

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #15



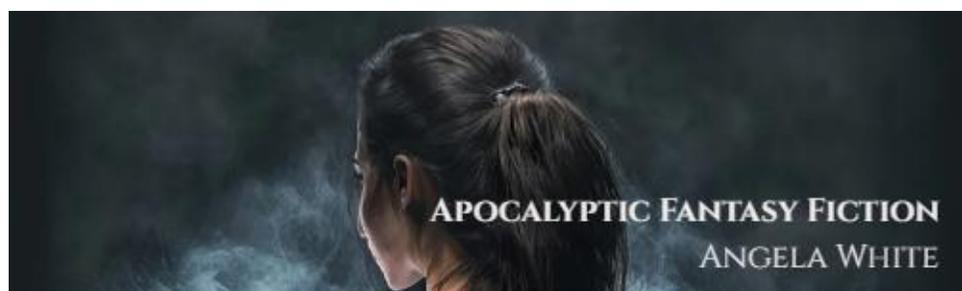
HARD
GROUND

Thank you Angie H, Crystal, John M, Jeff,
Wendy, Marleen, Kristi, Harry, Jim, Jacqueline,
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Tick-Tock

Blink

That's a Wrap

Close

Far and Near

We didn't know what to expect,
Upon our arrival.
We'd been through so much.
All we wanted was survival.

The island was beautiful,
A haven for all.
Then the ugliness came,
Putting our backs to the wall.

Our teams did the fighting.
They cleared the ground without fail.
Traumatized,
Not all lived to tell the tale.

We were attacked repeatedly.
Eagles took each blow.
Ancient threads glowed bright;
And now we know...

She can be hurt.
She can be defeated.
If we all stand together,
The war won't be repeated.

If we keep dividing,
We'll go into hiding.

Freedom will disappear,
Destroying the future far and near.

Chapter One
That's Not Good Enough

January 24th
Pitcairn Island
Day 2

1

Angela shoved the oar at Charlie, sliding over. His fear for Tracy would lend him strength. The smoke coming from the cruise ship wasn't slowing, but those two explosions were all they'd heard. Angela was grateful Courtney hadn't taken a rifle instead.

"How did this happen?" Marc wanted to know how Courtney had pulled it off. "We keep the weapons room locked!"

Angela's anger rose another notch. "She stole the keys from Peter while he was sleeping on duty."

"He's out of the Eagles!"

Angela nodded. "She covered her thoughts like we've accidentally taught all the normals to do. Kenn's rejection flipped her."

"She has to die, Angie."

Angela spotted a tiny speck of color in the water and concentrated. *Bring her to me.*

The ocean shifted against them. It made the rowing men work harder, but they didn't protest.

The waves rose; the water pulled an orange piece of debris toward them.

"That's Courtney!"

Angela ignored Conner's shout. She glowered at the panicking woman now trying to swim away from them. She considered all the options as she waited for the waves to bring Courtney closer.

"No!" Courtney flailed as she neared the lifeboat of furious people. Water sloshed over her face, sapping her strength.

"Anchor me!" Angela lunged over the side.

Marc grabbed her ankle to keep her from going all the way over, approving when she snatched Courtney's hair and shoved the terrified woman under the water.

Angela held her there, rage burning. She felt Courtney go limp and pulled on the mass of soggy hair.

Marc and Conner got Courtney into the boat, expecting a body.

Courtney coughed up water, rolling over.

Angela grabbed her hair again and slammed the woman's face into the wooden bench seat. Then she did it again. Blood and screams spewed as Courtney's nose broke.

The men kept rowing, approving when she did it a third time.

Angela stopped as Courtney sagged. She didn't care about the blood or the baby now. She leaned

back and began gathering energy so she would be able to help their injured people. She regarded Greg with smoldering eyes. “Take her to the beach; look after the kids and our captain.”

Greg nodded. He wanted to go with Angela, but he knew better than to argue.

Angela inspected their ship, grateful to see it wasn't sinking or tilting to the side. She leapt up and grabbed the ladder as soon as it came into reach.

Greg waited until they were all out of the lifeboat, then used an oar to push away. He sat on the center bench to row, anger blazing. He watched Courtney for signs that she was waking. If she did, he had a boot ready to kick her back into the darkness. He didn't know why Angela hadn't killed her, but he suspected Courtney was going to wish she had.

Angela waved Marc toward the bridge. “Connect Grant and Shawn; get me a damage report.”

Marc hurried to the bridge.

Ivan stayed on Angela's heels as she ran down into the ship. Smoke enveloped them.

Charlie and Conner stayed behind Ivan as he followed her, both trying to connect to their loved ones.

A crush of bodies fought against Angela and the others as they tried to get below. “Go to the top deck and wait for orders!” Angela shoved her way through, not answering their cries or shouts. Many

of the people were soaked, telling her the sprinkler system had activated.

Angela skipped the elevator and flew down the steps. They had no way to know if the elevators were safe. She shoved into an employee hall as more soaked, coughing, crying people flooded toward the top deck, filling the hallways and stairs.

“Can we get the windows open?” Ivan’s throat was already itching from the smoke.

“Not until we make sure the fire’s out.” Angela ran faster, feeling panic now. “We have injuries. I want all of you on that.”

Charlie’s heart evened out as Tracy finally answered. “Tracy’s in the mess, with Candy. Most of our people are going there.”

Conner let out a breath. “Thanks.” He hadn’t gotten an answer. He didn’t have a full physical bond yet to rely on.

Angela shoved against the employee door to the lab hallway. The charred, cracked barrier crumbled under the pressure, spilling her into chaos.

“I’m out!” Kenn strained, body starting to wither as he knelt next to Tonya. “Help me!”

“Jenny! Stay with me!” Kyle struggled to push healing light into Jennifer’s bleeding body.

“One each!” Angela directed Charlie and Conner toward the women. “Ivan, help the medics.” All three medics were down.

Angela went to Leeann, who was lying near the stairs. She shot a thin stream of healing energy at the girl, aware of the mother cat howling. She didn’t

spare energy on the two motionless kittens. Nothing would bring them back now.

Leeann opened her eyes and began to cry.

Angela joined Ivan, helping the medics while scanning the damage. Jayda and Debra had shields over the two fires, smothering them. One was in the lab. The other was at the entrance to the infirmary. Both of the fires were almost out, but the shields were full of smoke that would finish filling this hallway as soon as they were lowered.

Eagles arrived with fresh extinguishers and began spraying the tiny sparks and smoldering debris around the edges of the shields.

“Let go!” Neil sprayed at the base of the fire by the infirmary as the two women let go of their shields. Wade sprayed the lab flames. Thick smoke filled the hallway.

Charlie used his wind gift to push the smoke up the stairs.

“Check for more fires!” Angela caught Ray and Daryl. “Then get all the windows open.”

The two men hurried off.

“Angela!” Kenn bellowed through the noise. “I need you!”

Angela left the medics in Ivan’s hands and hurried to Kenn.

Blood was pooling around Tonya’s legs. Kenn looked up in desperation. “I can’t stop it!”

Charlie shook his head. “Me either.”

Angela paled. “I don’t have a lifeforce to give.” She ran names through her mind. “Conner!”

Conner shoved up from Jennifer, ignoring Kyle's growl. He staggered over to Tonya and began bringing up a lifeforce.

Jennifer coughed, rolling over to breathe as smoke tried to refill her lungs.

Kyle gathered her into his arms and took her to the employee hall so she could get a clear breath. "Jenny! Are you okay?"

Jennifer groaned. "I think so." She examined her body, lids shutting against tears as she felt the belly bump. *I haven't lost the baby.* "Thank you!"

"Thank Conner. He stopped the bleeding and healed your burns." Kyle sat her in a dusty chair and leaned against the wall, body weakened. He'd drained himself trying to save her.

"Give her another one!"

"It won't help!"

Kyle listened to Kenn and Conner, hoping they could save Tonya.

"What happened?" Jennifer coughed out more smoke.

Fresh rage flew through Kyle. "Someone blew up the lab. You were hit in the blast."

Jennifer stiffened. "Tonya was in front of me!"

Kyle nodded angrily. "She's in trouble."

In the hallway, Angela and Conner strained to heal Tonya, but blood kept pouring from the lacerations. Glass from the lab had impaled her in the neck, stomach, and chest. Angela understood they weren't going to be able to stop her labor. "Concentrate on the wounds!" Most of Tonya's

body was cut or burnt. “Jayda! We need a stretcher! And an incubator!”

Jayda hurried into the heavily damaged infirmary, hoping the ones they’d used for Samantha’s babies were okay. Glass crunched under her feet.

She found one still in the far corner. “It’s okay!”

Ed picked it up, coughing lightly. “Where do I take it?”

Jayda pointed. “The office at the end of the hall!” That office had only suffered damage to the outer walls and door.

Jayda hefted the stretcher and ran by the medics who were slowly recovering with Ivan’s help. He was healing all three of them at once.

Marc hurried toward Angela, anger growing at the sight of their injured people and the damage. The lab was a total loss, and most of the infirmary was destroyed. Marc joined Angela and Conner. “Shawn says it’s just this part of the ship. None of the monitors are showing any other damage, but he wants Grant to verify things are okay.”

“Later.” Angela leaned out of the way as Jayda and Ed sat the stretcher next to them.

Marc helped Kenn get Tonya’s bleeding body onto it. He sent strong blasts of healing energy as they worked.

The two volunteers lifted it and took her into the office at the end of the hall.

“You can’t stop it, can you?!” Kenn was panicking. “Who did this?!”

Angela didn't hide her thoughts. She was too angry and already getting tired. "Courtney."

Mutters and gasps went through the witnesses.

Kenn punched a charred wall. "Damn her!"

Angela went into the office, shoving her sleeves up. "We have to help Tonya. She's giving birth."

Kyle came to the employee door. He gestured to the gawking Eagles. "Do a complete walkthrough."

Angela knelt between Tonya's legs, glad the redhead's injuries were finally healing. Marc's power was doing more than hers or Conner's had.

Marc didn't stop until every burn and scratch was gone, but there was nothing he could do to stop Tonya's labor.

Jayda hurried in with more equipment from the infirmary. She plugged the incubator in and opened packages, mind flying. Courtney's betrayal was a shock. "Will there be a trial?"

"Not now." Angela put a hand on Tonya's rock-hard stomach. "Tonya? Honey, wake up. I need your help."

Kenn held Tonya's hand, fury growing. "I want Courtney executed when she's captured."

Marc agreed. "She was already caught. We'll handle it."

Kenn glared at Angela. "Fry her."

Angela concentrated on the baby that was starting to emerge. "Save your energy. If its lungs aren't ready, we have to try to help."

Tonya screamed as she woke, pushing.

Angela caught the tiny bundle in one hand. Her heart thumped when it didn't move.

Ed handed her the nasal aspirator.

Angela quickly sucked out the fluids to clear the baby's mouth and nose. She took the blanket Ed shoved at her and began gently rubbing the tiny infant.

The baby twitched.

Everyone with energy left directed it at the little boy, all praying for him to cry.

Tonya screamed again as the placenta passed, but she held out her hands. "Give him to me!"

Angela handed the child over, hating the limits of her power.

Tonya instinctively nuzzled the baby. "Momma's here. Talk to me!"

The baby's skin began to warm; it turned red and flinched. A weak wail came from its lips.

People cheered and clapped.

Tonya fought the pain and fear to keep encouraging her newborn. "Breathe! Let me hear those lungs."

The baby gave another weak cry, fists clenching.

Tonya smiled through the tears. "That's my boy."

Angela cut the cord and tied it off as Jayda pushed the incubator closer.

Kenn gently took the boy and placed him in the machine that would help him breathe and keep him warm.

Ed used light fingers to attach the oxygen cannula to the preemie's nose. He'd studied this part for Samantha's delivery. He refused to think about his brief moment of asking Courtney to dinner. *It didn't happen!*

Kenn increased the heat, mindful of the warnings about descendant children needing extra warmth.

Angela worked on Tonya. "She's bleeding too much."

Marc directed the last of his energy toward the redhead, determined to save her too.

Peter rushed into the office and put a hand on Marc's shoulder. He'd just found out who was injured.

Bright streams of energy flew into Tonya.

Angela sighed in relief. "It's slowing. Keep going."

Gabe heard Kenn's mental shouts. He ran in and joined Peter in sharing energy.

Both men stared at Tonya in horror. Even with the healing, it was obvious she was on the edge of death.

Angela massaged the uterus to contract it and help slow the bleeding. She packed towels between Tonya's legs, then checked her pulse. It was there, but weak.

Kenn took Tonya's hand. "Come on! You can beat this!"

Tonya's lashes fluttered and shut.

Kenn leaned down. “Tonya! Wake up right now!”

Tonya’s lids flew open. “Hate it...when you yell at me.”

Kenn grinned through his fear. “Stay awake. Keep fighting.”

“We need blood.” Angela grabbed a needle setup from the kit Ed had brought in and ripped it open. “Conner!”

Conner knelt so Angela could stick him.

Tonya shivered as cold waves filled her limbs. “The baby!”

“He’s breathing and his color is starting to look good.” Jayda was staying by the incubator.

Tonya shivered harder.

Angela shoved the needle into Tonya’s arm. “Clench your fists, Conner. The blood will flow faster.”

Ed went into the damaged infirmary, searching for their coolers. He retrieved a bag of blood that was O Negative, a universal type. Then he started digging through the mess for another IV setup. When Conner ran low, he wanted to be ready.

Tonya tried to focus on Angela. “Will you...”

Angela checked her pulse again. “It would be my honor. What’s his name?”

“Kenneth Adrian Harrison.”

Angela immediately went to the incubator and inspected the infant with the last of her energy. Dark blue light sank into the crying boy.

“Thank you...” Tonya’s head fell to the side as her lids shut.

“No!” Kenn drew on his reserve and his demon.
Save her!

You can only do this once. Are you sure, Master?

Do it now!

Blinding light filled the room.

Angela stumbled out into the hall, proud of Kenn.

Charlie pushed by her and went to help.

People came to Angela, offering energy and anger.

“Who did this?!”

“Why did this happen?”

Angela sucked in the energy, leaning against the wall. “I want you all on the top deck for fresh air.”

Most of the crowd in the hall went toward the steps.

The three medics stayed sitting along the wall, still injured. Ivan’s power had healed the glass wounds and many of the burns, but not all of them. He’d refused to drain himself in case Angela needed it.

Pam pushed through the crowd and ran to Morgan. She used their mate connection to share energy and finish healing his wounds.

Morgan put a hand on Harry’s leg and Terry’s arm. “See if we can share. The others are all out or about drained now.”

Pam pushed more energy; bright light flowed through Morgan's link and into the two grateful medics.

Ivan came over and put a hand on Angela's wrist, able to feel her need. He helped her up the stairs, keeping people from shoving her or bumping into her. He knew what was about to happen. He approved completely. *She deserves it, Boss. Don't you dare feel bad.*

Angela connected the entire hive as she reached the top deck. It was the first time she'd ever done it with all of them.

On every level of the ship, people stopped, turning toward her.

On the beach, Greg and Trinity rotated toward the ship. So did Cate and Cody.

Grant observed in concern, not sure what was happening. Courtney's bloody body was on the ground near his feet. She hadn't woken yet.

All of the descendants on the beach nodded at Angela's single mental question.

"Guilty," echoed from them at the same time. They retreated from Courtney.

Greg tugged on Grant's arm, pulling him back. "You may not want to watch this."

Grant figured it out next. "She earned whatever she gets."

Angela fired a mixture of Cate's death spell that she'd copied, combined with her fiery fury.

Flames shot through the air and zeroed in on Courtney. They slammed into the unconscious woman.

Courtney woke up screaming as fire covered her from head to toe.

Angela's fury lifted the woman into the air so even those on the top deck of the ship could watch her burn.

Courtney's shrieks filled every mind.

Most of them listened in satisfaction. The sound of justice was sweet.

In the office near the infirmary, Marc glared at Peter. "She stole your keys while you were sleeping on duty. You're out of the Eagles!"

Kenn looked over, icy rage filling him as Peter stared in horror. "That's not good enough."

Kenn drew his gun and shot Peter in the head.

2

On the beach, Adrian came from the tall grass to handle the body. Courtney hadn't lasted long, but the smell of burning flesh was awful and they needed to be careful not to set their island on fire. He began kicking dirt over it.

Trinity stayed next to the quiet twins.

Greg joined Adrian, but he stayed focused on the ship. "Was that a gunshot?"

Adrian nodded. "They're handling it."

Greg frowned. "You still have a link to Angela."

“No, to Marc.” Adrian kicked more dirt over the smoldering pile. “Kenn shot an Eagle for dereliction of duty. Marc isn’t sure if he should let it go or arrest Kenn for it.”

Greg was relieved Angela wasn’t involved. “You had us remove them sometimes, if the offense was bad enough.”

Adrian gently took ahold of a hot ankle and tugged, hoping it didn’t rip apart. “Marc believes Peter deserved it, but he doesn’t want people to think it’s okay to kill whenever they feel like it.”

“It’s not, but Kenn is an Eagle. We have more authority.” Greg wasn’t surprised it had been Peter, though he was curious what price Kenn would pay for it. Greg helped Adrian drag the reeking corpse toward the water. The animals would get a crispy meal this time.

“He’s about to…” Adrian turned toward the ship as Marc put out a call to the hive this time.

Greg observed, longing to be connected. *One more week!*

“Agreed.” Adrian came out of the daze, glad Marc had handled it that way. “They all agreed he was right to do it. Kenn’s off the hook with Marc.” Adrian retreated, watching the water start tugging on the body; small flares of steam rolled up at the contact. “I hear you’re going to be one of us.”

Greg scowled. “Who told you? No one’s supposed to know.”

Adrian regarded his former Eagle. "It's in your mind, loud and clear. Shut that down or you'll lose it before you get it."

Greg nodded curtly. "I will." He cleared his throat. "Well?"

Adrian shrugged. "I have no issues with it, but my opinion doesn't count for much anymore."

"It does to me, and to the boss."

Adrian didn't answer. He walked into the tall grass and vanished.

Greg scanned the people on the beach, not sure what he should do now.

The weeds parted near him. Dog came flying onto the beach. *Can't leave you humans alone at all!* He went to Greg and peered up. *I'm ready to help.*

Greg blinked at the clear communication. Dog didn't usually speak to him.

Grant gestured. "I need to return to the ship."

Greg slowly acquiesced. "We all do." He waved. "Get in the lifeboat. The boss needs us."

No one argued, but the adults dreaded seeing the damage Courtney had caused. The kids were happy they'd gotten to come to the island for a little while, but they were also disappointed the wedding hadn't been finished.

Cody patted Cate's arm as she settled next to him in the boat. "We'll try again when things calm down."

Cate smiled. "Good. I like her."

Cody chuckled. "So does Daddy."

Grant slid in next to the twins as Dog leapt into the center of the boat and Trinity took the end. “You guys say the word and we’ll do it right then. Everyone wants them together.”

Greg waited to feel jealousy at that statement. When nothing came, he let out a breath. *I made the right choice to let them charm me. I hope it holds forever.*

3

“That isn’t going to hold much longer.” Theo gently probed the charred, flaking wall next to the lab. “I suggest tearing it out so it doesn’t collapse when someone leans against it.”

“I agree. What else?” Angela ignored the mess, the noise, and the lingering smoke in the air as she and Theo examined the damage. It had only been an hour; not all the smoke had cleared yet, and the mother cat was still letting out eerie howls. Marc and most of the others were walking the ship to check for more explosives that hadn’t gone off yet. Ivan was ten feet away, watching everyone who came near this hall with suspicion.

“We should take out the entire lab structure. The infirmary can be repaired.” Theo stopped to make notes in his book.

Angela waited, slowly recovering her energy. All around them, people were cleaning up the debris while stealing looks into the office where Tonya was resting next to the incubator. Morgan was in the

chair next to them. Kenn was leaning against the rear wall of that office, glowering at anyone who dared to come inside.

The cleaning crew had removed Peter's body and was now attempting to scrub his brain from the door. Despite Marc getting a consensus that she should excuse his action, Angela hadn't made a final choice yet.

Kenn felt it. He was tense as he waited for her decision.

Angela entered the infirmary, aware of the weary, weak medics gathering the supplies they deemed could be saved. Camp members had come to help. The infirmary was full of people, but none of them spoke or smiled. Everyone was upset about what had happened. *So am I. I should have known this was coming. I could have prevented this tragedy.*

Jennifer appeared, face and arms still streaked in ashes and blood. "Where do you want me?"

Angela pointed. "In that chair with a pen and paper. The medics will call out items we need brought up from the cargo bay to replace what we lost here. As soon as I recover, you'll get another healing session. So will the medics."

"Okay." Jennifer went to the chair and eased down, hurting. She'd been healed, but that hadn't removed the soreness or the aching lungs from all the smoke.

Kyle gave Angela a nod of approval as he went by the destroyed infirmary on rounds. He didn't

look into the office at Kenn, but he planned to speak in support of the man if Angela decided he should be punished. *I would have done it too if I'd been close enough.*

Angela caught the thought. She sighed. Punishing Kenn would backfire. Everyone thought he'd done the right thing. *And Peter knew not to slack off on duty.* Angela wanted to let it go. It wasn't like everyone was going to start executing people for minor crimes. Peter's mistake had been huge. *But Kenn has to tell Tonya. I won't do that, and I doubt she'll be as forgiving as the rest of us.*

Angela knew Tonya had hidden feelings for Peter. She hadn't been sure what kind of feelings they were, but she'd recognized their spark. She'd been proud of the redhead for never giving in. Now that Peter was dead, those feelings might come out.

Kenn was monitoring Angela for a clue to how she was going to handle him. As he caught her thought, Tonya's lashes fluttered and she groaned.

Kenn sighed. *It doesn't matter if Tonya hates me for it. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. He's no longer here to endanger her or anyone else.*

4

“She missed the vital areas of the ship.” Grant recorded numbers on his clipboard, heart finally easing into a normal rhythm. “We got lucky.”

“I still don't understand why she did it.” Ray had been sent to guard the bridge, by Marc. He

hadn't argued despite the drama over mates guarding mates.

"I heard Kenn told her no about leaving Tonya." Grant shook his head in disgust. "Like that was ever going to happen."

Ray didn't mention the past, but he couldn't help thinking about it. Kenn had been a giant asshole a year ago. Back then, he might have tried to keep both women through force, while still pursuing Angela. Ray was proud of the Marine for his strength to change.

Grant sensed it. He glanced over.

Ray refused to apologize or explain how he felt. It wasn't love or even attraction. *It's respect. Kenn earned it through hard work. And he saved my life at least once. I owe him a little consideration.*

Grant sighed, returning to his clipboard and numbers. "When they come for an update, you can tell them we're fine. Theo and his crew are already drafting plans to fix the damage."

"Theo's solid." Ray scanned the island that was waiting for them. He wanted to walk on land so much he could almost feel it under his boots. Ray kept his expression blank and acted like an Eagle. *I want the same respect Kenn has. I have to keep earning it.*

Grant wanted to know what Ray was thinking, but now wasn't a good time to be caught digging for personal information. He was surprised Marc had sent Ray up here. He was also happy. Ray made him feel safer.

Both men turned as the elevator dinged.

Wade stepped out, nodding to Ray. "I'm your relief now that the threat's over."

Ray moved toward the steps. "Where do they want me?"

"In the damage zone. Everyone down there needs a break. Boss said to pick the one who looks the most exhausted and switch out."

Ray went down the steps and vanished into the ship.

Grant felt Wade's sharp eyes go over him, the bridge, and settle onto the deck below for a complete sweep before lifting to the island. Grant relaxed a little more. Wade also made him feel safe. *Most of the Eagles do. It's nice. I hope Courtney is our last traitor.*

Wade nodded but didn't speak. He was furious, and feeling guilty because he was glad it hadn't hit Samantha and her newborns.

On the deck below, Panaji and the fishing crew pulled up the lines they'd had in the water overnight. They were all full and the fish appeared healthy, but they still began running tests to confirm it. The fish would all go to the cooks as long as they tested negative.

Wade kept track of their expressions as he stood watch, curious about the results. He was glad when the fishing crew all relaxed or smiled. They didn't need any new problems right now. Clearing the island and setting up a base camp would take all of

their concentration and energy, not to mention rebuilding the lab and infirmary.

Wade scanned the ships around them. *I wonder if we can use one of the labs or infirmaries on those ships.* He didn't think those would be better equipped, but it would be a while before theirs was ready again and they had people who needed real medical care now. Wade made a mental note to mention it to the boss. Angela might have already considered it, but he wanted to be sure. The guilt he felt over his involvement with Courtney would now be with him forever. He had to do everything he could to make up for it.

Wade thought of Samantha sitting in the crowded mess with Charlie and Tracy. The teenager was on a break; no one had argued when he chose to spend it with Tracy. Wade liked him being close to Samantha and the boys, who were being passed around the room right now. The camp was easily distracted anyway, but newborn twins were a novelty in Safe Haven.

Wade scanned the beach. He spotted the lump in the water, heart clenching. *I'm sorry I didn't do more to help her.*

Grant felt the wave of regret. He guessed the problem without a mental gift. "Let it go, Wade. It's over now."

Wade shrugged. "Not for me."

Grant hoped hearing the truth would snap Wade out of his ugly thoughts. "She made her choice. Just be glad she didn't include Samantha in the blast."

“I am.” Wade did try to let it go and pay attention to his duty. *But I’ll think about it again later, I’m sure.* He scanned the beach a last time and then turned toward the ramp to keep track of the people who were still coming up for fresh air. *I wish Adrian was here. Talking to him used to make me feel better.*

Wade sighed. *But he also made his choice and everyone was hurt in that blast. There’s no going back.*

Chapter Two
Walk the Line

1

“**W**hy did Angela include Adrian in the choice to execute Courtney?”

Jennifer regarded Trinity, who was gathering the few sooty medical blankets that had survived the fires. “Angela hates to remove any of our kind. It feels disloyal to her. She wanted a complete consensus.”

“But Courtney wasn’t one of us.”

“The baby was.”

“Oh.” Trinity stepped over blood drying to the floor. The cleaning crew was on a break to recover their stomachs after handling Peter’s body and the mess. All of them had been green around the gills. “Did anyone vote to spare Courtney?”

Jennifer shrugged. “Not that I heard. You’d have to ask the boss to know for sure.”

Trinity made a face. “That won’t happen.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want her to think *I’m* disloyal.”

Jennifer leaned against the chair and smiled at Conner as he went by with a fresh load of supplies. “The boss wants us to have compassion, and to question the things that happen. She knows blindly

following anyone, even her, is bad for our future.” Jennifer swept the infirmary, unable to believe it had been pristine just two hours ago. Smoke-layered walls and debris-littered floors met her gaze in reproach. The ship wasn’t happy with this latest damage, but Tonya was too weak to communicate.

“What do you think will happen to Kenn?” Trinity hadn’t wanted to ask, but the desire to know was bigger than the urge to mind her own business. She was still shocked by the damage down here. Almost nothing was salvageable, and the smell of smoke was so strong it was turning her stomach.

Jennifer stared at the office. Kenn was still splattered in Peter’s blood, and anger. It oozed off him in thick waves that were keeping everyone tense and quiet. The rest of the ship was loud with chatter and voices raised in anger at the latest attack, but this hall was almost silent.

Jennifer was aware of Kenn listening to their conversation; she refused to let him off the hook. “It doesn’t look bad right now, but she may change her mind and make an example of him. We don’t need vigilante justice, even if the person deserved it.”

Trinity shook out another blanket. “You agree? Peter deserved to die.”

Jennifer yawned tiredly. “Doesn’t matter now.”

“It does to me.”

Jennifer frowned at the sweaty, wrinkled woman. “Why all these questions? And why ask me?”

Trinity dropped the dirty blanket into the industrial hamper Neil had sent up with the rookies a little while ago. “You’re on the new council.”

“Ah. You want to know what laws we’re making, and if any new ones might come from this.”

Trinity nodded.

Jennifer shut her eyes and didn’t answer.

Trinity kept working. She wasn’t upset that Jennifer didn’t want to talk or think about it right now. *But we can’t avoid it much longer. This will make other people ask these questions too and we need to have answers ready. They’re not going to be satisfied with silence.*

“Angela knows that.” Jennifer shifted in the chair, spine starting to hurt. “I need to go lie down.”

Kyle appeared in the charred doorway. “Boss said you’re in the office next to Tonya so we can watch you.”

When Jennifer got up and went toward that room, Kyle kicked into full worry mode again. Jennifer didn’t do anything without arguing. Kyle hurried to get a cot so she could rest.

Conner put his load of supplies in Tonya’s room, not looking at Kenn, then went to the next office. He sat in the corner and rested his head on his knees. *Please don’t let Jennifer go into labor, too. I’m not ready.*

Kyle nodded. He felt the same way.

Jennifer eased onto the cot as soon as Kyle got it set up, groaning.

Kyle's heart thumped. "Try to relax; think about how great it will be to get off this ship." Kyle covered her with a blanket. He wasn't sure what else to do.

Jennifer dropped into sleep quickly, body relaxing.

Kyle stayed next to her cot and wished John was still with them.

Kenn suddenly remembered the radio calls. *Damn it!* He went to the exit. "Boss? You around?"

Coming out of the elevator, Angela heard the tone and sighed. "When?"

"A month, maybe less."

Angela fit it into the timeline in her head, heart thumping. *So much for peace.*

Kenn snorted. "We can't even get that from our own people."

"True enough." She leaned against the blackened office wall, gaze going over the woman on the cot and the incubator. "Go get your gear. I'll stay with them."

Kenn hurried off even though he didn't want to be away from Tonya and his son for even a minute. With his gear, he could crash right next to them on the floor. He had enough survival equipment to last for weeks if he had to. Angela was making sure Tonya would be protected while she got the ship covered and then went to clear the island.

Kenn nodded at the well wishes and shock from people about what had happened, but he didn't slow to talk. His mind kept showing Tonya's body being

blasted toward him in the explosion. It was easily the most horrifying thing he'd ever witnessed. *It will be in my dreams for the rest of my life. Nothing will ever erase that feeling, not even a charm.*

Angela stayed in the office doorway, blocking the view as Morgan did a fast exam without Kenn hovering.

Tonya didn't wake; the baby didn't move.

Angela studied him, glad his breathing was steady, but she didn't like how still he was. She carefully slid the incubator closer to Tonya's cot.

Morgan nodded in relief. "It's normal delivery bleeding now. I think she'll be okay." Morgan went to wash up. He yawned, sucking in the acidic taste of smoke. He was used to long shifts and short sleep now, but it still caught up to him once in a while. He was anticipating a snooze in his cabin, preferably with Pam. She was on the top deck, helping other Eagles make sure everyone was accounted for.

Angela placed Tonya's hand through the opening in the incubator so the redhead was touching the baby.

The newborn immediately twitched toward the contact.

Angela adjusted the blankets so Tonya's arm was supported and covered, then she returned to the doorway to wait for Kenn. *Two lives left us today and one joined.*

A long yowl caught her attention.

Angela sighed. *Four lives.* Thanks to Stanley, the mother cat was now in a carrier with her

remaining kitten, but she wasn't settling down. Half her fur was singed off. Harry had tried to sedate her and do a real exam, but he couldn't get close enough without being attacked. If not for Stanley putting the bodies of the two kittens in the carrier with the single survivor, the mother cat would still be staggering this hallway, shedding burnt fur and misery.

The male cat hadn't been spotted since the explosion. Dog was searching for him now. The wolf's howls upon finding out the cats had been hurt had been awful. She'd given him the job of finding the other tabby to get a break from the noise.

Angela motioned at Stanley as the howls grew louder. "Bring the cats in here."

Stanley lifted the carrier warily, flinching at the howls and claws swiping at him through the gaps.

Angela took the carrier and sat it on the chair by Tonya's bed. "Go get something to eat. I'll call you when I need you."

Stanley left, eager for the break. He'd stayed busy carrying supplies and cleaning areas after Theo said it was safe to do so.

The mother cat's yowls faded into low cries.

Angela sent a calming spell that allowed the cat to quiet completely. It began to lick the surviving kitten.

Angela slowly opened the carrier and gently removed the two little bodies.

Morgan came over with a bag and took them from her.

Angela shut the carrier and wiped away tears. All deaths hurt her, even the animal kind. It was the one thing she still couldn't handle without crying. *Each soul is precious to me. When that changes, I'll know my humanity really is gone.*

2

“They’re gone. We can use the beach for a little while.” Quinn was thrilled to be on the island. His bruises and migraine didn’t matter. The breeze was light and the sun beaming on his skin was warm. It felt like a new beginning; he was eager to extend that feeling. Even the sun-burnt weeds around the cabin porch waved invitingly. All he was missing was a strong cup of coffee and sex to start the day.

Tommy kept digging in his kit. “I can’t find my roll of toilet paper.”

Kendle stirred the fire to bring it back to life. “Use leaves.”

Adrian rubbed his smooth skin, grimacing at the nick. Sadie had shaved him with shaky hands and a pounding pulse that had drawn his attention repeatedly. He glanced at her now and found her staring at his chest. His threadbare shirt allowed a good view of his body.

Sadie blushed as she realized he’d caught her.

Adrian leered. He liked the attention.

Kendle rolled her eyes.

Tommy swept the landscape, enjoying the cawing of birds and the sound of the water hitting

the shore. Now he was off ship, the ocean was beautiful again.

Adrian sank down on the top step of the porch. “I’m hungry. Who’s cooking first?”

Sadie made a face. “I’ll go last. I can watch you guys.” Sadie had abandoned her worn jumper for a pair of Adrian’s pants tied around her waist with a vine. She’d cut off the top of the jumper and kept it. They’d used the bottom half to start their morning fire. That was now blazing back to life under their mostly empty coffee pot.

Kendle thought of the storage space under the cabin, heart hurting. Luke had kept clothes in there, along with weapons and other gear he hadn’t wanted cluttering the cabin that didn’t have much shelf space. *I’ll get into it later and change clothes.* She glanced down. *I can’t wear this forever. It has a bullet hole in it and blood dried in layers.* It was also starting to stink.

Quinn frowned. “No one wants to walk on the beach?”

Adrian grimaced. “You do realize it smells like fried traitor right now?”

Quinn’s face fell. “I forgot.” He stomped into the cabin and slammed the door.

“What do you see in him?” Sadie didn’t like Quinn so far.

Kendle didn’t answer. She waved at the fire. “You’ll cook first. Get the pot we used last night and clean it. Then fill it with the water we boiled this morning.”

Sadie scowled but didn't argue.

Tommy held up a magazine. "You good for a walk?"

Adrian nodded. He caught the magazine and slid it into his gun. *Peter's gun*. Adrian sighed at the whisper, standing. Peter was another problem he'd missed. *It sucks that I only had a few months of greatness.*

Kendle began directing Sadie through a meal, but she winced at Adrian's thought. She hadn't been there, but even after all his betrayals, people in Safe Haven still wanted to believe he could do it again. *It must have been amazing.*

Tommy walked into the jungle without getting distracted. Angela wanted them on the other side of the island as soon as possible. Tommy wanted to make sure that happened. If they got comfortable at this cabin, they would put off moving and then Marc would return as Angela's enforcer. Marc might not kill Adrian or Kendle, but he and Quinn would be fair game.

Tommy took out the small map he'd copied from the few going around the cruise ship. "We should reach the ocean in an hour or less."

Adrian laughed.

Tommy snickered as he realized why that was funny. The ocean was an hour in any direction. The island was small. "Fair enough."

Adrian let Tommy lead, legs a bit shaky. They didn't like being on land even though they'd spent most of their life there. His stomach was also upset.

“First stages of land sickness.” Adrian drank from his canteen, hoping the water would hurry things along.

Tommy didn’t mention his own issues with that while they were in Port Stanley. “I don’t feel it.”

Adrian’s voice was slightly bitter. “You’re twenty years younger than I am.”

Tommy grinned. “Yeah. It’s great.”

Adrian snorted. “You’ll get to see what it’s like.”

Tommy shrugged, voice lowering. “Maybe, if I live that long.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Well, some of my most recent choices point to insanity.”

Adrian chuckled, nodding. “I get that.” He sobered. “But I’m still grateful, and honored.”

Tommy didn’t respond to the blast of familiar pleasure that he’d been craving for months. He walked straight down the faint path... *Path? There haven’t been people here for at least six months. How is there a path at all?*

Adrian felt Tommy’s tension and went into full alert. “What is it?”

“Someone else is on this island.” Tommy pointed at the path through the weeds that had obviously been used recently.

Tommy tried not to get angry when Adrian only shrugged. “You knew Kendle was lying.”

Adrian shook his head. “I suspected.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“Why didn’t you tell them you and Quinn were jumping ship?”

Tommy sighed. “I didn’t want the drama of anyone trying to talk me into staying, because it didn’t matter; nothing was going to do that.”

“Same answer. I didn’t want Marc’s scorn or disbelief, and it didn’t matter. We weren’t going to change our minds and go somewhere else. I also had faith that Angela suspected the lie as well.”

“She did, but Jennifer knew it for sure. She has some odd connection to Kendle. She can get into her dreams.”

Adrian realized Tommy didn’t know about dream walking. He considered telling the man.

Angela’s frosty blue eyes popped into his mind.

He grunted, obeying the unspoken order. She didn’t want more descendants knowing that was possible.

“She doesn’t trust us.” Tommy knew Adrian was holding back something important, but he didn’t dig for it. *All our secrets come out in the end. I’ll find out when I need it.*

Adrian smiled. He’d missed Tommy’s easy, go-with-the-flow attitude.

Tommy stiffened as Adrian’s approval blasted him again. “Don’t do that.” It made him feel guilty now.

Adrian stepped by him. “I’m going to be myself now. People will get used to it, get over it, or get pissed, but that’s not my problem anymore.”

If the old Adrian came back, it would cause more drama. Tommy hoped it happened. *If Angela is busy keeping Marc and Adrian from killing each other, she won't have time to torment Kendle.*

“What do you have planned for keeping Kendle from doing the same to her?”

“Grieving process, sex, marriage, kids, and then survival lessons.”

“That was fast.” Adrian lifted a brow. “Whose kids?”

“Her own, of course.”

“Kendle can't have kids. She was abused and damaged.”

Tommy stepped over a snakeskin in the path, mentally shuddering. “Marc healed her last night...”

Adrian considered it, becoming curious. “Do you know or hope?”

“Hope, but it's also logic. They have an amazing bond and he has amazing gifts.”

“Interesting.” Adrian liked having someone smart to talk to. “What about her breaking his lock so easily? Doesn't that mean he's not strong?”

“I think their bond made it possible. I also wonder if he pulled his punch at the last minute because it was her.”

“I doubt either of those are true.”

Tommy slowed. “Why?”

“William told me locks on adults are almost impossible. They never last.”

“But Marc didn't lock her. He stripped her.”

“Did he? If that were true, her witch would have been cast out.” Adrian tried to fight the feeling of horror as he remembered Jennifer yanking his free.

“Then he lied.”

“Yes.” Adrian swatted at a cloud of gnats as he hurried through the small swarm. “To her, so she wouldn’t try to break it. At least, that’s my suspicion.”

“That makes sense.” Tommy was now more sure he was right about Marc healing Kendle completely. “He would know having a kid would keep her busy.”

“True. And maybe even teach her to be kind and let go of hatred for the good of her baby.”

“Interesting.”

Adrian inhaled deeply, loving the scent of fresh earth that filled his nose. *But it isn’t home. It doesn’t smell like America.* “There are charms to help with it.”

“No, thanks.” Tommy pointed at the edge of a cliff coming into view. “Are we there already?”

“I don’t think so. It’s only been about fifteen minutes.”

The two men approached the cliff alertly, scanning the red clay walls lined in green foliage. The path led to here and then vanished. They didn’t discern a road or a way up the rocky cliff from this side.

“Where did they go?”

“No idea.” Adrian scanned again, heart thumping as adrenaline filled his veins. “We’re being watched. I can’t find them, but I feel it.”

Tommy instinctively swept the ground. He spotted a small mound of dirt and bent down.

Adrian drew his gun.

Tommy grunted, prying; a square section of earth slid aside as a hatch came up. “An underground tunnel!” Tommy took the flashlight from his toolbelt and shined it into the hole. “Should we go down?”

“No.” Adrian relaxed as the sense of being watched faded. “We have plenty of time to explore.”

“And you think we need more backup.”

“Yes. After the stories Kendle told, I don’t think two Eagles are enough for this job.” Adrian stepped around him and moved along the cliff. “Let’s find out what’s on the other side.”

Tommy let the hatch shut and followed. “Should we tell Angela?”

“Yes, though she may already know. Marc went exploring last night. He might have felt them.”

“Felt who?”

“The people still living here. You’re right. We’re not alone here.”

“Does that change things?”

“Maybe. Angela might decide to move to a different island.”

The jungle around them moved with life. Bugs and smaller animals darted away from them; birds

hopped from branch to branch, chirping. It was a sensory shock to both men after months of only water and the walls of their ships.

“Or she might clear this one, right? If the people are dangerous.”

Adrian didn't pause. “Unless they attack her camp, I doubt she'll go that way. Angela has had enough of killing to clear our path. She'll probably move Safe Haven.”

“Will we go with her?”

“No. Kendle won't leave now that she's here, and we're all outcasts. Whoever lives here now will have to learn to share.”

“What if they won't?”

Adrian didn't answer.

Tommy scowled. “You're not allowed to make that choice, are you?”

“No. We can't clear the islanders unless the alpha orders it and she won't. Even if it's self-defense, we can't kill them.” Adrian holstered as his own words sank in. “We need to train daily in restraining and maybe even in hiding.”

“Are you planning to obey every order you're given?”

Adrian sighed. “Yes, and so will you. Any deviation from the line we're walking will result in pain for those we love. Sometimes, it's better to give in than to fight back.”

“I don't agree with that. I never will.”

Adrian shrugged. “You’re young. Things are always black or white in youth. With age, comes wisdom.”

“And cowardice.”

Adrian’s jaw clenched. “Protecting your loved ones isn’t cowardice, Tommy.”

“But you don’t love Kendle. You’re protecting yourself.”

“Sadie’s death would hurt me.”

Tommy gawked.

Adrian flushed. “What? She grew on me.”

Tommy laughed. “It’s ironic.”

Adrian nodded. “Yep. Fate likes moments that match or link, especially if they contradict what you think you believe.”

Tommy considered his own actions again and feelings. He sighed unhappily. “I’m not sure I made the right choice.”

“And it’s ironic because now you don’t have a choice but to follow through?”

“Oh, shut up!”

“Okay.” Adrian stopped as he reached the end of the cliff. Glistening water peered back at him.

“This *is* a small island. I can’t believe we reached the other side already.”

“We didn’t.” Adrian pointed. “Part of it washed away. Or maybe the cliff fell.”

Tommy realized he was right. The ocean was lined here with small islands of sand in ragged circles that faded into the water.

“Mark it on your map. We might explore it later.”

Tommy spent a minute putting the fallen cliff and the tunnel hatch on his map.

Adrian swept the piles of sand, searching for a direction. He found one, but it made no sense. The piles appeared to be lining the coast instead of being random. “It’s almost as if someone was trying to expand the island on this side.”

Tommy stored his map and pencil. “Any idea why someone would want to do that?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it.” Adrian turned toward the path they’d used to get here. “Ask me again in a day or so.”

“I will.” Tommy felt Adrian working; he automatically fell into the guard place. He watched the birds and small animals in the trees, and the tall grass that swayed in the light breeze. He didn’t feel anything dangerous this time.

Adrian let his mind work and his feet walk, no longer shaky or nauseated. He was working on a mystery that felt important and an Eagle was guarding him. For this moment, he was happy.

3

Gabe smiled at Tonya as she fought to keep her eyes open. “He’s fine. Go to sleep if you want. No one’s getting in here unless we say it’s okay.” Kenn had put him on duty here so Angela could go back

to work and he could go get Tonya a tray from the mess.

Tonya didn't see Kenn. She let her lids shut, exhausted. Kenn was probably in the bathroom or checking in at the guard post twenty feet down the hall, but she still didn't feel safe. *I almost died. Courtney almost killed me and my baby. How rude!*

Tonya shifted restlessly, aware of her mind trying to tell her something. She was still rattled; it was hard to think. *I'm glad Kenny wasn't hurt...* Tonya's lids flew open. "He's dead."

Gabe froze as her head swiveled and her haunted orbs focused on him. *What do I say?*

Tonya read his mind like a laser, cutting through his blocks until the sound of a gunshot echoed in both their thoughts.

Tonya saw Peter's body slide down the wall. She glanced toward the spot where it had happened, but she couldn't view it through the door. *Peter's dead. Kenny killed Peter.*

Tonya shut her eyes as panic flew through her mind. *He'll be executed. This is all my fault!*

Gabe watched helplessly as tears began rolling down Tonya's pale cheeks. He stepped to the exit and looked for help.

Tonya let the tears fall, unable to do more. Her body felt like she'd been dropped from a cliff. But her heart thumped steadily, glad it had worked out this way. Peter was no longer around to get between her and Kenny. *Neither is Courtney.*

“Tonya?” Morgan eased into the room, drawn by Gabe’s frantic wave. “Are you okay?”

Tonya didn’t move. “Tell him I’m sorry.”

Morgan frowned along with Gabe. “Tell who you’re sorry?”

“Kenny.”

“Okay. What are you sorry for?”

“His arrest.” She forced more words out as exhaustion began to shut down her control. “We’ll get him out of jail. Tell him!”

Morgan put a calming hand on her forehead, soothing her while checking for a fever. “Kenn’s not in jail. He’s bringing food from the mess.” Morgan realized she’d passed out. “When she wakes up, make it clear he hasn’t been arrested.”

Gabe blew out a noise of derision. “Maybe he should be.”

Morgan tugged Tonya’s blanket up and stepped over to check on the baby. “Get out.”

Gabe held up a hand. “You can’t order me to go. Kenn put me here.”

“I’m saving your life, Gabe. Get out right now before he comes back and finds out you’re conspiring to get her through his arrest.”

Gabe paled. “You can’t know that!”

“But I can. I’ve watched it happen in Safe Haven for a year now. You’re no different than Adrian or Peter, and maybe no different than James either. Get out. Don’t come back.”

Gabe stomped from the room. *Damn it! How do I stay close to her now?*

“You don’t.” Kenn stepped from the elevator and pressed his gun against Gabe’s forehead.

Gabe froze.

“Well.” Angela walked calmly down the smoky hallway toward them with dozens of witnesses on her heels.

She had been assigning jobs for the day while staying close to this area in case she was needed. Her next chore would take her away from here. She still had to go settle the camp. Despite the day’s tragedies, work was always waiting. “I see I should have made myself clearer.”

Kenn fought with himself, wanting to pull the trigger and end his charade of being one of the good guys.

“Is it a charade?” Angela stopped next to him. “Are you still the same man who conspired against Marc to hurt me?”

Kenn winced at the reminder of his mistakes, his crimes. His arm slowly lowered. “No.”

“Good. I didn’t like him at all. The new you is much better.” Angela glared at Gabe. “Get lost.”

Gabe took off at a fast pace.

People got out of his way, giving him wary looks. They wondered what he’d done to provoke Kenn’s reaction.

“Kenn?”

Kenn braced as he holstered. He knew that tone. “Yes?”

Angela took the tray that had been in his other hand this whole time. “That was your last pass.

Walk the line or Tonya will be a widow before you even get married.”

Eagles and camp members glared at Kenn in support as Angela went into Tonya’s room with the tray.

Kenn went into the lab to discover if any of Tonya’s books could be saved. He didn’t care about Angela’s threats, though he knew she would follow through. *All I care about is Tonya and our son. I’ll kill anyone who tries to come between us.*

Kenn blocked his thoughts and started salvaging books from the twisted cabinet. *I’ll follow Neil’s example. I just won’t get caught.*

Chapter Three
Like it was Before

1

“**W**here is she?”

Ivan pointed. “Herding.”

Marc entered the loud dining hall and swept the two hundred people who were talking about the attack while watching Angela. Marc proceeded through the crowd, searching for anger, for threats, and leftover resentments. He’d just finished a round of the top deck. Things were calm up there. He was hoping to find the same down here.

Laughter filled the room, coming from those in the front.

“Switch!” Angela’s voice echoed sharply.

People in the front immediately slid to the side so those right behind them could move up. Those in the rear followed, now taking the second row.

Marc observed as the first front row people formed a conga line and went around to the rear amid familiar chanting. *How does she get them to do things like that?*

Angela rushed forward and grabbed Gus’s arm. She used all of her body weight and jerked him.

Gus yawned, not moving.

The crowd laughed again.

Angela straightened. “Gonna keep working on that one.”

The mess was full of camp members who’d been rattled from their beds by the explosion. Only a few people were sitting at the tables and counters. Most were gawking out the tiny windows at the island or watching her. Angela saw they weren’t covered in soot or wearing wet clothes; she assumed they’d run from the danger. *That’s why you aren’t Eagles yet. That’ll change in time.* “Switch!”

The crowd rotated again, also using a conga line. As soon as the next row was in place, Angela ran at Gus again.

Gus enjoyed standing pat and not budging from her attempts, but he wasn’t comfortable. He looked sharp in his Eagle jacket and black pants, but he didn’t care for being the center of attention. He stood stiffly and waited for the end of this impromptu display so he could go hit the bathroom. He hadn’t had his morning time yet.

Angela laughed with the camp and waved. “I’m done with that for now.”

Gus grinned and headed for the door.

People quieted as they sensed Angela was going to get serious. The sound of repairs and adjustments to their normal lives echoed from other decks.

“The medical bay, lab, and that entire hallway is off limits to everyone until we finish repairs. We’re switching to a temporary infirmary setup on a different deck. For now, call on the radio and we’ll come to you.” Angela hated that, but it would take

time to transfer their medical area. “You already know who set the bombs and what the punishment was; you also need to know Peter was executed for his part in it. Though he didn’t encourage Courtney, he made it possible for her to do it.”

“Is that a new constitutional law?”

Angela froze for an instant. *Damn you, Courtney!* She shook her head at Ralph. “I don’t have an update about that yet. Let me get you all settled on the island first.” Angela smiled hopefully, like she wanted to do it. “Unless you want to delay that while we do the laws first?”

Groans and anger flew at her.

Angela shrugged. “I assumed you would want the island first and laws second. Glad to know that was right.” She waved at Marc as he made it through the crowd. “Today is our first walk of the island in the daylight. We have to know what we’re dealing with. Marc is leading that run. I’m staying here. I’ll be doing rounds of all areas and groups. It’s time to get me that list of what you need when you go ashore to set up your area. If I already gave you a time limit for your lists and plans, you’re probably going with Marc during one of his many trips back and forth to get our base camp set. Get ready. You’re on standby for his call. If I did not give you a time limit, I will today on rounds. You’ll probably go ashore with me on one of my many trips while Marc has duty over the ship. Get ready. You’re on standby for my call.”

Marc hated it that Angela was still disheveled. He knew it bothered her. Her hair had come loose of the bun and was hanging around her soot-streaked face. He wished she could rest, shower, change and eat before starting all this, but leaders didn't have those options during busy days, let alone on days where their camp had been attacked. Marc needed the same things, but it really didn't bother him to appear in front of everyone in a sweat-stained shirt, sans deodorant, with ashes on his arms from helping their injured people.

Angela regarded Marc. "The mess has food packed for your first venture over, but you'll need to let them know what you want for lunch. Send a gopher."

"I will."

"No camp members are going over today unless you're on one of the project lists I just mentioned. As I come by on rounds, I'll assign you a job or location. Eagles will deliver the gear you need to be ready. I will stop by every area of the ship at some point today and tonight. I suggest you plan to be in your cabin or job area so I can find you." Angela consulted her mental list while people nodded, grumbled, and yawned. "After breakfast, the mess will be closed for the next eight hours so we can do a complete inventory on food. We don't want to run out. I need to make sure we're still good for the rest of this year. We'll be doing a cold lunch delivery. Make sure you clean up your garbage. Now that

we're near land again, we can attract all sorts of bugs. Nothing draws flies like rotting food."

Angela's voice hardened. "Only Eagles may take their weapons to the island."

Immediate protests filled the room, bringing a new level of noise. A sharp lance of pain sank into her temple and slowly faded. Angela didn't argue. It was nonnegotiable. She also didn't explain. The Eagles would make sure people knew why, but later, so she didn't have to answer the complaints right now. She spoke up as the noise faded. "Marc and I will now pick our teams for the day; look sharp, Eagles."

Eagles in the crowd now stepped forward. They came through every space and group, revealing themselves to the camp. Only a quarter of the Eagles were in uniform or on duty at any given time. Almost all of them were here now, ready to protect leadership if the camp rioted again.

Marc had been ready for this for weeks. He hadn't expected to do it in front of the camp. "I need Theo. He can tell us if the town structures are safe or if we have to repair them before use."

"Fine. I get Grant." Angela took out her notebook and flipped to the day's page so she could make notes. "He'll tell me how unloading has to happen with the heavier items."

Marc nodded. "I'd like Kyle and Neil. They'll supervise everything I get started."

"I get Jayda, Brittani, and Ed. Same reason."

Marc now retrieved his book. “I want Ivan and Greg as your guards.”

Angela snickered. “Sorry. I already assigned them to you.”

“Fine.” Marc smirked. “You get the Jr. Eagles—all of them.”

The camp clucked and groaned as they realized Marc meant the troublemakers as well as the well-behaved kids.

“Agreed.” Angela wrote it in her book and scanned. “Samantha gets Wade. Tonya gets Kenn. The medics get each other. I want them in pairs so they can observe each other and the patients. I’ll send them volunteers throughout the day.” Angela closed her book, aware of disappointed Eagles. “Conner and Charlie will share point.”

Eagles also recorded the assignments so they could pass on the information, but also so they knew who was supposed to be where and at what times. Knowing who to report to mattered.

Marc finished writing, then inspected his list. “I want Zack’s boys for my gophers. Ray is the first boat ramp guard, with Zack after him. They’ll switch every four hours until you send them a two-man relief crew who will do the same overnight.” Marc spotted Allison in the crowd and knew Zack would get the message. They were currently sharing a cabin in bliss. Zack’s sons were in the cabin next to them. Thanks to their medical issues, and Zack letting them know he was a descendant, Zack’s sons

were obeying everyone right now. Marc wanted to take advantage of that while it lasted.

“Agreed.” Angela gave him a bright smile, then faced the camp. “If you still don’t know what you should be doing, it means I have you on a different job or chore. Fall in with me as I do rounds and we’ll sort it as I go.” Angela tapped her watch. “I’m starting from right here in about ten minutes. Go now if you want a quick stop at the mess before it closes.”

“I’ll make sure everyone who isn’t here knows where we want them today.” Marc leaned down and kissed her cheek, catching the corner of her lip.

Angela groaned lowly at the feel.

Marc strutted toward the exit.

Ivan and Greg followed, both glad to be getting off the ship in this first day of work.

Kimmie came to Angela’s side and began scanning the leaving crowd for the rest of the Jr. Eagles. “Will Leeann get to help?”

Angela shook her head. “Morgan wants her on bed rest for a full day.” Angela smothered her fury. *Kids being hurt makes me want to fry people alive.*

“You did that.”

Angela snorted. “Oh, yeah.”

“Do you feel bad?”

“No. I should, but I don’t.”

Kimmie glanced up at her. “Is it because you’re byzan?”

Angela sighed, mood sinking. “It’s because I’m a killer. It’s easier to remove the problems and deal with the guilt.”

“I’m sorry.”

Angela forced a smile. “Me too. Adrian told me I would get to this point. He was right. It’s not a hard choice anymore.”

“It’s okay. We won’t let you become a monster.”

“Good.” Angela walked toward the opposite door than Marc had taken. “But don’t ever warn me again or you’ll lose the advantage. Just do it and know that it was needed.”

Angela stopped near the guards as a large group pushed toward her. Eagles and camp alike wanted to know what she had planned for them. Angela got out her smaller assignments book and flipped to the right page. “Marc might want to handle a few defensive plans for the island today. He’ll definitely set up a perimeter around our main working area. I need a few Eagles to go to the weapons room and organize it. You might be there for hours.” Angela scanned and pointed at the raised hands and fingers. “Great. Jeff and Pam are supervising. Nothing goes out unless it’s approved by Marc.”

Angela continued as those people left. “Our garden center will be busy over the next week. I need half a dozen organizers to see what all we have that’s ready for planting and where we are on everything else.”

While Angela picked people, the two door guards moved closer. Over a hundred people were still bunched around her, waiting for orders. It made the guards nervous.

“Before we can start most of our food production areas, we need to run tests to make sure it’s safe. Panaji is in charge of that. He’s already started. He needs a dozen people to carry equipment, record results, and help with testing. He’s covering shoreline fish, water, and air today. Who wants it?” Angela was encouraged when camp hands went up for that chore despite the work and boredom involved. She quickly picked them, hoping they would leave right away and reduce the crowd. She was starting to sweat from all the body heat. *And someone either has gas or they didn’t brush their teeth for the last year.* “Many of the normal classes are running today. If you’re scheduled for something right now, go see if it’s running. I’ll talk to you when I stop by on rounds.”

Another group left, disappointed.

Angela inhaled, stomach clenching again at the heat and odors. She leaned against the doorframe, hoping a draft might come in. “We will be clearing and cleaning any town structures Theo deems safe to use. That means I need an island cleaning crew of at least two dozen.”

Only a few hands went up. Angela noted them and sweetened that pot. “This crew will stay together longer than any of the others. You’ll vote in a leader and report to them on everything.”

A few more hands went up now.

“You’ll also help me supervise housing. When I assign people, you’ll settle them in. Over time, this group will be our den mothers.”

Hands went up all over the crowd.

“Temporary team leader is...” Angela chose from the people who’d volunteered first, pointing. She continued as that group left. “I hope to be relocating our animals to land over the next few days. I need a dozen strong, steady hands to evaluate, prep, and help move our livestock. We don’t have a dock or a crane, so this will be the hardest moving job we’ve done yet. No matter what, I need those animals to make it to land alive. Who wants it?”

Water lapped calmly against the boat, giving a false sense of security. Everyone thought about how hard it would be to unload everything without a long dock like they’d had back in America.

Eagle hands went up all through the crowd, as she’d known they would. The Eagles wanted a challenge and the possible rewards for accomplishing it.

“Unless you have something harder, I’d like a slot on that chore.”

Angela nodded at Gus. “Good. Who else?”

Debra appeared at her side; she held out a mug and a cinnamon roll.

“Thanks.” Angela took the hot chocolate, stomach churning. “You eat the roll.”

Debra shrugged and took a bite.

Angela held the travel mug under her arm and finished writing while scanning the remaining crowd. She'd gotten through half of them, but more had come in, drawn by people passing word of her location. "We're filling one of the swimming pools today."

A loud cheer went through the room. It was the one entertainment they hadn't gotten to enjoy on the ship yet.

"I need a group to clean it and fill it according to the manual we found. Then it has to have chemicals added and sit overnight. Every evening, the pool gets emptied and cleaned. We're using salt water. I refused to waste fresh water on it." Angela spoke louder to be heard over the now chatting camp members. "It's hard work. I'd like a dozen volunteers. Ian is in charge and waiting for you near the top front swimming pool." Angela recorded the few volunteers. "Everyone wants to play, but not do the work. How is that right?"

Her mutter got more hands to lift.

Angela picked the people she knew would follow through. Several camp members had a bad habit of volunteering and then canceling or not showing up when it was time to work. "I'm going to start rounds now. Feel free to stay with me or wait in your normal areas until I get there." Angela stored her book. "Last thing is my hand for the day." Angela scanned and smiled at the guy sitting alone at a small table in the corner. "Stanley."

“She picked who?”

Daryl chuckled. “Stanley.”

“Well, that’s her mistake.” Brittani slid the freshly packed packs onto the counter and counted them. “Eighteen. We’re good.”

Daryl sat on the stool, gazing at her in open desire. Brittani was already dotted in flour and other food items; the kitchen crew had been here before the explosion, getting things ready for a day on the island. Her parents were also splattered in food. Her two brothers were delivering instead of cooking today; they were clean. The smell of fresh bread was thick in the mess. Daryl inhaled deeply, trying to rid his nose of lingering smoke from the explosions. “You look beautiful this morning.”

Brittani blushed. “Thanks.” She gave him a fast leer, then began removing her apron. “I’m done here, Mom.”

Thelma grunted, working with a large pan of biscuits.

Brittani turned back to Daryl. “Where are you at for the day?”

“Marc has me, but not for a little while yet. I thought I’d spend that time...” Daryl grinned. “With your dad.”

Dwight came from the pantry, drying his hands. “I’m ready.”

Brittani glanced between them. “You and my dad together? For what?”

Daryl got up and kissed her cheek. “Have a great day.”

Brittani watched as Daryl and her father left the mess. “What’s that all about?”

“You, of course.” Hannah snickered at Brittani’s scowl. “Have you decided on the location for your wedding?”

“Location?”

Hannah gathered five of the food packs for delivery. “You know; here or on the island.”

“Oh.” Brittani shrugged. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

Hannah missed the nervous tremor. She headed for the exit. “Okay. See ya.”

“Yep.” Brittani fingered the ring on her hand. She assumed Daryl was informing her father they’d married in secret. *Which means it’s my job to tell the other half of that couple.* “Uh, mom? Got a minute?”

“No.” Thelma glared at Brittani over the pan of biscuits. “You can tell me about your marriage later. I have work to do right now.”

Shit! Brittani didn’t know what to say.

Thelma slammed the tray onto the stove harder than she needed to. Biscuits flew out.

Brittani hurried over to get them. “Are you mad?”

“My only daughter got married without me there. Why would I be mad?” Thelma stomped into the pantry.

Brittani decided it was a good time to go see if Angela was ready for her.

Thelma stayed in the pantry until she knew she wasn't going to cry. When she came out and saw Brittani had left, it was easier to be mad than sad. "You wait until your father hears about this, young lady!"

3

"Say that again."

"It's only been four days."

"I don't care how long it's been. I care that you didn't put up a fight." Samantha crossed her arms over her chest. "The garden is mine!"

Samantha hid a wince at a leftover cramp. The medics had told her that would happen off and on for the next month, but it still sucked.

Wade smiled at her. "Everyone knows that, but you have to take some off time now and recover."

"I want to talk to the boss."

Wade shrugged. "She'll be by on rounds. You can yell at her then."

Samantha grunted. "Won't matter. She won't change her mind."

"Nope." Wade was glad. He didn't want Samantha on a working schedule yet. "You have twins who need you right now."

Samantha knew he was trying to make her think of the kids and herself, but she couldn't help feeling

left out. “I’ve worked on that garden for months. And before we got on this damn boat!”

Wade gawked openly. He’d rarely been around her when she was mad. *That’s sexy.*

Samantha flipped him the finger.

Wade chuckled. *These are the moments worth dying for.*

Samantha softened, unable to remain furious with Wade gazing at her like a love-stricken puppy.

Tap-tap! Ralph poked his head inside the large, cluttered cabin. “Everyone okay in here? Need anything?”

“We’re good.” Wade kept gathering diapers, wipes, and a fresh change of clothes for the baby that had wet through his current outfit.

Ralph regarded Samantha.

Samantha flushed as she realized the older man had a great view of her thigh. She had the baby between her legs and the sheet had ridden up. “I’m fine.”

Ralph grinned at them. “The boss will be by on rounds. Feel free to tell her I’m doing a marvelous job as den mother here.”

Wade laughed. “You want this job?”

Ralph nodded, smile fading. “I hope she lets me keep it.” He ducked out.

Samantha knew Wade would mention it to Angela. She didn’t need to tell him to. He was an Eagle. He already knew.

The hall outside their cabin was full of people coming and going. It sounded like Ralph was

ordering a full clean of the area before Angela's arrival. Some of those people peered in and said hello, but none of them stopped. They were all busy. *Like I should be.* Samantha's anger returned.

"Apparently I'm supposed to be your guard and slave. I thought we could add in escort if you want to walk around a bit. The book says walking is fine, just no lifting anything other than the babies."

"I can go for a walk?" Samantha brightened. "Top deck. I want to see the island without a tiny port window getting in the way."

"Deal. Finish feeding little Jeremy, and I'll get his brother changed."

Samantha switched the baby to her other breast, observing as Wade deftly removed NJ's diaper and replaced it. Though she'd been watching for the last four days, it still surprised her that he was good at it. She and Neil weren't yet. They fumbled, dropped the diapers, and fretted the entire time. Wade pulled it off and replaced it in seconds. *He makes us look like amateurs.* "Where'd you learn to do that?"

Wade tensed for a split second before shrugging. "Girlfriends, family."

"Babies of your own?" Samantha thought she'd already asked him and received a negative answer, but she wanted to be sure.

"No, not mine." Wade swaddled NJ in the thick receiving blanket and gently placed him back in the bassinet. "My brother had a baby at fourteen. The girl's parents gave it to him at the hospital and took

her away to live somewhere that the stain wouldn't show."

Samantha felt bad for the girl and Wade's brother. She also felt a chill at the anger in Wade's voice. "I'm sorry. That must have been rough on everyone."

"It was. My brother had no business with a baby. He lost custody to the state, but not before I got attached. When they took him away, it was like I'd lost a little brother." Wade slipped on his boots and sat in the chair to lace them up. "My parents were glad the extra kid was gone. So was my brother. I cried for weeks. I was the only one who cared about that little life at all."

Samantha didn't want to ask, but she felt she had to. "What happened to him?"

"He was adopted by a rich couple and went on to become a lawyer. He didn't have time for us and frankly, we didn't deserve him. He was too good to be one of us."

Samantha realized Wade was letting her in on how he felt about himself and his family. She patted the bed she couldn't wait to get out of. "Come tell me your family secrets. You'll feel better and so will I."

Wade didn't hesitate. He wanted these burdens off his soul and he knew Samantha would understand. "My family wasn't good. For a while, I took after them in almost every way."

“You seem...down today.”

Marc knelt to retrieve a vest from the cabinet.
“Do I?”

“Yes.” Neil gathered magazines for their weapons. Neil felt cheerful, but he kept it inside so it didn’t bug Marc. Nothing was more annoying than to be around someone bubbly when you were having a rough day. Neil knew he should be angry like everyone else, but he was delighted that they were finally here. Nothing was dampening it. “*Are you okay?*”

Marc strapped on the vest, then got another one out for Neil. “Bad dreams.”

Neil frowned. “Visions or jumbles?”

“Hard to say.” Marc put the extra magazines in his holding pouches while Neil put on his vest. “We were here, but it was the old world. Nothing had changed despite everything we did, everything we tried.”

“I hate dreams like that. They make you feel like there’s no point in even trying to accomplish your goals.”

Marc shut and locked the cabinet. “The worst part is that I know it could happen. After all we’ve been through, the whole damn world will probably end up exactly like it was before.”

“People suck.”

Marc nodded. “I used to believe most people are good and there really are just a few bad apples, but

I've realized it's the opposite. And there just aren't enough good apples to conquer the rotten ones."

The camp hall next to them was full of busy people being led through chores by Ralph. Marc and Neil nodded at the busy man and got the same in return.

"Maybe we're not supposed to fight it. Like yin and yang—we can't have one without the other."

"Yeah. That's what scares me, Neil."

"Why?"

"Because it implies we'll never have peace, that it has to end this way every time. And that doesn't make me want to keep fighting for either side. I'm sick of being lied to, of hoping for things that aren't going to happen."

Neil had never been around Marc when he was like this. He'd witnessed anger, rage, and frustration, but depression was a whole new ballgame; he didn't know what to say.

Marc forced a smile at a group of happy camp members walking toward the steps to the top deck. Neil nodded at them. Neither man spoke until they were alone again.

Marc didn't want to continue the conversation—mostly because he didn't want Angela to know he wasn't having a good day. He'd kept it from her so far.

Neil snorted.

Marc chuckled. "Yeah, she does find out whatever we try to hide."

“It’s sexy that she’s so smart.” Neil frowned.
“And a little emasculating.”

Marc patted his balls. “That’s your issue, not mine. I’m all here.”

Neil laughed.

Marc did understand. He’d gone through his own issues over that. Now, he just respected her ruthless brain. “It eases.”

“Tell yourself that.” Neil gestured. “Bad dreams fade; depression eases. Life goes on.”

Marc let out a shuddering sigh. “And sometimes it just gets worse until something explodes.”

“Then you need to vent it.” Neil leaned in. “Adrian’s on the island, and I’d bet he could use a beating...”

Marc’s laughter rang down the hall. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You could also talk to your wife.”

Marc’s expression immediately darkened. “I think that’s helped flip my mood too. We get interrupted whenever we try to take time for ourselves. It’s like fate doesn’t want us to be together so it keeps throwing shit in our way.”

Neil understood in a blinding flash. His voice lowered. “Don’t think like that—ever. She deserves you, not that traitorous piece of shit.” He clapped Marc’s stiff arm. “Come on. We’ll do a matchup tonight for you with someone. Or several someones. You do need the outlet.”

Marc followed Neil, not arguing, but he doubted he could be provoked into coming out of his cage

today. *The tiger is in his own head right now. He isn't coming out until he finds a solution or he's sure there isn't one to be found.*

“There’s another man who’ll need an outlet shortly.”

Marc saw Daryl and Dwight coming down the hallway. Both men were walking with tense steps and no conversation.

Marc gave Daryl a sympathetic look as he and Neil left.

Daryl opened the door and held it for Dwight.

Dwight entered the small lounge and went to the recliner. He plopped down and glared at Daryl as the man shut and locked the door.

Daryl hated the tension. He tried to get it over with as quickly as possible. “Is it because I’m white or because you didn’t get to be there for the wedding?”

Dwight snorted. “Figures you’d think that.”

Daryl took the chair across from Brittani’s father. “I think you and your wife don’t like me.”

“We like you fine.”

Daryl frowned. “So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is your lack of ambition.” Dwight leaned back in the chair, but he didn’t look away from his new son-in-law. “My little girl was making something of herself here! Now she isn’t even trying. You distracted her from what matters.”

Daryl’s anger rose. “But you were okay with her and Gus. Hypocrite much?”

Dwight blew out another snotty snort. “She wasn’t going to marry Gus! He’s the pet she adopted when they were kids.”

Daryl opened his mouth to fire back.

“Excuse me. I should leave.” Gus stepped out of the bathroom in the corner of the lounge. He walked by both men without meeting their eyes.

Daryl sighed as Gus left without slamming the door. “Damn it.”

Dwight nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’ll talk to him later.”

Dwight’s wrinkles bunched up as he scowled. “Leave him alone.”

Daryl scowled right back. “I’ll do what I want!”

“Why don’t you want to move up?” Dwight brought the topic back around. “Anyone can do shifts on guard duty.”

Daryl’s defensive nature rose; he smothered it to respond with honesty. “I’m happy where I am, with who I am. I’m sorry if that isn’t good enough for you.”

“It’s not good enough for my daughter!” Dwight pointed a long finger covered in tiny scars from grease splatters. “She’s distracted right now, but in the future, she’ll look around and feel chained to you as you are right now—hair messy, shirt untucked, no Eagle jacket on, and wrinkled clothes you probably slept in. She’ll realize she made a huge mistake and your marriage will end as fast as it started.” Dwight waved a hand. “Get on out of here and think about your wife instead of yourself.

You're a married man now. She's supposed to come first."

Daryl tried to think of something clever to say. He decided it didn't matter if it was clever as long as it rang true. "Brittani loves me and I love her. Butt out."

Dwight glared until Daryl got up and left. As soon as the door shut, Dwight grinned. "He still has a spine. Good to know."

"Gus! Wait up!" Daryl hurried down the hall as Gus stopped and turned. "I'm sorry, man. You weren't supposed to—"

"They never thought of me that way until you came along!" Gus swung.

Daryl hit the floor a second later.

Gus marched toward the stairs, big fists clenched.

Eagles ran over to help Daryl. Marc got there first. He'd still been close by.

Daryl peered up, vision blurry. "Marc?"

Marc and Neil pulled Daryl to his feet. "Yeah, buddy?"

"Tell her I want my own team and I want it right now."

Marc straightened Daryl's wrinkled shirt. "She didn't think you want that."

"I didn't. I don't." Daryl rubbed his jaw, wincing. "But I need it."

Marc grinned. "Gus is advancing through training very fast."

“I think Kenn’s been teaching him shit on the side.” Daryl stumbled after Marc and Neil as they headed toward the weapons room. “Just for moments like this.”

Neil laughed, nodding.

Marc missed it. He was already back into his contemplations.

“You shouldn’t do things like that.”

Gus walked by Trinity without answering.

Trinity followed him, not afraid. She knew he wouldn’t hurt her. “If you want her back, beating on her husband won’t help.”

Gus stopped. He turned around, rage flaring again. “Her what?!”

Trinity smiled innocently. “Sorry. I thought you knew. They got married a few days ago. That’s why she wasn’t around for a while.”

Gus didn’t notice as Trinity went to her cabin.

Trinity leaned against the door, evil leer coming over her face. “I always get what I want, Gus. And I want you.”

Trinity got her kit from the closet and went into the bathroom to get ready for a long day of assisting Ed and Brittani as they ran Angela’s projects. She was eager to spend the time with Ed. He was a medic-in-training when he wasn’t working for the boss. He was a valuable contact. “It’s Brittani who needs to go back to the mess. I thought I could tolerate her. I thought I could fake it.”

Trinity slammed the bathroom door. “I was wrong.”

Chapter Four
Move Faster

1

“**W**here does the boss want me?”

“Right here in your cabin.”

Tobias smacked the doorframe. “We haven’t done anything wrong. Why are we being treated this way?!”

Conner stood straighter, eyes narrowing. “You and your wives reached a new level. You can’t be around Marc or Angela. You know that.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t mean we can’t have jobs until we leave.” The busy hall behind Conner told Tobias a lot was happening right now and he wanted to be part of it. He’d called Conner over in hopes of a job.

Conner paused, encouraged. “You’re leaving us?”

Tobias nodded. “Your boss knows. We just want to be useful until then.”

Conner inspected the cabin and the two women sitting demurely in the chairs on either side of the one large bed. Both females had sewing needles and were working on the same blue and white blanket. The neat cabin smelled like clean laundry and frustration.

Tobias swept the handsome boy. The Eagle jacket didn't have a name or patch, but it was clear it had been worn a lot. Tobias knew Conner had earned it and the scars he carried on his hands and arms, but he still didn't like the teenager.

Conner wondered why Tobias insisted on dressing like an old man playing golf, but he didn't ask or comment on the odd plaid choices.

Tobias scowled. "We're playing putt-putt later."

Conner shrugged. It didn't explain the rest of the times in the last week.

Daniella and Anna were also dressed for an outing. They both had on long gray sweaters over jeans and matching t-shirts with a variety of roses across the front. They looked normal; Tobias didn't.

Conner got his book out and did a fast scan to find something they needed that Tobias could do right here. "My notes say you have a gift the rest of us don't."

"Yes."

"Can you teach it or share?"

"Yes, and no."

Conner snapped his book shut. "I'll find out who the boss wants me to send by. Any special qualities we should look for?"

"Well, it's never been successfully done, even in the labs, so no."

Conner put his mind to work, running through what he knew of Tobias. "Haunted, hunted,

aggressive, short-tempered, intelligent..." He paused. "Do you prefer youth or wisdom?"

Tobias snorted out a chuckle. "Wisdom. Youth gives me a headache."

Conner glared at him.

Tobias gestured. "Exactly."

Conner turned away from the cabin, offended.

Tobias pushed the door shut with his boot. "Touchy."

Daniella and Anna stared at him.

Tobias sighed unhappily. "I don't either, but we can't stay now. Five known byzan, and probably more, in one camp? Safe Haven will be torn apart in a few months."

Anna dropped her head.

Daniella kept staring.

Tobias frowned. "What?!"

"Maybe it doesn't have to be that way."

"You know it does. You two are locked right now, but it won't hold. Locks on adults never do."

"I know. I meant we stay anyway."

"No. I refuse to cause their downfall."

"We won't. We have to be strong enough to remain stable."

"Not crack?"

"No. Our first crack opens as soon as we reach this level. I mean being able to handle those cracks."

Tobias wanted to take the chance. He liked it here, and his wives were safe, fed, liked even. "What do you have in mind?"

“The kids here are special. They can heal those rifts in our soul.”

“It didn’t hold on Marc and I doubt it will hold on Angela.”

“They only had one treatment. I’m thinking of regular sessions where *all* byzan get that care.”

Tobias saw where that might be enough. “Along with locks and therapy?”

Daniella nodded. “She’s doing rounds on this deck at some point. Talk to her. Make her understand it’s possible.”

Tobias nodded. He smiled at Daniella, warming. “I love you.”

Anna watched them kiss, glad her sister had pushed. *Tobias doesn’t need to know it was my idea. I know he tolerates me for my kind nature. Let him love Daniella for my brains. It keeps us both happy.*

2

“Are you happy that we’ve arrived?”

Tracy nodded. “Yes. I can’t wait to get off this boat.”

Tim was glad Tracy had changed clothes today. Her wet, shiny hair said she’d also showered. The cabin was neat and it smelled good. Tim wasn’t fooled, but he was encouraged that she was trying to fight her depression. “What’s Charlie doing today?”

Tracy smiled widely. “He’s sharing point with Conner. It’s great.”

Tim studied Tracy from the chair next to her bed. “When he’s not working for the camp, you’re not happy with him.”

Tracy’s face fell. “I try to be.”

“But you need him out there fighting for the future.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“For you or for your child?”

Tracy frowned, voice lowering. “For me.”

“Because at some point, that boy will inherit leadership and you’ll be the queen of Safe Haven.”

“Yes.” Tracy’s shoulders drooped. “I know it’s wrong. And I don’t want to make rules or be in charge.”

“You just want to be the wife of the man running it all.”

“Yes.”

“So while he was having his own moment of weakness, you realized...”

Tracy sighed deeply. “I didn’t want him as much when he was just going to be an Eagle. I don’t love him the way he needs me to.”

Tim gave her a soothing smile. “This honesty is good for you. It’s going to set you free of all that guilt.”

“But I deserve it! I let a kid seduce me. In the old world, I would have gone to jail.”

“Perhaps. You might also have been like the teacher who ended up marrying the student she seduced. Some people call that love trapped by age.”

“I know. I also know that teacher served years in jail and I haven’t.”

“You think you should suffer before you can be happy with him?”

Tracy rubbed her upset stomach. “Maybe. I’m not sure. I just don’t feel good about me, him, the baby, or the future and I’m sure it’s because I got away with breaking laws.”

“Some laws are meant to be broken. And most laws weren’t laws at all in the beginnings of civilization.”

“That doesn’t clear me. Those people didn’t know it was wrong.” Tracy’s voice hardened. “Are you going to tell him about our talks?”

“No. Our sessions are confidential.”

Tracy didn’t believe him. “What if I start flipping out again and tell you I’m planning something crazy?”

“Are you?”

“No! But what if I was and I told you? Like Courtney did?”

Tim winced.

“I knew it!” Tracy crossed her arms over her chest. “Well?” She hadn’t been sure in that guess. Now that she knew, she wasn’t sure if she should be angry.

“I didn’t think she would follow through when she made that confession.” Tim gave the full truth. “But even if I had, I believe in my calling. I wouldn’t have told anyone.”

“So crazy people get to hurt others and you won’t do anything about it?” Tracy frowned deeply. “I don’t like that.”

“I don’t either.” Tim shrugged, pushing his guilt aside to finish helping her deal with hers. “We’ll have a new constitution soon. It might forbid this type of privacy or it might protect it. Either way, I won’t reveal our conversations.”

Tracy locked eyes with him. “What if I told you I tried to kill my baby and I’m still not sure if I might try again?”

Tim sighed. “I stand by my answer.”

Tracy leaned back against the pillow. “I’m not. You’re off the hook.”

Tim didn’t believe her. “If you started to feel that way, would you come talk to me like Courtney did?”

She nodded. “Probably. You’re easy to talk to.” Tracy meant it. Tim didn’t judge, but he also didn’t lie. And he looked like a priest in his black pants, white shirt and collar, and black suit jacket. Only the sneakers were out of place.

“Good.” Tim didn’t want to leave it there even though they were already over time for this session. “Do you think you could tell Charlie these things? He loves you. He’d forgive you anything.”

Tracy’s cheeks reddened with her humiliation. “He can’t ever find out. He doesn’t see me this way. If he ever does, we’re done.”

“When you’re done eavesdropping, you have duty.”

Charlie jumped away from the door, spinning around to face Kyle.

Kyle stopped next to the boy, aware of the hallway emptying as Angela began her rounds. Kyle was dressed for a day of hard work, complete with toolbelt and Eagle jacket. He was surprised Charlie was in matching gear. The boy hadn’t been wearing his Eagle clothes lately. “Learn anything useful?”

“A suspicion was verified.” Charlie blocked what he didn’t want Kyle to know.

Kyle read the boy’s open thoughts and scowled. “That’s not good.”

“Actually, it’s perfect.” Charlie lowered his voice. “Now I know how to keep her.”

Kyle assumed the teenager was hiding something important, but he didn’t try to get through Charlie’s mental block. “You aren’t pissed?”

Charlie snorted softly. “Over something I’ve suspected since the first time I stalked her in the shower?” Charlie strode down the hall, humming happily.

Kyle shook his head. “Kids these days!”

Kyle lingered in the hall as it finished emptying.

Tracy’s door opened. Tim came out and shut it. He saw Kyle and stopped.

Kyle dug in without mercy, pulling up every detail of his conversation with Tracy.

Tim didn't know how to defend himself from the mental attack.

Kyle's fists clenched. "You son of a bitch!"

Kyle ran through the options and outcomes in seconds, disappointed and furious. He grabbed Tim and shoved him against the wall.

Tim didn't resist as Kyle cuffed him. "I'm sorry."

"You should be!" Kyle pulled him toward the steps. He glared at Jonny, who was on guard duty here. "Tell the boss Tim will be in the brig!"

Jonny frowned. "Okay. What's the charge?"

"Conspiracy that resulted in the attempted murders of nine members of this camp!" Kyle's tone dropped into dangerous anger. "And did result in the deaths of two kittens and two traitors!"

People got out of the way as Kyle shoved through the hall. Mutters and questions filled the air.

Jonny waved a rookie over. "Watch my post." He was gone an instant later.

Kyle took Tim toward the brig.

"It's my duty to keep their secrets when they come to me. I didn't have a choice." Tim hoped Kyle would be reasonable.

Kyle pushed Tim when he stopped. "Jennifer almost died. I don't want to hear about your duty to a murderer!"

Tim paled. He'd forgotten about Jennifer. "I'm sorry."

"You will be if Kenn finds out before I get you locked up. Move faster."

Tim did.

3

“Tim’s in the brig. Kyle put him there.”

Angela stopped, turning toward Jonny. “What? Why?”

The crowd around Angela all turned when she did, drawing more attention from the guards in this area and those passing by on their way to jobs and chores. Silence fell as they waited to hear Jonny’s answer.

“Something about helping Courtney.”

Angela blew out an annoyed breath. “That figures.” She was glad Kyle had chosen to arrest him instead of following Kenn’s example with Peter. “Tell Morgan the law council needs a meeting tonight after dinner. He can pick the time and place.” Angela held up a hand to stop him from leaving before she was done.

Jonny waited, hoping this didn’t turn ugly. He’d had a chance to consider it on the way to tell Angela. If people found out, Tim wouldn’t be welcome anywhere in Safe Haven.

“Stop by Samantha’s cabin and tell her she has a client waiting in the brig.”

Jonny frowned. “Neil and Wade won’t like that.”

“They’ll survive.” *Which is more than I can say for Tim if Kenn gets to him.*

“You’re not letting Tim out?”

Angela was aware of three dozen shocked witnesses storing her every word to pass on later. “He’ll go through the process like anyone else.”

“We need a bail system.”

“He’s safer behind those bars right now.” Angela waved. “Go on.”

Jonny hurried off as Angela turned toward the medics. “You were saying?”

Harry frowned. “Tim’s a good man. He wouldn’t have conspired to hurt anyone.”

“I won’t discuss his case since I’ll probably be his judge.” Angela gave him a pointed look. “Finish your update. I have a lot of stops waiting after this one.”

The slamming door behind them drew attention in that direction.

Kenn glared at all of them.

Angela shook her head. “Don’t do it.”

Terry took a step toward the furious Marine. “Come on, man. He’s been detained. We’ll get to the truth.”

Kenn shoved Terry with one hand as he went by.

Terry fell against the half open door next to them. He tumbled into the room and out of sight. “Ouch!”

Kenn vanished down the steps.

“Do you want us to go after him?” Harry didn’t want to even though he liked Tim. The thought of facing Kenn while he was like this gave Harry a gas bubble.

Angela sighed. “Tim made a choice not to warn us. Now he may face the direct consequences of that choice.”

“And what about Kenn?”

Angela’s voice hardened. “If he follows through, Eagles are to remove him on the spot.”

“What?”

“I didn’t stutter. That’s a direct order.” Angela frowned at Harry as the guard on duty transmitted that to the other Eagles. “I’m still waiting on my update.”

“I want to be part of his trial.”

“You will be. Now...”

Harry held out the clipboard so she could view the test results. “I mean it. Tim wouldn’t willingly hurt anyone, let alone pregnant women.”

“And cats.” Angela was surprised by the pain those two little lost lives were causing her. She flipped through the test results, mind scattering into the meeting that now had to happen. *I needed more time. I’m not ready for this and the future may suffer for it.*

4

“Get ready.” Kyle locked the brig cell and stuffed the keys into his pocket as determined steps echoed toward them, swallowing the noise of radios and running as Eagles rushed toward this deck.

Guards outside the brig stayed out of the way. Kenn had a nasty reputation as a fighter and they

were only rookies. The fact that he was heavily armed also increased their reluctance.

Tim moved to the back of the cell, but there wasn't a place to stand where Kenn would miss if he used his gun.

Kyle shut the main door to the brig and locked it.

Kenn's furious face appeared in the window. "Open up!"

Kyle tensed to dive out of the way if Kenn started shooting. "He'll have a trial."

"Open this door!"

"No, Kenn. Get out of here before the boss shows up."

Kenn grabbed the handle and yanked as hard as he could.

The door groaned, hinges straining.

"Stop it! You'll be banished!" Kyle understood Kenn's anger, but he didn't want the Marine to pay for this rash choice.

Kenn yanked again... The hinge snapped. The door fell to one side, hanging awkwardly on the remaining pivot.

Kenn kicked it off, breaking that hinge. Pieces of wood and metal flew through the room.

Kyle reluctantly took a stance in front of Tim's cell as Kenn advanced. "Don't do this."

Kenn stomped toward the cell, eyes glowing bright red.

"If you do this, you're out of Safe Haven. Tonya will be alone!"

Kenn didn't stop.

Kyle gathered his energy and fired a spell he hadn't used yet.

Kenn dropped to the floor, face stunned.

"What was that?" Tim stayed back in case Kyle fired again. They both watched Kenn pass out.

"Part of my new skill set." Kyle stepped to the desk as Marc appeared outside the main door.

Marc scanned the broken door, then Kenn's prone body. "What happened here?"

"He tripped." Kyle pushed the button on his radio. "We need a stretcher in the brig. No rush."

Marc lifted a brow. "He tripped?"

Kyle nodded. "Tripped and fell into the door. Broke it and knocked himself out."

Marc snorted. He regarded Tim.

Kyle also looked at Tim.

Tim went to the cot and stretched out. "He tripped."

"Uh-huh." Marc scanned Kenn deeper, registering traces of magic. It took a few seconds for him to place it.

Kyle shrugged. "What?"

"Nothing." Marc left. "I may have gifted him too well with that skill set."

Kyle smirked, pleased with his new talent. Knocking out prey was the number one gift of a tracker. He'd just used his for the first time, successfully, in action.

Tim stared at Kyle, finally starting to get scared. "I'm in trouble."

Kyle nodded. “And not just from the boss or the asshole on the ground there. A lot of people won’t understand the choice you made. No one will trust you now. Your life in this camp has changed forever.”

5

“It doesn’t change anything for me.” Samantha rubbed Wade’s tense wrist. “I mean that. The past is dead. Let it go.”

Wade was relieved to have it all out. His playboy days had been preceded by minor crimes and lack of respect for anyone. That trend had continued into his twenties, and then he’d begun to change. Being in Safe Haven had finished it. *I’m a good man now.*

“Yes, you are.” Samantha smiled again, enjoying the sparks as he leered back.

Knock-knock!

Wade rose, falling into alert mode. “Who is it?”

“Jonny. The boss wants Samantha.”

Samantha carefully rose from the bed as Wade opened the door.

“For what?” Wade stayed in the way so Jonny couldn’t enter.

Jonny frowned at Wade. “Step aside. The message is for her.”

Wade reluctantly moved over, but he kept a hand on the doorframe so Jonny still couldn’t get by him.

Jonny saw the twins were sleeping. He also noticed the cabin was a mess, but it wasn't dirty. Baby items were everywhere. "Sam, the boss said to tell you there's a client in the brig who needs your services." Jonny quickly left as Wade's face filled with thunder and Samantha's profile lit up like a neon bulb.

Wade saw it too. He sighed. "I guess we aren't taking that walk."

Samantha went to the closet to get her Eagle jacket. "Later, okay? The boss needs me!"

Wade had to grin at her happiness.

"Can you watch the boys while I go see what's up, or would you rather I took them to the den mothers?"

Wade frowned. "I can handle it."

Samantha zipped her jacket and smoothed her slightly wild hair. "Are you sure? You've seen how they get when we don't cover their needs fast enough."

Wade snorted. "They're babies, Sam. I'll be fine."

Samantha shrugged, now digging in her kit for the folder she'd used during Neil's trial. "There's no shame in asking for help. Remember that and call a den mother if you need it."

"I will." Wade wanted to tell her it was too soon for her to be doing real work, but he left that for Neil. "He'll probably be upset that I let you go."

"Yep. Want a perfect rebuttal?"

Wade grinned. She was already morphing into lawyer mode. “Yes, please.”

“Tell him you’re not allowed to forbid me from doing anything.” Samantha kissed his cheek and went toward the exit. “If you ever do, we’re done.”

Wade watched her walk down the hall, heart now thumping. He knew that warning was real. Samantha wasn’t going to tolerate men who bossed her around.

Wade gently shut the door and scanned the sleeping infants. “Looks like it’s just us, boys.” He settled into the rocking chair. “We’ll finish our nap and then see where the day takes us.”

Samantha nodded to guards and camp members as she walked toward the stairs. It hurt a little when she went down the steps, but not so much that it dulled her happiness. *I have my body back!*

Samantha felt a cold attitude as she neared the brig. She scanned to find out who it was coming from.

Sherman glared at her. “You’re here for the traitor.”

Samantha frowned right back at the vocal camp member, a little surprised. “I’m here to find out what happened and help someone decide what to do about it.”

Sherman gestured angrily. “That killer helped Courtney. He knew and didn’t tell anyone.” Sherman’s voice lowered. “He needs to be removed; he doesn’t need a lawyer!”

