

BOOK 3 IN THE BACHELOR BATTLES SERIES.

FOREVER CHANGED



Don't make eye-contact...and never talk!

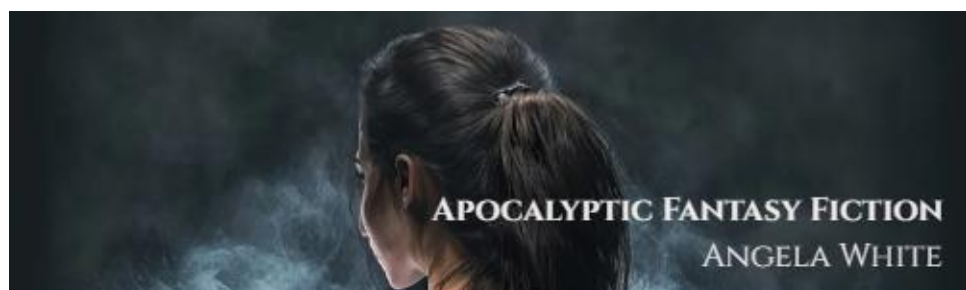
ANGELA WHITE

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Thank you Clara, John, Karen, Crystal, Kristi, Jacqueline, Drew, Jackie, Jim, Elizabeth, Mike, and Candace!



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Prologue

71AW

1

“Is it working?”

“Yes. Any radio within fifty miles should be able to pick up the broadcast.”

Jody paused, worried. “Can they hear us talking right now?”

Lucas smiled comfortingly at the younger man. “No, not until you push that red button. It opens the connection.”

The two rebel males were surrounded by dark equipment with dials and levers coated in seventy years of dust and rust. Under the debris, bloodstains also remained to mark the end of the world. Around the cluttered room, microphones and panels hung from the crumbling ceiling, some with letters still visible. *On Air* was the most common, but several screens also held mysterious combinations of numbers and graphs that only one of the rebels fully appreciated.

“How do you know this stuff?” Jody was nervous and excited. What they were about to do was forbidden. “There hasn’t been a working radio station since our grandfather’s time.”

Except for this space, the station had been cleaned up by their group. Lucas had insisted they keep this space the same as it had been when they arrived. It would serve as a reminder of the past and drive them on when their emotions or physical needs became a strain. “My family always said we shouldn’t forget the old ways.”

“Mine said the old ways were the reason the world ended.” Jody’s voice lowered into misery. “Both of my grandparents voted for slavery.”

“Doesn’t matter now.” Lucas stopped the coming excuses and argument. “Make the call.”

“Do you really believe anyone will come?” Jody was the youngest of their crew; he still had faith in the future. He was only here because his mother had sold him to a brothel that had been liberated a few years ago by these rebels. Jody had been glad to get the break, at first.

“I think we’re about to scare the hell out of anyone who hears us, but eventually, yes.” Lucas grinned. “If *you* call for them, they *will* come.”

Snickering at the brothel joke, the young man pushed the button. “Hello, America! This is Jody, coming to you by radio from New City. If you don’t know what a radio is, it’s okay. Most people don’t. A radio is a way of communicating. If you’re hearing this, you have one nearby and are a part of our new Network! How’s that for amazing?!”

Jody let off the button, waiting in case there was a response. Unlike his friend, he didn’t think anyone would hear the transmissions. Radios were highly

sought after for their replacement parts in black market computers and screens. Jody doubted survivors would give up that resource just to listen to strange voices.

“Do it again, then repeat it a few times each hour.” Lucas opened a notebook to record the time and date of the first call. “We are online, my friend. Only good things can come from this.”

Jody was willing to try even though he had doubts. Lucas had rebuilt the radio and then used spare parts to get solar powered electricity flowing through this old station. Their group only had ten members; power had made everything easier. Now, Lucas wanted other survivors to join them. They all knew ten men alone couldn't stand for long, even if their main population hadn't been fighting mini-wars over slavery. Men could remain free here in the north if they could handle the brutally cold weather and occasionally defend themselves. Most of the fighting was in the south, where some towns were still trying to follow the constitution.

Lucas listened to the wind beat grit and debris against the building as the storm grew louder. Jody had doubts about this plan succeeding, but Lucas knew who would win this war in the end. Women outnumbered men and they controlled the armories and complexes with the weapons. There was little that men could do in a battle against those big guns, but worse, men like Jody supported the slavery law because as a brothel worker, they got all the sex they needed and then some. Lucas loathed it and them,

though he'd never let that show. He signaled for Jody to try again.

"Does anyone copy? This is Jody, coming to you over the radio network from New City. We are in the northeast. You can follow these broadcasts to us. We have power and food. All survivors are welcome, no matter their gender."

Jody wasn't sure that last part was such a good idea, but they had all agreed it was what people would need to come out of their holes. Humanity only existed in small pockets that were constantly tearing themselves apart. They needed hope for a brighter future without all the fighting.

"Keep going." Lucas gestured to the script they'd written. "Word for word."

Jody pushed the button obediently. "This is Jody, broadcasting from New City in the northeast. We have food and power here. You will be cared for and safe. All survivors are welcome." Jody released the button to peer up at his new idol. "How long before we hear anything?"

"We'll see them before we hear them. Radios are out there, but answering would reveal their locations. They'll come check us out and then chatter will start. From there, we're golden." Lucas strode confidently toward the door to the warmer lounge that had been intact except for the front glass. "I'll be around."

Jody returned to the script, scanning to be positive he hadn't missed anything. He liked the

idea of being their public voice. It would make him popular with the females who came in.

In the lobby of the station, a dozen nervous men cleaned their weapons and repaired gear that had already been patched dozens of times. Crashed on old pillows and cushions, these men weren't as hopeful about the transmissions or the plan. They'd agreed because they were desperate. Lucas was certain they would have eventually joined even without the promise of sex and food. Pockets of resistance were getting harder to find, and at least as a slave, these rebels assumed they would be fed. Lucas didn't care if that was true. He had come to seize the opportunity his grandfather had told him of after they escaped captivity. His father had died in custody, but Lucas wouldn't. In fact, he was counting on the disease to help build a future that never would have been possible without the female hatred of his gender. *Women will rue the day they betrayed men.*

Lucas gestured to one of the more gullible men, Noah, as he went through. "Let's get security set up."

No one argued despite Lucas being new to the group. He had joined them eight weeks ago with a small stock of food and water that he'd given them in payment for safe shelter. When he'd told them his plans, the group had agreed to stick with him and provide protection and manual labor.

For payment, Lucas had promised women to care for their needs. That was the only thing they

couldn't provide for themselves. Their entire group was male. The few lone girls they'd found hadn't lasted long. Lucas had vowed to find tough fighters who were useful, claiming his radio calls would bring those and many more. The thought of having their pick, as their grandfathers had, had allowed all of the escaped males to agree and keep to the deal. Lucas was thrilled.

Wait 'til you see what else I have planned! He gloated silently as he and Noah stepped out onto the rubble covered street that had sported only animals for the last seventy years. *I'm going to build the world that past rulers dreamed about and the masses are going to worship me for it. All I need to get it rolling is one group of strong women who hate men.* According to his grandfather's calculations, nearly all women should now fit that profile.

Lucas brushed his black hair out of the way and braced against the harsh wind that tried to knock him off his feet. Lucas scanned the devastation that was being reclaimed by nature. He hoped Jody was able to send a few more transmissions before the coming storm overtook them.

Everyone was angry, but the rage disease was still spreading and mutating. Lucas was counting on it to bring the monsters to these apocalyptic roads in a matter of days. If he handled it right, the women would become the first converts in his new society. If he handled it wrong, he would become a slave to one of the violent new females who had inherited the earth. The weak men in this station were dead

either way. They didn't know he'd been searching for a group like theirs to use as bait. The sound of a male voice was one of the things that triggered these new women. Most survivors hadn't figured that out yet, but Lucas was very observant.

His grandfather had constructed breeding charts and predicted the behavioral jumps the world was about to suffer. As he lay dying from a changeling snap, he'd confided in Lucas and then sent his only grandson out into the dystopian world to reclaim their honor. Lucas was just insane enough to be sure it would succeed and to not care if he died in the attempt. Anything was better than slavery.

Lucas returned a wave from their group suck up and thief, Wesley Malin, who was watching from the safety of the front lounge door. Everyone called him Weasel.

Lucas continued through the double front doors that had been repaired using clear plastic, two car trunks, and a rusty welding tank. Sporting thick beards and tattered, salvaged clothes, this small group wouldn't have lasted much longer. Lucas didn't feel guilty as he subtly studied Noah's backpack. It held the keys to the man's truck and to their stockroom, where the guns were kept. Lucas had insisted it would scare the girls off if they saw weapons. He smiled encouragingly as Noah fought the stiff winds to climb up and watch for signs of anyone coming. Lucas was always careful to act like what they thought he was—a kind, caring leader.

To accomplish that, Lucas just pretended that the world was watching him. In time, it would be.

In the parking lot of the station, a giant antenna glowed with bright blue lights that barely cut through the haze still lingering over the city. The war had devastated New York, sparing only a few people and relics. This station was behind the skeleton of a large stadium that appeared to have taken part of a hit, providing protection somehow for the radio building and tower.

Until tonight, when they'd switched on the lights, his group had been free to work without interruption because they'd laid low. That had been step one. The station coming online was the beginning of stage two. The final step would start as soon as the first group of angry women arrived. Thanks to the war that killed so many men in every fighting nation, females had inherited the earth. Upon learning they were the majority, women had taken over all government facilities and claimed control of the country. Shortly after, male slavery had been voted into law and recovery had ground to a halt. Seventy years later, there were almost no free males left to resist in the south. Lucas was certain his group was one of the last in the north or east. He'd been searching for the right bait for almost a decade. The only area he had no information on was in the west, but even he wasn't crazy enough to go there.

"In the absence of true leadership, citizens will follow a grain of sand." Lucas waved to Noah, who

had reached the roof. “I’m a grain of sand right now, grandfather. In fifty years, I’ll be a desert. In four hundred years, this will be an ocean of my ashes. All I need is one clan of heartless changelings with the new physical mutations and no wisdom to recognize my treachery.”

“Lucas!”

He twisted around at the shout. “Yes?”

Jody’s words came out in a quick rush of horny eagerness from the front door. “We got a response on the radio already! Women are coming!”

Lucas clapped the man on the shoulder and went to help with the preparations. Mentally, he gave thanks that his prayers had been answered. His grandfather had made it clear that females couldn’t be beaten physically. The disease was mutating every thirty years so far, once a generation. In the next decade, stage four would kick in. His grandfather said there were seven stages coming, but by the time they reached the fourth, the human race would have transformed drastically.

The conversation had terrified Lucas with images of women becoming monsters who had to have blood from men. That was the final mutation. There was no going back from it. Men would be hunted until there were none left, and then the species would evolve into mammals that could fertilize their own eggs. Or they would all vanish. Both options were unacceptable to Lucas. He’d promised to carry out his grandfather’s plan to combat that future, but he’d also added his own

twist. Instead of finding the cure that had to exist in a lab somewhere under this broken land, Lucas had chosen to let the disease run its course. When the final evolution came, his heirs would have such a grip on this land that nothing could break it. He was going to pit these women against each other in every way that he could, forcing them, unknowingly, to kill each other off. A few hundred years of it would see the female numbers cut down.

Those left would be the strongest of their gender, unfortunately, but the breeding programs would modify the males and give them the disease so they could *change* as well. By the time it was accomplished, there wouldn't be enough women left in America to fight it—exactly the situation that had allowed male slavery. Instead of continuing to fight when they couldn't win, Lucas was sentencing his gender to horrible conditions for four hundred years and then they would have control that couldn't ever be broken.

He considered it a fair trade. Everyone knew without pain, there was no gain. He just didn't think it should have to be *his* pain. He'd been joining groups and turning them in when they failed to meet his bait parameters, but this setup was different. These men were cute, with sweet voices, strong bodies, and no brains. They were half of the proper ingredients. If his relative had been correct, the first signs of this physical mutation should be emerging right now, creating miserable females who didn't care how much blood spilled as long as they got

physical relief. Through that self-serving nature, women would die by the millions and become vulnerable. *We'll never give you another chance to betray us after this. Four centuries of male abuse will guarantee it.*

423 Years Later

Chapter One

Troubleshooting

New Network City
May 12th

1

“The cameras are working again!” Terry swallowed against a sore throat and wiped away sweat. She’d been screaming at subordinates for the ten hours that they’d been without visual confirmation on the Network Rider.

The ruler of the council lowered his hood to reveal male features that immediately drew the eye of every female at the table. He strode over to Terry’s station, leaning against the woman’s sticky shoulder.

Terry tensed, controlling the need to grab what she couldn’t have. She, along with other members, had been promised the cure for the rage disease once they’d proven their loyalty. Until then, it was an internal struggle the females had to be strong enough to conquer. The normally icy meeting chamber was warm and muggy, adding to the misery, but Julian’s voice was the worst part. The other males here had feminine tones, but not Juli. It was clear what he was as soon as he opened his mouth.

“Zoom in.” Juli enjoyed their discomfort even as he mentally vowed to increase electricity production. Rationing power meant no air conditioning for anyone except their guests and certain games, which had to be done to keep the masses from knowing how close the dome was to shutting down every day. It had been this way for a while, though they usually diverted the power from local shops. With so many out-of-towners visiting the city this month, they couldn’t do that without raising suspicion. If their subjects thought they were weak, his plans would be in danger. Their control depended on violence and fear.

Around the table, the rest of the sweating members leaned forward to observe as the biggest screen went from static to a fuzzy view waiting to be focused. As it became clearer, the images brought fear and anger.

“They broke our deal!”

“The Glowers are coming!”

“Do we have anything to hit it with?” Juli wasn’t as calm as he preferred to be, but he also wasn’t panicking like his henchmen. He had hoped the rebels didn’t know about the tribe of desert Glowers and their big captor. Upon discovering that they’d sheltered Angelica and her crew, Julian had ordered troops to kill every Glower found out of their hidden city. He’d hoped it would drive them back into that hellhole they called home, but it had obviously had the opposite effect.

Terry pointed at the screen, where their arsenal flashed up in a short series of lists that had been crossed off. They'd already used most of it to keep control over the centuries. "We could use the smaller rocket and still carry out your plans to hit Canada and China with the larger warheads."

Julian realized everyone knew about his plot to strike strategic parts of the world. But it wasn't common knowledge. He glared at the only one who could have told them.

Riana had the wisdom to run for the door, hand reaching for the handle.

Julian's blade slammed into her spine.

She hit the door and bounced off, falling in a bloody heap.

Members scattered around the room as gasps circled the rest of the table.

Terry ran over to help the fatally wounded woman, but Riana was beyond that.

Julian ignored Terry's flinch as he retrieved his knife. It was a silent lesson on betraying the oaths that people took to keep his secrets. He wouldn't allow that, ever.

Juli cleaned his hands and blade on the towel by his seat. The fading rag had once been streaked in blood daily. *I don't use it often enough anymore.* Julian placed the knife on the table and glared at those who had fled their stations.

Rusty motioned the women to retake their seats. Terry and Shelly were their public faces. To lose them and Riana, would mean a large hassle to find

quick replacements for the media crews to fawn over.

Blood pooled around the oddly shaped white chairs, running into the cracks of the white tile floor. Shelly was careful not to ruin her pink shag boots by stepping in it as she returned to the table. Julian's rage was too much even for a changeling. Others had flipped and tried to kill him, but his body was bigger, stronger, and his anger was deadlier.

Unlike the guards, the council dressed in what they wanted, giving the sterile meeting room an ugly mix of shades that made odd shadows on the windows. Julian especially hated their scarves, which were bright and glittery. The mess on the floor had to be swept nightly. That meant an extra ten minutes before he could be alone with a control method. The council didn't appreciate how on edge he was, not even Rusty. If they'd known, none of them would have eaten complex food or slept in complex rooms.

Terry lingered by the body, heart ripped apart by Riana's murder.

Julian pinned the teary woman with a dark glare, deciding her fate. The moment was tense and silent.

Terry remained crouched by the body, terrified that she'd just lost everything. Being Riana's lover was more than enough reason for Julian to kill her now.

"Sit. Do it right now." Julian did the same, impatient to address their problems outside the dome. There were more than a thousand people in

the crowd around the complex now, all eager to view Sam's game. Her popularity was disconcerting.

Juli glared as Terry rose. He would kill her later, when they were alone and he could extract a more satisfying pound of flesh on behalf of her lover's betrayal.

Terry knew it wasn't over. She slunk to her sweaty seat and tried to avoid Julian's line of sight.

"Send the smallest rocket we have. Calculate where they'll meet and blow it up. Send half our troops to round up survivors, half by land, half by sea. No public warnings to tip them off."

"What are we telling the reporters?" Rusty grinned at Terry. She had rejected him for Riana. Her misery was pleasing.

"Tell them the rebels rigged the train to blow up when it hit the city. They didn't know what they were doing and it went early, saving thousands of lives, including ours. The public will eat it up."

"In the meantime?" Shelly wrote down the orders so they wouldn't miss anything. Julian sometimes went for complicated schemes that required attention to detail and she wasn't going to be caught slacking or lacking while he was in this mood.

"We keep going with the plans that everyone here obviously knows. We're going to bomb the leadership meeting, which will devastate the power structure in the west, allowing the remaining half of our Defenders to take over during their power fight.

On the way, they will wipe out all known rebel strongholds in the Borderlands. Thanks to an insider in their group, we have two new locations of their dens. Then, we'll tell the UN the meeting was hit by the rebels as an example of why we can't sign the Recovery Treaty yet. Our rebels are too violent and have to be captured first. As for the remaining Pruetts, they will be hunted down or lured in. After that, we'll let the UN inspectors enter. They can watch from a game cell while we destroy their homelands."

The deep bass of his voice had the miserable women mesmerized, shoved into a place where there was only heat, voices, and the fight for control. The rest of the secretive council immediately began drafting their parts of the plan to complete the world takeover now that Julian had laid it out. He didn't do that often.

Julian exchanged glances with Rusty, his right hand man. Rusty would supervise the evacuation efforts here, in secret. He was loyal, but it wouldn't be much longer before the others figured out they had to leave the dome. Julian had hoped the Glowers and their ape master would never be found, but now that they had, another awful part of their past would be eliminated. The contagious tribe wouldn't be missed. The only deaths that might stir public support against Network control were the troublesome Pruetts, but once Sam died during her game, it would demoralize the rest. From there, they

could be squished like insects or rounded up for his use.

“Do it soon.” Julian didn’t care about the sweat dripping from his big arms onto the table. He was studying the screen again, where the giant ape and the Glowers, along with a dozen known rebels, were running alongside the train. The Network Rider appeared to have been seriously damaged, but it was chugging northeast at a steady pace. Julian estimated it would reach his city within two days. In the front car, where the broken glass provided no shield, were several Pruetts. Candice and her valuable prize were clearly leading this charge, but there were half a dozen other wild members of that clan standing behind them or hanging from the handrails—including Chester, Horace, and Sophia.

Julian felt a second tremor of unease. *They went south for help from the Nomads.* Known for their inability to work together, those enemies hadn’t been heard from in twenty years, and only sporadically before then. Everyone assumed the Mexican population had died out. The ruthlessness of the south had become well known during the first two hundred years after the war, but regular trains of poisoned food and diseased slaves had gradually conquered them. It should have done the same for the west coast, but it hadn’t yet.

“Is that Chester Pruett?” Beck, one of the lower ranked members, leaned forward to adjust the screen.

“Yes.” Robert was reading the files. “He hasn’t been heard from in ten years. Chester vanished after blowing up a hub in the swamp that killed three dozen Defenders and four rental males. Our notes say to kill them.”

“Yes, I know.” Julian’s attention went to Shelly, who was typing quickly. “I wrote it.”

Shelly felt his impatience grow. “Predicted area of destruction holds three hundred settlers, four wheat plantations—”

“Just do it.”

“Yes, sir.” Shelly didn’t care about the losses, either, though she might mourn the wheat if the kitchen ran out of bread. She hit the warm buttons carefully, not trusting the old technology they all enjoyed. It didn’t always work the way they needed it to.

“Another wave of refugees are heading for the city.” Shelly switched the view on the monitor. “It’s very close to where we’re aiming.”

They’d known something was going on in that sector by the panicked citizens flooding in. Multiple reports had been filed, claiming battles were happening on their property and squatters were carrying off their slaves. That entire zone was chaotic right now.

Julian reclined, staring intently at the screen. The rebels and their ape weren’t far away now. “No public warning.”

Shelly didn’t care one way or the other. “*This is a control command for all sentries in the east. Those*

without orders will immediately report to the nearest hub for instructions. Those with orders will carry them out now, effective immediately. I repeat: this is a command communication, coming from the control room of the dome... ”

Around the table, the men shared glances of approval.

The females kept their expressions tolerant, positions precarious at best. They'd sold out their own kind for these power seats, if they could keep them. The males up here didn't resemble the fragile creatures kept in the cells below. These men were every bit the monsters of the past. If the vaccine or cure went public, this was the future, so these women secretly rejoiced each time Julian delayed any release that might heal their society. At least while they secretly ruled here, females openly ruled the rest of their world. It was immensely better than the alternative. "Launching in three...two...one..."

Julian didn't watch the screen as the rocket flew into view. He shared a lengthy look with Rusty, his XO and best friend, while everyone else was distracted.

Rusty nodded subtly, telling Julian he would speed up their private plans. They didn't believe a small rocket was enough to kill the creature and even wounded, their Defenders would be less than effective against it. Leaving the dome was a foregone conclusion. They hadn't told the others it might happen because Julian hadn't decided if the other council members were going to be killed by

the rebels. Rusty expected his boss to eliminate a few, but not all. However, he didn't mind the thought of it being just him and Julian again for a while. The last time they'd done this, they'd gotten six months before having to replace the others by using premade clips. It had been great.

Rusty made a subtle sweep of the keyboard and began recording all their voices. He would start making short promo clips now for use during the transition so it would already be done when Julian told him to do it.

In the corner, another screen had been running continuously. Still waiting for word that Sam Pruett had checked in for her time trial, hopefully with her sister there to support her, Julian scanned the information being relayed to the observing world. Sam had twelve hours left to check in. If she didn't, she would be another wild Pruett unaccounted for—something that would cause him to lose sleep. Julian wanted to know where his enemies were, and what they were doing, at all times.

“Where are you, my black sheep?” He would have to make adjustments soon unless she showed up. If Sam and her sister had gone off grid together to get the weaker slaves to the UN delegation, four hundred years of work was in grave danger.

“It missed!”

“How did that happen?!”

“Now they know what we're doing!”

“Old missiles are hard to control.” Shelly was already typing in the order that would send the next one. She knew what their leader would order.

Juli controlled his rage and forced himself to wait while the rest of the council complained and muttered. *If I don't get a direct hit soon, I'm going to kill every woman in this room.*

Chapter Two

My Flavor

The Northern Borderlands

1

“You don’t have to do this.”

In the middle of sliding to her knees, Sam peered up. “Why? Do you stink?”

Baker chuckled, holding still. Her eyes held glossy tints of red that implied she was very tired. He knew better than to trigger her with sudden movements. “You always know what to say.”

Sam laughed, rough hands running over his strong, chilly legs in quick swipes to clear him of any ticks. They’d come through the bramble fields last night and couldn’t light a fire to check themselves or cook a meal. Now that they could see, she was doing a better search. Ticks were the same as they’d always been—nasty, dangerous, bloodsucking parasites that carried any number of diseases.

Around this small valley set among the hills, Network troops were on the move. Coming and going from every direction, it had forced the rebels to take cover. Apparently, the enemy had learned of their ambush and theft of the train. Sam hoped her

family was careful. It had been three days. Defenders could have reached them by now.

“All good.” She stood. Heat flared as she stared at Baker’s bare chest. They’d stripped down to almost nothing when they took shelter, hoping any ticks they’d picked up would stay with the clothing. She and Baker had spent the night in a corner of this hillside cave. Her heat had warmed the walls so much that he’d had to switch positions with her. Outside, their escort was enjoying the remaining cool drafts of the Changeling Winds. The dust had finally settled, but it had left gritty traces everywhere. Sam tried to shake some of them from her hair, knowing it was a lost cause. As soon as she got on her Mopar to drive to Adelphia, she would be coated again. The Borderlands were constant battles with nature that few won.

Baker tried not to respond to her standing in front of him in black shorts and a tight black top, but he had to clench his fists to keep from making a sexual advance. They didn’t have a pair of cuffs along. She also had to be at the trials in a few hours and though they were close now, they didn’t have time to waste unless she had another method of transportation lined up. “I mean it, Sam. You don’t have to play their games. Come with me. You’re more useful *alive*.”

Sam refused to travel that road with him, though she wanted to. When she’d told Angelica she hadn’t found a man she hurt to be away from, she hadn’t been lying, but she sensed splitting from Baker

might test that. She both yearned for it as a confirmation of her feelings for him, and dreaded it for the same reason. Had she really fallen for this sexy rebel? Now, when they couldn't be together and she was about to have her pick of the bachelor prizes? Talk about irony.

Baker growled as he stepped on a sharp rock, missing his shoes. They'd trudged through mud on the way here and left them outside last night after clearing the small cavern.

Sam finished her own tick check, and then went to the rear of the cave to collect the bedding. Almost completely round, the cave would have held them and their escorts, but her Runners had insisted on watching for problems. Sam assumed they were giving her privacy, but she hadn't used it. She had the fight of her life coming up. She had to get set for that.

Understanding she wasn't going to renounce the choice, Baker sat on a cool rock, wishing he could at least feed her before she left. "Anything I should know about the women in the west?"

Sam's gut churned, making her frown at the emotion. She didn't like being jealous. "Meaner, faster, more instinct driven. Just be yourself." She couldn't stop the flare of heat between them as they locked eyes. The pleasure she'd experienced with Baker during their two nights would never be forgotten even if she did find a more suitable match in the complex.

Unbroken. She flushed at her own snobbery. She wanted a mate who hadn't been passed around her relatives.

Baker had brushed off enough renters after sex to recognize the moment. Humiliation flooded him.

Sam sighed. "If you keep reading my mind, we'll have to make an agreement, Baker."

He snorted at the half-teasing, half-yearning tone. "You don't want that. You've tried my flavor and now you want to taste the new stuff. I get it."

Baker stood up, anger drawing her like his flirting never could.

"Just remember, Miss Hardass, anyone can make you cum. It takes a mate to keep you satisfied. Those boys can't do that for *you*."

"How would you know?" Sam hated to be put into a corner over something a slave wasn't even supposed to discuss.

Baker angrily jerked his pants up. "I just do. Mark my words, Sam. You'll be bored after the first visit."

Sam refused to deny that. It was definitely possible. Just because Candice and Angelica had gotten good men, didn't mean she would. It was especially true when she considered how hard the enemy would try to kill her while she was in the dome. She might not even get to the first visit.

Sam paused for fear or the urge to withdraw, but the eagerness didn't fade. She wanted to fight for her life. It was a challenge that she hadn't conquered yet, but most of her current family had. It was pride

and honor, need and heat, adventure and danger—she needed all of that to be satisfied.

Baker didn't speak on the subject again, but Sam feared he was right. The rebel boss had already given her all of those emotions, had satisfied her enough that she'd been able to sleep next to him for a few hours—a big no-no in her past. Sleeping with a rental was a bond she wasn't ready for and yet, she'd broken that rule, but the worst part was she'd been thinking about the bachelors at the complex while lying in his arms.

Baker gestured to the rebel who had come to the entrance of the cave. "Everyone set to go?"

Greg nodded happily. He'd spent the night squeezed between Rosa and another Runner, listening to their snores and mutters. It had almost felt like he was in the bachelor cells again. It had been nice. "Rosa said half an hour to let the rest of the fog lift. She doesn't like the smell of it."

Baker frowned in confusion. "The smell?"

"Beetles sometimes travel with the fog. They eat their food as they go. It stinks." Sam wasn't happy with the delay. It meant another half an hour of trying to avoid the conversation Baker wanted to have.

"I'll be around." Sam ducked out into the cool wind. He wanted a commitment, but he wasn't going to get it yet. If he was right, he would be the real winner. If he was wrong, one of her Runners would be lucky enough to earn his attention. Baker might not know it yet, but he wasn't ready to settle

down. Her crew was. They were all sick of being on the move, of never being at peace. Now, that was possibly over and she was happy her girls might finally have those years of normal life, but Sam wasn't expecting much for herself. Helping to bring down the enemy would be enough. If she won a nice prize while doing it, that was a bonus for a job well done.

Greg sensed the conflict, but wasn't sure what to say that would help. Rosa had answered his questions about the mysterious Pruetts, except the answers hadn't cleared anything up. Despite trusting them with his life, Greg was scared of Candice and her cousins, with Sam being the most terrifying.

Greg helped Baker clear the cave of evidence that they'd been here, both aware of two hulking women guarding the entrance. At the complex, it would have made them nervous and prevented conversations. Here, it was a relief and a temptation. Anything they said would be repeated to Sam or Rosa.

Baker resisted the urge to plant information.

Greg had no such qualms. He wanted to help his friend. "I've heard the west has families like hers."

Baker blanched at the idea. "Won't be Pruetts."

"Is that all that matters to you?" Greg scowled sharply. "I know your dad was big on them, but they aren't that special. There are other families."

Baker didn't reply. He knew Greg was right, but he didn't want anyone else. He'd never really

viewed Angelica that way, despite offering her a service that she'd refused, and Candice had never been his in the first place. With Sam, there was the sense that she was perfect for him. He wanted time with her to prove or disprove the theory. However, the family name did give him peace of mind. Was he intentionally marking off all others because the Pruett name meant honor? Unhappy with the revelation, Baker grunted. "Let's get out of here. They might need a hand on guard duty."

Greg hid a frown as they joined the Runners. The guards would tell Sam and she would believe Baker was only after her name. *That could be the problem now.*

Greg decided he would ask Rosa to help. He wanted Baker to be as content as he was, and Sam was a terrific match for their rebel leader.

Baker avoided Sam's post, walking quickly to their bikes to help clean debris from the tires and compartments. He felt Sam's eyes boring holes into his stiff spine, but he didn't acknowledge her. She'd ended it, was moving on. He was a man. He would accept her wishes and search elsewhere for his needs.

Sam understood she'd hurt him, but until she was positive of what she wanted, she couldn't claim him. It wouldn't be right.

"Fifteen minutes!" Rosa called over the wind.

Sam twisted around so her attention was on their surroundings and not the males. She demanded it from her crew and she followed the same rules.

Rosa saw both of their attempts to fight fate. She couldn't get Sam to reverse her decision—they'd ridden together long enough for her to know Sam well—but Baker was innocent in so many ways that Rosa was sure he would be receptive to her plan. She leaned over the bike, ignoring the immediate tensing of every other female, including Sam. "You smell good."

Baker blushed, staring in surprise. "Uh. Thank you."

Rosa's hand reached out to stroke Baker's big arm, honestly experiencing the heat, but not the terrible fire that was so dangerous. Being with Greg had already helped her control. "You and Greg get along...and I'm almost a Pruett."

Baker realized she was offering to claim him. He hesitated, torn. He assumed she was doing it to keep him from being harassed during their trip west. Now that Sam had ended things, he was once again single. "Can I think on it?"

Sam's growl echoed across the dusty campsite. She marched toward them with an expression Rosa immediately ducked. She'd known what it might do, but she couldn't take Greg being upset over his friend.

"You little bitch!" Sam grabbed Baker by the arm and dragged him toward the cave. "Let's talk!"

As she disappeared inside with a meekly obeying Baker, the Runners and Greg gave Rosa grins and approving nods. They all wanted the black

sheep and the rebel leader together. The combination was perfect.

Baker stayed standing when Sam released him and stalked to the opposite end of the cave. The anger coming off her immediately began warming the stone.

Now that she'd shown signs of Pruett possessiveness, Sam didn't know what to say. She wasn't going to claim him, but she also didn't want him free to be claimed by anyone else.

Baker waited as patiently as he could, eager to hear her offer. She had to give him something after displaying emotions in front of her crew.

"Why?"

"It's not for your name. Other families are strong."

Not like mine. She studied him. "If we were at the complex, how would you convince me?"

"I'm a man, Sam. They're all boys. I wouldn't need to do anything."

Drawn to the confidence, Sam came a few feet closer. "And if there were other *men* there?"

Baker scowled, hands clenching. "When you left, I'd make it clear who I am."

"What if they refused to get out of your way?"

Baker grunted. "I'd kill for you, Sam."

She grinned, giving him that harsh games expression. "I feel the same way."

"Then why won't you claim me?"

She sighed, forced into giving him the truth. "Because it may not be enough. I've always needed

more than the rest of my relatives. I won't put you through that. You deserve better."

Realizing she was trying to protect him, Baker slid forward and captured her lips.

Sam allowed him the liberty, shivering at the need a simple kiss could bring. She wanted him. There was no denying that. "Will you wait for me?"

"And be your secondary source if you find one you like more in the complex?"

Sam dropped her chin in shame. "Yes."

Baker slowly retreated, voice sad. "Then I have to give the same answer as back in the other den. When you decide I'm the one, come find me. Until then, I'm a renter and I'll make my own choices."

When he turned away from her, something in Sam snapped. *That hurt!* A tear rolled over her cheek and fell to the dirt. *I do love him. How did that happen?*

Baker felt her terror, but he kept going, proving he was strong enough to do so if that's what she wanted. His heart might never heal, but it was a small price to pay for the freedom of his gender. The Pruett's always marked a man in one way or another. He'd known that when he agreed to play with them. Now he had to live with it. "Rosa, I'm considering your offer. I'm under your protection until I choose not to be. Let's roll."

When Sam's growl came this time, Baker and everyone else ignored it.

Chapter Three
Spooked
New Network City

1

“The missile is in the air, sir.”

The council waited silently for the rocket to reach its target. An equipment malfunction had given them a long hour where the most exciting thing to happen had been viewing Terry’s agony as Riana’s body was dragged away by the robotic cleaner. At least the air conditioning had come back online. Julian had ordered the hound pen cooling to be diverted to this tower. The old equipment couldn’t take so much heat.

“Sir?” Robert, the man stationed over the city monitors, got Julian’s attention. “Sir, we have a minor security breach in sector five.”

Julian came over to peer at the display, still annoyed but no longer on the edge of his control now that the room had cooled off. He did a quick evaluation. The group that had overrun the security post appeared to be more settlers who lived around the city. They were trying to avoid the troops and the coming rebels. “Put them with the other refugees.”

Julian moved to the next monitoring station. He focused on Shelly. “When?”

“But sir!” Robert didn’t want to let them go. “Two of our Defenders were killed. The group who came through was too big for us to handle in that area. We have a lot of fighters out of the city right now.”

Julian twisted around to regard the subordinate, causing silence to fall again. When he didn’t reach for his knife, all of them were relieved.

Julian gestured curtly at Shelly, who was running the monitor over the nearby countryside. “How long?”

“Any second, sir.”

Everyone studied the largest screen intently.

“There!”

The blast hit the train in a perfect shot, sending metal and debris flying. Wildlife took off, fleeing in vain from the explosion that smothered the area with a gray and black cloud of smoke and dust. As the shockwave reached the cameras, their view of the scene abruptly cut off.

“Yes!” Julian pounded his fist on the table. “We got them!”

The rest of the council was relieved, but they didn’t enjoy it as much as their leader. Until the smoke cleared, they wouldn’t know for sure how many of the rebels had been killed.

Rusty concentrated on the static covered display, hoping the camera would come back online soon. If it didn’t, they would be in the dark about

the rebels until the team Julian had sent out reached the area. Their leader had also sent Terry out on a mission, but refused to say what it was.

“I wish to address the public. Get me a channel.”

Robert began hitting buttons on the monitor, doing as he was told even though he didn’t believe it was a good idea. He knew what Julian was about to do. Robert thought it would have been better to wait until they had confirmation that the threat was actually gone before announcing it. Details like that had a way of coming back to bite when it was least expected and could be least afforded.

Robert motioned to Shelly to read the script Julian had written.

“This is a control communication!” The computer announced it over the New City Radio Network, as it had first been called. *“Pay attention!”*

Those outside the dome quieted, peering up in suspicious fear as the giant screens switched from clips of old episodes to static. Seconds later, the monitors came to life with Terry’s victorious face and cheerful voice. “There have been developments in our battle against the resistance. A short time ago, we launched a counteroffensive against the rebels who hijacked the Network Rider. We have won! Sentries are enroute to collect survivors and bring in bodies for identification. I repeat: the threat in the eastern country is over. Citizens may return to their homes and resume resource production.”

In the hot crowd of muttering, murmuring, constantly shifting citizens, a small group listened to the recording with smirks.

Candice didn't gloat with her crew. She motioned Daniel closer. There were a lot of hard females around them. Some of those closest were supporters, but with their disease, deals often came second. She wasn't about to lose her mate in this battle for freedom.

Daniel kept his chin down, almost hidden by the cloak Candice had given him as they arrived in the city an hour ago. Wearing Bruce's old clothes, he blended with the other slaves who were obediently following their fleeing masters. All around them was heat. A lot of it came from the changelings pressed in around the dome so tightly, but there was also rebellion in the air—supported by hatred for the rulers who had allowed all of this to happen.

Candice felt the warm air shift into something dangerous, but it was too late to hide in the crowd as three large Diva gang members came up behind Daniel. Before she could switch to a safer position, another half-dozen leather wearing slave traders approached from her side.

Aware that things could get ugly, Candice glanced to where the rest of their group had blended into the crowd. Although she didn't spot them, she felt their response to her need and knew they would protect Daniel if things went crazy here.

Candice quickly pinpointed who she thought to be the main fighter of the gang. She locked a hand

around Daniel's wrist and turned to confront the family enemy. "Can I help you?"

Before the Diva could answer, screens around the city switched to the view of a missile hitting the Network Rider. The destruction increased the tension instead of dissipating it.

As the camera went out and the view switched back to the council woman, Candice controlled her expression. *It looks real. Mary did a great job doctoring that film.* By the time the troops got there and discovered they had been tricked, it would be too late to prevent all those fighters from entering the city. Quite a few of them were already here.

In a moment of Pruett judgment, Candice held her free hand out to the Diva in front of her. "Let's make a deal. I'll take down the dome and I won't kill you afterward."

To her surprise, the woman immediately shook her hand.

"I'm Naomi. That was what we wanted to talk to you about!" Naomi frowned a bit. "We don't have a leader anymore. You keep killing them."

Candice snickered. "So you think I should replace them? That's funny." She dropped her hand, openly wiping it down her tattered decoy cloak. The Diva's sweaty, slightly charred skin was layered with weeks of grit and grease. That came from eating food around cook fires, implying they had been traveling for a while.

"Anyone caught aiding the rebels will be placed into Vulture Run." As the council woman continued

to expand upon the consequences of helping the rebels, the crowd grew louder with muttering and comments, snickers, fighting, arguing, and growls. Normally, the shops in this city saw steady traffic during the day, but with this many citizens in town, all of the stalls were being overwhelmed with shouts from those trying to bargain for supplies and entertainment.

Candice scanned the rental clerks, particularly loathing those big females. They had no sympathy for their slaves, only greed. Even their clothes, made of fine fabrics and bright colors, stood out from everyone else. *I've never understood that. Shouldn't the product look as good as the owner does?*

In the crowd around her, finery was absent. Most of the locals wore shirts and pants sewn from animal hides or long cloaks that hid threadbare jumpers purchased secondhand from the Network. Few of them were armed, but with changelings, that wasn't necessary for them to be a threat.

"Refugees are being given a two-day pass for the work they've missed. Do not use the new train to return to your homes. It is off-limits to the public." The hooded council woman glared at them all sternly through the monitor. *"No loitering calls will be answered during this time. Anyone caught in illegal areas will be brought in for questioning. Civilians are required to report rebel sightings immediately."*

As the crowd continued to swell, so did the odors. Blood, feces, and sweat were the strongest, but there were also tempting aromas of males walking through the crowd and fresh food being offered by vendors.

Naomi gestured toward the old subway system. “You can stay with us until her train arrives.”

Candice signaled her group to follow. “All of us?”

The Diva scanned Daniel, and then Candice’s companions who were revealing themselves to be all around the Divas. She paled, nodding. “Yes. We’ve been waiting for this moment for centuries. We’re not going to lose it to internal fighting.”

Almost convinced, Candice followed the Diva through the hot crowd. She almost recognized the woman. Candice hadn’t been here for Angelica’s matches. She and Daniel had watched those from the Borderlands, rooting and worrying.

Behind them, more of Candice’s group faded into the crowd and trailed them without revealing their presence.

The clip of the train explosion was being replayed again, but Candice didn’t try to find flaws with the tape. She had little doubt that the Network would do that when they found out there were no bodies. Not even the ape was there. That furry relic was enjoying the rivers on the trip. He hadn’t been free since being captured shortly after birth and his enthusiasm for nature was causing ripples. Locals were fleeing ahead of him, horrified by the monster

splashing through to chase meals that usually hunted the human anglers.

As Candice and her group vanished into the old subway system, screens around the city switched back to shows that had been interrupted. Most of the crowd was satisfied the ape had been eliminated, but they didn't leave. There was still a sense of something about to happen here, and no one wanted to miss it—especially not if it meant Network control might weaken.

2

“Why aren't they leaving?”

Julian didn't answer, though he knew. Before Alex could repeat the question, the buzzer sounded, signaling an incoming transmission.

Instead of taking it in his private chambers as he usually did, Julian gestured for Rusty to put it on speaker. As the connection went through, Julian's anger returned. “What do you want now?!”

There was a brief pause where it was clear the person hadn't been expecting such a hostile greeting.

“This is Claudette Fife from the United Nations delegation assigned to your country. We have recorded an explosion of minor magnitude in your eastern sector. Are you aware?”

“We're handling our rebel problem and it would be easier if I wasn't constantly distracted by calls like these. We have four weeks. Mind your own

damn business!” Julian gestured for the line to be cut off.

The delegate continued brusquely over the speaker. “The UN has a responsibility—”

The line went dead.

Julian stormed from the room. The UN was a problem. Plans were in place for it and he needed to be patient, but the rage was consuming. Experimenting on himself had given Julian a mental black hole. He wasn’t stable.

Council members shared uneasy glances of concern—all of them. Though Rusty was firmly in Julian’s corner, he often wondered if he would be found dead from one of Julian’s rages. It was almost as if the disease had mutated again and was now affecting men. Rusty wouldn’t know. Only Julian had access to those records.

Rusty shuddered. If that was the case, he would rather be dead. Watching the women suffer through it was bad enough. He certainly didn’t want to experience it firsthand.

3

The Canadian Border

Claudette disconnected the dead line with an annoyed scowl. Julian and the Network council had been stalling the UN for years. The rest of the world was recovering, but they had no idea about the conditions in New America—except for the small tidbits they’d been able to glean from timid lads

who swore they had escaped slavery. The rest of the world, with the exception of two Middle Eastern nations, had outlawed the practice decades ago.

Claudette increased the volume on the screen that was currently highlighting a rare connection into New America. An episode of the Bachelor Battles was starting next week and the time trials were being run for it. Feeds like this one were almost impossible to hold onto. The Network had a sophisticated communication system based on the old world internet. After the war, the rest of the world had lost access to that precious resource when it was locked down by the American military. The Network was using it to evade broadcasting proof of breaking international laws. Despite the technology, some clips had been transmitted by locals, unknowingly providing a feed for bordering countries to pick up. This one being so clear meant there was someone on the American side of the wall observing the Time Trials on a Network device.

Claudette narrowed in on the line of players waiting for their run. *Is that another Pruett?*

Chapter Four
Be Careful
The Adelpia Time Trials Stadium

1

“Welcome to the final episode of the Bachelor Battles!”

The war changed all of us in one way or another, and some of us in every way possible.

“Here’s a happy surprise! We’ll have another of those infamous, bounty hunting Pruettts with us for this episode!”

We’ve had four hundred years of complete Network rule.

“Has there ever been a family so merciless, so mate-hungry?”

It’s past time for someone to challenge them.

“Samantha J. Pruett!”

Sam didn’t respond emotionally as her name was announced. At this moment during the Time Trial introductions, Candice had probably glowered at everyone. Angelica might even have waved, but Sam didn’t do either of those. She wasn’t going to waste herself in any way during this experience. They were only going to get as much of her as she wanted to give and right now, she didn’t want to give them anything. She walked onto the time trials

field amid roars from the crowd. She hadn't come for the taste of blood or the need to claim a mate, though she was looking forward to those rewards. *I came for the Network.*

Enjoying the cool winds that preceded a storm, Sam took the front spot for a brief moment while the crowd screamed and the other contestants swallowed jealous snarls.

“Samantha has been a Borderlands bounty hunter for more than a decade. Without a mate or children, she prefers to spend her time challenging the harsh environments left by the war. She and her crew, the Runners, are the most feared group since the Ring was killed. As I'm sure you know, Sam's little sister, Angelica, is one of those wanted for questioning about those murders. She is still on the run.”

The players behind Sam grew nervous at the family reputation being displayed. When Sam considered how it might give her the edge, she let her eyes phase red before rotating to glare at them.

The announcer quickly tried to capture the moment for the crowd. “There's no fear in that one, folks! Don't you love her black and blond hair?”

The opponents in the line behind Sam tried to answer her challenge. More than half of them began changing or advancing. The damp, cool air couldn't put out the fires she would start while here.

Sam smirked as guards rushed over with clubs and electronic batons. She faced the laughing crowd, the citizens who were about to bet their

fortunes on her, and slowly opened her cloak to reveal her fighting outfit. It was what she wore on runs. The plain pants and unimpressive top were overlooked for the full belt of Pruett weapons that no one else had gotten to view during the other games.

“That is a lot of killing tools! I’ve never seen so many on one waist. How did she fit them all?”

Sam rotated as the announcer gushed, giving the camera time to capture it in detail. Some were still stained with blood from the train fight. Under these killing devices, Sam’s muscular skin was tanned, beaten, and scarred with more damage than her relatives carried. It was obvious that she’d earned every blemish and knew how to handle each tool.

The players behind her stopped fighting with the guards and began thinking of withdrawing.

Any player could do that until they signed in at the dome, but almost no one ever did. For most of them, coming here was the last straw. They either wanted a cure or to die. *That’s why we usually come here.* Sam closed her cloak. She retook her place in line. The other players were now using the troops between them as a shield.

The time trial stadium was gigantic. It held fifty thousand seats and contained too many entrances and tunnels to count. Most of the stands and booths were thick with guards and citizens who were fighting, stealing, stabbing, and doing all other sorts of activities that Pruett frowned upon in public. It was like being in an animal den, making Sam’s

stomach flip eagerly. She liked the way the field was in an oval lined with concrete barriers to mark the lanes. She assumed personnel used the lack of night races to set up for the different runs. She also admired the top boxes of the stadium, where the rich and the reporters enjoyed 10'x10' glass booths that allowed them to catch every minute of the excitement.

As the other racers in this set were introduced, Sam kept studying her surroundings. It was rumored that the town behind the stadium was controlled by a branch of the Divas. Sam had never been there. As far as she knew, none of her relatives had. As enemies of that gang, they hadn't felt it wise to invade their turf unless on an official run. Sam studied the mysterious skyline, suddenly eager to gaze upon something she hadn't before. Until now, Pruetts had left eastern explorations to their enemies, but that could change during her time here. She wanted to know why the town was off limits.

Sam scanned the racers last. The Snake and the Diva were going to be solid fights, but there was also a rare swamp fighter and a mountain brute waiting in the tunnel to be introduced. Sam had walked by the pair without reacting, but she'd been aware of them and they'd been aware of her. Everyone in the corridor had felt the tension. They just hadn't known exactly where it was coming from.

"And here is our next group of potential players!"

Sam exited at a wave from the guards. The others hung back to give her a clear path. As they reentered the cool tunnel that led below the old stadium, four large guards approached them.

The other racers scattered as if they knew Sam was the target.

Sam also assumed she was and stopped. She kept her hands still, not wanting to provoke a fight that she couldn't win. Four guards were no trouble for her, but this zone housed and transported more than four hundred troops. She'd never make it out if she fought them.

"Come with me." The shortest sentry waved cockily as she walked by Sam. "Run and die."

"A Pruett run?" Sam snorted as she followed. "You must not know my family."

"I saw them both at the complex. Great games. Terrific ratings. Will you be as entertaining?"

Sam wondered if the guard wanted a scoop for a favor. That could be arranged. "More so."

The sentry chuckled, lip curling. "Good, good. It's been boring at home since your sister took her prize and fled."

It was a reminder that sometimes Pruett's did run.

Sam was offended by it as she was taken to a lower corridor. From what Angelica and Candice had said, potential players were kept in the bowels of the stadium. Used to communal living with her girls, Sam wasn't concerned over having to sleep in the same cell as those who were going to try to kill

her. In fact, she thought that might put her at ease. Life in the Borderlands was no bed of exhumed roses.

Aware that the escort wasn't normal, Sam stayed ready to react. They walked by racers waiting for their introduction and other players who should have been resting until their run was called. The crowd thickened into a mass of angry, snarling changelings standing around a dank tunnel that reeked of sweat and rage.

The guard pointed. "In here."

Sam went first as the Defender opened a rusty door.

"Miss Pruett!" A cheery, familiar voice called a greeting. "How good to finally meet one of you in person!"

Sam listened to the door shut, shocked to find a council member standing in the center of the dirty, bunk lined basement. She scanned for exits first, then evaluated her visitor.

Sam and the tall woman were dressed much the same, with long cloaks that covered the tools and gave only a hint of the muscular form underneath. Sam assumed the brunette was as armed as she was. The theory was confirmed when Terry came forward and her cloak shifted, revealing three knife blades in the front of her belt.

Noting the same details about Sam, Terry beamed graciously. "So attentive to survival. You are a credit to all who have died trying to

accomplish what you and your family have with the rebels.”

Sam tensed further. *How can she know I was there?*

Sam cautioned herself. *She doesn't. She's bluffing like a Pruett would. Be careful.* Sam walked to an empty bunk along the wall and dropped her kit. Dust flew up. “What do you want?”

Terry frowned. “So abrupt. Is there no time for politeness?”

“Not if you want me to die in the dome instead of here. You know how hard it is to keep the disease in check in a place like this.”

“I do understand.” Terry had fought her way up instead of inheriting a seat. She was the only person who ever had. “But we really don’t want you to die. Just the opposite.”

Sam heard the tone and braced.

“We want you to work for us.”

“My family has been employed by the council for centuries.” Sam was hedging. Candice hadn’t expected this when they’d sat down with the rebels and finished their plans.

“We would like a tighter relationship with your wonderfully talented clan.” Terry still wore a huge smile that looked out of place on her. “We’d like you and your girls to take over the yearly round up.”

Sam stared in disgust. “You want a Pruett to lead The Ring?”

“Yes.” Terry shrugged, voice cooling. “It was your girls who killed the last crew.”

“That hasn’t been proven.” Sam allowed her voice to sound unsure. “I still can’t believe it. I was only away for a couple weeks on my last solo run.”

“Perhaps there doesn’t even need to be a trial for your sister and cousin. If we knew you were loyal to us, Samantha, there wouldn’t be a need for us to wipe out your family like the annoying bugs you all really are.”

Sam grinned harshly. “Honesty! I like that. In return, I’m going to give you some advice. You ready?”

Terry nodded. Her face was now a wall of ice as she braced for bad news. “Do tell.”

“Get out.”

Terry frowned. “We’re not done talking.”

“I mean out of the city and out of Network control, you twit!” Sam sneered. “They sent you to deal with the black sheep because you’re expendable. They knew their messenger might not survive the conversation, but you didn’t, so there’s no way you’ll survive whatever else they have planned. If you value your life, get out now.”

Terry would have argued, but Sam went to the bed she’d chosen and curled around her kit, not worrying over bugs or the new layer of dust that flew up. “Have a nice trip back.”

“Same to you.” Terry reluctantly considered the concern Sam had put in front of her. *Did Julian send me out of the dome for that reason? He said I was forgiven for not telling him Riana was spilling his secrets, but am I really?*

No. And that's why I came with my private security team and not complex troops. The Pruett is wrong. I do know how much danger I'm in. Terry strode to the door. *I'm going to have to do something about Julian.*

Sam smirked as the woman left and angry players began pushing in to claim a bunk. The council was scared. That was the only reason they would offer her relatives a pardon and better jobs. They knew the Pruett could take them down. That made this game even more dangerous than it already had been. The enemy knew she was coming for them. They would be ready.

So will I! Sam appeared to be resting even though she was tensed for defense. There would be a few hundred diseased fighters in here with her over the next few days. Sleep would come later.

The drafty bunkroom continued to fill until all of the beds were taken. There were two minor fights during the time they had to wait for the first races, but troops outside the door shut them down quickly. The Network wanted blood to spill upstairs, not down here where they couldn't get much from it in the way of ratings. There were cameras in each corner, but only the main guards in the control chamber could view them. The cameras down here weren't live to the public unless something big happened.

After a few minutes of waiting for problems, Sam realized word had spread of the visit. Some of the racers probably assumed she'd been offered a

job or a threat, but everyone knew not to interfere with deals the Network had going. If you screwed something up for them, it could very well be the last thing you got to do before you were tossed into Vulture Run. With that knowledge in hand, Sam went to sleep.

A short time later, her snores echoed loudly through the area, drawing snickers and annoyed frowns at the arrogance.

She wasn't disturbed.

Chapter Five

Good Times

New Network City

1

The Diva den stank. It muffled the sounds of the speakers and screens, and the enormous crowd of citizens waiting for the action to begin, but the sewer also held in the smells. It was enough to make Daniel gag.

Candice didn't scold him for the weakness. Her own guts were flipping. She didn't understand why the Divas had chosen to remain in the city if this was how they had to live.

Grateful for their thick cloaks and good attitudes, the rest of Candice's group was unaffected by the garbage or odors. The insects, however, were another matter. No one was happy to spot bedbugs and roaches crawling along floors and walls.

As they wound further into the ground, the temperature rose and the bugs increased. Only vague sounds from the world above them made it down this far. Candice estimated that even if it was storming, the noise wouldn't be bad.

The ground was damp and squished under her feet from centuries of leaks, but other than that, the route was clear. It was obvious this was a well-

traveled path. Candice scanned for guards and threats, but saw none of either. She considered that a mistake on the part of their hosts. She wondered how many other entrances and exits there were to this den.

“We already have some friends of yours down here.” Naomi smiled at them. “From the south.”

Candice wasn’t surprised by that, but she was eager to visit with relatives she hadn’t been around in a long time. The Pruett family was wild and unpredictable, which often caused them to split off and spend most of their time with their immediate kin. The only time they all ever came together was for funerals and fighting. There hadn’t been either since before Daniel was taken.

The bottom of the sewer was dank and chilly, with crumbling concrete walls decorated in graffiti—most of it anti-Network. Despite being enemy lackeys who disposed of bodies and listened at keyholes, the Divas obviously didn’t like their masters. That had given them a common goal, allowing an alliance that never would have been possible otherwise.

Daniel scanned their surroundings with trepidation. Everywhere he looked, slave traders gawked at him hungrily.

As they followed their escort down chipped, filth covered steps, Candice kept a tight hand around Daniel’s wrist. She also memorized which tunnels they took and the easiest way to get out of here.

Daniel was distracted as they hit the next plateau and entered the open area of the subway. Rusting turnstiles and damp walls greeted them, sporting more graffiti and brittle, ancient posters encased in cracked glass frames.

Everyone in Candice's group wanted to stop and examine the relics, but their escort led them straight to a room next to the dusty tollbooth.

"In here."

As they went by the booth, they saw the dusty remains of a skeleton that had been preserved. It was obvious the glass doors had never been opened. Candice wondered what kind of germs it would release if that were to happen and then pushed the thought away for the more entertaining image of locking the entire council in there. *We could make it part of a history lesson. These were the tyrants of the olden days...*

Their escort shut the door behind them and latched it, then went over to a counter to where an illegal radio sat on a filthy, garbage covered shelf.

Candice's group settled into dirty chairs after shoving debris aside. Either the Divas didn't care about hygiene and health or they were using it to discourage trespassers. Either way, it made for an awkward atmosphere where the fighters were leery to touch anything.

Daniel settled for using his sight. He examined every bit of writing on the walls—graffiti and otherwise. There were a surprising number of metal signs explaining employee procedures.

Candice spent the time listening to their escort contact someone on the radio to report they had been collected.

The other rebels listened to the comings and goings of those around them, ready to fight their way out if it was needed.

Naomi hung up the mike and shoved a layer of garbage over top it, not waiting for an answer. “We don’t get many locals down here, but sometimes the young ones want to explore. We’ve had items stolen.”

Candice wasn’t worried about rebellious teenagers, considering that she was one. She gestured toward the door. “Are you collecting an army? I’ve never heard of so many Divas in one place.”

Naomi took the dusty chair across from her. “Since you Pruetts began killing our leaders, again, we have to band together. Our membership ranks have also dropped. People believe if they join us, it’s a strike against them with the Pruetts.”

“It is.” Candice stored the knowledge that her family had targeted Diva bosses in the past. “Why do you want to make a deal now?”

Naomi shrugged. “You can’t take them down without us, so that doesn’t matter.”

Following the usual Pruett strategies, Candice decided to agree. “What do you want?”

“We want you to replace the Network.”

Candice didn’t smile. “I already planned on that.”

Naomi corrected her. “No, you don’t understand. We want you, Candice, to replace the council.”

Candice stared in surprise. “You want me to take over.”

“Pruetts have always been fair, and the Divas are dying. It’s time to stop fighting those who are stronger and join with them, so that we’ll be around in the future.” Naomi sneered. “We’re not stupid.”

Candice recovered quickly. “I wouldn’t have agreed with that in the past, but if you’re honest in this deal, Pruett opinions could ease on the Divas. There’s no reason for us to remain enemies.”

“We agree. But there is one condition that has to be met, otherwise we will join with the Network and tell them you’re coming.”

Candice scowled. “Threats are not the way to get my cooperation.”

Naomi shrugged, unafraid of the glares now coming her way. “It’s not a threat. It’s a promise. If you don’t fulfill your end of the deal, we will be just as much a torment to you as we ever were to the Network. There are still enough of us around for that.”

Candice reclined in her chair, curious. This wasn’t what she had expected. She studied the short-braided brunette. “What’s the condition?”

Naomi glanced at Daniel and the other male members of Candice’s group. “You can’t free them. Ever.”

Over the instant outrage, Candice stared at their host. “You understand that if the males were free, there would be more of them?”

“Yes, and that is the problem.”

Candice assumed the woman didn’t like men. Many of their kind didn’t, despite needing them. The history books were ugly. No one wanted to go back to that. Candice also guessed that because the Puetts allowed their males more freedom than was normal in their society, and now the Puetts were about to challenge the Network openly, everyone was worried that men were going to be freed. Candice hadn’t put that together until now. She hadn’t realized the population knew the dome was about to fall. She hadn’t imagined the citizens were paying that much attention, let alone to be rooting for real changes to their society.

“It’s no secret, the way it was before. We have the old tapes and the old broadcasts, the books and the historical graveyards. Men were animals; that hasn’t changed.” Naomi scanned Candice’s companions without mercy. “Just because you’ve managed to tame a few of them doesn’t mean the rest will follow. As soon as we give them freedom, they will rise up against us to retake control of the world. The Divas will never agree to that.”

“Neither will I.” Candice nodded. “Tell your people I will consider the condition.”

That was almost as good as a yes as far as Candice’s group was concerned, which dismayed some of them and relieved others.

Daniel was hurt.

Naomi became angry, clearly not understanding that Candice had agreed. “We mean this, Pruett. If you try to free the men, we will kill every one of them we find.”

“You would endanger the future of everybody to keep us in chains?” Daniel was unable to stay quiet. He was horrified by the deal they were discussing.

Naomi examined him without sympathy. “You are not like the others. Many of the rental slaves also wish for peace, but as soon as the others are freed, the rebellion will be fed. Men will ask for reparations, and claims to families. Kids will be ripped from their mothers arms, and men will shed our blood again.”

“Isn’t there some way we can meet in the middle of all that?” Daniel was suddenly miserable. He hadn’t considered what it would do to the mothers when the men took their children back.

“No. The only way the Divas will support Pruett leadership is if you are all still slaves after it’s over.” Naomi stood up. “I was told you’ll need time to consider your answer and there are others arriving who must also hear my words. I’ll be back to get you in the morning. For your own safety, don’t leave this space.”

When Naomi left, a lock on the door clicked.

Candice swept her group, not surprised to find outrage and concern in every expression. She did the only thing she could in the situation, certain that

their hosts were listening through the radio Naomi had left active. Candice could see the green light on the console. She leaned against the buggy wall and tried to sleep, not comforting or explaining. They already knew not to expect it. Pruetts didn't do life that way. They held their best cards close until it was time to raise, call, or bluff.

Chapter Six

Something to Chew On

Adelphia Stadium

1

Sam woke an hour before she'd estimated her race would be called. Trial heats were run alphabetically by family name, so she'd had time to kill. Her jarring afternoon alarm was unexpected by the few changelings trying to doze. Many of them jumped up while fumbling for a weapon, or actually crawled under their bunks for protection.

Most of the racers had stayed alert, doing stretches or workouts in the limited space. They all paused to gawk or laughed.

Sam shut off the obscene racket and sat up. Grouchiness invaded when no cup of cold, stale coffee hit her hand. She dug in a pocket and came up with a large, shiny ingot. "I need coffee and something to chew on. Who wants to cover my needs while I'm here and be considered for my crew?"

Sam didn't say which crew she meant—her Runners or the Ring—but it didn't matter. A dozen warm bodies sat up or moved closer.

Sam flipped the token toward the center of the narrow aisle, where it pinged off rusty bunk bars

and spun in a neat circle. “The winner is whoever has that after the guards break up the fight.”

A vicious battle immediately ensued.

The other racers laughed and placed bets. A few of them also blocked the doors to delay the guards as noise levels rose.

Sam stretched happily, grouchiness easing. Her Runners often woke her with snarls and fights. Without that noise, the world didn’t feel right.

Sam walked to the tiny washroom while people were occupied, ignoring the sorry state of the facilities. She’d used worse.

When Sam emerged, the bloody fight was over. Troops were pulling two changed females apart as they continued to spew threats and swings, but neither of them had the token.

The gold ingot was in the thick grip of another rare contender and past powerhouse. The dockworker’s webbed grip declared her a mutant. In twenty-eight years on the planet, Sam had never known of one to be allowed to enter the games. *She must be special.*

Sam scanned the damage and the guards.

One of the guards met her eye. “Sorry for the trouble.”

Realizing the guards thought she was about to outrank them, Sam waved a hand. “Then let them go and come join us for the second round. I’m missing a few bodies on my crew if you care to try. We’ll place some bets, have some fun.”

The troops snickered as they understood, releasing the fighters to join them.

“Excellent. Now I just need what I asked for.” Sam glowered at the mutant.

The woman took off to find her coffee and something to chew on.

Sam sat on her bunk as the crowd began to place bets and fighters lined up in the center of the bunkroom to wait for the next token to be tossed.

2

“This is the one, folks!”

The sound of a screaming audience rang through the stadium in constant waves as Sam lined up for her first race. Some of the seats had triggers that over-excited fans could fill with ammunition packs if they could afford them. The grenades contained anything from fire to acid water. Sam didn’t care. Her cloak was made for moments like this. So was her body. In fact, her entire life had been.

“This is the Pruett heat, folks! It should be good.”

The speaker crackled as the announcer began to detail the run. Sam ignored the tired speech to scan the corridors in and out of this open field and then the rest of the facility. The stadium sat on the edge of a giant crater that ran for miles. Leftover from the war, this arena and the four block town behind it had been spared. No one understood why.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as Sam stepped to the starting gate. Around her, the other four racers were securing items or staring at the referee holding the flag so they wouldn't miss the exact start.

Sam waved energetically at the crowd.

Laughter rolled over the arena, along with shouts of encouragement and support.

"Pruett traitor!" The player on Sam's right spat at her boots.

Evat was a fighting legend from the Alabama swamps, but she was older now and those citizens had been broken by the Network. Angelica had also killed one of them during her show, so the hatred was understandable. Sam grinned. "Was she your kin? Went out pretty fast. Must not have trained her yourself."

Enraged, the changeling began to flip, drawing boos from the crowd and reprimands from troops stationed near each of the five lanes.

"No fighting!"

"She's flipping! Get a hound!"

A panel slid open behind them, revealing a dog pen. One of the cage doors slid back and a large hound obediently padded forward.

Evat calmed at the sight of the huge brown and black dog. As it stopped, inches away, her eyes faded to brown fear. "I'm sorry."

"The hound has her in line." The announcer got them back on track. "Is everyone ready? They're starting!"

Evat didn't breathe until the dog moved. It retreated far enough for her to reach the starting point, which she did with trembling steps. Her rage was gone, leaving only burning misery and awful depression to hold her steady. She took her place without glancing at the traitor again. Evat was the last of her family. She had nowhere to go and no way to survive. She'd come to earn a future or join her relatives, but being here was more real than she had understood. The scent of possible blood—hers—had wound the audience up. They were screaming and fighting, throwing items. The Network might need to kill her to keep control.

Lightning flashed over the stadium, arching in a brilliant display of vivid, forking power that struck something in the distance. Thunder clapped right behind it, dampening some of the feverish excitement. Rain wasn't a problem, but lightning storms were deadly.

"We're going to finish this heat of racers and then take a break for the storm to pass." The announcer sounded relieved. It made sense, considering the reporters and announcers were all crammed in the top observation booths on either end of the field. They were four stories up in glass shacks with antennas, but no rubber on the roofs.

"There goes the flag...and they're off!"

Sam ran hard and fast, pulling her cloak over her body as she flew through the barrage of non-lethal grenades that exploded across her lane. Dust flew in her face, coating her in time for a blast of acid water

that immediately started smoking through her hair where the cloak wasn't shielding it.

Sam jumped when the ground shifted, spotting the edge of a pit door opening as the dirt fell in.

She cleared the hole, but hit the next pit. She fell through, legs scrambling as her clawed hands did the same.

She caught the edge as she slid and was able to stop falling.

Above her, the audience screamed hungrily.

Below her, an animal of some sort lunged upward, grabbing her ankle with scaly tentacles.

Sam dug her boot into the wall of the pit while she pulled upward, dislodging the hold as she scrambled from the hole.

Sam took off running again, spotting the players on either side of her, but none of the others. The barriers blocked her view.

On her right, Evat hit the same trap of leaping too hard over the first pit to find another one waiting. She disappeared from view, unable to snag an edge.

Sam leapt over the next hole in her lane, aiming diagonally to avoid that particular trap. She jumped again and was able to miss the next opening pit, but dirt grenades slammed into her arm and hip, knocking her against the concrete rail. In the lane to her left, Sam heard a distinctive grunt of death and pushed herself to her feet. The roar of the crowd, combined with the screaming of the announcer over the lightning and thunder, was disorienting.

The huge lane divider provided a small ledge of shelter from the grenades, but not until halfway through the race. Sam struggled forward against the next barrage of hits to reach it, wondering if she was the only one left. It felt like all the seats were aiming for her as dirt, burning water, and small stones pinged off her body in a hail meant to drive her into the next pit.

Chilling screams echoed from the path to the far left, telling Sam to brace as she neared that part of her lane. There was a choice of two tunnels she could take. One was a black opening. Dim light came from the other.

Let's take the path less traveled. She darted into the darkness. As a grinder spun down from the ceiling, she ducked. *Bet the author of that phrase bled a lot.*

The tunnel was short, but it curved sharply several times to keep it dark. Sam's sight had strengthened from tracking through storms and dark nights to find her prey; she darted through the darkness like a cat, taking a small slice down her shoulder as she neared the exit.

Another grinder spun out of the wall, slicing a large chunk of clothes and skin from her forearm as she rolled under and back into stormy daylight.

Sam tried to gain her feet, but she was immediately knocked into the railing by a chunk of debris she couldn't identify as it shattered against her body.

Used to taking blows, Sam wished she was getting to deliver them as well. She shoved away from the wall and jumped, rolling upon landing. She broke the finish tape, drawing both loud cheers and ugly boos from the crowd.

Sam stood up, listening for the official call over the rain that suddenly burst open to drench them.

“That’s a record, folks! So, only the Pruett comes out of this heat. Place your bets! We’ll finish today’s sets after the storm lets up. Until then, may you all have a New Network day!”

Sam waved off the medic despite several wounds, then smoothed her burnt curls. She had the start of what she needed. The record, combined with being the only one to finish this heat, would give her good odds. By the end of these trials, she needed to be the favorite. It would stock her credits, but it would also keep citizens flooding into New Network City to observe her game. The council could close down the complex, but they couldn’t stop the blood from flowing. One tyrannical choice was going to sink them. Basing their control on death was a huge mistake.

Sam remembered to wave at the audience before she went into the cool tunnel, bringing fresh cheers. Over them, the roar of coming wind echoed dangerously. The brunt of the storm was almost here. People with phobias would be groaning, screaming, and fighting. Smart folks stayed away from large crowds at moments like this. Sam went back down to the packed bunks. She couldn’t afford

the appearance of fear, but she also wasn't scared. After that run, her adrenaline was flowing thickly. She might not be done performing yet.

Sam entered the bunkroom to find a Diva gang elder sitting on the stone stairs near the center bunks. All the beds were filled with alert gang bangers. Other players, witnesses, were lined up around the grungy walls, obviously hoping she would be killed. Sam had time to wonder if any of them had bet on her survival and then she was grabbed and dragged toward the older woman on the stairs. The elder was covered from hair to toe in leather armor and fury.

"They can't give you my job if you're already dead!"

It's just one of those days. Sam brought her rage forward. *Might as well embrace the suck.* With that final sarcastic thought, Sam changed.

Chapter Seven

Guts and Glory

The Borderlands

1

It was almost full dark before Rosa and the Runners took a break. With Baker and Greg tied securely to the waists of a protector, the wild women had reached the edge of the Borderlands by traveling nonstop. It caused discomfort to the bachelors who weren't used to spending so much time on a bike.

When they finally stopped, two of the big girls secured the small area Rosa had chosen. Baker and Greg staggered around after being untied, trying to ease their aches and pains without whining. They'd stopped attempting to wipe away the dust hours ago.

Rosa had picked a small valley that was surrounded by big boulders and scraggly trees. Considering there wasn't anything else in the distance to use for shelter, this was as good as it got in the Borderlands most days. Very familiar with the odd weather and even odder wildlife, the Runners set up alarm poles around the perimeter and then attached cloaks to them to provide a modicum of camouflage as well as a warning.

The two escaped slaves instantly felt better as Melissa made a fire against one of the larger boulders. They didn't like the dark, though Baker wasn't as scared of it as Greg was.

Aware of their inexperience in these areas, Melissa took the time to show them how to make a cooking fire. "We dig down a little, so we get underneath the edge of the rock. Then we place these branches over top so the flames are not touching them. The flat edge of this rock can be used for cooking in a bit."

Melissa began to pull items from her pack, glad of the stiff breeze carrying their scents away from her. She was a strong woman, but Baker's smell was intoxicating. If Sam really didn't want him, she did. "This will not hide odors and it will not hide the light. You should only use it when you're safe or you have enough womanpower."

In the distance, something howled. Long and sharp, it cut off abruptly.

The men traded amused, intimidated glances. They couldn't understand how anyone wouldn't be scared out here, even if they weren't alone.

Greg and Baker were confused when the big females placed their Network issued sleep rolls on top of boulders and behind trees instead of near the fire where they would get warmth. As Baker studied their nightly routines, he noticed a lot of the gear had come from the complex, despite these Runners being bounty hunters who didn't work directly for the enemy. As he studied them, he figured out that

was what the stolen stashes had been used for and once again applauded the genius of the Pruett clan. When they were in charge, life would be better.

“Over here.” Rosa motioned to Baker and Greg. She got them settled on rolls between two of the Runners, aware of their grumbles at the uncomfortable positions on the rocks.

On guard, Barb signaled for them to keep the men quiet.

Rosa and Melissa put a hand on the shoulders of the men. Greg was cute and Rosa was bonded to him, but the women knew he was only along to keep Baker company. The rebel leader was who they would protect the most if they were attacked.

As tension invaded the air, the bachelors realized there was a problem. Shrugging off the hands, both of them hunkered down on the sleep rolls, scanning the darkness.

Barb’s voice dropped to a whisper. “From the south. Mopars, not horses.” That implied it wasn’t troops, who preferred to use the faster, two wheeled bikes out in this terrain.

It took almost five tense minutes for the Mopars to reach their location. Baker was certain their campsite was gleaming like a jewel in a dark desert. They had the only light in any direction.

As the Mopars finally entered the outer perimeter, the Runners were able to see their company.

Melissa spotted white turbans and flowing tan pants. “Nomads! Aren’t they supposed to be with Candice?”

“Plans sometimes need to be adjusted. We’ve all learned that since changing.” Rosa gestured Melissa to stay with their wards while she and the others went to greet the arrivals.

Greg slid closer to Baker. “Who are the Nomads?”

Baker kept his voice low. “Southern Pruetts. *Wild* ones.”

Greg frowned. “Wilder than Sam?”

“They’re Wanted by the Network, dead.”

Greg and Baker studied the newcomers as chilly desert wind blew across their bare skin. Both men were looking forward to being snuggled in the warm sleep rolls.

Barb studied the Nomads as they arrogantly strode by her without acknowledgment. She recognized the Mopars, the concealing clothing, the weapons and the scars, but not the people. She assumed the Nomads had come on Candice’s orders, but she still treated them like she would any other possible threat. “Let’s see your proof of loyalty.”

It was a shock when one of the Nomads stepped forward and unwrapped the turban over his face. “Right here.”

Barb was still gaping at *his* cruel leer when a knife slid into her stomach.

“Help!”

“Snakes!”

Baker and Greg shouted, but it was too late to avoid the three Snakes behind them in the darkness. The kidnappers had blended in perfectly.

Baker struggled wildly as fighting broke out across the campsite. Swinging, he was hit by something that slammed him against the stones. He collapsed, grunting in pain as he rolled down the rocks opposite the fire.

Right as darkness swam over him in tiny flickers, Baker wondered how Sam was doing in her fight for survival. *Mine isn't going so well.*

2

“It’s okay. Don’t sit up.”

Baker woke to Greg’s comforting voice. He slowly opened his eyes, moaning at the awful pain in his temple. “What happened?”

“It wasn’t Nomads. The Runners took care of it.”

Baker slowly looked around. He found himself in a small cart, much like the one Candice had used to get him out of Alabama. Greg was sitting next to him, presumably keeping him from bouncing out as they chugged through the Illinois darkness. “I heard a male voice.”

“Yeah, they’ve never used our own against us directly before. It took the Runners time to react when they realized all the arrivals were men. It was over fast after that.”

Baker was impressed that the women hadn't abused the men before killing them. "Where are we going?"

"Rosa wouldn't say." Greg's profile was blurry in the darkness. "She was pissed that Barb let them through. She says it means anyone can sneak in."

That explains the tension. Baker knew handling discipline in a group was always tricky. It was also always necessary. He had learned that the hard way.

The bouncing of the cart behind the Mopar was making Baker's stomach roil. He slowly sat up, hoping that would help.

The Runners seemed to take it as a sign that he needed to stop because Rosa put her hand up, bringing them to a halt. Baker was disabused of that notion as he spotted the small creek bed. It was dry, probably for a long time from the condition of the bank and bottom as the Runners used lights and torches to verify it was a good location to cross. Behind the creek bed was a small culvert with a high stone top that almost formed a full ceiling. Leaving a sky hole, it would provide shelter for all of them and maybe even hide a fire if they wanted to try that again.

Baker glanced behind them and was surprised to spot a fire glowing in the distance. He quickly figured out the Runners had left the first one burning as a decoy.

Greg unknowingly filled him in. "I hope the wind doesn't blow the smell of the bodies toward us."

Baker understood they had burnt the fake Nomads. He knew he should be revolted, but the light would keep predators away while they got a few hours of sleep. He had an uneasy sensation that wasn't fading despite surviving. Sam was in trouble. That was the only thing that could make him worry this way... "Hey! What about Barb? She was hurt."

Greg refused to answer, telling Baker he didn't want to know.

The bad feeling grew worse.

The Runners cleared the cave and made camp slower than they had earlier. Even these big women had their limits and they were getting tired. Baker and Greg were exhausted. Traveling for fourteen hours on Mopars before being attacked and having to travel for another hour was too much. Both of them were asleep in the cart by the time Melissa said it was okay to come into the shelter.

Baker helped Greg out of the cart, both of them sore and stiff.

Yawning, Greg scanned the area and frowned. "This is worse than where we were."

Baker nudged him toward the entrance of the small cavern, smiling a bit. Now that they were out here on their own, Greg was slowly developing a spine. It was great to hear him complain. When he'd first rescued Greg, the boy had been a timid mouse who shook and curled into a ball when confronted.

It had been hard to imagine him ever speaking up for something he wanted.

Spotting danger, Baker tugged on Greg's arm, stopping him. He pointed toward the edge of the dry riverbank where Greg had been about to step.

Greg freaked out at the sight of the small snake. He dropped the torch Melissa had given him and took off running toward the Mopars, causing Rosa to stop what she was doing to go comfort him.

Baker snickered as he picked up the torch and joined the other Runners. While hiding from bounty hunters, Baker had discovered real snakes weren't nearly as dangerous as human ones were. Greg would also figure that out.

A short time later, they were all settled in the culvert, enjoying a small fire with a cup of water and a bowl of soup. Neither of the bachelors could identify the meat, but the taste was good and the vegetables were familiar. Not that they had received much of those during their time at the complex or on the run. Network employees ordered meals like this, as well as renters, and the slaves fed it to them.

Around the men, the Runners went about their normal routines as if one of them hadn't been killed. It horrified the men to know how callous the women were as they dug into the hearty bowls with jokes and calm conversations. They were also a bit revolted at the sloppy eating habits of the escorts who slurped, belched, and chewed with their mouths open. The males ate lightly. The riding and then the attack had taken a toll. Their weaker

stomachs couldn't handle such a mood or meal after spending all day in and out of adrenaline flows.

Hope let out a loud belch, then looked at Rosa. "Can we watch the program now?"

Rosa frowned toward Baker. "Sam said not to."

Angered, Baker put a hand on his hip and stuck his chest out in a display of manliness. "What are you, my new Den Mothers? I'm free!"

Rosa chuckled with her Runners. It was cute when the men got all puffed up like that. "Turn it on. We might be able to catch the ratings update."

Melissa quickly took out the often repaired satellite TV that had been put on the forbidden list hundreds of years ago. In all of their travels, Melissa had only known of troops and Pruetts to have them. "We may not be able to get any reception in this culvert. Don't get your hopes up."

Around them, the Borderlands were full of movement, but nothing close was human or their alarms would be beeping. Rosa had ordered them placed twice as far out as usual.

"And now, here are some updates on today's heats!"

Everyone jumped at the blaring announcer's voice.

"We've lost a third of the racers so far, which is low for the first day of time trials. These females are determined to survive this round and claim a mate! Isn't that scrumptious?"

Baker and Greg both winced.

The Runners nodded in agreement, laughing. They continued to eat and observe the screen that was being tuned in. Static prevented them from observing more than the outlines of the racers, but it was obvious that the broadcast was replaying sets by the reactions of the audience.

Baker leaned in as the announcer detailed what had happened throughout the day. Sam's race had been scheduled for midafternoon. This was where he found out if she was alive.

The Runners also leaned in to watch, but it wasn't out of fear for her survival. They were eager for some entertainment after the boring drive and the too-easy fight with the fake Nomads.

"Things got really exciting in the fifth heat today when the latest bounty hunting Pruett came through as the only survivor! You can see from this replay that she took several hits, but it didn't discourage her bid to win this episode of the Bachelor Battles."

Almost everyone observed Sam's race—Baker scowling and the women laughing. Greg didn't pay attention. He was tucked under Rosa's arm, happily fed and dozing. He wanted to sleep.

Rosa stroked his arm. This type of traveling would toughen him up. She turned her attention back to the monitor, secretly relieved when Sam rolled across the pit-dotted lane toward the finish line. As she cleared it and the crowd went crazy, lightning struck behind the stadium and the camera went out. The announcer switched them to replays

of different races. “During the pause to let the lightning storm pass, there was more trouble with that famous Pruett clan as Sam assaulted a dozen Diva gang members in the bunkroom after her race. Rumors are speculating that she wanted something to bet on while she waited.”

The Runners around Baker burst out laughing, but Baker was more worried than he had been. He leaned closer, hoping to get a view of her. Had she been injured?

“All of the fighters were fined ten thousand UDs for causing a disturbance, but none of them were disbarred.” The announcer continued with excitement. “Several were taken to the infirmary for minor injuries. We have not yet learned if that will lower their rank in these races or in the final choices for this episode.”

Baker yawned, finally coming down from the tension. Exhaustion was claiming him. He hated being away from her. He was positive the Network was going to kill her. They had let her cousin and her sister go, but he didn’t think they were going to do that again. There was no reason for them to let Sam live, but even if she did survive, she would come out of there with a tame, well-trained bachelor to take his place. There was no win in this for him.

The replays ended, switching to updates on different games, but the Runners didn’t switch off the TV. Baker assumed this was an evening tradition and resigned himself to waiting until they were done before he could sleep.

It didn't take long for him to assume the same position Greg was in, just without the big body of a Runner for warmth. As he drifted off, Baker wondered where Sam was and if she was thinking of him.

In his dreams, Baker made it to the complex, but Sam wasn't there. The Network had already fed her to their hounds.

Chapter Eight

Get Used to That

Adelphia Stadium

1

“This is the second day of Time Trials for the next episode of the Bachelor Battles!”

Sam winced at how loud the announcer was, and then caught herself, covering by bending down to verify her gear was strapped tightly. It was something a Pruett didn’t usually do, but she would rather have everyone think that was odd, than to have witnessed her reaction to the loud noise. It was one of the few weaknesses she had, but it still wasn’t the big reason she had never come to claim a mate before.

“For this race, folks, the Network has decided to turn off the audience chairs. That means no projectiles will be fired at the Runners while they race. We’ve also been informed that the pits are closed and the animals have been put away for the weekend. However, all of the remaining races will be held in a single lane.”

Sam grinned. *Hands-on. Nice!*

Around her, contestants that were doing stretches paused to shake their heads and mutter. No one wanted to be in the same lane with her.

Sam wondered if that would allow her to get in front or if they would block her into the rear. Contestants weren't supposed to kill each other during this part of the trials, but it wasn't a firm rule. Sam casually tucked her cloak into the straps that would hold it while she ran.

Watching Sam clear access to her weapons from the rear of their set, a tall, thin changeling jerked a hand. "I'm out. Take me out!"

Sam grinned again.

The announcer squealed in delight. "Well, that one was bluffed! We're now a Runner short. We'll have to wait while they bring up someone from the next heat of racers."

Sam took the opportunity to glare at the others, hoping to get a few more of them to duck out.

One more did. A girl with blonde hair and sparkling green eyes, looking like one of the promo models, walked off.

"That's two! Any others?!"

None of the other players withdrew, but Sam could feel their tension as two more contestants came from the tunnel to join the line. There were eight of them in this heat.

Sam did hold some sympathy for those around her, but overnight, she'd had time to consider how important it was that the council had tried to bribe her onto their upper class payroll. She had chosen to encourage the rumor that she'd been offered a job. It was obvious what the council wanted. The Network always shopped their own ranks before

hiring outside help, but The Ring needed a new crew of hard bodies. The yearly roundups couldn't be interrupted.

The referee at the far end of the lane raised her flag to signal the beginning of the race.

“There they go!”

Sam grabbed the spike pouch from her belt and began throwing them at her competitors.

The other contestants were caught unaware, ducking, arms coming up for protection.

Sam's aim was deadly, and unexpected. Spikes plunged into arms and necks, sending blood across the field and screams through the stadium. The audience rose to their feet and shouted in blaring support of her actions.

“Well, that's something we've never witnessed before!”

There was a brief pause while the announcer consulted someone they couldn't hear. Then the speaker opened up again.

“We're being informed it is not against the rules! Other players will be drafted to take the place of those who are unable to continue. What a great show, right?!”

Sam was busy defending herself against the few players who were wounded and retaliating. She delivered punishing blows with her electronic baton, not hampered by the bruises and cuts she'd gained yesterday in her run and from the fighting. Pruett medications were strong and so were their bodies.

Troops hurried in to separate the fighters after being ordered to save any of them that they could. The Network obviously wanted to prevent this from becoming a habit of racers hoping to eliminate their competition when they didn't think they could outrun them.

Ducking nasty claws, Sam chuckled and swung her killing tools eagerly. *I'm gonna upend all your traditions. Get used to that feeling.*

2

Julian slammed his hand on the desk. "Get a harder crew up there! Do it right now!"

Rusty hurried, but he wasn't sure that would matter. He honestly expected Sam to repeat the same action every time they brought a new player up until she was the only survivor. It would be another version of the games. The audience would love it, but it would undermine authority too much, so there was no way that Julian would allow it. Wondering if he would be sending the hounds in to kill the bounty hunter on the next order, Rusty opened the radio line connecting them to the control booth in Adelpia.

Julian was furious at the report from their troops. The team had found the wreckage of the train yesterday, but no bodies. No bounty hunters, no rebels, and of course, the ape wasn't there. Most of the council assumed the rebels were coming to

the city next, but Julian understood they had been duped somehow. The rebels were already here.

3

“Here we go again, folks... And they’re off!”

Sam reached for her belt, acting as if she were going to repeat her earlier actions. She paused for everyone to react, then took off running down the lane.

The other racers hurried to catch up, but with weapons in their hands and cloaks shifted to the wrong side for easier access, they were caught off guard.

Ten seconds later, Sam neared the finish line alone.

The announcer shouted across the stadium speakers. “The Pruett is so far ahead there’s no way anyone can catch up! That may be another record!”

Sam crossed the line laughing and waving at the crowd. Wanting to avoid the other players charging toward her, she spun toward the corridor to find a group of stern Defenders waiting for her. Each of them had a harsh scowl and a weapon in hand.

Sam stilled as the crowd quieted, everyone curious as to what was going on.

The sturdy sentry in the front came forward with a chip on her shoulder and a broken nose. It was obvious she either didn’t follow orders well or she took them much too seriously.

This is someone’s private security team.

“Come with us.”

Sam considered arguing, but she was curious as to what was going on. She allowed the sentries to lead her further into the stadium, aware that they were going up this time, instead of down.

When they came to the small elevator in the middle of the building, Sam guessed she was going to the top of the stadium. No other Pruett had, as far as she knew. “Cool!”

The six guards didn’t smile as they crammed into the small space together, but she sensed that some of them wanted to.

The small elevator dinged as it stopped on the second to last floor.

Sam and her escorts got out and went to the left. She did a quick sweep of the other halls, noting small doors and glowing rings on booths that were in the middle of recording. The Network had an organized setup for the timed runs, but she didn’t observe much security. In fact, other than a leering guard at each end of the hall, she and her small escort were the only people in this shiny hall.

The speakers echoed loudly around them. “There’s a fight on the field, folks!”

Sam listened in amusement as the announcer went on to describe the battle that had broken out when the racers behind her realized they could only come in second and began killing each other. One of them was dead and two more of them were too injured to continue. It had been a good day.

Sam was taken to a viewing box, where the same high-level council member from yesterday was standing near the window. The suite held bright paintings and padded furniture that looked extremely comfortable. However, despite being where the wealthy and powerful handled business, roaches still crawled in the corners.

Terry gestured toward the chairs. "Join me."

Sam was left alone with the woman again, but this time she suspected they would discuss something more important than her becoming a lackey. A single visit was a surprise. A second visit in as many days was a special situation that would send the media into a frenzy of speculation.

"The Network sent me to offer you a better deal and I'm going to do that. Then I'm going to offer you a personal deal that depends on the notorious honor of your family."

Sam was curious. Would she be offered another lackey position or would the Puetts finally be offered a seat at the big table? "I'm ready to listen to both, but I don't speak for my relatives."

"We know that's not true. All of your clan is in exile. You are the only one free and the reason is because you're here, where we can kill you."

Sam shrugged. She wasn't intimidated yet, though she was certain she could be if the woman were smarter.

Terry understood she wasn't going to be able to force Sam into making a rash emotional choice. She

settled back in the plush chair to study her. “How high do you have to go to be obedient?”

Sam chuckled this time. “You don’t have a chair for that.”

“If you refuse the deal, you won’t make it out of this stadium.”

Sam wasn’t impressed. “I already expected that, but Pruetts are pretty hard to kill, so I’m still gonna bet on myself.”

Terry smiled coolly. “Yes, your family is definitely resilient. I’d like to speak to you personally now.”

Sam leaned forward, letting a little bit of her anger show. “I won’t do for you what you refuse to do for yourself!”

Terry realized the changeling knew some of what she wanted and frowned. “Not all of us are as strong as the Pruetts. You know that.”

Sam sighed. She did know that. She’d been surrounded by it all her life. “What are you offering?”

“My boss said you can have the place of top Defender, with a possible promotion to the council upon the next death or resignation, providing you win this episode and remain in good standing.”

Sam wasn’t about to make a choice like that before she’d had time to consider it. “Go on.”

Terry lowered her voice. “The rest of the board has voted to give you an immediate seat at the *head* of the table if you eliminate the person currently occupying it.”

Sam was only surprised that more than one or two of them were involved in the plot. That made it very likely that their boss knew they were conspiring. “It’s hard to do something like that when the target knows I’m coming for them.”

“It’s also hard to do that when the person you’re hired to kill isn’t who you believe they are.” Terry leaned forward, eager to snare the loyalty of a Pruett. “The leader of the Network is Julian. *He* is an evil, ruthless tyrant who will put males back in control of the world. We can’t let that happen. You have to kill him.”

Sam couldn’t breathe. *Him. He.*

Terry waited impatiently for the news to sink in, barely remembering her own shock when she had taken her mother’s place on the council. They had all been lied to for centuries.

Sam was unable to spot a joke or a lie. That scared her a little. “Why are you doing this? What’s making you switch loyalty now?”

Terry’s haughty expression morphed into deep grief. “He killed my lover. Riana is dead.”

Sam felt the woman’s pain. She didn’t like it. “Men really rule this world?”

Terry nodded. “They’ll have every one of us in chains if you don’t kill him.”

This time, Sam was unable to resist the emotional response. Her eyes turned crimson. “You have my word. And if you’re lying, I’ll have your head.”

4

As Sam and Terry stepped out of the private meeting area, a small gaggle of reporters rushed toward them, shouting questions.

“Did you offer her a job?”

“Samantha? Sam, are you the new leader of The Ring?”

Sam protectively stepped in front of the council woman, eager to play the role. “Get them out of here!”

She glared at the few Defenders on duty. “This won’t be allowed again.” Implying she was taking the job and knew they’d been paid off to allow the reporters access.

Now trying to contain the excited gaggle, guards paled.

The reporters shoved against the troops now forcing them back to the unguarded stairs they’d come up. Behind Sam, Terry went down the opposite hallway, escorted from the premises. She walked fearlessly between the angry changelings in the corridors and was quickly tucked into the armed transport truck. Terry activated the communicator on her wrist. “We’ve got her. Connect me to the boss.”

5

“We have Terry on line one.”

Julian came over to the row of monitors that Rusty was covering. They were alone in his private

residence in the top of the dome. Cool air blew over them in luxurious waves.

“This is Julian.”

“She agreed to take the job as head, with a bump to the council later.”

“That’s great. Does she want a pardon for her family?”

“No. She wants them dead. Sam stands to inherit eight million UD’s and all three slaves. She said they’re already in the city, to wipe them out.”

“We are trying.” Julian frowned. “Did she have any suggestions on that?”

“Yes, actually, she did. Use the kids. She said the rebels will demand a rescue and we can set a trap.”

“Perfect. Get back here so you can be part of that operation.”

“Yes, sir.”

Julian waited until the connection was off before turning to Rusty. “I don’t trust Terry anymore.”

Rusty was always eager to get rid of another female from their council. “I never did. Do you want me to handle it?”

“Yes. She doesn’t need to know where our new training center is located.”

Rusty agreed. In fact, he had decided to recommend that none of the other members made it to their secret den.

“Let’s also test the new Pruett. Do it at the same time.”

“Who do you want me to send?”

“Robert.”

Rusty knew not to argue with the boss, but he doubted Robert would be able to get close enough to infect Sam unless he was presented as a slave... Rusty began to grin. “I’ve got it!” He spun around to reach the other console, chuckling. “You’ll love this, Boss.”

Chapter Nine

A Bargain Made

The Eastern Borderlands

1

“We’ll get to the highlights of the heats in a few minutes, folks, but first, we want to bring you this breaking news. As most of the world knows, The Ring was viciously murdered by rebel bounty hunters last month. This station has just discovered that Sam Pruett and her crew of Runners are going to take their place!”

Baker and the Runners froze at the announcement. They had just finished breakfast and were preparing to continue their journey west. This area was a barren desert, smothered in volcanic ash that still traveled on the stronger breezes. While there was a clear view in all directions, the hazy sun and blowing dust made it impossible to see more than a mile or two. It kept everyone nervous.

“Based on this small clip, we believe the position has been offered to, and accepted by, Samantha J. Pruett and her crew of restless Runners! There has been no official word from the council, but as you know, they never confirm these things before they are announced.”

Rosa flipped off the monitor, not wanting to hear anymore. She'd woken with a bad feeling and it had grown through breakfast. She gestured toward the Mopars. "Get us loaded up. We leave in ten."

Melissa was frowning. "Do you think Sam sold out her family?"

Rosa snorted. "No, but that's what the enemy will believe. She's just playing the game."

Relieved, the Runners continued packing the camp.

Baker and Greg helped where they could, and stayed out of the way the rest of the time. Neither of them spoke. Greg was experiencing effects of all the traveling and Baker was busy worrying over Sam. He didn't want to go west. He was needed in the east.

They traveled for almost an hour before the queasy feeling grew too strong to ignore anymore. Baker tapped Rosa on the shoulder. "I need to get off!"

Assuming he had an upset stomach, Rosa pulled into a relatively flat culvert and motioned two of her girls to stand guard. She regarded Baker impatiently. "I can give you five minutes to settle your guts, but then we need to keep rolling."

Baker drew in a breath. "It's not my guts. It's Sam." He focused on Rosa with flashing silver eyes. "You have to let me go back."

"Why would I do that?" Rosa glowered at Baker as he stepped away from the bike.

“Because we both love her.” Baker came around to stand in front of the dusty woman. “I can’t be across the country when she needs me.”

“She doesn’t need you.” Rosa grimaced as her uneasy feeling grew. “Sam can take care of herself.”

Baker leaned forward to glare at the big changeling. “I’m going back! You are going west to enlist help! Is that clear?”

Rosa wanted to laugh, but she couldn’t. “No.”

Baker tried again. “We need any help you can find in the west. You’ll do better without me along.”

“I can’t let you go. Sam will kill me.”

“Then you’re letting them kill her to save me. You know that’s what she did, right?”

Rosa scowled. “What?”

“Her crew, and her...whatever I am to her, will be thousands of miles away when she faces our enemies. Alone.”

“Candice’s group will be—”

“Outside the dome!” Baker interrupted. “They can’t help her.”

“Then how can you?” Melissa had been listening to their conversation. Like Rosa, she had a bad feeling and no faith in the rebels or the women of the west.

“He can get tossed into a show with her.” Rosa shrugged. “But then he’d be as bad off as she would be. No.”

“I won’t be caught. The bachelors have tunnels and alarms. How do you think we’ve gotten to so many of the prizes?”

Rosa scowled. "You didn't tell Sam that!"

Baker didn't back down from her anger. "No, I didn't. When we were in the Georgia safe house, I also didn't tell Candice about it."

"Why the hell not?" Heather leaned over Rosa's shoulder to listen and ogle. The lure of a slave standing up for his convictions was impossible to resist.

Baker stared at them with coldness he had never revealed. "I don't trust any of you. You're women. I can't endanger all men just because some of you have finally learned that slaves are human, too."

Each woman felt the blow deep in her guts. All of them were guilty of hurting men in minor ways, but their acceptance of slavery put them in league with their enemies.

"Damn." Rosa sighed. "That was the sound of brothel use ending for this crew."

"Sam hated it anyway." Melissa didn't look at either man now. She was too ashamed. "We all knew."

"Yeah, she could go years between visits, but she let us because she's a good boss. And I'm not saying that because I'm related to her, you know?" Ginny cackled, breaking some of the tension.

Baker leaned forward again to place a chilly hand over Rosa's wrist. "They've let two Pruetts go. What are the odds of a third coming out of that complex alive? This time, she needs help."

Rosa hid a chill. Baker had mirrored her own thoughts, almost word-for-word. She twisted

around on the bike to scan her girls and to get away from his touch. She was happy with Greg, but Baker was hot fire. *Too much for me to handle.*

Rosa counted the nods and shakes of her riders.

Baker observed the silent vote with worry and frustration, but he knew better than to rush them. Runners had their own code and they followed it meticulously.

Rosa jerked a hand at her bike, where Greg was being pulled in the cart. "Pick one and let's go."

