”

“He hopes I’ll screw up again. Now that he got rid of you, he can do the same to me and Angela won’t be able to interfere.” Adrian rolled over. “You’re here to tempt me, like Sadie is. Go away. I won’t break for either of you.”

Kendle left, slamming the door.

Adrian sighed. “It’s going to be a long trip.”

# Chapter Thirty-Two

**Beg for Mercy**

**1**

**“L**eave him alone.” Jeff tried to reach the scared little boy who was surrounded by angry camp members.

“He shouldn’t be here!”

“His father was a killer!”

“I’m warning you. Leave him alone.”

“Slam you!”

Jeff fired, hitting Clifford in the chest. The pain blast knocked him over the chair by his door and onto the floor. He stayed there, groaning.

The other normals fled down the halls or into their rooms.

Jeff picked Roy up, eyes glowing red. “You’re not staying down here anymore.” Jeff nodded to the two guards who’d been about to intervene; he glared at the others who hadn’t known which side to take. “It’s a little kid, and he’s one of you! Cowards.”

The two rookies flushed, not sure if they’d just lost their Eagle status.

Jeff had come to gather his things so he could finish moving into his new cabin with the other descendants a deck above. He’d found Clifford shouting at little Roy just for looking at him. “Sick of these people.”

Roy clung to Jeff’s neck. “Want Romeo.”

Jeff’s anger faded into sadness. “I’m sorry. Let’s go see Kimmie, okay?”

Roy shook his head. “Jenny!”

Jeff shrugged. “Whatever you want that I can give.”

“Piggyback?”

Jeff chuckled as he shifted the boy. “Ready?”

Roy grinned. “Go, horsey!”

Jeff ran through the hall, dodging people. When the boy laughed, Jeff’s heart eased into a better rhythm, but his mind stayed angry. *As soon as I get him settled with Jennifer, I’m going to talk to the boss and I don’t mean Marc.*

Jennifer met them halfway, face stunned. She took Roy and hugged him. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.” She nodded at Jeff. “Angela’s in her cabin.”

Jeff went straight there.

Jennifer took Roy into their room and sank down in the rocker with him. She’d spent many nights like this with Maria and Cesar’s sons. It felt right.

Autumn cooed in her bassinet, trying to grab the mobile. *Gotta get the ducks!*

Jennifer smiled. *Soon, I’ll have two. I don’t care if they have different fathers...* Jennifer’s mind went blank.

Roy tugged on her hair. “Okay?”

Jennifer slowly nodded. *Roy’s father is Autumn’s father. They’re step-siblings.*

Roy played with her hair. “Jeffs gave me horsey. It was fun.”

Jennifer rubbed his shoulder. “Jeff is a good man, like Kyle.” She sat Roy on her knee so she could view his face. “Do you like Kyle?”

Roy grinned. “Gives me suckers!”

Jennifer laughed. “Yeah, we’re all suckers for you.”

Roy’s face changed, darkening. “Not the normals. Hate me. Hate you.”

Jennifer sighed. “They’re scared. They don’t know what to do.”

“Talk to you.”

Jennifer shook her head. “It’s gone too far for talking to work. Some of them are leaving in the morning.”

“Good. Not nice to me. They yells!” Roy began to cry.

Jennifer hugged him again. “It’s okay, honey. I’ll protect you, like I did before.”

“Okay.”

Jennifer lifted him and moved to the bed. “I was about to snooze. Take a nap with me?”

“Yeah!” Roy loved being held.

As Jennifer’s arms surrounded him and her warm heat eased his fear, Roy’s thought came through clear. *Mommy.*

Jennifer’s heart broke. *I forgot about him; I’m sorry!*

Jennifer tried not to cry, not wanting Roy to sense her sadness. She rocked him until they both fell asleep.

**2**

“Jeff is coming.” Cody tossed an UNO card. “He’s mad again.”

Angela nodded at Ivan to open the door so his angry knock didn’t wake the twins she’d just gotten to sleep.

Jeff paused at seeing a cabin full of kids. All of them were here, except Roy, Autumn, and Kimmie. Even Kenn’s three orphans were in the corner, playing with Legos.

Ivan stayed between him and Angela; he respected Jeff, but he didn’t know him well enough yet. “Kimmie was on her way to get Roy from the den mothers. You didn’t see her?”

Jeff immediately spun around and went back down to find her.

Ivan shut the door. “Should I alert anyone?”

Angela’s face darkened. “No. If he catches them hurting her and kills someone, they deserve it.”

Ivan agreed. He braced to hear chaos over the radio.

Angela tossed a wild card. “Blue. And I’m out.”

Cody groaned. “You win.”

“Deal again. This time, Amy will play.”

“Don’t know how.” Amy came over to fill the chair as Angela got up.

Cody smiled at her. “I’ll teach you.”

“Okay.”

Angela joined Ivan by the door. She didn’t speak.

Ivan felt her trying to find the right words to ask for something; he braced harder. “Spit it out.”

Angela sighed. “Marc needs a workout...in the cage.”

Ivan paled. “You’re kidding, right?”

Angela shook her head. “No. I’ve already asked a few others, including Kenn. You won’t be the only target.”

“I’ll be the biggest target.” Ivan grunted. “Fine. Maybe I can get a hit on him this time.”

Angela snorted.

Ivan sighed. “Yeah. I can dream.”

“You can also get personal lessons from him afterward.”

“Because he’ll feel guilty?”

“Yes.”

Ivan chuckled. “Maybe you are evil.”

Angela shrugged. “When I have to be.”

“Why not tell him to take over Eagle training?”

She shrugged. “He doesn’t have the time. Because of that, he feels guilty for beating on my army.”

“So you’re setting it up for him to have a release, whether he wants one or not.”

“Sort of.”

Ivan tried to dig in her mind and found a wall of water. He had no chance of swimming through it for answers. “I think I liked it better the other way.”

“That makes two of us.” Angela stepped out into the hall, waving Molly and Monica over. “They’re happy right now. Try to keep them that way.”

Everyone turned at fast steps coming down the opposite hall.

Jeff appeared, with Kimmie on his back. Her grin was fierce.

Jeff slid her to her feet in front of Angela.

“Problems?”

Jeff shook his head, voice satisfied. “They won’t mess with one of ours. Damn cowards.”

Angela waved at the kids. “They need another guard right now, and maybe someone who can lose gracefully at UNO. I couldn’t.”

Jeff started to complain about the treatment Roy had suffered.

Kimmie took his hand. “Those people will be gone soon. Come on. Play with us.”

Jeff let himself be pulled into the cabin; Kimmie nodded at Angela and went in.

Molly and Monica joined the game, ignoring Kimmie’s glares. They settled where they found room and enjoyed the good vibes. Being around kids was soothing now compared to the tension of the camp areas.

Angela waved off her other shadows. “Go look after Marc. He’s doing rounds right now. I can’t promise he’s safe with things like this.”

Emma and Trent took off down the hall, calling for a location on Marc.

“Rookies are easy to fool.”

Angela frowned at Ivan. “That wasn’t a lie. Where do you think I’m going?”

Ivan realized she was stressing. “You handled the pirates. The troublemakers will be gone come dawn. What’s up?”

“I don’t know yet and that’s the problem.” She led him into an employee hall. “Marc is doing the bottom decks first. Let’s see if we can beat the rookies there.”

Ivan stayed on her heels as she took off, admiring the view. “Teach me something.”

Angela considered, zigzagging through the door toward the service elevator. “Mental or physical?”

“Something I can use in the cage with your fiancé.”

She snorted again. “None of us have super speed or strength.”

“Something mental, then.”

Angela slid into the elevator, leaving him room. She pushed the button. “What purpose?”

“Crowd management.”

“For the detention center or the camp?”

“Both, frankly.”

“Fair enough.” She pushed her braid over her shoulder and stared at him as the elevator descended. “You already know laughter can break panic. Fear only adds to it. What’s the other thing that can distract an angry mob?”

Ivan sulked. “I said teach me.”

“I am. If I just gave you the answers, you wouldn’t learn it.”

He frowned. “Sex?”

“For men, usually. There’s one that snares woman too.”

“I’m not sure. Hint?”

“No.” Angela let him go first as the door slid open. “Think fast. We’re almost there.”

Ivan scowled. “No other distraction would work on me.”

“Not even power?”

His mind fixed that into place. “They all want to be like us...”

“Yes.”

“And they can be, if they embrace the demon side and unlock the cage.”

“Yes.”

“And why aren’t we encouraging that?”

“Because they’re not Eagles; because some of them will go corrupt. Because we’re already having trouble monitoring ourselves and we don’t have time to do a hundred and fifty more. Take your pick.”

Ivan followed her train of thought and kept going. “That’s not the reason. Is it?”

“No.” Angela opened the cargo door and jogged down the steps. “Keep working on it.”

Angela smiled at Marc as he turned from his inventory of the neat cargo bay.

Ivan hung back and scanned the area. The rookies weren’t here yet. He didn’t discover Marc’s guards either, but he could feel their attention. Ivan settled against the wall and returned to the lesson.

“Can I just tell him?” Marc glared at Ivan.

Angela shook her head. “He’ll get it.” Angela felt the danger; ugly thoughts came to her. *Damn them!* She brought up a shield around Marc, then another. She stepped against him, strengthening the barriers.

Marc tensed. He began gathering energy.

“I’ve scheduled you a cage match.”

Marc hoped Ivan would be there.

“He will.” Angela smiled at Marc. “Feel better?”

“No. Why am I shielded?”

Angela sighed. “Because the normals are coming. They’ve decided not to leave in the morning. They’re taking the ship instead.”

Ivan and Marc’s guards immediately joined the couple, bringing up their own shields.

“How are we handling it?” Ivan wanted to be clear on what was expected.

Angela stared at Marc, eyes lighting up bright red. “We’re doing what the boss ordered. We’re removing them.”

**3**

Kyle found Jennifer holding Roy while they slept. He was sorry to wake her. “Jenny, we have duty.”

Jennifer slowly rose, leaving Roy in her warm spot. She smiled at Kyle.

Kyle didn’t smile back. He motioned Wade and Samantha into the cabin. “They’re protecting our kids. Neil is going to Angela’s cabin to help guard the others.”

Jennifer caught the tone. Then she found cloud walls in all their minds. Jennifer sighed, reaching for her Eagle jacket and gun. When Kyle didn’t tell her to leave it, she understood there was real trouble.

Wade brought up a shield over all four of them, then another.

Samantha groaned as she eased into Jennifer’s warm spot and wrapped Roy up in the blankets. “Jeff’s with the other kids too. Most of us are covered.”

Jennifer scowled, now pulling on her boots. “Who isn’t?”

Kyle held the door for her. “Our Captain.” Kyle kissed her, hard and quick, then he faded into the shadows.

Jennifer stared. *I want to be able to do that*. She marched toward the bridge, anger rising as she realized all their members were being protected by stronger descendants. Every cabin held a senior man or woman; all of them had shields over a weaker target. Something bad was happening.

Kyle followed her, hoping she didn’t need to use her gifts and take energy away from the baby. *The first person to threaten her won’t live to do it again.*

Jennifer caught Ray’s weak, silent cry for help. She didn’t answer so he couldn’t give it away, but she wanted to. *I wish Ray was one of us.*

Kyle snorted. “He is. He refused to unlock it because Dale wasn’t.”

She frowned. “Does Grant feel the same as the other normals?”

“No.”

“Good.” Jennifer shoved it all out of her mind. If she didn’t concentrate, they would be down a captain and that couldn’t happen. Grant being here was the difference between a smooth voyage and getting lost. No one else really knew how to repair this ship, sail this ship, or dock this ship. *If we lose him, we’re screwed.*

**4**

“We have your captain! All descendants will surrender to us. Come to the top level.” The PA system echoed all over the ship. “I repeat: we have your captain. Surrender now or we’ll kill him!”

Angela dimmed them, pushing Marc into a corner as their guards lined up in front of them. She keyed her mike. “I’m on my way! Don’t do anything stupid!”

“You stay in your cabin or we’ll kill him!”

“Okay. I’m staying right here.” Angela didn’t explain herself. She didn’t need to. Her guards understood she was luring the people into a trap.

Chaos broke out across the ship. Descendants not protecting someone rushed toward the top deck to fight.

“It’s intentional, to lure our kind up there. They really want Marc.”

“Why me? You’re the power here.”

“Not sure. Maybe they think you’ll negotiate. They know I won’t.” Angela lifted a hand; the lights right above them went out, casting them into dimness.

Voices echoed a second later. “He’s down here. I saw him not five minutes ago. Hurry up!” Clifford appeared in the doorway, flanked by a dozen bulky camp men. He spotted the line of guards and advanced, squinting through the dimness. “Where is he?!”

Brittani waited for orders. So did Daryl.

Ivan dropped his shield so he could grab the first man brave enough to rush them.

A dozen more camp members appeared behind Clifford.

Ivan’s eyes lit up bright red. “What do you want?”

“Give us Marc. We’ll trade for the captain.”

“What did you do with Ray?”

Clifford sneered. “Knocked him out. He wasn’t paying attention.” He came forward, gun aimed at Ivan. “Your rookie guards were also easy to distract. We told them there was a fight and they couldn’t use the radio or it would cause panic.”

Ivan kept his attention on Clifford as the mob of twenty grew; more men and women came through the other doors. All of them were armed.

Ivan reluctantly brought his shield back up. “You’re all in deep shit. I suggest you surrender and beg for mercy.”

“He’s in here. *You* wouldn’t be if he wasn’t.” Clifford scanned the darkness that was being lit by the adjoining room where the lights were glaring brightly. “Come on out!”

Marc stayed still when Angela put a hand on his arm. He waited for her choice, eager to fight. *She’s right. I do need a workout.*

Ivan grimaced.

Above them, three gunshots rang out in rapid succession.

Jennifer’s fury ran through the ship, shoving into their minds. *“Let him go or die!”*

Morgan was scared for her as he realized she was handling the top deck issue, but he still did his duty. He swept the mob. “Can we make a deal?”

Clifford nodded “Yes. Give me your power.” Greed made his eyes glitter like diamonds.

Ivan’s brain connected the lesson. “It’s power, right? Greed for power?”

Clifford glowered, gun swinging back to Ivan. “You don’t understand; you’re one of them!”

*Yes, Ivan. The offer of power is a dangerous, effective tool that just saved the life of our captain.* Angela keyed her mike. “Is it done?”

The radio crackled. “Yes.”

The cargo mob panicked at the sound of Angela’s voice. “She’s in here too!”

“Run!”

The doors slammed shut.

Ivan stepped forward, strengthening his shield and expanded it to cover the exits in case they tried to shoot through them. “Too late.”

Dangerous rage flew through the room.

“Kill her!” Clifford fired at the glowing red orbs appearing behind Ivan. “Kill them all!”

Gunshots began to echo; screams followed.

**5**

“Is it safe to come in?”

Ivan belched. “Only if you have a strong stomach.”

Kenn and Debra entered the wrecked cargo area. Debra immediately turned and left.

Kenn stared, flashing back to rescuing Angela from Donner. Watching her skin Trey alive had looked and smelled exactly like this.

“He’s fading fast. Slow down or it’ll be over.”

Brittani closed the cage door on her blood coated witch and stepped away from Clifford at Marc’s warning.

Ivan rose from the three withered bodies at his feet. He let out another belch. “That was good.”

Kenn scanned the room, counting four crying, terrified camp members alive inside Daryl’s shield. The rest were withered husks that would need to be disposed of.

Angela motioned. “Hungry?”

Kenn wanted to, but he shook his head. “Ray is on his way down. He’s okay, but he’s pissed. Can I put him in the cage with Marc?”

“No. We cancelled that a few minutes ago.”

Kenn sighed. “I always miss the fun.” He moved forward. “I guess I’ll take that snack after all.”

Ivan let go of the shield around the remaining traitors.

Kenn grabbed the closest one and sucked hard.

“Where are they?!” Ray stormed into the area as the others tried to flee. He inhaled, bringing up a shield to trap them.

“There’s his justice.” Marc turned to Clifford, who was trying to scream but couldn’t. “Let go. I want them to hear it.”

Brittani waved a hand.

Clifford’s screams filled the cargo bay and echoed.

Angela keyed her mike to make sure everyone heard it.

“You wanted me; you got me.” Marc slit the man’s throat and watched him bleed out.

“That’s wasting.” Brittani frowned at him.

Marc stepped back as blood neared his boots. “You had four helpings. Too much will make you fat.”

The descendants laughed, except for Ray. He was swallowing the last lifeforce.

The body fell. Ray released his shield and looked around for more. When he found only bodies, he scanned Marc and Angela, ignoring their guilt and their approval of him finally accepting who he really was. He rotated toward the door. “I’m doing rounds.”

Angela motioned. “Go with him. No more unless it has to happen.”

Kenn followed, stomach twisting at the merge of power from taking a lifeforce. “I hope they keep their thoughts to themselves. He’s hot.”

“With every right.” Daryl took Brittani’s hand, trying to let her know he wasn’t upset at her display. “Can you teach me to do that?”

Brittani blushed. “Later. Right now, I need to be naked in your arms.”

Daryl lifted her into his arms, not caring about the mess; he hurried toward their cabin.

Marc sniggered.

Morgan studied Angela. Every time she’d taken lives before, she’d experienced a guilt rush and either withdrew for a while or sought company who understood her. This time, Adrian wasn’t here and the kids didn’t need to view these images.

Angela sighed. “That was before I changed. I don’t feel bad now, only relieved.”

Morgan was glad. “They got what they deserved. We would have let them go. They had no right to attack us.”

“Agreed.” Marc offered Angela his arm. “Walk with me? I need to tell you something.”

Ivan frowned. “What about this mess?”

Kyle appeared in the hall ahead of them. “That’s my job. Stay with them.”

“Where’s Jennifer?” Ivan scanned. “I thought she’d be down here for the fun.”

Kyle took a roll of bags from his pocket. “She’s firing up the incinerator. We know how to handle our own messes. It’s everyone else we have to have rules for.”

Ivan wondered why Angela hadn’t called their enforcer.

“She handled Grant’s rescue.” Angela slipped her arm through Marc’s, enjoying the contact. Death still made her horny. She’d also stopped feeling guilty over that.

Morgan had assumed that from the calls, but he wished Kyle had handled it for her. “What did she do?”

“She offered to trade her gift for Grant’s life.” Marc was proud of her. “When they let go of him, she snatched their souls and sent them to hell where they belong. Kyle shot the rest.”

Angela looked up at Marc. “I already know. Try to let it go.”

“I’m not sure I can. I do still feel guilt.”

Angela sighed. “Unfortunately, that will change. I understand your choice. In your place, I probably would have done the same.”

Ivan and Morgan both wanted to know, but they resisted the urge to snoop in Marc’s thoughts. They scanned Angela instead.

Angela pushed them out with no effort. “He told Kendle to kill Adrian on that last run, but she didn’t do it.”

“So...he banished her because she didn’t kill Adrian?” Morgan wasn’t sure if he was okay with that.

“Not just.” Marc blew out a frustrated breath. “But it factored in. She betrayed me–twice.”

“And now it’s my turn.” Angela drew in a breath. “I lied when I said we could trust her now. I let it happen so it would snap the last bit of feelings you had for her. It also removed a problem with the camp, but I didn’t care about that as much when I made the choice.”

Marc wasn’t surprised. “I suspected it. Her thoughts never matched her actions.”

“Did she charm you?”

Marc shrugged. “I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter now. She’s stuck with Adrian.”

“Maybe that ship will be hit in the crossfire...” Angela gave Marc what he needed, even though it would hurt her. “If you get the chance to kill him during the battle, I expect you to do it.”

Marc swung her up into his arms and kissed her.

Morgan was tired of the drama too. *That will solve two of our problems.* He decided he could live with it.

Ivan was ecstatic. *That moves me up to number two!*

Lips still on Angela’s, Marc’s fist flew out and slammed into Ivan’s jaw.

He crumpled to the floor, groaning.

Angela chuckled. “Aww. You got your cage moment anyway.”

The radio on Marc’s belt crackled with Ian’s worried voice. “We may have another problem in the camp hall.”

Marc’s rage flared to life; he switched directions as one of his cracks widened.

Angela hurried after him, waving Ivan to follow.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

**We Are Not Friends**

January 10th

**1**

**“T**hey’ve barricaded the camp hall with couches and tables.” Ian stepped out of the way. “I’ve been trying to calm them, but they refuse to answer.”

Marc blasted the door open with a single wave of his hand.

Wood shattered, slamming into the walls, windows, and furniture. Smoldering cloth debris rained down across the entire hall.