Samantha entered the brig, sweeping the mangled door Theo's rookies were trying to fix. The brig was neat and clean except for that. Sam swallowed a shudder at the feel of being here again. "Sounds like a lawyer is exactly what he needs since he's already been found guilty without a trial."

Darren, Theo's top man, glared at Sherman. "Get lost or pick a cell."

Sherman went up the steps, muttering about disloyalty being a death sentence.

Samantha flashed Darren a short smile of gratitude for the support. "Thanks."

Darren shrugged. "It'll get worse. You should have a guard." Darren and the rookie crew didn't want to get into fights with anyone, but they were taking their time fixing the door in case the guards here needed help with that crowd. "We're leaving to join Marc in about ten minutes."

Samantha frowned. "We're all good now. They had a party to celebrate the birth of my twins."

"I know, but people are fickle. They'd want your defense if they screwed up, but the rest of the time, you're the old lawyer who gets the criminal off without punishment." Darren met her eye. "Watch your six. This might get ugly."

Samantha hoped he was wrong. She went to the only occupied cell.

Tim glanced up in relief. "Thank you, Lord."

Samantha paled as she added the clues. "Courtney confessed."

“And I held that confession like my vows require. The law is on my side.”

Samantha sat on the stool, mind spinning. “Yeah... We don’t have those laws anymore, Tim.” She wanted to give him better news, but she refused to lie. “I’m not sure I can help you.”

“You’ll try, right?”

She nodded. “Of course. I need to do some research.” She assumed the air of a lawyer, now feeling like one. “Until I say otherwise, stop admitting anything. Don’t discuss your case with anyone. And pray. You’re going to need that help too.”

“I already have been.” Tim gazed at her in sad resignation. “Even if they insist, I still won’t give in. The right to a private confession is important.”

Samantha wasn’t sure she agreed. She made a quick note. “Tell me why it’s important. Maybe I can use it to help you.”

“Because it was the first privacy right that ever existed. If it goes, all the others will fall after it. You’ll have no privacy in any way—including medical. It’s not as big a deal now, but in the future, when there are millions of people again, it’ll matter in every way.”

Samantha saw his point; she still wasn’t sure if she agreed. *But I don’t make those rules this time. Angela wants me on the other side to find the loophole.* Samantha stood up. “Try to relax. Enjoy the extra rest.”

Tim sighed. “I hate being caged.”

“I might be able to get you released under guard...” She stopped as he shook his head.

Tim glanced at the mangled door and the small crowd that was gathering. “Boss said I’m safer in here. She’s right.”

“We don’t need lawyers!” someone outside shouted. “Let him rot!”

Samantha’s anger rose. “People who get arrested are innocent until proven guilty!”

“He confessed!”

“That was the old world!”

Samantha went to the door without fear. “What if you were accused of a crime? You’d want someone to defend you.”

“He confessed! We know he’s guilty.”

“It isn’t that simple.” Samantha waved the hall guard over. “Stay here until the boss sends reinforcements. If they rush the cell, shoot them.”

“Without orders?”

Samantha nodded, walking toward the steps. “They don’t want trials or lawyers or a defense, even if it’s called for. That’s a lynch mob gathering the courage to drag a man out of his cell. If they do it, kill them all. It’s not like they’ll need a lawyer or a trial.”

Reminded of the seriousness, the guard slid a hand to his gun.

Some of the crowd left, not wanting to be a part of the next horror-filled situation in this camp.

The rest stayed put and glared into the brig.

Chapter Five
Cold Shield

1

“Do we have everything?”

Neil inspected the sheet on his clipboard again. “Uh... We’re still short a few people, a weapons bag, and our food for the day.”

Marc was aware of the lack of chatter in his group as they stood on the top deck. He understood. The sight of the island paradise was stunning to their senses. They hadn’t viewed land like this since leaving home. It was bittersweet and very welcome. They’d only had a few pictures of where they were coming to. Other than Kendle, no one had known what to expect.

Marc ran his hand along the rail, testing it automatically to verify it was sturdy. That was another lesson they’d learned. These ships were hardy, but they’d been made to have service between cruises. They’d now had this vessel in open ocean for eight weeks. It was a full month over what most cruise liners did between breaks.

The breeze blew the scent of earth to them, along with the faint odor of an engine. Their ship was off now, but the basic services still required

fuel, which meant waste from using it. The exhaust vents on the ship were at full power right now, still pulling smoke from the halls.

“Got the food.” Ivan joined them near the emergency boat chute. He began handing out the bulging fanny packs as men and women laughed.

Neil swept the top deck for their missing people while Marc sent a mental call for Greg to hurry up.

“Theo’s coming. Kyle’s dragging him up the steps.”

Marc snickered at Neil’s comment. Greg was right behind the pair and pushing them along. It was obvious Theo had been delaying both men.

Theo slid, still being pushed.

Kyle grabbed his arm and directed the slide toward Marc. The line of people waiting next to the rail moved aside so they weren’t bumped overboard.

Greg handed the weapons bag to Neil.

Neil’s arm dropped to the deck, guns clanging. “What the hell do you have in here?” Neil hefted the bag onto a shoulder as Greg and the others laughed. Greg had intentionally made it appear light.

“Just some toys.” Greg took his place next to Marc as Ivan went to the other side.

Kyle joined Neil. He began offloading some of the weight from the weapons bag by arming the waiting rookies and level ones who weren’t allowed to have a gun of their own yet except on runs.

Marc regarded Neil.

Neil nodded. “That’s everything...” He peered over his shoulder toward the ramp.

Marc shook his head. “That’s not our job today.”

“I know. Just doesn’t feel right to leave Tim in the brig while there’s a mini-mob outside his door.”

“Angela and Samantha have it covered.” Marc turned toward the first boat. “We go in sets of four, one minute apart. Let’s roll.”

Neil followed automatically. “Did you say Samantha?”

Marc waited until Neil was in the boat, then nodded. “All Safe Haven prisoners get a lawyer.”

“It’s only been four days!” Neil’s face clouded over. “No.” He stood up.

Marc shoved him out of the boat.

“Ahhh!” Neil hit the ocean below with a thick splash. Salt water closed over him and filled his nose and mouth.

“Cool off down there.” Marc waved casually at Ivan. “Release us.”

“But we’ll hit Neil!”

“I’m counting on it. If we don’t, I’ll hit you.” Marc grinned coldly.

Ivan let go of the controls. “Nope. You do it.”

Marc regarded Greg.

Greg laughed. “Be happy to, Boss.” Greg took over the controls. He released the boat immediately, grin widening as they began to slide down the chute.

Neil surfaced, wiping at his face. A familiar sliding noise filled his ears.

Neil flipped around and dove... The boat smacked him in the ass, knocking him deeper.

Neil swam back up, heart thumping. Neil blinked, holding his breath. He saw the shadow of the boat move away. He followed it as long as he could, letting out air in tiny streams.

“Where is he?!” Ivan wasn’t amused. “Go get him!”

Greg laughed. “The new guy is twitchy.”

Marc nodded, shifting on the bench seat. “I think it’s about to get worse.”

Ivan frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Neil lunged from the water and grabbed Ivan around the neck. He dragged him into the water.

Marc laughed with the others as Ivan drew his knife and began thrusting wildly at whatever had grabbed him.

Neil had dived down to avoid the coming reaction. He surfaced near the boat and grabbed a side to be pulled along.

Ivan broke the surface with a shout.

Marc waved at Daryl, who was bringing the next load of people. “Pick him up as you come through.”

Daryl saluted, laughing hard.

Ivan treaded water, spinning with his knife in hand. “I think I’m safer with sharks.” He spit, trying to rid the salty taste from his tongue.

Marc fell into his thoughts as Greg started the weak engine and steered them toward the small bay.

There has to be a solution that actually cures the disease instead of treating the symptoms.

Greg rode the few swells, laughing with Neil when it got a little rougher. They were both happy to be off the ship and to have arrived, but it was also going to be a man's day and they needed that.

Kyle waited for his boat to hit the water and then fired up the engine. He steered them next to Ivan.

Daryl grabbed Ivan's hand and pulled it to the side of the boat so he could hang on like Neil was doing as Greg brought Marc's boat ashore. It was a neat move that told any witnesses they were trained in water maneuvers.

Kyle was glad it had worked as their audience on the top deck let out a small cheer. They hadn't practiced water exercises much yet. Kyle was certain that was soon to change.

Shawn finished his one-minute count, then released his boat to follow. All the emergency ships in this chute were being used today to ferry Marc's group back and forth. They'd hoped to use the large rafts, but those were gone now, lost in their various battles and adventures to get here.

Shawn said a prayer and fired up the engine as they hit the water. *Please let things stay calm today. We don't need more drama.*

Marc exited the boat while Greg anchored it to the sandy shore with a heavy stake and rope.

Neil walked ashore, stumbling over the slippery rocks and garbage. The ocean debris was gone, but a lot of it had come in here. The trash was being

pushed onto the beach by each wave. Plastic bottles were the most obvious, but he also picked out a shoe, a plastic bag, and a plastic cup. *I wonder if we can reuse those for something.*

Marc nodded. “Add it to your list. All observations are to be written so we can go over them later and send updates to the ship.”

Neil got out his book, glad he’d thought to put everything into his waterproof pouches for today.

Marc scanned the beach, noting the burn marks and the body. Courtney’s corpse was half gone. What the animals hadn’t eaten was slowly being tugged apart. Pieces were coming back to the beach, but a lot of it was being dragged into open water. Marc assumed it would be gone by the time they returned to this spot later. *At least, I hope it will be. That’s morbid.*

It was also a vivid reminder that Angela wouldn’t tolerate any more traitors. Marc thought of placing heads outside their gate on the mountain and approved. Sometimes, extreme methods were called for.

“I see four paths.” Neil wanted to be in charge of navigation on this run.

Marc waved distractedly. “As you would.”

Neil ignored his dripping clothes and the boots attracting sand like magnets. He pointed at three Eagles and led the way. “Each man goes fifty feet, stays in sight and reports right back. Move out.” Neil took the middle path and began walking.

The three level one Eagles hurried to a path, swallowing grins of excitement. It had been a surprise when level ones were chosen for this run. They couldn't wait to explore and then go back and share those details. For a few minutes, a lower level team would have the spotlight.

Marc was aware of the pleasure of his chosen group so far. He sighed. *Minus one.*

Theo hurried over to Marc, half stumbling under the pack he was wearing. "Marc! I need a minute!"

Marc spun around, finger going to his lips.

Theo slowed, flushing. It had been so long since he'd participated in moments like this that he'd forgotten the first rule of landing anywhere new—be quiet.

Marc turned toward the paths, listening for trouble from the scouts. He didn't expect any and they probably didn't need to do this since he'd gone over the entire island last night, but it was a training moment.

Theo grunted as he reached Marc, unshouldering the pack. "They rushed me, Marc. I may not have everything I need now to do what you want."

"That's why I have gophers." Marc swept the two boys getting out of the last boat. Mike and Timmy needed the adventure, the exercise, and the good feelings that came with being useful. They also needed to be out of Angela's hair. She wasn't in the mood for boyish antics.

Theo saw the scouts coming. He frowned, trying to remember what he was supposed to do now.

“Don’t worry about that.” Marc dropped a surprise. “The engineering crew are not Eagles. They’ll need to try out like everyone else when we have openings.”

Theo tried to summon anger; he found relief. “Okay.”

Marc turned to scan the ship, impressed again. Angela had made a note that Theo didn’t want to be an Eagle anymore, but he hadn’t believed it. *She sees deeper into them than I do. I’ll work on that. It’s a handy skill for any leader. And invaluable considering that I’m going to lead these men and women into a final battle. I have to get myself ready, too.*

Neil and the scouts returned at roughly the same time and met on the edge of the beach.

Marc waited, content to let Neil direct this part. The back of his mind was working hard while the rest of him was rolling through the motions. He’d done this sort of thing as a Marine more times than he could remember. It used to be his favorite part of the mission. Today... *I can’t lead them for that final fight if I don’t find a solution to this. We’ll stay right here and evil will take over the rest of the world. At least that outcome will be different. It’s not worth all their lives.*

Neil came over to Marc. “Nothing in view in any direction. The farthest path to the right is where

Adrian's people went. We've recognized the tracks. I suggest the farthest path to the left so we don't run into them."

"As you would."

Neil made a gesture, then pointed at four more Eagles, all level ones. "Teams of two to lead us in. Weapons holstered. Reggie, you're with me."

Reggie brightened. He hurried over to stand by the middle path.

"Orders?" Neil knew Marc wasn't in the frame of mind to do this. He was curious how the man would do while only half here.

"All structures are to be evaluated. She wants us to start with the town, but we'll do them all as we find them. I counted a dozen that weren't in the main square. They're spread out. Ration water and food, watch where you step. There's a tunnel somewhere." Marc didn't react to his mind flashing Kendle's scars. She'd told him once that it had happened underground. He hadn't forgotten.

Neil made fast notes as Marc spoke.

"No looting or scavenging yet. No hunting. No fighting unless we're attacked." Marc ran through his mental notes. "Stay in sight. Short range communication. Medics in the center. Move us out in two."

Neil hurried toward Kyle to share the notes. "Two minutes."

Theo waited with Marc.

"You're in the middle, too. Get there."

Theo sighed, heading that way. His face flamed when he fell into the center as a protective and Eagles stared or murmured. He lifted his chin. *I'm still important.*

Marc swept Ivan next, catching the slightly bad attitude. He scowled at the man. "I know your problem. If I send you back, she'll humiliate you and put you on the shittiest chore she can think of."

Ivan's tension fled, replaced with resignation. "I don't think the kids can cover it."

Marc nodded. "I know the feeling. So will every other Eagle on that ship. She'll have more protection today than if we'd all stayed to guard her."

Ivan grinned as he understood what Marc had done. The warm sun and light was already drying his clothes, but the smell of salt was sticking. He felt itchy under his Eagle gear. "That was slick."

Marc shrugged. "She's rubbing off in some ways. I feel smarter now, like I went through some horrible class and passed it."

"I'm in the horrible part still."

"Yes." Marc turned as Neil reached him. "Keep Theo alive for me and we'll have a beer later."

Ivan brightened.

So did Greg, even though he wasn't sure he was invited.

Neil scanned the manpower. *I need someone fast who isn't afraid to take a hit or deliver one.* He signaled Megan. "Duty over Theo."

Megan grinned, showing the spot where her missing tooth should be. “Awesome.” She stepped between Theo and the rookie medics who were grumbling about on-the-job training. “I’ve got him.”

Theo frowned at her. “You look like a hockey player.”

Megan laughed. “Perfect. It’s my favorite sport.”

Theo shook his head. “I don’t get it.”

Megan ignored his disapproval. She didn’t care.

“Move out!” Neil led the way with the scouts right behind him. He stepped into the tall weeds lining the middle path. *This is more like it. On land, I’m good.*

Marc winced as he caught the thought. Kendle felt the same way, but that was another illusion. *We’re not really safe, ever. We just tell ourselves we are so we can function.*

Marc fell in behind Greg. Ivan took the rear.

Everyone tensed as they entered the jungle. In less than a minute, their ship was out of sight, and all they could hear was the slight roar of the ocean and the droning buzz of island insects.

Daryl felt the boring run start to sink in and sighed. He knew Marc had been here last night. If there was danger, it had already been cleared out. *This is just a training run and I don’t feel like playing the role today.*

“You okay?”

Daryl nodded at Trent. “I’m good. You?”

Trent shrugged. “Stomach isn’t happy, but I’m good otherwise. Land issues, I think.”

“It’ll ease off in a couple hours. The medics on the ship told Kyle to just puke if he needed to and drink a lot of water.”

“Marc said to ration the water.”

“I doubt he meant those with land sickness.”

“True.” Trent uncapped his canteen and drank a generous amount. He swallowed a loud belch as he stored it.

“Now curl your thumbs into your palms, like an incorrect fist.”

Trent did it. “Okay. Why?”

“Stomach control. Give it a couple minutes and your stomach will settle.”

Trent frowned, doubtful, but he kept his thumbs curled into his palms.

Daryl wondered how Brittani was doing as Angela’s supervisor. He tried to concentrate on the duty at hand, but his mind didn’t want to focus on anything. *I don’t feel good. Gus rang my bell harder than I thought.*

Shawn moved up next to Daryl. He didn’t speak.

Daryl nodded in recognition. If something went wrong, they would fight back-to-back. *But there’s nothing here.* Daryl was pale and walking crooked. He straightened repeatedly, fighting the imbalance of being on land. Most of them were doing the same. Only a few were adjusting quicker.

Shawn scowled. He felt good to be on land. Why wasn't everyone happy about it? *Even Marc's got something going on.* Shawn shrugged. *Glad it isn't me this time.* He scanned for danger and enjoyed the feel of land under his boots. *Maybe Marc will assign an overnight crew here. I'd love to spend the night by a campfire.*

Pam caught the thought and sent it to Marc.

Marc stored it and went right back to his thoughts.

Pam scanned the entire group and found a lot of distracted leaders and excited rookies. She agreed with Daryl's thoughts that there wasn't any danger here. *But if we're wrong, this entire group could get wiped out. No one's paying attention.* She cocked her head as an idea occurred. *Will Marc get mad if I wake them up?*

Marc turned to scowl at her.

Pam flushed. *Okay. I got it. No surprises.*

Marc turned around and resumed walking.

"What was that about?" Shawn didn't want her to be in trouble.

"I asked a question and he said no."

"Oh." Shawn let it go, not wanting to pry.

Pam settled in for a boring walk. *Are we there yet?*

Greg noticed the chatter. The rookies were asking questions and making observations. The senior men were marching along and realizing it wasn't going to be an adventure this time. Greg remembered when he'd felt like the new men and

women. *I was eager for any run. It didn't have to be exciting.* Greg grinned. *I got over that quickly. I guess almost dying changes a person's perspective.*

“So does danger.” Kyle was walking right behind Greg, trying not to trip. “Not all the rookies are breaking rules.”

Both men glanced over at Megan, who was marching along next to Theo. She wasn't chatting with anyone and her face held the marks of concentration they knew from their own rookie runs.

Greg shrugged. “We'll include that one later and see how deep it's running.”

Kyle thought about nights around the fire with Adrian. “You think Marc will do stuff like that?”

“I don't know. I think the boss would, but Marc's different.” Greg didn't mind. Each of their leaders had a purpose and an attitude to match it. *But Angela's the only one who makes me feel fearless. She'd die to save her team. I still don't know that about Marc.*

The two men listened to the rookies around them for a minute. The rookies were in new gear that didn't have the faded spots and tears of the senior men's clothes. Each of those flaws held a story the rookies wanted to hear but weren't brave enough yet to ask about.

“So how do you go all cold shield?” Hannah was the opposite of Megan. She was barely watching the path, let alone the rookie medics.

Ivan frowned. “I’m already tired of your chatter. Shut up.”

Hannah waved it off. “We’re safe here. Come on. You’re supposed to train us on these runs.”

Ivan stared. “You want me to teach you something? Now? While we’re entering an unknown territory?”

Hannah nodded eagerly.

Still listening, Greg and Kyle exchanged grins.

“Fine. It feels cold. There’s tingling and amazing brain waves that allow me to see better. My spine locks in place against the icy feeling and it doesn’t thaw until an hour after the mission ends.”

People around them nodded approval at the accurate description. Once that spine froze, the courage was free to flow.

“But *how* do you do it?”

“Repetition, forcing my brain to concentrate even when it doesn’t want to, and watching where I put my feet.”

“What?”

Ivan pointed.

Hannah stepped forward as she glanced down.

The ground shifted sideways, revealing a gap.

“He—” Hannah fell into the hole and vanished. The hatch teetered back into place.

Shawn and Greg burst out laughing as the rest of the group stopped and hurried over.

Ivan shrugged. “She asked for a lesson.”

Hannah’s voice echoed up. “Oh, slam you, Ivan!”

Ivan leered at Megan. “Okay.”

Megan blushed. She snorted and turned to do a scan of their surroundings while everyone else was distracted.

Marc pointed at Ivan. “You let her fall; you bring her up.”

Ivan snapped a fast salute and jumped on the edge of the teetering lid. He dropped straight down.

“Hey! Get off my foot!”

Marc snickered as the others laughed and Hannah shouted. Hannah was getting what she’d asked for.

Ivan kept training her. “Kneel down, dig in your kit, and find some form of light. I’ll count to ten. One...”

“All right!”

Rustling sounds came as Hannah took off her kit and unzipped it.

Marc scanned for issues and found Neil and Kyle setting up a perimeter guard. Marc immediately felt better. *This is another of those Adrian moments. He felt like this. Those men are special in every way.*

Kyle and Neil looked at him at the same time. Their faces glowed with the inner knowledge they’d always known. Having it recognized just made it better.

Ivan’s voice echoed. “Good. Now put it out. You’ve had a fast glance. If you leave the light on, you’ll attract things.”

“Things?! What things?!”

“Calm down. Just climb up my back... That’s my front. Keep going!”

“I am! Where’s the hole?”

“Sitting on my head.”

“What?!”

“It’s directly above you. Push on it.”

“Hold me steady... Careful with your thumb! That’s not a bowling ball!”

“Oh. My. God.”

“I can’t reach. I’m short a few inches.”

“I’m not.”

“What?”

There was silence from the hole.

Hannah shifted on his tensed shoulders. “Ivan?”

“Brace. I’m shoving you through. Something moved down here.”

Hannah popped through the dirt an instant later; the ground shifted again. Gabe grabbed the edge of the lid to the tunnel and held it open while Greg and Kyle yanked Hannah out of the way and then sent two strong arms down for Ivan to grab.

Ivan lunged upward, grabbing both. He held tight, legs drawing up as they pulled him through the hole.

Gabe shined his light, hoping to see whatever Ivan had heard. A small dark shadow darted through the light and disappeared into the darkness.

“A mole?”

Ivan shrugged, controlling his breathing so they wouldn’t think he was scared or out of shape. “Hard

to say. We can check the books on the ship for a list of underground animals on this island.”

Marc marked the location on his map, as did several other people. They were all using hand drawn maps right now. When they were settled, Neil was already aware that he was expected to make them real maps using a combination from everyone.

Shawn kicked off a corner of the lid so they would be able to spot it on the return trip. And to let in a little light. *Maybe it will kill whatever else is down there.* Vampires came to his mind. Shawn shrugged it off uneasily as Neil got the group moving again. *Vampires don't exist.*

His mind refused to let it go. *You mean like magic?*

Shawn fell into those thoughts and didn't come back out.

“Let's move.” Neil could feel Marc getting impatient.

The lines reformed with nearly everyone casting looks at the hole. Many of them were now afraid they would be assigned to clear that tunnel. The rest were hoping for that honor and adventure.

“Did you see that?” Megan put a hand on Theo's arm. “Did anyone else see something green and moving straight? Would have been about four feet in the air.” Megan glanced around.

Heads shook.

Megan frowned. “No one?” She sighed when senior men gave her hard scowls. “Could have been

an awning, I guess. Or a roof tile. We should be close to the town by now.”

People straightened at the reminder. There could be action now.

Greg and Darren exchanged a glance.

Darren nodded. He moved closer. Megan had her hair in a braid and strongly reminded Darren of the boss. Angela had worn hers the same way when she was a rookie. She’d been doing a long ponytail for the last few weeks. Darren thought it was sexy on her, but the braid on Megan made him want to wrap it around his rough hands. “Put it in your report.”

Megan frowned. “But there’s no verification.”

“Trust yourself first and your team second in moments like this.” Darren fell back next to Greg. The two men scanned ahead and let alert mode take over in case the rookie was right.

Megan waved at Theo to go as she dug out her book and fell in behind him to record her observation. It was entry number one.

“Why did he tell us to keep Theo alive? He isn’t in danger.”

Greg shrugged. “Just giving the rookies some drama maybe.”

Marc looked over his shoulder and pointed.

Ivan paled. “Snake!”

Greg ran forward and shoved Theo out of the way.

The snake struck, hitting Greg's kit. It clamped down, releasing a stream of venom that rolled down the pack.

Greg dropped it and snatched his knife.

"Let it go." Marc used a stick to pop the snake's jaw loose. He jumped as it hissed and scurried off.

Greg regarded his pack. "Get me a vial. We have our first sample."

Eugene hurried to open his medical kit. He was a rookie, but he already loved his job. He'd been planning to be a doctor before the war. He just wished he didn't have to ever leave camp to do it.

Gabe frowned. "Sample for what? It was a snake. We saw it."

Trent stepped by him to hold the vial while Greg squeezed his pack into a funnel to direct the dripping yellow venom. "To find out if the animals here are contaminated."

"Oh. That makes sense." Gabe stepped forward to help.

Marc waited impatiently, making eye contact with Megan.

Megan moved closer to Theo. "Stay by my side."

Theo nodded, brushing himself off. "Thanks, Greg."

"It's my honor." Greg wiped the rest of the pack on the grass and slung it over his shoulder where it was exposed to the air and not his skin. "Let's roll."

"We are close." Kyle had the real map out. He handed it to Neil and moved in front so Neil could

check it while he had point. The smooth transfer was noticed by several of the rookies and level one Eagles.

“Got another flipper over here.” Trent marked it on his map.

Kyle came over to investigate it.

“Put a hole in it and move on.” Marc copied that method of marking. When they got underground, it would be a distinctive feature in the tunnel hatches that they could modify to give their exact locations.

Kyle kicked the hatch with his heel. A harsh scent floated out of the darkness.

Kyle froze, paling.

Bang!

Bang!

“She’s hit!”

“He’s dead! Cesar’s dead!”

“Who did it? Did Adrian get him?”

“Other side’s pourin’, Boss.”

“No. It was Cynthia.”

“You okay?”

Kyle nodded, coming out of the past slowly.

“Other side was pourin’.”

Neil blanched, jerked into the past against his will.

Neil rushed to help Adrian hold the powerful gun steady.

The semi hurried toward them, grinding gears as it picked up speed. Huge bullets traced a path of

destruction up the road and finally began to plunge into the rig.

The windshield shattered as they tilted the gun up. The driver swerved too late. Blood sprayed across the cracked glass.

Now out of control, the truck continued its run.

Kyle touched Neil's arm. "Sorry."

Neil nodded, calming. "It's over. We survived."

Greg heard that. He forced himself to keep walking, fighting the feeling of shock that always tried to claim his mind when he thought of the rest stop.

Marc had caught it all. He walked behind Neil, thoughts snagged in a new direction. *I'm working with an army of shell-shocked men. The smell of death takes them back to their hairiest moments, the ones that should have killed them. I have to remember that while I train them. The rookies won't have those reactions. They haven't been in the shit as deep as the senior men. I need to help them get over it so they don't have that weakness during battle or life.* Marc had always hated how the military had treated men after they gave so much to their country. *Safe Haven isn't going to cast them aside. We're going to heal them so they can live again.*

Marc watched Neil and Kyle split the group in half without making a single gesture or giving any orders. *And some of them we'll keep using until they*

drop dead. Then we'll harvest their brain and find a way to build them a robot body.

Neil grinned. "I have some features I'd like to request."

Marc laughed. "Don't we all?"

Kyle saw the edge of a road and the first building emerging through the trees and grass. He lifted a hand.

Neil gestured, relaying the order.

Everyone put their hand on a favorite weapon and fell into Eagle walk formation. The twenty-two fighters and workers came out of the jungle as one army, all ready to face whatever was waiting.

Chapter Six
Watch the Ground

1

“Hang on.” Kyle stopped the group. “This isn’t a town.”

Marc and the others swept the flat, long area. It was overgrown in high grass all the way to the tree line of the jungle that began again right behind it.

Neil added the clues. “It was a runway.” Only the deep ruts straddling the weedy paths verified that. There were no planes, no trucks, no fuel station, or reception building. The one tiny structure would barely fit two people at the same time. It was the basic an airport had to have—a flat spot to land.

Kyle nodded, narrowing in on brass twinkling in the dim morning sun. “Looks like a gunfight.” He waved Shawn over.

Shawn was great at tracking and identifying weapons and their ammunition, even the used casings. “We have .45s, a shotgun....and a few rifle shells. This was a big fight.”

“Can you narrow the trajectory?” Kyle wanted to know everything about each site before they moved on.

Shawn concentrated, picking out a pattern. “The ruts are lighter as they go north. The plane was

taking off.” He pointed. “The shots came from there.”

Everyone inspected the trees.

“Just like she described.” Marc ignored Neil’s lifted brow. Kendle had given him more details about the island than she had anyone else, but he was still piecing it together from her disjointed descriptions and her memories. He’d skipped a lot of those, but the sight of hungry teeth coming toward her nipple was one he couldn’t banish from his mind. He wanted to kill her tormentor. He was glad the man had been removed, but he wanted to do it himself. “Keep moving. Write down those observations for the boss.”

There was a small flurry of activity as rookies and senior Eagles alike did what he’d reminded them to cover. No one wanted to go back and tell Angela they’d forgotten an order.

Marc consulted his personal map. “We should reach a home almost right away.” He skimmed the drawings. “It’s the...crazy lady’s home and store. There’s a small creek after that and then a treehouse-type blind. The town is half a mile after that, over rough terrain. We’ll be at the center of the island then. On this path, we’ll cross the top of the cliff first.”

People adjusted kits and straightened their lines as Neil took back over leading them. They stepped on and over the bullet casings with adrenaline starting to flow. The site was proof this island

hadn't always been boring and might not be now either.

"Do you think that was Kendle's escape site?" Ivan was stewing on her story.

Marc nodded. "Yes. And that means there were people alive here when she left."

It was proof she'd lied, but no one felt angrier than they already had been. It wasn't a surprise.

Marc pointed at a shadow. "Check that shed." He knew it probably held a communication method for pilots who landed, but he wanted to be thorough.

Neil chose Megan, Ivan, and Darren. He was aware of how the senior men were keeping track of the rookie female. "Clear and return. One minute. No scavenging."

Megan waved at Gabe. "You have Theo." She hurried to join Greg and Darren. The two men had already headed toward the shed.

Neil was impressed the rookie had covered her ward before leaving his side. *Maybe they're right to be watching her.*

Ivan and Darren slowed a little to let Megan catch up.

"You have point, rookie." Ivan fell behind her to provide support. So did Darren.

Megan marched forward and inspected the ground. She went all the way around the shed, checking for traps and locks. Finding none, she reached for the door handle. "Darren with me." The shed was small. All three of them wouldn't fit inside and Darren was slightly smaller than Ivan.

Darren hurried in, gun coming out. Ivan stopped at the doorway, gun staying holstered. The smell of slowly rotting wood filled their noses.

“Clear!” Darren holstered and stood by the exit as Megan did a fast check of the contents.

“Empty fuel cans, a tool kit, a radio and battery, a charger... And blood.” Megan retreated so Darren could examine it.

Darren noted the bloody handprint and lack of other signs. Sawdust on the floor didn’t hold tracks. *So how did they get a bloody body out without leaving a mess?* “Fake.”

Megan stared. “What?”

“It’s a decoy. No way to have hands that bloody and not leave another trace in here somewhere.” He scanned again to be sure he hadn’t missed a spot.

Megan watched him, emotions breaking through for a split second. *He’s even smarter than I thought. I wish he’d ask me out. I don’t have the balls to ask him.*

Darren blinked as he caught the thought. He stayed facing away from her. “You wanna get a beer later?”

“I absolutely do.” Megan beamed at him to be clear she was interested.

Darren didn’t turn around. He didn’t want to look at her yet. He was too stunned. *I read her mind. I’m a descendant!*

Ivan poked his head inside. “Welcome to the family.”

Megan frowned. “Come again?”

Darren waved at Ivan to stop, but the man didn't notice it.

“Darren just found out he's one of us.”

Megan's face iced over. She pushed by Darren. “Drink that beer by yourself. I'm busy.”

Ivan stared after her, confused. “Damn. I didn't think she was like that.”

Darren sighed. “I didn't either.” He immediately brightened. “And it doesn't matter. I now have another pool of women who can break my heart. I don't need her for that.”

Ivan clapped him on the shoulder as he emerged. “That's the spirit.”

Megan kept walking, chin up and face blank, but her mind was racing. *He finally asks me out and now this! I'm never going to get a break. I'm already not smart enough for Darren. Now I'm not the right kind either. Damn this new world!*

She pushed Gabe out of her spot. “I've got it!”

Gabe retreated from her sharp tongue. “You're welcome.”

“Stick it!”

Gabe returned to his place. “What's her problem?”

“Irreconcilable differences.” Marc motioned Neil to get them moving before anyone could question him.

Megan walked without glancing back, heart settling into stone. *I don't have a chance with him now. Might as well adopt a kitten and become a cat lady.*

Ivan was offended for Darren. *I'm sure you can find someone else if a descendant isn't good enough for you.*

Megan snorted. "Other way around. And mind your own business, okay? I don't need the drama."

Ivan realized they'd misunderstood. He kept it to himself for the moment, not wanting to distract them all by passing the correction.

Darren had already caught it. He tried not to stew on it as he walked. *I'm a descendant now. What are the rules? I might not even be allowed to pick my own mate.* Darren lifted his chin and settled into his job. *I'll talk to someone later.*

Shawn gave a low grunt. "Just tripped over another hatch. Mark it?"

"Yes." Neil added it to his map as he walked behind Shawn.

None of them flinched from the loud crunch as he kicked through a corner of the hatch, but they all wondered how far it was echoing each time someone did that. If there were other people on this island, they knew they weren't alone anymore even without the sight of so many ships surrounding their home.

Marc still hadn't caught thoughts from anyone but their group and Kendle's people, though those had been this morning right before he'd almost gotten married. Marc planned to finish that moment as soon as he found time. He was planning a beautiful dawn moment on the top deck with a captain to marry them and two witnesses. Everyone

else could throw them a party. Marc just wanted to get married. It had become important to him to seal their final vow. He wasn't sure why. He wasn't as jealous now, and he didn't worry over their deaths as much, but he knew things hadn't changed. He wanted to be able to call her his wife and enjoy that feeling for a while.

"I see a shack house. Might have a store under it." Kyle lowered his glasses and stored them. "No signs of life."

Neil felt Marc's impatience go up a notch. "We can clear this and catch up."

"We'll wait. Take them in."

Neil and Kyle led two small groups of rookies toward the shack home, mindful of the rule not to loot yet. They scanned for items as they went, marking locations for a later pickup, but there wasn't much.

Megan studied the ground around the tree line, noting several tracks that were recent. *Two men and a woman. I think.* She'd done well in tracking training on the ship, but it wasn't the same as field experience. *The female print is lighter. It could also be a light man.*

Megan swept Theo, found him safe and by her side, then went back to scanning the ground. *I don't see casings or dried blood, but there was a scuffle here. It just wasn't so bad that anyone bled.* She narrowed in on a wide scuff and a small handprint. *The woman (or light man) was hit from behind and*

knocked down. She followed the trail with her eyes and pointed. "There's another hatch."

Greg had been studying her this time. He nodded approval and went to kick a hole in the corner. He thought Megan was cute, but he already had a chosen cover story. At some point, he would ask Lisa out and they would become a happy couple that no one would ever suspect of not being perfect for each other.

Megan enjoyed the attention from the senior men, but she was too nervous to really appreciate it. It was important that she do a good job on this run. *My career will be all I have. I need to be the best at what I do so I'm always valuable to the descendants.*

"Clear!" Neil's call echoed. The shack and home were falling apart. And there had been another shootout. Casings littered the ground and the porch, but there were no bodies or blood.

Neil and Kyle returned to Marc. "More casings; food was on the plates. They left in a hurry. No other clues. Some basic loot still in the store. Whatever it was, they weren't cleaned out afterward."

"Maybe the people died, so they couldn't come back." Hannah was aware of the attention Megan was receiving. She wanted in on that.

"Maybe." Neil waited for Marc to make the call.

"Keep moving. We're not leaving guards here."

Kyle took the lead while Neil marked his map; the group advanced again.

The sound of flowing water came to them a few minutes later.

“That must be the creek.” Daryl frowned. “Didn’t Kendle say it had gators or something?”

Marc nodded. “Crocodiles. There’s an alternate crossing method.”

Everyone was glad to hear that. They walked toward the creek with careful steps and continuous sweeps of the ground for the dangerous reptiles.

“Two crocodiles at 3 o’clock.” Kyle held up a hand and pointed at an alternate path.

The group went around, remembering their beach escape. The reptiles there had attacked them without provocation. They were expecting the same here.

The two fat crocodiles watched them, but they didn’t budge from their sunny spots against a fallen tree. The crocodiles were wider than the trunk and half as long.

“No predators here.” Darren knew how that circle worked. “The people here left them alone or they wouldn’t be so big.”

“Creek in five feet.” Kyle stopped them. “Senior men on a tight perimeter. Watch the ground.”

“And the trees.” Neil pointed at a snake curling around a branch near him. He slowly backed up, heart pounding. *Guess this isn’t as boring as some people thought it would be.*

The creek was clear and moving fast. Marc was surprised by it. He hadn’t expected the island to have a creek, river, or any other moving water

source. At best he'd hoped for a pond that had been made into a community well. This was infinitely better.

Shawn knelt and scooped a handful of water. He took a tiny taste and spat it out. "It's fresh."

Greg pointed. "Snowfall melting maybe?"

They peered at the tall cliff that towered above them by at least a hundred feet.

"I don't think it gets cold enough for that here." Marc scanned for the seat Kendle had told him about. His lips thinned. "Our alternate crossing method isn't going to work. Come up with something, quickly." Marc already had ideas, but this run was more about training than accomplishing anything. If he needed to direct them, he would.

Neil scowled at the cut lines and broken wooden seat. "Someone destroyed it."

Megan had been studying the ground again. "I'd say they were trying to trap someone on this side."

"We are on the backtrail." Darren put it together in a flash. "That runway was where she escaped. All the rest is her backtrail. Even the bloody hand in that shed. It was hardened. It had been there a while."

Kyle pointed. "We can cross there. Move that big tree over; lift it and let it fall across. We walk over."

Hannah lifted a brow. "You mean the tree the crocodiles have claimed?"

Gabe shrugged. "We can search for a bigger one or cut one down..."

“No cutting. Angela’s orders.” Darren turned toward the reptiles. “There’s an easier way. We know the gators on the beach didn’t like fire. We’ll use torches and get them to move.”

The senior men liked the adventurous plan. The rookies and level ones glanced at Marc, hoping he overruled them.

“Do it.” Marc scanned for trouble and found another hatch. He went over and kicked the corner through himself.

The loud noise startled the crocodiles. They took off toward the water with hisses and whipping tails.

Darren grinned at Marc. “Wish I’d thought of that.”

Marc laughed. “Guard duty, right here.” He marked the hatch on his map, then joined the men to help lift the fallen tree.

Megan stayed by Theo and did fast sweeps of their surroundings while ignoring Darren, who began doing the same from a few feet away.

“Tallest people on the end. When we lift, you push upward.” Neil wasn’t sure how this would go. “Lift!”

Marc used his new strength to help direct the heavy tree. He let the men and women work, but not so much that they would be hurt or tire themselves out. *In the future, we’ll need a bridge here.*

Theo nodded. He added it to his notes, aware of sweat starting to roll down his back. He’d chosen to wear a full coat and now he was regretting it.

Megan saw the beads of perspiration rolling over Theo's neck. She frowned. "Take that coat off. You'll overheat."

"No room for it in my kit." He'd stuffed it with books.

"I have room. Give it here."

Theo reluctantly removed his coat to reveal that cut body.

Megan ignored it as she stored his coat, but every other female there turned toward him as if drawn by a string.

Theo grinned.

The other men scowled.

Megan blew out a snort. "Rookies!"

Darren laughed with her, glad she appeared immune to Theo's charms.

Theo also noticed it. *I wonder who has her attention so wrapped up? Even the boss gave my arms a quick glance the other night.*

"Good. Set it near the edge of the creek..." Neil grunted, hefting his end. "Now push it up!"

The group shoved the tree upward, hoping those at the bottom could hold it steady.

Neil saw it start to fall. "Let it go!" He gave a huge shove in the direction they needed.

Everyone jumped as the tree fell across the creek and crashed into the ground. A huge cloud of dust and debris flew upward, but the tree didn't roll.

Kyle scanned it, nodding. "Line up and get across. If you start to slip, hug the tree."

Rookies swallowed nervously as they lined up, muttering and sharing dismayed expressions.

Marc waited until the rest of the group was moving, ready to use his shield on anyone who fell.

No one did. They moved fast and carefully, all crossing in just seconds to clear the creek and make room for the rest of the team.

Marc came over last, despite the ugly looks from his protection. He walked calmly over the tree, mind already falling back into the deeper thought level.

Greg sighed. "Watch out for him."

Ivan nodded. "It's funny, though. Even distracted, he's a good leader."

"Imagine what he'd be like at full capacity."

Marc frowned. He hadn't realized everyone knew he was distracted. "Sorry."

Ivan waved it off. "This is mostly a training run anyway. We've got it covered."

"What if they're too scared to lie or break laws?" Neil couldn't take Marc's silent meditation anymore without trying to help. "Or we could reward the good behavior."

Marc wasn't offended that Neil was in his head. "We've tried the reward system. It already failed."

"What about fear?"

"Maybe, but magic won't always exist. When it's gone, so is the ability to know who's lying."

"Truth serum..." Neil realized that wouldn't work either. "Guess we'd have to dose people continuously."

“Dose people...” Marc’s lower level thoughts kicked in harder. “Dose them.”

“Yeah. We could put it in the rain so everyone gets hit with it.”

Gabe scowled. “You mean cloud seeding. That’s not real.”

“It was.” Marc followed Neil, mind going to a run not long after he became a Marine. “My squad and I defended a site where they were building a cloud machine. Governments around the world wanted to control the weather.”

“That’s not real.”

“We had fluoride in the water to mass dose people against cavities, and we had cloning to perfect the human body, but you can’t believe in seeding clouds to make it rain?”

Gabe fell silent, trapped. The first two were proof that the third could have existed.

“There were public ads in newspapers. LA had a lot of that. The environmental groups couldn’t shut it down, so they demanded the public be made aware. The government agencies put tiny classified ads in the papers and told the judges they were complying.” Marc wanted it clear that he’d researched the subject. “Cloud seeding not only existed, but they were also close to perfecting it.”

“Another good reason for a war; it stopped America from gaining control over the weather.”

Marc frowned at Ivan. “China was close to perfecting it, not us. The site I guarded was in China. We were sent through the UN.” Marc

refused to consider the rest of that mission. He'd done his duty with the foreign nations and then against several of those. The only country he was loyal to was America, but he felt bad about some of the things he'd helped the UN do during his time as a Marine. *If I could do it over, I wouldn't join. I'd stay with Angie and be a happy family.*

"And you would have all died in the war. Don't be an idiot." Ivan turned to scan behind them.

Marc locked his thoughts and tried to concentrate on the job at hand. Ivan was almost certainly correct. If he hadn't been a Marine, he wouldn't be alive now.

"I see a house." Neil consulted his map. "Shouldn't this be the town?"

"Yes, but her memory is a little screwed." Marc didn't blame Kendle for not remembering exactly where everything was. She'd been through a traumatic experience while on this island. "Set a perimeter and clear the outside."

Marc walked with his guards and the rookies as Neil and Kyle took half of the senior men and all of the level ones. Marc was impressed again by how the two men were ready for these moments. They didn't have to stop and think; they knew what they wanted to do and how to get it done. Marc assumed they'd discussed the plans before leaving the ship, but he wasn't entirely sure. Adrian had trained these two the hardest. It had clearly paid off.

Neil hated the house on sight. Kendle's description didn't do the Kraft mansion justice.

She'd told them it was a secure estate against a small cliff, with a dirt connection that allowed people to enter from either side of the property. She'd said the main house was tall and wide, with dark paint and an odd lean.

Neil immediately thought of the houses from horror films. He couldn't put his finger on exactly which one. The triangle roof on a square frame stopped it from matching up. It made him twitchy.

Kyle understood the feeling. The mansion didn't give off the impression of happy people dwelling inside. It said ugly things had happened here and more would again in the future. Kyle drew his gun and moved toward the front porch.

Neil followed him, waving the level ones to stay by the steps. "Watch your six and keep a hand on your weapon."

Kyle and Neil peered into the shuttered windows, but neither man was able to discern even furniture through the small cracks. There were no prints or blood spots or even damage to give them a hinky feeling, but it still grew as they met in front of the door.

Kyle did the next logical thing—he rang the bell.

Everyone flinched as a loud gong sounded somewhere inside the house. Rookies looked to Marc for instructions. The senior men advanced, ready to defend their team leaders if necessary. The level ones stayed where they were and tried to recall lessons that might help them through this moment.

Marc caught it all. *How did Adrian keep each level and their reaction straight? How did he handle each level without dividing them?* Marc wanted to know all of Adrian's secrets. Despite their rivalry, he respected Adrian's mind. *And if I can do it, I won't need as much contact with him to make my plans work.*

Kyle rang the bell again, braced this time.

Neil shook his head. "It feels empty."

"And also occupied."

Neil grunted. "Exactly, but not by people." Neil went to clear the rear, waving half the level ones with him.

Kyle signaled the senior men to set a tight perimeter as Marc and the rookies joined them in front of the mansion.

The rookies were easily distracted by peering up at the three-story home and imagining what it might have been like before the war. Even the senior men wondered if there were any luxuries inside as they did sweeps and kept track of Kyle's team. They were going to clear the other side of the estate that hadn't been viewed yet.

Marc waited impatiently, getting annoyed with his mind for refusing to pay attention.

Marc's demon didn't like him being upset. *Shall I shut the thought door and bring us to battle mode?*

No, not yet. Marc didn't want to stop working on the problem. He just wanted the solution to present itself.

What if there isn't a solution? What if it's supposed to be this way?

He frowned. *But to what end? So we do finally destroy ourselves? That can't be the grand plan. I refuse to accept that. I'll find a way. Or Angie will. Or one of the council. Before we leave this island, one of us will have the solution to peace on earth.* Marc sighed. *I need a new clue. We have to reach the next stop on our star map. We have one spot open, other than hell, but we...* Marc froze. *Hell! We haven't been to hell to examine those clues.* Marc's stomach fell. *Joel's the master there now. We're not done with him yet.*

"All clear back there." Neil led his team to Marc. "Nothing to report. Just flat land and a weak fence that's about to fall apart. And a basement entrance. It was locked too."

Kyle joined them. "Nothing on the side at all. Not even a window."

Marc gestured. "Let's keep going. I want to hit the town before lunch."

Neil checked his watch and was surprised to find it was almost 11 am. "Time went by fast on this run."

Marc didn't answer.

Ivan signaled. "Get us moving."

Neil frowned at the man. "Mind your level."

Ivan laughed. "Okay."

Neil let out a sigh, turning away.

Ivan snickered. Neil had gotten the best of him earlier, but he was all in the game now.

Neil led the group, wondering when Marc would send people to explore the inside of the mansion. He suddenly hoped he wasn't chosen for that chore. *It feels bad here.* Neil made sure his walk wasn't faster than normal, but there was no denying he had the urge to get gone.

The others followed, wishing he would hurry up. The vibes here were ugly. No one wanted to stay.

Marc walked and thought, digging deeper.

Greg stayed close, hoping Marc was able to find the solution. They all wanted the world to remain peaceful after they were gone. If it didn't, then their sacrifices and honor had been in vain.

Hannah moved next to Ivan. "Are you mad?"

Ivan sighed. "Not anymore. You still annoyed?"

She shrugged. "Not anymore."

They shared a grin.

Megan sighed, wishing it was that simple for her and Darren. She snatched a peek at him and found his attention centered on her. She quickly turned around to scan another direction.

Green eyes floated in the tree line.

Megan opened her mouth to tell everyone. And then she shut it. *They don't believe me, but Angela might.* Megan recorded it in her book.

The leaves swayed; the green eyes didn't. They blinked out and were gone.

Megan noted the location. It seemed like they were being followed at a distance. *Someone's keeping track of us.*

Neil led the group toward a clear area, hoping this was the town. He was getting tired of the walk. His legs weren't used to the earth now. He would have to work up to longer times on land.

Marc snorted.

Neil flushed. Marc wasn't going to give any of them time to slowly adjust.

"Angela, not me." Marc shrugged. "I'd like to take a week and relax, explore, but we can't afford it. The UN will be here, with all their little minions, in less than a month. We have to get ready to fight for our lives."

"Yet again." Daryl grimaced. "Is this all there is? Fight or die, breathe, fight or die, breathe?"

Marc nodded. "I think so, but I'm working on it."

Daryl didn't answer. If Angela had told him that, he might have taken a little hope. He didn't believe in Marc for things like this. Marc wasn't deep enough.

I miss Adrian. He would know what to say here.

Marc's demeanor turned cold. "Adrian was great for making you feel safer, but you never really were." Marc waved it off when Daryl would have argued. "Let me give you some hope—you don't have to leave the island. When we go back to fight, you can stay here and play house with your new bride. Better?"

Daryl snorted. "She isn't staying here."

"Have you asked her?"

“Don’t need to.” Daryl realized that was part of his bitterness. “She’s going to follow Angela to her death, like so many of the others.”

People frowned at Daryl, ready to set him straight.

Marc nodded. “Maybe. Maybe you, too. Destiny doesn’t stop because we get married, find a mate, or pop out a kid. Does it?”

Daryl glared at him. “No.”

“What can we do about it? Quit? Give up and walk away?”

“Not an option, even if she would, which she won’t.”

“Then what’s left?”

Daryl sighed, anger fading into sadness. “Fight or die, then breathe until the next fight.”

Marc gave him a sympathetic look. “I understand. I do. I want nothing more than to live on this piece of dirt forever with my family. I just can’t. You, at least, have a choice.”

Daryl grunted. “Not really. If I stay behind, I lose her, and nothing will ever get me to do something that causes us to split. Nothing.”

“I understand that too.” Marc gestured. “Come walk with me. We’ll chat while Neil finds this mystery town.”

Daryl went, but he refused to admit Marc had made him feel better. *I guess knowing there isn’t a choice makes it uglier, but easier in a way.*

“Uh, Marc.” Neil’s voice was stunned. “I found it.”

Marc and the others stopped at the tree line, picking out the problem.

“It’s gone.” Greg swept the scene, confused. “Why would they burn it?”

No one had an answer. They stared in shocked dismay at the wide half-circle of charred building frames. The town was gone. All the plans they’d made for moving right in vanished and drifted away on the breeze.

“Get a perimeter set up.” Marc unslung his kit and opened it.

Neil turned on him. “You knew! You found this last night.”

Marc nodded. “I did a fast run through of all the areas we covered today.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Does Angela know?”

“I told her last night. She knows.” Marc dropped his kit at his feet and turned on the Geiger counter. “I didn’t tell you because she said not to.”

Ivan was still scanning the town. Only three buildings hadn’t burnt to the frames. The fire had damaged all the buildings and the weather was finishing them off. “This is why you’re in your head today.”

“It got to me.” Marc was glad when the counter didn’t react. He stored it and took out his water testing kit. “Find me the well they were using.”

Neil and Kyle chose senior men for the perimeter duty. They joined those men, scanning and pondering what Angela would do now. She’d

planned on using these buildings. That wasn't going to be possible.

Marc followed Theo and Darren as they searched for the well. He'd expected a frame, but the fire could have destroyed it and burned the well down to a hole in the ground.

"I think this was it." Hannah kicked a charred board with her boot. A chunk fell off. The rest slid forward and disappeared. A dull splash echoed.

Marc knelt by the hole and began unwinding the wire he'd attached this morning so he would be able to test any deep water they found. He deftly scooped a vial and pulled it up, winding the cord around his wrist.

Theo was there to take the vial and pour the water on a test patch.

Everyone waited for the color to change.

Theo shook the patch and added more water.

Nothing happened.

Marc waved. "Take a sample back so we can verify it. Don't forget to label where it came from."

Theo frowned. "Won't the entire island run off one water table?"

"I think so, but we can't be sure, so we'll be careful. Take a sample of all water sources, even the creek. We'll get that on a different run."

Greg shifted his kit to a more comfortable position. "Aren't we going now? There's no reason to stay."

Marc got set to work. "Nothing has changed for us. This is the only spot on the island that's flat

enough to build what we have to have. This is still our base. We just have more prep than we planned for.” Marc put his kit on and squared his shoulders. “We’re clearing the remaining structures. After, we’ll have lunch while Theo does his evaluations.”

The three buildings still standing were the restaurant, the general store, and a long barn at the edge of a cleared, level plot of land next to an orchard. The orchard held apples and the trees were in full harvest. Marc motioned Eugene to get a few samples of those. “Maybe we can have apple pie this week if those are good. Vial it.”

The standing buildings were charred in places and missing shutters, parts of doors and windows. Curtains and faded blinds hid what was inside the restaurant and the store. The barn was open. Marc went that way to clear it.

“Wait. Work? Doing what?” Timmy had agreed to come because all he had to do was walk.

“Our animals have to come off that ship. We’ll pick corral sites, clear them, and follow Theo’s designs to build what we need.”

Theo immediately began studying the areas around the charred frames and leaning walls. “Does she want anything special?”

“Didn’t she give you notes?” Marc was certain Angela hadn’t forgotten it.

Theo paused to consider. He flipped through his book and got lost in what he found.

Megan stiffened, turning at a new noise. *I know that.* She strained, pulling up the sound.

Ivan shoved Theo forward as a thick branch broke off and thumped to the ground where he'd been standing.

Rookies stepped away from Theo, not wanting to be hit in the crossfire of the bad luck stalking him.

Megan stepped closer, wishing she'd figured it out. "You okay?" She helped him up.

Theo wiped the dirt off. "The boss knew. She sent me out here so it wouldn't hurt anyone on the ship."

Marc frowned. "She sent you out here because you're safer with us." Marc picked a few rookies and proceeded toward the barn. "If you hear something start to fall, get out of the way."

Ivan and Greg brought up the rear, ignoring Marc's displeasure. Where he went, so did they.

Marc let it go. He didn't want to feel safer with guards; he just did. There was no point fighting the feeling. It wouldn't change anything. *I'm in danger again and the threat is already on the island with me.*

Chapter Seven
Not on My Watch

1

“**S**ee anything dangerous?” Zack stopped next to Ray.

Ray snorted. “Nothing in view but an empty island and a lot of water.” He was standing at the top of the boat ramp above the emergency chute, watching their tethered boats and trying not to fall asleep.

“It’s noisy.” Zack rubbed his face and took a sip of his coffee.

Ray agreed. The birds and bugs were loud, as was the ocean smacking into the shore all around the island. The unwelcome smell of rot was also a reminder that they’d reached land. *Here we go again.*

“I’m your relief for the next four hours. Go get some coffee.”

Ray nodded, yawning. “I’m expecting the first gopher run soon.”

Zack frowned. “There hasn’t been one yet? It’s after noon.”

Ray shrugged. “Marc doesn’t keep the same schedules as us.”

Zack took Ray's post, scanning the ships and then the tiny shoreline. His sons were on the island. He already felt better now that he was on duty.

"Will there be a party to celebrate our arrival?"

"Last night wasn't enough?"

Ray grinned. "You know what I mean."

"I'll find out."

"We could do something to honor the people who fought for us, people who kept the ship going. You know. Stuff like that."

Zack considered it seriously this time. "I'll get back to you."

Ray sighed, giving in to his new bad feeling to ask about possible problems. "How are all the new people doing?"

"Fine, as far as I know. Gus and Ian are keeping Bernice and her daughter happy. Terry and Harry, and Panaji when he has time, spend evenings with the Cayman refugees. They drink and play cards."

"What about the others?" Ray hoped they didn't have any more traitors on board.

Zack didn't mind giving the update. "Tobias is doing quiet work for the boss. I saw them talking. Oh, and little Joey is still following Cate around, but he does speak to people more now."

"It hasn't been long. He's still adjusting."

"And Angela hasn't had her talk with him yet."

Ray's brow lifted. "Her talk?"

"Where she gives them the rules and scans them."

“Oh. I didn’t know she does that. It makes me feel better about Joel’s kid being on board.”

“Me too.”

Ray went toward the bridge. “I’ll be back.”

“He’s not there.” Zack peered over his shoulder. “Grant’s with the boss. They just made it to the bottom level.”

“Thanks.” Ray headed for the cargo hold, where Angela would end up. He wanted to see Grant, but he also needed to get his next orders. If he was off for four hours, he wanted a hot shower and a short nap. He could do that because Grant was on this ship and not on that island without him. Ray was getting bad vibes from that small chunk of land. It didn’t bode well for the future. *I couldn’t wait to get here and leave this ship, and I was happy when I got on duty this morning, but now, I’m afraid of it. My brain is still fried, I think.*

Ray nodded to Eagles as he went into the ship. He made contact with the guards on each level, checking that they were where they should be and alert enough to keep working. The last two days had been full of adrenaline-filled moments, but they were all coming down now and getting tired.

The ship’s halls were busy with people going to lessons, showers, the waste room, and the cargo hold. It felt like a spring cleaning day to him. It smelled like it too. Pledged lemons were floating through most of the corridors, and the hum of sweepers was a constant noise.

Ray heard Grant's deep voice as he hit the bottom of the stairs.

A dozen kids turned toward him, hands lifting.

Ray stopped. "Easy."

The kids were dressed as Eagles, with black shirts instead of jackets. They even had toolbelts with cuffs, radios, and a first aid kit. Ray was comforted by it even though he knew it could go wrong. The kids Angela had picked were serious and dangerous. They had to have jobs that used those traits for the good of the camp and not their downfall.

The kids relaxed, parting so he could enter.

Ray's frown was still on his face as he entered the cargo hold. He listened to the conversation as he wound through their stacks of supplies in search of the source.

"That will work until we get a real dock built?"

"It should. Even our biggest animals can go over it one-by-one, according to the weight limits. Good job on bringing all these manuals."

"Thanks. Now I'm going to ask you a stupid question. It's okay to laugh."

Grant chuckled. "Sounds interesting. Shoot."

"Can we overload the island, like with this ship?"

Ray walked quieter so he wouldn't miss that answer. It didn't sound like a stupid question to him.

"Around the edges, we can; parts might break off if they're already weak. Otherwise, no."

"And you're sure?"

Ray heard the pause and knew Grant had tilted his head and started considering options.

Angela sighed. “We’ll just have to be careful until we confirm or disprove that theory.”

“I’m sorry. Now that you’ve planted a seed of doubt, I’m not sure.”

“I wasn’t either. We did try to research it, but that information was limited.”

“I’ll scour the books and let you know what I find.”

“Good.”

“What’s next?”

Angela waved as Ray found them. “Your escort to lunch is here.”

Grant smiled at Ray. “I thought it was a cold lunch delivery.”

“It is. Your basket is being delivered to your cabin. You two have a nice lunch and hurry back to work. I have a full day planned now that we’ve covered how it has to happen.”

“I will.” Grant didn’t worry about leaving her alone in the center maze of their cargo area. The kids had every exit blocked. No one was getting in here without her knowing it.

Ray slid aside for Stanley to go by. He saw Stanley shoving papers into his pocket and sighed. Angela was giving him a chance, but Stanley wasn’t going to get this job either. *I hope she finds something for him. He’s too nice to be wasted as a garbage hauler or a floor sweeper.*

Ray immediately felt bad for thinking that way. *There's nothing wrong with those jobs. They're needed, and someone has to do them... I just hope Stanley gets something better. He's a good kid.*

Stanley joined Angela, still trying to corral all the papers. "Morgan is ready to move the patients. He said the new medical area is all set up and running."

Stanley had an Eagle jacket that was too large. He was pale, sweaty, and wrinkled from head to toe. His wild hair stood out as if protesting the job and all its grand confusion.

"Wow. They did fast work." Angela got her book out. "Sit down right where you are and organize those notes. Give me the ones you know I need now as you go through them."

Stanley sat, not sure how he would know. He opened the book and picked up the first paper. "The crowd around the brig..." Stanley held the paper up.

Angela took it and read Jayda's note.

The crowd around the brig is still growing. We either need to clear them out or move Tim somewhere safer.

Angela scribbled an answer.

Stanley held up another sheet and kept sorting.

Angela read it.

Weapons are ready. We're bored. Next?

Angela snickered. Even Jeff's notes had attitude. She wrote an answer and waited for the next update.

Stanley tried to hurry. He thrust two more sheets at her.

Angela skimmed them.

I need to talk to Grant about filling the pool. It's cleaned and ready. -Ian

Animals are fed and cleaned up, but they're too twitchy to move. Suggest a crew change.

Angela frowned. She moved the animals to a higher slot on her list.

Stanley handed her one more sheet. "I'm all good now. I just need to put them in the book." He dropped the entire stack. Papers flew across the floor, his lap, and her boots.

Sighing, Angela went toward the doorway. "Cody? Missy?"

The two kids ran over to her.

"Deliver these answers and find me when you're finished."

The two kids took off without protesting. They were enjoying being in on her plans.

Angela headed for the medical area. Morgan had refused to move Tonya without Kenn being awake for it. *Time to threaten his place again. And maybe his life.* Angela grunted. *It's not fun anymore. I think I need to get mean.*

Angela nodded. She gathered energy to knock Kenn right back out if he wouldn't be reasonable.

Terry waved the smelling salts under Kenn's nose, then hurried out of the way.

Kenn stiffened, lashes fluttering, groaning. His big arms strained against the handcuffs.

Kenn woke suddenly, eyes flying open. "Uncuff me!"

Angela sat on a charred chair that hadn't been moved yet. "Not until I can trust you to follow the rules."

"You can't. You should lock me in the brig."

Angela snorted. "Nice try. Tim's been relocated. Now calm down and listen."

"I want him dead." Kenn felt like he had a hangover, but that seemed to be the only side effect of Kyle's knockout blast. He still had his gifts.

"Yes, you've made that clear, but I doubt you want to leave Tonya unprotected."

Kenn frowned at Angela. "Your mind games aren't going to work on me. If you don't execute him, I will."

"I don't care for your attitude." Angela glared at him. "You owe me. A lot."

Kenn's lips thinned. He could feel the slap coming. "So?"

"So I want you to leave Tim alone no matter the outcome of his trial."

"I can't. If they clear him, I'll—"

"Stop it!" Tonya tried to sit up. His anger had woken her.

The baby flinched; the cats peered up warily.

Tonya ignored them, weak hand lifting. “We have a baby to raise. I can’t do that alone.”

Guilt ran across Kenn’s face. “He can’t get away—”

“Did you hear what I said?” Tonya let the truth fly. “You’re not screwing up my reputation for your revenge! I won’t let you do that to me. People will already say I caused Peter’s death. You can’t hurt Tim or I’ll pay for it.”

Kenn stared at her. Tonya was weak, bruised, dirty, and her hair was all over her shoulders and the pillow. She’d been through hell. His anger rose another notch. “You didn’t know.”

“Like that matters to these people. They’ll say I pushed you into it and our son will be picked on, shunned. Let it go.” Tonya fought not to cry. “The bitch is dead. Peter’s dead. It’s enough.”

“It will never be enough!” Kenn lunged against the handcuffs, almost flipping the chair. “He hurt me! He almost cost me everything! I’ll never get rid of this feeling!”

Tonya smiled sadly. “I know. I hate him too. But it’s not our place to remove him or make him feel bad even. Our job is to survive and make sure our son is covered.” Tonya waved. “Let him loose. He’s going to carry our boy to the new medical ward.”

Kenn’s anger began to fade. That awful hatred settled into his gut and formed a hard knot, but his

brain allowed thoughts to get through this time. He regarded Angela. “When’s the meeting?”

Angela didn’t act dumb. “Morgan set it for during dinner so everyone else would be busy and leave them alone.”

“And you refuse to let me remove Tim?”

“Yes. That’s not your job or your choice to make.”

“Fine.” Kenn glared at Morgan as the man joined them in the office to help get Tonya ready. “I want the right to privacy removed from our constitution so this can’t ever happen again.”

“What?” Morgan was shocked.

“And not just in medical and confessions. I want the criminal and financial right to privacy removed too.”

Angela nodded. “The council agrees to discuss it.”

“We do?” Morgan couldn’t get by the religious side, let alone the privacy for medical conditions and crimes. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. This matters to the future.” Angela felt Kenn’s next demand coming. “You can attend some parts of the meeting, but you may only speak if they ask questions. If you interrupt them, you’ll be removed even if I have to call Marc to get it done.”

Kenn nodded stiffly as she unlocked the handcuffs. “I agree.”

Morgan thought fast. “Can Tim be there too? In case we have questions?”

Angela regarded Kenn. “Can you handle that now?”

Kenn gave another stiff nod. “If I can’t, I’ll go for a walk.”

“Agreed.” Angela paused. “Morgan, you need to talk to Tim’s lawyer. I can order him to be there with a subpoena, but it would be better if he went willingly. See if his lawyer is okay with it.”

Kenn and Morgan frowned together.

Angela realized they didn’t know. She pointed at the woman walking their way with a slight limp that hid her stomach pain. “Samantha is Tim’s lawyer. I assigned her a few hours ago. His life is in her hands—literally.”

“Make room!”

Everyone shifted aside at Terry’s call, assuming he was bringing in a stretcher.

Dog appeared. He had a ball of fur in his mouth.

The small notch missing in Dog’s ear was a reminder that their animals had also made a rough journey to be here. Dog’s fur wasn’t as shiny or thick anymore. He had scars across his muzzle, his neck, and all of his paws. His golden orbs studied everything with mistrust. He too had changed.

The male cat was uninjured, but like Dog, its coat didn’t shine and its tail didn’t lift.

Angela chuckled as Dog dropped the cat onto Tonya’s ankles.

The male cat immediately scrambled up Tonya’s body and flopped down on her chest.

Tonya rubbed the cat, tears threatening again. “We need to get this done. I want to sleep.”

Kenn saw how pale she was. He let go of his vendetta for now. “She’s in pain. Do something for her.”

Morgan was already loading a syringe. “Just step back and let us work. We’ll have her moved and settled in five minutes.”

Tonya’s lids shut; a tear rolled over her cheek. “The cats come now too.”

Terry glanced at the cats, and then the incubator. “Can I bring the baby? He doesn’t want to eat my eyes.”

Tonya’s snicker was laced with deep pain. She nodded.

Kenn dutifully lifted the carrier, then held out an arm to the other cat.

The male growled.

Kenn snatched it by the back of the neck and sat it on his shoulder. He kept his hand tight on the cat so it wouldn’t jump right back down to Tonya.

As soon as Kenn retreated, Morgan and Harry got Tonya on her feet, wrapped her in a thick, warmed blanket, then eased her into a wheelchair. The entire group was on the move a minute later, with Harry carrying the IV and everything else Tonya needed, while Morgan pushed her chair.

Angela brought up the rear with half of the kids. The other half had gone ahead to clear the path and secure the new medical area. The adults could hear them shouting orders.

Brittani joined them. “I see you’ve unleashed the monsters.”

Angela smiled. “Yes. I should have done it weeks ago. No one wants to cross our kids. They don’t have limits. I forgot how handy that can be.”

Brittani agreed. She didn’t like most of their kids much, but she did respect them and that was powerful.

Angela reached up and put a hand on Tonya’s shoulder. Healing light flew over her lap and sank into her stomach.

Tonya relaxed, letting the pain out in a huge sigh. “Thank you!”

“It’s my honor.” Angela hung back as the medics got Tonya into the elevator with her equipment.

Kenn watched the medic handle the cords, relaxing when he saw how careful Terry was being with the baby.

Terry felt Kenn’s dark looks, but he ignored it. Their training books said some new parents would be overprotective. Considering what had happened to this family, Terry thought Kenn had a right to be giving them all glares. Security had failed him. *Though it won’t be repeated.* Terry wasn’t sure how he felt about that yet, but he didn’t have time to work on it as he pushed the incubator into the elevator and rolled it all the way back so the door could shut.

Dog hurried in with them as the door closed.

Tonya didn't speak in the cramped quiet. She hated being away from Kenn and their son. *I don't even have my cats!*

Dog placed his chin on Tonya's knee for the short ride.

Tonya smiled, tears threatening to rise. She rubbed Dog's ears and tried to enjoy being out of the office.

Kenn went into the second elevator. Angela and Brittani joined him.

As soon as the door shut, the rest of the kids flew up the steps to meet it.

Brittani liked the scent of Kenn's day-old cologne. She felt a conversation waiting to happen and stayed quiet, not sure if she was allowed to hear whatever was coming.

Angela hated Kenn's smell. He was wearing that old scent she'd always loathed. Even the layer of dirt and smoke over it wasn't enough to keep it from turning her gut.

Kenn sighed. "Tonya was trying them out on me the other night. If I lift my wrist you'll get hit with Versace." He fell silent, mind refusing to give him a break yet. He knew Angela's fiery scent; he knew what it meant, but he was too mad to care about the consequences.

Angela knew. She'd been there for these moments, but she wasn't getting ugly flashes of the past. She was trying to save his place in Safe Haven and maybe even his life. Angela waited for the

elevator to stop, not thinking about anything. She just enjoyed the twenty seconds of peace.

“I’m sorry.”

Angela knew what he was apologizing for, and it wasn’t his violent reaction to Tim’s silence.

Brittani slid back to clear room so she wasn’t in the crossfire.

Kenn wished Angela would shout at him, or at least threaten him. When she stayed silent, he began to worry over his future in her camp.

Angela gave him what he needed. “While we get her settled, I want you to clear the brig hallway and relieve the guard there.”

Kenn immediately felt better. He nodded. “I’ll handle it.”

“If Tim is arrested officially, he can have visitors. Have him searched and put in a jail uniform like anyone else would be.”

Kenn perked up. “Done.”

“If he has a single mark on him, you’re banished to Adrian’s camp for the duration of our stay here.”

Kenn stiffened. “That’s harsh.”

“Yes.” Angela turned toward him as the elevator stopped. “I have to know I can trust you to follow orders, Marine—even the ones you hate. This is a test. Don’t fail. I’m not bluffing.”

Angela smiled at the waiting kids as the doors opened and she stepped out.

The kids had formed a ring around both ends of the hallway where the elevators were letting Tonya and Angela out simultaneously. A few camp people

and Eagles were waiting at the ends of those halls but only to pass through. Angela had everyone working; it was coordinated under her supervisors and their assistants. She was getting updates when progress was made and not every time someone wanted to chat. “Kenn has some work to handle. He’ll need four escorts who stay for a while and make sure people do what he tells them to.”

All their hands shot into the air.

Brittani hurried away to finish collecting updates as Angela picked Kenn’s escort. She flashed Kenn a look of disappointment as she went.

Angela took the carrier from Kenn and held out her arm to the angry male cat still perched on his shoulder. “Come on, sweetheart.”

The cat swiped out, taking a thin layer of skin from Angela’s finger. Blood welled.

Angela’s eyes narrowed. She left her hand out. “Now, or I’ll see if you can swim!”

The cat crawled over Kenn’s arm and across hers. It hunched on her shoulder and dug in every claw it had.

Angela gritted her teeth and followed Tonya’s procession. “I clearly don’t have an animal gift. Maybe I can copy one...”

The kids hurried toward the brig without him.

Kenn let them go. The kids could hold their own until he caught up. If they ran into trouble, the camp members would need medics, not the children.

Kenn strode with his chin up and anger burning in his gut. He didn’t look back as his family was led

into the lounge. As long as Angela was with them, they were safe.

The lounge's main feature was a long, wide brown couch that had been covered in a medical sheet and outfitted with blankets, pillows, a portable metal tray, and a stack of supplies for the baby. A space had been left next to the arm of the couch for the incubator. Terry plugged it in and rolled it as close as it would go.

The room was small but warmer. Tonya relaxed a little. The draft in the office hadn't been good for the baby.

Angela shut the door to the room. She sat the carrier on the floor by the couch where Tonya was getting settled.

The male leapt from her shoulder.

Angela caught him by the gut and swung him into her arms. "Let her get settled first!"

Tonya chuckled, tucking the blanket around her waist. It felt good to be on a couch instead of in the hard medical bed.

Morgan hurried through his checklist as the other medics set up the IV pole, taped lines in place, and left.

Angela sat the angry cat on the couch next to Tonya so he didn't need to jump.

Tonya shielded her stomach with her hand as it walked onto her lap and flopped down.

Tonya tucked the edge of the blanket around the tabby.

A soft purring began to echo.

Angela and Morgan laughed.

“She’s covered.”

“Extra heat is good.” Morgan tugged the baby blanket up a little more on the tiny boy. “We’ll try to feed him shortly.”

Tonya let out another sound of relief. “Good. My boobs are about to bust.”

“Awesome.” Morgan went out to get things ready. He needed to skim the breastfeeding book again to make sure he was giving her the right advice.

Tonya blanched. “He’s not touching my boobs.”

Angela laughed again. “No worries. Enough of us have done it. You’re covered without his extra hand.”

Tonya smiled. “It’s odd, right? I let him examine me, and I would have let him deliver the baby, but I draw the line at a boob.”

Angela shrugged. “Maybe you just want a part of your body to stay yours.”

“Yeah.” Tonya leaned back as the heat from the cat began to ease a little of the cramping in her abdomen. “Can we talk?”

Angela got a blanket from the stack that had been placed in the corner of this lounge. She spread it over Tonya’s lap and bunched up a corner next to her neck so the new mom almost had a pillow. “Later, okay? Recover some strength first so you can give me a strong fight.”

Tonya yawned widely as the cat ducked under the warm blanket and started licking a paw. “I will, you know. A strong fight.”

“I do. I expect no less.” Angela went to the door. “When you’re ready, slide over and go to sleep. There’s already a pillow waiting.”

Tonya yawned again. “After we feed the baby.”

“I’ll tell Morgan to hurry up.” Angela opened the door, grinning. “He hurried.”

Morgan went in. “I’m all set. Here’s the book. You read. I’ll hold it and look in the other direction.”

Angela walked through the new medical area they’d made in an unused side of the cabins on deck one. It had a reception area, four rooms with a shower in each, and two bathrooms at each end of the hall. Then there was another curved area with smaller cabins. It would hold them for now as long as they didn’t have any big emergencies. *For those, I need to have a real medical bay.* Angela planned to use one of the other ships if they needed to.

Angela went to the first room and peered in. Leeann was sleeping. The medics had checked her out and decided to keep her overnight. The girl was pale, but many of their people were, thanks to being a year without regular sun exposure. The bags under Leeann’s eyes said she needed this care. She’d been tapped by the blast wave as it dissipated. The smoke she’d taken in was the reason Morgan was considering keeping her overnight.

Leeann's room was a game area that had held a pool table, some chairs, and a bathroom. With just a medical bed, a tray, and some boxes of supplies now, it looked like a hotel room someone hadn't finished furnishing.

Leeann's lids popped open. She smiled. "Morgan says it's been long enough. I can go soon."

The girl sounded alert. Angela realized she'd been faking sleep. "Nice. You got me."

Leeann beamed.

Angela walked to the window and stared at the island. The beautiful sight let her heart settle into a better rhythm. *I got them here. I just have to get them unloaded and settled.*

"Can I help?"

Angela leaned against the wall. "You can be my mental helper for the next updates. I need to see a few people before the rush finds me again."

Leeann frowned. "I can't. I'm locked."

"I know. We're testing it."

Leeann wasn't sure if she should be scared.

Angela drew in a breath. "Let's have Conner, Jayda, and Ed first."

Angela connected and observed as Leeann opened her mental doors and sent out the calls.

Leeann tried again.

"It's not getting through." Angela turned toward the island. "Now try a harder call."

"Who?"

"Doug."

Leeann's face squished up. "I can't do that."

“Try. For me.”

Leeann obediently opened a mental door to nowhere and sent the call into random space. She had no way to direct it. She just had to hope he got it anyway.

“It didn’t go through. That’s good.”

“But why?”

Angela wasn’t sure if Leeann was old enough to understand, but it was important she at least tried. “If we knew we could talk to heaven all the time, we’d do it all the time.”

“And get in trouble?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Leeann didn’t have close ties with many of those who’d died. Her agony was still hidden in a dark corner of her mind. It didn’t hurt or whisper, but she knew there was a powerful secret waiting there. *I don’t want to know. I’m happy now. I don’t want to ruin it.*

Angela made a connection. *Leeann and Greg could have broken their locks, but they’re honestly good inside. They don’t want that misery or drama or the consequence because they like their lives. That may be the secret to a lock that holds—the person has to want it.*

Angela was a bit disappointed. Like with any addiction, for some people, only willpower or death would end it.

Kimmie appeared in the doorway. She lifted her hand.

“I called them.” Angela waited for Kimmie to move aside. She was letting the kids act like full Eagles; they were excelling at it. A year of observing and wanting those jobs had sunk into most of their special kids and many of the normals. They wouldn’t know if the kids would now be inclined to side with good because of it, but Angela hoped they would see that pattern. In the old world, suffering these things would have snapped most adults, let alone the kids. Over half of them would have been ruined in one way or another. *And they would have died young.* Angela was desperate to provide these kids with a different future.

Angela gave Conner and Jayda her attention. Conner was running on high speed. Jayda was pacing herself. They were both getting things done. Angela was pleased. “Update me.”

Conner stepped forward. “No issues. Jobs are about thirty percent complete. You have five messages.” He handed them to her. “And one resignation. Stanley quit. We asked him what he thought he’d be good at. He said fishing. I sent him to Panaji.”

“Good. Pass the word to leave him alone. He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“I will.” Conner retreated and waited.

Angela saw another flash of a young Adrian working his way through the ranks of their evil government. *That’s not going to happen on my watch.* “Take an hour now. Cold lunch pickups for leadership are already stacked in the mess cooler.”

Conner scratched his ear, then tugged up the collar of his jacket. He loved being in full Eagle gear. It made Candy's face light up and her mind race with thoughts of their physical future.

Jayda stared. "You really are waiting. I'm impressed."

Conner flushed. "We've had some moments."

"Every couple has moments before they have *the* moment. I'm just surprised you haven't crossed that final line."

Conner was proud of himself too. Hearing it added to that new self-respect. "I'm not like my dad." He stopped her coming comment and turned to Angela. "I could deliver those lunches if you like, and eat on the way."

Angela nodded. "As you would."

Conner liked her answer. He gave her one of his father's smug grins and spun out of the room.

Angela chuckled. "He's definitely a Mitchel."

Jayda nodded, forcing her needs down. "And he knows when to use it. Candy better never break it off with him. He'll get snatched up in a minute."

"Yes." Angela and Jayda shared laughter as Leeann stared between them.

"What'd I miss?"

"Nothing. You just haven't hit that age yet." Angela patted the girl's ankle. "Thank you. The den mothers will be by in a bit with entertainment."

"Okay." Leeann was happy to have gotten some of Angela's time.

Angela left the room.

Jayda followed, ready to give her updates. She knew Angela didn't want Leeann to hear the next part. *Or maybe she didn't want me to hear why she was thanking Leeann.*

“Your brain is awesome.”

Jayda laughed. “So which is it?”

“Tim.”

Jayda sobered. “It's not good, actually. Kenn cleared a path and is now standing guard over an empty brig. The kids are yelling and threatening. Something may pop there.”

“And the other?” Angela had been sending workers out for hours before she and Grant had met in the cargo area. These were some of the first updates after those orders.

“Not great either. About half agree.”

“I assume with Kenn.”

“Yes. Sorry.” Jayda pushed her red hair out of her face and scanned her notes. “It split almost perfectly. The normals want it. The descendants don't.”

“That's interesting. I really expected that to go the other way.”

“I know. I asked them twice to be sure I understood clearly.”

Angela wanted another flash from Jayda's brain. “Which should I encourage or deny?”

“Give the normals what they think they want. Descendants aren't going to be the wave of the future.”

Angela heard the sadness. “I’m still working on that.” Angela wanted both types to share this planet. She just wasn’t sure yet how it would work. “Give me time.”

Jayda grinned. “You got it. You want the rest of these updates? It’s times, amounts, and whining.”

“No. I’ll go over them tonight when you turn it all in. Right now, enter us into the lunch break and then we’re stage two in one hour.”

Jayda hurried off. *I love being in Angela’s army. I’ll bet she was a great soldier before the war.*

Angela realized Jayda didn’t know her full backstory. *I’m not military. I don’t deserve that honor.*

“Not true. You gathered an army and led them into battles for survival. You are a soldier.”

Angela paused by Ian’s post, smiling. “Thank you.”

Ian kept writing notes in the log. “I’m busy here.” He knew she didn’t want to stay. There was a lot of work waiting. He’d volunteered for this post because he didn’t think he could sleep yet. The pool was done and the chemicals were in it. He didn’t have anything scheduled to do.

Angela got her book out. She penciled in a note, then put it away. “Get geared up and meet the recon team in the weapons room.”

Ian’s happiness slammed into her and increased her energy bar without her needing to draw.

Angela staggered down the neat hall. *And now we know why Adrian made sure to keep his people happy.*

Chapter Eight
Missing Things

1

“Hey, Boss.” Jeff came down the hallway in full gear. He was followed by Pam, Ian, and Molly. “What’s going on?”

Camp people slid out of the way as Jeff and his group came through, studying them in concern. If a team was going out in heavy gear, there might be trouble on the island. Fear ran through the hallway and began to spread.

Angela met them at the egress to this deck. “I need a recon run.”

“All right!”

“Awesome!”

Angela laughed. “I guess that’s a yes.”

“Some people have been betting you’d ask.” Jeff hoped Angela didn’t have any ugly chores for him. He also hoped she did. Removing Emma and others hadn’t been good for his mind, but a raincheck for an interrupted cup of coffee with Francesca couldn’t compare to a day off the ship on a secret mission, no matter the chore.

“I want a complete circle of the island. Note positions of any people and all buildings. Keep

circling until you reach the town. Then stay and relieve some of Marc's security. Or just join it, depending on what he needs. Send back all logs, journals, notebooks, or other information that can help me piece together what's happened here since the war. Be detailed in your reports."

"Hey!" Gus came up the steps. "You called for a switch?"

Gus's sour expression didn't encourage chatter. No one asked him why he'd hit Daryl. They could guess. News of the wedding was also spreading through the halls. The brief moment of acceptance he'd had recently was fading into bitterness and anger.

Angela lowered her voice. "When you reach base camp, tell Gus he has duty over Daryl."

Ian and Jeff busted out laughing while Molly and Pam frowned. They didn't have time to ask questions without giving it away. Ian and Jeff understood from the wording. A switch in the job meant the person's supervisor had recommended they be sent elsewhere. It was usually followed by a punishment or a lesson.

Angela waved. "My recon team needs a fifth man."

Gus brightened. "Really?"

"Get your full gear and meet them on the top deck in five. Jeff's in charge. Ian is XO."

Ian grinned as Gus took off running. "I knew this was gonna be a great day!"

Weak laughter echoed, drawing attention. The medics and patients liked hearing Angela laugh. It meant they weren't under attack and it was okay to go on living.

Dog hurried through their legs and came to Angela. He glanced up expectantly. *I'd like a ride to the island.*

Angela's laughter rolled down the hall this time. She knew Dog could swim it. He wanted to be with a team, but he didn't want to ask for it like a common dog begging for attention. "Recon team, you have a K-9."

Dog sneezed on her ankle and stuck his tail in the air. *I'm too pretty to be a cop-sniffer.*

Dog sniffed the feet of his team to be sure he had their scent. He doubted the humans would get lost, but if they did, he would be able to track them.

Laughter filled the air and sank into the ship. The lights brightened.

On the couch with her tiny infant suckling at her breast, Tonya let out a sigh of contentment. "We survived, Kenneth. Now we can be a real family."

The male cat eased closer and wrapped his tail around the baby's leg. He began to purr and put off heat in waves.

Tonya stroked the cat's ear and took deep breaths. *I can't believe I'm alive.*

Angela spotted Ed coming up the steps. She waved the recon team on. "Get to work."

Ed slid aside as Jeff and the others gave amusing salutes and hurried down the stairs. He held out a paper. "Sorry. Ralph likes to talk a lot."

Angela took the single sheet. "This is a lot?"

"I narrowed it down." Ed scanned his copy as she read his notes. He filled her in as they walked. "The animal area is done. That crew needs a new assignment. I sent them to lunch for now. All other stations and crew are ready for the lunch switch."

Ed was the opposite of Stanley. He wore a fitting jacket with deep pockets that were already filled from carrying and collecting messages between stations on the ship. His hair was smoothed with an Eagle cap so that cute dark curls framed his face and neck. He was calm, organized, and ready to deliver. Angela saw the female attention Ed was getting. She could see the adorable. She just wasn't affected. *It's a rare person who sees the beauty last and the value first. I wish I could be that way all the time, but I'm human too.* "Good work." Angela stored the paper. "What's up with Ralph?"

"He's good. He has everyone cleaning their cabins and hallways. He even got them to work on bathrooms. He said to tell you Tobias is grumbling and no one minds if you make him wait."

Angela chuckled. "I can do that." She sent out a mental call. "I need volunteers to spend their lunch break with me in the cargo hold for a pain-in-the-ass assembly. Those who participate can share a beer with me after dinner tonight. I'll be on the entertainment floor for a little while."

Angela let go of her radio and turned it down so the instant garble of responses didn't drown her out. "I'd like you to stay right where you are, Ed. I have Jayda and Brittani on other things."

"And no Stanley." Ed grinned. "I'm your Stanley!"

Angela snorted. "Let's go put a bridge together. We'll walk our animals off this ark as soon as I get an all clear call from the island teams. We'll put the portable corrals right above the shoreline in the tall grass."

"Then you'll go eat?" Ed was certain she hadn't had anything yet.

"Yes. We'll do lunch."

2

"We are on lunch break now, Safe Haven." Jayda's voice on the radios echoed across Marc's camp. "I repeat: it's time for grub and a break."

People turned them down, frowning. Most of them had forgotten to do that as soon as they reached land.

Rookies and level ones glanced at Marc, hoping he would echo the lunch order. None of them were ready to leave yet, however. They wanted to explore the island fully now that they'd gotten a base camp started.

Marc felt it too. The pull of being on a tropical island was strong. "We're going to build that first corral." Marc pointed. "Those boards are useable.

Pull them out. If we need more, we'll send for it from the ship."

They already had a nice stack for Theo to examine when he finished with his blueprints. Theo and Neil were working on the plans in the center of the burnt town, both ignoring the scorched view for a mental vision of something better.

Marc spotted Kyle staring toward the shoreline they couldn't view from here. "Everything okay on the ship?"

Kyle nodded slowly, breaking the connection. "Jennifer's feeling better. Boss won't let her up yet. You can imagine the words she's using."

Marc chuckled. "I can. How's everyone else?"

"Huh?" Kyle blinked. "Oh. Everything's fine." Kyle realized Marc knew he'd kept an open line to the ship since they left. "I needed to be sure."

"And the boss said it was okay?"

Kyle grinned. "I wouldn't leave the ship without it."

"I should have known." Marc grunted. "You're not staying here tonight."

Kyle shook his head. "Not unless I have to."

"You don't." Marc was aware of people around them perking up at the thought of staying here or returning to the ship. He tried to give them what they wanted and still be covered. "You can make your own choices on it when it's time."

Kyle sighed at the voice in his head. "Boss wants an update. Why don't you two talk while I stand guard?"

Marc laughed as he opened a mental connection. “Hello, dear.”

Kyle listened to them for a moment, but he was distracted. Jennifer already wanted to be back to work. He wanted her in their cabin until delivery. *It’s not safe here yet, Jenny. Be patient.*

She didn’t answer.

“I’m ready for the first gopher run.”

Timmy and Mike flew over at Marc’s call. They didn’t like salvage chores.

Marc handed Mike a folder. “These notes go straight to Angela. She’ll read them, make notes of her own, and then give you instructions. Don’t come back until she tells you to. Get going.”

Timmy and Mike took off running, laughter of youth spilling out into the clean air. The boys were tied down, zipped, tightened, and wearing shoes made for the terrain. Both brothers also had a weapon in their tool belt for the first time. It was only a small knife, but they still felt the bump in status.

The Eagles tolerated it, remembering their own wild moments. The boys had done good work today so far and hadn’t caused trouble. Now they would get a little time alone as their reward.

Marc hoped they didn’t wander off. “Stay together!”

“We will!”

“Okay!”

Marc shook off the worries as he turned back to the working team. “You can eat in shifts. Senior

men first. Rookies, keep working. Level ones take over security.”

“We’re about done with this site.” Kyle scanned the weed-dotted pile ten feet away. “Start the next?”

The piles from the burnt buildings were mostly boards and weeds now. Previous rainfalls had soaked the ash into the ground where it was already fertilizing the new weed growth of the season. The boards on top were dried, splintering fragments, but those on the bottom weren’t burnt as much. Several weren’t burned at all.

Marc nodded. “If you want to.”

Kyle did. He was ready to return to the ship, but he couldn’t until they were done.

Marc turned to scan the rest of his group. He was pleased to find them in decent spirits. He didn’t care for the conversations, but they had every right to discuss those topics.

The rookies were stressing over the future.

“It just sucks that we have to keep handling the UN.”

“They don’t know when to quit.”

“No. I hope this is the last time.”

“Same. If not, maybe the boss will send a kill team.”

“I’d volunteer.”

The senior men were dwelling on today.

“Kenn’s right, though. If Tim had told us, we could have stopped the explosion.”

“No one died, just a couple of cats. It’s not that bad.”

“But it is. We no longer have a working medical bay and lab. We may lose more lives because of Courtney. That total isn’t final yet.”

“I didn’t think of that.”

Marc didn’t want to. Angela was working on plans to cover that side. He was doing his job here and now. He listened to the final group, not surprised by their topic either.

“I want to be at that law meeting.”

“So do I. The boss said no to almost everyone.”

“She’ll be there. I trust her to do it right. I just want to hear the arguments. I loved court TV shows.”

Marc turned to scan the trees and froze. “Live one.”

Rookies went on chattering; the level ones turned his way. Senior men rushed over with guns coming out and adrenaline starting to pump.

“Don’t shoot.” Marc was horrified by the state of the woman coming through the trees. She wore a summer dress that would have been perfect in the 70s. It even had the flowing sleeves and pastel yellow flowers, though the pattern was splattered in dark stains. Marc wasn’t sure if they were dirt or something else. Her hairy knees and legs went to the ground in sticks of dirt that ended in black feet that

he could barely see. They blended in perfectly. Marc assumed it was a collection of mud and foliage that had dried in place.

He swept her face and stiffened further. She was bone-thin, with sunken sockets holding cloudy green eyes. Behind that fog, something tried to glow.

“Ma’am?” Eugene stepped forward, gun lowering. “We’re here to help. Ma’am?”

The woman ignored him. She was focused on something behind Marc.

Marc turned again and saw blood.

Jonny wrapped his handkerchief around his finger. “Sharp edge got me. I’m fine.” He looked up and saw everyone on alert. “What’d I miss?”

The woman’s eyes lit up bright green.

The glow startled them. Descendants raised shields in automatic defense at the sign of their kind.

Her mouth opened; drool ran from her lip.

Marc stiffened, alarm bells going off. “Do not make contact! Don’t let her touch you.”

The entire group assumed she was ill. Their recent battle with radiation sickness snapped them into action. Men jumped, guns came up.

The woman didn’t slow. Her head lifted... She scented the air. Her eyes dilated. Her expression flashed pain. Then anger took over. She rushed forward, zeroed in on Jonny.

Jonny backed up, paling. “What’s wrong with her?!”