Baker scowled, stomping to the Mopar. *Looks like I'll be escaping someone's custody yet again.*

Rosa waited for him to get set, and then led the Mopar line toward the nearest flat spot. She could feel Baker cursing her and was surprisingly hurt by it. *Damn rebel ideals are getting under my skin.*

Rosa pulled onto the flat stretch and then swung around in a neat, wide rotation that led them in the opposite direction. They would stay at the same cave they'd used overnight and listen to arguments for going on or back. Runners never dashed madly into a fire without proper preparations. Pruetts had taught them that survival lesson a long time ago. If they couldn't come up with a good plan, they would stick to the one they'd been given and Baker would have to accept that. Rosa didn't want to tie him up like the slave he really was, but she would. Sam had entrusted his safety to her and Rosa took that honor seriously. The only way Baker would get out of her sight now was if she let him. She hadn't forgotten who he was or what he was capable of.

Baker held on to the feeling of relief. *I'm coming Sam. Hang on.*

2

Adelphia

What am I gonna do now?

Sam wasn't sure what to do with herself. After the first two races, each contestant was given a two-day break while the referees finished running through the list of racers. Then they would match up heats for the final race. Until they were ready, Sam had to find something to occupy her time. Her one required interview was already settled with this morning's hallway incident. Her face was currently flashing over screens as announcers continued to broadcast news of her new job.

Sam spotted the solid red door of a rental booth and reluctantly walked that way. While she was here she needed to uphold the Pruett image and they always spent time with the slaves.

She opened the door and was happy to discover there were no other renters. It was also something of a surprise, considering all the males with their ankles chained to the wall in this chamber looked fresh. They also appeared to be in good health.

Sam shut the door and leaned against it. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared, judging reactions. If they were too scared, she would stay over here while she talked to them.

Instead of cringing away from her, the rentals smiled or waved, trying to let her know they were willing without pelting her with the sound of their voices.

Confused, Sam allowed them to lead her toward the plush couch, waiting for one of them to speak. The Network always demanded they be paid up front. There was usually a Den Mother in here to collect the fee so the council could be sure slaves weren't stealing from them, but it was just her and the men this time.

One of the males, a shorter copy of Daniel, gave Sam a generous grin and handed her a drink. "Congratulations on your new job."

Caught off guard, Sam felt the heat rise. She noticed their coloring next and realized they'd been picked out for her. All of them were sandy blond and brave around females. Both of those were so rare that to have them in the same space, fresh and healthy, couldn't be a coincidence.

"Are you a gift?" Her Runners had done something like this for her right after she'd chosen them.

"Yes. The board would like to thank you for your cooperation."

Sam spun around to find a tall man with dark hair and fiery blue eyes standing in the shadows near the window. He wasn't chained. He was so similar to Baker that her heart thudded. "I think I'm going to like this job."

Robert sat down on the edge of the large couch. "I'm all yours."

Sam made note of the frowns of the other males, but she didn't give anything away as she stared at the copy of Baker.

Robert waited for her to grab him, like he'd been told she would do.

Sam let the tension build. She didn't need the other males to tell her this one wasn't like them. It was in his leers and confident, cultured speech. The true renters would have spoken softly and been scared while doing it. For Sam, this was proof of the deadly secret she'd been told. She scanned his skin for marks and found none. He wasn't a renter or a gift. The man now stretching out on the couch in a provocative position to tempt her was one of *them*. "What's your number?"

Robert stared at her in wary confusion. He wasn't prepared for questions. "My bachelor number?"

Sam chuckled. "Your council number. Which one are you?"

The rental males stared in shock. They didn't doubt her accusation. Rage began to fill their hearts and sink in deep.

Robert froze for a bare instant of betrayal and then smiled invitingly, blasting her with his voice again. "Does any of that matter? We can talk afterward."

Sam nodded. "Sounds good to me. I like blood, so stand on the rug. Makes cleaning easier."

Now the supposed slave blanched, unable to hide his fear or his defiance.

Sam took a step closer. "What's your number?"

Caught, Robert sat up and smoothed his ruffled feathers back into place. "Six."

Sam ignored the rental males, who were now muttering and casting dangerous glares at Robert. "What number was that other flunky who offered me the job?"

"Terry. She's new."

"So she's number ten." Sam studied the free man—the first she'd ever seen or heard of. "What will my number be?"

"They offered you a seat?!"

Sam laughed at him. "Yeah. I'm guessing it's yours."

Enraged, the man lunged from the couch, producing a knife from his pocket.

Aware of the great setup, Sam forced herself to only disarm him with a nasty punch and a fast slam into the wall that knocked him out. She wanted to kill him. He was lucky she was a Pruett.

As he crumbled at her boots, Sam judged the situation. First, she needed to know how the witnesses would react. Attacking a council member was a death sentence, but the tyrants couldn't broadcast it because then the world would find out there were men on that ruling board.

Sam found the true bachelors in the far corner of the room, not scared like they should be, but twitchy and hoping not to be in trouble.

She slowly unbuttoned her cloak. “Order us a meal and a bottle on the Pruett tab. We’re going to be here for a while.”

Sam knelt down and tied the man’s hands and feet, then wrapped his mouth with a towel that one of the rental males handed her with a fast smile that sent heat back into her guts.

When she finished, Sam hung her cloak up and sat at the small food counter, enjoying the sights and smells around her. These males were the kind she liked at the brothels. It bothered her that the enemy knew her so well, but at the same time, she was also proud of her reputation for sticking to one type, one kind. When she took the buffet choice during the games, they wouldn’t know how to react. “I need some help. Are you in a position to give it and earn Pruett loyalty for your futures?”

The stockiest of the five men held out a gold token that made Sam smile. Those had come from Rosa. “Beautiful.” She motioned toward the unconscious man. “I need him stashed somewhere. It might be a while.” She gave the rental male a sharp look. “You’re allowed to speak.”

The man flushed. “We’ll put him up for you.”

The others nodded, now eager to pay forward some of the abuse they’d suffered.

Sam placed a matching token on the counter. “You are owed a Pruett favor. Try to keep him alive, but feel free to make sure he understands what it feels like to be a slave.”

The men brightened, revealing the side of them that Sam adored. She dug into the food they placed in front of her, not caring what it was.

“Would you like a service, Sam?”

Sam almost choked at the flash of agony and lust. She forced the bite down. “I’m good.”

Disappointment filled the air.

Sam looked around in surprise. “Really?”

More than one of them nodded and smiled at her again, trying to change her mind.

“We’ve been out of rotation for a while and you’re... Well, you’re a Pruett and they always please us without hurting us very much.”

Flames engulfed Sam, testing her control. Crimson filled her eyes. But her heart sent out too many waves of misery for Sam to agree. “Just the body-stashing, please. I don’t have the control right now for anything more.”

The males knew that to be a lie, but they stopped pushing at her warning. Only Daniel had forced a changeling into a snap and then taken her. They weren’t Daniel.

Sam’s problem was that they weren’t Baker.

Chapter Ten

At It Again

New Network City Sewer

1

“Well, she’s at it again, folks!” Speakers echoed through the monitor. “The Pruett has locked herself in the rental room and refuses to come out. Noises imply she and the stock are having a great time.”

Candice and her group listened to the report in amusement as they waited in the dirty sewer for Naomi to return. They had passed the night sleeping.

“That’s our Sam.” Candice switched off her radio and shoved it into a cloak pocket as the lock on the door flipped.

Naomi wasn’t alone this time. Two large mountain females escorted her in, both sweeping Candice and her group warily.

“We’re ready to meet with you.”

Candice and her group followed Naomi through the subway to another corridor that took them down two more flights of stairs and into the bowels of the subway station.

No one spoke.

The Diva meeting space was the same as the rest of the subway, except that it was larger, open, and filled with people. There were Divas, Snakes, swamp women, Glowers, farmers, business owners, and even a few Defenders, along with representatives from the brutes and the miners. They were all squeezed in together.

As Candice and her group entered the wide area, she did the usual sweep for exits and threats. While scanning, it was obvious that all portions of the New American population were going to be represented. That would make it harder for her to control the outcome.

Before she was noticed by everyone, Candice stopped to study the current mood. There were many enemies packed in together—especially of her family, who had killed more relatives of the citizens here than any other bounty crew had. The classes of the population were seated together, leading Candice to wonder if they had segregated themselves or if the Divas had done that for them.

To her immediate right were the business owners. It surprised Candice to see the famous city vendor, Mama Swank, was sitting in the front of the group. Marked by their expensive outfits and paid Diva guards, they were the first to notice her arrival and fall silent.

To the right of the executives was a small cluster of troops. Behind them was an even smaller group of Snake women. Continuing around the chamber, the swamp girls came next, followed by the starlets

and the reporters, who lingered between the groups and the wall with nervous gestures and repeated looks to their private security—also Divas.

A large squad of the gang's fighters lounged against the walls in deceptive casualness. They all wore the same white tops and shorts, again making Candice wonder if it was intentional or if they just wanted to show off the scars on their big bodies. Pruetts often used that technique, but not usually among their own kind.

To the left of the entrance, the southern Nomads and a small group of slaves were sitting and standing. Medicos and brothel workers, the slaves clustered in the middle of the Nomads and tried not to draw attention. They were being protected by Candice's friends and relatives who had come from the south, but also by Diva members who leered from their posts.

To the left of the Nomads and toward the rear, were three Glowers. Sitting in front of the desert people was a small clan of miners who were flanking a larger group of farmers. The old woman in the front of the growers was the same older lady Candice had paid for the death of her two hogs at the Tennessee River Crossing. She was the next one to notice Candice and gesture for her group to be quiet.

In a far corner, five large shadows drew Candice's attention next. Mountain brutes always stayed to themselves. There had only been a few approved for the games in the last century and it was

shocking to find them here among so many of the hired hands who had hunted them over the years.

As Candice continued to scan, picking up details, the wide room slowly went silent.

Candice's group stayed tight around her in a display of protection, nodding to those they knew. Daniel remained by her hip, unable to believe he was around so many females. Despite being with the Pruetts for almost three months, it wasn't easy to be brave. None of these women were like his owner. They couldn't be trusted.

Everyone fell silent as Candice advanced, eager to hear what she had to say.

Candice wasn't sure why there were Defenders in this small crowd, but she didn't pause to ask as Naomi signaled her to come over and meet someone. Candice assumed it was the newest leader of the Divas, who she would be expected to fight for control of the gang.

As soon as she saw the older woman, Candice had to revise her theory. The wrinkled, scarred lady was more likely the mother or grandmother of the last boss—making her an elder.

Naomi introduced them. "This is Harriet."

Diva members tensed as Candice extended a hand to shake, but she didn't hurt the old woman. "Candice Pruett."

The elder studied her with hard eyes and a firm grip. "You look like your mother did when she came through the games."

Candice grinned.

Harriet let go. “Sit.”

Candice was curious. How much power did an elder have? She’d never met one. Candice took the single seat across from the matron, being careful not to rock the rickety table between them. It looked as if it would fall without provocation.

Candice motioned to the ground around her, settling her group. She wasn’t expecting problems yet, but it paid to be careful and Pruetts were always that.

As Candice and the elder sat, most people got comfortable on the hard, dirty floor. It was amusing to see hardened fighters flinching from scurrying bugs.

Harriet stood up with Naomi’s help. “Before we start the meeting, I demand everyone show proof of loyalty.”

Candice and her group tilted their chins to show the family crest on their necks. Around the room, others who had been granted that honor did the same.

Candice observed in fascination as each group revealed their secret code to prove there were no spies. The medics and rebels, along with the starlets and the reporters, all shared tattoos that Candice recognized. The mountain brutes came forward to show brands that caused many of the observers to wince, especially the brothel men who had also been marked in such a way.

The Glowers didn’t need to show proof. It was obvious they hated the Network, but the guards and

Snakes who didn't have proof to show were glared at with harsh suspicion.

Across the area, clothing shifted as people continued to reveal their proof. Miners flashed axe scars on their ankles in the shape of a cross. Farmers and business owners held up tokens of loyalty they had received from various members of the groups here, including the Pruetts. Some of the Divas were holding feathers or colored ID cards. Candice memorized the signs in delight. The proof of rebellion had been all around the Network this entire time and they hadn't recognized it. The most obvious was the gold bangle that Mandy, the infamous Bachelor Tamer, as many of the citizens called the starlet, was holding. An outsider might have assumed she was a rich girl trying to buy her way into this meeting, but Candice recognized the shape of the bangle. Unlike what she had observed in the dome, this shape was a P. *Angelica and I helped make those for my mother a long time ago. I forgot about them.*

"Anyone without proof will now be removed."

Before many of the fighters could react, the gang spread out into the group, grabbing those who hadn't shown proof. Shouts and screams filled the air, along with the sounds of death.

It didn't bother the people who had shown their tokens. They had no sympathy for traitors, but those sounds were a balmy breeze to them anyway.

It took a while for all of their suspected spies and traitors to be hauled away. Not all of them were

killed. Half a dozen fled down the corridors. Others surrendered and were dragged from the chamber amid growled threats that they hadn't been spared. Many of the groups in this room had resorted to cannibalism over the years to survive. It wouldn't surprise Candice if some of those who had surrendered might not have been better off trying to fight. This meeting consisted of just leadership, which meant all of their subordinates would be waiting in other areas of this dank sewer, and all of those fighters needed to be fed.

Harriet slowly resumed her seat.

It was becoming clear to Candice that this was going to be more than a quick plea for assistance. These people wanted something big from her. To get them to fight, she was going to have to give it. From Naomi's words, she already knew one condition of this deal, but the Pruett's stood for freedom. That couldn't ever change or their family would fall.

Harriet motioned to Naomi, who carefully placed a large map across the weak table. "A gift."

Candice scanned it and lifted her brow. "You have the womanpower and this map of the upper complex. What could you possibly need from me?" She'd decided to play it cool. Instead of admitting she had come here hoping to gain leadership long enough to fight the Network, Candice had realized they thought she needed to be convinced. There was an advantage in that.

Harriet gave her honesty. “Everyone will follow you. Among ourselves, all we do is fight.”

“You couldn’t agree on a new ruler because you’re all afraid I’ll kill them.”

Harriet’s lips tightened. “That was a concern when we discussed it.”

Candice realized they had probably had that discussion while she and her group were waiting in the small, filthy room. She also understood several other groups had probably been locked in as well, simply to prevent problems. She approved.

Harriet opened the meeting. “All of us have concerns about Pruett leadership. We hope to settle those issues now.”

Candice found a comfortable spot in the chair. “I’m all yours.”

Harriet relaxed a little at Candice’s willingness to listen. “Good. In a while, we will break for food and rest, and then come back for a final decision.”

“What happens if the answer is no?”

“Then all of us will go our separate ways and die at the hands of the enemy.”

Satisfied, Candice splayed a hand. “Sell me.”

“What do you wish to hear first?”

Candice scanned the people again. “Tell me who you are and what you want. Be clear so there are no mistakes.” She focused on the Diva elder. “There may be fights over some of this.”

The Diva elder shook her head, making her braids bob. “No, there won’t be. We’ve all agreed not to, and my girls have orders to kill anyone who

interrupts this meeting for any reason other than what we deem necessary.”

Satisfied, Candice questioned the troops first. “What makes you betray your masters?”

The leader of the Defenders, Teva, stood up. She was scowling darkly. “They are not our masters. They’re our owners, the same as with the men. Those here with me have sons who are either in the shows or are about to be.” She sat down quickly, aware of all the mutters and grumbling of the crowd. No one had sympathy for her.

“You want your sons to be free?”

“Out of the games and into our custody, to care for as we see fit!” Teva corrected Candice firmly. “We do not support male freedom.”

Candice gestured toward the snakes.

Cora, ruler of the scaly women, didn’t bother to stand up. She clearly didn’t like talking to a Pruett. “We wish to survive without being hunted by either side.”

Candice smirked as she turned toward the swamper.

The leader of the marshy females, clad in black jungle attire that appeared hot and uncomfortable, stood up. “I’m Pawley. I have a sister at the trials right now. We are the last of our line. Swamp clans want the same as the snake women—to survive.”

Starlets and reporters came next, having to speak over nasty comments from many of the others.

“Being a lackey runs in the family. You all know that.” Mandy’s sultry voice caught attention among both the men and women, bringing enough quiet to allow her to be heard. “Ruth is here to represent the reporters. I’m here to represent the actors. There are a lot more of us who couldn’t make it to this meeting without drawing notice. We want the same thing as everyone else. We want to choose our own destiny. Just because our families are sellouts, that doesn’t mean *we* have to be like them.”

Impressed, Candice lifted a brow toward the farmers and miners.

“I am Mona. My group of miners lives near the farmers. We escorted them in. We have to travel together because we’re constantly hounded by troops and when they don’t come through, the rebels or bandits hit us. Because we spend all our time working, we don’t have fighting skills and our clans are dying. We want protection.”

The mountain brutes went next. Their attitudes among polite society obviously hadn’t improved during their exile.

“We’ll kill anyone who comes to our mountain!”

Divas quickly rushed over to quell the women.

As Candice paused to hear the demands of each group, she realized they had skipped the most important one of all. The slaves.

The group of males sandwiched between the Nomads had gone mostly unnoticed during this meeting so far. The rulers of these groups had

become leaders by being strong, which meant not giving in to the disease because a man was in the area. That small sense of safety faded as Candice waved toward them. “Who speaks for you?”

The chamber immediately began to warm as a tall, older guy with a scruffy beard and sexy red curls over a bruised face stood. He focused on Candice as he spoke.

“I’m Duncan. We want better working conditions.”

It was a double shock. Both the sound of his voice, which triggered instant heat from every changeling who heard it, but also that he hadn’t asked for freedom. All the representatives here had been certain they would hear that from either the men or the Pruetts, though the Pruetts hadn’t officially spoken yet.

Candice waited for the Divas to calm the situation. “Is that it?”

Duncan’s shoulders slumped. “I already know the answer, so I’m not going to trigger the fight by asking for what will never be granted.”

The few females with a conscience were hurt by his hopeless desperation, but everyone else was relieved. Not having to fight over slavery was a big relief.

“You’re not a representative of all males!” Daniel stood as he shouted. “I want a vote.”

Candice stared at Daniel in shocked approval. “Who do you speak for?”

“I speak for Baker’s rebels in the safe zone.” Daniel wasn’t as scared as he knew he should be. “There are hundreds of us. We outnumber all of your clans.”

The room erupted in chaos.

Daniel stayed standing.

Candice stayed sitting. She was ready to react, but it was also a test of intimidation. Anyone who wanted to shut Daniel up obviously had to go through her. Had she built up enough respect to be able to pull it off? Moments like this would certainly tell.

Diva members were forced to silence arguments between the groups as people fought over Daniel’s words. When there was enough quiet to be heard again, Candice gestured toward her mate. “Daniel is a free man. He holds his own papers. Pruetts do not believe in slavery. We will not support slavery. They have the right to be free.”

The room again went wild at the official word from the Pruetts. This time, Candice tugged on Daniel’s hand to pull him down.

“Stop this!” Harriet finally had to shout to get quiet. Despite the locals agreeing, and even the slaves knowing that it wasn’t going to happen, the Pruetts were still going to push male freedom. It was a frustrating disappointment to those hoping to get this meeting over with quickly and return to their posts before their absence was noticed.

Candice slowly stood, delighted when silence fell. She swept the groups, making eye contact with

worried, angry citizens. “We have different traditions than most of the people here. We’re not going to force our beliefs on everyone. That would not be possible if I accept your offer. You’ll have to work this out among yourselves.”

Now there was complete panic.

Candice sat down and began pulling items from her cloak. One of them was a small monitor. Sam’s final race wasn’t for another two days, but Candice was still hoping to get an update on her wild cousin.

“In five days, I’m going to attack the dome.” Candice turned on the TV. “I will take the enemy down, with or without your help. As for leadership in the city, you can kill each other off over it for all I care. I’ll be in Ohio, enjoying the willing love of my *free* male.”

Harriet shook her head at Naomi when she would have protested. “Our bluff didn’t succeed. Give her what we’ve withheld. We’re running out of time.”

Candice looked at Naomi as the woman took a pouch from her cloak. “I’ve already said no. There isn’t anything you can offer to reverse my decision.”

Naomi came over to Candice and held out the small pouch. In a square, it was heavy as Candice took it. She gently opened the bag to find an ancient book in a glass box. She peered through without opening it.

Marcella’s Manifesto.

Goosebumps popped out on Candice's skin. *It's the missing journal of our post-war family! We've been searching for it since before I was born.*

Candice stared in suspicion. "This won't buy my loyalty."

Naomi snorted. "Only blood does that, and we've shed enough of it. We're giving you that because everybody here has signed the back page. It's going to be the founding document of our new country after you eliminate the Network. If you don't accept, we're going to kill you all." Harriet stared at Candice, locking eyes. "That is not a bluff. We want this country founded on freedom from tyranny, including yours."

Candice shook her head. "Marcella Pruett is the reason none of us have liberty now. She's the founder of male slavery."

"Yes."

Candice was horrified. "The men have suffered enough and until you can understand that, you won't be able to build the world you're hoping for. All you'll do is keep killing each other."

"That's why we need you to lead us." Mandy's words drew nods from the reporters but frowns from everyone else. They much preferred the starlets to not talk.

"I can't teach you humanity if you have slaves of any gender. Unless we can agree on freedom for everyone, my answer is no." Frustrated with the lack of compassion in her fellow women, Candice shoved the items into her cloak and motioned her

group to follow. “We’re going to spend the night in the church next door. You have until dawn to make up your minds and then Pruetts will consider each of you enemies due to the threats I’ve received during this *peaceful* meeting.”

As Candice left, it wasn’t a surprise that she was followed by the brothel workers and the medicos. What was surprising was when the desert Glowers and mountain brutes also strode after her, making sure everyone else kept their distance. It was almost as if they had assigned themselves her protectors.

Candice liked it. Both of those groups had been shunned by the Network and everyone at the meeting. Them, she could trust. The rest of the selfish women were suspect and would be for the entire time Candice stayed in this ugly city. She hadn’t forgotten that most of them were longtime enemies and she was certain that they hadn’t either.

Chapter Eleven

Pruett History

New Network City

1

The church was tall, long, and old, with two stories and a huge steeple that lacked a cross. Daniel could see where it had once been, but time and weather had stolen it. Around the decrepit building, a flat, dirt lawn was dying under countless tents and homemade garbage huts of every shape and color.

“Pick a spot and blend in.” Candice looked at their tag-a-longs. “Don’t stop anyone from coming in.” Meaning they were to stop intruders from leaving, not from arriving.

The mountain brutes and Glowers immediately did as she said.

The renters hesitated. Those tents and shacks held hundreds of changelings who were gazing at the group with low growls and flickering vision.

Aware of the rising tension, Candice held up a shiny gold coin, getting immediate attention from the starving people. “I won’t forget the homeless. No Pruett will.” She tossed the coin to a wrinkled old woman who appeared to be by herself in this sea of angry breeders. “Care for my slaves?”

“My honor.” The wrinkled lady quickly hobbled forward to direct the men into her small shack.

The slaves reluctantly followed the old mother.

“Can she handle this crowd?” Chester was protective of all men.

“No.” Candice sighed. “No one can.”

“Then why?” Chester tried not to get upset. He assumed Candice had a good reason.

“These are my kind.” Candice’s tone mirrored the agony of the homeless around them. “I feel their pain. No one else cares for them. With any other leader, they’ll be dead soon. With a Pruett, they at least have a small hope.”

Candice’s voice carried. As the women heard her words and passed them through the maze of haphazard homes, most of them went back into their shacks. A few of the ragged wretches even came over to stand guard around the shack where the slaves had been taken.

Candice strode through the misery without pausing again, going to the entrance, but her rage grew at the smothering desperation. The enemy was a week away from paying for their atrocities. Justice was coming in muddy, bloody boots.

Daniel had never been in a church. Candice had tried to teach him about God, but it had angered the bachelor. What cold creator left their children to such misery?

As they reached the entrance, he paused at the sights and feel. It was overwhelming—worse than

the dank sewer or the homeless camp outside. Daniel knew of the orphans from changelings who had snapped, but he hadn't understood how young they were. Most of those filling the house of worship were under ten. He'd always envisioned them as troublesome teenagers who refused to work. That's how the Network portrayed them, but the building was packed with filthy, sickly little girls. Barely clothed, their scarred skin was dotted in sores that glared out around ribs and swollen stomachs that never got enough to eat.

Daniel cringed at the image of kids growing up this way, of *his* children being forced to struggle. His life had been hard, but this was the ugliest thing he'd ever witnessed. His heart broke for each one of them. "They're just babies!"

"Yes." Candice placed a comforting hand on his wrist, but didn't say more. If Daniel still held even the tiniest spark of caring for his former masters, this would help smother it.

The church was stifling, with cobwebs and stacks of religious items perched precariously on floors, benches, windowsills, and pews. It was obvious that cleanliness was not next to godliness here. The people were much the same, covered in filth and desperation.

A cheery voice greeted them from behind the sitting and standing children who filled nearly every pew of the large, dusty building. "Welcome to our place of worship. Come right in!"

Candice stopped in the threshold, with Daniel at her hip. It forced the rest of her kin to wait out on the tiny porch where the wood had holes and mold. It was yet another intimidation technique. A line of legendary fighters would make even the hardest of changelings reconsider causing problems.

The priest who hurried to greet them was dressed in black and white robes, with multiple necklaces that clanked together in the same annoying rhythm as her footsteps.

“You are all welcome he-here...” Irma stuttered as she saw who it was, hand coming down to find support on the grimy pew. “Pruetts!”

Daniel tensed. So did Chester and a few of the others who heard the ugly tone.

Candice extended a small pouch that clinked. She was finally running low. It felt odd to be so light. “A weeks’ rent, priest.”

The tall cleric shook a graying braid, green eyes flickering with tinges of pink as she fought to control herself. “No!”

Mary came through the narrow space, orbs glowing crimson. “Irma.”

Rage flared in the priest, heat baking off her trembling, aged body. “You!”

The kids nearest to the priest scattered through doors and open windows.

“Don’t be here. Don’t be here.” Muttering, Irma scanned the clan angrily. She found Bruce right behind Mary. Irma’s clawed hands ripped into the

already damaged wood. “How dare you bring him here!”

Mary sneered at the woman. “Look at him and remember the shame you brought to yourself that you can never repent of.”

Candice observed in fascination as Mary slid behind Bruce so he was completely visible.

To the shock of everyone except his mate, Bruce scanned the priest with hatred. “Hello, love.”

The sound of his voice, even filled with such ugly hostility, sent tears down Irma’s cheeks. It killed her anger, but not the bitterness. “Bastard.”

Bruce shrugged. “I never think about you at all, so maybe I am.” He smirked, tilting his chin so the crest on his neck would show. “A *Pruett* bastard.”

Bruce joined Mary in the rear of their group.

Storing a hundred questions, Candice dropped the coin bag. Personal drama had to come later.

The loud noise caused many of the remaining kids to jump.

“Take it or don’t. We’re not leaving.”

Irma scowled, coming to snatch the bag before anyone else could. She scrubbed away the tears. “Your family goes against everything this place stands for!”

Candice rolled her eyes and led the group up the long, narrow aisle to reach the door near the pulpit.

Irma gazed at Bruce in regret the entire time.

Daniel lifted a brow at Bruce as they followed Candice. The man had just shown more emotion than Daniel had seen from him so far.

“I was born in this city.” Bruce smiled fondly. “She was my mother’s best friend. When I reached selling age, she sent her oldest daughter to buy me.”

Daniel was aware of Candice listening curiously. He had to ask the next question and keep Bruce talking. “Your mom refused?”

“No, she snapped at the betrayal and killed the messenger. Irma kidnapped me in the chaos and went off grid. She knew what would happen. She was waiting outside my window. My mom was able to call a bounty hunter before troops arrived with a murder warrant and took her to the dome.”

Daniel winced. Murderers were either fed to the sharks or put into Vulture Run.

“I was assigned to the case.” Mary twined her hand through Bruce’s in a rare display of affection. “It took too long to track them. Irma had taken her fun and then sold him into the rental program. He was hurt.”

“You got me out of there.” Bruce squeezed her scarred hand. “You even offered to free me. There’s no dishonor for you.”

“How long?” Candice had stopped to cast a dark glare at the priest who was watching them.

“Years.” Bruce’s tone revealed agony that made all of them wince. “I had to be trained before I could be used by the public. When Irma finally realized she cared and came back for me, I put up such a fuss that they sent me back into training.”

“You fought for him?” Daniel was shocked. “Without a bond?”

Mary's face darkened with hard memories. "I wanted a breeding pass. I was willing to go to any lengths to get one and that was the payment for the run. I didn't know Bruce at all except for the picture on his missing male file."

"We met after she won the Luck of the Draw and came to look at the prizes. We were both stunned at the spark."

"I'm surprised you weren't born immune." Daniel looked to Candice as they reached the pulpit. "They love each other."

"Yes." Mary guided Bruce into the storeroom. "All final Pruett matches are love."

"Wait." Daniel frowned. "How did he go from a rental to a games prize? That's unheard of."

"The enemy bought me off." Mary's perfectly passive voice that rarely changed lifted in anger. "They trained him to please a Pruett and then gifted him to me atop the bloody bodies of eight other changelings who were also desperate for a breeding pass."

"That means you were almost a rebel!"

"Yes." Mary's voice trembled, but with pride this time. "A dangerous one who had to be pacified to keep from calling the very meeting we're about to attend."

Candice scooped up a few of the books and relics stacked by the pulpit, and pushed them into Daniel's hands. "Learn about these. We'll discuss them like we have before."

Distracted, Daniel clumsily stored the items in his cloak pockets. He loved to read. Each time he finished a book, he felt smarter.

“I can’t feed you!” Irma shouted as the Wanted rebels kept coming in. “The Network will know you’re here!”

A second bag of coins flew through the air, smacking Irma in the shoulder. She staggered against the pew, but caught the payment.

“Everyone donate!” Candice jerked her hand. “Show our host some gratitude for her generous hospitality.”

Pruett currency flew through the air.

The priest cowered between the pews from the onslaught being flung at her.

Candice’s amusement rang through the dusty building in cruel waves, causing more of the kids to leave.

“That was mean. She obviously cared because she tried to get him back. Maybe the Network told her to steal him when his mom refused to sell. After all, she’s a Diva and that’s what they do. I saw her necklace.”

Candice recognized Daniel’s defensiveness as a bit of Stockholm syndrome remaining from his time with Rankin. She didn’t correct him or scold. Retraining took time. She directed Daniel into the storeroom after doing a fast scan. “If you still feel that way when we leave, I will apologize.”

Daniel understood there was more going on here and vowed to get those details. Candice would

most certainly return to this conversation now that he had registered a complaint. She always did with lessons. Her tone said to pay attention and he would.

Candice settled him in a far corner to wait and rest. There hadn't been a clan meeting since she was a child. She expected it to take hours. Back then, she hadn't understood most of what was going on as she guarded a window with Angelica, who could barely walk at the time. That gathering had also been held in a church, but the host had welcomed their clan to the neighborhood. Now, *she* had called the meeting to determine the future of their family. It was fate.

Daniel studied the men and women who joined them, noting they were all tattooed, muscular, and scarred on nearly every inch of their exposed skin. Dressed in similar dark cloaks and boots, only their weapons and facial features stood out.

Candice hugged two of them—a man and woman with leathery skin and leather cloaks over leather clothes. “This is Lydia and Bobby. She doesn't usually let the baby bird out of the nest. This should be fun.”

The dark haired man flushed as the big brunette laughed and nodded to Daniel.

“These wonderful people are Sam and Angelica's parents, Amos and Camille.”

Daniel nodded politely. He was unprepared for the big hug from the bushy haired blonde woman.

“Good to meet you, boy!” Amos boomed as he also hugged Daniel. “Welcome to the most hated

lineage since the enemy gained control of America!”

Candice chuckled, grateful her relatives were showing Daniel acceptance.

“This is Daniel, huh?” Chester joined them. “He isn’t marked yet.”

Chester’s red curls and beard perfectly matched the intricate braids of the three young girls following him nervously. All of them were dressed in black cotton pants and tops with black sombreros hanging down their muscular backs.

“This is my uncle.” Candice helped Daniel stand when Chester’s shoulder clap knocked him off balance. “He taught us all how to play with fire.”

Chester swept Candice up in growling hug. “I saw your game. Outstanding!”

“Well, you’ve certainly done well for yourself.”

Daniel turned toward the accusing tone as the others quieted to listen.

The Indian man standing at Daniel’s elbow scowled, making his fur headband wrinkle. “You’re cute, too. Figures.” A fur robe outlined thick arms and a bad attitude.

Daniel had enough experience with jealousy to spot the problem. He stabbed out. “You didn’t get picked as a prize. You’re growing old and used, and barely managed to snag someone important.” Daniel sneered at the flushing man. “You’re lucky anyone bought you at all with that record of failure, let alone a Pruett. Did you lie to her or buy your way in?”

Candice stared in surprise. The rest of her relatives burst out laughing.

“Leo bought his way in.” Another woman joined them, favoring the embarrassed Indian man with a delighted grin. “But like a fungus, he grew on me.”

Daniel instantly mistrusted the rental male.

The woman held out a hand to Daniel. Black hair coiled atop her head twinkled with diamonds, as did her tan skin and flowing blue fur gown. She was covered in jewels. “I’m Ivy.”

Candice’s humor was replaced with a cold warning. “Ivy is my aunt and the clan whore. She’ll ride anything she can catch, no matter who it belongs to.”

Daniel snatched his hand away as Leo snickered over his discomfort.

“But I always pay well.” Ivy trailed a soft nail down Leo’s bare cheek. “Don’t I?”

Leo delivered an eager smile, big arms flexing. “Always.”

Warmth flooded the area.

Daniel didn’t get time to ponder that odd relationship, though a thought nagged as more people entered. It was the perfect time for something if he had the courage to reveal the truth to his owner. Candice would immediately add up the clues.

A man and woman in flowing tan jumpers and wide white turbans joined them, escorted by two similarly dressed, extremely beautiful girls who

scanned the occupants suspiciously. All of them wore the family crest on their right cheek instead of their necks.

“Sophia and Horace are sugar Nomads from the southern country.” Bruce loved being alone with kin, where he didn’t have to act like a slave. “They oversee the cane farms in the south that supply the city with sugar and fuel loads twice a year when the wagons come through to collect resources.”

Instead of answering, Daniel went to stand in front of Candice. “Will you mark me?”

Candice studied him for a moment where everyone else quieted to hear her response. Only Bruce truly understood. Leo didn’t have the mark. Ivy didn’t care enough to claim him officially. This was a test of Candice’s love, done right here in front of the family. Daniel was forcing Candice to decide if he was good enough to be one of them. Bruce admired his courage.

Candice smiled softly. “I’d be honored.”

Chester grinned, happy with the choice. “Who has a kit?”

Mary took a small box from her cloak and handed it to her daughter, giving Daniel an approving pat on the shoulder. “Don’t be afraid of what you’re about to do.”

Daniel caught the tone, as did Candice as she gently pushed Daniel to his knees. “Thank you.”

Mary smiled at him. “No, my son. Thank you, for bringing back the girl we all need. You’ve saved us.”

Daniel held still as the needle-lined tool neared his neck, determined not to scream no matter how much it hurt. When the pain came, he grinned as viciously as his owner and didn't utter a sound.

"Very good." Sophia praised him as Candice helped Daniel stand so they could admire the crest on his neck, but Daniel jerked away from them. He rotated gracefully toward Ivy, hands going to his weapon belt in a fluid motion that marked him a Pruett trainee. "Claim Leo or send him out. This is a *family* meeting."

The adults exploded with mirth and shouts that Candice didn't try to quiet. Daniel's demonstration of clever intelligence had her speechless. He'd known she wouldn't mark him until he asked for it. She'd told him that. He'd chosen this moment to do it, proving several points and raising a couple more—all without her suspecting a thing.

Candice frowned. *If I've underestimated my mate this much, how badly have I done that with Baker and his rebels?*

"You have no rights as a slave!" Leo's fists clenched at the sore spot between him and his lover. "You can't do that!"

"He's right." Chester overrode the next argument from Leo. "Toys had to wait outside at the last meeting."

Now on the spot, Ivy sighed. Leo wanted it, but she didn't. "Wait in the yard. Stay out of trouble."

Leo stormed from the room, cheeks flushing darker as thick jocularly followed him.

Ivy shrugged, coming over to sit on the single chair that wasn't covered in dirt or someone else's gear. "Well, that sucked." She dropped her kit at her feet, sighing again. "You have no idea what a little bitch he can be whenever I have to tell him no about something."

Fresh humor echoed.

"The legendary Pruett clan."

The men and women stopped snickering at Candice's words. The meeting was beginning.

Daniel sat proudly at her feet, neck aching lightly. The tattoo hadn't hurt as much as he had expected.

In the lobby of the church, doors opened and closed as locals came in and witnesses left on errands of information distribution. Irma stayed as far away from the rear space as she could get, seething in rage that she was sworn not to show or relieve. Priests were supposed to be passive. She'd chosen this future to offset her crimes against Bruce, but she still wanted him. The heat was a wildfire running through her body. If not for the deal she had made to report runaways and criminals, she might have already flipped.

Candice took out the glass box with the manifesto the Divas had given her. "I won't support most of this, no matter who lands the job." She handed it to Chester, who carefully opened it and began to read.



Chester shoved the box at Ivy. "Here. You'll love this."

Candice gestured toward the door. "No one comes in and no one goes out."

Family members who had trainees along motioned them toward the entrance. There were no other exits or windows, making it an odd place to find even a single Pruett and here were six of the legends, plus mates and children.

Candice began taking items from her pockets and passing them to those closest. "Many of us have gathered information—some on paper and some from rumor or observation. We'll share them." She drew out a larger pouch. "I also brought snacks."

It was how their peaceful gatherings began. Breaking bread was a tradition.

Daniel observed in fascination as Candice handled things like she did this every day. It was amazing and a bit intimidating. Mary had told him of the child being born into each generation who was stronger than the others. He hadn't understood until she pointed out that Candice had her soulmate, but she hadn't started burnout, despite that always happening fast once a bond was established. It was proof to the people here, especially those who had already suffered it. She was destined to lead.

"This meeting is open." Mary gave their motto proudly. "Let any who break our trust be crushed under our boots."

The family responded energetically. "Hear! Hear!"

One of their young guards whistled lowly to get attention. "We have followers coming."

Short and stocky, she reminded Daniel of Angelica, except this girl had brown hair and couldn't be more than twelve.

Candice shook her head. "I'll talk to them later."

"Got it!" Ruby spun back to face their uninvited guests. "This is a family thing. Get lost!"

The newcomers drew up at the hostility.

"But we need to talk to her!"

"Get out of the way, child."

"I gave you an answer." Ruby glared ominously, sending out a wave of fury that marked

her as an early changeling. “Don’t make me be mean.”

Candice chuckled, giving the girl’s mother an approving look. “Nice.”

Sophia’s chin went up a notch in response. “I’ve tried hard to honor our ways even though I couldn’t remain with you.” She waved the box on as it made its way around to her. “The real ways, not Marcella’s vendetta.”

Sophia’s other daughter, Glory, joined her older sister on guard duty as raised voices came.

The people wanting to speak with Candice found it annoying, but also cute—until the two children drew knives from their small belts and took up that familiar fighting stance.

The locals grumbled as they left, but they didn’t challenge the kids. That would bring the adults out in the wrong mood. It was also a little scary that they believed their children were deadly enough to handle guard duty in a place like this.

Candice cleared her throat. “We’ll start with the thing uppermost in my mind. Has anyone heard from Tara? We could really use grandma on this. No one causes chaos like her.”

As they began comparing information, Bruce sat by Daniel. “We’ll stay quiet and listen. You know what I mean?”

“Yes.” Daniel was relieved he wasn’t going to be required to participate. He didn’t feel like one of them yet, despite his great act. His scars could be

counted on one hand. Their scars were too numerous to count.

“I heard a story last year.” Ivy fidgeted with her ring. “There’s a Pruett in the west. The far west.”

Chester smiled eagerly. “Coastal?”

“I hear she’s a sailor who delivers goods up and down an unwallled portion of that coastline.”

Bruce leaned in as everyone began talking. “Tara Pruett was a wagon driver who circled the country collecting resources. She had five daughters and one son.”

“Grandma liked to sample different flavors.” Ivy gave Daniel a warm glance. “As a result, our clan is white, black, brown, and a few others.” She glanced toward the door. “If I don’t get a breeding pass, the Indian will die out with us. Leo and I are the last.”

Sophia snorted. “*You’re* the last. Leo is just your sperm donor of this decade.”

Ivy flushed, but didn’t deny the claim.

Daniel assumed she was switching partners regularly in hopes of finding a match to produce something other than the burnout that Mary and Sophia were currently experiencing.

“Grandma was a roamer.” Little Glory smiled. “Mommy says we are too.”

Mary nodded. “Many of us are Nomads. We were forced to split up when the enemy began to recognize how much power we had. That’s why Chester’s girls don’t have a mother. The council marked Allison as too strong-willed. She didn’t

survive her game.” Mary gave the saddened girls a loving glance. “But you have all of us and you can always count on your family.”

“Hear! Hear!” Ivy called. “Drinks all around.”

Candice frowned at her.

Ivy shrugged innocently. “It’s never too early to get into a mug or a male.”

Candice winced at the tasteless society joke. “When are you going to grow up?”

“When I get what you have, you cold stone!” Ivy bared her teeth. “Wanna rent him?”

Candice let the red bleed through, tone settling into gravel and spiked edges. “Wanna die?”

“Yes!” Ivy glanced away. “But not over your sloppy seconds.”

The relatives laughed again, but Candice didn’t. It reminded her that Daniel had been used before she’d rescued him.

Daniel didn’t like it. Candice being uncomfortable made him angry. He glared at Ivy. “Sloppy is bringing your whore to a family meeting and then trying to rent me in front of him.”

Guffaws and claps filled the room as Ivy flushed.

“That’s enough.” Candice’s hand settled gently onto Daniel’s shoulder.

“She started it!” He crossed his arms over his wide chest sullenly. “I’m not sure she’s one of you anyway.”

Silence fell—a thick one that forced Daniel to backtrack. “I’m sorry. That was rude.”

“Not really.” Ivy shook her head, face pale. “I’m not. How did you know?”

“You don’t act like them.” Daniel tried to figure out how it was possible. “Adopted?”

Ivy nodded. “I’m the seventh child Tara had, but I’m from a different litter dropped on someone’s stoop.” Ivy fell silent, drowning in her memories.

“Tara found her in a Borderlands campsite that had been attacked by vultures. By the time she got her back to civilization, Tara had decided to claim her.” Mary gave her adopted sister a warm look. “We’ve loved Ivy since we found out about her.”

Not sure why, Daniel snarked, but this time he kept it to himself.

Ivy knew. She shrugged. “I spent years with Tara, longer than any of her other children. If anything, I’m more like her than they are.”

Now the rest of the siblings were forced to accept that they were the different ones.

Odd dynamic. Daniel chose to push on to another question he had. “How did she hide a son?”

Bobby grinned. “She told everyone I was a girl. I had more hair then.”

Some of the adults snickered at memories.

“Bobby made a very cute girl.” Lydia grinned at him. “When I met him, the Network had just discovered his true gender and put out an order for his collection.”

“You got the order?” Daniel frowned. “That’s an amazing coincidence after Mary and Bruce.”

Lydia shook her head. “It was fate. Never doubt it. What we’re doing here will bring great and terrible changes to an entire nation. It was meant to be and we are the ones meant to be doing it.”

Reminded of the graveness of their mission, the family all looked to Candice.

“Let’s begin.” She sat down. “One, will Pruetts personally replace the council? Two, will slaves be given freedom if we take control? Three, do we set up the new society based on Marcella’s Manifesto? Four, do we keep the games going? If not, how do we control our society? There are more issues, but we’ll start with these and work our way down. Get comfortable. We’ll be here a while.”

Chapter Twelve

Local Demands

1

When the meeting ended, everyone except Candice and Daniel left the church. Besides not wanting to keep all their Pruetts in one coop, Mary and Bruce didn't care to be under Irma's roof any longer than they had to be. Candice stayed because she wanted Irma to be uncomfortable. It was also a prime location. They were next to the Diva den and almost able to view the dome entrance from here.

"Are you okay?"

Daniel lifted his chin. "Doesn't even hurt."

She snickered tiredly. "Liar."

The meeting had gone well, but having the relatives together had caused hurtful sparks of mental dissent. It had reminded Candice that some of her clan was still very much like their infamous founder.

She glowered at the box. *Marcella's Manifesto*. Under that first offensive page was a short booklet detailing the guidelines of the clan. Parts had been remembered and passed down, but the complete text had been lost during the riots in 230AW. Candice hadn't believed they would ever locate it, yet here it was, intact despite being in enemy hands.

Candice strolled to the softly lit den of the church, where she was visible from the main entrance. She settled on the window ledge and opened the box.

The pages of the booklet had been laminated a long time ago, but the material was brittle enough to make her retrieve a pair of tweezers from her kit. Turning the pages would be harder on her, but easier on the fragile book that had just been subjected to the rough hands of her kin.

Daniel found a spot nearby to lurk and blend. She would appear unprotected, giving him a small advantage if there was trouble, but it would also keep him from drawing attention. Males weren't allowed in any of these places. Daniel had assumed their rulers didn't want rebels to have a place to hide or meet, but now he believed it was to keep men from learning anything not censored to match propaganda. The only education slaves received was basic math and spelling, with brief, punishing lessons on past brutalities that made them ashamed to have been born with a pole instead of a hole.

Daniel scanned the front of the building, where the priest and her few helpers were now feeding the orphans. The condition of the kids was appalling, the numbers staggering. He had no idea how the poor church could feed so many.

As he had the thought, a handful of business locals approached the church with full arms.

Irma and her helpers hurried out to gather the boxes, but she didn't pay for them.

Daniel observed the donations in surprise. He hadn't believed people in this city cared about each other at all.

"Grandchildren." Candice didn't look up from the page that she was busy memorizing. She would make a copy later when there was time.

Daniel gaped in horror. *Illegal kids*. He hadn't considered that some of the orphans actually had living relatives. How terrible to not be able to take them in without fear of the harsh reproductive laws! The Network put the birth control chemicals in the vaccination and the food, but not everyone ate from Network stocks or got their shots on time, making this possible.

Daniel realized that was likely how Tara Pruett had been able to birth so many children. He just wasn't sure how she'd been able to bring them into open society without paying the price of death.

The line of suppliers ended, but the children kept coming. They fidgeted and fought like the adults would have in a line, all needing care that the church couldn't provide.

"I can fix some of this if I accept the Diva offer. It isn't just the slaves who are suffering."

Daniel knew Candice wouldn't have agreed even if he hadn't spoken up at the meeting. She was trying to teach him something; he tried hard to figure it out while waiting for more information.

Candice loved the way Daniel absorbed her lessons so intently. Sometimes it didn't even seem

like he breathed until she was finished. “You’ve heard of the frog in the pot?”

Daniel nodded slowly. “It’s heated so slowly that it doesn’t realize it’s being cooked until it’s too late to jump out.”

“Very good.” Candice smiled at him.

Daniel flushed, returning the emotion.

Candice cleared her throat. “Societies are often handled the same. The enemy has been doing it for a long time. These people expect it.”

Disappointment slapped him. “We’ll get stages of freedom.”

“Yes.” Candice grunted. “Can you imagine all slaves being freed at once?”

“Yes! And I’ve thought about it. I don’t believe we would take babies from their mothers.”

“But isn’t that exactly what Baker and Jason have planned for theirs? And what you supported before the mountain was blown up with us in it? What about your own offspring?”

Trapped, Daniel snapped his mouth shut. *I don’t like this lesson.*

Candice knew. She didn’t like it either, but a choice this big had to be fairly considered from every angle. “Those men will need food and clothes, shelter, and protection from obsessed mates who will try to take them back by force. They will have to be taught to care for their children before they can be in charge of those innocent lives. Households have to be set up. Rental personnel will need medical care and monitoring like they receive in the

complex. The list of details to handle is enormous, Daniel. Please be sure you understand where this could take us.”

Daniel figured out what she meant, but he couldn’t question the odds of a new gender war because a new swarm of orphans shoved into the church and ran toward Candice.

“Stay where you are.” She pointed at Daniel as she tossed a quick handful of coins into the air from her pockets before the children could mob and rob them. “Get out of here.” Her eyes flickered pink as the kids scrambled for the cash.

Instantly terrified, all but one of the kids ran. The remaining girl was about nine, sporting scraggly braids that hung to her thin hips. The only advantage Daniel saw was that she was tall. In time, her body might fill out to match and allow her to become a good fighter. Right now, she was a lost pup pretending to be a hound.

Candice gave the girl a deep scan, observing abuses and signs of a survivor. Wearing leather armor too big for her, it was obvious the kid was a thief.

A good one, Candice allowed, sweeping real shoes and even a ribbon in her dusty braids. The girl was a true scrounger if she had enough to sell and enough to keep. “I need items.”

The girl studied her. “Are you really one of them Pruetts?”

Candice tilted her chin so the child could view the family crest. “Yes.”

“Then I need something, too.” The girl crossed her arms over a flat chest. Both wrists had vicious defensive slashes that were healing.

Daniel hid a smile. She was a brave little thing. Candice was intrigued. “What do you need?”

“We want Den Mothers. We voted.”

“Voted.” Candice stared in delight. “You’ve organized the orphans!”

The girl nodded. “I’m the only one of us that can get in the dome to steal. I provide the most food, so I get two votes.”

“Which lets it go the way you want?”

“Every time.” The girl scanned Daniel warily. She didn’t usually have contact with males. “I’ll get you in, but you have to give us Den Mothers. We’re tired of being alone and sick.”

Candice held out a hand. “You have a deal, my friend.”

“Lea.” The girl quickly touched palms and then fled to tell the other orphans the news.

“Here comes another group.” Daniel nervously studied the opposite entrance. “They’re slave renters. They own all the booths that line the dome.”

Before Daniel finished speaking, Candice had gained her feet with a weapon in each hand.

Everyone remaining in the church—Iрма, her helpers and a few homeless worshipers determined to be fed—froze as the mood grew icy.

“Free rentals for life, for all of your kin.” One of the slavers tried anyway. “And a personal trade of a slave to you, right now, from any of our stock.”

Daniel gawked at the offer. In terms of UDs, that was worth millions. Candice had a big family.

Candice waved toward the dirty window and then the rickety doors now being blocked by her blended followers outside. “You may have to give me that much just to get out of here alive. I don’t honor sanctuary.”

The five large, colorful flesh traders knew Candice wasn’t going to give in from her reaction.

Daniel wasn’t sure why she hadn’t already started shooting. He’d never known Candice to pull a weapon on someone without using it.

“Don’t tell me you can’t be bought.” The slaver tried again, ignoring the threat as her crew tensed. “Just tell me your price!”

Surprising them all, Candice chuckled harshly, lowering her weapons. “Just tell me your demand—as if I don’t know.”

“You’ll take everything!” The slaver immediately began complaining. “Freeing the slaves will destroy us. You can’t do it.”

Candice sighed, disgust spilling over. “You’ve destroyed countless boys. Expecting compassion after that is insane. Get out of here. You have one chance to do so.”

“We’re not leaving until you agree!”

The dozen big slavers with the woman didn’t appear as confident. They began inching toward the exit.

Candice nodded. “That’s your choice. This is mine. Kill them all.”

Daniel ducked as gunfire split the tense air. He remembered his own confusion about her using whatever weapon she drew and realized Candice had planned to kill the slavers as soon as she'd pulled her guns. *I love her so much!*

Daniel crawled along the grimy floor to wedge himself under a warped bench, like Candice had instructed him to do during any fighting that happened while they were in this city. He hadn't wanted to agree, but he knew better than to disobey. He wasn't ready for this type of combat yet.

The fight was quick and bloody. The hungry and helpers fled, leaving Irma crouched by the entrance with her head buried under her arms. She clearly wasn't a physical fighter, though she had to be tough because she'd been here for so many years.

"I knew you'd cause trouble!" Irma didn't come up as bullets singled out wounded and made them dead.

Candice laughed, hard and cruel. "You ain't seen nothin' yet."

2

The Network

"We have reports of fighting at Irma's church." Shelly kept her eyes on the monitor. "Witnesses are saying Candice and Daniel are involved."

"We're not responding to fights." Juli ignored the reactions of the other four members. Everyone else was attending complex business, but word

would spread that the rebels were mere blocks from the dome.

“Is there anything else I should do?”

“Locate the missing link! Angelica is still off grid.” He looked to Rusty as Shelly’s fingers began clacking on the keyboard. “When will we have the bachelor kids?”

“Another day for the ones in the wagon train.” Rusty frowned. “Do we have to wait?”

Julian considered it and then gestured. “Check the sheets. If we have Jason’s offspring with Rankin, we’ll do it now.”

Rusty began typing.

Alex paused. “Does he know?”

Julian chuckled without humor. “Of course not. Rankin didn’t waste time conversing with her harem. When we told her to deliver a sample, she was just thrilled to be there legally.”

“Will Sam be like that as head Defender, do you think?” Rusty wasn’t expecting a good report from Robert.

Julian shrugged. “It’s always easier to control lesser leaders by letting them rampage, but I don’t care for the embarrassment. We’ll set firm rules.” Julian doubted he would have to handle that. The odds were stacked heavily against Sam’s survival. He didn’t expect to have to honor their deal.

“We have him.” Rusty switched the file to the largest screen so Julian could view the information and the image. “The boy arrived an hour ago. He should still be out from the transport drug.”

Julian studied the adorable seven-year-old child who looked exactly like his father. “Any trouble with the guardian?”

“We arrested her for non-payment of taxes. She’ll be in the vulture nursery in the next hour.”

“Good. Get a reporter up here—one we can trust.” Julian glowered at Shelly. “Terry is not to have access to the child. *You* handle it.”

Shelly typed faster. “Yes, sir.”

“Make it clear the kids are being held responsible for the actions of the parents. Scare them.”

“Is it a bluff?”

Julian pinned Alex with a dark glare. “Why?”

Alex swallowed nervously. “I can’t put boys into the games. You’ll have to remove me.”

The room went silent as the two men stared at each other.

Julian’s face relaxed. “Okay. It’s a bluff.”

Alex squinted in suspicion. Julian never gave in that easily. “You’ll let the kids live?”

Julian’s face was now totally void of expression. “My word on it.”

Alex relaxed. “Thank you. It means a lot that you’d do that.”

Julian waved off the automatic sucking up. He gestured calmly to Shelly. “Stand up.”

Shelly did it warily, confused.

Julian motioned to her belt. “Use that.”

Shelly frowned, hand going to the handle of her whip. “On who?”

Alex cringed down into his seat as Julian pointed. Alex had raped Shelly as her initiation onto this council. She wouldn't disobey the order. Alex was the reason she carried the whip.

Julian clapped in delight as Shelly began to strike Alex, whipping his hands before he could reach a weapon, drawing blood and screams that allowed Julian to regain control. Those were two of his favorite things now. *Because I'm changing.*

3

"What did they do with the bodies?" Daniel and Candice were alone in the storeroom. He was lingering in the doorway, watching Irma scrub bloodstains on the walls, floors, and pews.

"You don't want to know." Candice handed him the food pouch and her canteen.

Daniel grimaced, no longer hungry. "What is wrong with these people?"

"They don't want to die." She shrugged tiredly. "If there was nothing else, would you choose starvation?"

Daniel wanted to say yes, but couldn't. "Maybe."

"Me, too." Candice patted the bedroll she had spread between her legs. "Come let me hold you for a bit."

Daniel sat the food and water down to crawl into the bedroll and lean against her baking heat. "That feels great!"

“My thoughts exactly.”

There was a peaceful time where Candice believed he had fallen asleep.

“Do you think they’ve reached the big den yet?”

She sighed. “Yes. Baker said it wasn’t far.”

“How long to reach the wall?”

“A week on foot, with heavy losses. It’s rough terrain.”

“By the time Sam’s game begins?”

“Yes.”

Daniel shifted so he could observe her. “I’m sorry.”

Candice shut her eyes so that he couldn’t read them. “So am I, Daniel. As much as I want slavery abolished, you keep proving the need for it. Men are sly, manipulative creatures that have to be monitored for betrayals. If all the slaves are like you and Baker, freedom may already be out of your reach.”

“Why didn’t you tell your family that?” He was both ashamed of himself and proud.

“There’s no need to tell them what they obviously already know.” Candice’s annoyance was aimed at herself. “You heard the votes. Even Chester thinks we’ll have to keep slavery. They’ve always known. I’m late to this party.”

“Is it bad that we’re smart? It feels good.”

“The lessons you received about the past were not fabrications.”

“But girls are stronger now. We couldn’t do that again.”

“Now? No. In the future, after your kind has flourished and the disease has been cured? You’ll have the advantage again and you may use it to conquer us in retaliation for being enslaved. It’s exactly why women voted for slavery—revenge and fear.” Candice yawned. “More now or in the morning?”

Daniel wanted to continue the conversation, but he was tired and getting sleepy in her warm embrace. “Morning.”

“Thank you.” It had been a lengthy trip to reach this nasty city and the tiny sewer space hadn’t allowed for true rest. She was exhausted. “I want freedom for everyone, Daniel. If I can find a way to do it, I will. My word.”

“I’ll love you no matter what.” Daniel hugged her. “Always.”

Candice held him and tried not to worry over the promise. She was open to new information, but as of right now, she’d made her choice. None of those she’d spoken to about it would be pleased, including her mate or her relatives. She’d spotted one path to peace for their bitter nation and she was taking it, even if that meant enlisting help from sources the Pruetts didn’t usually approve of. *One week*, she repeated as she drifted off. *Your dome is nothing to me. One week and I’m coming to those top rooms.*

Chapter Thirteen

Heads Will Roll

Adelphia

1

“Welcome to day four of the Time Trials!

This marks the beginning of the final heats for this week. All the players have run two races and the blood has flowed, but the death count hasn't been as high on the lanes as usual. However, the bodies off field have increased so much that the Network sent extra security overnight.”

The announcer paused as the first group of racers stepped into view. The Network chose the lineup, not letting anyone know the matchups beforehand. The betting booths were a madhouse for exactly two minutes per run. Most of the time, it was evenly matched players, but Dana suspected today might be different. She leaned forward in her chair, high atop the field as her council-connected understudy fidgeted in the uncomfortable seat next to her.

“It looks like we'll have all our top contenders together!” Dana inwardly winced at her annoying squeal. Their training classes insisted on high energy broadcasts, but she'd never allowed it to dominate her private speech the way some in her

career did. “They’re lining up at a single lane again, folks! This should be great!”

Come on, Sam! Dana hadn’t bet on this race, but she still wanted the bounty hunter to win. Dana’s account was well stocked with UD’s that she might never get the chance to spend. Angelica’s game had made her rich.

Dana had never seen the stadium so full. Every seat was filled for all the races today and all the hotel rooms were taken. Even the upstairs hall now held high rollers who had come to bet on the Pruett. If not for the steady wind, the heat and smells would have been stifling. There was no conditioned air in Adelphia. The Network couldn’t spare the power. They barely had enough to keep the stadium lit. Dana was one of the few reporters who knew how bad the power shortage was.

“In this heat, we have five racers. The favorite, of course, is Sam Pruett!” Dana automatically paused for the cheering. With every seat in the stadium filled, even the hundreds of speakers couldn’t cut through that din. The audience clearly favored Sam.

“In second, we have Dorian Cutter, a Diva gang member with the fastest time of any of her kind in these games. It’s not as quick as that last Pruett run, but it is close. In third place, we have Miranda Blaze, a stocky farmer from our very own town of Villanova!”

Dana took a quick sip of water during the weak cheers, fighting with herself not to reveal more

about Miranda. The tiny town behind the stadium hadn't ever put up a contestant before, but the Network didn't want people snooping there. The memos hadn't stated why they couldn't cover the small town and Dana hadn't asked. "Our number four is the famous Snake tracker, Kissy. Her entire family was killed by Pruetts during an attack on the Network Rider. I think it's safe to assume that she came for revenge."

Next to Dana, the young girl wearing an expensive red and green jumper and matching cloak scribbled notes furiously as she studied the waiting racers. It rocked the rickety desk that was covered in papers, broadcasting equipment, dust, and scratch marks. The spiders and other bugs ran for the safety of cracks.

Dana let the booing and mild cheering die down before continuing. "Our last racer in this heat is Rhonda Rock! Named for the location she was born in, this mountain brute may be arrested as soon as the race is over. We've just learned she doesn't have a travel pass. Without that, the mountain woman is here illegally and the Network doesn't take those violations lightly. She may end up in a game anyway, though. The punishment for traveling outside a restricted area without a pass is death. These cautions were put into place after the mountain clans rose up nearly a hundred years ago and tried to breach the dome in New Network City."

Dana gave her helper a quick scan, seeing the younger woman was calmer than usual. She'd been

saddled with the pimply spy last week, but hadn't protested the extra work. Children weren't a threat to Dana. In fact, the girl had already become a fountain of information that Dana was sipping from carefully. "Get ready."

"Really? I get to be on the air today?!"

Fighting the urge to slash the hyperactive girl's throat and paint the dingy walls, Dana keyed the mike. "It looks like we're about to race, folks! And they're off... No, they're not." Dana tried not to laugh. "It appears the racers have chosen to fight instead. If any of them survive, this might be the best episode of the Bachelor Battles we've ever watched!"

Dana sipped her water, motioning for her over-excited partner to take the air. *You tell them about it. I'll watch.*

"That's right, Dana!" Gabby spoke eagerly. "As soon as the flag dropped, the Pruett lunged at the Diva. The Snake then attacked the mountain brute, leaving our farmer to pick a side. She chose to eliminate the favorite, but that quickly backfired as Sam stabbed her through the shoulder and then proceeded to do the same to the gang member. The mountain brute has been killed, as well as the Diva."

Dana reclined, trying not to enjoy it too much. After this episode, she would probably need a new job. *But that's okay. Thanks to these amazing Pruett, I can afford to switch careers.*

New Network City

“She did it again!” Naomi shouted as the radio was shut off. “Tell her to stop killing us!”

Candice lifted a brow. “Should Sam have waited for the enemy to kill her?”

“We are not the enemy anymore!” Naomi became desperate. “Please. Dorian Cutter was a breeder—one of our few.”

Candice shrugged. “Then you made a mistake in sending her.” She motioned Daniel to come along.

They strode from the church, where Naomi had stopped them on their way out. Candice and Daniel had eaten and listened to Sam’s final run—or what was supposed to be the final run. All the racers were dead or injured, delaying that heat until they recovered or dropped out. Candice expected to watch Sam’s real run this evening.

Around the couple, noises of normal life echoed—coughs, grunts, groans, cries, and tears. The homeless paused briefly in these habits as Candice passed, eyeing her with hope and suspicion.

“She forced them to change the time of the races!” Chester’s red curls bounced wildly as he hurried into place behind Candice. “They’re going to run it at night!”

Chester and his girls had chosen to camp outside the church with the homeless and their blending people—some of whom would be a surprise even to Candice. Chester had chosen to keep it to himself as

a good faith gesture to get Candice to change her vote. As much as he wanted the men freed, he hadn't been able to support it. They would be in more danger released than they were in chains.

"Yes, Sam likes to work in the dark." Bobby also came from a shack in the homeless camp. "We've been watching the males. The old woman keeps feeding them and making them sleep. No problems so far. Lydia's monitoring things now."

"Adding weight to the stock before she sells it."

Candice nodded at Chester's mutter. "Perhaps. But she doesn't know us, does she?"

Chester grinned.

"Where are you going?" Naomi quickly caught up. Her white top and shorts were speckled in fresh grease, as were her arms and hairy legs.

Must have been large chunks of meat to splatter so much. Daniel's stomach churned.

"I have an appointment." Candice delivered a challenging look. "Tag along?"

"After your cousin killed one of our best fighters today? No thanks."

Candice snickered. She actually liked Naomi. "More the office type, are you?"

"I prefer to live!" Naomi's eyes didn't flicker. She wasn't fighting for control of her disease as most of them had to whenever a confrontation happened. "Death doesn't appeal to me."

"Unless it's in a form that won't cost you anything." Candice followed that up with another

great guess. "That's why you won't take the job, right? It's more work than you want to put in."

"I am not lazy or scared! Slam you, Pruett!"

"In time, perhaps. Until then, come with us." Candice waved a scarred hand. "I'll guarantee your safety."

Curious, and forced to prove her bravery, Naomi shoved her sweaty escorts aside to join Candice in the lead.

"Who wants it?"

"I've got her." Ivy came up behind the Diva at Candice's call. Like most of their group, she and Leo hadn't gone far, either.

Naomi sneered at the fur wearing woman. "Are you also a Pruett?"

"Yes, she is." Daniel was still feeling bad about insulting Ivy's true relationship to the family.

"Aww." Ivy beamed at Daniel. "You really are a sweetie."

Behind her, Leo growled and stormed off in the opposite direction.

"Oh, hell. I thought he was okay now." Ivy tapped Daniel on the shoulder, impressed when he didn't flinch. "Any chance you two can be friends?"

Daniel was ready for that question. "That depends. Any chance you'll change your mind and claim him?"

"No."

"Same answer."

"Because he isn't a Pruett, you can't be friends? That's wrong."

“Maybe.” Daniel shrugged. “But if you don’t trust him, why should I?”

The others laughed at his cleverness, but Candice and Ivy winced. Ivy, because he was right. Candice, because Daniel was verbally sparring with a changeling without signs of intimidation. And he’d won. As much as she loved it, she also loathed it. *They’ve been lying to us. I don’t like that. No one lies to a Pruett and gets away with it. Not even our mates.*

“Who are these important people you’re meeting?” Naomi couldn’t help being nervous. She’d noticed Candice was headed toward the dome.

“Locals who will inherit the city if you guys don’t pick a successor. Have you made any progress?”

Naomi shook her head, but didn’t elaborate.

“I didn’t believe you would.” Candice motioned toward the troops lining the dome. It was the same on all three sides. “I’m going in. I can take two. I’ve chosen Bobby and Chester. They can pretend to be my slaves if I’m caught snooping. Everyone else will blend into this crowd and stay quiet.”

Naomi started to protest, but Ivy placed a cold hand on the woman’s bare arm. “We don’t argue with the boss when she gives an order.”

Naomi clamped her lips together and stayed with Ivy when the fur wearing outlaw merged into the masses.

Daniel stayed with Mary and Bruce, like he'd been told to do any time he was split from Candice. He hadn't seen them join the small parade walking toward the dome, but they were at his side now.

The others vanished into the sweaty, stinking, impatient crowd, though none of them went so far that they couldn't see Candice.

Chester and Bobby fell in behind her and kept their chins down as proper males were supposed to do. Both of them hid snickers when Candice stuck her nose up and the smothering crowd around them parted.

"Pruett!"

"That's one of the Pruetts!"

"Nice stock!"

Chester grinned.

Bobby blushed coyly.

Candice strode straight to the gate protecting the farthest side of the complex. During her games, she'd spotted part of a dock from a rear window on the fourth side. The special glasses she'd used had been gifted to Sam for her coming time in the dome. Right before they reached the line of bored, annoyed guards baking in the late spring humidity, a disturbance drew half of the grouchy Defenders into the crowd to break up a fight.

"That's our cue. Stay ready. This might be a trap." Candice strode to the remaining guards. "Orphans."

The guard in the front stepped aside, gesturing. “Lea said you were coming. Hurry in before our crew boss comes back.”

Candice and her slaves hurried into the throng of Defenders and disappeared, both worried and glad. Being helped by enemy guards was odd.

They were directed into an employee entrance with a single door and no guard. A few seconds later, they were alone in a dingy, dank hallway with high, wire covered ceilings and garbage on the grungy floor.

“That was fun.” Chester made sure his voice didn’t carry. Just because he didn’t see any guards, that didn’t mean there wasn’t any.

Bobby edged closer to Candice, already feeling caged. “I don’t like this.”

“That’s why we usually leave you behind on runs.” Chester laughed. “Your mate takes the place of a Pruett.”

“Lydia is a hardass.” Bobby chuckled, breaking the tension.

Candice had spent the time surveying the dim hall in an attempt to pick a direction to explore. Hoping to find the dock, she took the opposite path that the fishy breeze was going.

As they walked, the males stared at the signs on the walls in anger and dismay. Neither of them had been a prize. They’d only heard about the training and treatment, though Chester at least had the wisdom of fatherhood and age on his side.

*Never befriend a male. They are stock.
Men are to be enjoyed and then sold.
Anyone caught overfeeding males will be
suspended without pay.
Do your job or someone else will.
Employees are forbidden from the upper levels
without a security pass.
Bachelors are wild animals. Never forget to
lock their cages.
Mercy is for the weak.*

“This is all wrong. Why would they run stuff this way if they want us to recover?” Bobby’s mirth was gone. He slapped at a fly distractedly.

“They don’t, boy.” Chester looked at Sophia’s much younger brother by another lover. “I’m glad she brought you. Now you’ll see the truth.”

Candice let the men talk, not worried over it as long as no one else was able to hear them. She did assume they were on camera, but not a well-watched one or an alarm would have already sounded.

Chester felt her impatience. “Are your important people meeting us here?”

“No. We have common disturbances coming to keep the troops busy. We have to be back at the gate in thirty minutes.”

The males moved faster, neither of them caring for the timeline or the surroundings. The further they traveled, the fishier the air was becoming.

“Why did you invite Naomi and then not bring her in?” Bobby had assumed the Diva member would come with them.

“So she would be seen with us as we walked here.”

“You set her up! Nice.” Chester didn’t like Divas.

“In a way. Naomi will inherit leadership because she’s one of the few left in their clan who have the wisdom to plan for the future. Being seen with us will help her in that venture.”

“If she survives it.”

“Yes.” Candice frowned. “I hear voices. No talking now or you’ll blow our cover.”

Bobby knew that was directed at him and vowed not to screw up. He hadn’t been on runs with Candice and her branch of the family, but he’d always wanted to be.

Candice led them around the corner and paused, making them wait for the view until she forced her brain to accept what she saw.

The boat at the dock was enormous. Covered in working slaves and stacks of cargo, it was being loaded. She had no idea how it was even in the narrow port that appeared to be a cave cut into the side of the dome. In the distance, she could see the clear blue water of an ocean. Candice could feel the warm breeze and smell the salt. It was different than she had envisioned. She’d seen the ocean in books, but without the sounds and smells, it hadn’t matched up.

Candice edged to the side so the men could view the strange vehicle they'd likely never seen before. She certainly hadn't. Sailing vessels and oil barges were things of the past, and yet here was one of each in sight and they both appeared pristine. These weren't relics pressed into service in a desperate attempt to feed the masses. The bright and shiny boats were anchored at the very end of a dock that she estimated to be half a mile long. Smaller vessels and empty places along that dock glared at her.

The dock itself looked much the same as it had the first time she had been here to win Daniel's papers. Male slaves in chains were being used for manual labor and ships were coming in and out of the small harbor. It was hard to believe all of this was hidden behind the complex and no one knew.

One more lie falls. The Network has active ships and that means they have access to the rest of the country and the world. The wall was never to keep others out. It was always to keep us in.

Chester nudged Bobby as the younger man started to comment.

Bobby slid behind Chester to gather himself and hide his expression. His mate didn't want him on runs. Over the years, he'd realized it was easier and safer to let the woman hide him. Now, he was reconsidering that choice. The betrayals kept adding up in the war column. The rage he was experiencing was new and unwelcome.

Candice didn't move from the tunnel entrance. With troops all over the place, there was nothing she

could do alone. However, she wanted to. Boys as young as five were being whipped for not moving fast enough with their too-heavy burdens. Older boys were also carting boxes and bags of goods, but they knew to move fast enough to avoid the whip master.

That evil bitch is mine. Candice turned toward the hall. Just a matter of time, lady. You're going to feel that whip like all the kids you've used it on.

Candice led them back to the gate, not needing the full time. She'd seen what she needed to. There was a dock. There was a huge ship being loaded. New Network City didn't produce anything. They refined and built from what came in, but they didn't create. That meant the council was sending supplies somewhere...or they were loading up to leave.

Candice motioned her males through the employee door, seeing the guards were again distracted—this time by a group of orphan girls successfully trying to rob them.

Candice and her slaves merged back into the sweaty, shifting crowd around the dome without being recognized, but Candice wouldn't have cared if she had been. The sights and sounds were ringing in her heart and mind. Whips lashing across skin... Bleeding, screaming kids...

The news was running as they exited, featuring clips from across the complex. The screens and speakers outside the dome echoed with a small boy's proud voice. "I'm going to be a bachelor when I'm older."

Candice glanced up in horror, knowing who it was without the visual confirmation.

Jason's voice echoed over the speakers, just younger and innocent. "My daddy was a games prize."

Jason has a son. Candice studied the boy and found evidence of his mother in the red strands mixed with ebony. Rankin had stolen a child from Jason. When he and Angelica found out, it might blow their rebel plans, but it wasn't the biggest problem. *That's me.* Candice felt the rage flowing through her stiff limbs. *Before Angel can flip, I'm going to.*

Candice arched in pain. Her claws shot out, rage sending her through the levels in seconds. She looked at Chester with crimson orbs. "See that Bobby makes it home. I'll be late."

Soothed by what was coming, both males quickly obeyed.

Candice strode back the way she had come, but she didn't aim for the guards or the door. She went straight to the reporter standing in the crowd. Waiting to do a live segment from the ground, the woman had a group of hired escorts carrying whips and sneers of superiority. *Good enough.* Candice increased speed as her hands reached for the right tool.

"Hey!"

"I know her!"

"Look out!"

Chester and Bobby hurried away from the screams, keeping their heads down to hide vicious grins of satisfaction. Candice was taking a pound of flesh. The sound was a waterfall of joy to them.

Candice swung, slicing through the neck of a hired guard with her longest blade. Before the head hit the ground, she had slit the throat of the last terrified sentry with her shorter blade and spun into the safety of the crowd that closed around her.

The reporter, now drenched in blood and trembling in fear, let go of her bladder as the camera in front of her flashed to green.

Chapter Fourteen

Quick!

New Network City

1

Julian stared in horror at the reporter on the screen. He'd had her in his bed last week.

"Cut it!" As the screen in the center of the room went to static and then old promo ads, Rusty grimaced. "We all know who that came from."

"A message from Candice?" Alex was aware that Julian was frozen in rage. Not even his robes or cloak vibrated in the cool air. Alex didn't know how that was possible.

"Yes. She's saying she can kill any of us while the world watches—that she's going to." Rusty lowered his voice, also aware of Julian's dangerous reaction. "We have to kill her or get out of here before she follows through."

Julian spoke without moving anything but his lips. "I want a review of the tapes."

Rusty immediately began typing. "What zone?"
"This complex."

Wondering what clue Julian had found that he hadn't, Rusty typed 'Pruett' into the search scan and almost immediately an alert beeped. "Why didn't the alarm go off?"

Julian still didn't move, though he wanted to view the tape and see how she'd gotten in. He couldn't move yet. If he did, he would snap. "Don't alert those traitorous guards yet, any of you."

Realizing he was going to set a trap with that shift of troops, Rusty switched the information to the largest monitor so Julian could view it without having to move. "What do you want me to do?"

"Get us ready to evacuate—before the train arrives from Adelpia."

Rusty smirked. "All of us?"

Julian grunted, amusement helping him find a little control. "For now..."

It was a warning to the rest of them, but it wasn't needed. Having a private guard crew slaughtered on their doorstep had convinced all of the council that they were in danger.

"So playing with the children isn't allowed." Julian ran his hand through his hair in mock resignation as he calmed. "Fine. What about your friends and relatives? Are they off limits?" Julian very slowly walked to his chair and pushed a button on the arm. "I want all contenders for head Defender called in for a test of their skills. This zone only."

"You got it." Lauren was in the main control room where she spent most of her working hours. Being a council member wasn't as easy as the general populace believed. They all put in ten-hour days, every day. Julian kept them too tired to revolt.

"When they arrive, send them to the Diva den."

“Arrests or cleansing?” Lauren was already typing the orders that would go out electronically. There would be troops in the sewers within fifteen minutes.

Julian repeated one of his favorite phrases. “Mercy is for the weak.”

“Should I send a notice of dissolution afterward?”

“Of course.” He recovered enough to sneer. “Any surviving Divas who turn themselves in will be allowed to become Defenders and given refuge in the dome.”

“But the dome is about to fall.” Alex was listening to the hot crowd of angry viewers outside chanting slogans.

“Yes.”

The other members held a variety of feelings, but the biggest was fear of their leader. Even the Divas who betrayed their own kind would eventually be killed when the dome fell and the complex was overrun. Julian was covering bases and loose ends. If they made a mistake now, they would be on his list.

“It’s time to activate the clock for the meeting and for this city.”

Rusty met his eye. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. They’re coming in. We’ll make sure we have a party prepared. After the implosion, we won’t have a pest problem anymore and the public will go back to doing what they’re told.”

“We’ve put a lot of work into this complex.” Brandon spoke up reluctantly. “Where will we go?”

“That’s none of your concern. Just be glad you’re coming.”

“I am.” Brandon was glad he’d only been scolded and not killed. “We all are.”

Julian ignored the immediate supporting statements of faith and belief. If the rebels followed too quickly, every one of these people would be sacrificed so he could reach the training center that had been in use since he stole leadership. He had what he needed there to start over, including a few select females, but he doubted the bunker would be needed for the impregnable defense it offered. When the dome fell, literally, the rebels would be inside, trying to find a way to save the children they obviously cared about so deeply.

Julian added an afterthought. “Hit that church, too. The Priest there is housing rebels. At least, I suspect she has in the past and that’s reason enough.”

“Does she have a history with them?” Rusty kept typing orders.

“Yes. She sold out her best friend to steal a rare Pruett son. She owes them for letting her live. That free pass is over.”

“I didn’t know there were wild sons.” Shelly pulled her favorite scarf closer against the vent above her head. “They hid them I assume?”

“And stole them back when necessary. Bruce Pruett was the only one we were able to keep in the

complex. We gifted him to Mary when she showed signs of burn-out.”

“Why? That might have killed off that side of the family.” Shelly wiped glitter from her scarf onto the floor.

“Because Tara Pruett was the best tracker on the planet, a trait she passed to her children.” Rusty saw a muscle in Julian’s jaw begin to twitch. “Her eldest daughter inherited leadership. Without a strong matron, families scatter. Mary was already keeping them together. This is dangerous, because too many of them cause problems. So we gave her a mate she would burn-out with and we hadn’t had trouble for two decades. Bruce was from a distant branch of the family—a cousin five times removed, but it didn’t matter when the order went out. All hell broke loose.”

“How many male Pruettts are alive today in the wild?” Shelly sensed an edge of discovery that was snagging her caution away from the strong chemical odor that reminded her of Riana’s death. The cleaner had been in again.

“Three that we know of, but the southern branch hasn’t been heard from in a long time. From the surveillance tapes, I’d assume there are a few more by now. Chester and Horace appear healthy. There’s little chance they aren’t fertile. As you know, the cocktail wears off.”

Brandon protested Rusty’s information. “But we regularly update them at inoculation events. Do

we need to increase the dosage or stick them more often?”

“Both.” Julian took his seat with strictly controlled movements. “If left alone, the population will recover within a few generations. The chemicals we give all children are key to maintaining that control. By the time they reach adulthood, the disease has become permanent, but it takes multiple doses even with the genetic enhancements we’ve added over the centuries.”

“We have inoculation programs in all cities and large towns.” Shelly tried to soothe the boss. “The infection rate has stayed at 98% the entire time we’ve been in charge.”

Julian’s face darkened. He didn’t like being reminded of the last power meeting where he’d killed both his uncles to prevent them from interfering. Over the decades, his family had softened on slavery and the ultimate plan that was coming to fruition. They’d even wanted to discuss coexisting with the women who had enslaved them.

As if that’s possible! Julian glowered darkly at Shelly. He wasn’t sure how much more glitter on the floor he could tolerate. “Our founders gave us a plan and I intend to enact the final phase.”

“The rest of the bachelor children have arrived.” Alex broke the tension as he gestured toward a smaller screen in the corner that displayed their underground tunnels. Very few people knew about the subway beneath the city. That was part of the reason the Network and the Divas often worked

together. The gang knew. It was limited, but convenient when cargo arrived at the edges of this paradise that they didn't want anyone to know about. The ocean dock was used for deliveries of goods from their growers and harvesters along the east and southern coast—unknown to everyone except complex troops and slaves. The boat crews kept their jobs for life and then fed the sharks.

“Get them on camera. I want a new segment where we show the children growing up in the lavish complex before becoming games prizes. Use those kids in every promo.”

“That should bring the rest of the rebels in.” Rusty's arms and fingers were getting tired, but he kept typing.

“Yes, it will. We'll leave while the first clip airs and the train arrives with Sam Pruett.” Julian swiveled to stare out the window, where a tiny part of his city was now burning. The fire wasn't going to be put out. He was hoping it killed the orphans who had let Candice into the dome. That would really bring in the rebels for revenge. Who didn't like orphans?

“I've got your weakness now, bounty hunters.” He leaned toward the window to view the coming sunset. “You played your hand too soon.”

2

The Northern Borderlands

“She shouldn't have done that.”

Jason nodded, livid. The reception here was terrible, but it had been enough for him to figure out what had happened. “I love her for it.”

“Me too.” Seeing the bloody, pissing reporter had given Angelica the strength to keep Jason from going to the dome if he tried. He hadn’t yet, but she was waiting for it.

So were the men around them. The dozen remaining bachelors they’d brought along to the big den expected Jason to react. They were watching him, each deciding if they would go along.

In Daniel’s absence, the rebels had quietly chosen Jason as a substitute leader. He didn’t know yet because he didn’t view himself that way.

This sewer had once been a part of the railcar system, Angelica believed, due to the crumbling furnishings and small bits of track they were able to see. Nothing else was identifiable to give them an exact idea of what this underground area had been used for.

The bounty hunters always used leftover relics from the past, allowing them to stock UD’s instead of spending them on hotels. It also gave them places to mark on their maps as hideouts. It had been useful in many situations. This was one of those.

Angelica was glad of it. These men were weak, scared souls who had almost stampeded when a single changeling had joined them. She was being careful with her movements to keep from spooking them further. Their animal escort was gone and she was the only woman here. When they’d descended

into the ground, using ladders the big animals couldn't traverse, the huge dogs had howled for hours. Then they'd vanished and the rebels hadn't spotted any of them since. Angelica thought they'd realized they were free and went to explore their new home.

"Candice will get him out alive." Jason used that belief to hold himself in place. He couldn't leave all these men, but he wanted to. It was horrifying to know his tiny son was alone and unprotected in the complex.

"Yes. I'm sorry we can't go yet."

Jason swept the underground tunnel that was full of eating, sleeping, nervously watching rebel males. These walls were narrow and crumbling, shifting in small rumbles that warned of coming disaster. Despite being nearly ten feet under the stormy surface, they still weren't safe. Tattered clothes and stolen rations were no defense against the cold nights and lack of medicine. "I hate this."

Angelica gestured toward their training area. It was a shallow impression that only allowed half a dozen bodies to stand together at one time. "We've got another night here if you want to practice."

Jason nodded quickly. "Good idea."

He and a few others went over and began attacking the dummies they'd built from empty sacks filled with sand.

Angelica slid toward the entrance. Her rage was seething under the surface. Rankin and Jason had a son.

We'll get you out. Candice already knows without being told that your life means as much to the rebels as Daniel's sons do. We feel that way about all our family. Angelica stopped near the five large men she'd placed on duty. "Are the hounds still gone?"

Animal man nodded, while the other three spoke at the same time, getting nothing out clear enough to be understood in their fear of her. They were using the multiple voice defense.

Angelica sighed mentally while making sure her expression didn't change and scare them further. Baker's males here at the den were timid—more so than Jason and Daniel had ever been—and they weren't from games. They also weren't trained in anything. She and the true rebel males were teaching them, but it was slow work that few of the men were taking to without Baker here to lead them. She needed Jason to step up and take that role, but she hadn't told him that. She'd been letting them get to know him first.

Time's up. She opened the exit that had been welded together from several doors, making it two feet thick.

The harsh squeak couldn't be avoided. She needed to go topside and judge exactly where they were. The big safe zone had been an old train station beneath what remained of Missouri. They'd left the day after she arrived, but walking through the Borderlands was dangerous. They'd already lost four males to snake bites. The huge pythons were

buried in the sand, laying eggs. The wind sometimes covered them in dust, leaving a dangerous trap.

We need transportation. Where can I find us a ride?

Angelica climbed the rusted, shifting ladder, hood up to protect against the stiff winds that had forced them to stay put for the last two days. Not even her family was crazy enough to travel in this weather, but that didn't mean the Network wouldn't hire people who were. She could think of two groups who would hunt Pruett's in any conditions—Snakes and Divas. Candice hoped to make a deal with both of those clans, but Angelica expected a betrayal of any deal they made. She'd mentioned it to Candice before they parted ways, but her cousin had waved off her concerns in the usual gesture that meant *if they cross us, they'll pay*. Angelica hadn't argued.

The landscape was dry and hilly, covered in stones and boulders that not even the Network knew the source of. Many of the stones were darker and denser than the rocks their miners dug through and they didn't make good cooking surfaces like the grit layered boulders that dotted the rest of this forsaken area.

Angelica noted a small patch of clear sky and made her choice. She would go and find what they needed. Maybe she would luck into a community of allies. Even more lepers would be welcome at this point. The Glowers were another problem Angelica thought they would have to handle at some point.

Now that the ape was out, he wouldn't want to be caged again either, but the public wouldn't like the monster or the Glowers roaming.

"She's not going to free us."

Angelica ducked back into the hole, but didn't descend. She stared down at Animal man, who carried a torch and a deep sadness that nothing seemed to ease. He still had the purple stripe through his black hair, though it was starting to fade. Jason had told her the color was given to men who had survived a brutal program with the worst changelings. She hadn't asked anything else about the man. The escaped bachelor still refused to tell them his real name. He said he didn't want to get used to it because it would earn him punishments when he was returned to the cells and couldn't remember his number.

"Is she?"

Angelica hated to lie. Even if her family hadn't been dead set against doing it, she wouldn't have liked it.

Animal turned toward the den, pulling his snatched cloak tighter around thin, wiry shoulders. "I saw your face just now. You know she lied."

Angelica didn't stop the rebel and add to the damage. Candice had promised to free them, but that had been sworn when they hadn't had a real opportunity to accomplish anything. Now that there was a true chance at overthrowing their rulers, they couldn't do it without enough groups agreeing. Angelica didn't think it was going to be possible.

Nothing could get Divas and snakes to work with Pruetts. They'd been killing each other for hundreds of years.

Angelica slipped into the grit, shutting the exit door, but she'd only taken a step before it opened again.

"Where are you going?"

"To barter a ride. Keep them in line."

"When will you be back?" Jason didn't know what to do.

"A day, maybe less. Go back in. You're not safe out here. None of you are." Angelica stalked into the heavy dust without responding to any more of his questions. She had a job to do. If they were where she thought, it was close to the Borderlands water source. That made it a dangerous, needed place. If there was still water here, there would still be crazy women navigating it. She'd learned that in Georgia.

At the sound of steps, Angelica spun around to force Jason back to the den. She drew up at the sight of Animal man, relieved it wasn't her mate. She didn't like telling Jason what to do. He was a grown man who was capable of making his own decisions.

"I'm coming."

Angelica felt the accusation before it was spoken. "You think I'm abandoning them."

"No. Not with your mate there." Animal man was a bit jealous. "We all see how much you care for him."

“Good.” Angelica scanned the ugly sky for flying predators. She ignored the growling stomach that came from giving the last of her rations to Jason this morning. “But I would never shirk my duty, not even for my mate.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were leaving?”

“I didn’t want to have this conversation.”

“Why didn’t you pick a few to go with you as bargaining chips?” He sneered. “You could sell us.”

“I’m a Pruett, you nasty little snit! Get back in the hole and hide with the other cowards.”

Angelica stalked off. *How dare he insult me that way! If not for my duty, I’d slit his throat and leave him here to rot!*

Angelica sighed, calming. No, she wouldn’t. She’d make a nasty remark and storm off, exactly like she was doing. Honor didn’t stop after the duty ended. Honor was a way of life.

“It bothers you that she lied.”

“She didn’t lie!”

“Okay.”

Realizing the man was coming even though she didn’t want him to, Angelica thrust herself toward him. “If you walk too far away, they’ll grab you and run. Don’t you know how this works?”

“No.” He winced as the sharp wind stung his skin through the holes in his jumper and liberated cloak. “I’ve never been out of the complex. I was trained for pleasure. Like Daniel, I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

Angelica doubted that would hold for her cousin's mate. Candice had to have a man who could match her fire. Angelica shrugged. "I don't see you as either, but before this is over, I'd wager all of you will have to kill to survive. Now be quiet. I'm listening for bugs."

"Bugs. Why?"

"Because bugs mean water, my bitter friend. Now shush."

The rebel did.

Chapter Fifteen

Hell Breaking Loose

Adelphia

1

“I’d like a top center seat. The padded ones with service and full ammo packs.”

“For how long?” The clerk slapped a determined mosquito from her bare arm.

Standing in line with viewers who carefully patted her arm or called encouragement, Sam grinned. “For the entire day.”

The clerk behind the dirty glass ticket window stared in dull comprehension. “That’ll be three hundred UD\$ per hour...”

“Put it on the Pruett account.” It was easily the most cash Sam had ever spent at once on anything that wasn’t gear for her career. Left to her own devices until her final race, Sam wanted some action. The day in the rental room had been restful. Now, she was bored.

The girl wiped her sweaty neck with a pink bandana. “Personal or business?”

“Personal!” Sam flipped into an angry boss. “Do you make it a habit of letting employees use their account for personal use?”

The clerk, a young girl with a wealth of zits and sparse intelligence, jerked in alarm, rattling the booth. “No, of course not!”

“Good.” Sam switched back to eager viewer. “I’ll need food and drinks, and someone to save my seat when I walk around.”

“We have gophers.” The girl nervously stood straighter, shoving her slipping toga sleeve into place. Even a rumor of cheating could get employees killed. “It’s ten UD’s an hour.”

Around the ticket booths, the stadium was a shouting, shooting organism with parasites in various stages of their own immoral infections. *My kind of place.*

Sam took her ID card back. “I also require a reporter.”

Sam’s request drew that quiet cloudiness again. “A reporter?”

“Yes. I need to make it clear that I don’t support my relatives rampaging across New Network City, don’t I?”

Eased, the clerk nodded quickly, ponytail bobbing. “Sure! I’ll handle that.”

“Your name?” Sam didn’t care who was listening or how the girl might be hounded after this interview.

“Velvet. Velvet Malin.”

Sam’s face iced over. “Malin?”

Velvet paled as she sensed true anger that had nothing to do with rule enforcement. This was

thicker, uglier. "Please. I came here to get away from them."

Sensing honesty, Sam gave the girl a curt nod. "You get one chance to prove you're not like them. Don't screw up my order."

Sam left the murmuring witnesses and shaking clerk, wondering which reporter they would send. After Candice's display, it would probably be someone big and ready to fight.

I'll see if I can calm things down a bit so it doesn't all happen before I get there. Sam moved toward the top row of the stadium. It had the best catapults. She planned to spend the day shooting at the other racers and being seen having legal fun. The shady shit would come right before she left this bloody stop on the gauntlet.

"I'm a reporter."

The voice was extremely close. Sam quickly turned as a familiar shield of danger fell over her.

A blade plunged into her side instead of her spine. Pain rushed up in thick waves that sent her into the change. If not for her armored decoy cloak, it could have been a kill shot.

"My sister was on that crew!" The reporter plunged her blade down again. "I liked that one!"

Sam understood it was revenge for Candice killing the city security team. Angered over guilt she shouldn't feel, Sam forced herself up as she drew her blade, kicking.

She caught the thin woman behind the leg and used that falling weight to buoy herself up. Sam swung as she rose, taking off her attacker's head.

Sam stayed the way she had landed, crouched and swiveling to be sure this was the only opponent. She ignored the head rolling between the aisle and the viewers screaming in shock as it hit their feet and bounced.

"Is there a Sam Pruett up there?" A woman's cultured voice echoed from the bottom of the packed metal stand. "I'm supposed to interview... What is...?! That's a... I know her!"

Sam winced as she realized her assigned reporter had arrived in time to misinterpret what had happened. "Wait! It isn't what you think."

"I quit!" The reporter took off running toward the safety of the glass booths atop the field, escorts left behind. The trio of security guards cast thick glares at Sam.

Sam sighed, waving toward a medic booth near her seat. "Well, that didn't go as planned."

2

"That wasn't part of the plan!" Naomi shouted at Candice as she and the men returned to the steamy, crowded churchyard. A line of angry Divas was behind her, also glowering.

"You killed one of their best security crews on air. We'll all be hunted now."

Candice ignored them while she wiped blood from her face and arms. She loved crimson camo, but the males wouldn't.

"You didn't think you would be hunted?" Bobby glared back, voice sarcastic. "You act as if the council doesn't know we're here, brokering deals to replace them."

Naomi paled under the dirt and sweat. "They know?"

Chester was surprised that the woman didn't. "The Network watches every part of this city. Ask the bachelors about the camera system. The council will also know we were inside the complex, if they don't already."

Naomi took off running toward the sewer and her escorts followed, not sure why she was leaving. They'd been chosen for fighting skills, not thinking.

"Are we helping them?" Daniel stared as he and Bruce joined Candice. Mary was deflecting orphans from the church, fearing it was about to be raided.

Candice made a circular motion in the air and jerked her hand away from the city.

The homeless ran. They left tents and personal treasures in favor of avoiding the crossfire.

The old lady also herded Candice's males out of the area. Sleepy and drugged, they didn't argue when they realized a fight was coming.

"The Divas want males kept in chains. Do you really want to help them?"

Daniel, faced with the truth, shook his head at Candice's reminder. "No."

“Neither do I.” Candice drew her gun as the sound of arriving troops echoed. “However, we’re Pruetts and we have honor. It would be wrong to leave them to this fight simply because we’re not in there with them.”

“I understand.” He realized she was taking the time to teach him even though danger was coming. Right and wrong always mattered to her.

Everyone left in the churchyard reacted as a large squad of Defenders ran toward the homeless camp, followed by a line of hounds with thicker collars.

Daniel began to sing, as did a few of the other males who knew the secret to sometimes calming the diseased beasts that were larger than a Mopar.

Candice and her clan began firing bullets, knives, and arrows, mostly hitting enemies, but trimming a few of the fleeing homeless as well.

“Watch your aim!” Candice fired at a trio of big guards. Ivy and Leo would be required to train harder or she would take their weapons. Candice shoved into Daniel, forcing him toward the church. “Get inside!”

Daniel ran for cover while Candice let her fury loose on their attackers. There were no shouts calling for surrender or declaring them Wanted persons being taken into custody. This wasn’t a prisoner capture. It was an execution attempt.

Bullets flew into the frame of the church as Daniel made it inside. The helpers and kids fled through the back door and the windows.

“Get down!” Candice and the others poured into the church. Singing wasn’t working on the hounds. They’d killed most of the troops, but the huge dogs weren’t stopping. It was almost as if their collars were now preventing them from hearing the voices.

Chester and Sophia held the door shut as dogs hit it from the outside, grunting in effort as the others dragged pews over for reinforcement.

“I told them!” Irma screamed in fear and rage from the front of the church as the change ripped through her fragile body. “They said he’s mine when you’re dead!”

Crash!

A huge dog landed among the shattered glass from the window and lunged, grabbing the nearest person. It shook the priest like a rag doll as she screamed.

Blood sprayed across the walls.

When Mary and Candice would have helped Irma, Bruce stepped into their line of fire to prevent it. He’d heard what Jason did to Rankin and admired that.

Shocked a bit at the savageness from Bruce, whom they’d only known to be passive, both females gaped, distracted.

Ivy and Sophia fired at the dog, hitting it in the head. The massive animal barely flinched.

“What the hell?!” Chester stopped firing, preparing to go for the animal’s throat with his knife. “How is it still up?”

“Use explosives!” Bobby backed away. *I’m not ready for this.*

“No!” Candice took control “Sweet spot target! Sweet spot target!”

Daniel didn’t understand until everyone began hitting the dog’s eyes, throat, and sides. The loud, concentrated fire echoed painfully as they brought the animal down.

Candice spun around to reload and to spot Daniel. Finding him safe, she swept the dog and judged it to be almost dead. She took up a position at the broken window so she could see outside. “The rest are leaving!”

The dog in the church growled one last time, dropping to bent knees, and then it fell over. A few seconds later, the collar emitted a high-pitched whine... Then it beeped.

“Get out!” Candice grabbed Daniel. “Bomb!”

Daniel was jerked to his feet and shoved toward the den, where Candice had sat on the window ledge to read the night before. He staggered, slamming into the wall, and felt a stiff arm that didn’t belong to his owner lift him toward the ledge.

Daniel brought his arm up as he was brutally shoved through the broken glass.

People jumped out behind him as the dog collar exploded, blowing a hole in the side of the church that sent gigantic chunks of debris raining over the neighboring homes.

Some of the roofs caught fire, adding to the chaos. Locals fled toward wells for buckets of

water, but around the fiery church, nothing moved except fire and smoke.

3

“That is a beautiful sight.” Julian was watching the city from a side window of the top floor in the complex. “Great addition to the plan.”

Shelly beamed at Rusty like everyone else was doing, but inside, she wept for the hope they’d all had. There was no way the rebels had survived that trap. It had been too good, too quick, to counteract. The most they could hope for would be a few survivors who’d been out roaming when the attack started and missed the blast. That wasn’t enough for a rebellion to succeed.

Julian scanned the crowd around the dome. The Defenders had orders to shoot suspected rebels on sight. “Any reports from our ground troops yet?”

“The Diva den is still being cleared. We’ve taken damage, but we have an elder in custody. She’s being brought in as we speak.”