Screams echoed from the camp members; cabin doors slammed and locked.

Angela put a hand on his wrist before he could fire again. “No more.”

Marc scowled. “Are you crazy? They’re going to do this again!”

“I know.” Angela stepped between him and the shattered, smoldering door frame.

“You agreed to remove them!”

She shrugged. “We did; these people refused to help Clifford and his minions.”

“They knew! They let it happen!”

“Marc.”

He stared at her, rage boiling. “How can you still protect them?!”

Angela used an ace. “Someone reminded me that’s why we exist.”

Marc’s eyes glinted dangerously. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Change my target!”

Angela’s eyes narrowed this time. “Then pick your own, but not here, not now.”

Marc’s anger grew.

Eagles slid back to clear room, terrified the couple was about to have a huge fight that might kill everyone.

“I said no.”

His face darkened. “Are you taking over now?”

“Do I need to?”

Marc refused to answer.

She sent her attention over the scared descendants who’d followed them here. “I’m staying. I’m fine. Go clear the ship and be sure we didn’t miss anyone.”

Marc glared, fighting with himself. “It’s us or them. Why are you doing this?”

Her misery slapped him in thick waves. “It’s our destiny. You know it; that’s why you’re still pissed.”

“I’m pissed because they tried to steal our gifts! They took our captain hostage! They threatened us!” Marc kept his anger around him like a shield, refusing to let her sadness calm him. “They don’t deserve our protection!”

Angela was unable to hide her own hatred. “I agree, but it doesn’t change the facts.”

“What facts?!”

She gestured. “If you do this, we’re all lost. No forgiveness and no peaceful years on the island. If you kill them, we all die too.” Angela turned her back to him and stepped inside the smashed hall. She went to an undamaged chair in the lounge and sat.

When she leaned her head back and shut her eyes, Marc was unable to do it. *The alpha gave me an order... I can’t refuse it*. He spun down the hall; people hurried out of his way.

Angela waved off the very bruised man who started to join her. “He needs you more than I do. Don’t let him hurt himself.”

Ivan reluctantly followed. Any thoughts he’d had of challenging Marc were gone.

A camp door opened. Faces peered around it. The air was smoky; the smell of burnt wood was strong. It filled the hallway, bringing more unease.

The ship’s walls dimmed in response.

Angela didn’t look at anyone. She waited for their reactions. Despite what she’d told Marc, if the normals here got aggressive, she would finish what they’d started. Getting rid of Clifford and his group had calmed her rage, but not her pain. *We have to make peace. I just don’t want to.*

More doors opened, and more faces peered at her. They’d heard everything.

Angela heard footsteps come toward her. She sighed. “I’m sorry I lost my temper.”

People were stunned that she was apologizing.

Ralph cleared his throat. “We’re sorry too. We should have warned you about Clifford, and about Kendle.”

Angela nodded. When she didn’t say anything else, Ralph sat in the chair next to her. He motioned the nervous residents to come out. “She won’t hurt us. She defended us against Marc. You don’t need more proof than that.”

Daisey smiled at Ralph. She bent down and began cleaning up the debris from the door being blown open. Other people came over to help her.

Angela listened, mind racing, heart hurting. *This is why magic shouldn’t exist. There will never be true peace as long as descendants are on this planet. We were never supposed to come down here. Now, I understand why.*

**2**

“This is your captain speaking. I have a message from the boss.” Grant didn’t look at Ray as that man entered the bridge. “Anyone who wants to leave can do so at dawn. Lifeboats will be ready for your departure. Pack one bag and be on the top deck when the sun rises.”

The bridge was triple guarded now. The rest of the top deck was dark and empty. The ocean was also dark, though the warm wind was picking up. Ray doubted anyone else would try to get to Grant, but he almost hoped they did. He’d enjoyed taking lives.

His lock had snapped when they grabbed Grant and held a knife to his throat. He’d been on the floor from being pistol whipped; that few seconds had given Jennifer a clear line of fire to snatch lives and save their captain. Ray was furious that he hadn’t been paying attention when the mob had come through the hall. He agreed with Marc. The normals were a threat. They needed to be removed.

Grant knew what Ray was thinking. Most of the descendants felt the same and they were saying it, loudly. “I’m one of them.”

Ray stared. “You’re nothing like them.”

“I am, in the most important way.” Grant stared back. “Do you want me gone too?”

Ray snorted.

Grant smiled, but his words were hard. “If you kill the others, you’ll have to remove me too. I’ll never captain this ship after that. Not all of them are guilty.”

Ray blew out a sound of frustration. “Angela already said no. Stop it.”

“I can’t. You hate them now, but I’m normal too.” Grant’s sadness filled the bridge. “I can’t be with you if you hate my kind.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do.” Grant turned back to the wheel. “Make your choice now so I have time to pack a bag and rest before I leave.”

Ray’s fear and anger faded into anguish. “I wish you were like us.”

Grant sighed. “I could be...”

“But?”

“I don’t want it. You have to sacrifice everything for people who don’t like you or trust you. That’s too ugly for me. I’m not strong enough.”

Ray’s mind filled with more misery, damping the fire. “This sucks.”

Grant nodded. “I wish we could go back to how it was in Ciemus. I had such hope then!”

Ray cared more about Grant’s pain than his own. The rest of his rage fled, leaving only heartache. “I don’t know how to forgive them.”

Grant’s anger flashed out, surprising Ray and the three guards standing below the bridge. “I don’t plan to. Betraying our protectors is unforgivable.”

Ray gestured. “I don’t get you. Or Angela. Or anyone who thinks this is okay.”

“It’s not okay.” Grant shrugged. “But it’s how it is. We can coexist again. We need to make peace.”

“And how do we do that?”

Grant sighed. “You keep them alive, no matter how much it costs personally.”

“That’s not enough.” Marc stepped into the bridge. Listening to the two men had helped him regain some more control. “We have to love them again. Until we can, coexisting won’t be possible.”

Grant nodded at Marc. “Is she working on it?”

“Yes.” Marc sighed. “She’s gone through this before. She knows how to reach them.”

“Do you?”

“No. I’ve never loved them.” Marc forced out the rest of that truth. “I love the job, the control. I’ve always wanted the sheep gone. This was the excuse I needed.”

“So why didn’t you do it?” Ray’s anger came back. “Why didn’t you kill them all?!”

“My alpha said no.” Marc left the bridge, moving toward the rear of the ship. With those words, he’d reaffirmed his loyalty to Angela’s leadership.

Ivan was impressed, proud. “You really are a good man. I understand why she loves you so much.”

Marc ignored the soldier trailing him. He went to the rear of their ship and glared at Adrian’s dark vessel.

Ivan lit a cigar and leaned against the rail, hoping Marc would keep calming down. He didn’t like Angela being alone with the normals, but she’d refused a guard. He was hoping Marc would go back and stay with her until she came up to the descendant cabins.

“She isn’t coming back up tonight.” Marc took the cigar when Ivan held it out. “She’ll stay with them. By the time she’s done, we’ll have a fragile peace again.”

Ivan frowned. “Most of our kind don’t want that now.”

“But they’ll obey orders.”

“Because you did.” Ivan liked Marc even more for doing that. “What did Adrian mean when he thought about you being more than byzan?”

Marc extended his hand; power shuffled under his skin.

Ivan studied it. “Kronus had that... So does Angela.”

Marc put the cigar back in his mouth, letting Ivan figure it out on his own.

Ivan struggled through the fuzzy brain and bruises. “It’s an evolution!”

“The next level.” Marc puffed, inhaled. When he spoke, thick smoke streamed out and floated away on the breeze. “I don’t know what it’s called. We don’t have a name for it yet.”

“Yes, we do.” Ivan stared at Marc. “Earthbound angels.”

“Don’t ever call me that!”

Ivan assessed the glow that came through Marc’s tanned, scarred skin. “We’re not supposed to be here...”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

Ivan did. “Adrian doesn’t know that Angela unlocked herself. He thinks you did it.”

Marc thought about that. He realized Ivan was right. “Do you think I should lock him up again, or just strip him like I did with Kendle?”

“Strip him.” Ivan shrugged at Marc’s narrowed glance. “He’s not like you. He can’t make the right choice when it matters.”

“How do you know? You barely spent any time around him.”

“Then why did you even ask me?”

“Because you’re like him.” Marc shifted, glaring. “You want her more than your honor.”

Ivan shook his head, speaking from the heart. “If I lose my honor, I’d never get her. Adrian should have known that from the beginning. He still doesn’t or he would have let Kendle drown.” Ivan held out a hand.

Marc gave him the cigar, considering those words.

Ivan puffed and kept him company, now sure that Angela had sent him with Marc just for this conversation. The man didn’t need protection; he needed a friend.

Marc snorted. “We are not friends.”

Ivan shrugged. “We could be. I’m willing.”

“How can I be friends with a man who admits he wants my life, my mate?”

Ivan tapped the cigar on the rail to clear the ash. “With moments like this, where you see we have the same goal–her happiness.”

“Adrian once said that to me, along with a lot of lies about never betraying me, never trying to get her while we were together.” Marc sighed. “He might have even meant it at the time.”

Ivan looked him in the eye. “She loves you, completely. I see you through her emotions now and I know I could never live up to it, even if you were dead, but especially not if I had anything to do with that. I’ve accepted it. We’re not rivals. We both serve the alpha. You just have better perks.”

Marc was startled into a laugh. He took the cigar when Ivan held it out, heart and mind finally settling down. He turned back toward Adrian’s ship, but the anger didn’t return. He finally sighed. “I haven’t had a real friend since Neil, and even that was limited. I do best alone.”

“I know.” Ivan brought out the bottle of beer he’d taken from the bar but hadn’t gotten to drink. “That’s why it’ll work for us. We’re almost the same person.” He popped the top, holding the bottle over the rail to let the foam drip. “If not for her, we’d be alone forever.”

Those words sank into Marc’s heart, because they were true. “She’s the reason I’m alive; she saved me decades ago.”

“When you were kids?”

Marc’s mind went to the past. “She’s the light. The rest of us are dim copies.”

Ivan drank, then handed it to Marc, taking the cigar. He belched. “Thank you.”

Marc frowned. “For what? Beating on you every chance I get?”

“Sort of. I know you’re really just trying to hurt yourself, but I meant that night behind my CO’s tent. You could have killed me. Or worse, left me there without that invitation. I might still be with the government. I never would have changed into this man. I’m grateful.”

Marc hadn’t realized how much Ivan liked him, admired him. “You’ve hid it well.”

Ivan grinned, voice hopeful. “I had a great teacher.”

Marc faced Ivan, not hiding anything now. “I hate your guts.”

“I know.”

“So how can we be friends?”

“I’ll teach you to love yourself. We’ll be bonded in the ways you need.”

“You really think that’s possible?”

“Of course. Angela said it to me months ago, and she’s never wrong.”

“She said we would be friends?”

Ivan chuckled. “Actually, she said you would beat on me for a long time, and then we would be close. I asked her how that was possible. She said by then, I’d love you as much as I do her, that it would be easy.” Ivan met his eye. “She was right. You’ve become my unwilling mentor. It’s amazing.”

Marc felt the first real bonds of friendship forming. Instead of refusing it or getting angry, he nodded. “We’ll try. For her.”

“Awesome!” Ivan’s grin widened. “Do I kiss you now or something?”

Marc’s laughter echoed across the deck.

On Adrian’s ship, he and Kendle observed. The laughter hit them and caused fresh pain.

Kendle hurt because she knew she would never see Marc’s eyes light up again in amusement. From now on, when he looked at her, all he would see was a traitor.

Adrian mourned the friendship he’d thrown away with his honor.

Sadie took advantage of them being occupied to go below to their cargo hold. She dug under the rugs and came up with a bag of silver canisters that she and the trap team had brought onboard to help subdue any people here. At the time, they hadn’t known it was only Adrian; they hadn’t needed to use them.

Sadie took the bag to the room on the first deck and hid them under Adrian’s couch. She sensed they would be needed soon. She just wasn’t sure who she would use them on.

**3**

“Here’s the list.” Ralph handed the paper to Angela, then sat in the chair on her left. The room was cleaned up, though the smoke still hadn’t cleared completely and the door was too mangled for them to repair. The engineers would have to do it.

“How many?” Angela had spent the night here, having short conversations and regaining her cool control. She’d also explored some of her new levels of power. Being locked for weeks had given her more offenses, more defenses. It made her feel even more alien.

“Eighteen. Some of them might stay if you make a promise.”

Angela sighed, already sure of the answer. “What do they want?”

“For you to share power.”

“Let them leave.”

Ralph wasn’t surprised. She couldn’t give them power without ruining the future. “They aren’t sure they’ll be safe from Marc when they go up.”

“I’ll walk with them, if they want it.”

“They do.” Ralph gestured. “Read the bottom.”

Angela shook her head. “Too tired. Just tell me.”

Ralph frowned. “They left notes. Most of them are nice. I thought it would help you.”

Angela stuffed the paper into her jacket pocket without reading it. “They’re sorry; they’ll miss some of us. They’re grateful that I didn’t let Marc kill them. I got it.”

Ralph understood she was bitter. He didn’t fault her for it. He stayed with her as people began to line up by the missing door.

When they were all there, Ralph cleared his throat. “It’s time.”

Angela saw the obvious outline of stolen supplies and weapons in bulging suitcases, but she didn’t search them or even mention it. If these people made it to land, they would need those things.

Angela rose and strode to the door; almost everyone cringed at her fast movement.

Ralph scowled at them, but it made no difference. Those who were leaving would never feel safe here again.

Angela led them up the steps, aware of descendants lining the walls, lingering in doorways to watch. Their open hatred said they wouldn’t let these people feel safe here now.

Ralph stayed in the camp hall with Daisey, trying to find a solution for those who had decided to stay. Right now, they had a tense truce. He doubted it would last unless someone did something, but he already knew Marc and Angela couldn’t be the ones to handle it. *Then it has to be me.*

Ralph motioned to people watching him. “I’m calling a meeting of us norms. Pick a seat; let’s talk.”

**4**

“Lower them.” Angela watched Theo and the new sailing crew as they began lowering the first lifeboat of people. She didn’t look at the deserters.

They did look at her. Several were already regretting their choice to go, but it was too late to change their mind as the top deck vanished from view.

Angela scanned the ocean, fighting with herself.

Marc came to her side, still hating her pain.

Angela slid arms around him without hesitating.

“Do you want me to ask the ocean to protect them?” He didn’t want to, but he would.

“Yes, but don’t. They’ve made their choices. Those who stayed deserve our love, and our forgiveness. Those who leave are on their own.”

Marc agreed, as did most of the descendants on the top deck. They’d come up to make sure the people who were leaving didn’t try to rush the bridge or do anything else just as stupid.

The few normal individuals up here waved at their friends, but they were also glad to see them go. Everyone was hoping they could go back to getting along now.

Marc sent out a wave of calm and light; it swirled over the ship and brought up the Safe Haven bubble for the first time in over a month.

Most witnesses on the deck cheered.

Everyone in the lifeboats scowled or cried for what they’d just lost.

“Come on.” Marc led her toward the ramp. “Let’s get some rest.”

Angela sighed, stopping them. “We don’t have time for that.” She turned to her fighters, their defenders. “We’ll be at the detention center in the next thirty-six hours. Let’s see those shields.”

Marc brought his up. “Can you tell us the plan for that now?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have one. This isn’t a schemes and plots moment. We fight until we’re dead or they are. There is nothing else to do.”

Marc wasn’t sure if he should feel relieved, but he did. Straight fighting was what he was best at. “The kill team missed their check in last night.”

“I know.” Angela didn’t tell him that Mike had come by the camp hall. It was in the report she’d made but hadn’t delivered yet. Mike had been scared to give it to Marc. Angela brought up her shield. “Practice on me.”

Marc put more space between them and started firing.

All around them, the other descendants did the same as the nervousness faded and the anger returned. They’d been given a target. They were eager to hit it.

Gus stayed on the ramp next to Bernice and her daughter. He watched the two lifeboats get left behind as the big cruise ship sailed at high speed toward the future.

Bernice looked up at him. “Are you sorry you didn’t go?”

Gus smiled at her. “No.”

Bernice blushed. She scanned the practicing descendants, still scared, but willing to give them a chance to earn her trust. “They’re powerful.”

Gus sighed. “We all are.” He brought up his own shield over the three of them.

Bernice felt fear creeping in; it was drowned by the light and warmth that came with it.

Crissy laughed, hand pushing against his shield. “I like him.”

Bernice chuckled. “Me too. He’s good.”

Bernice was starting to recover; her skin was filling out from the loose folds and her sockets weren’t sunken anymore. Wearing black slacks and a blue silk shirt from one of the mall stores, Gus was still stunned by her beauty.

The little girl was happy and healthy. The medics had given her a full checkup. Tonya had finished the bloodwork on them both. All that remained was for them to finish recovering. Gus doubted that would be quick despite how well the pair was fitting in. Mental horrors didn’t just go away once you were safe.

Crissy pointed. “Look at them, Momma.”

Bernice swept the deck, seeing how their shields all rippled with bright golden light.

“If they were bad, it would be like the men who killed daddy. They were all dark inside.” Sadness filled the child.

Gus put a big hand on her shoulder. “No one will ever hurt you again. You’re safe here with us...with me.”

Crissy sniffed. “Thank you for staying.”

Bernice echoed that. “We might not have if you hadn’t, and we would have missed this.”

Gus was pleased at how he’d been able to show these new arrivals that Safe Haven was a place of hope and light, of second chances. *It’s also a place of murder and magic, of madness and danger. We’re different, special. No one can replace us. We were chosen to protect the weak and lead them to a place where they can exist in safety.*

Angela glanced over at him; she lifted a brow. *Have you made your choice?*

“Yes.” Gus moved forward and took a place by her side. His shield expanded to include the top of the bridge, keeping Bernice and her daughter inside it.

Angela laughed, delighted. “Welcome to Safe Haven, Gus. May it always be your home.”

# Chapter Thirty-Four

**Submit or Die**

January 12th

**1**

**“I** see it!” Grant signaled to the lines of anxious fighters on the deck below.

Many of them immediately brought up their shields.

Marc waved them off. “Don’t waste your energy.”

Neil and Ivan stayed on the steps to the bridge, following orders to protect Grant and Theo, but they were ready to help if it was needed. Wade was down in the ship, protecting their pregnant women and kids, along with Charlie, Dog, and Debra. Wade had orders to knock the camp out if they tried to riot during the fight. He had hated the order, but Neil felt better with him down there to guard Samantha and Amy. Nothing else about this made him feel good.

Marc had organized this top deck with senior descendants in the front and rookies in the rear. Cathy was loaded down with bags of extra ammunition that she, Ian, Emma, and Ed would distribute during the fight. Along the rails, their best shooters, archers, and knife throwers were waiting. Jayda was in charge of them. Quinn and Tommy didn’t mind. Neither did Peter, but James kept flashing ugly glares at her. *We’ll have to do something about him soon.*

Everyone else who wasn’t a descendant was standing next to one to lend energy for shields and spells. Gus and Jeff were on the ramp to prevent anyone from getting down into the ship. Three of their medics were on the stairs right below those two men, ready to give aid. Morgan was standing next to Kyle, worrying over what he’d heard about Jennifer’s nightmare. Neil knew he wouldn’t hesitate to fire on anyone who got near her. Marc had done everything he could to ensure a victory. Neil frowned. *So why does it still feel too light?*

Ray scanned the detention center through the binoculars as they got closer, heart dropping. He ran to the door. “I counted ten ships!”

Angela looked at Jennifer.

Jennifer’s face was pale. “Please. Do it now.”

Angela shook her head. “Not yet.”

Marc gestured at distracted fighters. “Keep those mental shields up! Clouds, water, spiders. Do not think about anything else!”

The few normal people who had come to the ramp for this moment muttered and scowled as the complex came into full view. With the pirate ships in sight, there was no doubt of Kendle’s guilt.

“She tried to kill us all!”

“He should have drowned her!”

Marc didn’t have time to enjoy the vindication. “I’m going to make contact. Get ready.”

Jennifer shuddered. “It won’t work. Sink them now, Marc, or we’ll lose.”

Marc grunted. “I can handle it.”

“No, you can’t.”

*My daughter is in there! I have to try.*

Jennifer stared at Angela, heart thudding. “My nightmare is about to come true.”

Angela began gathering energy. “Yes.”

Marc ignored them, mind traveling out to the complex. He expanded his grid, searching, as he prepared to make contact.

On Adrian’s ship, he and the two females stared at the detention center and the ships now starting to inch forward. He waved at Kendle. “Bottom cargo hold. Far corner. Big bag of weapons.”