Marc tripped her as she ran by. She hit the dirt.

Marc flinched as she rolled over, snarling at him. Spittle flew from her lips. “Get off me!”

Shock caused him to let go.

She quickly rolled over and lunged to her feet.

Jonny kept backing up, taking quick, panicked looks at the senior men and Marc. “What do I do?!”

Marc ran forward with Neil and Kyle.

The woman took off running, tensed to lunge at Jonny again. She stiffened suddenly.

Everyone stopped as she sank to her knees, face going red.

“Medic!” Marc grabbed his cuffs. “Heart attack. Follow your training!”

The two team medics, both rookies, hurried to get into their bags for that book.

Marc cuffed the woman’s limp hands in front of her. He went to stand next to Jonny while the medics got to work.

“What the hell was that?” Jonny was spooked. “She was like a zombie or something.”

Marc snorted, catching his breath. His heart was thumping in his chest. *Guess I’m not as recovered as I thought.* “She spoke. No zombies.”

“She’s sick.”

“Yes, but with what?” Marc tried to remember everything he’d heard about the rage illness. “Kendle said the island had an outbreak.”

“She also said it was empty.” Jonny waited for Marc to get angry.

Marc thought harder. “Do we know any of the signs of their outbreak?”

Jonny winced. “Eating each other. See? It is a zombie thing.”

Marc was quickly tiring of that joke.

Jonny shrugged. “She went for the blood, man.”

“Get a sample while she’s out.” Marc wasn’t sure if these rookie medics could do that.

Eugene looked up at him with pinched lips. “She’s dead. Do your own samples.”

Marc noted that reaction. Eugene wasn’t cut out to be a field medic. He would be too emotional anytime someone got hurt or died. “Did you try to revive her?”

“Of course.” Eugene waved at Christian, the other rookie medic who was injecting the woman. “We’re still trying, but I don’t think it’s going to work.”

“You’re trying. That matters.” Marc turned away before the man could ask him to use his gifts. *I’m not giving it away. You have to be worthy of it.* Marc knew that was wrong, but after all they’d been through, he was growing immune to the needs of others when he already had so many to care for. “Wrap the body and place it in the shade of that big tree.”

Jonny finished wrapping his finger. “Are we taking it back to the ship?”

“No. Morgan can make a trip out here. I don’t want to take a chance on infecting our ship.” Marc glanced around. “Which means we’ll all go through our decontamination process as soon as you hit the

ship.” Marc reached for his mike just as Angela’s voice came through the radio.

“Update me.”

Marc keyed the button. “We’re all 5-by. We found a rabbit. Not sure if it will live. Makes me wish we had a vet.” Marc used those words not only to cover the message, but also to give people another topic so they’d forget the rest of the call. The vet’s actions were shocking enough to get a second wave of gossip.

“Copy. Gophers have arrived. Sending them back right now at a run. Any requests?”

Marc assumed Angela was timing their speed to keep them busy and as an Eagle workout. He approved. “My sleeping bag and a case of beer.”

Angela laughed into the mike. “The gophers will bring it. Out.”

Marc grinned with the men who hadn’t forgotten his offer of a beer. It was almost later.

3

“Are we clearing tunnels?”

“Boss said later.” Jeff marked the hatch with red paint and moved on. They’d been out here for two hours now and they’d almost finished their recon. They’d crossed Marc’s tracks in several places. They’d also been to the far edge of the island. They had cleared each of the buildings they found, except for the homes. Angela had told everyone not to enter anyone’s home until they knew all the residents

were gone. She didn't want to start a war over property if people were living here.

Jeff didn't think there was. He'd found a few tracks of bare feet, but it was hard to say if they were new or old. The weather was perfect for preserving things—hot and dry. The ground was hard under their feet. *Also perfect for tunnels.* Jeff refused to consider what might be in those dark places. He didn't know if this island had a rat problem, but he didn't want to go down there and find out. *Someone put lids on them for a reason...*

The hatches were crude but effective. The last few they'd found were sturdy, but this one looked like it had gotten a lot of use. The four corners of the rectangle were all worn and the grass cover was bent, obvious. So was the path through the waist high grass that covered this side of the island. Jeff knew they'd been traveling upward, but they were still on the slight hill. He couldn't see the distance yet. He didn't think they were far from the edge of the tall cliff they'd all viewed through the ship's tiny windows. It had been enormous from there. From here, it was barely noticeable.

"I hear pounding." Pam turned toward their ship. "It's rhythmic."

"She's setting up the pontoon bridge." Molly knew the sound. The portable bridge was a lot of work for a crew that didn't know what they were doing.

“Let’s move.” Jeff had stopped them to mark the tunnel on his map. Now he wanted to be moving again. “Take us out, Dog.”

Dog lunged to his feet and vanished into the woods in front of them.

Jeff chuckled. “Only rookies are so eager.”

Molly nodded. Senior Eagles no longer flew into danger. They were content to let the danger come to them so they didn’t waste energy or rounds.

“I believe this is our last stop.” Ian put a hand on his toolbelt. “Be nice. This is the doctor’s home. She might still be here.”

The others snorted. Ian had said that at every stop they’d made, but after knocking or ringing the doorbells, no one had responded at all. They were convinced the island was empty.

Dog padded ahead to make a perimeter round. He hated how slow the humans were moving.

Jeff gestured at Gus. “Go with Dog and do a full perimeter check.”

Pam loved the sight of the doctor’s home and office. Built around and over a four-foot tree trunk that had been polished, the treehouse structure was the prettiest building on the island that she’d seen so far.

Pam also feared it. The thin front door was in pieces on the narrow porch; the smell of human waste was wafting out on the light breeze. *Bad things happened in there. Or still are.*

The men lifted their guns in unspoken agreement that they were going to investigate this one.

Jeff pointed at the faint path that met next to the tree home. “Guard duty.”

Pam frowned.

Jeff went toward the door before she decided to argue. She’d just been fully cleared by the medics, but Jeff wasn’t taking chances with their weaker people. *No one dies on my shift.*

The windows were covered in thick shutters, and the cellar on the side of the building was covered by long boards that had been nailed in place. High grass ran all the way up to the building and lined both sides of a stone path someone had lovingly sealed into a curving walkway with cement. Dead plants hung from the porch rails. The smell of something rotting increased on the warm breeze.

Jeff and Ian went over the walkway and up the narrow porch together. Molly followed a few feet behind, peering up and then to the sides while they covered the front and Pam watched the rear.

The smell of rot increased.

“That’s excrement.”

Jeff nodded. *Glad I didn’t eat yet. Nothing to throw up.*

Jeff stepped inside, finger easing closer to the trigger. He scanned quickly, stepping aside to let Ian in.

Both men inspected and studied, adding clues while Molly again searched above them and to the sides. Marc's four or five man team setups were easy to adjust to, but they still felt light. The men preferred Adrian's larger groups.

Jeff stepped into the reception area that had a cheery couch and fireplace behind it. In the rear, a single door implied a bathroom. He turned toward the wider area. Several doors blocked his view. He assumed the rooms were used for medical exams and treatments. The lounge was dusty and full of prints on the floor and furniture, but even those held a light layer, as if someone had been here a few weeks ago instead of today.

Ian saw it too. He patted his notebook and waved.

Jeff shook his head. *Notes later. Work first.*

Ian nodded. He followed Jeff into the narrow hallway and got ready to fight as Jeff reached for the first knob.

Molly stayed in the main doorway, watching them and staying where she could see Pam.

Pam waited with almost constant turns and scans, keeping Gus in her line of sight. She didn't want to be responsible for someone sneaking up on them.

Dog lingered at the edge of the property. *Come on! I have things to sniff.*

Jeff opened the door and slid to the right, ducking. He checked for threats in a fast blur. *Clear!*

He rose and advanced into the room.

His light revealed supplies, testing kits Safe Haven didn't have, water, MREs, and other items they always collected and stored. Jeff didn't view it as a loot stash. It bothered him that a doctor had been stocked up for survival this hard. It said life here might not be as easy as they'd all assumed.

Ian stayed in the doorway so the entire team was still in sight of each other. That was Adrian's training. Marc hadn't cut it or changed it. He'd just added what to do if one of those teammates suddenly left their line of sight.

Jeff went to the rear of the long room, spotting more medical supplies they could use, but no papers for information and no signs anyone had been in here recently. He turned for a last sweep.

Ian waited impatiently for Jeff to return. They were alternating clearing the rooms so no one got bored or tired, and everyone got some much-needed practice. That was Angela's addition. She wanted all people on a team to cover all the positions if it was called for.

Ian opened the second door as Jeff came out. He immediately shut it. He closed his eyes and tried not to puke. "Bathroom."

Jeff glanced over his shoulder at the door near the fireplace.

Ian pointed at the last door, held up one finger, then pointed toward the fireplace.

Jeff nodded. Eagle code was simple when you'd been using it for a while. He was glad Ian was going

slowly for him. He was rusty; Angela was right. *We need this practice.*

Ian opened the last door.

A rounded shadow lunged at him. The sharp blade of a knife plunged toward his throat.

Ian automatically drew and fired.

The shot echoed through the building and across the island.

4

On the ship, Angela stopped mid-speech. She connected the hive and waited.

Marc used his new, untested method of controlling communications during an emergency. *Go silent! Right now! Every level! Go silent!*

People in Marc's camp winced at the loud mental order that cut through everything else. They were close enough to him that it actually hurt.

Marc waited, listening for anyone who hadn't heard or was calling for help.

It was silent.

Marc sent out another call, using his radio and thoughts this time. "Gunshot location report." Marc assumed it was their people. He had gophers out there, though neither boy had a gun, and he'd been sure Angela was going to send out an extra security detail.

"We had a minor issue here. All over now."

Marc could feel Molly's revulsion and shock through the radio. "Any injuries? Do you need assistance?"

"Our team has no injuries. We are 5-by."

"Good. Make sure it all gets put in your report."

"Copy that. Out."

Marc sent a new wave. *False alarm. Great work! Now carry on.*

"She has a team out here with us."

Marc nodded at Neil's comment. "Recon, I'd guess. It's what I would do."

"Same." Neil moved toward the corral Theo was now starting on. "I took samples. I'll burn or dig at your call."

Marc considered it. As long as Morgan got samples to test, he would probably be able to determine what had killed their attacker and what was wrong with her. There wasn't a need for a full autopsy, so they didn't need to keep the body. "We'll burn. Pass that quietly to the recon team."

Neil frowned, voice lowering. "You think that was their minor issue?"

Marc shrugged. "I picked up horror. It sent me straight to our moment here."

Neil replayed the radio call in his mind. His frown deepened. "She said our team has no injuries."

"And it was Molly. She likes to be on the radio. I've never heard her be that short."

"Same." Neil grimaced. "I'm missing things. It's been too long."

“Angela has plans to get us all back into shape.”

“Yeah, looking forward to that.” Neil went to pass the word to Molly about burning bodies instead of burying them.

Marc ignored the sarcasm. His mind was flying through the clues now. Kendle hadn’t told them about these people because she’d been afraid no one would believe her, but also because she’d been afraid they would and then they wouldn’t bring her here. *This is home to her.* Marc hadn’t thought that would be the case, considering what had happened to her. She also had no roots.

Marc scanned the path that would take him to Luke’s cabin if he followed it. *I guess that one connection was stronger than all the other influences in her life.* Marc smiled, now thinking of Angie. *I understand.*

A shadow broke away from the tree in front of him. Marc stared at Adrian.

Adrian swept Marc and the busy people behind him.

Marc dug deeper, needing a good moment between them. He found Adrian’s mind closed.

Instead of breaking through, he withdrew. The sense of danger hadn’t hit until he returned to the ship this morning. He’d spent the night close to Adrian and his group, but he hadn’t felt it.

I’ll watch for anything out of the ordinary. Adrian straightened. *If you need me, yell.* He eased out of sight as Kyle turned to Marc.

Marc waited to see if Kyle had noticed.

Kyle had been observing another side of their base camp. “Our gophers are almost back. I can hear them running.”

Marc followed Kyle to the center of the now active town to meet them and send them back with the samples and new updates, including the news that Darren was a descendant. Marc refused to think about Adrian or the feeling of being safer that was now hitting him against his will.

Adrian rejoined his group, picking up his heavy pack. He’d dropped it at the gunshot and headed for Marc. He didn’t need Angela to assign him as a protector. He already knew what she wanted if there was a problem here. *And something’s going on. I don’t know what it is, but I feel it.* Adrian glanced over his shoulder at Kendle.

Kendle was already turning into the tall grass. She faded into the preveining shadows without a word.

Kendle hadn’t gotten her fill of staring at Marc. Fast glances weren’t enough. She wasn’t going to do anything wrong. She didn’t have any plans. *I just want to look at him.*

Adrian approved. Kendle would get to stare at Marc for a while, and he would be safer. She would rip someone apart with her bare hands if they threatened him.

Adrian took the lead from Tommy. Kendle had drawn them a small map of how to get to Luke’s mountain bunker, in case any of them were dumb enough to get lost.

Adrian surveyed Sadie. “You okay?” She was carrying most of their stuff.

Sadie stuck out her tongue.

Adrian sighed deeply, making sure she heard it. Sometimes he liked Sadie; and there was now. She’d been hard to get moving this morning. It had taken hours to get everything packed. They needed to view all the possible shelters they were allowed to use, then make a choice. Adrian knew Angela didn’t want them as close as Luke’s cabin, but being along the opposite shoreline wouldn’t give them much shelter from the ocean if the weather turned rough. Adrian was hoping the small bunker would at least fit them all for sleeping.

“I’m about done.” Quinn was tired of walking and sore. He slapped at a bug on his arm, stopping. “Does it matter if we get there tonight or tomorrow?”

Adrian considered it. He didn’t really feel like walking anymore either. *The land sickness might be getting worse.* “I guess not.”

Adrian glanced around. He chose a dirt area under a canopy of tall trees. “Small fire and keep track of it. It’s dry. Won’t take much to start a blaze we can’t put out.”

Tommy saw they were near the base of the winding rocky road that went up the side of the cliff. Kendle had described it as terror in the dark. Tommy hadn’t understood, but he could now while studying that road. “Good. I don’t want to walk that in the dark.”

Adrian grinned. “Afraid of ghosts?”

“Nope. I am afraid of whatever spooked Molly.”

Adrian frowned. “I wasn’t sure if it was overacting to screw with Marc and Angela. Molly has that type of sense of humor.”

“Not this time. Something happened.”

Adrian understood he’d missed it. “What do you think it was?”

Tommy shrugged. “No idea, but Marc’s on edge too.”

Adrian wasn’t surprised Tommy had picked up on the emotional clues. He pushed to see if the man had gone deeper. “What would make them jumpy?”

“A real threat.” Tommy considered. “Another army, residents who don’t want us here, an illness, pirates. There are a few options.”

“Let’s narrow it while we get camp set up.”

Tommy didn’t mind the movement as long as it wasn’t walking for a little while. He also welcomed the chance to figure out the danger and maybe even save Marc from it. *Then no one will hate me on either side. That’s my regret. I made friends on that ship and I miss them now. If I can have this life with Kendle and Adrian, and still keep my friends in Safe Haven, I’ll never leave.*

“I can see the ship.” Quinn pointed.

Adrian took a fast glance and quickly looked away from the black-haired woman walking across the pontoon bridge like she wasn’t afraid they’d made a mistake. *Oh, Angie. I miss you. I wish we*

could have some time together, alone, under good circumstances. Is that too much to ask?

Yes, it is. Angela turned and went down into the ship.

Adrian went to gather fallen wood for their fire.

“I see smoke.” Tommy pointed this time.

Adrian scanned it. “That’s where the recon team was for their issue.”

“How do you know?”

“By how clear the call was.”

“Should we go over and find out for ourselves?”

Tommy wasn’t in the mood for that type of adventure, but if Adrian wanted to go, he would provide support.

“No.” Adrian knelt to start placing the branches for their fire. There was a lot of fallen wood all around them. It wouldn’t last, but it would get them through for right now. “They’re on a run. Interrupting them won’t go over well.”

“And we’re not welcome anyway, right?”

Adrian sighed. “Not for a while, Eagle. But there is good news for you. You just might end up with what you want most.” *Unlike me. I’m here for the long haul. The next three years are going to be rough.*

Chapter Nine

Motivation Matters

1

“**L**ook around. See if there’s anything we should take back now.”

Pam nodded gratefully and went into the treehouse. The smell of the burning body was hard on her stomach.

Gus didn’t like it either. He lingered in the grass and waited for the call to go.

Jeff sympathized. *I’m just made of slightly stronger stuff.*

Standing nearby but downwind, Molly also scanned their surroundings. They were all shocked by the fast death. They were also disturbed by the state of the woman who was now burning.

The front of her no-longer white coat had been splattered with dried blood. The back of her coat had been tacky with bodily waste. Getting her outside would have been messy if not for Pam pulling out a roll of plastic. That pile of used scrap was now bagged and sitting next to the house for later removal. They’d attached a hazardous waste symbol and hoped it would be enough to make

people leave it alone until a cleaning crew came through.

Other than the actual spot of the death, the home wouldn't require much cleaning. The room where the doctor had been trapped was the worst. They had opened the doors and windows in every room to air it out. The boss would send a small team next to get it ready for use and then the camp would come here and never know what had happened. That bothered Molly. The doctor had clearly been living rough. She had a lot of questions and few answers. Molly hated a mystery. "Make sure you take any notebooks or journals."

"I will." Pam called it through the broken doorway.

Ian was also standing downwind, but he was watching the body burn. *I killed her.*

"You reacted like a senior Eagle." Jeff knew what Ian was thinking. "You did your job."

"My job is to kill?"

Jeff nodded. "A lot of the time, yes. Cherish the moments that don't involve death. Soak them in so you can remember there is another side."

Ian felt a little better. "I'm not sure if I can keep doing this. I also don't want to quit."

Jeff had gone through that as well. "Take time; think it all through. Then the next action will hit and you'll see which way you go."

"I can do that." Ian turned away from the body. "How long do we have to stay?"

Jeff studied the body. “Probably an hour. We’ll make sure the fire’s out before we go.”

“And the...bones?”

Jeff frowned. “We’ll leave them until the boss says otherwise.”

“Why?”

Molly knew that answer. “It’s a warning of who we are and what we’re capable of when provoked.”

Ian stared at her. “So we have claimed this island.”

Molly nodded. “Yes. This became New America as soon as Marc and Angela landed last night.”

Everyone jumped as a twig snapped in the fire.

Jeff frowned. “Where’s Dog?”

“He’s off on his own mission.”

“What do you mean?” Jeff wasn’t sure if they needed to go search for him.

“He didn’t come out here to do recon with us. He’s here for Marc.”

“I guess he does miss him.”

Molly made a face. “It has nothing to do with bonding. Dog knows Marc’s in danger. He wants to be there to watch out for him.”

“So do I.” Pam stuck her head out of a window. She was glad the others had brought it up. “Is there any way to make it burn faster?”

Jeff started to say no. He paused, considering. “Yes, actually there is.” It would use the last of his lighter fluid, but it would get them on the move in half the time. He sighed, reaching for his gear.

“Almost out of tobacco anyway. Must be time to give it up.”

2

Dog leapt up, fur bristling. He'd been resting and listening since arriving, staying close to Marc as the man worked. Dog faced the tree line, pinpointing the noise.

Marc stopped hammering the board in place.

Everyone else paused too, turning to scan the trees.

“Hello in camp.” Jeff could feel the hostility rushing toward them. “Recon team coming in.”

Marc and his group resumed what they were doing as Jeff and his team came through the trees.

Men nodded and grinned at each other in recognition, but they stayed quiet. The senior Eagles understood where they were.

Daryl had begun to feel better as the day wore on. Gus's arrival now brought back his headache and his anger. He went right back to work after scanning to see who'd been picked for recon.

Marc caught the smell of burnt flesh and matched it to the odor also lingering here. Kyle and Neil had burned the townswoman's body just out of sight; they were still observing that area to make sure the fire didn't spread. Marc sniffed again and caught a whiff of lighter fluid. *That's how they got done with their burn before us.*

Marc glanced up at Jeff as Theo went to get the next usable board from the pile. "Update me."

The recon team all regarded Pam.

Pam frowned at the teammates who'd insisted she tell Marc since she'd thought of it. "We ran into a grounder at the doctor's home. We cleared it and the rest of the island, including your backtrail. We did not go inside homes."

"Grounder?" Marc caught images of the death they'd had.

Pam shrugged. *Our bodies turn back into the ground. And it might be easier to think of them as animals. You know?*

Marc locked his thoughts. *I get it.*

Ian saw temporary corrals going up in two places, and a leader who'd worked right next to his team. Marc was streaked with gray ashes through his hair and down his shirt.

Marc hid his frown. *I need energy for the first time. I'm going gray.* "Good. Angela doesn't want to take the chance on starting a new war."

Pam wanted to tell Marc they may already have that issue, but she wasn't sure of her conclusions. "Can we talk later?"

Marc nodded. "I'll be sending people to the ship shortly. They could use an escort. You can send your notes directly to the boss." He included the rest of the team. "Then you can come back and have a beer around the fire."

The recon team brightened at the invitation. They all wanted to stay on land a while longer.

“Sure.”

“We can do that.”

Marc was sure they were the security team he'd been expecting. *Angie pulls three-fers all the time. She got two topside clears of the island by two teams today, she covered a fresh security detail for me, and she knows we'll all bond through this, making it easier for me to train and lead them.* “Until then, do you have orders to follow?”

Jeff grinned. “A couple.” He scanned the mildly interested crew that was covered in sweat. He found Daryl. His grin widened. “The boss said Gus has guard duty here.”

Marc hid a smile at being correct. “I don't need it.”

“Cool, 'cause it's for Daryl.”

Silence fell for a few seconds. Then chuckles and outright laughter drowned out the protests of both men.

Marc realized Angela had just pulled a five-fer. Tension had just broken, and the Daryl/Gus problem would be settled out here, away from the camp. He shrugged, amused and as always, impressed with his mate. “If the boss ordered it...”

Gus glared at the rest of the recon team. “You should have told me.”

Jeff snickered. “You should have known she wasn't going to let you get by with whatever you did.”

Gus relaxed. “This is a punishment for being switched? Awesome.” Gus marched over to where

Daryl was hammering loosened nails through the charred boards so they could reuse them. “Now I know I’m one of you.”

Fresh laughter prevented the tension from returning. The rest of the recon team switched places with the men on duty, giving them a break as they’d been ordered to do.

Marc refused to admit he felt better having more senior Eagles here. “If you’re staying and want to pass a message to someone on the ship, give it to them soon. The gophers will not be coming back out tonight.”

Timmy was relieved. He wanted to be back in time for mess. He was finding comfort in food. Cathy’s betrayal was stinging constantly. Stuffing himself seemed to dull it.

Mike also brightened. He was supposed to check on the radio when he returned, then he was off for the rest of the night. He was going to spend it with Leeann. He’d found some puzzles they could do while she was recovering.

“I have a sample that needs to be on ice.”

Marc motioned at his kit. “Back pouch. When you drop your report, tell the boss we’ve marked nine hatches. Find out when she wants the tunnel cleared.”

Marc expected to be told it was tomorrow’s work, but if she wanted them to start on it tonight, he would pick a few men who weren’t worn out and they would go night crawling.

Jeff opened Marc's kit and found the rear pouch packed with ice from the ship. Jeff slid in his labeled sample and quickly shut the kit. The ice was melting, but the material of the kit had slowed it a lot. He grinned, thinking about the gophers who'd had to run the ice out here.

"We'll set up in the barn. Theo said it's in good shape. We're already storing our gear in it. Just needs a fire ring and we're all set."

Ian took Marc's hint. He passed the word so the rest of the recon team could lighten themselves. Then he went to make a firepit in the barn. Most of the people who stayed would remain close to the fire. A few might wander off though, and the light would help them get back from a drunken bathroom moment. Ian wondered how Marc planned to handle security.

"Hey! All maps need to go to Neil."

Molly handled that, eager to view what Neil came up with. The former trooper was an artist. Molly thought his talents were wasted on maps, but she would be grateful to have them just the same.

Gus watched Daryl hammer in a long nail. He saw the bruise from his fist each time Daryl swung. *She married him. I can't believe she did that after the way he treated her.*

Daryl finished that nail and proceeded to the next preplaced board.

Gus moved with him.

Daryl's cheeks flamed. "I don't need a sitter!"

Gus didn't answer.

Daryl hammered in the next nail and dropped the tool. He stood up fast, making Gus take a step back to avoid him. “Get lost!”

“Make me.”

Daryl let go, swinging from the hip.

Gus took the full-arm hit across the cheek. He staggered, pain slamming into his face and neck.

Daryl stopped, waiting to see if the man recovered as rookies hurried out of the way.

Gus tried. He blinked, hands clenching in preparation. Waves of dizziness hit him hard. He sank to his knees as blood ran from one nostril.

Daryl stepped by him. “Get back to me on that.”

Eagles hurried over to help Gus.

Daryl went to Marc. “She’s had her fun. It was a great lesson on size doesn’t matter. Send him back or I’m out of here.”

“The medic will decide if he needs to go to the ship.” Marc gave the tired, dirty man a small grin. “Might be the best one I’ve ever seen you do.”

Daryl shrugged. “The motivation matters. Adrian was right about that.” Daryl waved at the rookies. “Lessons on my next off day. See me for scheduling.”

Marc wasn’t sure if this is what Angela had wanted, but he was all for it. Daryl wasn’t a huge man compared to a lot of the Eagles. Knowing he could take out the biggest man here with a single hit was a great deterrent and a perfect example of how training mattered more than physical build. *Damn. That’s a six-fer. I have a long way to go.*

“Are the girls supposed to do this stuff too?”

Pam regarded Megan. The girl had slid closer when the one-sided fight started. Pam snorted. “Most women have no interest in this side of Eagle life. That’s why there are so few of us.”

Megan sighed. “That’s too bad.”

Pam frowned. “Why?”

“I want to join in, but I’m not close enough with anyone, or angry enough at anyone, to do it.”

Pam grinned as she understood. “Marc might do matchups later. He’ll assign it, or there might be personal challenges.”

“Will you be there?”

Pam bristled, cool shield coming down. “It would be my honor to knock out your next tooth.”

Megan laughed. “Awesome. It’s a date.”

Pam caught Darren’s strained expression. She inspected his thoughts and got caught up on what had happened before they arrived.

Gus let the Eagles help him up. He slowly turned, searching for his target. He spotted Daryl, who was surrounded by rookies. He stomped that way, weaving.

Daryl spun around, voice dropping into that dangerous place where anything could happen. “We’re done.”

Gus knew better than to nod and increase his pain. “I need an evening slot.”

Daryl relaxed as he realized Gus wanted a lesson. “Okay.”

Gus stared at the smaller man, too hurt to hold onto his anger. “You better make her happy.” He went to where the medic was waiting and leaned against the closest tree.

Daryl wrote it in his book, mood improving. He refused to rub the hand that was already swelling and starting to ache. *I may have broken my wrist.*

Marc checked his watch. “It’s time, people. Get your gear and line up. You’re heading to the boat. See the Eagles on deck duty for instructions before going below.”

Jeff noticed Greg and Neil evaluating the woman who was missing a tooth. He didn’t know her name, but the senior men were studying her like they did with promising male rookies. He lifted a brow.

Darren gestured subtly since Neil and Greg were both in Marc’s line of sight and couldn’t do it without him noticing.

Jeff caught Marc’s eye. “Permission to add a team member for this run?”

Marc knew. “Megan! You’re up.”

Megan immediately walked over to the forming line and waited for orders.

Marc liked that. The rookie knew to be quiet and not expect the lead. *She might make a nice addition to a senior team. But not mine. Mine is full.*

3

“It gets dark quick out here.”

Jeff grunted. He was trying to make sure they didn't miss the path their gophers had created during their runs today. "Agreed."

The trees cracked and twitched with animals waking up and other animals trying to avoid them. It shifted constantly, making the shadows hard to watch. Everything was moving; they had to figure out if it was a threat in a split second.

Gabe scanned the shadowy trees, uneasy feeling growing. "I don't think we're alone."

The rest of the group muttered or spread his comment.

Jeff frowned. "Stop spooking the herd."

Gabe flushed. "My bad." He gestured. "It's odd being on land again."

Jeff nodded, willing to let it go. "Pay attention. If we get lost, we'll be the joke for the next month."

Gabe didn't want that. He closed his mouth and tried to ignore that warning bell in his mind.

Darren stepped closer to Megan.

Megan noticed. She let him stay. Gabe was right. The jungle around them was closing in to full darkness. She fought the urge to flip on her neck light.

"We're there. I see the shore." Jeff marched a little faster. "Let's move."

The weary group walked faster, all relieved.

Greg also stepped up next to Megan. "Coming back out with us?"

Megan nodded. "Pam said there might be matchups tonight."

“Maybe.” Greg wasn’t sure there would be enough people. Now that it was nearly dark, he was positive half the people who’d planned to return would find an excuse not to, just to avoid this walk back through an unknown jungle in the dark. Only true Eagles had the sand to do that. “Marc’s there, so it should be fun.”

“Any chance Adrian will stop by? I’d love to view that matchup.”

Silence fell through the group at Hannah’s tactless comment.

Greg sighed. “We prefer them to get along. Maybe you’d like to face the tiger instead.”

Hannah frowned. “Who’s the tiger?”

“Marc. When he’s out of his cage, he’s lethal.”

Hannah shrugged. “I guess Adrian wouldn’t be able to put up much of a fight in his condition.” She’d seen him today for a brief moment. He looked ill.

“He wasn’t always like that.” Greg remembered the days when Adrian stepped into matchups and men groaned, hoping they weren’t chosen to fight him. “I miss that.”

Several people nodded. The others either didn’t care or didn’t care enough to start a fight. It had been a long day of working. The sight of their ship, with Zack and Ray standing guard, was a relief.

Megan took a last glance behind her. Green eyes glowed and then vanished. She turned back, following the line. “Make sure my notes get to the boss.”

“I will.” Their quiet movements allowed Ian to hear the ocean. It was calm, almost soothing. The sun was setting behind the island and the shadows that had followed the team to the shore now began rushing over the beach toward the bridge. *Why do I think I’m safer now on the water?*

“Marc’s team is coming.” Ray and Zack were both on the ramp. They’d been acting casual and pretending they weren’t worried. None of the radio transmissions they’d heard today were comforting.

Ray was afraid of what the returning teams would say. He didn’t want to know his bad feeling about the island was correct.

Zack was worried about his sons, though he’d seen them twice on their runs. He no longer heard the loud drone of insects. The rushing water was all his ears were picking up. It was telling them to be careful.

Zack gave a short whistle. “Decontamination team get set!” Zack lifted his glasses. “You have...fifteen patients to handle. Be firm, be clear. Do not take no for an answer.”

The two-dozen camp members who’d volunteered nodded and grinned. Most of them were happy enough to have been given a duty on the top deck where they could at least stare at the island without it being through a small window. The rest were eager to hear the stories the returning team was sure to tell.

Angela came up the stairs and stood at the ramp, just above the small decontamination center they'd set up after Marc's last update. Angela saw two small streams of smoke rising above the tree line. *That's where both my men are. I like knowing that and at the same time, so does everyone else.* Angela considered ordering Marc to run a cold camp. She quickly discarded the idea. The Eagles wanted a night on land around a campfire. She had to trust them to also be careful in unfamiliar surroundings. *Adrian and Marc are both out there. The island is safer than this ship.* Angela sighed. *I hope.*

She waited as the long line of tired men and women trudged by the animals in the portable corrals and headed for the pontoon bridge.

Zack began flashing orders in Eagle code. He followed them up with mental orders to senior men.

"We're being cleaned." Ian thought about the evening shift he'd volunteered for and yawned tiredly. "Just go along and they'll get us through as fast as they can."

"Might not be that bad." Darren pointed. "The boss is watching."

Men snickered at the idea of showering while Angela looked down on them. New life flowed through the mostly male group.

The women didn't notice. They were eager for the showers, especially Molly, who could smell burnt wood all over her hands and clothes. She wasn't worried about the dead doctor being

contaminated in some way. She just wanted the smell to be gone.

“We’ll call names. Hang out on the shore or bridge.” Zack waved at Ralph, who was leading the camp people through this chore.

Ralph stepped forward with a sheet of paper he’d had Angela check on the way up here. “The boss needs Kyle, Neil, Jeff, Shawn, and Darren first. The next batch will be called in a few minutes.”

The five men stepped forward and went where Ralph pointed. Doing it this way ensured everyone was accounted for, and it eliminated any possible contaminants.

Jeff eyed the open-top shower tents now populating the deck below the bridge. He looked up to where Angela was standing and grinned. “Where do you want my clothes?” He started stripping.

Daisey hurried forward with a large garbage bag and held it open.

Jeff wanted to take his time and tease the boss, but there were a lot of people waiting. He quickly cleaned out his pockets, handed over his kit for a decontamination spray, and started on his clothes.

The women on the bridge paled, realizing they were going to have to strip in front of the men.

Greg watched to see who was going to protest or ask for a concession. He also scanned for male leers.

There weren’t any. The men were tired and their minds were already centered on the boss. They

weren't going to stare at the females in their group with Angela's attention on them.

The women realized that at the same time, sharing sheepish grins. The boss was here.

Ralph nodded to Daisey.

She gestured at Grant.

Grant activated the hoses.

Male shouts echoed across the deck.

Scrubbing women rushed forward with soapy brushes while Ralph began to spray the disinfectant.

The people waiting their turn winced and turned to stare at the ramp.

"I think I'd like to go back and spend the night with Marc." Jeff shivered.

Daisey chuckled. "Who wouldn't?"

Ralph came to the ramp again. "Next five senior Eagles!"

Jeff slid into the robe one of the camp women held out, skin on fire. "Little rough."

Daisey reached out to tie his robe.

Jeff flinched back. "I'm already bleeding. Thanks."

Daisey frowned at him and went to get a clean brush.

Jeff went up the steps in paper slippers and a robe. He joined Angela at the ramp, cheeks bright red. "Am I being punished?"

Angela laughed. "I'm sorry. I told them not to miss a spot."

"They didn't. The skin's gone. Everywhere." He tugged the robe tighter. "Orders? And keep in

mind I'm only dressed for a couple of things right now."

Angela's laughter rolled over the deck. She motioned. "Off duty until dawn."

Jeff curtsied like a southern woman. "I'm heading back out as soon as I get changed."

Angela's mirth followed him down the steps. She hadn't given Jeff a job because he'd chosen what she already wanted. He would consider it fun time off the ship; she considered it another guard for Marc if he needed it.

Kyle and Neil joined her at the same time.

Angela didn't keep them. "Samantha needs an escort. She's on the way to your cabin."

Neil waited for more. When nothing came, he went below, holding the robe away from his body so people didn't get such a perfect outline of his shape.

"I had to give Jennifer something to do. She's recording the law meeting until we feel pain from her and then she's off duty until at least dawn. So are you. Make sure she rests."

Kyle jogged down the steps as Darren joined Angela in a bright red robe.

"Does this make my nose look bigger?"

"No, just your ass."

Darren burst out laughing. He joined her with no sign that being in a thin robe bothered him. He leaned against the railing and swept the group still waiting on the shore and the bridge.

“The recon team found the doctor’s office. It’s small, but it’s already set up for medical use.”

Darren nodded. “Just say when. I’ll clear it and get it stocked.” Darren had done that for Adrian. He knew the drill. He’d been doing side jobs for the boss of Safe Haven before Angela had even joined. Darren was glad his services were being used openly now, but he still missed the feeling of doing private jobs.

“Pick a partner who will keep it quiet until I’m ready for the camp to know.”

Darren scanned the waiting group again. He decided to take a chance. “Megan.”

Angela studied the girl. “I assume she had a good day.”

“I think she did. I might be biased since I like her. Oh, yeah. I just found out I’m like you and Marc.” Darren waited to see if Angela was okay with that.

“I haven’t read the notes yet.” She sent a wave of approval. “Great job blocking me. I didn’t know.”

Darren grinned, enjoying the feeling of her praise.

Angela felt his question and his reluctance to ask. She smiled. “If you can find an open cabin, you can have it.”

Darren beamed. “Awesome.” He’d wanted to be on the descendant deck since they’d set sail. “When do you want us to go?”

“Take a quick sleep break, together maybe?”
Angela grinned. “Then go. Hourly clicks.”

Darren chuckled as he headed for the stairs.
“You’re the boss.”

Ralph came to Angela with a kit. “Recon team is staying with Marc, except for Molly and Ian. This is what they found today.”

Angela took the bag, relieved Marc would have them. She doubted Morgan or Kimmie would be happy with the news, however. They were both anxious and neither of them were leaving the ship tonight. “Don’t let the recon team go yet. They can escort and carry things back since the gophers are in for the night.”

“I’ll tell them to hang around.”

Angela made a face as her stomach twisted. After hours getting the pontoon bridge in place, her muscles were sore.

Ralph saw it. He waved toward the steps. “The mess just opened. Go eat right now, then go to your other meetings. I’ve got this.”

Angela didn’t argue. She’d had a quick bite of her cold lunch. She’d forgotten about it after that.

Angela was aware of Cody following her. The other kids were either on break or another chore. She’d kept Cody because he’d asked her to. Even Cate had wanted to run all over the ship doing her errands, but Cody was sticking close. “Is it because your dad’s in danger?”

Cody nodded, letting out a sound of relief. “I’m glad you know!”

“I do. I’m sending him more support for overnight.”

Cody made a face. “You should tell him he has to come home now.”

Angela chuckled. “I’d like to, but I can’t. Just like he can’t tell me what to do.”

“You’re the alpha. You’re the boss.”

“Only in camp life, Cody. If I boss him around in downtime, it’ll split us up.”

Cody sighed. “I don’t know about this adulting stuff. Sounds all wrong.”

Angela laughed. “No argument there.”

They both fell silent as they met a group of camp women who were also going to the mess. Angela smiled, but she stayed to herself. The stomach-ache was getting worse. She needed to get food in there so it would stop. “Just put the updates on the table. I’ll work while I eat.”

Coming up behind her with full arms, Jayda chuckled. “The important ones are on top. Have a seat. I’ll get you a tray.”

Hurting, Angela agreed. “Thanks.”

The mess was full of tired people who were ready to eat and relax. Most of them were also hoping for a bedtime story, but Angela didn’t have full details on the island yet. She couldn’t tell them exactly what had happened because she didn’t know. The returning teams would give them those stories later in the showers and in bunks while they were supposed to be sleeping. Safe Haven’s gossip chain never rested.

She sank down at the table and tried to seem like she wasn't worried or in pain.

Jayda handed her the top note and a pain pill. She left before Angela could give it back.

Angela chuckled as she realized the woman had been studying Ivan. He did that when he couldn't stand to see her wince anymore after a long day or night. Angela washed it down with a drink from her warm canteen. She skimmed the note Jayda had handed her.

Megan swears she saw someone following them around all day. Thinks it might be a survivor who's afraid to make contact.

Recon team removed a danger. So did Marc's team. We've had two islander deaths now. We're calling them grounders.

Blood samples have been sent to the coolers in the new medical lounge. They're marked.

Angela folded the notes, stomach twisting again. The samples would have to wait while Tonya recovered. The possible island survivor was a good thing. The two deaths were dangerous. If there were more survivors, they wouldn't come out after seeing her people kill some of theirs. She didn't know yet what had provoked those two incidents, but it was in the nightly reports that were still coming in.

Jayda sat a tray in front of Angela. "I can take some of that to your room for later."

Angela picked up her fork. "I have to do the updates now. The pack of books and journals can go. Thanks."

Jayda scooped up the heavy kit and headed for the exit.

Angela had already gotten updates on all their injured people, including Tonya and her newborn. Morgan was giving them healing sessions between researching laws for the meeting. They were doing well. The brig crowd had left as soon as they'd found out Tim had been moved; there was no reason for them to stay. They'd all gone back to their cabins and jobs. Ironically, many of them were currently within fifteen feet of Tim's location and didn't know it.

Around the mess, the topics of conversation were exactly what she'd expected. They were curious about the meetings, angry over Tim's choice, furious with Courtney, glad Tonya and Jennifer's babies had survived, and they were excited to finally be at their destination. All the decks were busy. As each group finished their chores, they would come here for a quick meal and their next assignment. Conner was still handling that, though he'd slowed now. She knew he had to be tired. This was one time he would be glad to get off point duty when Charlie took over at midnight.

Angela dug into the Tuna Helper, lids closing as the smell sent her to a happy place. *Yum.*

“Did you see her shoveling it in? It's great she has an appetite again.”

“I agree. She's too thin. She needs about fifteen or twenty pounds.”

Ian listened to the camp members walking by. He didn't know who they were talking about. He swept the mess, searching for a female eating heavily. He stopped on Angela as she scraped up the last morsel on her tray. Angela didn't usually have a large appetite. *Maybe tonight's food is worth eating.* He proceeded toward the line, waving off people who wanted tales from the island.

Others did the same, all planning on picking whatever she was having.

Angela didn't notice. She belched loudly and excused herself. Her stomach gurgled.

Angela yawned. "Ugh. Not yet. I have work left."

Ian got his tray and sat down. He scooped up a large bite of the Tuna Helper and eagerly shoved it in.

Ian paused as his eyes began to water. He chewed again, forcing himself to taste, to swallow. A tear dripped into his bowl.

He shoved it away and grabbed his drink. *Okay, it's not the food.*

Angela saw their gophers come in. She wasn't surprised when Mike grabbed two drinks and hurried out. Timmy began loading his tray full. Angela made a note for them to check on the boy later.

She saw Kimmie join her guard detail and decided to get it over with. *He's staying on the island tonight. He's fine.*

Kimmie turned and left the mess.

Angela made another note to check on the girl later too. She wasn't picking up rebellion, just sadness.

Angela read the next update.

Three animal pens are ready as long as we don't actually use them.

Love you.

Angela smiled. Marc seemed like he was in a good mood. She was thrilled with the progress he'd made.

She resumed her updates.

Have Gus and Daryl checked out by a medic. One for a broken wrist. The other for a concussion.

Angela wasn't happy that had happened, but she preferred it to be off the ship. The two men were going to go at it anyway. She'd just chosen the location and witnesses.

Her team now looked like she felt—weary and satisfied they'd put in a good day of prep. They couldn't all flood the island with people and crap. It had to be organized, and some of it couldn't be done until today. They'd needed to view the island for themselves. Now that they had, the rest of the work could continue. Crews would be laboring into the night to get them ready for tomorrow's plans of animals, den mothers, and builders taking over the base camp.

Angela motioned to Harry.

Harry left his place in line and joined her.

“I need a checkup for two Eagles.” Angela gave him Marc’s note. “Find them and handle it. No exceptions.”

Harry left. He didn’t mind. The grimaces on the faces of those eating said the meal wasn’t that good.

Angela looked up as another group entered the mess. Monica and Molly had Candy between them. The females appeared happy, even Candy. Angela was glad. *Maybe her delivery will go on time. The others haven’t.* Though Samantha’s had. She’d miscounted the dates. Everyone else had been interrupted so far and she didn’t want that to happen to Candy. She didn’t think the woman could take another tragedy. She needed to recover. *We all do.*

Ed entered the mess and quickly found Angela. He began gathering the updates she’d finished with.

“Thanks. Did we get any volunteers to go ashore for the night?”

“More than we need. I picked the most reliable men. They’re headed to the top deck now to meet their escorts. We were told the recon team was handling that.”

“They are and they’re probably ready to roll right now. Tell our men to hurry.”

“I will.” Ed took the updates and left.

Cody pointed at the doorway closest to them. “Morgan.”

Angela slowly rose and cleaned up her mess. “I’ll take a nap when I go to bed tonight.”

Cody snickered. He followed her to the trash bin, dumping his own tray. It was half eaten.

Angela noticed. “Are you feeling okay?”

Cody nodded, voice low. “It just wasn’t that good. Shhh.”

Angela shrugged. “It was a little burnt and crunchy. I loved it.”

Cody made a face. “Girls are weird.”

“Wait until you get older. That gets even crazier.” Angela followed Morgan, amusement falling away. “Once we start, no one disturbs us unless it’s an emergency. You have my list.”

“I do.” Cody walked straighter, standing taller. “You got it, boss.”

Angela swallowed a grin and followed Morgan into the office they’d chosen.

Cody shut the door behind them and leaned against it with his arms over his little chest. *I feel like my dad right now.*

The powerful sensation sank into his heart and settled there for life.

Chapter Ten
No-Go

1

“Hi!” Samantha gave Neil a fast hug as he joined her near the steps where a line of people were headed down. “Welcome home.” She hid her cramps and enjoyed the feel of his body against hers.

Neil blocked his thoughts and forced a cheery expression. “Busy day?” He’d wanted to call and order her to rest; he was proud that he hadn’t.

“Very.” Her voice lowered. “I can’t talk about the case with you, but I can pass a message of comfort if you want to tell Tim anything.”

“No need.” Neil leered. “Boss put me on duty over you. I’ll be close for the rest of the night.”

Samantha lit up. “Awesome.”

Neil let her warmth ease his troubled mind. “Where are the kids?”

“With Wade. The den mothers and Ralph have been by a lot to check on them.”

Neil frowned. “Wade had the twins all day?”

Samantha nodded. “I’ve been by there a dozen times. Would have been half that, but I keep forgetting to take things I need.”

“Take things where?” Neil held her arm as they went down the steps. He could tell she was tired.

“I did some interviews to prepare for whatever comes next. Then I did some research. I might need an assistant this time.” Samantha brightened again. “I’m hoping to get the case thrown out. That’s public news.”

Neil realized Samantha was already all-in. He sighed. “Whatever you need.”

Samantha could tell Neil had been through a rough run, but she was on a timetable. She hurried toward their cabin. “I fed the boys on my last trip while Wade got a shower. I need to see if they’re ready for a follow-up. I’m trying to get them to sleep through the night.”

“Already?”

She grinned. “There’s nothing wrong with having dreams, Neil.”

Neil chuckled as he reached for the doorknob. “I couldn’t agree more.” He attributed her great mood to having a job and the power of a pain pill. *Doing the same myself as soon as I’m on downtime.*

They stepped inside their cluttered cabin and stilled, struck by the sight of Wade laying on top of the made bed with a swaddled twin on each arm. All three males were resting peacefully. One of the boys even had Wade’s big finger in his miniature hand.

Wade opened one eye. “They crashed. Amy’s at the playground with some of the other kids. Then she’s helping the boss.”

Samantha smiled, moving toward the closet for a more comfortable pair of shoes. The flats looked good, but they made too much noise for the night shift. “You’re great with them.”

Neil shut the door, catching flashes of Wade’s day. *The boys getting baths, playtime that consisted of Wade making shadow puppets and telling them a story, meals of pumped milk given on Samantha’s schedule.* That was a tired man lying under those two tiny lives. “You feel better.”

Wade shut that one lid. “Every bone in my body hurts. It’s satisfying.”

Samantha checked her watch. “I’m sorry. I still have a final meeting. I hope it will all be over tonight. Then the medics are insisting I get a checkup. They want to do the boys tomorrow.”

“We’re fine.” Wade smiled. *I’m right where I belong.*

Samantha snickered. *Yeah, in my bed.* She had six weeks to wait physically. Mentally, she’d already had Wade.

Neil cleared his throat. “Darling?”

Samantha stilled at the tone. “Yes, my love?”

“The medics said eight to ten weeks.”

Samantha’s shoulder drooped. “Shit.”

Wade fought not to wake the twins with his laughter.

Neil watched Samantha, panic easing now that he was here with his family. *I don’t want either of them on that island yet. It’s not safe.*

Samantha looked over; Wade opened both eyes.

Neil refused to elaborate. “It’s not safe. If you love me, you’re both no-go.”

2

“We’re short a few.”

“They can’t make it to this one.” Angela pushed off her shoes and sighed at the instant relief. “This is our first time doing this officially. I understand some of you are nervous or not sure if you should be here. We’ll sort some of that as we go. For right now, get comfortable and be patient. We’re not leaving this room unless something goes crazy.”

Knowing Angela had booked a lot of time for this meeting let them relax. They all had questions and doubts.

“I had some books and other supplies brought in earlier. The boxes in the corner have us covered for the evening.” Morgan had chosen the largest office and had it stocked with snacks and drinks that no one had touched so far. The topics were too serious to eat and drink like this was a party. Everyone had come in, taken a seat, and started contemplating their new place in history.

Molly followed Angela’s example and pushed off her shoes. “When is Tim’s trial?”

“Wrong order.” Morgan had been studying their old laws since he’d found out he was going to be on this council. “First we hold a pretrial hearing to determine if there’s enough evidence to arrest him.”

Morgan paused, not sure if Angela wanted him to keep going.

“Yes, please. And reminders later for those who aren’t here.” Angela felt the warmth of the room sink in. The security of being surrounded by people who were smart and strong was a tonic to her nerves. She immediately wanted to take a nap.

“I’ll make sure they know.” Morgan held up sheets of copied paper. “I got the Xerox machine working!”

A few people cheered. The machines on this ship had resisted their efforts the entire trip.

“What’s the secret?”

Morgan grew serious. He leaned across the wide table. “Grant had to activate that function from his main control panel.”

Angela snickered as the others did the same or shared annoyed looks because someone hadn’t thought to try that sooner.

“So, pretrial hearing. If we agree with Kenn that there’s enough evidence, we issue an arrest document. Then we talk to his lawyer about scheduling and bail.” Morgan frowned. “If we’re going to allow bail. Those things have to be decided before we do the pretrial hearing. That’s why we’re here.”

“You mean we’re setting laws tonight?” Gus wasn’t sure he was ready for that much responsibility so soon. *And this headache isn’t helping. I think Daryl knocked a tooth loose.*

“Yes.” Morgan gave them the truth like he would any other rookies—a little at a time. “The boss has most of this covered. We’re going to make sure she hasn’t missed anything.”

Gus nodded, big shoulders relaxing. “I can do that much.”

“And then we’re going to set some new laws.”

Everyone else sniggered as Gus scowled at Morgan, but Angela didn’t. She was nervous about the outcome. *Makes me wish I’d looked ahead now.*

Morgan gaped. “Why didn’t you?!”

Angela took off her jacket and put it on the chair behind her so Morgan wouldn’t know she was lying. “I didn’t want to see that we can’t find a way to maintain what we build.”

Angela took over the meeting, standing. “Our old system worked some of the time. Other countries had bits and pieces we can glue together to try improving ours. We know it needs work, but we also adore it and honor it.” Angela paused for the door to open.

Samantha entered with a pale face, a thick folder, a thin notebook, and a bruised Neil.

Samantha looked wide awake and fresh compared to Neil, who was covered in bright scratches and purple bruises. He’d clearly had a long day on the island with Marc.

Neil scanned the room, nodded at Angela, and shut the door. He joined Cody on duty.

Samantha took her seat next to Angela and put the folder on the table. “I have an issue that comes before this meeting or the pretrial hearing.”

“Go ahead.” Angela opened her book.

“I can’t be on this council and be a lawyer when people get in trouble. We’d be starting off with a conflict of interest.”

“I agree.” Angela forced out the words. “Are you ready to make that choice?”

“No.” Samantha smoothed her brown slacks. “Can I resign from this session and still keep my place for now? I want to find a way to do both.”

“I have no problem with that for this case as it doesn’t pertain to you in any way except that which we all share. We know Tim. We like Tim. We’re pissed at Tim. It’s not going to be a jury of his peers. It can’t be.”

Samantha nodded. “I agree with that too. However, as Tim’s lawyer, I have to request the jury be taken from half normals and half descendants. I request you as the judge, with a provision that you will regularly monitor the jury for fraud and intimidation.”

Angela glanced around the table. “The council will vote. You will abstain.”

“No need for a vote.” Jennifer was keeping track. As the enforcer, she had dominion over even Angela in moments like this. That’s why Angela had agreed to let her be here even though she’d had a close call. *I’m the only one who can do it right now. We need to start a training class for that.*

Angela made a fast note in her book. *Individual training classes with each type of descendant.* Like with the Eagles, she would try to cross-train as many of her people as she could. Marc would lead most of the actual training, but the plans would come from her brain and a lot of her oversight to make sure they covered everything. *This hive stuff is powerful when we're on a project.*

"It is so recorded." Jennifer kept writing. "Angela will judge. The jury will be a random pool of each demographic, evenly. In event of a tie, the judge will make the choice. I now request the law council enter its first session to decide a law."

Angela nodded at Ralph. "Name it."

"Until we find a better way, will this be the setup each time we need a trial? 50% jury pool and you as the judge?"

"Yes, on the condition that if I have to resign from the case, an alternate judge must be prechosen and able to handle the case fairly."

"The only way we can know for sure if someone is being fair is to get in their thoughts." Morgan leaned back, unhappy. "I hate it, but a descendant always has to be the judge."

Gus nodded. "Agreed."

"I agree. But it has to be people we trust to tell the truth." Grant's voice hardened. "And that has to be allowed to change if the person becomes untrustworthy."

"Agree."

Angela and everyone else waited while Jennifer put it in the official record book. That was another duty of an enforcer. They were supposed to keep a log of the events if there wasn't a Keeper in their group. William's book had been full of little details they hadn't known. Most of them were laughed at or ignored. Jennifer was doing each one she read about. It was her turn with their history. She was fascinated with testing the theories she read. Angela was looking forward to a full report when the teenager wore herself out of tests. At some point, her copies would be sent to Adrian for an official place in history.

"You may continue the meeting." Jennifer got a quick drink and leaned back. She felt fine now, but it was nice to be in a recliner with her equipment. She had it spread out around her so she didn't have to get up for anything.

"I want to pick the judges now."

Angela shook her head at Harry. "Judges get elected."

The other members scowled.

"We'll have to have elections. Mud-slinging and politics." Ralph dropped his pencil in frustration. "Half the people hating each other again."

Angela snorted, sitting down. "We have that now. It will just break off a few more splinters of our original group."

Ralph was stunned. "This is how we got the old, fractured population that had so many differences

they couldn't get along." His grin faded. "This sucks."

Angela snorted bitterly. "Now that you're caught up, I want to make something clear. If we can't fix it or replace it so it repairs the problem for good, I'm not doing it for long. I will not restart the *same shit on a different day* lives we had before the war. We either fix it, or we pull it completely." Angela unfastened her jeans button and tugged her jacket around so it covered a drafty shoulder. The breeze coming down the ship stairway was chilly to her now. "As we go through the pretrial hearing, we'll have to stop and discuss these things, make choices. Samantha will be allowed to stay, but she will not be allowed to advocate for her position."

"What if she catches something we miss?" Molly thought Samantha was smart. She wanted her here. "We need her on the council."

"She could also use something we miss against us during the trials." Gus shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't think she can do both on most cases."

"Agreed. We have to find some lawyers, let them train a few people, then slit their throats." Grant looked around as people stared at him. "What?"

Angela frowned. "We'll train them to be impartial. It will take time. For now, Samantha will do it when she can, along with a few others." Angela took a sheet from her book. "I've gathered a list for us to pick through for defense and prosecution positions. We'll have a small pool for these

moments. The camp will elect several judges. We need a little time on this one.”

“I figured it out.” Dwight hadn’t spoken yet. He’d been working on a mental thread. “We’re the new Supreme Court. That’s why only a few people know exactly who’s in this room.”

Harry didn’t like that. “We weren’t elected.”

“The Supreme Court was nominated and then Congress voted them in. That’s exactly what has happened here. Each one of you were nominated. The rest of leadership agreed you belong here. Their silence gave us consent.” Angela pointed at the door to let them know it was about to open. “We’ll do something official later. Let me get us settled first. I had hoped we’d have more time.”

Cody opened the door as the rest of the council nodded or agreed this needed to come first, but knowing the rest of leadership approved would help ease a lot of their concerns.

Kenn stepped inside. “I was told to report here now.”

Molly wished Kenn would take a minute to change the jeans that were still splattered with dried blood. *Peter’s blood. He executed him.*

Angela handed Kenn a sheet of paper. “We’ll be ready to give you a choice on one of your motions by the time you get back.”

Kenn scanned the quick list of chores to keep him busy and left without looking at anyone else. He knew who was in the room; he just didn’t care.

Cody shut the door.

Morgan got ready to search the notes he'd brought. "Which motion?"

"Tim's arrest. Kenn could only detain him. I removed Tim from the brig and stashed him."

"So he's been held without counsel, against his will, for how many hours now?" Samantha opened her notebook.

"He's been enjoying games with a camp member. He wanted to help us with an experiment. I did not arrest him. I made that clear." Angela waved a hand. "I also told him that will happen if we vote for it."

Samantha was relieved. She didn't want Tim to be mistreated. "Good. I'd like to move that the entire case be dismissed. We don't have laws against following the ways of the church. He wasn't breaking a law. The law doesn't exist."

Angela denied that. "Overruled. We have laws that exist to prevent the tragedy we experienced. All camp members know to tell someone if there's danger to us."

"Exactly. After what we've been through, he knew the choice he was making." Gus had already decided.

"She's right, though. We obey old laws when Safe Haven doesn't have something covered yet." Harry looked around. "By that standard, he didn't break the law."

"The choice of privacy is off the table, as of right now. We'll schedule another meeting for it. I want to keep us on Tim's case. Did he have to tell

us or do the old world's laws rule in the absence of our own?" Angela opened her thickest book. "Let's hear opinions, if anyone has any."

"The old world is gone. Even if we don't have a law that says priests have to tell someone when the confession is bad, the law about protecting this camp is absolute. It's like falling asleep on duty. If something happens, you get in trouble for it, too, even if it's not completely your fault." Morgan was clear on how the Eagles worked.

"Anyone else?" Angela kept them moving. She didn't need her gifts to know how this was going to end.

"One of America's basic principles was the right to religion without interference." Harry defended his friend. "Tim was obeying his calling."

"A calling he only recently adopted." Dwight shrugged. "If he'd been a priest his entire life, I might buy it. He just converted. I vote for having a trial."

"Anyone else?" Angela waited. When no one else spoke, she gave her thoughts. "I think the camp should make this choice and we'll approve it or veto it. They need to hear why Tim wants it and why Kenn doesn't. Then we have the public vote on this law, and all of them will understand what they're voting for or against."

"That's great." Harry scowled. "But what about Tim?"

Angela's voice hardened. "We can't put this off or it will have bad effects. He'll have to be arrested

and charged with the crimes he's being accused of so we can get this in place. If there's no arrest, then there's no trial. If there's no trial, there's no need to make the law and honestly, we need this settled. It's in my top ten list of changes to make before I die."

"You're against it?"

"She can't be!"

Angela sighed at Morgan's question and Harry's automatic urge to protest. "I'm afraid if I tell you my thoughts, you'll all go with that and we won't be impartial enough. You'll see how I feel when the time comes and I cast my vote."

3

"And then he died. It was awful."

Walking by, Kenn slapped the man on the back of the head. "Shut up."

Kenn could tell the rookie had put in a hard day, but he didn't let the man off the hook just because he was scratched, tired, and bruised. "Get to your next station!"

The rookie flushed as he realized he'd been caught telling stories by a senior man. The group around him fled so they didn't get in trouble too. The rookie followed them, worrying over the consequences.

Kenn saw Darren lurking in the employee hall. He kept going, assuming Darren was about to give someone the scare of a lifetime.

Darren sniggered as he caught Kenn's thought. He'd considered scaring Megan, but decided to just get her alone like he would with any other Eagle. She was serious. If he kept his distance on their runs, she might be willing to talk during downtime. *Or I can push her and see what happens.*

Megan came from the new infirmary hallway at a fast clip. She spotted Darren and stopped.

Darren stepped through the employee door. "You scored a private run from the boss if you want it."

Megan drew in a breath. *I can do this.* "Who are we killing?"

Darren chuckled. "You don't start there. We're clearing and stocking a new area before the camp knows about it. It's FND."

"Foot-in-door, right?"

Darren nodded. "Do you understand it?"

"I think so. I'm getting on the boss's good side while proving my loyalty to the dream and the Eagles by not taking credit."

"You're earning acceptance into the inner circles of Safe Haven, Megan." Darren stepped closer. "The boss said we should sleep together first."

Megan laughed, brow lifting. "I'll bet she did."

Darren smiled, sending out charm. "It would be an honor to be your relief source, if that's what you're into."

Megan blushed. "I'm not into anything yet."

“But you like me. I know you do. We have a spark.”

“So? You’re not like me now.” She looked at the floor. “I’ll pick someone else. I’m sorry.”

“Is it because you’re scared I’ll take over your life or that our differences will split us in the end?”

Megan didn’t want to answer. She forced the truth out. “My jealousy would split us up. I want to be like you, Darren, more than anything. And I’m not. Being partnered with one of you would be the death of me.” She turned toward the showers. “I’ll be right here in?”

“Five hours.”

“Got it.”

Darren watched her go, hating fate. It had finally given him what he wanted most too, and the difference was already costing him parts of a future he knew he was supposed to have.

Conner appeared at the opposite hallway entrance. “Hey, Darren? Hang around for a minute.”

Darren nodded. He leaned against the wall and concentrated on whatever was coming. Emotions could wait. Danger might be nearby.

Kenn was on the other side of the wall, listening to Darren and Megan while gathering ammunition for the recon team to take to Marc. He paused, straightening.

Darren went to the end of the hallway for a better view. He made eye contact with Kenn, then scanned the far steps. Other than the elevator, the problem had to be coming through here.

Conner came from the camp hallway with two more off duty men behind him. “Angela said we don’t get involved unless we have to. Her exact words were: stand there and think.”

Darren frowned. “About what?”

Conner shrugged. “She didn’t say. I assumed you all would know. Anyway, no weapons. Kyle is going to be point on this.”

Footsteps echoed. Angela came down the stairs and headed for the camp hallway. Kyle was on her heels. Neil walked behind her with tense steps.

Kenn figured it out a few seconds later. He finished loading the ammunition into the bags, mind racing.

Angela went by Ralph’s post. “Clear the hall, ladies and gentlemen. Clear this hall for the next three minutes.”

People hurried into their cabins, but they didn’t close the doors yet. They wanted to know if there was going to be gunplay before they shut off their first-row seats to the newest action or event.

Angela tapped on Tobias’s door. “Come on out. We’ve made a choice.”

The door opened slowly. Tobias peered out. “What was the choice?”

Angela waved.

Kyle and Neil stepped forward, firmly moving Tobias aside to get to Tim.

“Stand up. Hold out your hands.”

“You are being arrested for conspiracy, failure to notify, and nine counts of attempted murder. You

are also being charged with two counts of malicious damage to the ship. You will have a chance to review these charges and speak with a lawyer. Do you object to Samantha handling your case?"

Tim lifted his chin as the cuffs clicked over his wrists. His white collar glared at them. "I'm not saying anything until I talk to my lawyer."

Angela was proud of him; she wasn't allowed to show it. Stunned silence went through the hall as more people came to observe. The dim lights from doors opening put a spotlight on Tim as he was led out into the hall.

"Your lawyer will meet you in the brig." Kyle sent a hard look around the witnesses. "We're going to have a quiet night and get ready for another long day of work."

A few people went into their cabins so Angela knew they weren't part of anything that might happen.

Angela wasn't worried about it tonight. Kenn and the kids had done a great job of keeping the brig hall clear and proving that even though you were angry, you didn't get to react any way you want to in this camp. "You will be held in the brig until your pretrial hearing. All time you spend incarcerated will count toward any sentence you could be given for these charges." Angela stepped out of the way so the guards could lead Tim through. "You may pick one person here to come along and witness everything so both sides are being observed by an

impartial witness who will report anything they see or hear to the lawyers and judge.”

Tim hadn't been expecting that. He spotted Ralph coming up the steps. “I want Ralph.”

Ralph nodded. He wasn't happy to have to do it, but he did like it that he'd been chosen.

“Take him to the brig.” Angela motioned at Kyle.

Angela went down the steps without saying anything else.

Darren went to his cabin, mind returning to Megan. He wanted to taste her, smell her, feel her. The spark had flared and now it was burning. He needed to put it out before the run or he would end up mixing business and pleasure. Eagles weren't supposed to do that.

Darren detoured toward the female side of the hall. He slowed, swiveling to see who might be interested. Angela didn't know about the small service sector of the ship that had popped up a couple weeks ago. He doubted she would let it stand, but until she tore it down, he was using it. Only a few Eagles had been given invites. He'd been one of the first.

There weren't any men here waiting in silken draped bunks to be a relief source. Darren wasn't sure how it would go when the first one finally did get the nerve to try. He doubted the women would care. It might even give them some protection, depending on who showed up. With Samantha giving birth, Wade was too busy right now for

lessons, so the males were left with his first lesson. Few of them were working on it yet. There were other exciting things going on. They would return to the lessons when life got boring again.

Darren got smiles and hair tosses from every direction. He remembered most of the senior men were on land with Marc or about to go there. Darren grinned. “There’s only one of me. Sorry.”

Hannah had hurried here in hopes that Ivan might show up. *But this one will do.* She opened her robe.

Darren stared, breath slowing, body hardening. “That’s so beautiful.”

Darren stepped forward in a daze. “Move up on the bed.” Darren climbed in behind her and tugged the curtain shut.

Chapter Eleven

Avoid Unless Approached

1

Kenn looked up from the organized puzzle of electronics spread out around him on the floor. “Checking up on me?”

Brittani stopped near him. “Feeding time for these lower levels.”

Kenn grimaced. “Pass. Thanks.”

Brittani set a paper bag next to his knee. “You’ll want it.” She stepped inside to find Tim opening a can from the mess. “Don’t eat that.”

Brittani set her bag on the desk and began unpacking it. “Mom wasn’t in a great mood. That’s how we always knew.” Brittani handed Tim a small bag. “I made that soup for a few people a little while ago. Don’t tell.”

“Thanks.” Tim sat on the edge of the cot, holding the warm bag. “How are you?”

Brittani was surprised he would ask about her at a time like this. “Better, I think. I’m glad we’re here.”

“So am I. How are your parents adjusting?”

“They don’t say much about Lou.” Her heart squeezed. “We all miss him.”

“Is your husband helping you with that?”

Brittani shook her head. “I don’t talk about my brother with anyone.”

“Then that’s your next step.” Tim smiled at her. “Try to reach out and share something about your brother. Bring him back for that moment.”

Brittani nodded, struggling not to cry. “I will.”

Tim could tell she was restless under the grief. “Were you involved in the fight?”

“No. And neither of them will tell me what happened.” Brittani frowned. “Daryl went back to the island to provide security for Marc.”

“And Gus?”

Brittani frowned. “How would I know?”

“Just asking. I heard they both needed a medical evaluation.”

“They had a fight. It happens.”

“It was over you.”

She sighed. “Probably. They’re both fine, just bruised and rattled.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“Annoyed...protected. Loved.” Brittani proceeded toward the door, embarrassed. “I have more deliveries to make and updates to give.”

“Good night.” Tim watched her go, wishing he could ease her pain. He didn’t feel useful right now.

“That was nice of you. She needed that.”

Tim was surprised Kenn was speaking to him. He opened his mouth to explain his actions.

Kenn kicked the brig door shut and resumed working on the radio.

“Is it a good idea to put a radio right next to a jail?” Sherman had been sent to help Kenn with the radio. He knew Angela had done it to remind him that he had to get along with people he didn’t like. The halls here were being guarded by descendant kids. He was surrounded, but his problem wasn’t with magic—it was having another possible traitor onboard.

Kenn kept working. “It’s portable.”

Sherman held the tool kit and brooded. He’d tried to converse with Kenn a few times, but the angry man didn’t want to give up any details about the last two days. Sherman didn’t feel like making small talk. He wanted to be able to go back to the camp with a juicy nut. He would have company all night and tomorrow.

“Maybe you should try being interesting and then you won’t need a juicy nut.”

Sherman flushed. He dropped the toolkit and strode away.

Kenn grinned. “Was it something I said or something I read?”

The kids were all glad that Sherman was gone. They didn’t trust him.

Cate came over to Kenn. “It was wrong.”

Kenn paused. He sighed. “Yeah. Killing always is.” He resumed work.

Cate stared at him. “We’ve done that, some of us. We knew we shouldn’t, but we did it anyway. The alpha forgave us those mistakes.”

“She’s not God!” Kenn didn’t lower his voice. “When the real thing shows up, he’ll find you worshipping her and she’ll be killed. Stop it!” Kenn dropped the screwdriver and picked up the rag to clean his hands. “Go tell the boss I’m ready to turn it on and start recording.”

Cate pointed at Amy and Joey and turned back. “She has a glowy-thing inside her now.”

Kenn froze. “What is it?”

“It has a lot of names, but it’s all the same thing.”

“You make my head hurt.”

Cate snickered. “My daddy says that too.”

Kenn’s face clouded over. He’d forgotten who he was talking to. Cate was Marc’s daughter. “How’s that going?”

Cate stared at him without answering.

“That well, huh?” Kenn felt his anger finally start to fade. Kenn didn’t react to little Joey hiding in the hall next to them so he could be both alone and close to Cate. *That’s Marc’s problem. I have enough of my own.* “Anything I can do to help you?”

“Why would you? We’re not friends and my daddy hates your effing guts.”

Kenn chuckled bitterly. “There’s some truth for ya. Doesn’t mean much in the end, though. You know?”

Cate nodded. “I’ve observed many people here not fighting even when they want to. That helps me. I’m fine.” Cate forced out the next words. “Thank

you for asking. Is there something I can help you with?"

Kenn studied the uncomfortable little girl. "You don't like all this civility, do you?"

Cate shook her head and forced herself to stop there. Cody and the other kids were helping her behave correctly and she was doing well, but she would never feel it in her heart.

"What do you miss the most about being wild?"

"Fights."

Kenn had expected that. Almost all the kids who'd been held by the UN gave that answer. "I think they've scheduled a matchup. Should be in the next few days." Cate's strained expression bothered Kenn. "I'll find out if there are any relief matches happening."

"You could do it." Cate was confident of her chances against the big man. "Please?!"

Kenn was trapped. "I'm usually the one who stands there and gets beaten on. It won't go over well if you get hurt."

Cate laughed at him.

Kenn sighed. "You really are Marc's kid." He finished packing the used tools into the small kit. "Get permission from your dad first, squirt. I can take *your* anger; his scares me now."

"He's a badass."

"Don't curse."

The kid was a vision of a young Angela to him. Kenn imagined she'd been much like this. He felt even worse for adding to her bad life, but there was

little he could do now other than follow her orders and help keep her alive whenever Marc let him get that close.

Cate studied Kenn. She saw everything people said and more. It was easy to recognize that her dad was right to hate him. It was also a shock to find out that she didn't. Cate wanted to know if that was because the alpha had demanded peace or if she genuinely liked Kenn even when she knew she shouldn't.

"Let me know when you find out?" Kenn was curious about that too.

"I will."

Kenn handed the girl the toolkit. "That has to go to the tool area in the cargo hold." His last item to do had been guard duty over this hall while working on the radio. He was finished now.

Sherman came down the steps. "She said go ahead. The meeting will still be a while." He went right back up.

Kenn began activating the radio. "Here we go." He hit the final switch.

Cate frowned. She didn't like the waves that came at her when Kenn began switching channels. Static filled the hall.

The kids all backed up.

Kenn didn't like the feel either, but this radio was more powerful than anything they'd used so far. He had pieced it together from UN parts and their own. "You guys go get your next assignment. The hall's been clear for a while. Get out of here."

The other kids hurried up the stairs, laughing and racing.

Cate came over to the small table where he'd been working. She opened the garbage bag and held it while he cleaned up the mess from unpacking all the parts.

"What do you want from me?" Kenn felt her trying to dig into his mind.

"Why does Marc hate you?"

Kenn locked those thoughts. "I was a bad person before the war...and for a little while after. Don't ask what it was. You're too young to hear it."

Cate's eyes widened. She whispered. "Must be really bad if only adults can hear it."

"It is. Now get out of here. I don't even like kids."

"Whatever." Cate turned toward the door. "I'm going to visit a friend on another deck. When they come hunting for me, tell them I went down the steps, not up."

"No." Kenn frowned. "Be careful up there. People are busy."

"I'll stay out of the way." Cate hurried up the steps before anyone else came down.

"You're good with kids. That's a shock." Tim was standing at the cell door so he could see through the window in the brig door. "How did that happen?"

Kenn waited to feel that dangerous rage again, but there was just bitter disappointment. "I can't believe you didn't tell anyone."

Tim flushed at the genuine revulsion in Kenn's voice. "I'm sorry."

"But you'd do it again, right?"

Tim slowly nodded. "Confessions are protected, private, personal."

"Then don't speak to me. We're not going to chat like friends and work things out. You're not an Eagle anymore, in any way."

"You can't strip me. Only Adrian can."

"I'm his XO. I have that power, and more, with the Eagles."

"You used to."

Kenn shrugged. He didn't tell Tim there were rules he hadn't thought about until now—rules like the one Marc had used to be given entry to the Eagles back in South Dakota. "Shut up, traitor."

Tim closed his mouth, miserable.

Kenn sat on the stool to play with the radio. Angela wanted this thing to reach to America. He wanted that too.

2

"Any news yet?"

"No." Gabe entered the hot tub room and shut the door. "They all came out for a bathroom break and leg stretch, but no one spoke and they were right back in there a few minutes later. Kids kept us so far away we could only see shadows on the walls."

The hot tub room had men and women leaning against the walls with drinks and even a few

smokes. Seeing those made it clear to everyone. The last of the smoking material was going around the ship; tension was high. The land team had been through more of what Safe Haven had been fighting all along.

“It’s an important topic.” Jonny puffed on his cigar. The hot tubs were empty right now. They’d been cleaned overnight, but the Eagles didn’t feel like soaking.

“One that I don’t want to hear about.” Greg glared at the rookies and level ones, most of whom were spreading tales of their adventure with Marc. Greg was waiting for their leaving overnights to assemble on the top deck so he and the recon team could escort them to Marc. In here, he didn’t have to answer questions or finish someone else’s chore. “Downtime.”

Gabe was relieved. He hadn’t wanted to seem squeamish, but he didn’t need to keep replaying the day. *It’s one to burn and forget.*

“Is Grant joining us?” Jonny glanced around the full room and hallway.

This was the perfect place to slip in and forget everything outside those doors for a few minutes or half an hour. People who had a problem with the smoke or the company didn’t come in. This ship held a dozen other places for moments like this. A few of those were also occupied. The public wasn’t welcome in any of them. Greg doubted anyone would toss out a camp member, but it would end the moment. Everyone would go their own way,

immediately. The camp people were learning to obey the unspoken rules now, and the descendants were keeping magic to themselves unless someone needed it. The truce was holding; it might even strengthen with the partnerships Angela and Marc had arranged and were still setting up.

Gabe frowned. "I doubt Ray will let him out to play."

Jonny snickered. They all respected Ray, but his behavior over Grant was causing them to make jokes. He hadn't been this way with Dale. It was out of the ordinary.

Jonny spotted a familiar profile and smiled. "I guess he earned a playdate."

Greg studied Ray and Grant as they came through the crowd of tired, quiet men and women. There wasn't much chatter. Most of the ship was also quiet. A lot of the camp had gone to bed. The brig was covered by two guards. The mess was closing; the entertainment floor was about to be in full swing. One of those businesses was currently hosting a party in Ralph's honor. Most of the people in this room had come from there. They'd paid their respects, then come here to be with each other and not talk about their day.

Ray didn't like the flashes he caught. He refused to ask any questions as soon as he recognized the mood. It wasn't as bad as when someone wanted to know how he'd survived the mountain. He never answered. He walked away to keep from thinking about any of those hard, snowy days. This mood

also couldn't match the ugliness of the rest stop when Angela had been shot either, but Ray was ranking it in the top five bad Safe Haven moments.

Island Eagles nodded at them, but they didn't invite Ray or Grant to stand with them. They were sticking with those who'd gone through it too so they didn't have to discuss it.

Ray took the Wild Turkey from Greg as he went by, tilting it up. He handed it off, coughing, and kept going. "Thanks!"

Ray had fought in the last big battle. He was still a hero right now and he was enjoying it like the other Eagles were, but he didn't force his company on anyone even though they would have tolerated it.

Zack waved. "Room over here." He was off duty too and stealing a few minutes away from Allison, who was hounding him to rest. He kept telling her he'd been healed and felt fine, but she didn't want to hear it. Zack didn't mind; he enjoyed having someone nag him because they cared, but he needed a few minutes of peace before he was able to tolerate another helping of it.

Jonny got up from the corner stool and joined that center lounge table too. It was cramped, forcing them to sit close enough for their knees to touch.

"Sorry." Grant moved his leg back toward Ray.

Jonny sent an invitation in his smile. "You have long legs. Gotta put 'em somewhere."

Grant stared at the warm tone. *Is he for real?*

Ray's head turned. He studied Jonny, brows coming together.

Jonny gestured at Zack. "Surprised you aren't with your boys."

Zack snorted. "Greg waved them over. They had a good day."

"That's great, right?"

"Of course." Zack frowned. "It's also odd. They know I want to ask how their day went. They don't want to answer."

"We shouldn't be talking about this." Ray didn't want to intrude. Downtime was supposed to be for letting it go. "Anyone going for a drink with the boss?"

A few heads nodded.

Grant smiled. "We could have a dance and a drink, and then fall asleep in the terrible chairs outside the law office. Might get to see one of them before the kids attack."

Ray snickered. "Funny."

Grant knew Ray was interested in legal moments and their outcomes. Grant also knew why. He stiffened as something brushed his leg. He moved over again.

Ray sighed. "Would you like a drink now? After I throw Jonny through that glass door, we'll take a relaxing walk to the brig."

Grant tensed.

Jonny made a face, hand coming up. "What?"

Ray looked over, leaning on the table. “It’s a bold bitch who cops a feel while I’m two feet away.”

Jonny flushed. He struggled to find an answer; he went for a lie. “I thought he wanted me to.”

Grant saw Ray’s fist clench. “Uh... Should I move?”

Ray nodded. “Six inches straight back. And go!”

Grant jerked back as Ray leaned over and punched Jonny in the throat.

Jonny grabbed his neck, gasping. He struggled to get in a full breath.

“Stay calm and it’ll ease up over the next few hours.” Ray held up a finger at the shocked witnesses. “We could use a couple beers over here.”

Greg laughed. He waved at Ritchie. “You heard the man.”

Ritchie scanned Jonny’s red face and teary cheeks. “And maybe a medic?”

Jonny sucked in air. “No. I’m. Fine.” He coughed, eyes watering again.

Gabe handed him his beer.

Jonny took a small sip to soothe his throat. It felt like glass shards were stuck in the flesh.

Greg had felt something coming, but he never would have expected Ray to be involved. He hid a grin. *Ray’s not afraid to fight for what he wants. He fits right in with the rest of us.* Greg’s mood dropped a level. *Now we need to know if Grant does. Is he*

one of us or just another one trying to slide through, like Kenn used to do and like Tracy wants to do?

Theo entered and shut the door. He scanned, clearly hoping to find himself alone. His face fell.

Greg waved.

Theo reluctantly went toward Greg. He wasn't in the mood to talk and act like life was fine. *That island isn't safe!*

Descendants turned to glare at him.

Theo stopped and turned toward the door. There was no way he could keep it out of his mind right now. He needed to be alone. He left.

Debra jumped as the door opened.

Theo saw who it was. Relief flashed in his eyes. Then they clouded over. He didn't want to frighten her with the truth. *I need someplace I can call my own.*

Debra signed. *Cargo hold?*

Theo considered it. Then he nodded, smiling. "Thank you."

Debra stepped forward. She slid her titties along his arm as she hugged him and pressed her lips to his.

Desire flooded them both.

Theo kissed her softly, the way she liked it. He nuzzled her cheek. "Can I come to your room tonight?"

Debra shook her head, stepping back. *I'll come to yours. It'll be late.*

Theo smiled at her. "Come when you can. You're always welcome." He'd decided being her

relief source was better than someone else getting that honor.

Debra went down the next steps, smiling happily. She saw the door to the law office open. Nine yawning, groaning, stiff men and women exited and went toward their cabins or next chores.

Debra turned her back so she wouldn't know. She trusted herself, but there were people on this ship who could easily force it from her. She was far from the strongest descendant at anything. *But Samantha helped me a lot. I'll practice until she's recovered and then we'll resume our lessons. I have to be good at something or I'll never be important to these people and I want that more than anything, even Theo.*

3

“Shut that door and do a count now that everyone's here.” Marc stood near the center fire, scanning the long, narrow barn while Shawn made sure everyone was inside. He counted exits. *Three windows and two main doors—one at each end.* “Look for hatches again. Double checking is good math.”

The barn wasn't made for this. Marc knew they were uncomfortable. He didn't openly teach them tricks to ease that. He handled his own needs and the smarter ones copied him. The senior men helped the others; that's how leadership worked. He got

that now. The chain of command mattered. Without it, how would they ever organize an offensive?

Marc knew Angela had already secured the ship for the night. He'd felt her shield go up and their connection go dark. Neither of them liked it, but they'd agreed this was the safest way for each group to spend the night. Anyone outside their shields was on their own. It would run through their energy, but the shields weren't being attacked, so they would last longer. Only a few of Safe Haven's people were able to hold a shield overnight. Marc knew Angela was working on that in her private testing, like she was with the lessons on going dim. She was covering those who already had aptitude first. *She's preparing teachers and trainers in all this stuff. I just have to make sure it's implemented.*

Marc lifted his shield, tightening it around the barn like a glove. He also brought down the mind shield he was perfecting when he and Angie dream walked.

Marc inhaled and caught salt. He wasn't sure if that was from the barn or the layer in his nose. He knew he'd be smelling salt for a long time to come. *This is why I didn't join the Navy.*

"We're all in." Shawn lowered the bar on the door, locking them in. They'd just taken a bathroom break. Before that, they'd brought in everything they wanted close as the sun set through the trees. Night had fallen fast after that. They'd hurried. The island even sounded different now. The waves crashed harder. The animals were louder. Their

voices carried farther. It had made them all eager to get under cover. Now that the group of twelve was inside a building with walls and doors, they felt better.

Shawn smiled at Pam and wondered what the kids were doing right now. Missy and Joey were getting along well and both adjusting. Missy was quieter since her brush with death. And Joey talked more since his. Shawn thought the blatant differences were a vivid contrast and a reminder that no two people ever handled things the same mentally, and it only happened physically when they'd been trained or brainwashed.

Missy's on duty over the boss. Joey is following Cate. Pam smiled back. I'm doing regular checks.

“Pick a spot to crash, get a dinner pack from the load Jeff’s team brought out. If you smoke, be sure you put it out all the way. It’s dry in here. This barn will go up like a match.” Marc eyed the center fire as he spoke. “Keep track of that too.” The ceiling was high enough; he doubted it would be an issue, but it was still smart to be careful.

Jeff opened the kits with the food Angela had sent from the mess. Everyone was ready for one of their cook’s hearty meals. The smell of something scorched filled the air as people opened their cans.

Jeff took a closer sniff and recoiled. “Maybe we got the wrong packs.”

Shawn chanced a quick bite. He grimaced as soon as his tongue touched it. Swallowing was hard.

The rest of the group forced themselves to try it.

Marc shuddered. He quickly spat it out and capped his can. He rolled it toward the door. “That’s our garbage pile. If your lid pops, you bag it in the morning.”

Eagles immediately capped their cans and rolled them. The pile grew.

Greg tossed too hard. He knew as soon as he let it go. The can smacked into a line already there and popped. Burnt Tuna Helper spilled onto the ground. The scent gathered above the pile and hung there, daring someone to get close.

Shawn laughed. “That’s gonna suck by morning. You might want to handle it now.”

Greg went to do that even though he’d just gotten here and needed time to catch his breath. He could barely tolerate it already. Eight hours of sitting there would make his stomach turn.

Marc dug through his personal kit. “Pot luck. Toss something in.” He pitched in the first two bags of stale chips and followed it with a stash of energy bars he’d planned to leave on site in the morning.

People began doing the same. The pile quickly grew.

“Answer a question correctly and pick an item.” Marc looked around. “That work for everyone?”

Most of them nodded. The rest were scanning the pile that was still growing.

“We’ll start in a minute. I want security volunteers first. Four hour shifts in the loft and at the door.”

Marc picked four rookies and waved them to their posts. Then he sat on a stack of dusty hay bales. “Who knows why the food’s so bad tonight? It’s the same cooks, mostly.”

Daryl grunted. “Her mom is pissed. So it’s Brittani’s fault.” Daryl grinned.

Marc chuckled. “You can let her know. Pick an item. Next question. Why am I doling out the pot luck items this way?”

“To be fair.”

“Because we don’t have enough for everyone.”

“Because you know we’ll trade after we get something and we’ll go to sleep hungry but happy.” Shawn yawned.

Marc kept going. “Care to elaborate?”

Shawn shrugged. “You’re bonding, trying to win us over. Making sure we’re happy with you on runs is a big deal. I just don’t know why you’re telling everyone.”

Marc grew serious. “Because honesty matters. I think if Adrian had told you from the beginning that he was being forced to turn in Safe Haven, many of you could have forgiven him and maybe even let him keep leadership. I always thought he had too many secrets. And I decided I wouldn’t be that way unless there was no other choice. I want you to know what I’m doing.”

“Okay.” Daryl cleared his throat. “I think I speak for the seniors when I ask, why do you want our trust, our loyalty?”

“There are a lot of reasons. Some are not so good, but none of them are bad. It doesn’t cross Angela and no one has to die.” Marc glanced around. “I can’t go to war with men I don’t trust and who don’t trust me. I’ve done this once already for this camp. I know what it will take for us to be successful. We have the strength and probably the firepower. We’ll train to gain the skill. What we can’t fix yet, are the fractures over the issues we’ve had.”

Marc gave them more truth, hoping they were ready to hear it. “Adrian ran Safe Haven a certain way because he planned for the outcomes. He was a master at getting people to do what he needed, vote the way he led. My time in his camp before it all went to hell was rough, but I respected it and I understood it. I’d like us to try that again, without the lies between us.” Marc took a drink of the beer Shawn handed him.

Shawn went to the cooler and began opening more and passing them out in the silence.

“Enough of that.” Marc gestured at the pile. “The next pick goes to anyone who can tell me where Dog is without using a gift. Don’t cheat. I’m listening.”

“He went roaming an hour ago when he thought we were safe and occupied. Then he went to the ship.” Shawn had been there when Dog took off after a butterfly and said he’d use the bridge to get back. He lifted a beer and popped the top. “I’ll get my item from the leftovers. I’m good right now.”

“Something’s outside, coming straight at us from the south.”

Marc and a few others hurried up the loft ladder to look for themselves at the rookie’s warning call.

The feeling rippled through the ranks until everyone who wasn’t peering through a window or a crack was busy checking their weapons.

“Damn.” Marc used his glasses, heart protesting. “It’s another one like earlier.” He sighed. “I’ll find out what Angela wants us to do.”

Shawn nudged the rookie from the window and then got his rifle out.

Marc frowned. “It’s not a zombie. She’s not going to give that order. Hear me now. No zombies.”

Marc’s radio crackled. “If you can’t make contact and establish communication, avoid unless approached. We’ll find their base and make a call once we get settled.”

“Copy.” Marc was glad he didn’t have to interact with the tall, thin man in the trees, staring at the barn. “Everyone stand down. I want a senior man up here.” Marc returned to the fire and their fun, but his mind stayed on the residents who weren’t zombies but also weren’t human anymore either. The one outside now didn’t seem aggressive. The woman today had been drawn to the scent of blood, but before that, she hadn’t been aggressive either. Marc didn’t know the fine details of the recon team’s encounter yet, but he suspected there had also been a trigger. Whatever was wrong with

the islanders, they had different stages. *Maybe one of the stages will be awareness and then we can find out what the hell happened here.*

Marc glanced up to see Kendle's face vanish from a window. He didn't mention it. If Kendle ran into the man and had problems, they would know. Hopefully, she would avoid him too. Marc didn't send her that order. He didn't want to have contact with her. *But if she screams for help, I'll be the first one through the door. It's not because I care for her. It's because that's my nature. I rescue damsels in distress and everyone else who needs it. It's who I am, and I like that. It's not going to change.*

4

Angela paused in the hallway and sank down on a stool someone had left out. The council was done for the night. They wanted another meeting while pretrial investigations were happening. They hadn't decided on anything else yet. It was almost 1a.m.; she was exhausted. The ship was quiet, their patients were all stable, and Tim's freedom was still undecided. "How'd it go?"

Tobias didn't look away from the chess game he was playing against Daniella on the other side of the wall. "Interesting. Can I ask a question before I update you?"

Angela tried to stretch the kink out of her spine. "Shoot."

"Why did you send me a normal?"

She was ready for that question. “Because it’s not magic. It’s brains and understanding what makes people tick. Tim’s got the heart for that. I wanted to see if he has the brains.”

“What’s gonna happen to him?”

“He’ll represent the new law that comes from this, be it yea or nay.” Angela wanted to crawl into the cabin and snuggle under the covers next to Anna, who appeared to be sleeping comfortably. The waves of exhaustion were catching up to her. “Well?”

“It went better than I expected in the observation department. I’d say he has the brains.” Tobias frowned. “It went worse than expected in the honesty area. He avoids truths about people because he doesn’t want to see their flaws.”

“So we need someone who can acknowledge any flaw in their fellow man, even if it’s a mate or family member.” Angela stifled a yawn. “Keep going.”

Tobias moved his queen. “Check.” He looked at Angela. “Send me a normal who hates magic. My word, I’ll be careful not to restart anything.”

“I’ll consider it. Tell me why.”

“They don’t know I’m always reading them. I get more honesty without using up my energy. I’m not a young man anymore.”

Angela assumed it would be that way for all of them at some point. She’d already been warned how rough the power was on their fragile bodies. *And our minds.* “Ralph gave me your note. Waves of

healing seem like a good idea, but I won't do that until I have to." Most of the camp didn't know the kids were locked. The kids had agreed to the locks so they didn't have to be targets all the time. Jennifer had mentioned that repeatedly. For the kids who didn't care if they were targets, she'd reminded them their loved ones were in the crossfire because of them. Jennifer hadn't felt bad for it; she'd been relieved. Autumn didn't need to use her gifts. She needed time to be a kid. Angela had agreed completely.

Tobias frowned as Daniella captured his queen with her knight. "Until, not unless."

Angela sighed tiredly. "I haven't seen anything. It's a logical conclusion."

"Better safe than sorry has always been an excellent creed." Tobias slid his rook forward. "Check."

Daniella snatched it up with her bishop.

"Damn game!" Tobias stood up, stretching. "My mind won't let me search ahead. I play this damn game with her, and I never get better at it. When we golf, they get better. I don't understand."

Daniella began resetting the board. There was no way he could win now.

Tobias tugged the blanket over Anna's shoulder, then came back to the table. "You move first this time."

Angela still hated it that his wives were so quiet. She'd barely heard them speak first at all since

picking them up at the detention center. “How are they?”

Tobias stared at Anna as she slept. “Better. Calmer. A little sad.”

Angela nodded. “Being without our witch hurts us. We miss them.”

Daniella got up and went into the bathroom.

Tobias sighed, coming over to stand in the doorway. “She’s so smart. She’s better than me, but I came with the sister.”