“Put her in a game immediately. Interrupt the regular broadcasts.”

“What about the rest of the captives?”

“The hound stocks are low. They need live food occasionally—for their health, you understand.”

The six men laughed together at Julian’s decision.

The three remaining women joined them with uneasy glances that were quickly hidden from the boss. Everything rested on Sam now.

4

Adelphia Stadium

Sam watched the breaking news being broadcast on the stadium screens with everyone else, unable to control her expression as the church exploded. She didn't see survivors, though she refused to believe there hadn't been any. Pruett's were tough.

More bodies you won't find. Sam kept the expression of shock and grief on, however. It was always wise to act for the audience and she was being watched by thousands. *How should I play it?*

Sam grinned suddenly. "I just inherited everything! Drinks on me—for the entire stadium!"

Mentally, she began to worry. It was unlikely that all of her family had survived if they'd been in that church. There was even a chance that she honestly was the last Pruett standing.

If that's the case, the enemy is going to get an episode they didn't bargain for. If I don't hear from Candice by the first match, I'll take off the chains that bind me to civility. Once I snap that control, I won't ever go back.

New Network City

“They’re so heavy!”

“Be quiet or the Defenders will hear you!”

“Sorry.”

“Good thing you told us to put those mattresses here last night.” One of the little girls grunted at the weight she was dragging toward the hole in the ground. “Gonna make noise though, when they hit each other.”

The dozen orphans struggled under the weight of the wounded adults who’d been knocked out in the blast. Many of them were burnt, but the children couldn’t help them yet.

Lea shoved Candice’s stocky body through the hole, not waiting for the splash of the mattresses sinking deeper with the impact. It might still get the attention of the guards sniffing around the front of the church. She gave a loud whistle.

Almost immediately, a young voice in front of the church shouted. “Rebels are attacking the dome!”

The laboring orphans were relieved as the troops and remaining hounds left at the decoy call.

“Hurry up!” Lea shoved them ahead of her. “It won’t take them long to figure out we lied.”

“We can’t go back to our hide out! They’ll know.”

“Why do you think I told everyone to clear out last night?” Lea shoved Daniel hard. He was heavier than his mate. “We’re covered as soon as they wake up.”

The smallest girl tugged a redhead her own age off the mattress and onto a strong shoulder. “You really think we can trust them?”

“I do. We’ll get our Den Mothers. You’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right.” Clara shuddered. “If not, we’re all dead.”

Lea stood up to make space for the other kids to drop their burdens. “We weren’t gonna make it alone. This is the best I could do.”

In the watery pile below, Pruetts began to wake and listen, grateful to the kids.

6

Candice and her family treated their wounds as they waited for the orphans to join them. They’d moved to the far end of the tunnel when they’d heard more troops arrive to examine the scene.

Daniel smoothed the burn gel over her red neck and shoulders. Her destroyed cloak was balled up and riding in her pack. She had shielded him with her body. As a result, half of her hair was gone and the rest was short, stiff spikes. All of them smelled like burning flesh and hair, and they were singed or actually burnt in places, but they were alive.

“We’re here.” Lea knew to announce their arrival.

The Pruetts didn’t thank the children. They didn’t hug them or offer tokens as rewards. They also didn’t make promises the kids had likely heard a hundred times from adults who wanted to use

them. The family offered the only thing they had that was equal to the deed—their name.

Candice handed her weapon to Daniel. “Stand watch.”

Daniel did it proudly as Candice knelt in front of Lea and then eased into sitting. She hurt all over. “Will you be my daughter?”

Lea gestured toward the other eleven girls she’d chosen to help with the chore Candice had paid her for. “What about them?”

Other members of the family pointed or raised hands.

“I’ll fatten up two of them.”

“I’ve got room for three.”

“I’ll probably never get a breeding pass.” Ivy smiled at the smallest girl. “I can adopt one of them.”

The girls stared suspiciously.

“Why would you do this?” Lea’s hand came up to her small hip. “You could pay us off or walk without paying at all.”

Candice smiled up at the child. “You saved the future here today. It wasn’t just our lives. It was the rebellion. That would have died with us. A few coins can never repay something so valuable.”

“We want to be wanted! Taking us in out of pity isn’t what we need.” Lea dropped down across from Candice. It felt wrong to stand over the powerful leader.

“Just stick to our deal, and give us Den...” The girl realized she and the others here were being given something better. “Real moms?”

Candice nodded, struggling not to cry as emotions overwhelmed her exhausted body and heart. “If you’ll have us?”

Lea laughed, holding out a hand. “You’ll do.”

Candice slowly turned the handshake into a gentle hug.

Lea had never been held by an adult who cared about her. It was too much to fight. She began to sob against Candice’s hard shoulder. *I’ve got a mom now. Holy shit.*

7

“I need you to relay a message.” They were walking away from the city now, using crumbling sewers that even the Divas avoided due to unsafe walls that were prone to collapse. The Pruetts were grateful, but there was still a damp, silt covered floor that tried to send them slipping and there were more bugs than any of them could count. The only time the sewers flooded was during the heavy spring thaw that had already passed. The rest of the time, it housed all the creepy crawlies they hated.

The tunnel they were walking through would eventually connect them to the main sewer under the dome if they continued in that direction, but that wasn’t where they were going. There were other things to handle first, but it was good to know they

had an escape route full of dark shadowy compartments where they could hide and handle pursuers.

“Okay.” Lea was munching on an energy ball with the other orphans. They’d been given medications and food, but everyone was out of water. The energy balls were juicy, providing a partial drink and a good boost of energy to get them back to the dome.

“When the fighting starts, go away. Take your girls out of New Network City. The marks you now carry will be honored by nearly any of the local farmers. Work for them for a few weeks until we get details settled and then we’ll send for you.”

“You promise?”

“On my word as a Pruett.”

“That’s good enough for me.”

Candice smiled.

“What are the messages?” Lea was happy with the chore. She didn’t want the other kids to get hurt.

“Go to the crowd around the dome first, and tell them you saw us in Battery Park.”

Lea frowned. “You want a fight.”

“I’m picking the location of a battle that has to happen. And I’m letting the family reputation have room to grow. When it’s over, you’ll do what I’ve told you?”

“Of course.”

“When do you want us to go?” Clara was at Ivy’s side. She didn’t like Leo and cast repeated stares of suspicion and fear. Unlike Lea, Clara had

gotten too much exposure to rental males. They weren't all good or meek like the Network claimed. No one was. All humans had a monster inside that had to be controlled or it escaped and hurt people. She knew. Clara gave Ivy a curious glance. *I hope my new mom does too.*

"Now, please." Candice hoped the tattoos would protect the kids, but there was a chance that it would backfire. The guards would be looking for anything unusual. Candice motioned toward the ladder. "On your way, please tell the Glowers and brutes we'll need that distraction at the dome at dawn. That will be the moment the ape gets his final reward."

8

Pruett Town

"They burnt it down." Baker stared at the former Pruett homestead. "Not even the entire town, just this house."

Rosa wasn't surprised. She was mildly concerned for Baker, however. He'd been insisting on monitoring all news broadcasts that they could pick up. Hearing Jason's little boy swear he wanted to be a bachelor like his daddy had put Baker on edge and all of the Runners had figured out why. He was waiting to hear his own child being used as a pawn in the war.

“The town’s empty.” Rosa pointed to where dark homes sat in neglect. “At least a week, judging by the state of the fields.”

All of them realized the crops had been abandoned.

“Were you here for the fight?”

Rosa shook her head. “We were with Sam when the news aired her sister’s name and she turned us around to escort Angelica out.” Rosa grinned. “She never doubted Angel would win. We feel the same way about Sam.”

Baker liked their comforting words as they turned toward the main road into the town, but he didn’t feel it. The sense that danger was flying toward his love was too large to ignore.

Hope pointed again. “Someone stayed.”

The single lit shack was one Baker recognized in anger. “The Malins!” He spat. “Useless.”

“Actually, they’re great for information, according to the renters.” Ginny shrugged at the looks. “So I like to talk afterward.”

Baker sighed. “A lot of changelings do. It’s nice to fall asleep with them when they’re like that.”

“Information is something we always need.” Rosa’s reminder brought a quick shift to the mood. The women got ready to fight.

Greg stayed still, panicked eyes searching for a place to hide. There was little hope the breeding family would give up secrets without being convinced. The Malins hadn’t survived by being disloyal to the hands that fed them.

Baker pointed toward the rear of the shack. “They have a tunnel. Three of you can cut them off and we’ll be waiting in the front to grab the mother as they run out. She’s the one we want.”

Baker’s order was followed without question and this time, it didn’t feel odd or make any of the females believe it was because Sam was sweet on him. Baker had proven himself so far with them and they expected him to keep doing so. It made sense that Sam’s mate was a leader too. She’d be bored to tears with anyone lesser.

Rosa made a few motions to get the crew in place, then looked at Baker. “You’ve seen her before?”

“Yes, once. I should recognize her.”

“Good. She’s your target. Bring her down and secure her for interrogation.”

Baker understood it would be a test of his fighting skills, but he wasn’t worried over that part of it. He just wasn’t sure he’d covered everything yet. “Hang on.”

Rosa held up her hand, waiting.

Baker concentrated. *What did I see that day?* He went back into his rougher memories to the day he’d been hired to service the family of women. He’d barely survived it, but he’d been able to eat for a month afterward. “They had a guard...” Baker tensed. “She communicates with the Network a few times a day. Take her out so she can’t call for any troops in the area.” The guard had paid Baker after dragging his drained, bloody body to the door.

“We go on three...” Rosa was glad for the knowledge, but they always assumed any place they were invading had security. It was the Pruett way.

Chapter Sixteen

Smothering Underneath

New Network City

1

“**N**o Pruetts were caught.”

“What?!”

Alex cleared his throat. “We have no Pruetts in custody.”

“They were inside!” Julian shuddered as rage leapt up to torment him. “We saw it through the dog collar!”

“Our investigator is there now.” Rusty motioned for Shelly to remain quiet when she would have spoken. The boss didn’t need to hear her voice. “The preliminary information implies they made it out through a rear window. We didn’t have people there when it blew. Our troops were spotted before they could finish setting the ambush.”

Julian shoved everything off the table in front of him. “I want them all dead!”

“They will be.” Alex stayed tense. You weren’t supposed to run from a wild animal, but Julian’s behavior was getting worse by the day. It was hard telling who his target would be when he finally snapped.

“Scour the city! Find them!”

“Our troops in the sewer are finished. They’re moving on to the orphan hideout at the garbage dump.”

“I want their little leader brought in.” Julian’s hands clenched and unclenched as he fought for control. “Kill the rest and leave their bodies out for everyone to see. Send it through now.”

Rusty keyed the mike. “This is a citywide order coming through. Authorization code is 7-7-5-4-3.”

“Doing it now.” Lauren didn’t reveal how angry or desperate typing it in made her. She didn’t like the games and she hated the sight of blood, but here she was, now sending Julian’s death orders out on kids. She keyed a mike in the control room, taking in a deep breath. *“This is a command order. Pay attention!”*

In the tower, Julian abruptly dropped into his seat and stared at the thinning pillar of smoke from the church that was a total loss. “How long until the game?”

Rusty lifted a brow. “Sam’s or the Divas?”

“Both.”

“One hour for the elder and registered Diva leader. Sam’s final trial run is at sunset, three hours.”

“I want all screens and reporters on it. Before, during, and after, I want to see their children bragging about how they can’t wait to be prizes.”

Rusty and Shelly kept typing, activating, and alerting, but the rest of the council waited for

instructions. None of them were okay with killing the orphans. They assumed Julian had forgotten how useful the little girls were. They made perfect spies and scavengers because no one ever suspected a little kid of treachery.

Julian stared at the painting of the founding fathers. Around that table, ten unsmiling, devious male faces glared and glowered as if they were changelings. Dressed in the clothing of the time, they were still vivid enough to fit in right now. Julian wished all of them were here to see his determination to push through the final part of their plan. Marcella had been clever enough to get the males enslaved, but their original founder, Lucas, had been even smarter. It was a shame he couldn't be here to see the finale.

Julian felt the disease sweeping over his legs, darting him with pricks of pain that signaled a flip that he wouldn't be able to handle in front of witnesses. He jerked upward, staggering toward his private entrance.

Brandon waited until the door shut and the whirl of the elevator sounded. "Where's he going?"

"To visit the cells." Shelly grunted. "He takes a death row walk and picks a control."

Alex was revolted. "What does he do? Eat them?"

Rusty glared at Shelly and then the rest of the table. "It's none of our business. Follow orders."

Shelly frowned as she realized this room wasn't safe to speak in. "We're wired now?"

Rusty shrugged, standing up. “If I were the boss, I would do that. We’re clearly not all trustworthy here, are we?”

Shelly would have scolded him for making them look bad on the recording, but there wasn’t time as Julian came back through the private door wearing an expression of delight and glee that made everyone cringe.

“You thought I didn’t know! That is classic.” Julian leaned against his door, back in control. “But your betrayals reminded me that we record the entire city. We require all buildings to be outfitted with microphones that feed directly to our security files.”

The council shared confused, afraid glances that made Julian laughed.

“Yeah, you’re going to kill me and run the show.” He snorted harshly. “You have no idea what I’m capable of.” Julian gestured toward Rusty. “Get the audio files from the church and the sewer. By the time Sam’s heat is over, we’ll know everything.”

2

“Is everyone here?” Candice scanned the large field that had once been a city park. Turned into an orchard a few decades ago, the desperate people in this city had stripped it each time it started to grow, forcing the Network to abandon the idea. Candice had been surprised by it anyway when she’d learned

the history of this city. Didn't they know not to feed the bears? Later, she'd put the clues together and figured out it hadn't been normal fruit. The homeless in the city at that time had gone sterile over that ten years. The orphan population here now came from newcomers and families who fell out of favor. The roaming bands of children were Network created and they hated their rulers even more than the Pruetts did.

The noise would have given away their location with all the sound if there had been any Defenders nearby. Raised voices, laughter, and songs were echoing through the peaceful air. If they hadn't been setting a trap, Candice would have been furious with the lack of defense tactics. It was a wonder any of these people had survived considering how lax they were about security.

Candice's speech had been prepared for weeks before she'd come back to this city, but it fell out naturally now as she prepared her army for war. "Our hosts say we'll only be on camera here if something new was added, so we need to search and secure. Sort jobs by ability, not by affiliation, folks. We are not enemies here today. We are business partners reclaiming what was stolen from us. The enemy must fall!"

The cheering that met her statement sent ugly birds fleeing the trees and bushes around them. Five miles from the dome, there were still homes and rubble in sight that told them they weren't safe. Candice knew it, but they weren't safe anywhere.

They were at war and it always came with risks that lesser people would decry as suicide or insanity. Those moments had earned the Pruetts their reputation.

“We’ve been pitted against each other to keep us from doing this very thing. We die and they rule, but that is about to end. All of our differences can be set aside until after we accomplish the goal that has united us. No more sons will be stolen. No more families will be destroyed to satisfy vanity and greed. We are the rightful rulers of our own destinies. We get to pick the future!”

“We can’t fight them alone!” someone shouted from the crowd of roughly fifty. The orphans were on the outskirts, staying out of the way.

Candice moved toward Lea. “Are we alone? Look around. We have ten times this many, all waiting to strike.”

Desert Glowers came out of their hiding places, revealing dozens of them. In the near distance, Candice could hear the energetic splashing of the ape traveling with that group. Across from the Glowers was a camp of mountain females. There were only a dozen of these hulking brutes, but they were almost double the size of a normal citizen—another reason the council wanted them gone.

Two dozen swamp women stood near the mountain clan, staring at Candice with both fear and hope. Behind those two groups, a small army of orphans were making camp and gathering food from the limited wilderness for everyone. The half-

mile field had trees on one side and an idyllically flowing stream on the other. It didn't look like the proper place for blood to be spilled or for the future of a nation to be decided. Candice walked through the crowd as the people vented oral rage and shared common ground with neighbors they had wanted dead just a week ago. Everything was about to change, but this time, the disease of tyranny had caused it.

“You can't mean the kids!”

“They can't help!”

“They don't get a vote!”

Candice spun around with red eyes and all of her fury. “Without them, we would be dead. They are going to help us and they are going to get a vote. Get on board with my plans or go lick the heels of your masters!”

“Who made you the boss of everyone?!” someone demanded angrily.

“Your life of cowardice! None of this would be happening without me and my crazy relatives.” Candice shoved by the woman. “Sit down and start thinking of how we're going to feed all these bellies.”

“We're staying?!” The woman didn't care that Candice had shoved her. Fear flared over her rough features.

Candice nodded. “Our fighters are coming here. The troops will track us here. You all came here to encourage a rebellion. You're about to get your wish.”

“They’re here!”

The guards continued to shout as they tightened leg grips around branches and drew their guns.

Bullets and arrows flew through the air as troops swarmed into the open field.

“Wait for the reload!”

Candice’s order was followed by those who heard. The rest of them rushed forward while grabbing their weapons.

In the front of the fray, troops fired into the trees to clear a path. They’d come in full force, preventing those in the rear from firing until they made it into the field. All of the front line Defenders were out of ammunition in a minute, pausing to reload.

“Kill them all!” Candice roared as she took off running.

Around her, the family reacted first, and then the rest of her mismatched army charged, many shouting and drawing knives. There were so many bodies in the field that guns were almost useless as the two lines collided.

Candice ran into the enemy ranks without fear, allowing the disease to turn her into the monster that always lurked inside now. Her blades sliced into arms, necks, and hands, sending guns flying through the crowd. Anything she could reach became an open wound. Bodies fell around her in splatters and splashes that made the other fighters stay clear of where she was. They all branched out, each strong killer of the group taking on the strongest Defender

they could find. Despite having more numbers than the squad, the squad was better equipped. The leaders had to go down hard and fast so the troops would lose faith.

“This is great!” Bobby was standing next to Chester, watching without participating.

Chester gave him a hard shove, knocking him to the ground just as an arrow went sailing over his head. “Stay there!”

Chester took up a stance over Bobby’s shocked form, regretting his vote to bring the rookie along. He scanned the crowd for Candice, hoping she didn’t need assistance because he couldn’t leave Bobby. He found her in the middle of a squad of Defenders who were trying to close ranks.

“She’s getting them from the inside!” Sophia laughed in delight. “I love this family.”

The front line of Defenders dwindled. By the time their leader called a retreat, it was too late. Candice and the rest of her group had come through the middle and made it to the entrance to the field, cutting off their escape. It kept two hundred Defenders and four hundred fighters crammed in together with no choice but to kill each other.

“Hold this spot!” Candice gathered her family with shouts, whistles, and gestures, hating being so far from Daniel. She’d left him on the other side of the field, out of the way with the other males who couldn’t really fight yet.

Candice watched Divas go down around them, noting the Glowers and mountain brutes weren’t

protecting them. *The girls did their job.* Candice swung in fury at a Defender lifting a reloaded gun to fire at those kids. Blood flew across her face.

Feeling the next arrivals, Candice shoved over to make space for the hounds that ran into the valley. The thick collars had been reinforced and the animals were the biggest ones she'd ever seen.

Candice motioned her family to let them through. The hounds were so intent on getting into the field that they ran right by Pruetts to attack Divas and Glowers.

Chester shoved Bobby through the battle toward Candice, ducking swings and dodging big animals with fiery breath and mournful growls. The hounds didn't attack men. Chester pushed Bobby behind their family line as Candice gave the next order.

"Kill the hounds!"

"Do not follow that order!" Daniel screamed into the bullhorn. "Do not kill the dogs!"

The sound of male fury stopped the entire battle for three seconds. Even the hounds lifted bloody snouts to locate the source.

Candice paused in her swing, allowing the Defender in front of her to stab her in the leg before she could jump back and bring her sword down.

"Take the collars off. You're not killing them this time! Take off their collars or run for your lives because you're not killing any more of the animals that we love!" It was the first time Daniel had sounded like a Pruett.

Mary scanned the battlefield and was relieved to find most of the troops dead, but the huge dogs were a threat. Before she could change her mind, Mary ran forward and sliced through the collar of a dog that was busy eating a reporter.

The animal jerked away in fear, cowering as the control collar fell to the ground.

The others who saw it tried to copy her move, glad the animals were reacting in fear instead of rage.

Some of the fighters continued to battle the dogs with intent to kill, however, angering Daniel. He gestured to the other males. "Sing! Do it now!"

The awkward chorus of voices had an immediate effect. The hounds froze, heads tilting up to allow death swings and collar slices. The rest of the changelings in the field snapped or fought to control their need as they tried to kill the remaining troops and not be mauled by the hounds or get trampled by the weaker fighters now trying to get out of the area with their lives. Blood and screams littered the battlefield.

Candice didn't care. She was trying to make her way to Daniel and the line of singing males at the far end where the woods met the water. He didn't realize he had made himself a target for every changeling on the field.

All across the bloody grass, hounds without collars were also running toward the line of singing males. Some had already reached them and were providing a wall of defense against the snapped

changelings now scrambling toward the men with red orbs and long claws.

Candice had flipped from an angry changeling into a terrified woman trying to reach her mate. There were others already ahead of her who would reach him first. “Look out!” She knew there was no way Daniel could hear her.

She watched in horror as two women flying through the crowd leapt up and knocked Daniel to the ground. One of the females grabbed his arm as she rose and began to drag him off.

The second woman attacked the first; the two fell into a vicious battle for the prize.

Candice ran faster. She’d never been so terrified.

“Keep singing!” Daniel shouted toward the other terrified males as he stood up. Changelings by the dozens were rushing toward the line of men, hounds and troops forgotten.

“Do you want freedom?!” Daniel screamed. “Do your duty to the rebellion! Sing!”

A few of the terrified males took off running instead, but the majority did as they were told. It was heartening and horrifying to witness defenseless males take up fighting stances while forcing out a ballad.

“Louder!” Candice passed the singers to reach Daniel. Two other women arrived at the same time, but not the two who were still fighting over him. Candice spun in a wide circle with her sword out and took off both of their heads. She considered it

fair payment for the way her heart was pounding at almost losing Daniel.

As the enslaved males tried to sing louder, emboldened by Candice being near them, the bloody frenzy on the battlefield began to calm. The sound of the male singing wasn't possible to resist when it was concentrated.

“Get the rest of those collars!”

It took Candice a moment to realize Daniel was talking to her. She smirked and gave a low bow. “As you wish.”

Free to be herself, Candice allowed the disease to take over, but not to kill. The novel approach required a great deal of effort on her part not to shove the blade home instead of slashing through the leather restraints.

Next to her, Leo and Ivy were trying to remove the collar from a snarling dog, but they were both afraid to get close enough to do it.

Bobby shoved them aside and darted forward with his small dagger to free the hound. It wasn't a surprise when he turned to them and smirked. “I can get used to this.”

Ivy chuckled.

Leo scowled.

Covered in blood and gore, Candice continued helping cut the collars.

Daniel and the males kept singing, controlling the situation and the females. Freed hounds were gathering around Daniel and the males, providing a slobbering line of protection that the other

changelings were choosing not to fight. The singing and the calmer demeanor of the freed animals was causing the disease to weaken. Except for the Pruetts. Daniel didn't know why they weren't pausing in their anger, but he assumed it was related to their family somehow. It was clear that they were different.

Chester tossed homemade explosives at the hounds and the Network troops, grinning widely as gore was blown across the battlefield. "I love playing with fire!"

Sophia glared on her way by him. "Pay attention!"

Chester ducked the swipe of a changeling and slit her guts open with his long blade. She sank to her knees in shock.

He swiped out again and took the head of the changeling next to them who was aiming for Bobby. Blood sprayed him in a wide arc.

Sophia and Horace fought side-by-side, punching, stabbing, and kicking in tandem. Defenders went down as they cleared the path for Chester to come behind them and slit throats or snap necks. They'd been fighting together for a long time.

The entire Pruett clan roamed the battlefield, shooting injured troops and freeing giant dogs. The corner of the clearing held the line of orphans who had been cooking when the attack began. There was no need for them to come onto the field. The Glowers and mountain women had those children

surrounded, but the kids themselves were waiting with clubs and sharpened sticks for anyone who did make it through the line of protection. The Glowers were only afraid of the dogs and the mountain women weren't scared of either. They all waited eagerly for the battle to reach them.

Candice and her family worked together to keep that from happening. Candice had told the two groups to look after the children, but she'd also wanted them out of the way. The Glowers might accidentally infect people on their side and the brutes were never careful about who they killed once a fight started. She and her clan met near that line to counter the remaining squad of troops who hadn't been able to retreat. The fifteen big females in silver and black were no match for their nightmares as Pruetts surrounded them, giving no mercy even when it was screamed for.

You chose your side a long time ago. Candice stabbed forward and retreated before she could be hit. *Take it. You've all earned it.*

Feeling like the hand of justice, Candice was unprepared for the knife that slammed into her back. She staggered forward, hands out for balance.

"One down!" Leo jerked the blade free. He threw the knife this time, hitting Ivy in the neck as she gaped at him in horror.

"Goal achieved!" He raised his arms in victory. "Now am I good enough?!"

"Kill him!"

"Candy!"

Leo's body arched and jerked as he was shot repeatedly. Slugs and arrows flew into his chest, spine, and legs, but it was too late to stop the damage he'd done.

All three bodies fell to the parched ground in an eerie tandem.

"Medico! We need medicos!"

"Candy!"

Fresh screams and running feet echoed to Candice as she lay there bleeding. Pain flew along her spine like the fire she'd spent so many years battling. She forced out words. "Kill them all! Never stop fighting!"

The words were terrifying. It was what someone on death's doorstep said to keep the family from being too distracted to fight.

Across the battlefield, the fighting stopped. A sense of doom fell over the area, bringing a cloud that even the sun couldn't penetrate.

"She's dead." Bobby lowered Ivy to the dirt, shaking hands coated in her blood. "She said to never give up the fight for freedom."

Bobby stood up to help Chester.

Lydia grabbed Daniel as the bachelor reached them. The medic was already next to Candice, pulling items from a ragged pouch.

Daniel pulled away from her.

"Let him work!" Chester shoved Daniel to the ground. He was stronger, but he wasn't smarter. Daniel leapt up and tackled the bigger man, but as

soon as they hit the ground, he rolled free and scrambled toward Candice.

“Let him go!” Mary shoved through the growing ring of witnesses to reach her daughter. “Let me by!”

The medico, Gerald, looked at Mary in desperation. “I can’t help her. I’m not trained for this!”

Mary yanked her cloak open and dug deep. When she pulled out a branding kit, half of those who understood what was coming moved away. The others watched so they would know how to do it if they ever needed to.

Mary hit the button to activate the tool, internally wincing at the newest scar to her child’s already marred skin, but she didn’t hesitate to slam it over the gushing wound when the beep sounded.

“Great!” The medico reached over her to hit the reload button on the tool when it began to cool off. “I want one of those for my gear.”

“Save her life and you’ll have ten of them.” Mary handed it to him.

The man immediately finished the work, face determined. When a Pruett promised something, they delivered. He had to do the same.

Mary and Daniel stayed with Candice, leaving them without a leader on the battlefield. Fighters wandered aimlessly, some stripping troops of clothes and gear.

“We should do something here.” Bobby scanned the chaos. “She always said upset people

can't be left on their own or they'll come up with bad ideas."

"Like that?" Chester waved sarcastically as the mountain women told two Divas they couldn't go near the kids, causing another fight to break out.

Bobby shrugged. "I could sing."

Chester shrugged. "Get on the bullhorn. I'll guard you."

Bobby scanned for the magnifier that Daniel had dropped when he saw Candice fall. "There! Let's go!"

The two males took off running, drawing attention from the field of fighters.

"Shit! No running!" Chester grabbed Bobby's arm to slow them down. "They're in changed form."

"Oh, yeah!" Bobby kept pace with Chester as they fast walked toward the line of mostly forgotten enslaved males. The hounds had remained with the singers, protecting them, but none of the men had thought to keep calming things after Candice was hurt.

Bobby scooped up the bullhorn and went with Chester to stand near the largest group of the hounds, hoping that would help. Their women were all busy right now.

Bobby began to talk, unable to come up with a song to sing in his excited panic. "Happy afternoon, New Network City residents!"

The absurd statement drew snickers and disgusted snorts, but it also took the anger down a notch.

“Well, go on.” Chester gestured. “Be yourself. It won all of us over.”

“Okay, folks. Have you heard the one about the fire hound and the changeling? They were hot for each other.”

Chester rolled his eyes and tried not to get distracted. When Bobby got rolling, it was often hilarious.

“What about the vulture and the miner? Both of them were picked clean when it was over.”

That got actual laughs from the crowd, encouraging Bobby to do better.

“We also have bats and bachelors. Both come out at night and suck.”

Chester frowned. “That’s too far.”

Bobby ignored him for the snickering females who were slowly turning from the anger to enjoy a new show. “What about the Snakes and Divas? They spend their time eating each other.”

The double jab earned Bobby a ripple of laughter that was addicting. He’d never played for an audience this big. He quickly picked out another nugget he’d heard from Sam and her Runners. “This city has it all, folks. We have a Network that doesn’t work and Defenders that don’t defend. We have warm running blood and cold water showers. We have the best of nothing. It makes us a special place.”

“Collars!” Candice tried to stay alert through the agony. “Get away from the collars.”

Dismay flooded those who heard as they realized what she meant. Men and women began screaming at each other, trying to give a warning that Candice knew was too late. The enemy was about to take another cut.

The first explosion scattered awful debris as it blew up next to a line of Divas and snakes.

Candice found Daniel's hand and pulled him close. They held each other as the collars went off, blowing up allies and enemies alike.

Daniel didn't let go even when she sagged in his arms and the medic fell over from a shrapnel hit. *I've got you. You looked out for me. Now, it's my turn to make sure you survive.*

Next to them, Mary and Bruce were locked in the same embrace, listening to screams for help and savage reactions from locals who were being betrayed.

Divas and snakes began running away, taking the business women and the reporters along.

The starlets left slowly, mourning their losses. When they fled, they couldn't take the bodies or the enemy would know they'd been here. Everyone who ran had hopes of resuming their old place now that the Pruetts had been defeated.

"Cowards!" One of the rebel males with the bloody Nomads grabbed a gun from the belt of the nearest woman and opened fire at the running locals.

No one stopped him. Many of those who fled would name everyone who had been here to save

themselves. Killing them was justice to the men and to those who were alert enough to witness it. The rest of the people on the battlefield were injured, dead, or staggering around in dazed grief through the chaos and gore to find their friends or relatives.

The Pruetts were no different. Bobby and Chester were nowhere to be found, causing panic in their clan. The rest of them had gathered around Candice, refusing to leave her.

“She said we’d be hit this way. That’s why we’re using the plated cloaks. She said to act like we’ve all been killed if the opportunity came.” Before anyone could guess her plan, Mary smeared her bloody hands over Bruce and herself, and then dropped to the ground. “I’m hit!”

“Use a Para cord. Make it look like we were all hit.” Lydia was worried about Bobby, but she had faith that Chester would protect him.

Sophia scanned the battlefield desperately. “We’re still short two.”

“Follow orders!” Daniel was too furious to speak softly. “Don’t risk the plan over two men who can fend for themselves.”

Sophia clamped her lips shut as Horace drew out an explosive. He lit it quickly and tossed it into the empty trees nearby. “Everyone down! Incoming!”

The explosion wasn’t large, but it hit a pile of debris and sent real shrapnel flying toward the family.

When the dust settled, there was a pile of bodies that weren't moving.

"It got them!"

"The Pruetts are dead!"

The remaining fighters were stunned. Worry and loss swarmed over the survivors, bringing fresh rage. They'd been sucker punched and now, their leader was gone. Without the Pruetts, few of them held any hope that the rebellion would be successful.

As that slowly sank in, people began to leave. No one approached the family. The council would want proof the Pruetts were dead. No one wanted to be caught with a body the Network had a claim on. That was always an ugly conversation.

The orphans, many of them crying, also began to leave. The sight of the tough children in tears broke the remaining will to fight. The battlefield cleared, leaving the dead and severely injured who would all become fodder for the campaigns and stocks.

"Wait." Candice gritted her teeth at Daniel's weight. She'd woken from the pain when he'd collapsed on top of her to protect her from taking another hit.

"Hang on, Candy." Daniel could feel her fading. "We'll take care of you."

Candice listened to his heavy breathing, inhaling his sweet, sweaty scent. "I love you."

Grief and rage swamped him as she passed out. They'd hurt his mate. "They'll pay for this. The final word will be ours."

Mary grunted her approval from his side. "Yes, and when we come, there won't be mercy or hesitation. We're going to give the same treatment they've delivered. It is going to be the ugliest thing the Pruetts have ever done."

Around them, the family fought to keep from revealing themselves by letting the disease take control. After death, there were no changelings and uninfected. There was only the person who'd been smothering underneath all along.

Chapter Seventeen

Monsters

New Network City

1

Julian stared at the bodies.

Almost an hour had passed since the end of the battle that they had watched through the remote collars of the dogs before activating the explosives. The bands were set to detonate upon the animal's death or removal of the collar, but they sometimes triggered them early, like in the church.

The snakes and the Divas had been decimated. The few remaining members of those clans would slink off into the southern country until they were hunted down. He didn't expect to hear from them anymore. It looked like all of the targets that had been in this city were in the field or family stack. He had a crew on the way to collect the bodies.

"The special featuring the Diva elder is about to begin." Rusty hit a few buttons, bringing the dark screen in the center to life so they could view that carnage.

Julian let the council enjoy the episode without comment. He was staring at his screen, studying the pile. Something wasn't right, but he didn't know

what it was. “Who did you send to collect the bodies?”

“Just a recovery team.” Rusty didn’t understand why Julian was worried this time. “If there are any survivors, the medics have the equipment to get them stable so you can put them into a game. They’re arriving on the scene now.”

“That’s the trap!” Julian pounded his fist on the table. “Call them back!”

“Too late. They’re entering the field.”

“Pull them back right now!”

As if the pile of bodies on the screen had heard his shout, all but one moved. The legendary family, without the burdens of the civilians, grabbed their weapons and attacked the recovery team. Julian had no doubt it was to take the supplies. That meant one of them was honestly injured. *Who?*

Julian typed in camera directions and was able to zoom in on a body. It was Candice. “Is she dead?!”

On the center screen, the elder Diva screamed in agony as a vulture ripped into her stomach and began to eat. The sound was soothing. It had been hours since his fun in the cellblock. He didn’t care that the sentries and other prisoners had witnessed it this time, but the rage was barely being held in. It was almost time for him to move into the next stage of physical relief. Blood was no longer satisfying him.

“What do you want me to do?” Rusty wasn’t angry, only scared now of Julian’s rage. “I can send

more hounds. We also have two squads back from the eastern farms.”

“Blow them all up. Do it now.”

Even Rusty hesitated this time. The recovery crew was all medics. They rarely ever fought. They didn’t know their tool kits contained an explosive device. “Are you sure?”

Julian turned to glare.

Rusty shrugged “It’s just that this feed isn’t secure. Someone might figure it out.”

Julian continued to glower.

Rusty began typing in the code that would kill ten of their best medics. He had chosen the recovery team himself to ensure survivors could be brought in for interrogation and punishment.

2

“Take your clothes off!” Chester shouted at the captive females, shoving one of them with the front of his gun. He had no intention of firing upon the unarmed women, but it didn’t seem that way as he leaned forward. “Get those clothes off right now!”

Around him, the rest of the family issued the same order.

The terrified medics were confused, but grateful they hadn’t been killed. They started to strip.

“Faster! You want to die!?”

“It’s beeping!” Bobby grabbed the tool belt near his feet and flung it as far as he could into the woods.

It exploded seconds later.

“Tool belts off! Tool belts off!”

As the medics realized the belts were programmed to detonate, they scrambled to remove them.

Mary and Sophia used their knives to slash the belts off the females who cringed from them in fear. It was just like dealing with the males.

Multiple explosions hit the area, but none of them were hurt due to Chester’s quick thinking.

Bobby clapped Chester on the shoulder. “Nice catch!”

Chester shrugged. “Wish I’d been thinking that hard when I let Leo get next to our leader.”

Bobby’s face fell. “You and me both.”

Chester scanned the area, half expecting troops to flood the gory field to restart the fighting. When no sounds of that came, both men were relieved.

“Do you think he sold us out? Or was it jealousy of Daniel?”

Daniel glared at them from his position next to Candice’s body. He hadn’t left her. “He sold us out.”

Chester stared. “How do you know?”

Around them, the family stilled to hear Daniel’s answer. His opinion was coming to be respected.

“How did they know we were here? How did they know where to send the medics to collect the bodies?”

Once Daniel pointed it out, it was obvious. The enemy was watching them.

“Do you want us to find the camera or should we prepare to move out?” Sophia looked at Daniel and then Mary.

Daniel gestured toward the medics who were checking their clothing and getting dressed. “That’s up to them. I don’t know enough medical information. It might not be safe to move Candy yet.”

Sophia and Mary took charge, directing a group to spread out and search for the camera. The Network had to be able to see them, which meant the council knew the Pruetts had survived and their medical team was now captive. Wanting to be sure the innocent medics were firmly on their side, Daniel spoke to them in low tones while holding his gun on them.

“I assume they can’t hear us from here. If I’m wrong then this won’t work.” He scanned their terrified faces. “Your masters will believe you are captives. You’re not. As soon as it gets dark, you can leave.” He looked down at Candice, who was unconscious. “I love her. Please save her in return for the favor I’ve given you. Give her back her life.”

“I found it!” Lydia climbed the tree to reach it. She could see where someone had come up recently and used the same footholds, assuming that if it had held Leo’s body then it would also hold hers. They were roughly the same height and weight, though she had her changeling fury as backup and he had only been full of cowardice.

“Why did Leo do it?” Bobby didn’t understand. “Killing Pruetts isn’t worth the reward the Network would have offered.”

“I don’t think the enemy came to him.” Bruce joined the two men at the base of the tree.

Lydia ripped the camera free and threw it to the ground.

Bobby frowned as the metal and plastic broke apart across the dirt and blood. “What do you mean?”

“I think he realized Ivy was never going to claim him. He was always going to be an outsider in this family. He had already spent all of his life that way—never being good enough for the person he was with. He snapped.”

“Snapped, like a changeling?”

One of the medics nodded. “We’ve suspected men get a variation of the disease. The Network won’t admit it, but we’ve watched our sons and brothers suffer through it. There was no reason to believe they would be mean.”

“There was also no reason to believe they wouldn’t be.” Mary felt her fire flare up and shivered. “Can you imagine males who change like we do?”

“We can’t free them.” Lydia didn’t glance at her men. “We can’t take that chance. I’m changing my vote to no.”

The males in the family didn’t protest yet. They were too horrified at the thought of becoming like the females they were so afraid of.

“Come help me.” Chester directed, full of anger and confusion that seemed to lend credit to the theory they’d just been discussing.

Bobby joined him to start gathering rocks for a burial. Pruetts didn’t leave their kin in the open to rot unless there was no other choice.

Leo’s body wasn’t touched. He wasn’t family.

3

Adelphia Stadium

“Look at that Pruett run! The other four racers can’t keep up even while changed!”

Sam was paying for the extreme boost of energy. Over the years, her family had discovered chemical means to enhance the disease. Eating energy balls beforehand worked, as did the nastier method of eating raw vulture eggs. For a few hours, the chemicals drew from fat stores and produced a steady stream of adrenaline that fueled their muscles. It also drained the body, sometimes causing failures in critical areas, like the heart.

Sam staggered as she crossed the finish line, chest squeezing. She fumbled in her cloak for a crude tablet that she shoved into her mouth while appearing to wipe away the spittle that had formed at the corners. She forced herself to straighten and glower toward the cameras, hiding the pain behind the rage. She then used her remaining energy to spin and draw the spikes from her belt.

The antidote worked fast, but it also made her vision blurry as it fought to slow the adrenaline stream. Sam took the time to aim. She couldn't afford to have her reputation damaged by this moment.

She hit both of the final racers, but neither were kill shots.

The roar of the stadium and the announcer faded as the buzzing in her ears grew so loud that she was forced to shut her eyes and allow her body to react as the two remaining racers reached her with furious screams.

Claws swiped through her tattered cloak, leaving furrows of heat across her shoulder as she ducked the swing. She immediately lunged toward the steps crunching closer, long blade extended. She felt it slide into her arm and swiveled around to hack at the leg of the opponent about to stab her in the side. Eyes stinging, she scanned through cracked lids for the other racers.

Sam felt the blow coming, but couldn't avoid the thin knife that plunged into her stomach and ripped upward.

Sam used her claws to pull the stunned woman closer, causing the knife to go in deeper. "I can't be killed!" Sam shoved the woman down and drove her own blade into an eye socket.

Ignoring the mess, Sam waited for the next attack, vision straightening and then fading again as the opposite chemicals fought for control.

"Medico!"

Sam took two steps toward the tunnel and dropped like a stone.

The noises faded as she lay there, feeling pain and dimness fighting over her nerve endings. *Can I just die now?*

The inner voice that seemed to only be found in her kin was relentless. *No. Not now, not like this.*

Sam lifted her head. “What’s next?”

The quieted stadium burst into shouts and cheering that the reporters knew not to air. Sam was now as popular as the game itself because of her refusal to play by the rules.

Sam listened to her fans with one thought in mind. *Get the body carriers ready. I’m going to fill them up.*

Chapter Eighteen

Let's Get to It

Northern Borderlands

1

“I’m going to call you Thomas.”

Animal man glanced over tiredly. “What?”

In the daylight, the bachelor’s scars gave him the appearance of being a Pruett. Angelica shrugged. “I can’t keep calling you animal man. You’re more civilized than many of the females I’ve been on bounty runs with.”

“Thomas is as good as anything else.” The male was too tired to argue and her choice was actually close to the truth.

“How did you get put into the games?”

Thomas stumbled over a small rock buried in the hardpacked ground. “Traded.”

“Your mother?”

“Network. I was born in a lab.”

“Are you one of the twelve who produce immune children?”

Weary of the lies, he stopped, forcing her to do the same to hear the answer. “Any man can be immune. The women get doses to keep the disease alive. By thirty, it dies out on its own unless enhanced.”

Weariness smothered Angelica suddenly, taking her strength. Her stomach roiled and her skin went clammy. She staggered, dropping her to her knees.

“Are you okay?!”

“Just need a minute.”

Thomas waited, worrying as she stayed down, breathing shallow. Her green face told him it was a stomach problem, but he knew she hadn’t eaten in a day because he’d witnessed the argument between her and Jason over it.

“Inoculations?” She resumed their conversation after a minute of placing pieces.

“Yes. The males get them in the labs to make them sterile or to steal a child. The females are infected and then reinfected at each vaccine event. How else could they keep an entire population like this over the centuries?” He frowned down at her.

“Are you ill?”

“I’m pregnant. It’s too soon to know for sure, but I do, just the same.”

“That shouldn’t be possible.”

“It is if I haven’t been vaccinated.”

“You haven’t had a vaccine in the last ten years?”

She shook her head. “None of us have. Mary Pruett fudges the computer to make it look as though our town takes part. Some of them do. We haven’t for a long time.”

“Then you’re left with an early strain. It might not pass to your child.”

Angelica felt relief at having any hope. It was what had kept her from claiming Jason when they'd realized how they felt. She didn't want to subject a child to this misery. She'd spent most of her life wishing her mother hadn't done it to her.

Thomas extended a hand, and his trust. "Come on. We need to get moving."

Angelica let him help her up, able to sense a difference in him already at the news. Hadn't he been around a pregnant woman before? She snorted at her own naiveté. He'd told her he was born in the labs. He'd never been around females at all, except in training.

"I'm going to use you as a bargaining chip for our travel." Angelica started walking again. "As collateral for payment. You'll have to stay with them while we travel."

Thomas sighed. "That's why I came. I've heard of the fishmongers. They're hard up for company, and they'll make any trade for it."

"My sister says the same, but she also said they're like us—honorable. We'll use that side and the Pruett shield." She met his eye. "I need to mark you."

Thomas shook his head. "I don't want it as a ploy. If it isn't honest, keep your mark."

"It is honest. You've been loyal to Baker and he's like a brother to me."

Thomas lifted a brow. "I get the mark?"

She cracked a smile at his hopeful tone. "If you'll accept it and all that it means."

“With pride.” He stopped. “Now?”

Angelica drew a small box from her pocket. Before he could view the needles, she had taken the tool in hand and slammed it against his neck.

“Ahhh!”

Angelica stored it, remembering when she’d marked Jason. That had been much gentler, but she didn’t have the strength and patience right now. “Have *you* ever seen a fishmonger?”

Thomas shook his head, fingering the warm tattoo. “Not even on newscasts or in old books. Only in stories from prizes brought back after escaping.” He dropped his chin. “And from renters.”

Angelica sympathized with his emotional turmoil, but she needed information and pushed on. “What did the rumors say?”

“They wouldn’t stay out of the water. The chemicals did the same thing to them.”

“All changelings are bloodthirsty. What makes these so different?”

“Their males are not sterile. They just don’t produce many.”

“Are they mutants?”

“Yes. They have gills and webbed feet.”

Angelica took a few moments to consider the information, trying to balance it with the fact that neither of them knew if the rumors were true. She had heard the same stories from Sam and the Runners, with the girls all being drunk at the time. She hadn’t put much faith in them. She also hadn’t

listened hard because she'd thought it was just another of their tall tales.

"If I get hurt, you'll avenge me?"

Angelica stiffened. "I'm not going to take many more times of you insulting my honor before I do something about it, *Animal*."

The bachelor knew better than to say anything else, but his thoughts were clear. He didn't trust anyone.

Angelica assumed he had good reason for it. "You're not going to die here."

He didn't respond.

"Why did Baker put you in leadership?"

The man didn't answer, but Angelica could tell that he wanted to.

"This isn't a family thing or a power trip. I need to know."

"I was a favorite rental for a while in the complex."

Angelica lifted her brow. "High-level clientele?"

"I serviced some of the council." He grimaced. "If you get the chance, kill Shelly for me."

Angelica stopped. Baker hadn't told her or Candice that. She spun toward her companion, scarred face etched in the Pruett intensity that was so deadly. "Tell me everything and do it right now."

Before the man could run or speak, they were both shocked into alertness by the sound of an engine coming toward them.

Engine? Angelica froze. Who had an engine out here?

The sound of rushing water came next, telling her they were closer to their destination than she had realized.

Angelica grabbed Thomas's arm and ducked behind what remained of a large warehouse built from brick and petrified trees. The Network had quickly learned that old materials were unusable, but not before they had wasted a lot of time, money, and lives in ventures. The Borderlands were dotted with failed projects.

The sound of engines grew closer. Angelica scanned for a telltale dust cloud, hoping it wasn't troops. The engines sounded like Mopars.

After a few seconds, the sound began to fade. Angelica cautiously stood up to try to spot the vehicles. As soon as she did, the smell of salt and fish hit her nose in a thick wave.

Angelica took in the ripple of upset water and the shadows of multiple women working in the murky liquid. Small boats roamed the outer waves, pushing fish toward the shore.

She studied the webbed hands pulling on nets, the wading pants cut out in the rear to allow for a short tail, the hair pinned up to keep from clogging gills on their necks, and realized her plan wasn't going to succeed. She and the rest of her relatives were wild. They lived in ways most citizens of New America wouldn't understand, but these women were even more rugged than the desert Glowers

they had found under the old city of St. Louis. These females weren't going to be fooled. The situation demanded honesty and a lot of luck. If it went wrong, she would die here. Thomas would die later, after a lot of misery.

There isn't another choice. If I don't get the males out of here, the weather or the environment will kill them before the enemy does or they'll start getting sick and I don't have a way to help them. What can I offer these females, honestly, to get their help?

Angelica studied the sturdy, misshapen bodies, mind flying. She looked down at the nervous male next to her, pieces clicking into place. These women would want the same thing the Glowlers wanted, the same thing everyone wanted—freedom.

Angelica took Thomas's arm, and helped him to his feet. "Stay close. Act as if you're at the complex with one of the renters."

Before Thomas could protest, Angelica stepped into view, forcing him to stay on her heels. She lifted an arm and waved energetically. "Hello! How is everyone today?!"

"Should I act like I belong to you?"

"Feel your neck."

Thomas gingerly probed the new tattoo on his neck.

"You already are my property. So, yes, act like I own you. I do." Angelica went straight toward the small crew, drawing attention.

Thomas expected the females to rush over and attack them, but no one did. Everyone froze, watching them in careful stillness. “They don’t seem surprised.”

“No, they don’t.” Angelica waved again, this time toward a small hut in the distance where several people were standing. As she waved, more came to the door. She assumed that was where leadership would be, but she didn’t go there yet. She went to the workers on the dock first.

The women were wearing clothes made from the hide of every animal available in these wastelands. The weapons had also been fashioned from the weak wood and unforgiving stone, providing knives and swords that had small handgrips because the wood wouldn’t take a blow if it were longer. “I’m Angelica Pruett.”

The tense mutant standing at the edge of the dock was clearly a supervisor from her clothes and weapons, but she didn’t act like it as she returned Angelica’s handshake with a confused expression instead of alertness like this situation required.

They may not be as much help as I thought. Angelica gave a quick pump of the woman’s webbed hand and let go. “I’m here to talk about the rebellion and a job. Who do I speak with?”

The woman pointed toward the shack. “Marta is the boss here.”

Angelica gestured toward her slave. “Come along now.”

Angelica moved toward the hut with Thomas on her heels. He kept his eyes on the ground, trying not to shake. The females were staring at him with more hunger than he'd ever felt and that was after servicing the council. It was terrifying. *I'm not going to die here. I'm not going to die here.* He repeated it over and over, forcing himself to trust his new protector.

As they walked toward the house that was roughly half a mile away, more females came out to stare at them in shock and suspicion. Now that they were on the shoreline, it was easier to see the tarps placed between huge boulders to serve as protection for campsites. It was obvious they didn't live here. This was a work site.

With his vision limited, Thomas was spared the sight of slaves scurrying around with painful limps and skips.

It was hard to tell how their injuries had been caused, but Angelica had observed the same evidence of torture at the complex. She did a rough count as she maintained a steady pace. With unknown groups, going into their lair or turf wasn't wise. If you had to do it, openly was often best for success in getting whatever it was that you'd come for. Angelica had been there when that plan had gone haywire, however; she stayed ready to scoop up her companion and run. There were too many for her to fight, especially if the males here were loyal to their owners or too scared not to follow attack orders.

As they neared the large shack, they were able to see it was actually two small huts directly in front of each other. Angelica assumed the first was for business. The rear would be a home for management. The shacks were 10'x10' and made from rotting wood covered in straw and mud. They appeared surprisingly sound.

Angelica kept her hands away from her weapons as three large mutants in front of the first shack came to attention in recognition.

“It’s one of them.”

“Get the boss.”

“She’s here.”

Angelica slowed her steps as her mind placed those words to the proper reaction. They were leery, but not hostile. Were they waiting to be invited into the fray or did they know their services were desperately needed? She would soon find out. The boss would know she was here in a few more seconds.

She smiled at the guards. “I’m Angelica Pruett.”

Raquel, a veteran of the wasteland, scanned her in suspicion. “Prove it, please.”

Angelica tilted her neck. “You can accept the mark or I can kill half your crew as a demonstration.”

Raquel frowned. “We are not easy targets for bounty hunters. The men here have been freed and taken shelter with us. They all have their papers.”

Angelica shrugged as if she would want to have that proven. They thought she was here to search for escaped males. *I can work with that.*

“Bring her in!” A voice echoed loudly from the first hut. “Don’t keep a bounty hunter waiting—ever! It makes you look guilty.”

“But we’re not.”

“That doesn’t always matter. Bring her in.”

A fourth sentry came to the doorway and pushed aside the netting. “Come.”

That boss voice came again. “Don’t be rude!”

Angelica waited for the sentry to step aside so she could enter. She scanned first for threats and exits, then she studied the fishmongers.

Thomas stopped in the threshold, right where she wanted him for the moment. He was safer between her and the shack guards than he was in this room. That was clear.

The small table in the center held various bones. From what she could see, most of them were animals, but Angelica couldn’t be positive about all of them.

There was a single table and chair, though the chair wasn’t visible beneath the overlapping rolls of fat hanging down the sides of the woman in it. Matted brown hair curled around her hog-like face in greasy tendrils.

“I’m Marta. Welcome!” The woman belched loudly as she tossed a fresh remnant into the pile. “Sit! Eat!”

“Not on your life.” Angelica stared coldly. Marta was dressed in bleached leather that would probably drop her to the bottom like a stone if she ever went into the water.

Marta laughed, gesturing at the guards. “Get out.”

It forced Angelica to step in, jerking Thomas along so they weren’t separated as the guards fled.

“You eat your own.” Angelica was horrified, hand sliding to her belt.

Marta’s humor and polite veneer faded. “We are not easy targets and you need us. Don’t forget your situation.”

Angelica cautiously took the chair across from the disgusting woman. “You can’t be trusted.”

“No.” Marta reached into a small pail in her lap to emerge with a crispy leg of a sort that Angelica refused to let her mind identify. “But I can be bought.” She peered at Angelica with greed glittering in her too large eyes. “What can you offer me?”

“What do you need the most? Name three items. We’ll bargain down to two.”

“I only want one.” Marta angrily waved the greasy leg. “Real food.” She sucked off the entire leg of meat, leaving only the charred bone.

Angelica gaped. “You’re kidding, right?”

Marta swallowed it whole, then tossed the bone into the corner of the shack. “No. You eat fish all your life and see how it is to smell roasting flesh. You’d break, too.”

“So, you’d give up cannibalism if you had food of your choice?”

“Yes. We all would.” Marta lowered her voice. “They’ll vote me out soon, but each of them take second helpings when someone dies. It’s gruesome the way we’ll do anything to have fresh meat.”

Angelica didn’t feel any heat from the woman. “You’re changelings?”

“Yes.”

“Weakened.” Thomas stiffened as the woman’s attention swung to him.

“Yes. The older we get, the less our children are infected.” She shrugged. “Still backfires. Older women can’t have many babies and most of them are deformed because of our diet.”

Angelica repeated a favorite Network saying. “Chemicals have been clear from the water for over a century.”

“That’s a lie.”

Angelica wasn’t sure what to say. She had limited knowledge about nuclear effects, besides what they faced daily as bounty hunters in harsh lands. “How does the enemy avoid that in their own food supply?”

“They found the remnant of fishing farms in the oceans all along our coastlines. They rebuilt them, improved them, and then ran us out of the area so no one would know the truth. All coastal populations are slowly becoming mutated.”

“That explains the migrations inland over the centuries.”

“Yes. The enemy has a lot to answer for.”

“I agree. Will you be there to receive the reward or will your heart give out before you get a chance to fight?” Angelica snarked. The woman was huge.

“Fight?” Marta laughed. “We’ll provide the ride you need and then we’ll vanish into the tide until it’s time to claim a reward.” Marta’s face turned to stone. “And that’s all you’ll get from us, Pruett. Your sister has hunted our kind. Your cousin ignored us in her plans for rebellion. We feel very little loyalty to any of you.”

Thomas took a chance. “What about the males you’re sheltering? Do you have loyalty to them?”

“They cook.” Marta showed no visible reaction to his words or his voice. “We adore our cooks. They get first pick of everything—including mates.” She scanned Thomas. “Can you cook?”

Thomas straightened as if insulted. “No. I can prepare a gourmet meal. Cooking is for bounty hunters and Network troops.”

Marta laughed again. “Good, good. You’ll fit in here.” She glanced at Angelica. “All of them say that, but only a couple can make thigh taste like steak.”

Angelica almost gagged.

Thomas shook his head. “I won’t do that, not for any reason. I’d starve first.”

Marta shrugged off his revulsion. “For survival, you would do much worse. I know. I’ve done it.” She scanned them both again. “We need a diet we

can survive from without shame. Provide that, Pruett whelp, and we might even fight for you.”

“I want you to protect a package.” Angelica was glad that the main threatening was finished. “It’s a very large package. You’ll need near a hundred boats. We can’t make multiple trips.”

“You don’t want your cargo split up.” Marta nodded. “I understand.”

She didn’t seem aghast at the idea of so many boats, encouraging Angelica. “It’s live cargo and has to be handled carefully.”

Marta scanned Thomas again before looking back. “You know I can’t guarantee recapture at checkpoints.”

“You can and will. As we travel, we’ll feast. We’ll do it again every evening. Then I’ll broker your end of the deal to be sure you aren’t forgotten in the restructuring that will have to happen.”

“I need proof of the food before I call in any boats.” A wicked gleam came into Marta’s eyes. “Cook for us. Now.”

Angelica glanced at Thomas. She saw his reluctance and shrugged. “I have to gather some items. I won’t use what you have here.”

Marta shrugged, belching loudly. “You can come and go, Pruett, but keep your male close. Until we have a deal in place, you don’t have protection.”

Angelica gave the woman a harsh grin from her games. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Marta paled a bit at the threat. “No need for that, whelp. Just keep your end of the bargain.”

Angelica motioned toward Thomas. “Come along.”

He followed her docilely from the shack, but he also flashed a quick look of interest at Marta, hoping it would help their cause. Thomas wanted to reach the border and this disgusting woman might be the only way. He was willing to pay whatever price was required.

Angelica led him out of the working zone, picking out more guards than she’d noticed on the way in. “Stay close.” She felt more trouble coming. “Actually, come here.”

She quickly removed her cloak and draped it around his bigger shoulders, tugging until he was covered. She drew up the hood, hiding him better than his outfit had. “If we get split up, go underground. Leave a trail. I’ll find you.”

Realizing there was about to be a fight, Thomas stared around worriedly, but he didn’t see anything.

Angelica knew what was about to happen. “It’s a test of who I am.”

She sighed as a line of mutant women appeared in front of them, blocking the path. Angelica sighed unhappily. “The family name needs some work in this zone.” She drew her longest blade into one hand and her gun into the other. “Let’s get to it.”

2

“Was this a part of your plan?”

Angelica grunted at the sarcasm. She had put up a great fight against the fishmongers, but one of the mutants had grabbed Thomas and threatened to slit his throat. She'd been forced to surrender.

It had shocked Thomas into complete loyalty. At that moment, he had expected to be betrayed. Instead, he had discovered a woman he could trust. As a result, he was busy squirming and wriggling against his bonds, trying to find a way to save her life.

They were tied to stakes between boulders, preventing anyone passing by from easily seeing them. The ground under her body was rough with rocks and debris that had washed ashore, but Angelica didn't need them. All Pruett's carried spare weapons in odd places. It was in their training.

"I can't believe you gave in to them. I thought you were a Pruett."

"That means different things to us than it does to some." Angelica was using her fingers to dig into the pocket of her pants. The women had taken her cloak, and patted her down while removing her belt, but they hadn't searched her clothes. That was mistake number one. Mistake number two was leaving her alone. They hadn't put a guard on duty.

Feeling slightly insulted, Angelica flipped the knife open and cut herself free. She had woken next to Thomas, relieved to see him there. After being struck from behind, her last thought through the grayness had been that he would probably taste

good. His body had been beaten on enough over his life to be tenderized.

Angelica freed Thomas and helped him to his feet, aware that he wasn't flinching away from her as he'd been doing. Without the capacity to explore his emotions, she gave him a comforting slap on the shoulder that knocked him off his feet.

Thomas looked up at her in amusement.

"We'll have to work on that." Angelica grunted, helping him up again. "Which way did they go?"

There was no sign of the fishmongers around them now. Even the small fires had been doused and covered. Angelica hoped they had gone downriver.

"I heard their leader say they were going to search for our cargo."

Angelica's eyes turned brilliant red. "They're going to find it and then some."

She motioned Thomas toward the closest fire pit to them. "Go blow that and bring it to life. Have a big meal waiting."

Before he could argue, Angelica took off running toward the den where the rebel males were hiding.

Thomas was glad he was going to miss the battle this time. Watching Angelica kill was as bad as watching the other women do it, except that in some ways, it was worse because he liked her.

Sighing in weary determination, Thomas began to scour the area for a meal.

Chapter Nineteen

Run for It

The Borderlands

1

“**S**he’s been gone a long time.”

Jason didn’t answer at first because he didn’t realize Ralph was talking to him. Ralph was the only hard ass in this group of rebels as far as Jason was concerned.

“We want you to find her.”

Jason frowned. “She said to stay here.”

“Do you always do what she tells you to do?”

Jason snickered. “Usually.”

Ralph sneered. “I guess you’re not who we thought you were.”

“Who is that?” Jason was starting to get angry. He stood up.

“We thought you were a leader. Baker told us we could depend on you, but you haven’t done anything to help. All you’ve done is spend nights wrapped in her arms.”

Jason looked around, at the dozens of men who were listening. This story would spread to the other three hundred and fifty-two men here. After careful consideration, Jason gave them an answer he

thought Angelica would approve. "I assumed free men don't need a boss. Was I wrong?"

Trapped, Ralph frowned. "We want you to go after her."

"I'm going to."

Ralph started to argue further, then realized what Jason had said. "Okay, good. When?"

Jason pointed toward the sky they were able to see from the very top of the door, where it didn't fit evenly with the earth anymore. "I'm waiting for it to get dark."

"You're going out into the Borderlands, alone and weaponless, in the dark?"

Jason nodded. "Yes. Coming?"

Now the one who needed to defend his courage, Ralph slowly agreed. "We'll take a group."

Satisfied he had handled it in a way that hadn't required him to tell anyone what to do, Jason moved toward the door. "As soon as I can't see light, I'm going out there. If I don't come back, do the best you can to get these guys to the wall."

Realizing he had been gifted with leadership, Ralph scowled deeply. "I'm going!"

Jason shook his head. "They need you more than I do."

That tone left no room for argument.

Almost pleased despite not getting his way, Ralph moved into the small crowd to pick out a crew of men to protect Jason while he searched for Angelica.

That went okay. Jason congratulated himself. *Now if I do the rest of the show as well, we might all survive.* Jason was almost certain Angelica was in trouble and needed help. He'd never felt this way, even during the times they had been split up. He might have worried over her safety while he'd been a true bachelor, but he knew better now. Angelica was a Pruett and they could take care of themselves, but this was different. His heart wouldn't settle into a normal rhythm and his mind insisted she was calling for him. It was impossible to ignore. When it had started, he'd passed it off as indigestion from the badly cooked meal made with short rations. Now, he knew it for what it was. Jason wasn't scared of being out in the Borderlands alone. He was afraid of arriving too late to save the woman he loved.

2

Jason climbed out of the hole with his small group. He waited until they were all together and the door was closed before he began giving instructions and pointing out landmarks. He hoped that if they were split up, the men would be able to find their way back to this small semblance of safety. Distracted, he didn't hear the hatch open again.

Ralph came to Jason and held out a small knife. "We had an extra. You take it."

Jason found dozens of men already out of the hole around him and more climbing out. “What’s going on?”

Ralph chuckled. “We decided we weren’t going to let you have all the fun.”

Jason realized this was the way for the men to prove to themselves that the women were wrong about them always being without courage. During their time as slaves, the men had learned bravery wasn’t the absence of fear. Bravery was action despite fear.

Jason turned toward the direction Angelica had taken, now leading his army. This was part of what he had dreamed of during his years in the complex, waiting for rescue from Rankin. *If I had known it felt this good, I would have rescued myself.*

Jason pointed out items for them to take as weapons while they walked. The most common were rocks. Battles throughout the centuries, both on the side of freedom and against it, had been fought using parts of the earth. This one would be no different.

3

Angelica ran as if Jason’s life depended on it. He and the other men were learning to defend themselves, but they wouldn’t stand a chance against...

Angelica stumbled to a stop, unable to believe what she was seeing.

The culvert below her was filled with rebel males and mutated women, but they weren't fighting. They were eating.

"There she is!"

Jason smirked. "I told you she'd get free and come here."

Angelica staggered down the dusty incline and went to Marta after a fast scan of Jason's pleased face.

The fish leader glanced up from her bowl with a sloppy grin. "The whelp! How was your afternoon, young Pruett?"

"Fun. Let me show you." Angelica punched the woman in her mouth, knocking her over and spilling the soup.

Angelica identified chunks of snake meat and assumed someone had killed a reptile for their meal. She had no doubt that her mate had bargained this truce. Pleased, she sat by him and took the bowl he offered.

"Once we got it down, the rest was easy."

Angelica chuckled, allowing relief to release her from the uncomfortable changed form. She leaned against his arm, proud.

The two factions were sitting on opposite sides of the fire and cooking area, studying each other. The women were getting a meal. Soon, their thoughts would turn to other forms of satisfaction. The rebel males knew. They were wolfing down the food and getting set to run for their lives.

“They’ve called for the boats. They said Animal man wouldn’t be hurt. They were also supposed to free you.” Jason smirked again. Nothing kept a Pruett from their mate. When he’d found out they tied Angelica up and hadn’t left a guard, Jason had been able to relax.

“Thomas.”

“What?”

“His name is Thomas now.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“What deal did you make?”

“A conversation after a fast dinner.”

“How did you know what to bargain with?”

“I looked at their leader.”

Angelica laughed. Marta had picked herself up and resumed munching, not caring that she’d been hit or that a cut above her eye was bleeding thin droplets.

Free males and changeling women having a meal together and sharing peaceful conversations was something Angelica had never witnessed. She didn’t think anyone had observed a moment like this in centuries. There was flirting and growling, but no violence and no threats of abuse. All looks being exchanged across the campfire were genuine attraction between willing people. The Network had forbidden this behavior centuries ago. Angelica was happy to encourage it.

“Your army is going to run when the battle starts.”

Jason nodded at Angelica's warning. "I bought time until you got here. I didn't know what else to do. There's no way we can fight them."

Angelica sighed. "I'm sorry to ask, but will any of them...."

"Not a chance."

Angelica understood the revulsion. She wouldn't mate with a mutant either. "How long until the talk starts?"

Marta belched loudly. "All right." She leered at Jason. "What else you got?"

"Thirty men with guns aimed at you." Jason motioned his secret men to come forward as the females tensed, realizing they'd been trapped.

"If you order your girls to fight, my men will all aim for you. My friends will be captured, but you will be one fat splatter across the ground."

Angelica shivered at the hatred in Jason's voice. "He isn't bluffing." She looked up. "I can't believe you aren't bluffing."

Jason didn't take his attention from the fishmonger glowering at him. "There's another option."

"What's that?" Marta belched again, but this time, she didn't put more food into her hands.

"Make a deal that works for both of us."

"I told you; we have a deal with the Network and you're worth a lot of UDs. Pruett hospitality is good and all, but it can't match the masters."

"The masters are about to be gone. The dome will fall soon."

Marta laughed, making all of them brace for bad news.

“Yes, whelp, it will, but not because of a breach. The entire complex is wired. If your crazy family gets the mob to attack, the council will blow it up.”

“You can’t know that.” Jason was horrified. They couldn’t reach the city in time to warn anyone even if they left now and they had no reception out here to make a call.

“I can and I do. My girls and I service the docks. We’ve seen it. Hell, a few of us have helped place those pods because we breathe underwater. You’ve all been tricked.”

“Candice knows.” Angelica patted Jason’s arm. “We’ve always assumed they would bring it down before revealing their secrets.”

Displeased that her information wasn’t a surprise, Marta let out a sound of exasperation. “Well, do you know about the compound that can only be reached by sailing?”

Angelica straightened up. “Okay, now you have my attention.”

“But you still have nothing to trade.” Marta hadn’t relaxed.

“How about our bodies?”

Everyone turned to see Thomas trotting down the culvert. Behind him, the sun finished sinking, bringing blackness and sounds of night.

The rebel males protested his suggestion as Angelica waved him to her side. “I thought I told you to stay there.”

Thomas shrugged. "You also told me I'm a free man and I chose to go with that one."

"Well done." She glanced at Marta, brow lifting. "He made you an offer."

"Just him? To service all of us?"

"Who cares about your women?" Thomas reminded Marta of her words to them in the hut. "They're going to vote for your death anyway, right?"

Marta grinned. "I like you."

Her girls weren't happy, but it was clear they weren't going to argue yet.

Thomas joined Marta instead of Angelica. "Agree to everything she wants and I'll spend each night with you until your crew stabs you in your sleep. After that, Angelica will fight for leadership of your clan. That'll be your revenge. You saw how she fights. There's no way she'll lose. You only took her down because she wouldn't sacrifice me."

Marta grunted happily, tugging him down. "Deal!"

Angelica scanned Marta's women, seeing that truth and also the hatred. She singled one out while Thomas had Marta distracted with a kiss. When she motioned to the fishmonger and patted her pocket, the woman nodded eagerly and slipped into the shadows without being noticed. For a Pruett token, Marta would lose her life and Thomas wouldn't have to submit to her. As soon as she dragged him away to consummate the deal, she would be killed by one of her own.

Now enjoying herself, Angelica grinned at the show and pretended she wasn't a monster.

Chapter Twenty

No Females Allowed

Adelphia

1

“You’re fine. Get out of here!”

Sam smirked as she left the infirmary located in the bowels of the steamy stadium. The doctor had gotten angry upon seeing how fast she healed. Only the stomach wound had been serious, but a few hours with medical care had already sealed it. The collapse had come from the chemicals, but without specific testing, the haggard doctor couldn’t figure it out. Sam assumed the woman had bet against her and lost, but she didn’t care.

Sam closed the door, spotting extra guards and lines of new players being brought in for the next games. None of them met her eye as she strolled by.

Instead of going to rest, Sam went up the hallway to the outside, and marched to the guarded booths along this side of the stadium.

Around her, the crowd either cheered or booed at her appearance, depending on their bets.

Sam chose the appropriate booth for her needs and went in. Recognizing the clerk, she walked to the counter and shoved a weaker female aside. “I’d like to be switched to a replacement contestant.”

The small office in the side of the stadium went quiet as three dozen Defenders and another dozen racers turned toward Sam at the words.

The player she'd shoved fled the building, leaving Sam to believe she might have been the reason the girl had been in here. No one wanted a fair fight with her.

Sam gave the puzzled clerk a patient smile. "You know how to handle that?"

The Malin girl nodded, hands going to the console in front of her.

While Sam waited for the clerk to send the choice in, she ran through the rules, wanting to be sure that she had everything covered. The top two hundred racers from the trials were assigned to a game. The rest were sent to the small, dingy apartments outside the dome to be close in case they were needed. The replacement players were free to leave or run the trials again if they weren't used for the episode. During their time in the apartments, they were also allowed to charge a debt against any winnings. If they weren't chosen, the debt went on the family tab. If they died, the relatives owed the bill. The top racers also got a choice to be replacements, but few of them wanted to miss the glory. Replacement players also didn't have to wait until the end of the week to leave the stadium. They were put on a train and sent to the city. They even had an escort for protection. Sam wanted that for several reasons.

She scanned pictures on the walls of the booth, reading the dozen signs informing players of the rules in case they were naïve enough to have not researched it before they came there. Those who survived these brutal trials were put into brackets according to their times. Winners were the fastest average of all three runs. Roughly half the racers died or were too injured to continue, but hundreds of females applied daily for the chance to get a mate or at least freedom from the pain. Replacement players were always needed.

“The train leaves in an hour for New Network City.” Velvet was typing and reading. “The ride will take eighteen hours. You have an open account. Would you like to travel first class?”

Sam shrugged. “Sure. I never have.”

“I haven’t either.”

It was obvious the girl couldn’t afford it.

Sam left the office with an hour to kill. If she was late for her ride, she would lose her slot and be in trouble with the Network. If she hung around here, it was likely she would be ambushed before the train arrived. Sam headed toward the place most people would be too afraid to follow.

“Where you going?”

Sam ignored the young orphan girl who hurried after her. She didn’t approve of the roving gangs of children who stole to survive, but she did have sympathy for them. She was wise enough not to get mixed up with them unless she absolutely had to.

Some of the children were as bad as the adults, and all of them were spies.

As Sam got to the edge of the property, she noted guards around the entrances to the town. Instead of coming up with a clever lie, Sam used her new authority. "I'm doing a security check. I want an escort."

It was obvious the guards had been told not to leave their post, but when Sam held up a small pouch, two of the large females stepped forward.

Sam tossed the pouch in their direction and moved into the forbidden zone.

Behind her, the little girl ran off, presumably to tell on them.

Sam heard the gate rumble shut as they entered the thick line of trees outside the stadium. She was unable to spot the town through nature growing in thick brambles over the rubble that hadn't been cleared. The Network was strict about never letting anyone back here. Sam wanted to know what they were hiding. This might be her only chance to find out. Like Baker, she was almost certain she wasn't coming out of the complex alive. As pain lanced through her healing body and the fire inside flamed to a new notch, she realized she wasn't concerned over that reality now.

The town came into view as the trio left the cover of the tall trees that never lost their needles. It was small and quiet, with only a few women moving through the late afternoon shadows. Most of them were hanging wash or cooking on outdoor

fires, but a few were standing guard, though they appeared not to be.

Sam moved down the middle of the main street, seeing the town wasn't as small as the Network had led them to believe. Instead of four blocks, the main street ran a mile between rickety wooden shacks and crumbling prewar homes. Sam might not have noticed the smoothness of the street under her boots without the deep ruts on both sides that told her heavy wagons came through often. That could only be possible because of the road being in such good shape. Sam wondered who the builders were.

One of the main reasons the enemy cited for lack of recovery after all these years was limited engineering skills. They swore they were just using what was left from the war, but Sam and her relatives had never believed that. They had access to Network equipment and old, looted books. The styles of guns were different, even if they accounted for necessary modifications. Communications were also very different, as was a lot of the upper class household gear. The enemy had engineers somewhere—maybe here.

“We can't pass the last check point.” One of the big sentries slowed. “And so you know, we have orders to kill you if you miss the train.”

Sam chuckled. “Then you should have brought more help.” She ignored their unease, not stopping when they both did. “I'll need a crew when this all settles down, no matter which job I take.”

The temptation was too much for the guard who hadn't spoken. She hurried to catch up with Sam.

The other guard turned back toward the stadium, money pouch tucked securely in her pocket.

Sam kept walking. "Any chance you'd turn around and shoot her in the head?"

"Uh, no, not really."

Sam heard the tone and glanced over. "Even if I offered you a chance at being my XO?"

Now the sentry thought about it.

Sam knew. "All you'd have to do is beat my current XO in hand-to-hand, with no rules."

"Make it official and I'll get her before she reaches the trees."

Sam didn't respond.

Keeping pace, the woman frowned as she realized it had been a test. "What kind of game are you playing?"

"Just finding your price." Sam's tone stayed amused. "Pretty low."

"Do I get the token or not?"

Sam flipped the shiny ingot through the air. "I may need to make a quick exit. If that happens, it would be useful if someone was at the gate to let me out."

"Since that's where I'm supposed to be anyway, it's covered."

Not trusting the guard, Sam studied a large concrete and rubber building that reminded her of the dome, only shorter and rectangle. It was covered

in tarps and personnel who scurried around in black robes with the Network logo blazing across their hoods in vivid warning to stay away.

Sam ignored it.

As they reached the building, one of the workers came toward them, toting a stack of rolled papers. As he rushed, his hood fell off.

Sam froze as the man tugged his cover up and hurried on.

The man.

As he hurried away, Sam spun to watch him. He was taller and wider than a woman, with dark hair and a thick mustache that clearly identified his gender. There were free men in Adelpia.

The sentry next to Sam laughed. "It's always fun to see faces when people realize what's going on."

Sam cleared her throat to push back the bile that tasted like sulfur. "What *is* going on?"

"The Network is trying to increase the male population, like they promised when they passed the new law saying they can try drastic measures." The guard pointed to the hill behind the building. "That's the training center. You can't tell how big it is from here."

Sam understood the sentry believed the lies about the birth rates and didn't contradict her. "What is this place?"

"It's going to be the first town of men. They'll have guards, of course, and rules, but they'll be able to live here instead of in the complex."

Sam walked under the tarp and into the cool hall that was almost finished. Cords and wires were visible, but the rest of the work was done. This facility was about to be operational and Sam didn't believe the story of its use for a minute. "Is this a way to appease the UN?"

The guard looked at her blankly. "What?"

Sam shook her head. "Not important. Let's take the tour and get back."

Relieved, the sentry led Sam down the widest hall. "This first side is reception and registration. The slaves will be processed here over a few days and then assigned to one of the rooms in the center of the facility."

Sam saw the restraints on the chairs, waiting for wrists, but the cuffs were smaller than what she'd seen used on rental males. They were also padded, which was an improvement.

"This is the shower system. As you can tell, they will always be secure here. The chains move with them on treads beneath the floor. They won't escape."

"Interesting."

"It is, isn't it? I love watching the improvements. At some point, we really will be recovered from the war."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, yes. The Network won't ever stop until things are better than they were."

Sam didn't ask why the woman was betraying the masters she clearly loved. A Pruett favor or crew job paid better. This guard would be a threat.

No spot on my crew for you. Sam stepped through an entryway that didn't have a door yet, spotting a cafeteria sign.

Behind the tables and buffet counter, the wall was riddled with square holes that held tracks and wrapped trays. The food was going to be delivered to the rooms on a massive scale, meaning the tables in here weren't for the occupants. She could have assumed it was for the renters, but the lack of restraints and the stack of furniture in the corner said otherwise. Those tables and chairs wouldn't stand up to a changeling for more than a few uses. Plush and elegant, Sam thought of the starlets and wealthy residents who went to the dome and received apartments for their stay in the city. "A giant brothel."

"Yes." The sentry smiled at her mutter. "Isn't it great?"

Sam nodded to pacify the Defender, still scanning the huge cafeteria. Doors behind the counters ran into the cooking area, with bathrooms and closets nearby. Stacks of waiting materials were in another corner, drawing her attention. She couldn't tell what was under most of those tarps.

Sam left the guard and began peering under the covers, shining the light on her belt. She found cases of dishes in fragile formats, along with nonperishable goods and pots for cooking, but the

middle pallet was wrapped in thick plastic that she couldn't see through.

Heart thumping, Sam grinned as she sliced it open. *I love being a rebel.*

Her amusement fell as she pried open a small corner. The pallet was full of metal and laminated signs that would be hung throughout the facility. She could only read the top stacks.

No Females Allowed Beyond This Point.

Women are to be seen, not heard. No talking!

Do Not Consume Female Food. Conception preventatives have been added.

Sam felt thick horror creep over her shoulder and tap. "This isn't for them. It's for us."

The sentry leaned in the door. "I didn't catch that."

Sam stood up and replaced the cloth. "I said I'm hungry now. They're going to have pudding every day."

"Wow. Nice!"

Sam went on with her tour, but she didn't linger in the other rooms. The rest of this walk was for show. She had what she'd come for and it was worse than she'd imagined. Not only had Terry been telling the truth about men planning to retake control, it had progressed so far that female prisons were being constructed. A plan like this hadn't been quick or shortsighted. It might already be too late to stop it. She had to get on the train so she had a way

to warn her family. If she died before that, so would this information.

2

The Network

“Sam Pruett is nowhere to be found. We’ve searched the entire stadium and run her name through the cameras. We can’t locate her. We also can’t find Robert.”

Julian listened to the report, rage growing. The small town behind that stadium held too many secrets to allow a wild Pruett to roam there. “If she misses the train, kill her when she surfaces.”

“Is that wise?” Brandon was painfully aware of how dangerous Julian was right now, but the mob around this dome was just as deadly. “The crowd is expecting to see her. We’ll already have to make sure she comes in as a replacement contestant even if one isn’t really needed.”

Julian didn’t answer. He was busy scanning the probability of Sam discovering something during the short time she had before the train left the stadium. He didn’t know why she had chosen to be a replacement contestant and that bothered him. Not knowing what his enemy was up to was high on his list of reasons for failure.

Alex typed in a code and brought the center screen to life. “The ape just reached the city.” His slashed hands were covered in bandages, making it slow work. He wasn’t protesting putting kids in the

games anymore. Now, he was only concerned with his own survival.

Julian motioned toward Rusty, who began to issue orders to Lauren, who would send it out to the rest of their troops. *"This is a control alert. We have a breach in sector four."*

Rusty waited for more information as Julian stood up and moved toward his exit. *Is it time to go?*

Julian motioned. "Everybody needs to be ready to leave by the time the game interviews start. Move out."

Most of the council fled, eager to finish the packing they had started upon learning the evacuation was necessary.

Lauren waited until she and Shelly were alone. "Do you think we can hold it off for twelve hours?"

"I don't think we can get two hours if they attack the dome. I'll bet Juli leaves us."

"I wouldn't put that past him, but I'm not sure he's willing to run yet." Lauren typed in a code. The field where the Puetts were supposed to be lying popped up on the monitor, showing an empty battlefield now being picked over by nature. "None of the Puetts are dead."

"Candice might be."

Lauren had forgotten about her injury. "They have medicine now. She might be okay."

"I hope so."

"Me too." Shelley stood up, able to see blood splatters across the keyboard from where she'd whipped Alex. It had been hard to stop. "Without

Candice controlling that family, I'm not sure we've made a wise decision in offering the chair to Sam. If Candice dies, we might be better off with Julian."

As Shelly left, Lauren was forced to accept that she might be right. Angelica and Sam were too wild. They would destroy everything the council had built. At least with Candice, men would still be slaves.

3

New Network City

"Someone tell me again why we let everyone get blown up." Bobby was tired and confused. The excitement of being with his relatives for a run had worn off. "We needed their help."

"We needed their fighters. The bosses were a threat."

"I don't understand. Pruetts always keep their word. We've disgraced the family name."

Mary spoke up before the others could scold their rookie. "They were a threat to our control after the enemy falls. They'd have spent months fighting over our rules and choices, and in the end, they would have banded together and outvoted us after we did all the work." Mary wiped Candice's sweaty head while the medic examined the injury. "It was her choice. I supported it."

"A lot of people were hurt and killed. They were our allies!"

“They were our enemies.” Daniel glared at Bobby. “Did you really think the city dwellers and the gang bangers were going to put a Pruett into leadership? Or that they would follow the orderly ways of society once the enemy was gone? Grow up!” Staying next to Candice, Daniel ignored the immediate angry shouts from Bobby, who had joined them as they came here. No one had asked where he and Chester had gone. They’d just been relieved the two men were alive.

“She isn’t awake to tell us that!”

Daniel snorted. “I don’t need Candy to tell me why she did this. I understand.”

“But we made deals!”

“Deals to keep men in chains!” Daniel pointed toward the dome that they could see through the window blinds of the empty replacement player apartment. “We are not the Network. Pruett’s are for freedom!”

Quieted by the reminder, the family glowered toward the dome, reminded that the evil wasn’t gone.

The only difference in the replacement player apartment was a rear door that led to the courtyard with brothels and shops. The Network encouraged people to run up a debt that could only be satisfied through control of their families. Otherwise, the apartment was identical to the ones Angelica and Candice had been treated to during their games. The spray-painted family crest in the corner would let Sam know they had survived the battle.

“What do we do now?” Chester hadn’t protested the choice to betray their allies, though he hadn’t been sure it would be enough to weaken the Network’s hold over those clans. Afterward, viewing the hundreds of bodies from both sides, he had to admit Candice had been right about taking the leaders first and claiming the troops of each. Staring out the cracked blinds, Chester didn’t see a single representative from the groups who had met hours before. They were all fleeing retaliation or fighting for leadership.

“The Glowlers will start attacking the dome at dawn.” Mary dug in the medic kit and handed Daniel a syringe. “Wake her up.”

Daniel didn’t hesitate. Candice had been out for hours. Her skin was pale and her breathing was rough. He needed to hear her speak so he would know she was fighting to survive.

“We shouldn’t send Sam in.” Lydia was worried about the future if they lost. “The war is known now. There’s no need to sacrifice a great fighter when we’re running low. Call Sam off this one.”

Daniel injected Candice and recapped the syringe. “How long will it—”

“Now...”

“Oh, shit!” Daniel jumped as a hand went around his wrist.

Snickers went through the tiny apartment at Daniel’s reaction. He’d been a solid rock so far; the moment reminded them he had been in the complex recently. It also shamed them. He was handling

himself better than they'd given him credit for upon sight.

Mary helped Candice sit up, wincing for her daughter when Candice didn't show signs her wound hurt.

"I've got it."

Mary flinched away.

Candice shoved upward, wobbling with a hand out that refused assistance. She gained her feet and did a sweep of the room, the people. It eased her to find all of them present. Only Ivy and Leo were absent. Despite the death, just one gaze shied from hers, but it wasn't in anger or revulsion. Bobby was ashamed he'd questioned her decision while she was unconscious.

Candice grunted, acknowledging it. She could guess what had happened. She'd been on runs with rookies. They rarely handled the stress like you wanted them to, but Bobby was family and he would eventually learn how things worked. His mate had protected him too much, making this harder on him than it should have been.

Candice limped to where Bobby was sitting on a torn sofa, alone. She dropped down next to him, finally letting out a moan.

Bobby blanched, but didn't offer comfort like he had the urge to do. His mate kept him at home, preferring a man who cared for her house and serviced her needs. Bobby hadn't minded it until now. He was in this room with the most badass of his relatives, but he didn't feel like one of them.

“What would Lydia do if she were in charge?”

Bobby flushed. “Tell me this is why she wouldn’t bring me along before.”

“And if you were alone?”

Bobby’s cheeks went darker. “She’d kiss me and make it all better.”

Snickers and exasperated sighs allowed the tension to break.

Candice stared at him with a brow raised. “I can do that for you, but I suspect you’ll be hurting in other ways afterward.”

She glanced at Daniel, not surprised to find him on the edge of growling. He didn’t care that Candice and Bobby were related. He’d heard the story of Mary and Bruce, and knew it sometimes happened.

Bobby chuckled. “No, thanks. Kind of you to offer, though.”

Lydia laughed. She’d known Candice was joking.

Candice closed her eyes as the dingy room spun. “How long?”

Mary consulted her wristband for the hundredth time that day. “Seventeen hours.”

“We’re staying here?!” Bobby was immediately tossed back into fear and disbelief.

Candice shook her head, breathing finally evening out as the adrenaline forced her body to respond. “Of course not.” She smiled without opening her eyes. “We’re going to stay in the Diva den now that the enemy cleared it for us. We’re just dropping a message here for Sam.”

Bobby stood up, moving away from her. “You’re nuts. That place will be a target for all the Divas who survived and for the troops searching for survivors. We’ll be fighting the entire time!”

“Good.” Candice opened red orbs to pin him in place. “Maybe while we’re down there, your balls will drop.”

His face became ugly. “Slam you!”

“That’s better. Now get over here and help me up. You’re my body man as we go in. The others will clear us a path.”

Bobby was soothed and honored to be given that job, not realizing it was because he was a weak link.

Daniel was proud and furious at the same time. Bobby would be closest to his Candy, but it also meant Daniel was strong enough to be one of the fighters. He leaned against the door they’d broken in and listened as Candice and Mary instructed the family on how to conquer a busted den with only eight tired adults.

4

The Network

“We’re getting calls from the power bunker. Everyone wants to know when we’ll be arriving.”

Julian didn’t reply. He was reclined in his chair, eyes closed and breathing calm. He’d made a choice and regained temporary control over the disease.

“We also ignored another transmission from the UN. From the threats, I’m guessing they won’t wait

until the deadline. They're picking up too many broadcasts to ignore the situation."

"If they come through the wall, our troops will delay them while we slip out. Even if they reach the dome before the missile fires, they don't have the codes to stop it."

"What if they bring the dome down?"

Julian shrugged. "Our training center will automatically take over the launch. It's all connected now." Julian had spent their lives working on that training center. Every extra unit of food and gear had been quietly rerouted there in weekly shipments. That also included slaves.

"Won't they leave the meeting?"

"If they could, perhaps."

Rusty assumed Julian had them locked in the bunker. "How?"

"I've ordered them sedated. They're getting it in the food and water, but also in the air. The slaves and shows are keeping them entertained between doses."

"I don't think Felix is eating, drinking, or breathing. He's furious that no one has arrived to greet the guests. He said our lackeys are lacking."

"Pull up his file."

Rusty brought the center screen to life, vaguely wondering where the rest of the council was. Robert was missing, and Shelly had been sent to Adelfia to watch the Pruett. Terry's body was being placed on the subway as a frame of Sam Pruett, but even Lauren was absent from the constant stream of

communications going out to troops over their private lines.

“Felix Marshal, from the family of Gerald Marsh, who was a decorated commander during the first war over male slavery. He killed more than fifty women to save his regiment, but lost the battle. We hanged him and gave his family a title. Felix is the seventeenth of his line and loyal to the point of fanaticism.” Rusty flipped to the next page on the screen. “Evaluations placed him as head of security for that facility because he will die before being breached.”

Julian sighed. “Normally I like that in a subordinate. Any way to get him out and bring him along?”

“Probably, but I doubt he’d agree with your other plans. We hanged Gerald Marsh because he surrendered to the females and then tried to bargain for terms on male slavery. We have to assume his descendant would make the same choices.”

“Oh. Well, we can’t have that. Find a pacifier. Anyone so tightly wrapped has an obsession they use for control.”

Rusty wondered what Julian’s was exactly, but knew not to cross the line by asking. “He likes using his authority. There have been rumors of abusiveness toward females.”

“Perfect. Tell him we can’t come yet because of a credible security concern. Have him lock it down and conduct a search. Tell him there’s an assassin in there with them—a female assassin.”

Rusty grinned, typing. "That'll keep him busy."

"It will also remind the men and women there that safety exists because I allow it. They've all forgotten how angry I can get when crossed."

"You've kept them fed and happy for years. The trains of supplies and slaves always arrive on time. They aren't scared anymore."

"Yes, I've been lax there. In the future, we will make regular trips out to kill our aging leaders so this behavior doesn't become a pattern. We certainly don't want to be fighting with our own, now do we?"

Rusty burst out laughing at the joke. His mirth faded as the console beeped and a message came through. "Sam Pruett just checked in at the train station."

Julian was relieved. He didn't need to alter his plans. "Excellent. Have her arrested."

"What about the game?"

"This dome won't last two more days. When we leave, I want her locked in my stateroom."

"She'll probably be met by fans and supporters. Should we do it openly?"

Julian nodded. "Yes. Her fans won't like her being arrested. It will make them eager to help bring this complex down. When it goes boom, they'll all be inside to pay for their disloyalty. Have the hunters take her on the way here."

"Nice." Rusty was impressed. "I think you're getting smarter. This is above genius."

Julian liked the praise. He got up to pour them a drink. “Now, let’s discuss the assignment of rooms on the boat. I know there are ten, but we’ll only need half that.”

“Just the men?” Rusty was good at guessing what Julian wanted.

“Of course. It’ll be all of us, my private guards, and one sedated female Pruett.” Julian almost giggled. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter Twenty-One

I Need You

Pruett Town

1

“She’s never going to talk.”

Baker grunted at Rosa’s frustration. “I can’t do it. You’ll have to.” His anger had run out. Now, he was just tired and worried.

Rosa stepped toward the Malin woman while drawing her knife.

Amber Malin glared at them through her pit-marked, pale face. “Slam you!”

Rosa slammed the blade into the woman’s leg and twisted it.

“Okay! Stop! No!”

Rosa slapped the woman and shoved the blade in deeper, not enjoying her work but still taking pride in it. Bounty hunters knew how to get information fast.

“I’ll tell you!”

Rosa jerked the knife free.

Blood ran down the woman’s bare leg and hit the wooden floor. It joined years of dirt.

They’d had no trouble getting to the matron. Most of the family had already left, heading for the Network bunker in the Borderlands like they’d been

ordered to. Amber Malin and her two eldest daughters had been packing the last of their valuables when the Runners broke in. They'd refused to take her out of the shack however, unable to handle traveling with the woman for even an hour. She was filthy and so was her hovel. They'd been here for a full day now, trying to get her to talk without using violence because she was pregnant. Baker had insisted they treat her gently, and they'd agreed, sure that he would change his mind.

Baker turned away from the screaming woman and went outside. Rosa knew what to ask and how to get the answers. "Will you kill her after we're done?"

Ginny shook her head. "We'll send her to our hideaway until the war is over and then she'll face her crimes."

"Has she committed any?"

"If not, we'll invent one."

"Your family hasn't gotten along with them. You shouldn't be allowed to make the choice."

The Pruett cousin shrugged. "People like that always come back to hurt you, Baker. Sam will teach you how to handle the emotional side of moments like this."

"By going to a brothel?" His guilt flared as another scream echoed.

"By reminding you these people are your enemies."

Baker walked away from the Runner. He knew she was right, but that didn't make *this* right. If not for Sam being in danger, he wouldn't ever have agreed and it had taken a day for his patience to run out. Still, it was ugly.

"Are you okay?"

Baker nodded at Greg's question. "It won't be much longer now."

Another scream sounded into the night.

Greg shuddered. "Who's doing it?"

Baker walked to the bikes to wait.

Greg paled. "It's Rosa, isn't it?"

Baker kept walking.

Greg went toward the shack, hoping he was wrong.

In the shack, Rosa was getting answers.

"Because we were vaccinated!"

"When?"

"Centuries ago. When they found the immortality drive on the space station that fell."

"Your family was vaccinated and then kept around to produce pristine males for their experiments?"

"Yes."

"What makes you so special?"

"Malins have been on the council as long as the Network has existed!"

"You have family on the council and you live here? Like this?"

Amber didn't answer. She didn't want to betray the Network. She might survive this interrogation, but she wouldn't come out of the bunker alive if she betrayed Julian.

Rosa leaned in, bracing on the arms of the chair. "I'm going to kill you and your daughters. Then I'm burning your house down for my boss. After that, if I think you've held anything back from me, I'll hunt down every Malin left in the country. Don't push me any further. If I have to hurt you in front of my new mate, it'll be ugly."

Amber understood she wasn't getting out of here alive. It didn't matter if she talked. In fact, talking meant delaying the death she saw in the Pruett soldier's eyes. "What was the question?"

"Why do the Malins live here?"

"We're spies."

"Who are you spying on?"

"Pruetts."

"Why does the Network have you spying on them?"

"If I tell you, you'll hurt me."

Rosa nodded. "Maybe, but if you don't, I'll chop off a finger every minute you make me wait."

Both women heard Greg's quick intake of air at the threat.

Rosa's face tightened. "Don't forget what I said."

Amber shivered. "We have to watch the Pruetts. They're part of a control group."

"You're studying them? For what?"

“The vaccines. If Pruetts start to recover, the Network knows to increase the dosage for the general population.”

Rosa was horrified. “Are there other groups like this?”

“Nine others.”

“Why them?”

“Their DNA recovers faster. The Network scientists use them as measuring tools for the rest of the country.”

“We avoid vaccinations and we don’t consume much of the rations from the Network. How are they giving it?”

“Brought back from the ashes of the past...”

Amber’s mocking phrase instantly sent Rosa to entering New Network City. Every vehicle was sprayed with rose scented perfume. There were no exceptions. People had been told it was a sanitizer. It was the same at all hubs. The rose spray was a constant.

Amber was unable to keep herself from taunting them. “Every thirty years, a wild Pruett goes into the games. She’s tested and measured, then given a mate to see how she reacts. As long as burn-out still occurs at the expected time, the dosage isn’t changed. You never knew. None of the clever Pruetts did, but we’ve always been here, betraying, just like your ne—”

Greg ran up and punched the woman in the mouth, knocking her out.

Rosa grabbed his arm in shock. She hadn't expected him to react that way.

Greg jerked out of her grip. "Kill her and let's go. We have to rescue Sam."

Outside, a bike started up and then faded into the darkness.

"Was that Baker?" Rosa ran outside, but the bike was already out of sight. "Damn it!"

"We have to contact Sam."

Rosa reluctantly nodded, opening her wrist communicator. "She's not going to be in a good mood."

"Nope." Heather headed back into the house to guard their prisoner. "Should I finish her off or get her ready for a retraining camp?"

"Retraining." Rosa chose it without hesitation. "She has more information to give."

"What about the daughters and guard?"

"Kill the guard. Take the daughters so the mother cooperates."

Heather shrugged. "If you say so." Upon being found, Amber Malin had hid behind her daughters instead of protecting them. Heather doubted the thirty-something-year-olds would be of any value.

Rosa was aware of the dilemma, but she wasn't cold enough to kill the gentle females without a better reason. After the war was finished and the dome fell, they would be put on trial. If found guilty of treason, someone else could execute them.

It took Rosa a few minutes to type out everything that had happened. She wasn't sure

where Sam was right now, though she'd estimated their boss should be on the subway if she'd chosen to be a replacement player like they'd planned. If that was the case, she wouldn't get the message until the train reached New Network City and she hit the street. Underground communications were spotty at best, with only the media and the council having a guaranteed line.

Rosa thought about that while she waited, hoping for an answer. The Network wanted the media to be reachable no matter where they were, but that was going to backfire on them. If Sam wasn't attacked, she would pick a fight. The Network wasn't going to get anything it wanted out of that Pruett, but certainly not a peaceful arrival for the reporters to bore the crowd with.

Her wrist communicator beeped. Rosa read it, smiling.

"I expected him to take off before now. Stop by the rental booth in Adelpia and tell the slaves you're the meat wagon. Their passenger needs extreme retraining. Valuable cargo to be protected at all costs. Make it a priority. And thanks for the gift!"

Rosa answered affirmative, glad Sam didn't seem angry she'd lost track of Baker.

Do you want us to go after him?

He'll find me.

Rosa grinned. *Good luck!*

Sam didn't answer.

Rosa went back into the foul shack. As she neared the room where they were keeping Amber, Rosa heard Greg talking. She entered the room quietly so she didn't interrupt him as he interrogated Amber's daughters. Both of those females were crouched in the corner, shaking and whimpering at having a free male so close. Rosa didn't think the girls had been outside the shack very often. She assumed from their thin, scarred bodies that they'd been their mother's slaves.