Kendle sneered. “Angela will protect you.”

Adrian shook his head. “Not this time. Go get that bag or we’ll be defenseless when it starts.”

“You have your gifts.” Kendle still moved toward the stairs. “Just use them.”

“I intend to. I want you two protected while I fight.” Adrian studied the detention center, hoping Conner had stayed strong. *This is where you make a final choice, son. Do the right thing.*

Adrian could feel Marc’s anger building; all the descendants were full of eager nerves. *This will be ugly.* Adrian began gathering energy, bracing to hear screams.

**2**

Drew screamed at the fire running over his body. He dropped and rolled, shrieks echoing though the training room.

Jordi waved two men forward who he hadn’t needed to use on them yet. “Get him to the med bay. The rest of you run it again.”

The two trainers dragged Drew from the room, uncaring of his injuries.

Greg and the rest of the kill team panted, trying to catch their breath. They’d had five training sessions like this in the last two days. All of them were exhausted. They’d been forced to sleep in shifts so the descendants here didn’t kill them despite the order about no fighting between matches. They’d won three of the five sessions, but these last two had been full out attacks that left the entire team with injuries and a new, unwelcome fear of magic.

Greg watched them take Drew away, mind calm even though he knew death was probably only half an hour away. *It’s almost over.*

Jordi grinned at them. “I guess you’re all not so hot after all.”

Greg grunted, knowing not to make it worse with insults. “Any chance of you joining our team?”

Jordi frowned, catching the double meaning. “No. I belong to *this* alpha.”

Shawn’s wrist alarm went off. He silenced it with a relieved sigh. They’d all been looking forward to that sound. “Angela is the only true alpha. When she gets here, you’ll die.”

Loyalty declared, the kill team waited for the chaos. They’d dropped off their toys during shower times, during mess, and on their way back from the med bay each time one of them was hurt. The homemade explosives had been planted in lockers, under tables, and along consoles. They’d all thought of clouds to keep it hidden, using Neil’s success at his trial, and they’d counted the minutes, eager for this farce to be over.

“Your master can’t handle Joel. None of us will turn...” Jordi’s rage rose as he began picking up thoughts from the kill team. The clouds were gone now. *They tricked me! Normals tricked me!*

Greg smirked. “My alpha taught us that.”

Jordi’s arrogance returned as he felt Joel’s attention swing to them from the command center. “Then we can make sure you never get back to her.” He gestured at the shocked troops who were also seeing the truth in their minds. “Disable them; Joel wants their lifeforces.”

The line of descendants advanced, throwing spells.

They were furious when the men were able to resist.

Jordi was stunned.

Magic slammed into them, the walls, and the computer, having little effect.

“Let’s go!” Greg led the kill team toward the door.

More angry troops appeared outside, blocking their exit.

Greg and the others got set to fight for their lives.

**3**

Drew groaned, straightening up between his escorts. His wrist alarm beeped repeatedly.

“What is that?” One of the trainers dragging him toward the med bay scowled. “It’s not on our schedule.”

“I’ll get it.” Drew slowly reached for it; he turned and slammed his elbow into the man’s mouth, crunching teeth. He quickly kicked backward, nailing the other man in the throat. Both of his escorts dropped.

Drew’s grin was huge as he took their weapons. He silenced the alarm and hurried back toward the training room as heavy steps echoed in his direction. “Time to play for real!”

**4**

“Something’s happening.” Tobias went to the door of their cell, seeing tense guards leaving their posts. He smacked the door. “What’s going on?”

The guards ignored him.

The other prisoners came to their cell doors, all hoping for an opportunity to escape.

Tobias tried to gather energy to scan troop minds. It came to him in thick waves; the drugs had worn off.

Tobias glanced at the wall clock. They were supposed to be fed their drugged rations in the next few minutes... He smacked the bars again. “We’re hungry!”

One of the guards frowned at the clock, then reluctantly got up, clearing a view of the monitor.

Tobias saw a training room being filled with troops who had heavy clubs and fearful expressions. He locked down on his thoughts as he waved his wives closer.

The guard came to their door with three trays. He flipped the metal latch and opened the door. “Here’s your–”

Tobias headbutted him, knocking the trays and the man to the floor.

Guards at the computers rushed over to subdue him.

“Stay in your cell!”

“Turn on the gas!”

Tobias blasted the energy he’d gathered, hitting all four of them. “Stop.”

The guards froze.

“Unlock the other cells.”

The watching prisoners were thrilled when the guards obeyed his mental possession. They hurried out. Many of them immediately fled. Some lingered to see if Tobias wanted to stay together.

Tobias waved them on. “If they hit us in a group, we’ll all be recaptured. Find an escape hatch if you can.”

Tobias scanned the cells as they fled. *Someone is still in that one*. He peered inside. “You can come out now.”

Cate shook her head. “He’ll hurt the others. I have to stay here.”

Tobias entered the cell, frowning. “Come on. We’ll get–”

He staggered back as she hit him with a powerful pain spell.

His wives grabbed him when he would have tried again.

Tobias reluctantly left the little girl; he took his wives through a narrow tunnel and vanished.

Cate shivered in the back of her cell and stayed there instead of joining the jailbreak.

**5**

Another alarm blared. The siren grew piercing, filling every inch of the complex. The speakers activated. *“There is a breach in sub-level three. All available hands to sub-level three.”*

Jordi scowled. *A jailbreak? Here?* He pointed at the kill team who had retreated against the wall and assumed a fighting stance. “Keep them here, alive, until Joel comes for them!” He marched from the room, motioning half the fighters along for support.

Greg and Shawn heard Jonny’s breath of relief. They didn’t echo it, but they understood. Being so close to death was nerve-racking even after going through it so many times.

“When we get home, I’m asking for a break.” Shawn wiped blood from his mouth while Greg patted down smoldering embers on his torn clothes. “Gonna soak in a hot tub, enjoy the entertainments, and drink. I want a lot of drinks.”

Jonny’s nervous chuckle angered the UN fighters. They moved closer with bright red orbs.

Greg slowly held up his hand. “Everyone ready?”

The descendants frowned in confusion.

The other two kill team members let out sounds of relief.

“Yes.”

“Finally!”

Greg pushed the first button on his wrist console.

A loud rumble came from below. It grew into a shaking screech that was followed by a new alarm.

*“Breach in sub-level 7. Water is coming in.”*

*“Seal it off.”* Joel’s angry voice echoed over the speakers. *“Close and detach!”*

The complex groaned and shuddered as part of the facility dropped toward the ocean floor.

Greg hit the next button; another explosion tore into the underwater sections.

The troops panicked. They were terrified of drowning. Half of them fled; the rest flew toward the kill team, firing more spells.

Shawn stepped in front of Greg, taking the hits. He fell to his knees as they swarmed Greg and Jonny, now using their fists and feet.

The door opened. Drew ran in, firing the gun he’d stolen from his now disabled escorts. He hit all three angry fighters beating on Greg.

“Catch!” Drew tossed the other gun, still grinning. *I’m an excellent faker.*

Greg caught the gun and opened fire, following his training. He stepped over Shawn, hoping the man wasn’t dead.

Drew provided cover fire as Jonny dragged Shawn toward the corner, where they formed a line in front of him and kept shooting; bodies dropped.

“They have live rounds!” Another UN fighter fled. “Run!”

The others kept firing spells, but they all ran toward the opposite door now. Bullets followed their retreat.

**6**

*“Breach in sub-level 7. Water is coming in.”*

*“Seal it off.”* Joel’s angry voice echoed over the speakers. *“Close and drop!”*

Conner looked up from the UN training booklet he was studying in Alexander’s room. His uncle had left for work an hour ago, but Conner hadn’t been assigned an official job yet. As the sirens blared, Conner’s heart thumped. *I have to pick now.*

Conner slowly stood. He swept the neat room where he’d enjoyed his time getting to know his relative. *But it isn’t home.*

Conner sighed, shaking his head. He grabbed his kit from under the spare cot and tossed it on while leaving. *Maybe Uncle Alexander will come with us.* Conner doubted the man would leave his cushy life here. *At least stay away from us while we break out. I don’t want to have to kill you.*

**7**

Jonny staggered back as a powerful spell landed. He shuddered, lids closing. He fell over next to Shawn.

Greg concentrated. *Conner! We need you!*

*On my way!* Conner was running full out. No one stopped him or even noticed him. They were too busy running for escape hatches as the complex sections continued to explode.

The door opened a few seconds later. Conner ran to their fallen men first and began trying to heal them. “You guys make a lot of noise.”

Greg grunted, wishing they had more mags. “We like to make an entrance and an exit.”

Drew stripped bodies of toolbelts. “Five minutes until our ship blows. I hope it’s close to wherever their fleet is hidden.” He hit the rest of the buttons on his wrist controller. Fresh explosions began ripping through the complex. “Ten minutes until this place sinks to the bottom of the ocean, maybe less. Hurry up.”

Conner strained, draining his energy. Shawn was already waking, but Jonny’s wounds were worse. He pushed in more energy.

Jonny slowly woke, moaning.

Greg hefted Jonny over his shoulder while Drew got Shawn to his feet.

“Stop right there!” Joel was in the door, eyes glowing red. Unlike Jordi, Joel knew who the biggest threat was. *I never should have let a second Mitchel in here; one was too many.*

Greg and Drew fired at the same time.

Joel’s shield deflected the bullets. He lifted his hand.

The lights went dim for all of them, including Conner. They slumped to the bloody floor. Conner knew what was coming next. He grabbed Greg’s hand, drawing his energy. He used his own reserve with it to bring up a shield.

Joel gathered energy to finish the job. “Shields don’t keep me out!”

A new alarm croaked, weakening as fire destroyed the circuits. *“Unidentified vessel approaching! Estimated time of arrival is...three minutes.”*

Joel fired a death spell and spun from the doorway without watching it land. He knew it was good. “Get in there and collect the bodies!”

The spell bounced off Conner’s special shield, slamming into the fighters who had been sent back in. Half of them dropped instantly, dead. The other half fell slowly, mortally wounded.

Conner cried tearless sobs at the pain as his body shriveled. The shield lowered, then vanished. He only had enough energy to use it once in a fight, but he was grateful to be so different at that moment. *I’m glad I’m a Mitchel.*

“Grab one of them.” Greg helped Shawn and Jonny back up as Drew dragged a groaning woman over. He dropped her by Conner. “Take it and let’s go.”

Conner sucked down the lifeforce, moaning and groaning at the unmatched levels. These fighters were far above him. He hadn’t allowed himself to be corrupted. These men and women had embraced it. Now, being recharged from a forbidden source, he almost understood. *More!*

Greg recognized the moment. He took a toolbelt from the shriveled body, frowning. “You look like your father after a training session where Angela did well.”

Conner grimaced. He pushed onto shaky legs. “I’ll never do that.”

“Not even for your family?” Shawn stepped in front of Greg again as Alexander entered the long, wide room.

Alexander was now dressed like one of the UN fighters; his blond hair was covered by a helmet, but those bright blue eyes were unmistakable.

Conner lifted his hand. “Please, don’t make me hurt you.”

Alexander hurried toward them and then went by. “There’s an escape hatch one level below. Come on.”

The kill team shared concerned glances, then followed.

**8**

“This is Safe Haven, calling the commander of the detention center.”

Joel stared at the radar in shock; he was unable to find the ship on his mental grid, but there it was on the monitor, a minute from his front door. “How is that possible?!”

The door opened behind him; Jordi rushed in. “We’ve lost the entire bottom level. I detached it myself while the cowards ran.” Jordi shut the door and flipped the lock against panicking troops flooding the halls. “We recaptured a few of the escaped prisoners and put them in the debriefing room, but the two bottom levels are heavily damaged. We’ll have to detach this...” Jordi fell silent at the image on the screen. The Adrianna was here. The top deck was covered in descendants with glowing red orbs. As he watched, their shields lifted in thick layers, covering the huge boat. “I don’t have them in my mind. How is that possible?!”

Joel growled.

Jordi retreated. He’d come here to survive, not to die before this part of the detention center could be detached.

Joel concentrated. *All enforcers will attack that ship! Follow your training!*

A few of his top fighters responded and began firing.

“This is Safe Haven refugee camp. This is your last chance at peaceful communications...” Power swarmed through the rooms and tunnels, bringing the chaos to a standstill. Marc sent his gaze over all of them, from the bottom up, marking weak spots on his mental grid. “You have five seconds to answer. Submit to your new alpha and receive mercy.”

Joel sent his rage out, meeting Marc’s power. He shoved it back, fury snapping his control. *How dare you! These sheep are mine!*

Marc laughed at him.

Jordi unlocked the door and fled. He knew what was coming next.

Joel yanked him back with a mental snare, slamming him against the desk. “Get Cate Brady up here!”

Jordi shook his head, trying to clear the bells. “Okay. I will!”

“Now!”

Jordi left, not running this time. As soon as he thought he was out of range, Jordi fled toward the nearest escape hatch.

Joel’s anger followed.

Jordi managed to use the panicking men and women as a shield while he ran through the tunnels. Bodies dropped all around him.

Marc scanned the center again, searching for his daughter. *Submit or die!*

“Get out!” Joel used his strongest shield and pushed the intruder out of the complex a second time.

Jordi took advantage of Joel being occupied. He slid into a narrow passage and threw himself into Joel’s private escape pod. He locked the door and hit the detach button.

Outside the pod, faces appeared through the window.

*Knock-knock!*

Jordi saw Conner; his fists clenched. *I hate that kid!* He spotted Alexander’s mocking blue eyes next. “You traitor!” *Joel will slaughter them both. I’ll be far away from here by then.*

“Come on!” Jordi hit the button again. “Let go!”

Greg held up his watch so Jordi could view it; then he hit the button.

In the distance, a massive explosion rocked the facility. The lights flickered in every tunnel.

The escape pod failed. It clanked down and stuck against the detention center.

Jordi screamed.

Greg walked away. *We may die here, but you will too. That makes it worth it.* Greg hurried to catch up to the rest of the kill team that was following Alexander. Finding Jordi down here had been luck.

Escaped prisoners had taken the smaller pods. Bodies littered all these floors. Greg didn’t know who was responsible, but he was grateful. Their scant ammunition wouldn’t have been enough to handle so many. They had planned to use the few knives they’d confiscated during their stay, but they’d had trainers in the session today; they’d been armed, though not with extra slugs.

Alexander led them to the larger pods, where panicked fighters were shoving and pushing for seats.

Alexander blasted them all with a sleep spell; everyone dropped in front of them, clearing a path.

The escape pods were round and lined in narrow seats with harnesses. The center chair had a console; Alexander immediately dropped into it. “Get in a chair. I’ll get us out of here.”

Greg lifted his gun. “Lock his gifts.”

Conner did it quickly, marveling at the ability he’d never used before.

Alexander didn’t care. He hit buttons on the console. “We’ll have about two minutes before it detaches. Get strapped in and try not to throw up. It moves fast.”

“Wait.” Greg held up his hand again.

Everyone braced for the final set of explosions.

The entire kill team went still as power swarmed the complex.

Greg concentrated on the voice now in his mind, lowering his arm. “Marc’s daughter is here.”

Conner slapped his head. “She’s in the jail. They said Cate Brady, but I didn’t realize who she was!”

Alexander scowled. “Joel will discover us on the cameras soon! We have to go–now.”

Shawn scowled. “Not without Marc’s little girl.”

“That little girl is corrupt.” Alexander started to hit the button. “I’m leaving.”

Conner sent his own sleep spell, drained again. He’d kept a shield over the group the entire way here.

Alexander’s eyes lit up in rage, but the spell was too strong. He slumped over.

Greg nodded. “Be ready to go.”

Conner took the gun Shawn handed him, dropping into the seat next to his unconscious relative. “Try to hurry. Joel is stronger than Marc. After they fight, we’ll all be killed.”

“Angela will handle him.”

Conner winced at Greg’s confidence. “She’s a new byzan; so is Marc. Neither of them can beat Joel.”

“How can you be sure?”

Conner looked at his uncle.

Greg left, refusing to put stock in anything the elder Mitchel had told Conner. *Angela can beat anyone; she uses her mind. That’s more powerful than any magic.*

**9**

“I don’t need any of you!” Joel strode from the command room, using his shield to deflect terrified fighters trying to reach an escape pod. The hall was filled with shoving, shouting troops who had forgotten their training. No one paid attention to him. The legend of Safe Haven was too strong; they were certain death had come for them.

Joel entered the jail and locked the door. Then he hit it with a damage spell that melted the latches. No one would get in that way without heavy equipment.

Joel went to Cate’s box; the other empty cells mocked him.

Cate cringed into the corner, whimpering. She’d refused to go with the others, not wanting to get the other kids hurt for her choices; now she wished she had. “I stayed! I stayed!”

Still in the command room, Joey stared in shocked pain. *He left me!*

He watched on the monitor as his father entered Cate’s cell. Joey ran. *I have to help my friend!*

About to enter the command center, Tobias grabbed the boy as he ran out. He lifted the struggling child and stared into his eyes.

Joey calmed against his will.

Tobias saw the location in Joey’s mind and sighed. He put the boy back inside the command center. *I should have forced her to come with us.* Tobias used his mental persuasion again. “Stay here.”

Joey obediently went back into his father’s den and sat in the chair by his cot.

“Come on.” Tobias brought up a shield, keeping a hand on his wife to share her energy. They’d used this setup many times.

The females stayed close, taking repeated looks over their shoulders to verify no one was sneaking up on them. Captives all through the complex were still breaking out, killing fighters, rushing to escape pods. Hungry dogs were chasing them down now.

Tobias slowed as he neared a long, dim tunnel. He opened a supply closet and ushered his wives inside. “I love you.” He shut the door and strode down the hall, not sure he would be able to keep Joel busy while Safe Haven sank them, but he had to try. *We’ll all go down together, like we deserve for letting our kind blow up the world.*

Alarms were still blaring; the air was thick with smoke. Debris littered the floor here, but there were no bodies. Lights flickered above him. Shouts and grinding noises echoed under the alarms.

*“Evacuation procedures have been initiated. Walk calmly to the nearest escape pod, and thank you for visiting this friendly United Nations underwater complex.”*

Tobias spun around as steps echoed.

Greg held up a hand to stop his team, recognizing a captive by the tattered clothes and thin frame. “Who are you?”

Tobias also recognized an ally. “No time. He’s got the girl in there.”

Greg and the kill team joined him at the mangled door, stomachs dropping.

“We can’t get through that.”

Tobias scanned the damage, grunting as he brought forth his reserve energy. “My wives are behind you.”

Greg turned to find two women glaring at him; they were pointing stolen guns. Greg turned back to the door. “They can protect our asses. What’s the plan?” He’d felt the man gathering energy.

“Same as you’ve been doing. We’re blowing this bitch apart.” Tobias sent out his first blast.

The door rattled, metal bending. The hinges creaked.

Tobias prepared to do it again.

Pain ran through the hall, bringing shrieks from all of them.

Joel cackled with insane glee. “I’m byzan! You can’t beat me!” His words traveled through the creaking, collapsing complex; they carried mentally to the surface. *“Attack them! Get the woman!”*

On the Adrianna, descendants barely felt the enforcer spells. Thanks to Marc having Jennifer attack them in their training sessions, their shield layers were nearly impenetrable. Their problem was the pirates still sailing from behind the complex. As they watched, the kill team boat exploded, blasting into the ships on each side. All three of them went up in flames and began to sink.

Joel didn’t care. He grinned insanely as he crooked a long finger toward the little girl cowering at his feet. “Kill their alpha or I’ll kill Joey.”

Cate screamed, eyes glowing red, but she didn’t fire on him. Her bond with Joey wouldn’t let her. Her shoulders slumped.

Joel observed in satisfaction as she gathered energy. As she opened the door to that mental gift, Joel studied it for copying. So far, an alpha death spell was the only gift he didn’t have. “Kill him now!”

Cate fired.

**10**

Marc froze, face going slack. He slid to his knees. Then he fell over.

“Marc!” Angela tried to heal him but there was no response.

Dog’s awful howls echoed from inside the ship.

Eagles fired rifles, picking off pirate captains like they’d been told. All around the railing, knives flew out. Jayda didn’t miss a single target.

Behind them, Adrian was using a powerful wind spell to repel the invaders, but there were too many pirates for him to handle alone.

Down in the ship, people shouted in fear at the hits slamming into their boat and protected walls. Descendants brought up shields over their weaker friends and family.

Huddled nearby, the normals now wished they were still included.