Angela hadn’t thought of it that way. “Is there anything you need or want?” She stood up and moved closer.

“Nah. You’re doin’ good by us, kid. Go have that beer if you can make it down there without falling asleep. I have extra energy to burn if you’d like—”

Tobias froze as she wrapped an arm around his neck and leaned her head against his. The drowning sensation was over in seconds. She backed up, then turned and walked away, swaying slightly.

Tobias yawned so hard his jaws cracked.

Daniella came from the bathroom. “New game?”

Tobias turned the chair so he could spread his legs, kicking the door shut. “How about some love and then a nap?”

Chapter Twelve

Skipped Levels

1

“**Y**ou can come back in now.”

Kyle entered the room, glaring.

Terry hurried out, unable to take Kyle’s thick disapproval.

Jennifer chuckled. “It’s just a routine exam.” The patients around them were all sleeping or trying to through their bad dreams. Jennifer could feel how restless they were.

Kyle grunted. He didn’t remind her it was an exam of her personal parts by men who weren’t really trained professionals.

Morgan tapped on the door and came in. He’d refused to do her exam. “We’ll have test results sometime tomorrow, I think, but you’re not dilated at all. Things seem fine.”

Kyle rubbed Jennifer’s wrist. “That’s great.”

Jennifer shut her eyes, shuddering. “Thank you!”

Morgan left them alone, also eager to escape Kyle’s oppressive attitude. He understood, but Safe Haven had to have a medical staff and they had to be trained. Still, it had to be hard letting men you’d served with put their hands on your wife.

“All the medical reports have been good.” Jennifer stood from the bed and dropped the paper gown.

Kyle’s head turned; his eyes darkened.

Jennifer knew it wasn’t passion. She had bruises from this morning’s hell. “They’ll fade in a few days.”

“Why doesn’t our healing cover everything?”

Jennifer shrugged, pulling on her jeans. “We assume it goes to the area that needs the most help and there isn’t enough left for minor injuries like bruises and scrapes.”

“But it always happens, even if the healer is fully charged.”

“Always?”

Kyle nodded. “The Eagles have been studying some things.” He frowned again. “Especially the medics.”

“I’m not sure.” Jennifer tugged the jeans up and fastened them, feeling that they were a bit snugger than they had been yesterday. “Angela might know.”

“We’ve asked. She doesn’t.”

Jennifer pulled on her shirt, then sat to fight with her shoes. The broken laces were being a pain. Kyle had gotten her a new pair, but she hadn’t put them in yet. “What about Marc?”

Kyle shook his head. “Didn’t think he would have new information.”

“You might be surprised.” Jennifer drew in a breath. “Adrian would know.”

Kyle's face iced over. "No."

Jennifer shrugged, hands flying over her laces. "Your choice, but it's a poor Eagle who doesn't get all the information because he doesn't like the source."

Kyle chuckled at her attempt to guilt him into it. "You're gonna be a legendary mom. You have that tone just right."

Jennifer laughed. "Autumn doesn't fall for it either. Works perfectly on little Roy."

"I'll help him with that."

Jennifer smiled. "You've been great with him. He loves you."

"Roy's a good kid." Kyle was happy they'd expanded their family.

"What time is it?" Jennifer couldn't remember where she'd left her watch.

"About 3 a.m." He opened the door when she moved toward it. "Off duty now?"

Jennifer nodded. "I recorded the meetings and then helped the medics do updates on our radiation survivors. They insisted on ending with me because of this morning." Jennifer's hand went to her stomach. "We're okay."

Kyle guided her down the hall, forcing a nod to the medic who'd made him wait in the hall while he did the exam.

Terry let out a sigh of relief. No one wanted to be on Kyle's bad side, especially since he'd dropped Kenn with one shot. Kyle and Daryl were the official badasses again.

Harry was sleeping now to take over at dawn. Then Terry planned to do the same. Angela had sent them rookie medics to help today. Terry assumed she would do the same tomorrow, but the rookies couldn't handle overnight medical point duty yet. They just didn't know enough, not even Ed, who was currently studying in his bunk.

Kenn nodded to them from Tonya's room. The Marine was on his sleeping bag right inside the door so anyone who went in had to step over him.

Dog had come back to guard his cats and Tonya. He didn't like sleeping on the island. He was curled up right outside the door, also blocking it. He planned to join Marc as soon as the sun rose.

“How are the survivors?”

Jennifer sighed. “Most of them are doing well. A few have lingering issues. A couple are showing signs of problems with bodily systems. We may need to restart the cancer treatments before Conner's ready. The medics are afraid they won't know how to handle it.”

Kyle cleared his throat. “We have the best medics in the world. They'll figure it out.”

The listening medics almost pissed themselves. The mood in the new medical area went through the roof.

Jennifer smiled as Kyle led her to the elevator. “That was nice of you.”

Kyle got her inside and hit the button. His tense face faded. Love took its place.

Jennifer blushed. “I'm fine.”

Kyle gently hugged her, heart thumping.

Jennifer held onto him and tried not to think about the horror of the day. *Soon, I'll sleep and it will fade away like all the others.*

Guards looked over as the elevator dinged and the door slid open.

Kyle nodded at Ian and Allison, who had duty over the camp hall, but he didn't break their embrace. He kept an arm around Jennifer as he took her to their cabin.

The hallways had stacks of boxes and bags along the walls. Kyle read the labels as they went by and understood it was for the upcoming weddings of Ralph and Daisey and also Charlie and Tracy. Ralph had organized people into chores while they waited on Angela to give them other work. Kyle didn't know if the weddings had been officially scheduled yet, but he assumed they would be this week.

Francesca stood up from the chair outside their door. She flashed Jennifer a big smile. "All's quiet. Thank you again."

Jennifer knew Francesca felt awful about letting a stranger take Marc's kids. She wasn't going to do it again, but she needed the chance to prove that. Jennifer had put her on duty outside their cabin. Kyle had agreed as long as the kids had another caregiver.

Bernice opened the door and came out. Her daughter was by her side.

"Any trouble?"

Bernice snorted. “Little sweethearts. They crashed half an hour ago.”

“Thanks. You can both go sleep now.” Jennifer went in to check on the kids.

Bernice regarded Francesca. “Snack time?”

Francesca laughed. “You lead the way. I’ll block interruptions.”

Kyle was glad the new woman was making friends. It had surprised him when Jennifer suggested Bernice as a babysitter, but it had been a solid choice. Bernice loved kids and they loved her. *She seems to have the perfect personality. So why don’t I really trust her?*

“Maybe it’s because she’s a female.” Jennifer grinned to let him know she was joking.

Kyle chuckled. “Maybe. That makes it your fault, right?”

Jennifer ran a hand over Roy’s wild hair and pulled the blanket up to his shoulders. “I’ll take the blame this time. Next time, you get it.”

“Deal.” Kyle did a fast sniff and relaxed. “Wow. She even changes diapers.”

Jennifer snickered. “I told her she could leave that for you.”

Kyle loved it that Jennifer felt well enough to joke around; it also bothered him. *She needs to rest.*

Jennifer nodded, amusement fading. “I almost died today. Sleep sounds good.”

Kyle flinched at the words. He shut and locked the door and hurried to help her get the bed ready.

“Is that it?”

Charlie nodded tiredly. He was in the mess, getting Conner up-to-date for shift change. “She’s sleeping as far as her guard knows.”

“Cool.” Conner stored the papers in his book and flashed a smile at Candy. She was waiting for him at a small corner table. They were going to have a snack together and then she was going to nap until it was time for her to help Daisey. She’d told him she might try to be a den mother. Conner was just glad the nesting stage seemed to have eased. He didn’t think it was good for her to be working so hard when she was only a few months from her delivery date.

Conner tensed as a familiar shadow fell over the counter.

Charlie greeted Tracy with a warm smile. “Join us?”

Conner stood up as Tracy sat. “Excuse me.”

Charlie felt the wave of hostility and frowned. “What’s up?”

Conner didn’t want to cause a scene, but he refused to lie. *You’re with a gold digger. She’s not one of us.*

Candy and Tracy exchanged smiles and acted like they weren’t listening.

Charlie stared in surprise. “What?”

Conner sighed, turning away. *You heard me. She can't be trusted and if you stay with her, no one will trust you either because of her.*

Charlie didn't respond as Conner joined Candy. The good mood fell flat.

Tracy put a hand over Charlie's. "You look good. This suits you."

Charlie melted under her warm tone. "Let's go find a closet to hide in so I can steal a kiss."

Tracy blushed. She stood up and let Charlie lead her from the room. She didn't look at Conner or think about what she'd heard.

Conner felt her blocking, but there was little else he could say to Charlie that might make a difference. *He has to learn on his own.* It was up to him to see her for what she was.

"Are you okay?"

Conner nodded, fighting the urge to rub Candy's wrist. "We're all good. Eat that cinnamon roll. The babies need the sugar."

Candy obeyed, feeling loved and well-looked after.

Conner continued to stew over Charlie and Tracy, but he didn't find a solution he could live with.

3

"We need to talk about what happened."

Ray took off his jacket and hung it on the hook behind their cabin door.

Grant stared at Ray. "I mean it."

Ray sat on the edge of his bed and began to untie his laces.

Grant frowned. "Raymond."

Ray's head snapped up.

Grant smiled softly. "We have to talk."

Ray pushed his boots off, sighing. "I'm sorry."

"That's not it." Grant sat next to Ray on the bed. "Do you love me, Ray?"

"You know I do."

"Then tell me the problem."

Ray let it all out in one ugly sentence. "I'm not sure we have a future."

Grant stared in shock. "What?"

Ray turned so he was facing Grant. "I think we should see other people."

"You do."

Ray nodded, forcing his voice to remain calm. "Others are interested and you should be sure."

Grant understood in a flash. "You're letting me go so you can be sure I want you and only you."

Ray stood up. "I'll move my things out tomorrow."

"No, you won't." Grant laid back on the bed. "I have another way I can prove my commitment to you."

Ray watched Grant's hands, breathing increasing. He wanted to remain strong, but he'd never felt desire like this.

Grant smiled. "Turn down the light and come to my bed."

Ray did.

4

Marc snapped out of a doze. He blinked. “Okay. Time to sleep.”

He straightened, then forced his legs to hold him as he stood. The barn and people swayed drunkenly, then righted into blurry shapes he recognized. Then his sight cleared into the perfect match he was used to.

That was odd. I feel like I just sobered up in layers.

Marc peered toward the guard in the loft. Almost everyone else was settling in to sleep. A few of them had passed out a while ago. Greg and Ivan had crashed on either side of him. Both men were currently snoring. They’d outdrunk him, but he’d outlasted them.

The fire was almost gone, but Marc didn’t plan to stoke it up. He was about to crash hard. He didn’t want a shout of fire to be what jerked him from sleep.

Only a few people peered up as Marc walked by.

Shawn was dressed in all black and blended in perfectly with the loft shadows. Marc tried to be quiet and not trip as he went up the ladder to that top deck. The smell of an island at night filled his nose. Salt once again rushed in right after.

Shawn didn't look away from the window. He recognized Marc's light steps. He knew who it was. Marc looked out the window and saw the townsman was still there. His stomach rippled.

Shawn nodded. "That's exactly it."

"He's closer. When did he move?"

"During the joke session. The louder you guys got, the closer he got."

Marc had quieted them down about halfway through. Now he was glad he had. At the time, his headache just wouldn't take it. He'd used the new place rule to remind them the island wasn't cleared yet.

"He isn't like the others. He's dangerous."

"Why hasn't he attacked or left?"

"No idea." Shawn nodded toward the light in the distance. "I think I saw another one out there, but it might have been Adrian's people."

"Final assessment?"

"We're not done dealing death, even way the fuck out here."

Marc smiled. "It feels good to hear someone else say what I'm thinking." Marc couldn't view boat lights or hear their camp, but he knew they were there. It was comforting and a concern. He didn't like being away from Angela and the kids.

Shawn chuckled. "Be careful. You may unleash a monster." His humor faded as he resumed studying the townsman who was twenty feet into the trees. "Or we already did."

Marc frowned. "Someone else did this."

“We opened those hatches, Marc.” Shawn’s voice was haunted. “We cleared most of this island. Jeff’s team cleared the rest. Do you think we missed these people somehow?”

Marc shook his head. “No.”

“Then that leaves the tunnel. They were here the whole time, under us—listening to us talk and walk overhead. And then we broke the hatches. We showed them the light, *the exits*.”

Marc shivered. “You can hold back a little, okay?”

Shawn grunted. “Gotta get it out. In all my time as a member of this camp, I’ve never been more spooked. I faced Cesar and his guerillas, Joel, and our own government.” Shawn let out a ragged breath. “But that single man down there is...”

“Dangerous.”

Shawn nodded. “We’ve been lucky so many times, man. This place is different. It’s small, but it’s wild. And we’re all rusty from that hell cruise. Now we’re here and we’re already working on claiming another chunk of hard ground.”

“You need a break.” Marc thought about it. “You may be the only senior man who hasn’t taken a willing break. You’re definitely due.”

Shawn glanced at the barn floor, where Pam was snoring lightly in a corner. Shawn hoped she didn’t have a hangover. He suspected quite a few of the men and women now sleeping in the smoky, garbage-dotted room would feel rough when they woke. “Like a vacation?”

Marc shrugged. “Angela will know what to call it, but yes. You’ll come back in a couple weeks, or if you decide you’re ready.”

Shawn realized Marc had just given him permission to retire if he needed to. “One year is too short to get the full benefits.”

Marc wanted to laugh. He gave more truth instead. “In an apocalypse, one year can be as hard as any ten. You’ve been in almost every fight and you’ve saved a lot of lives. Take your break, or retirement, well-deserved.” Marc retreated. “Just be ready to remove the locals when we go out in the morning. The boss will want us to treat them like wild animals that have to be protected. Then she’ll try to help them. If she can’t, we’ll get the order to remove them. All of that will happen fast. She’ll want it done before the camp gets out here.”

Shawn thought Marc wasn’t giving Angela enough credit, but he didn’t say so. “Guess the cover story won’t include the word zombies anywhere.”

Marc scowled. “No zombies!”

Shawn tensed as the man below looked straight up at the window.

Marc checked his watch. It was the dark of night. Taking a team out there now would be rougher than it had to be and possibly more dangerous. “I’ll be up at five. If he’s still there, we’ll make contact.”

Shawn nodded, turning back to his set stare at the townsman. It would be broken only by sweeps of the darkness. “Night, Boss.”

Angela wanted to go to bed. She was able to, but it didn't feel right with Marc off ship. She'd gone to the entertainment floor and skipped the beer while having a good time visiting with people who needed her attention. She'd solved several small issues and made a few of them happy. It had been nice. She'd also picked a crew to start clearing the pirate ships tomorrow, though that was only if Marc didn't need those people to finish their basecamp.

"You should go to bed now." Charlie had been on point for hours and each time he ran into her somewhere, she looked rougher. He put the updates at her feet.

"I will."

Charlie paused. "What did Leeann ask Doug? She tried not to think about it, but I caught it anyway."

Angela saw no reason to lie. "I asked if he had room for one or two more good souls. She didn't get through."

Charlie blanched. He turned away without responding, sorry he'd asked.

Angela yawned. She was in the chair next to the bed so she didn't fall asleep before she was finished. Some of the updates were important and needed answers tonight.

Angela stared at the shutting door for a moment. Kyle's note had told her about Tracy, but she'd

already known the woman was like that. It was what she'd tried to warn Charlie about and he hadn't wanted to hear it. Now, he'd figured out how to use it to his advantage. "I don't know if I should shake his hand or swat him on the ass."

Angela yawned again and wiped her eyes. She scanned the remaining stack of books from the island. The recon team had done a great job of bringing back logs, journals, and notebooks. There were at least ten of them. It was all she had left after Charlie's updates.

Angela scanned those and found nothing she needed to handle right now. She put them away and then leaned her head back. "Just a few minutes, and then we'll start on the last stack." Her kids were next door with Monica and Molly. She had a rare minute to herself, but she was too tired to enjoy it.

The sound of her guards outside the door was a comfort. The night shift had taken over all posts and the only sound other than light steps in halls was the soft sloshing of water against the boat and the island.

Her foot relaxed and bumped into the stack. The top notebook fell onto her ankle.

Pitcairn Population Study

An examination of the levels and effects

6

Megan flinched as she opened her door and found Darren standing there. "What the hell?!"

“It’s 4am.” Darren couldn’t help the warmth in his voice. “Good morning.”

Megan felt her body start to respond. She shut it down with a nasty tone. “Why are you pushing so hard?”

Darren faltered. “This is how senior men pick mates. When a rookie female shows interest in the job first and everything else second, they start paying attention.”

“You’re trying to claim me before someone else can?”

He flushed. “I normally just observe the connections. This time, there’s a spark for me. I’m fighting for what I want.”

Megan found it hard to be mad with his warm brown eyes twinkling at her in hopeful honesty. “I’ll need time to think it through again. Back off.”

Darren nodded. He retreated a step and hefted his kit onto his shoulders. “All set?”

“I think so. I’ve never done this, so I brought a variety of items.”

“I have it covered if you picked wrong. That is part of the test, though.”

Megan frowned. “Test?”

“Of course. It’s a real run, and it’s important.”

Megan’s frown grew. “The boss knows about us already. That’s why you made that joke.”

Darren smiled. “We’ve been preapproved. I hope that helps with your thought processes.”

Megan proceeded toward the stairs, embarrassed. “Run first, drama second.”

Darren followed her. The ship was silent around them. It was still an hour before dawn. Charlie was prowling the halls, making everyone feel like Marc was here. It allowed restful sleep for many people who wouldn't have otherwise gotten much. Darren was surprised Charlie had known to do that. He'd already checked in with the teen so he could let Angela know they'd started their run.

Megan heard voices as they neared the top deck. She ducked into the thin shadows so she wasn't spotted by the guards around the bridge.

Darren took the lead, showing her which shadows to use and when to move so she wasn't noticed. They made it all the way to the boat ramp.

Ritchie turned from a scan of the pontoon bridge and found Darren and Megan standing right behind him.

Megan grabbed his hand before he could draw his gun.

Darren slapped his hand across Ritchie's mouth to muffle the shout.

Ritchie gasped in air, eyes wide, heart pounding. He stepped out of Darren's hand as the other guards laughed quietly. "Get out of here!"

Darren snickered as he led Megan toward the ladder they'd attached to the pontoon bridge. "I love this job."

Megan nodded. "It's worth dying for."

“Adrian!”

Adrian didn't want to wake up. He was exhausted, sore, hungry. He was on the ground; it was chilly right before dawn. He was also damp in places. The tree above had dripped. The day was already starting out miserable. The chilly island air brought bumps to his skin and unfamiliar grunts and groans to his ears. *Something else is waiting for me—something no one should ever have to face.*

“Don't move yet.” Kendle whispered. “And don't speak. Your snores were stirring them up. They don't care about my voice as much.” She'd been calling softly for all of them. “I couldn't yell. That does get their attention.”

Adrian stared in horror at the filthy locals lying around and in their camp. He counted ten of them. *Group warmth.* Adrian shuddered. *Is everyone awake and ready to run?*

“Quinn just woke up. Give him a minute to adjust.” Kendle was glad they'd woken. She was completely creeped out. The locals were gathering. They'd spotted Adrian's people lying on the ground and joined right in. As tired as they were, none of them had noticed. *Does that mean these people aren't a threat?*

Kendle saw green eyes stumbling toward the pile. *Danger! We have to go right now. Stay away from the green!* Kendle stood, knife coming out.

Adrian and the others rose right behind her and leapt over the jerking, snoring, twitching bodies that had taken over their camp while they slept.

Adrian shoved his kit over Sadie's arm, then pressed the map into her hand. "Get to the bunker. Clear it!"

Sadie was used to following orders on demand. She backed into the trees as she unfolded the map.

"Shit!" Quinn yanked his leg free of the islander who was digging his fingers in, trying to split it open like it was food. Quinn yanked harder, jostling the sleepy man and the rest of the pile.

Kendle saw them start to wake, bodies twitching, hands coming up. "Come on!"

Quinn punched the man twice, fast, and yanked again.

The islander growled, eyes opening. He clutched Quinn's leg harder and tried to roll.

"Ahh!" Quinn felt the bone start to give.

Kendle ran around the other side and pulled Quinn's arm over her neck. She dragged him over the other waking islanders, pulling him free with her strength and the cooperation of a different angle.

Adrian and Tommy shoved two rising locals into the others and took off running behind Kendle and Quinn.

A wide shadow appeared in the path ahead of her. Kendle's heart froze as she recognized the woman who'd run the store. "Mary Jo?"

The clerk ran at her, mouth opening.

Kendle stepped forward and stabbed her, ripping upward in ecstasy. Ethan's face was all she saw.

Adrian and Tommy pulled on her arms, forcing her to leave the woman. She kept ahold of her knife and let the spasms fade.

Adrian took them to a row of tall trees. When he began to climb, everyone else did too. *Marc! Are you up?*

“We have to go clear his front door.” Kendle was going either way.

Adrian sucked in more air. “We can’t just walk through, not unless Angela clears us to kill. She’ll forgive that first one. Maybe. We can’t do it again.”

Tommy nodded. “And we might lead them there if they haven’t found him yet. The ones we saw might be all of them.”

“And they aren’t that dangerous.” Quinn wiped the dirt off his pant leg. “At least, I don’t think so.” Quinn didn’t want Kendle to think he’d been frightened.

“We can use the trees to stay out of reach when needed. Maybe during fights too.”

“Okay. But just you and me.” Adrian gave Quinn a hard look before he could protest. “What would make Marc happier? You helping him or you guarding the ship, the boss?”

“Ramp duty?”

Adrian nodded, getting his breath back. “Don’t enter their camp. Guard that entrance—both of you.”

Tommy wanted to be a hero again. He nodded and got set to jump and run.

Quinn looked at Kendle.

Kendle gave him a soft smile. “Hurry.”

Quinn left with Tommy, mood a little better.

Adrian took a deep breath. "If you have a way to contact Marc, use it. I think he's locked."

"We'd still be able use our gifts." Kendle didn't like it that Marc hadn't answered either of them.

"Except, Eagles had a night around a fire without the camp studying their every move. Most of them got drunk and stayed up way too late. Marc is cautious. Before he crashed, he locked them down." Adrian glanced over, listening for the locals to follow or their teammates to be caught. "Unless you have a way in."

Kendle knew about it. "After he healed me, something changed. Part of his light is keeping my cracks sealed."

"Cracks?"

"I've had them all along, Adrian. I thought you'd noticed."

"But that would mean you..."

Kendle shrugged. "I don't know what I am, but it's not like the rest of you." She glanced around, willing the sun to move a little faster. "What I went through on this island changed me. I skipped some levels. Remember what the book said about byzan not dying easy? That fits all of us." Kendle hopped down and concentrated. *Marc! I need you!*

Adrian flinched at the powerful call. He joined her on the ground and followed her toward the barn, trying not to trip over the jungle vines that made up the groundcover here.

"It didn't work."

Adrian knew. He hadn't heard an answer. "Doesn't matter." They were going to clear Marc's front door. He would notice them out here at some point. *Or maybe he'll let us both die and be done with the drama.*

Kendle snorted. "He isn't done with either of us yet."

Against his will, Adrian hoped that was true.

Chapter Thirteen
Murder or Mercy
January 25th
Day 3

1

Marc opened one lid and blinked. He sensed noise coming and groped for his wrist alarm. He shut it off just as it began to blare.

Men and women flinched, some waking instantly while others groaned at the abrupt noise.

Marc stayed still, listening, getting control of himself. He'd dreamed of being young again and doing things differently this time. He and Angie had run away together and been in the middle of a happy life. *But I felt something ugly coming, didn't I?* Marc stored the feeling and his last impressions of the dream. He didn't dwell in the past often, but it felt important this time.

Marc sat up and looked around.

The garbage pile caught his attention first. It stank. Greg had cleaned up the spilled food, but they'd all added to the pile through the night.

He scanned again and saw the fire had gone out. The charred remains of food and garbage glinted in the morning light.

Marc squinted against the rays of sun trying to fight through the cracks in the boards. The barn was well constructed, but clumsily sealed, with no foundation. The ground was the floor and the roof slanted because of it.

Marc stood up, nose wrinkling as the smells of burnt food and body odor increased. Greg and Ivan, still on either side of him, peered up with bloodshot eyes.

Marc glanced at Shawn, who'd stayed in the loft all night.

Shawn had been waiting for it. "He walked away a couple of hours ago. No sign of him or anyone else."

Marc checked the guard at the door.

Daryl shook his head "Nothing moving that I can see, but I can't see much. We'll need to add some holes in this door later on."

Marc hoped it stayed that way. He needed to piss. "Let's air it out and hit the john."

Daryl and Shawn came over to lift the bar and provide security.

Half of the others rose and followed, eager to use the bathroom. The rest rolled over in their bedrolls to steal a few minutes of snoozing.

Dim light flooded in; the faint roar of the ocean sharpened.

Angela woke slowly, feeling like she'd forgotten something. She reached for the thing poking her in the leg.

Angela stared, forcing herself to focus on the writing. She wiped dust from the front of the thick, worn spiral notebook. Words jumped out at her.

Sick.

Dangerous.

Craves blood.

She flipped to the first page, stomach tightening as she read the title.

Pitcairn Population Study

An examination of the levels and effects

Angela turned to page one and skimmed for the important details. She ignored the bloody prints on the page. She'd spent half of her leadership time so far leaving her own bloody prints.

Study Participants,

If you don't sign your name, you don't get the money.

Angela flipped by the long list of names. She would come back to it later, when she was ready to try to find each of those suckers. They'd signed away everything for money and never got to spend a dime of it.

The next three pages were common items found in any contract. There was even a page about suing or leaving the study. Angela flipped by it angrily. The scientists had known the participants wouldn't be able to pursue legal means for any issues. Raving lunatics with a taste for blood didn't have a lawyer

on speed dial. She flipped to the beginning of the study, understanding this experiment had been going on while Kendle was here. “Explains some things.”

The first dose given to the residents on this island produced a fast-consuming madness that gave them an incessant drive for the taste of blood. Three of the residents died in the first month. The virus moved too quick to allow maximum spread and ensuing chaos.

The second exposure slowed the virus and resulted in this book. I have studied the effects and eventual fate of every islander on Pitcairn, including myself. Somewhere along this suicide mission, I’ve been infected. Because it is progressing slowly, I assume I’m a second wave subject.

I was sent here to find a way to reverse the effects of each exposure, or find a way to use the virus as it was intended—to create an army. Sitting here in a pool of blood that I can’t identify, I recommend a third dose. It will either slow it further or drive us into that final stage of madness where we have no control over our actions. Either way, this nightmare will end for me and the participants who are still alive here and you’ll have an unstoppable army. You just won’t be able to stop them.

The doctor's handwritten note at the bottom gave Angela a chill.

I'm adding this now because I won't be sane enough to do it later. I'm infected. I long for the scent of fresh blood, the sight of it! But I don't want to taste it or feel it, so this study is in effect, a success. Stage two exposure slows the virus and allows the host to survive as long as the body can sustain it. The tunnels are a perfect home. The locals only come out when provoked or when hunger drives them to the orchards. Some will poke through the garbage at the shoreline. I feed them fish a few times a week to make sure they don't die before I get my results.

I've documented eight total deaths from the virus, with more side effects than we counted on. I've listed them somewhere in this damn study. However, all the deaths came from their bodies shutting down, not from the virus itself. As long as they were fed and watered, an army of these walking rage bombs would be entirely possible and almost genius. Their inability to use tools and think at the beginning does somewhat limit them. A third light dose might return more control and stop them from killing the targets before we can get information.

Angela stopped reading and grabbed her radio as danger filled the dawn air.

Marc opened the barn door and stepped out.

Ivan moved in front of him and scanned.

Survivors!

Six men and women were in the cleared area outside the barn door. Ivan stopped as he picked out details. *They're all in our blind spot. They're not moving. They're filthy.*

Greg watched Ivan flip into alert mode. He scanned the problem; his balls curled up. Greg drew his gun and pulled on Marc's arm, forcing their leader back.

Everyone behind them flinched as Greg pushed Marc in their direction. They didn't know what was happening.

The senior men assumed there was a problem. They flew from their bedrolls.

"Get back!"

"Don't go out!"

Greg stayed next to Ivan, mind shouting orders. He refused to move until he figured out how to keep Marc safe from the drooling, occasionally moaning locals who were finally starting to turn toward them. Their reactions were delayed, but coming.

Radios cracked with Angela's hard voice. "Possible incoming. Full alert!"

Marc shrugged out of the arms trying to get him back inside the barn. As he clicked the mike once to let her know she'd been heard, Marc realized he was still locked. He opened his mental shield and winced at all the voices calling for his attention.

Those around him were going through the same thing, while trying to resist the urge to answer. This moment needed their full concentration.

Ivan kept staring at the small group of islanders. He saw injuries and slow starvation now, and under that, madness.

Behind the shifting locals, Adrian and Kendle came through the tree line with their knives in hand. Ivan registered them in a vague way as his hand slid toward his gun.

Marc shoved back through, getting the images from all their minds as danger linked the hive members who were here.

“Slowly, step back and don’t stop.” Marc’s adrenaline snapped him fully awake as he saw the threat. His mind flew through options and outcomes so fast that he’d made the choice before anyone else reacted. He shook his head at Adrian before the man tried to be a distraction. He didn’t want a slaughter.

Adrian didn’t leave. If the islanders got ahold of someone, he and his partner would help.

Kendle stayed tensed to run to Marc’s aid.

Greg retreated, holstering his gun. “Come on.”

Ivan forced his feet to move. He slipped.

Marc grabbed his arm and pulled. “Go!”

No one stopped until they were all inside the barn.

Daryl yanked the door shut.

Marc let go of Ivan and returned to help bar it. Then he stared through the cracks to see what the reaction had been.

He couldn't see. The front of the barn was one big annoying blind spot. *How did they find it?*

Ivan slowly recovered, waving at Eugene. "Holster that."

Eugene looked down and saw the gun in his hand. He quickly shoved it into his holster. "Adrian was out there."

Ivan nodded. "He won't go far."

"Good. He can help us get out of here."

Marc frowned at Eugene. "It's a group of island residents. Our next orders will probably be to make contact and handle them."

Ivan paled. "Are you sure?"

"No." Marc stuck to being honest. "But I wasn't trained to sit by and wait. Neither were you. We're frontline Eagles. Our job is to assess every threat. We can't do that until we make contact."

Ivan sighed. "I get it. I just don't want to start the morning off this way."

"I don't either." Marc checked his weapons and felt for his extra ammunition. "But this is the job. If you're having doubts, you know what to do."

"I'll either talk to someone and work through it or I'll resign." Ivan grinned. "Like there's really a choice." He drew his knife, now cleared of guilt for hoping it might get ugly. He loved killing. He felt bad for that. "Where do you want me?"

Marc waved at his right. He chose Greg for his left. Both men were capable of attacking first, even against women. "I'd like to do this quietly. I'll approach and try to talk. They'll probably go batshit

crazy. We'll kill them all and spend the rest of the day smelling them burn."

Shawn winced. "Damn, Marc. Now *you* can hold back a little."

Marc opened the line that every descendant was now listening to, waiting for an update. He also keyed his radio. "Orders?"

"Make contact." Radios and minds buzzed with Angela's voice in response. "Clear if necessary."

"Copy." Marc motioned the rookies to the rear. "Let's go see if the locals are friendly."

Daryl and Shawn opened the door and provided backup to Marc's guards.

Marc scanned as he walked forward. It didn't look like the six men and women had moved much. *We didn't trigger them.* "Hello! My name's Marc. I'm from Safe Haven. It's nice to meet you."

The locals began to turn toward him, but their dazed expressions didn't change.

Slightly encouraged, Marc stopped with lunging distance between him and the closest man. "I'm Marc. Who are you?"

The man in front sniffed. He focused on Marc with sunken gray eyes, fingers curling up under the tattered sleeves of his filthy gray shirt.

Marc frowned. "That's not quite the reaction I'm looking for. Can you talk? We need to know what happened to you so we can try to help."

Front man took a step forward, arm coming up. Marc stopped Ivan from challenging him.

Front man stopped, peering between them with no expression.

“I think he wants something.” Daryl scowled. “Expects something.”

Shawn scanned the trees and didn’t find the townsman from last night. *He’s intelligent. That’s dangerous.*

He brought them to our blind spot.

Shawn nodded at Marc’s thought.

“Expects what?” Marc wasn’t making the connection. “A drink? A gun?”

“Help.” Eugene held up his medical bag. “Doctor.”

Front man immediately lumbered forward and lunged for Eugene’s throat with both hands.

Marc knocked Eugene out of the way and caught the townsman around the waist. The stench of an unwashed body went up his nose. Marc grimaced. *Give me the salt back.* He took the man down hard, thumping his head against the ground so he would stay there. “Detain them!” A few of the other locals were now reacting the same way. “Eugene!”

Eugene cowered behind Daryl as Shawn and Ivan subdued a woman trying to reach him. The locals weren’t paying attention to any Eagle except the medic. “Sir?”

“You are never allowed to speak on runs!”

“Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!”

The rest of locals turned toward him, anger coming into their faces.

Ivan frowned. “I think they don’t like some voices; that makes things harder.”

Eagles drew their backup knives and tried to get set as the islanders reached them.

“Look out!” Eugene staggered and bumped into Daryl.

Adrian and Kendle flew through the trees. The jungle grabbed at their boots and tripped them, tangling around their laces to poke their ankles. They swung around the trunks and branches, using their environment to accomplish their goals.

The trees seemed to groan under their rough touch. Adrian stored that reaction for later, concentrating on landing correctly. He didn’t do this often. His heart was already thumping.

Kendle drew her knife as they finally reached the cleared area and ran in to help the Eagles.

Marc heard steps running toward them. In a split second, he narrowed down that flat-footed run. He saw Adrian aiming for a tree branch and a growling local. He kept an eye on that as he shoved a woman off of Eugene and put his blade in her brain.

Adrian leapt, grabbing the branch as he swung his body to the side.

The branch broke.

Adrian flew into the weeds and hit the ground.

The local staggered right by him, still aiming for Marc.

A new group of ten islanders came through the trees and lumbered toward the team.

Adrian spotted them as he stood. “Incoming!”

The entire group went from angry to uncontrollable rage in a flat second at the sound of his voice. They screamed, running forward to grab anything they could reach.

Shall I bring us to battle mode now? Marc's demon asked apprehensively.

Marc found his knife without looking away from the chaos. *Do you really have to ask?*

Marc watched in horror as a local reached Reggie and lifted him into the air in a tight grip.

Crack!

Reggie screamed as his rib broke.

Marc threw his knife.

The blade plunged into the local's ear and pierced his brain.

Reggie hit the ground, screaming again as he and the body fell.

Marc filled his hand with his other knife, scanning quickly to see who needed his help the most.

Marc spun, ducking the arms of the townsman who'd watched them overnight. He slammed his forehead into the man's nose and plunged his knife into his stomach.

The townsman staggered, hands coming up to cover the dripping wound.

"Incoming!"

The call sent fear through all of them. They hadn't finished this wave yet. They weren't ready for another.

"There are more!"

“Behind that tree!”

“They came from the hatch! I saw it!”

“Here they come!”

“Ahh!” Reggie stiffened as a woman’s fingernails found his throat and dug in. He tried to crawl back.

Another local was there to wrap him up and squeeze while the woman dug at his throat.

Out of time, Marc shot them both.

The noise echoed across the island and made it all the way to the ship.

4

“Why is Marc’s team so small?” Kenn was on duty over Angela while Morgan helped Tonya get a sponge bath and fed. Everyone was waiting nervously for news from Marc’s team, but they all still had work to do too.

“He’s used to smaller groups.”

“Fire teams.”

Angela nodded. “He has to be trained to handle the larger arms of an army.”

“He hasn’t gotten them to work for him like Adrian did.”

“Give him time. He just finished adjusting to it. Now we’ll see some real magic.”

“Cool.” Kenn had never tried to overthrow Marc as their Marine team leader once he got there. The man had earned it and no one had worked harder or been smarter.

“I can’t wait to meet that man.” Angela waited for the next question.

“Why is half of his group rookies?”

“I’m sure you have guesses.”

“A few.”

“Hit me with the most likely.”

Kenn considered as he swept the corridor before moving aside to let her go up the ramp to the next deck. He made eye contact with the guard on this hall, then stayed on her heels as he finally answered. “Balance.”

Angela kept walking, but the surprise was hard to hide from her face.

It drew attention that Kenn had pleased her in some way. The witnesses were happy to see him already trying to recover some of the trust he’d lost.

She waited until they were in the deserted hallway below the ramp. “Explain.”

Kenn peered up and made eye contact with the guard at the top of the steps. “This is the last action they’ll see for a while, we hope and we can’t have them untested for three years. This gives them something to brag about and keeps the balance.”

“You were always this smart. I’ve admired that many times over the years.”

Kenn didn’t care if she was blowing smoke. Her words felt good. Instead of smiling, he faced her, unable to hide his bitterness. “You have the same illness Adrian had when it comes to this camp.”

Angela stiffened.

Kenn kept going. “Every single thing you’ve put them through or let them suffer, has been to shape their futures. You don’t even like this job. You’re doing your duty.”

A tear rolled from Angela’s eye. She wiped at it and resumed walking. “And don’t you ever forget it, Grunt.” Angela decided to reward his genuine insight with honesty. “I wouldn’t have been able to kill you.”

“Marc would have.”

“Or Charlie.” Angela didn’t remind him further that he still owed Charlie.

Kenn grunted as he figured it out. “You could have just asked me to help him.” He and Charlie had fought together recently. Conner was still being pissy about it. He didn’t know why Angela felt she had to handle him this way.

“This has to be a payment of a debt. You are part of the reason he’s going through all of this. Your lack of respect for women, combined with that attitude, told him a relationship doesn’t have to be honest or good as long as *he’s* happy.”

“I never would have thought he’d follow me in anything except the Corps.”

“I worried about it. This is that first step. Next is smacking her around when she doesn’t feel like playing nice anymore. I need you to get in there and fix it.”

Kenn scowled. “I can’t keep beating the kid. It’s what got us here.”

She rolled her eyes, tone dry. “I never suggested that at any point.”

“Well, he isn’t going to listen to a sob story from my youth, so I don’t know what to try.”

“I bet he would.”

“Well, I’m not.” Kenn never talked about his childhood. *And I never will.*

“Then make one up and let him think it was yours. I happen to know you’re an excellent liar.”

Kenn slowly nodded. “I can do that. Give me some time to find the right set up.”

“Thank you.” She studied him. “Are you okay?”

Kenn shook his head, showing where his true anger had been coming from. That hole was now filled with grief. “I should have given her what she wanted and my other baby would be alive.”

It shocked Angela to hear him talk about babies with anything but loathing in his voice. “As usual, you’re wrong.” Angela went up the steps and joined Ian.

Ian nodded to Kenn that he now had guard duty.

Kenn went to see if Tonya or his surviving son needed anything.

My son.

Kenn was still marveling over that when the sound of gunfire echoed from the island and brought everything and everyone to a complete standstill. Time slowed.

Angela recognized the moment. *Marc!*

5

Marc slammed a woman into a tree and let go, spinning to catch another woman who was about to run into the barn. He kicked her knee and shoved her over as Eugene darted forward and offered his cuffs.

Marc clicked them in place then stood and turned, waiting for the next attack. He saw they had most of these locals down now. Only two were still fighting, but it wasn't even close to the rage of the rib breakers.

Daryl smacked his rifle butt into a man's cheek to get him to back off. Blood spilled down the man's thin, red face and hit the dirt as he fell.

Adrian reached Marc. "I posted guards at the boat ramp when we couldn't contact you." He crouched, ripping his knife free. "Damn it! Incoming!"

Marc saw at least ten more locals coming their way from behind the orchard. He spotted green eyes. His stomach dropped. "Watch your lines; switch to live rounds."

6

"Incoming!"

Darren paused at the familiar shout, putting a hand out to stop Megan.

Megan was willing. She'd wanted to go help when the noise first started, but she didn't feel she had the authority to make that call.

Darren tugged her in a new direction. “Let’s make sure they have it under control.”

Megan nodded. “Good idea.”

A gunshot echoed, followed by an almost constant volley that sent birds from the trees.

Darren and Megan took off running toward the chaos, adrenaline flowing.

7

“In the barn!” Shawn called the rookies. “Get in the barn!”

Closest to that structure, Daryl hurried over to hold it open. He did a fast scan inside and saw shadows moving. “Barn has a breach!”

“Clear it once you get them in!” Marc hoped there would be less threats in there so the rookies could handle it.

“Five left!” Jeff fired again. “Four.” Now that they’d been cleared to use guns, the locals didn’t stand a chance.

Marc scanned in each direction, making sure Jeff’s assessment was correct. He saw Eugene heading for the barn door and pointed at him. “Get Reggie in the barn!”

Eugene reluctantly went back for the injured man.

Marc reloaded and holstered. It was over as soon as Kendle finished the last woman.

Kendle slammed her head into the woman’s cheek. The woman staggered. Kendle followed her

with a quick grab and spin. She snapped the woman's neck and let go.

Despite all the killing they'd done, the Eagles found her actions extreme. All of them looked away.

Marc pretended to not feel Kendle's hot eyes travel his body in a slow-motion tour.

Daryl caught Adrian's eye as he reloaded.

Adrian subtly shook his head.

Daryl glanced away before anyone noticed.

Neil dropped his eyes to the ground and pretended he hadn't. People still gave him funny looks and asked rude questions. The Eagles were now angry that Jeremy was being replaced. It had finally settled in that Wade was going to be in their lives, their bed. Neil concentrated on that so he didn't give himself away.

"We have a few injuries." Christian drew Marc's attention to the next choices he had to make. "We'll get the others inside, but Reggie needs your help. We can't do anything but bind his wounds."

"Cracked ribs."

Christian nodded. They'd all heard the crack.

"We'll get him to the ship. Make him as comfortable as you can for the trip." Marc studied the few captives, then the few survivors who were groaning and growling, down with mortal injuries. Blood from their wounds ran onto the ground and soaked into the dirt. *Is there any reason Angie would want me to spare them?* Marc wasn't sure. He looked at Adrian.

Adrian nodded. *You won't like it. You can skip it for now if you put them down before she gives the order.* Adrian headed for the trees, discouraging Marc from continuing to seek his guidance in front of the Eagles. He wasn't allowed to be a part of this. "Call me when you're ready."

Marc let him go, addressing his shocked Eagles. "Cuff them. Add the bodies to the burn pile. Double perimeter guards, senior men only."

"Marc?"

Marc nodded at Ivan's fearful tone. "She's already handling a sweep."

Ivan wasn't comforted. "Still..."

Marc sighed, bloody hand going to his radio while the medics got set to move Reggie.

8

Morgan and Kimmie were standing in the hallway when Angela opened her cabin door. They both stared with terror on their faces.

"Let's go." Angela led them up the stairs and toward the top deck ramp, not answering questions.

Morgan and Kimmie stayed on her heels. Morgan waved a few people from the morning work line to come along.

Angela crossed the deck and climbed down the ladder in quick, determined motions, drawing off duty men and women. She marched across the bridge, pointing at people as the sun beamed on the water. "I want our animals back on board. Get it

done right now. Be as careful as we were when we brought them out.”

Angela spotted two men at the shoreline where their bridge met the land.

“That’s Tommy. And Quinn.” Morgan wasn’t sure how to handle this.

Tommy stepped forward as they approached. “Please stay here. Adrian’s covering Marc. He sent us to tell you it’s not safe.”

Angela held out one of the notebooks she’d brought from her cabin. “Get this to Marc as fast as you can. I’ll stand watch here. Monica will follow in a few minutes with more help.”

Tommy and Quinn were relieved she wasn’t going to insist on coming ashore. Neither man had planned to argue if she had. They took off at a fast pace, eager to get back so they could keep an eye on Kendle. Neither man had forgotten she’d been shot recently; the gunfire had almost made them leave this post early.

Angela drew in a breath. “I want you to send a group out, with Monica leading, and stay here.”

Morgan fought with himself over the order. If not for knowing they were okay, he wouldn’t have agreed. “Fine.”

Angela gestured. “Send dependable people. Put the rest on duty right here.”

“Got it.” Morgan hurried toward the ship. He was met by the group of men and women who’d followed. Everyone else was doing a sweep of the ship. He handed out assignments, hating the order

and hating having female Eagles. Worrying over Pam and the others was slowly hurting every man with a mate in service.

Kimmie didn't argue either. She and Morgan had been woken by the mental shouts for Marc. If they went rushing out there now, they would be in the way, and it would leave their camp unprotected.

It was still hard. She stared at the sundrenched island in concern and dread.

Ed and Brittani joined her, waiting for their next orders.

"We have to find a way to tell the camp this island has a problem, without causing a riot."

Ed scanned the curious animal workers, some of whom were descendants. "The story's already spreading."

Angela sighed. "Damage control for breakfast. Again." She headed for the ship, holding up the other book. "I need a copy of this. Then you two stay in my cabin and go through every log and journal the teams have brought in."

Brittani took the book and put it in her inside pocket. "What are we looking for?"

"You'll know when you make the copy. Get that back to me as quick as you can, with a volunteer to run it to Marc."

"Requirements for that gopher?"

She considered Ed's question. "Fast, quiet, and not stupid. Draft replacements for yourselves to go keep the camp calm. They might need it for what comes next."

Brittani began climbing the ladder. “What does come next?”

Radios all over the ship and in places on the island echoed with Marc’s cold voice. “We are switching into alert mode, Safe Haven. Get to your next area and stand by for further instructions. No one is allowed to leave the ship. Close the bridge right now!”

Angela hurried up the ladder. “That.”

Chapter Fourteen

It's Just Not Right

1

“It’s more of ours.”

Marc and the others moved closer to the open barn door as Shawn stepped out. Bright sunlight flushed out the shadows, but the breeze was gone. The smell in here was rough without the wind carrying it away, but it was still better than outside.

Reggie was being taken to the ship. Tommy and Quinn had just dropped off a notebook and walked away without speaking to anyone. Monica and her small support group were given a better welcome as she hurried inside and shoved a pack at Marc. *Ed brought it up right as we were leaving.* Monica sucked in a breath. “Recon.”

Monica and her group had run all the way here, revealing a problem. *I’m out of shape. How did it happen so fast?!*

Marc took the pack while Shawn did a fast scan through the open door. Coming in here to make plans let them avoid most of the stench of burning bodies. The mood was low. Guilt was high.

The shade of the barn felt good to Monica and the two level one men Morgan had picked. They

towered over Monica in height and width. It was easy to see Morgan had sent them for physical support. Chad and Biff had stayed on her heels, also gasping and heaving. Boat life could have been fun in the old world, but Monica doubted it had ever been a healthy lifestyle choice.

She scanned the barn and found men on the loft edge and sitting against the walls around it. Many of them wore gear splattered in dark drops. Everyone was still wearing their clothes from yesterday; the haunted profiles were fresh. Monica didn't ask what had happened. She'd added the radio calls, the mental calls, and the fire outside to an ugly moment no one would feel like repeating unless they hadn't participated. "Boss has security rolling hard. She's covered. Where do you want me?" Monica smiled at Pam as she caught her eye.

Marc still had the first notebook in his hand, but he hadn't gotten a chance to read more than a page. "How many locals did you see on the way here?"

Monica paused. "None."

The dry ground puffed up a cloud of dust as Marc sat the pack by the fire ring. "Any special instructions from the boss?"

"Just said to get it cleared any way you have to. Call for whatever you need and she'll have it ready on the shoreline."

Marc nodded. The thought of clearing underground was abhorrent. *I feel like I'm in my old job in too many ways. I may need this to end quick.*

Marc opened a mental link to Adrian. *Come in for recon. Two hours.*

We'll be there.

“Everyone grab a book and start investigating. This is on-the-job training for any open higher level slots. Do well here and it might be noticed.” Marc wanted to keep them engaged, but he also wanted it done faster. *Two birds! This is how Adrian does it.* Marc focused on the title of the book. *Now I just have to pull a three-fer.* “Read for a few minutes, tell me what you find if it matters to the job we’re about to do. We’ll get through it all by the time the fire’s out.”

Everyone was willing. They’d expected immediate action from Marc; it was comforting that he was now acting more like a leader and less like a Marine. When he finished learning how to combine those two, he would be great at this job.

Daryl passed out hand sanitizer. Everyone used it.

Darren came over to Marc. “Megan and I have to go. We were already on a run when we detoured to lend support.”

Everyone who’d made a remark last night about the pair staying on the ship gave them nods of respect for putting duty over a night on the island with Marc.

Marc had already assumed that. “Thanks for the help.”

Megan snorted. “We got here in time to watch the rookies clear the barn. We didn’t do anything.”

“You watched over the rookies while they cleared the barn.” Marc liked it that they’d come to help. He didn’t want to discourage that behavior in the future.

“Cool.” Megan headed for the door.

Darren shook his head. “Same way out as in.”

Megan chuckled, turning toward the loft. “Okay.”

Darren and Megan left through the window, like they’d entered.

Shawn went to the pack to get a book while the other senior men chuckled at their antics. The morning sounds of the island were still odd to Shawn. He rubbed his ear, trying to get rid of the double timbre of ocean and wildlife. Birds were all over this island and they had healthy lungs.

Monica gestured at the stack. “She said sixty-eight total.”

Marc frowned. “Sixty-eight what?”

“Locals. Five of them are pregnant.”

Marc cringed inside. “We cleared the island twice, with two different teams. They had to be under us the whole time.” Marc made contact with Angela. *I’m sending some people back. Continue prepping on the ship. We’ll clear the tunnels.*

Angela had been waiting for his call. *Use everyone you have.*

Marc knew she meant Adrian. *Already planned on it. You stay on the ship.*

Marc felt her frown. He didn’t back down. *You can’t leave them without a leader right now.*

Angela knew he was using her sense of duty, and the truth, to control her behavior.

Marc sighed at her silence. *Please? I'll trade you one of these moments, later.*

Done.

Marc frowned as the mental line disconnected. "I think I fell for something there."

"You mean you have times with her when you don't?" Ivan sighed dreamily. "Must be nice."

It surprised Eugene that they were all going on with jokes and meaningless chatter after what they'd just done.

Shawn put a hand on Eugene's shoulder. He knew the problem without having a gift. "We're giving them an end to whatever happened here. I'd want someone to do the same for me."

Marc moved toward the door to do his own scan. Eugene was on duty, but no one trusted him to do it right. "According to this first page, it began as a controlled experiment. The doctor in charge of dosing them and recording the results was infected. It's now a free-range experiment."

"That's wonderful." Shawn rolled his eyes.

Marc waved the book. "I'll know more when I finish this. We might be able to avoid killing the others. They seem to have triggers. If we don't trip those wires, we might be able to detain them without a fight." Marc didn't want to think about what would happen then. "We'll make exceptions if they seem like the rib breakers." Marc didn't know what to call them yet. He needed to finish reading.

“Like that one?” Eugene pointed, heart pounding.

The townsman coming through the trees sported a tattered black coat hanging over a thin, blood-stained body that immediately began propelling him in their direction.

Marc drew his knife and stepped through the door. This is why he’d left it open; he’d just hoped his honeypot wouldn’t work.

“I got it.”

They all spotted Kendle a few yards away. It looked like she’d slept in the tree. The leaves were bent in the shape of her body. They popped loose of the trunk as she shifted.

Kendle dropped as the townsman neared her. She stuck out a leg and dropped him. She plunged her blade into the back of his neck and twisted.

“It’s not a zombie!”

Kendle shrugged at Marc’s harsh declaration from the barn doorway. “Solution’s the same.” She jerked her knife free and climbed back into the tree so she didn’t have to be what everyone was staring at.

Marc sighed. Then he looked around. “Volunteers to escort personnel to the ship?”

A few hands rose.

“Good. Remove any threats you find.” Marc hated that order.

Most of the Eagles loved it. Avoiding the smoke was forgotten as the group geared up for a fast run back where they might encounter more locals.

“What are we doing?” Eugene wasn’t sure how much more killing he could handle. It was only an hour after dawn.

“You should go back and give Harry a hand.” Marc held up a hand before Eugene could whine or beg for a promise that it wouldn’t be held against him. *Of course it will. You’re an Eagle. Now you don’t like the job all of the sudden.* “What’s going on with you?”

Eugene flushed. “I’m not leaving my team.” He fell silent, hoping Marc wouldn’t dig.

Marc didn’t sense bad things, just personal issues. “See me later for a chat.”

“I will.”

Marc gathered his bedroll and opened his kit as the line of people walked into the trees. He gestured. “Shut the door for a few minutes.”

Daryl hurried to secure the door. “Whoever did this to these people deserves to die. Slowly.”

Marc nodded. “And if we ever meet them, you and I will see to that.”

Eugene didn’t want to do what came next. “Can’t we wait and see if Tonya can help them?”

Marc got his secondary knife ready. “She doesn’t know how to do this. None of our people do. She just follows instructions in the books for basic tests. You saw these survivors. They’re starving. They have injuries. They’re covered in filth. They’re beyond help mentally. That’s not a good life for anyone.”

Daryl paused. “Shouldn’t they all be dead by now?”

Eugene reluctantly shook his head. “If there was only sixty-eight of them, they could have survived on farms and orchards. They don’t have scurvy. They’re getting fruits or vegetables.”

“The doctor was feeding them too.”

Anger flooded the barn. Marc’s answer made sense. The locals were used to getting food and pain from the same place. No wonder they’d rushed toward Eugene at the magic word.

“What about the captives?” Daryl could hear the grunting from their bound positions near the side of the barn. Those three locals weren’t aggressive, but they were still dangerous.

Marc tried to harden his heart. “Make it quick.”

Marc. I need something else.

Marc grunted at a request from Angela that he hadn’t expected. “I don’t want to.”

Greg knew what it was. He waved at Shawn. “Come on. The boss wants experiments run before we put them down.”

Jeff saw Shawn’s wince and followed them out. If Shawn couldn’t do it, he would. They needed this information.

Eugene opened his mouth to protest.

Marc shook his head. “Let it go.”

Eugene fell silent. *I’ll never be okay with this part of the job. It’s just not right.*

“Hey!” Sherman followed the three females down the camp hallway. “You talked to that traitor a lot. You got secrets too?”

Tracy kept walking. The hallway and camp lounge were deserted. The lockdown had stuck her on this deck. It was quiet, clean, and boring.

“This is not right.” Bernice was tired of Sherman’s accusations. He’d been bothering them every time he laid eyes on Tracy. She scanned for help. Tracy had finished showing her and Crissy the hallway cabinet of supplies for the cabins. They weren’t in sight of a guard post yet.

“Hey! I’m talkin’ to you!”

Bernice turned around, hands coming up to her slender hips. “Go away!”

Sherman stepped closer. “She might be a traitor too!”

Bernice waved her daughter to go with Tracy. Then she gave Sherman her ugliest glare. “I said go away. If you do not listen, I am going to mace you!”

Sherman snorted. “Weapons are locked up.” He lifted his hand, long finger pointing.

Bernice grabbed the small canister from her pocket and hit the button as she lifted it.

“My eyes!” Sherman backed up, rubbing and shouting. “Help! She blinded me!”

Bernice put away her mace as the guards hurried over to help Sherman.

Tracy snickered. “Nice.”

Bernice herded her and Crissy into their cabin. “Let’s have that tea now.”

“Room for one more?” Francesca came from her cabin. “I have two hours free.”

Tracy nodded toward the employee door behind them. “Maybe after you get rid of your shadow.”

Francesca frowned. “Why do you think I want to be around witnesses?” She knew Kimmie was following her. Every time she made eye contact with the girl, her red orbs lit up.

Bernice lifted her brow at Tracy. “You will tell your mother-in-law?”

Tracy blanched. “Not unless I have to.”

The three women went into the cabin and shut the door.

Kimmie came from the employee hall, eyes bright red. “Enjoy your tea. I’ll still be thinking about you.” She headed to her next assignment.

The guards helped Sherman into his cabin to wait for the medic. They didn’t see Kimmie.

Kimmie went to the cargo hold, where the members of the law council had chosen to meet this time. Everyone on the ship knew they were together right now, just not where they were. A final choice on one of the issues had been hinted at all morning from leadership. As soon as Angela had finished the security sweep of the ship, she and the others had gone to the meeting. If not for the alert, everyone would know who was on the council by who was missing. Right now, people couldn’t roam the ship. It was the perfect time for it.

Kimmie opened the last cargo door and joined the other kids who were here. They were guarding officers of the court, the leader of Safe Haven, and each other.

Cody loved the feeling. *This is what I want when I grow up. I'll be good at running things.*

Cate frowned at him. "That's Charlie's job. You can't take it."

"I won't need to. He's going through another evolution. When it finishes, he won't want to take her place anymore."

Cody and the kids didn't notice the adults in the room had stilled to listen, attention captured.

Cate stared in fear. "Why not?"

"Tracy. She's not good for him anymore."

Angela opened the door and stepped out. "She never was."

The other adults finished removing and storing their new robes as they exited, content with the decision they'd come to.

Angela moved toward the hall. "Pass the word. We've decided the camp has to vote before we can decide on Tim's fate. He is to be released immediately until after the vote, when a pretrial hearing may or may not be scheduled, depending on the outcome."

Angela chuckled at the looks from some of the younger kids who'd only caught a little of what she said. "I was talking to the adults."

Everyone chuckled. Angela motioned at the kids. “Escort your ward to one place only and return to me for your next assignment.”

The kids and the council eyed each other warily but obeyed. They clashed a little because of the size difference, but all of the members knew these kids were deadly in their own ways.

Angela watched as they all left, using as many different paths and hallways as the ship allowed. While these first laws were being made, she needed to make sure the council wasn’t influenced by the camp or the Eagles. Later, she would have to find a solution to stop that corruption from restarting. For now, Safe Haven would hold a vote and they would be on their way to having the first article of the New American Constitution.

Angela headed for the descendant hallway to check on moods and get updates. Then she would cover the same on the camp deck. Many of their planned chores could still continue and she could still float, solving issues and handling the paperwork. *I’m almost ready for action again. Marc and I will handle the next crisis together.*

3

“Why aren’t you out there with Marc?” Kenn was tired of listening to the wolf lick himself.

Dog paused in cleaning his tail. *Why do you care?*

“I don’t.”

Tonya and the baby were sleeping. The dim light from his lantern let him see the rise and fall of their chests when he did his checks. Even the cats were sleeping, rasping softly in the carrier together. It was peaceful.

Slurp! Slurp!

Except for the wolf.

“This isn’t bath time.”

Dog ignored him.

Kenn glared. “Can’t you find somewhere else to do that?”

Dog chuffed. *I could visit your mother.*

Kenn was startled into a laugh at the insult from the animal.

Dog stuck his head under his tail and resumed work.

“Oh, come on!”

Dog rolled over and stared at Kenn upside down. *I will stop, if you tell me why you killed Peter.*

Kenn stiffened. “Dereliction of duty.”

Dog snorted this time, making his whole body flinch. *He wanted your bitch.*

Kenn frowned. “My fiancé.”

Same thing.

“One isn’t respectful.”

It is the name for the female of my species, is it not?

“Yes, but women don’t like it.”

I’m not hunting human women. Why do I care if they like the words I use?

Kenn shrugged. “Got me there.”

Dog began licking his paw.

Kenn shuddered. "Stop it!"

Dog kept making the motion, watching Kenn for his breaking point.

Kenn gave in with part of the truth. "Yes, he wanted Tonya."

Dog stopped licking and rolled over onto his stomach. He stretched out, golden eyes trying to see into Kenn's soul. *You were already hunting for an excuse.*

Kenn nodded. "Yes. I was planning his death long before I made it happen."

Walking by the door, the guard stiffened. He forced himself to keep walking.

What will you do when they let Tim go?

Kenn scowled at the wolf. "They won't. The vote means nothing to his trial." Kenn had heard the law council's choice, but he refused to get angry yet.

They will and you know it.

Kenn shut his mind down. "I don't know."

Dog decided he'd poked the wounds enough for one night. He went back to cleaning his tail.

"Stop!"

No. You didn't give me what I asked for.

Kenn clenched his fists and forced his mind to search for sleep.

“I’ve never been locked down before.” Megan frowned around at the treehouse home. “At least not on land.”

Darren fastened the front door. He’d needed a bathroom moment. He also checked the door by the fireplace. It was just another exit. They’d both been surprised by it. “I’ve been through several.”

He took off his kit and sat it on an end table near the fireplace. “It’s boring for a while, then something happens and we all go home.”

Megan chuckled. “Well, that clears it up.”

Darren grinned. “We’ll keep working while we wait. It doesn’t change things for us. We’re on a private run.”

“Oh, yeah!” Megan stole a peek at his ass. *Those jeans are awesome. I can tell he isn’t wearing underwear.*

Darren stared in surprise.

Megan dropped her eyes, sniggering.

The treehouse had aired out mostly. There was only a bare hint of decay left. Darren was glad. Rot tended to ruin the mood.

Megan shuffled through the stack of papers. “I’m sending all of this to the boss. It’s a bunch of diary entries about contact with the UN. I think. It’s coded in places.”

“We’ll make sure she gets it tonight.” Darren checked his watch. “It’s noon. Take a minute to eat.”

Megan slid a sandwich from her pocket, cheeks reddening. “I’ve been munching for half an hour.”

Darren laughed. “I thought I smelled a cheater!”

Megan took a big bite, moaning.

Darren’s eyes darkened. She was smudged, wrinkled, mussed, and perfect. *This might end badly.* He felt around in his kit and came up with a folded water filter kit.

Megan studied it as he opened it. “We brought water.”

“For us. The boss wants a few basic systems set up in each location so it’ll be ready when the first crews are sent out to stock. Water and lights are top on the list.”

Megan brightened. “That’s why I found a pack of candles slid under my door!” She grinned, scooping the papers into a folder. “Angela’s good.”

“Any extras are supposed to go into the cabinet near the camp hall for their use. Eagles always keep one of whatever it is, however. We each have our own stock.”

Megan paused. “Is that right?”

Darren nodded, putting the smaller pot inside the larger, wider, empty pan. “When shit hits the fan, we pool resources. It ends up being a complete set of a lot of stuff you don’t know you need until it all goes crazy.”

Darren filled the largest pan from their canteens, then spread the sheet of plastic wrap overtop the entire setup. They’d filled them both with saltwater as they left the edge of Safe Haven’s light.

He tightened the edges and then placed a small pebble in the center so the water would have a drip

point into the center pot. “We’ll put this out in the sun and have a kettle of fresh water in a few hours.”

Megan was impressed with the solar saltwater filtration system, but she was intrigued by his words about keeping a stash. “How do you know which parts of your stash to bring on each run?”

Darren let out a sigh of approval at her intelligent question. “When you only have a little, you take it all. When you have more, you’ll also have more experience that helps you pick based on what you know about the run you’ve been given.”

“What did you bring for this one? From *your* stash?” Megan had forgotten all about the work for the moment. She wanted to know where she was weak as an Eagle. Planning for a run might be it if she couldn’t match his gear.

“Paper products, a lunch we can enjoy, and a body bag.”

Megan tensed, face tightening. “What are they for?”

Darren met her eye. “I brought the food so I could use the time to seduce you.”

Megan blushed. “Next?”

“The paper products are because I have a female along for this run and we might want to make a trade. I have some items no one else on the ship can match.”

Megan’s curiosity woke further. “Like what? Give me a hint.”

Darren pointed at the edge of something sticking from an inside pocket of his kit.

Megan read it quickly. “You have art pads.” She groaned again. “The trades I could make with those!”

Darren laughed. “We’ll see what you’ve got.” His mirth dropped. “I don’t need to tell you why I brought the body bag, do I?”

Megan shook her head, voice lowering to a bare whisper. “This is a deserted island. You’re playing pirate and burying a treasure.”

“And I’m trusting you with that secret.”

Megan smiled. “You can.” She took another bite of her sandwich and hoped the rest of this run went by slowly. *I’m alone with my prince charming on a deserted island. It doesn’t get much better than this.*

5

“It’s important to me that you understand.”

Adrian grunted between bites of the cold soup.

Sadie frowned at him. “I’m telling you I have a problem with our relationship. Are you listening?”

“We don’t have a relationship.” Adrian belched. “Good soup.”

Sadie grabbed his bowl and pitched it out the door.

Adrian sighed, licking his lips. “What about our relationship?”

Sadie smiled. “I understand you want to protect me, but I need to be part of the action. You can’t

leave me behind again or send me away when the fight starts.”

“Okay.” Adrian glanced at the door. “Can I have my soup back?”

Tommy entered the bunker, snickering. “You may want to get a clean bowl.”

Quinn appeared behind Tommy; small chunks of food slid down his chest and arms.

Sadie giggled.

Quinn didn’t. He stomped outside and started removing his shirt.

Sadie got three clean bowls from her kit and began filling them with the soup she’d been nursing for hours. Finding the bunker hadn’t been hard. Getting into it was another story—one Adrian hadn’t cared enough to hear. He’d come in, flopped down at the table, and demanded food. “We’re clear, right?”

Adrian leaned back in the chair and looked around. The bunker had been straightened, swept, and a few items had been unpacked from their kits. The pile of rocks outside the door said she’d also worked out there. “You did a good job.” He shut his eyes, willing his stomach to accept the meal. “Get some thermoses packed, then set up the saltwater filter like I showed you on the ship. Make sure it’ll be in the sun all day. Quinn will get the first load of water for it.”

In the doorway, Quinn frowned. “I will?”

Tommy sat at the table and dug into the food, stomach growling. “Come eat.”

Quinn sat, peering between them. “Why are you wolfing it down? What’s going on?”

Tommy waited for Adrian to answer. When he didn’t, Tommy swallowed and sucked in a breath. “It won’t take Marc long to go through that book. He’ll call for us to help clear the tunnel.”

Sadie listened, starting to understand something had happened. She eyed their clothes, but Quinn was now bare-chested and Tommy had his jacket on. Adrian had already changed his shirt.

Quinn reached for his bowl.

Sadie frowned at him.

Quinn jumped up, annoyance coming out in mutters as he went to his kit for a shirt.

Tommy decided to like her. He gave Sadie a quick smile and went back to the food.

Satisfied she’d set herself up as the female of the house, Sadie watched the door for Kendle.

Adrian felt it. “She’s in town. I doubt she’ll come in until Marc’s safe.”

Sadie brightened. She pushed the bowl toward Quinn as he came back and sat. “What do you want in the thermoses?”

Tommy belched. “More of this is good for me.”

“Same.”

Quinn took a quick bite to see what they were so happy with. The creamy chowder melted in his mouth. “Wow.” He swallowed and scooped another bite. “Where did you get the stuff to make chowder?” He shoveled the bite in, moaning.

Sadie pointed at the shelves in the rear of the bunker. “There’s a lot of stuff back there. Some of it is over its date now, but we can still use a lot of it.” Sadie went to the small sink and began to dig through the jumbled cabinet above it. “I think I saw travel mugs in here when I dusted.”

Adrian glanced around. He hadn’t realized she’d gone to that much effort. “Looks good.”

Sadie wiggled her ass as she leaned into the cabinet.

Adrian chuckled. “That too.”

Tommy finished his bowl, ignoring the banter and everything else. When Marc called them, he wanted to be ready. *I’m going to come out of those tunnels a hero. This is my ticket back in.*

Chapter Fifteen

We're Not the Same

1

“**W**e have enough information now.”

Marc gestured. “We know what we’re dealing with. The boss has decided how we’re handling it. Get your gear and get set.” The fire had gone out. Marc had just finished covering it with dirt. The bones were buried now, but the empty holes were like graves waiting to be filled. They were standing in front of the barn, out of sight of those holes.

Marc wasn’t sure yet how they were going to organize this tunnel walk. He peered through the trees to where he’d last seen Adrian. He didn’t spot anyone, but he knew they were there. He’d felt their arrival in Kendle’s first pause and tense. He was linked to her while she did sweeps of the town and ventured into narrow alleys still lined in rubble. The Eagles on duty out here were happy with her for covering the areas they didn’t want to; Marc allowed it so his guards got a brief rest before the next part of this day started. *Come in now.*

Marc’s team turned at the immediate footsteps.
Adrian slowed at the instant hostility.
Quinn and Tommy scanned for Kenn.
Kendle stared at Marc in open need.

“I called them in.” Marc didn’t waste time. “We’re going down and accounting for the rest of the missing townspeople. We considered luring them here, but it will take days maybe and we still won’t get them all.”

Adrian nodded. “Eagles always prefer the offensive. It’s our advantage.”

Marc frowned at the wording. “I need a way to mark where we’ve been.”

Adrian had already covered it on the walk down here. “You have solar lights—the portable ones. Set them up at each hatch you find. Mark the walls and string the solar cables as you go. When you run out, use the solar Christmas lights.”

Marc grinned. He couldn’t help it. “That’s brilliant.”

Adrian’s mood lifted instantly. He struggled to remain still and silent.

“We’ll hang here and wait for someone to...” Eugene fell silent as he realized Marc wasn’t going to wait.

“Guards will stay in the hole, together, except for fast scans and short breaks.” Marc stopped their grins. “Don’t scare the gophers or you’ll have knives being thrown and two missing teenagers who ran after throwing them. Teach the gophers how to set up the solar system. Thanks to Theo, the lights are already charged.”

Marc picked two senior men. “Daryl and Greg will go to the boat. They’ll make two trips back-to-back, then start installing the lights with two

gophers.” Marc made a final choice. “Divide into two groups. Each group takes a different direction or hatch. Hourly calls and body counts.”

The atmosphere grew thick, tense. Men searched for lights and courage.

Adrian gave Daryl a fast hand gesture.

Daryl turned away, acting like he hadn’t seen it. “I have to hit the head.” Daryl entered the tree line next to them.

Marc opened his kit and pulled out his five glow-sticks. “We’ll use these for now so we can mark our first direction. They’re almost useless for anything else anyway.”

Everyone drew out their ration of the snap lights that didn’t get bright and never cracked all the way through so it left gaps between the dull flare of neonic light.

Marc waited for the men to split into teams. He hoped he was with people who would pick those teams by skills and not politics.

Everyone joined Marc, leaving Adrian’s group standing by themselves.

Neil focused on Marc, daring him to protest. “Where to first?”

Marc considered as his team surrounded him. “The first incident happened at the doctor’s place. Let’s see what’s between here and there. We’ll come out somewhere near the shore. We’ll pick up the supplies while we’re there and come back here for lunch. Then we’ll take the opposite route.”

Shawn waved at Adrian. “We’ll cover the supplies. You go whatever way we don’t.”

Neil was relieved Marc wasn’t taking a direction that would lead him further away from the ship. “Questions?”

Adrian lifted his chin against the hostile glares that were hitting his team. They’d already forgotten how he’d just helped them. They were recalling why he hadn’t been with them all along. *It’s true—the bad stuff does stain you longer.*

Daryl rejoined them, adjusting his pocket, where new plans were now waiting for him to turn them in for the credit.

“Drop, get set, adjust lights. No guns unless there isn’t a choice.” Marc frowned. “And keep a count. We have to know we’ve got them all before our people can come ashore.” Marc felt that cold wave start sliding down his spine. “Let’s roll.”

2

“It bothers me that we didn’t stay and help.”

Darren closed a box and put a strip of tape over it. “It’s part of the job. We stick to our run so it always gets done.”

Megan frowned. “I get it. I just don’t like it.”

Darren distracted her. “Tell me what you’ve got over there.” The entire house had been changed now. Everything had been emptied and boxed or bagged in the front rooms. They were working on

the rear rooms now and doing a quick job of it by his estimate.

Megan scanned her piles. “Some medical supplies, blankets, rations, and batteries that may or may not be dead. They’re old. It’s all boxed and sitting in the hallway. I’ll clean the floor and window next.”

“Good. I’m half through that in the second room. There are a lot of boxes. The boss will be thrilled with these extra supplies.”

“Cool.” Megan paused as he came by the desk. She caught a whiff of his personal scent under the light sweat. Need flashed out, taunting them both with a sharp wave.

Megan flushed as he turned toward her.

Darren stopped and went the other way. He tried to shake it off. *That was strong. She’s already got me on a tight leash.*

He didn’t mind. He just wasn’t sure where to go with it now. He could wear her down and get what he wanted or he could try to romance her and build a future. He didn’t know her yet, but he wanted to be with her.

Darren hadn’t searched for a wife like some of the others had and were. He also wasn’t a regular service provider, though he was a steady user. He’d been waiting.

For what? That spark? That pull? If so, we need to verify it before we go any further down that path. If we’re just hanging out for sex, we don’t have to bother. You pick it and we’ll eventually stick it.

Darren rolled his eyes at his male mind. He got back to work packing up the room. Angela needed empty space to set it up how they needed it, but all these supplies would stay here where they could be sorted and added to their stocks—both here and on the ships. Darren was sure the boss was going to put supplies on all the boats they were keeping. *That's how I'll know which ships she plans to use for our ride home. If she doesn't have us load them with supplies, they're probably going to be a battle sacrifice.*

“I found a map.”

Darren went out to the lounge and took the paper. It was a tunnel system.

“It was stuck behind this picture. I saw a corner when I put it in the box.”

Darren scanned the image of the doctor and a man he thought was military. Darren peered at the engraving. “Luke and Ester.”

“Kendle's Luke?”

Darren nodded. “Keep that separate. We'll drop it off to Adrian when we see him. He'll make sure she gets it.”

Megan packed the picture in her kit, not meeting his eyes.

Darren held the map out, running a fast test. “Good find. Keep it until we pass updates.”

Megan reached for the paper.

He clasped her hand and waited.

Megan gazed into his eyes, aware of the world shifting and her throat going dry. “We’re not the same.”

“No.” He stepped closer, watching her nostrils flare and her nipples harden under her unzipped jacket. “In a moment like this, does it matter?”

The radio silence and gentle ocean noises coming through the open windows lent a surreal quality. She could feel fate watching, judging.

Megan let out a sound of defeat. “No.” She let him pull her into his arms, tilting her head to meet his lips in a torrid embrace.

3

“Get ready to update your maps.” Marc pushed on the hatch. “These will also go to Neil, but not until we’ve cleared the island. That gives him time to finish topside while we get time to cover these nasty-ass tunnels.”

People chuckled as Marc shoved the hatch up and propped it with the swinging twig that had been used a lot, judging by the indent in the side.

Marc took the ladder setup from Eugene and slid it in place while Shawn and Ivan prepared to clear their arrival. They’d been underground for an hour now.

“We’re at the doctor’s place, right?” Shawn scanned his map with his flashlight.

Marc nodded, stepping back to check his gear and store his flashlight. Directly under the hatches

was bright enough for reading when they were open. The five feet around the hatches were dim blurs. The rest of this tunnel had been pitch-black and filled with debris they didn't want to think about. The worst had been the bodies. They'd found three of them, all with stab wounds, according to the medics. The corpses had been old and almost gone to the bone. Marc placed it to the time period when Kendle had been here.

“Clear!”

Marc waved the rookies up first this time so Shawn could assign them to perimeter guard duty. When they'd come up at the beach hatch, the level ones had done it. That fork had dead-ended. They'd come back through this tunnel, aware of it having only a few sharp angles. Marc was betting the entire system was a rectangle with an extra connection across the middle.

Ivan scanned the treehouse, narrowing in on shadows breaking apart, hands righting clothes. He stepped in front of the window to provide cover. He turned his mind to the rookies. “Stay in your zone! It's just high grass!”

“And a burnt body.” Eugene knelt.

Marc pulled him up. “That was yesterday's action. Stay with me.”

Eugene fell in on Marc's heels as the group proceeded toward the front of the treehouse.

“I see shadows.”

Ivan stepped away from the window, hoping he'd given them enough time. “It's a recon team.”

Christian frowned. “How can you tell?”

Ivan pointed at the light footprints. “That’s our brand.”

Almost everyone snickered at the wording. They all wore the same kind now thanks to finding warehouse stocks.

“Hello in the birdcage!”

Now Marc snickered. They were all dusty and bored. This fast break was welcome. So was humor.

The door opened. Darren frowned at them. “Is there a problem?”

Marc stopped, scanning the fidgety woman behind him. “Megan?”

She hurried forward, shoving Darren out of the way. “Are you our relief?”

Marc snorted. “No.” He saw her wild hair and shirt that wasn’t quite right. *Untucked, I think.* He scanned Darren again and found no sign of anything wrong, just a cold attitude. *And that’s right, right?* Special run teams weren’t supposed to have contact with anyone and if they did, it was kept as short as possible. “Update me.”

Megan hesitated. She looked at Darren and then back to Marc. “You didn’t send us. You don’t get the first update.”

“Okay.” Marc stepped forward. “You’re under my lockdown orders. You may not think that applies to you, but I’m in charge of the island. Stay put. When you have something or need something, you can call.”

“This is a big job. Eventually, we’ll need a real cleaning crew.” Darren glanced at the small fire spot and the bones he’d chosen to leave alone upon their arrival. “I can bury that or dump it over the cliff.”

Marc approved. “Bury. One on duty while one digs. The locals are dangerous. If you have contact, handle it.”

Darren nodded. “I want it noted that a rookie told you, a boss in this camp, no. She followed Eagle rules in every way.”

“Team leaders will cover that.” Marc waved at Shawn. “Back in the ground.”

Shawn moved toward the hatch and ladder as the others checked their watches or the positions of the sun to see what time it was. “We’ve only covered a quarter of the island in an hour.”

Marc shrugged, following. “Then I think you should walk a little faster from here on out. Eagles fly, not crawl.”

Shawn flushed, dropping into the hole without using the ladder. “You want it, you’ll get it.”

Marc grinned at the tone. Shawn was now ready to hit anything that grabbed him in the dark. *One more verbal blast and he’ll be ready to kill.*

Shawn peered over his shoulder as Marc reached the bottom of the ladder. “You feel something coming? Is that why you’re winding me up?”

Marc took the guard position to stand watch until all their men were down. "It's been too quiet. This is usually when something hits us."

Shawn sighed. "Maybe it won't be us."

"Yeah. That's even worse."

Darren didn't relax as Marc's team left. Megan noticed. She kept her voice down. "What's wrong?"

"Ivan knows."

Megan watched Ivan walk to the ladder. He was the last man in line. "How can you tell?"

"Wait for it."

Megan watched as Ivan began to descend the ladder.

Ivan flashed a scornful glare over both of them and vanished into the hole.

Darren sighed. "That's not good."

"Will he tell anyone?"

"Hard to say." Darren went toward his kit. "We'll bury that body now, while Marc's still close."

"In case we have trouble?"

Darren nodded.

Megan tucked in the back of her shirt, then grabbed her jacket. "I won't let anything happen to you while you bury the...body."

Darren paused, mind flying. "Was it good for you?"

Megan blushed. "Very."

"And you'd be willing to do it again?"

“Yes, even though we shouldn’t. It won’t end well.”

“No, probably not.” Darren got the body bag out, lifting it carefully. “I’ll find time and places for us to be alone...” He finally met her eye. “Unless you want to date me openly.”

Megan liked it that he was giving her the choice. Megan put her jacket on, catching a strong scent of him on her as she zipped it up. *I’m not washing this for a while.* “And you’re sure about this? About us?”

Darren gave a curt nod, still braced for her rejection.

“Then we’ll give open a try and hope no one gets hurt.”

Darren relaxed. His attitude returned, pushing through the room in hard waves. “I’ll teach you everything I know. You’ll be the next Angela.”

Megan frowned at him, busy pulling her hair into a ponytail that was neat and tight. “I don’t want to be the next Angela. I want people to say *There goes Megan. None of you can match her.*”

Darren chuckled. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Megan came over to him. She ran a hand along the bulky body bag. “What about you? What do you need?”

Darren opened his mouth and let the truth roll out. “Company I can trust until the reset, and then pleasant memories.”

Megan understood what he was saying. “Tell me what’s in here.”

“Tell me that’s enough for you.”

“It’s not. But I don’t think we have a future anyway, so it doesn’t matter to this moment.”

Darren got his shovel, able to taste her on his lips. “It’s a stash of money, gear, guns, and a few other things I may need after the reset.”

“I thought a reset sends everything back to the way it was.”

He shrugged. “No one knows for sure. It might only reverse time and not bring anyone back or fix the societies that fell. I want to be covered.”

“You want the reset, but you don’t think it will be good.” Megan wasn’t sure how she felt about it.

“I don’t trust it at all, but I don’t think it can be stopped. All we can do is survive.”

“That’s a cynical view.”

“Yes.”

Megan shrugged. “Let’s get this done and come back and get *this* done.”

Darren nodded, voice dropping into need. “And then one more quick moment before we call Marc to escort us back to the ship?”

Megan laughed. “Deal.”

4

“I don’t think we made a good deal with Marc.” Quinn had been griping about it the entire time they’d been in the ground.

Adrian frowned, slowing to let Quinn get closer so his voice wouldn't echo as much in the darkness. "He told us to clear it. We didn't make a deal."

"That's what I'm talking about." Quinn stepped over the body of a rat. "Marc has senior Eagles, the best gear, and magic. We have the same team, the same gear, and a lot of rules we don't even know yet. We'll clear our share and get nothing for it."

Tommy was tired of hearing Quinn complain. "We have our lives."

Quinn shook his head. "No. We have to do whatever Marc and Angela tell us to. And when they get tired of us, they can banish us from the island."

Adrian wanted to say that wouldn't happen. He couldn't. "I'll think about it."

Quinn was satisfied. He trusted Adrian to keep his word.

Adrian motioned Tommy to take the lead. The tunnels were empty so far, and boring. Adrian didn't know where the rest of the locals had gone, but he didn't feel anything down here with them except nature. The insects loved it. They'd passed colony after colony of bugs he couldn't identify. The jungle above encouraged all the life below. It was amazing, but not a threat. *Is it wrong of me to hope Marc has more luck?* Adrian swallowed a snicker and kept walking.

"It turns here." Tommy shined his light and blanched. "Snakes."

Adrian scanned the tangle of reptiles in the middle of the tunnel. They were in a hollowed out spot. “We’ll jump it.”

All three men regarded the silent female bringing up the rear.

Kendle walked by them and stepped casually over the snake pile.

The reptiles barely noticed her. Only one of them twitched.

The men followed, hearts pounding.

Kendle led them toward the faint patch of light she could see in the near distance. She assumed it was another hatch that Marc’s team had broken. “Another turn coming up.” She made the turn, briefly falling out of their sight.

Tommy and Quinn hurried around the corner, leaving Adrian to bring up the rear.

Adrian didn’t protest the change or make them switch. He rounded the corner, yawning.

Adrian stopped. *They’re gone!* “Tommy?”

Tommy’s head appeared next to him. “Another tunnel.”

Adrian jumped.

Tommy laughed as he straightened. “Come on.”

Adrian followed. “I don’t like the rear.”

Kendle’s chuckle floated back at him.

Adrian sniggered. *She’s got me there.*

“I think this tunnel is curving toward the town.”

“We found another one like this when we first dropped down, but we haven’t explored it yet.”

Quinn scanned his map with his flashlight. “Do all these tunnels meet somewhere?”

“Under the town is what Luke said.” Kendle stopped under another hatch, mind starting to crawl. “I think it’s break time. Give me a boost.”

Tommy knelt with cupped hands to give her a lift.

Kendle popped through the hatch and climbed up onto land. *I hate it down there. That will never change.*

Tommy came up behind her, followed by Quinn.

Adrian lingered below the hatch, considering Quinn’s words. If all the tunnels met somewhere, the locals might be there. *Are we ready to face them if they’re all together?*

Adrian decided they weren’t. He jumped up and caught the edge of the ground, then he pulled himself up, straining. *We do need some of Marc’s gear. I just have to figure out how to get it.*

“You could try asking.”

Adrian lost his grip. He fell back to the bottom of the tunnel, groaning.

Marc smirked as he stepped over Adrian and leapt for the edge. He pulled himself up easily, aware of Kendle staring, Tommy chuckling, and Quinn frowning. He didn’t care. He wanted to be out of the ground for a while. “We’ve been behind you for the last ten minutes.”

Tommy wasn’t surprised. “We couldn’t hear anything over Quinn’s mouth.”

Quinn flushed, frown deepening.

Marc didn't see blood or injuries and assumed they'd found the same as he had—nothing. Wherever the other locals were, it wasn't in this tunnel.

Men shot dirty looks back and forth, but no one argued or threatened each other. That wasn't the type of action they were braced for.

Marc took off his kit. "We'll take a break together, compare maps, and share some gear. We're done in half an hour."

Quinn gave Adrian a pointed look.

Adrian made a sweeping gesture. "You're free to handle it."

Quinn found a log and sat on it to dig in his kit. "I'm not the leader. That's your job."

Adrian immediately denied that. "We're equals. I'm not leading anything. I'm not allowed to." Adrian rubbed his mark.

Kendle did too, unable to help it. The mark didn't hurt until she remembered it was there and then it burned and itched until her brain was distracted again.

Marc sat on the ground and dug out his energy bars. They'd been left in the pile last night. He tore one open and began to munch, relaxing as much as he could right now. Being in the ground was oppressive.

Quinn cleared his throat. "We need gear."

"We'll cover that last." Marc held out a hand. "Map?"

Quinn gave him the map he'd been working on. "I'm not done. Don't take it yet."

"I won't." Marc was impressed by the detailed drawing of the tunnel. Quinn had perfectly captured the thick, rotting boards and layer after layer of dirt of every shade. The hard-packed floors and rocks with shallow impressions implied water ran through the tunnels regularly. "This is good."

Quinn enjoyed the feel of Marc's praise.

Tommy looked at Adrian.

Adrian shrugged. It was hard to understand some people.

Tommy scanned the tree line, hoping the break ended early. He watched for trouble, hand never far from his knife.

"What's his deal?"

Tommy stiffened at Marc's question.

Adrian made a fast choice. He lied. "Tommy thinks this is all a giant trap by the UN. He's waiting for the gas and the pirates."

Marc frowned, hating the doubt those words immediately sent into his brain.

Tommy's face fell when Marc didn't scoff. "Are we enough this time or do more Eagles have to die?"

Even Adrian winced. *Direct hit.*

Marc got up and walked toward the hole. "Break's over. Give them gear and catch up." He dropped out of sight, leaving angry silence.

Shawn hurried after Marc. He tossed a magazine to Tommy. “Feel free to use one of those on yourself.”

Tommy caught the things they hurled and suffered the insults they bombarded him with.

“Traitors should be hung. Banishment is too good.”

“Marc didn’t deserve that, man.”

“Keep your mouth shut next time.”

“Dumbass.”

“Shit like that is probably where you got that black eye.”

Tommy didn’t respond to any of them.

Adrian also suffered the glares and the double insults meant to wound them both.

Marc whistled. “Let’s roll!”

The rest of his team ran to the hole and shoved themselves down into the stinky darkness.

Shawn had caught up to Marc, but he was having to use long steps to stay right behind the man. “Wanna talk before they catch up?”

“Nope. Wanna get this shit done.”

“What if we don’t?”

Marc slowed, frowning. “Meaning?”

“What if we switch islands? This one...” Shawn tried not to sound like a child who was scared of the thing under the bed. “It’s not good here, Marc. I think we should try the next island.”

Marc slowly came to a stop, mind spinning in different directions as he gave that full

consideration. “I don’t like it here either. Neither does Angela.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“She agreed to stay on the ship and to keep every camp member there with her. She unpacked the animals, and then put them back on the boat. She’s waiting for my call on it, and then she’ll do exactly that.”

“So what’s keeping you here? Besides Kendle?”

Marc shook his head, aware of the human bones near their feet. These tunnels were full of that sight. “Fate brought us here. Angela’s deal with the Messenger about not passing up any evil. The strategic location and setups we won’t have to worry about.” Marc sighed. “And worry that this is our one chance, right here and now. If we leave, we’ve left the path.”

“Where the water turns red and we all die?”

Marc nodded, surprised Shawn knew about it. “I guess Adrian and Angela weren’t the only ones who had that dream.”

Shawn donned his cap, listening to the others as they caught up. The noise was loud. “Dream walked, you mean.”

Marc turned around to hide his surprise, shining his light. He forced his feet to move as the Eagles formed lines behind him. *That’s another clue!* Marc locked that thought so he didn’t pass the knowledge to the other descendants in this team.

He shined his light on a long sword with a curved blade and a colorful hilt. “It wasn’t just the

locals and UN crews who used this island and these tunnels.”

“Damn.” Ivan moved closer to Marc. “They could have been on the island during the last fight.”

“Yes. They could still be here.” Ivan gestured toward Marc. “He was right to call a lockdown.”

Shawn nodded in agreement. “I hope everyone on the ship sees it that way.”

“The boss will keep them in line.”

“The boss is busy with Tonya and Tim. She doesn’t have time for another crisis.”

Marc agreed. “We’ll get this done and go back for dinner and an overnight break to make plans for a final clear. We have to make sure these tunnels are empty.”

“I’ll find a way to cover it.” Shawn thought of Kenn and how he used to put up cameras for Adrian.

“That’s good.” Marc led them toward the next curve in the long tunnel, nose wrinkling at the smell. *It might be good that we didn’t finish eating.* “Let’s roll.”

Chapter Sixteen

Find Your Honor

1

“Should we have given him the map we found?”

Darren nodded. “But we chose to hold it for the boss, so we’ll face him when the time comes.”

Megan didn’t like the sound of that. She kept watch while Darren shoveled out huge mounds of dry earth. He was piling it next to the hole. Megan had been surprised when he’d brought the bones along in an empty kit. She’d figured out he was going to put the body on top of his loot and hope that helped discourage people from checking it further if they found the site.

The ocean waves and chirping birds were louder out here and the trees creaked in the wind. It wasn’t as romantic anymore.

Snap!

Megan tensed. “I heard something.”

“So did I. Scan.” Darren shoved the body bag into the hole and then grabbed the kit and dumped the bones on top of it. He began to shovel the earth back in, pulse starting to race. He could feel time running out.

“Something’s moving over there.” Megan studied the distant trees that weren’t swaying with the wind.

“Which direction?”

“East at noon.”

Darren took a fast scan and kept shoveling. “I need thirty seconds. Get your knife out.”

Megan felt for it, not looking away from the large man now lumbering toward her with hard steps on the dry ground. “It’s a rib breaker.”

“Don’t let it get close enough.” Darren didn’t look up, working faster. “Concentrate. Go, duck, scan. Repeat.”

Megan aimed, shivering at the ice sliding into her guts. She threw the knife as hard as she could, arm wrenching a little. She ducked and scanned to see if it hit, hand reaching for her secondary knife.

The blade sailed past the man’s head by a few inches to the right.

Megan threw again.

The knife jabbed into the man’s cheek and knocked him backwards. He staggered, arms flailing.

“Finish it now!” Darren slapped the dirt with his shovel and hurried to back her up.

Megan chose from her remaining weapons, mindful about making noise. Her hand came up with the Maglite. She ran forward, swinging.

Darren watched her drive the knife blade through the man’s cheek in one powerful swing. He

wincing as the man still grabbed her, squealing and bleeding.

Megan swung the Maglite, caving in the man's skull.