"Tell me why the council doesn't want men free."

"Women will lose control!" The older girl shuddered. "Men! In charge!"

Greg looked at the other girl, seeing bruises that reminded him of his own slavery. "Where do they keep the kids for training?" Greg didn't remember his own entry. None of the bachelors did. They were drugged for transport to the city complexes as soon as they were ten. They never saw the outside of the building or the method of transportation.

"They don't tell us. No one knows where it is, so you males can't sneak in there!"

Greg controlled his anger, wanting the information more than vengeance. "Who knows the location?"

"The council."

"Who else?"

"No one else is supposed to know!"

"So who is it? Your mom, because she has a daughter on the council?"

“Rusty is her brother! Maybe his pink haired mistress knows.”

Greg sucked in air. “You lie!”

Both girls snickered at his expression.

Greg turned to look at Rosa.

Rosa went back outside to contact Sam again. She typed faster this time, furious.

Her communicator immediately responded.

I’m sorry. The person you are trying to reach is out of range. Your message will be delivered as soon as they enter a service area. Thank you!

Rosa sighed. “Figures.” She motioned to the Runners on guard duty. “We leave in ten minutes, with three prisoners. We’re headed to Adelphia for a pickup like this one. By the time we finish that, the dome will be down. Get us ready to roll. Boss’s orders.”

Greg joined her, unable to take the smirks or smells any longer. “The retraining center?”

Rosa chuckled. “That’s what we call the other Pruett homestead. We use it for people who need to be convinced, but can’t be killed.”

“Convinced of what?”

“The wisdom in never crossing a Pruett.”

Greg tried to smile. “Sounds like a good place.”

Rosa’s face darkened. “Not much better than this. I’m sorry you had to see it.”

Greg didn’t want to discuss that because he would have to face his own participation. “Hopefully we won’t ever have to again.”

Rosa slowly put her arm around his shoulders, relieved when he didn't pull away. "I'd give a lot for a life like that."

Greg rested his cheek against her. "Does that mean you're ready to settle down?"

Rosa sighed deeply. "I've been ready for years. I just didn't have anyone to settle down with. I can't be alone. I'll go crazy."

Greg knew exactly how she felt. He hugged her. "You won't be alone."

"...are you still scared of me now?"

"A little. But I'm also scared of me. I can feel the anger inside. I don't know how to control it."

Rosa's heart broke. "I'm so sorry you have to go through this."

Greg shivered at her tone. "I need you!"

Rosa immediately took him into the darkness and delivered a blast of relief.

2

Baker drove through the night. He would have been able to keep going if not for the tender care he had been receiving. Thanks to full rations on time every day, he had to use the bathroom more often. As the sun began to rise, he was forced to pull over.

The area wasn't empty. For the last hour that he'd gotten closer to civilization, there had been more homes and people. Women had stared at him in shock as he flew by, but none of them had tried to stop him.

Baker rolled to a shed that appeared abandoned and got off the bike with awkward movements. He was sore.

Baker hurried around the corner and did his business, trying to listen for trouble.

It found him without making a sound.

“Look what we got here.”

Baker came around the corner and found a small squad of Network Defenders around his bike.

“Where’s your owner?”

“Whose bike is this?”

“Let’s see your papers.”

Baker froze for a second, thinking, and then he held up his hands. “I’m Wanted by the Network.”

A Defender hurried over to detain him.

As Baker was shoved to the ground and hands began to grope, he sent his mind to Sam. He didn’t need to be alert for what came next. He just needed to get to the dome and this was the fastest way. Once these guards had taken their cut, he would be sedated and shipped to the council. All he had to do was survive their fee.

Baker grunted as a needle sank into his arm. “Right here in the mud, huh?”

The sound of his voice sealed the deal. Another needle sank in and claws came out.

“Get off him or I’ll shoot!”

Two of the Defenders ignored the shout.

Two gunshots echoed.

Baker fell forward as the remaining women released him and stood up to fight.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“Get on your knees!”

“This is my town. That is my male. I have his papers.”

The Defenders didn’t care if the local was telling the truth. They wanted the man.

The local woman fired twice more, hitting both of them in the chest.

As the gunshots faded, the farmer glanced at Baker. “You want a place to hide for a day? If not, get out of here now.”

Baker needed to keep going, but he’d been injected twice and there was no way he could drive like this. His body was heavy and hard, and the sweats were starting. When the shakes hit, he would be useless. “Hide.”

Vera came over and grabbed his arm, ignoring his heat and his gasp of lusty fear. She helped him onto his bike and then climbed on behind him. By the time she drove him into her barn, he was shivering in her arms and she was fighting the need to give them both relief.

Vera got off the bike and went outside to close the doors and cool off. She hadn’t had a man in years. She’d sworn them off in favor of helping them escape. Her channels reached far and wide, but it was always a fight not to keep one. The rescued slaves were almost always grateful enough to stay if she wanted it. That came from her strength to resist hurting them no matter how she found them. She’d even carried a naked man in her arms once and

hadn't hurt him. That was a source of pride for Vera, but the healthy man in her barn right now was worse than a temptation. Vera had seen the tattoo on his neck and wanted him more. If he was good enough for a Pruett...

Vera sealed the barn and went back to clean up the mess she'd made. As long as it hadn't been found yet, she could drag the bodies to the creek and blame their deaths on nature. If it had been found, she would give them Baker's description and point them in the opposite direction.

Pain lanced through Vera's stomach and legs, tightening her nerves until crimson blurred across her sight.

3

The man was still sitting on the bike when Vera returned an hour later. Sleeping uneasily, he snored and twitched as she shut the door and fastened it from the inside.

Baker opened his eyes, in torment. He needed to take himself in hand, but he wasn't safe here. He could feel the heat from his host. She had saved him being raped, but she might be just as dangerous to him as the Defenders.

Vera approached him warily, not sure if he would grab her. That had also happened a few times, though no one had believed the stories. Her neighbors swore men were only timid pets, but Vera

had seen them fight even, and this one was Wanted for multiple murders.

The two rebels stared at each other in desperate, common need.

“Which Pruett do you belong to?”

Baker groaned. “Sam.” He blinked, trying to focus. “You look a bit like her.”

Vera broke at the sound of his voice. “Enough for you to be willing?”

Baker nodded. “And guilty afterward.”

“For a mutual trade?”

“For betraying her. We have love.”

“Exactly. This is survival and compassion.”

Baker had already made his choice, but it was hard to follow through. “Where’s your bed?”

Vera’s knees weakened. “Right here in the straw.”

Baker got off the bike, closing down his emotions. “A business trade brought on by survival.”

Vera tensed as he approached. “Maybe we shouldn’t do—”

Baker lunged forward and slammed them against the wall, lips covering hers as his hard body ground into her thigh.

Vera wrapped him in her arms and moaned. “Thank you!”

Baker ripped the front of her shirt open. “It’s my honor.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kiss the Floor

The Network Crawler

1

Taking the train was dangerous.

Sam stepped through the sliding door of the subway car with a huge grin. She had a private security team now. Her escort from the women's prison wasn't among them. Sam had left her at the gate with a lie and another token. The guard now believed she was owed two favors from their family, when the opposite was true. Having two tokens meant it might take two Pruetts to kill them.

The subway train didn't look like the Network Rider. While the furnishings and fixtures had matching colors, there were no luxurious bunks or lounges with pillows to encourage romantic moments. This train was used to transport people back-and-forth from New Network City to Adelphia. Not many people were allowed to take it, which meant there wouldn't be a lot of income from citizens. The Network had refused to put more UD's into the train than they had to. As a result, it looked rather drab.

"The Crawler will reach New Network City in two days." The computer voice was a match to the

one from the arena. *“As we travel, please remember to enjoy the views when we slow. Our route will take us through the Underground Remains Museum that will be opened to the public next year.”*

Sam followed her security team to a rear room on the car, aware that the subway seemed empty. So had the part of the station where she’d boarded. Sam assumed it was intentional.

“This is yours.” The team leader swept the tiny compartment and then stepped aside so Sam could enter.

Sam went by them and into the next car instead. She’d never been on the subway.

Her team leader waved two women to stay as guards over the room, then followed Sam. If anything happened to the contestants on this trip to the complex, the guards were held responsible. Kasha didn’t want that future.

Sam walked the train, counting eight cars and only a few people. Though she hadn’t been here before, she was certain it shouldn’t be this way.

Kasha was thinking the same. She had a hand on her weapon, ready to fight.

Sam stopped in the second-to-last car, pausing to observe the tour guide.

The blonde’s suit matched the colors of the train, soft voice soothing as she explained what people were viewing through the floor length windows on either side of the benches. The tour car had comfortable seats and plants hanging in the corners, but it still lacked life. Other than the

colorful guide, there was nothing inside this car to see. All the fascination lay outside the dirty windows.

“Our journey through history begins with a mural depicting the war that gave us the Change.”

Sam moved to the window, adjusting for the feel of the subway under her feet. It moved a lot faster than the Network Rider had.

“As you can see, the mural is fifty feet high and at the perfect angle to be viewed from this distance. We must never forget how much effort the Network puts into our education.”

Sam rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest.

The train sped up as glowing green and yellow murals depicted a nuclear explosion in graphic detail. Sam stared. Each blur by the window was one small clip of the bomb. A bright light, the explosion on the ground, the smoke going up, the blast coming out. Timed perfectly, Sam’s heart pounded as she watched the world end. She’d heard about the murals, but never seen them. It was heartbreaking. Babies and elderly fell under the flames, the winds, the greed and panic that came after. Sam tensed as Marcella Pruett’s ugly face expanded into a cheering populace holding declarations of protection, of male ownership.

Then the Change images came, reminding Sam how long it had been since women began suffering the disease. She turned away, furious again. They could make murals of the past and rewrite history,

but it was still a fact that the Network was responsible for where they were now. They didn't want recovery. They liked things exactly as they were and only the current revolution would shake that hold.

Sam didn't pause again until she reached the rear, where the rental cars were rumored to be. There was a door with a guard, but the sign on it said no passengers were allowed. Once again pushing her new authority, Sam went right to it and reached for the handle.

"Let me!" The door guard hurried to open it.

I could get used to this. Sam entered the small brothel, waving her team to remain outside.

The four slaves in the subway car cringed into the far corners as the door shut.

Their terror froze Sam. She loathed it. Her rage was so bad that it was a struggle not to spill the blood of every Network employee on board with them.

The slaves were chained and dirty, with bruises and untreated injuries. They also stank. Sam groped for the door, rage overflowing her limits of control.

"Please don't!" One of the slaves rose from his bench. "Pruetts are for freedom!"

Sam almost couldn't. She'd never been so angry.

The slave who'd begged, Cliff, forced himself to stand. "Please?"

Sam couldn't even nod. All she could do was stand there and try to breathe.

The males realized she was fighting for control and waited. If she were a true Pruett, she would honor their wishes to keep them from being harmed further.

“I came for information.”

The males didn’t know what type of information she wanted, but it was an instant relief they wouldn’t have to service her.

Cliff was ashamed. “We weren’t given time to clean up after the other passengers. If you come back in an hour, we’ll be able to handle your other needs, too.”

Sam’s rage flared again. They were hurt, but still so scared that they were concerned about pleasing their next customer. It was beyond horrible.

Cliff sensed the dilemma and took a risk. “Can we clean up now?”

Sam was able to nod this time. She turned to give them privacy and to continue to regain control of her rage. The subway rental males were all brunettes wearing short shorts and half tops that showed off starving bodies that Sam wouldn’t have used even in her most desperate hour. The only thing she could think of when she looked at them was they needed to be fed repeatedly until their ribs weren’t showing.

The subway rental car was an identical match to the Network Rider brothels, only smaller. Narrow drawers slid out from under shelves that were also beds and would barely hold Sam if she had tried to

climb onto one of them. She couldn't imagine making love to a man in that cramped space.

"What information do you require?"

"Anything you want to tell me." Sam hit the buttons on the panel by the door, using her private account to rent the men for three hours. Then she ordered food and a long shower. The slaves were only given wipes and that wasn't enough for her even though the wipes were sanitizers. She didn't want their customers to be protected. She wanted the males to be. It still hurt and confused her that the Network didn't. They were everyone's enemy.

"We only have contact with players and Defenders, but we'll help in any way we can."

"What have you heard of my family?"

The males stilled in their washing and dressing.

Cliff let out a sad sound. "All dead, we're told. The Network announcements have been constant."

"Is there proof?"

"Video of the explosions and bodies."

"What's the mood in the city?"

"Angry. The Diva's lost their den and their elder. They want revenge. Everyone else wants the Network to pay for killing your family. Pruetts were their last hope."

Sam was satisfied things were exactly as Candice had predicted. "What about the council?"

"Old clips mixed with the new images and fresh warnings not to support rebels."

"No leading ladies declaring victory over the troublesome Pruetts?"

“No.”

Sam slowly sank down onto the bench by the door as the food and supplies she'd ordered began to arrive through the conveyer system. “If they aren't blaring it to the world, then my family isn't dead.”

“We've seen the video.” Cliff forced himself to keep going. “Candice went down first.”

Sam swallowed a denial. They'd been lucky so far that their family had come through the rebellion alive, but Sam stuck to the plan they'd made at the train conquest. Candice was hard to kill. They all were. “Do you have other information I would find useful?”

“There are a lot of Defenders on this ride. They got on before you. They're all in the front cars so they won't be seen.”

“I suspected as much. Arrest orders?”

“As far as we know, yes.”

Sam scanned the hurt men. “Those guards were your last renters?”

Cliff nodded, head dropping. The women had enjoyed their screams.

Sam leaned against the wall and shut her eyes. “Wake me from a distance if you need to. I'm not in a friendly mood.”

2

“Samantha J. Pruett! We have orders for your arrest. Come out and surrender your weapons!”

The squad of Defenders outside the rental car exchanged worried glances when there wasn't an answer. Someone had just placed a media call from here and it had to be her. The males didn't know the codes for an outside line, but they didn't have enough spine to commit such a crime anyway.

"Hurry up!" One of the Defenders glared at those in the front. "The reporter is getting on at the next stop!"

"Sam Pruett! Come out...or we'll come in and get you!"

Sam's laughter echoed through the door. "You don't sound very convincing. Want to say it again?"

The Defender team leader lifted her gun.

Another Defender slapped it from her hand. "Killing males is illegal!"

"We can say she did it!"

"Not with cameras rolling, you twit! We wouldn't have time to cover it up."

Knock-knock! "I'm coming out now. Don't shoot yourselves." Sam slowly opened the door and moved into sight.

"Do it now! The males are clear!"

Sam waited, not sure if those with guns would shoot her or not. It was clear that they wanted to.

"It's a full credit for taking her alive." The tallest Defender stepped forward. "Surrender your weapons or I'll change my mind."

"What's the charge?"

"Conspiracy and murder."

"Who did I murder?"

“Like you don’t know! Killing a council member during a meeting everyone knew about was stupid.”

“Frame job.”

“Surrender your weapons!” The tall Defender reached out to take Sam’s tool belt.

Sam jabbed the woman in her throat, crunching her windpipe. “I’m your boss, bitches. Back up!”

Sam’s demand paused the squad even though one of them was suffocating at her boots.

“I made a deal. I’m a council member.”

“We have arrest orders.”

“From who? What number?”

While the Defenders were distracted trying to answer her questions, Sam stepped from the room, allowing the door to shut. As soon as it did, she reached for her weapons.

“Trap!”

“Shoot her!”

“Look out!”

Sam rolled the grenade into the center of the squad and turned toward the door to avoid the spray as it exploded, blowing guts and gear against her and the train.

Awful noises came next, but Sam couldn’t hear them. The blast was ringing in her ears and distorting sound so badly that she staggered, trying to regain her equilibrium.

A gun fired.

Sam flipped into the change as the bullet struck her shoulder. It bounced off as her muscles shot out and her hair grew.

Sam dropped to her knees and jerked her spikes out, spotting moving legs. She aimed for the knees and threw hard, hoping to keep them from getting closer. Only four women were still standing, but all of them were aiming at her.

Screams blasted as spikes went through legs. Made from old world manufacturing, they were brittle relics that splintered upon impact, causing multiple injuries.

Sam kissed the floor as bullets sprayed the door and wall, barely missing her head.

“Kill her!”

Sam narrowed in on the voice and pushed off the wall to lunge.

She hit the woman in the knees and took her to the ground, feeling the gunshot more than hearing it as the Defender fired.

Sam’s arm lit up with fire, but she still squeezed on the Defender’s throat until the woman stopped moving. Then she drew her knife and slit her throat.

Sam did a fast sweep and found herself alone in the lounge car with a dozen bodies and cameras that had captured her every move.

When no support rushed in, Sam moved toward the door. She was prepared to face another squad, but this time, she was using her gun and saving her pineapples for outdoor use.

Sam put a hand to her ear and came away with bloody fingers. Sighing, she wiped her hand down her cloak and drew her gun before hitting the button.

The door slid open to reveal the same empty car she'd come through on her way in. The tour guide was gone. Sam assumed the animatronic speaker was under the floor somewhere, folded into a small box. *More technology I can't match to the society we have.*

Dripping blood, Sam left the tour car and went toward the rooms, still not seeing or hearing anyone. The ringing was beginning to fade and her balance was better, but Sam was almost relieved not to have another squad yet. The longer they gave her to recover, the better she would be able to handle it. They didn't know, but they had the advantage right now. She'd screwed up by using the grenade in a confined space.

Sam entered the bunk cars, seeing open and closed doors in the same pattern as when she'd first come through. She chose not to explore them, sensing traps that were mechanical in nature, not human.

Sam opened the door to her car.

She stared for a long time.

Four bodies were stuffed into her small flat, all with their throats ripped out like Angelica and Candice had done during their games. For further damning proof, a Pruett token was on the carpet nearby, winking in mischievous curiosity.

We need to start marking those. I'll never know who paid for this.

Sam went to the window and flipped the latch. The Network allowed open windows on the subway because there wasn't room in most of the tunnels for anyone to jump. Even if they did, the train would suck them under and crush their bodies into damp spots on the rails.

Sam hefted the four bodies out the window, grimacing at the effort of contorting the big women to fit. She was breathing hard by the time she finished. The Defenders she had killed would stay where they were until the Network sent a cleaning crew, but Sam didn't want to be held responsible for these extra deaths. By the time they identified the blood, the dome would be down and she would be able to track the person who had earned a Pruett token and then left it here. That bitch needed to die.

The door to the next cars was unguarded. The two beyond that were for the engineers and personnel who were likely watching the security cameras and calling the city in panic. Sam went back to the rental car to wait. The media woman had assured Sam that she had access to the train at all stops. Sam assumed she was a games reporter or had been one. Unless they got in trouble, they kept their clearances for life. If the train stopped for any reason, she should be allowed to board, and Sam expected the train to take advantage of the nearest station or hub to send troops in response to the calls from the engineers.

She would get to give her interview and then she would have to fight her way out, unless her interview provided enough distraction or chaos to keep her moving toward the city. The Network didn't understand her arrest wasn't necessary. She was headed straight for them. All this was doing was slowing her down. It wouldn't prevent the justice she'd already been paid for. Knowing the truth was worth more than any reward she'd been offered.

Sam opened the rental door and gestured to the terrified males. "Stay in the corners. When we get to the city, get lost in the crowd. Dress like women. Do the best you can."

"Where should we go?"

"Anywhere you want, just stay away from the dome."

"They'll be coming for you now. You won't make it to the city."

Sam laughed. "Wanna lay a wager on that?"

Cliff smiled shyly. "Against a Pruett? Nope."

Sam chuckled, suddenly curious as to why the sound of their voices wasn't affecting her, but there wasn't time to puzzle it out as the train began to slow.

"We are making a brief stop to take on passengers. Please stay in your assigned cars until we are moving again. Thank you."

The computer sounded evil to Sam's injured ears.

The train shuddered to a stop, brakes squealing.

Sam leaned against the nearest wall and tried to get her full hearing back.

The door to the car slid open to reveal a reporter Sam recognized, followed by two neutered males with cameras and equipment.

“Oh, hell. Roll! Roll!”

The two men hurried to get the cameras going as Dana moved gingerly over to join Sam outside the rental door. “What happened here?”

Sam had chosen a story before she’d spilled blood, but she decided that wasn’t needed now. Candice would understand her jumping the gun. “There was an attack.”

Sam was glad to see the squad of troops who entered behind the reporter were nervous instead of hostile. When they heard what she had to say, their anger would hopefully flip to a more deserving target.

“An attack on you? By who?”

“By the Network. They tried to frame me for the murder of Terry, the missing council woman.”

“A council member is missing?”

Sam shrugged. “I’m sure someone knows where her body is.”

“If the frame didn’t work, then why are you under arrest orders?”

“Because I accepted an offer to kill the head of the council.”

“Oh, my God! Why did you do that?! And who made the offer?!”

“Terry hired me right before she disappeared. I’m on my way to complete that contract.”

“Why?!”

“Because the men on the council are tyrants, especially Julian. *He* needs to die.”

“He...?”

“Yes. The leader of our council is a man.”

3

“I need to get off the train now.” Dana was storing her equipment, heart pounding from watching the camera feed. Sam had killed an entire squad of Defenders without help. The woman was a ruthless fighter. Dana hadn’t ever seen anything so brutal. Bodies were everywhere. “Thank you for the interview. I’ll make sure it gets aired in full.”

“When the dome falls, you won’t have so much interference. They’ll have other problems to handle first.”

“Good point.” Dana looked at Sam, who hadn’t moved from outside the rental car door. “Can I see the males?”

Sam tapped on the door.

It slid open to reveal four clean, nervous men who stared into the camera and then ignored it in favor of going to Sam.

“You’re hurt!”

Sam didn’t try to cover her injuries. “Don’t broadcast that!”

“I won’t.” Dana was satisfied the men were alive and unharmed. She gestured for the camera operator to put away the rest of their gear. She couldn’t wait to change her clothes. Reporters were always dressed in red and green outfits that denoted their status. The colors allowed them to blend in well on camera, but Dana hated it. So did all the other reporters, but no one protested. If they were wearing a different uniform, then they would have different jobs.

“Come in here so we can take care of you.” The rental males took Sam toward the small car.

Sam gave the reporter a last bit of advice. “Be careful when you leave. They’ll try to take that footage.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Exactly, so be careful.”

Dana nodded, heading for the door. “I’ll see you around, council woman Pruett.”

It was obvious Dana believed she would be able to kill Julian and claim the seat she’d been promised in exchange. Sam didn’t tell her any different. She wasn’t sure how that would go and frankly, right now she didn’t care. There was a nasty tug in her chest that said trouble was coming from multiple directions and she wasn’t ready for any of it. There was also an ache that told her Baker was in trouble again.

Sam started to sit as the door slid shut... The train immediately began to slow, shuddering in a way that implied it wasn’t a scheduled stop.

Sam sighed. "Sometimes, I hate being right." She opened the door. "Stay here, but keep the door open until they find me so they don't shoot their way in."

"Who is it?"

"Bounty hunters—the best."

Cliff frowned. "Pruetts are the best. Everyone knows that."

"Pruetts aren't the hunters anymore. Now, we're the prey."

The door shut.

Sam vanished into the shadows, wondering if she could short the lights without stopping the train that was already chugging along the rail again. It had been a fast stop, which meant her guess was right. Network troops would have kept the train sitting there, giving her a chance to escape. Bounty hunters got the train moving because they knew it would trap their target on board. All they had to do was search each car and they would locate her no matter where she hid.

Sam heard voices and heavy steps she identified as Dana and her crew. Sam was glad when there wasn't screams or gunshots, but the resulting silence wasn't an improvement. At least if people were shouting, she knew where they were.

Sam moved into the tour car, wincing at the immediate computer response.

"Welcome to the mural room! We are nine hours from our destination. This area is dedicated

to the riots of 230AW and the savior Network who brought us all out of such troubled times.”

Sam threw her knife and knocked out the camera in the top corner of the room. Then she used a spike to hit the light fixture, using her changeling strength. Darkness descended, only broken by the green glows of the mural they were speeding by, and the glowing green eyes of the computer tour guide that slid from the wall. *Great fake. I thought she was real.*

Sam pulled her cloak over her head and slid into the shadows behind the robot.

“There’s only one car left after this.”

“The rental car! We’re stopping there, right?”

“Of course. We’ll take our cut of the Pruett, too, before we hand her over. Now get in there!”

The door opened.

“No lights. She knows we’re here.”

You guys are the best now? Sam snorted silently, hands ready.

“I can’t see anything with that damn mural flashing by.”

“Turn it off. The button is on the robot’s ass.”

The bounty hunters snickered. One of them came toward Sam’s hiding place without caution.

Sam shoved her blade forward as the woman reached around, slipping it between the arm and body of the robot to jam it into a fleshy stomach. She ripped upward and then jerked it free.

Blood pattered to the carpet.

The mural flashed by, brighter.

“Turn it off!”

The body fell backward, showing death but not the injury.

“It’s her!”

Sam fired before the hunters could, spraying from the cover of the robot who continued to run its program.

“This part of the mural shows our dedication to preserving human life. The Network loves its citizens—all of them.”

Sam grunted as she threw her last spike. “And we feel the same. Lots of love here.”

Her spike sank into an unprotected throat, finishing the hunters.

Sam stood up and stepped free.

The train shuddered again as it slowed.

“Oh, hell!” Sam was fed up. She stomped toward the doors, aiming for the engineer car beyond it. After this, the train wouldn’t stop again. She would stay in the front and make sure of it.

Sam didn’t pick a weapon as she headed for the front of the train. Subway engineers wore the blue outfits of the transportation district, but they didn’t have a communication device or a tool belt. It wasn’t needed. The engineers were locked behind glass doors, with all the radios and controls. There was no way in there unless she had the code. Or a token to offer.

“Halt, there!”

A Network guard was at the main entrance door, waiting as it opened for another unscheduled stop. The lone Defender didn't see Sam coming.

The door opened to reveal familiar faces.

Sam pulled the trigger as the guard lifted her gun, blowing brains across the carpet and walls.

"Nice." Lydia stepped up into the train, followed by her Nomad escort. "Candice said we should keep you company."

Sam chuckled. "Excellent. I was about to go talk to the drivers."

The family members scanned the carnage they could see and smell.

"Too much stopping?"

Sam nodded, resuming her march. "Rental males are in the rear car and there's a media crew hiding somewhere in here."

Dana stood up from behind a nearby cabinet. The two camera operators with her also stood, but the males didn't look at the new arrivals.

Sam waved them toward the door. "Go now or I'll tell Dana what you're hiding."

The two men took off.

Dana stared in dismay. "They followed me to you, right?"

"Yep. One of your boys there is a traitor."

Dana's face hardened. "I'll make sure they don't have a haven." She held out her hand. "Thank you again."

Sam shook and watched the woman leave. She didn't know what Dana hoped to get from

supporting the rebellion, but she would likely receive it.

“Open the door!”

The engineers inside refused. “We want a token!”

“The boss said no more tokens. Open up or I’ll shoot.”

“The glass is reinforced!”

“The walls aren’t.”

“Open the door for her!”

“Not without a token!”

Lydia lifted her gun.

A terrified engineer shoved the greedy coworker aside and hit the button to let the rebels in.

The greedy engineer grabbed for a radio.

“Hands up!” Lydia lifted her gun. “Don’t do it. You can’t call them before I shoot you.”

“Long live the Network!”

One loud gunshot echoed and then the train shuddered violently.

Dana was thrown from the exit ramp and almost dragged under the groaning wheels.

“We’ve got it now!” Lydia laughed. “Sorry!”

Sam chuckled, seeing Dana had survived the fall as the door slid shut.

“Candice has updates for you.”

“I’m not going to the dome, am I?”

“No need. It won’t exist by the time we get there. The crowd was very riled. Your interview just sealed it. It might even be falling right now.”

“Where am I going?”

“To find Baker.”

Sam sighed. “Keep rolling to the city then.”

Lydia frowned. “Why?”

“Because that’s where he’ll look for me.”

“You’re still under arrest orders. Won’t there be troops at the station?”

“Maybe, but if the dome is down, they’ll have other concerns.”

Lydia grinned. She’d been able to stay home more and keep Bobby happy, but she hadn’t been able to get out of the family business completely. Lydia was one of the best hired killers the Network employed when they wanted someone removed. And if those people ended up on a southern plantation, where they could exist in peace, the Network never knew. “I’ll handle it. You rest.” She glanced around the cars she could see from where they stood. “Been a busy day.”

Sam laughed. “You could say that.” She went back to the males, satisfied her family would get her to the city. That’s what they did—came through when it counted.

Sam was disappointed she wouldn’t get to make her run through a game and get a bachelor prize, though, along with a new level of personal pride. She was also angry with Baker for leaving his protection and worried about him being alone. Desperate situations caused ugly consequences. That hadn’t changed and never would.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Leader is...

New Network City

1

“I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

Candice only grunted at Bobby, but the tone still got through.

He clamped his mouth shut and helped her down the sewer stair. His leather clothes creaked from lack of proper care.

They were in the center of the other fighters, ready to battle to the main areas, but there were only bloodstains, bodies, and silence down here. Darkness had fallen over the oppressed city, bringing screams of people being interrogated on the streets. The Network always relied on scare tactics for their successes and it was another weakness.

Candice wanted to gloat a bit about her plans falling into place so well, but the pain in her body prevented it. The medics couldn’t heal her inside. They’d been able to stitch and medicate her however, and that would be enough for what she had to get through. Afterward, she would be either dead or able to rest.

The small team went down the slimy stairs without lights, relying on changeling eyes to guide them.

Left at a disadvantage, the men were forced to grope their way along or hold onto a female for support. It was noisy, but they didn't see a live soul until they reached the bottom of the station.

Candice motioned Mary and Horace to go ahead and clear the path as they'd planned. She and Bobby stayed tight together, hands already hovering over weapons. Daniel and Bruce would try to help, but they weren't fighters like Chester and Horace were.

Around them, the station moved with grieving, eerie shadows who froze in anger and fear as they spotted the Pruetts. No one attacked them or even approached.

Candice ignored the soldiers in favor of the leadership voices coming from the meeting room. As she stepped over bodies of young and old Divas, Candice wondered who had inherited the remains. The elder had been executed on live TV. Few people would want the job now.

Candice stopped as Horace prepared to kick the door in. His flowing tan pants had been tied to his ankles and his turban had been switched inside out for a harder cover. He was ready to fight.

Behind them, Divas began to come from the shadows, but their expressions begged for peace not blood.

Candice granted their silent requests. "Knock."

Horace sighed at the order. "Okay." He pounded on the barrier, scaring everyone except their group.

"What?!" Naomi opened the door. Her face fell.

All four Divas in the large, bloody meeting room panicked, taking off for exits scattered around the dank hall.

"Take them alive." Candice let Bobby lead her to the chairs the women had been sitting in.

The rest of the Pruetts gave chase.

Candice leaned against Bobby's hip, breathing harsh. She was trusting Daniel to be able to do his duty now, but it was hard to stay still and allow it when it had only been a few months and a dozen lessons between this and his submissive behavior in the complex.

"Get over there!" Daniel shoved the woman hard, not caring when she fell and scraped her knees. She'd tried to stab him twice before he'd gotten the courage to slap her. It had only taken a single hit from a slave to freeze her and drain the rage. Daniel was glad. He didn't like how it felt. He would have rather slit her throat than beat on her, but Candice wanted these women for something.

The Divas were rounded up without much fighting. The Network had already taken that from them.

The Divas outside the room were torn. Half of them fled. The rest gathered around the open door and hoped the Pruetts would be merciful.

Candice glowered at the four women now kneeling in front of her. Covered in sweat, blood, and pain, her expression warned them of more ugliness to come if they didn't cooperate. "I'm going to take them down. You're going to help me."

All of the women nodded, grateful to discover they weren't going to be killed. They also wanted the chance at retribution. All of them had lost friends and family this time, not just fighters.

"How many survived who will fight?"

Naomi glanced toward the door. "Less than a hundred."

"And the other groups?"

"The mountain brutes are with the children, like you ordered. The Glowers are escorting them while your...monster hides in the alleys and inches closer to the dome. The merchants have all surrendered, claiming they were kidnapped. They've turned on the starlets and reporters, who ratted them out in kind. The Network ordered them all executed."

Candice sighed. "Go on."

"None of the snakes here survived. The swamp fighters all made it out of the city. No one knows where they are now. The Defenders blended into the complex."

"What of the men?"

The Divas peered back in blankness. "Who?"

"My males!" Candice growled, rage smothering her pain. "Those men are worth more than any of you!"

“We’ll find out.” One of the females glanced at the group surrounding them and then back to Candice. “Are you claiming leadership of the Divas?”

“Temporarily, yes.” Candice pushed away Bobby’s hand as she stood. “I’ll help you get settled after the dome falls and then you can pick your own rulers.”

“What if we want to become a part of the Pruetts?” The third Diva had had enough of death and losing.

“It’s the same as before.” Candice didn’t stop. “You’d have to give up your way of living and embrace ours. I have zero faith that you can do it.”

“Why not just kill us?” The fourth Diva watched as the females at the door parted to let the Pruetts through. None of their soldiers had any fight left in them now.

“Because we need each other, of course. What happens after will depend on your performance during.”

Encouraged, the Divas picked themselves up and went to gather their remaining fighters. When Candice said it was time to go, they wanted to be ready.

Candice took her group to the same space they had waited in for the first meeting with the elder. It was the only room she had spotted as they entered that didn’t have bodies and gore.

As they settled in, blocking the door with furniture, Candice moved to the corner to avoid the other people.

Daniel stayed with the fighters, helping get everyone settled. He knew Candice was hurting and he wanted to check on her, but he had been given duties on this run and he wasn't going to slack off in any way. It wasn't just their survival at stake; it was the survival of his gender and maybe even the human race.

The other Pruetts also knew Candice was hurt. As soon as Mary got Bruce settled, she joined Candice in the corner. The medics had taken their offer and fled as soon as it was dark enough to blend into the shadows.

Candice refused to let Mary examine the injury. "It's healing. You know how it works."

Mary allowed the rebuff because there were too many other things to cover right now. Everyone needed to know Candice's plan.

"We have to stay out of sight and keep the crowd around the dome worked up. Ideas?"

There was silence as people considered. None of them expected Bobby to come up with the answer.

"What if we tell them the truth?"

As everyone stared at him, Bobby stared at Candice. Her decision would make the final choice. "Just spread the word we're taking the damn dome at dawn. By the time Sam's train gets here, we may already have the city secured."

Candice considered it despite needing the time to heal. She had asked for other people's opinions to verify that she had covered all the bases. However, she hadn't considered being forthright with the mob around the dome.

Mary saw a flaw in that plan. "I don't believe Pruetts have that type of support in the general populace."

"Maybe we could help." Horace didn't want Candice fighting again so soon, but he had an idea.

"How?" Mary was all for any idea that gave them a better chance of success than the suicide run she suspected Candice had planned for herself.

"We make a deal. They help us take the dome and we promise to give them something in return that they want."

"Slavery." Daniel's tone was ugly.

Chester patted the rebel's shoulder in comfort. "We don't always have to mean it. Sometimes, Pruett's do bluff."

"You mean..."

Candice nodded. "We lie where we need to."

Appeased, the group began to make plans to spread the word that Pruetts would consent to keep male slavery in exchange for everyone's help bringing down the dome.

"What about Sam? Is there some way to contact her?" Mary was worried for the girl. Most of Sam's support structure was split between babysitting the ape and getting the rebels to the border. Mary didn't have much faith in Lydia after being around Bobby.

He wasn't trained and he couldn't fight; even Daniel was stronger.

"Not as long as she's on the subway. Even Network communications are limited when people are underground." Chester pulled his bedroll from his kit, hoping Sophia was having a peaceful night. She'd taken all their kids and trainees to the farms that had been cleared. The mountain brutes would help her keep them all alive.

"Why did she choose to be a replacement player?"

The others refused to answer Bobby. A part of being one of them meant figuring things out for themselves. It encouraged their family to be smarter than those who were told everything they wanted to know.

Bobby settled on a chair near Candice to wait for his next orders, frustrated.

"We should be hearing news reports about the gang being wiped out, even though the Network knows we survived." Chester made a bed in the corner with his cloak.

"The council has gone quiet."

Bruce looked up from making Mary's bed in the opposite corner. "That means they're getting ready to leave, right?"

Candice nodded. "And that's why we're going to the boat while everyone else goes to the dome."

"Without a ruler, all those fighters will die in the dome. And we know the Network plans to blow it up if it's overrun. The bachelors told you."

Candice looked back at Bobby without remorse. “Do you understand what that means?”

Bobby slowly nodded, not sure if he was okay with that or not. “Those being sent to the dome are not supposed to survive. You did it this way to eliminate competition after it’s all over.”

“You may turn out to be one of us yet.” Candice didn’t smile like the others were. “Everyone go to sleep. Dawn will come fast.”

2

“Are you awake?”

“Yes.” Candice had refused to sleep yet. The sewers around them had stayed active for hours. The other fighters were snoring, filling the room with enough noise to cover a quiet conversation.

Daniel shifted, hands going to her wound.

Candice put a hand on his wrist. “Not now.”

“Is there time to wait for later?”

She sighed. “I don’t think so, but they’ll lose heart. You have to help me take the boat.”

“And then you’ll tell them and get medical care?”

“My word on it.”

“What else can I do?”

“Not much. I need to rest.”

“We’re not going to the dome at all? Even to watch the ape fall?”

“Sam’s parents will help Jonas. We’re sneaking onto the boat while the mob and the Network are distracted. When they set sail, we’ll be with them.”

“How are we going to hide on a boat?”

“We’ll steal uniforms and blend in.”

“Pruetts? Blend?”

Candice snickered despite the pain. “Okay. So maybe we’re going to take control of the boat and hold the council hostage until they agree to our terms.”

“And what will those be?”

“Unconditional surrender.” Candice slowly rolled over. “Lay against me? I’m cold.”

Daniel scowled. “Don’t you die!”

Candice chuckled. “You can’t kill Pruett with a knife in the back. It only slows us down.”

“Tell him the real reason you’re healing so slow.”

Candice growled at her father.

Her mother twitched in her sleep and settled back down into Bruce’s arms.

“Tell him. He has a right to know.”

“Not like this!” Candice controlled her anger and disappointment. “It should be a happy moment, not another worry.”

“Tell him.”

Candice sighed at her father’s repeated order. “I’m pregnant. All my energy is going to the baby first.”

Daniel didn’t hear anything but pregnant. “I’m going to be a father?”

Candice waited for more, hoping it was pleasing to him.

Daniel wrapped his bigger body around hers and tried to send her all of his heat. "Thank you."

Candice shut her eyes. "It's my honor, Daniel. I'll try very hard to keep *all* of us alive."

Daniel rubbed her shoulders, grin stretching his face. "I'm going to be a daddy!"

Chuckles filled the sewer, alerting the Divas that their new leader was awake.

3

Morning came too soon for Candice. As dawn broke over the rioting city, she stood up, fighting not to groan. "Turn on the news."

Bruce hurried to activate his radio, worried. Candice's injury was dangerous to all of them, but mostly to Daniel. If she couldn't protect him, he would be lost. Despite doing so well, all the males in this room were a liability. "We should go underground."

While the others snickered and gestured at their surroundings, Candice nodded. "We'll find a place on the way."

"Wait." Bobby scowled, hands going to his hips. "You mean the men."

Bruce nodded when Candice didn't reply.

"Well, I'm not staying behind. She said I'm her body man."

Horace frowned at the rookie. "To get into these sewers. Now be quiet."

"I won't. I don't trust her not to—"

Daniel's fist knocked Bobby into the wall. He slammed into it and slid down, lids shutting.

Candice let out a sigh of relief. "My thanks."

Daniel returned to her side. "My honor."

The other Pruetts snickered. Bobby was learning their lifestyle the hard way. If he survived this, the rookie would accept his owner's choice from now on. Lydia hadn't rejoined them, but Bobby hadn't noticed her lengthy absence, or if he did, he didn't care enough to mention it. Bruce knew it might be because he was embarrassed to be asking after his master like a dog, but lack of awareness was more likely. It wasn't that Bobby didn't care about Lydia. He just wasn't as observant as he should be. That was proven by him saying he didn't trust Candice. That was a huge mistake.

Candice opened the door, not surprised to find four guards on it.

They jumped to attention and hoped her demands were reasonable.

The news began to play.

"... who says the attack on the subway that killed at least a dozen was a deliberate attempt to stop her game because the Network can't afford to pay off the bets if she wins. Here's the rest of that clip."

"Sam, why did you kill everyone on the train?"

“I didn’t. The bachelors are alive and well. So is the crew.”

“Can you afford the fines?”

“Already paid.” Sam snorted. “Didn’t make a dent in my account. I might do it again.”

“Why did you do it at all?”

“They tried to arrest me. I chose not to cooperate.”

“Why are you under arrest orders?”

“I accepted an offer to kill the head of the council.”

“Oh, my God! Why did you do that? And who made the offer?”

“One of the other members hired me.”

“Why?!”

“Because the men on the council are tyrants, especially Julian. *He* needs to die.”

“He...?!”

“Yes. The leader of our government is a man. We’ve all been betrayed.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“I’ll prove it.”

“How?”

“This interview is live, right?”

“Yes.”

“Get ready to lose your broadcast. The council is shutting you down as I speak.”

“But that would be manipulation of—”

The radio went to static, ending Sam’s interview.

“She did it.” Candice was thrilled. They didn’t need a reason for the citizens to attack the dome now. Sam had given them the truth.

Daniel was furious. “How long have you known?”

So was everyone else, but not at Candice, though they did want to know how she’d figured it out when they hadn’t. It was obvious she’d known or she would be showing surprise or revamping their plans.

Outside, Divas were shouting. Above the sewer, the same was true of the city locals. They believed Sam.

“Because it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“How do you figure?”

“The slavery, the population controls, letting the disease run unchecked.” She looked at Daniel with some of her old pain showing. “When I snuck into the dome at fourteen, I went in through the slave bay. I saw a boat, or thought I did. That’s where they caught me.”

Daniel frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I saw men getting off the boat—free men who were giving orders. After enough drugs and beatings, I said I’d made it up and they sent me home.”

“Why didn’t they kill you?”

“I’m a Pruett, I assume. They didn’t want trouble with our entire family while they were planning their escape.”

“You believe this goes back that far?”

Candice sighed. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you when it started, but I suspect we’ll find proof of everything in the dome.”

“And we’re letting them blow it up.”

“Get geared up. We’re taking it down.” She paused to sweep the hundred Divas who had slept in the hall outside. “In exchange, I’ll consent to an easement of slavery laws so everyone can adjust.”

Divas brightened, getting in the spirit.

Wanting to be confident they were riled upon leaving, Candice grinned. “Whoever brings me the head of a male on the council will be considered for leadership roles. If it’s not a council member, you go into Vulture Run.”

Given a warning, and a possible reward, Divas rushed from the sewers.

Candice and her group didn’t follow yet, but they left the door open to let stragglers know they were coming. They checked gear, chose weapons, and kept their faces blank of real thoughts and feelings. It was almost time to take back control of a country that had been under enemy rule for over four hundred years.

Time stood still.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Implosion

1

“The file was sent to multiple news agencies. The accusations Sam Pruett leveled against the government has brought the city to flames. There are riots in the streets and even rumors of a past mutation that the populace was told died a long time ago. There has been no word from the council, though troops have been called to the complex to defend the dome.”

Rusty opened the door to the leader’s apartment without knocking. “We have to go!” Rusty glanced around, spotting no sign of Julian. “Where are you? They’re breaching the dome!”

Rusty scanned the spotless three bedroom apartment, listening to the news report on the TV that was blaring through the residence.

“After killing the infamous family in an ugly ambush, the council ordered the arrest of Sam Pruett, who was on her way for her game. Sam survived the attempt on the train and gave us this shocking video.”

Rusty wasn’t distracted by the report or the lavish apartment. The government lived way beyond the means of the average citizen. The

females had to be careful to cover themselves in public so the rest of the nation wouldn't know they were hoarding supplies, technology, and slaves. Every council room had items that were off limits to the general public, including art, literature, and music. Almost all of these had been exhumed from leftovers of the past, however. There were no new artists, popular musicians, or thriving authors in New America. Thinking outside the box was not permitted. The Network allowed this decadent lifestyle to sway them to anything Julian suggested. Closets of clothes and jeweled stars were the least of the things Julian tempted them with, though the females on the council had all gravitated toward those material possessions. It only made Julian's conquest easier, as it had every ruler before him.

Rusty opened the door to Julian's bedroom and froze. He hadn't known there was so much blood in only one body. Rusty squinted. *Is it only one? I can't tell with so many pieces.*

Julian looked up. "It's time to go."

Rusty forced himself to enter and take hold of Julian's arm. He pulled him away from the teeth-marked leg. "I have an escort waiting. Where are your bags?"

"I already sent them to the boat." Julian straightened up, control back in place for a little while. "How long before they breach us?"

"Minutes."

Julian let Rusty and the security team take him to the private elevators. "Where is everyone?"

“The stairs to the dock. I didn’t have time to get rid of the women. I’ll take care of it after we set sail.”

“Good.” Julian put his hand on the elevator scanner. His was the only one that would activate the private transport.

Instead of going down, the elevator went up. The rear exit of the complex could only be accessed from the top floor of the roof.

Julian smoothed his clothes and fastened his cloak over his bloody shirt, aware of the troops staring at him. These five women knew all about the males on the council. They were here because of loyalty. *Cousins and nieces in our family are like that.*

The roof of the complex was a flat square in the center of a giant oval. Long stairs led from the exit and spiraled down the side of the tall building. Julian didn’t hesitate to start the descent. Now that they were outside, the roars of the mob were echoing up to remind him that he had played a dangerous game.

Rusty followed slower, not as comfortable with heights. It had taken longer to load the boat than any of them had expected, but a frontal assault at dawn had been a shock. Rusty hadn’t been alive for previous rebellions. Only a couple of those had even reached this level of violence in the city. It was terrifying.

The jeers from the crowd got louder as they descended. Gunfire and screaming became a constant noise.

Rusty saw people struggling down the stairs ahead of them. He slowed a little as Julian hurried to join them, trying to see who it was. He still had targets on his list, and now was a perfect time to eliminate people.

Around the stairs, the artificial atmosphere provided cloud cover that hid their descent. As they reached the second level and continued downward, their cover vanished.

“It’s Julian!”

“There’s Rusty!”

The council didn’t stop as their senior members caught up. It was obvious from how fast Julian was traveling that he wasn’t going to pause as he reached them. Instantly fearing being thrown over the side, the women hurried until his footsteps neared their heels and then they moved aside in hopes that he would just keep going.

He did.

As Rusty came between the two huddling women, he lunged forward and grabbed both of their legs.

Lauren and Shelly struggled, but it was too late. Rusty flipped them over the side of the stairs.

Bodies falling to the ground should have been noticed but weren’t. The chaos made it almost impossible to hear anything.

Julian hurried to the bottom, pausing by the bodies as an excuse for getting his breath back. Julian didn't like being physical unless there was blood involved.

One of the women moaned.

Julian knelt by her, loving the death moments. He always paused for it in all of his control sessions.

Shelley focused on Julian's victorious face. "Your days are numbered." Blood ran from the corner of her mouth.

Julian gazed at the dying woman, triumph fading. "What did you do?"

Shelly's eyes shut. "Hired your nightmare."

"Which one?!"

"All of them." Shelly's last breath rattled out in a laugh that sprayed blood. "All of them..."

2

"It's cracking!"

"The dome is coming down!"

People screamed at each other as the ape continued to pound against the weakest part of the dome. Right where the entryway met the door, the monster was banging away large chunks. Once it was breached, the failsafe would automatically take it down to prevent a sudden depressurization.

An awful groaning noise was coming from the ape. Taking constant gunfire from the few Defenders who hadn't been killed yet, the ape had already been shot dozens of times with large

weapons. It had also been hit with hundreds of small knives and explosive spheres. Its fur was too thick and matted to allow most of their weapons to get through.

The fire-breathing hounds that had come with them were doing battle with Defenders, but they were also being killed by changelings in the crowd who didn't realize they were loyal. The rebels tried not to think about it. Attacking the crowd around them to stop it was the opposite of what they needed to happen as they slipped through the crowd, passing out blades. "Take a knife, kill a Defender, get her gun."

Camille and Amos were fighting alongside the ape, trying to keep Defenders away while the primate pounded on the dome. Around Sam's parents, a small group of Nomads and family members were doing the same. Around them, thousands of enraged changelings fought and waited to get into the complex. The news crews were blasting Sam's accusation through every device, causing shock, dismay, and then anger. As the fury boiled, the women were hitting the streets to express their displeasure at being lied to and murdered by the very people they were supposed to be able to trust.

Amos saw a group of Den Mothers hurrying males and children away from the complex, dressed as women. He recognized it because that was how he had been stolen from the government and gifted to the wonderful Pruett woman who had hidden him

for so long now. Their daughters, Sam and Angelica, were a source of pride for him.

The ape pounded again, harder in his desperation as exhaustion neared; the dome finally reacted. A crack ran up the wall, releasing warm, soggy air through the hole.

An instant later, the protective shield emitted a loud hiss and began to lower.

“They have a big gun! They have a big gun!” Camille couldn’t be heard over the din of the crowd roaring in approval. People pushed closer in a frenzy as Camille continued to shout, trying to warn them.

Unable to, she grabbed her mate’s arm and threw them to the ground. She had no hope of survival. “Never stop fighting!”

Amos recognized the moment and hugged Camille as tight as he could. “I love you!”

The impact of the missile hitting the ape at such close range threw a wave of force into the air that hit everything in a half mile radius. People were knocked to their feet, burning or bleeding from their ears at the concussion. Wind flew over the crowd, knocking debris into people and impaling those who were unlucky.

The ape staggered, shaking the ground as it fell forward to catch itself against a small part of the dome that hadn’t slid down yet. It often took the dome four minutes to lower when the Network was airing things out.

Around them, the crowd beat on the wall and each other in anticipation of being inside. They'd barely noticed the monster's defeat.

The ape fell, crushing a group of Defenders who had still been firing into its big stomach.

Next to the ape, Jonah's body was uncovered. He had been killed in the first wave as they approached the dome with the ape. No one had stopped to mourn him, despite the Glowers being loyal. There hadn't been time. Now, the surviving outcasts began to gather around his body, and the ape, forming a circle of protection.

As the dome neared the 8-foot range, changelings began to leap over the wall and vanish inside the complex. The crowd was no longer interested in Pruetts, Glowers, Divas, or men. They had accomplished what everyone wanted—the dome was down and the government was defenseless. Loyalty and sorting out leadership would have a time, but that wasn't now.

Candice and her group came through the crowd to join the circle, somber. They ignored the ape and went to their two family members. Sam's parents had been killed in the blast.

Candice was cursing herself for not getting here faster. She hadn't thought the dome would take so long to fall. Camille and Amos should have been inside the employee door, waiting for them right now.

Candice scanned the ape as her mother knelt by the bodies. There wasn't time to give them a burial,

but Mary would do the best she could to hide the markings that would get them stripped by scavengers. If there was a point later when they could, the bodies would be collected. Most Pruetts weren't buried in accordance with laws, but with their honor.

“You...promised!”

Candice came to the ape, careful not to touch the mourning Glowers who had lost their ruler and their savage God.

“Will you...honor your word?”

Candice hunkered to stare at the dying creature. If the Network won this fight, the ape would be healed and put into service against her people. He couldn't be allowed to live. “Yes.”

The ape wheezed out a painful breath of relief.

“Do it now.”

Candice stepped aside so Mary could run up and slam a thick pole into the ape's eye.

Glowers screamed as the pole sank into the ape's socket to reach the brain and end its misery.

“Now!” Candice and her group threw their knives and spikes, refusing to attack the Glowers barehanded. The crowd around them parted, but didn't interfere.

Bobby rushed forward. “What are you doing?!”

Daniel grabbed him and swung the rookie out of the line of fire so he wasn't killed.

Candice tossed her blade, hitting the last Glower.

Bobby landed on Chester's knee with his face, hitting the eye Daniel hadn't blacked in the Diva den. Chester had been trying to catch him and missed.

"They're all down." Bruce was standing near Camille and Amos, his friends, while watching out for his mate. He was sad, but also glad for them. Sam and Angelica's parents had died together, fighting their enemy. Bruce's voice was gruff with unshed tears. "Your sacrifice will be remembered."

"Yes. Come." Mary led the crew to the employee entrance where Defenders were fleeing. The changelings were killing everyone in a uniform, including the media, who was trying to cover the story. The Pruetts traveled through this ugly din without being delayed. Women in the middle of fights swung each other out of the path, not willing to challenge the family even by accident.

If they hadn't just taken a double loss, on top of Candice's injury, they would have been proud of the image they presented. As it was, they weren't. The family was furious and scared.

Candice didn't ease their fears over her injury again. She couldn't. It was bad.

A stiff wind blew in off the ocean as they entered the dank, bloody tunnel, rustling Candice's hair and making her long for more of it. She had never been on open water, but the idea was thrilling. She was positive the breeze out there wouldn't layer her sweaty skin with toxic chemicals like it did here

in the city. *If I have to die in this war, I at least want to ride the ocean first.*

3

“Hurry!”

The council members, all men, scurried across the empty wharf behind Julian as he marched toward the dock.

The already nervous squad of Defenders guarding the dock stiffened when they saw a group of well-dressed males hurrying toward them. Spotting Julian’s bloodstains and rebellious expression, the women lifted their weapons, suspecting bachelors of escaping. The guilty looking guards with the men could have been bought off. It had happened before.

“Halt there!”

“Where are your owners?!”

Julian kept walking until he was right up against the gun of the team leader. “I’m the ruler of the council. Let me pass or I’ll slit your throat.”

The team leader would have snorted, but the troops around the men were making gestures that said he wasn’t lying. Their fear got through.

Julian slid by the guards, not impressed with his security and glad of it at the same time. “Stay here and make sure no one follows us.”

Julian hurried down the dock, aware of voices coming through the tunnel. The changelings would

reach this area quickly because it was on the ground floor.

Candice laughed harshly. “I thought the council wasn’t afraid of anything?”

Julian skidded to a halt as a dozen unwelcome shadows broke away from the shadows of the boat and came up the dock.

Julian scanned the boat and found his captain and the crew being held at gunpoint by four other rebels. It was obvious from the wet clothes that they’d swam to his boat and taken over. “Get off my ship!”

Candice chortled again.

Julian’s rage flared. If not for the relief session he’d had, he would have flown at her and tried to do what everyone else had been so unsuccessful at.

Candice knew. So did the rest of the Pruetts. Ten of them shifted cloaks in tandem to be able to reach their other weapons.

Louder, angry voices came through the tunnel, along with chilling screams of the last of the complex Defenders being defeated. The changeling mob could reach this tunnel at any point.

The few guards at the end of the dock eased down the wooden pier toward Julian and his ship.

Julian didn’t care. All he could see was the traitorous changelings in front of him. “Let me pass or I’ll kill the kids.”

Candice’s eyes flickered to red. “You have one chance to tell us where they are and then things will get ugly.”

Julian dropped the items in his arms and popped the latch on his wrist communicator. He dropped it into the water sloshing alongside the dock. "If I don't arrive on time, all the bachelors and kids will be killed. That includes your good friend, Baker."

Candice snorted. "You can't bluff me."

Julian sneered at her. "I'm a Pruett. I don't bluff."

"I'll kill you for that lie!" Bobby flew toward Julian, leaving his place in Candice's crew.

Mary gently shoved the rookie as he went by, knocking him into the water.

Candice stared at Julian. His dark hair, black eyes, and *you can't defeat me* attitude said he wasn't lying.

Candice's face filled with rage. Her hand went to her weapon. "Excuse me a moment."

Candice stepped by Julian without fear.

He, and everyone else, watched her walk to the crew of Defenders at the end of the dock.

Candice scanned one of the big females, verifying the whip that had caught her attention as it gleamed in the dim sunlight.

The dock supervisor felt it coming. She ran.

Candice tossed her knife, hitting the woman in the leg.

She collapsed in a heap, grunting.

Candice motioned to the other guards. "Beat her with her whip until she can't walk and then leave her there for the mob."

Council members cringed, expecting the same treatment.

“She’s like him!”

Alex motioned Brandon to be quiet as Candice stalked back toward her group.

She didn’t look at them as she went by.

The dock guards exchanged glances and then went to do as ordered. It was obvious that the chain of command had changed.

Screams came as the Defender was sliced open.

Julian laughed as Candice shoved by him to retake her place. The supervisor’s shrieks were delightful.

A small group of local changelings charged through the tunnel.

“Kill them or I’ll kill you!” Julian screamed it without looking.

The troops at the end of the dock ran forward to fight, clearing a path for the council to escape.

Two of the men, Brandon and Alex, took off running back towards the stairs, hoping they could hide in the elevator. It wouldn’t take them anywhere, but it also wouldn’t go to any of the floors where changelings would be. They would only have to defend themselves from the roof and if they could damage the stairs, this mob wouldn’t be able to reach them either. After the crowd got tired of looting and wandered off, the men might be able to escape.

The rest of the council stayed close behind Julian and waited to see if he was as clever as he

always acted. If anyone could bargain a way out of this mess, it was him.

Julian's Defenders were successful against the small group of changelings. The locals hadn't remembered to pick up a gun.

Hoping the noise hadn't drawn another wave, the guards returned to the dock and the drama unfolding there. All of them now hoped to be invited onto the boat if Julian was successful in clearing his passage. They also wanted to know the answer to Candice's question.

Candice stared, waiting. She didn't care if the changelings tore the council apart.

Julian read that on her face and tried another tactic. "I'll tell you anything you want to know, but you have to get me out of here. Now."

Candice gestured at the nervous men behind him. "What about them?"

Julian didn't blink. "Them who?"

Candice laughed at the stricken expressions of the male council members. She had only known Julian for a few minutes now, but it wasn't surprising that he was so ruthless. They should have known he had no loyalty to them. *I'm finally here. I found the enemy behind the hood.*

Julian spotted Daniel standing behind Candice. "Your kids are happy and healthy."

Daniel grimaced, but didn't rise to the bait.

Candice felt his pain, but she refused to be swayed. "Tell me."

More voices echoed through the tunnel, indicating a larger group.

Julian scowled, starting to be concerned. “There isn’t enough time to explain everything.”

Candice believed that was true, but she was enjoying his squirming. “Give me the basics and I’ll decide if I need the rest.”

Julian took a step closer. He might be able to shove her over and make it onto the boat.

Candice didn’t budge as the family on either side of her tensed to fire or lifted weapons.

Julian stopped, realizing they would kill him even without the answers. It forced him to use the strongest advantage he had. “If you don’t get me out of here, I can’t stop the bomb that’s going to hit the wall where your little rebel friends are gathering, with the help of the fishmongers.”

Stunned, Candice waved him onto the boat.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Feeding the Sharks

1

“What did you plan to do with them after you set sail?”

Julian didn’t glance at the trembling councilmen. “Someone has to feed the sharks.”

The remaining council members turned to run.

The troops at the end of the dock came forward at Candice’s gesture.

A large group of changelings ran through the tunnel and charged toward the wharf.

Rusty dove off the dock and into the water. He didn’t come back up.

The local changelings spotted the running men and the boat that was obviously getting ready to sail.

“Get them!”

The mob surged toward the pleading, shaking men.

From the second level of the stairs, Brandon and Alex observed in sympathy as the furious changelings tore their fellow councilmembers apart.

Julian didn’t even glance at the scene. He went straight to the captain of his ship. “Everglades Center, as fast as you can. We’re already late.”

Julian's boat crew wore the same uniforms of a complex Defender, but their rough, tan skin and sun bleached hair gave them away. It was obvious they weren't regulars in the dome. Their tools and weapons were also different. Candice counted more ropes than she did guns on the big women who hurried to obey.

Julian marched toward his stateroom as if he was still in charge.

Bobby pulled himself up onto the dock, furious at being knocked in the water. He jumped onto the boat, but kept his distance from Julian so he wasn't punished again. He refused to look at Mary.

The rest of the Pruetts jogged onto the ship as the captain sailed the boat away from the dock. The gangplank was ripped loose and dropped between the boat and the dock, where it was crushed.

The changeling mob ran toward the remaining guards.

"Did you help them?!"

"Were you their guards?!"

About to be overrun, the dock guards ran toward the ship and jumped.

Two of the five made it. The other three fell into the water and began to swim after them. One of the three women was a good enough swimmer to reach the small ladder on the side of the ship. The other two quickly fell behind for the sharks.

A few of the locals also dove in to follow, but the changelings on the dock were busy taking their anger out on the two screaming men who weren't

dead yet. Few noticed the leaving ship, and with no way to follow, those who did notice it ignored it for the open complex that was free to be looted and explored at their leisure.

Candice motioned her people to guard the boat crew and the three Defenders. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with them, but if they obeyed her orders, it might earn them the chance at a future where one didn't exist for them now.

Candice followed Julian below deck. His ship was decadent. The plush furniture and lavish golden accents immediately told passengers and crew alike that they were keeping company with someone important. The rest of the ship was the same. Candice assumed a lot of Defenders had died and killed for this coveted post over the years.

As New Network City began to fade from view, Mary allowed herself to relax. They now had the head of the Network under their thumb, as much as a Pruett could ever be under someone's control, and the complex had fallen. At some point, there would be an explosion that would eliminate most of their looting rivals, along with equipment and labs the Network had been using to abuse their subjects. The bachelors had been evacuated and everyone else was accounted for, except Baker.

Candice had every faith Sam would find him. That was why she hadn't worried over Julian's threat to kill Baker or the kids. There was no way to know if he was telling the truth about them, but his gleeful tone as he threatened Angelica and the

rebels at the border had convinced her that one definitely wasn't a bluff. It also told her there was a spy among the rebels or Julian was able to watch their movements somehow. Both options were terrifying.

Bobby frowned, wiping water from his arms. "When is it going to—"

The complex exploded in a thundering wave of destruction. No longer contained by the dome, it blasted outward, sending shrapnel into the air for miles.

Everyone inside the building was killed, along with those outside trying to get in. Thousands of lives ended in one powerful blast that echoed across the state and drew the attention of a large group of orphans and their protectors who were traveling south.

Little Lea glanced up at the mountain brute walking next to her. "Do you think they made it out?"

The mountain woman, Benji, had another little girl on her shoulder. "It was all part of the plan."

"To be in trouble for killing the bachelors? It's illegal to kill men."

"The bachelors were taken out of the complex yesterday. The Pruett clan sent multiple warnings through their contacts that the complex was going to be attacked. It forced the council to move the men out."

"I can't believe it's gone."

The mountain woman hadn't lived in the city all her life. She didn't share the child's grief. "We're on our way to a safe house. You'll get a new home."

Lea shrugged. "I didn't have one before. It's not a loss. It's just hard to believe I won't be able to look up and see that ugly tower anymore. It's always been a part of my life."

Benji pointed to the front of the line, where their guides, the remaining Nomads who hadn't been sent to help Sam, were pausing. "Maybe they need help."

The little girl ran up to offer assistance.

Benji breathed a sigh of relief. She was honored the Pruetts trusted her enough to escort the children, but she didn't like kids. It was one of the advantages of living in the mountain. There weren't many offspring and because of that, the parents kept the children sequestered where they couldn't annoy anyone and be hurt.

"We are here." The Nomad, Luba, pointed toward a shady area coming up. "Wait while we clear it."

The group of orphans and their escorts waited impatiently in the open as the Nomads verified there wasn't a trap. When they were signaled over and the entire group was under the cover of the trees, the mood lifted. It immediately dropped again as the children realized they were about to go underground.

The leader of the Nomads pointed at Lea, and then the other kids. “These are your people. Lead them to safety.”

Lea lifted her chin proudly and did exactly that.

Ruby and Glory were next to their mother, protecting her while she directed the orphans and other innocents into the tunnel. Chester’s children, along with the farmers, were bringing up the rear. Candice had wanted those who couldn’t fight removed from the possible crossfire. The city wasn’t safe, so she’d sent the farmers home with a lot of hands to help get the spring planting done. The city kids were eager to work on the farm under masters who weren’t abusive. The Pruett kids would tolerate the chore because they knew they were the real protection if there was trouble. Like their parents, they were dangerous.

Sophia stayed alert and listened for more sounds from the city.

Other than wind and screams, there wasn’t any.

2

Candice followed Julian into a lavish stateroom that gleamed from a fresh dusting. Boxes and bags of personal goods and linens were stacked neatly on one side. On the other was a basic set of furniture that would allow Julian to live here for an indeterminate amount of time. There was even a bathroom setup, complete with a shower. The small study in the corner was full of books, maps,

pictures, and computer screens. Technology screamed at her from every corner of the 10'x20' bunk. "Nice pad."

Julian chuckled as if he wasn't a prisoner and sank into the chair behind the desk that had been measured for his large frame. "Perks of leadership."

Candice settled into the seat across the desk as other people arrived to provide protection and listen to the information she was about to dig out of the enemy. It was hard to consider him a family member until they remembered his revelation.

Julian poured two drinks from the expensive decanter on the desk and lifted one of them in the air. "To the Pruetts."

It was impossible for Candice not to respond to the toast. She lifted her glass and downed the expensive alcohol. She had never had bourbon before. Even with her bank account, it was simply unaffordable. The alcohol burnt a fiery path down her throat and exploded in a sensation of pleasure and pain in her gut.

Julian did the same, mirroring her hiss at the sensation. "Only five people in the country have this."

Candice wasn't surprised, considering the amount of travel it took to collect the items required to make it. Corn was only able to grow in the south, along with wheat, barley, and rice. Distilleries only existed in the complexes, forcing them to transport the ingredients. It took months to make a single batch.

Julian gestured toward the pictures on the wall. “Your ancestors.”

While the others glanced at the images and found more proof of Julian’s words, Candice leaned back in the chair and studied her enemy. Pruetts had gone corrupt in the past, but not to the extent of the sly man observing every expression that crossed her face.

“It’s Tara!” Chester moved over to examine the pictures.

Candice stiffened, attention captured.

Julian smirked. “How do you think she got so many breeding passes?”

Chester glared at the picture. “She knew about all of it.”

Julian poured a second drink to cover the growing nervousness. He didn’t like the way Candice was staring at him. “Tara provides information from the territories. She’s always been one of mine.”

“Figures. That explains how she could drop off her bastards and never come back to check on them. It damaged her kids for life.” Chester couldn’t help the bitterness. His mate, Allison, had been killed while trying to find her mother and father. She’d heard a rumor they were being held in the complex.

Julian countered that calmly. “Tara is damaged. How could she help them by raising them?”

Candice kept studying him. “You sound like you know her well.”

Julian smacked the glass on the desk. He was annoyed when Candice didn't flinch. He was used to people being scared of him, but she wasn't. "I would agree with that statement considering that I fathered some of your rebel crew."

Rage filled the cabin.

Candice made a curt gesture to clear the room. If anyone was going to rip him apart, it would be her.

Daniel stayed. Everyone else left, casting ugly glares that warned Julian not to wander around by himself if Candice let him out or he wouldn't make it to his destination no matter what it cost them. No one wanted to know which of them he'd sired.

Candice didn't want to know who Julian was referring to either, but deep down, she already did. "Why did you let me live when I came to the complex the first time? Was it all planned out even then?"

"What do you think?"

Candice reached over and took the bottle to pour a second drink. "You let me go. You knew this conversation would take place."

"Very good!" Julian leaned back in the chair. "It's not Mary."

Candice shrugged. "It will devastate whoever it is. I'd rather not hear it."

Julian wanted to smirk at her cowardice, but he was afraid to push. Unlike the other Pruetts, who were quick to anger and recklessness, Candice was

letting her emotions boil. Julian knew that reaction was more dangerous.

“When you envisioned this meeting, how did you imagine it ending?”

Julian smiled again. “I had hoped you would join me, as my right hand.”

Candice also wasn’t surprised by that revelation. The Network had been going through council members too fast and replacements were always best when drawn from an inner circle who shared their ideals. The problem was that she and Julian had opposite ideals. There was only one way it could end, and she had no doubt that Julian already knew it, too. Which might mean the alcohol was poison or he had a knife in the drawer near his hand that he might try to kill her with, but Candice didn’t think so. Despite him knowing how it had to go, Julian honestly believed she was going to join him in his evil crusade to let men take over the world and make women slaves. That meant he had another secret and it had to be something powerful.

“I’m the only one who knows how to keep the men from progressing any further into the rage disease. If you kill me, or refuse to give me what I want, all men will suffer like you have for the next four hundred years.”

Candice stared at the evil man, almost unable to comprehend him. “How can you do that to your own?”

Julian didn’t show remorse as he answered. “The ends justify the means.”

“That phrase wasn’t true even when it was invented.”

Julian shrugged. “I’ve lived by it.”

“I need proof.”

Julian was also expecting that. “I know. That’s why you’re joining me at the training center. When you’ve met my demands, I will give you the formula and help distribute it to the populace.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I don’t want to die.”

Candice suspected the lie. “I want proof now. I don’t believe you can stop it in either gender. I believe it’s fading out now, because like you said, it burns itself out over hundreds of years.”

Julian realized he would have to give up on his plan to torment her for the entire ride. “We’ll have to go below.”

Candice stood up.

Julian was impressed when she didn’t show signs of the alcohol affecting her. He couldn’t say the same. After his control session, and then two shots of the expensive liquor, his stomach was boiling. He also couldn’t seem to shut his mouth. “I don’t want much. Everything I had hoped to accomplish will either continue or end at the training center. I won’t make it hard for you to consent.”

Candice noted the guards. Bruce and Mary were right outside the door and listening to everything being said, while others in their crew watched the captain and the Defenders who had joined them.

Candice indicated Julian to lead the way.

Julian took them down to the bowels of the ship, where the cold damp floors groaned and creaked under their feet. The ship had reached deeper water.

Julian opened the door to the lab that was empty and went to the center desk. He sat and began hitting buttons on the console.

Candice took a position against the wall nearby while her mother and father scanned the equipment and bays. All of the beds were empty and the lights were out over each individual compartment. The well-stocked area implied Julian was ready for medical emergencies. Considering her injury, that was almost a relief. If only they had a medic.

Computer screens came to life. Candice observed every swipe as Julian opened folders and files labeled with the names of bachelors who had obviously been experiments.

The next name caught her attention and held it.

“This is my file. Testing began at birth because of a genetic marker I carry that matches our founding father, Lucas. Look at the chart. The regular doses of the vaccine I’ve been receiving have begun to have an effect.”

Quick at math, Candice studied the numbers and came up with a fatal flaw. “You’re going to reach the max limit before the vaccine gets it under control.”

Julian brought up another chart showing his rapid progression. “We’ve made mistakes in the testing. The level of the vaccine needed to be

adjusted before I reached puberty. We tried to play catchup; it's been mildly successful."

"That means you don't have a real vaccine yet. You can't do what you promised."

Julian pointed at the bottom number on the file. "This is the last vaccine. We gave it to all the children, as well as the bachelor offspring. Look at the levels of the disease. It shrank the progression rate by 50% on the last batch. That's more than enough time to beat puberty as long as we begin vaccinating them within the first year."

Candice gazed at the screen. "All of this goes against your master plan. What's the catch?"

Julian hit another series of keys on the computer and the screen went dark. "That, I won't tell you until you agree to what I want."

"This isn't enough for me."

"As soon as we reach the training center, I'll show you the new test that was ready a week ago. They haven't been able to send the results because of your troublesome actions preventing messengers from getting through."

Candice understood Julian had refused to send the information over a medium that could be copied. She approved even as she hated him a little more for proving who he was. "This boat has to have a radio. Call them now and get the information."

Julian gazed at the dark monitor for a long minute. "How far away from the city are we?"

"A few miles."

"Any chance you might go back?"

Feeling the trap coming, she shook her head.

Julian gave her a familiar grin. "That's what I needed to hear." He leaned forward and switched the computer back on. A few seconds later, static filled the air. "I want an update."

Candice swept the brightly lit control booth on the screen. A dozen men in Defender uniforms stood watch over clerks and secretaries who were busy typing on keyboards connected to banks of computers.

Aware of her tensing, Julian hurried to relay instructions. "I'm on my way. I'm bringing guests for a tour. Don't panic."

The large man on the screen nodded as he typed, obviously bringing up the information. "Which part do you want first?"

"I only want the vaccination data."

The man on the screen typed again and then began to read. "94% chance of success with the last two dozen subjects. 99% chance with the next batch of subjects. Vaccination dates for the next control group are tomorrow morning, sir."

Julian glanced over his shoulder. "Satisfied?"

Candice nodded.

Julian rotated to his lieutenant. "Please arrange a special welcome."

The guard couldn't see who Julian was with. "Yes sir. Docking time?"

Julian realized their current captain hadn't been permitted to transmit that information and approved of Candice's caution. "Eight hours."

Julian disconnected the chat and swiveled around in the chair to look at Candice. “What did you get out of that?”

Candice hated Julian more and more with every second she spent in his company. “You have a male army. We’re sailing into a trap.”

Julian flashed an approving smile at her. “Now are you ready to listen to my demands?”

Candice crossed her arms over her chest. “Yes, and then I’m going to ask questions. Every time I think you’re telling a lie, I’m going to draw your blood. I don’t believe you’ve had that happen to you yet. It’s a unique experience.”

Julian laughed.

Candice flew across the small space and knocked him into the computer. She bashed his pretty face into the console three quick times and then slammed him backward to the ground by his hair.

She followed him down with a grunt and began to rake her claws down the exposed skin she could reach, digging in the tips.

Julian’s screams echoed through the boat.

Everyone who heard it was pleased. It was justice.

3

“She needs to eat. Open it.”

If the demand had come from anyone but Daniel, the family wouldn’t have obeyed. Candice

was still interrogating Julian, though the screams weren't as loud or often anymore. It had been three hours since Candice dragged Julian back in here by his hair, leaving bloody smears on the floor.

Daniel steeled himself as he entered the stateroom.

Bruce left the door open so he could grab Daniel and get him out of the way if there was trouble. He also wanted to see what was going on. There hadn't been a problem hearing it. Candice's questions had been brutal, penetrating shouts that revealed horrors he hadn't imagined.

Daniel scanned the room, smelling blood and frustration.

Candice didn't look up as Daniel stared at the bed where she had Julian. He wasn't resisting her now, but she still glowered to be sure he didn't try anything.

Julian grinned through the bloody nose and split lip. "Dinner. How lovely."

Daniel sat the tray on the desk, glad there wasn't a lot of blood. Candice was holding Julian's arm with her legs, knife slowly skinning the family crest from his skin. That was his only serious injury. Daniel didn't count the few gouges from her claws or the bruises from a struggle. He approved of her removing Julian from the family in such a way. It served two purposes.

Candice waited for Daniel to leave. When he didn't, she sighed. "Tell me why."

Daniel came over to the bed, noting Julian's face tighten as the knife neared the half-peeled tattoo again. Blood had begun to dry on the sheet and his clothes. "We've both wondered if I can handle this side of you. Now, we'll know."

"It won't matter to her, slave!" Julian spat. "You're only hurting yourself!"

Candice gaped at Julian. "Son of a bitch."

Daniel felt it, too. "I know you."

Julian growled. "Get lost!"

Candice slid the blade under the gory patch and sliced into the flesh.

Julian refused to scream this time, but he couldn't prevent the tears. Being skinned inch by inch was excruciating.

Daniel didn't look away as Candice cut through a small part of the tattoo.

When she dug the blade under the next corner, Julian whimpered.

Daniel still didn't react. In fact, he barely noticed. He was following the memory trail.

"He's paid for!"

"Another games kid?"

"This one is special. Make sure he's cared for."

"You got it. Owner's name and account number?"

"Council member number one."

"Oh. I'll handle it personally."

And she did. Daniel shuddered. Rankin had hated the government. She'd told him that repeatedly as she raped him.

"Daniel?"

"He's your father."

Candice dug the blade in deeper, then sliced through a larger section of the ink.

Julian screamed.

Daniel grinned. "Again."

Behind them, Bruce pulled the door shut.

"Why is she doing it without witnesses?" Bobby hadn't been present for anyone being blacklisted from the family. He'd only heard of it happening once.

"That comes after the crest is taken." Bruce motioned the rookie toward the stairs. "Get a report for us."

Bobby frowned. "I was just up there." He turned away before they could scold or punish him again. "I wish Lydia was..."

Mary gave Bruce a nod as Bobby spun around in panic.

"Where's Lydia?!"

"On a run." Bruce stepped by the rookie. "Come on. We'll get the update together while I fill you in."

Mary was relieved when the men vanished up the stairs. Training a rookie was exhausting, but Bobby had also been coddled for so long that he felt like he had the right to know everything. Teaching him to accept a bottom rung and work his way up

would take multiple runs that Mary hoped someone else would handle. She'd had enough of the kid.

"You evil bastard!"

Mary nodded at Daniel's shout. Julian was that and more. Their ruthless intelligence had spawned the tyranny this country lived under. Marcella had started it and Julian's line had finished it. Mary had no doubt they would discover the conspiracy went back to the very beginning. The only mistake in a perfect plan had been letting Candice live, using her as the distraction. Julian had forgotten how magnetic their family was, despite being the leader of New America. *He underestimated us.*

"Always! There has always been a Pruett leading!"

"How many men are at the retraining center?"

"Hundreds."

Mary waited, sensing the lie.

"Ahhhh!"

Mary sighed in pleasure at the sound of Julian's scream.

"A thousand! A thousand!"

"Stop lying to me. I don't enjoy hurting you."

"You stop lying so he won't know you for the monster you are!"

"You have no empathy. That's how we're different. I love the blood. I loathe the pain"

"You need the blood. You love the pain. It reminds you death hasn't come for you yet."

"Still playing with immortality, are you?"

"How do you know that?!"

Candice chuckled. "I know a lot. Your enemies hired me and they provided details. We know the grand plan. We know the disease will die out on its own. We know you have both the vaccine and the cure. And we know the UN is set to come through the wall in three weeks." Candice paused. "Oh, and there's the whole blowing up the rest of the power families so you don't have to give up leadership. Did I cover it all?" Candice finished taking the tattoo in one long slice that sent blood rolling over Julian's arm and the sheet.

"I'll kill you! You'll die for this!"

Daniel didn't care about any of it except for the path his mind was still following. "You breed with immune women to produce the bachelors. Like the other members?"

Candice hated the topic, but she knew the rest of the truth needed to come out. "Not the others, Daniel. The leader. For the last thirty years, just him."

Daniel thought he might be sick. "How many?"

Julian hissed as Candice slapped a bandage over his wound. "Thousands."

"They're at the training center?"

Julian's other arm strained against the ropes she'd used to bind him to the bed. "Some. Most had to be put down. Only ten weren't infected."

"Because of manipulations with your vaccine?"

"Because the mothers weren't compatible! It's been a problem through our history."

“That’s why the Malins were able to get away with so much. You need them.”

“The Malins have bloodlines in high places.”

“There was a Malin on the council?”

“Rusty.”

“One of the three men who escaped?”

“Yes. My XO. I didn’t know he could swim.”

“Why did your other children have to be put down?”

Julian chortled, madness showing. “They were too violent.”

“Side effects?”

“Yes. The wrong mix increases the progression of the disease.”

“How long have *you* been infected with our disease?”

Daniel and the other people froze at Candice’s casual question.

“You can’t know that.”

“Ah, but I can. I recognize my own kind. So will every other female you meet.”

“What gave me away?”

Candice pointed to the scars on his arms and legs. She hadn’t enjoyed stripping him to find the Pruett tattoo, but she’d done it and then left him uncovered to aid in the interrogation.

Julian frowned dramatically. “You had an advantage. That’s no fair.”

“He’s ill.”

Candice mirrored Daniel's disgust. "He's not curing the population problem. He's infecting the men with our disease."

"Why would you do that?!"

"We'll be like her."

Daniel's revulsion came up his throat. "I'll be topside."

Candice understood, but she didn't take her attention from Julian. "How close are you to that goal?"

"One dose and the scientists say I'll be able to *change*." Julian's crazy amusement echoed through the boat. "In the morning, all the control groups will receive the final dose. You're taking me to my army."

4

"Not one word!" Mary glared at Bruce as he joined her on the deck of the smoothly sailing ship.

He stood by her at the rail, but didn't speak. It wasn't because of her order. After time around the younger bachelors, Bruce wasn't worried over being properly timid anymore. He just didn't know what to say. He was heartbroken and furious that Julian had interfered with their lives.

Mary spun around and landed against his chest.

Bruce held her, feeling her body shake. *She's crying!*

Shocked, Bruce pulled her hood up and tugged his cloak around them so the crew would believe he was offering warmth instead of hiding her tears.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lean and Mean

Near the Canadian Border

1

“I don’t want to do this.”

Angelica didn’t tell him there wasn’t a choice. She waited for Jason to come to that realization on his own. She scanned the hundreds of males observing them, waiting to follow him, and sighed. If Jason wouldn’t do it, none of them would.

Overnight with the fishmongers had been almost boring. Marta’s death had been silent and the food had kept the others happy. When dawn came, hundreds of men and women had been crashed together, without violence. They’d had a couple of close moments, but Jason had controlled his men and Angelica had insisted the fishmongers do the same. Even the few couples who had progressed beyond smiles hadn’t become a problem, though the howling had been annoying while they tried to sleep. The fishers were noisy.

“Will they help us if we fall out?”

The fishmongers, under Angelica’s guidance, made gestures of comfort. Now that their ruler was dead, the women were eager to follow Pruett rules. Marta had kept them out in the wilderness through

their deals, but all of these angry females were ready for a better life that didn't include being outcasts anymore.

Jason knew everything Angelica was thinking, but he couldn't help the fear. This wasn't a quick river crossing. It was the ocean!

Angelica motioned the women to get loaded, hoping it would help Jason make his choice. Lingering to dwell on what could go wrong wouldn't help him.

Jason flinched as the fishmongers obeyed, expecting to be shoved onto the boat.

Angelica regarded him patiently, reminding him he wasn't under the control of people like that anymore.

Jason slowly relaxed. If there was trouble, Angelica would save him.

"Yes, I will." She knew what he was thinking.

Jason sucked in a tight breath before stepping into the swaying boat where the fishmongers would be responsible for their passage to the wall.

The other men began to follow his lead and got into the lines for the boats. Each ship would hold thirty men and a dozen sailors, making them a convoy of vessels that should draw attention from anyone on the shorelines as they passed. That couldn't be avoided. There were only two water routes to Canada from here and both of them were populated.

As they climbed into the boats, Angelica watched the fishmongers for signs they were setting

a trap. Killing their leader should have caused resentment, but Angelica didn't sense any. They appeared relieved that Marta's greedy rule was over. A new leader had been elected in her place in a unanimous show of support last night before they all slept where they dropped. Angelica had been horrified to learn that the young girl was Marta's daughter. She didn't think the atrocities of the war would ever end.

It took them an hour to load all the terrified males into the ships. The mutants controlled themselves remarkably well. Angelica knew it wasn't just Pruett power, as Candice was the only one who commanded that level of obedience. The fishmongers held hope of a better future, but they were also well fed. Thomas and his males were excellent cooks, turning Borderland rabbits into small steaks of delight over an open fire. Thomas swore it was because they didn't skin the animals first. In the past, it had been necessary to get to the meat, and to use the hide for clothing.

Now, cooking rabbits in their skin caused it to absorb the radiation. It could be peeled away, though. Their new diets of anything smaller than them had added increased value to the meat. Combine that with unchecked breeding and the hoppers were a great food source in the Borderlands that most citizens were unaware of. Angelica had caught them, with help from a small crew of women who'd wanted to learn, and the males had cooked. It had been hours of teamwork and calm, even with

Marta's body rotting a hundred yards away. Her clan had refused to bury her.

Angelica stepped into the boat and sank down by Jason as the last of the lines cleared. As soon as everyone was loaded, the sailors pushed away from the shore with long poles, and the boats dropped into deeper water.

Men yelled and scrambled for something to hold onto as the heavy ships sank deeper. Liquid death sloshed over the sides and onto the men, causing further panic.

Angelica whistled as loudly as she could.

The sound snapped heads to her and froze the chaos.

Angelica indicated her boat. It was being shoved along with the current.

The males in the other boats settled down in embarrassment, muttering and grumbling.

The females smirked and snickered at the reactions of the cute rebel males. Excepting the occasional illegal transport, they didn't have contact with men who had spines and these Pruett rebels were full of courage.

The rickety boats under them didn't appear capable of staying afloat, but they glided through the water at a quick pace that let Angelica breathe again. She was glad to leave the Borderlands. They were almost within sight of the wall. She hadn't realized they were so close. By going this way, they would avoid the cameras there, and the guns that defended the impenetrable barrier.

The last ship pushed off from the shore. Sailing in a double line, even Angelica was impressed. She'd already had moments where she'd been certain they were going to die. Making it this far was encouraging.

"How long before our first break?" When Angelica didn't answer, Jason frowned. "We're not stopping, are we?"

Angelica sighed. "We'll draw a lot of attention. If we stop, there's a good chance the Network will get troops between the wall and us. Do you believe these men are ready to fight Defenders?"

"No."

"Me neither. We don't stop."

Jason tried to find a comfortable position on the bench. "I'll make it work. I just have two questions."

"And those would be?"

"What if we need the bathroom?"

"Over the side."

"You have to be joking!"

"No."

Jason swallowed another protest to ask his second question. "What happens when we get to the wall? They'll have troops waiting for us."

"I'm working on that."

Jason heard the lie, but didn't call her on it. He assumed she didn't want anyone else to know those plans yet and there were a lot of people listening to this conversation.

Angelica let him assume it was to hide the information from their escort. If he knew the truth, he'd jump out of the boat right now. He was staying in Canada with the rebels, where he would be safe. *Then I'm going back to help my family.*

2

Angelica had never been on the ocean before. Neither had any of the rebel men. The fishmongers observed them in pity and amusement as they fought to control stomachs against the tide pulling the boats north. The water was only a little rough, but even calm swaying sent tremors through guts that were already full of adrenaline being pumped from their fear of drowning. It didn't help that the wooden ships groaned and creaked under their feet as they sailed through the water. The sound of men vomiting over the side of the boat had become loud in the hours since they'd set sail.

Now that it was nearing sunset, Angelica needed the noise to stop. If her maps were correct, they were approaching a populated peninsula where they would have to pass through a narrow channel. The sound would definitely draw attention.

Angelica scanned the women in the boat with her and Jason. One of them, a big blonde with scars and two missing fingers, hadn't stopped staring at them. "What do you have for their guts?"

The woman raised her voice to be heard over the vomiting. "Fish eggs."

Angelica grimaced. “Poison.”

Bridget snickered. “Not if you boil them and drain off the water. We grind them into powder and put it into hot tea for our new girls.”

Willing to do whatever it took to ease the misery and quiet them, Angelica shrugged. “Bring it on.”

Bridget pointed toward a ship near to them. “We keep it all there. That will require a stop.”

Angelica didn’t think she could get the men back on the boat if they stopped. Before any of them guessed what she was going to do, Angelica took off running toward the side of the boat.

Jason and the others watched in miserable amazement as Angelica leapt from their ship. Landing on her feet like a cat, she stood up calmly and advanced toward the other captain.

As the amused fishmongers and rebel men clapped, distracted for a moment, Angelica secured the medication the men needed. She didn’t know how she would distribute it yet to all of the boats, but they weren’t stopping.

Satisfied that Angelica was safe, Jason switched his attention back to the men on the bench with him. Ralph was here, along with Thomas, who no longer had ugly sorrow on his face. In fact, he was staring at Angelica as if he was in love with her. Jason gave the animal man a frown and then switched his attention to the women, who were a bigger threat. With Angelica off the boat, this was their chance to make a big mistake.

All the fishmongers, except for the one Angelica had spoken to, kept their distance. It was obvious they intended to keep to the deal. Jason regarded Bridget. “Who would have been your leader if we hadn’t shown up and forced Marta’s daughter into claiming it last night?”

Bridget straightened her shoulders. “Me.”

Jason was glad to know who he was speaking with. He doubted Angelica would secure leadership over the mutants for the Puetts, but he was also certain they wouldn’t be eliminated. Their skills were too valuable to waste and Marta’s daughter was about useless. Jason was already positive of that. The young girl had vanished below deck on one of the boats and still hadn’t come back up. Jason thought she was scared Angelica was going to kill her for leadership before the trip was over.

“Marta only cared about food.” Jason lifted a brow. “Do you share that feeling?”

Bridget shrugged. “If we can eat, and we’re not being hunted, life is good for us.”

Jason understood. Despite half the country being fertile, the Network preferred to keep its citizens lean and mean.

“Where are you going after you drop us off?” Jason was genuinely curious about the answer, but he also wanted to verify the women did intend to let them go.

Bridget pointed in the direction they’d come from. “We have a village. We’ll go home.”

It was a relief to know the fishmongers didn't need to be resettled. It made dealing with them easier.

Jason kept track of Angelica's progress on the other boats as he continued to pry information about the future from his captain.

Angelica stood in front of the small chest the captain had shown her, trying to figure out how she would distribute it without stopping the boats.

The captain tapped her on the shoulder. "Would you like me to deliver it?"

"You have an engine?"

The captain held a finger to her lips. "One of the few. That's why I carry the medical supplies."

Angelica was thrilled. "Yes, please, as quickly as we can."

Eager to chauffeur a Pruett, the captain hurried to the wheel and began to push buttons.

Panels on the rear of the ship slid out and then folded onto the deck. Two large engines slid out of the rear and splashed down into the water, held together by what Angelica could only imagine was centuries-old metal.

The sound of power filled the air and then splashes of water flew over the deck. The big ship lurched forward and swung out of the current, easily fighting it.

The men on the boat with them yelped, trying to find something to hold onto as their captain advanced toward the other ships.

As soon as they were in range, Angelica picked up one of the powder pouches and tossed it. Her aim was as good as always, allowing the captain to sail right by without slowing.

The captain grinned. "This is fun!"

Angelica made sure her aim was good as the next ship approached.

Around the sailing convoy, slaves and mutants observed Angelica's trip in fascinated distraction that allowed a few of the men to get their weak stomachs under control.

Grin stretching across her face, Angelica lobbed the pouches with deadly accuracy and enjoyed the feel of flying. The boat was going so fast it felt like they were gliding on top of the water.

The sailors began preparing the tea right away; glad she had figured out a way to give the men a break. It had been funny at first, but the constant sound of vomiting wore on even the most hardened sailors after a while.

Jason noted Thomas watching Angelica again and spun away from Bridget. He put his chest against the animal prize, bumping him. "What's up?"

Thomas shoved him hard, using a wiry strength that was unexpected.

Jason staggered and tripped over the bench. He fell awkwardly onto the warped seat, breath rushing out at the impact.

"Don't ever touch me!"

Jason tried to get to his feet.

Thomas walked away. "I'll throw you overboard. I don't care who your owner is."

"I don't have an owner! I'm a free man!"

Thomas snorted. "Then act like it."

Ashamed of his behavior, Jason got up and followed the man.

"What?!"

"Why were you staring at her?"

"She's good. We can trust her."

"Yeah, so?"

"So that's why. I've never been around a female who was good. I didn't believe any of them could be trusted."

Jason didn't understand, but he didn't want to get knocked down again. *I need more workouts.*

"I could teach you."

"Teach me what?"

"To fight. It's obvious that you can't."

"She's giving me lessons."

Thomas smirked at Jason's mutter. "The careful, censored versions that keep you from being hurt?"

"Yeah..."

Thomas padded to the far end of the boat, where there was a little more space and a lot less women gaping at his hair and muscles.

Jason thought about the pain that might come from a workout with Thomas and discovered he didn't care. It would be worth it. When they had to fight someone, he could protect Angelica and not always be a burden or a weak link.

The women on the boat left them alone, approving as soon as they realized a lesson was taking place. The two men shoving each other had been a delight and a turn-on, but observing a lesson of only men was mesmerizing. The captain of their boat had to force herself to pay attention to her job as the sweat and punches began to fly.

Angelica didn't know what was happening. It took her nearly half an hour to reach all the boats. Arms aching and spirits lifted, Angelica was glad to return to where Jason was probably bored or asleep... Angelica stared in surprised pleasure as she neared the ship. The rebel males were having a lesson. They weren't wasting the time.

Angelica scanned and found the males on several of the other boats doing the same. As another group began to form a circle and the shouting started, more men noticed and followed. It was wonderful.

Angelica was careful to jump onto the boat at the far end so she didn't disrupt the lesson. She lingered by the wheel with the captain and also tried to pay attention to their surroundings. The sunset was stunning and the cool splash of the ocean was refreshing. The breeze was constant and clean, telling them anything was possible if they had the courage to work for it. Angelica refused to ruin the moment by ordering the males to hide as land and lights came into view. If there had been more people in sight, she might have chosen otherwise, but there

were only a few dozen women on either shore and none of them appeared armed.

The narrowing water between the landmasses made a faster tide that forced the captains to pay attention, but the males didn't notice as they shoved and punched each other in the circle, letting themselves be men. Even their workouts with Candice didn't compare as blood splattered the damp deck and former slaves shouted in excitement. From the shores, it had to appear as though a ghost fleet was sailing by with the souls of men who'd been gone for centuries.

On the right, land was thirty feet away and barren except for a single old woman in a chair. Bottle in one hand and fishing pole in the other, both were frozen in air as she gawked at the boats.

On the opposite shore, a dozen locals had paused in washing laundry. Some of them ran off toward their town.

In a great mood, Angelica waved.

The little drunk woman dropped her pole, but not her bottle. She stored that in her pocket and patted it. "I'm seeing things. I've had enough."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Family Ties

Julian's Ship

1

“Go on in.” Bruce opened the door so Daniel could enter. He was carrying two trays from the galley and wearing a pensive expression. Bruce assumed Candice had sent him to pry out more information.

Bruce shut the door and stayed alert, positive that was why he was still on duty here. Mary and Candice knew he wouldn't forget any details he heard.

Daniel swept their prisoner and found Julian observing him intently. The bandage on his arm had bled through; blood had run down his side to pool on the sheets.

“Get up.”

Julian stood up awkwardly, hands bound. He watched Daniel put the trays on the desk, not speaking.

Daniel marched over to strip the bed, anger palpable. It had taken his owner an hour to convince him to do this and another hour of coaching to ensure he got it right. Daniel didn't want to be here.

Candice had told him that was why he was perfect for the job.

Daniel went to the small wash area and got the medical kit. He threw it at Julian, reluctantly impressed when the man caught it like Candice would have.

Daniel got out clean linens, not caring if the man attacked him. He was angry and disgusted enough to fight back.

Daniel tossed the dirty sheets into a pile, keeping track of Julian while he worked. Candice hadn't been worried about Julian hurting him, but Daniel wasn't positive. The man was obviously crazy.

As he finished with the bed, he realized Julian was still standing in the same place with the medical kit in his hand. "I'm not going to do it for you."

Julian sat the kit on a counter and began digging through it as best he could. He laid out the medical supplies as Daniel went to the desk to clear space for them to eat.

Neither man spoke yet. There was a thick, tense silence where they regarded each other and kept their thoughts to themselves.

Listening, Bruce was positive that wouldn't hold much longer. Julian had been alone for hours and someone like him needed to be the center of attention to be happy. He expected the man to begin babbling at any point.

Daniel quickly tired of watching Julian try to handle his injury. He stormed over to the man and

snatched the sanitizing wipes from his bloody hands. “Here!”

Julian held still as Daniel sanitized the injury and then smeared gel over it from a tube he’d had in his pocket. Angelica had given it to him with his basic gear before they’d left the homestead the first time. Pruetts weren’t supposed to have it. It also wasn’t a medication on this ship. “How did you get that?”

Daniel applied a more secure bandage and then began to clean up the mess. “You’ll have to ask Candice.”

“Is she in remission?”

Daniel stiffened. “No.”

“How do you know?”

“She has rage.”

Julian snorted. “She’s discovered a lot of secrets over the last couple of months. Perhaps that explains it?”

Daniel shrugged. “I didn’t come here to talk about Candice.”

Julian went to the desk and sank into the chair. “What did you come here for?”

Daniel cleaned his hands and took the seat across from the man Candice would never call father. “She sent me for information.”

Julian ignored the tray Daniel shoved toward him. “Why would I tell you anything more than I’ve told her?”

“You care for me. I don’t know why or in what way, but I felt it. So did Candice. That’s why I’m here.”

Julian was impressed with the honesty. It was a powerful tactic, mostly because it was right. “I spent a lot of time with you, before you were put into the games.”

“So Candice would want me.”

“So you’d be acceptable to her after so many years. Pruetts don’t just lay down with anyone.”

“You make me sick.”

Julian shrugged and lifted the lid on the tray. He began to pick through the lavish meal.

Across from him, Daniel did the same.

The awkward silence held a few minutes longer as both men tried to figure out what to say.

Julian broke first. “Would you like to know about your kids?”

Score one for him. Daniel’s fork dropped to the tray.

“You have two sons. Neither of them are walking yet, but your eldest, Devon, is getting close. Both of your sons have been in the program since birth.”

“What does that mean for them?”

“It means if she chooses to go against me, your children will suffer the disease like all of the women you’ve ever known.”

“But if they get the other half of the vaccine, the part made from *your* blood, they’ll be cured and unable to pass it?”

Julian shrugged. “There’s a 10% chance they’ll react badly, but considering our relationship, it’s unlikely they’ll experience a single side effect.”

“Are they on the list for tomorrow’s vaccinations?”

“No. They’re too young.”

“How can you do this to us? How can you support the suffering of men this way?”

Julian smiled in comfort. “That part of our lives is almost over.”