Wade, standing next to Amy and Samantha, saw a chance to make peace. He expanded his shield to include the closest normals. When they breathed sighs of relief, the other descendants did the same so that all their people down here were covered.

**11**

Cody shoved by the distracted descendants at the top of the ramp. He’d slipped out when the fight began.

Charlie followed. “Come back! It’s not safe up there!”

Cody ran straight to his father.

Charlie saw Marc on the deck. His heart thudded. *Dad*? He joined Cody in trying to wake Marc, danger forgotten.

Non-descendants fired shell after shell from their grenade launchers, many of them perfect shots. Small explosions rocked the ships surrounding them; men were blown into the air and fell into the angry ocean.

“Reverse course!” Grant hit buttons and turned the wheel. He was forced to drop speed to nothing to avoid ramming them. Their ship couldn’t stand up to those reinforced boats.

“Why aren’t they firing on us?!” Neil had expected that as soon as they’d gotten into range.

“If they sink us, his main target dies. Hold those shields!” Angela scanned, aware of things going badly. Without her gifts, she hadn’t been able to search ahead and see what was waiting. *I’ll never do that again if we survive this*. She stepped over Marc and added her own layers of shielding as grappling hooks were tossed and canisters of gas were shot at them. All around the ship, pirates were trying to get onboard. Their shields were holding so far, but Adrian’s ship was unprotected. Green gas floated through the air, along with flames and ice as the descendants blasted the closest targets.

Toshi watched from the flagship, already sure they were going to lose. *I wish I’d joined Safe Haven.*

He kept watching, staying back as half his fleet was destroyed. The UN ships took longer to go down, but his wooden vessels were sinking in just a couple of hits. *I hate magic.*

Angela felt another spell coming and smothered Marc in thicker layers of protection. Whoever was firing was only aiming for him.

The blast hit her shields and rebounded, knocking two people off their feet.

“We have a deal! Help us!”

The ocean began to rise at her demand, sloshing over the pirate boats. Huge waves rippled through the water, rolling the smaller craft. The waves split around the Adrianna, but they slammed into Adrian’s unprotected boat mercilessly.

Angela connected to Marc mentally. *Marc! We need you!*

The silence terrified her. She dug deeper while her hands searched for an injury to heal.

“She’s here!” Cody stared up at Angela. “Don’t hurt her!”

Angela realized Marc’s daughter was the one attacking him. She grabbed Cody’s arm. “Tell her to stop!”

“I’m trying! The bad man is making her do it. She doesn’t want to!”

Angela pointed at Marc. “Protect him.”

Cody and Charlie both brought up shields over their father.

Angela blasted out a shield that kept expanding until their entire ship was in its protection, giving her fighters a needed break. “Gather energy for the next wave.”

Angela sent out her alpha pull. *Submit or die!*

The warning echoed through every mind in the complex. She followed it with fire.

Huge blasts spewed through her shield, catching the nearest UN ships. Men screamed as they began to burn.

Angela lifted both hands.

Powerful gales rose; men dove into the angry water to avoid her wrath, only to be swallowed by the ocean.

Broken, burning ships banged into the detention center and each other. Men scrambled onto the sinking hatch, pounding and shouting to be let inside.

Angela slowly lowered her hands. “It’s almost your dream.”

Jennifer nodded, sweating. “Do it now, before the rest of it happens. He might not want me if I’m powerless.”

Angela locked Jennifer’s gifts.

Jennifer slid into the protection of Kyle’s shield.

Angela scanned; pirates were all over Adrian’s ship, but only there. Even the few who’d managed to get to the complex were being swallowed by the ocean. Angela opened her mouth to give an order that no one wanted to hear.

*Wait!* Joel connected to her directly. *If you sink us, you’ll kill a dozen innocent people. Including Cate Brady.*

Angela paused, letting that fear beat bright in her mind while her hands made motions in Eagle code. “What will you give me?”

Joel chuckled. *You do not have the advantage.*

“Neither do you.”

Joel’s chuckle faded. *We’ll trade.*

Angela kept giving silent orders. “I want all those people released, and you dead.”

*I am immortal!*

Angela wasn’t sure if that was true, but there wasn’t time to demand proof. “The people then.”

*Fine. What will you give me?*

Angela scanned his mind through their connection, confirming his obsession and his strength. “Jennifer Recce.”

Joel’s breath caught; his mind filled with triumph. *I agree. Clear the hatch so I can send them up.*

Angela blasted fire over the entrance, sending such heat that bones melted.

Joel laughed. *Maybe I should have traded for you.*

“Don’t suck up. It’s rude.”

Joel broke the connection.

**12**

Tobias blasted the weakened jail door with the last of his energy; he slumped against the wall as it exploded.

Greg and Shawn hurried in, leaving the small group with Jonny and Drew.

“He’s gone!” Greg scanned and found a ladder in the far corner. The hatch above it was open. “He ran!”

The complex shuddered again; huge sections fell.

“We have to get these survivors to the escape pod.” Shawn waved the others to get going.

Jonny and Drew helped Tobias and his wives onto the ladder. Tobias didn’t mention the little boy he’d left in the command center. *Even if Joel survives this, his son won’t.*

Greg was dazed, furious. “Why didn’t he kill us?”

“Safety net, I think. If he fails to kill Angela and Marc, he needs us alive. Come on.” Shawn tugged on his arm. “It’s time to go.”

Greg was shaking his head. “He has Marc’s daughter!”

Shawn took Greg’s arm. “We’ve done what we came here for. Angela and Marc will handle that.”

Greg had no choice. The detention center was collapsing. Water dripped from almost every seam. He and Shawn took off running, no longer having to watch out for UN troops. They were all gone or dead. The tunnels stayed clear.

Conner grinned at the sight of them rushing toward the open pod door. He put his hand over the detach button.

Drew and Jonny were also relieved, but they didn’t pause in getting Tobias and his wives into the seats.

Greg and the others ran in as another tunnel collapsed.

Lights flickered; the entire section began to fall.

Conner hit the button; the door slid closed.

The pod shot backward, away from the crumbling level.

Bodies were flung against the walls and seats as the pod picked up speed. It barreled away from the chaos, rising as it went.

*“Sonic decompression has commenced. Do not leave the pod until the pressure has stabilized.”* The computer was in control now. *“Oxygen supplements have deployed.”*

Drew and Jonny clicked their harnesses.

Conner held on to his chair, stomach churning.

Greg and Shawn stayed on the floor against the wall. They were too tired to fight the G-forces now pinning them in place.

A monitor activated near Conner. It flashed bright red. *“Warning! Impact course detected! Warning!”*

Conner didn’t know what to do. He hit the change course button and hoped that was right.

The pod shuddered, engine fading. It slowed.

*“Enter new coordinates.”*

The red warning light blinked off. *“Collison avoided. Resume course?”*

“Yes!”

*“Order recorded.”* The pod shot off again, bringing fresh groans. Heads spun from the pressure; hearts pounded as people sagged in their seats.

Conner tried to stay conscious, observing the monitor. The pod was moving in a huge circle as it rose, gaining speed. Numerous other pods were also under the water, but they appeared to be going down. Debris smacked into their pod as it continued to rise.

Conner shut his eyes. *I will not pass out. I will not pass out!*

The pod increased speed.

Conner passed out.

The monitor lit up again. *“Decompression is complete. Oxygen has been adjusted. Do not exit until the timer goes off or death will ensue. Thank you for using our experimental submersible technology. Have a UN day!”*

Alexander groaned as he woke, hurting all over. His mind replayed Conner’s attack. He’d never been hit with the family spell; fury burned in his mind over it. He clumsily yanked his knife from his belt and unsnapped his harness. *I’ll get rid of one of you right now.*

# Chapter Thirty-Five

**More Power**

**1**

**A**ngela pulled the cuffs from her belt.

Kyle put Jennifer behind him, eyes glowing red. Several others came over to support him, including Morgan.

“What does he want her to do?”

Jennifer shivered. “Everything, Kyle. He’ll use me to conquer the world. He’ll breed me for powerful children and consume them. Then he’ll consume me. He only wants more power.”

“You’re not going!”

Jennifer ducked under his big arm and hugged him tightly. “Do your job; I’ll do mine.” She kissed his stiff lips and then walked to Angela with her arms out. “I trust you to keep him alive.”

Angela snapped the cuffs on with no change in expression. She led Jennifer toward the front of the ship, where the entrance to the center was rising. A long, bent plank began to extend. It bumped into debris from broken ships and the complex. It looked like only the top level was still intact.

Angela waited with Jennifer, watching the hatch open. Several individuals fled across the ramp toward them. Many were injured, but all of them were descendants or Invisibles.

Eagles ushered them toward Jeff so he could take them below.

Angela waited for the rest, refusing to think of anything but trading Jennifer for the little girl.

Behind her, Safe Haven descendants lined up, ready to keep fighting on her orders.

Kyle stayed back. He knew if he got any closer, he’d never let it happen. He scanned Marc, wishing the man would recover and stop the two females who were about to enter hell alone. Kyle had felt Joel’s power. He doubted Angela could win that fight.

So did Angela.

The hatch opened again. A group of red eyed descendants were shoved out. A small girl was among them. She flew across the ramp. “Cody!”

Cody caught her, arms wrapping her up tight. “Cate!”

Eagles directed the other survivors toward the steps by the bridge and waited for orders, glad Marc’s daughter had been released.

Angela saw Joel in the shadows of the hatch; she didn’t see the other captives. “The rest?”

Joel shrugged. *Dead.* He stepped into full view with a squirming boy under one arm. His shield glowed with dark strength. *Like you.* He fired at her.

Angela caught the blast and swallowed. She hid the pain. His power was much stronger.

*Byzan!* Joel connected to Cate. *Kill her. Now, or I’ll drop Joey!*

Descendants gasped, realizing they’d let an assassin onboard. Several of them moved toward the little girl.

Cate automatically brought up a shield around herself and Cody. “Stay back!”

Angela’s eyes lit up in brilliant red. “I am the alpha. I request your protection for everyone on this ship.” Angela stared at the shuddering little girl, hoping she’d made the right choice as old magic swirled around them.

“He’ll drop my Joey!”

Angela didn’t use more magic; she used the truth she’d been able to glean from Joel’s dark mind. “He’ll conquer the entire world. No one will be safe, not even Cody.”

Joel held his angry son over the water. “Do it now!”

Angela tried to smile as the child fought with herself. “I forgive you. Now take your place among my army.”

Forced to make an awful choice, Cate fired her death spell. “Die!”

Cate’s spell smashed into Joel’s shield and the door, sending up a thick wave of smoke and debris.

Joel dropped the boy; Joey hit the water in a small splash and vanished under the waves.

Angela connected to the ocean. *Can you save him?*

There was no answer.

Cate fell to her knees by Marc’s body, crying. “Joey!”

Cody knelt by her. “Help dad!”

Cate kept crying. “I hurt him too.”

Cody grabbed her hand. “You have to help him. He’s falling!”

“She missed.” Jennifer trembled as Joel reappeared in the charred doorway. “She missed!”

“No, she didn’t.” Cate’s spell hadn’t been able to get through Joel’s shield. Angela put a hand on Jennifer’s elbow and moved them to the front of the stunned people who were afraid to fire on the evil man.

Joel scanned, eyes landing on Jennifer. Cate’s betrayal and his son were forgotten; so was the other byzan. “Send her over!” Joel stared at his prize, marveling at Jennifer’s ability to keep him out of her mind.

Angela nudged Jennifer. “Just like last time, Eagle.”

Jennifer nodded, but she was terrified. Joel wasn’t Donner; he wouldn’t give her a minute alone or fall for tricks to buy time. As soon as he realized she was locked, he would reverse it and take control of her mind.

Angela concentrated. *Greg? Shawn?*

There was no answer.

Joel stepped forward to retrieve his captive; his shield lowered as his hands went out to grab her.

Angela grieved as she gave the order. “Now!”

All the descendants who’d gotten her Eagle code messages fired, even those who had friends still in there.

So did Angela. “Get down!”

Jennifer dropped to her knees, heart pounding in her chest. Relief flooded her as she realized Angela had never intended to hand her over.

The spells hit Joel at the same time, knocking him backward and through the door. His shield reappeared, rippling with power.

Kyle and Morgan darted forward and dragged Jennifer back onto their ship.

Angela sent her strongest fire spell, vainly hoping he was afraid of it like she used to be. The glowing hand crashed down against his shield.

Joel absorbed the blast through the barrier, then sent it back.

Shields came up over the Adrianna as all the descendant fighters reacted. The thick layers deflected Joel’s hit back into the complex doorway, hitting the control panel. The pod began to sink.

“No!” Joel screamed in rage as he tried to stop it, but the computer was too damaged. It took him down into the complex, where he was too tired to fight through the walls and angry water. He took off running through the tunnel to his command center. “This isn’t over!”

Blast after blast slammed into the remaining level now, breaking it apart, sinking it. Joel shut the door and slammed his hand over the identification pad. “Detach!”

The complex crumbled around him and sank toward the bottom of the debris littered ocean.

Angela stepped back as the ramp collapsed. She handed Kyle the keys to Jennifer’s cuffs, not looking away*. I need to feel him die.*

His words, *I am immortal*, rang in her mind. She scanned the churning waves, hoping he would sink to the bottom of the ocean and run out of air. They couldn’t kill him with their gifts. He was too strong, too evil.

Huge bubbles came up as the complex sank. Debris and bodies floated up with it. So did escape pods that hadn’t been detached in time.

“Some help here!”

Angela turned toward Adrian’s ship. She marched across the deck, drawing energy.

Everyone watched, expecting her to save him again.

Angela threw fire that severed the towline. She stared at Adrian as he realized what she’d done.

Adrian, even in a moment of life or death, admired her. *Perfect*. He was still smiling when he was hit from behind with a sword that sliced into his side and let his blood flow out onto the deck.

Green gas floated over his ship in heavy waves, slowly knocking everyone out. It thickened, telling Angela someone onboard had just released a fresh batch. She spotted Sadie in the wheelhouse, wearing a gas mask. She was tossing silver canisters onto the deck below.

Angela didn’t care where the girl had gotten the gas. She turned away, heart breaking. Whatever happened on that ship was no longer her concern. *I made my choice the instant Marc banished Kendle. Now we all have to live, or die, with that.*

Onboard the pirate flagship, Toshi swung the wheel away from Safe Haven. *We can’t win this fight.*

Three other ships with only minor damage changed course to follow him. The promised profits weren’t worth dying for.

“Something’s happening over there!” Morgan pointed as everyone turned. “What is that?”

“I see survivors... They’re climbing on the hatch!” Jennifer narrowed in. “Two pirates…and the kid he dropped!” Jennifer drew her gun.

The two pirates flew into the angry waves where shark fins were now appearing. Next to her, Kyle swept the waves for more of their people.

Pam was sobbing. “Shawn!”

Morgan held her, still scanning the big pod that had surfaced. Huge bubbles and debris were popping up all around it. “I’m not getting anything at all. Maybe it’s empty.”

“It’s Conner!” Candy shoved by them, frantic. “He needs help! Conner!”

*Thud!* The Adrianna shuddered at the impact as it was hit from below. People all over the ship were knocked to their knees.

“Shields up!” Angela was dismayed as they obeyed, but the shields didn’t go through the water. *We only trained for the top!*

*Thud!*

“Tonya!” Angela raced to the redhead who was on the ramp. “We need you!”

Tonya knelt, hand going to the deck. “Protect us. Please!”

*Thud!* Weakening wood groaned.

Kenn put a hand on Tonya’s shoulder, lending his energy. Powerful magic swirled over the ship, sinking into every beam and board. The hull lit up bright green, forming a shield under the water.

“Sharks!” Jayda pointed over the side of the ship. “They’re going under us!”

Shark fins appeared in the waves and then vanished as the animals dove toward the bottom of the ship. More wildlife appeared through the waves. There wasn’t time to identify them all. Blood welled in the water as the predators took a needed meal.

Angela waved at Theo, who was in the bridge with Grant. *Get us moving!*

The engine immediately fired up, but the waves and dead start made it slow.

The complex was gone now except for the hatch pod. Debris floated in every direction. The green gas was thinning around them and the screams were fading. *It’s almost over. Hang on.*

People braced for the finale.

Time slowed.

“We made a deal!”

Angela turned to find Joel stalking across their ship.

“I will have her!” Joel had set the autopilot to surface right here, buying him time to climb up the side. His command center had been close enough to the surface that he’d been able to swim, shield up to protect against the angry waves. Red orbs glowing, he centered on Jennifer. “We made a deal!”

Jennifer shuddered as his eyes found her and lit up brighter.

Kyle started to unlock Jennifer so she could fight.

“No!” Jennifer shivered, gun now in hand. “That’s what he wants.”

Kyle shoved her behind him; Morgan did the same, creating a barrier of angry bodies.

Angela and Cate fired first.

Joel deflected the hits with his shield, then sent back his own blast.

Cody and Charlie stepped in front of it to protect their family. They took the hit together and fell, stunned.

Joel had been byzan a lot longer than she had; Angela already knew she couldn’t win in a battle. Her mind went to the strategy she’d used against Neil in the cage. *I have to take him out.*

Everyone opened fire now except Angela. She used her reserve energy and connected to the forbidden King.

*Well, you’re in trouble again.*

Joel faltered, getting Angela’s thoughts. Immense power pressed in on him, dwarfing his own.

Angela didn’t waste time. *I banish you from hell. He’s your replacement.*

*Thank you!*

*It’s my honor.*

Joel screamed as ancient magic took over. He turned to run, scared for the first time in a decade. His shield vanished. His energy bank was empty.

Trinity tossed her snare and yanked him back as Brittani, Daryl, and Kyle trapped him in layer after layer of shielding.

“You wanted more power.” Angela fired, sending her deadliest spell.

Joel’s skin melted until he was a shrieking skeleton. He exploded, blowing bone dust over the deck.

Silence fell; time resumed.

Angela’s bracelet glowed bright white, then vanished.

She rubbed her wrist. *May you find peace being back with the Creator.*

She went to Marc, motioning Morgan to help Charlie and Cody. She was drained.

“Hey! It’s the kill team!” Neil waved at Shawn through the window of the pod.

Shawn puked.

Neil laughed. “Yeah, we all feel that way.” He scanned the other people in the pod, dread returning. Angela’s words came to him. *Five will go. Four will return.*

**3**

Greg struggled against Alexander’s thick body. He’d woken as the man stabbed at Conner’s shield.

Drew slowly opened his eyes, stomach roiling. He turned his head and puked.

Alexander ducked the mess, hold loosening.

Greg followed him down, hands finding his Adam’s apple. He crushed it as Alexander’s knife slid into his stomach.

Both men fell over. Blood ran across the floor.

“Help him!”

Conner groaned, body shriveled again. He’d used his reserves to protect himself from Alexander’s attack. “Empty!”

“Boss!”

Everyone began shouting for Angela.

Except Drew. He put a hand on Conner’s wrist. “Take mine. I give it willingly.”

Conner sucked down Drew’s lifeforce and shoved it into Greg.

Drew dropped to the floor. He smiled as death came. *It was my honor…*

**4**

Drew opened his lids to find bright light and thick cloudy walls. He groaned, hands going over his body. *I’m not a skeleton. Did someone save me?*

Doug appeared next to him, smiling. “You saved yourself.” He helped Drew to his feet. “We’ve been waiting for you, brother.”

Drew sucked in air that he no longer needed. He held onto Doug’s big arm as he scanned the happy faces standing around them. “I’m dead.”

Everyone nodded.

Romeo came forward. “You get to be with us now.”

Drew’s terror subsided. *I didn’t go to hell… I’m good!*

Doug chuckled. “Good as can be. Come on. Let’s get you warmed up.”

The others surrounded Drew, no longer separated by classes or levels.

Ozzie took Drew’s other arm. “Thank you for your sacrifice.”

Drew sat on the soft bench. He let them drape a robe around his shoulders. It immediately formed to his body. A gold lapel pin appeared in the shape of a hand. Calm filled his mind. *This is where I belong.*

“Yes. With you up here, lending a hand, our loved ones will continue to survive. There is no greater sacrifice than the one you’ve made. We are all humbled by your actions.” Donald knelt in front of him and placed soft sandals on his feet. “Welcome to the weigh station.”

**5**

Candy shoved by the tired Eagles. “Conner!” She ran to the side of the ship, where the rescue skiffs were being deployed to pick up survivors and their kill team. She stayed there as the escape pod door flew open and Conner’s weary face appeared.

Quinn and Tommy had to make multiple trips to the pod; the small rescue boats only held six people. Candy didn’t budge from her place along the rail. She didn’t watch the other pickups being handled by Ian. She didn’t care about them.