She dropped to the ground and swung again, hitting his jaw as he fell. Blood and teeth sprayed the tall grass.

He thumped heavily to the ground and stayed there.

Megan let Darren advance to be sure the threat was down; she swept for other problems, gasping in air. She wasn't sure if she'd been breathing at all for that fight.

"Replay it from the beginning." Darren walked a tight perimeter. "Catch every detail for later."

Megan didn't ask him what it was for. She fell into the zone, replaying her victory.

Darren waited patiently, sure she was narrowing in and replaying parts, impressions. Later, he would show her what to do with all those beautiful, awful images that came from each battle. It was something Adrian hadn't known to do for his Eagles. The senior men had decided the turnover rate would be better if they cared for the mental stability of the Eagles as well as their mental training.

"Okay." Megan stared at the body. "Burn here or take him back?"

Darren wasn't sure. He didn't want to open the hole and bury it. If Marc or anyone else wanted to see the new body, it would expose his stash. He also didn't want to draw problems to the treehouse.

“We’ll take it back, but no burning until we’re finished.”

“So we can watch for more grounders?”

Darren nodded, frowning. “I don’t get the name we’re using.”

“Pam picked it. She said we all go back into the ground, and these people live in the ground, so it just fit.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “I guess I expected something snappy.”

Megan chuckled. “I think all the good names were already taken.” She grabbed an ankle and waited for Darren.

Darren finished storing his gear. He kicked foliage and debris over the fresh hole before joining her at the body.

The walk back was short and silent. Both of them were glad to let go of the body after dragging it to the charred spot near the front walk.

Darren headed for the house. “Can I get a raincheck on that quick moment? I need a shower.”

Megan was relieved. She felt the same way. “Of course.”

“We’ll probably be here until dinner.” He held the door for her. “Meet you in the mess an hour after we get cleared?”

Megan ducked under his arm. “Aren’t we all on lockdown?”

He grinned, locking the door and turning to stare at her pointedly. “Even rookies can make it to the mess unnoticed. I know. I’ve seen them do it.”

Megan laughed. “Challenge accepted.” She stepped around him to reach the sink. She blocked his view as she shoved her sleeve up.

A bright, bloody scratch glared at her.

Megan quickly rinsed it off and got out her medical kit.

Darren joined her. “Are you okay?”

She held up her arm. “Just a scratch.”

Darren’s heart leapt. “We need to get you to the ship.”

Megan opened the kit and started picking what she wanted to use. “Why? It’s a scratch.”

“That might be spreading their illness as we speak.” Darren grabbed the alcohol and twisted the lid. “Brace for it.”

Megan held out her arm, rolling her eyes. “Just do it. We have work waiting.”

“We’re calling Marc!”

“For what?” Megan swallowed a hiss at the pain. “So I can sit alone in a room on the ship? There’s no lab, Darren. Tonya barely survived birth. There’s nothing they can do for me right now.” She smeared on the ointment he squeezed out, then picked up a bandage. “Tape it.”

Darren reluctantly wrapped the tape around the bandage. “You’ll have someone look at it when we go back?”

“Of course.” Megan kissed his cheek, making them both stiffen at the immediate chill.

Darren chuckled. “Okay. Let’s get this done.”

Megan turned to the last desk, ignoring the scratch that was already starting to throb.

2

“We haven’t seen much of Dog.” Thelma tried again to start a conversation.

“I don’t think he’s feeling well.” Dwight’s mind was on the next choice the council had to make.

Thelma frowned. “How was your meeting?”

“Fine. We’re on a break.”

“Have you spoken to Brittani today?”

“No. You?”

“No.”

Thelma and Dwight shared unhappy looks as they resumed serving the lunch meal. It was encouraging that Daryl was helping Marc clear the island, but they didn’t want Brittani upset with them. They were also still upset with her. It made for an awkward crew where their sons stayed quiet and tried not to mess up so they didn’t get yelled at.

The mess was crowded. Over half the tables were full and all of them had been waited on. Thelma and Dwight were good at this. Everyone wore the puffy faces of a morning, complete with yawns and stretches as they shifted in the chairs and booths. The counter was empty for the moment, but Dwight knew that wouldn’t last. Angela had cleared the entire ship and lifted the lockdown, except for the top deck and the bridge. Both of those areas had heavy security.

“Have you seen Gus?”

Dwight frowned at her. “He’s been around.” Dwight wasn’t allowed to tell her that Gus was at the law meeting.

“Is he okay?”

“Seemed like it.” Dwight smiled at Ray and Grant. The men were holding hands as they came to the counter.

Thelma had opened the windows when they started their shift. The warm breeze and sounds of happy birds were a beautiful complement to the meal. For a few minutes, many of the diners were able to pretend they were on a relaxing cruise with great food and good friends.

Ray kissed Grant’s cheek and left, nodding to Dwight.

Dwight got Grant’s usual noon coffee ready. He wasn’t alone in that. Several of the camp members liked coffee all through the day. “Ready for food?”

Grant shook his head, smiling. “Just the coffee, thanks.”

Dwight wondered what had put Grant in such a good mood, but there wasn’t time to ask as another group entered the mess for lunch.

Tobias and his wives came to the counter while Laura’s nieces and Debra went to a table near the windows so they could stare at the island. Tracy, Bernice, and Gus came in right behind them and filled the booth in the corner.

The females all had sweaters over jeans and purses over shoulders. It reminded Dwight strongly

of the old world. He looked away before it began to sting.

Dwight and Thelma kicked into high gear, leaving mental issues behind to enjoy the zone of a perfect meal shift.

Tobias spotted the white outfit and placed the man at the counter. He sat next to Grant and extended his hand. "You must be the captain. I'm Tobias. These are my wives."

Grant smiled at them all in turn. "Nice to meet you. I'm Grant." He shook quickly and went back to his coffee.

Tobias scanned Grant and spotted signs of how he'd spent the night. He grinned.

Grant ignored the leer, standing up. "Excuse me." He went to a single table by the far window.

Tobias frowned. "That was rude."

Anna and Daniella sighed. Tobias didn't mean to be abrasive. It's just who he was.

Tobias waved at Dwight. "We need the full meal. Do we come back and help? We don't mind."

Dwight shook his head.

Thelma slid in front of him. "Yes. Come help cook."

Dwight frowned at her. "Stop it."

Thelma grinned and went back to the fryer.

Dwight got them silverware. "She's joking. What do you want to drink? We have powdered milk, water, coffee and tea, and Kool-Aid."

Tobias laughed. "Kool-Aid?"

Dwight chuckled with them. “We found a warehouse with Kraft products.”

Anna frowned. She wanted to ask a question, but she didn’t want to give it away that Daniella wasn’t the smart one. She held onto it, hunting for a way to find out that didn’t expose her. She wanted to know if it was the same family. “Tea.”

“Coffee.”

“Water.”

Dwight got their cups, glad these newest people seemed good.

“I wonder if it’s related to that mansion they’ve been talking about?”

Dwight sat the cups down, squinting at Tobias. “What mansion?”

“They found a mansion on the island. Some chick who’d been here before told them it’s called the Kraft mansion.”

“Oh. No idea, but it fits together.” Dwight began pouring the hot water while the slightly taller sister opened her tea bag. Dwight studied them, wondering how they were fitting in with their different relationship.

Tobias used a little sugar and no cream. “We’re fine. No one’s hassling us.”

Dwight understood Tobias was a descendant. “Them too?”

Tobias nodded. Even though they were locked, it didn’t change who they were. “Our kind is safe here, right? We were told we’d be safe here.”

Dwight nodded. “You’re fine. Most of leadership is descendant, so you’re covered.”

Tobias heard the tone, but he didn’t ask the next logical question. He didn’t want to flip any cards yet without knowing what might be on the other side. Safe Haven had a lot of things going on.

Tobias felt people sweeping him and his wives. They’d dressed carefully for this moment. They’d copied the sweaters and jeans, but they’d added their old tracking hats and Tobias had his long leather coat. They looked like a team of something the camp members couldn’t identify yet and the descendants didn’t want to.

Tobias scanned the crowded mess, seeing all member classes and ranks mixed together except for an empty center table. *Maybe this is the perfect job to gather information. Then I’ll know where we can fit in and help or just not be in the way.* “Was she serious about the work?”

Dwight paused, nodding. “We’ve had several promotions from this job.” Dwight realized that was a good thing as it came from his mouth. “This job makes ya or breaks ya.”

Tobias chuckled. “Tell her I’m interested. The wives can do what they want.”

“I like to cook.” Daniella smiled at her sister. “Anna prefers to read.”

“I’ll let the boss know. And thanks!” Mood going up, Dwight went to tell Thelma her little joke might have scored them two helpers.

Thelma returned from getting Debra's order. "It's so sad about those girls. Someone cut out their tongues. Can you imagine?"

"No." Dwight put a hand on her arm and quickly filled her in.

Thelma smiled. "All right. I brought in two. Your turn."

Dwight laughed. "Okay!"

Thelma motioned to the grill. "They each want a short stack, powdered eggs, and rehydrated sausage."

Dwight headed for the stove while Thelma worked on the drinks. Angela preferred it when they used a buffet set up, but Thelma enjoyed the feeling of running their own restaurant. They'd compromised. When there was something big happening, they were allowed to handle it this way. Arriving at the island had earned them a few special meals.

A loud voice drew everyone from their food and conversations.

"But she shouldn't be here!" Sherman pulled away from the Eagle on duty. He pointed at Tracy. "She made confessions too. She might be like the other one!" Sherman rubbed at his red, puffy eyes. "And that new one maced me!"

Sherman's bright yellow shirt and green pants were out of place among the dark shirts and jeans, but he didn't care. He liked standing out. That's why his hair was brown dreads and he had a metal ring in his lip.

Gus stood up, throwing out his chest. He smacked into Sherman and knocked the man backwards.

Sherman hit the edge of a booth and tripped, landing on the guard's foot.

Gus's bruise glinted at Sherman. Reality crashed in. *I'm not even an Eagle! I can't fight him.*

Sherman began babbling apologies.

Tracy quickly got up and left while they were all distracted.

Bernice went after her, glad that Crissy was with the other kids.

Sherman slowly rose. He turned toward the counter without saying anything else. Sherman glared at Dwight. "I was told to meet my new instructor here."

Tobias groaned. "No."

Anna giggled. "She sent him?"

Tobias grunted as his wives laughed. "Maybe she is trying to kill me."

3

"Is there someone you can tell?"

Tracy shook her head. "Charlie might try to kill him. And Angela's busy."

Bernice was new to Safe Haven, but she already knew Tracy and the boss weren't close. "Let's go see if Candy has the hair shop open today."

Tracy brightened. "That sounds fun."

The two women walked by the guard post, unaware of Ian listening to them. He made a note in his log. If someone was hassling Tracy, the boss would want to know.

Ian scanned the camp deck. This hall was busy with people in various stages of preparation for the wedding and the two parties that were happening soon. Bits of lace and ribbon were floating through the air and littering the walkways. Daisey was in charge of the decorating while Ralph was handling the people. Ian wasn't sure what Tracy or Charlie were doing. He hadn't seen them help with anything. *It's almost like they don't really want to get married.*

Ian listened to all the conversations he could hear, recording notes when he thought it was something the boss would want to know. It was part of the job.

“I hope she has plans. They heard another call on that big radio Kenn hooked up. The UN's coming for us.”

“The boss will handle it. Doesn't she always?”

“True. Still, I'd like to know the plan.”

Ian kept writing as that group of camp people walked by. He was still and quiet most of the time now when he was on duty; people talked around him now without ever considering that their words were being reported.

“Do you know how you’re voting yet?”

“Sure. We’ve always used the old world laws for crimes we don’t have covered in Safe Haven. He’s not guilty.”

“I’m not sure I agree. We could have lost a lot of lives. He should have told us.”

“Well, you get to vote any way you want to.”

“But I *don’t* want to! I like Tim!”

“I don’t care about him one way or another. I know justice matters and he can’t be held responsible for breaking a rule that doesn’t exist.”

“The Eagles say he had a duty to tell because he’d been one of them.”

“Safe Haven’s laws come before the old world laws?”

“Yes.”

Ian kept writing. He still wasn’t sure which way he was voting because both of them were right. Adrian had been slow to make new laws, so they’d used the old ones. The few laws he had made concerned changes and one of those had been to put Eagle honor above the law. Ian wasn’t sure which way he would go when the vote happened in a few days.

Ian capped his pen and scanned again for trouble. Finding nothing, he leaned back in his chair and eyed the kids coming down the hall. He liked it that Angela had given them all jobs. It kept them busy. He didn’t want to work with them.

Missy stopped by the guard post. “We’re gophers. What do you need?”

Ian pointed at Daisey and Ralph. “I’m good. Talk to them.”

Missy led the other kids toward the upstanding couple.

Ian forced nods to all the kids who focused on him. He wasn’t afraid of them, but he wasn’t comfortable either. He spotted Charlie coming. He made eye contact.

Charlie came over. “What’s up?”

Ian hoped he was doing the right thing. Charlie looked like an Eagle, and he sounded like one right now. Ian was sorry to distract him from his job, but Tracy was pregnant. They always made exceptions to the rules for that. “Someone might have been hassling Tracy. She and Bernice went to the shop floor.”

“Thanks.” Charlie hurried toward the stairs, anger growing.

Ian did a fresh scan of the cabins. The smell of chocolate floated through the ship, telling them what was coming at some point. Thelma was still making up for the bad meal. She was also giving them treats to celebrate their arrival. Ian wondered if she’d thought of it on her own or if Angela had asked her to so people would be more patient while Marc cleared the island.

He spotted Ray coming with a small box in his hand. *That’s a ring box.*

Ray glared at Ian. “Keep your trap shut.”

Ian snickered. “Nervous?”

Ray nodded as he walked by. “Of course.”

Ray went to where Ralph was surrounded by camp members who were waiting for their next orders. Decorating the chapel was starting today even though their only preacher might not be able to officiate.

Ralph slid over to make room. “Ray’s going to propose to Grant. Who wants to help me make it special?”

Ian was surprised by the reaction of the men and women. He’d expected nasty remarks. Instead, there were smiles and nods. *I guess things really have changed. In this case, it’s good.*

Ian saw a small crew coming down the hall. He watched them go into Darren’s cabin with a stack of boxes and cleaning supplies. Anger slid into his gut as he automatically assumed the worst. “We’ve lost one.”

4

“Tracy!” Charlie hurried down the steps. “Wait up!”

Tracy and Bernice stopped.

Bernice smiled at Tracy. “I’ll see you later.” She quickly left as Charlie caught up.

“Are you okay?”

Tracy nodded, forcing a cheerful smile. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Charlie sighed. “Don’t lie to me. I know someone was bothering you.”

Tracy was encouraged that Charlie wasn’t flying off the handle already. “Sherman’s just worried. A lot of people are.”

“That doesn’t give him the right to harass you.” Charlie scanned her thoughts. “Over Tim?” He snorted angrily. “I should have known.” Charlie led her toward a hall chair. “Your talks with Tim are private. It’s none of their business.” Tracy smelled and looked nice, normal. Charlie didn’t want anything to interfere.

Tracy was relieved. “You think Tim’s right?”

Charlie’s face lost all warmth. “I think he should be hanged for treason.”

Tracy’s heart dropped. “Oh.”

Charlie pushed it out of his mind. “I’m sure your talks weren’t bad. Don’t worry about it. I’ll let the Eagles know, and they’ll make Sherman leave you alone.”

Tracy gave a quick nod, cheeks flushed. Guilt whispered ugly things in her ear.

Charlie felt it. He ran a thumb along her cheek, sending out sparks. “I love you.”

Tracy moaned low in her throat. “Don’t stop.”

Charlie swept and found too many witnesses. “Sorry.” He grinned as she glared. “Maybe later.”

Tracy chuckled. “Tease.” She checked the wall clock. “I need to go help Daisey with preparations. Want to escort me?” Most of the ship was on harder chores and jobs, but Angela had insisted this was

important too. She said they had to enjoy life sometimes, not just live it.

“I can’t. I have point in a little bit. I have to get ready.”

“Okay.” Tracy proceeded toward the next steps.

Charlie hated it that they couldn’t spend time together when they wanted to. “Dinner?”

“Sure!”

Charlie watched until she was out of sight, aware of Jayda coming closer.

Jayda didn’t want to have this moment, but everyone else was busy. “Can I talk to you?”

Charlie turned with a frown. “It’s my life. Mind your own.”

Jayda grunted as the teenager stomped off. “I guess he already knows he’s marrying a skank.”

5

“Here’s another one.” Morgan handed the labeled sample to Harry so he could store it in the freezer. Tonya wasn’t in any shape to run even a temporary lab and they didn’t have anyone else who could do it. Tonya had submitted a name for her first trainee, but Angela hadn’t even been told yet thanks to Courtney trying to kill people.

“Should we get approval and send for her trainee so he can get started on something?” Harry locked the freezer.

Morgan wiped his hands on the towel and went to the kit that had been sent to them for storage. “No.

Let the boss cover this one. We just heal the patients.”

Harry relaxed. “I can do that.”

“Good.” Morgan signed out. The medical bay was busy, but under control. They were even back to handling some of the regular appointments. It was also loud. The non-stop chatter from all areas was giving him a headache. “You have it under control? I can go for a while?”

Harry grinned. “Yes, mother.”

Morgan snickered. “I got your mother right here...” Morgan stopped as Trinity came from the next room over.

Trinity ignored their male jokes. “Conner’s done with Molly and Allison. They’re both doing great. We put it on their cards for this visit.”

“Let them get dressed, then give them a copy of that card and help them to their room or to their escort. Do not leave them alone.”

Trinity went to summon Molly’s escort. After getting a treatment from Conner and healing from herself, Trinity knew the woman would need help to get settled in her cabin.

Conner emerged, holding a Band-Aid against his arm. “I got it wet when I washed my hands.”

Morgan chuckled, not asking how the water had gotten all the way up there. He quickly got a new one and applied it. As he worked, Morgan scanned Conner’s open thoughts for trouble.

Conner allowed it. He didn’t want people to think he was hiding anything, but he also

understood Morgan was scanning him so he could offer to help with whatever he found. “I’m just tired. We’ve done a lot of treatments.”

“We need to give you a longer recovery period between them.”

Conner shrugged. “I wanted to be sure they were clear.”

Morgan locked eyes with the boy. *Was she?*

Conner shook his head. *Molly had tiny growths restarting. I got them all this time—I’m sure I did—and we’ll still have to do it again. Those spots in her body are weak and cancer cells love weak spots.*

Morgan sighed. He put a hand on Conner’s shoulder. “Go get some rest, okay? We need you to stay healthy.”

Conner forced a smile that ended in a yawn.

Candy hurried over, holding her stomach so she could waddle faster. She took Conner’s arm, flashing an ugly look at Morgan. “Don’t call him for a while or you may have to admit him.” She turned Conner toward the elevator while he was trying to form a protest.

Morgan went to his log and made a fast note. He agreed with Candy. His note made that clear.

If we keep using Conner like this, we’re guilty of the same crimes the labs committed. His agreement, which is really guilt over his last name, is no excuse for what we’re doing to him.

Morgan waved at the girl lurking in the employee hall behind the guard station. “She’ll be

here when you get back. Come run this message to the boss.”

Kimmie stomped through the door and snatched the paper. “You cheated!”

Morgan nodded. “I know what you’re thinking and I’m not Tim. I will tell the boss everything. Stop stalking her or pay the price.”

The little girl stuck her hands in the pockets of her jumper and effected an innocent expression.

Morgan snorted. “Nice try.”

Kimmie ran toward the steps.

Francesca stuck her head out of Leeann’s door. “Thanks.” Her tea with Tracy and Bernice had been nice, but it hadn’t lasted long.

Morgan shrugged. “It won’t work. That little girl has it in for you.”

Francesca stroked her long braid nervously. “What should I do?”

Morgan walked by her, eager to start his break. “Go to the Eagles or Angela, and do it soon. She’s almost made up her mind to remove you from Jeff’s life.”

“Can someone help me?”

Morgan stopped, heart thumping at the desperate tone. He turned as if in slow motion. *Please don’t be an outbreak. Please don’t be an outbreak.*

Gabe leaned on the desk, eyes barely open. His swollen face pleaded with them. “Help?”

Morgan and Harry ran toward Gabe as he fell to the floor.

Chapter Seventeen
We Survive

1

“Where’s the boss?” Ed went to the guard post. “I have updates.”

“One floor below your feet.”

Ed headed that way, hiding his thoughts. He couldn’t wait for this to be finished.

Ed found a small crowd as he reached the bottom of the steps. He heard Angela’s voice, but he couldn’t see her yet. The crowd was a mix of camp and Eagles, all chatting and watching as if they didn’t dislike each other. They wore jeans and sweaters or Eagle clothes, making it easy to tell them apart.

The drafty hallways smelled like aftershave and sweat. Ed found it comforting. It said people were working, which meant progress was being made, which meant the boss would be happy at the end of the night. Everyone liked that.

“The animals are being cared for by Mike and Leeann. They’re both occupied today. Who wants to pet the goats and shovel their turds?”

Ed grinned with the others at Angela’s question as he made his way through the crowded hall.

“Good. Now, in this next area, we have a quick lunch. Grab it while it lasts.”

The lunch room was actually a cargo hold they hadn't gotten sorted yet. Angela planned to get them to work while they ate, and then some of them would remain behind to finish the job.

Men laughed as they realized what she had planned.

The crowd quickly thinned as people went into the large room, grinning and chatting about everything from Marc to the UN.

Ed met Angela at the door. “Updates.”

Angela read through the long list, heart dropping a little with each one.

Ed felt her mood dip. He understood. Gabe was in stable condition, but the new medical issue was another bad omen. They'd had enough of medical issues. Ed never wanted to be around another outbreak of any kind. He was still having nightmares from it.

Angela stored the notes. “Stay with me for a few minutes. I might want to send answers.”

Ed waited in the hall as Angela went in to join the men and women who'd been with her since Marc's call. Except for those she'd put to work, anyway. She'd left people behind on every deck and things were getting done. Ed was certain her plans for the island were ahead of schedule.

“Boss to the medical floor. No rush.”

“Copy.” Angela turned that way at the radio call, not surprised things were happening here while

Marc was gone. Fate was testing them both, but she doubted the ship issues would be anything she couldn't handle. Marc's trials were what she dreaded. *Get it done any way you have to. Just come home soon.*

Marc lit up the back of her mind. *I love you.*

Angela smiled at his fast message. He was linked to the hive right now, though most people probably wouldn't know it. Angela was encouraged. If he had time to explore minds, then the run must be boring, and that was exactly how she hoped it stayed. "Tell them I'll be back."

Ed turned to the eating crew.

Angela hurried up the stairs, pushing her body to give her more than she needed. *Because I will need it at some point and it has to be there.*

Neil met Angela at the top of the steps. He held a door open for her.

Angela entered the small office and found it empty. She figured it out right as Neil spoke. *Nature.*

"There's a storm coming. Sam says it's nasty." Neil didn't tell her Samantha had done it in front of a group of camp women. "The story's already going around. Sorry."

"It's fine." Angela took a deep breath and switched mental files. "When?"

"She's not sure yet. Sometime this evening. It's coming from the east. Our landmass is making it hard for her to scan since she's still weak."

Angela caught the note of disapproval in his voice. "I'm sorry, too. Make her rest as much as you can, but we need her, Neil. We don't have anyone else who can defend these people."

"I'll help with that."

"Maybe Tobias can teach *you* his gift. I need someone who can always tell if they're lying, without magic."

"I thought it was a gift."

Angela shrugged. "It is. He just doesn't use magic to do it."

"Okay." Neil tackled the next thing he needed. "I'd like to join Marc."

"No."

Neil frowned. "Why?"

"Because I need you with Samantha until this case is settled and people have accepted it."

"You think she's in danger?"

Angela didn't meet his eyes. "She was threatened by a camp member when she went to the brig to talk to Tim."

"I know." Neil stared at her. "I also know Sherman is all mouth. What's up?"

Angela's shoulders drooped. "I'm not sure. I can't look ahead, but I feel it coming and I think there are three main targets."

Neil's concern popped to life and settled into his gut. "Marc, Theo, and Samantha; without them, our plans are useless."

Angela nodded. "Nature's back. We got a little break from her, but we're on land again and she can

reach us. Marc's a leader. Theo's a builder. Samantha can warn us of her attacks. Nature's aiming for all the areas where we've been able to defeat or challenge her."

Neil ran those moments through his mind. "What did Marc do?"

Angela shivered. "He survived."

"Boss!"

Angela and Neil hurried out at Morgan's shout.

Angela immediately began shooting healing energy at Hannah. Her swollen face was turning dark red.

Angela let Neil help her, not sure what had caused the woman's severe reaction.

"We got Gabe with an EpiPen. He'll be okay." Harry saw Hannah and ran for the cabinet to get another one.

Angela kept holding it at bay while the medic jabbed the pen into Hannah's arm.

Morgan caught her as she folded. He put her in the chair right next to them, watching her chest for breathing.

Angela waved Neil toward the steps. "We need books about bugs."

Neil frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"Bugs on this island. This is an allergic reaction. She and Gabe were both on the island."

Neil headed for the steps. The books on the island had been in the infirmary when Courtney blew it up. The books that survived had been taken to the cargo hold.

Trinity had been listening. “What’s the big deal? We covered them. He’s fine now and she’s getting better.”

Angela helped Morgan and Harry as they got oxygen treatments ready for both patients. “One attack is a rare moment. Two so close together implies we’ll have more.”

Harry went to the cabinet, frowning. “I don’t think we have enough pens to cover our entire population even once.”

“I know.” Angela went into Tonya’s room and shut the door. “How are you feeling?”

Tonya was trying to get up. She glared at Kenn. “I have work to do.”

Kenn gently pushed her back down. “We’ll bring it in here. Stay in bed.”

Angela handed Tonya her notes. “He’s right. Read the things I send you, then give me ideas and suggestions. If you need a book, Kenn will get it and hold it. Let your body heal while your mind works.” Tonya was a lot better, stronger. Kenn looked like he hadn’t slept for more than an hour in weeks.

“I need all the allergy books.”

Angela gestured.

Kenn hurried out, glad Angela was supporting his choice.

As soon as the door shut, Tonya glared at Angela. “I can feel you weighing the choice. Let it go. He’s earned a mistake without you frying his ass to the wall.”

Angela sat in the chair, mind speeding through possible outcomes of the allergic reactions. “Give me your word you won’t let his son grow up to be like him in any way.”

“I already planned on that.” Tonya met her eye. “Please. Let it go.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

“I’ll use blackmail.”

Angela frowned. “Against who?”

“You.” Tonya motioned to the mark on her arm. “You’ve been blocked from the time stream. Most people on this ship don’t know.”

“They don’t care as long as one of us can do it. Try again.” Angela was glad to see Tonya alert enough to fight.

“Oh, stop it. Just leave him alone or I’ll scratch your damn eyes out!”

Angela laughed, nodding. “There’s the Tonya I’ve come to respect.”

“I mean it, boss lady. I need him alive more than you need him dead.”

“That, I can agree with.” Angela scanned the redhead. Angela didn’t look at Dog. She knew what was wrong with him, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it.

“Anything else?”

Tonya nodded. “I need a favor.”

“After threatening me?”

Tonya shrugged. “It was just a little threat.”

Angela chuckled again. “What’s the favor?”

Tonya drew in a breath. “I want Tim to christen my son. Can you make that happen?”

Angela stared, shocked into silence.

Tonya sighed, leaning against the pillow. “I know it’s crazy. But I really do.”

Angela stood, moving toward the door. “And I guess you’d like the father there too.”

“Yes, but no blood is the most important part.”

“So you, Tim, a Bible, Kenn, and no blood.”

Angela’s voice sharpened. “Are you nuts?”

Tonya nodded. “Will you help me?”

“Of course. I specialize in crazy. It’s how I got this job.” Angela stepped into the hall and shut the door. She stayed there, guarding it while she scanned the medical area for issues she needed to handle right now. She saw Trinity and waved her over. “Duty here until Kenn gets back.”

Angela checked her book to see what was left on this deck.

Trinity took the post without questioning why they were guarding Tonya. She didn’t care. She just wanted to be here so she would know all the little secrets and surprises. The new medical area had become the gossip hub as people came to visit and get checkups. It was a great source of information while she killed time until she could get Gus alone. He was back in his meeting now.

Brittani came up the stairs with an arm full of books. She didn’t see Trinity in the hallway.

Trinity put her foot out.

Brittani tripped, sprawling forward. Books scattered across the floor.

Everyone stopped and stared at the loud clattering and her grunt of pain.

“Oh, my God! Are you okay?” Trinity hauled the woman roughly to her feet. “I’m so sorry.”

Brittani sucked in a breath, wrist throbbing where she’d caught herself. “I’ll survive.” She bent to pick up the books.

Trinity hurried to help her instead of grabbing her knife and plunging it into the woman’s neck.

Brittani and Angela felt the cold chill at the same time. They paused, both staring at Trinity with hazy eyes searching for answers.

Trinity’s smile faltered. “What? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to trip her. I didn’t even see her.”

Brittani went to the desk and put the bent, dusty books on it. “I’ll be around.” She limped toward the elevator.

Angela kept staring at Trinity.

Trinity stared right back, walls up and thick. It would take Angela an hour to get through her shield and all she would find was thoughts of hating Brittani and nothing else. Trinity was a master at guarding her thoughts.

Angela’s lips curved into a cold smile. “Be careful.”

Trinity nodded. “I will.”

Angela stepped aside as Kenn’s boots echoed, getting closer. “Go find your honor. Get out of here.”

Trinity flushed. She stomped toward the opposite exit Brittani had taken, nose in the air.

“She’s trouble.” Kenn walked by Angela. “I’m not sure what happened, but she flipped on us.”

“Love happened.” Angela frowned. “Or obsession. It’s hard to tell the difference some days.”

Kenn snorted. “Ain’t that the truth.” He paused, hand on the door knob as he balanced a stack of books in the other. “Did you tell her yes?”

Angela nodded, not surprised Kenn already knew.

Kenn’s face darkened. “It’s never going to happen. Tell her to ask for something easier—like world peace!”

Kenn went inside and shut the door.

Angela sighed deeply. “Why did I want this job again?”

2

“You’re saying it doesn’t matter in the end. We decide.”

“Yes, but go deeper.” Marc had gotten tired of walking in silence. He’d started putting Ivan and Monica through mental testing.

Ivan concentrated, following Marc over old bones. “We would have still made the same choices.”

“And that means...”

“God is an excuse!”

“Not always.” Marc knew his team was uncomfortable with the topic, but they were cooperating. Ivan was ahead in the brains area. Monica was excelling at predictions based on environment and peer pressure.

“It’s damp down here.”

Marc didn’t respond to the obvious comment or the interruption by the rookie. The walls were earth and carefully placed boards. The dirt floor held small puddles of water and the echo of a distant drip had been echoing since they’d entered this tunnel.

The dirt shifted along one wall, sending a trickle to the floor. Their lights bounced off vines and bugs in every direction. A dank draft blew through the tunnel, making noses curl and stomachs churn.

“I don’t swim.” Eugene didn’t want them to think he wasn’t trying to fit in. “I can learn.”

“Hush now.” Marc understood rookie nerves were hitting Eugene and reminding him he was just that—a rookie.

The tunnel floor shifted under their feet in this section. Thick vines tips stuck through the boards and ceiling. Men walked around them or ducked, sure the feel would be sharp and slimy.

“There’s another pile of bones.”

The group slowed at Shawn’s call. He and Trent were staying twenty feet ahead of the main group to scout and provide Marc with a few seconds to make a decision if something went wrong. Both men watched the tunnel while Marc caught up.

In the rear of Marc's group, Kyle and Biff walked sideways and backward to make sure their flank was covered.

Marc and the others spotted the distinctive swords among the bones. "Pirates." He'd forgotten about the pirates helping the UN. *I hope this is all of them.* Marc motioned.

Shawn and Trent resumed point, light steps moving over bones, bugs, and puddles.

"Ocean's getting closer." Eugene was trying to atone for his error.

Marc sighed. "Talk less, think more."

Eugene flushed. "Sorry, it's just that I'm..." Eugene stopped talking and tried to ignore the disapproval of the entire team.

Another small chunk of wall slid to the floor and melded with a puddle they all avoided.

"Let's mix it up. Monica goes first this time."

Monica braced, taking a deep breath.

Everyone else waited for the riddle or brain twist Marc was about to throw. They were all trying to answer it silently before Monica or Ivan, but they didn't want to be put on the spot. Marc's questions were too hard, too deep, for their current environment. Being underground in the darkness was no place to discuss the afterlife or the origins of mankind.

Marc thought it was the perfect place. It would help steel their nerves, and it passed the time. "If God doesn't exist and it's all random, why does every society cling to religion?"

Monica frowned. "I don't cling. I have faith."

"Pull yourself out of the equation. Look at it as if you don't have a connection."

"I find it hard to do that." Monica faltered for the first time. "I can't be unbiased about this topic."

"Work on it. Try to answer." Marc wanted to be sure they were able to see any situation from both sides before making a judgement.

"Maybe it was fear at first..." Monica dug deeper. "They didn't have the science that we did before it fell. Thunder and lightning were gods to them. They based their societies around the most powerful influences in their lives."

"Yes. The weather and Nature determined their survival most of the time."

"It still doesn't prove or disprove." Monica wiped dirt from her hair for the tenth time and finally brought up the hood on her jacket. Everyone else had already done that.

"No. So you have to keep going until you find something that does."

Monica fell silent, hunting for the thread she knew Marc was leading them to. She was enjoying the lesson and the distraction from the stinking darkness that echoed all wrong in her ears. She forced her brain to use parts that rarely saw action. "Drawings, paintings. Giant structures." Monica's voice lightened. "The Nazca Lines."

"Circumstantial."

Monica frowned—at the new bones they were stepping over and Marc’s response. “Matching origin stories.”

“Legends and myths set in actual places. Fiction based on fact. Traveling singers. Gossip between traders.”

“I give.” Monica didn’t want any more questions for a while.

“And that is the answer to the first question that triggered this session.” Marc pointed at Ivan. “Tell me what it is.”

Ivan was ready. “People were refusing to believe in anything after believing in everything. It confused them, and then peer pressure drove them toward a logical answer so they didn’t appear backward. It was never given an honest exploration.”

Marc nodded, impressed with both of them. “And that concludes today’s—”

“We’re back where we started.” Shawn held up his map. “I marked that ceiling beam.”

Marc believed him. “What does that leave?”

“We have to explore it until there’s nothing left to explore.” Shawn consulted his map again as everyone stared at him. “The tunnel that goes under the town, and the hatch right behind the barn.”

Marc motioned at Shawn. “Take us to the shore. We still have supplies to pick up.”

Shawn didn’t mind staying in the lead; he was eager to polish his rusty navigation skills. Clearing these tunnels had been great for testing rookies and

allowing senior men time to adjust to being on land again.

Not that it's helping. Marc's stomach rolled over, spewing acid. His legs shook a little as he stepped over a tree branch that had no business being down here. The beams weren't rough limbs and the hatches, even with holes kicked in them, wouldn't have allowed a branch that size to fall through. It was another clue in a mystery Marc was already tired of.

"Why the quiz?" Ivan knew there had to be a string attached.

"The boss gave me an extra assignment before we left." Marc grinned. "I'm in charge of deciding who gets their own team."

Men muttered and laughed at the news.

"Something's moving ahead." Shawn slowed, waiting for them to come to full alert. He advanced at Marc's motion, hand on his gun while he shined his light.

The dirt under their boots swelled, forcing up bugs in the hundreds.

People jumped, stomping, groaning, crunching, and cursing.

Marc saw tiny green points come through the dirt. They swiveled toward his boots and slid forward. "Vine attack!"

Christian stared at him, half a smile curving his lips. "Vine attack? Really?"

Marc jumped over the green coils and pushed people toward the nearest hatch. "Roll out!"

The others followed, passing Christian.

Christian looked down and saw the vines coiling around his ankle. “Oh, shit. Vine attack!”

Shawn bent and sliced through the vines. He sheathed as he stood, giving Christian a stern look. “Move out!”

Christian jerked his leg free and hurried after Marc.

Eugene laughed. “They’re just plants. They can’t hurt us.”

A large vine shot out of the dirt wall and plunged into Eugene’s throat. Blood ran down his chest.

“No!” Shawn and the others grabbed Eugene as he fell, putting their hands over the gaping holes in both sides of his neck.

Christian slashed with his knife; the vine retreated into the shifting wall, avoiding the blow.

Eugene shuddered, eyes shutting.

“Marc!”

Eugene stopped moving.

“It’s too late.” Marc sent healing orbs anyway, but he already knew it wouldn’t matter.

The other vines slowly retreated as Eugene’s blood soaked into the ground; the dirt stilled.

The team stood around the body, stunned by how fast it had happened.

“Did anyone find out what his problem was?” Marc felt bad that he hadn’t talked to the man.

Shawn stood up as the blood curved toward his boots. “He was afraid he was gonna die on this run.”

3

“Someone died.” Adrian paused, fighting the depression that came behind the awful cold chill. “Marc’s upset.”

“Should we go find them?” Tommy was ready to be out of here for a while. It had been boring, but also tense. It was like the walls were waiting for the right moment to swallow him. He couldn’t be the hero if he was the target.

“No. We need to finish this tunnel.” Adrian had been keeping track. “We should be near the end of it. Look for a hatch.”

Tommy and Quinn shined their lights, hating the bugs that fled from the exposure. It was easier to be down here if they didn’t know those creepy little things were all around them.

“It looks like all these tunnels meet in the center of the town.” They’d found the cleared area a little bit ago. A very old campfire and a ragged blanket had been all there was to find. Quinn was starting to enjoy the walk. He’d spotted a lot of places he could go to be alone if he needed it. *This island is like one giant tunnel playset.*

“Who do you think it was?” Tommy hoped it wasn’t anyone he cared about.

“Not sure yet. Marc isn’t torn up, but he’s upset. I think it was an Eagle.” Adrian’s voice hardened. “No more distractions right now. Pay attention to the job so it gets done.”

“Who gets to sleep with Kendle tonight?”

Adrian rolled his eyes. “What *does* she see in you?”

Quinn thought about their craziest night together. “I make her feel alive. You make her feel close to Marc.”

Tommy frowned when Quinn stopped. “What about me?”

“You’re like Luke, I assume.”

“We’re both links to other men, but you make her feel alive?”

Quinn nodded. “She’s safe with you guys.”

Tommy snorted. “I think she can take you.”

“I meant sex.” Quinn ignored their groans. “You’re safe. I’m not.”

Silence fell for a minute, allowing only their even breathing and the sound of their feet on the dirt.

Adrian caved first. “All right. Explain.”

Quinn grinned. “You’re both...bed guys. Maybe the floor or wall if things are hot enough.”

“What are you?”

Quinn sighed as memories floated through his mind. “I’m more of a blindfolded, balancing naked on a balcony rail in the dark on a moving ship kind of guy.”

Tommy laughed. “That’s how the boot got wedged in the outside window rail!”

The three men chuckled, but it faded fast. The tunnel sent sound back in odd waves that their ears refused to decipher without protesting.

Adrian tensed. “Something’s coming.” He scanned for the hatch. “Get out. Find the hole!”

All three men shined lights on the vine-covered boards above them.

“There!” Tommy ran for the hatch and jumped up to pop the clip.

Bright light flooded and vanished.

Dirt sprayed him in the face as the wall fell, gushing earth over his chest, legs, and arms.

Quinn slammed into him to bump him free.

Adrian grabbed both their arms and shoved them toward the pile. “Up!”

Tommy crawled up the shifting earth and climbed out. He stayed on his side, dropping an arm down.

Quinn grabbed his arm and then held his own down for Adrian.

Nothing happened. “Come on!”

No answer.

Quinn and Tommy scooted to the edge, lights coming out.

Adrian stomped on the vine trying to curl around his boot. He ducked as one flew from the ceiling.

“Jump!”

Adrian did, curling up to protect his body as vines shot out of the dirt walls and tried to impale him.

Quinn and Tommy jerked Adrian topside and retreated as more vines came from the hole, searching for them.

“What the hell was that?!”

Adrian got to his feet, chest burning. “Nature’s back and she’s still pissed.”

Adrian reached for his radio, then remembered they weren’t allowed to break radio silence unless it was an emergency. He studied the hole, not sure what he would say. He settled on a mental warning.

We were attacked by Nature. She’s getting meaner.

Adrian got his breath back and waited for Marc’s answer. *Call it a night. We’ve had enough fun for one day.*

4

“Tiger to base. We’re sending back a fallen Eagle.”

“Damn. Copy that. We’ll be ready for the handoff.”

“Eugene died in action.”

“So noted.”

“Keep most of the escort; send new gear.”

“Covered and waiting. Storm warning. Six hours.”

“Copy. Resuming clearing. Out.”

Safe Haven and everyone else listened to the upsetting radio call between Marc and Angela, glad he had told them who it was. Eugene had been okay and they always needed medics, but he wasn’t as important to most of them as one of their leaders.

Angela and Marc felt the most grief. Both of them mourned another life lost on their watch.

“Anyone who wants to go back can leave with the body crew.” Marc scanned his subdued team, relieved to see resignation and not mutiny or terror. “I can’t promise it won’t be you next time.”

Shawn grinned. “That might be the best morale speech I’ve ever heard from you.”

Marc snickered with them and then felt guilty for it.

“Life goes on, man.” Shawn shrugged at the unpleasant looks. “It does. We still have a job to do. Let’s get it done and continue on to the next thing that wants to kill us.”

The radios crackled again as they snorted. “We’re almost done here. Permission to head back?”

Marc keyed his radio. “Join the team coming by your door shortly.”

“Copy.”

Marc was glad Darren and Megan were going to the ship now too. He didn’t want anyone else on the island except those who had to finish clearing it. As for nature, he was limited in what he could do. They had flamethrowers on the ship, but if they killed the vines under the ground, the plants topside would die. They couldn’t use poisons for the same reason, and only a few of the descendants would be able to shield entire teams while they explored the tunnels. *We’ll have to fight it out.*

Marc scanned the stunned, twitchy team now eyeing the hole with trepidation and reluctantly cut a few more. “Guard duty over the boss until she gives you another job.”

All three Eagles brightened, but they still watched the trees and ground for the next threat.

Marc was glad they didn’t know the real reason. *I can’t take another death today and you three are the weakest Eagles here. I made a command decision. So why does it feel so dirty?*

Marc answered himself. *Because it’s what Adrian would do. It’s sleazy but effective.*

Marc drew his knife and sighed. “Tuck and tighten; we’re going down in two minutes. Enjoy the fresh air and bright sun.”

“Can I ask a question? About the brain quiz?”

Marc nodded.

Monica drew in a breath. “Did we pass?”

Marc chuckled despite the mood. “Yes. I’ll work on Biff and Shawn next.”

Biff and Shawn groaned as the others laughed.

Ivan came over, drawing his knife. “Who won?”

Marc passed his sharpening stone. “Why?”

Monica shrugged. “We just want to know.”

Marc decided to be honest. “Shawn.”

“What?”

“But you didn’t ask him a single question!”

“And yet he still gave the best answer: We have to explore it until there’s nothing left to explore.”

Marc sheathed, bracing again. “This is why we’re here. We explore. We invent. We survive. In the

end, this is one of the most magnificent ways an Eagle can fly.”

The quiet men proceeded toward the hole with Marc, most of them nodding to Trent and his group of escorts. Trent was taking back the body, along with a little piece of the team’s heart. Eugene hadn’t been a favorite. He hadn’t been likeable even. He’d refused to leave though, and that made him one of them.

Marc dropped into the hole and slid aside so the next man could drop. He was ready to stomp or draw his blade.

Nothing happened.

Marc wasn’t hit with the cold chill of danger. It felt like he was being laughed at as a warm draft blew over his body. *So that’s what fate smells like.* Marc hid a shiver and led them out.

Chapter Eighteen

Working Both Sides

1

Kendle stared at the cave entrance as her mind finished replaying the horror she'd suffered inside that stone gap. She stood there, feeling the warm sun, smelling the salty air. *I should have died in there.*

Kendle waited to feel something, anything, other than the heavy sense of loss. Her life had been stolen from her. She could never go back to who she'd been.

The ocean slapped against the cliffside, sending sprays to the top. Kendle shivered as the wind brought faint drops that broke over her arm. *I should have died out there too.*

Kendle turned at the sound of scratching. She saw a hatch open. Marc's head popped through.

Kendle's heart skipped a beat.

Marc stiffened, hit with her pleasure when he wasn't ready to block it. He climbed out and scanned the area while Ivan hung the ladder. Marc had felt someone out here. He'd come up to handle it.

Kendle gave him a tiny smile as their eyes met again. She quickly glanced away before his frown could ruin it for her.

Ivan came over to Kendle. “We’re going in there.”

Kendle nodded. She’d known they would at some point. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to or not. She’d been standing here, trying to decide if she had the courage to face her worst nightmare.

Marc and Chad worked on opening the cave while Shawn and Biff settled on two watch posts that covered all sides of the cave except for the cliff it was a part of. They scanned upward repeatedly, but the sun was too bright to see if there was anything up there.

Ivan joined Kendle, but he didn’t speak. He watched Marc and the others go into the cave.

Kendle felt better when he only stood with her. She didn’t feel like chatting.

Ivan understood it was hard to face hell alone, but he didn’t know what to say. Just being here would have to be enough.

Shawn frowned at them. “Find a guard spot and get in it!”

Kendle snorted.

Ivan gestured. “You pick first.”

Kendle took the opportunity to join Marc’s team. She chose the rear of the path, where she didn’t have to see the cave at all. *I don’t need to go in there. I know what happened. I relive it daily. Seeing the place won’t make any difference.*

Marc and the others walked the cave, wincing, grimacing, and flinching at the things they found. Their minds tried to block the images, but there was no way to pretend they didn't know what had happened in here.

“We'll burn it all.” Marc didn't see anything that needed to be saved or removed. “Seal it back up for now.” Marc left the cave, searching for Kendle.

Kendle refused to meet his eyes. He was feeling bad for her. It was a weak moment, and she wasn't going to take advantage of him. *When he really wants my company, it won't take a torture room to make it happen.*

Marc caught that and locked it all up. She was right. He felt awful for her and guilty just because he was a man. He felt the need to be nice to her to make himself feel better, not her. Marc turned toward the hatch. “Fall in. Our day isn't over yet.”

Kendle stayed in the rear of the group, ready to flee if Marc told her to go.

Marc waited until they were all in the ground. He searched the resigned faces and found Kendle.

Kendle waited, eyes pleading.

Marc opened his mouth... And shut it. He led them out, refusing to admit that he felt better with her along. “When we get to the next fork, go collect my gophers and their guard. Take them to the shore bridge. They're stringing lights.”

Everyone knew who he was talking to. “I will.” Kendle celebrated inside her mental walls and followed. She didn’t walk with her hands on her weapons; she wasn’t worried about Nature. She was ready to face anything tossed at Marc. *That’s why I’m here and I know that now. I’ll keep him alive while he saves the world. Angela doesn’t get this side of him—only I do.*

All the descendants tensed as an ominous wind blew through the tunnel.

The ground under Marc’s feet vanished. He tilted and dropped into the tunnel. Part of the roof collapsed on him; a side wall caved in. Large rocks in the soil slammed into his body and head. A cloud of dust rose from the hole and coated the stunned team.

“Get him!”

“Watch the sides!”

Kendle flew by Marc’s team and dove into the hole.

Green eyes lit up in the darkness.

Kendle shuddered; her hands drew both curved blades she’d taken from the pirate bodies as they washed up. “Come on, Ethan. Let’s replay this moment.”

About to jump in, Monica shifted and landed on the other side instead. She shined her light and found most of the missing locals crawling and lunging toward them. “We need backup!”

Senior Eagles dropped into the hole and let the slide down the collapsed wall determine which side

they ended up on. As they slid, their hands freed weapons and lights.

Ivan didn't touch Kendle to pull her back. He pushed his shield out to include her.

The man she was stabbing fell to the ground.

Kendle drew back and spun, eyes glowing brightly.

Ivan glared at her. "Pay attention, Rookie!"

Kendle snorted, moment of madness fading into concern. She knelt and began flinging rocks from the center pile.

Everyone else came over to help her while Ivan kept them shielded. Their lights flashed off drooling, furious locals all around the shield. Their groans and grunts were worse than if they'd been shouting, but it also let the Eagles relax a bit. These locals weren't as bad as stage four yet. Handling them wouldn't be as hard.

Radios crackled. "I'm waiting for an update."

Marc's emergency contact system had already kicked in. The radios had stayed clear all this time. Angela was impressed and almost out of patience. It was clear in her voice.

"Cave-in. Ongoing dig." Ivan was almost out of energy already. "Rookies jumping at shadows. Sorry for the gunfire."

Angela didn't believe it for a minute, but she was pleased that he wasn't spooking the herd. "Sounds like you'll need a break soon." Angela forced out the next words, begging to be wrong. "Who did it hit?"

Ivan didn't want to answer.

Neither did anyone else.

Ivan reluctantly keyed his mike again as Kyle switched places and lifted a strong shield so he could rest. "It's Marc."

Panic ran through Safe Haven at those words.

The entire team felt it. Ivan hit his mike again. "Keep your ass on that boat, Boss. We have it covered and this island has not been cleared."

Eagles stared at Ivan in surprise and disapproval.

Ivan waited, watching the angry locals slam against Kyle's shield. *I feel like we're at the airport hangar again.* "Angela? Did you hear me?"

The dead radio was his answer.

Ivan waved at Kyle. "Switch back with me. If I'm drained, she might not knock my teeth out."

Weak chuckles echoed as they worked to free Marc. They knew he was under the pile, but they hadn't heard a single sound from him.

Kyle knew what had to come next. He shined his light on Christian. "When Ivan drops his shield, we'll clear this side, take a pause to get set, then do the other side."

Christian recoiled. "You're kidding, right?" He kept moving toward the ladder.

Kyle frowned. "This is what we came here to do. If you can't handle it, get up the ladder and stand guard."

Christian flew up the ladder that Monica had finished setting in place.

“We go on two.” Kyle stood next to Kendle, who hadn’t stopped working, sliding his knife free. “Make it fast and move on. We don’t take pleasure in this part of the job. Our honor demands this duty; we don’t have to like it.” Kyle nodded at Ivan as Shawn stepped forward to flank him and Kendle increased her digging frenzy. Rocks were flying into their ankles; it was the least of their concerns. “Lower it.”

Marc shifted under the pile as the chaos began. *This wasn’t how I wanted this to go.*

Marc shoved up through the hole Kendle had created, breathing in deep to settle his thumping heart as men noticed it and kept fighting. He had scrapes and scratches, but he was okay otherwise. “Keep count; don’t get in their reach. And watch the ground.” Marc pushed out his shield, body hurting and bleeding in several places. “It’s definitely not friendly.”

Kyle keyed the mike, able to feel Angela’s frustration with the wait. “We are all 5-by, Boss. It’s okay to breathe again.”

2

“Who’s out there?” Daryl scanned all around the hole. He’d come up for a fast scan and heard something coming closer.

Kendle emerged through the trees, knife in hand. “Marc wants you all on the ship. Get his gophers and go.”

Daryl assumed Kendle had been sent as their escort. He might have argued or demanded proof any other time even though she was dirty and bleeding lightly in places. The vibes here were clear. If they stayed, they would bleed. “Come on up! Double time!”

Greg helped Timmy and Mike affix the last line of solar wire to the boards. He herded them toward the hatch. “Get up there.”

Greg went up last, holding his light in his mouth as Daryl and Timmy pulled him up by the arms. He didn’t see anything, but he felt it nearby, watching.

Kendle picked the shortest path to the beach. Marc had sent her away before she could start mothering him, but she wanted to get back as fast as she could. “Stay together.”

Greg and Daryl sandwiched the boys between them and got set.

Kendle grinned as she caught their thoughts. She gave them a couple more seconds to get set, then she took off running.

Greg and Daryl shoved and pushed the boys into place, dragging them when they had to as they stayed on her heels.

Kendle didn’t stop until they reached the edge of the high grass. She paused and slid to the side so they could go by. She heaved in air, loving the physical strength that seemed to be returning.

“Thanks!” Daryl didn’t slow, forcing everyone in front of him to keep moving.

Kendle chuckled. “Anytime.” She watched as they made it to the bridge, snickering when the senior men still didn’t let the boys stop.

Kendle turned back toward the path without scanning the ship for Angela or anyone else. Marc was here on the island. *I don’t care about those other people at all.*

3

Megan and Darren saw the body bag over Trent’s wide shoulders and stayed silent as their escort walked by. They joined the rear of the line, catching the solemn mood. Another Eagle had fallen. It was impossible to deny the job was lethal. Old Eagles were a myth that hadn’t been proven yet.

“Anyone up for beer and cards later?”

Hank fell silent at the immediate glares. This was an Eagle honor guard. They weren’t supposed to be chatting like nothing was wrong.

The walk felt long to Megan. She fought the need to talk and scratch. Her arm was bothering her now. She was suffering the pinches and lances of pain, but the itching was driving her crazy. She shifted it against her hip, sucking in a breath at the instant discomfort from contact. *That’s not good.*

Darren grabbed her arm and shoved her sleeve up. He grimaced at the sight of the yellow bandage. *Straight to the medic when we get back!*

Megan nodded, dropping her head as Eagles glared at them. She adjusted her sleeve over the bandage and fought to keep from touching it again.

Darren dug in his kit, ignoring the glares. He'd been with them since Wyoming. He'd agreed to be an Eagle once they hit the ship, but he'd been special in the old world too. He was going to do what he thought was best. If Eugene had still been alive, he would have done the same. Darren shoved a bottle at her. *Take one right now.*

Megan read the name and nodded. Antibiotics were a good idea. She'd never had a minor scratch flare up this fast or this bad. She popped one in her mouth and swallowed while shoving the bottle into her pocket. *Thanks. I'm out in my kit.*

Darren made a mental note to refill her medical kit when he got time. He stepped closer and met her eye.

Megan blushed, smiling at the heat. He was making it clear that he was worried about her and would stay with her until he knew she was okay. It was sweet, but it felt wrong to enjoy it with a dead body swinging in front of them. She retreated. *Run first, drama second.*

Darren's lips twitched. *Remember you said that.* Megan frowned and pushed it aside for later.

"Angela's waiting for us." Trent could almost feel her scanning for them.

Everyone straightened as the ship came into view. Angela and a small group of black clad Eagles were on the top deck, watching for them.

Trent walked faster.

“Are you okay?” Hank was a rookie, though he felt too old for that title.

Trent nodded, shifting the bag higher onto his shoulder. “I’ll need to switch when we stop at the bridge.” Carrying the body of a full-grown man over your shoulder for a mile was a challenge for almost anyone, but he wasn’t going to give it to a rookie in sight of the boss. “I’ll cover it on the bridge. We’ll use the ramp to get on the ship.”

“No need. The boss has a gurney waiting.”

Trent was relieved as he spotted what the rookie already had. He didn’t want to carry a body through the halls.

Missy met them at the end of the bridge. She waved Trent to go on through. “Everyone has to be decontaminated. Senior rank first.”

Senior men stepped forward, smiling at her jumble of the word.

Darren caught the girl’s eye. “Megan needs the medic.”

Missy gestured at the woman, narrowing in on her arm by the way she was avoiding touching it. “Were you bit?”

Darren frowned. “They’re not zombies!”

Missy ignored him. She stared at Megan.

Megan went around the odd little girl. “You need a Barbie doll or something.”

Missy smiled. “I have two of them. Their heads are under Pam’s pillow.”

The group chuckled and quickly swallowed that noise as Angela and the Eagle escort took possession of the body. They all watched until the group was out of sight.

Ralph came forward. “First five senior Eagles, come with me.”

Megan and the others went where Ralph pointed.

Darren watched Megan get directed to a medic, but he didn’t relax. Her arm was bad.

Hank stepped closer to Darren. “Beer later?”

“Maybe.”

Hank saw who Darren was watching. His eyes narrowed. “You got a date?”

Darren forced his mind to go blank. “I do. I’m going to shower, eat, and sleep with your mother.”

Hank broke out laughing at the joke they were all using now.

Darren forced himself to join in, mind spinning. Hank had been competing with him on everything since they’d joined in the same group of desperate refugees. *Did I just put him on Megan’s trail?* Darren hoped not. *I might have to push him off the top deck and watch him ding into the balconies on the way down.*

The rookie medic grimaced at the sight of Megan’s wound. “Get in a booth, get scrubbed, and go straight to the medical bay.” Terrance didn’t even want to try cleaning it out himself. He waved at Trinity. “Don’t touch her arm. Wrap it in a towel

and walk her to the medical area as soon as she's cleaned."

"I'll handle it." Trinity led Megan over to the booth, glad she was about to get a break already.

Megan was glad Trinity didn't grab at her clothes and rush her like the other cleaners were doing to the senior men. Clothes were being torn, arm and chest hair was coming out, men were whimpering. It was ugly.

Megan hurried out of her clothes and stifled a scream at the combination of the cold water and the scrub brush. *I may never leave the ship again. Other than getting laid, it really wasn't that good for me.*

"The supplies are gone." Phoebe peered at the shoreline. She and her partner were on ramp duty. It was their first duty alone as rookies. "I didn't see them get picked up."

"I didn't either." Keith was sure one of the island teams had snuck out, practicing camouflage training. Kyle and Adrian had both liked to do that. There was no reason Marc wouldn't also.

Trent stepped into the decontamination booth, noting the extra guards and the medical equipment being delivered to their captain. He ignored the rough scrub. "What's going on?"

Ralph paused. He didn't want to tell them, but they were going to find out soon anyway. "We might have another outbreak. Two people are in the new infirmary. Angela locked us all down again."

Megan let Trinity wrap her in a robe, barely noticing the Disney design that might normally

have made her laugh. She followed Trinity to the ramp, heart starting to pound. She was already nervous about the scratch. Hearing the ship was under a lockdown for another possible outbreak was making her mind go to scary places. “What kind of outbreak?”

Trinity frowned. “We don’t know yet. Gabe and Hannah had allergic reactions to something. The medics aren’t sure if it was an insect bite or maybe the water on the island.”

“Or something worse?”

Trinity nodded, descending the steps at a fast pace to avoid a crew coming up with a long, heavy roll of plastic and a bag of tape to store in the bridge in case they needed to seal it off. “The boss isn’t taking any chances.”

“That’s good.” Megan shivered. “Maybe we should take the elevator?”

Trinity turned that way, frowning. “Do you think you came into contact with something contagious too?”

“I’m not sure.” Megan didn’t want to tell anyone but Angela what had happened.

Trinity didn’t push. “Tell the medics everything you can. They’ll call the boss if they think you need to see her.”

“Cool.” Megan slowed as the new medical area came into view. It was crowded and busy, with medics hurrying among the rooms and people waiting in the halls between those rooms. Megan

had a flashback of their nightmare. “How many are sick now?”

Walking by, Harry paused to fill her in. “Just the same two. We’re behind in appointments.” He spotted her arm and took a glove from his pocket. All the medics were carrying a stack today. They were too busy for hand washing between patients. “Let’s see that arm.”

Trinity headed toward the top deck, nodding at Megan.

“Thanks.” Megan winced as Harry probed the wound.

“This is infected.” He frowned at her. “How long did you wait before coming in?”

“Half a day.” Megan lowered her voice. “I was on the island.”

Harry led her over to a standing tray in the hallway. “Sorry, all the rooms are full.” He started opening packages. “I’ll clean it out, medicate you and we’ll keep you under watch for a little while depending on how the cleaning goes.”

Megan sank down in the chair when he pointed. “Any chance of getting some clothes?”

Harry scanned her attire and grinned. “I think I can handle that.”

Megan blushed as his eyes went over her thighs. “Now? Please?”

Harry took off the clean white coat he’d just donned and handed it to her. “Let me get that arm done first.”

Megan slipped the jacket on and then shoved the sleeve up so he could reach the wound.

“Pill or shot for the pain?”

Megan shook her head. “No. Just do it fast.”

“Okay.” He picked up the alcohol and a wipe. “Please don’t scream. My nerves can’t take it.”

Megan nodded, gritting her teeth as he tilted the bottle.

Angela came down the stairs with Ed and several others on her heels. She spotted Morgan coming from Tonya’s room and went that way. “Update me.”

“We split them up. Terry is covering Gabe and Hannah. Harry and I are handling everyone else. We’ve isolated them and sealed off their rooms. We’ve sanitized down here and the crews are working on the hallway and steps. Elevators will go last.” Morgan handed her a sheet of paper. “Those were all notes from before. I haven’t had a chance to add anything.”

Morgan scanned the clipboards on the desk and found Tonya’s. “The baby’s not breathing as well as I’d like. Trinity will be giving him a healing session later. Conner gave him one earlier.” Morgan added notes to Tonya’s paperwork.

“I’ll look in there before I go. What else?”

Morgan swept the busy infirmary. “We need to push back appointments or something. Samantha and her twins are due here any minute. Jennifer will be by for her test results and I haven’t had time to

run them yet. We have people scheduled for the next three hours.”

“Make the call. You have my approval.”

“I need to catch up. Tell everyone medical appointments have been pushed back one day unless it’s an emergency. Then send me more hands. We need to get people released so I have an open room. Then we have to clean and stock.”

Angela motioned at Ed. “Stay here and cover whatever he needs.” She picked two kids. “Missy and Cate will cover the guard posts. Use the adult guards for transportation and supply runs. Send the kids back to me when you get caught up.”

“Will do.” Morgan looked over, frowning at the sight of Megan’s injury. “We’ll get more of those as the island crew comes in tonight. We need to rotate the medics.”

“I agree. Whoever came on duty last needs to go on break as soon as I send in camp support.” Angela put her hand on Megan’s wrist. Healing energy lit up the connection.

Megan smiled as the throbbing stopped. Harry was trying to be gentle, but it hurt more than she would admit.

Angela proceeded through the hall, peering into the rooms. The first two on the right were covered in plastic. Angela brought up her shield and pried a side open enough to step in. She resealed it and scanned the two bored people in the beds. A portable curtain between them had been shoved back so they could play cards.

Hannah and Gabe looked up, both tensing.

“We’re fine.”

“They overreacted.”

Angela studied them. Both patients were puffy and pale, but fine otherwise. “It doesn’t hurt us to be careful. Plus, it’s a good practice drill.” She headed for the door. “I’ll send in some entertainment.”

“Thanks!”

“Great!”

Angela resealed the tape and dropped her shield. She went to the rooms on the left.

Leeann was putting on her shoes. “I’m free!”

Angela laughed. “Behave.”

She went to the last room, being quiet as she tapped and opened the door.

Angela ignored Kenn, Tonya, the wolf and the cats who all prepared to fight. She went to the incubator and gave the baby a steady stream of energy. His little body didn’t move at all. If not for the breathing machine timing his breaths with beeps, she wouldn’t have known he was alive.

Our babies need more heat.

Angela shook off the flashback. “More heat.”

Tonya began shifting over. “Can you hand him to me?”

Angela gently lifted the little boy and placed him in Tonya’s arms.

Kenn was there to cover them both with a quilt. “Body heat’s good.”

Angela pointed at Kenn. “Step out and help the medics until they get caught up.”

Kenn didn’t argue. He and Angela went out, turning in opposite directions.

Angela went to the hallway intersection that divided this deck. This other side was empty except for Reggie, who’d been brought in a few hours ago. They’d all tried to help him, but broken ribs were the bane of all descendant healers.

Reggie smiled at her through the painkiller. “I’m good, Boss.”

Angela lingered in the doorway, seeing they hadn’t gotten him ready to move yet. When Leeann vacated that room and it was cleaned, Reggie would get it.

Angela scanned the rooms on this side and keyed her mike. “Ralph, I need a camp crew in suits to come outfit a medical room for me.”

“Copy.”

The possibly infected people could come to this side, clearing two medical rooms for the patients who weren’t staying or having emergencies. “This is now our overnight area.”

Reggie’s smile faded as the memory flashed through his mind again. “The rib breakers are dangerous.”

Angela nodded, paling. “I’m sorry we can’t heal it.”

Reggie took in a deep breath. “Marc saved my life. Please thank him for me.”

“I will.” Angela had to try again. She lifted a hand, hating his pain.

Reggie scowled. “Save it for people you can help. Never waste it.”

Angela smiled, hand lowering. “Thank you for your sacrifice and your honor.”

Reggie blushed. “Anything for you, Boss.”

Angela chuckled as she left. Reggie was a secret admirer who never gave a hint to how he felt. That’s the best kind. *I don’t mind if they want me. I just don’t need to know about it.*

4

“Shield break.” Adrian stopped, lowering his. He breathed in deep, hands resting on his knees as Tommy and Quinn squeezed him between their tense bodies.

Vines immediately came from the ground and walls.

Both men began swiping and stomping. The ground heaved, shoving them toward the lethal green tips.

“Why don’t they attack when your shield’s up?!” Tommy sliced through a thick vine and stomped on another one.

“Nature’s running me out of energy, and then you. She’s working both sides.”

Tommy snapped off the end of a vine sliding by him toward Adrian.

Quinn cut through a vine and turned, catching a shadow. “Duck!”

Adrian dropped as a thick vine darted over his shoulder. Quinn snapped it off.

Bugs ran up their legs. Men swiped at them vaguely, more concerned with the vines. The bugs found skin and bit.

Men slapped at the stings now, still concentrating on the vines. They knew a decoy when they were stung by one.

Adrian brought his shield back up.

The vines slowly withdrew as they got the message from Nature to wait. Men dug for the bugs this time, crunching and crushing with pleasure.

“How much farther?”

Quinn got the map out, squinting. His flashlight was starting to go dim. “Half a mile and then we’re at the center again.”

“And we’re done there even if Marc isn’t.” Adrian advanced, keeping both men in his shield so they were protected. “Increase pace and stay alert.”

The trio proceeded through the tunnel at almost a run, automatically ducking and dodging loose boards and vine tangles even though the shield was up. They barreled around a narrow curve.

“Shit! Go back!” Adrian tried to drag the men to a halt.

Quinn and Tommy scrambled, grunting at the pain of a sudden stop.

Heads came up, eyes glowed in the darkness.

Adrian kept moving backward, horrified. At least ten grounders were lumbering after them, but that wasn't the worst part. *What were they eating?!*

Adrian turned and ran, managing to keep ahold of both men as they turned with him. "This first hatch sticks! Keep going!"

The trio ran full out, all of them able to feel Adrian's energy dropping.

5

"Stop." Marc held up a hand, lowering his shield.

Nature immediately attacked.

The Eagles slashed and swiped while stomping and trying not to hit each other in the chaos as vines shot out of the walls and dirt geysers erupted, spraying them with dank earth.

"Someone's coming." Marc brought his shield back up, peering ahead with his grid. Dirt sprayed over the shield. Marc tensed as the vines began to stab it, trying to get him to let go. Each fast jab felt like a branding iron touching his skin.

Adrian and his group flew around the corner, relief flooding their faces as they spotted Marc and his team.

"Incoming!" Adrian kept going as Marc lowered his shield to let them in. He finally stopped in the rear with Quinn and Tommy at his sides. All three men drew in huge breaths as Marc's shield

came up and the Eagles finished battling the things Nature had slipped through in those few seconds.

Marc stared at the line of coming locals in dismay. “You brought a train!”

“Yeah. Sorry.” Adrian drew his blade, wincing at his sore palm. “They were eating. We interrupted.”

Marc understood it was too many for Adrian’s small crew to handle. He waved Ivan and Shawn up next to him. “Get your nets out! Give each other one end and stretch it out. Hold it tight and let them pile up!” Marc nodded to Chad, using his size. “Take the side right behind Shawn. I’ve got Ivan. Pike and pull.”

Chad nodded, drawing his knife. “I got ya.”

Ivan grimaced, moving into position. “I always hated this job.”

“Same.” Marc braced. “The rest of you can take down anything that gets by us. And watch your six. We won’t have a shield for a minute or two.”

Men groaned, getting ready. Two minutes down here without a shield felt like weeks.

“Ready?” Marc looked around to be sure they were set. “Hell will break loose in three...two...one!”

The locals hit the net and kept coming, shoving all of them back. Boots dug into the dirt as bugs and vines exploded from it.

“Shields up!”

Dank breath and body odor swarmed the team as the locals were shut inside the shield with them.

Chad and Marc swung repeatedly as the trapped grounders bunched up against the net, growling and trying to talk. They didn't pause as the front row went down. They kept swinging until nothing else moved.

Adrian stared as Marc retreated. The man was covered in blood and gore. His clothes were torn and his exposed skin was dotted in bug bites, scratches, and welts. "You had the same day we did."

Marc snorted. "Where does this tunnel go?"

"It circled under the town and then goes toward the cliff. It's part of the Kraft estate, I think."

Marc felt the danger subside. He slowly lowered his shield to let his energy refill. "Watch it."

Eagles turned, knives still in hand.

Marc saw Shawn's arm dripping blood from a vine impalement that hadn't gotten far enough to do real damage. He waved at Christian. "Bandage that. Someone get us a count."

Christian stepped forward, lifting his bag over the body pile. He tripped and landed face down against them.

A wounded grounder on the edge of the pile grabbed him and pulled him down.

Christian tried to scream, pulling backward, but the grounder squeezed his chest and didn't stop.

Crunch! Crack!

"Grab him!"

"No!"

Christian sagged against the pile as Marc and the Eagles stabbed the grounder again and again.

Chad pulled Christian free, turning him over.

Christian's head fell to the side; blood dripped from his mouth and nose.

“God damn you!” Marc punched the dirt walls bitterly, rage pushing against a mental scar. “I will kill you!”

Nature laughed at him.

Ivan brought up his shield to stop a thick vine from shooting into Marc's back.

Marc leaned against the wall as Ivan also brought up his shield around the team.

Adrian glared at Marc. “Say it!”

Marc wiped blood from his face. “That's a night. Find a hatch and get us the fuck out of here.”

Chapter Nineteen
Are We Done Yet?

1

“We lost another medic!” Angela swung around and punched the wall, rattling the pictures. “Damn it!”

Ed waved at Missy before the girl could enter. “Boss needs a minute.”

They stayed back as Angela launched into a tirade with more profanity than either of them had used over their lifetimes combined.

People came closer, brows lifting, hearts starting to pound.

Angela stopped as the wave of sadness hit. She wiped her eyes and shut them, drawing in deep breaths.

Ed waited for her to regain control, mood shattered. Two medics had gone with Marc and they’d seen to Eugene’s body a little while ago.

“They’re bringing in the body as they come home. Get an honor guard drafted. Pull people from other posts if you need to.”

Ed got his book out and started writing her instructions.

“Have a decontamination crew ready, and tell them to go easy. This team isn’t in the mood for

games or roughness. Just get it done and let them go.”

“Orders and jobs for those coming in?”

“No. Let them have downtime as soon as they get here.” Angela motioned at Missy. “I need a crew to escort Grant. He has a run. Ask the senior men who are off duty right now.” Theo’s crew had cleaned out the ships overnight and the ocean had disposed of the mess from it. They’d grabbed supplies and powered the ships down right where they were until Angela decided what she wanted done with them. Now, those ships needed to be moved.

Ian frowned from the guard station. “Do I have time? I’m off this post in half an hour.”

Angela nodded. “We’ll make it work. You’ll run that team. Samantha’s timed the storm to around sunset. We should be able to get it done.” Samantha’s evolution was great, but it had popped through a bit late. The storm coming at them was huge. A few days’ notice would have been better.

“I’ll make sure the captain gets back safely.” Ian swept the hall, cleared it mentally for issues, then got out his book to make notes on who he wanted to take and what gear they might need. He’d had a good meal and a rough scrub. It had given him a second wind, but he was certain he would sleep for ten hours once he finally crashed. Thinking Darren had died had fueled that second wind. Ian was relieved to know he’d been wrong.

Angela headed up to the medical wing. “Missy, have Grant meet me on the bridge with his escort in forty minutes.”

Angela stepped inside and paused, head turning. “Damn it!”

Morgan ran from the back room. “I heard it too!”

A tiny cry for help had almost been lost in the chaos.

Morgan used magic on the tiny boy who’d stopped breathing. Angela used first aid.

Tonya and Kenn watched in horror. They hadn’t known anything was wrong.

“I just fed him and put him down. What happened?!”

Kenn put an arm around Tonya, holding her and hoping.

The infant sucked in a startled gasp of air and held it.

Morgan used more magic that had no effect.

The baby sucked in another breath. And then another. His little chest rose and fell. His color began to even out.

Morgan retreated, swaying on his feet.

Angela pushed him into the chair. She carefully lifted the baby and gave him to Tonya. “Don’t put him fully on his back. He’s too weak to burp up the air bubbles. Roll a blanket and lean him against it.”

Tonya held him close and thanked God silently.

Angela sat in the chair next to the open door, staring at Morgan.

Morgan was trying not to cry. “It’s been a long day, Boss.”

Angela leaned against the wall, lids shutting out the bright ceiling light. “And it’s not over yet.”

“Help!”

Angela jumped up and ran out the door. “I didn’t need my point proven so fast!”

She scanned and found Francesca on her knees, crying and shouting.

Morgan grabbed Francesca’s arm and jerked her to her feet. “What’s wrong with you?!”

“My hair!” Francesca grabbed the jagged ends that were now up to her neck. “Someone cut my hair off!”

Morgan and Angela swept the hall of shocked people, but there was no sight or mental thoughts to give anyone away.

Francesca pulled out of Morgan’s loose grip and knelt again, feeling around on the floor. “It has to be down here somewhere. I want my hair!”

“You can’t reattach it.” Morgan got her back to her feet, being gentler this time with the distraught woman. “Are you hurt?”

Francesca shook her head, tears welling again. “I’ll live.”

“Good.” He brushed loose hairs from her shoulder. “I think it looks good on you.”

Francesca began to bawl.

Angela swept again, checking small dark corners this time. She didn’t see the person, but she could feel them. “Do you know who it was?”

Francesca's face filled with anger. "I heard the giggle. It was Kimmie!"

Angela waved at Ian. "Ask her. She'll say no. Put her in the brig until Jeff gets here, then send him to handle it."

Ian headed for the steps.

"My hair!"

"Oh, suck it up!" Angela frowned at the crying woman. "You lost some hair in a bad prank. Why are you sobbing?"

"He won't like me anymore!" Francesca's anger flew from her mouth. "That little bitch split us up and we weren't even a couple yet!"

Francesca stomped toward the steps. "I'll be in my cabin—sucking it up."

Angela sighed. "Are we done yet?"

She spotted Brittani coming through the hallway with a determined expression and a fast pace. *I guess not.*

Brittani didn't see Angela watching her, but she'd planned her action so it wouldn't matter who witnessed it. She was carrying a bedpan from Reggie's room.

Trinity stepped out of Leeann's room, wiping her hands on a towel. "It's all cleaned and restocked. What's next?"

Brittani tripped, arm coming up. The bedpan tilted, hitting Trinity in the chest and drenching the front of her. Waste hit the floor and splattered in every direction.

Brittani overcompensated and jarred the pan a second time, sending a fresh torrent over the stunned woman.

Brittani straightened, smiling. “Whoa. Good thing I didn’t fall again.” She walked away, leaving them all shocked and groaning at the sight and smell.

Trinity stared after her, eyes watering from the odor. *War has officially been declared.*

2

“Nature declared war on us again.”

Adrian swallowed the drink from his canteen. “She never ended the first war. We were just out of her reach for a while.”

Tommy scowled. “How are we going to clear these tunnels now?”

“Nature comes at us in waves. She has to gather energy and she gets tired. We’ll cover it between blows—like we always have.”

Reminded that they’d been doing this all along, Tommy fell silent, but the frown didn’t leave his face.

Marc understood. They’d made it to the town without any more problems. He’d had them gather the gear from the barn. “We’re out of here in three minutes. Piss, drink, and scratch while you can.” Marc saw Kendle and Quinn standing near the edge of the cleared area, scanning the cloudy sky. “You can stay here or go where you want. We’ll resume

clearing as soon as the storm passes. We'll call you."

Quinn nodded when Kendle only stared. "We'll be ready." Quinn hoped it rained for a couple of days. He was ready for a break.

Marc frowned at him. "Lightweight."

Quinn flushed as the others, including Tommy, laughed at him.

Marc moved toward Ivan, who had the body bag over his shoulder. "We'll switch halfway through and you'll shield."

Ivan didn't protest. Marc was clearly worried about making one of the normals carry the body. Ivan didn't agree, but he wasn't the boss. It wasn't his place to point that out.

Marc frowned at him. "They're all better with their knives than you are."

Ivan flushed this time, lips thinning.

Marc waved at a few of the faster men. "You bring up the rear." He didn't want half the group running ahead if they had trouble. "Everyone else in the middle. Ivan and I will cover the front."

Ivan scowled, shifting for a better grip. "Isn't that a bit much?"

"Stay on my heels. Last man checks the rear every ten seconds. Move out!" Marc set a fast walk and brought up his shield as he brought out his well-used knife. He didn't look at Kendle as he went by her. He'd made sure she had gear earlier and knives didn't need to be reloaded.

Kendle stared in longing until Marc was out of sight.

Tommy headed for the barn. “I vote we stay right here.”

Quinn frowned, following. “It stinks in there.” He’d been catching hints of it since they arrived.

“It has a roof and four walls, and we can sleep in the loft so we’re not on the ground.” Tommy surveyed the long road up the cliff. “And we won’t have to walk that tonight.”

Quinn was sold. He began searching around for damaged wood to use in their fire.

Tommy swept Kendle and found her still staring. She didn’t look like she wanted to be interrupted. Tommy went up to open the loft window so it could air out for a little while. The wind was sharpening, bringing a heavy scent of salt that he much preferred to the stink of sweat and rotten food. The garbage from Marc’s team was bagged, but it still stank.

Kendle shook off the daze and went into the barn. She picked a corner and began shedding her bloody, torn, dirt-dusted clothes.

Tommy brought his canteen over and set it by her as he realized she was going to wash. Then he went outside to help Quinn gather fallen wood for the fire.

Kendle scrubbed with her shirt turned inside out, mind replaying the day. She hadn’t had a moment with Marc that stood out, but just being around him had helped her mentally. *I think I can*

get through the night without being crazy for a change.

Kendle quickly finished and donned the sweatpants and t-shirt someone had donated. Marc had ordered everyone to pass extra gear to her. She'd had to carry it all, but she'd done it without a complaint. Her group needed all this stuff and Marc was being nice. It was a win-win for her and it had only cost a sore spot on her shoulder.

Kendle left her shoes there and went to the center fire with her dirty clothes. She placed them in the ring and went to pick a spot in the loft to sleep. She was exhausted. She couldn't wait to shut her eyes and stop seeing the tunnels.

Tommy and Quinn came in and shut the barn door. They worked on the fire next, silently scanning for her.

Kendle slid onto the edge of the loft beam and let her legs hang over the side. She yawned, missing the flare as Tommy started the fire. Her mind went into doze-mode and waited.

Tommy went to get cleaned up, not waiting for an invitation. He was tired. "We'll lock it up and crash. Food can wait."

Quinn snorted, digging in his kit for his little stove. "I'm wide awake. You guys go on. I'll have something hot waiting when you get up."

Tommy liked that idea even better.

Kendle watched her men get cleaned up and cook. *This is almost perfect. If I had a drink and a bubble bath, I'd be all set.*

3

Adrian stopped on the stone walkway, lowering his shield. He stayed still, breathing in large gulps of air. Walking up the cliff would have been easy for him a year ago. Now, he felt like he might die. Adrian peered back down the rocky road. *Is that one of my lungs?*

He wiped sweat from his brow and scanned ahead. The bunker he was headed to was nestled at the bottom of this cliff, but the only road to reach it was right here, halfway up the opposite side.

Adrian groaned. *That was halfway?! Going to the top really might kill me.*

Adrian took another minute even though he'd already spotted the faint path he needed to take. His chest burned and his lungs ached. All the activity the last few days had weakened him. He hadn't had any downtime for his body to rest and heal. He also hadn't had any time to think. Marc and Angela were dumping baggage and moving on. They'd finally reached the island and the first thing they'd tried to do was seal their commitment to each other. Adrian found it sweet and sickening at the same time. The interesting part was that Kendle was still alive. Adrian had been sure Angela would get rid of her during the battle. "I think she tried, but it wasn't a kill shot."

Adrian forced his feet onto the path. The tall grass that lined the cliff most of the way up covered

rock piles and drop-offs. He placed his feet carefully, aware of the wind trying to trip him up.

The path wound down immediately, taking him to a side of the island Marc didn't know existed. Adrian only did because of Kendle's stories about the people who'd lived here. Last night, he'd spotted this path and didn't mention it.

Adrian saw a small shack built on a stone ledge. He approached it slowly, searching for signs someone might be inside the homemade structure. The bunkers he'd seen here so far were prefab, but this was an actual apocalypse shelter—even more so than Luke's den.

Adrian pried the front door open, glad to feel the stone under his feet. The rock ledge went all the way around the shack on all sides and extended about four feet. Nature wasn't getting through it. She'd have to knock it off the cliff.

“And it won't matter.” Adrian scanned the table and chairs, the bed built into the wall and the simple rug on the floor. He pushed it aside with his boot and found a hatch. He pushed the wooden slide panel open, sniffing hesitantly.

The air was clear. No rotting bodies were waiting in the ground.

Adrian felt for a ladder and found a stone step. He grinned. “Nice.”

Adrian used his light for a guide as he descended into the cliff bunker. When he was far enough to clear his head, he tugged the wooden

floor shut. *I'll glue the rug to it later so no one can tell this is here unless they already know.*

Adrian stayed on the bottom steps, shining his light and making plans. The small bunker held a natural bathroom that dropped waste into a hole. It even had a toilet seat. Adrian planned to clean that and then make sure Nature couldn't come through the other side while he was on the john. He also needed to see where the waste dropped so he wasn't drawing people by the smell.

The opposite corner from the bathroom held cubbies carved into the rock. Each cubby had equipment and a purpose. Adrian was suddenly eager to use the baking rock. He could see where someone had been heating the rock itself for cooking. It was genius. The only fuel required was for the basic fire. In the time it took to heat a cup of java, the entire rock ledge would be hot enough to cook on.

Adrian studied the floor, seeing notches and carefully chiseled grooves. He found the same in the walls and ceiling. The notches were perfect for holding a wire or a cord. He saw a switch on the wall by the stairs. "No way." Adrian reached over and flipped it.

Soft solar lights flared to life all over the compound.

Adrian spotted a recliner and a small end table stacked in front of a folding bed. There wasn't room to have it all set up at the same time. "I don't mind alternating."

Adrian wanted to stay; he forced himself to go back up, put the rug in place perfectly with the dust marks, and then to remove his prints all the way back to the cliff.

Adrian didn't notice the rough walk this time as he headed to Luke's bunker. His mind was full of plans for his new den. He couldn't wait to be there officially, alone. "Now I have to find a way to earn it or keep it hidden from everyone." Adrian wiped his mind of the future and settled in on a study of the present.

He was almost certain they had a full day of clearing left and he assumed part of that would be spent going through the Kraft estate. As each hatch brought them up somewhere, they'd cleared the buildings next to them. Adrian had seen Marc's tracks all over the island. He hadn't gotten up here to the bunkers yet, but that wouldn't be much longer. As soon as the end of the week, Safe Haven's rules would govern this island. Anything Adrian wanted to do under the radar had to happen before that.

Adrian had considered exploring the Kraft estate without Marc's team. He wasn't hunting for gear or old world loot. He needed to know what had happened on this island. Marc hadn't shared much information with them, which meant he probably wouldn't in the future either. Adrian wanted his own source.

Adrian breathed a sigh as Luke's bunker neared. He could smell whatever Sadie was cooking. Light

came from the doorway, pushing back the shadows of the coming sunset. Adrian tried to look at it as his home, with his woman waiting inside. She had dinner ready and she was eager to spread her legs and make him welcome.

Adrian grimaced. *That doesn't appeal anymore. What the hell happened to me in the last year?*

Adrian knew he would spend a lot of his time on this island in soul-searching sessions. *I lost myself out there somewhere. I'm not sure how to get me back, or if I should even try. I have a lot to sort through.*

Adrian forced a smile and brought up thoughts of the ugly day as Sadie sensed him and came to the door with a huge smile of welcome.

“Are you in for the night?”

Adrian nodded as he stepped into the bunker. “Until the storm passes.” He took the coffee mug Sadie handed him, frowning at it. “Where did this come from?”

“Kendle dropped it off hours ago.” Sadie gestured. “I have a pan. I could fry something.”

Adrian chuckled at her dubious glance. “I’ll handle it in the morning. I found some eggs.”

“I thought we were supposed to leave the animals alone.”

“Oh. Well, too late now.”

Sadie snickered at his fake innocence. “I haven’t had a real egg in a long time.”

“Same.” Adrian saw she had all five bedrolls placed. “No one else is coming back tonight.”

Sadie went to collect and store the others, blushing. “Good.” Sadie knew he’d had a rough day, but she’d been here alone the entire time and she wanted to get things settled between them.

Adrian saw she’d cleaned up and tried to make her hair look nice. Adrian thought she was cute, but he wasn’t sure if he was ready to take things any farther with her yet. He’d held her last night while they slept, but it had been chilly and he’d wanted her moans to stop. Now, they had time to do more if he wanted it. She was certainly willing.

Adrian grimaced. “Not tonight.”

Sadie’s face fell; her eyes dulled. “Why? You got a headache?”

Adrian sighed, easing down by the fire. “I’m filthy. I spent the day eliminating locals. My brain is in pain.”

Sadie accepted that explanation. She came over and turned down his bedroll.

Adrian sat the mug down and rolled into it, aware of the nicer bag being one from Marc’s stash. *Why is he trying to butter me up?*

“Maybe he wants to make his *wife* happy.”

Adrian’s expression hardened. “Yeah. Definitely not tonight.”

Adrian settled into the bag and shut his eyes, ignoring her mutters.

The night popped and groaned around them. Adrian let it put him right to sleep.

Sadie stayed awake longer, stewing on how to get what she wanted.

“They’re moving the other ships.” Theo pointed at what most of them had already noticed.

The decks of the *Adrianna* were busy with crews doing different chores. Marc didn’t try to figure out who was doing what. He walked over the bridge with the body, heart hurting. *I never want to do this again.*

Rough waves rushed up onto the beach and tried to pull the garbage back into the water. The wind shoved against them. The darkening sky wasn’t all from the coming sunset.

Angela was on the top deck, near the rail. She met his eyes.

Marc refused to acknowledge the unspoken correction. The thought of doing this again and again was abhorrent to him.

“Top five senior men first.” Ed was in charge up here now. He’d chosen patient scrubbers for this moment. “Drop your clothes and gear into the bags. If it needs to go to the boss or cold storage, tell us when you drop it.”

Marc and the others let Ed guide them into the shockingly cold water scrub, mentally cursing. He tried to concentrate on the sky above them, but the brush hurt.

The decontamination crew all wore scrubs and masks, adding to the dark mood of the returning team.

In the booth next to Marc, Shawn concentrated on the last pirate ship now disappearing behind the side of the island. The ocean around their ship was angry. The swells pushed against the bridge, clanking parts together.

Shawn watched blood swirl across the deck as the water cleaned his body. *Can you do that with my brain?*

Molly approached Marc. “Is everyone off the island?”

“Yes.” Marc watched Molly wave a group down. They hurried toward the end of the bridge where it met the shore, tool kits in hand. Marc realized Angela was taking the pontoon bridge up. He immediately assumed it was going to be a rough night on top of a hard day.

Molly came over to Jeff. “Kimmie’s in the brig for assault. Boss said she’ll stay there.”

Jeff grunted. “Thanks.”

Molly flashed him a sympathetic look and went up the steps to the top deck. The island was stunning from this distance. It promised a fun time. *Liar!*

“You can go.” Ed held out a robe.

Marc put it on and went up the steps, glaring at the few female Eagles eyeing his knees.

The females turned away, swallowing grins and snickers.

Angela knew Marc needed downtime. She could feel it. “I’m sorry. Can it wait?”

Marc nodded stiffly. “Where do you need me?”

“I need updates first please.”

Marc sighed. “Two lives lost. Five injuries, all minor. We’ve put down 39 locals so far.”

Angela put it in her book. “And the problems?”

“Nature, as always.”

Angela knew, but she’d had to ask. “Basecamp update?”

“Established. I think Tommy and his group are staying there during the storm.”

Angela’s lips thinned. “Okay. What about the tunnels?”

“Almost cleared. We have one left. It runs under the Kraft estate, we think. We’ll clear it at the same time, in full.”

Angela was glad he planned to take a full crew for the final clearing.

Marc snorted. “I meant Adrian’s group and my fire team, Angie.”

Angela frowned, but she didn’t argue. She’d told him he could clear the island his way. Hers involved fire and a lot of dead things that would never grow back. “We’re almost done moving the ships. Grant isn’t sure about us yet. He’ll stay in the bridge through the storm.”

“Shawn wants to help.”

“If he has the energy, he’s welcome to. I put Ray and Zack on duty over that area. They’re already there, waiting for Grant.”

Marc waited, wondering why she was telling him where people were going to be.

Angela took her kit off and opened it. She handed him an outfit from the top.

Marc smiled. “Awesome.” He dropped the robe and began dressing.

Angela turned to glare at the rookie females now staring at his naked ass.

All three women turned around, paling at her glares.

“We had some minor issues while you were gone, and one big one. Your gophers and guards made it in fine.” Angela didn’t mention who’d brought them in. She hadn’t been up here to see Kendle, but the guards had told her.

Marc waited for her wave of jealousy over him being around Kendle.

Angela didn’t have time for it. Her mind was racing over everything, hunting for what she’d missed. She couldn’t see it, but like usual, she felt it.

Marc read her thoughts, wincing at some of the ugliest images. “My day was worse, but not by much.”

Angela’s face darkened. “Hannah and Gabe are fine now. About ten minutes ago, Trent came to the medics with the same issue. We don’t know what’s causing their reactions yet. We’re checking the books for anything known about this island.”

Marc paused, chest feeling heavy. “Maybe it’s that crap you’re spraying as disinfectant.” Marc coughed and couldn’t find enough air to clear his throat.

Angela spun to him, scanning. “Marc!”

Marc sucked in air, chest growing heavier.
“Medic, I think.”

Angela took his arm and hurried him toward the bridge steps. “We’ll use the elevator.”

Marc let her guide him, struggling to get in a full breath now. He felt like someone was sitting on his chest.

Angela hit the button and then keyed her mike as it began to take them down into the ship.
“Morgan! Get a pen ready!”

“Copy!”

Angela didn’t waste healing energy that wouldn’t work. She looked into Marc’s eyes. “Stay as calm as you can. The pen will open you back up. Breathe slow, in little sucks.”

Marc leaned against the wall of the elevator as his head swam. He drew in a tiny breath and let it out. “Trying.”

Angela slapped the open button the instant the elevator stopped.

Morgan was there to hold out the EpiPen. Angela slammed it into Marc’s thigh.

She helped Morgan get him into the wheelchair Trinity brought over.