“What do you mean *our*?” Daniel’s shout echoed through the ship. “You haven’t suffered anything!”

Julian shoved a bite into his mouth without responding.

Daniel forced himself to calm down. “You believe four hundred years of misery is worth whatever final goal you hope to achieve.”

Julian nodded right away. “After this, men will always be in control. No one will ever have a chance to slip out from under the family again.”

“Have you ever considered sharing leadership?”

“No! Never! Women are the enemy! They betrayed us! We can never ever trust them again!”

Daniel understood Julian was too far gone in his fanaticism to be brought back and switched topics like Candice had suggested he do when he hit a wall. “You don’t look so good.”

Julian frowned. “Well, recently, someone stuck a knife in me.”

Daniel snickered. "As much as I hate to admit it, you are a Pruett."

Julian couldn't help the pride at Daniel's acknowledgment. "Yes, I am. Everything I've ever done is to avenge my family."

"I don't understand."

"They were slaughtered by women during the war."

"So you're carrying out vengeance for something that happened centuries ago?"

Julian slammed his hands on the desk and leaned over his tray. "Don't mock me! You've no idea what I'm capable of."

"Actually, I believe you're capable of anything. Someone like you doesn't have limits."

Julian stared at him as if that wasn't a bad thing.

"When you ran all of your tests, did your scientist give you a date?"

Julian stiffened. "A date for what?"

"For your death. It's obvious that you're on the downside."

"I will never die!" Julian slammed his hands on the desk again and then shoved the tray to the floor. He punched the desk repeatedly, eventually cracking his knuckles and sending blood splatters across the wooden surface.

Daniel didn't budge. Julian's rage didn't frighten him. Julian wasn't a woman.

The door burst open and people came inside to offer assistance that wasn't needed.

Daniel waved them off.

Realizing he was snapping, Julian controlled it and sat back down in the chair. He glared at Daniel, ignoring the witnesses. “I am *not* going to die.”

Daniel stuck to the plan. “Why do you really have an affinity for me?”

Julian’s face filled with pride. “You were my addition to the master plan. Without you and your choices, none of this would be possible.”

“You talk like you’ve won.”

Julian flashed a charming smile that the rest of the council had been terrified of. “It’s not over until it’s over, you know?”

No one liked the sound of that.

“What trap do you have waiting for us at the training center?”

Julian’s grin widened.

Bruce and the others went back out into the hall, but left the door open.

“What happens if you win?”

Julian jerked his hand. “Everyone falls in line where they belong.”

“Meaning the women are in chains this time.”

“Facilities are already being constructed.”

“How do you expect to accomplish that? It’s not like the general population is going to consent.”

“They will if your owner orders them to.”

Daniel stared at him in exasperation. “Candy is not going to vote for slavery of the females. She doesn’t even want men as slaves.”

Julian laughed. “Like I said, *boy*. It’s not over yet.”

Daniel switched topics again. “We found the codes on your computer. The council families are not going to be killed.”

“It’s interesting that you’re smart enough to have this interrogation with me and yet you haven’t figured out that I never create a single plan. I always have a backup.”

Daniel frowned. “You have another bomb arranged?”

“Of a sort.”

Daniel knew Julian wasn’t going to say more. “Where is Tara Pruett?”

Julian’s face betrayed him. It was obvious he had hoped this topic would be skipped.

“I don’t know.”

Daniel stood. “Okay. I’ll go tell Candice you just lied to me. She’ll be down to talk to you a few seconds after I tell her.”

Forced to answer, Julian snarled again. “Tara is on her way here!”

Daniel paused. “What do you want in exchange for letting our kids go?”

“Ah. The real reason you came.” Julian crossed arms over his chest, ignoring the pain from his injury. “I want Candice and all the other wild Pruettts with me, agreeing to every decision I make.”

“That’s never going to happen.”

“Maybe, maybe not. You’ll have to live with the consequences.”

Sensing the time had come, Daniel exposed his mental dagger and brought it down toward the man's neck. "This is an amazingly complicated plan. How are you distributing the disease?"

Julian deflected the blade right back at Daniel. "Why, with you bachelors, of course. You didn't think I let all of you leave the complex out of the goodness of my heart, did you?"

Everyone froze as Julian delivered news they had hoped to never hear.

"The bachelors you've rescued are already spreading the disease. Every child they have is infected. The tests given at birth don't detect it in males. Most male children are never even tested. It's already too late to stop what I've put into motion."

"I'm infected?"

Julian was delighted by Daniel's dismay. "I gave you the injection myself, right before you were transferred to the games complex. Then I notified Candice you were up to be won. Without you, my shy, malleable bachelor, the world might have been able to recover. Thanks to you being an icon of rebel strength and independence, all of the bachelors are out spreading my vision. Literally."

Julian pulled Daniel's tray over and began eating his food while Daniel removed shouting, threatening observers and guards from the cabin as they tried to reach the enemy. Julian smiled the entire time.

“What’s he doing up here?!”

“Kill him!”

Daniel stepped in front of Julian as they emerged from the lower deck. “He needs fresh air and I need to talk to Candice.”

The angry women on the boat, including Julian’s crew and the Defenders, had been filled in on the situation. They shouted and made ugly gestures, but held their positions. No one was willing to cross Candice just to kill Julian. He wasn’t worth that to any of them.

Daniel led the way toward the wheelhouse where Candice and the captain were standing in the dim room with a small lantern and maps.

Candice scowled as she realized Daniel had brought Julian topside. She would have scolded him, but his expression said it was important. Candice shifted away from their witnesses.

Daniel leaned in to whisper.

While they communicated, everyone watched in apprehension, not trusting anything that had come from Julian.

Candice let out an angry growl. “I agree.”

Daniel motioned Julian to join them. “Don’t forget what she told you about lying.”

Julian held up a hand that was still bound. “If my life wasn’t in danger as well, I wouldn’t tell you.” Julian regarded the captain. “I assume you’re still following my orders for a situation like this?”

The female tensed. “Yes, sir.”

Everyone realized the captain was one of Julian’s women who had known what was going on and not only condoned it, but helped him to achieve it.

Julian smiled at the woman. “If I survive, you get a *double* breeding pass and a penthouse suite in the new tower.”

The woman beamed. “Thank you, sir.”

Before any of them could guess what was going to happen, Daniel ran toward the captain. Catching her off guard, he was able to drag her out of the wheelhouse and toward the railing of the ship.

“No one crosses us!” Daniel hefted her over the side and shoved.

Julian regarded Candice as the captain’s scream cut off with a dull thud. She hadn’t cleared the ship. “My proof.”

Daniel stared at Candice in horror as he realized he had let his rage take control.

Candice’s heart broke. Everything was true. Daniel was infected. All of them were. The hope she had held for the future crumbled at her feet. “This changes everything.”

Julian went to the rail to observe the captain’s body as it was dragged under the ship. There was no way the woman would survive. “Can any of you sail a ship?”

Several of the Pruetts had experience, but nothing of this size. Julian’s ship, the *Independence*, was a three-story house inside a small battleship. It

had everything a ruler would need while on the run from an angry populace.

“You can.”

Julian laughed at Daniel’s comment. “And there’s proof of the other side. The men I’ve bred during my life are smarter, healthier, stronger, and bitter from four hundred years of abuse. When the final battle takes place, the women won’t stand a chance.”

Females across the deck glowered, but it was obvious that he was right. Daniel had eliminated the captain with almost no effort, and they had witnessed the same thing during their rebellion. Few of them would be able to match a male changeling.

“Look out!”

Bounty hunters and Defenders spun around to locate the problem.

Julian grunted as he was shoved and then tripped, slamming into the deck with his face. His nose took most of it, blood spraying.

The click of a gun echoed loudly.

It could have been any of the people Julian had tormented on this ship, but it wasn’t. The drenched man holding a gun to Julian’s skull had last been seen diving off the dock as they made their escape from the city.

Julian looked at his former best friend without remorse.

Rusty’s hand shook as he fought not to pull the trigger before he got the satisfaction of words. They mattered to him after all the years he and Julian had

plotted and schemed together, murdered their own together, and even offered comfort when the women weren't enough. "Why?"

Julian glanced over Rusty's shoulder to Candice, ignoring the blood running down his chin. "You hired bounty hunters to kill me."

Rusty's fury wasn't going to be appeased by logic. "We were in this together! I never would have let them kill you!"

Julian snorted bitterly. "If you had come to me when they offered you the deal, if you had been honest, we would already have the entire family locked up."

"Who the hell is that?!" Bobby was still running off at the mouth at the wrong time.

Julian was happy to out his former friend. "Rusty *Malin*."

Pruetts advanced in anger.

Rusty lunged forward as he pulled the trigger.

Chester slammed into the man. He had come from behind, using the evening shadows.

Both men fell to the deck and rolled into the railing, swinging and grunting.

People hurried over to help Chester subdue the angry man as Daniel and Candice went to see if Julian had survived the assassination attempt. Beyond needing him to rescue their kids, neither of them cared if he hadn't.

Everyone else hoped Julian was dead.

Julian slowly sat up, wincing. "Consider yourself off the council."

Rusty spat towards him, restrained by Chester and two of the Defenders. "Traitor!"

"Tacky dresser!"

Candice rolled her eyes. "Lock them up."

Both men were wrestled to the brig, where they would occupy the two cells.

Candice motioned her father along. He would pick up anything they talked about that she needed to know. Both of them expected there to be plenty of words. Julian and Rusty were furious right now. The truth often presented itself at moments like that.

Daniel stayed next to Candice, waiting for his punishment for throwing the captain overboard. He'd certainly killed her.

Candice ignored his guilt. "This is war. She was the enemy."

Daniel stayed with Candice as she walked the deck. He could feel her working on plans and didn't interrupt, content to be allowed to still be with her. After what he'd done, he deserved to be in the cell with the two men below. *I'm more like her father than I thought.*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I Have an Arrangement

Tara's ship, sailing south

1

“How long until we get there?” Angelica had joined Bridget while Jason and the other men helped with dinner.

“Sometime in the next hour.” The captain pointed ahead of them, where fog was obscuring the view. “After the war, the north Atlantic flooded the Great Lakes and a 200 mile stretch of land on either side. That’s where we are now. The ocean provides half of the border with Canada.”

Angelica hoped it was unguarded. “I heard it’s also a nursery for whales and a feeding ground for sharks.”

“That’s why it doesn’t need to be guarded.”

Angelica observed the tranquil water, trying to spot any of that wildlife. Other than in books, she had never seen a whale. Unlike the men around her who were suffering bouts of seasickness that the medication was only helping with a little, Angelica was exhilarated by the salt spray in her face and the rocking under her boots. After this war was over, she was getting a boat. “We’re arriving after dark?”

“Yes. It seemed like the best way to go in case it is guarded now. We haven’t been this far north in years.”

Evening was falling over the water, providing beautiful views in the rippling waves, but limiting their sight. Despite enjoying the ride, Angelica was eager for land so she could get the men unloaded safely. She was certain her family was in danger and needed help. She wanted to travel south as soon as possible. “Are we still out of range of communication?”

“From our side, yes, but we should spot land soon.”

A loud splash to the right pulled attention. Sprays of water came up as Angelica glanced over, alerting her to something under the waves. She tried to estimate how large the animal was and couldn’t. Because of that, she decided it was a whale. Most of the ocean life had become bloodthirsty, but whales had remained gentle, though they had enlarged. The one currently swimming next to them was twice as long, and half as wide, as their boat. It was amazing.

Males screamed as they spotted the whale.

Angelica sighed. That was another reason she would be glad to be back among her family. She couldn’t take their fear much longer.

Another spray of water came alongside. Angelica squinted and found a smaller shape she identified as a calf. It was a nice moment of watching the mother and child that was broken by the sound of a loud horn in the distance.

Everyone looked up to see shadows coming through the fog.

“Friend or foe?”

The captain hauled on the wheel. “I’d say the latter based on their impact course!”

The small ship sailed by them, barely missing.

As it went by, the passengers on both decks were able to view each other.

“Pruetts!”

“Defenders!”

Shots immediately began to fly.

Ahead of them, more horns sounded, alerting those on land to their presence.

The fishing captains glanced toward Angelica, not sure what she wanted them to do.

“Don’t stop for anything!”

The women realized it would be a race to the finish and got excited. Some of them flipped into the change, scaring the men around them, but most hurried to get into position to draw more speed from their vessels. A few of the bolder men tried to help.

Caught by surprise by the fishmonger ships coming through, the small Network fleet was unable to stop the rebels from passing the red-taped barrier separating the countries. Defenders screamed as the fishing boats ran over them and made a beeline for the shore coming into view.

People on that shore observed the race, some of them aware of what was going on.

One of those was Claudette Fife, the UN representative leading the investigation into New

American slavery. The Canadian Government had agreed the UN could enter through this waterway to view the land from the ocean, as long as they didn't go to a shore. Claudette was set to board her ship an hour from now. She observed in amazement as ship after ship, carrying shouting, screaming, shooting men and women, flew toward them through the fog. She was horrified to witness Network troops firing into the unarmed sailors and their passengers. Bodies from both sides fell into the water and onto the decks.

"I want crews out dredging for those bodies!" Claudette pointed at her lackeys, determined to gather the evidence. They had heard the complex fell, but Claudette was certain Julian had survived—mainly because he was so evil. She had suspected what was going on behind the walls of New America, but this was proof. The men passing her location had obviously been slaves. It was in their scars and haunted eyes as much as it was in their exuberant reactions upon reaching freedom.

An awful squeal of high-pitched agony echoed across the foggy waves. One of the Network boats had struck a whale. The ship was splintering, quickly drawn beneath the cold water as other whales in the pod came toward it. The animals converged on the survivors, disproving the theory that whales were not carnivores.

Blood flowed through the water, drawing other predators. Fins flashed above the waves. More screams rose through the fog.

As the last boats passed her location, Claudette signaled her troops toward the dock in front of them. “Guard my boat.”

She marched toward the Canadian shore where the UN encampment had been set up two years ago when the complaints had first come in. Less than a mile away, thousands of Canadian citizens were gathered at the wall in support of UN actions over violations of the world treaty. As soon as they realized hundreds of slaves had reached freedom, those citizens would converge on this location and chaos would ensue. Claudette was hoping to get ahead of that, despite not expecting the arrivals.

As she hurried by her troops, she barked orders. “I want a perimeter up around the shoreline. I want another perimeter half a mile out to stop anyone from coming through. Put up our full barriers, all the way to the water. If anyone gets through, it’ll be your jobs!” Claudette hurried toward the dock, where the first ship, carrying Angelica Pruett, was stopping. “Get all of our medics up here. They’re not getting a week away from the sun.”

A camera flashed.

“Damn it!” Claudette detoured toward the reporter who was standing in front of a UN tent, snapping pictures of the refugee’s flight. She missed Angelica’s nod as the ship sailed by.

Canada didn’t look different. Angelica was instantly disappointed. For some reason, she had always envisioned the other countries of the world as shining examples of light and civility, but the

land in front of her was as dark as the country she had just left. She could see faint lights in the distance and assumed there was civilization of some sort, but it was nonexistent in this area. There were only the edges of two tall, terrible walls broken by a deep channel of ocean water between them.

The cold, foggy air blew over her skin, providing relief from her disease. Rage Walkers was still ravaging her as bad now as it had been before she claimed her prize from the complex. The difference was, she had a relief source who was more than willing to dampen the fire whenever she requested it. She didn't request it often. It was more than important to her that their physical moments came out of love and not as a pacifier for her disease.

Angelica and Jason stayed on the dock as the happy men from their boat unloaded.

"We made it!"

"She got us here!"

"We're free!"

Once empty, Bridget sailed to the middle of the channel to allow the next boat to come in.

Angelica hoped the men would stay together, but she was no longer concerned with it. As they sailed in, she had noted the UN woman staring at her in recognition and admiration. The men should be safe here.

"What do you want me to do?" Jason was eager to help.

Angelica slid her hand into his. “Absolutely nothing.”

Jason was content with that answer. It had been a short time since he’d left the oppressive safety of the complex, but he was a different person now.

The bachelors were all yelling or crying as they left the boats, but they remembered to thank their escorts. More than a few shy smiles were exchanged, and even a couple of rare handshakes and hugs from those who had bonded during their short trip. The fishmongers had been remarkably controlled, considering they were surrounded by so many unowned men.

The rebel males gathered in celebratory groups along the shoreline to gaze in wonder at their new home.

Angelica had already scanned the distance and spotted numerous guards traveling their way on the orders of the UN boss. Angelica was keeping track of that woman, but if she didn’t hurry up, any conversation the woman wanted to have would have to wait until the war was finished. The need to get going was growing stronger. Things were happening in her country and that was where Angelica needed to be.

As more boats unloaded, Jason began to notice Angelica’s restlessness. It took him one more unloading to figure out what was going on. He waited for a moment when they were briefly alone on the dock. “We’re not staying, are we?”

Angelica shook her head.

Jason braced to be back on the water, but he didn't protest. He hadn't been jealous of the time Angelica spent around the other males during this trip, but at the same time, he was ready to be alone with her if it was possible. He enjoyed their time together, no matter what they were doing.

Angelica squeezed his hand. "A few more minutes."

Jason grinned at the next group of bachelors getting off the boats, shaking some of their hands and enjoying their excitement at having freedom. He didn't know what came after this, but he was certain the men would stay together. A lot of them had created bonds during captivity, but more importantly, those bonds had solidified during their escapes and flight. He turned to greet the next load. "Hey! There's another boat coming."

Angelica had hoped the Network wouldn't chase them into Canadian territory.

"It's flying a New American flag!"

Angelica let Jason keep track of that while she rotated around to meet the UN representative who was jogging through the rebel men with words of welcome while trying to reach the dock before Angelica left. Angelica was certain the woman knew she was about to. It was in her worried, darting glances to verify Angelica's location.

Claudette and her people were dressed in blue and white uniforms with a small UN logo over each breast. Clever faces and heavy tool belts completed the image. They looked like players about to go into

one of the games. Angelica tried not to laugh at the thought of Claudette in a cage with her. *Talk about a waste of my skills.*

The UN troops stared at the rebel males in surprise and hunger, but without the lust that accompanied changelings spotting unescorted men. Angelica was relieved. There was no way she could protect them from their new Canadian hosts and she couldn't take them back to New America yet. Coming here had been a huge risk; she was glad it was paying off.

Jason observed the boat with a frown. "It's traveling fast and looks overused."

"I can say the same here." Angelica waited as the UN representative reached the dock. The matronly woman hurried toward them with a genuine smile and a hand out.

"Welcome to Canada!"

Angelica grinned despite wanting to be as stoic as her family was reputed to be. "Thank you. Sending the whales out to greet us was a nice touch."

The woman laughed. "I'm Claudette."

"Angelica."

"Pruett?" Claudette verified.

Angelica tilted her chin so the tattooed crest on her neck was visible.

Claudette's smile widened. "Excellent. On behalf of Canada and the United Nations Council, I would like to offer you sanctuary and the opportunity to speak for your country."

“I’m happy to accept sanctuary for the *free* men who just crossed your border, but I don’t speak for my country.” Angelica didn’t think the woman’s grin could get any wider but it did.

“You haven’t heard the broadcast.” Claudette jerked her radio off her belt and flipped the buttons. “This has been going over all stations for the last three hours.”

“New America is no longer under control of the Network. There has been a coup. The rebels are in control of New Network City, Adelphia, the Atlanta hub, the Tennessee Crossing, and the southern train hub. All troops are required to surrender to the nearest location.”

Angelica stared at the radio. “They did it.”

The radio crackled again with the rest of the transmission. *“The Network has been removed from leadership. The two highest ranking members are in the custody of Pruetts. Our family will ensure citizens receive justice for the atrocities committed against them. I repeat, Pruetts have control of New America.”*

Claudette shut off the radio. “Congratulations.”

Angelica let the women shake her hand again, stomach boiling. “I need to go.”

Beside her, Jason tensed. “That sail has a family crest.”

All of them turned to watch a small yacht glide up to the dock with a brilliant red rose wrapped around a sword on the sails. A matching symbol was

on the side of the white boat, as well as on the cheek of the woman standing on the deck.

“Do you know her?”

Angelica felt like she should, but didn’t. “No. Get on the other side of me.”

The big woman stepped off her boat alone, demonstrating courage. There was a skeleton crew in view on her ship and all of them looked like her—a hard fight.

Angelica stepped into the center of the dock so the woman wouldn’t be able to get around her unless she allowed it.

“A whelp!” The lumberjack of a woman stopped in front of Angelica, scanning her from hair to boots. “I watched your game. Good fun.”

Angelica snorted against her will. “You should have been on that side of it.”

The woman chuckled. “I have, child.”

Angelica struggled to find a name and was surprised by what flashed in her mental file. “Grandma Tara?”

Tara chuckled. “Smart and a good fighter. Definitely family.”

Angelica didn’t relax. There was something about the woman that was already rubbing her the wrong way, and like Candice, Angelica never ignored her instincts. “What are you doing here?”

Tara gestured toward their country. “We have business.”

“Who sent you?”

“The council.”

Angelica frowned. "You work for the Network?"

"I have an arrangement." Tara glanced over her shoulder at Jason. "I have your son on my ship. His name is Jamie."

Angelica didn't try to stop Jason as he ran toward the yacht. There was no way it was leaving without being searched now and it would be easier if they could sail away on it after she killed the crew. "If anyone hurts him, I'll make it ugly for all of you."

"They have orders to observe, nothing else."

Angelica had to leave it at that, forced to concentrate. This was a Pruett and that made it the most dangerous situation she had ever been in. "What happens now?"

Tara walked back toward the boat, ignoring the danger of turning her back on someone like herself. "I take you in, I get my reward, and things go back to normal."

Angelica followed, marking every weakness she could find. A new game had started and this time, it had no rules.

Claudette didn't interfere as the trio left. She had all the proof she needed to convince her boss that a full-fledged invasion of New America was warranted if the Pruett didn't come out with control when this last situation was over. She would give Angelica and her family time to handle things and then she would make a report. A week after that, UN

ships would flood through to rescue the remaining males.

Claudette moved down the dock and got to work settling the refugees into the tents for food and statements.

2

“I heard him and saw him on broadcasts. How did you get the kid?” Angelica wasn’t convinced Tara was telling the truth. She needed to know before she was trapped on the boat.

“I run the supply wagons and cargo ships. I made a delivery and pick up while I was at the complex. Missed the explosion by days.”

Angelica hoped the other children had been saved as well. Candice had told her it was covered.

“You and I will stay here and talk while they have their reunion.” Tara stepped onto her boat. “After that, you can join them and we’ll have a peaceful trip. I have orders to deliver you alive. I’d like to be able to do that.”

“We’ll see what happens.” Angelica wasn’t throwing out false bravado. She was pissed. How dare a Pruett betray another Pruett!

Tara’s chuckle floated across the deck. “Too bad you’ve already been brainwashed into serving the greater good. If you were a little more selfish, you’d make a perfect XO.”

Angelica rotated around and whistled at Claudette. “As a senior member of the Pruett

family, in charge of New America, I give you permission to enter in support of our control.”

Claudette realized what Angelica was doing. She didn’t say anything, afraid to give it away.

Tara scowled deeply. “You can’t do that!”

Angelica stepped onto the boat. “I just did.”

Unable to deny the claim due to the transmissions being broadcast across multiple channels, Tara turned toward the front of the ship. “Go sit down and shut your mouth.”

Angelica was glad she’d made the last minute decision. She didn’t like the idea of bringing in a foreign entity, but in this case, she was going to make an exception—mostly because of the representative. Claudette had impressed Angelica in just a short few minutes. She hoped the UN would enter and provide the assistance she needed, providing she could figure out where to go to provide that assistance. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there!” Tara gestured at the woman manning the wheel. “Get us out of here!”

The boat sailed from the dock a few seconds later.

“The council wants you to support their leadership, openly. In exchange, they will free all of the bachelor children and consider lifting some of the regulations on slavery.”

“I already know the Network fell. They don’t have the authority to bargain anything now.”

“Authority, no, but they do have your children. Ask your mate what he wants to do. Bet he doesn’t hesitate.”

“Jason does not have the authority to bargain on behalf of the Pruetts.”

“Yes, he does. He has the mark.”

Angelica realized Tara was right. As soon as a male or female was marked with the crest, it gave them a voice. “Who helped you with this?”

“You are quick. I didn’t think anybody would realize there was a traitor in your group.”

Angelica snorted. “I’m probably the last of my family to figure it out.”

“I’m your family, too.”

“No, you’re not.” Angelica tried to pierce her grandmother with an interrogation glare. “Who is your rat?”

“Greg.”

Angelica gaped in shock.

Tara smirked. “That’s why he was perfect. He’s scared all the time, so no one noticed he was hiding anything. It became harder to track you after he split off with Sam’s group, but we had followed you far enough by then to know you were making a run for the border.”

“What did you offer him?”

Tara regarded her as if she were crazy. “I didn’t offer him anything. I promised not to kill him and all the other rebel males he loves so much.”

Angelica grimaced. It was going to be hard to punish Greg because she knew that. She would save

the information for after someone else took his life. Long before, however, Tara's skull would be separated from her body.

Tara knew what was going through Angelica's mind. She smirked. "I never sleep alone and I'm always armed. If you believe you can, I'm ready to die."

She was the epitome of a Pruett and Angelica was intimidated. She was also worried about Jason. She hadn't heard a noise since he'd disappeared from her view. "Are we done here?"

Tara shrugged. "We'll have time to talk again."
"How long?"

"A full day."

Angelica yawned. "Good. I can use a nap." She was hoping to cover her intimidation.

"I've done everything you've done and then some. There's nothing you can do or say to get one over on me. Just be a good little girl until we arrive."

Angelica controlled herself by a hair and stood up. She took a few steps and then turned around to pierce Tara with her rage. "I may not be the one to do it, but one of us will get justice. You're Pruett. You know."

Tara motioned one of the girls on the ship to bring her drink. "Yes, I do."

Angelica had to try. "Don't you understand what this is going to do to the world, to our country?"

"Of course." Tara shrugged "My mother was on the council."

Angelica's eyes widened. "There was a Pruett on the council?"

Tara laughed, hard. "Wow, the things you don't know."

Angelica was too upset about the revelation to care about being mocked. "What happens to us?"

"That depends upon your answer to the offer."

"I don't have the authority to negotiate."

Tara frowned. "Your action with the UN representative says otherwise. Try again."

"I *won't* negotiate."

Tara shrugged. "Then the Network will kill you and everything you hold dear. That's not my problem."

Angelica noticed boats in the distance. The fishmongers were subtly following through the fog. She switched her attention to the whales they were passing so she didn't give the fishers away.

Angelica was dismayed when Tara's yacht slid into the center of a large Network convoy coming into the channel. The fishmonger boats wouldn't be able to compete.

"No! No!"

Jason's shout echoed from below, transmitting a level of horror that chilled Angelica to her bones. She took off running.

Tara's harsh amusement followed her down the stairs and into the bowels of the ship.

Angelica hurried into the stateroom to find Jason standing by the wall, horrified.

Angelica looked around. She spotted a small boy with glowing red orbs. “He’s a changeling!”

Jason groaned in abject horror. “They infected him!”

Jason’s son was wearing a bachelor outfit from the complex. He had a bachelor haircut, and a bachelor ID number tattooed on his wrist. He had Jason’s beautiful coloring and his mother’s courage as he stared at Angelica.

“You’re a criminal!”

Angelica’s mouth dropped open. The boy hadn’t been trained yet. That was the only answer she could come up with for him speaking in front of a woman.

Jamie continued to stare at her, making Angelica wonder what he was thinking. She refused to ask, sensing this child would have to be handled carefully. He was seven-years-old. By that age, she and Candice had been raiding neighborhood houses, fighting Defenders in humiliating battles they had refused to report due to their defeats, and observing the comings and goings of the business in the brothels. There was little doubt Jason’s child would be as intelligent and curious.

Angelica shut the door and went to comfort her mate. The boy was tough. His father needed care first.

“Good morning!” Tara beamed as Angelica marched through the door and joined her at the table in her cabin for breakfast as ordered.

Angelica grunted. It had been a long night and she wasn’t looking forward to this conversation.

Tara’s grin widened. She had enjoyed listening to the shouts and cries coming from the cabin where Angelica and her mate had been locked in. Finding out the boy was a changeling was a harsh blow that had guided Tara into a peaceful sleep.

“Why are you doing this? What did you get out of it?”

Tara speared a piece of fish and dipped it in a brown sauce. “There wasn’t a choice. All power women are eliminated as soon as they breed. I bargained a different life for myself—one where I make the rules.”

“What did you bargain with?”

“Julian’s uncle was supposed to inherit his seat. I made sure he didn’t and Julian rewarded me.”

“Sounds like a momma’s boy.”

Tara snorted. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking he’d kill over me. We’re not that close.”

After the night she’d had, Angelica didn’t have any patience left for pleasantries. “That’s a bullshit answer. You’re Pruett and we don’t put this much work into anything unless we’re getting something big out of it.”

Tara grimaced. “I hate men. It pleases me to hear their cries and see their blood. As long as men are in chains, I’m happy.”

Angelica had learned things from Thomas. “Men won’t be in chains much longer.”

Tara snorted, waving a beefy hand. “The council will never allow Julian to make all men into changelings, and his experiments have shortened his own life span. He’ll be dead long before any of that can happen.”

Angelica realized Tara didn’t know about the bomb scheduled to hit the power bunker in three weeks. She didn’t tell her. “You sound as if you don’t care.”

Tara shrugged. “Should I?”

“He’s your son, right? The one we never heard about.”

Tara’s weak rage flew through the room. “My only son! Bobby was an orphan!”

Angelica didn’t blink. “So why are you happy at the prospect of Julian dying?”

Tara glared. “I already told you. I hate men. All men.”

“How can you hate slaves? They’re defenseless.”

“Not the rebels.”

“They’re free now and gone.”

“Julian didn’t send me to round up rebels. He wants his *family* reunited.”

Angelica couldn’t take that. “You’re lying!”

Tara smirked, but pain lurked in her tone. “That’s where we all came from.”

“All?”

“I have eight children alive. All of them but one were created against my will, by council members.”

Angelica hated it that she was able to see the truth and even guess which one of them was the wanted child. “Ivy isn’t adopted.”

“No.” Tara grew wistful. “Ivy was a wonderful surprise. I stayed out too long and my birth control wore off. I got drunk on Indian punch with a southern tribe one night and woke up sore. I don’t know which one got me and made her. Julian wiped them out for it before you were born, but I hid the brat. Loved that one.”

Angelica was curious. “Are there other tribes left in the south? What’s it like there?”

Tara gave her a clever grin. “We can go together. He said I need to pick one of you as my understudy.”

“An understudy for what?”

“The Roundup. Someone has to make a list of the kids so The Ring can collect them.”

Angelica stared as she realized Tara sailed from place to place and gathered a list of kids to be snatched from their homes. “You sell out our people in every way.”

Tara frowned. “It sucks that you have a moral line, but Julian will fix that.”

“How?”

“Retraining. He’ll kill the baby, but you’ll be glad of it after he arranges your breeding with one of us.”

Angelica swallowed her rage and bile. “Us?”

“The family. We keep it tight. I can see the wisdom now.”

And I can see the insanity. Angelica didn’t get to say it as Jason’s son barged into the cabin and stormed over to Tara.

“I want it now!”

Tara glowered at the child, but she moved back from the claws coming out of his fingertips. “No more candy. You have to wait until we get there.”

Jamie snapped. He flew toward Tara with claws extended and screams coming from his mouth.

Angelica wanted to let the boy go. It was obvious from Tara’s huddling reaction that she wasn’t allowed to hurt the child, but she was also scared of him. Angelica reluctantly interrupted the interesting revelation.

She marched over and grabbed the child by the back of his neck. She lifted him off his feet, drawing choking noises and angry grunts that were accompanied by wild swings, swipes, and kicks. Angelica let him hang there, aware of Tara staring at her in surprise.

Tara wasn’t full of rage anymore. She was burning out because she had been gifted a mate of her choice from the bachelors. Julian had done it to her on purpose because she was getting too old and she would need someone to protect her from all the awful things she had done during her time as roundup leader. He was ready for her to be replaced and forgotten about in the family bunker. Tara was

eager for it as well now that she had a male of her own to hurt.

Jamie's little face was blue and tears rolled from the corners of his eyes, but he still stiffened in fresh rage when she began to lower him.

Angelica jerked the boy back into the air and held him there, hating herself, Tara, Julian, and everyone else in their country who had allowed the situation to become so bad that she was forced to do this.

Now at the door, Jason didn't interfere. Angelica was doing what he hadn't had the strength to do when the child became enraged.

Angelica remembered a moment like this with her and Candice, and forced herself to finish it. She gave the child an ugly shake. A weaker person's neck might have broken. Jamie only flopped around like a ragdoll and growled harder.

"I'm the boss!" She lowered the child to his feet, ready to grab him again to drive in the point.

Jamie sniffed, claws sliding back into his fingers. He peered up at Angelica in worship. "I'll be good now."

Angelica turned away to hide tears of rage that had little to do with the disease. Someone had to pay for all the emotional suffering she had gone through and she suspected it would be the relative now observing with clever, glittering intelligence. Tara wasn't really a Pruett. *That crest on her cheek has to go.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

No Mercy

Outside New Network City

1

“**S**he’s dead. Let me take you home and care for you.”

Baker ignored Vera’s hot words, continuing their trek through the rainy darkness of the alleys outside New Network City. As soon as the drugs wore off, Baker had tried to leave. That’s when the trouble had started. Vera didn’t want to be alone anymore. He had threatened her with Pruett vengeance, but that was fading fast as they continued to hear of the family being killed.

They had made the trip here in record time, due to his pleading for her to keep going every time she wanted to stop. He was surprised Vera was still helping him and grateful, but he worried about how it was going to end. The possessive hand on his shoulder was on the edge of changing. She had been that way the entire time they’d been traveling together.

“No one could have survived.”

Again, Baker refused to confirm her opinion. They had watched on Vera’s portable TV, witnessing the devastation at the dome. There was

nothing left, but Baker knew Sam hadn't been in there.

Vera whimpered as Baker took the bike to a faster speed. She didn't want to help him locate his owner. She wanted to keep him.

Other people were also traveling through the dark alleys, but no one paid any attention to them. It was a male with his owner as far as they were concerned, and there were more immediate things to worry over. No one had heard from the Network in days and the complex was gone. Their country appeared to be without rulers. Surviving members of gangs and families were converging in places to discuss what came next, or fighting, but all of them were waiting to hear a real leader address the nation. It was obvious that Candice and her family had brought the Network down, like they'd promised, but no one knew if they had survived the battle. If they had, they were the new council by right of conquest.

"Please. I'll never hurt you. You'll be happy with me!"

Baker knew he couldn't ignore her again or it would cause her to flip. He shook his head.

Vera's clawed hand tightened on his shoulder. "I can make you."

Baker sighed miserably. "Thank you for your hospitality, Vera. If we ever meet in the future, my owner will give you a token."

Vera opened her mouth to scream.

Baker swerved the bike violently, almost tipping it over. He dislodged Vera with a harsh shove.

Stunned, she flew from the bike.

Baker sped off as she fell. Her screams brought guilt, but not enough to make him turn around.

Now free of the talon on his shoulder, Baker increased to full speed. He could reach that limit without the double weight. He would be at the subway station in hours.

Now a male alone on a bike, Baker drew attention. He had hoped to keep Vera with him as long as possible to avoid this situation, but her obsession had grown too quickly. He was forced to weave in between fleeing changelings who might pursue him because he was by himself.

Gunshots echoed behind him.

Baker automatically assumed Vera was shooting. He swerved out of her view and into a cluster of trees. He wasn't certain the bike would make it through the muddy gaps, but he was determined to try. Being out alone was dangerous for a male, even though the Network was gone. Little had changed upon the destruction of the complex. Someone had to step up and take over leadership soon or everything Candice was trying to do would be lost.

Baker heard bikes coming up behind him and panicked. He drove into the darkest shadows, hoping he didn't run into anything with the bike that he couldn't spot.

The engines roared closer in a familiar tone that sent relief into Baker's heart. He slowed, allowing the Mopars to catch up.

Rosa and the Runners fell in around Baker with motions for him to keep going. They knew where he was headed.

Baker immediately felt protected. He nodded to Greg, who was riding behind his big owner, then steered his bike toward the open road. With an escort like this, he could go anywhere he wanted to without fear.

Baker was curious as to how they had found him. He was also hoping they had heard something from Sam. She wasn't supposed to make it to the games. The Network had wanted her to die to distract the rest of her family from the rebellion.

Baker was now surrounded by bighearted women who flashed glowers at people they passed. It drew immediate attention and even cheers as some of the people recognized Sam's crew. Word began to spread through the countryside that a Pruett had been sighted.

2

"We'll be there in five minutes."

Sam heard Lydia, but she didn't look away from the screen where the reporter was giving details of everything that had happened in the city. The reporter was standing in front of what remained of the complex. The devastation was incredible. There

was so much rubble that it was impossible to pinpoint bodies. Fires were still burning and smoke was pouring out of various places. Screams of pain and grief echoed in the background, completing the battle scene. *Pruetts were definitely there.*

“The devastation is indescribable. The Network council appears to be dead in the blast, along with most of the rebels who did this. Various factions of the city are fighting over control while buildings burn and the injured die.”

Sam studied the crowd of fighting, screaming, attacking, and stealing women. “It’s not safe for the train males to go out there.”

Lydia agreed. “I can send them to the safe house with the Nomads, but that leaves you and I for whatever is waiting when the doors open.”

“Do that.”

Lydia left to tell their group the new plan.

Sam continued to study the screen. She had a feeling that Baker was nearby and she was hoping to catch sight of him. At the same time, she was also hoping she didn’t. If he was in the city, he was in terrible danger.

“Meanwhile, trains are still rolling into the city, carrying players who were supposed to participate in this week’s games. Sam Pruett is among those, causing a mob of people to gather at the station. It is unclear whether these citizens are going to welcome the new council member or attack her.”

Sam wasn’t sure which one that would be either, but she was leaning toward the attack. Taking a

Pruett hostage would serve a dual purpose. If the Network had survived, a hostage could be exchanged for UDs and favors. If Candice had survived, Sam could be used against her. It was a win-win for a bounty hunter or a tracker. Sam was prepared to fight upon her arrival.

“Bounty hunters are flooding the city even though no one is sure who will pay them if any of the rebels are captured. Everyone here is loyal to the Network.”

Sam switched the screen off, unable to take any more of the reporter sucking up. It was obvious the woman was terrified that the council had survived and would come for payback. Sam was positive when her broadcast was over the reporter would be one of many who disappeared from sight until the chaos settled. Most of the elites would do the same, but a chunk of their population was gone.

New Network City had been fully packed for her game and the apartments surrounding the dome had been destroyed. It was impossible to determine what they had been before the explosion. The same was true of the local business owners and the Divas, who had been looting the complex when it blew up. Those left in the city were without leadership. In this situation, that would make things harder. Once a group had a leader, the leader could be negotiated with. When the mob was in charge, that wasn't possible.

Lydia came to the door. “The engineers are saying there's a crowd on the tracks. She

recommended we take the employee hatch on the opposite side and let them keep rolling.”

Sam grinned. “Stop, drop ‘em, and roll?”

Lydia snorted, lips curving. “That is what we’re known for.”

Both women advanced toward the hatch to get ready for their departure.

The sounds were deafening as Sam opened the hatch. Shouts and screams, gunfire, thuds of bodies falling, and a horrible storm moving in told anyone within a 5-mile radius that chaos had struck the city. Lydia could hear the same noises echoing from other areas, but there wasn’t time to determine who might be the cause of those. All around the station, hundreds of bodies fought for space and survival. Stabbing and shooting, they murdered each other without knowing why.

Rain drenched the crowd as the sky above them opened up, wind blowing relief across sweaty skin, but it didn’t spread. Blood would flow here until the women were satisfied.

3

“No mercy!” Baker’s scream slammed into the Runners around him and set them on fire. It triggered the change in all of the females, including Rosa.

The Runners struggled to control their bikes as their bodies flipped into the change, bringing groans and clawed grips.

Baker shot at the crowd around the station, able to hear the train arriving. Snakes and Divas were fighting with each other, but not enough for him to be able to ignore them. When Sam emerged, everyone was going to converge on her. They needed to thin the crowd.

The Runners around him aimed at the biggest threats first. Anyone with a gun in hand was targeted and eliminated as they rolled into the station.

“Pruetts!”

“Get them!”

The cloudy sky above them rattled as the mobs clashed in front of the subway station. Thunder and lightning were ignored by those in life or death struggles. Rain came in heavy sheets that slammed into the muddy ground and splattered their boots, cloaks, and pants with mud, but the fighters refused to stop.

Baker ducked weapons being thrown, while trying to find a path for the bike. He swerved at the entrance ramp, knocking women off the steel platform.

The Runners followed him up the ramp, also shooting at women who gave chase and tried to surround them.

Screams and shouts overwhelmed the squeal of the brakes as the subway cars slowed.

Rosa spotted familiar cloaks as people rolled from the opposite side of the train. “Go left!”

Baker had also seen the people exiting the rear. He swerved directly into the middle of the thickest part of the crowd, shooting and shouting to be the distraction so Sam could escape.

The Runners followed him eagerly into the fray.

Sam turned, recognizing the guns and screams. Surrounded by angry locals and snake women, Baker was struggling to control the bike against the bodies piling on top of him.

Sam flipped into the change as she ran. She hit the squirming mass with all of her strength, knocking the Mopar into the air.

Everyone flew off.

Baker smacked against the ground. Dazed, he lay there. “Hi, honey!”

Sam was already on her feet. She took a position over top of Baker’s body as the Runners surrounded them on their bikes, shooting.

Sam and Lydia joined in the gunfire as the train males snuck away unnoticed.

The Runners weren’t able to stay on the bikes as the crowd pressed in on them. Forced to abandon their transportation, they surrounded Sam and Baker in a tight shoulder-to-shoulder circle, emptying mags and throwing spikes. In the distance, the sound of another mob echoed.

The train behind them began to roll out, also unnoticed by the fighters. They had who they’d come for.

“Get them all! No mercy!”

The sound of males screaming penetrated the rage of the female mob. It was impossible for them to ignore the sound of so many men shouting. Women in the crowd rotated toward the new noise, giving the person they were fighting with the advantage or an opportunity to crawl away. Women grunted and bodies fell.

Big males without owners came around the corner of a shrapnel-dotted alley and charged toward the changeling women.

Sam jerked her knife out of a snake's throat and spun around as a Diva tried to take Baker from underneath her. Blood splattered as she swiped again, spilling the woman's guts onto the ground.

Sam jerked Baker up and pushed him toward the wall of the station.

The Runners followed, providing a line of protection.

The crowd of angry, semi-armed men met the rear of the mob of changelings without fear.

"Those are complex bachelors!"

Sam didn't have time to respond to Baker's surprise. Women in the crowd were determined to kill them. Spikes were hitting and guns were firing. It was all she could do to keep Baker from being hit. It was also amazing to see the quick glimpses of men fighting, but it was also terrible for Sam and her Runners, who knew a lot of the plot the Network had in place. It was obvious the men were not like everyone had been led to believe. Their hair was longer, their muscles were bigger, and the rage

shooting from their eyes was intimately familiar to every female here.

“They’re infected!”

Sam shook her head, finally getting a break from the fighting as the men reached the center of the mob of women, drawing them away from the station wall. “It’s normal anger. And better health.”

Baker hoped that was true. The Pruetts and the rebellion had forced the Network to take better care of their slaves, but he didn’t think that accounted for the rage allowing the men to kill.

Sam ducked as a knife pinged off the wall behind her and sliced into the woman standing at her side.

“Rosa!” Greg dropped to the ground beside his owner, trying to stifle the flow of blood coming from her arm.

“We need to get out of here!” Lydia shouted to be heard. “If he’s right and they are infected, we’re in danger, too.”

Sam wasn’t going to take that chance. She scanned the area, searching for an escape. Pruetts were good at finding them and she did so now, spotting a small hole in the rear of an alley.

Baker stayed close as she led the group to the tunnel, all of them shoving snakes, hunters, or locals out of their way to reach it. The crowd of males was pushing the women toward them now. The females were no longer in lust or rage. They were terrified. There had never been a time in their lives when men were violent.

The tunnel was stinky, but empty of people as their group ran in and vanished from the station.

The few changelings who noticed and followed weren't doing so to capture them. They were running for survival.

The crowd of men didn't notice the few women who escaped. Finally free of their chains, the men took their justice in blood.

4

Sam saw shadows at the end of the tunnel, but she didn't slow. She had her bloody knife in one hand and remaining spike in the other. Behind her, she could hear Baker fumbling for whatever weapons he had. Between them, they would clear the path.

The shadow shifted aside as Sam barreled out.

"It's Dana!"

Sam stopped at the last second, spinning around to slam the blade into the wall of the tunnel instead of the reporter's neck.

With no time to explain, Dana was forced to recover on the run. She hurried toward the side of the tunnel and then went back in as if she was going to the train station. As soon as they were in the darkness, she curved around to a set of stairs that led down.

Everyone was relieved as they quickly got out of sight. The entrance was hidden enough that a mob probably wouldn't notice it.

The rickety stairs took them down twenty feet before leveling off into a single tunnel that was pitch black and smelled of salt.

“I can’t use a light or it will give us away. Sorry.” Dana advanced through the darkness, proud of herself for timing their exit through the tunnel. She had heard the mob and the train, and then waited exactly where Candice had told her to, though everything was happening earlier than she’d been told to expect. Dana knew that was why Candice had given her this responsibility. It didn’t throw her off to be hurried or delayed. That was also the reason she had been a reporter.

“We don’t have far to go.” Dana was sure they had a lot of questions.

Despite an instinctive mistrust of the media, Sam liked Dana. She let the reporter keep the lead.

“Here we are.”

A sound of something shifting echoed and then light flooded their eyes.

“Hurry!” Dana waved them through. “From a distance, the light can be seen.”

The group was inside and the door fastened a few seconds later.

Dana flipped the light switch. “This is an old bomb shelter under an ancient radio station. The resistance made that entrance to reach the subway station. We’ve never used it until now.”

Sam’s group glanced around to find themselves in a wide basement with crumbling concrete walls and a dank floor. Water dripped somewhere in the

distance and rats scurried along the floor. It was obvious that this area didn't get much traffic.

They relaxed. This was the type of den that Pruetts preferred—something avoided by the public. Dana's safe house had crumbling furniture and cobwebs over everything. Long metal stairs wound upward in the far corner toward a door, but there were no windows. It was cold and damp, but safe.

"Candice said you should stay here until she makes contact." Dana handed Sam a letter in a sealed envelope. "She knew it wasn't going to be safe to travel."

"What was the alternative?"

Dana chuckled, nodding. "She said you might be bored."

Sam let out a disappointed sigh. "I didn't get to have my game. I wasn't going through all the stress for the rebellion or a bachelor. I wanted the fights."

The Runners around her laughed.

Baker frowned.

"Candice said if you can reach the bunker where the leaders are gathered for the power meeting, it would be good for you to take control of it until she reestablishes a government for the country."

Sam nodded. "We'll sleep and then head west."

Dana wasn't surprised. "I'll be back in a couple hours. I need to go check on things topside."

Dana quickly slipped out the exit before anyone could protest. Instead of causing concern, it brought relief to the Pruetts who were glad to have the reporter watching out for them and gathering

information on things that were happening while they were resting down here.

The Runners spread out to explore their new den, leaving Sam and Baker alone.

Baker's face flooded with guilt.

Sam already knew. She shrugged. "You don't belong to me."

"It doesn't feel good."

"Then don't do it again."

Baker stared at her. "That's all you're going to say?"

Sam's eyes began to flicker. "What would you like me to say, Baker? You're a whore. I knew that when I picked you off the family rack."

Baker winced. "I don't want to be."

Sam shrugged. "It's a little late now. I've never demanded your fidelity because I don't believe you can give it."

Baker finally had the reason why Sam had refused his offer of a private agreement. Hurt, he stared at her, not sure where they went from here.

Sam pointed toward the corner, where Dana or someone else had placed a stack of blankets and boxes. "We need beds. Check it out."

It was her way of letting him out of the conversation that neither one of them wanted to have. She was devastated by his infidelity, but at the same time, completely forgiving of it because she assumed it had been done so he could get to her.

Baker couldn't let it go. "Does this change anything?"

Tired, bloody, and aroused, Sam glared at him, snapping a little. “Yes, it does! It means I can’t trust you!” Sam shoved him toward the boxes. “It also means I respect you, something I’ve never been able to do with a man. I’m not getting rid of you. I’m going to *fix* you.”

Baker almost cried. Instead, he forced himself to dig through the dusty boxes for blankets.

Sam listened for trouble and observed as he worked, hurt and full of need. She frowned as he went to the corner and spread out two blankets. “What are you doing?”

Baker paused in making the beds. “I’m sorry.”

Sam sighed. “So am I. That doesn’t explain why you’re making two pallets.”

Baker regarded her with shame. “I thought you’d want space.”

Sam’s eyes blazed. “Don’t hold yourself back from me now.”

Baker was relieved. He quickly put the blankets together.

Sam settled into the bed with a grunt. It felt good to stretch out and shut her eyes without being attacked. “Get under here.” She could hear him shivering.

Baker slid in next to Sam, tensing when she immediately wrapped him in her warm arms. He didn’t know if she would want a service, but he was prepared to love her for all he was worth if she did.

Sam sniffed, able to smell the other woman. She forced her eyes shut and went to sleep.

Baker stayed awake a lot longer, wishing he'd stayed with the Runners like she'd told him to do.

Chapter Thirty

Family Business

Dana's Safe House

1

“**A**re they up yet?”

“Sort of.”

Voices and chuckles echoed to where Sam and Baker had just finished an argument that consisted of grunts and growls.

Dana entered the dank room and smiled. “Good morning!”

Sam grimaced at the cheer. “I need coffee and something to chew on.”

Baker hurried off to handle her needs.

Dana frowned. “Didn’t he tell you he was drugged?”

Now Sam scowled. “How do you know?”

“It’s how the Runners tracked you. Four Defenders were killed while attacking a male. He’s loyal to you. Anyone can tell that.”

Sam felt her heart settle into a normal rhythm. “I’ll handle it.”

“Good.” Dana held out a bag. “I found you a radio and some ammunition. Sorry there isn’t more.”

Sam stuffed the bag into her cloak. “Are you going to the next safe house after this?”

“Yes. I’ve done too many interviews to stay in the public view until the country isn’t so chaotic.”

“We’re glad to have you on our side.”

Dana turned toward the other end of the room, where the rebels were gathered to eat. “I’m not, really. I just believe we all have the right to be free. You Pruetts might be as bad as the council.”

Sam didn’t argue. She couldn’t. The woman was almost certainly right. Pruetts were ruthless and no amount of civilization could tame them completely.

Sam joined her Runners, flashing approving nods that were expected. They’d done well as far as she was concerned. Adapting to changing situations was a survival instinct that not everyone had.

Baker hurried over to push a mug of bitter coffee into her hand.

While everyone was distracted, Greg leaned closer to Rosa. “I need to talk to you. It’s important.”

Rosa sighed miserably. She had been happy with Greg during their weeks together, so it had been easy to avoid this moment. Now that it was here, her heart was breaking but there wasn’t any sympathy. “Why did you betray us?”

Silence fell as every head rotated toward the couple.

Greg winced, paling. “I was a coward when they approached me. I was afraid to refuse.”

“And after your balls dropped?” Baker was furious at the new betrayal from someone he trusted.

“I thought you would kill me.”

Rosa scanned the people in the room. It was obvious what they were all expecting. If she chose to pardon him, to give him a second chance, they would accept it because they loved her and wanted her to be content.

Rosa studied her heart and discovered that as much as she cared for Greg and wanted a future, his betrayal was unforgivable. They didn’t have one.

“What’s going on?” Dana didn’t understand the tension, though the accusation was clear. One of the men was suspected of betraying the Pruetts and that was a death sentence.

“Greg is a traitor.”

“I was forced to be a spy.”

“How did you report our location?”

Greg rubbed his arm. “I didn’t have to. My tracker was never removed.”

Everyone realized they were being tracked right now. If the Network survived, they knew where all the rebels were.

Rosa looked at Sam.

Sam was holding Baker’s arm to keep him from attacking Greg. “It’s your call. We have retraining programs.”

Rosa wanted to stand by her man, but the betrayal was too large. She wrapped her big hands around Greg’s neck.

Dana ran forward to help the bachelor who wasn't struggling.

A Runner grabbed her and shoved her back. "This is family business!"

Dana swallowed a shout, unable to match the strength or skills of the big women. "This is wrong."

"He could have come forward at any point." Baker watched Rosa cry as she strangled her mate. "If you were one of us, always being hunted and finding out your friends are traitors, you'd understand and agree. Now shut up. This is hard enough on her without your drama."

Rosa kept squeezing until Greg's face turned red and then blue. When he sagged in her grip, she snapped his neck with a brutal jerk and stood up as his body fell.

Sam was there to hold Rosa as she sobbed.

Baker and the Runners disposed of the body, not feeling as much sympathy. Greg's choice had earned him this awful ending. The fact that they were once again unsafe made them rougher than needed as they disposed of him. Baker's concession was to make sure Rosa wouldn't spot the body when they left. He held no malice toward her even though he suspected she'd known something wasn't right for a while now. It was a shame all of them would bury and hope never to repeat. It was also a harsh lesson learned. From now on, all males would be inspected to verify their tracker had been removed, and that would happen no matter who inherited leadership of their broken country.

The group was ready to leave the den a few minutes later, but Sam refused to go through another fight so soon while they were low on ammunition and numbers. She chose to go through the ancient radio station after Dana dismantled the traps on the stairs. The rats down here gave her hope that the surrounding neighborhood might also be deserted.

After four centuries, almost nothing remained of the equipment in the radio station. They were lucky the walls and stairs were intact, though both groaned at having to support weight. Dust and debris shifted and crumbled as they ascended to find it was full dark. They were out of sight of the city, but the screams and gunshots were a constant symphony.

“The males have taken the city.” Dana led them down an alley and into the woods. “They’re cleaning out the females. It’s ugly. No one is safe there now.”

“I don’t understand how they became infected.” Baker was trying not to think about Greg.

That’s all Rosa was stewing on as she followed Sam.

“I don’t either, but that mob had our disease. We all saw their eyes and extra strength.” Heather was creeped out at the idea of changeling men. Part of her was hoping they’d imagined it.

Sam wasn’t sure what she’d seen, but the noises coming from the city tilted the odds in the direction of rage. The men were sacking the city, probably

even doing what males of the past had—pillaging and celebrating their freedom in any way they saw fit. It was horrifying.

Sam hoped the innocent residents had left the city. She didn't care if the men were clearing out snakes, Divas, or Defenders. Those populations needed to be eliminated anyway, so the men were actually doing them a favor, but Sam was also dreading the effect. At some point, those males would have to be brought under control. It would be up to Candice as to how that happened. Sam planned to vote towards leniency even though she disapproved of their actions. They'd been abused all their lives. That earned them sympathy with her.

The woods around the group cracked and snapped with wildlife and other citizens fleeing the city. No one bothered the recognizable group. There was a Pruett in the mix. The shadows around them had fled the city to avoid fights like that.

"Any word from the Network?" Sam refused to ask about her family. She didn't want to show doubt over their survival to jinx things, but she was worried. It was impossible not to be after viewing the destruction at the dome. No one who had been inside could have survived.

Heather grunted. "No, and we're monitoring all channels, but with the complex gone, most of the antennas were destroyed. I'm hoping to get a real update as soon as we enter a new area."

"I need to get to Lake Wilma."

Dana nodded. "That's where we're all going. Candice arranged a ride."

Satisfied they were on the path they needed to be, Sam followed the reporter to the edge of the woods. Dana didn't look like a reporter anymore. Other than her hair color, she fit in with miners.

Dana saw her glance and gave her a smile. "I come from a long line of dirt diggers. When I decided to be something else, no one was happy."

"I can imagine."

The miners were beefy, tattooed women with jeans, vests, boots, and short, spiked hair that was all dark. There were no blondes, making Sam wonder how Dana had gotten her platinum locks. She wasn't going to ask the woman to drop her pants to prove it, but Sam was almost positive she was a natural blonde. The only way she could be yellow from a brown family was if her mother had gotten lucky enough to score a bachelor. "Is that why you became a reporter in the complex?" Sam guessed with infamous Pruett accuracy. "Because your dad was a bachelor?"

Dana didn't answer right away, but her hands clenched into tight fists and her pace increased to a fast march. "My father was a bachelor who turned on his owner and escaped. He stuck around long enough to rape my mother on his way out of town. She had just been promoted into the Defenders. She didn't want to be a dirt digger either."

Except for before the war, Sam had never heard of a male taking advantage of a female. The books

had spoken of that happening, but it had never been recorded during the history of female rule.

“My aunt and cousin hunted him. They brought him here and let the rest of the town use him until there wasn’t anything left.” Dana pointed back toward the safe house. “He’s buried under the floor back there. Every now and then, I spit on him as I walk by.”

Sam didn’t ask anything else about the reporter’s ancestry, but she made a note of it. That was another concern that would have to be taken into consideration.

Dana also let it go. “We need to cross the town ahead. After, we’ll be at the mines.”

“We’re traveling underground?”

Sam ignored Hope’s nervousness. She liked the idea of being out of sight. “Will we have escorts?”

Dana pointed toward the edge of the tree line, where shadows were breaking away. “Yes.”

Four burly mining women fell in step with them as they reached the trees, and then kept going.

The miner in charge took Sam’s right. “I’m Emily. I’ll be your guide through purgatory.”

Sam chuckled. “For how long?”

“We’ll drop you at the Pennsylvania, Ohio border.”

“Can you drop me at Lake Wilma instead?”

“Your cousin said you might want to skip that area because that’s where everyone is going first.”

“Everyone?”

“Survivors, allies, friends and family. Then everyone is meeting at the Pruett homestead in Ohio.”

Sam approved. “Lake Wilma first.”

“We go right by there. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

Sam waited on the rest of her questions as they approached the town. Lit up with streetlamps and alive with people coming and going to various businesses and buildings, the town obviously wasn’t in the middle of a riot. That was a relief, but the sight of the uniforms was not. “This is a Defender training town!”

Dana walked faster, not answering.

The group slipped around the edges of buildings, trying to stay in the shadows as they passed bunks housing as many as three hundred Defenders. Sam had been here twice to drop off fugitives. Despite being well armed and skilled, she had been intimidated by the number of combatants. Tonight, she was terrified. Pruetts weren’t supposed to show emotion, but Sam had already figured out the bravado she survived with in the Borderlands wouldn’t succeed now. Being around weaker people and having compassion for them was making her vulnerable.

“Do you hear that?”

Sam would have scolded Baker for the noise, but the sound of a mob coming was distinctive after the subway brawl. She took off running, leading the way with Emily keeping pace to point out the tunnel

they would hopefully disappear into without being spotted.

Male voices rang through the night.

Sam frowned, realizing the changeling men from New Network City had found the tunnel they'd come through. It worried her that they were still raging. In her experience, the disease flared in quick, dangerous bouts and then stayed dormant while providing enough pain to remind her it was still there. These men had been raging for hours. It wasn't normal even by Network standards.

The Defenders of the town were also taking notice of the problem. The women hadn't been alert as Sam and her group left the forest, but that was quickly changing. Chins were tilting up, hands going to weapons. It was obvious they hadn't been warned.

"Over here." Emily led them around a bunkhouse and into the woods behind it. She knelt at a small rise in the ground and began feeling around with her hands.

As soon as the entrance was open, everyone dropped into the dark hole without worrying about what might be waiting. The noises behind them—loud howls and screams of pain and rage as two changeling armies met in battle—was enough to convince them that whatever was ahead couldn't be as bad as what they were leaving behind.

Sam stepped aside after she entered, waiting for the rest of her group to be in. Baker was already by her hip. The tunnel was wide and tall, filled with

moldy, cracked beams that made all of them doubt the stability as they entered the darkness.

The last person to come down was moving slower than the others. Sam put a hand on Rosa's shoulder in comfort, but she didn't say anything. There were no words.

Sam and Rosa secured the entrance to the mining tunnel and joined their group.

"We were getting worried." Five more miners were standing in the windy tunnel with lanterns and relieved expressions.

Sam delivered Pruett nonchalance by walking by them without responding.

The miners hurried to get ahead of her with the light that Sam didn't need. She had always assumed the miners were the same, so the lanterns were a bit of a surprise. She thought maybe they were doing it out of a kindness for anyone else in her group who wasn't a changeling. That would be the only male with them.

Sam wondered again what had happened to trigger the men in the city. She also wondered if she needed to worry about the man in their group. She didn't think she was capable of doing what Rosa had done. She would leave him behind before she would kill him. Baker already meant more to her than anyone she'd ever known, except her sister.

"We have transportation ready. There are people waiting. This cart was about to leave. We've been escorting citizens in and out of the city. This last group wanted to wait until it got dark topside."

The miner pointed toward carts coming into view as they rounded a bend in the tunnel.

Sam realized there were railroad tracks under her feet and understood what the woman meant. The mining carts were all connected together in a long train. The tracks under them were dark, rusty mysteries that no one explored closely as they approached the ride.

“We have a place secured up front for you.”

Sam ignored the directions as she recognized people in the cart. She went toward the two Nomads who were with one of her Runners. She settled into the empty spot amid welcomes and the rest of her group did the same in various places around her.

The miner chortled. “Welcome to the New American Underground Railroad, Pruetts.”

Sam finally gave them what they were hoping for. She grinned.

Chapter Thirty-One

That's What We Do

Julian's Ship

1

Three sharp trills woke Candice from her light doze at the desk. She opened her eyes to find Julian staring at her.

“There’s a message coming in.” He indicated the console to her right. “When you’re ready, push the green button.”

Candice sighed. Julian had been tied to the bed for a while now. He had to be hurting from the position and the removal of his tattoo, but he was acting as if he was on a vacation. He was even smirking. “You expect to be freed upon arrival.”

Julian yawned, not wincing at the pain, but he didn’t look away. “It’s a fascinating situation. You know it’s a trap and I know that you know. So why are we both following through?”

Candice saw his nose wasn’t broken and felt disappointment. She’d been hoping Rusty snapped it. “Because we believe we have secrets from the other person.”

“We are Pruetts. That’s what we do.”

“You may have the blood, but you aren’t really one of us.”

Julian didn't care about her insults. "It won't matter when the public finds out. As soon as they know a Pruett betrayed them, no one else in our family will have the opportunity to reshape this country. Even if you succeed, you lose."

Candice shrugged. "You don't have enough men to wipe out all the women. Even if you win, you lose."

They stared, trying to figure out what the other was hiding.

The computer trilled again.

Candice hit the button.

"Good morning, Boss! I have updates for you."

The screen stayed dark, indicating either a computer on the other end relaying a message or a lackey who wasn't allowed to view into Julian's private residence.

"Give me all the updates now," Julian ordered from across the room.

"Yes, sir. There are four updates for you today, sir!"

Candice decided it was a computer generated voice.

"Update one: Males are rampaging across all of the cities on the list. The women were caught off guard, but many of them are forming a resistance now. Everything is on schedule. Update two: The Network Crawler arrived in the city and departed with no signs of Sam Pruett. There was too much fighting for the Defenders to know if she was killed upon arrival or escaped. Update three: Vaccines

were given this morning. Testing will begin in one hour. Update four: The cargo from the north slipped out of our hands, but the wagon master secured the most important package and is on the way. That is all the updates for you this morning, sir. Have a New Network day!”

Julian’s happiness wafted through the room. “Did you understand those?”

Candice frowned. “Your plan to distract the women and spread the disease in the cities is working. You expect the vaccines to produce quicker results than usual because you started testing right away. The rebels slipped through the border, but you captured Angelica. And you don’t know where Sam is.” Candice gave him a bored glance and yawned.

Julian laughed. “On the council together, we will be unstoppable.”

“What happens when we arrive at the training center?”

“Not when, before.”

Outside, an ugly grinding noise alerted Candice to a problem.

“I never let anyone reach my base.”

Candice verified his bonds were intact and then hurried topside. She had expected Julian to set a trap, but not until they reached their destination. According to the map, they were still hours away.

Julian’s amusement followed her up the stairs. “The crew on this ship is mine, Candy, not yours.”

“Hold your fire!”

Candice climbed faster. The panic in Daniel's scream was chilling.

"It's our kids!"

Candice reached the top of the stairs and spun around the handrail to reach that side of the deck. As she gripped the handle, a boat came alongside, allowing her to see a group of children being held at knifepoint by *male* Defenders.

One of the angry men gestured at Candice. "Let's make a trade."

Candice wanted to refuse. If it had been anyone else, she probably would have. Because of Daniel, she had no choice but to comply. "Bring them up."

Daniel breathed a sigh of desperate relief. After what Julian had told him, he knew the two infants were his. He had been preparing himself to jump over if Candice had refused to make the trade.

So had several other people on their boat.

The male Defenders smirked, knowing they had the upper hand. Other members of that crew began to attach the two nearly identical ships. The only difference was Julian's flagship was larger.

Candice hadn't expected this.

There was a moment where time appeared to slow while the free males secured the ships together. Bending and distracted, they were vulnerable. It was a tempting moment for Candice's crew, who were positive they could take control. The problem was the kids were likely to be caught in the crossfire.

“As soon as he gets you onboard, he’ll threaten to blow us up.”

Candice nodded at Mary’s warning. “Do what he wants until I tell you otherwise.”

Mary left her alone. She didn’t see a way out of this one, but she wasn’t the leader of their family for a reason. Candice was sharper and able to deal with situations like this, no matter who the enemy was. Facing their own made it harder, but not impossible.

“Bring Julian up here; cut him loose.”

No one liked Candice’s order, but they didn’t protest. It was obvious that she had a plan that they weren’t privy to.

“Unless there’s no other choice, do what he wants.”

Everyone nodded or grunted at her words.

Julian was chuckling as he was brought up the stairs by Chester. “Round two to me.”

Candice didn’t speak. She was studying the children. All of them were scared. Their terror fed her determination to thwart Julian. In his future, these children would hate each other based on gender. Even if every Pruett died in the attempt, that wouldn’t be allowed to continue. She was now willing to sacrifice anything and anyone to ensure a better future for both sides. “We surrender.”

Freed of his bonds, Julian clapped. “Wise decision. You will join me. Everyone else will stay here and try to figure out a way to save you.” Julian motioned at his men. “Give them the kids.”

The transfer was made without comment or incident, but it was tense. None of the Pruetts were happy, except Julian. His delight rolled over their nerves and frayed the edges.

Daniel's children had metal bracelets around their thin wrists with ID numbers on them, but no names. There was other information Candice couldn't read as two haggard guards pushed the children into Daniel's arms.

Daniel regarded the kids who had his coloring and features, heart thumping, squeezing. "My babies!"

The toddler in his arms immediately slapped Daniel's face. "No talk! No talk!"

Everyone except Julian recoiled in horror. The baby was already being trained to be obedient.

Julian chuckled, clapping. "Good boy!"

The toddler also clapped. "D34 is a good boy! D34 is a good boy."

It was another layer of horror to discover the children didn't have names, but answered to an identification code.

Candice followed Julian onto his ship without looking at her family.

Julian opened the identical stateroom door, pushing buttons on the wall as he entered. A large view screen came on and began to give the news.

"...and sightings of rebel males in the hundreds have been coming in from our northern border. Canada has refused to give information on possible refugees who have made it to their country. In other

news, enraged males are still attacking cities and causing destruction. The Network complex has been destroyed by the rioting. The government still has not been heard from and are presumed killed in the explosion. Fights for control are rampant. Reggie, do we have more information on that yet?"

"Yes, we do. Survivors from the city and the complex are trying to help each other while being attacked by angry males. City Defenders are all dead or have abandoned their posts. We are recommending the public stay in their homes until this time of unrest is over."

Julian sat in the chair behind the desk with a grunt.

"This recording began broadcasting a few hours ago and has been playing repeatedly on independent news stations."

"New America is no longer under control of the Network. There has been a coup. The rebels are in control of New Network City, Adelphia, the Atlanta hub, the Tennessee Crossing, and the southern train hub. All troops are required to surrender to the nearest location."

Julian regarded Candice. "When did you tape that?"

Candice had taken a position near the door so she could listen to the people outside. "A month ago."

"You told the reporter to hold onto it until the dome fell?"

Candice nodded.

“I know where all the family is except your wayward cousin. Are you bluffing about holding the Tennessee Crossing and other hubs?”

“No. We have a lot of allies.”

Julian stared at her. “I almost let your branch of the family become too powerful.”

“There is no almost.” She obviously meant him.

Julian laughed. “Impressive.”

Candice didn’t care about his false praise. “What happens when Angelica arrives?”

“You’ll address the nation with a speech. Killing men, even if in self-defense, is illegal. Your demand for the women to surrender should guarantee my plans.”

“Why kill them? You don’t have the numbers.”

“I don’t need numbers. I have the cure.”

It only took Candice a few seconds to figure out what he was referring to. “That’s what they’re spreading.”

“Yes. My males will be the changelings and females will become weak, timid creatures with no hope of escape. And it’s all thanks to you.”

“What happens to us personally?”

“As long as you obey, your family lives in comfort. If you refuse, they’ll be punished.”

“Okay.”

Julian regarded her with a scowl. “This is not a joke. I will kill every one of you.”

“Okay.”

Julian’s frown deepened. “What game are you playing?”

Candice gestured toward the screen, where a replay of past episodes was starting. “The Bachelor Battles, of course.”

Julian chuckled.

Candice switched topics. “What are you going to do with Rusty?” Council member number two was still in the brig on the other ship.

Julian’s amusement faded into bitter anger. “He’ll be retrained.”

“And your sailing crew?”

Julian grimaced. “They’ll feed the sharks.”

“I assume they don’t know.”

“Oh, they know. They’re betting on you to save them.”

Candice stored the information. “Will we be staying here or going back to the mainland to rebuild?”

Julian liked the acceptance, but he knew better than to trust it. She was a Pruett. They didn’t just accept anything. “We can discuss that later. Right now, you need to give me a good faith gesture.” His tone was unmistakable.

“You’re insane.”

Julian shrugged. “That, my wild relative, is completely beside the point.” He motioned toward the bed. “This is how all members are confirmed.”

Candice couldn’t do it. Even if she was at the height of lust, and he was the only male around, she still wouldn’t have been able to. “I’ll slit your throat and bathe in your blood.”

“Shall I order one of the children killed?”

Candice didn't like feeling trapped. She also suspected there was an experimental agenda behind the demand. She scanned the apartment for a small black box. "I'm going to need help."

Julian frowned. "That shouldn't matter to you."

Candice snorted. "It matters more than you think. And if you were a true Pruett, you would know that. We don't just lay with animals, even ones we're related to."

"There's time." He smiled, hoping she would be pleased. "I'm a perfect genetic match for you. We ran it during your game."

"What will it accomplish?" She knew he had to have an ulterior motive.

"The offspring will live twice as long."

Candice stared at him in shock. "That's the real reason you've done this."

Julian gave her a disappointed look. "Of course. What else would be worth damning myself and the rest of the world?"

Candice realized she wasn't going to be able to bargain her way out of anything with Julian. Not only was he an evil genius, but he was obsessed with something that had been haunting humanity since the beginning of time. He would have to die and it had to happen soon.

Julian was almost able to read her thoughts. "Every sample of the cure produced over the last forty years has been made from my active blood. If you kill me, you destroy the future. No matter what, I get to live."

“What’s so special about your blood?”

“It bonded to the cure and the vaccine. I’m the first male to carry both and the only one who remained infectious. We still don’t understand why.”

“I assume the offspring will be cultivated to further your experiments?”

“Now, now. I’m not a complete monster. I only need one of our child’s limbs. It will be allowed to live.”

Candice was revolted. She was also determined to win this game. “How long until we get there?”

Julian pointed toward the bay window. “We’re here.” He pushed a button on the desk; the window slid down.

Candice stared as the holographic barrier disappeared to reveal a small island surrounded by ships where women toiled outside a concrete bunker, unaware of the agenda of their dangerous ruler.

Julian enjoyed her dismay. “Whatever you believe you know, whatever you think you’ve planned for, you don’t. You haven’t. You’ve never met a challenge like me. I’ll be your downfall.”

Candice crossed her arms over her chest. “Or I’ll be yours.”

Julian shrugged. “Either way, you’re stuck with me.”

Candice didn’t argue.

“Did you notice there are only women out here?” Bruce was trying to forget what they’d learned about Candice’s parentage, but it was hard.

Mary had noticed. Around them, the others were either meeting their children for the first time or offering comfort to someone else’s child. Bruce and Mary were keeping an eye on their captors, as well as watching Daniel. As soon as he was finished with his reunion, the family expected to have problems. He didn’t react well to being away from Candice.

The training center was a small fortress. Most of it appeared to be under a large flat concrete platform that took up almost the entire island. In the center of the platform was a large building blocking the view of the rear of the island. It contained an entryway for employees, according to the signs. There was heavy security, along with cameras and guns. The troops here mirrored the boat crew, with tanned, weathered skin and tools that belonged out here and not on land. Mary was curious about several of the items in their belts, but there wasn’t time to explore them. *After the fight.*

“We’re going around to the rear. We’re not going to get close enough for the women on guard out here to spot the male guards on this ship.”

“I’m sure that’s intentional.” Mary, like her daughter, had already figured out half of Julian’s army were brainwashed women who didn’t know the future he planned for the world. Mary was

certain Candice would take advantage of that if it was possible, but right now, it wasn't. If they resisted, the kids would be killed. No one was willing to take that risk.

And there was also the sense that Candice needed something else before they could fight. Mary couldn't think of any other reason that her daughter would tell them to obey the enemy.

The women on duty around the bunker and on the fishing boats around the island stared and waved in welcome as they recognized Julian's flagship and escort vehicle. Radio communications were exchanged.

Mary listened to be sure the first mate was following Candice's orders and not Julian's. She didn't think the woman would backtrack on their agreement because she was already due a severe punishment from Julian for even letting them onboard. Mary thought the woman was also smart enough to know Julian couldn't let her and this crew live now that they knew the truth.

When nothing negative was exchanged, Mary gave the first mate a nod.

The woman returned the gesture, waiting for orders. She was aware of the legendary reputation of the family she was transporting and she had faith they would come through. She hadn't known about Julian's plans, but the changeling men on the boat had scared her. In greater numbers, the men would be able to win any battle. It was terrifying.

Daniel stood up, wiping away tears. “Take the kids below.”

People hurried to do as he ordered, giving the kids comforting smiles and words. Both of the children were too young to know what was going on, but it was obvious they had already made a bond with Daniel because neither of them were crying or looking away from him.

Daniel joined Bruce and Mary at the front of the ship, staring at Julian’s window. He could see Candice’s shadow in the glass and that was a comfort. “We’re going to kill them all—men and women.”

Mary was relieved. She already knew Bruce was loyal, but having Daniel confirm he was too allowed her to let out the breath she had been holding. After everything the males had suffered, she wouldn’t blame them for joining their own kind in overturning female control. There was still no guarantee it wouldn’t happen later.

“What should I do?”

Mary placed a comforting hand on Daniel’s wrist. “You’re a Pruett. Act like it.”

Daniel immediately drew his gun and fired into the ship in front of them.

Candice didn’t move.

Julian dove under his desk.

Mary burst out laughing. “Good boy.”

Drawn by the gunfire, guard ships in stationary positions began to sail toward them from the

retraining center, not sure if Julian needed assistance.

The radio lit up with Julian's angry voice. "False alarm. Return to your posts."

The ships immediately changed direction, disappointing Daniel. He was tempted to open fire again, but he decided to save his ammunition for a better opportunity.

The water around the edge of the compound wasn't calm like out in the open ocean. They pulled the boats along at a faster rate of speed, and due to negligence on the part of the male sailors, they bumped into each other repeatedly. People were knocked to their knees as wood groaned at the impacts.

Daniel watched Julian gesture wildly and assumed he was berating someone for their lack of skills. As he observed the man, Daniel felt Candice staring at him. He wasn't able to identify exactly what it was that made him uneasy about the look, but he suddenly wished he had put up more of a fight about her leaving this boat. Despite being distracted over meeting his kids for the first time, Daniel now felt guilty about his lack of loyalty to Candice. He had assumed that because of who she was, she would be okay alone with Julian. Now, he wasn't so sure. Julian looked like he was a lunatic on the edge of killing everyone around him.

Mary was thinking the same thing. As they sailed around the rear of the compound, she noticed there were cameras and no guards.

The two ships went into an enclave that took them under a bridge and inside the bottom of the bunker. It was set up so much like the complex in New Network City that Daniel shivered as they went underneath. *I'm a prisoner again.*

Next to him, Bruce reached out for Mary's hand.

Chester joined them, voice gruff. "We may not make it out, but we'll make sure they can't bring anyone else in here. As soon as Candy gives the signal, we'll paint this island with their guts!"

Soothed with thoughts of angry vengeance, the men stood straighter and stopped searching for comfort. Like their female family members, they would find peace in the blood.

Chapter Thirty-Two

My Price

1

“**A**re you alert enough for a conversation?”

Rusty glanced up from the small cell. “Whatever you want me to do, I can’t. I won’t.”

Mary took a seat on the floor. “All I want is information. In return, I’ll give you a token.”

That got his attention. It was well known if a Pruett gave you a token, they owed you a favor. Rusty sat up.

Mary motioned Bruce to keep an eye on the door. She didn’t think some of this conversation would be good for everyone in their group. It was mostly Bobby. She couldn’t count on the rookie to react right or say the right thing when it counted. She also had concerns about how Daniel was going to react when the rest of the truth came out. Mary now suspected what was going on with Julian. She had come to Rusty to confirm it.

“What can I use the token for?”

“I doubt we would consent to spare your life. If I were you, I’d use it on justice.”

Rusty spent a minute considering what was most important to him. “I’ll tell you anything you

want to know. After we're done talking, I'll tell you what I'd like to use my token for."

"Deal."

Bruce listened in amazement as she handled the enemy. Mary wasn't aggressive often, but when she was, he took note of it. So did everyone else.

"Tell me about the council. How did it start and what were the goals?"

"The Network is a representative of each family, from the very beginning. Over the years, some lines have died out."

"Not yours. You're a founding member."

Rusty's lip curled. "The Malins and the Pruetts have always been tied together. Even when we didn't want to be."

"What about the family who lived next to us?"

"My mother recommended your elimination. That may have triggered all of this. She heard about young Candice defying Rankin when she came to pick up Daniel. She knew her for what she is—a threat."

"Where are the missing council members?"

Rusty grinned. "Dead."

"What's the goal of the council?"

"World domination. What else?"

"Male changelings?"

"Yes. The rebels are infected. You've helped Julian spread it into another country. The UN will carry it to the rest of the world."

“Two for one. They carry the male version of our disease and deliver a cure for the female version so we can’t fight back?”

“Yes. Brilliant, isn’t it?”

“Has the Network done this before?”

“The riots of 230 AW. You were told it was over the men. It actually *was* the men. Our relatives were doing a test run on the plan Julian is bringing to fruition. It also reminded people in the west that we can kill them whenever we wish.”

“Why did you agree?” Mary was following her instinct that said Rusty wasn’t as bloodthirsty as Julian was.

“You ask that like there was a deal or a choice.”

“You could have died instead.”

“I would have died instead. No one tells Julian and his crazy family no on something they want.” His look said she knew that very well.

“How does he buy new members?”

“Power.”

Mary grimaced at Rusty’s tone. It said power was the ultimate goal and nothing else would satisfy. That was a side of human nature that her Pruetts had always tried to smother in themselves. “Why does Julian want Candice? He has unlimited females and I’m sure some of them are more skilled than my daughter.”

“This plan didn’t start when Candice was born or when Daniel was taken. You were given a bachelor. He wasn’t as clean as you thought he was. He also can’t breed. He never could.”

Mary realized she had been infected through Bruce, turning Candice into something Julian and the council had engineered. “Tell me the rest of it. I know there’s more.”

“Julian created her through you, using his father’s plan. Thanks to the rushed trials he performed on himself, Julian’s infection is progressing rapidly. He needs to impregnate her before he snaps so we can continue the immortality experiments.”

Mary was horrified. “What happens to Candice and the baby?!”

“We can extract the fetus right after her death, and Julian only needs one attempt to impregnate her. He’s gotten a lot of practice.” Rusty leaned his cheek against the cool bars, bruised face alive with his own madness. “He’ll give her a month to make sure it’s viable and then he’ll cut it out of her while she screams.”

Mary flipped a token toward him as she stood up. “Name your price.”

Rusty grinned, mirroring her family’s haunting expression. “He betrayed me to get to her. My justice is your daughter’s death. It will crush all of you.”

2

“Part of the island is open.” Daniel pointed.

A wide dock ran into a tunnel that began at one end of the island and presumably continued out the other. It allowed for continuous travel.

“That’s so the women out front don’t see Julian come to the island.” Horace was impressed and dismayed. “It’s quite brilliant.”

Many of them had wondered how Julian kept so many secrets, but it was obvious he was using the family technique of doing it right out in the open and daring anyone to suspect him. That was a hard strategy to beat.

As the two ships sailed under the tunnel that was at least ten feet taller than the masts, they became aware of the shift in the wind and the coolness to the breeze. Concrete walls quickly surrounded them, blocking them from view as the entrance began to close. It didn’t make much noise, impressing Mary as she came up from the brig. It was an island retreat she would have designed.

On the side of a shipping platform, a line of men waited. It was impossible to tell if they were changelings without angering them.

The first ship carrying Julian and Candice listed to a rough, creaking stop. A few seconds later, Julian emerged.

Candice was right behind him. Her eyes went to Daniel first, verifying his safety.

Daniel nodded at her, arms busy with squirming children.

Candice stared at him, hoping he would understand the choices she had to make.

Daniel knew from her expression that he wouldn't like whatever came next. He braced himself for ugliness, but he didn't consider disobeying anything she chose to do. He trusted Candice.

Julian didn't have the patience for the reunion. "For God sake! You've only been apart an hour." He gestured to the troops who were waiting. "Put them in the cell. Hurry up!"

The head Defender of Julian's retreat frowned. "They're armed and they're together."

Julian rotated toward the pillared stairs, waving Candice to follow. "Put them together and let them keep the kids. There's no reason for them to go find each other if they're already together. And if they do come searching for her, I'll kill her."

"I still think we should take their weapons."

Julian snorted. "Pruetts don't need weapons to be dangerous."

Julian's arrogance was insulting, but he was also right. They had made a deal and he trusted them to keep their end of it because they were honorable.

The family allowed themselves to be taken up a small hallway that ended in a wide cell set up like a military barrack. As soon as they were all inside, the reinforced glass door shut and locked them in.

Daniel went to the door as Candice disappeared up the pillared stairs with Julian. "I'm going to kill him."

Pruetts chuckled.

Chester laughed. “Candice has his name. You’ll have to pick another target.”

Daniel shrugged. “Just so long as someone ends that bastard.”

All of them nodded.

3

Mary helped get the kids settled and spent a moment circling their generous prison. Designed in a long rectangle, there were small cubicles with bunk beds along one wall. In a corner was a door that presumably led to a bathroom. She took a fast look in and counted six small stalls, two sinks, and two showers.

Next to the bathroom was a wide shelf stacked with toiletries for all ages. On the opposite side were twenty double stacked lockers where they were obviously supposed to store their gear. The other wall held a large viewing screen and had multiple sofas and chairs in front of it. In the center of the floor, was a round hatch. Mary assumed it went downstairs to allow for easier prisoner exchanges between trials and executions. This cell resembled the bunk of an army so much that she wasn’t sure they were just prisoners. It was more like they had been brought here to fight.

“Some of our names are on the lockers.”

Everyone who wasn’t busy with a child went over to locate their name at Chester’s comment.

Other things caught and held attention, such as the small kitchen and a tiny medical station. It was obvious Julian expected them to stay here for a long time. No one spoke it, but everyone knew he might get his wish if he held Candice hostage against them.

“There are sixteen of us, counting the children.” Daniel was curious even though he was busy with his toddler. “Who are the other four?”

“Sam, Angelica, Jason, and Baker.”

It was a relief to know four more members of their family were expected to arrive at some point, but it was also a concern. It appeared as if Julian had been prepared for everything.

“At least he can’t hit the power meeting.” Bobby was trying to find something positive in their situation. “When we took the game down, it stopped.”

“I doubt that.” Bruce gestured toward their gilded cage. “If he was this prepared, he didn’t leave control of the missile at the dome. It’s still set.”

“I need a little help here.”

Chester was trying to get Baker’s little brother to sit for a washing and dressing. The feral child had lived in the vulture nursery and he wasn’t responding to kind gestures. After everything he had been through, Chester refused to be firm in any way.

Daniel knew how to handle it. He had seen children like this brought into the complex after

they were stolen from their murdered parents. “Sit! Punishment!”

Cain sullenly dropped into the chair and let Chester take care of him.

Baker’s little brother looked like him. If he had tattoos and an Onyx earring and necklace, he would have been a miniature twin. Chester didn’t know how Baker was going to react to the boy who was as wild as he had been, but Chester was already looking forward to handing over the boy’s care. Cain was a handful who would have to be forced to do everything. He hoped Baker would be able to bond with the boy and calm him so basic hygiene wasn’t so stressful.

Daniel stared at the boy, anger and frustration overwhelming. “I don’t ever want to have to do that again.”

“They just brought Rusty up.” Bruce had stayed near the door to watch the comings and goings of the center.

Mary looked over. “Which direction are they taking him?”

“They’re following Julian and Candice.”

Mary considered her brief conversation with Rusty before they had reached the center and then pushed the thoughts away. It was obvious Julian expected them to be here for a while. She didn’t have to do anything about it yet. *Candice will.*

“Please take council member number two to his cell and help him sleep.” Julian didn’t glance at the man being dragged along behind them.

Candice saw the new bruises that said Rusty hadn’t wanted to leave the other ship.

“I told her.” Rusty chuckled at Julian’s expression. “I told her everything.”

Julian sighed. “I do regret that our relationship has to end this way.”

Rusty opened his mouth.

A guard cracked him in the back of the head, knocking him forward to slam against the floor. It was an awful sound.

Julian walked away. “Come along. There’s something I want you to see.”

Candice followed.

The guards dragged Rusty away.

The training center hallways were absent of windows, signs, and art. There were only doors leading to rooms that Candice couldn’t view into. Her sharp ears didn’t pick out any sound, leading her to believe most of them were empty.

Julian went up another small flight of stairs to a dark hall. “This is my viewing booth.” Julian didn’t switch on the light. He didn’t need it either.

Candice was instantly nervous as they stopped in the center of the large glass room with no other exits, but she was also distracted by the sights.

Julian let her scan, watching her expressions.

Candice was horrified. There were breeding sections, labs, living quarters, testing booths, and

cells. She stepped further in to view the other rooms, identifying them as utilities, storage, living quarters, and what she assumed was the boss's digs. Candice stared at that room for a long moment, spotting a large bed and an even larger hound guarding it. She instantly assumed the big bitch was responsible for all the hounds she had ever fought. In the breeding labs, Candice observed females eagerly climbing onto tables. "What did you promise them?"

"A chance on the council or a shot at top Defender, depending upon how much they required. The scientists were much simpler to deal with. I just promised not to kill them. They were too smart to lie to." Julian pushed buttons on the wall; warm air began to blow from the vent in the ceiling.

The temperature in the complex was 70° and made most changelings sweat. Candice realized now, feeling the warm air blowing over her sweaty skin, that the temperature had been set for men and not women. The complex in New Network City had been the same. *The signs were all around us. Did we see them and fake ignorance?*

Candice returned to studying the rooms. In the living quarters, four different areas housed kids, men, women, and guests separately. The rest of her family was currently switching on the view screen in their holding cell to observe the news while they waited to see what she wanted them to do. In the power room, lackeys who she assumed came from unsuccessful breedings scurried about, pushing buttons and repairing equipment.

In the control booth, four identical men drew Candice's attention and held it. She stared in disgust. "Sons or clones?"

"A little of both."

Candice faced him. "In what order will I be visiting these rooms?"

Julian sighed in delight at another sign of her intelligence. "First, the lab for bloodwork. Then, the testing booths and more bloodwork. After, you can pick—my bed or a table in the breeding section. Before the sun sets tomorrow, you'll be furthering the family line."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Full Circle

Mining Tunnels

1

“I think the water is getting closer.” Baker wasn’t a fan. The few river crossings he’d made alone had been harrowing moments where he wasn’t sure he would survive. The only one he’d enjoyed had been traveling to the Stone Mountain hideout with Candice. Despite their past relationship, he had liked observing Candy with her new mate. There had been jealousy that she hadn’t thought he was good enough for her, but it had been enlightening to see her expressing emotions. He’d known her for more than a decade before that and hadn’t witnessed the occurrence even once.

Sam already knew his fears and the newest threat. She had been listening to the sound for the last half hour. There was a terrible storm raging topside. She could hear it above the tunnel and feel cracks of thunder rattling through the ground. The only good thing was that changelings didn’t usually stay out in the rain. That meant the violent men would seek shelter and hopefully calm down.

“I can’t swim.”

Sam sighed. “Neither can I.”

Baker scowled. “We need to get out of here! Can we go any faster?” He already knew they couldn’t go back to reach the exit.

Sam couldn’t help being slightly panicked at his tone. She glanced toward the driver in the cart in front of them.

“No.” Emily was enjoying the dimly lit ride. Unlike the rare passengers they were hauling, she could swim and she liked water. The light was an added treat. She usually made this trip in the dark, sleeping. “This rail system is old and weak, mostly because of the water. If we go any faster, we may cause a structural failure. We’re already at the limit.”

Sam didn’t insist. She trusted the miners, who survived here day after day, and year after year, without support from the Network or anyone else. Sam was grateful for them. Making the trip from the city to the homestead in Ohio would have been a weeklong battle aboveground.

In the carts around them, most people were snoozing. Only a few were noticing what she and Baker had.

On either side of the tracks, waves began sloshing loudly, bringing more people to alertness. A sense of danger filled the air, making Sam smile. “I really was getting a little bored.” She regarded the driver. “Do things come out of the water down here?”

Emily's expression was grim in the swaying lantern light. "That's the number one cause of casualties among miners."

Sam didn't ask what creatures they might face. She already knew the dangers of the water. They were why she couldn't swim.

The Runners around her also knew. It was the one thing that could make their group detour from a straight line after their target.

"We have the preservers." Rosa was in the next cart. It was the first words she had spoken since strangling Greg. "We can tie them together and float out if it keeps coming."

Sam didn't like that idea. She scanned the carts, estimating there were more people who couldn't swim or fend for themselves than the other way around. "Is there another route that will take us up an incline?"

Emily quickly consulted the maps stored in the front of each cart. After a moment, she nodded. "We don't usually take this route. There's an incline coming, but it will detour us short of your destination."

Sam shrugged. "Take us up the hill. It's not fair to endanger everyone else because I'd like to ride the rapids to conquer a weakness."

Sam's adventurous attitude amused the group of people.

"That's a Pruett. When things are at their worst, they're at their best."

Sam almost wished Emily's words weren't true. Being like that had prevented her family from having peace.

The next few minutes were filled with tension and halfhearted attempts to break it with cracks about having fish for dinner. Sam didn't join in, trying to figure out how she would save everyone if they were attacked. She wasn't prepared to hear the sound of *rushing* water.

The small wave rolled onto the tracks and splashed against the carts, splattering everyone in cold dampness.

People yelled and cringed as the water receded.

Sam realized they were going to be hit with wave after wave of water as they traveled, and was actually relieved. If it didn't come in hard and heavy, they had a chance to get ahead of it.

She felt the small cart begin to wind upward. They were okay as long as the train didn't break down...

The carts under them groaned and squealed at the extra weight of carrying so many passengers uphill at full speed. Sam wished they had considered lightening the load, but there hadn't been time.

A fresh wave came in, reaching further and soaking them more. The water was gaining ground.

In the carts, more lanterns flickered on as people struggled to see how close the water was.

Sam quickly took rope from her belt and tied Baker's wrist to hers, listening to the instinct that

said they weren't going to get up the hill. She stood, pulling him along.

The tall ceiling of the cave allowed for plenty of movement. Sam took advantage of it and jumped out, jerking Baker along.

Prepared for the landing, Sam slid into the muddy water, arms there to steady Baker as he slammed into her side. The couple swayed uneasily for a few seconds and then balanced.

With less weight, the carts began to chug a bit faster.

Sam pushed Baker ahead of her. "As fast as you can!"

Sam's Runners and the rest of their group followed, some making graceful leaps from the cart while others fell out and rolled to avoid being run over.

Other people in the carts considered doing the same, but only the bravest joined the family.

Everyone hurried to get up the hill before the next wave of water rushing through the tunnel.

This wave soaked everything in a blinding blast of cold that knocked people off their feet and brought shouts of panic.

Sam kept going. She recognized the moment. Survival was upon them.

Behind them, people shouted for help as the wave dragged them away. Changeling claws digging into the hard ground weren't enough.

"I see light!"

“We’re almost there!” Emily was still on the front cart as Sam and Baker ran by. She liked getting wet. She was always one of the last to abandon the train when this happened. She wasn’t left behind, however. She timed her leap perfectly, landing on the platform as the train reached the top of the hill and evened out.

The Runners took stock of their group, noting their members had survived the brief moment of action. Disappointed with the adventure so far, the Runners followed Sam.

No one went back to save the others.

The mining platform was at the top of a long metal ladder with reservoirs and missing rails. It was obvious there had been another part here, but it had long since crumbled into debris that had been covered by dirt, leaves, and sludge from spring rains. It was impossible to tell how big this mining operation had been before the war, but Sam suspected it had been huge. At the top of the ladder, lanterns glared in a dim welcome as voices came.

“It’s Sam!”

Sam stopped and spun around. “Send the males back!”

Emily frowned. “Through the water?”

“Take them back to the other tunnel. They’ll suffer the water better than what’s waiting.” Sam turned back to the noise, hoping Emily obeyed.

“Sam Pruett is here!”

The people on the mining platform were a combination of those who had just fought in the city

and locals. There were Divas, snakes, reporters, starlets, Defenders, brothel madams, and bandit crews. All of them were pissed and searching for a target.

“Watch out for that male!”

Sam pulled Baker to her side for protection. Several members of the crowd were already stepping forward with weapons raised.

Everyone in the crowd was female.

“Kill the male!”

Sam was forced to use her knife as several changelings came forward to grab Baker. Her vicious slashes sent blood across the platform and caused the rest of the group to back up.

Sam’s Runners quickly formed a circle around her and Baker.

“They’re on our side!” Emily was trying to calm people by reminding them the Pruetts were for freedom for everyone.

The crowd didn’t want to hear it.

“The males have killed hundreds of us in the city! He can’t be spared!”

“I claim him in vengeance for my daughter!”

Sam and her Runners had guns and knives in hand, but they were ready to reach for more powerful tools of destruction if needed. They never traveled light.

“These slaves belong to us!” Rosa’s bellow cut through the din of the crowd and brought shocked silence. “We get to kill them!”

It was impossible for the women to argue. As the owners of the men, Sam and her Runners had the right to execute them.

Sam walked toward the exit, ignoring Emily's continued attempts to calm the crowd. It was obvious they couldn't stay here.

Sam emerged into the rain to find the area sparsely dotted in trees around a lake and shore that was empty of people. She hurried across the muddy field towards the rippling water already nearing the point of overflow. The rain was coming in long, hard sheets that smacked into them with little balls of unidentifiable material Sam assumed was leftovers from the war.

She had no idea how something could remain in the atmosphere for so long and only come down with the storms, but she had developed that theory after being exposed to the particles for too long. She had a scar on her finger that reminded her even rain could be dangerous. Later, traveling through some of the western radiation zones, she had seen the same scars on people there.

Despite the rain coming down hard, there was little wind to prevent Sam from locating the right spot. As she neared the small hill next to the lake, she could see the entrance to the safe house. It was already uncovered.

At the top of the steps, two tall thorn trees stood in monument to those who had come before. Sam and Candice, along with Angelica, had brought them here on one of their drops, thinking it made a

good marker for the entrance. At that time, there had been trees all over this area. Blight had come a few years later, wiping out half of the trees in the country, but their monuments had already been dead and hadn't been harmed. They were now lonely sentinels among the last of their kind.

Like my family. Sam stopped at the top of the narrow stairwell, picking out damage. People had tried to get in with fire and tools. She rotated around to glare at the people who had emerged from the tunnel to observe.

Many of those women went back inside to avoid Sam's angry glare. It was worse than the storm beating on them.

If I only had time. Sam hurried down the stairs, sliding half the way, and slammed her hand against the identification scanner. Baker fell along behind her, bumping into muddy walls. He hadn't been ready for her movement.

"Welcome to the safe house. We hope you have a rebel day!"

Sam snickered as she entered. Every den had a comment like that programmed into the welcome greeting of the computer. It was one of the small ways they expressed their defiance against the tyrants who ruled them.

Sam entered and pulled Baker along with her. She slid aside and quickly cut his rope. This safe house had been part of a presidential compound before the war. Almost all of it had been crumbled into decay and unusable when their family had

found it. Over the last century, they'd spent spare time repairing, rewiring, and bringing equipment to turn it into a den that would hold fifty people comfortably for more than a month in any situation. The extra stocks they had skimmed from their jobs were here too. There was food and water, weapons and ammunition, medical supplies, and a large chest of gold stars and other currency. Sam had never known any of them to speak about it, but she had always assumed this bunker would be a last resort for their family when the Network turned on them.