Angela unlocked Jennifer. “Check on our kids.”

Jennifer went immediately, with Kyle on her heels. Angela had told him to stay with her for the entire fight. That was over now, but Kyle didn’t plan to let her out of his sight for a long time.

Candy flew to Conner as soon as he reached the deck. She wrapped him up, sobbing.

“Did we get them all?”

Morgan nodded at Angela, out of breath from hauling the survivors onboard as they reached the top of the ladder. “All our people are onboard.”

Angela waved at Grant and Theo. “Resume course.” She didn’t look at Adrian’s ship.

Quinn did. So did Tommy. They both saw Sadie going from body to body, killing the unconscious pirates. Kendle wasn’t in sight, but both men felt her. She’d survived.

Adrian was another matter. His blood was coating the deck.

Tommy clasped hands with Quinn. “We’ll see her again.”

Quinn didn’t respond. He almost hoped that wasn’t true. *If she comes back to Safe Haven, Angela will kill her this time. She no longer has any protection.*

Tommy tugged him toward the chaos of their top deck and let go. “We have work waiting.”

Quinn followed, locking up his heart. *She was bad for me. I know it. I hope she finds peace...and stays gone.*

Tommy joined the men hauling injured people down to the infirmary. He saw a few of the descendants trying to heal Marc, but his daughter had a shield around him. None of their help was getting through. Tommy hefted a man over his shoulder and went down the ramp.

“You have to let go.” Cody pulled on Cate’s arm. “They’ll help him.”

“They came here to kill me!”

Angela marched over and grabbed the girl through her shield. She lifted the furious, scared child into the air.

Everyone braced for more ugliness.

She gently put the girl to sleep, glad the child was empty. Cate’s power was amazing. Angela also locked her gifts.

Morgan took their newest precious cargo from her and headed down to the infirmary.

Angela and the others healed Marc as much as they could, but he didn’t wake up. Only his even breathing and steady heartbeat said he was alive.

“It’s the death sleep.” Cody stared at Angela in fear. “He tried to absorb her hit.”

Angela motioned two guards over. “Take him to our cabin and stay with him.”

She scanned the settling chaos as their ship began to inch through debris and bodies. She saw Greg standing next to Shawn, who was being cried on by Pam. She smiled at him. *Welcome home.*

Greg’s heart pounded. *I shouldn’t be here. Drew should!*

Angela went to him and put her arms around him while he cried on her shoulder. “I’m glad you survived. We need you.”

Greg drew back, anger coming into his face. “To die. Let me go now before I become someone you’ll hate.” Greg shuddered. “I’m scared.”

She hugged him again.

Greg held her close, pretending that she was his. *I wanted to die on this run.*

“I know.” Angela nuzzled his cheek. “Take your reward. I give it willingly.”

Greg kissed her.

For Angela, there was nothing.

For Greg, it was everything. He gasped against her lips, then retreated. He sank onto his knees, crying. “I shouldn’t be here!”

Shawn helped him up. Jonny took his other arm.

A cheer welled over the deck as they limped below.

Jonny stopped. He motioned to Conner.

Conner’s smile spread from ear to ear. He hurried to join them.

Candy clung to his arm and refused to let go.

Conner put an arm around her and followed his team below. He didn’t spare a glance at his father’s fading ship. He’d made his choice. *I’m a good man and an Eagle in Safe Haven’s army. Nothing will ever come before my honor again.*

Samantha came up the ramp and joined Tonya and Angela as she scanned for the next issue to be handled. She’d slipped by Wade while he was comforting their kids. Samantha was surprised to find her mind shut. She couldn’t get through.

“I’m grieving. Leave me be.”

They both assumed it was over Adrian.

Angela snorted. “We lost three *good* people today. Adrian wasn’t one of them.”

Drew’s withered body had been taken below for disposal. Kenn already had instructions to add his name to their memorial.

Tonya scowled. “Who else died?”

Angela let the tears flow, pointing toward the front of the ship. Kim and Darren had been covered. They were next to be carried below. “Joel’s death spell rebounded off my shield. They were in the path.”

Samantha and Tonya stayed with Angela as she mourned, watching the Eagles clear the deck. Waves lapped against the ship, calmer now. The sharks and other wildlife were gone, but pieces of the detention center and the escape pods banged into them as the cruise ship gained speed.

Tonya rubbed the rail of the ship. “You did well.”

The walls brightened; the ship increased speed on its own.

Tonya snickered at Samantha’s surprise. “I have a way with hardasses.”

Kenn appeared at her side. “Yes, you do.” He kissed her cheek before she could protest, then went to collect Kim’s body.

Tonya smiled at him. “Kenny?”

Kenn didn’t turn. “Yes, my love?”

“I want you to move back in with me.”

James turned from the body he’d been about to pick up. “What?! You’re forgiving him?!”

Tonya flushed. “I’m not perfect either.”

“He doesn’t deserve you!”

Kenn spun around. “Mind your own business!”

“She is my business!”

“No, James.” Tonya tried to be nice. “I’ve told you before; you and I will never be together. Saving my life doesn’t earn you that.”

“Wanna bet?!” James stalked toward Tonya, hand rising.

Kenn grabbed the man and hefted him into the air. He tossed him over the rail.

People flew to the side to see if James surfaced.

“Stop the ship!” Peter waved at Theo and Grant.

“No.” Angela turned toward the bridge. “This ship doesn’t stop again unless we have to.”

“What about James?” Peter didn’t like James, but they’d served together.

Also protecting Angela now, Ivan shook his head. “He was going to hit her. We all felt it. We don’t need him here.”

Peter saw James surface.

James waved and shouted for help.

Peter went to get the last body. James had been violent before they’d joined Safe Haven. Peter had hoped that side of James was gone. Now, it didn’t matter anymore.

Tonya didn’t watch James try to stay afloat as the ship kept going. She put her back to Samantha’s and stood guard over the deck of working descendants.

Neil gestured to some of the Eagles standing around. “I want a search of the ship.”

Gabe sulked. “No one made it down the ramp. And the art pictures would have killed anyone who did make it through.”

Neil stared.

Gabe sighed. “I have an idea. Why don’t we go search the ship?”

Neil’s lips twitched. “Permission granted.”

Gabe chuckled and drafted a few men to go with him.

Neil frowned. “Just men?”

Gabe realized he’d made a mistake. “Sorry.” He pointed at Molly and then Monica. “Let’s go.”

The two females fell in at the rear of the group.

Angela went to where Debra was standing by herself, staring up at the bridge. Theo was gazing back in hope and frustration.

“Are you okay?”

Debra nodded. *Just thinking.*

*About?*

*The reset they wanted.*

Angela tensed. She eased her expression so people wouldn’t think something else was happening. *Go on.*

*If they had reset the war, we might have found each other during the peace. I could have been happy with him then.*

Angela sighed. *No, Debra. If you can’t love him now, it wouldn’t have worked then either. The heart doesn’t change.*

*That’s not true. Before the war, I didn’t want to be a fighter. I didn’t want to have sexual freedom. I longed for a normal life, with a normal husband. I could have been happy with him.*

Angela walked away, shielding her thoughts. She refused to make more people aware that resetting time was even possible. If they found out only three lives had to be taken, almost everyone would want to do it. Marc already did, but he didn’t understand how that would happen. *We can’t base our future on slaughtering three innocent kids. I won’t allow it.*

**6**

“It’s been three hours.” Morgan looked to Neil. The two men were on guard outside Marc’s door now. “Angela woke from her death sleep about this time.”

Neil shrugged, observing everyone coming and going in the hall that was filled with camp members and descendants. They weren’t fighting or avoiding each other now. They were all exchanging leery glances that turned to sniggers as Kenn came down the hall with a purring cat on each shoulder.

Kenn sighed. *Never gonna live this down either.* He dropped Tonya’s token on the table and left.

Everyone was coming by with signs of respect for Marc. The table near the door was filled with plastic flowers, notes, toys, cards. Neil hadn’t realized how much they’d come to care for Marc. *He was a good leader. More stable than Angela, more honest than Adrian.* “Maybe he’ll stay in charge.”

Morgan didn’t answer, though his face darkened. If Angela hadn’t found a solution, Jennifer might have been handed over. *I can’t trust Marc in charge now, no matter how good everyone thinks he is. Angela is the alpha; I want her leading.*

Neil knocked on the door and opened it, hoping everyone would see Marc was alive and go. It made him nervous to have so many people here at one time.

Angela looked up from the chair next to Marc’s bed. She shook her head.

Neil let the gawkers have a minute, then shut the door.

Angela leaned back. It had been a long day.

Dog put his head down on Marc’s knee. He hadn’t left Marc’s side since he was brought down. *I should have been there.*

Angela grunted. “You were protecting our kids. We didn’t know Cate had that gift, Dog. It’s not your fault. Or hers. She was lied to.”

Angela swept the other bed, where she’d ordered Cate and Cody brought. Cody had fallen asleep holding his sister.

Cate’s lids flew open. She saw Angela first, then Marc.

Cody’s arms tightened around her. “Shhh. It’s okay. You’re safe now.”

Cate’s lashes fluttered. “Sorry...” She dropped back out.

So did Cody.

Angela locked down on her emotions. She needed to rest and recharge. *I’m coming to find you, Marc. I know what that hell is like. You won’t be alone in the darkness much longer. My light will guide you.*

**7**

“How is he?”

Neil grunted at the question he’d now been asked more than fifty times in the six hours since the fight. “No change.”

Kenn held out a folder. “Updates when she’s ready.” He moved down the hall, eager to be finished and get his things moved back into Tonya’s cabin. He was in a great mood. Angela had posted the teams list again and he was on it, along with the kill team and several others who’d affirmed their loyalty to the future. She hadn’t been able to tell them before for several reasons, but mostly because she hadn’t known which member of their kill team wasn’t coming back.

Neil scowled at the next two people so they would keep going, tired of repeating himself. He scanned the notes. *Damn*.

Neil tapped on the door and entered. “I’m sorry. I have updates.”

Angela gestured.

“The kill team is in the infirmary with the rest of our injured people and the new arrivals. The healers are taking turns with them. Everyone is recovering.” Neil swept the twins, hating how fragile the little girl was in comparison to her brother. *We’ll take care of that. She’ll be cared for here, and protected. She would be anyway, but a kid with her gifts will always be a target. We’ll make sure this never happens to her again.*

Angela circled her finger.

Neil frowned. “The ship is fine. Theo and Grant did a complete check; Tonya...translated.”

Angela sighed. “Stop lubing me, Neil. I’m not a virgin.”

Neil flushed. He forced out the worst news. “They found Ramer on the search of the ship. He’d locked himself inside one of the containers. Apparently, he had a stash...”

“He’s dead?”

“Yes. Morgan said he overdosed.”

She sighed. “Send our grief counselor to talk to Stanley. They were close.”

“I will.” Despite being asked so many times, Neil couldn’t help himself. “How is he?”

Angela opened her eyes. “Lost in the darkness. Will you help me get him back?”

Neil shut the door. “You name it.”

“I’m ready to go get him now. Stay in here. When his daughter wakes up, she’ll be...upset. She needs comfort and a firm hand.”

“I can do that.” Neil sat in the chair by the door. “What about Cody?”

Angela smiled. “He’s lending me the extra energy to bring his father home.”

# Chapter Thirty-Six

**Loose Ends**

**1**

**J**ames timed his jump. He was balanced awkwardly on a piece of charred debris that kept trying to throw him off. He lunged at the passing ship...

*Slap!*

James slammed into the hull, losing his breath but not his grip on the rope hanging down. It twisted in the current and smacked him into the drifting ship mercilessly. He hung on, trying to get the strength to climb.

Waves and debris shoved against his legs; James sensed an attack coming. He began to climb, making sure his grip was tight. The rotting rope cut into his hands. Blood ran down his arms.

James kept going, determined to live. He was furious Angela hadn’t stopped to get him. *I wouldn’t have hurt Tonya...much.*

Waves slapped against the boat, reaching for him.

James moved faster.

He made it to the first rail and heaved himself over. He lay there, getting his breath back as his mind replayed being tossed overboard. *I now have one goal. I’m coming for you, Kenn. You and your woman. When I’m done, I’ll rip apart your little Safe Haven and watch it burn.*

“Hold it tighter!”

“Sew faster!”

James frowned at the voices above him. *Adrian isn’t dead?* He sat up, considering options. To get to Kenn, he would need distractions. *And seeing Adrian alive will definitely provide that.*

James got to his feet and went up the steps, dripping salty water and blood.

The deck of Adrian’s ship was covered in gore, bodies of men who’d had their throats slit, and fiery debris. The pirates hadn’t been careful and neither had Kendle. James scanned the empty flamethrower by her side, then the other weapons the two females had. James wasn’t scared of swords or knives. Guns were the only thing that could stop him and he didn’t see any. Even the pirate bodies didn’t have firearms. *I guess the UN thought they might be overwhelmed by their paid help. Big mistake not to properly arm their forces.*

Sadie turned at the footsteps.

Kendle slapped her arm with a bloody hand. “Hold that rag tighter!” Adrian’s wound was the ugliest thing she’d ever seen. She was trying to sew up the gaping hole, but he was losing blood faster than she could close it.

Sadie pressed harder, but her attention stayed on the drenched, angry man marching toward them with a sneer. “Company.”

“I know. I saw him get tossed overboard.” Kendle jabbed the needle in again, trying to remember the little bit of first aid she’d learned. She’d also seen Marc fall, and Angela devastate the pirate fleet. She had faith Marc would survive. Right now, she needed Adrian to do the same.

James grabbed a flaming log that had been part of the wooden railing. “Move!”

Kendle ignored him.

James grabbed her by the hair and jerked her backward. He plunged the fiery stick against Adrian’s side. Flesh sizzled.

Adrian didn’t respond.

Kendle glared at James, rubbing her head, but she didn’t shout or attack him. *Wish I’d thought to do that.*

Sadie scanned the deck for any pirates she’d missed. She got up and went to loot the bodies. *I hope they have some food.*

James cauterized the rest of Adrian’s wound, anger boiling like the man’s skin. He shrugged out of his kit, glad he’d been wearing it when Kenn tossed him over. “Here. Find my first aid kit. Antibiotic ointment, with no bandage for a few days so we can watch it for infection.”

Kendle scowled, but did as she was told. She didn’t like James at all and the impression wasn’t improving. She had avoided him in Safe Haven because he’d been close with Ivan, who was Angela’s doormat. Now, she wished she’d spent a little more time getting to know him so she would have a clue about who he really was.

Adrian groaned, rolling over as alertness came into his brain; he screamed.

Kendle forced a pill into his mouth and then another, stopping the awful noise. “Swallow these.” She poured in water.

Adrian forced it down, body on fire. “Angie! Where’s Angie!”

“Oh, shut up!” James kicked Adrian’s leg as he stood. “I’m sick of that bitch! She took everything from me! I never want to hear her name again!”

Kendle’s eyes glittered. *He’s an asshole, but we have a common enemy.*

Sadie came back, arms and chest covered in gore. “I need help getting the bodies off the ship.”

Kendle stood up. “I’ll do it.”

James glared at her. “Stay here and help Adrian.”

Kendle put a hand on her hip. “I’m not a nursemaid!”

James walked by her. “No, you’re an outcast, like the rest of us.”

Kendle’s lips thinned. Rage rose up.

Adrian grabbed her ankle, drawing attention. “They left us. You have to follow!”

Kendle grunted, jerking away. She grabbed James’s kit and began opening packages.

James hefted the first body over the side.

Next to him, Sadie did the same with a larger man. She wasn’t afraid of work.

James nodded at her. *She’ll do. The other weak bitch might have to go. I’m done with female leadership. This is my boat now.*

Kendle smeared a thin layer of ointment over Adrian’s ugly wound, controlling her stomach. The odor was awful and the flesh tried to slide under her fingers. “Why is he helping us?”

Adrian tried to concentrate through the fiery pain. “Revenge.”

Kendle scowled. “He thinks you can challenge Marc?”

“Not me.” Adrian groaned again, fighting the darkness. “She’s my sleeper.”

Kendle scanned the dark skinned girl, seeing her arms bulge as she lifted a body. “What’s so special about her, other than those muscles?”

“She beat one of us...without gifts.”

“How?”

Sadie walked by them, chin up. “I pretended to be his friend.”

**2**

Moving Adrian below was a chore. Kendle finally got him up and over her shoulder, then staggered toward the stairs. She glared at James as she went by him. James and Sadie were still clearing the ship.

James glared back. “If he dies, we’re screwed. Don’t drop him.”

“Maybe you should help me!”

“What happened to your women’s lib shit?” He laughed at her frustration. Sadie was handling the last two bodies on the rear deck; he headed for the stairs. “I’m getting a shower...or making one if you guys haven’t yet.”

“Don’t waste all our water!” Kendle struggled not to fall as she descended the stairs after him.

Adrian tried to help her, but he’d never felt pain like this. He’d had other injuries, some of them severe, but he now knew what Angela had gone through while he closed her gunshot wound with hot car lighters.

Kendle got Adrian down to his dusty den and put him on the long couch, sweating. She dropped to her knees, worn out.

Adrian tried to remain conscious. He lifted his hand toward the desk. “Gun.”

Kendle shook her head. “Not until I rest.” She had fought the remaining pirates hand-to-hand after the flamethrower ran out of fuel. She was exhausted. If she missed James with the gun, she would have to fight again and she didn’t have the strength to do that right now.

Adrian passed out.

Sadie came down the stairs at a jog and joined them. She flopped down by Adrian and stared at him.

Kendle wondered if the girl was good or bad. After weeks with Adrian, surely she was a little corrupt? “Whose side are you on?”

Sadie frowned at her. “Don’t start trouble you can’t finish.”

“But James is dangerous!”

Sadie shrugged. “We’re all dangerous. Don’t dish it out if you can’t take it.”

“Good advice.” James came in, still filthy. He’d lurked to listen.

Kendle didn’t have time to recover now that she’d been caught conspiring*. I should have gotten the gun.* She tried distraction instead. “We have to get this ship moving or we’ll lose them.”

James pointed at Sadie. “Go handle it.”

Sadie flashed a bright smile. “I get to sail the boat? You’re awesome!”

James chuckled. “Yep. Go on. Do the best you can to keep them in sight.”

“I will.” She smiled again as she went by him. “Don’t kill her yet. I didn’t think about it while we were dumping bodies, but we’ll need bait for fishing.”

James laughed. “I like you.”

Sadie giggled. “Same.”

Kendle rolled her eyes. “Figures.” She shoved to her feet. “Let’s get some things straight right–”

James punched her in the mouth, hard. He watched her fall. “Are we clear?”

Kendle passed out.

“Excellent.” James went to Adrian’s desk and took the gun. He stored it in his wet waistband.

Adrian’s open notebook caught his eye. He settled into the chair to read it, satisfied with how things were going. *I have two captives and a piece of ass when I’m ready to fight her for it. It’s going well.*

**3**

“We’re on course. I set the autopilot.” Sadie spotted Kendle on the floor as she came down. She smiled at James. “She’s bossy.”

James nodded distractedly. Adrian’s notebook was fascinating. Angela had refused to give the normal people this knowledge.

“Can I read with you? He wouldn’t let me.”

James shrugged, sliding over a little.

Sadie plopped down next to him and leaned against his shoulder.

James frowned vaguely. *She’s too willing. I may have to rape the other one if I want a fight.* James went back to reading.

Kendle moaned as she woke, hand coming up to her swelled mouth.

James snapped to alertness. *I have to get her tied up*. He stood, pulling the belt from his pants.

Sadie lunged upward, driving her long knife into his spine and out through the front of his chest. Blood poured over him and onto the floor; he fell in a heavy thump, landing next to Kendle.

Sadie jerked the blade free. She wiped it clean on his pants and sheathed it.

Kendle pushed up against the wall, staring at James as he died.

“Good girl.”

Sadie flashed a genuine smile at Adrian’s comment. “It was my honor.”

Kendle groaned as she got to her feet, head spinning. “Another convert. Great.”

Sadie chuckled. “He gets under your skin.”

Kendle knew not to nod and create more pain for herself. “I think I can help get him up the stairs...if you want to try?”

Sadie shook her head. “I’ve got it. We really do need fishing bait. I’ll carve him topside.”

Kendle breathed a sigh of relief, leaning against the wall for support. “Thank you.”

Sadie patted Kendle’s shoulder, then opened the door so she had a clear path. “Us outcasts have to stick together.”

Kendle went to Adrian to check his wound.

Sadie lifted the bloody body; she began whistling a merry tune as she went up the steps, leaving a gory trail.