Marc felt like he was going to pass out. He heaved, sucking in air... His lungs began to open, allowing a tiny thread through.

Marc coughed, eyes watering as the epinephrine opened his swollen passages and let air through.

Angela and Morgan watched him, waiting to see if it was enough.

Angela hit her radio again. “Tell the scrubbing crew to stop right now! Some of our people might be allergic to it.”

“Copy.”

Marc glanced up at her with puffy eyes. Normal color was coming back into his face. “Happy. To. Help.”

Angela laughed in relief as Morgan pushed Marc’s chair toward the only empty room. “This isn’t what I planned for our evening.”

Marc thought about his earlier fantasy of making love to her on the rear deck in the coming storm. “Same.”

Chapter Twenty

That's Not Allowed

1

“**E**vening mess is now ready, Safe Haven. Come and get it before the waves toss it onto the floor. See if you can catch a moving bowl. It’ll be fun. See you there.”

Darren frowned at the radio. Jonny was normally good on the air, but he was trying too hard to sound happy with that sore throat from Ray’s single punch.

The descendant hall was mostly empty as Darren stepped out of his new cabin. It was a narrow room with a bunk bed, a tiny closet, and a bathroom. It was perfect.

Loud snores echoed through the hall.

Who the hell can sleep through this rocking? Darren held the rail as he went down the stairs toward the medical area, nodding and smiling at people. Most of them didn’t know he’d been on a run and since he hadn’t been here, they assumed he’d been with Marc for clearing the island. Darren didn’t claim that, but he also didn’t tell them different. Not getting credit was better for him than public adulation. Unlike most of the latest rookies to join, he wasn’t in it for last-minute fame and

glory. He honestly wanted to do his part and that couldn't always happen with quiet missions. They were quiet. So much that Darren didn't know if Angela was aware of what he used to do for Adrian or if this run had been a coincidence. *Brandon and I were quite a team. I wonder how he's doing. Is he happy in Ciemus? I hope so.*

Darren stepped into the medical area and paused to get a feel for the flow. It was busy and crowded. Angela and Marc were at the entrance to a room. Marc was in a wheelchair and appeared to have had the day from hell. Angela was leaning against the wall by him, filling out paperwork.

That hallway held a lot of action. A cleaning crew was scrubbing the floor at the end. The smell coming from there was sharp and bitter. The other two room doors were shut, leading Darren to assume one of them held Tonya and her little family, but he wasn't sure who was in the other one. Darren knew it wasn't Reggie, Gabe, or Hannah. He'd helped move Reggie and the bored patients to new rooms before being sent to unpack. Paying the cleaning crew to deliver his things had been brilliant and it had only cost him a can of cocoa powder he'd had for months.

The little lounge by the entrance of this hallway held people who'd been scheduled for appointments and members of the returning team coming in as they were decontaminated.

Darren slid aside so Shawn could get by him. The man had been scrubbed clean of everything but

the sense of failure that always accompanied runs where someone died. *I hate those.*

Darren scanned again and found Megan following Morgan down the hall toward the room where the cleaning crew was almost finished. Darren hurried after them, being careful on the wet floor. The ship was bouncing around, not making it easy. “Hey. How is she?” Darren smiled at Megan.

“Not great.” Morgan was too tired and busy to beat around the bush. “It’s infected and so far, the antibiotics aren’t having an effect. Tonya’s researching it since we agree the allergic reactions were all from the disinfectant.”

Darren frowned. “Did it go bad?” He’d been scrubbed with it too. He could still smell it on his skin.

“No, the dates are good. Some people just can’t handle some chemicals.” Morgan pointed at the tray, aware of lightning flashing outside. “Put the bandage there. The boss is going to look at it.”

Morgan went to Angela. “I recommend we have them all shower again right now and then again before bed. No one sleeps in a room alone or at least without a radio.”

Angela nodded, holding out the clipboard. She took Morgan’s note and signed it before giving it back too. “Missy will run it to Grant. He’ll make the announcement.”

“Is he back?”

Angela nodded.

Darren stopped listening to that conversation and watched as Megan slowly peeled the bandage from her arm. He surveyed her injury and immediately stepped over to Angela. He kept his voice low. “That came from a grounder, Boss.”

Angela came over to Megan, stomach dropping at the jagged, angry wound. “How do you feel?”

Megan shrugged. “Tired.”

Angela examined her, frown growing. “Get the room set. She’s staying.”

Morgan went to handle that.

Darren moved closer. “Can I help?”

Angela nodded. “I’ll need my medical bag from my cabin, and someone to hold her while she screams.”

They both paled. Lightning flashed again.

Darren pressed a kiss to Megan’s cheek, not caring who saw it. He hurried to gather what Angela needed.

Angela met Megan’s eyes, aware of how scared the girl was under her calm façade. “I need to cut it out now, while its narrow and won’t do as much damage. We may have to do it a few times. Or I can wait, give you the strongest antibiotics we have, and hope.”

“What is it?”

Angela examined the wound again. “I think it’s a staph infection base with a spreading trigger. I can see where it’s gotten bigger each time it was cleaned.”

“Me too. We’ve done it—”

“Three times, yes.” Angela sent healing energy into the wound and stopped, watching it.

The sides widened ever-so-slightly. “No magic either. This is manmade.” Angela patted the girl’s wrist. “Do you have a will made?”

Megan nodded. “I made it the day I joined the Eagles.”

“Tell someone where it is. Make the choice.”

Megan leaned in to whisper. “Can Conner try?”

Angela froze as fate laughed at her. Conner’s secret gift wasn’t. “I’ll have to get back to you.”

Angela waved her into the room and went to make notes on her chart. If Conner’s blood could put cancer into remission for a short while, what could it do for an infection? “I need that lab.”

Angela waved the guard to keep an eye on Marc as workers from the mess came through the medical hallway with trays of food.

Patients and medics sniffed cautiously and smiled, groaning at the wonderful odor of beans and ham.

Angela fished in her pocket for a peppermint, turning toward the steps. *I’ll go get an update myself just to avoid that stench. The mess is a mess.*

2

“I heard it was zombies.”

“Stop it. There’s no such thing.”

“We have two deaths.”

“They were both medics. Morgan should watch his six.”

The mess rang with conversations and dishes clanking as the ship shoved against the waves. The boat wasn't happy. It groaned as the wind howled.

“Are you okay?”

Tracy nodded, holding tight to her cup and plate. The food was good, but the motion of the boat made it hard on her stomach.

“At least eat some crackers.” Charlie pushed the pack closer to her and quickly grabbed his cup again as the table shifted.

Lights above them swung wildly at another swell. People were talking about everything that had happened, while trying to ignore their fear of the growing storm. It had been a while since they'd gone through one this bad. It was louder than all of their voices and activities combined.

“This is the Captain. I'm moving the ship out of the worst of this. Hang on and I'll get us settled.”

People were glad Grant was handling it. It didn't feel safe to sit in open water and let Nature throw things at them.

“Can we join you?”

Tracy smiled and Charlie nodded, both sliding over to make room for Gus, Bernice, and her daughter.

Tracy smiled at the little girl. “How's your belly?”

Crissy made a face. “Icky. And I don't even have a baby in there.”

Everyone laughed, but it didn't last as the ship lurched into motion, engines straining against the storm.

Bernice distracted Tracy with a wedding question. Gus leaned closer to Charlie, taking the moment. "Can we talk later?"

Charlie's face fell. "You too, huh?"

Gus nodded. "There are a lot of others."

Charlie sighed. Gus had saved his life. He couldn't refuse this one. "Fine, but it won't matter. I'm not changing my mind."

"I didn't think you would, but I have to say it anyway."

"Whatever. Catch me after we eat."

Gus nodded, ignoring Bernice and Tracy's curious looks. He gestured. "That's just what we need."

They all turned to see Ian coming toward the table.

Bernice flushed. "I think he likes me."

Tracy and Charlie nodded, laughing.

Gus glared.

Ian ignored him. He smiled at Bernice. "Care to join me for dinner? I can tell you about the island or about the ships we just moved."

Bernice frowned. "I am eating with my friends right now." She didn't like his upset expression in response. "Perhaps you would care to join us?"

Ian swept the table, catching all the frowns. He shook his head. "Another time. Thanks."

He left, aware of Tracy and Charlie snickering and Bernice letting out a sigh of relief. He left the mess, face red and mind spinning.

Bernice felt bad. “He is a nice man. I’m sorry I cannot give him what he wants.”

Crissy peered up from her tray. “What does he want, Mama?”

Bernice waved it off. “When you’re older, love. Eat your dinner.”

“Okay.”

Tracy watched the girl, brain taking her to bad places again. Just the thought of being a mother terrified her.

Charlie put his hand over hers and sent waves of calm.

Tracy relaxed, shuddering. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Charlie nudged the crackers closer. “Just a few? For me?”

Tracy obediently picked one up and began to nibble on it.

Charlie swept the mess, but he didn’t see his mom or dad. He did notice Greg in the corner with double the normal amount of food on his tray. Charlie assumed the man was trying to bulk up. The far table was full of male Eagles who were studying parts of the mess. Charlie watched them to see what they were watching. When he figured it out, he read their minds to confirm it. *I like using my brain first and my magic second. I get that from my dad.*

Charlie chuckled at the thoughts from the males. They were searching for emotional responses in

mated couples. He and Tracy were being watched too. Charlie wanted to help the men but he couldn't. *I'm barely getting through my own relationship, guys, I can't help you. I get that from my mom.*

Charlie tensed as Sherman entered the mess.

Gus shook his head. "Leave it alone."

Charlie glared at the man, concentrating.

Sherman whipped around, finding Charlie. He immediately turned and left the mess.

"What did you say to him?" Tracy knew something had happened.

Gus snickered. When Charlie didn't answer, Gus filled them in. "He said Dog wants to come by and talk to him about how he treats women."

They all laughed, glad the teenager wasn't following Sherman or making a scene. They'd all expected it to be much worse.

"That's the one you should watch out for." Charlie nodded at the opposite end of the mess. "Trinity just came in."

Gus turned and saw Brittani enter the mess through the main door.

Conversation faded to nothing as the two women glared at each other across the crowded room.

"Where's your mom?" Gus looked around. "This might get bad." The story of their issues today had already circled the ship.

"Are they going to use magic?" Bernice scowled.

Tracy nodded. "I feel it."

“That’s not allowed.” Crissy ducked her head.

Lightning flashed outside the ship; thunder rolled over them in deep waves that rattled the tables and everything on them.

Trinity and Brittani stepped forward at the same instant, choices made. They both fired.

The witnesses watched in stunned amazement as Trinity’s snare jerked Brittani forward and slammed her into the nearest table.

Brittani’s giant mental shove knocked Trinity into the door she’d just entered. She slid down it, unable to stay conscious.

Brittani stood up, gut hurting, lip dripping blood. *I just won my first magic duel.*

Almost everyone swept for the highest-ranking Eagle or council member.

Greg keyed his mike, voice full of disapproval. “Boss, we’ve got one for the medic and one for the brig.”

“Copy.”

Brittani didn’t resist as Eagles came over and handcuffed her. “Someone call Samantha. I think I need a lawyer.”

3

“Did someone call her lawyer?”

Jeff stopped on the stairs as Brittani was brought from the elevator in handcuffs. He stared as the ship seesawed.

“She’ll be here shortly.” Greg opened the door to the brig and held onto it. “After you.”

Brittani went inside, using her strong legs to fight the motion of the boat.

Jayda pointed at Jeff. “Yours is waiting too. Samantha will be here in a few minutes. Kimmie is first.”

Jeff frowned. “Why?”

“Because she was arrested first.” Greg went inside and opened the cell across from the little girl. He kept his mind blank so she wouldn’t know he hated seeing a kid in there. Kimmie was one of three kids on this ship who were still unlocked. Greg wondered if this might lose her that status.

Jeff came in and set his tray on the desk. He nodded at Jayda, who was on a stool in the corner, arms crossed over her chest.

Kimmie jumped up and came to the bars. “Jeff!”

Jeff got one of the folding chairs that had obviously been put out for visitors. “Give me a minute to get settled.” Jeff retrieved his tray and sat, using his weight to keep it from sliding as the boat dipped. He scooped up a bite and blew on it.

Kimmie scowled. “Jeff!”

Brittani and the other adults hid snickers.

Jeff chewed slowly, stomach rumbling. He hadn’t eaten today. Their short break had been interrupted when Tommy pissed Marc off, and he hadn’t felt like munching anything while they were in the tunnels. He swallowed. “Start from the beginning.” He took another bite.

Kimmie opened her mouth. And didn't know what to say now that he was here.

Jeff lifted a brow.

Kimmie paled, realizing she would have to admit to everything to get out of this one. Her fast mind tried to spin a lie.

Jeff scooped up another bite from the sliding tray on his lap. "I can feel you inventing a story. Try the truth."

Kimmie retreated from the bars, tears welling.

Jeff swallowed, and shook his head. "That won't work this time. It's bad enough that you're in jail, Kimmie. Tell me what happened. Now."

Kimmie dropped onto her cot so she didn't have to look at him. "You'll be mad."

"I already am. I've had a long day, kid. You're making it longer."

The girl began to cry for real. "I was following her. And I didn't do my job. The other kids covered for me."

"Wait. Who were you following?"

Kimmie's voice grew in volume and age. "That slut!"

Jeff's lips twitched. "What did you do to her?"

Kimmie's tears dried up. "She has short hair now. She looks like a boy."

Jeff quickly stood up and went to the desk. He dropped his tray like he was angry.

Greg saw Jeff trying not to laugh. He understood, but his job was to make this seem like a big deal.

Jeff nodded, sobering. “It is a big deal, I agree. So she’s in for assault. How long was the sentence before the war?”

“I think it depended on how bad. Since there wasn’t physical harm, as in injury or wound, she’d probably get off with a year in juvenile detention.”

Kimmmie’s face drained of all color. “A year in a cage.” She focused on Jeff in desperation. “I can’t. You know I can’t!”

Jeff retreated as voices echoed. “We’ll see what your lawyer says.”

“I’m sorry! Please!”

Jeff hated the panic in her voice. He wanted to calm her.

Samantha shook her head as she came in. “That’s my job.” She smiled at the scared little girl. “I talked to the boss for you. Is that okay?”

Kimmmie nodded, coming over to the bars.

“I’ll be talking to your accuser next. We’ll see if we can get her to drop the charges.” Samantha smiled again through her upset stomach. She hated the rough rocking of the boat. “I’ve had good luck with that, you know?”

Kimmmie nodded, little arm coming up to scrub at her tears.

“Before we talk, I need to know if you’re okay with Jeff representing you as your guardian. If not, the boss will do it.”

Kimmmie pointed, now too scared to speak.

Jeff brought down a mental wall, willing to wait and see why Samantha was making it worse instead of better like she'd implied she would.

“Good. Now, do you admit you did it?”

Kimmie nodded.

“Okay. Can you tell me why?”

“No.”

“If I guess, will you tell me when I'm right?”

Kimmie hesitated. She felt a trap.

“I'm your lawyer, sweetheart. I'm here to protect you. I'll start by getting you out of this cage, but we have to cover some things first. Okay?”

Kimmie held onto the bars and pressed her face through as she whispered. “She likes Jeff. I like Jeff.” The girl retreated, arms coming out. “It was just one of those things.”

Samantha chuckled. “Funny. If we have to go to court, use that on the jury but not the judge. Angela will know what you're doing.”

Jeff frowned. “Hey!”

Samantha regarded him with cool eyes. “Be quiet or leave.”

Jeff started to say he was Kimmie's representative and then he considered Samantha's record. He went to the desk and lifted his tray right as it started to slide off the desk.

Thunder rattled the ship, making people jump.

Samantha turned to Kimmie, smiling again, but this time, it was cold. “You've scanned Francesca's mind.”

“I wasn't supposed to...”

“But you did.”

Kimmie nodded. “She’s not dirty. I can’t give you that.”

Samantha leaned forward, voice lowering. “What about her past, Kimmie? Was she always good?”

Kimmie frowned along with everyone else. “I didn’t look. I don’t know.”

“That’s okay. Jeff will the next time he sees her and he’s so good, she won’t even know he’s getting the recon we need.” Sam looked over at Jeff. “Now you speak.”

Jeff swallowed and cleared his throat. “I’ll check it out, but I’m not promising to tell you what I find out.”

Samantha shrugged. “If it’s bad, we’ll know by your reaction.”

Samantha pulled his stool over and sat on it, barely feeling the cramps and aches. “Has Francesca ever been mean to you?”

Kimmie’s bottom lip stuck out. “She doesn’t like me around. She sends me away so they can have time together.”

“Isn’t your jealousy wrong if he wants to be with her?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“She’s wrong for him.”

Samantha read the girl’s mind, eyes widening at the images of the future Kimmie hadn’t been allowed to search for. “You did it for Jeff.”

Kimmie nodded in concern, anger making her twist the words. “The slut wants to change him. She wants him to be Marc’s pet and Angela’s to-go man. Jeff wants to be left alone. She’ll change him, and none of us will ever be happy!”

Samantha was aware of the surprised silence of their witnesses. She kept going, glad they’d noticed. “What if he wanted to date a woman who didn’t want to change him?”

Kimmie crossed her arms over her chest. “She has to be an Eagle, and he likes brown hair with big boobies.”

Samantha laughed at her words. “You wouldn’t mind?”

Kimmie let them see the rest of the problem. “If she’s good for Jeff, she might be good for me too. Franny only wants *him*. I need a mommy.” Kimmie tried not to cry this time. “I was good, but I didn’t get my family back and I miss them!”

Samantha shut her book and motioned at Jayda. “Let her out. The boss said she can be released into Jeff’s custody.”

Jayda opened the cell, glad the little girl was leaving.

Jeff left the tray for the cleaning crew. He led Kimmie toward the door. “You’ll be in touch?”

“Yes. Within the next couple days.” Samantha turned to Brittani as Jeff left and Greg shut the main brig door. She felt the use of magic. “So. Whose ass did you kick?”

Brittani frowned. “How do you know I won?”

“I heard the call. One for the medic and one for the brig. The winner isn’t the one who goes to the med bay.”

Jeff had lingered by the door to find out what Brittani had been brought in for. “What? I missed the first-ever Safe Haven magic duel for cut hair?!” He glared at Kimmie. “You are in so much trouble! Get to the cabin!”

Samantha grinned as they left for real this time. “Was it Trinity?”

Brittani frowned as she nodded. “How did you know?”

“I was informed about the bedpan and the tripping.”

“You’ve already talked to people?”

Samantha nodded. “I was on my way to eat when it happened. I sent Neil and Wade to dinner with the twins while I came here to see if I can help you two.” Samantha got her book out. “Your mom said she was surprised it hadn’t happened sooner. Your father said, ‘no comment’. Your brothers agree it was badass. Half of the Eagles who witnessed it want you to train them.” Samantha shut her book. “I haven’t heard a word from Gus or Daryl. They were both there. They saw it all.”

Brittani groaned, sitting on the cot. “I got angry and I let it get the best of me.”

“No.” Samantha’s voice cooled like it had with Kimmie. “You were excited because someone was willing to duel with you.”

Lightning flashed again, brighter this time, closer to the ship.

Brittani stared at her. “But that’s not what happened.”

Samantha stared right back. “Yes, it is. I’ll be talking to Trinity shortly. She’s facing the same charges as you, I assume. She’ll agree that you were dueling, exploring your gifts, and you both wanted to impress people. You didn’t even think about someone getting hurt.”

Brittani was surprised Samantha was giving her a great lie as a cover story. She didn’t know what to say.

Samantha kept going, tone insisting. “You’ve been incredibly sad over the death of your brother. You finally felt a little better and you tried to have some fun. You made a bad choice on how to do it. Understand?”

Brittani slowly nodded. “That’s genius. The judge will let that by in a heartbeat because she feels guilty for it.”

“Yes.” Samantha stood up. “I’ll see about getting you released tonight. If not, I’ll be by in the morning with either a trial date or a punishment offer.”

Brittani came to the bars. “Thank you.”

Samantha smiled. “It’s my job.” Brittani’s swollen lip was red and black. The bruise was spreading down her chin. “Are you okay? Do you want to see a medic?”

“I’m okay. Just a little bruised.”

Samantha saw Brittani rub her stomach.

Brittani lifted her shirt to show a long purple bruise across her stomach and hip. “She has a nasty snare.”

Samantha moved to the desk. “Yes.”

“Uh, Sam. I don’t think the boss will like how you’re doing that job.”

Samantha leaned on the desk, looking at Jayda. “Good. Make sure you tell her every detail in your report.”

“What? Why?”

Samantha braced against the rocking of the ship, glad she’d chosen gym shoes instead of her flats this time. “So it will come to her attention and get added to the docket for the law council. Every time I get a criminal off, she’ll correct the loophole that allowed it. I also got a prisoner released without a single piece of paperwork. Don’t forget that one.”

Jayda scowled. “Is Kimmie allowed out?”

“Of course.” Samantha signed the brig sheet, added Jeff’s name because he’d forgotten, then left.

Greg and Jayda exchanged glances. “She’s good.”

Jayda nodded. “Makes you wonder how Neil keeps up.”

Greg chuckled. “He got himself a Wade.”

Jayda stopped laughing. “Most people can’t believe he got a replacement for Jeremy so soon.”

Greg sighed. “We’re done here. Let’s go to the mess. We can eat and talk about something that won’t cause a fight—like politics or religion.”

Jayda realized she'd touched a nerve. "My bad."

Greg waved it off. Jeremy's loss was still an open wound to him. He liked Wade, and Neil could live his life anyway he wanted to. *But he's not a replacement, because Jeremy was irreplaceable.*

4

"I picked the wrong one! Damn it!"

Shawn stepped out of the elevator, nodding to Ray and Zack. "Are we lost?"

Shawn smiled to show he was joking. The island was on their right and being hit with an ugly sea. Tall waves rolled across the top of the ocean, swelling, rumbling, colliding with smaller swells. It was magnificent.

Rain beat on the deck and steps, splattering through to splash their boots and legs. Heavy wind whipped by, making everyone wish the plastic had been put up even though they didn't have a radiation issue.

"I chose to go with the current to get us around the island and now it's pulling us back out to sea!"

Shawn had cleaned up, eaten, checked on Pam, Missy, and Morgan, and was now ready to help for a few hours or until exhaustion hit him. "What can I do?"

"Watch the radar and scream if we get too close to the island."

Shawn took that post, sliding into the seat with a smile. The first half of his day had been crazy and it appeared that the rest of it would be the same.

The ship rose, flipping their stomachs as it kept going. The waves vanished as the sky flew out to greet them.

Lightning flashed, hunting for a target.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when it didn't strike them.

The ship dropped heavily as the wave rolled under. It jarred the entire ship, sending cups, brushes, and shelves of items flying as nails and hinges broke and plastic gave under the force.

The front of the ship hit the oncoming swell midway and came to a shuddering stop as it sank in. The wave was thicker, more powerful, than the ship trying to cut through it.

Grant and Shawn hit the padded wall behind the wheelhouse together, sliding to the floor. Ray managed to grab the handrail and hang on. His feet lifted from the floor for an instant.

Zack flew backwards into the elevator that had just opened with another guard for the captain.

Daryl caught Zack and fell against the wall, thumping into it. He helped Zack to his feet and shook off the ringing ears.

All over the ship, the same motion was repeated. Calls for a medic swarmed the radio.

Shawn crawled to his post as Grant did the same. He scanned the radar. "We're too close!"

Grant manhandled the long ship away from the island, and steered into the rough current again. It snatched the ship forward and pulled the front sideways. It tilted toward the water.

Alarms went off all over the consoles and throughout the ship.

The radio lit up in undecipherable garbles that medics couldn't get through.

Grant slammed his hand on the anchor release.

The heavy anchor plunged from the back of the ship and pulled them down into the water. The rear of the ship dropped, evening out the decks.

“Great idea!”

Grant sucked in a breath, nodding. “Yeah. Now we have to ride it out.”

Chapter Twenty-One
Too Late Now

1

“What the hell’s going on up there?!”

Neil didn’t answer the camp member as the ship went up and everything not welded in place went in the opposite direction. The crowded mess had become a dangerous slide.

“Get out while it goes up!” Kyle was trying to time the motion of the horrible waves that had come up out of nowhere.

No one listened to him. Some people were trying to evacuate the room while most of the others were trying to ride it out. They were watching the windows and holding onto their chairs for the next slide.

The water rose, swirling overtop the window. All light outside vanished. The water was pitch black, smothering their view and the entire deck.

Everyone breathed a sigh or drew in air as the water receded to show the furious sunset-colored waves surrounding them.

Water rushed by the window, swirling and spraying little waterspouts along the thick glass. They broke up as the next wave dipped, vanishing below the frame.

Gigantic waves swelled in the distance, rushing ahead of them. Debra flinched as the tail end of another huge swell slapped into the window and broke apart, obscuring the view.

Chairs slid backwards, taking people with them. Empty planters fell over and smacked into welded tables and chairs.

Debra's cup slipped from her grip. It flew sideways as the swell crested.

Theo ducked it.

Wade saw it coming and stepped in front of Samantha. The cup shattered against his shoulder.

Samantha tried to hurry to the exit, but the tilting ship sent her against the rail. She clung to it, waiting for the drop that was coming.

The ship went down and kept going.

Greg grabbed Lisa as she slid by, pulling her into his arms. He covered her with his body as the metal cabinet and waves of broken debris flew toward them again.

Debra shoved Theo toward the employee door. The main exits were crammed with crying, shouting, bleeding people and piles of broken debris.

Theo reached the door and bounced back as Ian came through it, hitting him.

Debra caught Theo as he fell. A glint caught her eye. She automatically wrapped him up and rolled out of the way right as the metal cabinet whizzed by. It cracked into the vending machine, shattering the glass.

Theo crawled into the narrow employee hallway and pulled Debra in after him. He tugged her onto his lap and sealed their lips.

Debra moaned, on fire. She brought up her shield and kissed him back, ignoring everything else.

Neil pulled Samantha through the main door, arm around her to help cover the twins. She'd come in looking for Francesca when the wave hit.

Samantha covered the crying boys and let Neil lead her out of the danger zone.

Neil and Wade went down the hall sideways, feet finding balance at the edge where the floor met the wall. It was odd and required a stiff body and legs to keep from tipping over.

Everyone else lined the walls and waited for each crest to make a few feet of progress.

Neil pushed the closet open and swiped the contents of the top two shelves out into the hallway. He held the door open, feet braced on each side of the hallway so Samantha could get inside and be protected from flying, sliding debris and shoving, panicking people. Neil saw injuries that were minor and a few that might be serious, judging from the blood trails, but there wasn't time to help anyone as the next wave lifted the front of the ship.

Neil grabbed Wade's arm and pulled him back, blocking Samantha into the corner of the closet where she didn't have room to slide. He and Wade braced their arms on the door and each other and

hoped it was enough to hold them in place as the ship crested and started to sink again.

2

Shawn held onto the rail. “She can’t take more of that!”

“I know!” Grant steered straight for the island. Rain slammed into the deck and windows like bricks, making the glass creak.

“Are you beaching?!”

“No. Slide-stop.” Grant tried to time the move, hoping the ship could handle this after everything it had been through.

Shawn saw the alarm on the monitor light up. “Too close! Too close!”

Ray, Daryl, and Zack held onto the rails behind the seats and hoped Grant knew what he was doing.

Grant began turning the wheel. The ship groaned, thumping, popping...

Grant eased on the engines as he steered, gunning the boat into a wave that carried them sideways. As the wave crested against the island, the huge ship slowed, stopping near the mouth of the cove. The force of the water coming against the ship held it in place.

“Where did you learn that?”

Grant was too shocked by his success to lie. “Movies and my remote control boat.”

Shawn laughed hard.

Grant began lifting the anchor that had allowed the turn. Without it, and the tall wave he'd rode like a surfboard, they would have flipped while trying that. Once the anchor came up all the way, he would drop it again to keep them in place. This side of the island was a lot calmer. Out of the direct path of the storm, it was also a slice of the island they hadn't viewed yet. It was darker here, where the cliff wall was blocking the moon for now.

Grant scanned the other ships. His stomach sank. "We have another problem."

Shawn saw it too. "We've lost one of the ships!"

Huge swells were trying to push all of the ships into the rocks that lined the cliff. The next set of waves slammed into the farthest pirate ship and shoved it up onto the rocks, sideways. Debris flew in every direction as the hull was ripped open. Gas and fuel began to flow, but the waves weren't done. They battered the beached ship again, shoving it further onto the jagged stones. The ship tilted and rolled back into the water, cracking and shedding debris.

"That one's coming loose too! Get the boss up here."

Shawn heard the crazy man inside offer a suggestion. He decided to take it. "You call her. I'm going over!"

"What?!" Grant didn't look away from the pirate ship that was really a small oil tanker. It was pulling free of its anchored spot. A few more tugs

would see it loose and it only had two directions to go—the other ships or this cruise liner.

“Be ready to move us.” Shawn started timing the waves.

“Move where?”

“Beach us if you have to, Grant. If we get hit by that tanker, we’ll go straight down.” Shawn keyed his mike. “I love you.”

He ran down the steps and slid across the deck, seeing how fast he could go.

Ray and Zack both hit their radios, not sure if they should have stopped him. “Boss!”

Daryl watched in admiration. “He really is nuts.”

Grant keyed his mike. “Brace for impact!” He watched as Shawn increased speed, running across the drenched deck in huge strides that ate up the available space. Grant held his breath as Shawn leapt and the wave reached them.

Shawn hit the wave feet first and went straight under.

3

“Shawn!” Pam shoved by the guards on the ramp to the top deck.

Molly grabbed her arm, but she stayed with Pam as she went up into the storm. The driving wind was the worst of it. The rain was barely there in comparison.

Molly pushed Pam toward the bridge, sweeping for flying debris through her goggles.

Pam climbed the stairs as the ship went up and down in place. Bobbing was better than sailing, but it was still hard. The steps kept popping up as she tried to go up.

Grant nodded toward the rails. “Hang on.” Another swell was coming right for them, but Grant sensed it was really aiming for Shawn.

“Where is he?! Did you see him come up?”

Grant shook his head at her. “I’m not sure. It’s hard to tell.”

“Where was he last?” Pam prepared to go in after him.

Zack blocked the bridge doorway with his body. “Yeah. You’re not doing that.”

The elevator dinged, spilling Marc out with the wave crest. Gabe and Hannah were in there with him, stuffed in and queasy from the motion on top of the medications they’d been given.

“What are you doing?” Ray knew they were all supposed to be in the medical area.

Marc picked himself up, pale and puffy. “Where did you see him last?”

Grant pointed at the small gap between the ships. “I think he was headed for the anchor.”

Gabe and Hannah recoiled from the stiff, cold wind, both staying in the open elevator. “Is it getting colder?”

No one answered Gabe since it was obvious that Nature was hitting them again in any way that she could.

Pam let Marc put an arm around her as they both scanned the swirling, violent waves tugging on the ship's anchor. They both saw where the mount had twisted. It wouldn't take much more without breaking.

Missy appeared on the bridge steps, hugging the rail as the wind and rain tried to blow her onto the deck.

Molly hurried over to help.

Zack reached outside and grabbed the girl by the shoulder of her jacket. He lifted her off her feet and brought her inside.

Missy ran to Pam as soon as Zack let go.

Pam hugged the terrified little girl as the next wave lifted their ship. *Now the waiting begins.*

4

Shawn's brain kicked on as the water closed over his head. *What the hell am I doing?*

He held his breath and kept his body crunched up to protect himself from debris. *Too late now, dumbass.*

The water shot him upward, like Shawn had been hoping for. He'd been counting on Angela's deal with the ocean. *But I'd have done it anyway. Missy's on that ship. She's worth my life.*

Shawn opened his arms and reached out, praying his calculations had been correct.

Thick, cold metal slid into his arms and banged into his face.

Shawn clung to the anchor, mind swimming. His breath shot out as he fought to stay conscious. Shawn forced his arms to work, pulling up with the water that was lifting him in the next wave.

Shawn popped above the water. He knew better than to open his mouth yet.

Water sloshed over him again, making his ears ring at the volume.

Shawn kept climbing, chest burning, body freezing.

The wave receded, popping him to the surface. It kept going down, letting him draw in fast, small gulps of air like he'd planned. Staying calm and controlling his body's reactions allowed Shawn to climb up the anchor at a steady pace.

Shawn pushed his legs to find the next large clasp in the anchor so he could shove himself to the top of the deck.

He heaved himself over and let go of his control, rolling against the railing. Shawn laid there, shivering, arm over his face so he could breathe through the icy rain. *I didn't die. How is that possible?*

“Tell me that’s him.” Ray pointed through the driving rain.

Pam narrowed in, trying to connect to Shawn mentally.

Marc wasn’t sure how to help. He moved closer to Grant while everyone was distracted.

Pam hugged Missy again. “It is him!”

“Here comes another wave.” Grant was now certain Nature was aiming just for Shawn. *And she may get him. He can’t reach cover on the ship before that wave hits.*

Marc had never used his shield in a situation like this. He tried to push it out, but it only filled the space and didn’t move out further.

“You’re too tired.”

Everyone jumped as Angela appeared in the doorway, soaked, with Molly on her heels.

Zack retreated to let her in.

Molly hurried back to her post under the bridge where she was out of most of the rain and could see the ramp into the ship.

Angela stayed on the steps, adding her shield to Marc’s.

The wave crested, reaching them. It lifted both ships and then slammed them down.

Shawn’s shadow vanished behind the rail of the pirate ship.

“Is he okay?” Grant wished he had a gift right now so he could be linked to the hive.

Ray nodded, grin breaking out. “He’s in a hallway, catching his breath.”

People cheered and sighed. Cold breaths rushed out, confirming the temperature drop Nature was shoving at them.

Grant watched the ocean for the next blast.

Nature swung right away, sending a monster wave they couldn't block without everyone working together.

"Ask the ocean to help!" Pam pulled on Marc's arm. "The ocean will help."

Marc shook his head, glad when Angela came inside. "The ocean is beat. It's been fighting Nature for us the entire trip."

"Help him!" Pam watched in horror as the wave swelled and kept going, reaching for the sky. It towered over their deck. "Please!"

The cruise ship lurched as the wave hit the deck and broke apart. The entire front of the bridge vanished behind the spray.

Pam waited for the windows to clear, heart thumping. *Shawn!*

Angela shut her eyes and brought out her reserve energy. She groped for Marc's hand.

Marc clasped her hand, feeling power flow through her that dwarfed his own. He saw into her halls of doors, recognizing the immense power she held at her fingertips. *And she can't use it. Magic can't always be our answer.*

Angela squeezed his hand and did nothing while letting the rest of their witnesses think she was helping.

Pam pointed. "I see a light."

Grant gawked. “He got it going!”

Cheers filled the bridge.

The rain slowed; the wind eased. The temperature continued to drop.

Angela proceeded toward the door. “He stays there until it’s over—tell him that.”

“I will.” Grant assumed Pam would stay up here until the storm was over. He wasn’t surprised when she took the co-captain’s chair and Missy stayed next to her.

Pam gestured. “How do I work the radio?”

Grant began explaining.

Marc felt Angela’s misery and arousal. In a blinding flash, he connected to her. The cracks were there, but the lies, the inability to solve all the camp’s problems, were giving her unpleasant cramps. She wanted to fix the world and she felt like all she did was make it worse. Mental cries from the kids were the worst. Den mothers had been taking the children to the mess when the storm hit. The hallways had protected them from some of the injuries that those in the mess had sustained, but they were still in need of care she couldn’t provide yet because others were hurt worse.

Marc followed Angela down the ramp into the ship, grateful that the swells were settling. The storm had been strong, but quick. *I hope that’s because Nature’s exhausted. I know I am.*

Angela grunted at his thought. She was almost asleep on her feet, but she had to find a little more to get them through the rest of the night. “Can you

try to get the medical area organized? I'll triage where I find them and call for help with the serious ones." She didn't have energy to spare on healing right now unless someone was on the verge of death.

"Code blue! Code blue!"

Angela took off running at the radio call.

6

"He's breathing again." Harry leaned back as Sherman coughed, rolling over. His hands came up to his head and came away bloody.

Harry saw Angela run in. He waved. "He was hit in the chest by a chair."

Angela checked on Sherman, while Marc scanned the mess. Calling it that would be an understatement right now. Nothing was where it was supposed to be. *It'll take a week to straighten this out.*

Marc scanned for injuries and found mostly minor wounds. He headed for the employee door to avoid the crowd trying to get to the medical bay or their cabins to check on belongings and friends.

"Yeah! Yeah!"

Marc stopped at the sight of the naked couple writhing on the floor.

Debra's shield lit up bright red, blocking his view.

"Hurry up!" Marc went by them. "You have work waiting."

He wiped his wet hair out of his face and scanned the hallway for places to step. All the rocking had dislodged too many items to count. He was sure they'd be finding things in odd places for a long time. It was easily the worst storm he'd ever suffered through on a ship.

Marc peered through the window before he opened the door. He saw a clear moment and hurried out into the medical bay. He slid into the corner of the reception area and scanned to see who needed his help first.

“Over here!” Morgan had felt Marc's arrival. He was on high alert for news about Shawn.

Marc went to Morgan, dodging a splatter of something on the floor that he didn't want to identify. “He's moving a loose ship. Pam's calling him.”

Morgan already knew that. He also knew Pam hadn't gotten through yet.

Marc held the kit Morgan was working from, wincing as the cries from the rooms grew louder.

“I haven't had time to check them. Harry was on break and Terry was off duty. They're not here yet.”

Marc smiled in comfort at the woman Morgan was attending. “I just saw them in the mess. They're stitching wounds and splinting bones. You're going to get a rush down here in a few minutes.”

Morgan wrapped the bandage around the camp woman's head and taped it. “Don't go to sleep.”

She smiled back at Marc. “I won't.”

Morgan directed her to a far chair in the corner.

Marc closed the kit and motioned to Monica, who was here for an appointment. “Emergency?”

Monica shook her head.

“Can you help?”

Monica smiled. “Be glad to.”

Marc assumed she’d been bored. “Do what Morgan tells you to.”

“You got it.”

Morgan went to the medical rooms. He opened each door, peered in before going to the next.

The cries got louder as he left each one.

Marc realized Morgan was determining who needed him the most.

Morgan headed for the back rooms next. “They’re yours, Marc. Monica, come with me.”

Marc went to the rooms and repeated Morgan’s actions. He found a bruise, some scratches, a bleeding wound, and a pissed wolf. Marc went in to give Trent a few stitches. “What is it with you and getting hurt?”

Morgan stood in the doorway of Reggie’s room.

He stared at the dead man, rage flaring. “That’s three of us now.”

Blood dripped from Reggie’s nose onto the floor. He’d been tossed from his bed. Morgan assumed the crushed rib had punctured a lung.

Morgan heard the rush Marc warned him about coming. He reached in and flipped the lock on the doorknob. Then he shut the door. They would open

it later with the tip of a knife. Until then, Reggie wouldn't be subjected to the stares of everyone who wanted to see a dead body show. "Rest in peace, Reggie."

Morgan forced his mind into that dull place where hard work could be finished even through awful pain. He went to handle the arriving injuries, refusing to think about anything except surviving until morning.

7

"They're fine. Stop pacing." Sadie scowled at Adrian. "You know *she's* fine."

Adrian ignored the jealousy. "Marc's been up and down all night. They have a lot going on."

"And it's easier to get it while you pace?"

Adrian snorted at her. "Funny."

Sadie finished cleaning the dishes, listening to the storm howl and blow outside the bunker. She loved it here. As long as the food held out, she was good. "Why is he up and down?"

"Nature tried to kill them again." Adrian tried to reach Kendle, but he didn't get an answer. "I think she has her shield up."

Sadie assumed he was talking about Angela. "You aren't allowed to contact her anyway."

Adrian gave Sadie a dark glare. "Kendle, Tommy, and Quinn are in an unprotected barn surrounded by trees and maybe locals." His tone

sharpened. “Can you think of someone other than yourself for a little while or is that too hard?”

Sadie flushed dark red. She glared at him, slapping her cup down. “Why are you so mean?”

“You pushed that button.” Adrian didn’t hold back. “You should go to sleep before you accidentally find my fuck off switch.”

Sadie grinned. “Now that’s funny.”

Adrian let out a chuckle. He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Get some sleep. We may have to dig out of here in the morning.” They’d listened to trees and rocks hitting the door as Nature repeatedly tried to reach them.

Sadie gave into the warmth. “Okay. You can turn out the lights.”

“I will.” Adrian went right back to his mental links and calls. He still didn’t know why Marc had allowed this private connection between them, but he was grateful.

It’s so I can keep track of you.

Adrian breathed a sigh of relief at Marc’s calm voice in his head. Marc wouldn’t be checking in if Angela was in danger or dead. Adrian stopped himself from babbling. *Sadie and I are in the bunker. We’re good.*

Adrian gave Marc what he’d come for. *I can’t reach Kendle.*

Thank you.

The connection broke.

Adrian grunted. “Welcome.”

“What?” Sadie paused in making her way to her bedroll.

“Nothing. Goodnight.”

“Yaw.” Sadie crawled into the bed, sore body letting out cracks and pops as she tried to get comfortable. She was already dreading tomorrow’s work. *Why am I the housewife?* Sadie realized setting herself up as matriarch of the bunker had backfired. *This isn’t what I wanted at all.*

Adrian caught the thought and hid a grin. In time, Sadie would be a formidable challenge to any man or woman, in every way. Right now, she was a rookie who had to go through all the normal lessons and then the whole set of new ones he was creating for her situation. Adrian felt bonded to Sadie. He wanted her to have a good future. For that to happen, she had to change.

We all do. Adrian blew out the candle lantern and continued to pace. He’d been doing it for hours. He didn’t need the light.

Sadie gritted her teeth and hoped the storm got loud again so she didn’t have to hear his steps.

8

“That’s my girl.” Shawn held the ship in place against the calming waves, copying Grant. They had the engines on and were steering against the wind while throttling slightly as needed. Grant was smooth, not jarring the people below. Shawn was rough, making the pirate ship groan and shimmy,

but he didn't have passengers to worry over. His concern was keeping this ship from breaking anchor.

And not dying of hypothermia.

Shawn dug in his kit as the wind gusted, once again grateful that Adrian had insisted Eagles always carry one. Most of the senior men opted for a small kit that went under their jackets, but Shawn always carried a pouch in his inside pocket with everything he thought he might need. He pulled it out now, hand shaking.

His fingers burned, but they worked, clutching the pouch while he tried to pry it apart.

Cold water gushed over his fingers, bringing more pain as his jacket shed a wrinkle of liquid and Nature sent a fresh blast of cold wind.

Shawn tugged out the orange capsule and put the rope around his neck, teeth now chattering. His toes were already numb. *Why did I think the ocean would be warm here?*

“B-because it's a t-tropical island!” Shawn pulled out another pouch and dropped the first one. He ripped open the plastic cover with his teeth, shutting his eyes against the blast as the pop-up emergency tent slid from the container and sprang open in front of him. It bounced against the wall of the ship and slid, knocking him down.

He tucked as he rolled, hand going out to grab the pouch he'd dropped. He landed by the open flap of the tent, groaning.

Shawn forced himself to roll inside. He immediately felt better as the icy wind was blocked. He let go of the pouch and began fighting with his clothes.

Once he got them off, he would put on the emergency outfit folded into tight squares in his pouch. He didn't have dry shoes, but the capsule also held socks and a pair of thin slippers that would get him through for a few hours.

As soon as Shawn finished changing, he forced himself onto his cold feet so he could retake the wheel. He scanned the ocean through the wet, cracked window. Nature had tried to reach him even as he'd entered this bridge, but the glass had held. Shawn was glad she hadn't thrown it harder or he would have walked right into a tree branch coming through the window.

Shawn registered a change in the air. He spotted a clear sky behind the last layer of gray and green clouds. The wind died. "It's over."

Shawn could almost feel Nature laughing at him. "Yeah, yeah—it's never over. I get it." Shawn let go of the controls, waiting to see if the ship stayed where he needed it to. When it only bobbed a little to the right, Shawn was satisfied. In the future, they wouldn't put their armada so close together so they couldn't be wiped out by their own ships. The Adrianna would be in a separate location as well. Shawn was certain they had injuries. He flipped on the radio and reached for the knob to put it on the Safe Haven channel.

“...much longer?”

“We are delayed. The engines are cooling off.”

“Lack of parts?”

“Lack of knowledge, sir. We don’t know how to fix it.”

“We have copied this. Resume radio silence and join the attack as fast as you can.”

“Yes, sir. Good luck!”

Shawn listened for more, but the radio went quiet.

Shawn scanned the filthy, stinking bridge for a log book. He saw Safe Haven boot prints in dried gore that told him Theo’s crew had been through here right after the battle. Without a channel guide, he would have to flip through every station and wait to see if there was any activity—like Mitch had done for them in the beginning of this perilous journey.

Shawn grinned. “I never would have believed this is where I’d be a year after joining the Eagles. I knew Adrian would take me places I wanted to see, but I never expected the view to be this good.”

9

“I know she’s pissed, but I didn’t expect her to hit all of us at once.”

Kendle and Tommy ignored Quinn’s babbling. It had been a long night.

“Adrian’s fine.” Kendle scanned the half collapsed barn they’d just crawled from. “He’s always fine.”

Tommy thought of the sword scar that went around Adrian's waist from the back of his ribs all the way to the front. "If you say so."

Kendle picked up her kit and slung it over one shoulder. "Let's roll. Watch your six."

Quinn grinned.

Tommy frowned, but he didn't say anything. If Kendle tried to act like Angela, she wouldn't move on. *It'll be good when Angela gets classes going.*

Kendle frowned over her empty shoulder. "You can go right now."

Tommy paused, pride and fear fighting.

Kendle didn't care. "I don't need you. I'll never make real peace with her. Adrian isn't the leader of shit, and I don't want to have your babies. Does that cover it all?"

"Damn." Quinn kept walking. "Someone woke up in full-on bitch mode."

"It's called truth." She glared at Tommy. "Make your choice."

Tommy turned and walked away.

Kendle's heart clenched. *That leaves me with Quinn. Great.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

Her Clock is Ticking

1

“**I**s everyone accounted for?” Angela wrapped the strap over Trent’s shoulder and attached it to the sling.

Terry nodded, scanning the chaotic medical bay. “We’re short Shawn.”

Angela snorted. “We should be, but he’s got the skills of an elder and the luck of a kid.” Angela wiped her hands and proceeded to the next patient as Stanley came behind her to give instructions and supplies. Angela and Morgan had an efficient emergency department running right now. Things weren’t in the exact places they might have preferred, but it was working.

The more seriously injured patients were in the rear rooms, in recovery. A medic was staying back there with them at all times. It was Harry’s turn right now.

All around them were signs of the hard night that had finally eased up. Trash cans were overflowing. Empty glove boxes were piled on the floor. Bandages and other garbage were in the sinks because the hazard bags were all full. A cleaning

crew would come by in a while, but most of the work here had to be done by the medics, who knew where to put it all. This area hadn't been hit as hard, being in the center of the ship. The locked cabinets had also helped, but it still needed a lot of work.

“All injured are either here or have already been through.”

“Good.” Angela examined Caleb's arm. “You need a few stitches.” She let go and began opening packages from the pouch around her neck. She'd made it from her jacket.

“Do I get pain medicine?”

Angela nodded. “Yes, but it's a shot.”

Caleb blanched. “I can wait.”

Angela smiled. “I don't like needles either. I'll be fast, okay?”

Caleb stared. “How fast?”

Angela surveyed the wound again, hands automatically getting the stitch ready to thread. “I need to do it two times, one on each side. Can you say a poem or think of a rhyme?”

Caleb frowned. “Can I have a Band-Aid?”

Angela chuckled. “I'm sorry, sweetheart. Just shut your eyes and say your ABCs. Start...” Angela pinched up the skin on Caleb's arm. “Now.”

Caleb let out a cry.

“Come on, let me hear those ABCs.”

“A...”

“You can do it.”

Caleb blinked back tears and began rattling off his ABCs loudly to combat the pain.

Angela numbed each side with practiced movements. She retreated as Caleb landed on Z. She smiled. “Now we leave it alone for a few minutes.”

Angela gestured Ritchie over. “Stay with him. Watch the wall clock. At four minutes, have him touch it and see if he can feel anything—but gently and on the edge. Don’t let him poke a finger in there.”

Caleb chuckled through the oddly throbbing pain. “That’s silly. I won’t do that.”

“Good. At four minutes, call for me.” Angela moved on, back aching and burning. She wiped her hands again, returning to giving Ed orders and instructions. It had been this way for an hour, but they were almost caught up. “I want all weather notes given to Samantha. Grant will have readings and such. When she asks what they’re for, tell her that weather book she thought about making for the boss.”

“Got it.” Ed scanned his notes. “We postponed the wedding parties until tomorrow evening. Was that right?”

“Yes. Everything has been put off for exactly one day. And make sure the people who were off ship today know to shower a few times to remove any remaining decontamination spray. Grant didn’t have time to give the announcement.”

“Cool. I’m headed up there next for an update.”

Angela nodded. Marc was with the camp, directing things from there. After he’d helped her get injured people down here to the infirmary, he’d

insisted on handling their most pressing areas while she helped Morgan and their volunteers. “Is it still raining?”

Ed might have been sarcastic with anyone else, but this was the boss. “I’m not sure, but I think so. It’s too dark out now to tell if it’s rain hitting windows or just spray.” The ocean was still making the boat rock more than any of them liked.

Angela realized she was out of patients. They’d seen to everyone now. “What did Samantha say?”

“She said it’s over. We have clear radar for a hundred miles.”

“That’s wonderful. Make sure Grant hears. He won’t ask, but he’s waiting on that call.”

Ed nodded, writing it all down. Grant had them on standby to fire the engines back up if things got bad again.

Angela saw Missy and Pam come in and go to Morgan. She was glad Grant had finally sent them out of the bridge. Shawn was giving them regular updates. The females were needed elsewhere. Angela was confident Morgan would put them to work after they hugged and updated each other. “Tonya had a candidate for working in the lab with her. She hadn’t gotten the name to me yet. See who it is and get them in here as soon as you can. Make sure they stop in and see her first.”

“Got it. Next?”

“I’m all good.”

“Same.” Angela turned to Caleb “How long’s it been?”

Caleb smiled, arm no longer hurting. “Two minutes.”

“Let me know.” Angela scanned those who’d been told to wait. She saw Lisa doing a crossword puzzle in a book someone had left behind. “Lisa, you’re clear.”

Lisa rose quickly and headed for the door. “Thanks!”

Angela waved at Greg. They both had bumps with some stitches and some bruises. “You are too. Keep an eye on each other tonight.”

Lisa snickered. “I’m game if he is.”

Greg chuckled, holding the door. “Let’s start with comparing future scars and we’ll go from there.”

Angela laughed with them.

“Send in the next one!”

Angela waved at Caleb. “That’s you, sweetheart. Morgan has candy.”

Caleb hopped down and ran in.

Angela went through the rear of the hall as Ritchie followed the boy in to let Morgan know what he needed. Angela was glad to get away. She’d done the worst part of it; Morgan could do the rest. Medical care on kids was the hardest part of the job. Most of the time, they didn’t know why the doctor was hurting them. It sucked. *But we do save their lives, so it evens out.*

Trinity glanced up from her bed, saw it was Angela going by, and quickly shut her eyes. Morgan

wanted her to stay overnight. Being here at the same time as Angela was bad luck.

Angela pushed the swinging door open to the lounge at the rear of this area. She scanned, seeing how much progress had been made.

Ralph wiped sweat from his neck. “Hey, Boss. Good timing. We’re about done with the first stage.”

“I see that. Thank you for sticking with it even though you wanted to be somewhere else. You feel like the Eagles do.”

Ralph snorted. “You’re trying to encourage us to join.”

“Of course.” Other than these few, most camp members were on their deck, trying to get their beds cleared, along with a path to the bathrooms. They would work on the rest tomorrow. Her people needed to sleep soon. Angela could hear it in the brief flares of attitude as everyone worked.

Angela swept the new lab again, satisfied. “It looks good.”

“We’re going to bring in the equipment next. Tonya’s telling us where to stick it.”

Angela laughed at the wording. “Yeah, she’ll do that.” Angela’s mirth faded. “Where’s Conner?”

Ralph frowned. “He hasn’t been seen in hours. We thought you had him on something quiet.”

Angela keyed her radio. “Who has eyes on Conner?”

“He’s in his cabin. We can hear him snoring.”

Angela frowned at the rookie's answer. "Check on him. Make him talk to you."

"Copy."

Angela waited, still scanning all the work they'd done to turn this area into a lab. Theo and Ralph had worked nonstop for hours; they now had sturdy counters and space for coolers and equipment. This lab would be better than the last one.

The radio crunched. "He won't wake up, Boss. Candy even slapped him. I think we need a medic."

2

Conner knew what was happening. He'd just never thought to be on this side of it. The darkness was absolute. His feet traversed a level surface that he couldn't see.

Conner didn't bother to advance slowly with his arms out in front to block his body. He knew how this worked. He had to wander the dark nothing until he found the light. Conner had translated that literally, but he'd also assumed it was figurative as well. He was searching his mind for an answer he hadn't known he needed.

"It's like reaching the end of a level and needing the password to go further." Everything was like a video game to Conner right now, but he wouldn't have known how else to express it.

Am I a good person? Am I on the right path?
Conner wasn't sure where to search for that mystery answer. "I've been happy. Right?"

Conner kept walking as he considered that. “I adore Candy. I enjoy being an Eagle. I have friends now, and I’m not lonely. But...”

Conner slowed as he found a disturbance in his happiness. “I still miss my dad. I feel robbed of a life with him.”

Conner stopped, digging deeper. *Am I unhappy and hiding it so I can have all those other things?*

Conner didn’t like the possible answer. He forced himself to keep going. *If that were true, it would show. There would be signs.* He frowned through the darkness. “What would those signs be?”

Conner kept following the thought threads, unraveling a knot in himself. “Restlessness, apathy about life, not feeling satisfied with the benefits.” He considered, wanting to get it all so he didn’t have to keep walking. He didn’t mind the silence or the darkness, but the walking was hell. *I’m tired. Should I be this tired?*

Conner thought of all the medical treatments, the duty shifts, and the last run. *Yes, exhaustion is normal. Keep going.*

“Other signs?” Conner’s mind kept rolling. His feet kept moving. The darkness didn’t change.

He searched a new direction. “I’m only close to one person. Is there something wrong with Candy?”

Conner’s heart sank as a dim light appeared ahead of him. “What is it?”

Conner’s mind immediately went to her mental stability. *Is it because of the war, Lee’s death, or me?*

The light went out.

“Okay, none of those.” Conner chose an uglier scenario. “There’s something wrong with the babies.”

Conner was relieved when the darkness didn’t change. He tried the only other thing he could think of. “Candy’s sick.”

Bright light flooded the great darkness. He slowly opened his eyes, blinking as moisture ran from the corners. “What’s wrong with her?” Conner held onto the other world for another second, long enough to get an answer.

Her clock is ticking.

Conner focused on Angela’s concerned face. “Death.”

Angela nodded. She’d heard the answer too. “We’ll do everything we can for her and the babies.”

“But it won’t be enough.” Conner immediately shut his eyes. “I need a minute alone. I’ll come to the med bay in a bit to try what you want.”

Angela moved away from his bed, motioning for people to leave. She knew what he was about to do, but she didn’t forbid it. If Conner wanted to use his personal lifeforce on Candy, that was his business. What bothered her was that he had one to give at all. Only parents got those.

“It’s too soon.” Candy blocked the doorway. “I won’t allow it.”

Conner liked it that she would defend him. It was another sign their bond was growing, but he

was too tired to really enjoy it. “They need my help. I have to try.”

Candy reluctantly moved to let them leave, glaring at Angela. “Don’t mistreat him because he’s a Mitchel.”

“I’ll look after him.” Angela scanned Candy. “He’s been a good influence on you. I don’t want that to stop.”

“I don’t either.” Candy went to the chair in the hall to wait.

As Angela stepped out, Ivan caught her attention. “Can I have a word?”

Angela followed him out into the hall, moving away from Candy. “Hit me.”

Ivan didn’t want to, but it was his job now. “Darren and Megan had sex on their run, before she got hurt.”

“What punishment is being recommended?”

Rain smacked into the window, making people frown. They were all ready for the storm to be done.

Ivan frowned. “I didn’t tell anyone else yet.”

“I know. Why?”

Ivan grunted. “Darren and I are friends. I didn’t want him to get in trouble.”

“So noted. Go on.”

Ivan wasn’t sure if maybe he was in trouble now too. “Kenn planned Peter’s death. He was talking to Tonya, I think. It’s in Ian’s notes.”

“I doubt he would have admitted that to her.”

Ivan shrugged. “Ian was walking by and heard it. He’s not sure who Kenn said it to.”

Angela had an idea who it had been. Most people wouldn't be able to get the truth from that source. It might require Marc's help. Angela scanned Ivan's face and sighed. "Go on, finish it."

Ivan drew in a breath. "Shawn just called with a radio update. He's getting a channel we aren't."

"They're closer?"

"No, we still have the same amount of time." Ivan met her eyes. "They have ten ships coming, with orders for three more to catch up. They've had some ocean issues and repairs aren't as easy anymore."

Angela barely heard the rest of what he said. *Ten ships for sure and maybe thirteen. I estimated five to seven at the most! It's double. My plan won't work and we may not have time to change it.*

3

"It's shift change, Safe Haven. Fill out those nightly reports and get them to the boss before you hit the rack."

Samantha moved aside to clear room in the hallway. A group of rookies were late for their posts and running at that radio reminder.

Jayda opened the brig door for her as they went by.

All the rookies jumped aside in time to avoid it. They flashed glares and grins at Jayda as they kept going.

Samantha chuckled. “I remember those days.” She entered the brig and put her folder on the desk. The den mothers had all the kids together for a check and count. They’d offered to take the twins for an hour so she, Neil, and Wade could help and work.

Jayda shut the door. “When you come back, you’ll get to go through it all again.” Jayda was eager to get out of here and go be useful to the boss. She’d had a boring evening where she’d rested. Now, she could relieve someone.

Samantha’s smile widened. “With new instructors. That could be fun.”

Chad laughed with them as he scanned the top paper on her folder. It was a Post-It note.

If you’re reading this, the boss wants you after shift change.

Samantha lifted the folder and turned toward the cells as she casually covered the note. She’d delivered the same message to several people on the ship.

The brig was almost normal. Papers and office supplies were scattered across the carpet, but the desk was welded and so were the cots. Brittani had ridden out the waves in her bed, being rocked to sleep while she held the sides.

Sam went to the stool that had been left between the cells. “How are you?”

Brittani yawned.

Samantha laughed. “It’s been one of those days.”

“And I missed being able to help.” Brittani sighed. “I do the stupidest stuff sometimes.”

“Everyone does. That shouldn’t be the end of their lives, careers, or relationships.”

Brittani opened her eyes. “You talked to Daryl.”

Samantha sat on the stool. “He’ll be by. Marc drafted him to help with cleanup.”

“Is it bad?”

Samantha tensed, mind going to the chaos.

“I’m sorry.” Brittani sat up, stretching. “What’s the bad news you’re delaying?”

Samantha frowned. “I need to get better at that.”

Brittani waited, almost sure she knew.

“The boss isn’t in a good mood right now, as you’ll understand when you step out. We’ve had deaths today. That’s always hard on her, but we’ve all just been reminded that Nature is also waiting for us the instant we set foot on that island. Or any island. Moods are bad.”

“I’m out of the Eagles.”

Samantha nodded. “Suspended pending the outcome of your trial.”

Brittani checked Samantha’s shoulders and stood up. “What else?”

Samantha didn’t meet her eye. “If you’re found guilty of the charges, you could be locked for a period of time to be determined by the boss. Trinity is facing the same charges and penalties.”

Brittani came to the bars, bracing. She felt something worse coming. “Go on.”

Samantha's shoulders eased. "Because magic was the only action, Angela has to decide if magic laws need to be added to the constitution. She's pissed about being rushed into all these choices and most of us haven't even gotten off the boat yet."

"I fucked up. I get it. Tell me!"

"If magic laws are included, you could face a double punishment. For a duel, that's covered in a locked period. If you're found guilty of assault and attempted murder, you'll be banished."

Gasps echoed from the guards.

Brittani held onto the bars, mind zeroing in on a third option. She kept it behind her walls and for emergency. "What if it was self-defense?"

"You'd have to be able to prove it."

"She started it all by tripping me. I splashed her with a bedpan. When I went into the mess, she was standing there. Her hand flinched. I thought she was about to kill me."

"Trinity told me the exact same story from her point of view, except her version included a few curse words."

"It's my word against hers. Great."

"Yeah. So they'll have a pretrial hearing. They will definitely decide there's evidence and you'll be charged and officially arrested. Your trial will be set for that same week. The boss will scan you both at some point and she'll decide what sparked it and we'll go from there. But we already know it was jealousy over Gus. We're just not sure if it's one or both of you." Samantha watched Brittani's face.

Brittani rubbed her arms. "I miss our friendship, but I love my husband." Brittani flashed her hand to show the ring. "Daryl and I got married back near Port Stanley."

"On a personal note, congratulations!" Samantha smiled. "I hope you guys have a lifetime of happiness."

"Aww. Thank you."

"On a professional note, that should help. Have you spent time around Gus since your breakup, as in private time?"

"We've had talks in public, but that's it." Brittani refused to think of those moments or the topics. Only Angela would be allowed full access if it was needed.

"Good. Do you know about Gus and Bernice?"

Brittani nodded. "He's slow, but he'll make a move at some point. She'll be lucky to get him."

"I think so too." Samantha gave an honest opinion. "Trinity is the woman scorned and you were an easy target. But if we make her pay for that, then you get in trouble as well. So we have to clear you both."

"I understand."

"And you can't take revenge for it later because our laws will forbid that and there are no limitations on crimes, either going forward or going backward."

"Are you allowed to tell me these things?"

Samantha nodded. "Angela wants people talking about it. They picked a few of the biggest

issues to work on first. It won't be long before we have the first vote."

"That's good, right?" Jayda had been listening. She was confused. "I mean, we have to have laws."

"Some laws, yes. But how long before people start trying to make their own or they start politics up again? Or they decide they've had enough of Angela being fair and they start gathering people to vote against her?"

Samantha's predictions brought everyone to a standstill as they received a view they hadn't considered.

"We've seen how fast it can happen. Our legal system can be manipulated. We have to revamp it to fix those loopholes and imbalances, the lack of limits and audits. It's moving too fast now and it has to slow. That can only happen if you idiots start following the laws so we don't have to do this again for a long time." Samantha stood. "Her husband is coming for her. Boss said he'll have release papers."

Brittani breathed a sigh of relief at knowing she was being released and Daryl was coming. She needed his support right now.

Samantha paused at the door. "If you have an issue before the trial, do not fire back. You may defend. Are we clear?"

Brittani nodded. "I won't. I promise."

"Good." Samantha left the brig, satisfied she'd passed enough of the boss's leaks for the camp to be occupied with gossip overnight. Angela didn't want them stewing on Nature or their losses. She wanted

them talking about the future, and what better way than to threaten a banishment? *We haven't had one of those in a while. I wonder if some people might consider committing crimes just to get that?*

4

“If you have to cheat, you didn't win.”

Daryl slowed. “What?”

Neil stopped, tone revealing his pity. “The sacred position you're getting wasn't earned honorably, and you'll know that every time you lead a run or attend a leader's meeting. It will crush you.”

Daryl froze at Neil's comment. They were passing in the employee hall, with no one around. This hallway held less debris than the main passages, but they still had to be careful where they stepped.

“I saw you and Adrian.”

Daryl turned to face Neil. “They're solid plans, Neil. No one will take them from Adrian now, but we need the upgrades.”

Neil waited, listening for all of the truth.

Daryl hated being on this end of it. “I'm getting pushed from too many sides. I folded.”

Neil nodded. “I get it, I do.” Neil had always liked and respected Daryl. And Daryl hadn't held Neil's mistakes over his head like he could have. “Tell her where they came from.”

“I will.” Daryl lingered.

So did Neil, not sure what was coming. It didn't feel bad, but it did seem important.

Neither man mentioned the island or the hell waiting here for Marc to finish. They'd been there and felt it. They didn't need to talk about it too.

"I'm sorry about Jeremy."

Neil tensed.

"I'm not sure if I ever told you that."

Neil didn't want to have this talk. "I don't know. Probably."

Daryl gave him a sympathetic smile. "Jeremy would have liked Wade. He also would have liked it that Sam and his son have two protectors. You know?"

Neil relaxed, understanding Daryl was giving his approval. "What's it to you?"

Daryl snickered. "You got the tone right, but your voice is too deep to be Missy."

Neil laughed. "Had to try. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Daryl headed for the door. "Catch you later."

"Where are you going now?" Neil knew Samantha would be busy for a bit longer. She had to interview Francesca and then report the results to Angela. After that, she could give those results to Jeff or wait for morning. Because she was going to be on the descendant deck, and then with the boss, Neil was taking the opportunity to do rounds of these employee halls to make sure no one was traversing these dark passages with nefarious

purposes in mind. He also got to spy on people who didn't know he was hiding behind the walls.

“To the brig to bail my wife out of jail and then hopefully to spank her naked ass.”

Neil's laughter followed him. “Good luck with that.”

“I know, right?” Daryl's amusement faded almost immediately. All the things pressing in on him flew back and started poking again.

5

“Is it working?” Darren was tired of waiting. He wanted answers.

Morgan examined the wound. “It doesn't look worse.” Morgan checked the IV, patted Conner's shoulder, and left the room.

The medical bay was quiet and almost empty in front now. The lights had been dimmed so people in chairs and on the couches could sleep. The two medics on duty made constant rounds of both areas, eager for dawn when they could go to their cabins, uncover their beds, and crash.

Conner snuggled under the heated blankets and sipped his powdered juice. He'd been fed and watered, given medical ointment for his scratches, and they were checking on him every hour. He'd given Megan a full pint of blood now. He felt like they could keep going if she needed it.

Megan smiled at Conner again. “Thank you.” Her arm wasn’t throbbing anymore. The relief was great.

Conner yawned. “Welcome.”

Conner was pale, with sunken eyes and puffy skin that begged for deep sleep. Darren opened his mouth.

Conner shook his head. “I’m good, man.” Darren had been pushing things on him since he walked in. “You guys a couple?”

Megan blushed.

Darren nodded curtly.

Conner shrugged. “That’s why he’s so hyper.” Conner put his head back and let himself doze now that he knew Darren wasn’t a threat. The vibes from the man were formidable. *He learned that from my dad.*

Darren stifled a snort. *I learned it from life, kid. Your dad just helped it along in the places I needed.*

Conner didn’t respond. He was dozing.

Darren moved closer to Megan’s bed. “Is there anything I can get for you?”

“No, you covered it.” Megan looked around. “You should go to your cabin and sleep. There’s no room here unless you want the floor.”

Darren pointed at the kit in the corner. “I’ll put my bedroll down when I’m ready to crash.”

Megan liked that. “Aren’t you tired now?”

“I’m just now thawing out. It’ll still be a while for me.”

Megan rubbed her eyes with her good arm. “Well, not for me. I need to zone out for a few hours.”

“Go on. I’ll be right here.”

The protective tone brought a deeper blush to her cheeks. “Thank you for staying with me.”

Darren leaned down and kissed her.

Megan melted under his touch.

“So this is what you’re hiding!”

All three of them straightened or turned to find Hank in the doorway.

Hank pushed his ballcap back for a better view. He scanned Conner and the IV, then Megan’s grip on Darren’s hand. “Why are you hiding her? She’s hot.”

Darren moved forward. “Visiting hours are over.” He shut the door before Hank could reply.

Conner frowned. “He’s trouble.”

Darren nodded. “He always has been for me.” Darren went to put out his bedroll. “Try to sleep. I’ll be in front of the door.”

Megan and Conner did, but neither of them completely relaxed.

Darren felt alert mode snap into place and settled in for a long night on guard duty.

Chapter Twenty-Three
I Have a Run

1

“**W**here are we going?”

Daryl shut the employee door and led the way.
“Marc wants your help.”

Brittani held onto Daryl’s arm, relaxing a little. She’d thought Angela had summoned her already.

Daryl hugged her close. “We’ll make it work out. Don’t worry about it.” Daryl hadn’t scolded her at all, and he wasn’t going to. *I have my own issues. She just went a bit farther.*

“I love you.”

Daryl stopped, pulling her into his arms. He found her lips in the dimness and locked them together, minds connecting, breath mingling.

We’ll run if we have to.

Yes. Brittani broke the private connection, smiling at him.

Daryl ran a thumb over her swollen lip. “I need to teach you to duck as you fire.”

Brittani ran her fingers over his bruised cheek. “Take your own class first.”

Daryl chuckled. He got them moving, panicked feeling starting to fade. He had his soul mate. That mattered more than anything else.

“He’s wrong, you know.” Brittani slowed as they reached the door to the public hallway outside the mess. “I don’t care what you do for a living as long as we’re together and it feels like this.”

“That’s all I need, too.” Daryl clasped her hand, eyes lighting up. “Marc deserves all the credit for what’s about to happen.” He tugged her into the hall before she could ask questions.

Brittani lifted her chin as everyone turned toward them. Ten Eagles covered in sweat and smudges stared at her expectantly.

Daryl opened the mess door. “Take a minute. Then see if you can do anything.”

Brittani entered the mess, frowning in confusion. She doubted she would be able to handle something that Marc and so many Eagles couldn’t.

Marc turned as she entered, scanning the exits. All of them were shut or blocked with trustworthy people on guard.

Brittani stopped, stunned by the destruction. The mess was gone. In its place was a wide room with chunks missing from columns and gashes in the walls, doors, and windows. Shattered fragments of everything covered the floors and counters, the tables and shelves. Nothing was where it was supposed to be except the ovens and the counters that had been built into the walls. “Son of a bitch!”

Marc nodded. “While you were snoozing, we were being hit by Nature.”

Brittani cringed. Hearing that from Marc hurt her deeply. “I’m sorry!”

“You should be. Angela now has to decide if ancient laws will guide our future.” Marc glared. “We didn’t want to ever do that. You’ve forced her hand.”

Brittani had heard this already, but coming from Marc made it sink in and stick. “I’m sorry. What can I do?”

“Be found not guilty or get the case dismissed.”

“I want that too. How?”

Marc took a step closer, not trying to intimidate her. He was just angry at her, Trinity, Nature, and a few others. “Convince the witnesses it wasn’t magic.”

Brittani was shocked. “Do you hear yourself?”

“Do you want to be banished?” Marc made a curt gesture toward the waiting, hopeful Eagles. “I asked them. They said we have to have rules for magic if you guys were dueling. Then one of them said what if it wasn’t a duel? What if they were trying to kill each other?” Marc took in a breath, calming so he didn’t frighten her. “If the rookies can figure it out, everyone else will too. You’ll both be banished. After the history, no one is going to believe you weren’t serious, especially when she landed in the medical bay.”

“It doesn’t prove anything.”

“Angela’s the judge! You can’t get this by her!” Marc crunched over debris as he moved toward the door. “Do something in here to help us clear it, and think!” Marc’s voice sharpened. “Or run away with your new husband like you’re planning as a

fallback. If you go to a different island, Angela probably won't hunt for you."

Marc left, slamming the door. He took up that guard's post so the man could cover a spot further down the hallway. The use of magic with approval wouldn't start problems with the camp, and Marc was hoping to surprise Angela with something good. The blocks of twisted metal and plastic in the mess were beyond saving unless Brittani could do something with them. Marc assumed she would be able to move it for them to clear paths for cleaning. He wasn't expecting more. He was giving her an outlet and time to think while freeing ten hard bodies to put on other chores. The amount of cleanup they needed to do was staggering. It was going to delay everything by at least a day and a lot more for some areas.

I need to get Kenn on it. Marc didn't like using Kenn for the positions that Adrian had used him in, but this one was important and Kenn was the fastest at this job.

Crunch!

Marc winced at the loud noise, but he didn't leave his post as the rookie Eagles slowly left for other jobs. They stared over their shoulders at the noises, wanting to peer inside.

A chair flew against the door and cracked in half.

"Sorry!"

Marc chuckled. Brittani didn't sound sorry. She sounded happy.

Daryl listened to the crunches and bangs, heart hurting. "I'm sorry."

Marc nodded. "I understand. That's your wife and you'll die for her. Banishment is nothing compared to being without her. I get it."

Daryl was glad. He still frowned. "But?"

Marc pointed. "But she's not going to follow through on it. Honor does matter to her. It matters to everyone."

"Yeah." Daryl headed to the showers. He was off duty now, finally, until dawn. He wanted to get cleaned up and then spend the rest of the evening covering a shift wherever Angela needed it. He was sure their cabin was a mess too. The danger was over, but it would still be a very long night.

Crack!

Marc retreated a few feet from the mess door for his own protection. *When a woman's throwing things hard enough to crack them, it's a good idea to get out of her range.*

2

"Don't throw that!" Jonny pointed at the little girl. "It's time for bed. Go see the den mother." Jonny wasn't afraid of their children, but he didn't like telling them no about anything. "The boss gave me this post to test me. Do you want me to lose my job and go away?"

Amy stilled. “You don’t yell as much as the others.” Amy turned toward the hall. “I’m going, but I won’t go to bed.”

Jonny didn’t argue. Getting her there was his job; getting her to go to sleep was someone else’s nightmare.

Jonny spotted Missy and Cody sneaking down the hall. He didn’t move. “Get in there!”

Both children ducked back into the kids’ area.

Jonny keyed his mike. “The mice won’t stay in their cages. Send a cat!”

Kids laughed at his joke. Eagles cringed, knowing they were officially late for duty.

Two rookies hurried up the stairs and caught a boy coming through an upper window.

“How is he even fitting through there?!”

Dutch dropped and ran as the two guards took their post over this intersection.

With two exits covered, the older kids grew desperate to avoid notice. Wendy dove into the laundry bin in the hallway.

Harold chose the service elevator. He climbed in and shut the door just as Eagle boots sounded. The squeaking pull cart was too loud to use. He frowned at the trap as two Eagles arrived and took places around the elevator and door to the steps.

The single unguarded exit stayed open.

Cate calmly walked through it.

Joey followed a few seconds later.

The radio echoed with Grant’s amused voice. “Little boss mouse walked out with her pet. Headed

toward the elevator.” He was able to see them on the monitors.

Guards shifted focus and direction, hunting for Cate and Joey.

Cate took off running.

Jayda rounded the corner and spotted Joey. She grabbed the boy and spun around, sweeping for Cate.

Cate stayed behind the cabin door that had opened, not looking behind her. She knew who it was.

“I’m glad you could make it. Come in and shut the door.”

She did.

Wade came up the stairs at a jog. He spotted Neil coming through the employee door. “Have you seen Amy?”

Neil shook his head. “Just got here. Sam sent me to find Amy while she feeds the boys.”

Wade laughed. “She knew I’d need help. I chased the little monster to this deck, but I can’t find her now.”

“She likes high places. She knows you only look down because she’s small.” Neil went to the end of the hall to keep watch. All the posts around the kids’ area were covered now, and he was an extra guard at this end until Wade cornered Amy or flushed her in this direction.

Neil saw Charlie pass by on the deck above. Gus was right behind him. Neil knew what was about to

happen there. He was glad they were trying to reach the boy, but it was a lost cause. He'd watched it happen before and after the war. When a guy was in love, it didn't matter why the woman agreed, so long as she did.

Neil almost understood. He would give in to any demand Sam made just to keep her happy. He needed her so much that he could never forsake her and their kids for anything, not even Safe Haven.

Wade turned and frowned at Neil. "Shut it down."

Neil locked that threat as best he could. It kept trying to pop open and expose his greatest fear. *Please don't ever make me pick between the Eagles and Samantha. I've already killed to keep us together. There isn't anything I won't do.*

The kids were taking advantage of the chaos. Unguarded posts and late den mothers allowed them to outnumber their caregivers and find ways to sneak off.

Angela came down the hall, hand waving.

Slam! The door to the service elevator flew open, revealing Harold.

Wham! She exposed Wendy in the laundry bin.

Angela went to the vent in the girl's bathroom, waving Wade along as the two kids went back to their room with frowns at the watching men.

Angela pointed.

They peered up at the angry little eyes above them.

"How the hell did she get in there?!"

Angela left Wade to handle that while she went into the main kids' room. It had been outfitted and rearranged to create lines of beds with small lockers and dressers lining two of the walls. Coats and shoes went at the far end. Angela walked over all those items, groaning as she realized she hadn't covered this. It was still hitting her that every single area of the ship was a jumble of confusion.

Ed came in behind her. "We have the gym ready; half the kids are there. We're grabbing them right after teeth brushing. Doors to the gym have three guards each. We're doing hourly counts. No escapees so far."

Angela breathed a sigh. "Thank you. There are a few more coming down right now."

"Yeah, I saw Cody and Missy. They were kicking the guard in the nads and trying to get into the big elevator."

Angela knew she was supposed to be mad, but the kids had been perfect today. She hadn't had a single issue. She was letting them blow off steam like her Eagles would do overnight and in the morning. They'd had a rough first week at their destination and it wasn't over yet.

"Mind your own business!"

Everyone stared as Charlie slammed the door to the office he'd just come from. He jogged down the steps toward the camp area without noticing Angela.

Gus came out of the office and spotted Angela right away. He shook his head.

Angela sighed. People were trying to get through to her son, but it wasn't working. *He's like his mom. He has to learn the hard way.*

Angela saw her next appointments had arrived. She proceeded toward the female bathrooms and ducked into the office next to them.

The three men stepped inside and shut the door, all braced for bad news.

"I have a run."

Relief went through the messy room.

"I need a six-man team who can use our water gear, doesn't fear dark, cold spaces with unknown predators, and is willing to risk their lives to achieve one of my goals."

Greg met her eye. "Will all of us return?"

"As long as you don't panic, yes." Angela moved toward the door. "Let me know by morning mess. I'll notify each of your suggestions myself."

Angela went down to the medical area, listening to see how much of her camp was still awake. The entertainments floor was silent. They couldn't do much there right now with it all damaged. Crews would have to be drafted and alternated to fix all their areas.

Angela went to the counter, scanning the two waiting couches. Blankets and pillows were stacked at one end of each. "Update me."

Terry handed her the clipboard. "Just finished filling it out. Nice timing."

Angela read it quickly, wishing the news was better but relieved it wasn't worse. "Twelve injuries from the storm. All minor except for Sherman."

Terry signed the logbook as he spotted his relief coming down the steps. Morgan had taken a fast nap and come back. After the crisis was over, all the medics would sleep for a full day. Terry's mood dipped. *Those who survived, anyway.* "Sherman is now awake and upgraded to stable."

"Good." Angela finished it quickly. She knew Terry wanted to get out of here before the next emergency held him away from his bed. "Trent was released. The baby is better. Tonya can be released if we want it. And Timmy is waiting in the lab." Angela frowned. "Timmy?"

Terry paused. "I thought you knew. He's Tonya's new student." Terry slid out of the way so Harry could get by, not upset that she was reading it aloud. When you were this tired, it helped to hear it so they could be sure everything was covered. "Oh, I didn't add Marc's mutiny to the book. I signed them all out. We had gophers deliver their recovery instructions."

Angela chuckled. "All our people need to let off a little steam now that we're here."

Terry met her eye. "Does that include the people who've been arrested?"

Angela stored the notes and gave the clipboard back to him. "I assume Samantha asked you to talk to me."

“She did. I would have anyway. Brittani is an Eagle letting off steam, and Kimmie is a good kid who made a dumb choice. She could have hurt Francesca, Boss, but she didn’t.”

“She did, actually. She exposed a vanity none of us knew existed.” Angela still wasn’t okay with it. “I’ll take your opinion into account, but it’s not up to me. The camp expects a punishment for all of our recent offenders. If I don’t do something, everyone will start to test those lines and I can’t have that, Terry, especially not right now.”

“I understand.” Terry left without saying more. He and Harry wanted to insist on Tim getting a free pass or some type of pardon, but they were saving their special arrow in case it wasn’t needed. All the men on this ship knew how to manipulate Angela’s emotions to have a chance at getting whatever it was they needed from her at that moment. *When Marc takes over and sees what we’ve been doing, we’re screwed.*

Angela looked in all the rooms and found two of them occupied. Sherman was sleeping and Tonya was just waking. Angela skipped them for a walk to the rear, where one room still waited to be handled. She felt awful about it, but she didn’t have the energy to do it herself or the manpower to have it covered by anyone else. It had to wait until morning.

“Evening, Boss.” Jeff moved by her and went to the locked door, tool kit in hand. “Morgan told me. Wait an hour and send a crew.”

Angela's approval hit Jeff hard. He staggered forward. "Nice."

Angela chuckled, turning toward the front rooms. She didn't see any other patients. She was impressed that Morgan and the others had managed to clear everyone out while she'd been on rounds.

And I'm pissed. At some point, Nature and I will be face-to-face, and I'm going to make her pay for every life she's taken from my herd.

Neil came down the hall and stopped, spotting Jeff going into Reggie's room. "He didn't make it."

Angela wished they'd been faster. "I'm sorry. A rib punctured his lung during the storm."

Neil turned around and left, fury at Nature growing. *After the boss takes her payment, the rest of us want a turn. I haven't forgotten about Jeremy or any of the others.*

Angela tapped lightly on Tonya's door and opened it. She did a fast scan before shutting the door. It was hard to give patients privacy in this setting, but she tried.

Tonya switched the baby from her breast to her shoulder, smiling. "You look like I felt yesterday." Kenn grimaced at the joke as he covered the baby with a blanket and then tucked the ends of it over her shoulder to catch any mess.

Angela forced the expected smile. "You look a lot better."

Tonya grinned at her. "I sucked out his restless energy."

Kenn glared. “I thought we were going to keep that to ourselves?”

Tonya shrugged. “I didn’t do anything wrong. No need to hide it.”

Angela slid into the chair and yawned. She wasn’t surprised Tonya could still draw energy. “You’re bonded in special ways. You can do things for each other that most people can’t. It’ll probably last a few more days or even a week.”

Tonya stilled. “I’m not one of you?”

Angela grew serious. “You are, in every way. You’re just not a descendant.” *At this point.* Angela regarded Kenn. *And you already know it’s coming.*

Kenn didn’t meet her eye. “Just hoped I was wrong. It’s dangerous to be like us.”

Angela nodded. “That, it is.” She saw a pile of supplies in the corner of the room. Many of the packages had blue bows and cards attached. “People came by to visit you?”

“Camp members came between cleaning shifts.” Tonya smiled. “It was sweet.”

Angela gestured at the other corner. “And the pile of kids in a blanket?”

Tonya laughed. “They wanted to be close. I miss them.”

The three kids fit inside Kenn’s huge sleeping bag. They were all out and snoring lightly. The two adult cats were on Tonya’s ankles, with their kitten next to her knee where it had the extra heat from the lamp Kenn had rigged up earlier. Tonya’s adjusting body also needed the heat apparently because she

was so much better than before that Kenn and Angela kept stealing small glimpses at her face to enjoy the beauty.

“How are things out there?” Kenn felt bad that he hadn’t left this room.

“Shell-shocked after only one day. And it’s not just the teams who went to the island.” Angela looked at Tonya. “Morgan’s note said you had a chance to examine some of the stuff we’ve collected and sent in here.”

“Yes.” Tonya rubbed the baby’s little back. “I had Timmy move it to the lab. I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“The day after.” Kenn frowned at her.

Tonya ignored him. “We’ll start testing the samples for the rage illness. I’m already sure that’s what they have. Triggers so far are scent and sight of uninfected blood, loud noises, male voices. They’re still slightly intelligent. One can draw the others. Not all of them are at the crushing stage.” Tonya grimaced as warm spit up ran over her shoulder. “Good boy?”

Angela and Kenn chuckled. He helped clean her up as she shifted the baby to her other breast.

Tonya winced as the baby latched on. “I didn’t know these things hurt if they aren’t emptied.”

Kenn opened his mouth.

Angela cleared her throat.

Kenn dropped his head, hiding a grin.

Tonya missed it all as she got the baby settled. “Those are all rage illness symptoms. We saw the

gas they were probably hit with. It's the most logical conclusion, so we'll start there. It'll take all of tomorrow waiting on tests to confirm it." Tonya rubbed her arm where the IV was still in. "And it doesn't matter, right?"

Angela confirmed that as Kenn frowned. "No. They have to be cleared no matter what it is. We need to know if we can catch it."

Tonya drew in a breath.

Angela saw it and braced. *Here we go.*

"I'm sure of three things right now." Tonya held up a finger for each one as she spoke. "They have the rage illness. Some of them are contagious. And we've been infected."

Angela grimaced as fresh adrenaline pumped through her system. "I need her in that lab, Kenn." Angela knew Tonya couldn't give her answers yet to the two dozen questions she now had.

Kenn nodded. "I didn't know that's what we're looking at. I thought we were healed."

"We were, but there wasn't immunity so we can be reinfected." Angela cursed herself for not covering that.

"I was working on a test. Kenny saved the book with those details. I'll start it in the morning." Tonya checked the clock again. "I hope to have the first batch of results by this time tomorrow."

"I'm going to the lab next. Anything you want me to pass or bring?"

“No. Timmy comes by once an hour to update me.” Tonya checked the clock again. “You can stay put. He’ll be here in about three minutes.”

Angela didn’t argue. She was beat.

“You need to go to bed.”

“I will.”

Kenn frowned at her, arms crossing over his chest. “I meant soon.”

“I know.”

Kenn didn’t say more. That wasn’t his place anymore.

“So, about that christening...”

Kenn chuckled. “No.”

Angela shrugged, voice hardening. “I tried the easy way.”

Kenn tensed.

Tonya snickered.

Knock-knock. Timmy came in. He stood straighter as he spotted Angela. “I have updates.” He shut the door at Kenn’s impatient motion.

Tonya took them and began scanning.

Angela studied Timmy. “How are you?”

Timmy’s face darkened. “Fine until I think about it.”

Angela shrugged. “We’re sending someone to talk to you as soon as we get settled.”

“The tests were clear. I’m good.” Tonya had given him a clean bill of health. He’d just left and gotten to the mess when the lab exploded. “I’m sorry you were hurt.”

Tonya sighed, eyes shutting. “I’m fine until I think about it.”

Timmy didn’t laugh. He left, sadness weighing on all of them.

“They have all the equipment gathered. Some of it is even set up. Not everything had instructions with it.” Tonya put the papers on the bed next to her. She peered down and saw the baby’s eyes were open.

“He’s drawn to your voice.” Kenn had been watching.

Tonya smiled. “That’s my boy.”

The baby resumed nursing, eyes staring at Tonya’s beautiful face.

Angela got up. “I’ll be close by.”

“Good night.”

Kenn expected Dog to get up and go with her. When he didn’t move from the corner near the kids, Kenn scowled. “What’s the deal with you? Marc was in danger and you haven’t left this room.”

Dog grunted and buried his snout under his paw.

Kenn frowned deeper. “Is he sad over the kittens or something?”

Tonya stared at Dog in sympathy. “He searched the island and realized there are no other wolves here. He’s going to be alone for the next three years. Give him time to adjust.”

“Damn.” Kenn hadn’t considered that. “Fine.” He grabbed a receiving blanket from the pile, unfolded it, and tossed it in a pretty spin. It landed on Dog’s back and legs.

Dog whined and stuck his head under the blanket.

Kenn chuckled.

Tonya leaned back, finally feeling like herself. “Gonna sleep some more. Will you take him when he’s done?”

“I’ll cover it.” Kenn watched her doze, a bit stunned by how fast he’d adjusted to this new life in his life. It felt natural to take his son from her breast and swaddle him close, to whisper of his love and promise to be a better father than his own had been. That tiny life meant more to him than his own. That was the real magic.

Angela paused outside their door, making a final choice on Kenn’s future. She swept his rash choice under her mental rug.

Angela saw Marc stagger in. She pointed at one of the couches. “Crash.”

Marc handed her the updates, kissed her cheek, rubbed her ass, and went to the couch. “Goodnight.”

Angela laughed. “Sweet dreams.”

She headed for the lab. She wanted to see how much was done and who was still there. *After that I’m going to come out here, crawl on Marc’s chest, and collapse.*

Marc groaned. “Come on. Papa needs to feel that heat.”

Angela sniggered. *Let me sleep for a couple hours and you can feel more than that.*

Marc would have answered, but he was already out.

Angela went to the lab.

Ed came down the hall around her and flipped on the main light in the new lab. He handed her the last of the reports and updates. “Shawn says he’s fine until morning. He’s still monitoring the UN channel. Kenn isn’t sure why we aren’t getting it. He added it to his list, but it won’t happen today.”

“Shawn will keep a record. We’ll cover that over the next few days.” Angela scanned the wide room, pleased with the boxed file cabinets and shelves waiting to be assembled. The ship had been stocked on portable gear. The clear plastic partitions between each cubby were tilted and a few papers were on the floor, but that was it for disarray in here. All the supplies and boxes had been picked up and stored in the small closet. Timmy hadn’t been in here for long, but he had it straightened. Angela was impressed.

Ed checked his notes. “We brought the books up here to Tonya. I hope it helped.”

“We’re still working on it. Conner was able to help Megan, but the transfusion didn’t heal her wound.” The infection was still there and it was growing. Angela was sure they were going to have to cut it out and burn it shut like she’d stated earlier, but she didn’t mind waiting to see if Conner’s blood stopped it. *Maybe we haven’t given him enough time yet.* “It bought us a little time to figure out which antibiotic will kill it.”

“But not long enough, right?” Ed was sure of his calculations. “We need a couple days to try each one. She doesn’t have a week for us to experiment.”

Angela frowned. “I’ll work on it.”

Ed nodded. “So is Tonya. She asked for all the books from the doctor’s house too. I brought them from your cabin.”

“Good, but don’t let her tire herself out. Make sure she rests.” Angela headed for the door, content with the new lab for now.

“I will.” Ed wrote it down for the next shift, following her out and turning off the light. “Kyle and Debra have point covered, Boss. Go to bed.”

Angela wanted to.

Ed pointed at the other wide couch they’d prepared earlier. He’d known where she and Marc would end up after the chaos of the evening. The people who’d gotten rest today were covering night shift all over the ship. Jennifer had gotten tired of kids sneaking out and went to the gym with Autumn and Roy to sleep. Everyone was now in their bed, accounted for and sleeping, including Cate, who had appeared at about the same time as Jennifer.

Angela caved. She went to Marc and crawled up his chest.

Marc shifted, arms opening. “That’s what I’m talking about!”

Ed laughed as he left, enjoying the vibes. It was nice to see them getting a moment together, even if it was only a few hours on an uncomfortable couch. *Anywhere can be enough if you’re in love.*

They left!

Adrian scanned the ocean around the island as far as he could view through Tommy's glasses. He saw calm waves, beautiful blue water and that was it.

Adrian's heart thumped. *Where is my camp?!*

Kendle and Quinn came around the curve on the cliff road and saw Adrian standing near the dirt edge, scanning the ocean.