"We turned on them first. Score one for us." Sam waited for everyone to get in, glancing around. Other people were here; she needed to make sure they were disposed of properly.

As soon as everyone was in, Sam fastened the door and typed in the code to lock down the bunker.

"I told you, it's Sam!" Melissa hurried over. "We knew you would come here!"

"Any problems?"

Ginny shook her head. "Nope. You?"

Sam glanced at Baker and grunted.

Ginny chuckled. "All men are trouble. It's part of their charm."

Sam pointed at Ginny's captive. "We may need to take him with us. If the power bunker won't let us in, we'll use him."

The two Runners guarding Robert were eager. The short time they'd been forced to wait in this safe house had been boring. They much preferred to be in on the action that Sam had obviously gotten to

enjoy on her way here. The blood drying to her cloak and face was proof.

Heather nodded. "We can escort him after the mob fades."

Sam grinned at Robert. "Enjoying your time with the family?"

The council member grimaced. From the hollow, sunken cheeks, Sam assumed her girls had made use of their time. In any other situation, she might have berated or even pulled them from her crew, but this was a Network member who deserved every second of abuse the women wanted to hand out.

Sam walked around them, growling as she spotted other captives. "Malins!"

"Baker sent them." Hope gave Baker a look of approval. "Your mate insisted we interrogate them. We learned a lot."

Sam was proud of Baker, though he had disobeyed her orders. "Did he suggest a future for them?" She didn't look at Baker, unable to hide her bitterness.

Baker dropped his head, shame flooding his mind again.

"He recommended they be caught in the crossfire or dumped somewhere there was heavy fighting."

Sam snickered. "I agree. Maybe the mob outside needs to know this family has been breeding immune males for experiments and hiding their secrets for centuries."

Heather began digging in her muddy cloak for chemicals to wake the women. "That sounds like justice to me."

Sam scanned the shocked reporter. "Once you leave, you won't be able to get back in. You should stay here." Sam wanted Dana to survive this war. She liked this spunky woman.

"But she's pregnant!"

Sam studied the unconscious mother for a moment, then shrugged. "Vote."

Dana frowned. "Here and now?"

"Not you. The Runners." Baker pushed away from the wall and headed for the bathroom area. "She'd sacrifice any of you. Don't be fooled."

Sam heard the tone and wondered what Baker was holding against the Malins. She understood her own feelings. His were a surprise.

Hope looked at Sam.

"I hate being civilized." Sam pointed to the rear of the den. "We put cells back there for a reason, I guess. Lock them up. Candice will decide their fate."

Dana breathed a sigh of relief.

The Runners scowled at her for interrupting.

Dana took the hint. "I'm needed in the city. We've been escorting bachelors and children out for the last week. Before, we did it during transport."

Sam chuckled. "You're the city rebels!"

Dana's nose went into the air. "We are the Railroad."

“How did you get involved, considering your father probably escaped the same way and then hurt your mother?” Sam couldn’t help the question. It would give her more insight into who Dana was.

“My mother taught me the difference between good and evil. I’ve never known that to be indicative of one gender or one race. All people can be evil. There’s no reason to hate them until they actually do me a wrong.”

Sam was satisfied with that answer. She felt the same. She studied the remaining people in the safe house, noting a few miners, a couple of orphans, and a few bachelors who had escaped. Sam was satisfied the people here were handled and she was already eager to go. The sounds echoing through the earthen walls and steel door said the mob outside wasn’t dissipating despite the heavy rain and impossible entrance.

“This is amazing.” Baker had come from the bathroom with a clean face and arms. He had been inside two dens with Candice over the years and both of them had been small and sparse. She had only required a small amount of space for herself, but it was clear this bunker had been made for a large group of people. There were dozens of beds, a hygiene compartment, clothes and weapons, and a pantry stocked with nonperishable goods. Baker went over to examine those, curious as to how long they had been here. Like almost everything else, nonperishables still had an expiration date.

Baker wiped away the dust.

497 AW. Exp. 2515 507 AW.

He couldn't stop the smile. "Years. She hadn't even gone to rescue him yet, but she was preparing a place to hide when this war came. Brilliant."

Sam didn't comment on Baker's discovery. They also had a lot of equipment and technology that the average citizen didn't have access to. None of it would help Sam right now, so she left it, but it was a comfort to know it was here. The factories inside the dome had been destroyed and it was hard to guess when or if they would be rebuilt. Some of these relics in Pruett possession may be the last in existence. "Has anyone heard anything from my sister?"

"A group of males made it across the border into Canada, but there hasn't been any new reports in hours. They're replaying the same clips from this morning."

"Nothing new on the Network or Candice?"

"Nothing."

Sam marched toward the rear exit. "I'm going west."

"You guys should stay here." Rosa gestured toward the people who weren't captives. "Don't open the door."

They could hear the crowd still gathering outside despite the rain. Their anger was making it through.

Sam and the Runners moved to the rear of the bunker, familiar with it. They had dropped the last

crate of supplies a year ago. That one had included fuel.

“I’m traveling to the Borderlands. Anyone who doesn’t want to make that trip can stay here and help protect the others. If the crowd outside makes it through, do the men a favor and shoot them. It’s a better death than servicing the mob.” Sam disappeared through the rear exit of the bunker and entered the long tunnel that would take her out into the woods behind the lake.

Baker hurried to catch up. He didn’t want to stay here without Sam.

A much smaller group hurried out of the bunker, several of them getting a chill as the door slammed shut, putting them back into danger. In the den, there had been a few minutes to breathe and relax. Out here, they were in full changeling form with adrenaline flowing and hearts thumping. It wasn’t pleasant.

Unlike the women, Baker had never felt safer. He was surrounded by strong women who would die to keep him alive. It was incredible.

It took them a few minutes to reach the small concrete enclave that held a dozen Mopars and another stack of weapons. The Runners hurried over to outfit themselves and get the rides ready.

Sam settled Baker on her Mopar and tried to keep an ear out for trouble. The other end of this tunnel didn’t have a door. They would be riding straight into anyone who might be expecting them.

A few minutes later, the group rolled out of the tunnel and bounced over a muddy field to reach the woods. With engines roaring over the storm and lights glaring, their exit was attention getting.

Baker realized Sam was trying to draw the mob away from the bunker and approved even when fear crept into his stomach. He couldn't deny there was also an edge of excitement. He was finally out having an adventure with his very own Pruett.

Cresting a small rise, the bikes gained air; the Runners let out shouts of excitement that were contagious.

Fire flew through Sam as Baker joined them.

The Runners had never had a male voice in the chorus. It drove them to continue the yelling beyond what Sam normally approved of. They sounded happy. *I wish there was time to stop and tell him how much I love him.*

Sam didn't know where this emotional side of her had come from. She had spent her life alone. As soon as she was able to handle herself, she had gathered a group of girls from their town and left. She had spent the next fifteen years traveling the Borderlands, searching for peace. Now, all she wanted was to settle down and live with Baker. It was terrifying. *Burnout is already hitting me.*

Chapter Thirty-Four

More Blood

Training Center

1

“This first test is designed to measure intelligence. Using the screens on the walls, solve the problems to pass. At the door, you’ll be asked a final question.”

The testing control booth was a small square block with four dark glass windows. There was a console in the front of the block and an expressionless male technician waiting for orders.

A wall panel on her left slid aside to form a doorway. Candice stepped forward, donning her normal resolve. She needed one big piece of information from Julian. She had to earn it before she could ask for it. That meant playing his game, for now. “See you shortly.”

Julian chuckled. “I’m getting it on tape. If you survive, we can watch it while we create the next generation.”

Candice hissed as the barrier slid shut. The urge to kill Julian was so strong that she wasn’t sure she was going to be able to wait without a barrier between them. If not for needing a critical piece of

information, he would already be a pool of blood under her boots.

The intelligence booth was barren of furnishings. There was one exit and three walls covered in computer screens. It made Candice nervous. She knew Julian would refuse to allow her out if she didn't pass the test.

Julian's voice came through the speakers. "Whenever you're ready to begin, push the button."

Candice immediately pushed the button.

Five screens activated on the dark walls, illuminating the space. Candice stared at the first screen.

"If at any time you wish to stop the test, all you have to do is tap on the glass."

Candice flipped a finger in the air.

Julian chuckled and stopped talking to her so the results wouldn't be corrupted.

The first screen was a series of math problems that she solved without problems. Julian hadn't expected her to have issues as it was school age material. All female citizens were required to have this education.

The second screen was a little more difficult, indicating an advanced education level. He was impressed when Candice didn't spend any more time on the second screen than she had the first.

The third set of equations was comparable to his own education, which had been constant throughout the first twenty-five years of his life. His father,

Nathan, had insisted his son be smarter than he was and that man was brilliant.

Candice cleared the third screen without hesitating. All the information she needed to solve these equations had been taught to her as a teenager. Her mother had been a burnt-out changeling who hadn't been able to manage leadership over such a wild family, but educating her children had been easy with her computer skills. The Pruetts had every program the Network had ever created for educational purposes.

Candice progressed to the fourth screen, where political, religious, and moral questions were flashed at her in a series of blurs with a timer in the corner intended to make her nervous. Candice used her normal line, not worrying about what answers Julian might expect. She didn't care about the results of this test, but she also wasn't going to pretend to be someone she wasn't.

At the end of the fourth screen, a simple question blinked, forcing her to concentrate.

In what year did the Network take over New America?

Candice didn't locate the correct answer on the screen. The timer was quickly counting down; she felt her nerves coil into a ball. If she failed this test, she would be ruled out as a genetic match for Julian and he would switch to someone else in their family without ever letting her out of this box.

Julian leaned toward the glass, rooting for her.

Candice made a quick decision and ripped open the panel on the wall under the screen. Using a small knife, she pried off the casing and began to manipulate the settings.

“Can she do that?”

Julian waved the technician to be quiet.

A new option popped up on the screen.

None of the above.

Candice quickly chose the new answer, triggering the door. She regarded Julian, brow lifted.

The speaker crackled. “You broke my computer. It wasn’t supposed to let you through without answering the fifth screen. You may proceed.”

Candice smirked as she stepped to the door labeled *Agility*.

Bullets flew by, coming from the opposite wall.

Candice ducked, survival mode kicking in. Slugs pinged off the walls and trimmed her flesh as she skated underneath the line of fire toward the exit. Like the last one, this booth was barren of furnishings except for the testing equipment. There wasn’t time to note anything else as electrified tiles shocked Candice and drew cries. She didn’t stop moving.

The tiles beneath her rumbled, indicating they were about to drop.

With no choice, Candice leapt forward, taking several electric hits.

She smacked to a halt against the barrier that immediately opened and dropped her into the next room.

“You may proceed.”

Candice grunted. “No shit.”

Julian laughed.

The computer triggered as soon as Candice stood, activated by her movement.

“In this test, the candidate must reach the exit. The level of strength required scales with each barrier.”

The booth was cold and damp, she assumed to preserve the huge stones that weren’t on tracks or rollers as far as she could see. The walls were growing mold and there were cobwebs in the corners. It was obvious this room hadn’t been cleaned for years. *That’s because most people die in the agility test*, she thought, wincing at the dead sensation in her lower leg.

Candice regarded the huge rocks and then turned a glare toward the glass. She couldn’t hear Julian, but she was positive he was amused. She wasn’t. She was getting tired and she was injured. At least three bullets were lodged in her leg, with another in her arm. Blood was trickling down her back and the knife wound Leo had delivered was now infected.

Candice resolutely stepped forward and shoved on the first rock.

Julian settled onto a chair in the small office, aware of the technicians discussing the test and

laughing. They would probably be eliminated after this, due to lack of respect for the process. He didn't count his own amusement. He wasn't mocking her the way his men were. He was impressed. Only four people had successfully passed all levels of this examination without begging to be let out or dying. He was one of those, and he carried ugly scars to prove it. He was delighted Candice might be the fifth. That put three Pruetts on the list. Tara had done it the fastest, though Candice was on track to beat that record.

“How is she doing?”

The technicians straightened up, remembering the boss was in the booth with them for this test.

“I don't know how to rate her for the first test. We've never had someone go through without completing the fifth screen. We gave her the highest marks you can for the adaptability she demonstrated.”

Julian observed as Candice used one rock against the other. She had knocked the first one over by tilting it with her body weight and was using it as a lever to move the others, instead of relying on her changeling strength. Julian was disappointed that he hadn't gotten to witness her change yet, but he was impressed that she was saving her strength for when it mattered. Though she hadn't done this before, it was obvious she suspected something bigger for the fourth booth. Julian motioned the technician to keep going.

“She tied the record time for test two, but she took one more hit than Tara. We gave her second highest marks.”

Julian agreed with that choice. Watching Tara go through the test had been just as fun.

“So far, she’s thirty seconds ahead on stamina and strength.”

“You have my little extra at the end ready?”

The technician nodded. “At your call, sir.”

In the booth, Candice used the last of her normal strength to shove the rock out of the way. She could see around the edges to the exit now. There were two large slabs left. She was reasonably confident she could get to the next one, but it was going to drain her. After, she would be forced to flip into a changeling or she wouldn’t make it through. Instead of draining herself now, Candice let her rage have control.

Julian was mesmerized by the sight of her flipping into a changeling. He had watched it on screens during her game, but it wasn’t the same as being three feet away from her, hearing her screams and observing the pain. It made him hungry.

Candice quickly shifted the last two rocks easily, feeling Julian’s eyes burning holes into her as he examined her in all her changeling glory. It would give him an advantage in any fight with her, but there was no help for that.

Candice pushed the button on the door and moved inside with her hands hovering over her weapons.

It was dark and silent, triggering her eyes.

She scanned for heat, finding large splotches of it everywhere.

The barrier closed behind her.

Julian slapped the counter when the technician didn't switch the lighting fast enough. "Get the infrared on!" He didn't want to miss any of Candice's fight with the changeling men and women who had been trapped in the booth with a bloody body for hours to stir them up.

Everyone in the small office leaned forward to observe intently. This was the point where even the fastest, strongest candidates usually lost their lives.

Candice swung her knife in one hand and her longer blade in the other, killing everyone who approached. She didn't wait to hear snarls or try to speak to them. She had no way of knowing who they were or why they were here, but it didn't matter as changeling claws ripped through her cloak and skin. She was unable to use the gun because the bullet would ricochet, forcing her into ugly, close quarter combat that quickly wore her down.

Candice lunged again, feeling her blade cut into a fleshy part of a body. A dripping noise echoed and then the body fell.

Gasping, Candice spun and slashed outward again, able to feel someone sneaking up on her in the darkness.

Blood again pattered to the floor and then went silent as it was covered by the corpse.

The senior technician looked at Julian. “That’s all of them, sir.”

Julian motioned. “Send in the extra.”

Candice waited for the door to open or a light to come on. When that didn’t happen, she realized the test wasn’t over.

Her changeling ears went into overdrive. Because there was no other light to reflect off, and she was so tired, her changeling vision only penetrated a few feet in front of her. She slowly advanced, trying to spot a path through the blackness and bodies.

Candice heard the soft pad of huge paws. Her stomach dropped. *A hound. Shit!* They were hard to kill even when you were in full health and could see them coming.

Julian rose from the chair and went to stand right up against the glass to have the best view possible. If Candice died here, he wanted to be close enough to feel it. She hadn’t been given warning on what was coming, or extra ammo for her weapons. This was a contest of fighting skills against a savage enemy—something Pruetts had been thriving at since the war. The added twist was that the changeling hound was a *male*. It would have no sympathy for a woman. In fact, he always insisted the hound keepers were women so the big dogs would hate them for the abuse. He’d mirrored the plan for people, wanting men to inherit all parts of the earth.

Candice could feel the ruthless menace of the predator stalking her, but she couldn’t tell which

direction the soft breathing was coming from. For one of the few moments in her life, Candice honestly considered dying. Her mind filled with memories of love and laughter with her mate and family, willing to surrender, but Candice refused to give in. That wasn't how she had lived her life and that wasn't how she was going to die. She would go down fighting and meet her end with honor.

The hound lunged forward.

So did Candice.

Julian's evil face squished against the glass.

The hound was huge. Its body covered Candice's entire frame as it landed on top of her. She could feel the thick tail curling, searching for an open area to hit. Her attempt to stab it in the eye failed, sending her to the hard ground. Candice could only think of one thing to do. She curled into a ball and sent her hands to her belt for a more powerful weapon.

The hound took advantage of her vulnerability. It snapped down on her leg.

Candice screamed.

Julian's claws scratched on the glass. "More! More blood!"

Candice let the dog bite into her leg, bringing one clawed hand around to the animal's face. She jammed her thumb into its eye.

The dog howled, enraged by its pain. It snapped down on her leg again.

Candice shrieked.

Julian beat against the glass in ecstasy, spraying spittle.

The technicians eased their chairs away from the boss.

Candice fired her gun into the dog's big skull, using her hold on its eye socket to determine the correct direction to keep from killing herself as well.

Four quick shots echoed through the booth, hurting her ears.

Blood splattered across the glass where Julian was standing.

Candice screamed again as the teeth sank in deeper, and then the hound released her and slumped over.

Candice scrambled away from the animal, listening for the next threat. Her leg was on fire, she had no sensation in her back, and she was gushing blood from several places, but she wasn't dead. That was a miracle.

"You have passed. Congratulations!"

The door hissed open. The lights flashed on.

Candice didn't move.

Julian signaled the troops to collect her. He knew better than to enter the dark space without protection. Candice was still in her changed form and on the edge of more violence because of her injuries. Weaknesses always made Pruetts more dangerous.

Refusing to groan or scream again, Candice saw three panels in the walls that had allowed the

changeling men and women to rush her from all directions. There was also a smaller, wider hound entrance near where she had come in. The walls were stained in the blood of previous testers. She suddenly doubted the hound had been part of the evaluation. That had been Julian having fun with her, as she'd had while removing his family tattoo.

Candice didn't resist as the men dragged her out of the testing booth. They stopped in front of Julian, but she sagged between them, unable to put weight on her bleeding leg. The other one wasn't responding at all.

"Take her to the medical bay. When they finish, send her to my bed. She's ready now."

Candice's anger began to fade with her strength as she continued to bleed.

Julian lunged forward and grabbed her by the hair. He forced her head up. "Stay changed for the blood work or I'll send your mate in there next!"

Candice's rage immediately slapped the change back into place. She glared at him. "I should have let Rusty kill you."

"Yes, you should have. Now you'll both pay the price for such a weakness." Julian gestured to the guards. "Get her out of here."

"You didn't answer Daniel's question."

Julian frowned. "What question?"

"The date of your death."

Instead of flying into a rage as expected, Julian gave an evil laugh. "I'll tell you right before I kill

you.” Her blood and screams had shored up his control.

“Deal.” Candice let the guards take her from the booth, throwing a promise over her shoulder. “They’ll be the last words you ever speak.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Tough Love

Tara's Ship

1

“**S**he’s pretty. Maybe grandpa will keep her.”

Jason and Angelica turned to look at his son. Jason and the boy were in the bed, resting, while she took the chair by the door to watch over them. She had been exchanging smiles and waves with the child since he woke up, but his words ruined the good moment.

“Grandpa?” Jason was confused.

Jamie nodded. “Grandpa Julian said some of us get to keep our women. You might be one of those.”

Both adults were horrified that the boy had even spoken to Julian, let alone remembered his words. It was obvious the child had been brainwashed and would need to be retrained. Thankfully, Angelica already liked the boy. Time around her family would help him. Neither of them considered his actual words.

“We’re heading there now. Do you like your grandpa?”

The little boy shrugged. “He wasn’t mean to me.”

It made both of them feel better to hear that. Angelica had expected to feel a small measure of resentment for the child that had been stolen by Rankin and the council, but she had discovered only pity in her heart for the boy who looked exactly like her mate.

Angelica went to the tiny window as Jason tried to explain things to his son. She didn't interfere with the lessons Jason gave to the child, but when they got to the part about who could be trusted and who couldn't, she winced when he added the Pruetts to the list of people who could be counted on. She didn't know for sure, but she suspected *grandpa* was the ruler of the council. If that was the case, they would have to put a qualifier on family trust.

Angelica studied the island, noting the female Defenders in the front. When Tara's ship sailed straight toward them instead of taking a different entrance, Angelica's dangerous grin appeared. "I wonder if they know..."

She glanced over at Jason. "They'll be coming for us soon. Keep him next to you."

Jason nodded. The sense of danger had grown the longer they traveled.

Harsh pounding came on the door before Angelica could say anything else.

"Get out here! It's delivery time!"

Tara's amusement echoed through the hall as she left.

Jason lifted a brow at Angelica. "Are you able to kill her? Because we're not getting out of this if you can't."

"No one gets out of a training center." Jamie frowned at his father. "You can't be a rebel anymore. You're one of us."

Angelica stared at Jason. "I may need your help."

Jason wasn't afraid to fight now. He was furious. "I've got you." Jason had come a long way since she had rescued him from the complex. Despite wanting his freedom, he had been just another timid slave. Now, he was a man.

Angelica moved toward the door.

Jason helped the boy to his feet and followed.

As the trio went toward the ladder to the top deck, the women on duty stared at Jason. It was obvious they didn't spend much time around males. Angelica's plan defined into a vague scheme that gave her hope.

When Angelica's pace picked up and the aura of confidence slammed into him, Jason mentally sneered. *My Angel's back, and you traitors are in trouble!*

Angelica climbed to the upper deck, no longer studying the island. She examined the three hundred females handling security for it. Most of the women were big changelings with glowing pink eyes who watched their arrival in suspicion. The rest observed in excitement.

Angelica realized the women on duty out here were bored *and* unsatisfied. *Perfect.*

Angelica joined Tara at the front of the boat as the ship docked.

Jason stayed behind the women. He kept Jamie by his side, hoping nothing happened to the boy now that they had been brought together.

“This will be your new home.” Tara gestured toward steel doors opening at the front of the complex. “You go in, you don’t come back out. You should take my offer. It will kill you to be caged.”

Angelica noticed women on duty staring at her expectantly. *I’m going to give you what you’re searching for, and in exchange, you’re going to betray your master.* Plan firmly in place now, Angelica waited for the crowd of women coming to greet them to be close enough to hear her.

Also aware of the expectant glances, Tara led the way down the ramp. “Come on!”

Angelica noticed the tension. It made sense that her relative would be aware of the danger, too. The difference was that Tara’s arrogance was going to be her downfall.

Angelica walked down the gangplank. As soon as she hit the concrete wharf, she stopped. “How long have you known men really rule our country?”

Shocked troops rotated their way. From the expressions, some of them had heard the reports of changeling males rampaging.

Tara scowled. “Just keep walking!”

Angelica estimated it was a hundred feet to the entrance. She had until then to convince the witnesses she wasn't lying, or to provoke a fight with Tara. No matter what else happened, she and Jason weren't going in there on these terms. "You are a traitor to this family. Men rule the council and you knew!"

Tara refused to be distracted. Julian had told her not to use the front entrance when she delivered Angelica, but Tara didn't like being relegated to the rear entrance like a servant. She had disobeyed Julian's order.

Angelica got louder. "How long have you known about the cure?"

Anger was coming from the crowd around them now. Instead of being restrained, Angelica walked through the guards, making eye contact with some. "They have a cure for our disease. There's no reason for any of us to be suffering."

"What is she talking about?"

"What's going on?!"

Tara shoved her way to the door and hit the button to avoid answering their questions.

Angelica pushed harder. "Did he promise you a spot on the council? Or do you already have one?"

Tara grunted.

Because she didn't deny the accusation, the troops took it as fact.

"Traitor!"

A knife slammed into the wall next to Tara.

Tara spun around, drawing her gun. “Who threw that?!”

“Tell us what you know!”

“Don’t let her get inside!”

Angelica knew the time had come. She lunged forward and grabbed Tara’s arm before the woman could reach safety, jerking her around. The gun went flying.

Tara immediately jerked her knife from her belt and began to stab Angelica in any place that she could reach.

Angelica changed, taking more hits than her cloak deflected enough to prevent mortal injury. Tara wasn’t wearing her cloak. Angelica lunged forward with her wrist blade extended and knives in both hands.

Tara rolled forward, punching Angelica in the mouth and knocking her backward. The blades still sliced into the older woman’s hands and arms, but she didn’t react to it.

Jason got his son out of the way, surrounded by Defenders who observed in angry confusion.

Angelica swung back viciously, trying to find a soft spot, but Tara was too quick. The woman had obviously spent her life fighting and she was good at it.

Angelica took another stab in the arm and a punch to the chest. Dazed at the fast reflexes, Tara knocked her to the ground and stole her air.

Tara rushed forward again.

Angelica rolled, hitting the feet of guards as she tried to avoid the boot blade. Blood smeared across the concrete as she continued to roll.

Tara jumped, trying to get ahead of Angelica. Flipping the handle on the move, she brought her knife down in a vicious display of strength.

Angelica caught the blade right before it sank into her neck, grunting in effort to keep it from finishing the plunge.

This time, Jason felt the moment arrive. He let go of his son's hand and charged forward. The knife Angelica had given him this morning was curled under his palm as he reached the struggling females and slammed his fist down against Tara's neck.

Tara gaped, unable to believe Angelica had chosen less than honorable methods. "Pruetts don't do that!"

"How does it feel to be stabbed in the back by family?" Angelica grinned as Tara slid to her knees, blood running from the corner of her mouth.

"Pruett's adapt." Angelica shifted over to put an arm around Jason in comfort. "You are officially removed from our family, *grandmother*."

Tara's lids fluttered shut. "See you in hell."

Angelica shrugged. "Maybe, but not today."

She regarded the surprised, staring guards around her. They weren't sure if they should arrest her, kill her, or join her. "There are males inside this complex, males who betrayed us. Pruett's wouldn't be here if that wasn't true. You know my family. We don't bluff and we don't lie." She glanced down

at Tara, who had finally stopped trying to live. “We do take out the trash.”

Angelica sighed, bleeding, hurting, and ashamed. “There’s a lot more trash inside. I can’t do this alone. Help me?”

Her request had been phrased in such a way that none of the Defenders could resist. These women had been alone for a long time. The image of men inside, ready to be used, fired them up.

Angelica pointed toward the door. “Let’s get that open.”

Troops rushed forward to comply.

Jason kept a hold of his son as the women around him attacked the entrance. He didn’t feel any remorse for killing Tara. In fact, he was proud of it.

Jamie glanced up at his father. “Grandpa will be very unhappy.”

“Good. I have a few things to say to him, too.”

Instead of joining the fighters as they tried to penetrate the center, Angelica searched for a camera. When she found it, she marched over to be the main object in focus. She had no doubt someone was watching everything happening out here. Using women had been a mistake. The Network needed them to be able to operate in public and grow power, but not all the women had known they were serving a government of men bent on putting women in chains.

Angelica flashed the family grin. “If you surrender now, I’ll go easy on you.”

Inside the bunker, Julian screamed in rage.

“I think we’re under attack.”

The family had been resting, but the sound of fighting outside had woken many of them.

Bruce pointed toward the dark view screen. “I think that’s why we lost the monitors a little while ago.”

The screens had shut off abruptly during a news report playing Candice’s coup recording. When nothing else had happened, the family had returned to resting. Except for Bruce and Mary. Mary was working on a plan to get them out of here alive and Bruce was worrying over Candice. He was sure she was in trouble.

So was Daniel, but he had his hands full taking care of the two young children. The family around him was only helping a little, giving him a crash course in parenthood. Daniel’s nerves were already reaching a breaking point.

The barrier to their quarters slid open to reveal a twitchy leader followed by half a dozen guards.

“Get over here!” Julian grabbed Mary by the arm and dragged her over to the control panel on the wall, ignoring the instant hostility from everyone else.

Daniel put a hand on Bruce’s wrist when he would have interfered.

“Tell her to stand down!” Julian hit the button and brought up a screen that showed the outside of the training center.

Angelica’s grinning face brought chuckles from nearly everyone.

“I’ll kill you all! Tell her to quit!”

Mary knew he wasn’t bluffing, but she could only give one response. “You wanted us here. We’re only missing Sam now.”

An evil expression came over Julian’s face. “That one won’t be joining us. I arranged other lodgings for her. Perhaps we’ll get to view the game.” Julian shoved Mary away from the monitor and shut it off. “What’s her price?”

“She doesn’t have one. She’s coming in.” Mary smirked. “For you.”

“They can’t get in here.”

“Then why are you scared?”

“I’m not scared of anything!” Julian leaned into her face, so angry he was spitting. “I’m a Pruett! Everyone is afraid of me!”

Mary didn’t react at all.

Julian lifted his hand.

Family and friends stood up and moved toward him. Bruce was in the lead, with Daniel right behind him.

The male guards ran for the door, not about to challenge them in defense of their boss.

Mary waited, not sure how she would react. It had been a long time since she had been hit like this and she had never been struck by a male.

Julian paused, feeling the danger. He lowered his hand and rotated toward the exit, glaring crimson at the guards who were now running down the hall to avoid his wrath. “She can’t get in here.” Julian opened the door and stepped through. “She can’t reach me. But I can reach all of you.”

Julian left with that threat.

Bruce hurried over to verify Mary was okay.

Mary shrugged off his concern. “We have bigger problems. Everyone come over here. I memorized the code he used to activate this console. Block the view from the camera.”

Pruetts quickly gathered around their matriarch, feeling like they’d won a victory. Julian’s behavior hadn’t been steady, stable, or reliable. With him acting like that, it would give Candice a better chance to kill him.

None of the others were sure why Julian wasn’t already dead after being alone with Candice. It made them worried that she might be gone, but none of them voiced the fear. Until the body was found, they would assume she was alive.

Mary and Bruce knew she was alive and kicking somewhere. Julian couldn’t complete his plan without her.

“He’s not sure about Sam coming. He lied. He does bluff.”

Everyone turned to look at Daniel, who should have been occupied with the fussy infant and squirming toddler in his arms.

“You still think he expects Sam to come here instead of falling for whatever trap he set for her.” Mary frowned. “Why?”

Daniel pointed at a child in the corner who was eyeing them in fear and anger. “He brought Baker’s brother. He wasn’t sure if Sam might show up here and he wanted to have it covered. He really is a Pruett.”

Mary stared at the feral child who had been brought out of the vulture nursery under what could only have been ugly circumstances; she was forced to admit Daniel was right. Julian was going to be the first worthy adversary they had come across. It wasn’t comforting.

3

“What happens now?”

Angelica pointed toward the camera. “He’ll get tired of watching me kill his troops and destroy his beautiful creations. He’ll make contact through the camera. We’ll make a deal. He’ll lie. So will we.”

Jason’s lips twitched. “I’ve never seen this side of you.”

Angelica grunted. “No one has.”

“How long do you think it will be before he makes contact?”

Angelica shrugged. “This is a fortress and he’s well supplied. It depends on how much time I need to buy for Candice to get whatever it is she’s searching for.”

Jason frowned. “How do you know she’s searching for something?”

“Because she hasn’t killed everyone on this island and taken over it. If she had found what she was searching for, she would be opening the door and inviting us in.”

Jason believed that could be true, which meant the situation was more dangerous than he’d estimated. Even if they got inside the complex, there would be a battle between the guards in there and the women out here. Jason didn’t want to see any of it. The hateful changelings around them were already making him uncomfortable. He and Jamie were huddled at Angelica’s side, hoping nothing triggered a fight. There was no way she could defend them against so many. Once the barrier opened and these women got inside, any males they found probably wouldn’t survive.

Angelica was aware of his unease. She shifted the pair so they were between her and the wall. If the boss man didn’t make contact soon, she would be forced to trigger him to keep Jason and his son safe. The women out here were only going to wait so long.

“Angelica Pruett!” The speaker crackled, quieting the crowd of furious changelings. The voice was male.

Angelica signaled to indicate she was listening.

“Surrender or I’ll kill your family.”

A male voice making such a threat against a female was unheard of. It caused an instant reaction

in the crowd. Fights broke out as female changelings were unable to control their rage.

Angelica flipped a finger toward the camera.

Jason couldn't help the chuckle. Angelica's defiance of authority and refusal to play by Network rules was always going to be a source of admiration for him. She was fearless.

Angelica was terrified. She was playing an awful game with a madman. Their lives meant nothing to him. Angelica suddenly wished Candice was out here and she was in there. *One wrong move will see us all dead.*

Chapter Thirty-Six

Skeletons

Western Borderlands

1

It only took them half the normal time to reach the power bunker. Sam had refused to stop. She'd been cooped up and hurt. She wanted to ride.

There were three routes through the Borderlands—two roundabout paths and one shorter, narrower way. Each came with its own dangers. The two outer paths were the most commonly traveled and unsafe due to bandits and changelings. They were the routes Candice and Angelica had chosen to take during their flights through the area. The center, less used route, exemplified the reason for the fear of this territory. The two hundred miles of arid, uneven terrain and rapidly changing weather was home to mutations that had been breeding unchecked for centuries. Sam chose that path.

“Ready?”

Sam nodded at Rosa's question. Baker was behind her and once again secured to her by a rope. They were all wearing rainproof ponchos, which made him less noticeable as they entered the Borderlands in a tight formation.

The wind lashed out in greeting.

Goggles were lowered and cloaks were adjusted, but they didn't stop. Sam had driven them straight through since leaving the safe house, but making camp here would be the act of a novice.

The landscape went from calmly dying brown to cracked tan that said the rains hadn't come yet. *Good. Maybe we got lucky with our timing.* The rain came for a few weeks a year, but the storm cells stayed together for hundreds of miles, springing tornadoes like a fountain.

Rustic buildings once used for shelter were deep in the sand; they added a rougher layer of passage for the Mopars. Right after the war, there had been an attempt to return some cities to order. Most had been wiped from existence by nature or the Network, leaving no place for survivors or rebels to hide. Stone Mountain had been the last den in the eastern country, and there was only two others that Sam knew of. One was north of these lands, in the mountains. Candice had chosen to skip that with the rebel males and send them straight to the border wall instead.

The other den was ten miles from where the Network was holding their required power meeting. The location of the power bunker had been easy to come by, thanks to the council member they were holding, but before now, they had hunted this area and rebels had hidden here, all without ever knowing how close they were to a Network stronghold.

Baker was bored. He had heard a lot about the Borderlands, all exciting, but when they drove and kept driving until he was almost asleep against Sam's hot shoulders, he had grown bored. It was nice to be so close to her, to feel the way she controlled the Mopar, but he was sore and his ass was starting to tingle. He also wasn't sure how much more his stomach was going to take after a fast breakfast of dried snake. It wasn't what he was used to and it had his guts rocking.

The wind pushed against the riders.

Baker felt Sam mold herself to the bike and tried to do the same as his stomach clenched again.

"Go right!" one of the rear escorts shouted.

Sam swerved to the left as a huge sinkhole opened up in front of them, following the code of opposites in case it was an ambush.

Another hole opened. Sam expertly swerved around again. The Runners were doing the same, forced to break ranks to avoid crashing into the holes.

"Woo-hoo!"

Baker stared in annoyance as one of the females shouted in fun. This wasn't a flat road. Didn't she care about getting hurt?

Baker realized all the big women were grinning or going faster. *Nuts. They're all nuts.*

No longer bored, Baker held on to Sam and tried not to get sick.

Sam pointed to the right, where a herd of horned turkeys peered up in alarm at their approach.

Baker was immediately distracted.

Thanks to the information from Angelica and Candice, Sam was able to handle Baker. They had also told her he would need nausea medicine on trips. Once they stopped, she would handle it. The fragile bachelors weren't used to traveling. Candice had warned her of everything that could go wrong, except for how quickly they would develop a bond.

The herd of turkeys flew into the air.

Baker laughed at the sight.

It was contagious, bringing smiles from the women. It gave Sam a sense of pride and warmth, reminding her of when she had been happy, back before the change had made her into a killer.

The ground grew drier as they traveled, showing shattered cracks and no tracks on the hardpan. It should mean no one was around, but a sudden sense of being watched crept over Sam. She drew her gun.

The Runners followed her lead.

Sam was pleasantly surprised when Baker shifted to the left and used his hand to help rebalance their weight on the Mopar. It felt natural to share control with him; she pushed the bike faster.

Ahead of them, Rosa made a motion and veered off the main path.

Sam followed, approving. Her XO was avoiding a possible ambush.

Now on even more uneven terrain, Sam shoved the gun into Baker's big hand and took control of

the bike. She felt his surprise and reluctance, but she had her hands full as they reached the ditches.

Drilled by four centuries of flash flooding during the torrential rains, it was a wild ride of gaps, dips, holes, and relics of the old world.

“Damn!” Baker saw them coming.

The gulls rose from the ruts beside the Mopars, lunging for the draft.

He raised the gun, horrified. Baker saw bald heads and black eyes, and realized the gulls were sightless. Half a dozen, they were each the size of the bikes. “Look out!”

Sam swerved to the left at Baker’s shout.

One of the huge mutations swept by, barely missing her.

Another flew over the convoy, nails striking out.

Baker fired the gun.

Bang!

The noise immediately made up for his miss, sending the birds to a higher altitude. They circled above the riders, squawking angrily.

Baker stayed ready with Sam’s gun.

The gulls followed for a time, but stayed well above. Baker assumed the noise of guns was one people didn’t make often here or maybe the birds were especially sensitive to it. Storing the information, he didn’t do the same with her gun because Sam hadn’t told him to yet.

He defended us! Sam was in shock. Every bit of that had been Baker. Even Daniel hadn’t handled

himself so well. Sam couldn't stop the huge grin that came across her face.

Sam felt his hand rise at the next movement to the left and shook her head.

They passed the bobcats without coming to harm or causing any. Bobcats were one of the few animals in the Borderlands that didn't attack on sight. They preferred the carrion left from vultures.

Baker lowered the gun, scanning tensely.

Sam nodded her approval. He would be easy to train. If he wanted a place in the family business, he had just earned a shot at it.

2

The rough ride lasted until they were a few hours from the Network power bunker and then the sky changed. It went from swirling colors to dark clouds carrying dust, forcing them to pull over.

Sam was the only one who didn't stare at Baker or offer him congratulations. She handed Rosa a map. "Red is good, blue is bad. If we get split up, I'll search these first."

Rosa studied it for a minute and then put it away.

"We'll keep rolling." Sam spent a minute handling her business and then got on the Mopar. Baker had done the same next to her, cheeks scarlet.

The Runners didn't argue with her decision, even though the storm would definitely hit before they reached the bunker. It would be safer to hole

up, but the sense that time was getting tight was tugging on them all.

They were able to stay ahead of the storm until they reached the desert grasslands. This was the most dangerous part of the untamed area; the Runners changed formation. They didn't have a full complement and they were getting low on ammo.

Baker had switched the gun to his other hand after an hour and then back after another. He was glad he had rotated as the wolves came out of the sandy grass.

Baker pulled the trigger. He didn't fire the first shot, but it was close between him and Rosa.

Flying through the tall weeds around them, the wolves were snarling, snapping nightmares that longed for blood as much as any changeling.

The noise of the guns was deafening, but the wolves paid no attention.

Baker spotted a large stone wall and assumed they would find shelter there. As the wall neared and the dust storm bore down on them, the wolves doubled in number. Then tripled. The guns took them down easily, but more came in to take their place.

Ahead, a group of ambushing animals charged at Rosa.

Sam pointed so Baker knew which ones to hit first.

He did a great job, but it wasn't enough to keep the wolves from reaching the Runner. A big animal flew into her.

Rosa jerked the wheel, tires lifting... She rolled the bike.

Sam slowed and swung around. Never being split up was a hard rule they always followed.

Sam opened the gun portals on the outside of the bike and began circling Rosa, firing to keep the wolves at bay.

The Runner stayed below the line of fire. When Sam paused, Rosa leapt.

Baker grunted, but helped hold the woman on as Sam sped away.

The others hurried into formation around them.

Rosa leapt from their bike onto the rear of Melissa's. They all sped for the wall as dust began to fly over the landscape.

The wall wasn't solid, but it was as if there was an invisible border there that the animals refused to cross. The wolves skidded to a halt at the stone, howling.

On the other side of the wall, the ground sloped into a steep hill the Runners cleared at a fast pace.

As they hit the top, Sam waved.

The group slowed to view what she had.

"An old city!" Baker's enthusiasm faded as he realized this was also an old battlefield. He estimated it had been at least a year because of the color of the bones, but it was impossible to be sure. They could have been here from the beginning. Once a well populated city, it was now just another graveyard from the old world.

Sam rolled forward, crossing over the bones and debris. She could feel Baker shuddering behind her. She hated putting him through this, but it was necessary. The dust storm was too fast. She'd tried to stay ahead of it, but they weren't going to be able to much longer.

"There!" Sam stopped the Mopar and tugged Baker off the bike with her.

The Runners also stopped and hurried to where she'd pointed.

"We've got it!" Rosa and Melissa lifted the hatch and immediately dropped into the hole in the ground.

Baker groaned, vaguely aware of Runners securing the Mopars with chains quickly shot into the hard ground.

Sam pushed him over to the hole and picked him up as the winds increased. Sand blew over all of them.

Baker thought of resisting. "I could just walk."

Sam shook her head, grinning. "To get to this den, we have to fall."

Sam jumped into the hole.

Baker held on, screaming in her ear.

Sam kissed him to silence the noise.

They hit the platform below and stopped abruptly. Sam's gravity boots beeped to signal they were empty.

Baker grunted as Sam pulled him into her side, clutching her for balance. "I may be sick."

Sam laughed and pulled him along as she moved to let the others through.

The last Runner to jump grabbed an old rope and used it to slam the hatch shut as she dropped. If not for his terror, Baker would have had a hundred questions about this place and who set it up. Instead, he couldn't stop shivering. If not for the lights the Runners were striking, Sam might have had to sedate him.

"Let's go." Sam led the way.

Baker stayed as close to Sam as he could without climbing onto her back. His uneven breathing and heavy steps were the only sounds in the tunnel. He had a lot of questions and concerns, but mostly, he just hated the dark. Slavery had seen to that.

"We'll be good here." Sam chose a cubby and went to it.

The enclave looked as though it had been set up for storage. Baker wondered what, if anything, all the dusty crates might be holding. He wasn't surprised when two of the Runners immediately began to find out.

Sam cut the rope between them and slid down the wall. When she motioned toward him, he took the seat in front of her.

"We're only an hour away. Sleep for a while if you can. I won't let anything happen to you."

Comforted, Baker did as she instructed.

Sam stayed awake. She and Baker were fully bonded and it was terrifying. She couldn't imagine

being without him and yet, every second they traveled west made that reality more likely. Despite her bravado, Sam wasn't sure they were coming out of this. They might go down in a blaze of glory to end the hold the Network had over their country. She was already mourning the loss and celebrating the honor.

3

“There's nothing left.”

Sam didn't respond to Melissa as they sat atop the hill to observe. The nuclear powered bunker in front of them had obviously been breached. On either side of the entrance was an untouched fuel depot and an animal shelter, but the door was open and smoke was pouring out. There were also bodies on the ground in front of the entrance. The animals, however, were grazing peacefully. They hadn't been harmed or taken. This section of the Borderlands was near to where the western territory started. Built after the war, this bunker had protected elite members of the council for three hundred years. That was all over now.

“Who do you think did this?”

Sam shrugged at Melissa's question. With everything that had been going on, this area should have been light on security. She doubted the council would have ordered troops out here to handle something when a bomb was scheduled to take care

of it in just a couple of weeks anyway. This appeared to be an outside force.

Baker grimaced. "Are we going in?"

Sam rolled her dusty Mopar down the sandy hill as an answer. There might be things they needed inside, but she was positive there would be information.

Baker wished she had made a different choice. The bunker door being open was a bad sign.

Their escort stayed alert, also noticing Baker's unease. If not for Sam's choice, none of the women would have ventured inside. For most of them, this bunker represented everything that was wrong with their world and it had needed to be destroyed. Finding out someone had done that was a relief. For others, they didn't want to know what macabre experiments had been conducted in there.

Sam ignored them all and entered the bunker, curious about what lay inside. As far as she knew, none of the Pruetts had ever been inside the power bunker, so this was another first for her family.

Outside the bunker, half of the Runners stayed with their vehicles and kept an eye out for the villains to return. The rest followed their boss inside.

Sam found bodies as soon as she entered. Lights were on in the distance, giving a narrow pathway of illumination that revealed well-dressed citizens wearing screams of death. There were bullet casings, along with knives and arrows, littering the

floors. It was clear there had been a brutal battle here.

“Hey!” Baker pointed. “I recognize her.”

Sam studied the dead body with pink hair. Her throat had been slit. “Former Den Mother?”

“Yes.” Baker had been in and out of the complex enough times to recognize the regular people. “I think she was also a rental for member number two.”

Sam stored the information, listening for signs of survivors or attackers.

The lounges in the bunker were as lavish and decadent as Sam had imagined upon learning of this place. The people who came to these meetings had ruled in the past. They weren’t going to be kept in shabby conditions. The brothels, kitchens, and entertainment areas were the same. Sam saw illegal films and educational material that even the Pruetts couldn’t get. The medical bay was also heavily stocked, making Sam glad to know there was an area like this nearby if she needed it. When the war was over, she might have to come back and explore everything in here. It would take a lifetime to read it all and figure out everything that had been perpetrated against past and current populations.

The utilities were also still intact. It was pleasantly cool, with active radios and view screens in the rooms they were passing. Clips came to them as they explored the bunker.

“With no word from the government for two full days now, citizens are starting to wonder what

comes next. There has also been no word from the Pruetts after their initial claims of controlling the country. Everyone is waiting to discover who is leading us. In the meantime, fights for that position have broken out in all major cities across the country.”

When Baker would have entered the rooms to switch off the devices, Sam stopped him. If there were anyone in here, the fading noises would tell him or her that company had arrived. Sam suspected they weren't alone. This was suddenly feeling like a well-laid trap.

None of the compartments in the bunker were sealed. It took Sam a minute of concentration at one of the hand consoles to determine the safety switches had been overridden. That implied a traitor in the bunker had let the enemy in by the front door. Sam studied the information, trying to figure out what had happened.

“There should be a control booth, with a log of events.”

Sam was interested in how Baker had so much information about an area that even the Pruetts hadn't explored, but she didn't question him on it yet. She moved further down the hall.

The control room was on the first floor, in the center of the dimly lit bunker. Despite outward appearances that the complex might stretch for miles under the hillside, it wasn't that big. According to the map Sam found on the door, the bunker only had thirty compartments. That wasn't

so large by any standard. In comparison, the family home had twelve. Sam was glad the bunker was small. It would make exploring it easier, and also defending it, if they were attacked.

Sam scanned the map for areas she wanted to search. When she had her bearings straight, she walked deeper into the complex, tiring of the news clips.

“UN officials are reporting a large group of escaped men who claim to have been enslaved all of their lives. Investigators have entered the country in a large armada, but have not made contact with anyone on the mainland yet. This news agency assumes the UN is waiting for a ruler to be chosen so information can be exchanged in a meeting.”

Sam considered the little they knew about the Network’s dealings with the UN and determined the announcer was wrong. Either the armada had been given permission to enter the country or they’d broken international law based on the rebel male’s stories of horror. It didn’t matter which one to Sam, but it might to Candice. She wouldn’t like anyone interfering in the sovereignty of their country.

Sam quickly reached the evacuation chamber, as labeled on the map, heels clicking in a steady rhythm down the glittering floors that belonged in a palace and not a bunker. Sam had never seen such finery and doubted she ever would again. These relics would be placed in museums or melted down to provide multiple rations for thousands of

families. Greed would not be allowed in the new New America.

Sam wondered if slavery would be. With everything that had happened, she doubted Candice would free the males, but it was impossible to guess what her brilliant cousin would decide. Sam planned to agree with her, no matter how hard it was. Candice was the leader of their family. She would be honored as such.

At one point in their youth, Sam had been jealous of Candice. Older, stronger, and wilder, Sam had believed responsibility for their family should have been hers. She wasn't sure exactly when her impression had changed in that area, but she now thought it had been shortly after Candice returned from the complex after trying to rescue Daniel the first time. Though Candice had failed, she had shown more determination to rescue a loved one than Sam had seen from their family.

Forced to split up to keep the Network from recognizing their power, it was common for their family to go years without visiting each other. They had loyalty, but they didn't have emotional bonds. That hadn't been true of Candice. Over the years, she had proven she would do anything for her family, including bleed for them. It had earned Sam's respect. She would never cross Candice. If Candice decided men needed to remain in chains, that's what would happen.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Properly Honored

1

They entered the evacuation chamber and found it in pristine condition.

Melissa frowned. “Maybe they didn’t have time to use it?”

Sam pointed. There was a small path of sand leading to a cabinet behind the open door. There was also more sand leading into the open tunnel.

Sam went to the cabinet.

Behind her, the Runners got ready to fire, trusting her instincts.

Baker stayed out of the way.

Sam jerked the cabinet open.

A trembling man cowered in the bottom of the cabinet with bruised arms over his head. “Please don’t kill me!”

Sam holstered her gun. “Convince me that I shouldn’t.”

Felix glanced up at her in tearful terror. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Sam motioned the Runners to get the shaking man out of the cabinet. “What happened here?”

The man cringed away from the females, crawling toward Baker. “We were betrayed.” He

stood up and spat on the floor. “The western women let the rest of them in, but they didn’t have the passcodes. It could only have come from the boss.” The man glared at Sam. “I know who you are. I demand justice!”

Sam frowned at him as Baker made a rude gesture. “Why would I give that to you? You are the enemy. You’ve done Julian’s bidding your entire life.”

Felix recoiled from the name. “You can’t know that!”

“You’d be surprised.” Sam gestured at the monitors. “Why do you believe I should give you justice for the boss betraying an evil henchman?”

“My relative was Gerald Marsh, who spared women during the war. He also spoke in favor of a mutual existence. All he got for his trouble was hanged.”

Sam leaned against the wall, crossing her arms over her chest. “Tell me everything you know and I’ll consider your request.”

Felix began to spill his secrets.

Sam already knew most of them, but the family tie came as a shock. “That’s why he drew Candice in!”

Felix shook his head. “That’s why he drew all of you in. Julian’s captive heirs can’t procreate. He’s trying to find a way to make sure his part of the line survives.”

“What else?”

“This facility housed the elders of the past.”

Now he had Sam’s full attention. Funeral ceremonies were forbidden. All bodies were taken to a crematory and the ashes were then dumped into holes on their property. Mourning wasn’t encouraged and there were never stones or plaques like they read about in the old books. The funeral rites of the council had always been secret, though the populace had assumed they were given different options. Even the wealthy were cremated though, so no one had been sure. “Take me there.”

Felix hurried toward the door, eager to obey and save his life.

Sam knew what was expected in exchange, but the man had made a deal and she wasn’t going to change it.

“This is morbid.” Rosa turned toward the door. “I’ll be on duty outside.”

Sam wasn’t surprised. After what Rosa had been through, it was a wonder she was capable of performing her duties at all. Sam, on the other hand, didn’t find it morbid. In fact, as she entered the Cryo Room, she was impressed and felt as though the people had been properly honored for whatever sacrifices they had made toward the recovery of their country. If she hadn’t known how evil the Network was, and how they achieved their goals, she might have been fooled into thinking they were civilized. All she needed to do was consider the games to know that was an illusion.

Elite members had probably been shipped to stasis chambers, and promised that they too would receive such respect and admiration while waiting for technology to provide them immortality. It had given Julian an edge over everyone that had been unmatched.

Sam couldn't help being impressed. It was genius. The only thing she wondered was why Julian had felt the need to eliminate the people in this bunker. The Network had obviously been doing business this way for centuries. The west had been under control with deliveries of wagons that contained the supplies they couldn't make on their own, and fresh males. The east had been completely in control of the rest of the country. The only thing Sam could come up with was the elite members hadn't agreed it was time to implement the final part of the plan that would put men in control of the world. The reason she believed that was because most of the bodies in this bunker were male.

It appeared as though the power people had been having trouble with their own. That also meant Julian had a lot of children somewhere. Even though those males couldn't produce children, if Felix was to be believed, they were still in the line of succession and that would have to be dealt with.

The chambers were too frosted to make out features, but they lined the walls in a bizarre display of technology that made Sam's head hurt when she considered the lives of their citizens. None of them would believe stories about this place. It was too big

of a tall tale. They would have to see it and even then, they would be tempted to block it out like Sam was. The Network's experiments were extensive. It would take them years to go through everything and determine which programs needed to be stopped or expanded upon. Sam hoped Candice decided to get rid of it all. Nothing the Network had started should be finished.

Sam went to the first cryogenic pod and picked up a dusty folder from the rack in front of it. She took her time reading, trying to absorb all the details. When she finished, she activated the security log.

Sam tapped the computer file next. There was a single disk available. She chose it, not expecting much.

The small screen came to life. It went from static to a flashing warning that there was a two-day-old report waiting instead of a six-hour update.

"Someone will be in trouble for that." The missing security check coincided with the state of the bodies in the bunker. Sam rewound to the most recent file and then hit play. The scene that popped up immediately captivated her.

"Are you looking forward to stasis?"

The elderly man on the screen with the oxygen tube running through his nose bobbed. "It will be an honor to join our ancestors."

The man on the tank next to him snorted in clogged amusement. “You sound like your grandson.”

Sam hit stop. Before she listened to more of that conversation, she needed to figure out who these people were.

The ten men were all over the age of fifty, with four of them elderly and not in good shape. From the brief bit she’d allowed to play, Sam assumed those men were getting ready to go into cryostasis.

Sam studied the room around the men, putting off the uncomfortable niggles in her mind that said she knew at least two of them.

The screens behind the men were active and plentiful. It was obvious they were able to monitor the entire bunker from here. Sam saw males in other rooms, but only young ones being cared for by Den Mothers who should have been in the complex to help with the bachelors. Sam recognized two of them from her cousin and her sister’s episodes. It appeared as though the Den Mothers were cooking, cleaning, fetching, babysitting, and performing other menial tasks for the former members.

Sam wondered vaguely where the families resided and then continued with her observations.

There were no western women in any of the rooms, except for the brothel. Sam recognized them by their different clothing and by the fact that they were the oldest females on any of the screens. The western women were clad in animal skins that

implied they were more savage than their lavishly dressed counterparts in the room. Sam quickly scanned the cringing slaves and found convicted rebels and men who were too old to fight or breed. It was still better than what the west was used to, according to the rumors she had heard. Sam just felt sorry for the slaves.

Happy children playing caught Sam's attention again and she peered harder at the screen. All of the children were boys. *Dark haired and black-eyed...*

Sam shuddered. Either all of the children had the same father or all of the families had the same DNA. Sam believed the first one was the most likely. *Occam's razor*, she thought. It appeared as though Julian was trying to breed out the other members.

Uneasy feeling at a full boil, Sam hit play and observed the rest of the clip.

"Are you ready to eat now, sir?" One of the Den Mothers entered with a large tray carrying bowls. Her pink hair was in wild disarray.

The eldest man of the group, Flynn, glared at the woman. "You're interrupting!"

The Den Mother immediately bowed and began to retreat from the room. Flynn's displeasure was always painful, like his son's. He had passed on everything he knew about torturing women so that when his boy inherited his place on the council, he would know how to handle them. Pink had been around for all of that and knew what was coming.

“Let the bitch go.” Nathan stood, gesturing.
“Get out of here.”

The Den Mother vanished.

Flynn scowled at Nathan. “I wasn’t going to do it now.”

Nathan frowned back. “We have bigger problems. They didn’t send wagons or gifts this time. The western women are getting impatient. They also didn’t send bachelors. The ones we already have here are used up.”

“To hell with your food and whores!” Cramer shouted. “I want to know where Robert is! What has Julian done with my son?!”

Nathan turned an ugly glare on the man. “He’s busy taking care of rebels and the UN, not to mention a little side trip down family lane.”

Cramer’s face turned red. “You’ve been trying to eliminate us from the council for years! I don’t even know if that boy is mine!”

Nathan shrugged, cool tone dropping into place. “Then it shouldn’t matter to you if he’s dead or alive.”

The timbre was enough to put Cramer in his place. He slumped in the lavish chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

Sam had figured out who Julian’s family was. Her stomach was on fire as she stared at Nathan and Jonathan. One middle age and one elderly, they were both black haired, with dark eyes and intelligent expressions that warned an observant

person to leave them be. The younger generation who was inheriting leadership wasn't in the room. Sam found them on a monitor, being cared for by Den Mothers with purple, orange, and yellow hair. From the sneers the pink woman had gotten upon entering the power room, Sam assumed the men didn't like the colorful hair. She was curious as to why they allowed it here. She kept watching, digging for more clues.

"It is odd that your son, Juli, hasn't arrived yet." Alvin gloated. "The last communication implied we have a traitor here. Shouldn't he at least call to verify the problem has been resolved?"

"Yes! Now we are hearing rumors that the United Nations has proof we've allowed male slavery even after the world treaty was signed." Theodore was the next highest ranking member after Nathan.

"Julian's experiments have distracted him." Victor was right below Theodore in rank. He had little fear of death from the others. "The island of men is causing rumors. That location was supposed to be used for the work on immortality, not an army of changeling males. The rumors of a vaccine, combined with his other errors, have caused the population to rise up against us. We have to do something about it."

As the men contemplated and frowned at each other, Sam understood more than she wanted to. These former rulers supported male slavery because

of greed. They didn't have to share, and they could be as cruel as they wanted to be and the women were blamed. They were able to enjoy the games while working on immortality, and of course, they hated their citizens. There were many reasons for them to continue whatever grand plan had been put in motion by their ancestors. Sam suspected they only had sympathy when one of their own was affected and even then, it was a shallow worry. Cramer had already turned his attention to the buffet, appearing to forget about his missing son.

"At least our families are safe in the bunker under the Adelphia stadium." Bryce was hoping Brandon, his son, was there.

Nathan sighed. "You have to understand where Julian is coming from. He doesn't like it that we've been working toward a peace deal with the west or that we insisted he start releasing the vaccine to our country next year. The rest of the world has moved on and is recovering. Julian will never allow that here. He has to live up to the legacy of our great and terrible family."

"It's a shame to him that leaders before this have allowed male misery to sway them. We are more liberal than our parents, as are our children. Julian is not, because he's the spitting image of Lucas." Jonathan wheezed. "He will always try to match his ancestor's ghost."

"We need to find out when he's coming. I have a new girl I believe he'll enjoy torturing. Sasha is experienced in screaming." Victor flashed a fake

look of sympathy toward Nathan. "I'm sure this is a difficult decision for you. If you wish to recuse yourself, we will certainly understand."

Nathan gestured toward the man standing outside the door now, waiting to speak with them. "Felix is going to get in the way. He has a nasty sense of loyalty and duty that we won't be able to buy."

Victor shrugged. "Felix has gotten out of control with the torture. Everyone here knows there's really no traitor. Julian is just keeping us busy until he decides to show up."

"I'll have Sasha distract Felix as soon as Julian arrives." Victor was sure it would work. "She has a sister we can use for Julian."

Sam waited, expecting Nathan or Jonathan, Julian's relatives, to protest, but they didn't. It was obvious they agreed with the decision that had been made.

Sam suddenly understood. "It's all of the rebels in Julian's kingdom in one place. He sent all of them here to die. He knew they were going to try to kill him. He knew and they didn't see it coming."

Sam heard someone running down the hall. She quickly ejected a disk copy and slipped it into her pocket. There were eight other files on there that she wanted to watch.

"We're under attack!" Heather ran in. "We shut the door, but we can't lock it!"

Sam calmly walked toward the exit. "We're being taken into custody."

Felix scowled. "Custody? By who?"

Heather frowned. "The same people who trashed this place. We're going to fight, right?"

Sam fought the urge to draw her weapon. "Like I said, we're being taken into custody."

Baker had forgotten the Pruett's wanted to know how things were in the west. It was vital to the restructuring of the country once this war was finished; it forced him to stop a protest as Sam stepped outside.

Groaning again, Baker slipped a knife into his underwear and followed her out. Where Sam went, so did he.

As they emerged, Sam's group was glad she had chosen to surrender. The fifty aggressive, well-armed women waiting on horseback and bikes for them wouldn't have allowed much room for error, especially since half their crew had already been captured. They would be better off trying to escape rather than facing the women. It was obvious they were responsible for the destruction of the bunker.

"Sam Pruett!" The muscular woman in front of the riders held up a sheet of parchment. "You are under arrest for murder, treason, conspiracy, and the kidnapping of a council member."

Sam grinned. "Robert. He tasted yummy."

Runners smirked as the western woman continued.

"You will be taken before the West Coast Council for judgment of your crimes."

Sam calmly held up her hands. "I surrender."

The expressions of the fighters surrounding them became disappointed. They had obviously been hoping for another battle.

Milena, their leader, snorted in contempt. “Some Pruett you are.”

Sam grinned. *You have no idea. But you will.*

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Bachelor Town

1

“Tie them up.” Milena pointed. “Eliminate that male.”

Before Sam could interfere, one of the Defenders tossed her knife.

The blade sank into Felix’s neck.

Gurgling in horror, he slipped to his knees.

Sam glared at the woman giving the orders.

Milena glared back. “This isn’t the pampered east. We don’t make deals with the enemy and we complete our missions even if we don’t agree with them.”

It was obvious that the woman was making a dig about Sam’s family turning on the Network.

Sam didn’t argue. The woman wore the marks of a head Defender, but Sam was positive this wild child wasn’t in contention for a seat on their council. She was too uncontrolled. Sam’s knowledge of the west was limited, but she and her Runners had discovered several things that held true in every female they’d met over here. One was they were all equal in their hatred of men. The other was they didn’t like mutants. They believed it ruined the bloodline. But the most valuable thing she had

learned on runs in this territory was that all of the females were completely loyal to Marcella, the original founder of male slavery. To speak badly of that ancient icon was to ensure a death sentence. Because Sam and her family had always been stoic and slow to provoke, they had been able to travel through these areas without fear. Being a descendent of the infamous woman had certainly helped, but their icy behavior and legendary escape skills had often swayed people. The angry woman in front of her didn't possess any of the charm that Sam's family was known for. In fact, Sam wasn't even sure the girl would be a good fight. Her XO, a stocky woman with more blades visible than Sam carried on her entire person, was a different story. Sam grinned, hoping they got the chance to battle.

Baker stared at her. "What is it with you guys?"

Milena immediately gestured. "How dare you speak! Kill him!"

Sam stepped in front of Baker. "If you're supposed to bring me in alive, that won't help your cause."

Milena held up a hand, stopping the women who had begun to react to her order. "He is yours?"

"Baker is a free man. He holds his own papers."

Milena scowled. "That is not allowed."

"Baker is Wanted by your bosses." Sam hadn't wanted to give out that information, but it was obvious from the way the women were eyeing Baker what was going to happen if his ownership wasn't hashed out immediately. She would only be

able to kill so many of them before they got her. The odds weren't good.

Milena studied Baker. "It is easy for me to discover if you are telling the truth. Don't lie. Who are you?"

"Richard Baker."

"The leader of the rebels?"

Baker grinned. "The one and only, baby."

Milena gestured eagerly. "Secure him."

Sam motioned Baker to submit as the women tied his hands together and led him toward one of the horses. She had done the best she could to secure his safety, for now.

"These are your...Runners?"

Sam nodded again at Milena's snotty query.

Milena scanned them. "I will consider some of them for my crew if they switch loyalty and take a proving test. The rest will be put to work guarding the brothels."

Sam and her group didn't protest as they were bound. Sam's crew understood she wanted to be captured.

Sam was taken to a horse. Before the troops could lift her onto it, Sam leapt from a dead stop and took her place. Ignoring the surprise, she kicked the horse into motion and claimed the spot next to Milena.

When she stuck her nose in the air, Milena chuckled. "Acting like one of us does not make it true."

Sam didn't answer. She was busy observing everything about their hosts. She was positive survival would lie in the small details. Sam didn't see the hounds that usually accompanied troop treks into the Borderlands. She also didn't see radios or many guns. It led her to believe the west was living in a more primitive fashion. This theory was held up by the wagons following behind the horses. They had obviously been filled from the bunker, but most of the goods hadn't been taken. "When will we reach the council?"

"An hour."

That meant the complex was nearby. "What did Julian pay you for betraying everyone here? I assume this power meeting also held members from the west."

Milena pouted. "We didn't get as much as I wanted, but my mother makes the rules until I inherit leadership. We traded five wagons of supplies, twenty slaves, and a promise that he won't send the male changelings here."

Sam understood the west knew men were leading the council. They were in on it. "Does Julian have men on the council out here, too?"

Milena grew angry. "Males do not hold power in the west! We follow the teachings of our founder, unlike you!"

"And yet, you know the truth and did nothing."

"We also knew the men being freed would trigger the failsafe to turn them into changelings. We hate you for putting this newest war into

motion.” Milena kicked her horse and got ahead to avoid more talking.

Sam stored details. The women around her were staring, trying to place her with the rumors they’d heard of wild Pruetts attempting to free rebel men. No words were spoken, but Sam was clear from the exchanged glances that these women really did hate her for her moral line. The idea of free men was abhorrent to them. They were all her enemy. “What am I being arrested for, specifically?”

Milena jerked a hand toward the slaughter they were leaving. “You wiped out a lot of powerful families. There has to be payment.”

Sam grinned. “If I had done it, there wouldn’t have been a survivor.”

Melina flushed as guards snickered.

“Why did you do it?”

“Because I was told to.” Milena directed the wagon train. “Stay close. If you try to run, the troops will shoot you.”

Sam didn’t tell the snotty girl Pruetts didn’t run.

They rode for a few minutes before dusty shacks began to come up in the distance. While they were so far out, it was plain to see five roads coming straight down the middle of five fields. The fields appeared to stretch endlessly into the distance. As they got closer, they were able to see all of the fields were different, with familiar and strange plants mixed together. The only thing that was separate was the race of the workers.

Sam studied that, then confirmed her guess with a question. "What happens if someone crosses into the wrong area?"

"Killed on the spot by the first guard who can reach them." Milena gave Sam a challenging glare. "If you survive the punishments, I'll ask that you're put here for hard labor. Then maybe you can find out."

"You appear to have a personal problem with me."

Milena lifted her nose into the air. "You'll see."

Sam saw the family tattoo on Milena's neck. It was obvious she had flinched from the way the edges were blurred. "Do you have rebel males here?"

"A few. Most end up like that." Milena pointed.

Sam and her crew grimaced at the four hanging corpses. Sam assumed they would see more demonstrations like that the further they traveled. It was a warning. "We have more freedom in the east."

"You have decadence and greed in the east. We kill to serve our greater good."

"And what is that?"

Milena repeated the answer automatically. "Ensuring Marcella's vision lives forever."

Fanatic. Great. Sam didn't say that or let it show on her face.

The guards on the shacks noticed them coming, tensing in anticipation of a problem. When Milena led them toward the path where the white laborers

were toiling in the sun and dusty wind, the other troops relaxed.

Sam understood race separation was a strict thing here. She had never been this far into the west. She wasn't familiar with the customs, but she instantly disliked that one. All of the workers were scarred and apathetic, barely cringing from the electronic batons of the overseers strolling the fields to keep them laboring. "What do you do that makes them so lifeless?"

"We don't give them false hope. Our laborers are bred for exactly that. They live and die to serve the Network."

"How do you rise in rank here?"

"Only through birth."

"Council bastards?"

"You can make top Defender if you kill everyone else vying for the job, but you can't be on the council unless you're related."

Sam had many other questions, but she suspected she wouldn't get full answers from Milena. She stored them for later, for when she was talking to the boss.

2

The sight of Bachelor Town brought the convoy to a halt on the rise above the buildings. It wasn't a myth. It was right before their eyes, stinking and covered in dust, but it was here. Sam and her Runners had been listening to fabulous stories about

a town of men for their entire careers, but none of them had believed.

Milena and her escorts enjoyed the expressions of the new people.

Sam, along with the rest of her group, gawked in surprise. The hillside in front of them slipped down a narrow path and wound between the jagged cliffs, creating a clearing that was the center strip of a town with five streets. Set into treacherous red stone, were homes, businesses, and guard shacks. Inside many of these, and lingering on some balconies as if no shortage existed, were males.

Baker stared in resignation, instantly recognizing his own kind.

Sam's Runners filled the air with mutters.

"The bachelor city."

"They look empty."

"All of them are branded."

"We're drawing attention. Male in the middle."

Baker flinched at the hot bodies of the Runners who surrounded him on all sides, but he was glad of it.

Milena watched in jealousy as Sam's crew responded immediately to her order. Her own support never reacted so quickly.

The Runners compared sizes, weapons, and alertness of the town guards, not liking the results they were coming up with.

Baker felt Sam's rope go back around his wrist and didn't struggle.

Milena moved forward. "Let's go."

As they traveled, the Runners shifted positions to stay around Sam and Baker.

Milena expressed her disapproval. “He is in no danger from us. If he belongs to the council, he will not be harmed here.”

“Good to know.” Sam didn’t change her order however, or their positions.

The first buildings held women of multiple nationalities going about their daily activities. The second row sheltered the hounds and Defenders who watched their approach in suspicion. The last block had brothels. One on each corner, they were labeled by race instead of a name.

Sam made an ugly gesture that all of her Runners understood. If there was an opportunity, they were going to liberate this town.

The slaves didn’t react to the newest group of changelings coming in to use their services, but the women did. Their faces went slack with need at the sight of a fresh man.

“Head down, right now!” Sam glared at him. “And no talking. *Not one word.*”

Baker obeyed instantly, feeling the danger.

The security team continued to observe Sam and her group. They had heard stories of the rebel males, but the cringing slaves around them had prevented them from believing it. In fact, most of them were certain Sam had lied about Baker being Wanted. It was more probable that he was a crew tag. All the hard women on a team would share one

or two males while on runs, tagging them for their crew.

Milena suddenly hoped Baker was put into the brothels. He was well cared for, unlike the slaves here that she had already picked over.

The ride through the town was five minutes of hard acting for the Runners. They were appalled by the starving, broken men crammed into rotting plank-and-dirt shacks. They wanted to avenge these innocent males; it was a struggle to play the role, especially when they reached the center of town. A sign proclaimed it the amusement area, but the Runners didn't find it funny. Bound slaves were being tortured. Their screams demanded a vicious vengeance.

"This way." Milena gestured. "If you're lucky enough to be released, you'll be able to pick your vehicles up here at the maintenance bay."

The dusty western women drove the Pruett Mopars over to a drunken old woman with a baseball bat who was slouching in front of a small hut with wide double doors.

Sam took control. "How much?"

The old woman scanned her. "Who do you stand for?"

"Equality."

The woman spat nastily. "Double then, my goody-goody."

The old woman cackled at Sam's displeasure as she straddled a Mopar and roared into the structure set deep into the bottom of the cliff.

“This way.” Milena took them through a large stone gate connected to both sides of the cliffs. On top of the gate was a thick line of security with body armor and no obvious weaknesses.

The iron gates clanged shut behind them, but the Runners didn’t glance back. It was obvious their previous idea of locating rebels or convincing the city women to switch sides had been a lost cause from the start. These western people were much more brutal than their sisters in the east, as hard as that was to believe.

The haphazard shelters outside the gate mirrored the ones inside, but the number of males doubled. These were personal slaves of the residents, as well as block men—all branded for manual labor. The scars over their ankles and legs were only outnumbered by others on their shoulders.

As the Runners passed, a furious guard flipped her whip and took a layer of skin from the shoulder of a slave who was laboring over laundry. Blood welled.

The Runners turned their faces away. It made them appear to be exactly what they claimed, but rage was in the cool glaze over their eyes. Each of them knew it wouldn’t take much to be provoked. Their time around Baker’s rebels had changed them irrevocably. They would never revert to this cruelty; death was coming to all the women in this town.

The shelters gradually became nicer as they rode, showing the first signs of class separation.

Instead of clumsily pressed planks, the siding was clean and the windows were adorned with curtains instead of ragged sheets that hung from pegs. The slaves, however, appeared the same.

This second gate cranked shut behind them.

Baker was the one to break ranks as he looked back. He quickly rotated forward as Melissa delivered a curt glance of warning.

Milena stopped in front of a building that had one door and bars over the windows. “You’ll be called when they’re ready for you. Wait inside.”

Sam let her crew go in before joining them. She lingered in the doorway as the large escort of Defenders surrounded the building and began to dismount. Sam thought the horses looked just as abused as the men here. “Your mother leads the council?”

Milena grimaced, giving away her thoughts on that.

“Can she be bought?”

“No Pruett can.”

Sam was satisfied with the answer. Because she was dealing with people like herself, she didn’t bluff or lie. “When the country is restructured, all of you will be arrested. Surrender and receive mercy.”

Milena laughed scornfully. “We’ve told the east for decades that you wildcards needed to be eliminated. You’re a threat to all of us.”

Sam leered. “Agreed. The worst one is looking at you right now.”

Milena chortled again. “Good. Even my mother isn’t dumb enough to let *you* live. Your Runners may walk out of here, but you will not and neither will your tag.”

Sam didn’t respond.

The holding area was a large square room with two windows on either side of the door. There were no other exits or weak spots. The Runners took up places along the walls, noting the lack of furniture. The only things in the room were a small bath setup and signs on the walls being scoured away by the dusty conditions.

Sam stayed by the door, aware of the fact that it hadn’t been shut or locked. Milena’s entire squad had surrounded the building. They weren’t taking chances that she would escape.

In the distance, another storm was pushing closer. Raindrops were beginning to fall and clouds were gathering. As lightning flared, the Defenders outside advanced onto the porch, forcing Sam inside. When she shut the barrier with her boot, letting it slam, it was a relief.

“People in this town aren’t friendly.” They also weren’t loud and didn’t appear violent. In fact, Rosa thought they were terrified. Even the changeling women with their long claws and red orbs waiting in a line outside the brothels were remarkably subdued. She assumed leadership here was responsible for that. She wasn’t sure if she was revolted or impressed. Changelings had to be kept

under control or chaos always ensued, but this was extreme.

Sam settled by a window, putting her back against it to help muffle some of the sounds. In situations this dangerous, the Runners took a moment to make plans. If there wasn't time, they just followed their leader.

"They have the brothels sorted by race, too." Heather had been studying it from the moment they entered the crop fields. "It looks like only corresponding races can use each supply store."

That was another curiosity for most of them, but not for Sam. For her, it was a shame. Her ancestor had been a fanatic about bloodlines and gender. "After they take me out of here, it's likely security will relax. I'd like this town under our control before the sun sets tomorrow."

Rosa frowned. "You don't think we'll be taken in together?"

"No. That plane on the airstrip can only hold about six people, and they'll want me double guarded to keep me from hijacking it."

Everyone gathered around the windows to observe the small plane sitting by a ramp with stairs and two dusty guards.

When no one exited the plane, Sam marched back toward the door. "If you can't liberate it, destroy it." Sam opened the door before Milena could.

The girl frowned, retreating to allow Sam and Baker to exit.

Milena waved at the Runners. “My boss said you are all free to go. There are no charges against you. You can stay here for one night rent free. After that, you have to pay.”

Sam made a subtle gesture for Heather to shut the door.

Rosa studied the other Runners as it closed. Sam had given them orders. “I suggest we visit the brothels and get information.”

The women grinned and began cleaning up, eager for the release as well as the knowledge. They would do what Sam wanted, but there was no reason they couldn’t have a little fun too.

Sam was thinking the same thing as she walked away.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Problem Child

1

New Network City had been beautiful to look at. It had been designed to entertain and impress their guests. It had been a shining beacon in the distance that inspired people to dream of all the things that might be possible inside. Sam's first glimpse of the western complex was exactly the opposite.

Instead of a dome covered high rise, she was looking at a mountain fortress that would be nearly impossible to penetrate. Much like in Bachelor Town, nature had provided the foundation and walls. The light shining out of the side of that mountain indicated thousands of rooms.

The view from the plane was limited by darkness and rain, but Sam was able to spot a large population center around the fortress. There were hundreds of locals living at the base, like there had been in the east. Sam was sure if the weather was better and it was daylight, she would be able to see stores and brothels that mirrored where she had just come from. All the hope she'd held of the west being different finished dying as the plane dipped toward the ground.

The storm had fallen behind while they flew. Their pilot had used the drafts that came ahead of the storms to win that race, but as they began their descent, a sharp draft rattled the plane.

Baker yelped as the plane lurched sideways. The sound of the engines remained steady, but he wasn't comfortable with the way the vehicle shimmied in the wind. It was unsettling.

Sam's grin widened as the ride roughened.

Milena glared at the pilot. "Bring it down easy!"

She was on the bench across from Sam; her white-knuckle grip on the seat implied she wasn't enjoying the ride the same way. Sam couldn't resist needling the woman. "Are you sure you're a Pruett?"

Milena's growl was drowned out by a crack of thunder.

Sam chuckled.

"I'm going to buy him." Milena leered at Sam. "He'll be in my bed and you'll be in the stomach of a vulture."

Sam gave the woman a fighting wave.

Milena's nose rose into the air. "Council members don't perform in the games. We're not animals."

Following instinct, Sam searched for a sore spot. "But you're not a council member, are you? Your *mommy* is."

Infuriated, the woman lunged across the plane and tackled Sam.

Baker tried to stay out of the fight, but it was hard in the confined space.

The pilot ignored them, struggling to land the plane in the rough wind. She would normally have refused such a ride, but they'd doubled her fee for this pick up.

Sam slammed Milena's head into the side of the plane repeatedly, venting some of her frustration over how the males were being treated in Bachelor Town.

Milena now struggled to get out of Sam's iron grip. She was finally reduced to biting to get the wild woman off her.

Sam flung the woman away. "Coward!"

Milena stayed on her side of the plane, wiping away blood. "Bitch."

Sam was pleased with how their first encounter had gone. "And it gets worse from here."

The pilot chuckled. "Your *mommy* is going to want her."

Milena wiped blood from her cheek, dark eyes glinting dangerously. "She won't go against the east. Julian wants this one dead and we're going to give it to him."

The pilot shrugged. She knew better than to argue, but during her travels around the broken country, the pilot had only seen one family who always survived. That gene wasn't passed in every bloodline—evidence Milena—but in the Ohio Pruetts, the resistance gene was indomitable. Time after time, they came out on top.

The plane touched down on the damp concrete strip outside the mountain fortress, jarring everyone.

Baker held in another yelp as the plane shifted, sliding.

The pilot struggled to keep it level, hating the run. "I'm supposed to be in my cubby with a mug and a man. I don't like this shit!"

Milena and her team were used to the grumbling of the pilots. When they didn't complain, then there was a problem.

The landing strip ran in a half moon around one side of the fortress. In the wind and rain, not to mention the darkness, it required someone who was skilled and fearless. Their pilot brought the plane down directly in the center of the runway as if she had done it a thousand times. For all Sam knew, she had, but it was still impressive. She reached up and slapped the woman on the shoulder, not caring that it might interfere with the flight. "Nice job!"

The pilot gave her a nod of acknowledgment, but didn't break attention as they bounced along the runway strip and rolled toward the unloading ramp in front of the fortress.

As the plane rolled to a stop, a dozen Defenders rushed out of a nearby shed, followed by giant hounds with red eyes and bad attitudes.

Sam stepped in front of Baker.

Milena pushed them toward the castle, grimacing. She didn't like men and she didn't like

water. Other than that, she was fearless. *I am a Pruett. I'll prove it by slitting that bitch's throat.*

Sam felt the threat. She waited for the woman to gather the courage to strike her again. This time, Milena wouldn't survive the battle.

Before Milena could get herself killed, a Defender pulled Sam into the fortress.

Baker was relieved. He had also felt it coming. He had no doubts about Sam beating the pampered girl, but he didn't think killing her was a good way to start their meeting.

Sam tried not to be impressed or intimidated as she entered the fortress. She was led by one guard, with no one following behind Baker. That alone was intimidating considering they knew who she was. It was also a concern that there were only half a dozen guards in sight when they entered the complex and none of them rushed forward to provide security on her. These women weren't afraid of a Pruett. They also weren't afraid of Milena. They scanned her new injuries and smirked.

The entranceway to the fortress was like every castle Sam had seen in old books. It was a five story marvel carved into harsh, damp stone that was constantly being eroded by wind, salt, and rain. Sam was positive the other side of the castle had water damage. She could hear the waves, though she hadn't seen the ocean yet.

The entrance hall was a quarter mile of dark, harsh entrances and exits flanked by stairs that led to upper levels and storage compartments. There

were shelves and lanterns on the walls, but no electricity or devices to imply they had power here. Sam also doubted there was plumbing. She wasn't looking forward to using a pot. Around the large room, there were statues and memorials that Sam didn't have time to examine as Milena led her forward.

"They're all memorials to our founder." Milena liked explaining the reception hall. It was one of her favorite responsibilities as the daughter of their ruler.

The guards stared at Sam impassively, obviously not impressed. Sam was already tired of being looked at that way. *Before I leave, I'll make sure that changes.*

"There are four memorials. One is dedicated to the beginning of male slavery. Another is to Marcella's vision of there always being slavery. The third is to remind us of the sacrifices of the first females to die under Marcella's plans." Milena pointed to each one as they went by.

Sam caught sight of the fourth and grimaced. "Let me guess. That one is dedicated to the war."

Milena's shoulders straightened in pride. "Of course. We remember the events that gave us the gifts we have today. If not for the war, women would have never shaken off the chains of oppression and taken the steps to ensure their rule over the future of humanity."

Sam didn't comment. You couldn't argue with a fanatic. *You can only kill them.*

Sam and Baker were taken into a holding area and into a small cell with two cots and a wash bin.

Baker shuddered as the gate locked behind them.

Sam immediately went over to the cot and stretched out. It had been a long ride to reach the bunker. She was ready for a few minutes of peace and quiet so she could think.

Baker sat on the other cot, but he didn't believe he would be able to sleep. None of his memories of this type of captivity was good.

Milena turned away from the cell. "I'm going to let the council know we've arrived."

As Milena left, Baker looked at Sam.

Sam felt his concern, but this wasn't the time for comfort. "Remember who we are."

The guards thought she was talking to them and began sneering and throwing insults.

Baker also stiffened, but only in shame that he wasn't upholding the family honor. He forced himself to lay on the cot and mirror Sam's cold attitude.

2

Less than five minutes later, Milena came back through the door to the area. "Leave the male here. They want her."

Sam didn't look at Baker. "I'll find you."

He didn't protest as she left, but he felt her absence keenly. He had gotten used to being

protected by Sam and her Runners. Being alone sucked.

The troops stayed away from Baker as the two women left. Despite half of them being in changeling form, none of the women molested him. Until the council made their decision, he was off-limits.

Sam followed Milena to the main room without attacking her, but at some point, she and the girl would have another moment and the result would be even more satisfying.

The reception room was an incredibly wide chamber that appeared to be a natural formation in the mountain. In the center, carved steps led to a small dais where five thrones held the council. The rest of the space was a dim, thankless reminder of the location. Sam wondered if that was intentional. There were lanterns, with no carpets or curtains or anything that even resembled wealth. If not for the five women watching her entrance, Sam would have suspected she had been taken to the wrong place.

This was nothing like the plush surroundings the east had kept themselves in. This was the stark barrenness of a monastery and the five women sitting stiffly in the cold thrones were the ghosts of the past. Though Sam had never met these women, she immediately recognized one of them. The resemblance to their founding family member was uncanny. Sam connected her to the racial segregation of the brothels. The council was

keeping bloodlines pure. That theory was reinforced by the members themselves.

Five races were represented. In the center, on the tallest throne, was a white woman with glowing red orbs and long, sharp claws tapping soothingly on her armrest. To her right, was a Mexican woman and then an Asian. On her left, was an Indian and a black woman. Sam liked it that other races were represented. *If only you didn't support slavery!* That was the part of Marcella's manifesto that Sam had always had a problem with. She believed women could rule the world without having men in chains.

It took a while to reach the women because the room was so large. The uneven floor had obviously been left as it was found; it was patched in places. There were four other doorways that led from the chamber, along with a small window directly above the council. Sam didn't spot technology that was familiar. In fact, she didn't spot any technology at all.

Sam was able to see where there had once been more chairs. She counted five missing seats. Sam assumed those women had died, but she didn't know why they hadn't been replaced. Everyone had assumed the west mirrored the east, meaning there were always ten seats. That obviously wasn't the case here.

Sam was pushed in front of the five women without bonds or a guard other than Milena.

The western council were dressed in what Sam assumed was native of their origins. The colorful

outfits glared in sharp contrast to their ruler. The center woman was dressed in the severe black of a matronly fighter who was no longer in her prime. Wrinkles around her eyes and on her hands gave proof to that. She estimated Marcella had to be at least seventy. Her daughter, on the other hand, was under twenty and that was curious. Sam wondered how Marcella had ended up with a rebellious young girl, but this wasn't the time to ask. The other council women were younger than Marcella. Sam assumed they had larger families or more stable lines of succession.

The woman in the middle gestured. "Please state your name."

"Sam J. Pruett."

The council members exchanged glances, sizing her up to determine if she was lying.

"You are the sister of Angelica?"

Sam nodded. "Did you catch her game? She's awesome."

One of the women, the Indian, chuckled. "I am Keisha the 19th. It is an honest pleasure to meet you."

Despite the friendly words, Sam got the feeling the woman didn't mean it in the least.

The next woman in line continued the introductions. "I am Gia, the 20th."

Sam understood her theory of keeping the bloodlines pure had been an understatement. To achieve rulers for so many generations that still had

the same racial makeup meant there was no inbreeding allowed for leadership either.

“I am Nida, the 23rd.”

“I am Ivory, the 14th.”

The ruler waited for Sam to look at her expectantly. When she did, the woman flashed a familiar grin.

“Marcella, the 17th.”

Sam couldn’t stop the grimace. She hated that name. Marcella’s ruthless behavior after the war had started the family reputation, but Sam would have given it up to not be related to the woman who had started male slavery.

“Enough with the introductions!” Milena was standing on Sam’s right, waiting to be acknowledged for the capture.

Keisha gave her a patient smile. “Formalities must be observed.”

A lackey came over with a book and a knife.

Sam knew she was supposed to make a blood mark and didn’t protest.

While the technician took care of it, she scanned the council again. Every one of these women was intimidating. They had obviously earned their place on the council by violent means. She determined that by the way they were scarred. It wasn’t as heavily as herself, but it was still noticeable. All five women were fighters.

The clerk took the book and vanished down one of the dark tunnels.

Sam crossed her arms over her chest and took a comfortable stance, waiting for the leader to begin. She would start this meeting respectfully and adjust as necessary.

“Sam Pruett, you stand accused of treason, conspiracy, sedition, and murder. What is your defense?”

“I’ve always had problems with authority. My mother called me her problem child.”

Everyone on the council snickered except Marcella. She stopped tapping on the chair. “Since you have no defense, we will proceed immediately to judgment.”

“I’d like to make a statement, but it’s not a defense.”

Marcella waved a hand. “The accused has requested final words and been granted.”

Sam took a step toward the ruler and let her disgust come through. “You have disgraced yourself and you have disgraced your family! Justice will be served and you will be subjected to the full penalties.” Sam pointed at the other members. “I find all of you guilty and sentence you to death.”

Marcella laughed. “That’s exactly what I was going to say.” She gestured toward the guards. “Get her ready for the game.”

Sam didn’t struggle. All of this was a formality, like Keisha had stated. Julian had ordered her death and no amount of breath-wasting words would reverse her sentence. All she had done was speed

things along. She'd made that choice because she didn't like Baker being alone in the cell.

"Wait!" Milena stepped forward. "I want the male!"

Marcella glanced tolerantly at her rebellious daughter. "Use your personal account. The price is double the norm and is paid to the east. They own him."

Sam's blood boiled. She glanced over her shoulder to make eye contact with Milena. "Don't go to sleep. I'll be there when you wake up."

Milena didn't laugh as Sam was taken from the room. She could feel the genuine threat behind it. She didn't want to have to face Sam in a fight. The short moment between them on the plane had convinced her who would win.

Marcella and the council watched, waiting until they were alone to speak.

"It's almost a shame to lose her. Are we certain there's no chance of conversion?" Ivory was always on the lookout for new talent to add to their army.

Nida didn't like that. "If this had happened a year ago, I would have said yes, but you know as well as I do that once we bond with a slave, we change. She is already bonded to the rebel leader. That makes her a threat. She'll never uphold our values."

"I agree. Broadcast the game live and make sure you capture the moment she dies. Send the feed directly to Julian at the center." Marcella entered the other part of the chamber, where chairs that were

slightly more comfortable waited in front of a viewing screen. "I want her bleeding or all of you will be."

The members hurried to obey their leader's order. Marcella never repeated herself. She would kill someone before she had to do that.

"Milena. Stay behind for a minute."

The rest of the council didn't look at Milena as they shuffled by her. It was obvious from Marcella's tone that the girl was in trouble. All of the council agreed with whatever punishment was coming. Milena was Marcella's only daughter. She assumed that automatically gave her the right of inheritance, but her rebelliousness and thoughtless actions were the opposite of the requirements. To rule here, you had to be true to your roots.

Marcella waited until they were alone and the girl was at her side before she spoke. When she did, the ominous tone flowed like death. "That is the last time you embarrass me. You will no longer present yourself to the council. The next time you show emotion or speak out of turn, I will order your death."

Milena wasn't in control—exactly what was always getting her in trouble. "I can't believe you would say that to me. I'm your daughter!"

"Nothing is a given in our society."

"But you don't have other children. You have to leave it to someone."

Marcella pointed toward the door. "I would leave it to her before I gave it to you."

“You can’t mean that!” Milena took a threatening step closer to her mother. “I’m your blood!”

“We belong to Marcella.” The ruler didn’t scream, but her contempt slapped. “You’ve never really been one of us. Can’t you even try to pretend?”

“And you’ve never been my mother! Can’t you ever pretend?!”

The raised voice was yet another violation of the rules. Tiring of the disobedience, Marcella pinned her daughter with an evil glare. “If you step out of line again, even a little, I get the male and you get dumped in the shark tank.”

Milena opened her mouth to protest.

Marcella grabbed the girl by her throat and slammed her against the wall. “Go on! Say it!”

Milena struggled to breathe. Her mother’s iron grip was unexpected. Despite seeing the woman fight, Milena’s youth had allowed her to believe she could take her off guard at some point.

Marcella squeezed, wanting to finish the job. She was a changeling who enjoyed bringing pain to others, but she was also horribly disappointed in her offspring. Marcella spent most of her time trying to get pregnant so she could replace the willful child, but until she did, the girl was right. She had to have an heir or Marcella’s legacy would end with her.

Marcella shoved her daughter to the ground. “One word and I’ll finish it.”

Now put in her place, Milena crawled away from her mother's rage and then scurried toward the door with tears coming down her cheeks. "If I ever get the chance, *mother*, I'll return the favor!"

Marcella sighed. That was the first time Milena had ever felt like a real Pruett.

The leader went to the altar in the corner and knelt on knees that had thick scabs and scar tissue from all the praying she'd done over the years. She never missed the daily ritual. Neither had her parent. She'd learned the strict rules of life at her mother's knee while eight other siblings battled for attention. Marcella had always known her destiny, but unlike Milena, she'd embraced it eagerly. It was an honor to carry on the founder's legacy.

Marcella bowed her head and begged her idol for guidance on the future. A hard choice was coming, and she didn't want to do it.

Chapter Forty

Exiled into the West

1

“Come out here.”

Baker did as the guard demanded, encouraged by the male at her side. If he was left alone with the slaves here, there might be a chance to escape and help Sam.

Baker let them bind his wrists and lead him from the cell. They went down a long stone tunnel with windows that let him view the docks, armory, stock rooms, and more. There was obviously no need for secrecy here. The people were too scared to revolt or steal.

Baker was taken to a small room that he instantly recognized. He stopped, knees locking. “No.”

The male slave shoved on his arm. “Go on. It’ll be rough if you resist.”

When the guard reached for him, Baker reluctantly went to the table in the center, guts boiling and knees starting to shake. “What’s going on?”

The Defender slammed her fist into his kidney. “Shut up!”

The slave helped Baker onto the table, but there was no glance of sympathy. He'd clearly done this too many times to feel bad about it.

Baker was strapped to the table for the injection. He shut his lids as the needle sank into his arm. *Please, Sam. I need you.*

"Get him cleaned up and delivered." The Defender left.

The slaves bobbed in obedience and began stripping Baker now that he was secured to the table.

Baker forced himself to remain calm and think. *What would Sam do?*

Talk her way out and then kill them all. I can do that.

Baker scanned the weak men removing his filthy boots. *No, I can't, not alone.* "Where are the rebels?"

One of the male slaves finally answered, cutting away Baker's pants. "There are no rebellions here."

"How is that possible?"

"The west coast has a shortage of males."

"For a while, they were letting the snakes hunt and eat the men who escaped or tried to fight."

"And because you can only rent a male and not buy one, no families have popped up to breed new men. They are totally dependent on us for survival and we slaves know it."

"I don't understand."

"Even upon death, we pull out. Once in lust, the women can't stop us. We developed our own

defense. We refuse to give these evil women our children, to continue this life. We'd rather that humans died out. That's how *we* rebel."

Baker was surprised to find he didn't hate them for their weaknesses as much as for their acceptance of that being all they could do. He clamped his lips shut and forced himself to stop trying. They weren't going to help him. They wouldn't even help themselves.

"We suggest you do the same or you'll end up in the vulture nursery, too."

"Enjoy the show." The technician flipped on the view screen. A couple running through a jungle-like setting flashed up, filling the room with screams as the biracial couple fought together to kill the huge vulture. Their voices became louder to echo over the cheering audience and dying bird.

"We killed it!"

"We can do this! We killed a vulture!"

A horrible screaming noise echoed from the nursery, followed by the sound of wings—a lot of them.

"I think we only killed a baby!"

"Run!"

Baker tore his eyes away from the horror. Sam was going in there. "She's not coming out, is she?"

Neither of the slaves answered.

Stuck inside a tiny cell, Sam could feel the storm now raging outside the fortress. Thunder was rattling the building, causing dirt to shift in her cubby. There were no windows for her to see the bright glare of lightning, but she was positive it was still happening. Mother Nature was unhappy. The west put up with her tantrums regularly, according to stories. Sam had always assumed the low population on this side of the country was because of the storms, but it had all been an illusion to keep the east from merging with the west and discovering Marcella's methods of control. Even by eastern standards, Marcella was a huge tyrant. She was also a better ruler. That was obvious.

All the furnishings in this fortress appeared to be carved out of stone, though Sam had spotted a little wood. She wondered if that was out of necessity. She hadn't viewed many trees since they left the power bunker, leaving stone, dirt, and sand to build with. Stone benches and couches, along with stone light fixtures and tables, appeared to be proof that building medium had been hard to come by over the years. Sam wondered why they didn't import something from the east. A few comfortable chairs wouldn't have been harder than transporting males or supplies.

"Open the cell."

Sam resisted the urge to sit up at the voice.

A black robed woman came to the gate. Standing in regal glory and hatred, she was impressive. Sam couldn't deny the intimidation

wafting over, but she'd been in uglier places than this while trying to outrun her fate.

Marcella was the exact opposite of her daughter. She had long gray and black hair running to her waist in thick waves that weren't confined in any way and yet conformed to the curve of her spine as she walked. The cowl had an open front, allowing Sam to see black eyes and pale skin that had been abused for decades. It was almost like looking at her mother or her aunt Mary. The family resemblance was striking.

Marcella's daughter, on the other hand, could have mirrored this generation of wild Pruetts with her short spikes and tattoos. But for her loud attitude and reckless nature, she also would have upheld the family gene. Unlike her mother, Milena preferred a half top and a long wavy skirt in a silken thread that Sam was positive Marcella disapproved of. It was obvious the girl was flaunting her position of authority, against her mother's wishes. Sam wondered what the punishment for that had been. Clearly, it hadn't been too harsh or the girl would have changed.

When Sam only stared without reacting, Marcella motioned for her cell to be opened.

Her flunkey hurried to obey.

Sam noticed the private guard didn't appear to be a fighter. She wondered what Marcella used such a timid person for.

Marcella filled the doorway, making it clear that Sam would have to fight her to get by. “She’s my death warder.”

“Tastes your food, walks in front of you. That sort of thing?”

Marcella nodded.

Sam shrugged. “I can see why the east coast wanted you gone. You’re too careful. You might have challenged them at some point.”

Marcella nodded. “Pruett intelligence and bravery are rare for there being so many of us.”

Sam thought of the weak links in her branch and grunted. She wasn’t going to argue a point she couldn’t make. Of all the family she’d spent time around during her travels, Sam could only stand two of them—Candice and Angelica. Even her parents were tolerated. In fact, they were the reason she’d left home so young. Watching her father forced to live as a slave had been crushing.

Marcella lifted a brow. “Nostalgic? Many players get that way as they face their judgement.”

“I’m not a player.”

“Convicted criminal, then.”

“I’m not that either.” Sam sat up, not caring if her movement triggered a guard. She met Marcella’s frowning gaze. “I’m a subject of the east coast, which I now rule if all of them are dead. Shelly left her seat to me.”

Marcella’s gasp echoed through the chamber.

Sam yawned.

“Why didn’t you say this at the trial?”

“You didn’t ask and I don’t know how your court system works.”

“You were going to use your thirty seconds to reveal this?”

“Nope.”

Marcella frowned, uneasiness rising. “Why not? It may have stopped your game.”

“I don’t want it stopped.” Sam flashed an eager grin to show what was under the cool control. “I signed up for the bachelor Battles.”

Marcella’s lips twitched. She hadn’t smiled in years. “The dome fell before you arrived.”

“Exactly.” Excitement laced Sam’s words. “Are your birds really harder?”

Marcella nodded. “No one survives the nursery. Those overfed vultures you have in the east can’t compare to the beasts we breed here for the games.”

“Awesome.”

Marcella laughed.