Kendle wanted to roll her eyes, but she didn’t need the new wave of pain. “You’ve done a number on her.”

Adrian groaned, clutching his ribs.

“I understand.” Kendle pried his hands away and lifted the bandage. “Damn.” She retrieved the medical kit Sadie had brought down, worrying. “That looks rough.”

“No healers.”

“Nope. You’ll have to recover on your own or die for real this time.”

Adrian felt determination fill him, like it had in the past. “Mitchels...not easy to kill.”

“You got that right.” Kendle chose a stronger ointment and began slathering it on. “And for once, I’m grateful.”

“Why?” Adrian winced at her rough touch.

“Because James’s plan was solid. I need you to live. Now shut up and start healing or you’ll never be with your precious Angela again.”

“I will!”

“There’s that Mitchel sex drive. Hold onto that.”

“It’s not sex.” Adrian flinched from her hands this time. “I love her!”

“Yeah, yeah. You just want what you can’t have.” Kendle wiped her hands down her tacky shirt. “If she said yes, you’d be bored in a month.”

“Not true!”

Kendle grunted, rolling him over to get at the other side of the injury. “Maybe you’ll get to prove that.”

Adrian concentrated on her words instead of the pain as she smeared on more medication. “You don’t want me to kill Marc.”

“No. I want you to make him crack. Then she’ll send him away to protect her sheep.”

Adrian stared at her scarred face. “Marc has cracks?”

“I felt it when he kissed me. If we show up on their island, and survive that encounter, it might push him over the edge.”

“You’re evil!”

“So?”

Adrian shut his lids. “More ointment. We won’t stand a chance if the infection gets me first.”

Kendle chuckled ruthlessly as she dabbed more cream onto the angry red blisters that stretched all the way around his ribs on both sides. “Hush now. Use that clever mind and tell me how we survive that landing.”

Adrian immediately settled into doing just that. There was always a way to get Angela to ease her decisions. He just needed the right leverage.

**4**

“I heard what you said.”

Kendle glanced up from scrubbing the floor to find Sadie leaning against the doorway. She was covered in fresh blood, telling Kendle she had been serious about cutting James up for bait. She shrugged. “And?”

“You’re both traitors to Safe Haven.”

“I don’t care about that camp. That’s Adrian’s weakness.”

“What’s yours?”

Kendle sighed. “I’m nuts. And I want someone who now hates me.”

“Angela’s man.”

Kendle sneered hatefully, jealousy rising. “Her *fiancé*.”

Sadie studied her. “And you were with Adrian...before?”

“Yes.”

“And others.”

Kendle snarled. “What of it?!”

Sadie came over and took the empty spot on the couch by Adrian. “Maybe that’s really why Marc doesn’t like you. Men hate it when we sleep around.”

Kendle flushed. “I wasn’t sleeping around. I tried to have relationships with them; it didn’t work.”

“Why not?”

Kendle’s heart broke all over again. “They’re not Marc.”

Sadie smiled. “Good.”

“Why is that good?” Kendle leaned back, tossing the rag down. “Why do you even care? You’re just a stowaway he decided to adopt.”

Sadie’s face changed into the fighter Adrian had met the first time. “We have a common goal. I needed to be sure you meant it.”

Kendle’s neck hair rose. “What common goal?”

Sadie ran a gentle hand along Adrian’s arm. “We both want Angela gone. Together, we can do that.”

Kendle gawked. “You’re in love with him!”

Sadie rubbed his arm in comforting circles, glad he seemed to be resting peacefully. “I’m obsessed. You know what that’s like.”

Kendle reluctantly grinned. “You’re devious and honest. I admire that.”

“Right back at ya. But don’t tell him. He thinks I’m sweet and innocent. I don’t want that to change until I kill Angela.”

Kendle’s heart thumped. “He’ll hate you for that; you’ll lose him.”

Sadie shook her head. “When I get my gifts back, the very first thing I’ll do is charm him. Then he won’t care if she dies. He’ll only want me.”

*She’s as crazy as I am*. Kendle grinned. “We’re going to be good friends.”

“Yep.” Sadie cuddled up to Adrian’s warm body, being careful of his injury. “Or we’ll die together on our quest. Either way, it should be fun.”

**5**

Ten miles away, Jordi sat in his escape pod, alone. The collapse of the detention center had set it free. He’d gotten away from the battle and waited for Safe Haven to come for him. When they didn’t, he’d followed.

“I’m right behind you now. I’m coming to that island, but you won’t know I’m there until it’s too late to stop me.” Jordi opened a can of supplies. These pods all had a small amount of supplies and oxygen. Soon, he would have to find a way to resupply.

Jordi studied the monitor, tracking both ships. He was staying out of their mental range, assuming a stationary pod on their radar would be written off as debris.

He was tracking several other pods as well, but all of them were going east, away from Safe Haven. Everyone knew where that camp was headed. Their power players on the other side of the world would hear what had happened, and then they would send reinforcements. Jordi didn’t plan to wait for them unless he had to, but it was good to know they would eventually come.

Jordi thought about the man who’d held up his wrist controller and calmly walked away, leaving him to die. “I will have my revenge, Greg. And I’ll take your entire camp out with you. All I need is a little luck.”

Jordi wasn’t sure what had happened to Joel, or even how they’d been tricked, but he knew his cousin was dead. He’d felt it. “Our fighters were no match for them. They were able to withstand our magic. It’s almost like they have some other type of protection...”

Jordi wiped a finger across the monitor, assuming Adrian’s ship had been cut loose during the fight. “Adrian wants Angela. Maybe we can cut a deal. If not, I’ll sink his ship and still infiltrate their camp. Either way, I’m coming and nothing will stop me. Joel was powerful, but he was reckless. I’ll wait until hell freezes over if I have to. Then I’ll slaughter them all and be a byzan. When that happens, all normals will be removed and descendants will rule this world–as we were meant to.”

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

**Close**

**1**

**M**arc sent his grid out and came back with the same darkness that was all around him. It was as if there was nothing here, no one left. He walked through the darkness, hands out in front of him. *Where am I?*

Marc sent his grid out again, frustration rising. *Where is everyone? Angie?*

Silence bounced back. Marc screamed it this time. “Angie!”

There was no answer.

Marc kept moving, mind starting to bend. *Am I dead? Is this the containment for souls waiting to be judged?*

Marc thought of the hand prints he’d seen on that device. *No. Souls are solid in there. Where am I?*

“Death sleep...”

Marc spun around at the wet-sounding voice. “Who’s there?”

A cruel chuckle echoed. “Just your mind.”

Marc sent out his grid yet again. There was still nothing.

*I’m going mad*. *Angie? Where are you?*

*Marc?*

Marc ran toward the sound of her voice. “I’m here!”

The voice screamed in pain. “Where are you?! I need you! They’re hurting me!”

Marc ran toward her sobs even though his mind said that young voice was from the past, not the present. “Angie! I’m coming!”

“But you didn’t! He hurt me, Marc and you let it happen! You said you’d come for me! Where are you?!”

“I’m here now!”

More cruel chuckles echoed. “Doomed. Evil. Corrupt.”

“No! I’m good!”

“You are a murderer. You covet, lie, deceive, kill. You are corrupt!”

“No!” Marc covered his ears as the voices continued to spew ugly truths at him.

“Butcher!”

“Liar!”

Marc slid to his knees as the volume increased, head pounding. “I had no choice!”

“We always have a choice.” The voices stopped echoing. Soft footsteps neared him.

Marc grabbed for them, lunging out. He fell on his face and hit a solid surface. He moaned. “I’m sorry!”

“But not enough.” The steps stopped by him. “You must atone for your crimes.”

“How?!”

“Die!”

“Get away from him!” Angela flew toward the fading blue light. “Keep fighting, Marc!”

Marc wasn’t sure she was real. “I can’t. I did those things. I’m evil.”

Angela found him on the ground and covered him with her body. “We’re all evil and good.” She drew him into her arms. “Only love beats this hell. Come back to me!”

Marc tried to pull away. “Another demon in my mind. Get away!”

Angela kissed him, crying for his pain.

Marc felt her tears. Warm and wet, they ran down his cheek and arm. “Angie?”

“Yes; keep fighting, Marc.”

Marc sent out his grid and found her holding him. “You’re here! You came for me!”

“Always.” She held him tight, cheek against his. “I forgive you, Marc. Now forgive yourself and we can go home.”

“I can’t.” He twisted in her grip. “I have cracks. They’re widening!”

“I know.” She refused to let go of him. “Don’t let the darkness win.”

“I deserve this.”

Angela only had one big gun. She fired it now. “Adrian didn’t die.”

Marc stilled. His hatred rose, trying to smother him.

Angela pushed harder, aware that she would have to deal with the fallout later. “He’s conspiring again; I need you to keep me safe. No one else can.”

Marc clutched her arms. “Pick! Do it right now!”

Angela smiled, sending her love. “There was never a choice. I want you.”

“Only me?!”

Angela pushed again. “Unless you die now. Then Adrian will spend every night filling me with his seed, and hurting your kids.”

“No!” Marc snapped awake, sitting upright. “I’ll kill him!”

Cate and Cody both jerked awake.

Cate immediately climbed under the bed, shaking. *I want my power back!*

Cody waited for Marc’s rage to clear, but he didn’t speak or move.

Angela woke next. She held him like she had in his nightmare.

Marc let her calm his anger, but his mind stayed on Adrian. *The next time we meet, one of us will die. I won’t walk away until the job is finished!*

Cody slowly crawled from the bed and got down on his knees. He peered under it. “You can come out now.”

Cate was scared. “I did that to him!”

“It’s okay. They aren’t like the others.”

“Not like mom?”

Cody shook his head. “They won’t sell you. Come out and meet daddy. He’ll protect you.”

Cate slowly came out, shaking. She spotted Angela.

Angela smiled at the girl. “Hello, Cate. Welcome to Safe Haven.”

Cate looked at her dad.

Marc stared into eyes the same shade as his, seeing his own twin. Cate and Melanie were identical. He saw her terror next. Marc locked away his painful memories like he always did. He smiled, sending out waves of calm. “Nice to meet you.”

Cody tugged her arm, getting her closer. He held out a hand to Marc. “She needs to see who you are.”

Marc curled his fingers around Cody’s warm hand.

So did Cate.

Two bright blue sparks ran up his arm and vanished.

Cate’s shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry.”

Marc pulled her closer, gently. “I don’t blame you.” He held her stare. “I only love you.”

Cate began to cry. “Mommy said that...and then she sold me!”

Marc’s heart broke. He pulled the girl into his arms and held her while she sobbed. “That will never happen again.” Marc opened his other arm to Cody. “I won’t let anything happen to either of you. You’re safe now.”

Angela eased from the bed, letting the family have their reunion. She slipped from the room, motioning Dog to come with her. “No one goes in there until I get back.”

Kenn and Ivan both scowled.

“Is he in danger?”

“What are we looking for?”

“Nothing. He needs time with his kids. Make sure he gets it.” Angela went to the camp deck, aware of several guards on her heels and more in the shadows. She didn’t send them away.

Camp members stiffened when she entered; many of them refused to meet her eyes.

Angela went to the rear couch and sat, pleased with the work Theo had done to put up a new door. She let the tension build as she searched for the right words. Rumors had spread of the deaths, of the lifeforces they’d taken from the camp. The guards had tried to tell them it was self-defense, but the normal residents didn’t trust them even though Kendle’s guilt had been proven and the descendants had protected them during the fight.

Angela read more trouble coming in their body language and their sly glances at the Eagles. “I need to tell you all something. I’m not calling a meeting for it, or making an official announcement. That’s not needed. You’ll tell each other.”

People came closer, bodies stiff, ready to run.

Angela waited until they were in range. She fired a spell that brought calm, peace. She let her love flow over them like she used to, drawing them in. Then she delivered the truth. “Magic was never supposed to exist on Earth. We were not supposed to come down here. Descendants were only born in vast numbers for one reason. Someday, we’ll all be gone and your kind will inherit the earth again. There’s no reason to fear us, or to want to be like us. We only exist to die for you.”

**2**

“This is the captain. I’ve been told to inform you we will be rounding the tip of South America in the next two days. The ride will get rough. After that, we’re making a straight course for our island. We should be there in less than ten days.”

Cheers sounded from most of the passengers. Everyone was tired of the ocean and this boat.

Conner didn’t cheer. He gazed at Candy, not caring about anything else. He watched the soft breeze blow her hair around; he enjoyed the feel of air on his skin, not caring that he was missing the celebrations below.

Candy blushed, thrilled that he was home. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

“I can’t.”

“Are you missing your dad?”

“No. He was never a father to me. My sister was the only one he ever cared about until Angela.”

“Will he die?”

Conner shrugged. “I don’t care. I’m happy now.”

“You should get some rest.”

Conner nodded at Eagles walking by, soaking up their approval. “I was below the waterline for too long. I might even sleep up here tonight.”

“Would you like to tell me about it?”

Conner grimaced.

Candy quickly withdrew her offer. “You don’t have to. It’s okay.”

Conner sighed. “It wasn’t all bad. I met my uncle.”

“Another Mitchel?” Candy frowned. “Marc won’t like that.”

“He only sucked up to me to get to my dad.”

“What did Adrian do to him?”

“He slept with his wife. ...I killed him.”

“Oh.” Candy put a hand on his wrist across the small deck table. “I’m sure you only did what you had to.”

Conner pulled away. “I did my duty; I didn’t want to. The same with what I’m about to do.”

Candy braced. “You’re ending things with me.”

Conner chuckled. “Never. But I am going to follow the rules now.” He stood up, then knelt at her feet. He took a small box from his pocket. “Will you marry me?”

Joy spread over her face. “Yes!”

Conner carefully hugged her and kissed her cheek. Then he moved back before they could get carried away.

Candy let him slip the ring onto her finger, almost crying. *He still wants me!*

People around them gave halfhearted claps; the Eagles nodded and went about their business.

Standing near the rail, Shawn tossed a cigar box overboard. He didn’t turn as footsteps approached.

Pam slipped under his arm.

Morgan took the other side, leaning against Shawn’s heat.

Shawn soaked up their warmth. “It was my burn box.”

Pam knew not to speak. This was a moment between men.

Morgan studied the dark water. “What was in it?”

Shawn forced out the truth. “Pictures of camp women.”

Morgan frowned. “In the showers?”

“Some. Mostly faces.” Shawn felt better getting it out. “I’m a voyeur, of a sort. I liked looking at them at night when I was alone.”

“And now?”

Shawn smiled. “I don’t need them anymore.” He hugged Pam closer. “I gave one picture to Marc, for Cody. The rest are now in the water below us, being pulled to the bottom.” He sighed. “Can you forgive me?”

Pam nodded right away. “It’s not that bad...”

Shawn felt her body language change. He frowned. “But?”

“Some things happened while you were gone.” Pam sighed. “We need to tell you before everyone else does.”

Shawn knew instinctively the worst of it was connected to Morgan. He shifted so he could view the man’s face. “Get it out; I’m no one to judge.”

“I wish I didn’t have to.” Morgan was grateful for his new life. He was scared of it ending. “I think I’m resigning from Kyle’s team.”

Shawn was surprised. “Why?”

Footsteps sounded behind them. They all turned to see Jennifer approaching, alone.

Morgan tensed as he caught her thoughts; Kyle was calming down now. He would find out soon.

Jennifer motioned.

Other Eagles came from the shadows to witness the moment.

Jennifer walked up to Morgan. *Slap!*

Shawn stopped Morgan from falling over the rail.

Jennifer ignored him and Pam. She glared at Morgan. “Are we good now?”

Morgan realized she was punishing him. He shook his head. “Again.”

*Slap!*

Shawn moved Pam aside when she started to step between them.

“Again.”

*Thud!*

Morgan staggered against the rail. “Again!”

Jennifer rubbed her sore knuckles. “Pam.”

Pam didn’t want to do it.

Jennifer scowled at her. “Give your man the loving correction he needs to let this go or I’ll call Kyle up here!”

Pam didn’t want that. She drew back, honoring her commitment to the Eagles.

*Slap!*

Jennifer focused on Shawn.

Shawn glared at her. He’d figured out Morgan’s feelings for Jennifer had become public while he was gone. “He doesn’t deserve this.”

“I know.” Jennifer still waited. She’d chosen this way to handle it so Kyle couldn’t get involved. It was only a matter of time before he found out and ripped their team apart. And if he didn’t, Morgan was going to. He hadn’t done anything wrong, but his mind refused to believe that.

Shawn sighed. *For the future.* Then he punched Morgan, knocking him to the deck at Jennifer’s feet.

Morgan looked up, eyes wild. “I’m sorry!”

Jennifer leaned down and gently wiped blood from his mouth. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Loving you is wrong!”

Jennifer sighed. “No, it’s not. Wade taught me that.”

“How?”

“He showed me his feelings for Samantha. He fought it too. We can’t help who we’re attracted to, who we admire and respect. You’ve never made a move and you never will. You’re a good man. Now rise and stay with your team in the full honor you still have.”

Shawn and Pam helped Morgan to his feet, both glad it was over.

Jennifer stepped back to give them room. “We won’t ever speak about it again. I won’t act different with you anymore.”

“Wade really helped you.”

Jennifer nodded at Pam. “He explained that Morgan was going to punish himself. He also told me Kyle can’t take revenge if I did it this way.”

“Revenge for what?” Kyle had been drawn by the group of tense Eagles gathering around the rail. He glowered at Morgan, who was the only one bruised and bleeding. “What did you do?”

Morgan forced it out, needing his sins cleared. “I fell in love with your wife.”

Kyle chuckled, shocking everyone. “Is that all? I’ve known for months.”

“What?” Morgan gawked with everyone else. “You didn’t say anything...or slit my throat!”

“Why would I?” Kyle’s expression darkened. “You’ll help me keep her alive, like Adrian did for Angela, but you’d never break our code of honor the way he did. I’ve never been upset about it. You’re one of the few men here that I trust completely.”

Morgan felt tears roll over his stinging cheeks. “Thank you.”

Kyle nodded at Shawn. “Welcome home.” He put an arm around Jennifer’s shoulders, still chuckling. “Want to hit him again? You might be able to knock him out right now.”

Jennifer snorted, rubbing her fist again. “His skull is harder than yours.”

Laughter spread good vibes across the deck that raced over the ship and lightened the mood.

In the bridge, Ray turned toward Grant, hand going to his pocket.

“Don’t.” Grant stayed facing the water.

Ray sulked, hurt. “Why? We love each other.”

“I’m not ready for marriage, Ray. Even if they’re okay with it, I’m not.”

“I don’t understand.” Ray moved to where he could see Grant’s face, dropping the ring back into his pocket. “What’s the problem?”

“I’m gay!”

Ray snorted. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Don’t laugh at me!”

Ray stilled at Grant’s anger, surprised by it. “Then tell me so I can understand.”

Grant gestured upward. “We know heaven and hell are real. Everything I am goes against that! The bible–”

“Was written by men, for other men, who wanted to control all men.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“I do, actually.” Ray leaned against the glass wall. “I figured something out during the battle for the weigh station. The Creator made us equal. It’s us who sets the differences, the lines. He only wanted us to live and be happy, to give him the praise and glory that his angels wouldn’t. That’s the only place we failed, Grant. Being gay isn’t a sin.”

Grant’s expression softened. “I can’t believe that. I want to, but...”

“But you’ve been told that every day of your life. Literature and churches reinforced it until you were terrified to be yourself. Then the war came and you were freed, and you still clung to those old shields.” Ray leaned closer. “Our love is not a sin! Let go of your own prejudices. No one here hates you for it–only you do.”

Grant sobbed, clutching Ray’s shoulders.

Ray held him, heart thumping. He too had believed that all his life. Safe Haven had set him free; he had just freed Grant. “When you’re ready, we will be married and they’ll all celebrate with us. This is our home, our family. It’s all we need.”

**3**

“Do you still need me?”

Angela looked up at Ivan. She was still in the camp area. She’d stayed, explaining things, admitting mistakes, making promises they knew she would keep. Most of the camp was in their cabins, winding down and talking about everything they’d seen and heard. They didn’t have peace again yet, but it was a lot better than it had been. “Yes.”

Ivan sat next to her, keeping his distance. “You’re still leaving?”

“She won’t need to.” Kimmie marched down the hall with Amy and Missy. “Move, but get ready to catch her.”

Ivan stepped in front of them. “What are you doing?!”

“Healing her cracks.” Kimmie glared up at him. “Decide your future now.”

Ivan knew what she meant, though he wasn’t sure how she knew what they’d been talking about. Ivan wanted to tell them no and still run away with Angela at some point. He wanted to keep that hope alive... *But I want her healed more.* He stepped aside. “Do it.”