Kendle read his thoughts and snorted. "They had to move overnight. Your camp is fine."

Adrian relaxed, turning to watch their arrival. "Rough night?"

Quinn nodded. "We went to the shack after the barn collapsed, but it leaks."

Kendle kept walking. "We're crashing in the bunker beds until Marc calls for the final clearing."

Adrian nodded, aware of Sadie coming down to join him. She was walking funny, swinging her hips wide. *Is that flirting?*

Kendle grinned at him. "Have fun."

Adrian frowned, ignoring Sadie as she stopped by him and struck a pose. "Where's Tommy?"

Kendle tensed, then resumed walking. "Gone."

"What?"

Quinn grunted. "He took off on us, man."

Sadie tried a new pose. She stuck her foot out too far and tripped, falling at Adrian's feet.

Adrian stepped over her and hurried after Quinn. “What do you mean, he took off?”

Sadie stayed on the ground, staring up at the sky as her elbow started bleeding. “I think I’m being too subtle.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Plan B

January 26th

Day 4

1

“Thanks for bringing me up here.” Samantha gave Neil a happy smile. “It’s nice to see the sky and the sun.”

Neil nodded, scanning for trouble. Angela’s words were ringing in his head. “Five minutes.”

Samantha had been working hard. She hadn’t gotten to view the island yet. And they needed to talk. Reggie’s death had driven it home for Neil.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yes.”

“And deadly.”

“Yes.”

Samantha knew there was a lot going on in his mind. She could feel it. She turned to him, enjoying the warm breeze. “We’re not staying here, are we?”

Neil froze for an instant and recovered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh.” Samantha studied him, seeing the light beard and the haunted expression. He hadn’t come down yet even though he’d been back on the ship almost a full day now. “Was it that bad?”

Neil held in a shudder. “It’s a no-go. That’s all you need to know.”

“So if not here, where?”

Neil scanned again to be sure they were alone and out of hearing range of the other descendants.

Samantha frowned. “It’s only normals up here and the bosses are crashed in the med lounge for another hour. What’s up?”

Neil signaled in Eagle code.

Samantha stared. *Leave Safe Haven? To go to Adrian’s camp?* Samantha’s voice rose. “I meant another island, Neil, with Safe Haven.”

Neil realized he’d handled this the wrong way. “Let’s go back.”

“I’m staying right here.”

Neil grimaced. “I meant in this conversation.”

“Oh. Go on.”

“The island is beautiful.”

Sam grinned, playing his role. “Yes.”

“And deadly.”

“Yes.” She waited for whatever was supposed to come next.

Neil stepped closer. “The boss said Brittani may face a double punishment—our laws and theirs.”

“Right.”

“We don’t know what our laws are, Sam. And she said there’s not going to be a statute of limitations, right?”

Samantha started to see where he was going.

Now that he was speaking it, Neil couldn't stop. "It's not just me. Amy is one of us. We may both still be in trouble."

Samantha took the next logical leap. "And if an enemy gets Angela's seat, or Marc's, then we're all targets for replacement."

Neil frowned. "What?"

Samantha shrugged. "I'm pointing out things that could happen." She scowled at him. "If you'd said you were getting bored, or even that you wanted a different life than this, I might have listened."

"But that is what I'm saying, Sammi." Neil stared at her in near desperation. "We don't have to live by either set of laws! We're strong enough to be on our own."

Sam frowned. "I assumed you'd want to join Adrian."

"We'd probably stop by there and we might even spend a few days or a week, but that wouldn't be home for us."

Samantha knew Neil wanted a rash choice he could hold her to, but Samantha was still in lawyer mode. "You haven't sold me. Even if you had, it still wouldn't matter." She ran a soft hand along his stubble. "Here's what's going to happen: We're staying here and forming New America. When the boys are a little older and there's a group who wants to go exploring, we can talk again. Until then, I have no intentions of leaving this camp. You and Wade

can do whatever you want, but the boys will stay with me.”

Neil’s lips twitched. “What about Amy?”

Samantha snorted. “If we tell her, she’ll drug you and tie you to the bed for the next three years. Where’s Neil? Still in a coma.”

Neil laughed, nodding. “Okay. We’re staying.”

Samantha studied him. “Why the doubt?”

Neil sighed. “Some people are leaving. A couple already have.”

“But we accounted for everyone last night.”

“People covered for each other. The boss knows. She said as long as they want to leave, we have no right to hold them.”

“What about Marc?”

“He’s pissed, but telling them the same thing.”

“Why does our population always go down even after we add new people and new lives?”

“Nature hates us.”

“True.”

“And another thing,” Samantha pointed at him. “your best friend is clearing a dangerous island. Get your ass off this ship and finish helping him. Take Wade with you.”

Neil scowled.

Samantha stopped the argument before it could start. “I know all about Angela’s warnings. I’m in our cabin all day today with the boys, doing some research. Angela has books coming and she’s sending a guard for my door. You have no excuse.”

Neil grinned. “You’ve covered it all.”

“As much as I can.” Her tone softened. “You’re good right now, but you’ll feel guilty later. Go do your duty and come home with honor.”

Neil kissed her passionately.

Samantha didn’t let it progress so her abdomen wouldn’t start cramping again. She’d discovered the connection. She nuzzled his jaw, then turned to scan the island, leaning back into his arms.

The breeze ruffled her clean hair over his face. Neil inhaled, body relaxing... Neil twisted, keeping her covered as he took them to the ground.

The bird flew overhead, letting out a loud caw.

Neil flushed. “Sorry!”

Samantha locked her arms around his neck and pulled him down. “Since it already hurts, I might as well get something from it...”

Samantha arched as Neil kissed her throat. Her eyes opened. “Oh, my God.”

Neil grinned. “Nope. Seven weeks to go.”

“No. Look!” Sam pointed.

Neil turned around and peered up. His eyes widened. “Is that a cave?”

Samantha nodded, sitting up. “It has a ladder.”

“That’s not a ladder. It’s a rope bridge.” Neil could see where it had been dropped after each use so it hung straight down without tangles. The two end ropes were weighted and on the ground. All they had to do was collect those two end ropes and sail them out to a larger ship. The bridge would hook to the side and allow an easy offload of people or cargo.

Neil helped her up. “Come on. We have to wake up the boss.”

Samantha frowned. “It can’t wait an hour?”

Neil led her toward the ramp. “Shawn just spotted the cave too. He’s about to call it in and wake everyone.”

Samantha spun around and met Shawn’s eye through the window of the ship. *Stop. Wait.*

Shawn nodded, frowning.

Samantha didn’t tell him how long or why. She studied the clouds.

Neil did it with Eagle code. “Samantha?”

“Yes?”

“Have you forgotten the code?”

Samantha slowed, cheeks reddening. “Some of it.”

“You’ve been faking?”

“Yep.”

Neil grinned. “The clouds gave it away. Don’t use those.”

“I knew that.” Samantha ducked under his arm and held onto his waist. “Let me tell you about this funny dream I had. I was walking on the clouds...”

2

“Samantha’s great.”

Marc tightened his arms around Angela’s shoulders. “Yes.”

The medical area was already waking and becoming active, but the couple didn't want to move yet.

"I want to send a different crew to finish the island clearing."

"I'm finishing what I started."

Angela didn't argue further. If she protected him too much, she would lose him anyway.

"Boss?"

Angela sighed. "Be right there."

Angela lifted herself on her arms and kissed Marc, hard.

Marc felt her concern. *I'll be careful.*

Angela smiled as she stood. "Good morning, Safe Haven. How may I serve you today?"

"I'm sorry." Darren hadn't wanted to bother her. "She's worse."

Angela followed him into Megan's room.

Marc sat up, stretching.

Kyle came through the door a few seconds later, carrying a mug. He handed it to Marc and kept going. "Your team is gathering in the small gym."

Marc stood and headed that way. "Thanks!"

Kyle snorted. "Don't thank me; it's instant."

Marc didn't care. He sipped the bitter coffee and tried to pry an eye open.

Marc paused to eye the long bathroom line. *I can wait.*

He staggered down the stairs, turning on his radio.

"It's a cave. I'm telling you. Alert the boss."

Marc keyed the mike. “The boss knows about it. Get off the radio.”

Silence fell. Marc hadn’t lifted the radio silence from yesterday. He mentally marked Hannah’s name to scold later.

The smell of bacon wafted through the hall; Marc detoured. *I don’t know where it’s coming from, but I’m hunting pig.*

All over the ship, waking men were drawn by the scent. They came from bathrooms with razors still in hand and soap dripping from their chins. They left beds with naked females. Old newspapers snapped shut.

Guards forced themselves to stay at their posts, grumbling about the time. They had another hour before shift change.

Kids noticed the distracted adults and resumed sneaking out of supervised areas.

Marc caught it all, but the smell of bacon was impossible to resist. He tracked it to the small gym where he was meeting his team.

Those men were already in the hall, eating something that smelled like heaven to Marc. He eyed the sandwiches. “Bacon, egg, and cheese?”

His team nodded, taking bites, groaning.

Chad swallowed and forced out a fast sentence as Marc went by. “I figured out a way to camera-up the tunnels.”

“In a minute.” Marc entered the gym, mood lifting. *It might not be such a bad day after all.* “Where did they get eggs? And cheese?”

Ivan appeared at Marc's side. "Shut up. I don't need to know."

Marc laughed. "Fair enough." He joined the growing line in the corner where Thelma, Dwight, their sons, and Brittani were running portable grills and toaster ovens on the edge of the stage. They had a buffet set up, complete with a stack of plates and silverware they'd salvaged from the mess. "Outstanding."

The mess crew brightened under Marc's praise. They filled his plate and shoved a fresh mug of coffee into his hand.

Marc followed Ivan to the nearest table, eager to dig in.

The new mess filled up fast; light chatter about various events circled the room, getting people caught up. Marc realized he was listening to the actual grapevine. He took a large bite and mental notes.

"They both have bruises and now the women were fighting. Something happened."

"Any idea what it was?"

"No, but they used magic openly. We're all waiting for the hammer to drop over that one."

"What about Gus and Daryl?"

"They didn't use magic. It was a matchup."

"If the girls had just punched each other, they wouldn't be in trouble?"

"Exactly."

"Not sure that's fair."

Marc wasn't either. He swallowed and immediately took another bite. The sandwich was amazing. All the ingredients were real. *Someone found a stash of eggs. The cooks might have made cheese and we had frozen bacon, but the eggs are new.*

Marc stuffed in another bite and resumed listening.

“I heard it's ten ships.”

“I heard it's twice that many.”

“Either way, it'll be the biggest battle we've had so far.”

“The biggest was against the American government. You weren't with us then. It was brutal.”

“I listened to it on the radio in Ciemus. We were all rooting for you.”

“Except William.”

“I wouldn't know. I never spent time around him.”

“Will he really come after us here?”

“I told you—I didn't spend time with him. I was a little fish in that town. My parents were delivery workers before the war. The Mayor didn't have us over for dinner.”

Marc scanned the mess as it went quiet. He spotted Trinity coming in. Her perfect face caught

his attention. She'd had an ugly bruise last night in the medical bay.

Brittani smiled; her split lip was also gone. "Over here!"

Trinity grinned. "Hey! Sorry about last night."

Brittani laughed. "We both put too much muscle into it. Are you okay?"

Trinity nodded, coming to get a plate and cup from Brittani. "I jerked back too hard and slipped. I forgot to account for the rocking boat."

"Me too! It went forward right as I did."

The women laughed.

Marc lifted a brow, catching on right away. "You fooled a lot of people. Half the camp thinks you two were using magic."

Brittani rolled her eyes. "I don't break camp rules."

"Same." Trinity gestured toward Brittani. "We were talking about doing a play. We had a crazy idea to do an on-the-spot improv of a fight." She laughed again. "We weren't good at it."

People muttered and murmured at the new information.

Marc chuckled. "I think it was good. We'll be resuming classes for the kids once we get settled. Maybe you two could help with a drama class."

They knew not to refuse. Trinity nodded while Brittani forced a bright grin. "Sure!"

"Sounds fun." Trinity took her food and headed for the main door. "I'm with the kids now for a half shift. I'll mention it."

Marc went back to his sandwich, stomach growling. He wasn't sure if that was enough, but he assumed the women would repeat this act a few more times before Angela had to make a choice on anything.

Marc wondered whose idea it had been. He took another bite while subtly watching Brittani. She'd done a good job rearranging things in the mess for them, but it would require weeks of work before it would be usable again. He hadn't spoken to her when she walked out.

Brittani turned to get another tray, giving her mother a look that Marc recognized. He caught Thelma's small nod in return and stored the knowledge. Thelma was the brains behind the solution.

Chatter in the mess went back up as the expected second fight didn't happen. Conversations resumed. Marc tried to get them all.

"I bet it's how they smuggled in stuff to the residents here."

"Probably. I'm glad I don't have to clear it. I hate dark spaces."

"It does explain the circles of dirt below it. Someone had to blow the cave out of the cliff and dig a lot. That debris had to go somewhere."

"It looks like they were making an area below it for small boats to sail through for unloading. Maybe the bridge wasn't sturdy."

"Not in the weather we had last night."

“I know. Did you hear about Shawn?”

“I heard he jumped off the ship, but not why.”

“He stopped one of those other ships from breaking loose and hitting us. He saved our lives last night.”

Marc was glad Shawn would get a hero's welcome upon his return. It was one of the most amazing things he'd ever heard of, let alone witnessed. He hadn't seen Shawn go under, but he'd watched the climb. In the future, Shawn would be a go-to guy for him.

Marc watched as Tobias came in with one of his wives. They retrieved bags from the counter and left without speaking to anyone.

Marc caught Dwight's attention as he went by. “How are they doing so far?”

“Fine. They're delivering first. Got here early, don't talk unless we ask 'em something. It's fine.”

“Good. Great food.”

Dwight beamed as he went to the grill.

Marc scanned for more conversations. He had to join his team soon, but he wanted to be sure everything here was covered. He didn't want to leave Angela on her own with all the small issues on the ship, but they did need to get the island cleared today. If it took much longer, the camp might revolt. The talk and thoughts of leaving to go off on their own would increase until people actually started doing it.

The six men sitting together in the far corner caught his attention next. *I know that gear. And that feel.*

Marc's enjoyment of breakfast faded a little. *She drafted a kill team. We're going with plan B.*

3

"We're never going to be able to repay this debt."

Kenn sighed, aware of people moving quietly through the halls. *Those are the steps of a kill team.* "Sorry I woke you."

"Never mind that. We owe them both." Tonya had been stewing on it each time she woke to care for the precious infant who now meant the world to her.

Kenn nodded. "The only way I can repay them is to keep Marc alive. She's still worried."

Tonya frowned. "I thought he was in the clear."

"They never found a solution. She tried to change that future so many times it endangered her own life."

"Does that mean it's one of those moments that can't be changed?"

Kenn shrugged. He did a short stretch, making sure he didn't bump the incubator. The baby was there, on his side, getting a breathing treatment. Kenn was keeping a close eye on him. "I don't want to leave you alone."

"But you do want to be there."

Kenn nodded. “To help clear our home? Of course I do. It might be the last action for the next few years.”

Tonya snorted softly. People were acting as if the UN wasn’t coming for them again, but Tonya was more pragmatic. She knew that battle would come, like all the others had. *It’s what happens after that concerns me.*

Kenn waited for her to work it out, not sure which way he wanted her to go.

“Why are you leaving this up to me?”

“We’re a family. We do things together or not at all.” Kenn liked how that sounded. *It’s because I mean it.*

Tonya couldn’t argue with that. “I don’t want you to go, but it feels like you should. That’s the right thing to do.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Okay. You should do that.”

They shared a chuckle at the unimpressive wordplay, enjoying the new bond between them. They were both very smart and very dumb. They were learning to communicate on those lines in these moments so no one misunderstood or got their feelings hurt. They both knew what mistakes had ruined their lives before. Neither of them planned to repeat those errors in this relationship.

“When do you want to get married?”

Tonya blinked. “Where did that come from?”

Kenn scanned the baby that seemed to have grown an inch in a few days.

“We don’t have to. I’m fine with things the way they are.”

“I’m not.” Kenn had made his choice. “I’m ready for the next step.” He dug in his pocket.

Tonya took the ring and admired it. “It’s gorgeous...”

“But?”

“I don’t want you to feel forced.”

Kenn chuckled. “Put the damn ring on, woman.”

Tonya grinned, sliding it onto her finger. It was a perfect fit. The other ring had been lost. She wasn’t sure where.

“Will you marry me?”

Tonya nodded, suddenly fighting not to cry. “You know it.”

Kenn came over and kissed her cheek. He went right back to his seat so he could watch their son. “We can join Ralph and Charlie. I think a couple other couples are hoping to do that too, so it would be a group thing.”

Tonya wasn’t sure. “Um...”

“Or we could wait a little bit and I’ll make a site on the cliff overlooking the ocean and we’ll do it as close to right as I can manage.”

Tears rolled over her cheeks. “Stop it. I hate to cry.”

“Clifftop wedding it is.” Kenn stared at the wolf. “I wonder if Marc might stroke out when I ask him to be my best man?”

“Marc?”

Kenn nodded, voice growing solemn as he stared at his son. “He saved your life and gave me my honor back. I owe him everything.”

They both quieted as Angela tapped on the door and entered, shutting it behind her.

“How is everyone feeling this morning?”

Kenn grunted.

Tonya rolled her eyes.

“I see.” Angela checked the baby first, thrilled by the evidence of growth. “Any more trouble?”

“No.” Tonya smiled at Kenn. “He’s kept a close eye on him when he isn’t in my arms.”

“Nice.” Angela scanned Kenn. She recognized his mood. *I should. I lived in fear and anticipation of it for over a decade. He’s about to turn into the Marine and go off to battle.* “Be careful.”

Kenn stilled, waiting for more.

Angela didn’t want to talk about the past or the future. She was hiding in this moment. “Any luck?”

Tonya realized Angela was talking to her now. “I sent notes to Timmy. He gathered the items and mixed them right here next to me.” Tonya pointed at the powdery spots on the floor. “He was nervous. We mixed it and gave it to the medics for Megan a few hours ago. It’s working so well that Darren volunteered for top deck guard duty with Hank later.”

Angela heard Kenn’s thought on that. She stored it for later. Hank wouldn’t be hassled unless he broke a law, but if Megan didn’t want him

around, there were plenty of work shifts waiting in opposite areas.

Kenn met her eye. “I think Darren plans to handle that on duty.”

Angela blew out a frustrated breath. “Why not? He claimed her on duty.”

“I’ll see to that when training restarts.”

Angela was curious. “What’s the punishment?”

“First offense is humiliation and hard labor. If he follows through tonight, it’s a double offense. His team will handle it with love.”

Angela winced. “Yeah, I’ve seen how much they care.”

Tonya cleared her throat. “I may have found the cure and you two care about drama on duty?!”

Kenn and Angela laughed. They’d been waiting to see how long she could take it.

Tonya laughed with them as she understood.

“I’m proud of you.”

Tonya fought tears. Hearing that from Angela, her mentor now, was amazing.

“Tell me how it works.” Angela distracted Tonya so Kenn could go without dealing with a scene.

Kenn finished lacing his boots and stood, reaching for his jacket.

“I found it in the doctor’s journal.” Tonya pointed at the page, quoting. “*We can only use antibiotics on the subjects when they develop medical issues related to the new lifestyle. Any food has to be raw. The chemical barriers around the*

virus cells attack everything else. I gave them a list of stuff to gather for our tests.”

“We only needed enough for Megan.”

Tonya frowned at Kenn. “I may be able to use it as a base to develop a vaccine to the virus.”

“Can you do that?” Kenn didn’t want her working again so soon and he honestly didn’t think she was capable of advanced lab work, even with books to follow. “You’re not trained.”

Tonya wasn’t offended. “I won’t know unless I try.”

“You have my approval.” Angela ignored Kenn’s mental protest. “I’ll send Jennifer in to help you. Her mind is like yours and she’s on easy work for the next five to six months.”

“Sounds fine.” Tonya didn’t mind the teenager anymore. She didn’t have a problem with anyone. *My life is good.* She smiled at Kenn.

Kenn missed it for scanning his son in pride. *My life is good.*

Angela chuckled as he headed for the door. She and Tonya pretended their men weren’t going off ship to face danger yet again. Grant had just moved their ship into place so Shawn and Theo could bring the rope bridge out and attach it. In less than fifteen minutes, Marc’s team was leaving the boat. Angela hadn’t seen him since they’d risen from the couch. They were both busy. *And I don’t want to jinx him. If I say goodbye...* She flashed a smile at Tonya. “Let’s get you dressed and into the lab. We’ll pick a spot for the incubator.” Angela drew a carrier from

her pocket. “I’ll carry him until we get you all set up.”

Angela paused at a familiar voice calling mentally.

Tonya missed it as she rose and did a careful stretch. “Mmm. That feels good!”

Angela turned to get Tonya’s kit, zeroing in on the voice.

Please. I’m sorry.

Angela opened a private line. *It’s only been a few days. I thought you’d last longer.*

Tommy snorted. *So did I. I’m sorry. I’ll do whatever you say. I want to be back in Safe Haven.*

Angela knew a few others were listening to the call despite the private connection. It’s the way the hive worked if members were close enough together, but it wouldn’t have changed her choice. *I’ll lift your banishment as soon as you earn it.*

4

“Let go of that. Don’t do that!”

“Just because your wife is the enforcer, that doesn’t mean we have to listen to you!”

Kyle frowned, pushing his eyebrows together. “Don’t make me mad!”

The kids ran in mock terror as he chased them through the temporary beds, tickling and pushing them onto the mattresses. It had been going on for

half an hour. Jennifer was exhausted just watching them. She had no idea where Kyle got his stamina.

Kyle paused to leer over his shoulder.

Jennifer blushed, laughing. They'd spent the night right here, and with Kyle on duty, she'd gotten a good night of sleep and spent time with kids who'd needed her attention and supervision. The guards weren't able (or willing) to make the kids behave and the den mothers were busy trying to help get the ship back in shape.

"How much longer?" Trinity hadn't slept well and the little act in the mess had given her a sour disposition.

"One minute."

Trinity returned to her post on the door. She normally liked their kids, but her head was still hurting from Brittani's blow.

Jennifer stored that, frowning at the woman. "If you don't want people testifying at your trial, keep that shit to yourself!"

Trinity paled.

Leeann pointed. "She said shit."

"Don't say shit."

"Aww! She said shit!"

Jennifer groaned as the curse word went through the gym of kids. "Thirty seconds!"

The guards were all eager for the time to pass. Jennifer had made a deal with the kids that they could do or say anything they wanted in here for an entire hour. After that, they had to go back to behaving. After yesterday, the guards were hopeful

the kids would stick to their end of the deal. The work had been done correctly. The kids had even tried to give them nightly reports. Much of it couldn't be read, but they'd talked to the kids for an oral copy. It had worked out well.

Kyle let himself fall so the kids could pile on for the win. He saw Jennifer laughing. He also noticed her hand was resting on her stomach. *Is that protecting or pain?*

Jennifer met his eye through the squirming pile of kids, letting him see the shield around her body. *I'm protecting all the time now, Kyle. I may never let my shield down again.*

Kyle echoed her thought, glad she was okay. *I'm going ashore with Marc.*

Jennifer whistled. "Time!"

An amazing change swept through the room, turning little monsters into calm, polite Jr. Eagles who stood, straightened their clothes, and came over to line up in front of her.

Kyle gave Roy a fast hug and let him go line up. Kyle smiled at all the kids as he proceeded toward the door.

"Follow Trinity, kids. She's dropping you at your posts for the day." Jennifer went to Kyle and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Kyle held her, but not tightly like he wanted to do.

Jennifer's shield surrounded him, bringing him in closer. She kissed his lips. "Be safe."

Kyle leaned against her and memorized the moment. “And you.”

Kyle let go and left before he could do or say anything else. A lot of people were talking about going off on their own. Kyle wasn’t going to do it and he doubted Jennifer had any plans for it either, but they were one of the few couples who actually could make a go of it if that’s what she wanted. *When I get back, we’ll talk about what we want from the future.*

Kyle saw Neil and Wade ahead of him. He fell in behind them, acknowledging their nods. He was glad they’d chosen to come.

“Room for another?” Kenn came from the employee hall with his gear, or at least, what he’d been able to find of it in the mess that used to be their cabin.

All three senior men grinned their approval or clapped him on the shoulder.

“Welcome to the Eagles.”

5

Thud! Thud! “Are you in there, Jeff?!” Francesca lifted her hand to pound again.

Jeff opened the cabin door, glaring. “Give me time to answer.”

Francesca ignored his frown. She grabbed at her sheared hair. “Look what she did to me!”

Jeff scanned her hair. “It’s not that bad. You have a good neck for it.”

Francesca glowered. “I look awful! I want her punished!”

Jeff was already tired of the yelling. “Fine. Where do you want me to hit her and how many times?”

Francesca paused.

Kimmie froze. She was in the chair next to the door.

People listening in the hallway scowled and prepared to call the boss.

“I didn’t say to hit her.”

Jeff gestured. “You came here all wound up and demanding something radical. The boss’s punishment isn’t going to be enough for you. So where and how many times? Do you want me to break a bone to make sure she knows it was a mistake?”

Francesca’s eyes narrowed. “This isn’t a joke! She assaulted me.”

Jeff sighed. “She played a bad prank. Angela will punish her. Go away.”

Francesca’s eyes filled with angry tears. “So she gets her way. You won’t look at me the same now.”

“Nope, and it has nothing to do with your hair.” Jeff gave her brutal honesty. “I could get behind the short hair. It can be sexy. I can’t get behind a diva who isn’t satisfied with camp punishments. I also don’t care for drama queens who like to cause a scene. So she cut your hair. Cut hers and call it even.”

Kimmie shuddered at the thought of Francesca coming at her with scissors.

Francesca turned and stomped down the hall. "I'm pressing charges. See if she can cut that off, you asshole."

Jeff grunted, shutting the door calmly. "There goes an enemy for life. You know that, right?"

Kimmie shrugged. "She's not the one for us."

Jeff sat on the bed to pull on his boots. He had duty shortly. "Who is?"

Kimmie copied him and tugged on her own boots. "I can't look without permission."

Jeff stared. "You lied. You didn't scan her at all."

Kimmie didn't meet his eye. "So?"

Jeff wasn't sure what to say. He didn't really want a relationship right now. Sex was easy for a top Eagle to get in this camp, and he liked not having the complication. "For now."

Kimmie nodded, smiling brightly. "I'm hungry. Let's grab a bite as you go."

"Okay." Jeff let the girl lead the way. He knew she might become dangerous when she was older, but Jeff assumed they only had three years left anyway and then they would all die in the final battle. He didn't need to get attached to anyone else. Saying goodbye to the kid would be hard enough.

Kimmie skipped ahead and kept her mind blank, but her witch paced furiously, searching for an alternate to that vision of the future.

“Oh.” Jeff leaned down. “What did you do with her braid?”

Kimmie snickered. “It’s under your pillow.”

Jeff stumbled and caught himself. “Why?!”

Kimmie shrugged. “You kept thinking about stroking her hair. Now you can. *She* just isn’t attached to it anymore.”

Chapter Twenty-Five
Ancient Threads

1

“**D**rag and point are the worst. I can only cover one of them.” Marc studied his assembled team. They were all wearing full Eagle gear and carrying live rounds. For many of them, it was the first time for both of those. “Who wants the other slot?”

Several fingers went up, but no one spoke up. Marc hated moments like this. *Maybe I can rotate between them...*

The island breeze ran over the team, bringing the scent of wet earth and salt. Birds called to each other all over the island, making it echo as they warned each other the humans were coming.

Marc fought the need to sink down into his mental puzzles. *That has to wait. This has to happen now.*

“You’re not taking either of those slots.” Wade came up the ramp through the men and women; he jokingly shoved a rookie out of his way. “We’ve got point and drag. Get your ass in the center and hold the shield when we need it. We’ll rotate that as needed.”

Marc grinned at the sight of the senior men coming through the small crowd on the top deck. Camp members, friends, and family had come to see them off and stare in fear at the scary island. Marc knew it would add to the gossip fodder, but he hadn't refused them. The rookies and level ones weren't ready for a run like this. Only half of them were going to come back.

The senior men wore their gear easier, better. They knew what went where and what it was for. They also knew what needed to be in reach. They weren't neatly groomed, and they'd all added their own twists to the uniform and tools. It was clear who was bettered prepared to handle what came. The rookies and level ones stared in longing.

Kenn and Wade took Marc's front. Neil and Kyle took his rear.

"Make room!"

People slid aside at Morgan's call.

Dog ran through the shifting sea of legs, zeroed in on his target. He slid to a stop in front of Marc and dropped flat on his stomach. It was the position Marc had trained him to use on runs when things were about to go crazy.

Marc's emotions rolled over everyone on the deck, filling their hearts and lifting the mood without a single word.

Marc eyed the rope bridge swaying gently in the breeze. "Last man signals Grant. He'll disconnect us."

Kyle scanned the team and immediately turned toward Marc. “Permission to switch out a rookie...or five?”

“Granted.” Marc hadn’t wanted to pull his senior men away for this. He’d chosen the best of the lower levels, knowing he would come back shy at least a few. *I chose to sacrifice them to save my best men. Now I feel like Adrian.*

Kyle pointed at three of the rookies and jerked a finger over his shoulder.

The three men went quickly, relieved they didn’t have to die today.

Kyle scanned again and found more faces that hoped to be picked. He made another gesture. “No one below level two. Get out of here.”

“See the boss for reassignments.” Marc felt better already. *I like a smaller team anyway—easier to control and these are the best the Eagles have to offer...*

Charlie shoved his way through the rookies to reach the top deck. He made eye contact with his surprised parent and went to the center of the forming line. He knew he wasn’t good enough to be directly in front or in the rear. *But I can fight, heal a little, and hold a shield. I’ll handle my part.*

Marc reluctantly nodded. “Anyone else?”

“Yeah, us.”

They all turned toward the ramp.

Daryl, Jayda, Molly, and Zack came up the steps. Pam and Gus were right behind them.

Marc laughed. “This is so sweet I may cry.”

Kyle was eager for the competent bodies, but it was up to Marc.

Marc didn't want to leave Angela shorthanded. "I'll take the women. The boss needs men for heavy lifting and guard duty over the captain while he powers down the other ships."

The men frowned while the women grinned and hurried forward.

"I think the boss wants Gus and Zack with the captain." Kyle waved the women into place, frowning. *I wanted Daryl.*

Marc met his eye pointedly.

Kyle shook his head. He wasn't going to switch the women out and be called sexist for the next year.

Wade didn't care about that. "Switch out, ladies. I'm sorry. We need the bigger bodies on this one. When we need brains, you'll be up."

It was a solid excuse, but the women immediately started protesting.

Marc lifted a hand. He nodded at Wade. "A senior man made the call. Report to the boss for bitching and reassignment."

Pam laughed. Molly and Jayda frowned. The women stayed together as they went down the ramp.

Gus and Zack nodded to Marc and headed for the stairs to the bridge.

Ray stepped out of the bridge. "Someone grab Jayda. She's with us today." Ray had a headache. He wasn't using mental communication unless he had to.

Daryl joined the team in his usual place, glad Wade had taken that blow for them. “Thanks.”

Wade shrugged. “My happiness doesn’t depend on their view of me.”

The men quieted, considering the slight accusation in his words.

Marc snickered. “You’re good with both sexes. When you teach that to Neil, make sure he passes it on to his best friend.”

Neil warmed at Marc’s declaration. He swallowed his grin. “I think I’ll be in classes for a while.”

Men brightened at the reminder of Wade’s secret lessons.

Wade groaned. “Not today, dudes. Death and sex don’t mix.”

All the senior men snorted.

Wade shrugged. “Had to try.”

Marc felt the moment arrive. He nodded once at Kenn.

Kenn took the point position and began checking his weapons. “Go in thirty.”

The eight men sobered, straightening, hands checking favorite gear. They stepped into their places for a walk into combat.

Wade took point with Kenn. Daryl stayed right behind them. Dog came next, still laying at Marc’s feet. Behind his dad, Charlie waited patiently. Morgan towered over Charlie as he stepped in place, with Neil and then Kyle bringing up the rear.

It was a dream team with nine arms that could be used together or individually.

Now I'll learn how to use it. Marc slid into alert mode and kept going.

All around him, Eagles did the same. Despite this good start, none of them assumed they would feel the same upon their return.

Marc drew in a breath as Kenn advanced, mind splitting his view between real-time and his grid so he could see the threats coming.

Mostly unnoticed in the small crowd on the deck, Tim shut his eyes and said a prayer for their safe return.

Kenn didn't hesitate on the rope bridge. He and the other military men were used to adjusting for different paths to reach their goals.

The other men placed their feet exactly where Kenn did, trusting him to lead them into the minefield they all expected.

They crossed the bridge in seconds. Dirt shifted over them as they stepped inside the cave, falling into hair and open pockets. A sharp breeze blew into the tunnel, making them turn away or bring up eye cover.

Marc stepped into the cave, scanning as the others did the same. He found an immediate exit, a sloping, muddy dirt floor, and a cubby that appeared to be dry. He wondered what each of them saw first, but there was no way to be in so many minds at one time.

The cave had a wide center with raised ledges on each side that were corroding in the harsh ocean environment. Old prints ran down the center. The team avoided that spot so their tracker could examine them.

A small desk sat in the corner of the entrance room. A straw mattress and a bowl completed the tiny room. Marc realized it was set up for a person to stay overnight. *That isn't a bowl. Chamber pot.*

Marc swept the ceiling and found a tall cliff shedding light layers of dirt over his team.

He stepped closer, grid not finding anything moving up here. Marc tried to scan deeper and scowled as his grid went off.

“Clear.” Wade stayed by the tunnel, sweeping with his neck light. A cool, reeking odor was coming up, reminding him of the beach escape. Wade forced the flashback to wait, narrowing in on a dark spot a little ways down the tunnel. “I think there’s another room there.” Wade frowned. “Cavity?”

Daryl stayed near Marc. “Cubbyhole.”

Kenn sniggered. “Cave hole.”

Morgan didn’t want to be left out. He thought fast. “Cliff crack.”

Charlie laughed aloud.

Neil cleared his throat. “Nook.”

“Cranny.” Charlie was proud he’d thought of one.

Kyle felt like it would be rude to abstain. “Slit.”

Laughter bounced off the walls.

Marc wanted to be upset and scold them for the noise. He shrugged. “Gap.”

Wade laughed with them. “Okay. We’re calling them gaps.”

“But not all of them are big.”

Charlie’s innocent statement sent fresh amusement through the team.

Charlie grinned as he understood. “I meant the holes.”

“So did we, kid.” Kenn moved to Wade’s side and shined his light. “We’re heading down.” He and Wade went right then, forcing the others back into their jobs.

Marc liked that. He hadn’t realized that was a point man’s job in the Eagles.

We also keep track of our leader for on-the-fly instructions. Wade eased down the slight incline behind Kenn, listening, feeling, and trying not to smell. *Point man keeps you on schedule. That’s why she gave you Kenn and he took a front slot.*

Kenn peered up from the ground where he’d been trying to study old prints. “Was that wrong?”

Marc shook his head. “We’re on a deadline. This island has to be cleared by dawn tomorrow so the camp can get off that ship. It’s our job to make it happen.”

“We will.” Wade followed Kenn. Daryl took their guard slot at the opening as Dog hurried after them.

“Two gaps across from each other. Same size.”

No one laughed at Wade's call. They'd had a little fun. Now they would work hard and finish claiming this island.

"Slip-n-slide here." Wade eased down the tunnel. The slant was almost straight. "Once we get down, we aren't getting back up this way without a lot of work."

"Roll on." Marc was ready to bring up his shield if they needed it; all the descendants were, but Nature didn't attack them. *Maybe she really is tired.*

The tunnel was narrow and muddy, with chips missing from the walls and ceiling. It appeared that this cave saw a lot of water when it stormed.

Wade and Kenn went down the sloshing, sliding tunnel, followed by Daryl. All three men hid grins as they found the bottom and the ground evened out.

"More water here." It was up to Daryl's ankles. He was glad he'd picked his highest boots for this run.

The rest of the team joined them at the bottom of the tunnel, with some of them grimacing or sighing as water infiltrated low boots that shouldn't have been worn.

"Dead end to the right." Wade turned as Kenn did the same, both scanning each direction. "Weak wall boards straight ahead..." Wade smiled. "And shallow water. Path looks clear."

Marc gestured, already eager to get out of these tunnels and back to a warm shower. It was cold here and wet, and it stank. They'd been inside for about

three minutes and the mood had already dipped to disgust and dread. *I feel it coming.*

Marc brought up his shield. He included the entire team and the wolf standing alertly on a rock at the edge of the tunnel so he didn't have to get soaked yet.

Everyone tensed, peering around for the threat. The descendants listened to the mental hive for Marc's call.

A stiff breeze came down the tunnel, mocking them.

Marc sighed, lowering his shield. "Sorry. My grid isn't working right." Marc refused to admit it had shut off as soon as he entered the cave. It was hard to search through other decks when he was on the ship, but he'd managed. Underground was a new challenge; he'd lost this first round. "Move out."

The ground shifted under them, sloshing the water onto Dog.

Hey! The wolf shook, spraying them all.

Neil searched the shadows around their dim lights. "Quake?"

The dark tunnel was lit by their flashlights and small holes in the ceiling from warped, bent boards.

Marc shrugged, shield back up and firmly in place. "Doesn't matter. Keep rolling."

"Why is she protecting these locals? Why are they special?"

Wade frowned at Daryl's query. "Nature has been trying to kill us all along. This is just a good moment to try."

The ground dipped again.

“Aww. Don’t ever say it!” Marc felt the ground give under his feet. He dropped with his team, unable to keep the shield up around all the sliding, flailing bodies.

The ground fell with them, getting in their eyes, ears, mouths. Bodies thumped into the dirt walls and each other, unable to stop the slide into darkness.

The hole went down at a slant, letting them fly through the mud toward an unknown edge they all felt coming.

Marc grabbed out for anything to stop his fall. He found something hard and wide, and clung to it. “Grab anything!”

Neil found the same purchase just below Marc. Everyone else kept sliding. “Grab something!”

Short shouts told Marc the drop hadn’t been far. He listened for piercing screams, unable to see if the dots were all moving.

Harsh breathing and grunts echoed up as the men found ground.

“There’s a little ledge.”

“Count off.”

“We’re all here.”

“Injuries?”

“Yeah.”

Neil’s heart was pounding in his chest. “I counted five.”

Dog barked above them. A few seconds later, a weighted rope slid down the dank wall by them and kept going.

Marc understood. “Heads up for a rope! Keep feeding it!”

“Marc’s up there!”

Small cheers echoed through the darkness at Wade’s call.

A light flared below Marc and Neil; muted voices echoed up as the men helped each other.

Another rope slid down and against Marc’s arm. He grabbed it as the earth started to shake.

“Hang on!” Charlie had the ropes tied off, but he wasn’t strong enough to pull anyone. “Climb when you can!”

Marc realized Charlie was up there by himself. “Get your shield up!”

“Already did. I have it covered.”

I thought the same thing. Marc inched upward as the dirt shook. Then he stopped.

Neil heard shifting and realized Marc was climbing. He leaned toward his hand so he could reach the button on his neck light. He blinked at the bright flash as it dropped. “Wait. You’re going the wrong way!”

Marc kept descending. “We have five men down there.”

Neil leaned against the earth and controlled his breathing. He wanted to send Marc up and tell him they would handle it, but Neil wasn’t sure that was true. “You’re the boss.”

“I have to go now.” Adrian eased out of the bunker, hand between him and Sadie. Adrian’s bloodshot eyes and light beard said he’d passed a rough morning. So did his attitude. It wasn’t enough. Sadie tried to come through the doorway.

“I want to go!” Sadie pushed her chest against his hand. “Take me!”

Adrian snatched his hand back. “Can’t. Got that headache.” He retreated. They’d just finished eating and dressing, and Sadie had followed, hoping to go along this time.

The earth rattled again, making Adrian stagger backward.

Small rocks rolled down, bouncing off the hill to smack into trees, the ground, and the human targets. Kendle and Quinn ducked the larger stones, seeking shelter closer to the cliffside. Dust flew at them from cracks and crevices, but the ground didn’t split.

Adrian covered his head as earth and rocks fell in front of the bunker, burying the exit.

He slowly stood up, swiping at the thick dust.

Kendle hadn’t fallen. She was on the road, waiting, but not for much longer. *Marc needs us!*

Adrian put a hand around his mouth to amplify the sound. “Are you okay in there?!”

“Why are you yelling?! Oh, God. Am I going deaf? I wasn’t even hit.”

Adrian saw a small crevice and knew she was able to get air.

Sadie kept talking. “That was so scary! But now you have to take me. I’m not safe here.”

Adrian began to grin.

So did Quinn.

Kendle hurried down the cliff road, shaking her head.

Adrian stepped closer to the mostly covered door. “Dig yourself out. Cook dinner. I’ll be late.” Adrian followed Kendle.

“Wait!” Sadie began grabbing rocks and handfuls of dirt. “Don’t leave me in here! Adrian!”

Adrian kept going.

Sadie’s voice echoed down the road. “When I get out of here, I’m tearing your clothes off with my fingernails!”

Adrian winced, moving faster as Quinn laughed. *Maybe she won’t be able to get out.*

3

“Are we all here?”

Grunts and snorts met Marc’s sarcasm.

Marc shifted upward. “Let’s roll.”

A real chuckle broke through this time.

The entire team was hanging from the walls, hands gripping roots and unknown sturdy forms they hoped would handle their weight as they climbed.

Marc and Neil led them upward, trying to take the same path. It was hard to find it with only flashlights. The earth had stopped shaking as soon

as Nature realized she wasn't going to get rid of them that way, but it was still dark and filthy.

The darkness pressed in on them as they climbed. Dirt gave under their fingers, slimy things crawled over their hands. They hugged the wall and pulled, not thinking about anything but making the next foot of hard ground.

Scratching and other odd noises echoed through the dirt, reminding them that they weren't alone down here.

Dirt fell, hitting the men below as they climbed. It was unavoidable and they didn't have spare breath to apologize or warn anyone.

Kyle paused to catch his breath.

A gust of wind went by his ear. *Not natural! Deceiver!*

Kyle understood Nature was trying to screw with him. "Go away, shrew. I'm busy."

Near him, Kenn frowned. "You okay?"

Kyle huffed. "Never better."

"Do you hear that?"

Marc groaned at Neil's query. "Water. It's raining again." He heaved himself up another few feet. "Faster, Eagles. Climb!"

The team moved up, lights bouncing off views they didn't understand. Most of them hadn't spent time in tunnels or caves before the war; they weren't sure what they were viewing. They didn't care. They just wanted to get out.

Water began dripping over the edge, hitting them in the faces and chest.

“How are you guys doing down there?”

Marc frowned, breath coming out in a long huff as he pulled himself up another few feet. He assumed Charlie was having trouble based on the nervous tremor in his tone, but none of the team had the extra breath to yell. *We're coming up.*

Dog growled. It echoed through the tunnels.

Marc and the others tried to climb faster.

“Ugh!”

Marc knew that sound, as well as the suck-in of breath to combat pain. “Get eyes on Daryl!”

Morgan shined his light. He grimaced. “Snake bite. It's lodged in his bicep.” Morgan recognized the snake. “It's not poisonous.”

Marc knew they couldn't handle medical issues right here. “Keep climbing.”

Daryl was, while glaring into the eyes of the snake that was releasing something into his arm. The thin brown reptile had long fangs and a narrowed head that Daryl wanted to slam with his other fist; he didn't taunt it or stop to remove it. Charlie's grunts and groans said they had to get out of this hole right now.

“Dad!”

“We're coming, boy!” Marc drew in another breath and pulled. His hand gripped the edge and dug in.

Morgan stiffened. “I'm in trouble.”

Marc and the others shined their lights and saw movement all around Morgan. The vines here were pale white. Marc realized they were roots, not vines.

These parts of the trees and plants never saw the sunlight.

The vines tightened, tugging.

Morgan couldn't struggle as the vines wrapped around his body, squeezing. He was afraid to lose his grip. He sucked in a breath as they wound up around his chest.

Marc met his eye. "Hold that breath."

Morgan screamed as the vines jerked him into the wall.

Eagles slid over, yanking vines, dragging them back out and snapping them as best they could without falling. The vines bled clear liquid as they were cut. A smell of earth rose up.

"Dad!"

Being hit from both sides, Marc followed his instinct. He held on with one hand and grabbed his knife with the other.

Marc plunged the blade into the thick, dark root next to him, chopping away at it.

Nature screamed in pain. She fled in surprise.

The Eagles pulled Morgan free of the vines and held onto him as Wade brought up a shield around the injured man.

Marc stabbed the root again. He quickly yanked his knife free and put it in his mouth. *Climb!*

The mental command got them all moving again.

Wade and Kyle sent energy into Morgan as Kenn heaved him up to Neil and Marc.

Morgan didn't respond.

Marc also sent healing orbs as soon as Morgan's body reached him. He shoved, getting the medic to the top level. He followed him out and knelt to help. "Cover Charlie."

Kenn brought up his shield, stunned at the sight of the water pressing against the boy's barrier. Charlie was forcing it to drain into the opposite tunnel. *The kid saved our lives.*

Water was running under the shield in places, dragging dirt and debris into the side of the hole Charlie didn't have covered. Mud was splashed all over his shield and the walls.

The filthy, tired team stepped over piles of dirt and debris, wiping blood and mud from their arms and faces. Their bandanas were left where they stood. No one wanted the memories even if the stink could be washed out.

"Thank you!" Charlie slid to his knees as Morgan was hoisted up and Kenn took over shielding them. "Is he okay?"

Morgan groaned. "I'm alive, kid."

Charlie snorted. "I've got your kid right here."

Men chuckled weakly in acknowledgement of the running joke getting an upgrade.

Morgan slowly sat up, ribs aching. "They tried to bend me in half, backwards." If not for his vest, the first jerk would have broken his spine.

"I know." Morgan's scream was still ringing in Marc's head. It would be a new sound for his nightmares.

"It's over, I think." Charlie pointed.

The water had gone down. The sound of rain was slowing.

Daryl grasped the snake's slimy tail in one hand and drew his knife, teeth gritted at the pain as the reptile dug in deeper.

Daryl swiped through the snake, cutting off its head.

He dropped the body.

Dog ran over and grabbed it, shaking. Blood and guts sprayed the men's legs.

They barely reacted.

Daryl reached for the snake's head and tugged. "It's locked. I'll have to pry it open."

Morgan limped toward him. "I can help now." Marc's energy was taking care of everything but the bruises.

The water rippled near Morgan's leg. A long snout rose. Teeth gleamed in the dim tunnel.

Dog growled. He leapt forward and knocked Morgan down.

The crocodile snapped at the wolf in anger of the lost meal.

Morgan rolled away from them, realizing he'd almost been bitten. *It would have taken my leg off!*

"Yeah. Stop identifying yourself as a medic!" Wade hurried forward with Kenn.

Dog stayed in front of the croc, yapping to keep its attention as the Eagles lined up behind it for rounds of stabbing at the back of its skull until they found the right spot.

The croc hissed, mouth opening wide.

Wade plunged his knife in, knees landing in the water on each side of the animal. He held on, feeling its pain and life draining.

The Eagles retreated, regrouping as the crocodile slid under the ankle-deep water and didn't surface.

Morgan moved toward Daryl, body aching, mind bleeding.

Daryl shook his head. "I've decided to leave it for now. My new father-in-law should see it before I clean up. Then he can quit ragging my ass for not being ambitious enough."

Neil understood that situation. "She's one of us, Daryl. And we can't have low-achieving mates. You know that."

"Isn't that the same problem the kid has?"

"No." Neil wiped mud from his arms. He slung it onto the wooden boards. "Charlie has a gold digger. You have an Eagle. There's so much difference, it can't be measured."

Charlie wanted to be mad, but he was too tired. He let it go.

Water and mud dripped down the walls as they walked by, jangling already rattled nerves.

Daryl sighed. He let the final truth roll out so this moment would end. "We might leave if magic laws are put into the constitution."

Marc tensed. People turned toward Daryl, all frowning at him and the snake head.

Daryl ignored the looks. "I'm sorry. I wanted it to be out in the open."

“We thought about it too.” Wade didn’t look at Marc. “Samantha doesn’t know.”

Neil shook his head. “She knows. She said no.”

Wade grimaced. “Damn it, Neil. You weren’t supposed to tell her yet!”

Neil shrugged. “You know how it is before a run like this. You say too much or not enough.”

The other men nodded.

Kyle studied Marc through the mud and slop. “Have we earned a break? They can do this shit topside.”

Marc laughed. “Yes. First hatch pays daylight.”

Relief went through every man there.

Chapter Twenty-Six
So Be It

1

“**S**o what’s up with you and the gold digger?”

Silence fell as everyone regarded Charlie and Kenn in surprise.

They were all on the stone walk near the town. No one had been talking aloud, but all their thoughts had been flashing over everything except going back down into the earth.

Kenn waited for the boy’s reaction, not sure what to expect. He was braced for several options. None of them were pretty.

Charlie sighed. “It doesn’t matter. You can tell everyone to stop. I’m not calling off the wedding and nothing you can say will change my mind.”

Kenn shrugged. “Just had to be sure, kid. No one likes the match.”

Charlie scowled. “We’re having a baby. People need to get with it.”

“You could still be a good dad even if you two aren’t together.” Marc was glad Kenn had brought it up.

Many of the other men nodded in agreement and settled in for a distraction.

The jungle and grass were a welcome change from the tunnels, but no less dangerous. Men watched the vines on the trees and the ground near their feet for treachery. A stiff breeze came through the nearby tunnel hatch, reminding them that the job wasn't finished.

Dog padded around the team, watching and waiting for the action to restart.

"She can't handle it alone and I won't make her try." Charlie let them in on his reasoning. "I'll be with my kid and I can keep it safe. She listens to me. As long as she's happy, I'm happy."

"Wow. That's an awfully heavy load to carry for the next two decades." Wade was surprised Charlie was settling for so little.

Charlie shut his kit, ready for this conversation to be over. "I won't do it and neither will she. Stop trying."

Kenn shrugged. "It's your future, kid."

"Stop calling me kid!" Charlie spun around on Kenn. "I'm about to have one and I didn't even get to be one!"

Kenn's face darkened. "Go on and blame me for that too, *kid*. But I didn't start the war and I didn't match you with a skanky bitch who should have never been allowed to breed."

Charlie leaned over and punched Kenn, swinging from the hip.

Everyone else froze, including Marc.

Kenn slowly lifted his hand and wiped blood from his lip. He lifted his eyes to Charlie's

apprehensive face. “Just don’t ever do that to her.” Kenn lunged forward and wrapped both hands around the boy’s neck. He didn’t squeeze.

Caught off guard, Charlie knew he couldn’t win. He held still, glowering at Kenn.

“It always comes down to violence with us, *kid*. That is my fault.” Kenn tightened his grip a hair. “When you think about hitting her, or the baby, remember this moment. If you ever do it, I’ll finish this.” Kenn let go and retreated into his place in line. He didn’t look at Marc.

Charlie rubbed his throat, trying to find something ugly to say.

Marc assumed Angela had set this up. “I’m going to add something.”

Charlie tensed. “Dad.”

Marc hated to do it. “Your mom made her choice on Tracy, son, and it isn’t good.”

“Don’t do it.” Charlie started to panic. Only one thing could screw up his plans right now. “Please don’t..”

Marc didn’t let Charlie’s wave of fear stop what had to happen. “As long as you’re with someone who doesn’t respect the job...”

“No!”

“You can’t inherit leadership. She made it official this time. If you stay with Tracy, you forfeit your rightful descendant inheritance.”

Charlie’s face fell. His shoulders dropped. His eyes darkened. “She’ll leave me now. Or become unstable.”

“Yeah, listen.” Morgan finally got involved. He’d wanted to speak up for weeks. “She needs to be on meds, have a lot of therapy sessions, and she should never be left alone with any child. I’ve told all that to the boss.”

“This is the boss’s fault!”

“No.” Kyle spoke up next. “Tracy has been hunting leadership since she joined Safe Haven. Most of us enjoyed her visits, including Adrian. She wouldn’t even look at a rookie.”

“I don’t care.” Charlie finally let the truth roll out. “If I don’t marry her and keep my place, she’ll kill herself. I can’t be responsible.”

“I thought you were all deep in love and stuff?” Neil hadn’t been keeping close track of Charlie and Tracy. He’d had his own secrets to face.

“He woke up on his rookie test run.” Kenn knew when and where, down to the moment it had happened. “He saw an alternative he couldn’t have.”

Charlie rubbed his sore knuckles. “I almost didn’t come back.”

“It’s not wrong to do what’s best for you.” Neil lifted his chin at Marc’s frown. “We’ll watch her, and try to help. We’ll keep the baby under guard. What happens beyond that is on her, not you.”

“I’ll still carry it.”

Marc felt the time for his advice arrive. “Of course. We all do, Charlie. Every man here has a horror in his past that he’d give almost anything to

change. What makes you a man is how you handle the setbacks and challenges.”

“I don’t want the baby either. And I feel guilty for that.”

Kenn winced. “I told Courtney the same thing the night before she tried to kill Tonya. Everyone else was caught in the crossfire.” Kenn heaved a heavy sigh. “I’ll carry that forever.”

Marc met Kenn’s eye, frowning. “And what came after?”

Kenn nodded. “I know she knows. Go on. It’s the perfect time.”

“Did you know how Courtney got the keys?” Marc dug into Kenn’s mind before he could bring up a wall. “So you could kill him openly?”

Kenn didn’t resist. “No. I daydreamed a few times. I don’t know if I would have ever followed through, but I promise you it wouldn’t have been right there in front of everyone that way.”

“I believe you.” Marc was glad. He’d come to respect the new Kenn. “There is no punishment. Life gives us coincidences that sometimes also fulfil a dream or a desire. We can’t control that.”

“Cool.” Kenn refused to act like he’d been worried about it.

Other men tensed as Marc swept the entire team.

Marc was disappointed. “I don’t have anything else, but you clearly do.” He frowned at them. “Get it out or get it finished. That’s an order.”

Men nodded; Marc noted who so he could check on them later and see if they'd handled their issue or made it worse.

Kenn scowled at Daryl, pointing at the snake head. "Take that off."

Daryl grunted, waving a hand. "Hold me down and take it."

Kenn laughed. It felt like the old days.

Daryl patted the dead snake. "It's my new good luck charm."

Marc gestured at Kenn. He could feel Adrian getting closer to the Kraft house, where they were meeting.

Kenn drew in a breath and stood up. "We roll in one. Get set."

Wade reached over and rubbed the snake head. He didn't speak or think anything funny.

Marc and Neil shared a glance.

Neil shrugged. He reached over and stroked the slimy corpse.

So did Marc.

The others did the same, picking up the custom for this moment. They had little hope it would help, but they all felt it couldn't hurt.

Dog came over to Daryl, golden eyes solemn.

Daryl leaned down, not sure what would happen, if anything.

Dog lunged, jaws snapping around the snake head as he yanked backward.

Daryl hit the ground, screaming.

Dog let go and got set to try again. *Kill the snake! Kill the snake!*

Daryl rolled over, arm covering the snake. “Don’t help me! Don’t help me!”

Dog stared in haughty contempt. *Humans!*

Morgan moved toward Daryl. “I can—”

Marc slapped a hand over Morgan’s mouth, stopping the words.

Everyone braced, waiting to see if he’d triggered another attack.

Morgan flushed as Marc let go. He didn’t speak as he dug in his pocket and handed Daryl a bandage and the tape.

Daryl stuck it in his pocket for later.

Marc didn’t feel Nature watching them anymore. The fight wasn’t over, but they’d won this round, even if it had been by accident.

Marc proceeded toward the hatch, icy spine keeping him standing tall. *I hurt her by stabbing those ancient roots. I doubt it was a serious injury, but now I know she can be wounded. That final battle just changed.*

Marc dropped to the dark tunnel floor without using the ladder, braced to fall through it or hit mud.

Mud splashed up his pants.

Marc brought up his shield and expanded it to include the men descending behind him as he retreated to clear room.

Topside, Wade held his shield over those gathered to go in while the other men either dropped or scanned their surroundings while they waited.

The island was loud, in motion, and beautiful compared to where they were going.

Each man followed Marc's example and dropped down as if they weren't afraid. Nature had struck them so many times since they landed, they couldn't back down now. Going to another island might be easier. Living on the ships could even be tolerated under certain conditions. What they couldn't accept was defeat.

Marc waited until they were all in his shield, pleased with how Charlie was automatically watching over Dog. The wolf was leaping in and out of the hatches without assistance right now, but if the ceiling lifted a couple more feet, he would have to be given a boost.

"I don't have a grid down here." Marc shoved his pride aside. "Does anyone?"

Heads shook; people glanced at Kyle.

Kyle frowned. "Oh, yeah. Sorry. I forgot." Kyle concentrated. A thin, faint grid popped up in his mind. "In and out, but there."

"Awesome." Marc slid backward. "You and Morgan in the center. We go in ten."

Everyone got set and in place. Ten seconds went by fast.

Kenn and Wade advanced, aware of Marc's shield keeping pace as they walked. It pushed over the floors and walls like a clear curtain.

Kyle scanned as he walked. He saw Marc's shield feeding energy to all of them, including Dog. He recognized the thin beams of blue light.

Kyle glanced over his shoulder.

Marc lifted a brow.

Kyle wasn't sure what to say or ask. He turned around, saving it for later.

Marc knew. "It's a tracker gift. You see things others often don't."

"This wall is weak." Daryl ran a hand over the rotting boards. He wiped the mud down his pant leg. Marc nodded. "It looks like they tried to reinforce an older system."

"Was there a mine on this island?"

"I doubt it. We'll check the books later."

"I think it's always belonged to the pirates." Wade knew about the story of the island's origins, but he didn't tell the others. This wasn't the right time.

They walked by another section of the tunnel with four more gaps that had been clearly used for sleeping rooms. They stepped over crates and gear, empty gas canisters, candles, scraps of clothes, rotting rats, and shifting, slick ground that wanted them dead.

"I'm getting something." Kyle moved to the right, hand coming up. "On the other side of this wall."

Everyone went silent to listen.

Odd shuffling noises filtered through.

Kyle let go, chest burning. "Sorry. Lost it." He sucked in air, hating the rookie limits of his new gift. "I'll work on it."

Marc wasn't upset. "Neil will check the maps and see if we've covered that side yet." Marc knew they were on the Kraft estate now, so he doubted it.

Neil was already doing that. He skimmed with his finger. "No. This is the last quarter of the island. The estate sits up against the cliff. I assume we'll find tunnels or bunkers there that link to this one." Neil put away the map. "Or it could dead end again and have a different entrance. We know these tunnels are linked in some way. We're missing the other exits due to great camouflage."

"I think so too. When we get the solar lights up, it will show us where they are." Marc waved. "Tear it down."

The point men dug out crowbars from their kits and got to work.

The shuffling noises grew louder, then stopped.

Kenn and Wade had the first layer of rotten boards down in less than three minutes, ripping through them with brute force. Wood fell and piled at their feet.

Marc and the others watched the tunnel in both directions between trying to peer into the new room.

A draft of decay floated out as the largest board came free.

Kenn flinched.

Wade's stomach rolled. "Guess we know what's causing that."

Most of them nodded. Rotting bodies had a distinctive odor.

Kenn and Wade ripped the last few boards off and retreated to store their crowbars.

Daryl and Marc advanced, lights shining, hands on weapons, and Marc's shield glowing brightly over them.

Charlie held his shield over the rest of the team and waited to see if he could hold in his guts. The smell was growing and it was thick, rough.

Marc shined the light to the right while Daryl took the left. They both winced.

"Incoming!" They retreated as a group of locals rushed toward the hole.

The Eagles were ready for them. As each one came through, an Eagle spiked them and dragged the body out of the way. The locals were muddy and angry, but none of them were rib breakers.

Marc helped Daryl pull a dead local back, arms straining.

Another local shoved through the hole in the wall.

Charlie saw the man first. He tossed his knife and took the man down without dropping his shield.

"Nice." Kenn stayed near the boy, ready to defend him if needed.

Marc went back into the room and spotted light. "There's a hole in the ceiling." The entire hatch frame had fallen in, making a wide hole in the earth. The jungle above them waved a mocking greeting.

Daryl shined his light on a heavy duty door that was covered in burn marks.

Marc realized someone had burned the entire room. “The locals probably fell through during the storm.” He put his light on a body in the corner. “She landed on something. I can see metal coming through her stomach.”

Daryl looked away from the dead woman in the short red dress. “It’s just one room.”

Marc waved him out, glad it hadn’t been worse.

The team reassembled in the tunnel, all curious about the heavy duty door.

Marc was too. “We’ll find the way in later. It probably connects to the mansion.” He didn’t want to waste their energy on that right now, though. It would be easier to dig around than to try to go through it. “Roll us out.”

Kenn led them through the main tunnel, breathing deeply of the draft. Even the dirt reek was better than a rotting body.

The tunnel turned. Kenn stopped, letting the team get closer before advancing.

Wade stayed close to Kenn to provide backup, but he didn’t think anything was going to happen right now. It felt like Nature had pulled back to lick her wound and watch.

“Light ahead. Might be another open hatch.” Kenn waited for the group again. His job was to find things, not to decide what was done with them.

Marc stared through the broken hatch. He saw jungle, but it didn’t look familiar. He didn’t have the island memorized yet. “Guesses as to where we are?”

Kenn was ready. “Next to the Kraft house. We’ve been on the estate for the last ten minutes.”

A chill went through the group, including Marc. He motioned. “We’ve cleared all around it and we’re about to hit the end of this tunnel. It feels like a dead end. We’ll scout it, then go up.”

Kenn and Wade headed for the darkness while the rest of the group braced to go up and face another fear.

“Hatch.” Kenn shined his light and found the dead end. “Tunnel ends in a hatch.”

Marc didn’t want to use it. He also didn’t want to go through that house. *Is there anything I need to do before we try it?*

Kyle glanced over. “What would Angela do? Or Adrian?”

Marc tried not to be offended. “Angela would put guards here and go in from the top. Adrian would probably ask for volunteers who want to face the basement before the living room.” Marc gestured. “Her way is safer but slower. Someone tell me why it’s slower.”

“Because we’d put off the basement.”

Marc nodded at Charlie. “Exactly. Which means if we go in from down here, at full strength, with full magazines, it should go faster. It doesn’t add more danger for us. We have to clear it anyway and it’s all unknown from either entrance. So how do we pick?”

Wade spoke up. “Adrian would assign those volunteers.”

Marc nodded. "I could do that, but I don't need to. Only a few of you want to go in this way. We'll enter through the house."

Wade scowled. "Doesn't that make us cowards?"

"On the contrary. It says we listen to our gut. If your entire group thinks it's a bad idea, it's reckless to do it anyway unless you have no other choice."

People nodded, able to see what Marc was trying to teach them.

"Stay together. Use your knives. I don't want one friendly fire injury. Make sure you aren't hitting a teammate—that's your top goal."

Marc's hard voice setting rules and reminders was a comfort to most of them.

Marc climbed the ladder that Kenn quickly hung. Their portable setups were working great. They rested on the ground and were long enough to coil on the bottom of the tunnels.

Marc scanned quickly, spotting three forms coming through the trees. "Clear!"

Marc waited for Adrian and his group to come to him, listening to his team climb up. If anyone had trouble, he was ready to jump down and help.

Adrian stopped a few feet away and scanned the team as they came up. His eyes widened with each one, mind forming conclusions based on the evidence.

Marc waited for his questions and avoided looking at Kendle. Her eyes were crawling all along

his body, but he felt no attraction. He was on a run. That was all he was concerned with right now.

Kendle sensed it, but she didn't care. She stared openly, ignoring everyone else.

"Where's Tommy?"

Quinn was already tired of that question. "Gone. Took off." Quinn narrowed in on Daryl and the snake head. He retreated. "That's so not right."

Daryl ignored him, climbing out of the ground like a badass because he felt like one.

Adrian scanned the haunting house they'd all been dreading. "They've gotten a little gun-shy."

Marc nodded. He'd noticed that too. So had Angela. *We're tired of friends and family dying.*

Now Adrian nodded. *It's always been the worst part of the job. You can't stop death, no matter how much power you have.*

Marc lifted a brow. *Recommendations?*

Adrian frowned. *On being gun-shy, facing death, or going into the hell house here?*

Marc snickered. "Your nerves are showing too."

Adrian grunted. "You're the one who avoided answering."

"Fine. All three."

Adrian took a minute to consider his words. Around them, Eagles took up guard posts and listened intently to see if Adrian had an answer for whatever Marc had asked of him.

"Gun-shy comes from self-protection. Teach them not to fear death, or run them through so many close calls that they can handle anything." Adrian

lifted his chin. “I recommend the last option. It’s the one I was using.” *Men who don’t fear death can be unstable and hard to manage.*

Marc knew that was true. “Go on.”

Adrian shrugged. “Death isn’t something I can conquer for them. We’re all going to die at some point. I recommend living while we still have life and letting a good legacy be our immortality.”

“That’s very good.”

Adrian shrugged at the praise. “It’s a copy that’s been told for centuries. I believe in it, but I didn’t invent it.”

“And the hell house here?” Marc pushed the button again.

Adrian’s spine straightened as cold waves began to slide down it. “I recommend we go in right now and clear every inch, starting with the basement.”

Marc waved a hand. “Amen.”

The team climbed the stairs at his call of ‘so be it’, staying close to him and their weapons.

“You take the top. We’ll go below.”

Adrian didn’t argue with Marc’s choice. He waved Quinn and Kendle next to him and prepared to enter his nightmare.

2

“They’re going in the house now.”

Angela stiffened. The girls were here with her because few other people wanted to be around them,

camp or descendants, when the mood was rough. Missy and Kimmie were different, dangerous.

The door to Angela's cabin opened. Amy came in with Cate.

Angela waved them to the empty couch. Those two girls weren't welcome in many other places either. The rest of the kids were calming, blending, and being tolerated, but these four had more issues. *And more magic.* They were still unlocked and able to read thoughts. Angela assumed that was why the camp was leery, but they'd also had moments that scared people.

"They kicked in the front door."

Angela braced. Kimmie was telling everything as it happened. Angela hadn't asked her to do it, but she also hadn't told the girl to stop as they'd come here for Angela to change clothes. Stanley had dumped juice on her while trying to hand her a cup.

Tap-tap.

"Come in."

Samantha, Pam, and a few other women peered in with nervous expressions. More were waiting behind them, including Jennifer and Brittani.

Angela sighed, fastening her jeans. "We have another twenty minutes until mess is over for the camp. It's back to work then."

All the women nodded, letting out sighs and smiles of relief. Last in, Jennifer shut the door. The only ones not here were Tracy and Tonya.

Kimmie shivered. "They're going straight to the basement."

The adults tensed, turning toward the girl as they understood she was relaying the run in real time.

Kimmie flinched, hands clenching. “He ducked the vine. It’s okay.” Kimmie tried to smile at Angela. “He’ll be okay.”

Angela let the girl comfort her as she kept track of their men, but Angela didn’t feel it in her heart. *I can’t keep him with me all the time. I have to trust him to defend his own life.*

Women dropped into chairs and onto the floor to wait and listen. Many of them caught Angela’s thought and understood. This was part of the job. It wasn’t the hardest part, but it was the moment where the waiting partner questioned the commitments and duties to be sure it was worth a risk to those precious lives.

Angela jerked her boots back on and laced them up. She stood, checking to see if she had everything.

“No! Don’t open the door!” Kimmie leapt to her feet. “It blew up! It blew up!”

Every woman there froze at her shriek, bodies glitching as they tried to accept the giant rush of terror those words sent through their minds.

It blew up!

A loud blast echoed across the island to the ship.

Angela reacted first, feet unfreezing, body lunging toward the door. She jerked it open with a rush of horrified females behind her. They peered through windows as they hurried through the

corridor, able to see a large plume of thick black smoke hovering over the island.

Gunfire cracked out from the top deck, making them all flinch.

“Breach!” Alarms began wailing all over the ship. Grant’s angry voice shouted through every radio and speaker. “Breach! There’s a breach on the top deck!”

“Medic! Woman down on the top deck! Oh, God! Woman down!”

Radios blared back in multiple responses.

We sent the strongest fighters away... Angela recovered, understanding what was happening. She used her gift, striding down the hall. *Prepare to defend yourselves, Safe Haven! The enemy has breached our gates!*

The radio fell silent as Marc’s emergency communication system kicked in.

Angela keyed her mike, grateful for the open waves. “Lockdown right where you are! Eagles, search the ship. Start with the area you’re in and leave a guard to show you’ve covered it. Find the intruders. No mercy!” Angela knew how to get a faster search of the ship done now, thanks to their previous issues. Within twenty minutes, all areas would be cleared, even with a rookie crew on board.

And it probably isn’t needed. Angela keyed her mike as she reached the elevator, other hand drawing her gun. “They’re here.”

She fired with her left, aiming for the elevator controls as the door started to slide open. Sparks flew up as she hit it twice.

“Deck C, elevators. Intruders are using the elevators!” Angela retreated, forcing all the women and kids behind her to do the same.

Jennifer stopped Brittani from lifting her gun. “Crossfire!”

Brittani nodded, opening the first door they came to.

Angela and Jennifer pushed them all into the room as both elevators opened. Her bullets hadn’t disabled them. Heavy footsteps echoed.

“You go in too.” Angela pulled the door shut behind Jennifer. “Lock it. Shields up in layers. Fire on my call.” She brought up her own shield, turning as three men marched toward her.

A fourth man appeared behind them. Tracy was in his tight grip. Blood trickled down her throat as the knife dug in a little with each step.

“Stop right there!”

Guards on the area called for backup as they drew their weapons and watched for Angela’s call to open fire.

The radio flooded with calls again; no one was able to get through.

The four dehydrated men wore ripped, stained UN uniforms that stank. It said they’d been on the island the entire time, hiding and moving to avoid detection.

Angela felt a trap start to close in on her. She stepped forward, cool grin coming to her lips. “In one minute, you’ll be the only one alive, but you’ll wish you weren’t.”

All the men paused, surprised by her threat.

The man holding Tracy knew she was talking to him. “And your daughter-in-law will be dead. Surrender and she won’t be hurt.”

Angela kept advancing. “Some sacrifices are worth everything to the future.” She lifted a hand, flames dancing along her fingertips. “You picked the wrong target.”

“But...it’s your son’s wife! His pregnant wife! Stop!”

“Sorry. You should have picked someone I like.” Angela dropped her shield and opened fire.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Let's Roll

1

Marc pushed himself up, head swimming, ears ringing. He coughed, body curling up in pain. Bright heat flared in his ankle. *That might be broken.*

Marc lifted his head slowly, trying to hear through the high pitched ringing. He felt something warm and wet running down his chin. *That's my blood.*

Marc flinched as something soft hit his cheek. *That was debris.*

He blinked, vision doubled. He kept blinking and breathing, waiting for the worst of the blast effects to ease. Light flakes fell across his face. *Those are ashes.*

The acid odor of smoke filled his nose; the roar of flames popped into his ears. *The mansion's on fire.*

Next to Marc, Neil rolled off something sharp, chest burning as he coughed out dust and dirt. *Exploded. We went in the basement and it exploded!*

Neil forced his eyes to open. He immediately shut them as dust and ashes fell over his face. *Maybe I'll hang here a minute.*

“Ship!” Kenn shoved himself out of the debris as adrenaline filled his body with strength, but not control. He staggered around, almost blind from the concussion. “Ship!”

Dog whimpered, paws raking his singed ears.
Make it stop!

Morgan uncurled, relieved to find he wasn't seriously injured. *I may need stitches in a few places, but I'm okay.* He reached out and put a hand on the wolf.

Dog's whine faded.

Marc slowly sat up, pushing boards and debris off his leg as smoke curled his nose. “Count off. Find everyone.”

Wade shot up out of the debris with his shield glowing dully. “Vines!”

“Ship!” Kenn smacked into the edge of a basement support and fell backward. He landed on his hip as blood rolled over his nose. “Ship!”

Charlie groaned as Wade jerked him out of the rubble. He crouched where Wade shoved him, trying not to puke or cry at the pain. Smoke hit his nose. He dipped his face into his shirt, fighting tears.

Daryl and Kyle came up through the debris together, shields doubled for protection.

“There are vines!”

“Watch below!”

Marc felt his demon come forward; he let go of his control with gratitude. *Thank you.*

It's my honor. Marc's demon got him to his feet and began searching for a way out.

The others who weren't injured joined Marc, also letting their demons have more control than usual. Ashes floated over them as the small fires above burnt through a layer of furnishings and frame.

The others watched, uncomprehending.

Kenn fell over, eyes blinking, breathing in harsh gasps. "Ship!"

Marc shoved Morgan toward Kenn. He covered the medic with his shield, only able to push it out a few feet. His energy bank was full, but he didn't have command of his body or his mind yet. Without concentration, the energy and all his gifts were useless. Marc leaned against the wall, ankle screaming, lungs burning from the smoke, brain throbbing from the concussion. The rest of his body felt beaten. He scanned Charlie. "You okay?"

"No." Charlie puked.

Marc sent healing energy. The stream missed and floated into the ashes and rubble.

"Damn it!"

Marc's demon repeated the move, aiming. The orbs hit Charlie this time and sank in.

"There's a hole." Neil staggered toward the corner, wiping ash and soot from his face so he could see better. "We can climb up here."

Wade came over to help Neil start up the pile of boards, concrete, insulation, and other debris. The stack shifted, but it held as they went up.

Marc and Morgan helped Kenn toward the hole in the floor, minds refusing to copy his panic. They

knew there was a problem on the ship, but they had to see to themselves first.

Creak... The frame of the house shifted, sending more dust and debris over them. It smothered the fires.

“Get them up there!” Marc shoved men toward the rubble ladder, feet stumbling over bloody boards and wires. He lifted Dog into Wade’s big arms, fighting to keep calm as the smoke thickened.

Marc and Morgan got the rest of the team climbing, shoving on them until everyone was back in the only side of the smoky living room that hadn’t been destroyed.

Marc knew they weren’t safe. “Out. Keep going.”

Marc looked for Adrian, tripping over the charred rug. He saw Kendle’s body on the landing and Quinn sprawled near her. Neither of them were moving.

On the steps above them, Adrian moaned, sitting up.

Marc swallowed his bitterness. *Of course he survived.*

Marc saw Kendle flinch. Her arm twitched as she woke.

Kendle jumped up, eyes flashing wildly until she spotted him. Ashes and debris fell all around her.

Marc watched blood run down her arm.

Kendle slowly calmed, staring at him through the waves of smoke.

Marc didn't respond.

The team limped and staggered out of the creaking, smoking house, stumbling down the steps to the grassy yard while Morgan healed their worst injuries.

Marc came down the last step too fast. His ankle gave. He fell, shouting.

Morgan limped over to help him.

Marc refused it, smothering another shout. "Get to the ship."

Morgan hesitated. He'd helped the others, but he was getting low. If he healed Marc, he wouldn't have much left for anyone on the ship.

A volley of gunfire echoed through the air from the shoreline.

Marc got to his feet. "I have my shield and my Dog. Get to the ship!" He coughed out smoke like everyone else was doing.

Kenn forced his feet to move, mind and vision blurry. Morgan had helped him, but he wasn't fully healed. None of them were. *I'm coming!*

The others followed Kenn, focusing on the ship and their loved ones.

Marc pushed on Morgan's arm, mind now shielded on all sides. "Go on."

Morgan took off running, no longer able to resist the calls from Pam and Missy.

Marc stared at Kendle. *You know what I want.*

Kendle made a gagging noise and then took off running after the team. Marc wanted her to defend the camp. That's what she would do.

Quinn ran after her without being told. He didn't have a red mark. He was allowed inside Safe Haven's perimeter.

Adrian hesitated, ears still ringing. He knew something wasn't right. *What's going on?*

Marc pulled out his map for a blurry confirmation of where the broken and open hatches were in case he needed to run. "What are you waiting for?"

Adrian stared at Marc, unable to see into any part of his mind. "Are you sure about this?"

Marc stored the map while gathering energy. He sent it to the parts of his body that needed it the most. Descendants couldn't heal themselves very much, but he needed every little bit he could get. The ringing ears faded, allowing normal sound. *Better!*

Marc began patting himself to be sure he was tied down and his weapons were in place. He also took note of which ones were missing.

Adrian stepped closer. "Marc..."

Marc's head snapped up, eyes blazing. "Get the fuck out of here!"

Adrian recoiled from the shout and the mental sting that had come with it. He turned toward the shore path, anger now awake and flowing hotly. "Don't die, Marc. They'll all find a way to blame me."

Good. Marc kept his demon in the front to help him stay in control of his battered body. *Now it's a twofer.*

Adrian took off running, mind switching to the camp, and to Angela.

Marc dropped his mental walls as soon as the man was out of sight. He opened his grid. “You should go too. This will get ugly.”

Marc’s grid revealed a huge, furious dot flying toward his location. “Go.”

Dog dropped to his stomach and waited for an attack order.

Marc limped after the team, wanting to be sure that huge dot didn’t decide to attack them instead. “Come and get me. I’m here. My team is gone. It doesn’t get any easier than this.”

The dot zeroed in on him and increased speed.

Marc began shifting energy toward his spells and shield as Dog fell in on his right heel. “Last chance to go.”

The wolf snorted, golden eyes glowing with fury. *Not for all the pussy on our ship. This bitch needs to go!*

Marc laughed, soaking in the moment while he was still able to. Being with Dog was always like being with one of the guys. *I’ve enjoyed that. His humor has no censor.*

Dog braced for action, also able to feel what was coming. *If we die here, so be it.*

Marc drew in a calming breath of warm island air, relishing the feel of breathing, of living. “As long as that camp survives, our sacrifices were worth it.”

The dot vanished, becoming a towering shadow flowing through the trees like wind. Marc saw amazing green orbs in the violent breeze. As he watched, the orbs zeroed in and turned slightly to intercept them.

Marc stopped; a thick sense of doom wrapped around his heart and body. *I can't beat her.*

Marc's spirit refused to accept the loss before a single blow had been struck. He squared his shoulders and settled into full Marine mode. Then he brought his shield up and opened his hall of power.

Nature slid to a stop inches from him, nose pressing in on his shield until he was struggling to keep it up. Her winds spun around the barrier, preventing clear sight.

Nature sniffed, nose above his head. She retreated, rattling the ground with her movements.

Marc strengthened his shield and stared. He had a single clue about how this fight needed to be handled, but his mind refused to work as he registered her form.

She was stunning, in a painful way that made his heart ache. She was the woman of every man's dreams.

Dog growled. *It's just a pretty face!*

Marc sucked in air. "That's more than pretty, Dog. She's...almost flawless."

Nature chuckled sexily, sending out thick vibes of mating fever.

Dog stiffened.

Marc grimaced. “Not interested.”

“Are you sure?”

Marc froze as her voice sent tingles down his spine. *Not fair!*

“Why does it have to be fair?” Nature examined his form, his mind, his power. “You are not an equal. You will not survive this challenge.”

“Then you’ve honored me by doing it yourself. Thank you.”

Confused by his civility, Nature studied him deeper.

Marc scanned her again as well and found a long, thin streak of blood running down one long thigh. *I did that.*

“You were the *first* man.”

Marc winced. “That was a different lifetime. Here and now, I’m just in your way.”

Nature’s annoyance lit up her emerald green eyes.

Marc moaned at the sight. *Flawless is a weak word!*

Nature lifted a hand; long, smooth fingers reached out. “Join me. I give you one chance to exist.”

Marc took a single step forward. His eyes blazed as he sent out alpha waves in thick bursts. “I’ll give you the same offer—Make peace or I will follow through on my destiny to kill you.”

Nature recoiled in fury; her hand lowered. She lunged forward with giant, snapping teeth and began eating through his shield.

Dog ran at her and leapt, going for her neck.

Nature turned, hand catching his stomach as Dog snapped off a piece from one of her antlers... She threw him into the tall grass.

Dog yelped as he hit the ground and slid into the weeds. He didn't get up.

Marc's fury increased. It blew out of his chest and turned the shield into a clear, solid wall that she couldn't pierce. Bright power ran through his arms and chest as he prepared to battle. "Let's roll."

2

Charlie reached the shore first, youth lending him speed. He ran onto the portable bridge, jumping bodies and blood puddles as he raced toward the ladder.

Morgan and Daryl came next, not slowing.

Daryl pointed.

Morgan followed it and saw Grant and Jayda in the wheelhouse of the boat next to them. Shawn and Ray were on the roof with their rifles, explaining all the bodies on the bridge. Anyone on the Adrianna wouldn't have been able to cover this spot from their posts.

Neil and Wade flew by the bodies as well, but they noted details so they knew what they were facing. The uniforms and pirate weapons on a mix of nationalities didn't narrow it down to more than their usual foe.

Kenn had slowed to stay by Adrian and Kendle—not to share their company but to make sure they didn't step foot on the ship. In a high-alert situation, they might be shot. Kenn had Tonya clear in his mind now. The fight for the ship was almost over and Tonya wasn't near that chaos, but he didn't pause as they reached the pontoon bridge. "Stay here."

Adrian grabbed Kendle's arm when she would have followed anyway. "Don't break that rule."

Kendle jerked away, but she stopped. She scanned the water and ships, seeing Grant and his crew had repositioned them all again since she'd been here last.

Adrian waved Kendle back to the edge of the bridge. He went a few inflatables further, studying the dead men. *Straight invasion. I wonder why they didn't use a decoy.*

Quinn finally caught up. He rubbed Kendle's arm as he went by.

She scowled.

Quinn kept going.

Kenn was on the ladder as Quinn reached it. He slid back down with his boot out and hit Quinn in the face.

Quinn dropped and didn't move.

Kenn turned and started to climb again. "Tell Tommy I haven't forgotten."

Quinn didn't hear it. He was unconscious yet again.

Kenn spotted Morgan working on a bloody body near the guard post. It didn't look good, judging from Morgan's expression. Darren was kneeling next to them. His rifle was on the deck by his leg, in easy reach.

Kenn saw three bodies at the top of the ladder and matched them to Darren's weapon. He found a messy kill hanging over the side of the railing to his right that implied Darren's partner wasn't as good. The bullet holes on the rail said she'd walked it in.

Kenn counted six more bodies on the deck below the empty bridge. *A group of them tried to take over the boat or they were trying to find shelter from Darren's slugs.* Brass was all over the deck, explaining the volley of shots that had seemed endless as they ran through the jungle.

Kenn went down the ramp, seeing more bullet holes where guards below had fired up. Blood droplets were scattered over the carpet, but there wasn't a body.

Kenn followed the trail, already knowing where it would end. The new Eagles Angela had picked for guard duty had done a solid job from what he could see. Intruders on-the-fly were hard to manage in the best of situations.

Kenn saw Daryl getting a report from the rookie on duty here. The rookie was gawking at the snake stuck in Daryl's arm while trying to form sentences that made sense.

Kenn kept going, seeing more brass and blood. He spotted a body on the stairs. The dead man

looked like all the others—an enemy who would never stop hunting them.

Kenn's anger flared as he saw Harry leaning against the wall near the corpse, holding his white coat around his arm. Blood was dropping steadily.

“He knew I was a medic and he shot me anyway!”

“I see that. Come on.”

Harry leaned on Kenn as the Marine slid an arm under him and kept moving. He was headed where Harry needed to go.

“At least I didn't die.”

Kenn went down the steps with most of Harry's weight on his shoulder and bruised hip. He took him straight to the medical lounge and shoved the door open.

People flinched, turning.

Terry lifted his gun.

“At ease.” Kenn brought Harry to the row of seats in the corner and gently put him down. “Boss almost has it covered.”

Kenn returned to the main door and shut it, turning the lock. “Someone go make sure the rear entrance is secured. Then stay there and keep an eye on it until we get an all clear call.” Kenn frowned at the scared people. “Now!”

Jeff appeared on the other side of the door. He spotted Kenn inside and kept going to check the next area. “Medical bay is clear.”

Kenn went to Tonya's room. "Coming in." He opened the door and found Tim there, gun in his face.

Tim blinked. "Awesome." He holstered and retreated.

Kenn scanned Tonya and the baby, who were sitting in the chair behind Tim, both prepped to bugout if needed. Kenn felt his rage leave. Bitterness and resignation came in its place.

Kenn shut the door to her room and went to check all the others. He didn't stop until he'd cleared every part of the medical wing.

3

"Help! Oh, Lord! Someone help us!"

Theo followed the sound, not hesitating even though he wasn't an Eagle anymore. He eased to the end of the hallway as the sounds grew closer.

Bernice followed the UN man. "Stop! Give her back!" The man had grabbed her daughter without asking who she was or making any demands. Bernice knew what he wanted from her pretty daughter. Bernice attacked the man, slamming her fists into his exposed skin.

Theo used the glass windows to spot the problem. He tensed, arm coming up... Theo lunged forward and wrapped his arm around the man's neck. He jerked hard and cracked it.

Crissy fell into Bernice's arms as Theo dragged the dead man down the hall, aware of Eagles and camp people flooding the area.

Debra spotted him and rushed forward in relief. She kissed him, arms holding him close.

Theo enjoyed the moment, glad he'd been here to help.

Bernice rose, bringing her daughter along. She found Theo and shoved through the small crowd to reach him. "Thank you!"

Theo smiled at her as Debra let go.

Bernice slid into his arms and locked their lips.

Theo lit up like a neon bulb, arms coming up to hold her close.

Bernice deepened the kiss, also caught off guard.

Debra gaped, shocked.

Crissy giggled. "Momma likes him!"

The Eagles chuckled as Bernice finally retreated.

Theo grinned like a fool. "You're welcome?"

Debra tapped his arm.

Theo turned toward her.

Slap!

Debra marched off.

Theo rubbed his cheek, frowning. "Well, we aren't a couple, remember?!"

Theo turned back to Bernice as everyone else laughed.

Bernice smiled, hugging her daughter close. “You remind me of my late husband. He was also good with engines and helping people.”

Theo frowned, brain no longer working. “Well, I’m not a replacement!”

Bernice stepped forward, face darkening.

Theo braced for it, having just experienced that particular expression of female displeasure.

Slap!

Theo rubbed both cheeks as Bernice and Crissy went with the Eagles to make a report. “What just happened?”

Conner cleared his throat. “Near as I can tell, you were kissed by two beautiful women, then slapped by both of them, and it all took place in about two minutes.” He grinned, hand coming up as he retreated. “Don’t rub that off on me. I wouldn’t know what to do with it.”

Theo snorted. “Yeah, saying exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong moment takes skill.”

“Yeah, why would you say that about her husband?”

Theo sighed, following Conner to finish searching this deck. “I really have no idea.”

“Well, if that’s what you’re like with all the blood *in* your brain, don’t ever talk during sex.”

4

Morgan swallowed his sadness. “Men die in battle. We all know that.”

“She’s not a man!” Darren glared up, tears welling. “She shouldn’t have been here!”

Morgan felt the moment arrive for a graduation lesson. He hated fate at this moment. “Why do you think we have to treat them as equals?”

“This is no time for a lesson!”

“No, this is the *reason* for the lesson.”

Darren glared as everyone quieted. Each person there was hoping Morgan could make them feel better with his next words.

“We treat them as equals and view them as any other Eagle in Safe Haven’s army of defenders.” Morgan’s eyes went over Hannah’s bloody body. The only consolation was that she’d died quickly. Even if a medic had gotten to her right away, she wouldn’t have survived. “When we lose one in battle, we see them as another man who fell so it doesn’t rip our guts out and break us. If we see them as what they really are, like you are right now, no Eagle would ever do more than one run. We wouldn’t have an army.”

It didn’t make any of them feel better, Darren least of all. He stared at Morgan with rebellion forming behind his grief. “She shouldn’t have been here.” He raked the rest of the witnesses, picking out female targets. “None of you should be in an army!”

Morgan held up a hand when the females in the crowd started to protest. “You can take that to the boss. After this, she’ll consider it. When the story spreads, as it always does in our camp, a few of the

already nervous rookies and level ones will probably resign. That may even sway her decision.”

Darren’s fury grew. “I will. You know I will.”

“If you think you should, yes.” Morgan let the blood on his hands drip to the deck. “I also know you’ll think it through while you shower and get ready for your next shift.”

“I’m going straight to the boss so I don’t have time to think. She needs to see how this feels!”

Morgan stepped forward, anger blazing to life. “You think she doesn’t?! She dies each time we lose a camp member! She loves these people more than we ever will.”

Darren shuddered as grief took back over. “You don’t understand. Leave me alone.”

Morgan swept the couple waiting for him by the ramp. “I understand better than you think, Darren. But it’s *their* lives. We have no right to tell them they can’t make the same sacrifices as us.”

Darren didn’t answer.

Morgan went to his family while thanking God that it hadn’t been one of them.

5

“Stop it!”

“Do it!”

An awful scream echoed as Neil, Wade, and Charlie hurried through the crowd in the descendant hall. Kyle was right behind them.

Neil spotted Samantha and went to her. Wade followed; both men were relieved to see her and the twins in her arms.

Kyle met Jennifer at the rear of the crowd, arms opening for their tight clutch.

Charlie scanned the crowd and didn't see Tracy. "Where is she?!"

People pointed at the cabin they were gathered around.

Greg and Ivan stood in front of the door. They both shook their heads at Charlie as Angela's voice rang out.

"Do it again!"

"No! It's enough! I understand!"

Angela's cold voice came through the door. "Do it again. We need that answer."

A man's scream came, muffled, like someone had a pillow over his face.

Charlie blanched. "She's torturing him!"

Greg shrugged. "That's not the ugly part, son. She's making Tracy do it."

Charlie tried to connect to Tracy, but his mom's shield was over both of them.

"Tell her so I can stop!" Tracy's voice was panicked.

"Okay! We were already on the island!"

The crowd stilled to listen as Angela and Tracy got the information they needed.

"Who sent you? When are they coming? How many are coming?"

“Toshi dropped us here weeks before you came. Please don’t! Please!”

People around the door backed up at his shriek.

“What were your orders?”

“Kill leadership and cause trouble, but you kept clearing the tunnels. We couldn’t do anything!”

“You breached my ship! You killed my Eagles!”

“Ahh! Ahh! Ahh!”

Neil and Wade led Samantha away from the door. They didn’t want her to view inside that cabin.

The crowd mostly followed, sure they would hear the details later.

Charlie didn’t budge.

“How many? Don’t lie or I’ll drag this out for days!”

“Thirty pirates. Thirty pirates!”

“Why did you say pirates...”

An ugly scream echoed, sending another cluster of nervous people away from the door.

“Do it again!”

“No! I’m done!”

“I thought you wanted to be the queen of Safe Haven?!”

“I do!”

“This is part of the job. Do it!”

“Okay!”

“Ahh! Ahh! Kill team! There’s a kill team!”

“Who are they here for? How many?”

“Everyone! Spare time keepers. Kill the boss. Grab women. Remove the camp!”

“How many?!”

“Five!”

Silence came a second later.