It drew the guards closer to listen.

Sam smiled a bit herself. Marcella’s amusement was pretty, unlike her.

Marcella studied her distant relative, clever mind formulating plans.

Sam felt it. “Before I became a council member, I was a bounty hunter. My Runners helped conquer that dome.”

“You can be bought.”

Sam’s tone sharpened. “I can be hired.”

“Ah.” Marcella added it up quickly. “Did they send you here to kill me?”

Sam grinned.

Marcella forced herself to remain in the doorway, where she was an easy target.

The troops behind her called for support.

“Why haven’t you tried yet?”

“I think I can make a better deal.”

“Trading up is a sign of greed and untrustworthiness.”

“So is considering replacing your daughter with a convicted criminal.”

Marcella stared in approval.

Sam lifted a brow. “What’s the offer?”

“What’s the rush?”

Sam pointed toward the guards. “I’m scheduled for a game.”

Marcella came into the tiny cell and sat across from Sam on the narrow ledge. “I’m going to ask a question. If you give me the right answer, I’ll pardon you. After you run the nursery.” Marcella gave her a warning glance. “Sometimes the techs can’t get to a player in time.”

“I don’t need a net, ringmaster.”

Marcella almost laughed again. “You are wild and well educated. How is that possible?”

“My cousin Candice insisted we learned.” Sam’s tone warmed. “She’ll be the leader of the council when we restructure. She’s like you.”

“And that brings us to the question.” Marcella pinned her with eyes that peered into the soul. “Will you release the males from slavery?”

Sam sighed, not needing to lie or hide her emotions. “No.”

Marcella scowled. “We have chemicals to make you tell the truth.”

“Pruetts don’t lie!”

Marcella stopped herself from recoiling at the shout as troops flooded toward them.

Sam controlled the rage. “Can we do this after the game?”

“You really do need it.” Marcella frowned. “And yet you have a willing male to ease your pain.”

“He’s not willing.”

Marcella made a rude gesture.

Sam sighed. “Okay, so I’m not willing.”

“Burn out?”

“Yes. Our branch goes into it almost immediately upon finding a satisfying mate.”

“My daughter needs that so she won’t be so reckless.”

“She’ll always be reckless.” Sam regarded the woman curiously. “How did you end up with her? She feels like a child born in hopes that it wasn’t too late.”

“That’s exactly what Milena is.” Marcella admitted it without shame or scorn. “I’ve had nine children. The one male is in the brothel and earns me top price daily. The other seven daughters died thirty years ago.”

“At the last power handoff?”

“Yes. Our relationship with our brothers in the east has never been peaceful.”

“Why haven’t you eliminated them like they’re trying to do to you?”

“Marcella’s Manifesto.”

Sam shrugged. “I haven’t read it. There are no copies in the east that I know of.”

“One was stolen from us a decade ago. It was the original.”

“If it turns up, I’ll see that it’s returned.”

Marcella nodded her gratitude. “Our family formed the Network. The manifesto tells how they always voted down gender lines and there were always five of each. Neither side could win.”

“So they split off. But by then, male slavery was established, so the eastern men couldn’t just take over.”

“No. They had to have dupes.”

Sam considered. “Why do you think Marcella consented to it? Why didn’t she slaughter them?”

“Because she wasn’t on the council and couldn’t reach them. The other senior members of the family determined she was unstable. She was exiled into the west after trying to assassinate those same people.”

“So when they split, the women came to her.”

“Yes, but she didn’t want them. They’d betrayed her and she had already begun gathering sisters who believed in the cause.”

“She had to take them or the east would attack?”

Marcella nodded, once again impressed by how fast Sam was adding up the story. “They forced Marcella to create the west coast government. Those five women and their families were given hereditary rights to the seats.”

Sam could imagine their founder’s fury.

“Would you care to guess? You’ve done well so far.”

Sam pulled up the beginning of their conversation, then determined the answer on how she would have reacted if she’d been their founder. “The power exchange laws.”

Marcella wanted to clap. “Excellent.” Her own descendants weren’t as sharp. She was enjoying the moment. It was like seeing her idol’s vision embodied in the flesh. “The east handpicked all ten seats on their council and they made deals through their five reps here. We had wagons of men and supplies coming in to help curry favor. When the vote came, seven of our ten females voted to allow a free-for-all once every thirty years.”

Sam chuckled. “She bought off the men. The council wanted control of the nukes and she threatened to send them the way they were intended.”

“Yes. The laws changed and now, we kill each other’s children every three decades in hopes of eliminating one of those original families from the founding table.”

“I assume you got rid of one by wiping out the power people at the bunker?”

“Of course. Five of us betrayed the sixth.”

“You can’t replace seats until only one remains?”

“Our founder wanted to be sure the east couldn’t repeat the demand. When only one family remains, we have complete control and can pick all of the seats.”

“And five of you are left.”

“It will be four as soon as I die. My daughter will not survive.”

“I would.” Sam slowly reached into her pocket and came up with a Pruett token. “I won’t swear loyalty to the old ways, but I will give my word to make sure the founding line survives and receives control over the west—like she wanted.”

“Marcella wanted control over the entire country.”

Sam shrugged. “We’ll basically have that. I won’t let deals like previous ones be made and neither will my cousin or sister.”

“You’re much like I believe the founding females were, but you have a dreadful need to spread equality. That makes me hesitate. At some point, you *will* let men be freed.”

Sam played with the token, aware that it didn’t mean anything to the woman. That didn’t matter because it meant something to her. “Yes. I refuse to lie. I want the men free.”

“But...?”

“But even if we could control the male changelings—And we can’t. They’ll be bigger and

stronger—I don't think those men are ready for freedom. They'll need to be transitioned and that will take a long time." Sam sighed again, forced to give more than she wanted to in order to seal this deal. "And maybe that could be stretched into a hundred years. By then, we can find common ground to prevent the problems of the past."

Marcella shook her head, frowning. "After centuries of slavery that won't happen. We will have a new war with the changeling males. It is inevitable."

"Maybe not. Baker has a lot of sway over the rebels, and we've earned their trust and respect by rescuing them, defending them. They'll be with us."

"And when the brothel owners clamor for new males and you have to meet the demand? Or when the breeding programs run low and the locals start to rebel?"

"We'll quell it."

"No. You'll give them males to keep the peace and their fathers will rise up. Or you'll deny them access to any males and the women will rise up. The peace you seek cannot be attained."

Sam grunted. "I wish Candice was here. I know she has answers to this."

"Your cousin is dying in an eastern training center."

Sam smiled. "I knew she didn't go down with the dome!"

"You weren't sure."

Sam frowned. "Pruetts can die like anyone else."

"So true." Marcella studied Sam. "What happens if the males rise up?"

"War. We'll lose... Unless we do it before they can recover their numbers."

"If you can find a path to peace, that will not stop our deal. I've buried enough children to recognize the foolishness in some of the severity we exist with. However, I will never be a party to a future where the men can rise up against us and win. I would rather both genders died out and left this miserable earth to the animals."

Sam understood that. "We'll need a test of loyalty and honor... And it'll need to be repeated with every child born."

"With the boys."

"No. That was a mistake of the first council. Neither gender is flawless and neither is evil. I want *all* children tested for disloyalty."

Marcella waved a hand. "That is not key either. As long as you verify the intentions of the men, I can agree."

Sam pushed the conversation back to the deal she was about to be offered. "You believe she's going to kill you."

"I know she is. I just don't know when."

"Doesn't she realize the others will slaughter her to have one more seat eliminated?"

"She believes they'll follow her because they won't have my rigid rules."

Sam snorted. “She won’t make it through her first night.”

“No. I doubt she’d make it through her coronation. Milena is the last of stilted genetics too old and radiated to produce offspring. I’ve tried several times since, but she was the remainder of my youth.”

“I could remove her for you...”

Marcella had learned enough to be satisfied with Sam’s character. “She plans to mate your male as you go into the game.”

Sam’s orbs flickered red. “Does she?”

Marcella stood up, hand out. “I accept your token of trust.”

Sam placed it into the woman’s wrinkled hand, proper answer falling like blood. “It’s my honor. It can’t be broken.”

Marcella left, motioning to the shocked guards. “Get her ready for her game and then go about your duties. If this leaks, all of you will die before I do.”

The troops were timid creatures with no thought of rebelling. Sam doubted they would even discuss the conversation among themselves. Her impression that the east was more severe had been a horrible underestimation.

Left alone, Sam wondered how she was going to keep her word and still uphold her own honor. As wrong as it was, she almost liked Marcella. That would make it hard to kill her. The woman’s daughter, on the other hand, was about to hurt the man Sam loved. That couldn’t be allowed and it

trumped any deal or greater good choice. She wouldn't sacrifice Baker for these people.

Can I trust him to react the same? Would he sacrifice his life or his principles for me?

Sam ignored the evil doubts that Marcella had planted. There would be time for tests of loyalty later. First, she had to fight a nursery of vultures, escape the paddock, rescue Baker, and kill the west coast council. *No sweat.*

3

Milena sneered as her mother entered the viewing area. "Did you enjoy your visit with the wild Pruett?"

"It was enlightening."

Milena scowled. She'd rarely been able to push Marcella into true rage. Their brief moment earlier was nothing new between them, but her mother had never drawn blood. *I'll have that honor.*

The animosity between them wasn't new for the other people in the sparse viewing room either. They'd existed this way for a long time.

The viewing area was the one place Marcella allowed any material enjoyment. Small rugs were on the floor for people to sit and there were mugs that held a hot drink to ward off the damp chill in the air from being so close to the ocean. She also allowed a second lantern, but that was the end of her concessions.

Marcella took her place in the center seat, trying not to feel ashamed when the other children sat by their parent. There were a dozen in some rows.

Milena also sat in her place. She was the only one and it stung, but it was also how she wanted things. If her mother had managed to squeeze out another pup, Milena would kill it before it was weaned.

In the front of the chamber, big view screens were being turned on by males who limped and kept their chins down. Marcella found it soothing. She also found it boring. She wondered if Sam's mate would be fun to ride. Her current toys certainly weren't.

Marcella frowned as a new thought occurred. She looked at her daughter. "I thought you were claiming her male?"

Milena flushed. "He's drugged and getting ready. I ordered a screen turned on so he can watch his owner die."

Marcella sighed in disappointment. "She scared you."

"I'm not scared!"

Marcella turned back toward the screen. "You could have already claimed him and been back. She scared you."

Milena started to get up, challenged to defend her bravery.

"Sit and shut up or I'll tell the others here to throw you out the window."

Milena paused. "They'd throw you out, too!"

Marcella shrugged.

Milena was forced to drop into the seat. Her mother didn't bluff. It was why she had control over the council despite only having one heir. Marcella was hard to kill.

The other women had tensed, scenting blood. They now sat back in disappointment. During this power exchange time, anyone could be killed without punishments or fines—even their leader.

Marcella knew what they were thinking. Isolated and alone, she lifted her chin. "I'm the last true Pruett in the western bloodline. As soon as you kill me, the east will lay claim. None of you have the right to challenge them. You're not me."

Order restored, the women turned their attention to the screens as Milena sulked and Marcella breathed a mental sigh of relief. That excuse wasn't going to succeed next time. She was surprised it had now. If Milena had been smarter, she would have challenged for leadership in front of the others and bought them off to help kill her mother.

Sam would have thought of it. Marcella replayed their conversation as the interview segment started. *She's my kind.*

Chapter Forty-One

What Will You Give?

Training Center

1

“**S**amantha J. Pruett has been found guilty of treason against both the eastern and western Networks. Her sentence is about to be carried out.”

Everyone in the training center holding cell rotated toward the view screen where the news had interrupted replays of the Bachelor Battles.

“Sam has been stripped, outfitted for a run in the nursery, and will now have an interview. Stand by as we enter the sealed cells for this. As you know, the controllers will not open a game even if we reporters are attacked, but we’ve heard this branch of the family can be trusted.”

“Branch of the family?” Mary glowered toward the glass door.

No one answered as Sam appeared on the screen.

The reporter stayed back from Sam and made sure her voice carried. “Sam? Can we have a minute of your remaining time?”

“Why not? No one else here will talk to me.”

Drawn against her will, Mary gravitated toward a seat. The others were already in front of the screen.

“How did she get in the west?” Bobby was confused. “She was on her way to New Network City.”

Chester frowned. “Be quiet so we can listen.”

“Sam, your trial was short and you didn’t defend your actions. Are you sorry now?”

“No. The citizens here have forgotten what Pruetts stand for. I haven’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“The power exchanges are a tool the east coast has been using to control you.”

“Um, that sounds like classified information, so let’s talk about the charges instead. Did you really help a group of rebel males escape the country? Trafficking men is a serious charge.”

“I did. There were hundreds of them.”

“Hundreds?” The reporter swallowed saliva. “What was that like?”

“She’s keeping them busy.” Bruce hoped Mary would confirm his theory. He liked Sam and didn’t want to see her die.

“Maybe.” But Mary didn’t think so. It felt like Sam was building up to something.

“Torture. I couldn’t touch them.”

“Why not?”

“They were immune and free.”

The reporter gasped. “Immune? Free?”

“Yes. The eastern population of men has recovered.”

“Cut!”

Sam’s wide grin was the last image on the screen. It switched to static.

Bobby stood up. “What do we do now?”

“We get out of here and help Candice conquer this bunker and island.”

“How?”

Bruce pointed to the tunnel Julian had taken. “We wait for Candice’s sign.”

“I don’t think we can do that.” Daniel reluctantly stood up. “She’s hurt. She has been since she was stabbed. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s in the medical bay and needs us to rescue her.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

Daniel’s voice caught as he looked at Bruce. “She made me promise not to interfere, even if the baby died. I gave her my word.”

“Died?”

“Baby?”

Chaos erupted.

2

“We got the bullets out and stitched up a myriad of injuries.”

“But?” Julian glared at his medic.

“She’s paralyzed in one leg...”

“And?”

“She’s pregnant.” The doctor’s voice lowered. “It doesn’t look good for her or the baby. Her previous injury is too bad.”

Julian was berating himself for testing her without giving her the physical exam that the other players had undergone first. He was also furious that his plan for offspring would have to wait. As much as he wanted to order the pregnancy terminated, Julian wanted her baby. The tests he would be able to do on her child would be almost as important as those from their offspring together would be after she healed. “If she dies, so do you!”

“I’m already doing everything I can for her, but she needs rest and time without stress. She can’t get that here.”

“Join the club.” Julian scanned the screens on the wall. He didn’t care about Sam’s game in the west, but the changelings outside still destroying property in their attempts to breach the facility were a large concern. If they got in here, he was a dead man no matter what else happened. Angelica was determined to taste his blood. He could feel it.

3

“He’s watching.” Angelica turned toward the camera, covered in blood from fighting the few guards who didn’t want to believe they’d been

fooled, and from the security traps that she'd been triggering.

"We're picking up a broadcast!" Claudette was in the corner that she and the UN troops were defending.

Angelica thought the woman sounded thrilled to be in the thick of the action. Her amusement faded as she observed the broadcast.

When it cut off, she growled and spun toward the door where the camera was mounted. It had taken several hits so far, but the bars around it had held.

Angelica stopped below the camera and began pulling items from her pocket. She'd delayed this choice in hopes her relatives inside would have time to do whatever they needed to, but Sam was in trouble and Angelica couldn't help her until this situation was resolved. "Time to heat things up."

"What is she doing?" Julian leaned toward the monitor. Angelica was assembling something familiar... "She stole that from me! No one is supposed to have one but me!" It was the one thing that could cost him this game.

"Stop!" He slammed his hand over the radio console. "Stop that!"

Angelica laughed at the panicked order. "What will you give me?"

The din faded as guards quieted to listen. Julian had just shown a weakness.

The other troops froze at the male voice, unable to deny the truth any longer.

“What is it?”

Jason motioned the boy to be quiet. He and his son were huddled behind the UN troops, terrified and excited at the same time.

“Your life! Get out of here!”

Angelica kept working, lips curved in a mocking smile.

“Stop her!”

None of the guards on the landing answered Julian’s demand. Many of them shouted insults and made ugly gestures.

Angelica’s hands didn’t stop laboring on the EMP bomb. It was one of three that she and her family had managed to steal from stocks over twenty years. They were strictly regulated. Mary had claimed they’d used them on runs and then employed their homemade copies to manage the damage. The Network bombs were much more powerful.

“I’m not coming down there.”

Angelica didn’t respond. She was waiting to hear the hiss of the door. As soon as it opened, she planned to cover Jason and the boy with her body and wait for the changelings to stream into the center to do the work.

“What do you want? Your family? I’ll send them out!”

Angelica was almost finished. “I came for you, sweetheart. You’ll be top bitch in my post-rebellion stable.”

Julian’s screams were ugly, but they didn’t stop Angelica from sliding the last piece into the bomb and placing the magnetic side against the barrier.

“I’ll kill them all!”

“Better make it fast. I’m coming in right now. So is everyone else.” Angelica hit the button and then stepped back even though there wouldn’t be an explosion that sent out shrapnel. This weapon used a pulse of energy to short circuit any electronics in range.

Pop! Buzz.

The alarm disengaged as power went out across the center.

Angelica hurried forward to shove her blade into the crack to pry, hoping the blade didn’t break before she could get enough space to fit her fingers.

The door shifted, opening; she shoved her changeling claws in.

“Look at all the boats!”

Distracted, she turned, expecting to see the fishmongers.

She did, but that wasn’t what everyone else was staring at. Boats were coming from the rear of the island—boats of men in Network guard uniforms.

The male troops didn’t look like their female counterparts. It was obvious from their pale skin that they weren’t allowed to go outside and risk exposure to the guards in front of the island.

Angelica watched the men flee, wondering how many of them would die during their attempt. Then she turned around and got back to work on the door.

4

“Something’s happening.” Daniel was still by the glass door of their cell. “Troops are running.”

“Toward?”

“Away.”

The others came to the door to observe.

Guards ran by the glass without a glance at them, panicked.

Mary signaled her crew into fighting formation. “Remember your lessons; watch out for the kids and rookies.”

Bobby went into the center with the kids, red cheeked. He was the only rookie here. Daniel had proven himself repeatedly.

Daniel stayed by Mary. “As soon as the door opens, I’m going to find Candy. Can you clear me a path?”

Mary smiled, patting his arm. “We’re going together.”

“*He’ll* be there.” Bruce was scared of Julian.

Mary grunted, feeling like her old self. “Good. Whoever brings me his head can have my art collection.”

A buzzer sounded.

The lights went out.

The view screen snapped off.

The air system shut down.

Bruce quickly dug out a light and flipped it on.

“Was that one of ours?”

“I believe so. Bring the light over here.”

“It’s Angelica!”

Angelica walked through the tunnel toward them with a familiar grin. She immediately began to work on their door.

Mary added another warning. “The others don’t know our males are not in Julian’s army. Protection formation.”

Behind Angelica, male guards were fleeing from changeling women now streaming into the center. Some of the men were in changed form, but it was obvious they hadn’t fought anyone before.

Angelica came inside and started to secure the door until they were ready to go out.

Mary helped her.

Screams and shouts echoed through the center as the changelings overwhelmed the complex. Many of the males were struck down on sight by furious women who understood the council had betrayed them and their relatives through the history of Network control. Rage like that could only be settled in one way. Slaughters and rapes took place side-by-side while the Pruetts discussed what to do next from the safety of their cell.

“Are you positive about her injury?”

Daniel nodded. “She was bleeding again when we set sail.”

Mary paled, but no one could see it in the darkness. She was glad.

Daniel looked at Chester. "If anything happens to me, I want *you* to have my kids."

Daniel's revelation stunned the women.

Chester nodded quickly, also surprised but impressed with the courage that choice had taken.

The females were worried. It was a sign that Daniel might still side with the men, but there was no time to deal with it right now. Mary signaled three people along.

The family was confronted as they exited.

"We want those males!"

"Open the door!"

Mary didn't waste time trying to explain what would have to be repeated hundreds of times and still wouldn't satisfy. She drew her gun.

Around her, the others did the same.

Gunfire filled the hall.

The dark bunker was full of awful noises. Most of it was caused by the female changelings, but the men who managed to get the advantage over a woman were just as triumphant. Angelica and Mary tried to cover their group as more fights filled the halls around them, but it was hard in the dark. Only their familiar formation allowed them to keep track of each other.

As they got through the first wave of changelings who were determined to get into the holding cell to their men, a new group came from the opposite tunnel.

“Incoming!”

Before the angry guards could charge toward them, the main door of the center exploded. Screams and debris flew through the air as the entrance was cleared.

Another group of changelings from outside rushed in.

The Pruetts lifted reloaded weapons.

Angelica recognized them. “Hold your fire!”

Claudette hurried over to Angelica, delivering Jason and his son. “It’s safer in here.”

Jason grinned at Angelica. “The fishmongers showed up. Males are coming around the rear of the island. They’re not making it very far.”

Angelica was glad of the help. When this was over, the angry women here might turn on them as well. Bloodlust often worked that way. “We need to find Candice.”

Claudette and her group of troops took up posts in front of the family cell. “We’ll cover things here. Go get your girl.”

Mary led the way down the hall, trying to pick the right direction. “We need to locate one of the technicians or male guards.”

Daniel didn’t see any workers. “I think all of them are gone.”

Mary pointed at a security office. “The control men didn’t have time to get out. They have to be hiding in there.”

The family went that way.

Mary pounded on the door. "I want to reach the medical bay. If you tell me where it is, you'll be protected. I'm Mary Pruett. I always keep my word."

There was a shuffling noise from the right. Everyone turned to see two terrified males come from under a desk.

"There's a map on the wall by your hand."

Mary pointed as the door opened. "Go to the holding cell with the rest of our men. You'll be safe there." Using her changeling eyes, Mary memorized the route on the map, then led the way back into the dark danger of the training center.

Bodies and damage greeted their passage in every tunnel they traversed. It was obvious from the setup that Julian was organized, but he hadn't counted on Angelica finding a way to get into his bunker.

"Two blocks down here." Mary pointed. "It looks like there are three guards stationed outside the bay and two more inside."

They advanced silently down the hall toward the bay, but the screams and shouts from everyone else would have covered any noise they made.

Bruce pointed. "I don't think he has his guards anymore."

Pieces of Julian's clothing were on the floor outside the medical bay door, along with blood smeared over the handle. It was obvious he'd had to fight his way in.

The windows were dark, but all the changelings saw Julian's big body on the other side.

"Stay back!" Julian retreated into the cubicle with Candice as Angelica and her crew entered the bay and locked the door with a blade in the hinge.

Julian secured the hand lock on the cubicle, hand trembling.

The medical bay was set up identical to the larger one in the complex in New Network City. Candice was in the center bed, surrounded by empty beds while tubes and wires ran in and out of her body to machines that beeped and relayed numbers. She wasn't on a breathing machine, but she was being fed by IV because she hadn't regained consciousness yet.

"Come out here!"

Julian lifted the knife in his other hand. "I'll kill her if you let that girl in here!" Julian had always known who would come for him in the end.

Angelica was almost drooling as she pressed her face against the glass and bared her teeth. "I want to taste his blood."

Mary saw a male technician hiding in the corner and dragged him over to the control panel. "Open the door."

As the technician obeyed, Julian pressed his knife against Candice's throat. "If you come in here, I'll kill her!"

Daniel gestured. "He's bluffing. If he kills her, Angel will rip his throat out with her teeth."

Angelica's anger flared hotter at the name. She snapped her teeth at Julian through the glass.

Daniel glared at Julian as the door to the cubicle opened. "Surrender or she comes in first."

"You'll kill me as soon as I give up."

Daniel realized there was only one way to end this. "As a Pruett, I promise you'll be taken care of." Daniel ignored the protests of the others as he bargained with Julian.

Julian relaxed. When a Pruett gave their word on something, it happened. He let go of the knife. "I give up."

Daniel rushed to Candice as the family secured Julian.

Screams echoed outside the medical bay as males were caught by lustful changelings coated in blood. Candice's family wanted to help the males, but if they did, they would be risking their own. They were forced to remain behind the glass barrier as Julian's males were given their first lesson in the art of war with women who had been battling their entire lives. The men didn't stand a chance.

"I'll be safe with you." Julian was also terrified of the mob of angry females now gathering outside the medical bay. "I know you won't let them take me."

"Daniel." Candice was barely conscious.

He had to lean in to catch her whisper.

Everyone waiting for her choice.

Daniel straightened up. He went over to Julian. "What is your death date?"

“Why should I tell you?”

Daniel stepped forward. “Because you’re scared to die. You brought us here to help stop that. Let me try.”

Julian stared at Daniel, eyes begging him to be trustworthy because he was a man. “The male variation wears off without follow-up vaccines. I didn’t give them my version because it causes burn-up within months. I’ll be dead before she is.”

Daniel held his hand out. “Thank you for your honesty.”

Julian smiled in relief, extending his hand to shake.

Daniel jerked the man forward onto the knife in his other hand.

Candice grunted her approval and passed back out.

Women outside roared and went to find other targets.

The family stared at Daniel, but the moment was interrupted by a view screen dinging.

“Sam’s game just started.” Mary didn’t know what to do about that problem.

Bruce pointed to another screen coming to life as the backup generators kicked on. “Is that a countdown?”

The technician was no longer worrying about answering now that his master was dead. It would be worse not to. “He sent it as soon as Angelica got in, so you can’t scan his eyes and abort. The

computer knows the difference between living and dead.”

Fury made Daniel’s voice loud. “Why are you so happy?!”

The technician regarded him as if he was stupid. “Because women should be slaves and we should be rulers.”

Mary tried to regain control of the situation. “Send the west a warning. Tell them what’s coming.”

The technician smiled. “I can’t. Julian locked it all down. Only he knew the codes. There’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

Daniel shoved the technician toward the door, feeling no sympathy for him. “Send him out.”

“To the holding cell?” The sly man smiled widely. “I’ll be safe with your friends.”

Daniel pointed at the opposite hall.

“No! No!”

Everyone agreed with Daniel’s judgment. The technician was shoved out into the hall where he was immediately spotted by a red-eyed changeling and chased out of sight.

Daniel didn’t like how ruthless he was becoming, but he wouldn’t have changed his decisions even if Candice told him to. That man didn’t stand for the same things they did. He was the enemy.

“We have to help Sam.” Angelica was becoming frantic.

“I don’t think we can. She’s on her own.”

“Actually, she’s not.” Angelica frowned at Mary. Then she took off running out the door and down the hall.

She leapt over the screaming, bleeding technician being attacked by a changeling guard and landed on the other side. She didn’t stop until she reached the holding cell where the rest of their family was waiting. She hurried to the UN representative as soon as Chester opened the door. She wasn’t going to abandon her sister to fate’s whims. “Can I get a ride?”

Chapter Forty-Two

Take My Place

The Western Fortress

1

“That concludes the interview. Sam will be given thirty seconds for a statement before being taken to the paddock.”

Sam leaned forward, letting her eyes glow crimson. She didn't need thirty seconds. She knew how to start a riot with two sentences. “Milena, when I win this episode, I get your place as Marcella's heir. She has my token to prove our deal.”

Chaos erupted from the reporter and the guards around her.

Sam was shoved out of the room and taken through the same tunnel, but they made a sharp left at the intersection and went down steepening stairs. Sam wondered what was going on in the viewing room Marcella had mentioned. Was the council in the middle of a screaming match or were they simply shrugging and asking what was next? Sam was voting on the latter from the other members, but she was positive Marcella's daughter was furious.

Sam was shoved into a small cell outside the double doors of the nursery.

“I’m worth a lot of UDs. Can anyone be bought?” Sam didn’t have time to beat around the bush.

One of the guards flinched, gaining her attention. The other guards shook their heads in scorn, walking away from the cage.

Sam caught the first guard’s eye and subtly patted her pocket. They hadn’t taken her underclothes, leaving her a couple small weapons and a stash of tokens.

The guard gave a curt nod and then slammed her hand against the cage. “None of us can be bought!”

The guard stomped away.

Sam shrugged and began to get herself mentally prepared for a fight and flight. A run through the vulture nursery was supposed to happen in less than ten minutes and produce an exhausted winner who had outrun an entire nursery of angry vultures and their hungry offspring. Because it was so rare to have a survivor, both Networks agreed to give the players little advantages. For her game, she had been given a black-and-white uniform, her hair had been pinned up, and an empty tool belt had been fastened around her waist. She was told she could earn the weapons for it if she made it far enough into the paddock. She’d been allowed to keep her boots. When asked if she could put money on her survival, more contempt had met her query. Apparently, betting wasn’t allowed here. Sam disapproved of the no wealth accumulation setup.

“Doors are opening in 3...2...”

The same guard she had communicated with flipped the latch early and turned her back on the cell.

Sam was out in a flash, grabbing the traitor by her neck. She quickly hefted the woman around and snapped her neck.

“Why did you do that?!”

“She couldn’t be trusted.” Sam walked toward the double doors as guards surrounded her in confusion and anger. “You heard what I told them on the interview, but here’s a secret. I’m going to kill everybody on the council and destroy everything you do here. Then, I’m going to free *all* the men.”

Furious, the guards rushed over to beat on her.

Sam laughed, delighted. She loved it when she was able to get under someone’s skin so fast. She lashed out with her claws, not needing a weapon.

2

“She is escaping!”

In the viewing room, the council was horrified by how easily Sam was beating their Defenders. Even though more people were being sent in to help, Sam was eliminating them in record time. It was obvious that she wasn’t going into the paddock. She was about to have free run of the complex and she had the skills to keep that freedom.

“You did this!” Milena ran toward her mother, unable to control her rage. “You picked her over me! She just got here! I’m your blood!”

Marcella didn’t try to defend herself. She was tired of being in control and Sam had given her the one thing she wanted. Marcella grinned as her daughter neared. “She’s a real Pruett. You won’t ever be that.”

Milena stabbed her mother, crying and screaming.

The power switch had come.

The other daughters attacked each other or their parent to claim the family seat.

The bloodlust quickly spread. The guards hurried off to locate their rival for the next position up. It was true survival of the fittest here. Males would be safe during the melee and then they would be in grave danger from the winners.

Marcella slid to the floor, staring at her daughter. She was unable to move.

Milena stared back, covered in blood and rage that she never knew how to subdue. “Why couldn’t you love me?”

Marcella drew in a deep breath... “Sam Pruett is my heir!”

Her head slumped to the ground. Her hand opened to reveal the shiny gold token.

Milena screamed. She snatched up the knife she’d dropped upon seeing her mother’s guts hanging from it and charged off to locate her rival for the family seat.

Behind her, the slaughter didn't stop. All the mothers but one were down, also choosing not to fight. They were all tired of this existence.

The one who chose to battle, Nida, was struck repeatedly by all of her daughters, unable to defend herself against the angry group of twelve. Overpopulating her line to ensure the family seat had backfired.

As Milena hurried into the hall, the guards quietly shut the doors to the viewing room and locked them. Marcella's last order had been to lock the council in. Duty to their former ruler finished, the guards took off to do their own job search.

Milena didn't notice. Her rage was in control.

3

"We have an alarm!"

The four surviving females ran to the beeping console. Layered in blood and gore, they didn't attack each other despite being able to narrow down to one or two seats if they did. No one left wanted to rule alone.

"We have an incoming missile!"

"Where will it hit?"

Ivory's child studied the console. She and her mother had been in charge of complex security for a long time. "It's coming right here!"

New to the job, none of the females knew what to do.

"Do we have an evacuation plan?"

Ivory's heir waved toward their dead parents.
"Ask them!"

The other girls frowned.

"How long until it gets here?" Keisha's daughter decided to take charge until Milena returned. She was sure the interloper would be killed.

"It's hard to tell since it's flying so low, but I guess about fifteen minutes."

"Why didn't our alarms go off sooner?" Gia's offspring was on the verge of panicking.

"Because we were all distracted by the new Pruett!" Nida's child made an ugly gesture. "How about we eliminate another seat and the four of us will share control and have peace?"

"I'd vote for that."

The female heirs marched to the door together, eager to get it done and get out of here. All of them had private transportation, but they hoped to take their security with them.

One of them grabbed the handle.

It didn't open.

"What are you waiting for? We don't have time to play around." Ivory's girl yanked on the door several times. "It's locked!"

"Get out of the way!" The others shoved on the barrier, getting the same result.

"We'll go out the other way!"

The girls jumped over bodies and blood, shoving each other to reach the rear gate.

"It's locked, too!"

“Let us out of here!”

There was no answer.

4

“This is it.”

Sam waited for the slave to open the door to Milena’s den.

“She’s coming for you. A lot of guards saw you grab me and bring me here.”

“Good!” Sam growled. “Go tell her where I am.”

The sleazy man ran off as Sam entered the door. She walked through the dank cell, noting previous renters had left stains to prove they’d been here.

Sounds came, drawing her deeper into the filth.

“No. Let me go. I have an owner!” Baker shuddered and moaned, body arching as he strained to get free of the cuffs. Eyes open but unseeing, only a release would help him.

“Please let me go!” Baker whimpered as a warm body leaned over him. He jerked on the cuffs and found both hands free.

“Ah!” Baker grabbed the woman, rolling them over. Already thrusting, he wrapped his arms around her waist in an iron grip and shoved between her legs.

Sam’s rage held her still, one hand keeping Baker from going anywhere and the other free to reach her belt if needed. He was an animal on top of

her, shoving her up on the bed as he whined and drooled.

Sam spread her legs and let him rip clothes aside to reach what he needed, fury peaking.

Baker groaned, drugs in control. "I hate you for this! I hate you!" He shoved in deep, trying to hurt his tormentor.

Sam barely felt it. She was listening for Milena's arrival.

A floorboard creaked.

Baker neared the edge, rocking faster, grip tightening.

Sam lifted her free hand. It wasn't empty.

The door swung open.

"That's mine!"

"Never was." Sam fired.

Baker kept thrusting, climax sending him into a fit of jerks and grunts that made Sam worry. It sounded as if he'd been ridden repeatedly and never allowed to finish. From what Jason and Daniel had stated, that was a common torture used by Network Defenders.

Baker didn't let go as the drugs continued to work on him, but the release did allow a small measure of sanity to return. He caught a familiar scent and then the smell wafting up from their bodies. "Sam?"

"I've got you now."

"Sam!" Baker kissed her.

He didn't stop there. He couldn't unless she restrained him.

Sam didn't. By the time he finished, she'd cooled off enough to join in, clutching him as they jumped the bridge together.

Milena's body screamed up at them from the floor.

5

"Thank you for saving me." Baker vomited again.

Sam grimaced, trying to stay ahead of the splatter and the guards on their trail. "My honor. Can you be quiet?"

Baker tried harder and was unsuccessful. They fled down the hallway with him spewing a clear trail. As soon as they'd stopped shuddering, she had grabbed him and taken off running.

Sam realized this wasn't going to succeed. Running with Baker over her shoulder was slowing them and giving them away. She swung him to his feet and pushed him ahead of her, hoping he didn't have anything left to bring up.

Around them, the tunnels were scenes of slaughter. Sam didn't know if her arrival or words had triggered the power exchange, but it was clear what was happening. Low ranking guards were attacking their superiors or trying to locate the people above them. There were too many bodies to identify according to rank as they ran by. She assumed the viewing room was the same. In fact, she believed the chaos had originated there.

Subordinates wouldn't be going crazy unless their leaders were. The state of bloody agitation Milena had arrived in also upheld that theory. It had only taken Sam a few minutes to force a technician to tell her where Milena had stashed Baker. Sam was sorry it had ended so quickly. She had hoped to feel the woman's blood on her hands, but getting Baker out of here alive was more important.

Sam found the stairs the guard had sullenly described; she had to carry Baker on one arm to keep up their speed. It was rough labor, but her changeling body was equipped for this. She had her rage to carry her through, but she wouldn't be able to do this for long. Unlike her moments in the time trials, she didn't have chemical enhancements here. In fact, the only things she had that she'd entered this fortress with were her boots, her underclothes, and Baker.

"Stop there!" The guard on the next set of stairs ran in front of them.

It was obvious the woman wasn't in contention for a promotion because she was still at her post.

The guard lunged forward.

Sam spun aside to avoid the knife, dropping Baker. She snatched the shocked Defender by her neck and slammed her against the wall. The knife clattered to the floor. "How do we get to the rear dock?!"

The strangling sentry pointed.

Sam kept ahold of the woman's arm and propelled her and Baker in that direction. "Take us there!"

The struggling guard didn't want to lead them out. Sheila was a low-level Defender with no hopes of advancing further than she was right now, but she enjoyed her job. She didn't want to lose it.

Sam raked her claws down the woman's arm, drawing a scream. "Get me there now!"

The guard ran toward the dock in terror. She hadn't been able to advance any further because she wasn't a fighter.

Sam and Baker hurried to keep up, trying not to lose sight of the frightened guard.

A loud alarm began to blare through the tunnels, alerting Sam to a new problem. As they entered the bowels of the fortress and she finally caught the smell of salt, a computer voice echoed through the tunnel.

"Please evacuate in an orderly fashion. Incoming missile will arrive in ten minutes."

The alarms grew louder as the message repeated.

"He didn't hit the power bunker. He sent the missile here!" Baker vomited again.

"Yeah." Sam realized she had lost sight of their terrified escort.

Baker held onto Sam and tried to keep his guts under control so they wouldn't keep leaving a trail.

Sam changed direction as she tracked the smell of salt. Her sharp ears also picked up a faint hum of

water and she moved them in that direction, not liking this. It would be too easy to make a mistake.

Baker tried hard not to trip as they went down the final set of stone stairs that were damp enough to be slippery. He slid against the wall, scraping his arm, and then he was lifted onto Sam's back as she rushed into the darkness.

Dim lanterns in the distance led them to a small dock with no guards in sight and a huge section of ocean that came right up to the foundation of the fortress. It was obvious from the depressions in the ground that this had once been an impact site or at least the edge of one. Sam scanned the area, nerves pounding on her brain. Ten minutes wasn't long to get away from anything the east had sent. She had little doubt they were responsible.

Baker pointed over her shoulder. "Is that a raft?"

Sam hurried in that direction.

The rear dock was poor even in comparison to the rest of the surroundings. The narrow wooden pier of molding, wooden planks appeared as if it wouldn't hold the weight of one human, let alone supplies or equipment. The small dock ran up under the fortress, where the water met it near the beginning of the stone stairs. As she had suspected, the water was indeed eroding the brick away from the land, making the fortress unstable.

A shadow broke away from the dock as they reached it.

The guard Sam had just terrified drove the spear in, grunting as she put her full weight behind it.

Sam's forward momentum helped to impale her.

Baker was thrown from her back at the abrupt stop, landing in a painful heap on the stone wharf.

Sheila shoved again, trying to make sure the Pruett was dead. She knew her life depended on it now.

Sam gurgled, staggering backward.

Baker screamed. He scrambled up and rushed at the guard.

Terrified again, Sheila tried to pull the spear out to use on the enraged male. She loosened it, but couldn't get it free in time as Baker slammed into her.

They both fell into the water.

Sam slumped to the damp wood, spear dislodging. She was unable to keep from falling over.

Sam slipped into the water.

The computer echoed again, new alarm blaring.
"Due to changing weather patterns, the expected impact time has been adjusted. Estimated arrival is 3..2..1..."

The explosion lit up the west coast for the first time in five centuries.

Chapter Forty-Three

To Be Free

1

Baker wasn't a good swimmer. The riverboat captains in Georgia had begun to teach the rebel males how, but none of them had taken to it. Baker had passed their simple test, but a calm portion of river was nothing like the wild ocean now slamming him into debris around the dock. His only comfort was that it hadn't taken much to drown the guard who hadn't had time to draw in a breath before they went under.

He struggled to reach the spot where Sam had gone into the water, arms aching. The ripples were flowing outward, trying to carry him away.

Baker held his breath and dove under, ignoring the awful roaring of crumbling stone as he fought to find Sam.

A shiny white emblem on a black player's uniform grabbed his attention.

Baker shoved through the murky, debris-laden water and grabbed her arm.

Sam was aware of Baker pulling her, but not much else. With ringing ears and lungs filling with water, she wasn't capable of doing more than forcing herself not to resist, to trust him to keep her

alive. Marcella didn't believe the males could be trusted, but Baker was proving her wrong.

Baker heaved Sam's head above the water so she could breathe.

Sam sucked in air and coughed out water.

Baker groaned in relief, and then in fear as he saw the wave coming toward them. "Hold your breath!"

Baker shoved them back under as the wave hit and rolled past to slam into the foundation of the fortress that was crumbling.

Baker pushed off of a chunk of debris bumping into his legs and broke the surface, dragging Sam with him. The couple coughed and gasped.

Baker tried to swim toward the raft that was still attached to the dock, but he doubted they would make it in time. The awful groans and creaks coming from the fortress behind them said the bomb had done its job and then some.

Another wave rolled in, forcing the couple back underwater.

Sam pushed them above the surface this time, using the powerful legs that were finally responding to her commands. She shoved them toward the raft, aware of blood flowing from her wound. She had about a minute and then she would be useless to him.

The raft was the same kind she and her family had often nicked from Network supplies during their runs, claiming they had been lost while pursuing criminals. It was slow, but there was

nothing special about it and nothing more that would help them other than keeping them out of the water.

Baker slid his arms around the slippery raft and held onto the ropes attached to it, coughing.

Sam did the same next to him as another wave broke over top, stealing the air.

Splash!

A huge chunk of debris fell into the water next to them.

“Get in!” Sam pushed on Baker until he was in the fragile raft. If a piece of debris hit it, they were gone.

Another huge chunk of the fortress broke off and slammed into the dock, separating it from the shore.

Sam used her knife to chop through the ropes connecting them to the dock that was now sinking. They had given her one weapon for her game, but she’d collected several more on her way to get Baker.

The raft jerked, dragged into the current.

Behind them, the fortress crumbled into the ocean.

The raft floated in choppy seas as waves slapped them around and dragged them away from land. With no way to paddle, they couldn’t fight the current. In a short amount of time, land quickly fell out of sight, but the raft kept bobbing on the cold, salty water.

2

The sunset while on the ocean was something Sam would never forget. The glistening hues lit up the water and almost made her believe magic was possible. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She assumed the loss of blood was making her crazy as she passed out.

Sunset on the ocean was creepy for Baker. He stayed away from the sides of the raft, trying not to think about what it would be like to fall overboard and be lost in that cold, dark grave. He also refused to contemplate the animals in the water under the boat. He had heard stories and hoped none of them were true.

Few citizens in New America knew how to swim. The places where the water wasn't toxic, the wildlife was, and Sam couldn't rescue him right now. In fact, she might not be able to ever again. Baker had never seen anyone recover from an injury like that without weeks of sessions in a Network complex.

"Remember who she is." He tried to comfort himself, shivering as he moved closer to Sam to see if there was anything he could do for her. "Pruetts don't just give up."

3

Sam screamed as saltwater hit her open wound.

Baker flinched, causing the raft to shift uneasily.

Sam opened her eyes, hands going to the injury. She scanned quickly, seeing Baker and the open ocean in every direction. Ignoring the pain, she swiveled around to peer behind them and screamed again.

Blood poured through the broken scab that had been forming.

Baker leaned over to replace his shirt over the injury, hoping that would halt the flow. “You’ve been out for hours. There’s no land in sight.”

Baker sounded terrified. Sam was impressed that he’d tried to tend her injury, but she wished he had waited until she was ready for it. The saltwater was stinging worse than the injury had been hurting before she moved.

Sam turned her head and had to catch herself on the side of the raft, dizzy.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood. I didn’t realize how bad it was until a little while ago.” He gestured at the wound. “The salt is burning out the infection.”

Now Sam was really impressed. She was also weak and about to pass out again. “Don’t drink the water.”

“I won’t. Save your strength.” He returned to unraveling threads from the rope on the side of the raft to use as stitching for her wound. He wasn’t sure yet what he was going to use as a needle, but he would figure it out when her crimson orbs stopped staring at him.

“Are they all gone?” Before Baker could answer, Sam slumped against the raft.

Baker was glad she had woken, though it had only been for a minute. Hours of listening to just the ocean and her unsteady breathing had been rough on him.

As he leaned in to check her injury, a flash caught his eye. Her hairpin gleamed in the moonlight.

Baker carefully removed it and bent it into the shape he needed. All he had to do was make a point. He took the knife from Sam’s belt and began to work on it.

The sharp blade quickly turned it into a needle without an eyehole. As he threaded the rope around it in an awkward tie, Baker hoped she didn’t wake up again until he was done. He had only read about doing things like this or watched the medics do it to him after a bad rental session.

Sam didn’t flinch when the homemade needle entered her skin and began stitching the hole closed.

She also didn’t react when Baker rolled her into a ball afterward, hoping that would allow her some warmth. They had no blankets or supplies here and nightfall was well upon them.

Baker began to work on their next need—food and water. He had no way to produce fresh water out of salt, but the ocean was full of wildlife that could be eaten. Baker struggled to remember what the river women had told them. *Three rows of teeth*

or less is fine. Anymore is toxic. Avoid colors and never fish at night.

Baker realized it was too late to do any fishing. He settled for preparing the rope and needle so it would be a hook and line when the sun rose. He didn't want to know the difference between daylight and nighttime aquatic life. He hadn't asked then and he hoped he wouldn't discover that answer now.

With nothing else he could do, Baker carefully curled his body around Sam's and allowed himself to rest. He didn't think he'd ever been so scared, but he also was relieved. Even if they didn't survive this, the western council had been brought down. Sam was a credit to her family.

4

Sam woke to male shouting, something that was unusual in any situation.

"Come here! Hold still!"

Sam jerked her eyes open to find Baker struggling with a fish. His juggling act was an amusing way to start a day.

Baker let go of the fish. It slapped into the wet bottom of the raft and flipflopped around until it ran out of energy. As it lay there, gasping at him for air, Baker looked at Sam in panic. "What do I do with it?"

Sam chuckled through the agony. "Eat it."

Baker slowly calmed. "I know. I even have seaweed to cook it on, but I don't know what comes between that."

Sam was surprised he knew that much. She looked at his knife. Lifting her arm to point was out of the question. "You have to slit it from end to end and clean it out. Then skin the scales away from the flesh and cook it." She examined his catch without moving, approving of the two rows of teeth. "Good job."

Baker was thrilled with the praise, but he was so hungry! He wanted to eat and he knew Sam needed it, too.

Sam wanted to help him with the fish, but the stitches were fragile and movement would rip them out. She also wanted him to have the experience so if she died he would be able to survive. There wouldn't be much water in anything he caught, but it might be enough to keep him alive until the raft hit land. The biggest danger at this point, if he caught food regularly, was the ocean itself. This raft wouldn't protect him.

With Sam's oral guidance, Baker got their meal together. He was used to preparing food in extreme conditions, but this topped the list of his adventure so far. They had brought down a government and survived. It was amazing. "How do I light a fire?"

"Use your hook and knife." Sam fought to stay alert, vision blurring. "Direct the spark onto the seaweed. Are you sure it's completely dry?"

Baker nodded. "I caught it last night so it would be ready."

Sam smiled at him. "You might as well be a born Pruett. You act like one."

Baker liked those words, but they also hurt him. "I'm sorry you didn't get your game. I know you were looking forward to it."

Sam carefully shrugged. "I toppled the government here a couple hours after I arrived and I left with my bachelor. I consider it a job well done." She shut her eyes. *So will my family.*

Baker cooked the meal while she dozed, trying not to fall into panic. He really did hate to be alone.

Sam forced herself to wake and eat when it was ready. She didn't enjoy the fish, but she didn't hate it either.

The noises and smells of the ocean weren't pleasant in the sunlight. It smelled like rotting fish and sounded as if someone was slapping a wet blanket every time the waves broke against the small rubber raft. Baker's body ached and his throat was parched. As he moved, his vision swam. He didn't like being on the ocean. He had no idea how anyone could stand this for long.

As the waves continued to carry them, Sam lifted a finger toward the fish guts. "Start collecting those. We need a big pile."

Baker didn't like the sound of that. "Disgusting."

Sam licked oil off her fingers and rubbed the rest around her lips. They were already becoming

cracked. “We need something red to draw attention. That’s the only thing we have. Keep collecting them.”

“Okay.” Baker saw she was fighting to stay alert and chose to help her with a distraction. He had things he needed to say. “I saw your interview.”

Sam waited for Baker to express his displeasure over her choice, or to question whether she had meant it. She wasn’t prepared for his words.

“I don’t want to be free anymore.”

She stared at him in surprise. “What changed?”

Baker motioned in the direction he thought was behind them. It was hard to tell where they’d come from without any land in sight. “What we have now is better than that. I don’t know what deal you made for us to escape, but please don’t continue their vision. Men don’t deserve it.”

“I’m not sure I agree anymore. And you don’t either or you’d be demanding instead of begging.”

Baker couldn’t deny that. “Please, Sam. Don’t take her place for real. The west doesn’t need a new leader.”

Sam refused to answer.

5

It was dawn when Baker woke. Cool wind was shoving the raft along.

“There’s a storm coming.” Baker forced himself to climb over the pile of guts Sam had said they needed. “We’re going to die here.”

Sam didn't answer.

Baker groaned at the effort that it took to reach her. His body felt as if it weighed three times as much and his muscles were gone. He shook Sam's leg. "Sam!"

When there was no response, panic shot adrenaline through his body and allowed him to get close enough to verify that she was breathing.

Baker was relieved to see her chest rising and falling. He examined her injury and found pus coming from the stitches, along with lines of infection. "More red, Sam!" He cackled.

Baker clumsily dribbled water over the wound again, hoping the salt would burn out the infection. There was also a chance it would burn through the stitches, but there was little choice. He had nothing else he could treat her injury with and even though he had caught several fish, she wasn't getting stronger. Neither was he. The lack of water was taking its toll.

It had been days since they'd escaped and Baker had no idea where they were or when they might reach land. What he did know was Sam wasn't going to last much longer. Her injury hadn't been as serious as he expected and they had stopped the bleeding with the stitches, but the infection was dangerous. He had watched rebel males die from the same problem.

Weakness swarmed Baker. He slumped into the raft next to Sam. With the last of his strength, he curled his arm around her waist and dropped his

head against her shoulder as rain began to pelt them.
“Hang on, baby. Hang on...”

Chapter Forty-Four

Foreign Entities

Above the Borderlands

1

“We should be over the area shortly.”

Angelica was observing through the windows of the helicopter.

When Angelica didn't respond, Claudette went back to her satellite conversation. Between pauses for the delay, Claudette had been studying Angelica.

Angelica appreciated the woman's concern, but it wasn't necessary. She had every faith her sister would be found alive. She was enjoying the feel and views. She had never been in the air before, at least not for long. This had been a day of zooming over the land, grass, and trees. It was fascinating. She had offered to bring Jason along, but he hadn't wanted to leave his son and he had been a little intimidated at the thought of flying. He had chosen to stay behind and make a return trip with Mary when Candice was ready. Angelica missed him.

“Yes, sir. Yes, ma'am.” Claudette was on an open line with the UN, which consisted of four members who no longer rotated. New members were elected by their self-sacrifice, combined with

bravery. She was thrilled to finally be inside the walls of New America legally. She had been tempted to come across before, which would have meant breaking international law. It was a relief to know she wasn't going to be forced to do that. However, all of their concerns about the Network had been valid. The males were still enslaved here and the disease was rampaging unchecked. Claudette hadn't told them yet, but the new rulers here would only have a short time to get things in order or the UN would insist on helping.

"Yes, sir. I'm flying toward the site now with the new number three." Claudette paused to let the next message come through, scanning the ground. "Is that smoke?"

Angelica and the pilot were already staring. The talented man flying the helicopter steered them that way.

"No, sir. It was a full-scale coup of the country. They control both east and west."

"It's going to be one country again." Angelica didn't look away from the clouds of smoke billowing up from what appeared to be a small town in the distance. "It will take us a little while to get things straightened out, but we will bring our citizens together. The atrocities of the past will not be repeated."

While Claudette relayed her message to the UN, the pilot took them lower for a better view of snakes with swollen bodies sending sprays of dirt into the

air as they burrowed into the sandy ground to lay eggs that were being stolen by huge, wild vultures.

“There are refugees coming from the west, sir. We’re going to investigate this. I’ll connect with you later.” Claudette closed the line between them before her boss could deny the action.

Angelica snickered. “Will you be in trouble for that?”

Claudette shrugged. “He’s currently sleeping with my mother, so I doubt it.”

Angelica chuckled. She hadn’t asked any questions about the rest of the world yet. She could feel Claudette and her crew wondering why she hadn’t. They didn’t understand that until Candice had a chance to restructure things, no one wanted to be biased by any other setup. Candice would figure out how to make this country love itself without outside help. Getting the UN involved had indeed helped them win this war, but they would manage the rest on their own. It would just take them longer.

The refugees below them were traveling east, away from the chaos. Most of them were carrying bags and almost every female was leading a slave.

“I’ve never seen that in my lifetime.”

Angelica sighed. “I’ve never seen anything else.”

Claudette understood and didn’t push. The new leaders were not going to be held responsible for the sins of the old rulers, no matter the relation, but they would be required to clean up the mess as fast as possible. “Get closer.”

As the chopper zoomed down, a small town came into view.

“Brothels!”

Their shock was almost amusing to Angelica. She had been raised here and assumed the entire world was the same way, when in fact, the world was civilized and this country was a savage remnant of the past, still tearing itself apart. Angelica already knew things weren’t like that on the outside. One of Claudette’s bosses was a male, the pilot was a male, and at least half the sailors who had escorted them here were male.

New America would have to catch up to the rest of the world, but it would be done carefully. After everything they had gone through, and after watching the changeling males easily defeat women who Angelica had been positive couldn’t be defeated, it was obvious this was going to have to be done slowly. Freedom would be possible for the men in their country, but not all at once.

Angelica assumed Candice had already considered that, but until she recovered, they wouldn’t know for sure. Candice was the leader of their family and that hadn’t changed because she was also the ruler of the country now. The decisions she made for them would stand and be upheld for their family and for their citizens. “You should have someone check out that town.”

“Something special?” Claudette was hung up on the brothels. She was eager to explore the town.

“I believe my sister’s crew is there.”

Claudette had heard about Sam's amazing group of Runners. She nodded eagerly. "We'll take care of it."

Instead of being encouraged at the find, Angelica was nervous. She couldn't imagine a situation in which the Runners would allow her sister to be separated from them, but the distinctive burn pattern in the town was impossible to ignore. Pruetts had set it on fire. "Is there any word from your people along the coast?"

"No, but the feed comes in slowly in this unstable atmosphere. The bomb definitely hit land."

Angelica didn't say anything else on the subject, but she did wonder how Sam had ended up all the way in the west. She had been assigned to take control of the Borderlands bunker and remain there to hold it as another coup location.

"More refugees!"

Angelica studied them. Unlike the town they had passed, where almost everyone was traveling calmly, this group was in a hurry and carrying nothing. Many of them were on foot and almost none of them had a slave.

"Can you go lower?"

The pilot took them down at Angelica's request. "This is the limit."

It occurred to Angelica that she had been around speaking males for days and none of them had triggered her. It was a sign that she was entering the burnout phase, but she had more rage than ever. It was almost as if she were in... "Remission."

Claudette glanced over. “Did you say something?” The chopper blades above them were making an extraordinary amount of noise.

Angelica shook her head, storing the observation to examine later. Candice would be thrilled.

The next group of refugees fell behind them, leaving a pristine desert backdropped by a smoky sky. There was no longer any need to follow the readings on Claudette’s devices. All they had to do was follow the smoke.

“The injured are coming now.” Claudette picked up her phone. “I’ll get a medical camp set up out here.”

The injured were bloody, with shellshocked expressions and staggers that said they’d been walking for a while. The explosion had happened days ago, leaving enough time for the severely injured to have died and survivors to have cleared the area. Angelica scanned the people hard, hoping to spot her sister, but all of these people were a different race. Angelica didn’t spot a single white citizen. It was another mystery about the west that she hoped Sam would be able to clear up.

The wind increased as they neared the smoke coming from behind a steep hill of sand. As they cleared it, the complex came into view.

“Oh, my God!”

Angelica wasn’t as impressed as the others. She assumed New Network City looked worse, but there was still an incredible amount of destruction below.

The huge fortress that had obviously been set into the cliff was now crumbled on the ground around it with a gaping hole where a roof should have been. The eastern council had obviously lined up a direct hit. There was nothing left of the fortress, but there were people all over it, trying to salvage and steal.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No. She isn’t here.”

Claudette and the pilot both frowned.

“How do you know? There are hundreds of people down there.”

“No blonde hair and no fighting. My sister isn’t here.”

Claudette finally took note of the races below and began writing in her book. She was still waiting for her call to go through.

The pilot flew over the destruction, drawing attention from everyone on the ground. People below acted as if the east had arrived to finish destroying them and took off.

As the chopper left the shore and flew over the open ocean, it dipped in the strong current wind and then recovered. The pilot paid no attention.

Angelica wanted to laugh, but she was worried about her sister. The water was full of debris. It was like the pictures she had seen in books of the land right after the nuclear war. It was history repeating itself. There were also bodies in the water, many of them facing downward and too decayed to identify. Most of them had the wrong color hair, but a few of them were blonde. Angelica refused to ask them to

stop and check the bodies because it felt as if she would be cursing their luck. She believed her sister was alive. She wasn't going to go checking the dead.

"My boss wanted me to ask if you know anything about a Canadian reporter who supposedly made it over the wall a few weeks ago."

Angelica peered harder at the debris. "We haven't had time to go through Julian's files yet. He might have notes on it. We'll let you know if we find anything."

The pilot checked his gauges. "We're getting low on fuel."

"Keep going."

Claudette was sorry to say it, but she still did. "No one could have survived that hit."

"You don't know the Pruetts. Keep going."

Claudette consulted with the pilot. "How long?"

The pilot studied his gauges. "We can go for another hour and then we'll have to head north to refuel."

Angelica was satisfied she had bought another hour of searching time.

Claudette's call beeped as it went through. "I need a medical camp at the coordinates of the explosion."

A stern male voice came through immediately. "Do you have permission?"

Claudette flinched, not expecting such a quick reply. "Angelica Pruett has given permission, sir."

“Before you hang up on me again, I have other things I need an answer for. Write this down.”

The UN woman scrambled for her notebook and pen while Angelica snickered and the pilot frowned.

“We need an answer on vaccine distribution. The previous rulers put qualifiers on it and refused us the right to reproduce it.”

Claudette was scribbling. “I got it. Next?”

“Slavery laws, future inspections, and a timetable for everything we’re discussing right now.”

There was a short pause for her to catch up and then the man continued.

“The Canadian Prime Minister wants to know how long she’s going to be hosting the 392 rebels who snuck into her country without permission. She’s not pursuing sanctions due to the situation and has promised the males will be well cared for. However, if they stay more than sixty days, they are considered Canadian citizens by law and cannot be returned.”

Angelica shifted that to her priority list.

“There also needs to be a national address made as soon as possible. The news is full of rioting and stories of people battling for control over the cities. The sooner these new leaders step up and put citizens into those positions, the sooner my phone will stop beeping.”

“We’ll handle that one as soon as Candice wakes up.” Angelica listened openly to the loud man’s demands.

Claudette was actually glad. “Angelica insists that will be a priority. They want the country under control as much as we do.”

She makes a great mouthpiece. Angelica kept scanning the open water under the chopper.

“Handle things and then get back to me. Once you do, we’ll discuss how you involved UN troops in someone else’s war.”

Claudette grimaced. “That was self-defense, sir, as usual. You know these places don’t just surrender when we show up.”

“Your subordinates always echo that claim. As long as they do, you will not be punished. You may come home in full honor.”

“Thank you, sir!” Claudette disconnected the call in relief.

The pilot chuckled.

Angelica regarded the woman. “What did you do to earn that reputation?”

“I liberate slaves of all genders.” Claudette squared her shoulders proudly. “I don’t care who they are or where they are. If they’re being held against their will, I will find them.”

Angelica wanted to believe her. Nothing the woman had done implied otherwise, but Angelica was suddenly sure that Claudette couldn’t be trusted.

The pilot looked over his shoulder a little while later. “We’re getting very low on fuel.”

“Turn us to shore. We’ll meet the medical camp and help set things up.”

Angelica could almost feel her sister. “Keep going.”

Claudette frowned. “We can come right back as soon as we refuel.”

Angelica pointed. “I see something.”

The pilot didn’t. Neither did Claudette until she squinted hard. “Something’s moving...”

Vindicated, Angelica waited impatiently for the helicopter to reach the site. She was almost certain it was a flock of birds circling something. Angelica didn’t have her binoculars anymore and she didn’t see any on the plane, but the huge gulls were obviously attracted to something and Angelica wanted to know what it was. The only reason she could think for the birds to be circling something out in the ocean was that it hadn’t died yet. Otherwise, they would already be consuming their feast.

The pilot cleared his throat. “We have to refuel. I’m not crashing here. If we’re found, they’ll think I’m a slave.”

Claudette chuckled, approving the decision.

Angelica slammed her fist against the chopper. “Call it in! Send someone else!”

Claudette was already pushing buttons on her phone. “The other chopper had to go fill up. It should be finished now. I’m sending it to these coordinates and telling them to scan a hundred miles in all directions. Whatever it is, they’ll locate it.”

Angelica was forced to stay in the chopper as it turned back toward land. She understood the dilemma, but it was a hard fight not to open the door and jump into the water. Unlike Sam, she was an excellent swimmer. She was positive her sister was hurt and needed her. It was a frustrating ride where Angelica refused to speak for fear of committing violence when it wasn't called for. *Hang on, Sam. I'm coming.*

In the time it took them to reach land, Claudette found out the other helicopter was already in the air and flying toward their previous location. Instead of continuing to where the medical camp would take hours to be set up, Claudette made a call to the captain of her armada. While the helicopter went out, she and Angelica would take the boat. Even if they didn't locate anything, it would make them feel better.

Seeing all the destruction wasn't encouraging. Claudette still didn't think anyone could have survived the bomb, let alone to be alive out on the ocean. Even though she sailed it regularly, Claudette still feared the water. It was evil. *Like men.*

Baker lifted cracked lids to find a bird perched on the side of the raft. Its colorful beak snapped at part of the gut pile and swallowed a large chunk.

Baker blinked, not sure he was really seeing it.

Caw!

Baker glanced up at the new noise as he realized the bird on the raft hadn't made it. He was startled to find a dozen large birds circling overhead.

The bird in front of him continued to pick at the pile.

Baker shifted around to shoo it away and froze. There was a boat.

Baker remembered how to breathe. His hands groped out for Sam. "It's a boat!"

As the ship came closer, Baker groped harder and his voice got louder. "Sam! It's a boat, Sam!"

Baker looked over to find her sprawled out awkwardly in a slack jawed position.

Baker scooted over, unable to see her breathing. He shook her frantically. "Sam! Wake up!"

The big boat came alongside them and voices called out greetings. Baker didn't hear any of it. He was pushing on Sam's chest like he had learned from the medicos, hoping to revive her.

Steps splashed heavily into the filthy raft next to him and hauled Baker out.

Baker didn't have the strength to fight. All he could do was scream. "No!"

"We'll help her if we can."

The comforting voices didn't get through to Baker. The medics were forced to sedate him,

barely catching him as he dropped. In his weakened condition, the sedative took instant effect.

Baker lay in strange arms, groaning and moaning. “Don’t you die on me, Sam Pruett!”

“It is them! Get on the radio!”

Baker went under the silence a few seconds later, still crying for his mate.

Chapter Forty-Five

Sappy Stuff

1

“**T**hey won’t wake up for a while yet. The medics sedated them.”

Angelica glanced up with a genuine smile as Claudette joined her in the medical bay of the UN ship. “Thank you. For everything.”

Claudette took the seat on the other side of Sam’s bed. She was happy for all of them. “It’s amazing they survived. The methods used were ingenious.”

“I think it was him.” Angelica studied Baker with fondness. “He saved her.”

“How do you know?”

“Because of the condition we found her in. She wasn’t capable of taking care of herself.”

“Slaves are among the most timid of the world’s population. Just because slavery has been abolished doesn’t mean our men have recovered. I highly doubt your sister’s mate, no matter how special, was responsible for their survival.”

Angelica shrugged. The woman didn’t know Baker the way she did. “The males in New America are clever. We’ve been watching them during this war, but even before, there were signs.”

Claudette frowned. "Does that include from your mate?"

Angelica's expression grew pensive. "I knew from the beginning he was different, but I didn't understand how much until we were dealing with the mutant women who sailed us to the border. Jason negotiated that deal on his own and came out of it with exactly what he needed. He didn't sacrifice a single male, not even as a rental. It was impressive."

"And also a concern?"

Angelica shrugged. "We've all been concerned about it. My sister and I didn't discuss it, but my cousin voiced several opinions before we took the dome. She said they have to prove they can be trusted. Knowing the effects of the rage sickness they're now going through will help, but it doesn't change it. We already had those concerns."

"The UN can't support anything except complete freedom. Nearly every country in the world has signed the treaty, promising never to enslave another human being, of any gender, for any reason."

"That final choice won't be up to me." Angelica's expression didn't change. "But I will have a vote. As of right now, I believe Baker rescued my sister and that proves him dependable. I love Jason and I believe he would do anything for me, including kill. I'm also positive Daniel feels the same way about Candice. However, I will not free the males without approval, so if that's what your

boss is expecting from me, you should soften the blow.”

Claudette made a mental note to do that. It was what her superiors were hoping for, but Claudette understood the concern after witnessing the violent males at the training center. The changeling disease had never spread to the male gender in the rest of the world. This was the first time she had witnessed that phenomenon and it was terrifying.

Once she explained the situation to the UN leaders, she thought many of them would also understand and consent, but the majority would insist the new rulers of this country were breaking international law. Julian’s grandfather had signed it during his time as leader. He had been under pressure from the UN on several other issues that they had promised not to investigate, such as having the remaining arsenal from America’s nuclear past. After the explosion in the west, it was obvious that concession should not have been granted. Claudette would have been against it, but as a low ranking investigator, she would have little authority in final decisions. Still, she thought she could at least buy the Pruett females time to get their country together before the UN started insisting on complete freedom.

“They should sleep until we arrive, probably another hour. Would you like to go to the mess and eat?”

“No.” Angelica motioned the woman on.

Claudette left, not insulted. Angelica had to be exhausted. She had only slept on the way to the training center and not again since then. Claudette assumed she would rest until they arrived and approved.

As the UN woman vanished into the hallway, Angelica looked at her sister. “She’s gone. You can quit faking now.”

Sam chuckled hoarsely. “I could always fool mom and dad, but never you. What gives me away?”

Angelica grinned. “I’m not telling.”

“Stubborn brat!”

Angelica was delighted to have her sister back. “I flew over your damage path. Nice.”

“Baker?”

Angelica motioned toward the bed on the other side of Sam. “Sedated and recovering. He’ll be fine.”

“Candice?”

Angelica’s silence told Sam she wouldn’t like the answer.

“What happened?”

“Ivy’s boy toy snapped. Candice was stabbed in the back. Then Julian got to torture her. She may never walk again.”

That news hurt Sam. She couldn’t imagine Candice not being able to walk. “When will they know?”

Angelica shrugged. “I haven’t gotten an update since I left. The reception out here is terrible.”

Sam could tell how worried Angelica was about their cousin. Angelica had always been closer to Candice than to her immediate family. Sam had left, eager to escape the misery of her home life, and their mother had sent Angelica to live with Mary out of fear that she couldn't make the girl strong enough to survive in their family. It had been a smart decision as far as Sam was concerned. Other than herself and Candice, Angelica was the most intimidating person Sam knew. "I'm proud of you."

"You must want something."

"I do. I want you to know how proud I am to call you my family."

Angelica frowned. "Are you dying? I'm going to get the doctor."

Sam laughed and groaned as the pain began to catch up. "I'm going to rest now, little sister. I know you have it covered."

Angelica almost cried. The entire time she had been a child, looking up to Sam and Candice, that was all she had longed to hear. Now, she had it all. A wonderful man who loved her, children in their lives and a child on the way, the respect of her family, and a chance to beat the disease that had tormented her for so long. They had control of the country, which meant no more tyranny. Everything was perfect except for missing the one person who had been the driving force to make it happen. It didn't feel right to celebrate without Candice, so Angelica didn't.

“If you two don’t stop the sappy stuff, I’m going to cry.”

The women looked over to find Baker awake.

Sam immediately began to get up.

“Don’t you dare!” Baker shoved himself out of his bed before Sam could. “Dammit, woman! Can’t you stay in a bed?”

Sam snickered, staying where she was.

Angelica chuckled. She moved toward the door to give them some privacy, but she went slowly, hoping to have her suspicions confirmed.

Sam shifted over so Baker could perch on the edge of her bed.

They gazed at each other in victory.

“You need a bath.”

“You need a new outfit.”

They laughed together, grateful they had survived. There had been moments where they had both doubted it.

Baker leaned forward and hugged her. “Thank you.”

Sam hugged him back with the arm that wasn’t strapped to the bed to keep her from dislodging the tubes and needles. “I’ll give you any reward you ask for.”

Baker frowned. “I didn’t save your life for a reward.”

Theory confirmed, Angelica went to the control booth to see if there had been word from the training center. Everyone was being relocated to the mainland.

As Angelica's light steps faded, Sam pulled Baker close to whisper in his ear.

Baker laughed. "I'll give you that anytime you ask for it!"

Sam gave him a pointed look.

Baker groaned. "You're incorrigible!"

"Do you think you can keep me in line?"

"I wouldn't even try. In fact, I'm hoping more of you rubs off on me."

Sam laughed and held him. "Good, because I don't think I can stand to be away from you now. You're my heart."

Baker gave her a quick kiss and moved back. He hated to interrupt the good moment with something that might prevent it from remaining, but there were things they needed to get settled. "I won't hold you to any commitment you made while we were in the west. You made those choices under duress to bring down the Network. I've enjoyed my time with—"

Sam kissed him before he could say anything else.

Baker was quickly swept up in need, able to feel how much she wanted him.

As they broke apart, Sam held onto his shirt. "I don't want to make an arrangement with you. I want a relationship with the man I fell in love with."

"Are you sure, Sam? I really don't expect anything from you."

"Well, I expect a lot of things from you, so get this through your thick skull, Baker. You belong to me."

Baker was finally able to relax and move on to the next topic. “I love you, too, Sam. I want to be with you forever, even if you vote against freeing us.”

Sam winced, but didn’t lie. “I might. I haven’t decided yet.”

Baker already knew. “I do understand. I also know if there’s a way for freedom to happen in the future, your family will make sure that it does.”

Sam sighed. “Marcella said no man can ever be trusted, but she was wrong. She never had her own bachelor.”

“You think if she had gone through the games and won her own man, she might have had sympathy for us?”

Sam shrugged, getting tired again. “I don’t think it could have hurt. Marcella wasn’t completely bad. If she had been surrounded by our branch of the family, she might have really been one of us. The corrupting factor was how Julian forced them to set up the council. He kept them at each other’s throats every thirty years, preventing them from ever challenging him. All the threats they made about sending a missile if he invaded were a bluff. Nothing out here works anymore.”

“I’ll bet the UN woman will be relieved to hear that.”

Sam’s voice dropped into cool hard tones. “The UN is *not* allowed to know. No one is. As far as the world is concerned, New America is still a nuclear power. Do you understand?”

Baker quickly nodded and shoved it into the rear of his mind so he wouldn't blurt it out at the wrong time. He didn't understand why Sam was making that decision, but he trusted her.

"It will weaken our position with them if we don't free the males." Sam yawned. "I'll tell you more when I can stay awake."

Baker patted her hand. "Sleep safe, sweetheart. I'll be right here."

Sam drifted off with a smile, positive his would be the first face she saw when she woke.

2

Angelica reached the control booth she had been shown earlier; she paused outside as she heard Claudette's voice. The woman was talking to her superiors again.

While she waited, Angelica scanned the ship that was a marvel to her. Unlike the boats of the fishmongers, the UN ship didn't have bugs or moldy planks groaning as it sailed through the ocean. It was obvious the UN had put their UD's into upgrades. She wished she had hours of unstressed time to explore the many compartments that kept the ship powering through the water. She had been on other boats, but this one made all of those look like the toys she had played with as a young child.

There were dozens of rooms with equipment she couldn't identify, being manned by men and women in blue and white uniforms who smiled at

her and then return to their jobs without asking questions. It was neat, clean, and organized. Angelica wanted this type of navy for their country once they settled things, and then no one would be able to sneak up on them. They would control both water and land.

Claudette disconnected the conversation.

Angelica tapped on the door and stepped in.

“Fresh reports are coming in.”

Angelica settled on a nearby stool, eager for the information.

“The training center has been fully secured. They’re dealing with the bodies and figuring out how to shut everything down. As soon as she’s stable enough to travel, they’re bringing Candice to Pruett Town.”

“As soon as Sam is ready to travel, we’ll go that way, too. It won’t be safe for you and your people to stay here then.”

Claudette understood Angelica was already trying to verify when the UN was going to leave. “Are we going to have trouble later? When the negotiating begins?”

Angelica shrugged, not looking away. “Maybe, but we’ll know the person on the other side can be trusted to keep their word and to do the right thing for their people.”

Claudette was forced to be satisfied with that answer. She really did like these women. “The fighting is finally dying down in the cities. The only problem left is the changeling males have taken

over two connecting towns in southern Pennsylvania. The miners living there are asking for a Pruett negotiator to come make peace. They say they have room for the men, but they need someone to insist on no more violence.”

“The miners are peaceful.” Angelica lifted her brow. “Has Candice sent someone to handle it yet?”

“No.” Claudette’s tone dropped into concern. “She hasn’t regained consciousness.”

Angelica handled it as she thought Candice would. “Tell Mary to go. Take the fighters and do it openly. Broadcasting would be helpful.”

Both women were distracted by a high-pitched chittering outside the boat. The UN ship was sailing through the debris near the shore and disturbing dolphins from their dead body buffet. The long, shiny animals fled from the big boat, chattering and slapping at the water. It was a reminder to Angelica about the state of their world. She sighed. “Tell all Defenders to report to the nearest hub for assignments. Everyone will obey current laws.”

Claudette stared at her in shock. “Why?! You have the power to free them right now and I know you want to. You can’t mean what you said before.”

“I do. I won’t finish what Julian wanted. Candice trusts me to know that. It’s why she sent me and not her mother or mine. They would have broken under this choice.”

Claudette scowled. “You won’t, will you?”

Angelica turned toward the door. “No. I’ll always put the future first now. I am forever changed.”

Chapter Forty-Six

Marked for Life

1

“There she is!” Melissa took off running toward the landing party that was bringing Sam’s stretcher from the UN ship.

The other Runners hurried to catch up, all waving, screaming, or yelling.

Angelica might have been embarrassed in another situation. Instead, she was happy that her sister had such a loyal crew. Most people in New America had learned to betray each other the first chance they got.

The two strong male medics carrying the stretcher concentrated on not letting the women dump their patient onto the ground in their excitement.

Sam didn’t react to the people around them. When the Runners tried to shake her into responding, Angelica shook her head. “They sedated her right before we arrived. She refused to stay in the bed.”

The big women laughed.

“That’s our Sam!”

“She would if Baker was in the bed with her!”

There was fresh amusement as the group escorted the stretcher into the makeshift medical camp that had been set up a few miles from the destroyed fortress. Claudette's people had measured the levels of toxins and declared it safe here.

The Runners hadn't cared where the camp was, as long as Sam was being brought to it. After taking down Bachelor Town, the Runners were eager to be with their leader. They'd enjoyed battling the guards there, but it hadn't been the same without Sam. Finding out she had been gravely injured had angered all of them. They hadn't wanted her to go into the western fortress alone, but Sam had insisted. Now that they knew she would survive, it was okay to be proud of their accomplishment.

"I assume you guys are responsible for the town I flew over?"

"You got to fly? That is awesome!"

"We had a little fun. Boss's orders."

Angelica hadn't doubted that. As soon as she saw the brothels, she'd assumed Sam was responsible for the destruction. Neither of them liked the way the men were treated in those places. Many of the fines they'd received over the years had been for committing acts of violence against brothel owners and renters.

"When will she be up?"

Angelica looked at the medic.

The medic, a healthy male who didn't spend time in the company of women because he worked on an all-male team, blushed. "A couple hours."

Rosa groaned. “Damn. He’s cute.”

The medic flashed her a smile. “You’re not so bad yourself, darlin’.”

His copy of the old world line was too much for Rosa. She shook her head, walking away. “I can’t do that again. I don’t need a mate.”

Angelica gave the medic an encouraging look. “She doesn’t believe in slavery.”

“I’ll remember that.” The man left as the medical people in the tent took over.

The makeshift camp was full of tense, white clad workers who slipped between survivors with supplies and words of encouragement. Claudette had wisely insisted her male troops remain on the ship or inside the tents so they wouldn’t be mistaken for a slave.

“Get over here!”

A local woman slapped her slave’s arm as they walked by, punishing him for not moving fast enough on bare feet.

Angelica was unable to interfere with any of the slaves moving through the camp. Women still had men on leashes. Women were still abusing them. Men were still bleeding. In their lives, nothing had changed yet.

Good mood gone, Angelica went into the tent and joined the Runners as the stretcher was put down. Medics immediately rushed to hook Sam up to the machines that were waiting.

If Sam had been adrift much longer, she wouldn’t have survived. The cute medic had told

Angelica that Baker's actions had slowed the infection, but they wouldn't have been able to stop it out there. Angelica considered it a miracle. Sam's survival was a reward for all the other losses they'd had, and would suffer, because of this war. Hopefully, doing the right thing would make a difference in whatever final judgment lay ahead for all of them.

Another stretcher was brought in, carrying Baker. Awake and disgruntled, he had his arms over his chest and his lip sticking out in a continuous pout as he was placed next to Sam.

Technicians also rushed to hook him to machines, ignoring his mutters about being able to walk.

His rebellious attitude brought chuckles from Angelica and the Runners. The UN women were used to such behavior and didn't react, reminding the Pruettts that the rest of the world was free of their limitations.

"Did they get moving yet?" Melissa looked at Angelica.

Angelica was glad to have a positive answer. "Yes. The training center is empty."

"Good. I'll feel better when Candice gets here."

Angelica understood that. Being away from Jason was torture and she was eager to know Candice's prognosis.

"I heard Candice refused to ride on the UN boat. She made a deal with the fishmongers."

Angelica wasn't surprised. If not for needing help with her rebel males and locating her sister, Angelica would have already asked Claudette and her group to leave. As it was, she didn't expect them to be here much longer. Citizens from this area had been instructed to bring city stocks to feed and care for everyone. The supplies were already arriving in a regular assembly line of wagons and carts. Once Sam could travel, the UN would no longer be required.

Angelica didn't expect that to be a problem. While on the way to the medical camp, Claudette had been contacted by her boss with a possible case of slavery somewhere in South America. Claudette was being dispatched to investigate it as soon as she was finished here, which meant the woman wouldn't dally.

Angelica had briefly considered volunteering to go with the woman as an observer but hadn't. Her country needed her to help with the rebuilding more than she needed to see the world that was now open to all of them. At some point in the future, things would settle and then she could travel. She also didn't want to be away from her family until after the baby was born and probably not for a good bit after that. She had no illusions motherhood would be easy. The few days with Jason and his son, along with watching Daniel and his babies, had convinced her that her game to win Jason's freedom had been a breeze compared to parenthood.

“We have people arriving.” Rosa was in the doorway. “I see Ginny.”

Angelica went out to meet them.

Baker considered who it might be and then motioned Heather over so he could whisper. “We have a member of the East Coast Council in custody. Robert.”

Heather immediately went to tell Angelica.

Baker looked around at the other Runners. “I missed you.”

They all chuckled.

“Well, you won’t have to miss us next time.”

Rosa came over to the cot where Baker was now hooked up, covered up, and looked like a cow in a blanket. She took a tattoo box from the pocket of her charred cloak, making a mental note to restock the fire supplies. They’d used all of it in the stockrooms. People always made the mistake of putting flammables next to their nonperishables.

Baker held still as Rosa neared his neck with the device. “I don’t understand.”

She roughly slapped a tattoo in the place next to the Pruett family crest.

Baker was listening for the answer and barely felt the minor pain that was nothing compared to what he had experienced during his adventure here in the west.

“You’re one of us now.” Rosa clapped, a bit sad. She had hoped to do this with Greg. “You’re the first male Runner on Sam’s crew. Uphold that position with honor.”

Baker couldn't stop the tears. He knew it wasn't manly to shed them in front of the females, but he was touched they were accepting him. "I'll be a good mate for her. I promise."

Rosa smiled. "This isn't because she finds you pleasing in bed or because you're as tough as she is. It's because you've changed us. You're a good man and you've made us see that slavery is wrong. We hope you'll continue to influence us in the right direction on the new paths to freedom that we all expect to take together now."

Baker was honored and speechless. He had no idea what to say.

Rosa knew how to fill the sappy moment. "Now that that's over, I need a mug and a male. Who's got my back?"

Baker couldn't help the chuckle. He liked these big women and he was proud to be considered strong enough to be a part of their crew. He would never dishonor them. *They're my family now.*

2

Angelica stared at the leashed, bound, filthy slave who glared at her in bloody, unbroken defiance. He was barely clothed, barely fed, and exhausted. It was like looking at the bachelors she had helped rescue, except Angelica felt no sympathy.

Robert was in a cart being pulled by two of the Runners that Sam had left in the East. Heather had

delivered Baker's words and Hope had filled her in on their hostage, but neither had details to give. She'd just said Sam ordered a pickup and they'd found Robert waiting in the care of some rental rebels. This story would have to wait until Sam was better, Angelica decided, or at least until she could be alone with Robert's guards. They were surrounded by citizens from the west right now. Many of those had already asked about Sam's condition, expressing concern for their new ruler. It was obvious the local population here had seen Sam's interview and statements. They knew she was Marcella's heir.

The UN people were also seeing and hearing that, lending credence to the family claim on leadership of the country. They did control all of the key areas. The statement Candice had released about the Tennessee Crossing and the Georgia hub were also true. The people holding those areas were paid Defenders that the Pruetts had collected during their travels over the years. The news stations were under the control of Dana and her group of smugglers. Dana had been responsible for helping get men out of the complex for years. Angelica had no idea how the reporter had been doing it under Julian's nose, but she was impressed. Dana would definitely have a place in the restructuring.

"Is there someplace we can store him?" Hope was also ready for a mug and a male.

Angelica knew the honorable thing to do was to take Robert into custody, present him to the UN as

a prisoner of war, and turn him over to them for a global tribunal that would charge him with crimes against humanity. Eventually, some sort of justice would be served. Robert would be the sole target for everyone's anger and hatred.

Angelica knew that was the decision her family honor demanded, but she couldn't do it. Robert would have a lavish cell for a decade or more before ever facing a true sentence and even then, his death wouldn't be allowed. Claudette had already made the mistake of telling Angelica that capital punishment didn't exist in most of the world. "He's a rental male. Put him in one of the brothel tents."

Hope gaped at Angelica.

Next to her, Ginny hid a family grin. "There's another camp building up a few miles from here. No UN people there. They could use a rental worker."

Angelica nodded, seeing Robert was too drugged to protest. "Candice needs to be informed in case she wants to make use of his services."

Ginny understood Robert was to be kept alive in case Candice overruled Angelica's choice.

Robert finally roused himself as the cart turned. His drunken words were barely understandable. "I am a council member! I am a council member!"

Hope slammed her boot against the cart. "One more word and I'll cut out your tongue!"

Robert snapped his mouth shut. Hope had already convinced him on the way here that she didn't bluff. He had several scars to prove it.

Hope pulled the cart down the dirt path between the tents and disappeared.

Angelica looked at Ginny. “She could probably still use a hand.”

Ginny stared at Angelica for a moment longer and then surprised them both. “Can I buy him from you?”

Angelica burst out laughing. “Of course. I don’t have room for two.”

Ginny hurried off to look after her new slave.

Rosa had stayed close enough to the tent flap to spot anyone trying to sneak in, but she had also followed Angelica to be able to listen. As the girl came back, Rosa stopped her. “I’m surprised you did that.”

Angelica was already feeling guilty. “Was it wrong?”

“No. In fact, letting him live was more than he deserved.” Rosa reached into her pocket and pulled out a familiar item. She stepped toward Angelica before the girl could react and placed the tool against her neck.

Angelica was too surprised to feel the pain. “I’m confused.” She had wanted to be an official member of her sister’s crew for years, but she had been afraid to ask because she didn’t feel like she was as hard or as intimidating. Sam had never made the offer, leading Angelica to believe she felt the same. New members of the crew could only be added by unanimous choice and that included Sam.

“Welcome to the Runners.”

“Did my sister agree to this?”

“She would if we had bothered to ask her, but we didn’t need to. You’ve proved yourself worthy.”

Angelica couldn’t stop the scowl. “Because I lied to the UN and sold a member of the council into slavery?”

“We would never reward you for something like that. Can you think of anything you’ve done that would make you deserving of this?”

Angelica smirked. “Nope.”

Rosa snorted. “You didn’t give up on Sam. You knew she was out there somewhere and you found her. We love your sister the way you do. In time, you’ll have that same bond with us. We’ll all be your sisters.”

It was a great moment for Angelica. She had always believed she bonded with Candice because she hadn’t had anyone else in her life. Her parents had been cold, distant figures and her sister had been an absolute legend. Latching onto Candice had been a survival reflex. Now, she would have the rest of the emotional support she needed, along with people to keep her safe and entertained during the upcoming adventures she was sure to have as the country was restructured.

Around them, the tent camp was noisy and smelly, with citizens coming and going in every direction. UN employees and locals were interacting without violence, eager to exchange information. People here had long been denied

knowledge of the outside world. It was great for them.

It was hard on the UN workers. Thanks to Angelica insisting none of the laws had changed yet, Claudette was unable to interfere with the activities in the tents. She was only allowed to help. It made it hard for the employees to witness the abuse, past and present, of the slaves, but few of the women were interested in hurting their men right now. The UN people were an exotic mystery. It kept them occupied.

Angelica was smiling as she returned to the medical tent.

Baker noticed it as she entered. "What made you so happy?"

Angelica shrugged. "A little council justice. I'll tell you about it later, after Ginny has a mug and her male."

Baker could guess from that. If it had been any other man, he might have protested, but he hated the Network and everything they had stood for. The council member deserved to be punished. Robert would suffer the fate he had sentenced countless males to during his time on the council. With every scream, and every drop of blood and semen that was taken from him, souls would find peace and their country would heal. "Congrats."

Angelica grinned, nodding at him. "You, too."

They both fingered their new tattoos and enjoyed the moment.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Scribes

Pruett Town

2 Days Later

1

“**A**ngelica! The boats are here!”

Angelica didn't respond to Rosa's shout. Candice, along with the rest of their family, was arriving via the fishmongers that she and Jason had befriended. They'd been able to sail most of the way home. They had been met at a tiny dock three miles from town. Candice's prognosis hadn't changed, requiring a vehicle pickup instead of the usual Mopar she wouldn't be able to control. Angelica wasn't going to join them yet. Candice would be taken straight to the new house. Angelica would see her there.

The UN was continuing to prove useful. Claudette had insisted on sending them a medical transport. The vehicle had prevented Sam from being jostled around so much that it damaged the repairs on her injury. She hadn't liked it, but she'd submitted when Baker insisted. It had taken them two days to reach home, and they'd been joined by people along the way who had fought in the rebellion or been affected by it. Groups of refugees

had followed Sam from the west, and were now squatting in tents outside Pruett Town. The locals here were caring for the refugees, using Network supplies that were being delivered by reassigned Defenders.

Footsteps and shouts sounded as more citizens heard the arrivals and went to greet their hero. Angelica felt the need to go keep things under control, but resisted. It had become natural to her to enforce the peace as a member of their bounty crew, but she wasn't a hunter anymore.

Angelica scanned the basement again. The homestead had been burned, but the fire left an untouched basement hatch. Upon opening it with her code, Angelica had discovered their possessions intact. The flames hadn't gotten through, though the space was still smoky. Angelica was relieved and knew Candice would be as well. Not only had they bled and wept to gather these items, some of them were irreplaceable.

Angelica tucked the framed document under her arm. The town had generously given them a place to stay until they could rebuild, but Angelica didn't know when they would be able to start on that. There were too many other things ahead of it. They weren't exactly destitute, however. The family had several other dens and houses that held stashes of items that they would need to recover their wealth. It would be up to Candice as to how they did that or whether or not they even needed to. In fact, everything was up to Candice.

Angelica left the basement with a spring in her step and hope in her heart. Everything would be different for their people now.

As Angelica emerged, she found Baker perched in the poisonous thorn trees that lined the property. They'd survived, though the bark had charred off to reveal green mantis eggs. It wasn't the first time their home had burnt down, though it was the first occurrence during her lifetime.

Baker nodded at the document under her arm. "Candice will like that being brought up."

Angelica wondered if Baker was nervous about meeting his little brother after so many years or if he had just felt like going for a walk. He was allowed to do that now. In this town, men were safe.

"We should have known something was up with you when you got near our pets."

Baker stroked the tree that was vibrating under his body like the purr of a mountain cat. "I understand wild things."

Angelica laughed. After Baker's relationship with Candice and Sam, Angelica didn't doubt that was true. She'd also had an opportunity to be with Baker, but preferred friendship. As a result, it was like talking to an older brother.

"Are you okay?"

Angelica gave him a funny look. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I hear Jason's son is a handful." It was Baker's way of mentioning Rankin without saying her name.

Angelica stiffened, but only a little. "I'm working through it. I don't blame the boy."

Baker was glad to hear that.

"What's going on?" Angelica could tell there was a problem by the way he was staring.

"I want to have a baby with Sam."

Angelica gaped.

Baker didn't tell her why. He assumed she could guess he wanted that bond with her sister—the kind she and Jason were going to have.

Baker jumped to the ground. "When everything is settled, are you going to join the Runners?"

"Are you?"

They stared at each other, neither willing to answer first.

Angelica snorted. "I know what you want."

Baker gave her an innocent look. "I got what I wanted."

"That's not all or you'd be done with me and be back with Sam right now."

Baker chuckled, throaty voice sending chills over her hot skin. "What do I want, *Angel*?"

Angelica spun around and punched him in the arm.

Baker staggered, wincing. "Ouch!"

Angelica rolled her eyes.

Baker understood he might be making her angry with the act and gave in. "Okay, so I do want something from you."

Angelica snorted. "You want me to help you convince my sister to stay home for a year and have

a child before we all go off exploring the world together.”

Baker flushed. “Yeah.”

Angelica shrugged. “Okay. The country can always use more like us.”

Baker draped an arm around her shoulders without fear or feeling a flinch in response. “Yes, it can. We’re awesome.” He gave her a quick hug. “Thank you.”

She shoved him away, not wanting the town to witness her being emotional. “Get lost.”

Baker jogged off, eager to be back with Sam.

Angelica walked, enjoying the sights and sounds of victory. Their town had been thrilled that Candice was coming home instead of setting up shop in a city. Upon learning she intended to make this her center of operations, the town had voted to give them a large apartment. The former owner had died during the rebellion.

Angelica thought it was generous. The women here had already received the vaccine or the cure from Network stashes and were starting to feel relief from the disease as their immune systems copied the chemicals and slowly flushed out the poison. The locals were happier with every hour that went by. It made sense that they would be grateful enough, and greedy enough, to want Candice to make their town prosper in the way the council had always encouraged of New Network City. Angelica hoped that wouldn’t happen here. Once they finished

cleaning up the slums, this place would be beautiful. A city skyline didn't belong here.

Angelica heard more vehicles coming and increased her pace. There were already signs of the new future in the town around her. The brothel was closed. There were no males inside and no screams echoing to disturb the peace. Everyone here understood abusing men was no longer allowed, though the official laws hadn't changed yet. Pruett Town would be the first place of safety, but that would spread. Women here now hoped that over time, abuse of males would fade into a horrible memory that wouldn't be forgotten but could be forgiven.

Angelica had her doubts. Many of the men who were accepting comfort from new protectors here would be furious if Candice didn't free them. They would turn in open rebellion and there would be little that she could do about it. Tara and Julian had been right. It was a catch-22. Every male was talking about freedom and what he was going to do with it—like Baker's rebels had been. They were also discussing how to be reunited with their children. Candice was likely already working on those plans, but she was never going to agree to take babes from their mothers. That would increase the male anger. Angelica hoped her cousin would find a solution where no one else could.

The males who understood true freedom was close had chosen to take homes in their town. They didn't feel comfortable enough to flaunt themselves

in doorways and windows yet, or to linger on porches, but their happiness was unmistakable. Male amusement was rolling through the streets, singeing changeling nerves and making women sigh in loneliness. Once those two populations began to mix, their country would start to recover. Angelica wished the same could be said for Candice. Walking was something she would never do again. The medics all agreed on that.

Angelica stepped inside the large townhome that she, Candice, and Sam were going to share. The front room was full of visiting train males that the three women had helped, along with the Runners. All of them nodded or smiled, but they didn't stop talking. They had no reason to fear a female entering this home.

The new house was more lavish than the family was used to, containing six beds and sturdy furniture that even the Pruetts wouldn't have been able to afford. Angelica assumed locals had gathered these things from Network hubs. There was no reason not to use the items. The house was also stocked with food, supplies, and a small number of weapons the townswomen had gathered in a show of support. If there was fighting here, they wanted the Pruetts to be able to defend them. There were also curtains over the windows and even a welcome mat outside the apartment. It didn't have their name on it yet, but one of the rebel males would certainly take care of that as soon as paint sets were given to the artists in their group.

Angelica entered the study, where Sam was sprawled on a couch with an illegal book. Her injury was almost healed, but Baker was making her rest anyway.

Angelica hung the framed document on the wall across from the bed where Candice was going to be placed. She could hear her cousin arriving. Daniel would carry her in. Candice wouldn't want people to witness that weakness, so Angelica didn't send a greeting party to welcome her.

Sam watched Angelica straighten the frame on the wall, lips twitching. "Do you remember when we got that?"

Angelica nodded. "Only from the outside. I couldn't go in then. I was young and Candice wasn't sure if I was capable of killing yet."

Sam's eyes were haunted. "I felt the same way. We were shocked to come out and find the bodies."

"The swamp women snuck up on me while I was stomping around, complaining about being left out. I almost died there."

"We all knew, Angel. Me, Candice, and Aunt Mary. We all understood right then that you were one of us. When the moment came, you survived on your own."

"You guys still wouldn't let me go in on runs for a long time."

"We didn't want you to get cocky, like Bobby."

Angelica pulled a face to cover her real thoughts on that. "I'll bet Aunt Mary was thrilled to have him along."

Sam let out a deep sigh. "I just know I'm thrilled that I avoided his company for most of this adventure."

Both women laughed and then quieted as male voices mirrored their amusement from the next room. The sound took getting used to. It was good, but rare enough to pluck nerves and remind them they had changed once again.

"Any morning sickness yet?"

Angelica blushed. "No."

"I heard raw vulture eggs will settle it."

Angelica groaned as her stomach twisted. "Now you're just being mean."

Sam laughed. "What are sisters for?"

They both stilled as male voices lifted in excitement.

"It's Daniel and Candice!"

"There's Jason!"

The men all got up to greet the couple as they entered.

Angelica and Sam waited. They had no doubt Daniel would join Baker and Jason to exchange his part of the story after he got Candice settled. Outside providing protection for the house, Sam's on-duty Runners were doing the same with any local who would listen. The bragging women were being tolerated by the town because they were heroes, but it was obvious they were still wild. It had come as a shock to everyone except Sam and Baker when the females had refused the cure.

Rosa had explained it as a fear of losing the rage that made them who they were. Sam said the women would eventually want the cure; forcing them wasn't the way to handle it. Angelica agreed, though she would insist on her child receiving the vaccine at birth. She'd had enough of their family burning alive.

Angelica didn't think she would be able to forgive and forget the awful things the Network had forced her to suffer, but she was no longer worried about burning up or burning out. Now, she wanted the suffering of her fellow citizens to ease. Then she wanted peace to live her life with her mate and their children, and to explore the world. Many people had the same plans. Surprisingly, though, it was the citizens and not the Defenders who wanted the adventure.

"Cain?"

"B-Baker?"

There was another wave of shouts and cheers as Baker was reunited with his little brother. Sam watched the shadows on the wall, happy for Baker when the boy flew across the floor and into his arms.

"Never leave me! Never leave me!"

Baker hugged the boy, crying again. "I won't, little man. It's you and me now."

Daniel came in with Candice in his arms, big shoulders easily supporting her weight. He looked good. *Really good.*

Angelica and Sam gaped.

Candice grinned. “That’s love, ladies. Yours will be the same in time.”

The girls laughed as Daniel blushed. He placed Candice in the waiting bed, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, and then scurried from the room to join his buddies.

It was wonderful to see him acting upon his own needs and desires without requiring permission. Angelica and Sam were looking forward to the time when their men felt comfortable enough to do that. Being back around Daniel would speed up the process.

Candice adjusted herself in the bed, not wincing. There wasn’t any pain. Her leg was a dead appendage that refused to respond to any of her commands, though she was trying daily therapy anyway. Julian’s medics had insisted there was no hope, but she was a Pruett. *We never give up.*

Angelica and Sam waited for Candice to get comfortable. As she did, they listened to the men in the other room and marveled at how fast their lives had changed. Candice had only left for her game to rescue Daniel three months ago, but it felt like it had been much longer. What they’d accomplished should have been impossible in that amount of time, but everyone in their country had been ready for a different future. This family had been able to give it to them.

“Before we talk about anything else, there’s something I need to tell you both.”

Angelica’s expression tightened.

Sam looked at Candice, sadness all over her face. "We know."