Kimmie uttered the words, hands lifting.

Angela didn’t resist, tired of being a danger to her people. She slumped over as the spell landed.

Ivan waited until all three girls had hit her. Then he gently picked her up.

Kimmie and the others escorted him, letting people know she was okay, that she needed to sleep.

Ivan took her straight to Marc, trying to seal up his broken heart. *I’ll never have a life with her now. That was my only chance at happiness*. He told himself he’d done the right thing even when the pain continued to grow. *I’m an Eagle, a defender of the light. I’ll survive. My honor and Marc’s friendship will be enough.*

Neil opened the door for him, reading Kimmie’s thoughts. He gave Ivan a nod of approval and retreated to clear space.

Ivan saw Marc was awake. His twins were gone.

“The den mothers came for them a few minutes ago. They needed to eat and get cleaned up. Dog escorted them.” Neil shut the door and resumed his post as guard.

Ivan placed Angela next to Marc. He tugged the blanket up over her and moved back, eyes saying things he wouldn’t let escape from his mouth.

Marc shifted to make her more comfortable. He smiled as her sweaty vanilla scent floated to his nose. “Stay a minute. Let’s talk.”

Ivan sank into the chair out of Marc’s reach. He’d heard all about Neil’s adventures. He didn’t want to be hit again.

Marc chuckled. “No more hitting. You’ve proven you care more about her happiness than your own.”

“Why didn’t you kill me?”

Marc grew serious. “She’s an alpha. She draws men and women. You can’t help loving her.”

“I tried not to...and then I couldn’t fight it.”

Marc wasn’t angry about it anymore. “I know. You were on the edge. You made the right choice.”

“It hurts.”

“It’s supposed to.” Marc stared at the man.

Angela shifted closer. “My Brady...”

Marc kissed her head. “I’m here.”

Angela curled onto his chest and fell into a more peaceful sleep.

Ivan’s pain grew uglier. He stood. “I’ll be around.”

“Ivan.”

Ivan braced. He met Marc’s eye, unable to hide his agony. “I’m sorry.”

Marc sighed. “So am I.”

“What do you have to be sorry for?”

Marc kissed her cheek this time, loving the way she snuggled closer even in sleep. “She’ll need you to help her when I’m gone. Be patient; go slow.”

Ivan stared, shocked. “You have cracks now!”

“Yes. I have for a while.” Marc shrugged. “I’m very good at hiding it.”

Ivan sighed. “The kids can help you, like they just did her.”

“I’m not going to let them.”

“Why? If those cracks widen, everyone will be in danger.”

“She’ll send me away when it gets too bad; you’ll be there for her in ways I never have been.”

“Why would you do that? Are you crazy?!”

Marc’s eyes began to glow red. “When we go home, I will be the edge of the sword that clears the darkness.”

Ivan got it in one blinding flash of pain and joy. “You’re taking her place!”

Marc nodded, red orbs shifting back into blue misery and eagerness. “When I said I’d give anything for her, I meant it–even my life.”

“And you think I’ll be able to pick up those pieces?” Ivan crossed his arms over his chest, ignoring his thudding heart. “She’ll never get over you. Don’t do that to her.”

“I have to. She deserves a good life. If I don’t handle it, she will, and I refuse to let her make any more sacrifices. Stay close to her, keep loving her. In time, you’ll get what you want most. You’ve earned it.”

“And if I tell her what you’re planning?”

Marc shut his lids. “What makes you think she doesn’t already know?”

“I...” Ivan snapped his mouth shut and left, not slamming the door.

Marc held Angela as she shifted, mind starting to come down from the tension he’d been living on for over a year now. He was almost at peace. It was a welcome change from how he’d spent so much of the time since the war, and even before. *I’ve never really been happy. Even being with Angie can’t give me that. The cracks are the excuse I’ll use, but a couple years on that island will break me. I’ll leave her again.*

Angela’s grip tightened around him.

Marc smiled. “Not yet. I’m good...for now.” *And when I’m gone, Ivan will love you and remind you that life isn’t supposed to be all misery. I couldn’t give you to Adrian. He’s evil. Ivan is good. He’ll love you the way I wish I could have*. Marc thought about his kids. *And he’ll be the father they need.* *It was never my destiny to raise those kids. It’s my duty to give them a future and then get out of the way so they can live it.*

Marc thought of how much he’d changed, and of how much he’d stayed the same. *I’m a closed off loner. That’s never going to change. It’s simply who I am.*

Angela tried not to cry, but she was unable to stop the tears that began to soak his shirt.

Marc chuckled. “I thought you were sleeping.”

Angela held him and let the cry run its course. Inside, she felt peace finally come. She’d always known Marc’s restlessness would take him away from her again at some point. Now, they both knew.

“Even when it happens, you’ll be in my heart and my thoughts.”

“Always?”

Marc’s grip on her tightened. “And even after.”

**The End of Book 13**

**What would you like to do now?**

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# **Deleted Scenes**

“What was her crime?”

Jordi stepped back from the open cell door, voice pointed. “She refused an order.”

Shawn waited for more details.

Jordi frowned at him. “She refused to kill the little monster in the next cell.”

Shawn stepped over to that box, but there was no window.

Jordi’s eyes narrowed. “Is this a problem for you?”

Shawn sighed. “Safe Haven never had me execute innocent people.”

“She’s not innocent!” Waves of fury came from the windowless cell. “She hates all descendants. She would have killed me, but she was scared!”

The young, shouting voice shocked Shawn. He turned to Jordi.

Jordi shrugged. “We have all ages here. Most of them are monsters.”

Shawn grunted. He went back to the first cell, hardening his heart. “She doesn’t sound like a monster.”

Valerie retreated against the wall, terrified.

Jordi blocked the doorway so there wouldn’t be an escape attempt. “You have no idea what she’s capable of.”

Shawn jerked Valerie into his big arms and quickly snapped her neck. He let the body drop, refusing to consider what price he might have to pay for doing this.

“Excellent.” Jordi waved to the guards. “Take her body to the dog pen.”

Shawn’s interest was captured. “You have dogs here?”

“A few. They track fugitives if we can’t.”

Shawn followed the man from the room, mind full of clouds.

Jordi scanned him for regrets and found only thoughts of the sky. “Why do you guys do that?”

“Do what?”

“Think of the sky, of clouds, so much?”

“We miss it, I suppose. Angela kept us below deck so much I thought I’d go crazy. I was thrilled to get out of there.”

“Understandable. Will you all need breaks from here for that reason?”

Shawn grunted. “Probably. We’re not content in one place for long.”

“Well, when we clear the pirates from their many islands, maybe you’ll be assigned to help.”

“Perfect. Hate those looters.”

“Yes, they do live up to their reputation, but even thieves have value at times.”

Shawn didn’t ask what the pirates were doing for Joel. He didn’t want to know.

Jordi approved. “You’ll live longer that way.”

“Yep. Is it chow time yet?”

Jordi chuckled, pointing at the clock on the hall wall. “Not for another hour. Before that, you have a training session to survive.”

Shawn grinned. “I’m your man.”

Jordi moved closer; he put a hand on Shawn’s big arm. “You could be…”

Shawn looked over at him, detecting soft eyes and curved lips. “Who rides top? I’m no one’s bitch.”

Jordi laughed aloud, dropping his hand. “I like a man who fights back. Or a woman. I have no bias. We can share.”

Shawn shrugged. “Just don’t tease. I’ll get mean.”

Jordi retreated, taking the warning to heart. “We’ll get to know each other first. It always goes better that way.”

Shawn understood he’d frightened Jordi a little. He flashed a bright smile. “Sit with me at mess?”

Captured, Jordi gave a quick nod. “Let’s get you to the training room before my cousin decides to remove you for being late. I don’t want you in one of our cells.” Joel wasn’t in a good mood. He hadn’t gotten what he wanted from Laura Shalet. Conner was scheduled for a session with her and her powerful nieces as soon as they woke up. Joel had gassed them when they tried to escape.

Shawn resisted the urge to push again. He nodded and fell back into silent meditation of the sky he couldn’t see from here.

Jordi swallowed a shiver and began making plans to get time alone with Shawn.

**Deleted Scene #2**

“What are you doing here?!” Zack marched into the brig, glaring at the rookie guard for allowing it. “Get her out of here!”

Gabe shrugged. “She’s not breaking a rule.”

Cathy sneered. “Make me.”

Zack’s voice rose. “I will. I’ll call the boss!”

“So? He’s legal.”

“Yeah. Back off.” Timmy glowered through the bars of the cell. “You have a piece of ass. You don’t need mine too.”

Cathy’s eyes narrowed as a deep flush ran up her cheeks. She stood.

Timmy realized he’d said the wrong thing. “My bad.”

Cathy grunted. “That’s what I get for wanting a kid who isn’t even old enough to shave.” She kept going, ignoring his protests. “You’d better grow up a little, or I’ll have to find someone who already has.”

Zack took the stool she’d been sitting on; he shoved a clear bag between the bars. “You need to stay away from her.”

Timmy tossed the bag of games to Eric, who was reclining on the other cot. “Cathy and I were talking about getting married.”

Zack sputtered. “What?!”

“No one can complain then.”

“You barely know her!”

“That didn’t stop you from trying to nail her, and Allison!”

Zack swallowed his embarrassment. “Do you like Allison?”

Caught off guard. Timmy shrugged. “Don’t really know her. She’s okay, I guess.”

Zack peered at Eric. “What about you?”

Eric grinned. “She’s got the high score.” He held up the racing game to show them.

Zack chuckled, but inside, he worried over Eric. The head injury from the beach fight had healed, but the boy wasn’t the same. Zack sighed. *Really, none of us are.*

**Deleted Scene #3**

“Descendants are all evil. They have to be removed.”

Clifford tossed restlessly in his bed as the nightmarish voice came closer.

“They are an abomination. You have to save your kind.”

Clifford fought to see through the darkness. “Who are you?”

A cruel chuckle echoed. “A friend.”

“What do you want? Why are you tormenting me?!”

“The magic users are going to enslave all normals when you get to that island. You’re the only one who can stop it.”

“How?”

“Kill Angela.”

“She’s too powerful! Too protected.”

“She has weaknesses.”

“I can’t get near her kids now! They don’t trust me.”

“But you can get near her mate. She’ll trade her life for his. Kill her! Before she kills all of you.”

Clifford snapped out of the dream, shivering. He scanned for the owner of the voice and found only his dark, empty cabin. He settled back down under the sweaty sheet and tried to forget the nightmare, but the words wouldn’t leave his mind.

*Kill her! Before she kills all of you.*

# **Audio**

[A screenshot of a movie

Description automatically generated](https://www.authorangelawhite.website/law-audiobook-page.html)

**New Eagle Teams**

**Special Forces Team #1**

Kyle, Daryl, Morgan, Ivan, Ray

**Special Forces team #2**

Neil, Wade, Tommy, Emma, Trent,

**Level One Teams**

A-Angela (TL), Trinity, Brittani, Gabe, Harry, ~~Kim~~

B-Jayda (TL), Debra, Stanley, Zack, Theo

C-Peter (TL), Pam, Allison, Terry, Quinn

D-Marc (TL), Ed, Ian, Cathy, ~~Kendle~~, Panaji, ~~Darren~~, Francesca

E-Greg (TL), Jonny, Kenn, Timmy, Charlie

F-Shawn (TL), Conner, Gus, Mike, Jeff

**Eagle Rules**

1.) All Eagles will put in two hours daily on training.

2.) All Eagles will serve four shifts a week on assigned chores.

3.) Eagles do not date underage members. Hunting the young is forbidden.

4.) Eagles are fully committed to the final battle. They will NOT stay on the island.

# **Descendant Gift Chart**

These are the possible gifts, and limits, of the descendants.



# **Book 14**

**[](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-14.html)**

[Riding the Waves](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-14.html)

“It’s hot in here.” Samantha switched the room air conditioner to high. She stood in front of the vent, smiling in relief. “That’s good.”

Wade stood and put a hand on Amy’s arm. “She’s freezing. So am I.”

Neil grunted. “We went through this a few months ago. It’s the babies. William said they’ll need a lot of heat.”

“They’re making her temperature rise?”

Neil nodded. “Drop another blanket over Amy. She’s out from her playground time. She won’t notice.”

Wade covered Amy to her neck with the thickest quilt. Then he pulled on his jacket. The larger cabin was still cluttered in baby items, toys, books, and movie cases, but it felt nice to Wade, like a home. The thuds and voices from the cabins around this one helped that effect. They were a large family in a huge floating apartment complex.

Neil waved at the minifridge. “Ice packs help too.” Neil resumed writing in his book.

Samantha had ditched her jean jumper for stretchy pink boxers under a purple maternity tank top. Wade tried not to leer at her exposed skin as he got the ice pack, but it was hard. Her body was firm, rounded, perfect. *With her hair pinned up, even her neck is sexy!*

Samantha smiled at Wade as he extended the ice pack. “Will you hold it on my back?” Neil was in his Eagle gear, as was Wade. Sam felt safe with two Eagles once again protecting her.

Wade swallowed as she lifted her shirt. He held the freezing ice pack against her bare back. “I’m not as cold now.”

Samantha chuckled. She pushed against the ice pack. “Nice.”

Wade peered over at Neil. “How’s the baby book coming?”

Neil frowned. “Slow. I’m making a lot of guesses.”

Wade used his free hand to tug the chair over. He kept his hand on the ice pack until Samantha sat, letting her body hold it in place against the chair. Then he shoved his icy hand into his pocket. “But this is normal, right?”

Neil didn’t answer.

Wade moved toward the door. He shut it gently and went to the one person he hoped might be able to give him some answers. Now that he was part of Samantha’s life, his concern for her and the babies was growing.

“He’s very hyper.”

Neil snickered at her comment. “He has buildup now.”

Samantha laughed.

Neil glanced over at her. “I love that sound.”

Samantha grumped. “Don’t get all sex-eyed on me. I can’t be distracted that easy.”

Neil’s amusement faded. “You know.”

She rubbed her large stomach. “You’ve been studying William’s book and notes for a week. You’re scared.”

Neil wiggled his toes to pry his socks loose. He hadn’t showered or changed since the fight at the detention center. He wasn’t calm enough for that yet. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I’m surrounded by descendants with healing powers. As long as I carry to term, it’ll be fine.”

“I wish I had your faith.” Neil resumed working.

Samantha locked her thoughts. Neil didn’t need to know she was worried too. It wouldn’t help anyone if they panicked.

“What’s wrong with the babies?” Amy sat up, keeping the blanket around her shoulders. The yellow quilt and wild hair framed her sleepy face. “Is they okay?”

Samantha forced a bright smile. “They’re just being still right now. Nothing to worry about.”

“Okays.” Amy snuggled under the blanket and crashed out.

Neil and Samantha shared an honest stare, both terrified. The twins weren’t moving at all.

**2**

Wade hurried to the top deck and stopped next to Conner’s bedroll. “What’s going on with Samantha’s twins?”

Conner peered up at him, confused. “Why are you asking me?”

“Because you know.”

Conner didn’t like being woken only an hour after he’d gotten to sleep on the top deck. “Why do you think I know?”

“Because you were in the labs and you store information like your father did.” Wade dropped into a folding chair near the teenager’s sleeping bag. “Please.”

Conner sat up, blowing out a frustrated sigh. “I don’t know why you guys are worrying.”

“The babies stopped moving.”

Conner smiled. “That’s great.”

“Why is that great?” Wade refused to relax.

“It means they’ll be born soon. Descendant babies go quiet. The scientists don’t know why, but it always means birth in the next month.”

“She’s got eight weeks to go.”

Conner shrugged. “Maybe she miscounted.”

“Yeah...” Wade leaned closer. “If they come early, can you heal them?”

Conner wanted to give Wade hope, but he couldn’t. “We can’t create; we only heal. If they come early and something isn’t formed all the way, they’ll die.” Conner now understood why Wade and Neil were full of panicked thoughts that they were trying to hide from everyone. “Is she hot or cold?”

“Hot.”

“Eating a lot or less than normal?”

“Less, I think.”

Conner flushed. “And sex?”

“No!”

“It sounds normal, except for the sex part. The closer to delivery, the more the women want it. You’ll have to tell her no.”

“Neil will. I’m not doing that while she’s pregnant.”

Conner grinned. “Gross, right?”

“No. Just disrespectful to Jeremy’s memory.” Wade studied Conner’s bloodshot orbs and tense form. The boy hadn’t changed his filthy clothes or showered. “You didn’t take downtime with your team.”

Conner frowned. “I didn’t know I was supposed to.”

Wade didn’t say more, but it was clear from Conner’s tension that he hadn’t come down from the fight state yet. *Neither has Neil.* *Does that mean it isn’t over yet?*

Conner grunted. “I’m just restless; no worries.”

Wade’s unease grew. The boy who had left wasn’t the young man in front of him now. *Conner grew up. That sense of danger isn’t coming from him, but he’s picking up on it.*

Conner was busy yawning and missed that.

Wade let it go for now, but he stayed alert. It was common to be restless after a fight, but if it lasted, that meant the fight wasn’t over.

The dark night clung to the ocean and made it impossible to tell where the water ended and the sky began. Conner hated it. *I never want to be on another boat in my life.*

Wade agreed, though he didn’t say it either. They were Eagles; they went where orders sent them, but that didn’t mean they had to like it. “How was your reunion with Candy?”

Conner didn’t blink. “Nice. I set some limits. We should be good now.”

Wade grinned. “You really have grown up.”

Conner shrugged. “It feels a little different, but the old me is still there too. I didn’t expect that.”

“Welcome to manhood, where you now get to pick between the young, more fun, immature you and the older, wiser, a little boring you.”

Conner laughed. “Yeah, that’s about how I see it.” The boy straightened, squaring his shoulders. “But I’ll listen to both, at different times.”

“Smart.” Wade blew out a sigh. “I sure didn’t. That young voice led me into places I’d never thought to go.”

“Why are you like you are?”

Wade knew what Conner meant. “Maybe we’ll have a beer some night and talk about it. And why you are who you are.”

Conner snorted at the evasion, but he hadn’t expected Wade to tell his life story anyway. “It’s cool. There will come a time when you want to tell me everything.”

Wade froze. “Why? Is it about Sam? What happens?!”

Conner chuckled. “Easy. I meant while you’re waiting on the birth. Having someone to talk to makes the time go by easier.”

Wade’s anger flared. “I’ll be with Samantha the entire time she’s in labor.”

Conner’s lips thinned.

Wade sighed. “No, I won’t, will I?”

“Neil has you on duty, *outside* the delivery room.”

Wade hadn’t spent much time thinking about that moment. His shoulders drooped. “Whatever they want.”

Conner gestured. “It’s all Neil. Samantha hasn’t said anything as far as I know. Neil doesn’t want you in the delivery room.”

Wade stood up. “Thank you for the information.”

Conner also stood, grabbing his sleeping bag. “I’ll crash on the couch by her cabin in case she needs something I can do.”

Wade followed his instincts. “Tell Morgan I want him in a cabin near us, just in case.” Wade marched toward the steps to the bridge.

Conner forced himself to walk below, fighting his new revulsion of being under the water line. *I survived. I’m home. It’s okay.*

The steps to the bridge were slippery. Wade was careful where he placed his feet as the wind continued to whip sprays over the ship. It wasn’t storming, but the winds were reaching 40 mph in some gusts, according to the anemometer glued to the bridge window. Wade examined the other signs and notes for changes.

He found it all normal. The reminders to check the air quality up here once an hour sent a shudder through his bowels. He guessed it always would. Some traumas were too ugly to forget.

The clean bridge held newer, brighter bulbs in the fixtures and the light over the elevator was red, meaning it wasn’t available for this floor. That was a trick to give their captain a slight edge if anyone came up here again with hostile intentions. Theo had rigged the light a short time ago, and installed a rack of guns painted so well they blended in perfectly with the wall of Grant’s cubicle. The matching ammunition magazines were below those weapons. Velcro kept them from moving. Unless you were hunting for the differences, you weren’t going to know Grant was armed. All the improvements were from Ray and he’d bumped them through in a few hours by going straight to the bosses.

Wade joined Grant. “If I need to call Adrian, do you know how to reach him?”

Grant frowned. “Yes, but I’d have to get permission from Marc or Angela. I doubt they’ll clear it.”

“If I need it, they’ll give the order.” Wade lingered, needing another piece of information he doubted Grant would want to give.

Ray came from the shadows by the elevator. “Just ask him and save us all the next ten minutes of chitchat. He’s working.”