Candice wasn't surprised, but it was still her duty to inform them. "I'm sorry. We haven't recovered their bodies yet, but Camille and Amos will be given full honors."

"Angelica and I discussed it briefly on the way here. We'd like them to be cremated. We're going to scatter their ashes on the ocean. We believe they would have loved it there."

"How did you know?"

"They weren't at the training center with you." Angelica refused to feel the pain. Mourning her parents was coming in short, painful blows that she preferred to deal with in private.

"They were killed in the blast with Jonas and the Glowers. If not for them, the ape might not have cracked the dome. We owe them a lot."

Both women agreed, but they didn't want to discuss it further.

Candice understood. "Ready for your new jobs as my scribes?"

Sam laughed, shrugging. "Okay. What's a scribe?"

Candice snickered, aware that she was joking.

"Has anyone heard from Mary and Bruce?" Candice had been out of the loop while the fishmongers brought her up river and delivered her to the medical car. Radio communication had been spotty during the trip.

“They’re on the way. It’s almost calm now.” Angelica was still taking advantage of her relationship with the United Nations. Claudette had offered to send the chopper to pick Mary up and Angelica had accepted.

“People are gathering. We’ll need to expand the town.”

Candice nodded at Sam’s observation. “After Adelpia, all of us will gather here and begin restructuring plans. Right now, I want to handle things we won’t do then, things that either won’t be handled publicly or need to be handled now.”

“Like what?”

“Start with threats and enemies.”

Sam ran through that list quickly. “A few of the Glowers are here. We detained them on the premise that the vaccine takes weeks to work.”

“That won’t hold them long. You’ll need to send Defenders out to shut down their dens.”

“We’ll pass the word about our wishes.” Angelica didn’t like the decision, but she certainly understood. With Jonas dying next to the ape, both leaders were gone and the Glowers were already starting to scatter into the countryside. If they didn’t get a hold on them now, that disease would be the next to spread across the country and maybe the world.

“We’re still holding Robert.” Angelica lowered her voice. “I sold him to Ginny.”

Candice sighed. “I’ll decide what to do about him later.”

Neither of the women protested, but it was hardest for Angelica. She should have already turned him over to the UN's justice. Robert was currently serving eight-hour shifts, five days a week, as a top rental in the refugee camp brothel. Whenever he was finally brought in, Angelica expected him to be a completely different person—exactly what he had done to males for years.

“I want the subway made free, indefinitely, so people can make it to the vote we'll hold in medical facilities. They'll hold more people at once and we can vaccinate or cure them at the same time. Our financial institutions have been interrupted and our economy is fragile. Freeze prices on basic things, lower prices where needed, and stop people from gouging. I don't want anyone starving during the transition.”

Angelica and Sam were now taking notes. Despite Candice's words about them being scribes, they hadn't realized she would be giving them instructions. It was still a surprise to remember that they were in charge of the country.

As Candice waited for them to catch up, she also reflected on the changes that had happened. She didn't dwell on the injury at all. The loss of one limb was a tiny price to her in comparison to the liberation that was happening. It would take the rest of her life, and the lives of her descendants, but they would be able to atone for the sins of the past and fix the mistakes of the leaders who had come before them. It pleased her that the Pruett family, who had

caused a lot of this chaos, would be responsible for fixing it.

Every one of them owed it to their country and to the citizens around them. Family curses couldn't be removed. They could only be atoned for and she was in the middle of doing that, with a nice first victory under her belt. Actually freeing the men from slavery and eliminating the disease would be the next victories. Candice expected it to take decades. In the meantime, she had thousands of other areas that would have to be fixed or broken down and rebuilt. She honestly couldn't wait to get started on it all. The rest of her family would have adventures and carry on their ruthless reputation. *I have the honor of leading them.*

Chapter Forty-Eight

All Better

1

“**T**here he is!”

Bobby had just entered the home. Lydia was in the middle of the Runners, enjoying their stories and telling her own.

Angelica subtly moved to the doorway to observe the reunion. Bobby had two blackened eyes that were starting to heal. He'd been punished repeatedly and one of those moments had been by Mary. Lydia had to be disappointed.

Bobby stopped in the doorway, spotting his owner in the center of a victory pile. All the men and women in this room had proven themselves. Bobby flushed in shame.

Lydia sighed as the room quieted. “Now, you get it?”

Bobby flushed. “I’m sorry I insisted. I won’t do it again.”

Lydia’s disappointment was clear, but she still waved him over. “Come here.”

Bobby grinned, hurrying into her arms.

Lydia kissed him softly and stroked his glossy hair. “Is that all better?”

Bobby nodded, settling against her.

Everyone else burst out laughing.

Angelica looked over to find Candice asleep. It was obvious their fearless leader was seriously injured beyond the paralyzed leg.

Sam had come to the same conclusion. “I connected some pieces I think we should talk about.”

“Do you want to wait for Candice to wake up?”

Sam shook her head. “Pretty sure she already knows. It’s you I’m concerned about.”

Angelica frowned. “You know about mom.”

Sam let out the breath she’d taken. “That makes this easier.”

The stepsisters regarded each other.

“Julian played with our lives. With *their* lives.”

Sam nodded. She and Angelica were both Pruett, but from different branches.

“At least we know she didn’t cheat on dad now.”

Sam grunted. She’d hated her mother for a long time for the affair that had produced a black haired child in a branch of all blondes. She’d loved Angelica, but it could have gone the other way. She might have spent her life hating all of them when they hadn’t known Julian was mixing Pruett cocktails each time they went in for a conception. Network law required samples brought in from the father that were cleaned and implanted. Only the poorer populations had been reduced to a metal table with straps and syringes for breeding. It had been easy for Julian to manipulate things.

“I still don’t understand what he was trying to accomplish.” Angelica sat next to Sam so their voices wouldn’t carry to the various people around them. “How could making me and Candice help him with immortality?”

“I don’t get all of it either, but it has something to do with the offspring he would have made from a child with one of you. They’d been doing it so long that they’d almost perfected extracting the flawed parts, the parts that allow the aging process.”

“So a child, with him would have lived longer. And each child after that, even longer, until immortality was reached?”

“Exactly.”

“Why him?” Angelica’s lip curled. “He wasn’t impressive in any way except his mental capabilities. Little Cain has more muscles.”

Sam snickered. “I suspect the council sank into complacency over the years and didn’t keep buff. It was probably also a way to blend in. A group of men with huge arms might have drawn attention.”

“Wouldn’t that have eroded the DNA?”

“Of course, but that’s where the wild branches came in. He waited for one of us to show ourselves stronger or smarter, and then lured us in with a bachelor. We came home with a man and the next step could be taken because we all get bloodwork while we’re there. You know. Even the time trials require a blood sample.”

Angelica nodded. The Network had claimed it was to prove who the player was, but Sam’s theory

made more sense. “After a while, burnout kicks in and we want a child?”

“Yes. So we go to the complex, thinking we’ve chosen the father.”

“But Julian switched it.” Angelica was horrified. “How long? How many of us?”

Sam shrugged. “We’re still gathering the information, but at least most of Julian’s life. I watched the rest of the bunker meetings on the file.” Sam handed the disk to her sister. “When you’re done, make sure Candice gets it.”

“You gave her a summary?”

“Yes. It’s nothing she has to cover now, but you’ll both find it interesting. From their discussions on cryostasis, they believed they were only a few years from being able to start experimenting with reviving some of the old ones.”

Angelica shuddered. “Implanting heads on bodies?”

Sam remembered Angelica hadn’t been in the bunker with her. “No. They still had bodies. I assume the scientists were going to insert the stronger DNA into the cryochambers for treatments. It would have taken years of that for their bodies to adjust and reproduce it on their own.”

“And how many kids had to die to get the crap they were injecting?”

“Thousands, Angel. That’s why Julian was ready to put the final part of Lucas’s plan in motion. Those couples need time to be matched up, bred, and the babies gestated to the proper age for

removal. They knew it would take years to conquer the women once they turned the changeling men loose. Their only flaw was acting before Julian's final batch of men was ready. The few hundred in the city couldn't infect enough changelings. They didn't have the numbers."

"We got lucky to figure this out."

"I think so, too. Candice forced his hand by not letting me reach the game. The dome wasn't supposed to fall for another week. By then, his tests at the training center would have been done and he would have ordered all males in their possession to receive the new injections. With another week to carry it out while I was in the dome, keeping it from being attacked, the hubs would have distributed it to towns across the country. We wouldn't have been able to stop it."

"So he only had the men in the complex to let out?"

"And not all of those. Dana and the Den Mothers have been sneaking them out in high numbers since we took the Network Rider in the Borderlands. Candice warned them."

"Does she know? About our..." Angelica didn't want to say it.

Sam nodded. "She knew as soon as she saw Julian. Didn't you?"

Angelica dropped her head. That's why she'd wanted him dead.

"Don't do that!"

Angelica's chin went up at Sam's sharp scold.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of and neither does Candy. In fact, you both have a lot to be proud of.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey! You’re a Pruett. Act like it.”

Angelica left the room.

Sam sighed. She had no doubt that Candice had reacted the same way when Daniel tried to comfort her. It would take them time to adjust. Not many people knew, even among their family. The public would never know most of the horrors Julian and his kind were responsible for, but those who did would have to find a way to live with it.

2

“Are you ready?”

Candice nodded at Daniel’s question. They’d just finished a tense meal where people had fought not to protest the schedule she’d set. They were leaving for Adelpia.

Candice took in a deep breath to steady her voice. How she sounded mattered just as much as the words did. She pushed the button to begin broadcasting. “My name is Candice Pruett. I am responsible for the coup against both Networks—east and west. For the moment, I’m your new boss, so pay attention!”

Candice wanted to be sure everyone believed she was just as ruthless as Julian and his henchmen had been, so they wouldn’t cross her.

“With a lot of help, I have liberated New America from the tyranny of the councils. Never again will this country be allowed to fall into corruption. My family and I will take the next six months and put things in order before turning this country over to your elected representative. I’ll tell you more about that later. Right now, I’m giving you changes that are to be put into effect immediately. First, the games are abolished! Other laws will be discussed and voted upon, but this one has no room for compromise. I will no longer stand by and watch my fellow women kill each other because of a disease that can be stopped. That brings me to the next item of business. In ten days, all citizens will report to their nearest medical center for a cure. For those who have not yet presented symptoms, we have a vaccine. I repeat: we have both a vaccine and a cure for Rage Walkers disease. All females in New America will present themselves to a medical station in ten days.”

There was a pause and static where everyone could feel Candice weighing her next words. Many of them automatically assumed the topic was slavery.

“I was not elected to this job. I took it from the people who held it before me. That is repeating the same mistakes. To account for this, I am demanding a countrywide vote in six months for a President. However, our previous constitution will be instituted immediately in most ways. Copies will be distributed as soon as they can be made and election

procedures will be outlined.” Candice paused again, speaking from her heart and her hatred. “This is a hard time for all of you. You’ve suffered terrible losses, and your lives have been disrupted—some of it through no fault of your own. You feel like you’ve been abandoned by your rulers and the disease is slowly wearing you down until there’s no hope. I know how that feels, but this is a lie that has been perpetrated by both councils to keep us under control. That type of leadership will not be repeated. We will learn to adjust to the disease. We will get control of ourselves. We will be vaccinated and cured, and we will learn to live with each other without violence.”

Across the country, mutters, mumbles, and shouts, filled the air in every town. Some of it was resentment, but most of it was anger at finding out the councils had been able to help them but chose not to.

“I’m telling you these things because many of you are going to be tempted to pick me as your President simply because I liberated you. That is the wrong reason to elect someone. If you’re not going to approve of the choices I make, then you shouldn’t vote for me. My biggest goal is to free *all* the slaves. I don’t expect that to happen overnight and I’m not going to make instant laws that hurt you financially, but hear me clearly. If you pick me as your President, I will free your slaves or die trying. Between now and the election, I will do everything I can to set that into motion. Males are human

beings and it's time we treated them, and ourselves, with respect by recognizing it. We're better than that. Now, we'll act like it."

Angelica approved of the speech, but she doubted many others did. She could hear shouts from their townswomen and assumed the rest of their country was experiencing the same emotions. Angelica was also surprised that Candice was admitting so much. She was glad of it, but she wasn't sure it would allow her cousin to win the election.

"As a candidate, I am obliged to tell you that I am paralyzed as a result of this war. I have no movement in one of my legs, and not only will I not be able to defend myself, but I will also require security because it will make me an easy target for anyone out there who wants to claim my spot or perform a coup. Weaknesses must be disclosed by all candidates. Now, does that mean I will be less effective? I think it's evident that I have support in all areas of the country. My decisions are fair, based on solid values and the justice we've never received from the Network. I hope to be forthright with you and not handle you, but instead treat you as the recovering victims you are, that *we all* are. What has happened in our country for the last four centuries is an atrocity that will never be repeated. Unlike this message, which will repeat until you've heard it so much that you have it memorized."

Sam was also aware of the hostile reactions to the address Candice had ordered to be broadcast

once an hour for the next ten days. It would ensure that every soul in the country understood leadership had changed. She had already scheduled the first meeting of their new council. Sam had surprised them all by insisting Candice hold it in Adelphia.

“I am issuing pardons for everyone who helped me liberate New Network City, and for everyone who aided with the rebellion. That includes the mountain clans, who are now free to travel, and the mutant fish women. Neither of those clans is banned from society. All Glowers will report to the nearest medical center for vaccinations or the cure.”

Angelica winced. *That’s a lie. All Glowers have to be removed. We can’t take a chance on Julian’s shots against their disease.*

“All Diva gang members are also pardoned. The elimination orders are rescinded. Bodies can be collected and taken to the usual locations for burial.” Candice drew in another breath, ready to be done and on the way to Adelphia. “There were no survivors of either council, so we have no one left to blame, no one to bring to trial or to execute for the horrible atrocities committed against us. Because of the rage we all feel over not having a target, I’m ordering changelings to volunteer for Defender duty. You’ll be given jobs and activities to help you release the anger until the cure or vaccine can take effect.” Candice’s voice softened. “I’m going to talk to you again. You’ll hear me and see me, and know what I stand for. I’m a Pruett. We don’t hide. We fight for the truth and we never bluff.

Please don't test me on these new laws and adjustments to our lives. I'll make it better for everyone or I'll kill us all. There is no middle ground. Anyone you elect will be held to that same standard and there will always be one of us standing over her neck with an axe, waiting to swing it. This is my promise to you all. A new day has dawned."

Chapter Forty-Nine

Animal Attraction

1

“**T**here are people following us.”

Angelica’s head disappeared from the window of the medical transport vehicle before Candice or Sam could reply.

Sam looked at Candice. “She’s twitchy.”

Candice shrugged. “I thought she would expect it.”

The two women were in the medical transport with a pile of pillows and blankets they’d both refused to use.

“She didn’t spend time in the cities the way we did during our part of the rebellion. She doesn’t know how the public feels about us.”

Sam’s expression implied she didn’t either.

Candice didn’t ease the fears, continuing the usual family tradition of making people figure things out for themselves while dealing with the moments of stress. It was a hard way, a hard lesson, but it had brought them through a war with only a few deaths. Those people would be missed, but the sacrifice could have been much worse.

“It almost seems like you don’t want her to bond with the public.”

Candice forced herself not to clap the way Julian would have. Spending time around him hadn't been good for her. "Angelica has more rage than you or I do now. We're going to be limited for a while, and one of us, forever. She doesn't have those limitations. The weight of the reputation that allows us to keep control over the chaos will fall on her young shoulders."

"We'll be there to help her."

"As will her mate and her children. Not having to stay away from the rest of us will also give her a support structure so she doesn't have to maintain the hard façade continuously the way we have."

It was the first time Sam had ever heard Candice admit an emotional weakness. Sam instantly bonded with her in ways that she hadn't before. Sam suspected they'd gone through many of the same struggles.

From what Angelica had told them about her adventures, the only part of it that had truly been life or death for her had been the fight with Tara. That had been an impressive battle, but she hadn't been on the edge of dying the entire time. She also hadn't seen the worst of their citizens. Instead, Angelica had viewed the evil of the outside world and protected her country and her family from it even as she used it to her advantage. She would negotiate with the UN for the return of their males from Canada, among other things. Candice planned to handle some of that during the radio address from

Adelphia. She hadn't spoken to the representative yet. She was looking forward to it.

Sam watched the countryside roll by through one of the small windows, aware of her Runners making continuous passes around the convoy. Candice had insisted they travel openly on main roads to provide stability and calm for a country that was in the middle of being rebirthed. They only had to deal with the placenta at this point, but that was still hard, painful work.

"We could find a way for you to be out there with her now, if it's bothering you."

Sam was glad Candice understood her injury was almost healed. "After facing Tara, she can probably handle a few angry citizens."

Candice agreed. Angelica wasn't alone, however. Sam's Runners, along with a few dozen other various people who had joined in the rebellion were escorting them.

Candice turned around for a brief moment of eye contact with Daniel. He and Baker were in the front, with Jason. When Daniel had requested lessons, Candice had pushed him toward the driver seat and climbed into the back with Sam's help. The ride had been stop-n-go for the first half an hour until he got the hang of it, but now, six hours later, they were chugging along at a nice pace. When they took their break at Lake Wilma, the men would switch drivers. Candice and Sam weren't looking forward to two more sessions that jerked guts around and gave them headaches, but neither of

them thought of protesting. Having their convoy driven by three males was drawing a lot of attention.

That was another reason Angelica was twitchy. There were females around them who didn't trust the men, though most of the male changelings had now calmed. They only had one trouble spot left in the country and that would be taken care of shortly. Candice liked showing the citizens that not all men were bad and not all women were violent. They were a moving convoy of fifty, with free males and females in the mix. It was something the country hadn't witnessed in four centuries.

Angelica's face appeared back in the window. She was riding one of the few horses that had been brought from the west by the refugees from the fortress. "It's a group of locals from the town we're about to pass. They want to ride along."

Candice waved a hand. "You're in charge of security."

Angelica flashed a grin and disappeared again. "Fall into the rear!"

Sam tried to find a comfortable spot on the padded bench. "Should I tell her she's not supposed to get friendly?"

Candice shook her head. "She already knows."

"Are you sure? I didn't."

Candice gave her cousin a teasing grin. "You aren't the brains of the pair. You're the brawn."

Sam chuckled. "I'm definitely that." Her hand went to the bandage on her stomach that covered the nastiest injury she'd ever had. Baker's stitches had

been a survival reaction that kept her alive, but they'd needed to be removed upon her rescue. Sam would never forget the pain of them being cut out in the places where the flesh had begun to heal around the rope. They'd been removed by a clumsy male medic with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks who had flinched at every sound outside the tent. He had been the one exception to Claudette's brave people and it had drawn Sam's attention. She glanced at Candice. "I saw some things in the west."

Candice nodded. "I saw some things in the south. Angelica told me about things in the north. The rebels have information on the east. We have all the pieces now. As soon as we're all together, we'll complete the puzzle."

2

Their arrival at the Lake Wilma safe house was noticed before they reached it. Tents and vehicles of people were lining the road. Word had obviously spread that they were on their way, though none of them had mentioned stopping here on the way.

Angelica immediately moved toward a medical transport vehicle to protect the most important passengers. Jamie, along with Chester and Daniel's children, and Cain, were in the vehicle behind Candice and Sam. Angelica went to guard the children.

Tension flew through most of the convoy now; the size of the crowd was increasing the closer they

got to the safe house. There were a variety of people in it, but no enemies as far as the Pruetts could tell. None of the snakes had survived and the remaining Divas numbered less than two dozen. It was a relief to know most of the family threats were gone. Sam and Candice were both ready for peace.

A noise echoed around them, slowly growing louder until it was unmistakable. The people were cheering.

Candice closed her eyes. When Daniel had been ripped from her arms, she had dreamed of moments like this night after night. Even back then, she had known the only way she would ever be able to escape the haunting pain of losing him was to make sure it could never happen again. Now, the moment was here.

Sam was shocked. “Are you crying?”

Candice didn’t try to hide the tears of joy.

Sam didn’t push, astounded at a display of emotion from Candice. She had known her cousin was capable of warmth, but she had never thought to see it.

The cheering grew louder, becoming almost too much for changeling ears as the convoy moved through hundreds of people who were no longer under Network control. They obviously knew who was responsible.

As they neared the lake and the entrance to the safe house, Dana and the miners came out to greet them. There were still rotting corpses in a few places and several fires that stank. The aftermath

was being dealt with here, as it was in New Network City. Longtime residents had gone through several riots during the time the city had been in existence. It wasn't new to them. All their lives had been based around destruction, cleaning it up, and then destroying it again. That awful tradition was over now.

The cheering slowly faded as the vehicles stopped and people pushed closer to view their new leader. By right of conquest, Candice was the new Network.

Dana hurried over to them, with Emily and several other miners on her heels. Angelica kept all of them back as Daniel and Baker helped Candice and Sam out of the vehicle and into the bunker.

Sam and Jason stood behind them to block the view as Daniel hurried down the stairs. Candice didn't like anyone seeing her this way, but she had refused all of their ideas to increase her mobility.

Angelica made sure everyone in their convoy was inside the bunker before waving Dana and her small group in. She was taking their security seriously. She didn't know who would be stupid enough to challenge them right now, but it wasn't a good idea to take chances since their deaths would mean the winner inherited everything.

Joyous male voices echoed from the bunker as all the males they'd rescued greeted Candice and Sam. Most of them were rental males who no longer resembled what they had been before. Happy and not afraid to show it, they had turned the safe house

into a home. Beautiful smiles and encouraging sights met the group as they came into the den.

Sam was glad their prisoners weren't here. Rusty, along with the Malin females, was being held in Pruett Town under heavy guard. Candice hadn't said what would happen to them yet, but her address had denied their existence, so Sam assumed their punishments would be personal, like Robert's had.

Cliff hurried over to Sam. "We prepared a special meal for you. I hope it's okay that we helped ourselves to things here. We wanted it to be nice when you arrived."

Sam sank down into a chair, unwilling to admit how weak her injury had left her. She didn't want to groan, so she grunted.

Cliff took that as confirmation that it was okay and hurried back into the kitchen area to help the other men.

Candice looked around and frowned. "They don't have enough places set for everyone."

"They don't know if it's okay to eat with us." Sam slowly went to tell them while Daniel got Candice settled onto the small couch in the corner.

He placed several bags next to her that he thought she might need and then lifted a brow.

Candice gave a grunt that sounded much like Sam's had. "Go away."

Daniel chuckled. He went to help Chester with the two children he was slowly getting used to caring for. He had finally chosen names for them,

but he wanted to get family approval before announcing them or using them.

Daniel took the squirming toddler from Chester and moved into the bathroom area, positive the child needed to be changed. He hadn't been warned about this part of parenthood.

Chester settled onto the couch next to Candice, handing her the infant. The baby had slept the entire ride, unlike the toddler Chester had been forced to entertain. He had forgotten what it was like to do childcare, though he had raised his own like all men in New America with a family were required to. He hadn't missed most of it. Chester *was* missing his own children who were still with the mountain brutes and the other family kids, protecting the orphans and farmers. They would be here by morning and go with them to Adelphia. After that, everyone would return home to Pruett Town. There was no longer any reason for them to live apart.

"Wow. That is just gross."

People chuckled as Daniel's voice echoed from the wash area.

Chester nodded, reaching over to help Candice adjust the belt around her waist as she fought with it. He didn't comment, but it was nice to be able to care for her. Candice had always been the hardest of their family and hadn't accepted help from anyone.

Candice didn't like needing it, but she didn't resent them giving it. They were her family.

Voices echoed through the rear tunnel as Angelica oversaw getting their vehicles into the rear

entrance and refueled for their trip in the morning. It would take her a while.

Jason and Jamie had joined her. Baker and Cain had also gone with them, but it was mostly so Baker could run Cain through the tunnels and wear off some of his energy. Due to the way he had been living for so long, Cain was wild. Only the Nomads seemed to get his attention with their daily workouts. The boys and men were all following the Nomads in their exercise routines. Jason had told them about doing it on the boat with the rebel men and the others had insisted. The sight of it was enough to make changeling nerves fry.

“Oh! A baby!” Dana rushed across the room to plop down on the couch next to Candice. She immediately stripped the sleeping infant from Candice’s arms and began fawning over it.

Candice rolled her eyes. It was obvious that Dana wanted to have a baby.

Candice watched Sam greet the miners and then limp around the room to talk to other people. Candice hadn’t told her to do it, but Sam knew what was needed. There was information to be gathered, but Candice was no longer mobile. Angelica would be the one who enforced the family name. Sam would be the one who gathered information and made deals. Candice would be the one who ordered people killed to keep it all together. She didn’t mind the role. She often thought it was what she had been born for, what her family had been born for, and while it wasn’t true in the way that Julian had

wanted it to be, it was necessary. Their world was a savage garden that hadn't recovered from the tragedies of the past. That made them a violent, traumatized people who needed a firm hand.

"That's it. I don't know what the Network was feeding you, but I'm changing your diet right now." Daniel finished washing his hands and then took the toddler toward the kitchen. "Let's see if we can find something that doesn't smell even remotely like what we just left behind."

Daniel was unaware of the laughter as he walked by. He was also unaware of the approving looks of the parents in the room. Daniel was doing remarkably well considering that he had never met his children or been a parent before. The toddler in his arms looked happy to be there.

Loud noises came from the rear tunnel again, but this time, they were laced with an edge of tension that drew Sam. She grimaced at the pain in her stomach as she moved toward the tunnel.

Rosa followed, but at a distance so her leader wouldn't be offended. She wasn't sure if Sam needed backup.

Sam hurried down the tunnel, hearing Baker's voice and Cain growling. She also heard another noise that still gave her chills even though she knew there was a good chance it wasn't a threat. Many of the hounds were gravitating toward the free men, including the big beast Jason had rescued from the train where Rankin had died. It had been following the convoy, causing Baker's little brother to slip

into panic episodes. After living in the nursery with the vultures, he was terrified of all animals, no matter their size or intent. After days of the panic that often progressed to screams before Baker was able to calm him, Sam was fed up.

Baker struggled to hold the boy away from the hound that was sitting calmly next to Angelica and peering at them in confusion. "It's okay! It won't hurt you!"

Sam walked up to them and jerked the wild boy out of Baker's grip. Holding Cain's thin, strong arms to his waist with one of hers, she dragged him over to the hound and forced him to kneel.

The hound regarded them curiously, big head advancing to sniff.

Cain squealed in fear, but Sam held him in place.

The hound moved closer.

Cain began to scream.

The hound recoiled.

Adults flinched.

Sam grabbed Cain's hand and placed it on the hound's shoulder, rubbing the soft fur. She held it there, forcing them both to adjust.

Reassured, the hound smelled something attractive on the boy's hand and licked it.

Cain giggled.

Sam let out a sigh of relief as the screaming stopped, but she didn't let go of the boy or give up control of the situation. Despite trusting the hound,

Sam was ready with her free hand to plunge her knife into its eye if she had to.

Unaware of its life being decided, the hound continued to lick the boy's hand and then his cheek as the same scent caught its attention.

Cain dissolved into laughter.

Sam gave the boy back to Baker and walked into the tunnel toward the main rooms. "Keep encouraging that behavior; be ready to kill the hound as needed."

Baker and everyone else stared in surprised approval as Cain broke free of Baker's grip and went back over to pet the hound again.

Emboldened, Jason's son joined him. Jamie was shyer than Cain was, but just as curious.

Baker stared after Sam. "How did she know to do that? Is there a book?"

Jason chuckled, thrilled. "If not, maybe she can write one for us."

Chapter Fifty

Tucked

1

“I can’t. She’ll be mad.”

Jason leaned closer so their conversation wouldn’t be heard by anyone else at the long tables that had been shoved together. The train males had prepared a feast and were still coming and going with bowls and mugs. The clinks of dishes and other voices provided cover. “She’s already mad, remember?”

Daniel snickered at the rage joke, but didn’t follow it up with any of the ugly bachelor quips he knew. They’d had a lot of time to find cruel ways to depict their captors. “She’ll let me know when she wants to try it.”

Jason lowered his voice even more. “She has pride, Danny boy. If you ever want to get laid again, handle it so she isn’t crushed, and do it soon or you’ll feel like you did when they pulled you from the renter program.”

Daniel frowned.

Candice noticed. Her attention swung to the two men instantly.

Baker's little brother stormed into the room, shoving by the legs in his way. Everyone expected him to go to Baker.

Sam grunted as Baker's little brother swung himself into her lap. She settled them into a more comfortable position, allowing Cain to nuzzle her cheek like the wild dogs often did. It was one of the ways she'd been able to bond with him.

Sam realized everyone was staring at her. She glared and dared them to comment on it.

Baker watched them nervously. "He needs a bath."

Sam frowned. "He hates the Den Mothers. I'll handle it." She was trying to teach the boy that he didn't have to just accept things anymore, but he did have to obey some rules.

Candice approved. Daniel's children were making a remarkable recovery in those areas, but they were still young. Cain would need time.

Angelica pointed her fork toward Cain and then Jamie, who was now in the doorway. "Go get your baths. Do it right now." Before either of them could protest, Angelica motioned toward the hounds lying in the corner. "Take one of them with you for a guard."

Happy, the boys left with sharp whistles that immediately drew both animals.

Angelica was a respected enforcer in their circle now, but it didn't hurt that she was willing to give concessions to the children who were so abused. For

the first time in their lives, they had firm leadership tempered with compassion.

Jason quickly looked at Angelica. He smiled as he caught the yawn she tried to hide by wiping her mouth with a napkin. She usually used her sleeves. She'd given herself away.

Angelica felt his stare. "What?!"

"Can I put you to bed?"

Oohs came from the Runners.

A flush went up Angelica's cheeks. She shrugged. "If you like."

Jason left the table with a pointed look at Daniel.

Daniel kept his head down, mind already plotting how to make it work. Candice's injuries were healing well. In fact, if not for the leg, she would already be back on her feet and doing harder labor, he was sure. That meant a physical moment wasn't out of line, but she'd shown no signs that she was still interested in it. Daniel didn't know what had happened to her while in Julian's care and he didn't want to, but he couldn't leave her like this. He had to fix the future for them, while she healed their country. They both had jobs to do.

Daniel drew in a breath, reminding himself that he was allowed to do this now. He spoke. "Are you ready for bed?"

Candice nodded. "As soon as Sam and Angelica give us a toast to Camille and Amos."

The mood sobered as everyone looked at the sisters.

Sam held up her glass, assuming she should go first and give Angelica a minute to form the right words. “To mom and dad!”

Candice rolled her eyes as everyone laughed at the brief toast and drank.

Angelica stood up, but she didn’t lift her glass. “I’ll toast them when we recover the bodies.” She left the room.

Candice winced. She looked at Sam.

Sam lifted her glass again. “I got this... To mom and dad!”

Laughter followed Angelica down the tunnel to her bedroom. She’d stocked it over the years, but never slept here. She was eager to shut the thick door and not hear the family celebrating. She didn’t think her nerves could take much more. She was still wound up and angry. Her parents’ deaths were only part of the problem.

Angelica slammed the door and didn’t come back out.

2

Daniel gently lifted Candice into his arms, skin heating up from the contact. He waited for her to show a sign she felt it too and was rewarded with her eyes flickering pink.

“I’m low on patience.”

Daniel straightened at her warning and took her from the room.

The celebrations went on behind them as the thirty people continued to eat, drink, and remember their losses.

“Where are you taking me? We’re supposed to be headed to bed.”

Daniel took her into the rear room he’d prepared earlier.

Candice stopped a smile at the sight of the bed, clean clothes, and portable shower. She’d been cleaned in the training center before leaving, but it hadn’t washed off the stink of Julian’s hideout. She helped Daniel get her set up and then waved him off. “There’s a stool. I’ve got it.”

Daniel knelt down to work on his boots.

Candice’s eyes narrowed. “We should talk about this.”

Daniel shook his head. “You talk.”

Candice watched him remove his dirty pants and shirt, stripping down to nothing in front of her without fear. His huge grin told her what he had in mind.

Candice shook her head.

Daniel’s grin widened. “My owner taught me to meet a challenge head on.” He stepped forward and began taking her clothes off.

Fire shot through Candice, turning her eyes crimson and bringing her claws out. She shuddered, fighting for control. She hadn’t sought a private moment with Daniel in a while. At first, they’d been busy, and then she’d suspected she was pregnant and hadn’t wanted to add to the risk with all the

fighting she'd known was coming. After that, she'd been too ashamed to bring it up. Physical moments between them would now be awkward fumbling where he pretended she aroused him and she acted as if it wasn't a disability.

Daniel knew the problem. The medics had told him and so had Mary, but the bachelor hadn't needed it. He knew how prideful Candice was. It was one of the things he loved about her. Jason's words had been a confirmation that it wasn't too soon.

Daniel removed her shirt, running a hand over her soft hair as he did so.

Candice shivered, lips clamped shut. Daniel had needs and even if she couldn't feel anything anymore, he still could.

Daniel got the water flowing and moved her into the warmth as soon as she was naked, not reacting to her grunts of frustration. He settled her on the stool and closed the curtains around them.

A dim light came on at the top as the ceiling sealed, enclosing them in wet, private warmth.

Daniel expanded the space to the proper size and then held out a hand.

Candice let him help her onto her good leg, then braced on the dead one. She was learning to use it despite the lack of response or feeling.

Daniel knelt before her.

Candice froze.

Daniel moved forward and proved his theory of not all the nerves being dead on that side.

Candice clutched the walls of the shower and struggled not to make any noise that would give them away.

Daniel felt her response, her pleasure, and swelled. *I like being right.*

He loved her until she shuddered against his chin, quietly moaning his name. He quickly shifted them so he was on the stool, and settled her onto his lap, facing away.

Candice grinned, bucking where she could, and enjoyed his wild rutting and uncensored groans. His noises were echoing through the bunker. When he exploded, Candice closed her eyes in happiness.

3

Walking through a nearby compartment, Jason laughed at the couple. Those who thought Candice's leg would hold her back were in for a surprise. Daniel wasn't going to let her use it as an excuse to withdraw from him or anything else.

Angelica was already in their tiny room, but Jason was hoping she was still awake. He thought Daniel had the right idea and it had to be now, while Jamie and Cain were playing with toys they'd never seen before. Chester had sportingly agreed to watch the boys, with Dana's help, until morning so the parents could sleep. None of the children had cried the entire time they'd been with their family. It was good not to hear that noise, but it was awful to consider how that had been accomplished.

“Nice quarters.”

Angelica nodded as Jason entered. She was sprawled on the bed, tired body echoing his words. The mattress was a wonderful change from the bedroll on a boat deck.

“How long before we have to go back out?”

Angelica calculated. “Half a day.”

Jason grinned, eyes darkening. “Perfect.” He quietly latched the door to their room.

“What are you doing?”

Jason’s grin widened. “Pleasing us both. It’s been a while.”

Angelica stiffened. “I’m not sure this is the right time or place.”

Jason began removing his clothes.

Angelica listened to his movements, imagining what he was doing by the noises. When his shoes came off, she frowned. “We’re just sleeping now.”

There was a rustle and then the sound of his pants hitting the floor.

Angelica swallowed. “I mean it. We need sleep.”

Another noise came, telling her he was removing his shirt. *That means he’s naked.* Angelica groaned mentally. *Just don’t look!*

“Angel...”

Angelica rolled away from him. “No.”

Angelica didn’t hear a response. After a full minute, she rolled back over to see what he was doing.

“Damn.”

Jason nodded without pausing in his steady strokes, eyes roaming her body. “You can sleep, though.”

Angelica laughed.

Jason moaned at the sound of her amusement, her voice. Fire flew through his veins as she shifted to pull her shirt off.

Jason stepped closer as she stripped, eyes darkening further. He hadn’t been this horny since Rankin’s drugs, but this time, it was all desire. He wanted his woman. It made all the difference.

Jason stepped to the bed at her motion, flushing as she directed him toward her mouth. She hadn’t done this to him yet. It was erotic and pushed his control. “Please!”

Angelica slowly spread her legs.

Jason hurried into the bed.

4

“Lot of flavors to sample.”

Sam’s head whipped around at Baker’s comment. “What?”

He nodded to the rental males she’d been staring at.

Sam snorted. “Like they could handle me.”

“I talked to some of them about Adelpia.”

Sam tensed, glad the noise level was so high.

“They said you didn’t use their services.”

“I had other issues then.”

Baker forced himself to keep going at her harsh tone. "What about now?"

"Oh, for god sake!"

Silence fell in the room at her exclamation.

Sam flushed and glowered around the table. "Mind your own shit!"

Runners snickered. Everyone else did as ordered, but they kept trying to listen.

"Sorry, Sam."

Sam gave him a sharp look.

Baker grinned. He removed the necklace he always wore and slipped it over her head. He waited for her to deny his open claim, heart thumping.

Sam was touched. She had never been given a gift by a man. None of them had. She fought back tears. "You are such an ass."

People laughed, pretense already dropped. Everyone wanted the couple to have a happy ending.

"Can you adjust to Cain?"

Sam shrugged. "Easier than to you, probably. I understand wild things."

"Can I give you a wild child?"

It took Sam a minute to understand what he was asking for. Most of the people in the room got it before she did and held their breaths.

Sam had to fight the heat before she could answer. The idea of Baker giving her a baby was fascinating. It was also scary. "I'm not ready for that...but I might be at some point."

The witnesses were more disappointed than Baker was. They groaned and shook their heads at her.

“Okay.”

Sam felt that heat rise. “I assume you know ways to prevent that until I’m ready?”

The Runners snickered.

“I do.” Baker recovered quickly. “Can I show you one?”

“Only one?” Sam delivered an innocent look. “What will we do tomorrow?”

Baker laughed. “I have a few ideas.”

“Get the cuffs. I’ll be in shortly.”

Baker made them face the last fear. “No cuffs.”

Sam scowled. “I don’t want to—”

“Hurt me?”

She nodded.

Baker slowly rose and slid his huge arms under her stiff body. “That’s not an issue anymore.”

Baker took her from the room amid both laughter and frowns.

His better health was already letting him match their strength. The females watching now understood why the Network had kept the men on the edge of starvation; they continued to worry over the choice to free them.

Chapter Fifty-One

Our Dystopia

3 Days Later
Adelphia

1

“**G**ood afternoon, New America! Today is the day we’ve been waiting for. In a short ten minutes, our new ruler will begin broadcasting the live audio of her conversation with the United Nations. But before we get to that, our three-woman government has generously consented to a short interview as they enter the stadium where the meeting is taking place.”

“Dana, did they tell you why they chose Adelphia stadium? Does it have anything to do with the ban on the games and the unrest over the lack of entertainment?”

“Yes, Reggie. I was told this facility already contained the broadcast equipment. As you know, all other locations with this capability were destroyed during the rebellion.”

“Dana, what about the brave rebel men who will be with the council? Will we get to hear from them?”

“All indications are yes, Reggie. In fact, here they come and the males are leading the way!” Dana

rushed over. “Baker! How does it feel to be the first free man in New America?”

Baker grinned shyly. “Amazing.”

“Is there anything you’d like to say to the men who fought alongside you?” Dana held out the microphone.

Baker used the words Candice had given him beforehand. “The war is over! All rebels will be safe in Pruett Town. I repeat: the war is over, men. Come home and help us build the future.”

Dana beamed, then switched to the next male waiting uncomfortably for her attention. “Wonderful! Jason! Do you also have words for the rebels or the changelings?”

Jason also used Candice’s short propaganda clip. “I’d like to ask them to come and help us. We need the builders, medics, rental workers, and others to join our efforts. We have jobs for you. No brothel work.”

Dana frowned slightly. “Well, the changelings might be disappointed to hear that.”

“Our leader has plans to help them, too.” Jason was cheerful. “Candice has all of us covered.”

“That sounds like a man with confidence, doesn’t it, Reggie?”

“Yes, Dana, and wow. We’ve never had males speak so openly in our society. This is so naughty!”

Dana laughed. “Here comes Sam and Angelica, the infamous sisters who transported hundreds of rebels to the wall and brought down the west coast.

Sam, we've heard you're the heir to the west coast council. Is that true?"

Sam didn't need a preapproved speech. "Yes, but we're not splitting the country up. Candice and I, along with Angelica, will handle things for the next six months until a President is chosen. That person will have dominion over all the country, not just one part of it."

"That will certainly be a change." Dana moved on. "Angelica, how do you feel about everything that's happened? With Candice injured and Sam recovering, how does it feel to be the family enforcer?"

Angelica grabbed the mike. "Hey! You males in Pennsylvania. Mary says you're refusing to release your hostages. As soon as this meeting is over, I'm coming down there to rip your hearts out and eat them! I'll slit you from stem to bend. You'll scream—"

"Okay. As you can hear, Angelica wants those hostages released, boys. I recommend you listen. Oh, good! Here comes Daniel and our temporary leader, Candice Pruett!"

"Dana? Dana, is she walking yet?"

"No, Reggie, she isn't."

Candice's hard voice cut through the chaos like it always had in their family. "I have a message for the women of our country. Are you feeling lost? Angry? Restless? Are you without a job? Come to Pruett Town in southern Ohio. This is Candice and I have work for you—honest labor where you'll be

too tired to get in trouble or attack the males. Come to my town and join in the rebuilding of our country.” Through the days and weeks to come, the nation would be smothered with broadcasts like these.

Dana smiled widely. “Excellent. Thank you for giving us these moments of your time.”

Candice ignored the curious glances at her battered body. “You’ll get more of them. It’s important the citizens know who their rulers are. We didn’t have that before, but we will now.”

“I certainly hope so. I look forward to a time when I might also have a mate who can stand there and hold me without even sweating. He’s in great shape!” Dana leaned in a bit. “Aren’t you scared of him overpowering you?”

“Not a bit. Even if he could, he wouldn’t.”

“But we’ve been taught males are the enemy.”

Candice grunted. “Yes, we have. Daniel, please tell her what you told me this morning.”

Daniel frowned. “Do I have to?”

There were gasps at a male refusing, even politely.

“Of course not.”

“Then I will, because you want me to and I want you to be happy.”

“Thank you.”

Daniel blushed at the heat in her simple words.

“Oh, now, that’s adorable.” Dana stared in longing. “I really want one!”

Candice chuckled. “Go on now.”

Daniel cleared his throat. "I wouldn't want to live without my Candy."

"Aww. Now I have to have one."

"Dana, can you ask council woman Pruett if she has made a decision on slavery?"

"Actually, they've just entered the stadium, Reggie, but maybe we'll hear something during the meeting with the UN. It is scheduled to begin in a few minutes. We'll go off the air until then to save power."

2

"Yuck. That tasted bad."

Everyone laughed at Angelica's joke. They'd rehearsed their lines on the ride here, spending the time sorting things. Now that the first part was over, all of them were feeling better. Manipulating people was an inherited skill, but that didn't mean they had to enjoy it like Julian had.

Sam walked away. "I'm going to help get the guys settled."

Angelica took Candice onto her back before she could protest. With Daniel's help, they almost had the switches down without needing to communicate about it first.

Candice didn't complain. They had offered a wheelchair setup at first that had inspired her to threaten decapitations. They'd settled for piggybacks and wagons.

Angelica dropped Candice at the table and slid into the spot on her right, studying their surroundings. They were in the center of the stadium field, at a table inside four portable walls to provide a measure of protection. Angelica still wasn't sure why Sam had chosen to do this here, but she didn't mind. They had claimed penthouse suites in the apartments outside the stadium, and in the morning they were going to tour the female prison in the town near here. Angelica and Candice were both curious about it after Sam's description.

Candice got ready to anger people. She started with her cousins. "I'm not freeing them today, or even in six months."

Angelica stared at her mentor, her idol. "They deserve freedom. We promised."

Candice gestured with a scarred hand. "We promised to free them from tyranny and we've done that. Anything more has to come with careful considerations."

"I don't understand." Angelica had sensed this was coming, but she needed to hear the reasons directly from Candice.

Candice knew that, too. "What happens to all those men if we announce they're free as of right this minute?"

Angelica's frown became a deep scowl. "The women won't give them up. They'll hide them from us like we used to do to the Network."

Candice's voice was grave. "And some of them are so bonded they'll kill them before giving them

up. Then, there are the men. Suddenly free, will the anger they carry in secret spill out onto the streets again? Rage can be as dangerous as apathy, as you know.”

Angelica did know. “But next week, after we calm some fears, make some more plans?”

Candice bobbed her chin toward the stands, where two male rebels were kicking a guard to get her tied up. She’d refused to swear loyalty to the new leaders. Their satisfaction was clear. “They were good through all of this. They’ve gotten strong. So much so, that they might become a danger to us again in a very short time.”

Angelica wanted to protest, but she’d read the same forbidden history books that Candice had. Before the war, men had ruled and women had bled. Things had been that way for a lot longer than five hundred years.

“I’d not put us back into that hell. Until I can figure out the solutions for these problems, our males will have to remain cherished slaves for their own protection.”

The words were a haunting parody of the leaders who had gone before them.

“So we really are taking their place?” Angelica was horrified.

Candice clenched her fists to cover her own revulsion. “Yes.”

“The men won’t allow that.”

“Hello?” A UN voice broke in on Candice’s satellite radio, interrupting Angelica’s protests.

“Who represents your country now? It’s been a week. I demand answers! What do you call yourselves? Who leads you?”

Candice looked at Baker, who was lingering by the radio. “Handle that.”

Baker didn’t need to be told how. He grabbed the mike. “Candice Pruett is temporary President. Angelica Pruett is her XO. Show some respect and wait until she’s ready!” Baker cut off the connection so the UN man couldn’t hear what came next.

The two women stared at each other in disgust and relief as they realized how easy it would be for them to slow male freedom. Cheers sounded from their mates at Baker’s open anger toward the UN, driving in the feeling of self-loathing.

Angelica sighed miserably. “Sam will stop us.”

“You think?” Candice didn’t really want to do this. She just didn’t see another choice.

“Sure. You’ll see.”

Candice let the words ease her as they were joined by that frowning changeling.

Sam had heard some of their conversation and deduced the rest from their expressions. “Let me guess. I get the deciding vote.”

Angelica nodded.

Candice shrugged. She was the boss, but it mattered to her that the choices were made in agreement.

Sam stared at Baker. “Most of them don’t really need freedom from us, just a happy home.”

“That sounds like a Network line!” Angelica was furious at her sister’s words.

Baker didn’t argue with it, though he was sad over the way it had to be. Like Candice, he didn’t see another option yet.

Candice added a new layer of concern. “We may even still need the games for a while. We don’t have a court system yet. Until we build things, we can’t just rip out all the structure. Our society can’t take another collapse.”

Angelica’s stomach roiled again. “So we’re just herding the sheep?”

Candice didn’t answer. She didn’t need to.

Angelica pounded the table. “I won’t be a part of this. I won’t give up my honor for this!”

“Will you give it up for me?” Jason had overheard all of it, along with Daniel.

“What?!”

Jason stared back, sad but resigned. “We’ve known for a while that she wasn’t going to free us.”

“And that’s okay with you?” Angelica was in shock.

“It’s how it has to be.” Baker placed a hand on Sam’s shoulder when she sighed unhappily at his words. “Our society will eventually become equals, but not now, not here. Right now, there’s only anger and resentment on both sides. We have to let these wounds heal.”

Angelica looked at Candice in disgust. “You never meant for them to be free!”

“I wanted the Network gone and my property returned. I wanted the men to be treated better and our country to be released from the past.” Candice finished it with shame. “Revenge drove me, not freedom goals.”

Angelica’s voice rose. “What about the promises we’ve made?!”

“They’ll be fulfilled in time. My word on it.”

“But not for ten years?”

Candice shrugged. “The ten year moratorium is a great start. It keeps the peace on both sides.”

“This is wrong!”

“Yes. It’s also right.”

Understanding she was outvoted by her own family and her mate, Angelica slumped in her seat in surrender. “I vote yes.”

Her son would be born a slave despite the revolution she’d just fought. She buried her head against Jason’s hip as the private vote was finished.

Candice motioned Baker to activate the connection. As he did, she put the satellite phone on speaker so their radios would pick up every word and send it out to their citizens.

Claudette had already left for her next mission and her boss wasn’t good at handling the finer details. He had been calling for the last two days. None of them knew what Candice planned to do about it now that they didn’t need UN help.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

“This is Candice Pruett, Pro Tem leader of New America. I have a list of public grievances over the

UN interference in my country. Please cease and desist all actions and interruptions in our recovery.”

“How dare you! After everything we did for you! The deadline still stands for New America to prove they’re abiding by the treaty!”

Candice continued in the same calm, firm tone. “New America is not subject to your laws, Mr. Secretary. Any previous agreements will not be honored with your organization, as you have proven to be as big a threat as the one we recently eliminated.”

“The UN is not a threat to anyone! We help those who cannot help themselves.”

“You have lied, cheated, and stolen your way through country after country under the guise of humanitarian aid. We have evidence of a mass grave, illegal entries, murders, conspiracy, and male trafficking. How do you respond to these charges?”

Candice signaled to the Nomads. She knew it wouldn’t be needed, but she hadn’t been bluffing and she wanted it known. The Canadian reporter had been shipped to them via the Runners and then Dana. She was being given asylum in exchange for her testimony against the UN and the Canadian Prime Minister for their part in helping the Network keep men in chains and women in the change.

“You have no proof of wrongdoing! These are serious accusations!”

“Yes, they are. My special guest is a reporter from the northern wall. She’s going to tell us how you helped the east coast council kill a group of

rebel men and bury them before they could escape into Canada. Then my reporter will read the notes we've found on UN deals with both Networks for the cure and vaccine. Do not pretend you weren't part of the tyranny we've existed under, sir! I will not stand for it."

There was no response. The phone connection went dead.

Candice continued to address her country. "This will be the first of many calls that you can listen to and know we're doing what's right, not what's easy. My special guest will go live after I've finished." Candice paused to draw in a breath. "Most of these issues will be settled right after the election vote six months from now. However, we can't let them all wait until then. Temporarily, the following laws are so read into our society for immediate distribution.

"The yearly round up is abolished. Anyone caught selling another person, or stealing one, will be imprisoned until an execution can be arranged. I realize this will impact your financial wellbeing. To offset that, you may sell your men to us, and use the UDs to start a new life that isn't based on slavery. Those men will immediately be freed by me."

The nation held its breath.

"Men are never to be hurt, handicapped, or disfigured. The same punishment applies."

People shifted restlessly, impatient to know what the future of slavery held.

"...you can keep the slaves you have. For now. That is all." Candice didn't look at Angelica. She

could feel the girl struggling not to cry; she didn't want to make it worse.

The reporters began to repeat the broadcast in full as the Canadian woman got ready to tell her story.

Candice stayed at the table, not feeling proud anymore. The choice she'd made didn't feel honorable. *Because it's not.*

"Excuse me." Angelica staggered from the table, followed by Jason.

Sam sighed.

Candice nodded in agreement.

Baker and Daniel didn't speak or look at the women at all. Despite knowing it was coming, they couldn't help the heavy disappointment.

Neither could Candice. It was ugly.

As fast as I can, Candice swore. Freeing the men wasn't my first goal, but it's the most important thing I'll ever do. I know that now. I'll never stop working on it, no matter the cost.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Honor Thy Father

1

“Did you know there are people waiting to talk with us?”

Candice nodded at Angelica’s question as the girl came back to the table. “Dana said the miners and Defenders have things under control.”

“Yeah, because they’ve done such a bang-up job in the past!” Angelica spun back toward the line of women being brought into the stadium.

Candice looked at Baker. “Take everyone to the apartments we showed you on the way in. You and Rosa handle things until we get there.”

Baker’s chest puffed out. “You got it.” He gestured at the others. “Let’s go.”

Sam chuckled at the expressions. No one was used to hearing a male tell someone what to do.

Sam waited until they were alone. “Who are we meeting now?”

“Possible problems and loose ends.”

Candice’s answer brought Sam to her feet. She checked her gear as if she was on a run.

Satisfied Sam understood, Candice used her cane to get to her feet. Again, there wasn’t any pain

or a response from the dead leg. Sighing in aggravation, Candice limped toward Angelica and the line of women waiting to speak with her. “I had Runners sent out to gather them.”

Sam had wondered where some of her Runners were, but she assumed the women had chosen to take a break. They all had to do that from time to time, but it was a relief to know her crew was intact. What was left of them anyway. She had several open places even if Angelica chose to run with them, which Sam doubted.

Sam noted Defenders quietly moving into place around the stadium entrances and tunnels, blocking an escape. *Ah. One of those situations.* Sam squared her shoulders and strode behind Candice with an expressionless façade and hands hovering over her weapons.

Candice immediately felt better. They were all targets now.

Candice stopped, motioning to Emily.

Emily brought the groups and individuals over to Candice one at a time, ready to kill them if she was told to.

“First, we have Naomi. She and eight other Divas are requesting jobs as Defenders. The rest of their gang has fled the city. We’ve heard they’re joining the swamp women who took off before the dome fell.”

Candice waved Naomi toward the exit. “We’ll take them. Make her Head Defender.”

Everyone was surprised, but no one more than Naomi. She stared in suspicion. “Why?” She had come here expecting to be killed.

“You’re not quick to end life. I respect that.”

Naomi didn’t ask more questions. She lifted her head and left the field. She was followed by her remaining Divas. They all flashed Candice glances of gratitude for sparing them.

Candice switched her cane to the other hand and fought to maintain her balance on the dead leg. “Next.”

Emily brought them forward with curt gestures. She could feel Candice’s discomfort and didn’t like it. “This is what’s left of council security and some of the other complex Defenders.”

Candice caught the disapproving tone and studied the women who glared back as if they expected her to let them go based on courage. Candice chuckled.

The Defenders relaxed in confusion.

Candice scanned them, seeing fresh gear and clothes that had to have been taken from illegal stocks. She found heavy pockets that were likely filled with loot, and each woman had defensive scratches on their arms that were healing. “Who were you fighting?”

The captain of the guard sneered. “Men and women you stirred up. We’re lucky to be alive.”

Sam shook her head. *You were until that.*

Candice delivered a soothing smile to the women. “What were your jobs when not protecting the men who betrayed us?”

The guards hesitated. Candice’s friendly face didn’t match that ugly tone.

One of the women in back spoke up. “We all had different jobs.”

“Like what?”

“I was a dock supervisor.”

“I provided transport security for council slaves.”

“I oversaw marking the prizes.”

Candice’s head snapped up, eyes glowing bright red. “You’re the brander?”

The woman took off running.

Candice didn’t need to move as Angelica hissed in rage and snatched a knife from her belt.

Candice waited patiently as Angelica threw the blade and impaled the woman in the leg. She went down in a heap.

“Dogs!” Angelica didn’t like using the hounds for security, but she also didn’t want them killed.

Two large hounds without collars came from behind them and ran toward the screaming Defender.

Angelica looked at Candice.

Candice nodded.

Angelica’s voice cracked out. “Kill!”

The two hounds raced each other to the meal.

Candice watched the small Defender crew in front of her for signs they would fight their way out

and found nothing. They'd come here knowing they were going to die. Candice didn't drag it out. She made a fast motion and switched her cane back to her other hand as Angelica and the Runners rushed forward and took their lives.

The line of people waiting had thinned with the two groups, but those still in line tensed and considered running.

Candice glowered at them. "Next?"

The guard under the dogs screamed in awful support of the order.

Dana and the reporters were in the stands, filming and chatting. Candice had insisted they get it all on tape.

"These two have been arrested for rape. Not of each other."

Candice stared at the changeling man and woman. They were complete opposites in every way except the insane glare in their eyes.

"Do they have a defense?"

"Both claim the rage was too strong to fight."

Candice sighed unhappily. "Dana, get all of this."

The man and woman tensed as the reporters came closer.

Candice drew her knife and limped forward. "I sentence you both to death. Being angry is no excuse."

Runners held them as Candice drew her blade across their necks, ending it quickly.

The death of a male on the news would be the top story, Candice was sure. It would trump the UN address. “Crimes against each other will not be tolerated. Get along or die.” Candice waved toward the exit. “That’s all the filming for today.”

Dana got her people out of the stadium as fast as she could, sensing Candice’s mood. It felt ugly.

“Next?”

Emily motioned a terrified girl forward. “Velvet Malin.”

Sam caught the reactions of her cousin and sister, and reluctantly cleared her throat. “I’ll speak for this one.”

Everyone regarded her in surprise except for Velvet. She flashed Sam a grateful nod. “I’m sorry for what my family did to you.”

“How did you get away from them?” Sam hoped her faith in the girl wasn’t misplaced.

“I was sold to the council for experiments.” Velvet grimaced. “I sold myself to earn UD’s and bought my own freedom.”

“The Network didn’t care by then because you were finished with the tests anyway?”

Velvet nodded at Candice, face showing her horror.

“Why did you come here?” Angelica was stunned by it. “You had to know we’d lock you up or kill you.”

Velvet’s tongue darted across her chapped lips nervously. “I came for news about my family.” She

looked at Candice in the silence. “Are they gone? Am I really free now?”

Candice couldn’t help feeling sympathy for the girl. “No. Your brother survived.”

Velvet frowned. “Brother?”

Candice waved her toward the eating hounds, positive the girl knew how to handle them. “Take the dogs back to my apartment and ask for Daniel. Tell him who you are.”

Velvet shook her head as she added up the clues. “I didn’t come to make a claim on your family.”

“And I’m not granting one. I’m giving a brother and sister the chance to meet.”

Velvet dropped her head in shame. “He won’t want to see me.”

“Nevertheless, you’ll do as told.”

Velvet turned toward the hounds without further argument, surprised that she wasn’t being eaten by them.

Everyone watched the girl walk up to the hounds and slap one of them on the rump. “Come!”

To their shock, both big dogs immediately left the bodies and followed her toward the exit.

Sam looked at Candice. “How did you know?”

“She came right by them when Emily waved her over. Both animals cowered and acted relieved when she didn’t order them to do anything.”

“Interesting.” Sam looked around, seeing there were no other people waiting. “Can I get a minute?”

Candice nodded. She looked at Angelica, who hadn't heard Sam's quiet request. "Get them all back and settled."

Angelica was glad to. The mess here was making her stomach turn. She glowered at Sam as she remembered the morning sickness comment.

Sam missed it. She looked at Daniel as he came toward Candice. "I'll bring her back."

Daniel glanced at Candice to approve Sam's offer.

Candice shrugged. "She wants to run around the field without Baker yelling at her."

Daniel chuckled. "I'll keep him busy, but don't overdo it, you know?"

Sam nodded, giving him a warm look. She wasn't close to Daniel, but she still loved him because Angelica and Candice did.

The two women waited until they were alone, both scarred and forever changed.

"I need to tell you something."

Candice waited, bracing for something she'd missed. While lying in Julian's medical bay, waiting to see if her overused body could carry her any further, she'd planned and studied plans to be sure, but she hadn't been. It had felt like she'd forgotten something important.

Sam stood up and came over to kneel by Candice.

Candice snorted, shoving to her bad leg.

Sam chuckled, rising to place her shoulder under Candy's arm. The medics didn't want her to

use the leg at all in case the nerves were trying to heal.

Candice and Sam limped awkwardly toward the center of the field. As they reached it, chuckling a bit at their clumsiness, guards watched them from a distance.

Sam studied the ground and then moved them toward an edge of the stadium field that was covered by huge slabs of concrete.

Candice felt them before she heard them. The faint screams and pounding sent adrenaline and horror into her heart. “Who is it?”

“The power families who weren’t sent to the doomed bunker. Julian locked them in to keep them alive.”

Candice limped away from the hatch, forcing Sam to come along to keep them both from falling. “He failed.”

Sam realized Candice had already made that hard choice, the one she hadn’t been sure she would bring up.

“This stadium is being demolished in a few weeks.” Candice forced it out past the bile. “We’ll move that up.”

Sam understood Candice was waiting for her to protest, but she didn’t have anything to say. The Bachelor Battles was a hard game. Julian’s side had lost. All of them knew the price. Even death wasn’t really enough.

The women left the field without speaking again.

Sam knew better than to pick Candice up like Daniel was doing whenever she needed to go somewhere. They weren't that close. Instead, she stayed near enough to grab the woman if she fell.

Candice was glad for the opportunity to attempt walking on the leg without Daniel hovering over her like a Den Mother. She was also embarrassed at all the witnesses. The streets of Adelpia were the busiest she'd ever seen them. It was a large town, but there was barely enough room for everyone who had come. In a week, the vaccine and cure would begin distribution in all cities and that included this one.

Sam was also aware of the people staring at them, but she didn't think it was for the same reason that Candice did. In their lifetimes, no one had ever seen a male killed on TV. They didn't care about the woman Candice executed; the shocked respect they were showing came from Candice demonstrating equal justice. They'd never had that.

Outside the stadium, long blocks of buildings stretched into the distance. There were brothels, stores, hotels, and apartments for longtime residents or frequent visitors of the Network. When they had arrived this morning, Emily and Dana had met them and escorted them to the largest building. It was still barely big enough to hold all of the Pruetts who were going to be there. They were still waiting on other members to arrive. Sophia and the children, with a few of the orphans and miners, were on their

way to Pruett Town. They had been delayed by high water.

The other Nomads were outside the Adelphia apartment house, preparing to leave. Now that Candice was surrounded by protection, the Nomads were eager to get back to the only way of life that had ever satisfied them. Horace would pick up Sophia and the kids along the way. Little Lea had chosen to stay with the farmers until she was old enough to fight and then she would come and train with their family. Angelica hadn't met the girl, but the update she'd received had implied Lea would probably become one of their best fighters or Runners.

Chester and his family were also returning to the south, but they weren't leaving just yet. Chester was enjoying his time around the other men and being able to walk down the street unmolested. It was a big joke to him to see the expressions on the faces of the women as he strolled by whistling.

As they reached the apartment, Angelica came back out to join them. Before she could say anything, loud laughter from the nearby Runners drew their attention. That was all the Runners seemed to do, no matter the situation. The big women didn't know how to be quiet.

Aware of what was going on, Sam nodded to Angelica, passing care for Candice to her, and went to join her crew.

Candice and Angelica observed without speaking, aware of all the faces in the windows of the apartment behind them.

The door opened.

Bobby came out onto the stoop and stopped between the two women. He also stayed quiet, observing the event.

“Lydia and Rosa.” Sam got their attention, wishing she felt better so she could spend more time celebrating with them. All she wanted to do at the moment was get this finished so she could go rest. She had no doubt that Candice felt the same. “This is yours for your actions during the rebellion.”

Heather and Melissa handed the women new cloaks and stepped back.

Sam slapped Rosa on the shoulder. “You’ve earned the right to have your own crew now. *Rosa’s Runners*.”

Rosa didn’t know what to say. She refused to show emotion. She swallowed a lump in her throat and handed the cloak back. “I’m happy being your XO.”

Sam had expected that. She pushed the cloak into Rosa’s arms. “It’s there when you’re ready for it.” Surprising them all, she stepped forward and gave the woman a huge bear hug.

Rosa caught her balance as everyone laughed.

Sam turned to Lydia. “We would like to offer you a spot on the crew.”

On the stairs, Bobby tensed. If Lydia became a Runner, she would be gone all the time. *Or I'll have to really learn to be one of them.*

Not far away, Luba paused in preparing his vehicle to look at the rookie. "In the south, rules are taught gently. We have a different life there."

Bobby was surprised by the offer, considering how badly he had done on the trip.

Luba knew what he was thinking. "Training rookies in a time of war is hard. It expects more out of them than some are able to give. With time, maybe you could still become what you want to." Luba shrugged at him pointedly. "Maybe you'll find a life that satisfies you more than the one you imagine will." Luba went back to his preparations before Bobby could respond.

"Yes!"

Sam and the Runners cheered Lydia's choice to join them, drawing more people to stoops and windows around them.

Candice didn't interfere with anything that was going on. It was all family business, but at the same time, it wasn't. Bobby and Lydia were not Pruetts.

Bobby turned around and went back inside the apartment.

Angelica looked at Candice. "Are you going to tell them?"

Candice had been stewing on that question since she'd discovered the truth. "It's the right thing to do."

Angelica didn't answer. It was the right thing to do, but it was also the wrong thing. Destroying the image of who the couple thought they were, or thought they wanted to be, wouldn't help any of them.

"Unless it becomes a problem, we'll keep it between us."

Angelica was relieved. "What about us?"

Candice grunted. "A lot of people already know the truth about Julian's experiments."

"But they don't know what we know."

"Do you think we should tell them everything? Will the truth set us free?"

Angelica stared at the bitter tone. She hadn't been expecting it.

Candice struggled not to reveal how horrified she was. "No, Angel. I will not honor thy father."

Angelica didn't pretend ignorance. She had been working her way up to finding out how much of Julian's behavior Candice was going to repeat. "He upped the dosage for the men in the complex for the last few months, including Jason and Daniel. Baker stole rations for the rebels from the Network, so they got it, too. The bachelors are already spreading the cure. Why hasn't it affected Sam?"

"It will in time. I suspect that's why she told Baker no about having a child yet. She believes when that happens she'll burn out. As for us, as Julian's children, we're immune to the cure, like him. That was a side effect he didn't anticipate but still tried to use. When his last dose wears off, the

men should stop being contagious, and you and I will be the only ones who can spread it.”

“We’re carriers?”

Candice nodded. “It’s very likely that our children will inherit our immunities. There’s no way to know until it actually happens. Julian hadn’t gotten that far in this testing for this generation.”

“I think I’m in remission.”

Candice stared at her.

Angelica flushed at showing emotions, but it was a big deal for all of them. That legendary stage was unachievable according to the Network. “I can’t change anymore.”

Candice hadn’t been alert enough during the fight at the center to know.

“I can get my claws when I’m really upset, but that’s it.”

Candice wanted more details, thrilled for all of them, but before she could answer, the door behind them opened again.

Neither woman had realized how quiet it had gotten as the Runners checked in on satellite phones with their people in one of the nearby towns that were having trouble. As the door shut, echoing, everyone turned to look at Bobby.

Bobby looked at Lydia. As their eyes met, he saw the dawning realization in her face that she would have to either leave him behind or bring him along in order to join Sam’s crew. In all of her excitement, she was just now considering how this would affect their relationship.

That's enough for me. Bobby looked over at Luba. "Is the offer still open?"

Luba motioned toward the vehicle. "I'm leaving now."

Bobby didn't look at Lydia as he jogged down the stairs toward the car. As he went by Sam and Angelica, he threw an embarrassed look over his shoulder. "The next time you see me, I'll be worthy of the name that I can't ever really earn."

As he got onto the vehicle, Candice and Angelica realized Bobby knew the truth.

Lydia watched in shock as Bobby rolled away with Luba. For one moment, her face filled with an awful depression that hurt the hearts of everyone around her. Then she lifted her chin, drew in a breath, and looked at Rosa. "I need a mug and a male. Who's got my back?"

Instead of cracking another joke like everyone was expecting, Rosa embraced the horrible new emotions that Greg had given her. She put a hand on Lydia's shoulder. "He'd come back if you ask him."

Lydia shook her head and shook off the comfort. "Bobby has to decide if he wants this life or if he even wants to keep trying to be one of us. He might have just made the best choice for both of us."

No one could argue with that. The Runners escorted Lydia inside to help distract her from her man troubles.

“Mary and Bruce are on their way!” Melissa relayed the message that had just come in. “The men heard Angelica’s threat and surrendered!”

Everyone was laughing as they went inside with the Runners.

Left alone, Candice and Angelica spent a moment enjoying the quiet and the feel of victory. The town around them was calm and curious despite the live execution and new rules. They still had enemies, but even those citizens were willing to give them a chance to prove there was life beyond the Network.

Angelica handed a small disk out to Candice. “That’s from the power bunker. Sam gave it to the Runners before they were captured by the west coast. There’s a lot of information on there. You’ll want to watch it alone.”

Candice put it in her pocket, good leg exhausted and bad leg nothing. “Somebody owes me a lot of UD’s.”

Angelica shook her head in confusion at the quick switch of topics. “Excuse me?”

Candice indicated Sam. “We didn’t get the results of her last run. If she was the winner of the time trials, I’m a very rich woman. I had a lot of money on her.”

Angelica burst out laughing. She understood Candice didn’t want to talk about personal issues anymore and agreed. They had an election coming up in six months, and before then, years’ worth of work to be done. There was going to be plenty of

opportunity for them to discuss everything that had happened. She chose to take them in a direction that was the complete opposite to please her cousin. “I hear we’ll be delivering around the same time. That should be a lot of fun.”

Candice moved up the stairs, turning her grimace into a very familiar grin. “Well, we do like to keep it in the family.”

Angelica groaned. “Are you going to spend the rest of our lives making terrible jokes like that?”

Candice slipped her free arm around Angelica’s neck in a graceful move that implied she’d been practicing. “I certainly hope so.”

Angelica put her arm around Candice to help her inside, chuckling. “Me too. I can’t imagine a life that doesn’t include you.”

Candice slipped her hand into Angelica’s, stopping them in the archway. “I love you.”

Angelica’s eyes filled with red tears. “If you knew I can still change, you should have just told me!”

Candice chuckled. “We’ll have our full strength back after the babies come.”

Angelica was glad to know it. She’d spent her life hating the change and now, when she had a tiny chance to get rid of it, she wanted to keep it close for protection. “Too much irony.”

Sam grunted as she came in, hearing her sister. “I couldn’t agree more.” She looked at Baker and Jason. “We want to go for a walk. Get your leashes.”

Silence fell in the flat.

Baker's lips twitched. "Can we put them on you?"

Sam snorted laughter, echoing the braying Runners around them. "Maybe. I do like to stir up trouble."

Baker beamed. *I love her so much!*

Next to him, Jason echoed the silent sentiment as he stared at Angelica. Life in the future would have hard moments for all of them, but there was also hope now and that was enough to make it all worthwhile. "We changed everything."

"To us!" Sam raised an imaginary mug.

Everyone who had a cup toasted with her.

Candice looked at Velvet, who didn't meet her eye, and then Daniel.

Daniel glared.

Candice smiled. He'd spent a lot of time trying to convince everyone that he was timid, but his true nature had bled through in moments—like when he'd forced Leo out of the meeting. Daniel had instinctively mistrusted the traitor and hadn't been able to keep up his act because he'd felt threatened.

Daniel sighed. If Candice thought he should spend time with his sister, he would do it, but not now. Velvet would have to prove she was good. Then she would have to make the first move. He was a Pruett now and she was a Malin...

Daniel realized that would be keeping the old fight going and understood what Candice wanted from him. He reluctantly stood up and went over to

sit next to the shy girl who had stuttered her name upon knocking and then waited for death.

Velvet jumped as Daniel sat by her on the couch. She was scared of males.

Daniel felt it. He'd been around that reaction his entire life. Even though it came from a woman, it still felt the same. He looked at her. "I'm Daniel."

Velvet snorted lightly. "Yeah."

Daniel didn't know what to say to the girl. So he didn't speak again. He just stayed next to her so she wouldn't feel like a bug under a dome.

Candice was pleased. In time, Daniel would be glad to have a member of his first family that he didn't have to hate. This would give him another layer of peace in payment for everything he'd suffered while away from her.

Candice still hadn't forgiven herself for not being able to stop his captivity in the complex. Knowing what had happened to him there made that impossible. She would spend the rest of her life trying to atone for that and still fail. Some things couldn't be fixed once they were broken. That was a law of life.

6 Months Later

Chapter Fifty-Three

Close

November 7th

1

“The results are in, folks! We have a President!”

Angelica jumped at the loud announcement from the wall screen even though she’d been expecting it. Dana’s voice was even peppier than before the Network had fallen. She obviously was having a good time as the main reporter for the election.

“We are here in Adelphia, waiting for the President to come out and make a statement. We can’t wait to hear her first words. This is a momentous occasion for everyone in our country. We haven’t had a President in almost five centuries.”

Jason reached over and turned the screen off. “Are you ready to go out?”

“No.”

Jason snickered. “It’s cold. Do you want the thicker cloak?”

“No.”

Jason held out a hand.

Angelica continued to grumble, but she pushed herself off the couch and waddled toward the door. She didn't want to go out and show vulnerability to the world. Her ankles were swollen and her back hurt. Right at this moment, she couldn't remember why she'd wanted to have a baby.

Jason held the door for her, nodding to the Runners outside providing security. Over the last six months, the big women, and the few men now on the wild crew, had proved invaluable. Jason blushed as Hope slapped him on the shoulder and cackled. "Fatherhood looks good on her!"

Angelica grimaced at the tasteless joke.

Jason chuckled. "You'll have your turn. We've all seen you and Thomas every time we visit."

Hope cackled louder.

As they moved into the chilly hall of the complex that had been built across from the demolished stadium, the reporter's voice blared from screens and from the hall in front of them where she was doing the live report.

"The fishmongers have agreed to let the rebel men stay with them. It's rumored they have created bonds and several of the mutants are pregnant."

Angelica didn't agree with the free rein Candice was giving the media, but it was too late to interfere. None of them liked being in the dark anymore.

"Canada refused to release the rebel men, claiming that because they passed the sixty day limit, the rebels were Canadian citizens. Candice Pruett negotiated their return."

Angelica thought about that trip and hid a gag. The morning sickness had been hitting her hard then and even the soothing herbs of the fishmongers hadn't been able to calm it. The trip had been successful, however. No one wanted to incur Candice's wrath by breaking the new rules, but the mutant women were also delighted to have the men. Locals throughout the country had refused to accept the rebel males after fighting changeling men, but the fishmongers hadn't been intimidated. They'd been hungry. The rebel men had offered to cook every night and a deal was reached. That was the last trip Angelica had been on; she was restless now, as well as uncomfortable. "Too big to go anywhere."

Thomas and Ralph had taken charge of the rebel males and been elected their unofficial leaders. The Mayor of that town had yet to be chosen. Marta's daughter had been drowned by fishmongers who sank her boat while she slept because she had been too cowardly to fight at the training center.

"The family has promised us that new programs are coming soon to entertain and educate, but they've all sworn there will be no new games. Many of the local residents were disappointed to discover that, but they're willing to wait and see what the council has in mind. We've also been told that Pruett Town will be renamed when it becomes the new capital of the country in the official independence celebration next year to mark the anniversary of our freedom from tyranny."

Angelica shifted to her other leg to take the pressure off her back, refusing to hold Jason's arm for support. Too many people were able to see them and she couldn't afford the weakness. None of them could. Even while pregnant, she was finally the most feared Pruett in the family. That honor gave her deep pride.

Jason halted by a door down the hall. He tapped lightly as a warm breeze rushed over them. All the bodies were heating up the room.

Bruce opened the door and held it so Mary could exit.

Mary went straight to Angelica and gave her a firm hug.

Surprised, Angelica returned the embrace. She'd never been that close to her and her uncle.

Mary knew. "I'd never try to replace your mother, but if you need something she would have covered, you can come to me."

Angelica was touched. After learning the secrets of her parentage, she had almost expected to be excommunicated from the family. It was a relief to know Mary didn't feel that way.

Bruce handed Angelica a picture. They had just returned from New Network City, where the cleanup was almost finished.

Angelica stared with tears in her eyes at the monument that was dedicated to everyone who had lost their lives in the rebellion. The bronze statue had the ape in the center, surrounded by Glowers, Runners, Divas, snakes, locals, and of course,

Pruetts and Nomads. Jonas was also depicted beside the ape. All around the edges were the locals they had lost. Angelica's parents were the ape's guards.

Bruce moved forward. "Amos loved you, girl." He hugged Angelica. "So do I. Tell me if you need anything."

Angelica hugged Bruce longer than she had Mary. The idea of having a father figure who wasn't evil was appealing.

"The first decision our new ruler made this morning was to issue an official decree on slavery. In exactly ten years from this date, all males will be born free. To stop countrywide rioting, the President agreed to let owners keep their current slaves. Those males will not be eligible for the ten-year rule. However, there were harsh restrictions imposed on those owners. Brothels have been reopened, though the buying and selling of any persons is now forbidden unless you are selling them to the Pruett. As you've heard, those men are being immediately freed upon sale to the family. In other male news, the rebel men, supported by Daniel Pruett, have petitioned for the right to vote. A Presidential decision on that issue isn't expected for some time, as only free persons can vote under our new constitution."

Angelica's mood grew uglier. No amount of arguing with the local owners had convinced them to give the men freedom sooner. It was a bitter victory.

As they reached the end of the hallway that led to the auditorium, hot air hit them and the noise increased, warning her there were a lot of people ahead. Angelica assumed it was the full 10,000 bodies this facility was able to hold. Julian's male engineers had done a remarkable job overseeing the project. Now that they were free, the engineers had gravitated toward Pruett Town, where they could live in safety. In fact, almost all the men they had rescued over their rebellion had come. They were helping build infrastructure that was based on forbidden books. Candice was paying top UDs for any old material people found or were hiding. Information was no longer forbidden in their world and it was leading to quicker recovery in most places.

The group paused at the next intersection to allow other members to join them. Lydia and several Runners came over to provide more protection since the group was larger.

Lydia was a different person now. Angelica had spent time with her since Bobby's departure and noticed the changes. She was quieter, something that was odd for Sam's crew. It was obvious she missed her mate. No one had heard from Bobby since he left. They hadn't heard from the Nomads either, but that was normal for them.

The crowd roared as Angelica and her group came into view. As reporters rushed over and the Runners hurried to get in between them, Angelica scanned the auditorium. Screens were showing new

laws as they were being discussed by the reporters. Den mothers were writing them out and passing the cards. Their old job of educating bachelors was a useful skill. In time, they would become teachers and replace the hour-long daily computer lessons that the kids were now tolerating in boredom.

As security cleared the path, Jason led them toward the stage.

“Bobby?”

Everyone paused to scan the front row, where family members were gathering to witness the new leader take control.

Bobby stood up, dark eyes and tanned skin making him appear to be a true Nomad. His clothing matched it—a white turban that was now being twisted nervously in his hands and flowing tan pants. He wasn’t the same rookie who had left with them six months ago. That was obvious in the way Bobby held himself in place even after Lydia took a step toward him.

The reporters caught on to the drama and began recording the reunion as Lydia paused, face crumbling when he didn’t run to her.

Bobby cleared his throat. “I’d like to make an arrangement with you.”

Lydia brightened. “Really?”

Bobby nodded, but stayed where he was. “Can I talk to you, alone?”

Lydia shook her head. “I’m working. Do it now.”

Bobby's face turned scarlet. "I love you. I want to be with you, even if you are a Runner. I think I can make it work now."

Lydia wanted to go to him, but she refused to shirk her duty. "I accept your arrangement."

The witnesses and reporters gushed as the couple exchanged warm looks.

"We're making everybody wait." Jason led Angelica to the stairs by the stage, and passed them to settle her in the front row.

"Isn't that sweet?!" Dana moved toward the stage as her camera crew followed. "That was Lydia Pruett. Adopted into the clan, the Runner has been providing security for the family and doing an excellent job of it. Several assassination attempts have been thwarted. Rumors imply the assassins were sent by members of the United Nations, who have been pretending to offer shelter to abused males around the world and now own more of them than anyone else. The United Nations is currently being sued by five countries, with more lawsuits expected. The longtime Secretaries-General committed suicide last week, and the woman running the show in his place walked out yesterday morning. The UN may be dissolved."

The news flipped to a clip of Candice giving an address a few weeks ago.

"I have refused demands to allow the UN to tour our weapons facilities. We are a sovereign nation and we do not need foreign oversight. However, because our citizens insisted on the ten-year

moratorium, I have been forced to agree to a six-month inspection of brothels, and a yearly inspection after that, until the world is satisfied we are no longer abusing our men. In exchange, they will not hassle us over the moratorium. They will remove all camps and troops on our side of the border.”

Angelica tensed as Dana looked her way, assuming the next clip would be about her. She hadn’t gotten used to being in the spotlight. She was glad she hadn’t been chosen in the election. She had protested vehemently about her name even being placed on the ballot, but local populations had insisted.

“The UN has demanded that New America outlaw capital punishment for the deal to be final. Those of us who have lived our lives under tyranny understand that some people need to die and we support leadership’s decision to refuse. The negotiations are still underway. In the meantime, supervision of the males has been given to Angelica Pruett. There is little doubt that she is able to keep control over the situation even though she is only weeks from her due date. I’m sure you all remember the riot a month ago when free males took over an armory, but surrendered as soon as Angelica showed up. They didn’t even try to negotiate when they found out who had been sent to quell them. Everyone feels safer with Angelica watching over the changeling men who are no longer experiencing symptoms of the disease.”

Angelica was glad when the reporter moved on. She wished the new President would hurry up. She had to pee and her ankles were swelling again.

The doors behind them burst open, letting in a rush of soothing cold air.

People in the crowd screamed, scattering as two large hounds came in, carrying Cain and Jamie. The children had become so used to the big dogs that they were now riding them like horses.

Behind the wild children who were enjoying scaring the crowd, Den Mothers ran after them with wild hair that was no longer in vibrant colors.

Angelica pushed herself up and turned around to glare with red eyes.

“Uh-oh.” Cain and Jamie quickly dismounted and took their seats in the front row with the rest of the family, heads bowed in innocent obedience.

Angelica whistled.

Velvet Malin, as frazzled as the Den Mothers, came to the door. It was obvious she had been chasing the boys and hounds, and fell behind. She made a sharp gesture. “Come!”

Both dogs followed her out of the crowd, bringing peace to the unexpected chaos.

As everyone stared, Chester lumbered in with Daniel’s children in his big arms. The redhead looked like he had been fighting with the hounds.

“How did I become the diaper whisperer?” Chester shook his head. “I need a new mate.”

Around him, his kids nodded.

Hearing his words, half the Runners swiveled in his direction.

Laughter broke out in the crowd. All of the Runners admired him for his skills with the kids.

Sophia's group was behind Chester. Their family was followed by three slaves who appeared happy. As they entered the auditorium with their two impressive daughters leading the way to provide security, Angelica and Candice stared. It was like looking at their past lives. It was also a reminder that not everyone wanted to change. The Nomadic cane farmers didn't see a need to fix what wasn't broken.

"And that's another group of our famous first family, folks." Dana chuckled at her clever words and went on as if everyone agreed. It was obvious the males didn't. The riot Angelica had quelled was over the 10-year wait period. "The hell hounds are mostly calm now, but crews of singers are rounding them up until we can determine what mix of chemicals will free them from their chains. The old Network didn't have a plan for that, but our new one... And here she comes! Candice! Candice! Can we have a moment?"

Candice grinned.

Daniel stayed next to her as she braced on the cane that she only needed now when her leg was bothering her. She was mending and it hurt.

The audience in the auditorium cheered as if a game was starting.

“Wow. They really like you. Tell us, Candice, what is this new position you’ve created for yourself?”

“I’m the lookout at the top of the tower. When I see smoke, I send a crew to put out the fire or replace the tiles.”

“So you’ll be watching our new President to make sure she doesn’t overstep her authority?”

“I’ll be watching everyone.” Candice looked at the camera. “The distribution rate is low. Only thirty-five percent of you want the pain to stop. Only fifty-four percent of you want men freed at all. You’re talking about the games being restarted even though I’ve told you that won’t be allowed. You’re already pushing me. Of course, I’m going to watch the new President. So will you and so will everyone else. We’ll keep each other in line and find support in the struggle.”

“That sounds ominous.”

Candice shrugged, not letting her big stomach detract from the menace as she answered. “The rest of the world controls themselves and lives in peace with the men. We are just as strong as any of them. We can and we will.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to say to the country that chose your cousin over you?”

Candice nodded. “Yes. Good job. I’m proud of you.”

Candice went to her seat as the crowd roared.

“I wonder how Sam’s taking it?”

Candice smirked at Angelica's comment. They'd both refused to talk to Sam right after the announcement, so she couldn't resign. "Better than Ginny is. She just heard and thinks we're leaving her in the western power bunker forever."

Angelica chuckled. Ginny still had custody of Robert. She and a skeleton crew of Runners were holding the bunker until they found time to deal with it.

Ginny had also reported that she and Robert were a couple. Candice recognized obsessive undertones, but Robert was providing information on anything they asked, so she wasn't rushing his demise. He was their last prisoner. The Malin women, along with Rusty, had been executed months ago. She'd ordered it as soon as the baby was born. The child had been sent to an orphanage and would hopefully never know who his parents had been.

"While we wait for the President, let's go over some of the new laws concerning men. Reggie, do you have that sheet?"

"I do, Dana! Today's vote gave us four new rules for those special guys in our lives. Men and boys are to be educated and paid for labor, equal to the females. That didn't cause as much uproar as the brothel rules. All rentals, men and women, must be willing. They also have to be healthy, receive medical care, and, they have to be paid for the service! Brothel owners went on strike last month over that, but the abundance of males has caused

them to fail in their efforts to reverse the council's decision. Just yesterday, the union members agreed to a deal preventing criminal charges for past abuses, providing they abide by the new regulations."

Candice glanced at Angelica, delivering a nod. She'd sent the girl to deal with the union members. An hour after she arrived, they had a deal in place.

Angelica didn't respond even though she liked the praise. She wanted the men freed. Bargaining for terms of their slavery was awful. She didn't count them being willing. They didn't know any other life. Of course, they were going to return to selling their bodies. Candice had promised to wean the population off prostitution and Angelica believed her, but it was still frustrating.

"Slave owners are allowed to keep their property during the ten year moratorium. In exchange, all males with children can petition for visitation rights and even custody. The Watchman, our lookout, will make the final choice on those cases, not the President. Men can also own property and travel unescorted, though that's still dangerous when you consider that less than half our citizens have come in for the cure or the vaccine. Now that chemicals are not being added to the food, water, and air, all changelings will burnout in time. There is no reason to resist the medical treatments that are being provided at no cost to citizens."

Dana paused, not liking some of what she was relaying, but she couldn't deny it was fair and

effective. Every broadcast they made about the vaccine and cure brought a few hundred more people in for injections and allowed them to remove Glowers, severely diseased, about-to-snap, and criminal elements. It was awful and perfect—like life itself.

Dana looked around, seeing the crowd was getting impatient. The Runners had things covered, though. Dana had now witnessed them in action enough to know they could handle a rough crowd. Still, she hoped the new President presented herself soon. She was on her last update. “We spent time on the streets of this city this morning, asking people why they voted for Sam Pruett. Here are some of those answers.” Dana motioned for Reggie, who was in the control booth, to run those clips.

“I wanted Candice in there. Her game was amazing, but I’d rather have her watching *over* the person in there, you know? She won’t let them repeat Network evil.”

“Excuse me? Why did you vote for Sam and not her sister?”

“Her sister scares me.”

The crowd laughed, as did the reporter on the replay.

“Same here. Does it make you feel better knowing she isn’t going to make laws for us?”

“Well, I didn’t mean it that way. She’s terrifying. That will keep the free males from going on another rampage.”

Dana hoped that was true. They were telling people the males weren't able to change fully now, that it was wearing off, but that depended on several things they weren't discussing in public. Some of Julian's experiments were bonding with the disease.

"Miss? Can I ask why you voted for Sam?"

"I didn't. I voted for her man."

"Um... What?!"

"Just kidding. I voted for Sam because she told us the truth."

"Her entire family was involved in that, you know."

"But Sam could have taken the Network's offer and sold them out. She didn't. She stayed true, so I rewarded her with my vote."

2

"I can't believe this is happening to me." Sam ducked a powder puff and dodged a brush. "Stop that!"

Rosa and Baker snickered. The reporters had sent a crew to get Sam ready to be on camera. Sam had wanted to go as she was—dirty from the two days of travel it had taken to get here on her Mopar. She'd refused the confined space of their safety vehicles.

Sam tensed, glaring as a neutered man approached her with a long dress. "I'll make you wear it."

The man dropped the dress and ran behind the other members of the TV crew.

Baker waved them out. "It'll be okay. You did good."

Rosa frowned at her oversight. She should have thanked them.

Baker ignored her lapse. He was teaching the Runners how to treat other people. It was hard work. They'd spent their lives being famous for a *lack* of manners.

"You really should change your clothes." Baker pointed to the bottom of her tattered cloak. "You still have blood on it."

Sam sighed, stomping down from the platform in front of the mirror where the crew had pushed her an hour ago. "Change clothes. Wash your face. You sound like my mother."

Sam winced internally at the poor word choice and then went on with her complaints. "Do you hear that cheering? I hate cheering." She jerked a new cloak from the closet and tossed it overtop the old one. She fastened the ends, still grumbling. "Uncomfortable clothes, people sucking up, having to be *nice*. I liberated a country. Why am I being punished?"

Baker chuckled, taking her arm before she found another excuse to delay. "Your people are waiting, Madam President."

Sam grunted, not resisting like she wanted to. She'd never been so nervous.

Rosa escorted them out into the hall where people began to cheer as soon as they saw her.

“Vulture balls!” Sam took in a breath and plastered the family grin onto her pale face.

Snickering at her curse, Baker led her toward the podium as they entered the auditorium, sensitive ears cringing at the noise as they were recognized.

He understood Sam’s tension under his arm. She wasn’t worried over being attacked. The sound was so loud that he was being disoriented. He could only imagine how bad it was for her ears, but he knew how to make her feel better. Baker leaned in and kissed her on the cheek as they reached the stairs, drawing more cheers and a few whistles. “You’re a Pruett. Act like it.”

Sam’s eyes glowed red. She lifted her chin and walked up the steps without stumbling like she’d been afraid of doing.

Baker took his spot in the front row, puffing out at the catcalls and Candice’s nod of approval.

Angelica leaned over to whisper in his ear.

Jason frowned, turning to look at his son and Baker’s little brother as they got loud again.

Cain shrank down in the seat. “Don’t tell Sam.”

Baker turned back around so the boy wouldn’t see his smile. Cain was in awe of Sam. He was dressing like her, walking and talking like her, and begging her for lessons on everything. Baker was thrilled every time she agreed and followed through. Cain was slowly adjusting to the outside world and it was because Sam had the strength to force him to

do it without hurting him or losing her cool. The boy responded well to that approach. Baker couldn't be firm with him. He just threatened to tell Sam.

"Pruett! Pruett! Pruett!" The crowd chanted wildly. Made up of both men and women, they fed off each other, bringing snarls and growls of need that weren't just female.

Angelica whistled.

The obnoxious noise cut through the din. Everyone knew who'd made it. That sound and death were becoming synonymous with Angelica.

The crowd quieted; people slowly took their seats.

The Runners breathed a sigh of relief and stayed alert. They'd never handled a crowd this size, though escorting the changeling males to their new home had been close. Changeling women had lined the route to express their disapproval at the men being relocated instead of removed. Many of the men had killed women during the rampage. It had also colored the view of the rebel males in Canada, making it harder to get them back because no one wanted to take them in.

Sam braced on the podium as cameras flashed, keeping her eyes down like Dana had warned her to do. She saw the speech Candice had written when she'd refused to. Sam read the first two lines as an awkward silence fell in the auditorium. *Thank you for this honor. I'm thrilled to be here.*

Sam picked it up and reached inside her doubled cloak for fire supplies.

Candice sighed in pleasure as Sam burned the speech.

Angelica heard it and assumed Candice had triggered Sam intentionally.

Baker grimaced as the crowd of wild women cheered again. He leaned over. "Sorry. I hope you didn't put much time into that."

Candice shrugged. "A week or so."

Baker groaned, then straightened. He met her eye.

Candice nodded to confirm the suspicion he couldn't voice right now. She'd known Sam would win. She wanted it this way.

"Why?" Baker hoped the cheering would allow Candice to answer.

Candice motioned Angelica to do it.

Angelica leaned close to Baker, liking the way Jason's head snapped toward them even though she was the size of a Mopar and Baker only had eyes for Sam. "She's not." Angelica looked at him. "You get it?"

He nodded. Sam wasn't one of Julian's experiments, but she was a Pruett—a real one bred from a willing bachelor and Pruett female. When she hit remission, it would be natural. Baker suddenly approved more than he already had. Once again, Candice had freed them—this time from a family curse.

The crowd quieted again, many of them tensing as Sam picked up the microphone. She had the authority to reverse laws or even create a new

council to put them right back where the Network had kept them for so long. It was all up to her.

Sam glared at the crowd. "I can't believe you did this shit to me."

People went crazy again.

Sam threw her hands in the air. "I mean it!"

Her fans got louder.

Angelica grinned. "This is great."

Candice nodded. "She'll be unshakable after this."

Now Angelica and Baker understood why Candice had triggered Sam's wild side.

"Fine." Sam glared in frustration. "Since you insisted on me being here..."

She had to pause for another wave of cheers and whistles. "Oh, stop that!"

The crowd laughed and refused to stop showing signs of their loyalty.

"I have an XO now."

Silence descended across the auditorium and across the world. The broadcast wasn't being limited anymore. Everyone could pick it up now.

"That's better." Sam cleared her throat. "I've chosen Dana to be my right hand."

There was confusion, mostly from the reporter as her crew turned the camera on her.

"What? I didn't... I'm not even on the ballot."

"Dana will be the perfect woman to help me keep you problem children in line." Sam pointed. "She'll report it to me and I'll tell Angel."

Angelica, already in a rough mood, growled at the new President.

Laughter cut through the anger.

“I hope you all know I’m not the indoor type. When she reports it, I’m likely to show up there on my Mopar, with my girls and guys, and I won’t be wearing a damn dress!”

The audience responded with laughter and calls for her to leave the men behind when she came.

Sam knew how to handle it. She gave them a different atrocity to be angry over—one worthy of their rage. “I need to tell you something that I’ve decided should be public knowledge. It’s about the Network and their changeling men.”

Some of the front row members tensed, but Candice didn’t. She’d suggested this a month ago and was glad Sam agreed.

“Our disease has spread to the men.”

There were gasps and shocked expressions as Sam continued.

“The Network told us that couldn’t happen, but we saw them change in the cities. We saw their eyes and claws, and we felt them. The council lied. Men can be, and many already are, infected with the rage disease.”

Shouts and mild panic filled the air in halls across the country where people were gathered to witness the first speech of the new President.

“All men need to be brought in for vaccinations or the cure. Reporters will be given more details on that after this briefing.” Sam paused. That law

would allow them to inspect the privately owned males and ensure they weren't being mistreated. "I've added an amendment to the ten-year moratorium."

Everyone tensed this time, including Candice.

"All parents can opt to make their sons free at birth, as of this very moment."

Angelica looked at Candice. "Our kids won't be born slaves!"

Candice hugged the girl because they were family, but she frowned over her shoulder. Sam's announcement meant she was going to go against Candice's wishes when she saw fit. That could lead to problems.

Sam felt the concern, but she wasn't done angering her kin. "I'm supposed to spend the next twenty minutes telling you what I'll do as your leader and what I won't do. There's even a list." Sam gestured to the stack of papers on the podium next to where the speech had been. "But I'm not going to."

Sam moved toward the stairs and sat down. She leaned toward the people in that section of the audience. "I want to tell you a story. I'm not going to leave anything out and you can make your own judgements about right and wrong."

The crowd cheered again, but not as loud. Many of the leaders were worried about her words, but the citizens sensed awful truths coming, ones they wouldn't have heard if they'd elected anyone else.

“It began over four hundred years ago, when relatives of the Network council activated an old radio station after male slavery became the law...”

Candice didn't know if Sam planned to tell them everything, but she was suddenly rooting for it. Even if Julian was right and the masses rebelled when they found out the Pruett family was responsible for their misery, it was too late. Sam had been duly elected and she now held the power to crush those rebellions as she saw fit. *We're all forever changed. The truth of our history isn't going to make that any worse. In fact, it may finish giving us freedom.*

Candice knew the next ten years would be just as hard as what they'd already faced. During that decade, men would be able to organize and start recovering. There was a huge chance that they would revolt as soon as they were officially freed.

She didn't want to think about how ugly it would get if that happened, but that was her job now. *If we can learn to trust each other again, it might be okay. And if we can't...*

Her thoughts went to Julian and his awful methods of control over their society. She suppressed a shudder as she finished the thought. *If men really can't be trusted, I'll put them back in chains faster than my father did.*

The End
What would you like to do now?

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Note From the Author

Hi! I hope you've enjoyed our time with the legendary Pruett family. I'm sorry to see it end. Are you? I can think of at least two spin off series that might come from this as we follow the descendants in their new lives, or go all the way back to the beginning and witness Marcella and Lucas's evil schemes. If those sound like something you would want to read, please let me know in a review or on my FB page.

What can I read now?

Have you checked out all three of my series? Many of them connect to each other. You'll see familiar characters there!

Already read everything I have?

Thank you so much! What an amazing fan you are. I'll try to hurry up with the next release. Until then, may I suggest exploring my website? There's a lot you can do there.

Thank you again for joining me on this adventure. Have a New Network Day! Lol.

Waving at you,
Angie

Deleted Scene

“I spoke with Rusty before we left the training center.”

Mary stilled, as did Bruce. They both looked at Candice with guilty expressions.

Candice sighed. “He’s been telling the guards he made a deal and he has a token to prove it.”

Mary tried to explain. “We had to tell some lies to win this war.”

“You should do it.”

“What?”

“Stop it!” Mary knew what was coming. Candice had been staring at her scars since she’d entered the room.

“You owe it to me for what I did to your face.”

Mary came over to the bed, furious. “You are my daughter! I would never do that!”

“I’m sorry...mom.”

Mary’s eyes filled with tears. “You evil little bitch.”

Candice opened her arms. “Can you forgive me?”

Mary crawled onto Candice’s lap and bawled like a baby.

People in the room also cried, but they hid it behind yawns and teary glances out the window.

Over Mary’s shoulder, Candice looked at Bruce. “Dad?”

Bruce joined them, fighting not to cry. Candice was saying nothing had changed for her, that she still had a father and she loved him.

Audio



Did you know the The Bachelor Battles series is
now available in audiobook format?

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