Ray was twitchy and wired; his eyes spun every few seconds, searching for the next threat. Wade knew that was normal. Grant had been in serious danger from Joel. Wade hid a smirk. *Once he has that ass, it will only get worse. Men protect their mates. It’s hard to snap out of it.* “Grant, do you know why William flipped when we came through, but not before?”

Grant stiffened. “Yes. I’ve told Marc.”

“Will you tell me?”

“Why?”

“Because I think it concerns Samantha. I’m trying to confirm it.”

Grant turned to look at him. “It’s not Samantha he wants.”

Wade’s stomach churned. “The babies. Son of a bitch!”

Grant’s anger came through in his voice. “Twins have always been valued for spells, but your kind are special. William has wanted to reset the war since it happened. He said he needs three time keepers, or newborn twins and a time keeper.”

“He’s two thousand miles from here.” Ray tried to make them both feel better. “He’ll never make it to the island. The ocean promised Angela.”

Wade grunted. “But he could send someone.”

Ray hated that answer. “Son of a bitch!”

Grant sighed. “I think William was working with the UN. Our people didn’t know.”

Wade scowled. “Why didn’t he attack before we left? He could have taken Sam hostage.”

“He didn’t want to risk hurting the babies or making them come early, was my guess.” Grant hoped he was wrong. “I have no proof of this, you understand. It’s just comments he made and things I overheard.”

“It’s true. It all fits.” Wade’s big fists clenched. “He tried to charm Angela to get our time keepers!”

Grant’s brow puckered. “It’s not all about the reset. He really does want Angela, as much as Adrian does. I doubt we’ll be on the island long before he shows up.”

“I’ll be ready for him.” Nothing would be allowed to interfere with Wade’s new life. *If I have to commit mass murder and become byzan to fight him, I will.*

“Okay...”

Wade scowled. Grant appeared calm in his clean captain’s outfit, but Wade caught the muscle twitching in his jaw. It matched Ray’s constant scans. *Ray’s twitch rubbed off on him. That’s normal too.* Wade continued to find signs of trouble, but his training allowed him to match actions to causes, and come up with what was normal for the situation. *And yet I’m still not satisfied. It’s time for another check of the ship. I’ll do this one myself so I’ll know it’s all clear.* Wade descended the steps, inspecting guard booths and patrolling Eagles for any signs that didn’t fit.

**3**

“This is Somchai, calling the ship now approaching the Falkland Islands. Please come in. We need help!”

Everyone who heard the call turned toward their radios. The Adrianna hadn’t had contact from land, any land, since the Cayman Islands.

Half a dozen people sat up or stopped what they were doing. They recognized the name.

In their cabin, Marc stared at Angela. “It’s in the book. That name is one of the founding families of Ciemus.”

Angela was already reaching for her radio. “Do not answer them, Grant. Change course to get us close enough to scan.”

“Copy.”

Angela put the radio on the nightstand. She rolled over, studying Marc. The cool air blowing through their open cabin window smelled of fresh water and the freedom of late-night adventure. It made the hair on her arms stand up. “I have an idea.”

Marc frowned. “Who am I killing?”

Angela saw the haunted glaze hiding under his calm expression; she hated his guilt, but that would forever be a part of their lives now, like her decision to trek up the mountain to face Vlad alone. She forced a chuckle. “I was thinking more along the lines of stress relief and cardio exercise.”

“We have to let you finish healing...” Marc’s breath caught as she arched, stretching. Hard nipples poked against her shirt. “We should wait...”

“Okay.” Angela ran hands up her ribcage and over her full breasts. “If you’re sure.”

Marc’s mouth went dry. “I... Uh...”

“You can stay over there. That way you don’t break the medic’s rules.” Angela ran her hands over her breasts again, lifting the tank top.

Her bare skin gleamed with good health in the lamplight. Her scars glinted at him too, but this time, he was able to find beauty in them. *She gives everything in life, no matter the job or chore. She’s fearless.*

Marc locked the door and leaned against it. “Yeah. I’ll stay right here.”

“Good. If I get too hot, you can call for help.”

Marc chuckled. “You’re mean.”

Angela rolled over and sat up, blocking his view as she pulled off her shirt.

“Now that *is* mean.” Marc moved toward the chair in the corner as his balls grew heavy.

Angela froze.

Marc groaned, already sure it was bad news. “What now?”

“Damn it!” Angela started fixing her clothes. “Morgan needs us in the infirmary. Allison just collapsed.”

Marc went right then, waving Ivan from the booth to guard Angela. He used the elevator to get there faster. *We’re about to perform magical surgery for the first time.* Marc locked up his nerves and concentrated on everything they’d figured out about this side of their gifts. It wasn’t much. *Please let her survive. I can’t take anymore death right now.*

**4**

Jennifer paused near the QZ, reading the thoughts of those inside before she entered.

Kyle didn’t disturb her even though he knew she was exhausted and the people inside were impatient. They needed this last chore finished so they could both rest, but it was important. He wasn’t going to interrupt her.

Neither were the other three men he’d chosen to come along and provide security.

Jennifer felt the people inside become aware of her; she waited, letting the tension build.

The quarantine process had three stages now. The first was a holding area until the medics called them, one-by-one, for a checkup, bloodwork, and a conversation. The medics decided from there if the person returned to the same holding cell or if they were placed in the real QZ. The real QZ meant the medics were okay with the person. Being put back into the first holding area meant the medics wanted someone else to clear the person or group.

All the detention center people had been moved into the dorm-style quarantine zone that was still being worked on, even now. Each adventure had shown Safe Haven what they needed to update or upgrade. Jennifer was here now to move this group into cabins, after a basic tour of important areas. They’d all passed Tonya’s blood tests. By the time they reached the camp living area, Ralph and Daisey would have the buddy-system in full swing.

There would be bags of clothes so they could change out of the basic paper pants and shirts the medics had given them after their showers. There would also be supplies, assigned cabins with a buddy, and a constant guard until their buddy declared them safe on their own. The other people they’d rescued were in the infirmary. They’d been sedated and their injuries were healed. Someone would debrief them as soon as the medics cleared it.

Jennifer strode into the quarantine zone, holding a sheet of paper. “Good morning, new people! You’re all cleared to move into cabins.”

Tobias and his wives stood, eager to thank their hosts.

Laura and her nieces frowned at the thought of being mixed with the camp.

Joey grinned. “Can I play on the swings now?”

Jennifer smiled at the cute little boy. “We’ll stop by there first.”

“Yeah!” Joey waved at Laura’s nieces. “We get to play!”

The girls smiled at the cute boy. Jennifer estimated their ages to be around ten. With short, sandy blonde hair over thin, bruised skin, it was obvious they were much older mentally.

Both girls smiled at her, but they didn’t send thoughts.

Jennifer sensed a lot going on in their minds. She didn’t pry. She saved her energy for when it was needed.

Jennifer saw Laura’s green eyes inspect each of the Eagles in her protection detail. She searched them in seconds, then turned her attention back. Jennifer lifted a brow. “See something you like?”

Laura nodded, causing her blonde spikes to wave. “Nice stock here.”

Jennifer shrugged, cheeks darkening. “Not my department.”

Joey tugged on Jennifer’s arm. “Can I visit Cate?”

“Yes. Give me a few minutes and I’ll take you, okay?”

Joey immediately sat and pinched his lips shut.

Jennifer studied Laura. “How are you settling in?”

“We’d be better off staying here.” Laura put her arms around her nieces. “Normals don’t like us.”

Jennifer frowned. “We no longer have that problem here. Our camp won’t attack you.”

Laura snorted, but she didn’t call the girl a liar. She scanned her instead.

Jennifer zapped the woman, using a child’s strength. “Only with permission.”

Instead of getting angry like the witnesses expected, Laura relaxed. “You follow the old ways.”

“As much as we can, but be clear: we will not tolerate breaking camp rules. You’ll get a cabin; you’ll mingle.” Jennifer’s lips thinned. “People will accept you if you do that. Break the rules and our enforcer will handle you.”

Laura paled. “You have an enforcer here?”

Jennifer let her eyes glow red. “And I’m very, very good at it.”

“We’ll follow the rules.” Laura brought out her own red orbs. “But don’t think we’ll take their abuse. We’re fighters, survivors. Our destiny doesn’t change that.”

Jennifer’s eyes faded to normal. “You know.”

Tobias snorted scornfully. “We’ve always known. Ciemus wouldn’t accept it. They think we’re meant to share that future.”

“You know William.”

When Tobias shook his head, Jennifer looked at Laura.

“I know of him. My parents took me away from that cursed town when I was little.” Laura let her anger show. “He’s there now, trying to blast through their walls. We heard their calls for your help.”

Jennifer wasn’t surprised. “We told them they should come with us. That was before William snapped. They wouldn’t listen.”

Tobias’s profile darkened. “Then they haven’t changed. He might kill them all.”

Jennifer dug for more information. “Why is he only hurting our kind now? First reports said he was slaughtering normals.”

“We think he’s trying to lure you back since killing innocent humans didn’t do it.” Laura took the bag of gear that a black clad sentry handed her. “We’re grateful you didn’t fall for it.”

Jennifer frowned. “Why?”

“Joel was worse.” Tobias ran a hand through his gray hair, stopping to scratch behind his big ear. The other hand stayed wrapped around his dirty coat. He’d refused to burn it with the rest of their things. He and his wives had been treated for lice. The medic had sprayed the coat and put it in a sealed bag that he couldn’t open for a week. Tobias was embarrassed, but his wives were thrilled that the itch was gone. They didn’t care if their curls reeked of chemicals. The relief was worth it. “He would have consumed all of us.”

Jennifer wasn’t sure she agreed. “And that’s worse than William burning people alive?”

Tobias snorted. “Yes. If Joel had gotten all our gifts, not even Safe Haven could have stopped him. William won’t have that advantage.”

Jennifer stored the information. She smiled at the twin girls huddled under their aunt’s strong arms. “Do you like puppies? We rescued one from the water.”

Neither girl answered, but their expressions lit up.

“They don’t talk.” Laura got them to their feet. “The government scientists cut out their tongues to prevent them from using charms.”

Jennifer was horrified. She sent out waves of kindness. “That abuse will never happen here.”

Both of Tobias’s wives flinched at the loud noise of an Eagle team going down the hall toward the hot tubs.

Kyle stuck his head out the door. “Hey! What is rookie rule Z?”

The three men stopped, staring in apprehension.

Kyle scowled. “You’re not alone yet. Do not celebrate until alone!”

Jennifer hid a smile as Kyle resumed his place. She turned to Tobias’s wives. She shoved into their minds. *Are you with him willingly?*

The females nodded, but they didn’t talk either.

Jennifer scowled. “Speak up!”

“I’m not sure they can. One of the spells Joel cast hit them both. I’m not getting anything from their minds either.” Tobias kept the nervous women close. “They used to talk all the time. I miss it.”

“Our medics might be able to help.” Jennifer led them out of the quarantine zone and up the stairs. “What do you know about Somchai?”

Kyle walked behind the group, scanning for trouble while Jennifer tried to get the information they still needed. He didn’t expect any problems from this group. They appeared to be good people, except for Tobias. Kyle dug into the man’s mind while Jennifer had them all distracted. *I’m not taking any more chances with her life. Joel might have been the first to try to capture her, but I doubt he’ll be the last.*

**5**

“What are you doing here?”

Conner stepped aside to let Marc enter the medical bay. “I made a deal. Helping the cancer patients is part of it.”

The infirmary was now separated by three large partitions. Minor issues were handled in the front, near the door that would send them to the lab for bloodwork. The center area, where they were now, was for emergencies and operations. It was wider than the other two areas. The third zone was for those who needed to be quarantined or healed. Morgan didn’t know what they would try with Allison. He’d directed the other medics to prep the center area while he carried Allison from her post where she’d collapsed.

Marc scowled. “Mitchels and their deals.” He stomped over to the desk and waited for Morgan to update him. Allison’s waxy face and sweaty skin said her body wasn’t doing well under that Eagle uniform. *We don’t need the Mitchel here, getting in the way and forming his own plans that screw with mine.*

Conner let out a deep sigh. “Are we going to have trouble?”

Marc gawked at the cocky teenager, a little shocked. *I didn’t think Conner had any balls.*

Conner locked eyes with him. “You’re pissed that I passed my test. I get it. Don’t take it out on Allison.”

Guilt swept Marc. He grunted. “Yeah.” Marc motioned. “What can you do?”

Morgan came over to Conner, needle in hand.

Marc braced for more ugliness even though he didn’t like Conner.

Morgan slid the needle into the vein on the first try and taped it in place. Blood began rushing into the tube. “We don’t know how to do this the other way yet, but Tonya’s working on it. We’re not sure filtering it is a good idea at all. Tell the boss she’ll need to make a choice on that.” Morgan directed Conner to the chair next to Allison’s bed.

Marc frowned. Morgan assumed Angela was back in charge now.

Conner smiled at Allison, who was staring in glazed fear. “We’re going to try this first. Marc will stay in case we don’t have time to wait for it to work.”

Allison shivered, breathing shallow, skin clammy. She was covered in thick medical blankets and she was still cold.

Morgan didn’t want to have the conversation now flashing in Marc’s mind. He gestured at Conner. “Tell him what you told me and Angela.”

“I’m an everyone type, literally. In the lab, they found out I’m immune to almost everything. There can be bad reactions if I mix with a non-descendant, but our kind will improve almost immediately.” Conner was glad to have it out in the open. He hadn’t wanted to hide it from Marc. He also felt more fear now. He planned to mix in other, more powerful ways later with Candy, and she wasn’t a descendant.

Marc was examining the boy’s thoughts now and storing everything for later examination and use. “But Samantha was fine when she got back to camp. She didn’t act like she’d had a medical treatment.”

“The lifeforce pushes it into remission. The antibodies in my blood kills the dormant cells that are still there. The lifeforce really isn’t needed unless the person is critical. They just need a few transfusions.” Conner shrugged. “Other than Angela, no one ever asked what we did for her.”

“We.” Marc sighed. “It wasn’t just you.”

“No. My dad gave her a lifeforce while I gave her blood. She was distracted by the magic; she missed most of the medical.”

Morgan had put the pieces together after hearing it a second time. “Are you telling me the government had the cure for cancer all along?”

Conner nodded. “Of course. Haven’t you ever wondered why Congress people never died from cancer? Neither did Supreme Court judges or Joint Chiefs. Just like they had passes to bunkers, they also had other advantages the average person never saw.”

Allison whimpered as the pain increased.

Conner regarded Marc. “We need the boss.”

Marc felt her approaching. “She’s on the way.”

“She’s here.” Angela loathed being back in the infirmary; the harsh smells of a clean room ready for use made her guts boil. She went straight to Allison, forcing a cheerful tone and grin. “Let’s get you back on your feet!”

Marc and Morgan both studied how Angela brought up the struggling lifeforce and then forced it into Allison. The screaming soul protested the entire time; it hurt Marc.

It made Morgan angry. He turned away from the sight and went to fill out the paperwork for this treatment.

Angela shuddered, gasping.

Marc put a hand on her arm to replace the energy she’d used.

Angela leaned against him, lids closed while she recovered.

Conner didn’t usually get to witness this forbidden side of magic. He also studied it intently.

Allison groaned, heart thumping.

Marc connected to her like he had during the recharge. He narrowed in on the mass they’d found. “It’s breaking up!”

Morgan came over and joined the connection. “The pieces are dissolving!”

“They’re dying.” Tonya came hurrying into the room and sat at the desk with a stack of folders. Her wild hair covered her face as she sat. Tonya shoved it back impatiently, opening the top folder.

Marc kept inspecting the x-ray-like images as he spoke to Tonya. “Dying?”

“The good blood cells are killing them, using the energy blast from the lifeforce.” Tonya dug out a paper. “We have to stop my experiments.”

Marc and Angela both turned toward her. “Why?”

Tonya gestured. “Her blood work shows elevated levels again. The food cocktail I used actually fed the cancer. We have to stop.”

“Don’t you dare!” Allison fought the pain to yell at Tonya. “You find the one that kills it! People won’t have the options of transfusions and lifeforces after we’re all gone. You have to cure it!”

Everyone stared in surprised sadness.

Tonya’s shoulders drooped. “We at least have to tell them there can be side effects.”

Allison shuddered, tears welling as the pain finally began to subside. “Don’t give up on us, Tonya.”

Tonya smiled at the feeling of being needed. “I won’t, as long as we can tell them this might happen.”

“Also tell them there are not enough lifeforces left for everyone.” Angela’s tone hardened. “And no one outside this room hears about Conner.”

Tonya paused. “But I want to use his blood for the next cocktail.”

“So?”

Tonya frowned. Angela was saying she could do it, but she wasn’t allowed to tell the patients what was in the treatment. “I don’t think I’m okay with withholding information.”

“I understand.” Angela let Marc handle this one, hoping he was ready to really be trained for this job.

Marc had already thought it through. “Conner will be hunted for his blood. Someone with no medical knowledge will try to take it and kill him by accident. Then there’s no cure for anyone.”

Tonya didn’t yield. “This is one of those slippery slope moments. If we do it for this treatment, it’ll be easier to do it for the next one.” Tonya shrugged at Angela. “I need rules or I can’t be a part of it.”

Angela smiled. “Honor looks good on you.” She motioned to Marc.

Marc took out his notebook and recorded it. “Under privacy?”

“For now. It may get moved to a medical slot.” Angela turned to Allison, still smiling. “You’re patient zero in our first medical constitutional law. How does it feel?”

Allison grimaced.

Angela chuckled. “Rest for the next day or two. You won’t want to, but I’m ordering a recharge for you as soon as Conner and Morgan clear it.”

“And it covers Conner, right?” Allison hoped so. She didn’t want anything to happen to him because of this.

“Yes.” Angela focused on Conner. “We have to protect him.”

Conner’s mind had already moved on to other topics. “I saw you cut my dad loose.”

“It was time.” Angela swept him, finding the new maturity. “Are you ready for the next stage of your life?”

Conner shrugged angrily. “It won’t be much different. I’ll follow the rules and pretend I’m not a Mitchel.”

Angela winced.

Marc frowned. “It’s a good deal, kid.”

“No, it’s not, but it will give me what I need, so I’m doing it.” Conner glared at Marc, not holding back. “But it didn’t have to be this way. Both of you should step aside.”

Angela held up a hand to stop that argument. She switched the topic back to where it mattered. “I want you to donate, often.”

“I will, but it’s not just me.”

Angela’s expression brightened. “Really?”

“Add yourself and Marc to it.” Conner held still as Morgan detached the IV. “All founding families can do this.”

Surprise filled the medical bay.

“How do you know?”

Conner held the cotton ball while Morgan opened the Band-Aid. “The scientists.”

Marc denied that. “Mitchels? Sure. Bradys? Yes, but only recently. Angela’s family has never been in the labs. Try again.”

Conner regarded Angela. “Yes, they have. Joel had files on his private computer in the detention center. He had records on three of your bloodline. Two were from sixty years ago. The third was listed as your father–Darius Wells Jr.”

Angela had frozen at the revelations.

Marc asked the next question he knew she would want answered. “Who were the older two?”

“His parents.” Conner kept going even though he no longer wanted to. “They were both removed right after the war. No one knows where Darius went.”

“I have family alive?” Angela’s fury lashed out, warming the room. “He’d better not come here. If he does, I will have justice for being abandoned to that life!” She strode to the exit, needing a minute to get her anger under control. She’d swung to pissed in seconds.

Marc let her go out alone. Ivan was on her heels and she was pissed enough to fry anyone who threatened her. He caught a flash of people in the halls and sighed. “Zack’s coming.”

Allison knew what was expected. “Just the lifeforce.”

“And an IV treatment. You don’t know what was in it.” Conner smiled at her. “And you don’t, you know. It could have been anything. You were sick; it was hard to keep it straight.”

Allison slowly closed her eyes. “That’s exactly right. Thank you!”

Conner shocked them all by placing a soft kiss to her forehead.

“Get better.” Conner pulled her sleeve over the bandage as Zack came in.

Zack didn’t even notice the boy as he rushed to Allison’s side.

Conner held his chin up and enjoyed being one of the good guys. “I have a quick errand and then I’ll be on the couch outside Samantha’s cabin if you need me.”

Morgan watched Conner leave; he sensed the changes and was relieved that it had gone well. He was also glad the boy would be close if he was needed. *I have no idea how to birth one descendant baby, let alone two. We have to learn fast.*

Morgan ignored the need for rest and went to the rear right corner instead, where he opened the partition and began lugging in the boxes that might help them save those two precious lives.

[](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-14.html)

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Book Fourteen

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