Everyone but Charlie backed up as quick steps came toward the door.

Tracy flew out, bumping into Charlie. Tears and bloody hands came up in defense.

Charlie wrapped his arms around her and led her away from the cabin. He was furious, but a fast glimpse of his mother said this was a bad time to pick a fight.

“She held them with her shield and burned them alive!” Tracy shuddered. “I can still smell it.”

Everyone could. They could also see the pile of smoldering bodies Ian was spraying with the extinguisher before they caught the carpet on fire.

Angela came out of the room, waving a hand. The door slammed shut before the crowd could catch a glimpse.

Greg and Ivan both got a peek and a chill. Only one part of the man had been touched.

Angela wiped blood from her arms with a towel she’d taken from the bathroom in the cabin. She’d used it to muffle the screams at first. Then she’d decided everyone needed a reminder they were still at war.

Angela pushed her radio button. “I’m still waiting for that call.”

Trent’s voice came right back. “Just found the last one. She was hiding under a bed. All kids are accounted for.”

Angela breathed a sigh of relief even as fresh adrenaline flowed through her body. She hit the radio again. “How long for my all clear?”

“We’re on the last deck now, Boss. Two minutes.”

Angela didn’t want to wait that long. “Grid it.”

Jennifer leaned against Kyle and opened her mental grid. It lit up with hundreds of moving dots.

Angela gave another radio order. “Except for the clearing crew, stop for the next two minutes. I repeat: stop where you are right now and don’t move unless you have to.” Angela waited.

Jennifer narrowed in. “They’re all ours. I don’t see anyone new.”

Kyle wanted to verify that, but he was exhausted, empty, and injured.

Angela strode toward the stairs to the top deck. “They have to be on one of the other ships. Call Grant and get me a crew up there to go over each one.”

Greg relayed the messages while Ivan scanned around them for the missing kill team.

Angela strode across the deck, fury growing at the sight of Hannah’s body.

Darren jumped up, mouth opening.

Angela focused on him, connecting him so he could feel her pain. *I’m sorry.*

Darren cried with her. The agony increased as he felt the sorrow of all the members of their hive.

Angela kept going, letting the tears roll.

Angela went down the ladder and jumped to the pontoon bridge. She stepped over Quinn's unconscious body without reacting. "Get me a boat."

Ivan hurried toward the row of emergency boats they'd tied up, swallowing his concern. Angela was almost coated in blood. She was leaving red tracks with every step. He wasn't going to prevent her from doing anything.

Angela locked eyes with Adrian. *Five targets left. Find them!*

Adrian immediately began searching with the grid he'd never admitted to. He found them instantly.

Adrian spun, drawing his gun.

Five men rose from the shallow water near the shoreline, lifting rifles.

Kendle jumped in front of Angela as all the men fired.

Three fast rifle shots echoed. Then Adrian fired his sleep spell and his gun.

Kendle brought up her shield and deflected the bullets that sprayed across the pontoon bridge and the side of their ship. She staggered at the sharp pain of repeated impacts.

Angela put a hand on Kendle's shoulder to steady her.

Kendle wrapped her shield around the slugs and let them drop. Brass clattered across the bridge.

Adrian scanned and turned, hunting for whoever was shooting from the trees. They'd picked off the last of the kill team over his shoulder.

"It's Tommy." Angela waited to feel relief now that the battle was over. She didn't tell them Tommy had begged for another chance and she'd granted it.

"Ship is all-clear, Boss."

"Copy."

Angela's heart pounded as Eagles out here verified all these targets were down. She knew something else had gone wrong. *What is it?*

"Boss?"

Angela's stomach curled at Daryl's reluctant tone. "Where's Marc?"

No one spoke.

Angela turned to Adrian, orbs glowing bright red to match her blood coat. "Where's Marc?!"

Adrian gestured toward the island. "He's coming. His ankle is hurt. He sent everyone to help you."

Angela dug into his thoughts, anger flaring up. She marched toward the shore, fingers curling into a fist.

Adrian moved aside. "He told us all to go, Angie."

Angela swung across her body and punched Adrian in the face.

He fell backward into the water with her bloody fist print on his lip.

Angela kept going, zeroing in on a narrow section of the island that was protected on all sides

by the jungle. “Get the camp settled. Get the traitor out of here. Do it now.”

Greg waved at Ivan to forget the boat as he followed her.

Angela hurried onto the beach and up the hillside with Kendle on her heels. Most of Marc’s team hurried after them as they realized he should have made it back by now.

“He really did tell us to come here and defend the ship.”

“I believed him.”

Kendle scowled. “Then why the hit?”

Angela gestured angrily, slinging blood onto the grass. “Adrian knew something was wrong. He left Marc to face it alone.”

Kendle didn’t want to believe that, but there was a history of Adrian trying to sacrifice Marc for the greater good. “Prove that and I’ll kill Adrian tonight in his sleep.”

Angela shoved into Kendle’s mind, sharing the thoughts she’d gotten from Adrian. “But don’t offer what you can’t afford to pay. If he dies, so do you!”

Kendle fell silent.

Angela increased her pace.

“I see a dust storm.” Greg frowned. “A blue...” He fell silent as he recognized magic being used inside a shield.

Everyone moved faster through the tall grass.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Tick-Tock

1

Marc slid through the tall grass that turned into razors. They raked down his arms again and drew more thin red lines before he could get his shield back up. Marc felt Angie and the others hurrying his way, but there was no time to warn them of what was happening.

Marc got up and fired. The powerful death spell bounced off Nature's injured thigh.

She flinched, then fired back.

Marc tried to catch the dry-out spell and swallow it for energy. The dry heat belched right back out instead and slammed into her.

Nature roared at him, spinning closer with those giant teeth snapping.

Marc dove under her and expanded his shield, hitting her weak leg. She didn't seem to have any other weak spots.

"What the hell is that?!" Daryl stopped, mouth dropping open.

Nature in the flesh was even more intimidating than in their minds. Eight feet tall with exceptionally long legs covered in peacock feathers,

her head sported a set of the most beautiful antlers any of them had ever seen, even with a small point missing. Her humanoid face was severely cut back by the thick antlers, making her eyes the most dominant feature on her face. A few curls of blondish red hair hung over her delicate ears and vanished into the elegant emerald plumage covering her back and generous chest.

“There’s Dog!” Greg pointed toward a jagged clump of uprooted grass. Dog was behind it, not moving, but he was inside the shield, preventing anyone from reaching him.

Angela went by Greg and tried to enter the fight.

Nature’s shield was the hardest barrier Angela had ever felt. It squeezed her out with mocking ease.

Kendle fired her strongest spell at the bottom of the shield, away from Marc.

Nature hissed as she absorbed it to add to her energy bank.

“No magic!” Angela waved at Eagles who wanted to use guns. “Save them. If she lowers the shield, take her down.”

“We need someone who can connect with her.” Daryl scanned the faces around him, aware of the crowd growing as Grant’s group came up the hill. Many of them spotted the snake head in his arm and flinched. Then they spotted Nature and considered running. “Maybe we can negotiate.”

“It doesn’t work that way.” Adrian backed further into the crowd. “Nature controls them, not the other way around.”

Wade and Neil were both glad Samantha was on the ship. They'd come out to help after leaving her in Gus's care. He was watching over a lot of their partners and kids right now.

Not all of Marc's team had come up here yet, but Adrian knew they would. Until they arrived, he planned to watch their surroundings. They were all exposed right now and no one was on duty out here. He saw Tommy coming down from his blind and approved. *Good luck in your second chance.*

Nature felt him. She spotted Adrian in the crowd. Her eyes lit up with deep need and fresh fury.

Adrian moved behind the crowd to block her view.

Angela saw it all. An awful, perfect solution popped up in her mind.

Marc fired while Nature was distracted, hitting that thigh repeatedly with his last knife, his last bullet, and almost the last of his energy. His heat spell rippled through the battlefield, turning the grass and trees to brown, smoking husks. It hit Nature in waves that burnt her leg.

Nature flung out a hand and slammed Marc into her shield. She blasted him with wind, blowing his hair and jacket back.

Marc blistered her with close-range pain, always aiming for her leg.

Nature's grip eased for a brief second.

Marc jerked loose and fell to the ground.

Pain rolled through Marc's body in numerous places as he jumped the vines coming at him with deadly points. One of them jerked upward and impaled his broken ankle; it dragged him to the ground.

“Ahh! Ahh!”

“Marc!”

People who had energy left fired spells, but the wind shield around the battlefield was too strong for them to get through.

“Do something!” Kendle couldn't stand the sight of Marc being hurt. “Help him!” She fired again with all she had, but the weak ice spell had no effect on Nature's shield.

Angela connected to Marc through their bond.

Marc held his breath and welcomed Angela's feel as their minds melded together. *Hello.*

Angela winced at the desperation in that one word. *Never stop fighting.*

I won't. I love you.

Nature's fury blasted both of them, ripping off small shreds of Marc's torn skin. Leaves and vines sliced into him, bringing fresh drops of blood that soaked into the ground.

Angela sent a mental image. *Make this deal.*

Marc forced his mouth open, using the breath he'd held. “When death comes, I promise it to you.”

Nature's greed flashed over all of them.

Marc finished it as he sucked in another breath. “This island is sanctuary for humanity.”

Nature slowly stopped spinning and eased her hold on Marc. She brought him down to the ground and retreated, staring at him in anger and greed. “If you break this pact, I will destroy this island like I have done so many times in the past. My ancient threads will be re-spun elsewhere. You and your kind will be gone!”

Marc fought the pain and grayness making him sway on his bloody feet. “We have a deal in place. And we’ll fix the damage to your...threads.”

Nature swept him with cold heat. “You can’t grow beyond this island. There is no room. You have doomed your kind to a miserable existence.”

“Maybe. But at least we will still exist.” Marc knew the time for force was over. “I hope for peace between us in the future.”

Nature began to move back, head swiveling to mark all of them. “Do not go home. Stay in your new land and live your specks in time. Leave the rest of the world to its fate.”

“I’d like to.” Marc sighed deeply, pain radiating through every part of his body. “But I don’t make those choices. I’m not the boss, and she already hates it here. We’ll see you in three years. I’m sorry.”

Nature gave him a look that was almost fond. “As am I, Marc of this lifetime. You have not been a disappointment.”

Marc turned around as the shield dropped and people rushed toward him. “Neither were you.”

Morgan and Angela caught Marc as he fell. His blood was streaked across a wide swatch of this cliff top.

Nature retreated, increasing pace until she was a windy blur that vanished into the bluster of leaves and grass. *“Tick-tock, Safe Haven. Tick-tock.”*

Marc stared at the sky above them, blinking away tears as they manhandled him to get to his worst injuries. “Will she honor it?”

Angela nodded, holding his leg up so Morgan could stop the bleeding. “She wants that energy the same way the ocean wanted mine. I counted on it.”

“I can’t believe you did that!” Adrian was furious. He stomped over, shoving people out of his way. “Your energy will go to her! She’ll have control of your power during the final battle!”

Marc cried out as they shifted him. It faded into laughter.

Adrian scowled. “What’s funny?!”

“It’s not mine.”

Adrian stared. “Not your what?”

“Not my power.” Marc forced his head to turn so he could see Adrian. *“Yours.”*

Adrian understood in an angry flash. “What makes you think I’ll agree to give up my energy to her when I die?”

Marc pointed toward the cruise ship that was lined with worried faces in nearly every window on every deck. “Them.”

Adrian realized he was trapped. He glared at Angela. “You knew Nature wanted one because the

ocean got one! You knew I'd be a target in that final battle..."

Angela didn't answer or stop working on Marc. His wounds were healing, but it was too slow. *Something isn't right.*

Adrian heard the key turn in the lock to that prison. "She sold me out again."

Marc let the fog claim his mind as they lifted him onto a stretcher. "Now that's flawless."

"Let me add to it." Kendle sneered at Adrian. She'd been reading his thoughts, and as usual, Angela had been right. "He found a bunker he hasn't told you about. It's on the other side of the cliff road, in a small area he also hasn't told you about."

Adrian was already edging toward the tall grass. "Slam you."

Angela looked at him directly for the first time.

Adrian immediately dropped his head, muttering. "I would have told you. It's been cleared."

Morgan went with Daryl to collect Dog. Biff followed with another stretcher. The wolf hadn't moved at all. Morgan had scanned him, but he wasn't sure if Dog was alive.

Morgan knelt, moving his hand slowly. "Dog? It's Morgan."

Dog whimpered.

Morgan breathed a sigh of relief. He used the last of his energy on the wolf, swaying as he crouched there.

“That’s enough.” Pam had forced her way out of the cabin where Angela had ordered them all to wait. She led Morgan aside as Daryl carefully lifted Dog onto the stretcher. “You’re getting a quick break before you do anything else. Sit down right here.”

Morgan did. It had been a long day. *We should have all died in that blast. Why aren’t we dead?*

Shawn came through the crowd that was following the stretchers down the hill. He stared at the couple, waiting to be noticed so he didn’t interrupt.

Pam looked up and smiled softly. “Welcome home, Wildman.”

Shawn’s torn, scratched skin glared at them in the sunset. Both her men were in rough shape, but Shawn’s mood was high and Morgan’s was the lowest she’d ever felt. His body was battered. He looked like he’d been in a boxing ring with a much better opponent.

Shawn joined them, taking Morgan’s other side. He could feel how much their partner needed care right now.

Pam sent healing energy while Shawn covered Morgan’s bloody, torn body with his jacket. He sat next to him, offering quiet comfort as the sun began to set.

Morgan let them protect and care for him as his body absorbed their love, but his mind stayed in the ground.

Everyone cleared room for the stretchers to be brought to the shore. Angela walked behind them, mind flying through what needed to come next. Her worry over Marc filled the rest of her mind, pushing for space.

Ed eased through the crowd to reach her elbow. He already had his notebook and pen in hand.

Angela didn't slow as she walked. "Tommy is no longer banished. Get him settled in a bunk on the camp deck and find him a job. He's isolated until he clears the medical tests, and he's not a priority."

Standing nearby waiting to talk to her, Tommy sighed in relief. "Thank you."

Angela nodded at him as she went by. "Make sure the camp knows he was our other sniper out here. He earned a second chance."

Tommy slid into the line going by, not caring when almost everyone scowled at him or ignored him.

The people in the crowd swept for all of Marc's team, hoping no one else had died. Knowing Marc was injured was already bad enough. They didn't want another death on top of that.

The sun was beginning to make its descent. Odd colors flashed off the bloody clothes and gory wounds of Marc's team. People noticed the men were leaving blood trails as they walked. It was easier to see down here on the bridge. The grass up on the cliff had hidden it. People didn't ask for details about the run yet, but they pointed and talked about what they did see. The most popular

comments concerned the snake head embedded in Daryl's swollen, purple arm.

“Tell our radio man to deliver this news over the PA system. We're disembarking tomorrow after dawn. I want everyone to assemble in groups on the top deck. We're all going to the island together for a full morning and afternoon of exploring and relaxing. It's an off day, and maybe a new national holiday.”

People around her cheered at the news. Angela didn't. She wanted to get Marc and his team to the medical bay so she could find someone with energy to spare. Marc's worst wound still wasn't healing. She needed more power. “I want every member of Marc's team brought into the medical ward.”

Most people assumed that was so he would have extra protection. Angela did it so he would be able to take downtime with his team right away. She could feel the heavy weight on his soul from this run. The lives he'd lost would eat him up if she didn't keep him with his team. They'd been through this too much; they knew how to cope. “All of them will spend the night. So will Shawn. Friends and family can visit until lights out. Just stay out of the way of the medics.”

Ed kept writing as they reached the bridge. The pontoons were only wide enough for two people and the stretchers. Ed and Angela waited for Marc and Dog to be taken across.

Angela scanned the bodies littering the bridge and shore. *We leave those wherever we go.* Blood

ran over the sides and dripped into the ocean. More would follow once the mess was handled.

She spotted Jeff going toward Hannah's body. "Damn. Send Darren to Megan. Make him go right now."

Ed saw what was happening and hurried off, squeezing around the stretchers to stop that ugly scene. Jeff was giving Hannah respect by handling her body first. The enemy would be dumped into the ocean. Hannah would go below. She would be added to their memorial list, along with everyone else they'd lost claiming this island.

Angela paused, turning to scan those still on the beach. She met Kendle's eye. "Thank you."

Kendle nodded and retreated into the cover of the tree line to finish watching until Marc was out of sight.

Adrian stiffened as Angela glared at him. "What?"

Angela snorted. "Keep the bunker. Clear that area again. I want a map in two days. Make notes."

"I will." Adrian wanted to say more. He turned toward the cliff road. "I saved parts of my history book. If you send office supplies, I'll get you a copy."

Angela waved for Brittani to write that down.

Brittani did, glad Angela was still using her for jobs and chores.

Angela decided to settle that right now too. "The council isn't pressing charges since it was an act. Just warn us next time."

Brittani nodded quickly. “We will. Thank you!”

Angela shrugged. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I did, boss.” Daryl joined them, distracting her before Brittani’s guilt made her confess. “My plans for the teams have been coming from Adrian.”

“I know.”

Daryl stared. “What?”

Angela chuckled, mind starting to thaw now that the fighting was over again. “I studied under the man. You don’t think I know his work?” She sobered. “That’s a little insulting.”

Daryl wasn’t sure if he should laugh or apologize. He waited quietly.

Angela didn’t drag it out. “Your punishment is up to your team leader.”

Daryl realized Marc would have the final call. Daryl felt better. “Thank you.”

Angela nodded. She noticed the snake head locked into his arm and sighed. “Must you?”

Daryl nodded, falling back out of her reach. “Yes.”

Angela delivered the next bit of news. “All Eagles who saw action clearing this island are getting a bump in level.”

Chad frowned. “What? Why?”

“You graduated this course. Unless you want to spend 3-5 weeks drilling on it?”

Chad didn’t. “What about the lessons we’ll be missing?”

“What do you think replaces this course? It’s a rotating lesson system that works around the hurdles life throws at us. Then we use it to our advantage.”

Greg pushed the rookie. “Go on; stop bothering the boss.”

Angela chuckled. “Thanks.”

Greg scanned the damaged team and the island. Smoke was still rising in thin plumes. “This has been surprisingly hard ground to settle.”

She nodded. “Yes. But it’s ours now and we’ll stay until we feel like leaving.” Angela walked onto the bridge.

“Angela?”

She stopped, but didn’t turn. “You won’t like the answer.”

Greg had to ask anyway. “Are we clear now? It’s time for that three years of peace, right?”

Angela sighed deeply. “That has not been revealed.”

Greg stared. “You lied.”

Angela tensed.

Greg scowled when she didn’t deny it. “You lied. We’re not getting peace.”

“No. Safe Haven’s fighters have other missions and duties to handle while our friends and families get those years. Decide right now. Is it worth it to you?”

Greg didn’t hesitate. “Down to the smallest drop of my sweat. It’s just not fair.”

“I know; that’s how life works for our kind. Be sure you really want this, Greg. Lasting peace is for normals.”

Greg didn’t answer.

“Why aren’t their wounds healing?” Daryl had been watching as Angela sent healing energy into passing team members that only had a little effect. “Are they immune?”

Angela stopped trying for the moment. Tonya and Timmy were getting the medical area ready and Ralph was bringing volunteers from the camp to help. Morgan would be along in a minute and they would use old world methods on their patients.

Daryl frowned when Angela didn’t answer. He didn’t repeat the question as they reached the ladder to the ship. Quinn had been dragged to the edge of the bridge and left there.

They spotted Jeff walking away with Hannah’s body cradled in his big arms.

Angela’s pain was in her voice. “She begged me to switch her up here today so she could see the island and pretend she was helping.” Angela’s heart broke. There was nothing she could say to make it better.

Witnesses behind them cheered as Shawn, Pam, and Morgan came to the bridge. Everyone knew of Shawn’s daring save during the storm. They cheered him and Marc’s team, clapping and calling out their approval at the job being finished.

Pam hugged Shawn’s waist as Morgan moved ahead, fueled by their energy. “I want to share.”

Shawn looked down, confused. “Share what?”

Pam met his eye. “What you asked me for.”

Shawn realized Pam had changed her mind about making him a descendant, like Jennifer had done for Kyle. “Why?”

Pam gestured toward the peacefully floating ships he’d helped line up all day. “If you’re going to keep doing crazy shit like that, you’ll need it!”

Shawn leaned down and kissed her to show his gratitude.

People cheered again, happy with the hero getting a kiss to end his great adventure.

Angela followed the stretchers down the ramp, glad Jeff had taken a different path. She saw Ian coming toward her with updates and injury reports. Angela waved at Ed, who was also coming back to her. “See my assistant.”

Ed’s face lit up, showing a handsome man who’d just been pleased. “Thank you, Boss!”

“It’s my honor.” Angela scanned the ships and the island, then the calm ocean being lit by a stunning sunset. She blocked her thoughts as she descended.

2

“Hi!” Megan smiled at Darren as he came into her medical room. Megan had just finished dressing. She couldn’t wait to get to her cabin and have a real shower, followed by clean duds. She hated Darren seeing her while she was a mess.

Darren shut the door.

Megan held up her arm. "It's really getting better this time. They even said I can go soon!"

"I'm glad."

Megan's happiness faded as she focused on his face. "Are you okay?"

"No." Darren shuddered. "Hannah's dead."

Megan paled. "What happened?"

"We were on top deck duty during the breach. She was shot."

"I'm so sorry." Megan studied him, seeing his grief. "I didn't know you two were close."

Darren gave her a sad smile. "I didn't either." *It was the best sex I've ever had and now it's gone. She was the one.* That quick moment in the cabin with Megan hadn't come close to the pleasure he'd gotten from Hannah in her little compartment. Darren had found two women he could love, at nearly the same time, and he'd lost the one he hadn't known he wanted. *Too late now.*

Megan felt it coming. Her face darkened. "Go on, and then get out."

Darren did. "I'm sorry. I made a mistake in judgement. We're not right for each other. I can't see you anymore."

Megan shrugged. "That's your choice." She refused to make a scene.

Darren waited for her to do just that. He'd hurt her. He knew it. She deserved to shout at him if it would make her feel better.

"You can leave now."

Darren stiffened at her icy voice. “Do you need anything?”

“For you to get out. I don’t want you to see what comes next!”

Darren didn’t want to hold her while she cried. Shouting would be better. He reached for the door handle. “I’m sorry.”

Megan burst into tears as he left.

Terry frowned at Darren, making him stop. “That was cruel. You could have fucked her without fucking her, you know?”

Darren went around the angry medic. “I can’t ever go through that pain again and I won’t ask her to resign. I’m a bachelor now. Someone else can hold her while she bleeds out on the deck for the boss’s goals.”

Terry made a note on Megan’s report about what had happened. *It might be better to keep her overnight now.*

Terry hadn’t forgotten about Courtney’s reaction to rejection. The explosion had been in his dreams just last night.

3

Jennifer slipped into the employee hallway while everyone was busy. She saw Cate and smiled. “I’ll be a little late for our lesson.”

“Okay. She’s coming from the shower in one minute.”

Jennifer went by the little girl and waited at the next door. Cate was on duty in these hallways right now, ensuring no adult was ever able to use them to hurt another child.

Francesca emerged from the shower room, towel twisted on top of her head.

“Early is good.” Jennifer stepped out. “Let’s talk.”

Francesca sucked in a gasp, stopping. The towel slid off and hit the floor; damp hair fell over her ears and neck. “Are you here to kill me?”

Jennifer chuckled. “No. I need a favor from you.”

“Oh.” Francesca brightened at the thought of Jennifer owing her a favor in return. “Ask away.”

“Drop the charges against Kimmie.”

Francesca’s face iced over. “No.”

“What do you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“She’ll trade you something.”

Francesca didn’t need to think about it. “Have her use her gifts for me.”

Now Jennifer’s face iced over. “I meant work of some kind. She can clean your cabin or carry your trays for a month.”

Francesca shrugged. “I want her to look for something that’s only important to me. It’ll just take a quick second and I’ll never tell anyone.”

“Absolutely not.” Jennifer held up a hand. “I’ll do it. *If* you drop the charges.”

Francesca nodded immediately. “Deal.”

“I’ll tell her lawyer.” Jennifer held out a sheet of paper and a pen.

Francesca signed it without reading it. She wasn’t going to break their deal. She didn’t need to read the threats.

Jennifer stored the paper as she drew energy, being careful. “What do you want?”

Francesca’s voice lowered into misery. “I’m so lonely! I can’t take it. Who’s supposed to be my mate?”

Jennifer relaxed. She didn’t mind matchmaking. It was a fun part of her gifts.

Francesca waited nervously while power hummed through the hallway.

Kyle found them a second later. He scowled at Francesca for asking Jennifer to use her gifts. Everyone knew she wasn’t supposed to do that right now.

Jennifer held out a hand to him. “Tell her the name I guessed last night.”

Kyle snorted as he rubbed her chilly fingers. “You were right? Figures.” Kyle nodded at the Eagle walking by the door with a load of supplies for the team now filling the medical bay. “Gabe has a pinup in his bunk of Marilyn Monroe. You could pull off that hairstyle.” Kyle wanted their match to be successful. When the kids were unhappy, so was Jennifer. She would always try to help them. He needed Francesca to view this event as a good thing that gave her a solid, satisfying relationship. Then Kimmie would be off the hook, for now.

Jennifer and Kyle left her standing there, thinking about that possibility.

“I’ll let the boss know.”

“No. I’ll let Samantha know. We have a chain of command for this stuff now.” Jennifer pointed at the growing crowd. “Now get in there and let the medics stick you with stuff.”

Kyle laughed, holding the door. “Stay with me for the wait?”

“You know it.”

They joined the rest of the team and their loved ones in the reception area of the medical wing. Many of them sat in the chairs and hugged, chatting lightly. No one spoke of what they’d been through yet. That might come after they were cleared. Right now, women were feeling for injuries and asking medical questions to be ready when it was their turn.

The men didn’t mention their worst injuries and they didn’t think about the run. It was closed up in their minds and hearts with all the other ugly missions they’d had.

Jennifer felt Kyle’s pain and weariness. She also felt his triumph. He’d had a good run. *But what is that smell?*

Many people were wondering the same thing, but none of them were rude enough to ask if the team had waded through dog shit.

Morgan came through, scanning each man in a slow walk that refused to skip anyone who needed help first.

Ralph came to Morgan. “We have all three exam rooms cleared, cleaned, and we’re stocking them. The back hall has eight rooms. We’re stacking supplies back there too. We don’t know where to put it all yet.”

“Thanks. We’ll each need a couple volunteers.” Morgan met Terry’s eye through the crowd as Ralph picked camp people to assist them. “You ready?”

Terry nodded. “I’m in room one.”

Morgan pointed at Marc.

Angela and Charlie handled the stretchers this time.

Morgan nodded toward Harry. “Just until you start hurting.”

Harry grinned. He’d been medicated and treated. The bullet had gone straight through and then Trinity had healed him. He was almost as good as new. “I’m in room two.”

Morgan nodded at Daryl and Kenn. “Put Dog with Marc. You two take room two together.”

Angela liked it that they were going to handle the team two at a time.

“I’m in room three.” Morgan waved at Neil and Kyle.

“Cool.” Wade slid over on the couch and stretched out. “Yeah, baby.”

Morgan motioned to Shawn as he led the two men toward room three. “Don’t go anywhere. You look like us and you weren’t even there.”

Pam approved. She tugged on Shawn’s arm, making him sit down near Wade’s couch.

“Where do you want us?” Greg came from the back room with Ivan. “We were discharged, but we don’t feel good. We think we should stay.”

Morgan chuckled. “Take a room on the end. Cover guards here to free up camp people.”

Ralph shook his head, smiling. “We’re staying too. You’ll have all the help you need tonight. And when the other medics finish, you’ll be seen to as well.” Ralph frowned now, fingers coming up to fork back and forth. “I’m watching you.”

Morgan burst out laughing, heart warmed. *We should make Ralph an Eagle somehow.*

Morgan went into the room and shut the door, thrilled to find two chairs, a narrow exam table along the wall, and a stand up tray in the corner. Ralph had made sure they had plenty of room to work. “He really is a handy man to have around.”

Tim came to the doorway. “How can I help?”

Morgan was thrilled to have the extra medic. “Can you do all the stitches?”

Tim nodded eagerly. He was fast at that. “Bandages on or off?”

Morgan examined Kyle’s bloody, muddy, scratched, bruised arm where a long cut would now give him a thick new scar. “Let’s go with off, until morning. I want to watch them. Ask Tonya what antibiotic she used on Megan. We’ll hit everyone with that.” Morgan hadn’t been here for the cure. He’d just heard about it.

Tim moved toward the cabinet to gather the supplies he needed.

“Did you see what happened when she tried to heal Marc?”

Neil nodded at Kyle, shutting the door. “It happened to Samantha too, while we were on the road. She almost lost the boys. Conner and William got her to the ship. Angela and Marc were covering it by the time she went into labor.”

“I’ve been watching, keeping track where I can. It’s like we develop an immunity to it, but that immunity doesn’t last.”

Neil caught on. “If we don’t use it on someone for a long time, it will work for them again?” That matched with the medical observations Neil had been gathering too.

“Yes. But it’s never as strong as the first time.”

“What about healing from different people?”

“It’s not the person. It’s the level.”

Neil got his book out, ignoring Timmy as he came in with supplies and put them on the tray.

Morgan waved. “Shut the door and come over here.”

Timmy did, swallowing his smile. People were hurt. He wasn’t supposed to be feeling good. *But I am. I may not need food now. I have a real job and it matters.*

Morgan stored that level of progress. Angela would be pleased. “I’m going to scan each of them. You write the results and what I want done about it. If they need stitches, Tim is handling it. If they need a cast, Terry is good at those. If they need anything else, Harry and I will cover it. Get them cleaned up

and into the back cabins to wait for those treatments as soon as we finish with these exams.”

Timmy scribbled fast, pencil flying.

“They can have showers and food after stitches. Tim is coming around now. Go pass those instructions and then come right back here to record my scans.”

Timmy finished writing. “The camp is sending gifts to Shawn for the boat jump. Put them in his room here or his cabin?”

Morgan snickered, opening packages on the tray. “Leave them out there so we can all tease him until we’re cleared. Then he’ll decide.”

“Cool.” Timmy opened the door. “Looks like a delivery crew is coming in.” He moved off to handle his list.

Morgan finished scanning Kyle. He reached out. “I’ll make it fast.”

Kyle held out his hand, revealing a crooked middle finger. “My bird is flying the wrong way.”

“Been there.” Morgan used a careful grip, tightening as he jerked.

Crack!

Kyle’s eyes blazed for a brief instant and then faded.

Jennifer stuck her head in the door, scowling at Morgan.

Neil gently shut the door in her face.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Blink

1

“**C**oming in.”

People tensed as Tim stepped into Tonya’s room. They didn’t know how that would go.

Tim caught a fresh whiff of the decay the entire team reeked of. His nose curled, but he didn’t ask what had caused that odor. His short time as an Eagle had educated him on the many smells of death.

Kenn didn’t open his eyes as he slid the blanket aside so Tim could stitch his wounds. “I’m next in line for the shower.”

“Sorry.”

No one spoke while Tim got the stitches ready.

Tonya knew she needed to let them work this out, but it was hard not to jumpstart the moment.

Kenn felt her impatience. “Fine. I’ll drop the accusation against him, but I’m not withdrawing my petition to the law council.”

Tonya smiled. “I can live with that. Thank you.”

Tim knelt by Kenn to start with the large, freshly cleaned gash in his stomach. If it had gone much deeper, Kenn would have been

disemboweled. “Sorry.” Tim stuck him with the needle and began numbing the area.

After this run and the drugs the medics had given him during the exam, Kenn barely felt it. As soon as they’d finished, Kenn had come here to be with Tonya and his son.

Tim peered up as he opened the first suture. “I’m going to vote that we remove the right to privacy.”

Kenn stared. “Why?”

Tim nodded toward the baby. “While I waited for the enemy with a gun in my hand, I realized it was wrong. If the boss enforces the charges, I’m going to plead guilty.”

Kenn was surprised and soothed. “I’m glad you understand.”

“I do. I wish I’d told someone. Those deaths are on my hands too.” Tim put in the rest of the stitches without speaking.

Kenn held still, mind flying over the run in brief flashes that were okay for others to know about. The darkest parts weren’t allowed to surface.

The PA system crackled as it activated. “Hello, and good evening to you, Safe Haven. I have several updates and announcements, and then we’ll have soothing music until bedtime. The wonderful cooks are delivering baskets of snacks and drinks to most areas of the ship right now. They’re promising a terrific dinner. Come to the new mess at 8pm. Those in the medical bay will get deliveries and gratitude on behalf of all of us.”

Cheers echoed from every deck.

“The ship has been cleared; the lockdown is over. And now, for the best news of all. Straight from the boss, folks. Be on the top deck at dawn to disembark! We’re getting off this ship!”

Jonny gave them plenty of time to clap, cheer, and hug over that news. They’d been waiting to hear it for months. “Boss says we’ll spend the entire day on the island. It’s officially an off day except for a couple of stations. We’ll rotate those every three hours so everyone gets to enjoy some time off ship. We’ll grill food, play music and games, fish, and walk through any topside part of the island from the airstrip to this beach.” Jonny examined the radar and saw that would give the camp access to most of the island, but not the cliff road bunkers where Adrian and his people were.

“And a final notice, all parties set for tonight will take place on the island. Boss said we’re having a slumber party. Pick a pillow and a partner, and be on the top deck at sunrise.”

Safe Haven immediately began winding down.

Team members took deep breaths, accepting their continued survival against awful odds.

2

“Why can’t you heal us?” Charlie didn’t want normal care. It took too long.

“We’ve done it too much. Medicine has to handle it this time.” Angela helped Terry remove

Marc's clothes so they could access his wounds. He was still unconscious. Now examining his battered body, she was glad.

Charlie stared at Dog. "Can you help *him*?"

"I'm going to try as soon as I get your father settled." Angela frowned at the teenager. "Why don't *you* try?"

Charlie shrugged. He stood and went to Dog's stretcher. He put a hand on the wolf.

Dog let out a moan of relief. *Better.*

Charlie rubbed a spot on Dog that didn't seem injured. "We'll get you fixed up. Try to sleep through the medical care."

Dog's body relaxed as the pain receded enough to let him sleep. *Thank you.*

Charlie looked at his dad.

Angela lifted a brow. "Maybe. Do you feel well enough to try?"

Charlie nodded. "I was behind them when the house blew up."

Angela winced.

Terry forced himself to keep working, glad he hadn't been there. The entire team had clearly missed death by inches.

Charlie put a hand on Marc's still bleeding, twisted ankle as Angela draped a heated blanket over the rest of his body. They would uncover each area as they worked so he didn't catch a chill.

Charlie's magic sank into the gory hole and began closing it from the inside.

“It’s working.” Terry watched, fascinated. “Try the break next?”

Charlie nodded, directing the stream at Marc’s ankle.

Terry’s face fell. “It’s not working.”

Angela frowned. “We don’t heal bones. It’s just one of the limits.” She directed Charlie back to the chair. “Snooze for a few minutes and then we’ll get you settled and comfortable, okay?” She covered him with a heated blanket.

Charlie nodded, yawning. “I’m furious with you. Just so you know.” He’d taken Tracy to their cabin so she could clean up, but he hadn’t stayed. He’d come to be with his team so his brain didn’t explode from what he’d been through.

“I know. As soon as we get you settled, we’ll get her up here. Someone will drag in a couch so she can stay the night if you want.”

“Cool.” Charlie leaned his head back.

As Angela straightened, Charlie grabbed her wrist. He didn’t look at her.

Angela smiled. “You’re welcome.” She rubbed his hand and went back to helping Marc.

Angela sent energy in thick streams that refilled his energy bank in seconds. His skin smoothed, wrinkles fading. His hair returned to glossy black.

Marc didn’t move, but Angela felt better. She’d wanted to do that for two days, but she’d been trying to let him handle his own feeding. He’d clearly chosen her old method of pretending it didn’t matter.

Tap-tap. The door opened and Samantha stepped in. She quickly shut it. "I'm not here. You don't see me." She put a hand on Dog's paw and groaned as energy transferred. "That's yummy!"

Angela chuckled.

So did Charlie.

Terry enjoyed the show as he worked on Marc's other injuries.

Samantha headed for the door. "I was never here." She stepped out and shut the door.

"There you are." Jennifer came over to Samantha, missing her flinch. "How is he?"

"Better, I think. They kicked me out."

Jennifer frowned. "Me too, from the other rooms. This waiting sucks." Jennifer handed Samantha a folder. "Francesca dropped the charges. She said Kimmie's just a kid and kids make mistakes."

Samantha smiled. "Awesome. Now why'd she really do it?"

Jennifer laughed. "I need to go make sure the den mothers have the kids under control."

Samantha tucked the folder into her pocket. "Morgan said at least half an hour before I can get in to Neil, and Wade is sleeping. So are the boys. Want company?"

Jennifer nodded, sliding over to make room. She spotted the pile of gifts near the main door. "They all think Shawn is the main hero."

Samantha nodded. “It’s good. Our guys won’t have to go through as much of the nagging for details.”

“But our guys did hard work. They just don’t get to tell anyone about it.”

Samantha held the door, still thrilled with having her healing body back. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Ed came up the stairs, arms full of notes for Angela.

Samantha held the door for him too. “She’s in room one. But hold on.” Sam got her book out and wrote a fast note. “Francesca dropped the charges. I’ll tell Jeff and Kimmie in the morning.”

Ed was glad. “Cool. Boss dismissed the charges against Trinity and Brittani.”

“Thanks.”

Ed went to room one, avoiding the waiting people and working crews so he didn’t get in the way or trip over anyone. He knocked with his boot.

Angela opened the door and came out. “They need a few minutes.” Charlie was getting his exam now, and Marc was still unconscious.

“I can put this in your cabin.”

Angela denied that. “They need a few minutes. Hit me.”

Ed shuffled through the notes. “I’m sorry. It isn’t in order.”

“It never is right after we see action.” Angela swept the medical bay, seeing someone had covered Shawn and Wade with heated blankets.

“Ray and Grant are together on guard duty at the steps to the top deck. Jayda and Conner are splitting point. Conner’s sleeping now. He’ll take over around 3 a.m. All the kids are in their areas, except for Missy and Amy. They’re all cleaning up from the storm. Allison, Candy, Daisey, Molly and a lot of the camp women are with them.” Ed spotted Amy and Missy coloring books in the corner. He marked them from his list. “Bernice and Anna want to come in here and help. I told them to get showers, put on comfortable clothes, and report to Morgan for assignments. Is that okay?”

Angela nodded, holding the door for Harry to come out of the next room.

Harry went to the main desk and made notes. He had to lean on the corner of the paper to keep it from sliding. “Daryl can be taken to the back. Then see if you can get Kenn back there long enough for his treatments.”

Brittani came from the chairs while Tonya came from her room. The baby was in her arms, bundled up.

Kenn followed her, scowling at all of them.

Harry motioned to the cleaning crew going by with his good hand. “I need that room ready ASAP.”

The crew detoured and eased into the crowded room to get started.

“Wade, you’re up for stitches.”

Wade slowly sat up, letting the blanket fall. “Which arm first?”

Tim chuckled as he came over with a tray of supplies. “Whichever you like.”

Ed went on with the updates. “Zack, Gus, Gabe, Debra, Jeff, and Trent are on rotating patrols of all decks. Those last two are also on body cleanup. It’s almost finished.”

Angela nodded. “Anything else?”

“Monica is with Theo while he picks through the camp for a repair crew. They’ll be working tonight after everyone else crashes. And that’s it. We’re all closed up and accounted for.”

Angela signed his note.

Ed headed for the door. “Be back in an hour with another update.”

Angela was pleased with Ed’s performance. *I made the right choice there.*

Megan came from the exam room. She spotted Angela. “Boss, I have something.” She gave Angela the picture she’d found at the doctor’s place. “I thought we could pass it to Kendle.”

Angela studied the image. “I’ll make sure she gets it.” Angela now understood why Kendle was fixated on Marc so hard. He and Luke could have been twins in everything except age. *And Marc’s not that cynical or anti-social yet.* Angela tucked the photo into her jacket pocket. “How are you feeling?”

Megan shrugged. “My arm’s a lot better. They released me a while ago, but I had to wait for paperwork and meds.”

Angela hated Megan's emotional pain. She leaned closer. "Sometimes you have to fight for what you want. The hardest part is deciding if it's worth fighting for at all."

Megan's eyes glistened as she fought back tears. "If he was in love with Hannah, I can't fight a ghost." Megan moved toward the door. "I'll be with the den mothers tonight. I'll hug those little ones for ya."

"Good. They need all the attention they can get." Angela felt her mind click a page in her plans and mental calendar. *One more big battle, then we do get a nice break.* Angela rubbed her sore back and went to wait by the door for Harry's call to move Marc, Dog, and Charlie to a rear room. *Let's start with a peaceful night of healing.*

3

I'm not dead.

Marc's mind replayed what had happened. He winced at the memories of Dog being hurt, of being impaled in front of Angela, of being eye-to-eye with their biggest opponent in the coming battle. *I don't think we can beat that, even with a lot of us inside her shield together.*

Marc concentrated, smelling cleaning chemicals and the disturbing medicinal scent that always came with clinics and hospitals. Angela's sweaty vanilla filled his nose an instant later as she leaned over him to brush a hand across his forehead.

Marc swallowed a shudder and forced his eyes open to keep from replaying his time in the earth again.

Angela smiled. "Welcome back."

Marc slowly looked around, not feeling much beyond warmth and fuzziness.

"That's the blanket and drugs. You're fine. Everything's still there."

He saw Dog and Charlie nearby. They were both bandaged and covered in blankets. Marc carefully moved his leg. Pain broke through the drugs.

"Yeah, sorry. Even Charlie's magic won't heal bones."

Marc realized Charlie had healed half of his worst injury. The impalement was fully recovered. "How is he?"

Angela looked over at Charlie. He was sleeping soundly. Tracy had refused to come up and sit with him because she was here. Angela was okay with that. "Fine, now. He feels different, though. This was a hard run for him."

"He did well." Marc yawned, slowly moving his hand up to rub his face. He had stitches and bandages all over his arms. "This was a rough one for all of us."

He felt the tubes and bandages all over his naked body now. The weight of the warm blanket and Angela's presence were the only reasons he stayed calm as he focused on clearing his grid. He hated

being injured. Not knowing if he was still able to function in every way was disturbing.

Angela helped him find the controller so he could sit the bed up. She felt him start worrying about his team. “They’re all fine. They’ll be glad to know you’re awake.”

She dug a baggie from her pocket and held it out before his mind could pull him back down into the constant foggy replays. “This was in Dog’s mouth.”

Marc examined the small fragment, recognizing it immediately. Power ran up his arm and hummed through his mind. “This is special.”

“I thought so too.” Angela didn’t ask for the story of how it had gotten there. She assumed she would read about it in their reports.

Angela checked on Dog while Marc adjusted to being in the bed and having a cast on his ankle.

“Ah, hell.”

Angela chuckled. “Morgan thinks it will heal faster than normal breaks because of who you are.”

“Well, that’s good news at least.”

Angela caught the tone. She frowned. “We claimed the island, a fleet of fighting ships, and both Kendle and Adrian are alive so we can enjoy their suffering later. What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t find it, Angie. I had a thread I could have worked on, but I didn’t unravel it and now it’s gone!”

“Is that all?” Angela came back over to his bed.

“What do you mean is that all? We can’t live like this.” Marc was still in his head even after everything that had happened. “It won’t work.”

Angela leaned closer, magic flaring out to capture him. “Tell me how to fix it!”

Power flew through the room, bringing old magic. Marc’s demon spoke to her directly. “*Without dark, you do not notice the light. Without war, peace would bore. One cannot exist without the other.*”

“I refuse to accept that answer. Give me a way around it.”

“*The Master will not like this.*”

Angela nodded. “And maybe we’ll both pay for that later, but we’ll give him peace right now. He’s been struggling too hard with this. He’ll crack again.”

The demon bowed to her. “*Create a world where evil is valued even as it works for the good.*”

Angela stared, stunned, as the demon faded.

Marc yawned. “Did you get what you need?” He was nauseous. He hadn’t been on this end often. He didn’t like it.

“Stand by.” She turned toward the window and began to use her powerful mind to see if the pieces would fit into place on their own. That’s how she always knew the right plan. It sometimes went down to time for planning, but she was confident in the choices when she made them. The few times she’d tried to make a piece fit, they’d had more losses than she’d estimated.

Marc wiped his face and sat up in the medical bed. “These are comfortable.” He began playing with the controller.

Dog chuffed from his stretcher bed. *Are you a pup?*

Marc chuckled. “I’m a guy. That old comedian had it right in some ways.”

Dog didn’t know who Marc meant, but Marc seemed happier now and that made Dog content. He put his big head down and continued watching as Angela tried to find a way to fix their world.

4

“I need—”

“Shh...” Marc pointed.

Conner stopped as he saw Angela pacing the corner, muttering.

Marc waved. “Give it to me.”

Conner handed Marc the update sheet, not looking away from Angela. He was still going on full steam. He loved point duty, but he was glad to be sharing it in this situation. There was a lot going on. It was too much for one person to handle.

Conner swept Marc. “You look better.”

Marc smiled tiredly. “I will be. I just need some downtime.”

“I get that. Is she okay?”

“She’s in the groove. Don’t bother her unless you have to.”

“I won’t. I’ve seen my dad do something like that too. It’s cool. I didn’t know she’s a blinker.”

Marc paused with the paper halfway to his eyes. “A blinker?”

“Yeah. Man, it’s been a long time. I’d forgotten.” Conner stared at her. “She’ll blink in a minute. Just watch.”

Marc studied Angela, not sure if he should be worried.

Angela froze. She went dim for an instant. Then she resumed walking. It happened so fast that Marc rubbed his eyes again, not sure what he’d seen.

“Their minds are working so fast that their body systems are having trouble keeping up. When they freeze, it’s a catch-up moment, like buffering.”

Marc wondered if that computer term had been discovered before or after blinkers were studied in the labs. “Is it dangerous?”

“If they’re attacked, they’ll be caught off guard. They usually lock themselves in somewhere with protection they trust for moments like this.”

Marc felt pride that Angela believed she was safe enough to do it with just him between her and the rest of the world when he was in this condition. “Any other details you can think of?”

“No, but if I remember any, I’ll put it in my notes.” Conner proceeded toward the door. “Blinkers are smart. It’s awesome that Safe Haven has one.”

Marc nodded, though he still wasn't sure what he'd seen. He concentrated on her, eyes wide open. "Come on, baby. Blink for me."

Finally on his way to bed, Ian continued by their door, making a face. "Blink for me? What kind of foreplay is that?"

5

Tonya and Kenn glanced up in surprise as Ivan appeared in the doorway. Kenn saw how tired he was.

Tonya saw he was nervous. "What is it?"

Ivan came in, not looking away from Tonya. "I'm sorry. Please remove the curse."

Tonya blinked, staring.

Kenn scoffed. "You're not cursed. Hell, you're barely hurt...physically."

Ivan didn't have as many bandages as Kenn, but it was clear from his haunted expression that he'd been in the same war.

"They're all dead. Everyone I came here with is gone now."

"That's not under her control!"

Ivan watched Tonya's icy face. "Ask her."

Kenn pointed. "Get out before I get pissed!"

Ivan stepped forward and put a small box near Tonya's foot. He snatched his hand back in time to avoid the swipe of the male cat.

Kenn had already risen. He shoved Ivan toward the door.

“Look at her face!”

Kenn reluctantly stopped and turned. Ivan’s voice was too upset to be anything but genuine.

Tonya didn’t hide the hatred. “Do you know what you did wrong?”

Ivan nodded. “I’m sorry for it. I’m not that person anymore.”

“But you’re not far from it, either.” Tonya studied the tense man, ignoring Kenn’s shock. “Find a way to prove you’ve changed, or pay your debt.”

Ivan gestured at the box.

Kenn grabbed the box before she could reach for it. He popped it open and froze, stunned. “I’ve never seen a ruby that big.”

Kenn carefully held it out so Tonya could take it.

Tonya ran a gentle finger over the jewel, almost mesmerized by the patterns, the beauty. “Your debt to me is paid.”

Ivan felt a chain snap. The weight on his shoulders eased, letting him stand up straight again. “Thank you.” He quickly left before she could change it or add anything, shutting the door.

Kenn sat in the chair as the cat settled back down where it had been. “When did you do it?”

Tonya looked over with ruby light sparkling across her face and hair. “It was the first thing I did when the baby’s power came in.”

Kenn stared at her. “Is that what Adrian needs to do?”

Tonya’s chuckle was harsh. “Ivan thought about it; Adrian actually did it. There isn’t a big enough gem on this planet to get me to remove that curse.”

Kenn didn’t remind her that she’d asked for it from Adrian, but he still didn’t see it as rape. Tonya clearly did. Kenn didn’t want to get in the middle of it. *They can settle this one without me.*

6

Ivan went through the rear hallway, doing a check on the rooms. Visiting hours were almost over. He expected a lights out call over the radio at any moment.

Ivan stepped around the pile of gifts that were still coming from the camp. Almost all of them were for Shawn. Ivan planned to make it clear that Shawn wasn’t the only hero. Marc’s battle with Nature had been epic in Ivan’s opinion.

Ivan paused as the hall door opened.

Lisa peered in. “Can I see him?”

Ivan grinned, nodding. “Just make it quick. He’s in the room at the end, on the right.”

Lisa went that way. “Thanks.”

Ivan wondered if she and Greg would end up being a couple. He didn’t know Lisa well so he wasn’t sure if she was enough like Angela to make it work.

Ivan spotted Brittani coming from Daryl's room just as Trinity came down the hall with a fresh load of warm blankets. The females glared openly at each other. Both women were wearing Eagle gear and toolbelts with every slot filled. They didn't look like they were having peaceful moments of practicing literature or entertainment.

Ivan cleared his throat. "If you two expect your act to fly, you'd better start acting like it was just an act. You know?" Ivan lingered, waiting for an answer.

Brittani turned toward the opposite hall.

Trinity left by the main door.

Both women knew he was right but they couldn't bring themselves to make peace yet.

Brittani stopped as she saw her parents coming in. They spotted her and came over.

Britani scowled. "You were wrong to push him into this. You know that, right?"

Thelma and Dwight both nodded. The couple looked tired and smelled like fresh bread. They were also content with how things had turned out.

Thelma gave her a weak smile. "I was mad that you didn't have me at your wedding."

Dwight shrugged. "I was just mad. I didn't need a reason."

They chuckled, but Brittani knew they meant everything they'd said. "You'll see. You're wrong about me."

Thelma reached out and hugged her. “We decided it doesn’t matter. We want you to be happy.”

Brittani pointed at Daryl’s room. “If you want me to be happy, accept my husband.”

Dwight moved toward the room, nodding. “He did well. He’s a badass.”

Thelma grinned as Brittani chuckled. “Your father likes knowing your husband can keep you safe.”

“I know.” Brittani let it go. “Come on in and sit down. I know you’re tired.”

Thelma and Brittani went into the room.

Dwight scanned Daryl’s bandages and wounds, then the other bed. “Where’s your bunkie?”

“He went to be with his new family.” Daryl smiled softly at Brittani. “He said my wife might want that spot.”

Brittani grinned, patting the bulky kit she was wearing. “That’s the plan.” She laughed with him, sliding by her parents so she could put the kit on the ground by Daryl’s bed. “I brought your comfy clothes and some other things.”

“Thank you.” He shut his eyes as she leaned down to kiss his cheek, wild hair falling over his face. *I love you.*

Brittani nuzzled him and straightened. She turned to her parents. “You can sit and stay awhile.”

Thelma came over to Daryl and placed a wrapped package in his bruised, scratched hand.

She clasped his fingers as he reached for the freshly baked bread. "Welcome to our family."

Daryl was all for making peace. "Thank you. I'm sorry we eloped. We'll do another wedding if you like."

Thelma paused, expression brightening. "You would?"

Daryl and Britani both nodded.

Dwight met Daryl's eye as he leaned against the doorframe. "I might have been wrong."

Daryl grunted. "But you don't think so."

"No."

Thelma frowned at Dwight, tugging her green scarf closer around her neck. "We agreed to let it go and hope."

"So we did." Dwight wiped his hand on his pants again before touching her. It felt like he still had some flour under his nails from making the bread dough. He put an arm around her shoulders as she came over to him. "It's all shut down early tonight. We have time for a walk anywhere you'd like."

Thelma nodded immediately. "Top deck."

Dwight chuckled. "Okay." Almost all the women were making trips up to stare at the beautiful island.

Brittani smiled as they left. Her parents were in love and always had been. It was great. "Things will be better now."

"I believe that too." Daryl yawned. "I'll sleep for a while now, I think. It's fine to do other stuff."

“Okay.” She dug in the kit. “I need a shower and I’d like to get an update from a couple of areas.” She glanced over and found his eyes shutting. “Goodnight.”

“Love you...” Daryl let sleep claim his exhausted body. His brain stayed locked and on full alert.

Chapter Thirty
That's a Wrap
January 28th
Day 5

1

“What time is it?”

Wade checked his watch as he settled against the hall wall, using the light on it. “1:23am.”

Morgan yawned. “Are we all here?”

The rest of the ship was still noisy and active as people finished chores, ate, and got ready for bed. The medical area was dim, still, almost silent, and well-guarded. The team wanted to be left alone for a while. Greg and Ivan had made sure they were.

Wade had already scanned. “We’re short our team leader.”

“He’s coming. He had to wait for the boss to leave for updates.” Charlie didn’t want them to think of him as Angela’s son right now. He was just one of the team. “I told her I needed to check on Tracy.”

The other men wanted to ask if he’d made a final choice on the wedding, but they didn’t. They weren’t in the mood to talk.

Marc limped toward his team, smelling smoke and whiskey. *That's exactly what I need.*

Dog limped at his side. Both of their casts gleamed in the dim, smoky hallway. Marc's cane thumped lightly.

"Should we go?" Ivan and Greg didn't want to be here if they weren't welcome for it.

"You can stay." Morgan didn't tell them to be quiet since they hadn't gone through as much. They already knew to do that. They weren't rookies.

Marc eased among the two dozen men and took the spot along the wall they'd left open. It had a small ledge. Marc sank down on it gratefully, sniggering. "I invited Shawn. He said he doesn't deserve to be here. I think all the gifts from the camp are bothering him."

Marc's team had also invited Chad, Biff, and a few of the rookies and level ones who'd done well. Those men were here. The women had declined to let the males have a good moment together.

Dog eased down at Marc's feet, grunting heavily.

Marc rubbed him. "I know how you feel."

"Shawn's embarrassed." Morgan snorted. "He said it's the stupidest thing he's ever done and he should be put on meds for being crazy."

Neil handed Marc the bottle, being careful not to step on Dog's bandaged tail or his paw. The cast went up to Dog's side; it had already been signed by everyone on this team and quite a few others.

Dog rubbed against Marc's cast to scratch his ear.

Daryl groaned loudly. "No scratching!" His snake bite felt like little ants were crawling all over it. The medicine Morgan had used was almost as bad as the bite had been. If not for the drugs, he'd be going crazy.

Wade and Kenn tried not to flinch at the unexpected noise. Their eardrums were bruised from the blast. So were Dog's. He buried his head under his tail.

Kenn opened his hand toward Marc. "Tonya donated two fatties from her lab stash." They'd all eaten heavily of the steak, boxed potatoes, and canned vegetables from the ship's reserve stash. Their stomachs were fine; their brains weren't.

Morgan didn't smoke. His bruised ribs wouldn't be able to handle it if he had to cough. He avoided the bottle for the same reason. He was here for the comfort of his team.

Like Morgan, Charlie passed on the bottles and the bud. He needed the images in his head to stop playing. He was hoping being around his dad and his team would help that.

Ivan was almost sorry he'd missed the action until he met the eye of someone who hadn't. Then he was glad.

Men smiled weakly and fell back into their replays.

Marc drank and smoked, nerves taut. He passed them both and exhaled while belching fire.

Weak chuckles floated this time as men jumped from the real flames.

Marc went a step further and opened the nearest window without moving anything but his finger. Smoke began to roll out, clearing the hallway so they wouldn't be caught as quickly.

The other descendants were distracted by his display. They used their gifts as well, lifting bottles and floating smokes.

Greg and the other normals watched and didn't speak.

The fun faded fast. Men leaned against the wall and let the images roll through their brains. Having to lock it all down to keep it away from the normals and their mates was rough on minds that had already gone through so much.

Marc dug in his pocket for a cigar. He didn't like them much, but he had a taste for it right now. "We need to talk."

Men tensed. No one knew how he meant that, but any of the ways weren't welcome right now.

"We're adding a new step to the end of runs like this one." Marc puffed, free hand rubbing Dog's neck as he sat by Marc's casted ankle. "The old world called it therapy. We won't call it anything but our private downtime, like we always have."

Marc leaned his head against the wall as his mind swam from the combination of drugs, alcohol, and nicotine. "Physical health is important. We all work on that when we can, and we get the best medical care we've learned how to provide." Marc

waved off the joint as it came back around. *It isn't strong enough right now. I want the drunk.* “We’re going crazy in ways. It’s dangerous for the future of the camp and the Eagles, but also for our friends and family. We sometimes worry about what happens to them if we snap.”

Silence fell as men were allowed to examine those moments openly. All of them had felt that way. They were trying to walk the line between hard-ass and evil; they didn’t always hit that line perfectly.

“I think the easiest way is to let it out before we try to go back to our lives.” Marc took the bottle as it came around. “If you don’t want to, it’s fine for now, but I’m asking the boss to make therapy a part of Eagle training either way. It just doesn’t have to be in these moments.”

Marc waited for protests, taking a long drink that burnt his throat and guts on the way down. When no one spoke and no one left, Marc continued. “I want to hear the best and worst moment or part for you. I know you’ll all feel you should say when they started screaming for us as they were breached, but what we went through on that island was worse. We could hear their voices; we knew they were alive. On the island, death stalked us for days. That needs to be respected.”

Marc tightened his grip on the bottle. “The worst part for me was the sense of doom that hit when I realized I didn’t have a chance in hell against that beautiful bitch.” His voice shook. “Angie’s

been trying to keep me alive—you all have. I thought that was the moment it was supposed to happen.”

The team was distracted from their misery by his story. They hadn't seen the first half of his fight.

“She played with me, beat me up, drained me.” Marc lifted the bottle. “My best moment would have been seeing Angela's face after Kendle ratted Adrian out over the bunker. Wish I'd been conscious for it.”

They understood. Angela's anger at Adrian was always going to please Marc.

“My best moment was sending you guys back to the ship, alive. After that explosion, I thought I'd killed you all.” Marc's voice lowered to a mutter as he worked through the pain in his brain. “The deaths. That was really the hardest part. I got them killed and I knew it was going to happen. I didn't see it, but I knew medics were a target. I should have sent them all back as soon as I figured that out.”

Wade understood that feeling. “My worst moment was realizing I'd led my team into a trap. I should have seen the wires.”

Kenn grunted. “Same here. I've worked with explosives for decades. Why didn't I see it?!”

Wade exhaled a deep cloud of smoke. “I'm sorry. I'm going to go through that course again, with the rookies and level ones.”

Marc nodded. “You should teach it. Setting it up each time and running them all through it will ensure you never forget it.”

“That's good.” Wade felt a tiny bit better.

“What was your best?” Kenn liked the idea of fixing their minds, but he was also already eager to return to Tonya and his son.

“Being able to get my shield up so fast when the house blew.” Wade sighed. “I tried to push it out and cover everyone else, but there wasn’t time.”

“You got part of me.” Kenn nodded at the man. “I think it saved my life. I didn’t get my shield up at all.”

Wade kept it going. “What was your worst?”

Kenn fought a shudder. “Falling into the earth, the darkness. I thought hell was swallowing me for my past.” Kenn had dreamed that an hour ago and refused to go back to sleep. “My best moment was hearing Marc above us and knowing he’d get us out of there.”

“I’ll never leave a man behind.” Marc looked at Charlie.

Charlie shrugged. “I didn’t think I was going to be able to hold the water back long enough for you to climb up. Knowing I could was the best moment. I pulled my weight instead of being carried this time. I’m making progress.”

Marc knew Charlie needed to let out more than that, but this wasn’t the place for personal drama. He moved on.

Neil stiffened as Marc’s bruised, bloodshot gaze landed on him. “I thought Sam and I had just lost another partner.” Neil stared at Wade through the smoke and eye-blur. “I thought you were killed when it blew.”

Every man there felt Neil's trauma. That wasn't going to go away just from a short talk in the dark. It was proof that continued therapy was a good idea.

Neil rubbed his shoulder, hoping the ache faded. The painkillers were wearing off and he had a torn muscle that was taking notice. "My best moment was watching Marc's fight. He got hits in on her! It gave me hope for our final battle when we go home."

"That's my best moment too. Marc's fight was badass. If we'd all been inside her shield to help, we might have been able to do some real damage."

Marc looked over at Morgan. "You think so?"

Morgan nodded with the others. "We'd need to fire up some ancient threads too, just somewhere else so we don't break our deal here."

Marc nodded. "I'll put it in my notes." Marc skipped the bottle this time as it came around for another pass. "What was your worst?"

Morgan's eyes glazed over; his breathing slowed. "Watching them die. Not being able to stop it. Not being able to help any of you without triggering an attack."

Everyone nodded. Those moments would never be forgotten.

Daryl spoke up before Marc could pick him. "The snake was the worst and the best for me. I was scared of them. I always have been. I was bit as a kid and it ruined them for me." Daryl was thrilled with his improvement. "Now I just have respect."

Daryl patted the baggie in his pocket. “And a hell of a souvenir.”

Chuckles came again. They sounded better to Marc’s ears, more normal. Marc focused on Kyle. “You’re up.”

Kyle gestured with his broken finger splint. “My worst was being too rattled by the explosion to answer any of the people screaming and calling for me, but it wasn’t for them. I wasn’t sure if my status had changed. I don’t want to be normal again.”

“Can that happen?” Greg didn’t want to interrupt, but he had to know. If that was true, it might change everything he had planned.

Marc shook his head. “No. You can’t lose the gifts because of an injury.”

Kyle and Greg both relaxed about it.

“What’s your best?”

Kyle gestured. “Right here and now, knowing I’m not alone in all of this.”

Marc was glad it had gone so well. He felt all of them wanting to go back to their rooms and rest.

Dog chuffed.

Everyone paused, not sure what the wolf would say.

Dog spoke directly to all of them. *I thought you were dead because I missed the smell of explosives.*

Kenn and Wade bonded with the wolf through that. The other men insisted it wasn’t his fault.

Charlie rubbed the wolf’s good ear. “What was the best moment for you?”

Dog leered, fur on his tail lifting. *An hour ago, when that new woman soaped up my balls. She even rinsed me!*

Laughter exploded from the men, bringing them down another level.

Marc rubbed his beard, laughter still snorting out. “That’s a wrap.”

In the next hallway, Angela and few of the women went back toward the main medical wing. Marc was handling things that Adrian hadn’t thought to include. They were pleased.

Angela was thrilled. *He’s finally taken his place now. Kenn was right. That Marc is incredibly good at the job.*

The deaths they’d had weren’t taken lightly, but when all was said and done, Angela knew it should have been a much higher casualty count. *We have Marc to thank for that. If I’d handled it, we would have burned twice as many.*

“I don’t understand why they can’t talk to us about it.” Brittani followed Angela to the medical lounge to continue helping the tired medics clean and prep for tomorrow. “Some of us are bonded in every way.”

“Yes, we are.” Angela gestured. “But would any of us want to tell our mate or kids the details of what we’ve been through?”

Jennifer grimaced. So did Samantha and a few of the others.

“When we have a female team go out, and we’re hiding in a dark hallway afterward, they’ll do the same for us.” Angela wondered if any of them caught that hint, but she didn’t ask.

Brittani didn’t have an awful horror in her life, except the war and the death of her brother. *But I didn’t want to talk about that at first.* She slowly understood. *And I’m still not sure if I do now.*

Angela put a hand on Brittani’s shoulder, lending silent comfort. Sometimes, words really did just get in the way.

Jennifer spotted one of Tonya’s cats lingering in the hallway. “Does he need something?”

Angela snickered. “They’re worried about Dog. When he gets back, they’ll settle down.”

“Can we see the kitten?”

Tonya’s door was open enough for her to hear Brittani’s question. “A quick peek.”

Most of the group went in to see the kitten and the newborn. Samantha went toward the elevators with a happily sleeping infant in each arm. “Tell them I crashed?”

“I will.” Angela watched as Jeff came from the shadows to escort Samantha to her cabin. There wasn’t enough room here for them to all stay overnight. Jeff would stand guard over Sam, at least until shift change in two hours. At that point, Angela was certain Neil and Wade would join her in their cabin. Neither man was seriously injured. The medics would let them go without a lot of fuss.

Angela thought of the conversation between Marc and Conner. When she'd reached the last puzzle piece, it hadn't fit. As soon as Marc had mentioned the conversation, the final piece had changed shape and fit perfectly in place with a neat click. *The enemy will be here in two weeks. Over that fourteen days, Safe Haven is going to learn how to blink.*

2

Marc's alarm woke almost everyone in the overnight medical wing. He'd changed the song to an obnoxious country tune last night. Marc liked switching genres a few times a year, but it didn't really matter as long as it blared and his brain hated it. He let it go for a few seconds to be sure all of them were up. They had a nice day ahead of them. He wanted them to enjoy all of it, including Safe Haven's official landing.

Groans and moans of men with slight hangovers and a lot of body pains began to echo.

Angela stretched in Marc's bedroll, yawning. "Good morning."

Marc frowned down at her. "You said you were going back to the cabin."

Angela shrugged. "Was too tired and your kit was right here." She rubbed Dog's neck, drawing a moan. "He kept me warm."

Marc chuckled carefully, testing his body. Pain bounced back in sharp waves.

Marc's grunt and uncomfortable shift was echoed in nearly every room. Angela and the other overnight guests pointed at pills and bottles of water sitting by their beds. The medics hadn't wanted to wake them.

All of men accepted the pills and small bowls of biscuits and gravy. The biscuits were leftovers from the sandwiches and wanted by everyone. Thelma had made sure the team got them.

Doors shutting, urine flowing, coughing, and a dozen other personal noises echoed through the ward, waking the resting medics and volunteers.

On duty now, Tim got them up and gave them instructions on what came next. After each man got an exam, Morgan and Angela would decide if they were okay to make the ladder climb and walk to the island.

The men didn't care. None of them wanted to go. The camp needed to see them there, however. Angela had already been clear about that with all the females who wanted to coddle their mates.

Angela clicked her mike. "Good morning." It would let point people know she was ready for updates. Angela went to the public bathroom.

By the time she emerged, hair smoothed and face washed, a small line of people were waiting for her.

Angela handled it right there so the team had a little privacy for a few more minutes.

She spotted Morgan coming out to talk to Tim and realized it didn't matter. The team was still

running in fast gear. Morgan shouldn't have been ready that fast.

Pam caught her eye from the doorway of their room. *I had him up early.*

Angela snickered at the images of Pam giving Morgan lip service, then making him go back to sleep afterward. Morgan had snoozed happily for another hour and then got up a few minutes before Marc's alarm went off. "That's one way to distract him from bad dreams."

A waking ship reached Angela's ears as she finished collecting updates and making decisions on how to handle the coming day of fun in the sun. *They sound good, healthier than the last time I listened this way.* Angela was pleased.

These next few weeks will boost all of them. We need to be on land to flourish. Humanity is supposed to rule the earth. I have no idea what controls the sea. It felt like a mixed partnership that had a silent companion we never saw. Some of the animals and moments hadn't belonged to Nature or the ocean, but they'd been just as dangerous. *I think that's fate, almost caught in the exact moments. If I could slow it down, would I find something like the green lady?* The camp had started calling Nature that for lack of a better explanation. The team wasn't talking and the Eagles who knew what it had been hadn't been cleared to tell them yet.

Angela put the thoughts aside as Dog limped out of the room, followed by Marc. Their tandem dips

and rises made her smile. It also hurt her that she couldn't completely heal them.

Marc found her across the long hallway of busy people. *Where do you want me?*

Angela grinned.

Marc chuckled. *Find us a motel. Make sure we aren't followed. I feel like taking my time.*

Angela laughed. She joined him and Dog, aware of his team coming out to form a circle around them. The team was still tired in the fake light. Angela wanted to see them soaking in the sun without shirts or concerns. *And I'm going to.* They deserved to enjoy their downtime. "It went better than I foresaw."

Ivan immediately scowled. "You told Morgan you didn't look this far ahead. You lied!"

"I've heard that more than once in the last 24 hours." Angela took the clipboard from Morgan. "I don't need to give you all one request because you already know I'll help you with whatever I can." She smiled at each of them, making sure they felt her approval. "Thank you for a job well done."

Men nodded or smiled as their mates came forward, frowning at Angela. Too much of that from an alpha could snare a man's mind.

Greg ducked into the hall to avoid the blast, keeping his lock and his honor.

Angela motioned. "We'll get you ready and up there. You'll get a break while the line moves. At least fifty people spent the night on the deck so they could be first off the ship. Once they go, you'll all

go. Let the camp celebrate you. Even if you hate it, they don't. It gives them hope and comfort. It also shows them what it takes to be an Eagle. We'll get some signups today. We'll also have resignations. Let them go with grace. They aren't like you. There's nothing wrong with being proud of that. We just don't rub it in. It's not needed."

Angela knew they wouldn't, but telling them not to was part of her job. "You can talk about this run and all the details, if you can talk about this run. I don't expect it. The camp will want it. That's up to you."

Most of them were sure they'd never speak of those moments again unless they were having downtime and Marc insisted.

Angela finished updating them on what she wanted. "After you spend a few minutes on land, I'm ordering all of you back to the top deck of the ship for a catered meal and first use of the swimming pool that Panaji and Selito recleaned and refilled after the storm."

The men broke into smiles.

"I'll have cards, games, books, activity kits, and various other entertainments sent up there." Angela smiled. "I'm also setting up the big screen TV by the pool and having Theo put on championship sports games for the rest of the day."

Cheers echoed through the room this time.

Angela topped it off as the medic motioned that they were ready to start the final exams. "You're off

all duty for the next two days. Have some fun. Get some sleep. And thank you.”

Angela tensed as men grabbed her for hugs and pats, showing their appreciation.

Angela used it as a moment to fight her own remaining fears. She embraced them back and laughed with them, glad she was strong enough to keep recovering from her past.

3

“Good morning, Safe Haven. It’s time to wake up and walk into a new life. Are you ready? I know I am.” Jonny paused to rub his puffy eyes so he could focus on the page of notes. “It’s dawn and we are gathering on the top deck to finally leave this ship, at least for a while. This day will be recorded in our history, folks. Be there. In other news, the mess is closed. Deliveries have all been made. Check outside your door for your basket.”

People who’d already found it grabbed their basket and merged into the crowded hallways and elevators. Those who’d overslept jumped up to get ready.

Jonny finished the announcement with a smile in his voice. “I’ll be providing the music today, so if you’d like to submit a request, I’m now in the center of the entertainment floor. Thanks to Theo, I have a DJ booth! I’ll be here all day. May it be a wonderful break from what we’ve endured to get here.”

Standing in the crowded hallway to wait for the boss, Grant looked over at Ray. “He’s out of the Eagles now?”

Ray reached over and straightened Grant’s collar. “You look good in jeans and a white shirt.”

Grant frowned. “So do you. I can’t believe I let you talk me into dressing alike.”

Ray chuckled. “It’s cute.”

Grant’s frown grew. “You avoided the question. You did it.”

Ray spotted Angela coming through the crowd and climbed the stairs. “Does it matter? He’s thrilled. He’ll be handling all the parties, weddings, announcements. He and Mike will also cover all incoming and outgoing messages over the new radio Kenn set up. Everyone wins.”

People around them ignored the couple. Many of the mates in the crowd were doing their thing right now. Nerves were a little rough, though the mood was high. They’d gone through a lot to get here. Little quarrels were nothing in comparison.

Ray led them up onto the deck. He and Grant stepped aside, sheltering under the bridge as the line of people came up behind them.

Angela joined the men, scanning the crowd.

“I’m not sure if I like that.” Grant didn’t want to be owned.

Ray shrugged. “I didn’t do it for you. He wasn’t happy in the Eagles. He had a rough run at the detention center. It made him rethink the future. Now, he’s happy.”

“It had *nothing* to do with me?”

Ray sighed, aware of Angela listening. He wasn't allowed to lie. “That pushed me to do something about it.”

“You don't own me. I can have friends.”

Ray grinned. “You sound like Jennifer.”

Grant laughed. “You didn't hurt him again or get him in trouble. It's fine. I didn't want to handle that one anyway.”

Ray relaxed. “Good. So, that's a no on ownership. What about a partnership?”

Grant stilled, mind locking. “What?”

Ray clicked his mike once, then knelt. He held up a ring. “Will you marry me, you stubborn jackass?”

Grant burst out laughing as people chuckled and gathered around them. “That's how you ask?”

Ray smiled. “How about I love you and I want to be with you forever?”

Grant melted. He nodded. “I'd be honored.”

Ray rose for the kiss as witnesses cheered.

“There's another one!”

People turned as a camp member knelt in front of the woman next to him. “Will you marry me?”

It triggered a chain reaction of proposals that kept people cheering and clapping. Jonny began playing the wedding song as Ray double clicked his radio.

Angela was happy for all of them. *I'll do my best to make sure you always have a Safe Haven to live in.* Angela smiled at Grant as the couple turned

around. “You’re both off duty for the next week. Spend it anywhere and anyhow you like.”

Tim came to Angela while witnesses congratulated them. Tim had chosen to wear his slacks, sweater, and collar. He was getting a mix of hostility and welcoming glances as he walked through the assembled camp.

Angela nodded. “Please do. If I’d said yes the first time, it might have all been easier.”

Tim brightened at her show of support. He bowed his head, not worrying about what others were doing. “Dear Lord, please bless our time here and let it be the sanctuary we truly need. Amen.”

“Amen.” Angela didn’t find any hatred in her heart anymore for that word. She’d heard it growing up and loathed it because *so be it* didn’t mean anything except it couldn’t be changed. But *I grew up and changed everything. I don’t have to hate the beginning anymore. It made me who I am right now.*

The crowd parted as a group of females came up, all carrying babies or gear for those babies.

Angela loved being surrounded by the infants. She sent a light wave of love that rippled over them and their mothers.

Tonya stiffened as little Kenny spit up. It ran down the front of her shirt.

“Here.” Samantha tucked the end of the blanket around the baby and then over Tonya’s chest. “You’ll have to do your own cleanup.” Samantha drew back as the baby belched again, followed by a small eruption of white yuck.

Tonya proceeded toward the nearest chair. “I don’t think I’m cut out for this.”

Samantha grinned at her boys in the twin stroller. “It gets easier.”

Samantha moved them all into the sunlight, body soaking it in. She shielded the twin’s faces with their little caps, but she didn’t cover them otherwise. Children of Nature needed the sunlight as much as they needed the water or the air.

Jeremy Jr. farted.

Neil Jr. yawned.

“I see they have their own language.” Tim smiled at them as he shifted aside. “I’m staying on the ship today. Just send for me if you need me.”

Tonya kept cleaning. “Stop. Stay. Wait.”

Tim froze. “What’s happening?”

Tonya slid the towel down her cleavage and scooped. “This is just... Oh, what the hell did I eat?” Tonya wiped, then wadded the towel. “That should be burnt.”

The witnesses laughed as Tim stared at Angela, now worried she’d made a decision and it hadn’t gone in his favor.

Tonya finished cleaning herself and the baby. Then she came over to Tim. “Do you need holy water or something?”

“No.” Tim frowned. “The blessing comes from the heart of the priest and goes straight to God. The rest is trappings.”

Tonya rubbed the baby’s cheek so he would open his eyes. “Well?”

Tim broke into a grin. “Kenn said yes.”

Tonya nodded. “He won’t attend, but he’s okay with it. Your choice to defend us made a difference.”

The other mothers moved closer, forming a ring of protection.

Angela watched, aware of the camp mostly ignoring them for viewing the island and talking to the new couples. A christening wasn’t exciting to them because it wasn’t their children.

Angela spotted Tracy coming through the crowd. Charlie was close behind her. Their clasped hands said they were still together.

Tracy didn’t smile or talk at all. She scanned, found Angela watching them, and whipped her pale face toward the island. Her thoughts stayed blank.

Charlie knew she felt like a trapped animal, but he couldn’t help her this time. He could only be there for her when she made her choice. *I need to get her through the pregnancy. Then my mom can help with the baby and Tracy can have her life back if that’s what she wants.*

Tracy refused to think about it or anything else while under Angela’s eye.

Angela wasn’t disappointed or surprised. But she was resigned. *You’ve forced my hand, boy, yet again. This time, the choice is final. You can’t put the needs of the many ahead of the needs of yourself. Neither can she. You’ll never inherit my legacy.*

Angela clapped with everyone else as the island team came up the steps. Cheers, claps, and well

wishes were almost deafening. The noise echoed across the water and hit the island.

It rolled over the banished man watching them, bringing tears to his eyes. “We did it, Angie. We did it.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Close

1

Adrian leaned back in his chair. He'd been up here on the cliff top for an hour. He'd heard Angela's order last night. He wanted to watch his camp come off that ship and onto the promised land. The cheers and happiness hitting him in waves was recharging his energy and his lagging spirit. Not even the fast glimpses of Angela could compare.

Adrian spotted Conner and Candy coming up the ramp. *He looks happy. That's good.* It was hard for both of them to be apart, but Adrian believed it was for the best. *Let Marc rub off on him for a while. Conner will be better for it in the end.*

Adrian saw the heroes coming up next. The camp cheered louder as they spotted Shawn. "What did he do again?"

Kendle thought back. "Ship save, I think. He jumped into the ocean during the storm."

Kendle was in the grass next to Adrian, also scanning the ship, but she didn't care about the waves of good will. She just wanted to stare at Marc.

“Ah. Well, people like a hero, but they adore an *action* hero.” Adrian saw bright colors on most of the survivors. He’d preferred somber hues to show respect for death. Angela encouraged self-expression in any shade to celebrate the possibilities of life. Both ways were right. “You should make up with Tommy.”

Kendle scanned the shoreline where Tommy was stiffly standing guard and being ignored by everyone even though he’d passed his medical tests and he’d helped them during the breach. “I’ll think about it.”

Adrian was surprised he’d gotten that much from her. “Cool.” He held out his mug. “Drink?”

Kendle took it and sipped the coffee. They’d all spent the night at the restaurant and woken to find Adrian gone. Kendle had tracked him here. “Are we going to dig Sadie out?”

Adrian chuckled. “Yes, I think we should.”

Kendle rubbed her sore legs, ignoring the filthy pants. There were clothes in the gear Marc had sent, but she didn’t want to change until she had a chance to shower. “Do you hear that?”

“Music.” Adrian had been catching the faint sounds. “They might turn it up a little after everyone’s off the deck.”

Heavy steps echoed behind them. “You son of a bitch!” The shout drew attention from everyone, even those on the ship and shore.

Sadie was covered in blood drops from broken nails, gouges from falling rocks, dust, and fury. Her

legs flashed through the torn clothes; her hair blew behind her as she increased speed.

Kendle smirked, leaning out of the way. “No. That.”

More people turned in time to see Sadie flying through the air. She tackled Adrian, knocking him out of the chair. They rolled down the hill with her taking swipes at him.

“Ow! Stop! No means no!”

Witnesses clapped and laughed as clothes and bits of skin flew into the air. They might have helped anyone else, but it was Adrian.

“He was wrong. It’s a radio announcement.” Quinn didn’t turn as Kendle gasped. He was against the tree behind her and blending right in, thanks to the sunrise shadows.

Kendle smiled. “I like your zest for life, Quinn, but I love it when you prove you can be serious.”

He smiled. “Would you like to listen?”

Kendle nodded, turning toward the ship.

They both ignored Adrian’s shouts and Sadie’s grunts.

Quinn activated the radio on his belt, not sure if it would work after being soaked. It had dried, but there was no guarantee.

“...vote on privacy has been scheduled for two days from now, at noon. All law council meetings are cancelled, pending the outcome of that vote...”

On the ship, Samantha pushed the stroller over to Angela. “I noticed you dropped the magic meeting from their docket too.”

Angela nodded. “We don’t need it yet, thankfully.”

Samantha decided to push. “And Kimmie? You know Francesca dropped the charges.”

“But I didn’t. I have to punish her.” Angela found the girl in the crowd and waved her over. She didn’t see Jeff, but she didn’t wait. “Kimmie will do third shift guard duty with senior Eagles for the next month.”

They all waited for more.

Angela copied Jeff’s response to Francesca. “Do you want me to beat on her or something?”

People smiled and relaxed as she chuckled.

Kimmie was thrilled. She tried hard not to show it. She loved guard duty, and being with the senior Eagles was almost as good as being with Angela.

Marc’s team made it to the top of the ramp, walking slowly through the tight crowd in the same formation they’d used on the run. Marc had insisted on it even though he was in a wheelchair, hoping this might replace a little of those moments in their nightmares. Dreams often mixed things up. He hoped that would happen here.

The camp formed lines on each side of the men, congratulating them and clapping. They were about to be off this ship and these men were the reason why.

The other Eagles and fighters didn't remind them it had been a long trip and a lot of people had helped. Angela wanted the camp and this team to bond. She hadn't told them why yet, but everyone connected it to the UN deadline.

Daryl shielded his eyes as the sun beamed directly at them. "Was it that bright yesterday?"

Wade smiled at people instead of piking them. For a second, he had to remind himself where he was. "I think it's part of the deal. This is a sanctuary. A place like that soothes, heals, fixes." Wade breathed in deep. "We need this. Nature knows."

The rest of the team wasn't sure if that should worry them. Marc and Wade knew it was an advantage their camp would have over everyone else in that final battle. They would go into it healthy, recharged, and with three years of training under their belts, plus a year of extreme survival living.

Marc noticed all the descendants were pale and tired with sunken eyes and rough, patchy skin on their hands. *Even the younger descendants look older. This trip hasn't been good for our kind. It's using us up.*

Angela smiled as the men joined them, filling out their large circle. She immediately felt safer.

Marc took Angela's hand as Terry pushed him close. Dog stayed still on Marc's lap, eyeing everyone warily. "Thank you for letting the men have an adventure together."

Angela grinned. “Remember this when it’s our turn.”

The women laughed as the men groaned.

Angela pointed at Ed, who was standing by the rope ladder and stairs. “My assistant will now let us off the boat.”

Ed swelled in pride as he waved the first group forward. “This way to paradise island.”

Angela frowned. “This is New America, and we’re all her citizens, no matter how long we stay.”

Kenn saw Marc nod at Tommy. The medics had cleared him an hour ago. Angela had immediately put him to work. Kenn’s ire rose. *I still owe him.*

Marc shook his head. *Leave it for next time.*

Kenn sighed resignedly. “You’re the boss.”

Marc’s grin lit up his face. It faded as he scanned the cliff and saw Adrian. The man had gone from being attacked to rolling Sadie over and giving her what she was demanding. Moans were now floating down the hill.

Kenn shook his head. “Leave it for next time.”

Marc sighed. “Fine.”

Dog whined low in his throat.

Kenn frowned at the animal. “I figured out a possible solution. I’ll tell you, *if* you promise to *never* make that sound again.”

Dog huffed. *Whatever.*

Marc chuckled and listened, curious. He hadn’t known Kenn and Dog had bonded enough to talk about a problem.

Kenn gestured. “There are three other islands around here for us to search. There may still be hope. And even if they don’t have wolves, we’re only a week from home. Maybe we can take a trip. I’m pretty sure Angela will send a team for recon at some point.”

Dog’s ugly mood began to lift. His ears rose.
When’s the run?

Angela stepped closer to Greg as people who’d heard that laughed. “Are you ready to try?”

Greg stiffened. He nodded. “Whenever you are.”

“After dinner tonight. Be in my cabin.”

Greg swallowed, suddenly gun-shy again. “Are you sure we should do this?”

Angela sighed, eyes going to the northeast, toward home. “No, but we have things coming that will make this hard ground look friendly. I need you and the others to be able to help us face our destiny and pull out a win. Now that we’re here, we have to get ready for the next stage and we only have two weeks.”

Angela pushed away that stress, donning a bright smile. “But for today, we’re here and alive—that’s cause enough to celebrate.” She advanced with the line, merging with everyone else. Groups were being directed down the ladder to the gently bobbing bridge. Angela didn’t look toward land yet. She wasn’t sure she could without frying the couple climaxing together in the tall grass.

3

Adrian finished Sadie off, enjoying it, but he was distracted.

Her groans echoed over the camp, bringing laughter, frowns, and even a few cheers.

Adrian stilled, growling against her neck. It had been a while and Sadie felt great wrapped around him. But it still wasn't as good as his fantasies about Angela.

Sadie shoved him off and rolled in the grass, grunting and groaning.

Adrian laughed. He fastened his pants and went back up to his chair, still eager to watch the camp walk onto the island.

More cheers and a few boos echoed as they saw who walked away.

Adrian got settled and lifted Tommy's glasses right as the first group reached the end of the pontoon bridge. Adrian reached for the single cigarette that had been in with the supplies Marc sent. Adrian had saved it for this moment.

Kendle reappeared at his side, holding out a bottle. "This came too. I didn't give it to Sadie. She's already unpredictable."

Adrian chuckled. He took a long swig, then fumbled for his lighter. He narrowed his eyes against the smoke as he lit it.

Kendle took the bottle back and enjoyed the moment with him. When Adrian held out the smoke, she switched. They watched Safe Haven

land officially, minds spinning through all the new possibilities that would come now.

Sadie sat up. She spotted Adrian and pointed. “Don’t you go anywhere!” She curled up in a ball and began to snooze.

Kendle sniggered. “You’re in trouble now.”

Adrian ignored them both. Angela and her family were coming down the ladder. Kenn was carrying Marc on his back. The stiff one-arm hold Marc was using made Adrian miss his physical health. Charlie came next, carefully carrying Dog in a sling on his back. Adrian saw Angela step back to let Tracy go next. Tracy hurried, almost falling. Adrian didn’t know what had happened between them, but it was clear that Tracy hadn’t come out of it ahead.

Adrian saw Angela’s face as she turned away from everyone. Pain flashed and was quickly hidden.

Adrian pretended he hadn’t noticed as she finally glanced in his direction.

Mind your own business!

Adrian turned the glasses in a different direction. *You’re the boss.*

Adrian scanned Marc and found him staring up at Angela. *Whatever it is, Marc noticed it, too. Good.*

Adrian felt Conner watching him and fought not to look. *I miss that kid.*

Kendle nodded. “Me too. But he’s a lot different than you.”

Adrian grunted. “Good.”

Kendle shrugged. “Right now, sure. Later? Who knows? We may need another you.”

Adrian stilled, mind spinning back up with the plots and schemes he’d paused and tried to forget about. “That’s almost possible, but I’d have to have an extraordinary reason to become that hard, selfish bastard again.”

Kendle was encouraged. “If I come up with something, should I let you know?”

Adrian wanted to tell her no, that he could tolerate three years of this to get a few legal, ethical weeks or months with Angie later. *But I can’t.* He sighed. “Yes. But it can’t work if *any* of us die, so don’t go there or I’m out.”

Time slowed as Kendle turned to look at him. “Not even if it’s Marc?”

Adrian frowned at her, eyes narrowing against the sun and the sudden tension. “You wouldn’t do that.”

Kendle stared back, not hiding anything. “What if we ascended?”

Adrian opened his mouth to tell her to go away before she got them both killed.

Kendle waited for it. She was expecting it. *If he does the right thing here, I’ll be tossed off this cliff in about ten seconds.*

Sadie kept snoozing, too tired to figure out what they were planning right now, but she memorized the words. She knew it was important to the future she was planning.

Adrian returned to watching Safe Haven. “If you make that plan, and I’m not saying you should, be incredibly detailed. Don’t miss a single tiny thing. She won’t forgive and forget even once more. She’ll give Marc the order and both our heads will be on pikes.”

Either way, my torment will end. Kendle let out a satisfied sigh as time picked back up. “The future just shifted again. Did you feel it?”

Adrian nodded. He’d also felt it slow. *I just chose a different path. Now we’ll all pay for it.* “Get out of my sight for a while. I hate your guts right now.”

Kendle understood. She got up and walked toward the trees, not offended. She couldn’t resist a parting blow, however. “It didn’t take much to turn you.”

Adrian felt the evil inside stir. He grunted, letting it wake this time. “It never does. I’m a Mitchel.”

The End of Book 15

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

“It’s lunchtime, Safe Haven.” Brittani’s voice echoed through the public speakers. “You have one hour to eat. If you have an issue for the boss, come see me on the top deck and I’ll schedule you a time.” Brittani hung up the mike and waited at the top of the steps. The bridge was empty for the moment. She was guarding it so Grant and Ray could have lunch together.

Jayda came up the ramp from the ship. “I have two appointments already made for her.”

Brittani opened her book. “Same. The 8 p.m. at the hearing. Then the beer and entertainment floor she already mentioned.”

Jayda grinned. “Same, on both.”

“Perfect.” Brittani kept her book ready as a small group of people came up the stairs. “Hang around and we can eat together right here.”

“Cool.” Jayda retreated and scanned the group. They were all Eagles who’d finished the first job Angela gave them. They were ready to be reassigned.

She swept the island and the ships around them, wondering what it would feel like to walk on it. She hadn’t left this boat once. *It feels like home now. That’s so odd.*

She checked the deck next and spotted Ian filling the top swimming pool. She could see and hear water running into it, though she wasn't sure where the hose was lying.

Ian felt her stare. He smiled at her and went back to work.

Jayda turned toward Brittani, glad things were peaceful. She was also a little bored. It was nice to be out of the mess and avoid cooking for the day, but she wanted to accomplish something, learn something, be someone. *I want to be out there with Ivan, having an adventure.*

“We go with the boss.” Brittani leered. “It’ll be great. Be patient.”

Jayda nodded. She leaned against the wall under the steps and watched over Brittani while she handled the small group.

Deleted Scene #2

Update me!

Adrian shoved a local off Kandle and helped her up so she could run. *Little busy here!*

Angela stayed with them, too worried to notice who she was linked to. She felt the view changing. She could see down, but not up. *He's climbing.*

Adrian grunted, pulling hard to get himself to the next branch. He straddled it and leaned his head against the tree.

Angela waited for him to recover, listening to the sounds of someone else near him. She didn't sense grief and assumed his group had escaped.

We're trying not to kill.

Do what you have to and burn the bodies. Where are you?

A few hundred feet from the barn. I can see the front door from here. Give me a minute and I'll show you.

Angela sighed impatiently.

Adrian lifted his head, unable to take her disapproval.

Angela saw the barn and nothing around it. Smoke was coming from a pile of something behind the barn. She narrowed in and was able to feel Marc inside even though she shouldn't be able to. Their bond gave her a pass against his shield, but only

long range. She couldn't get inside it; she could pick up vibrations that were familiar.

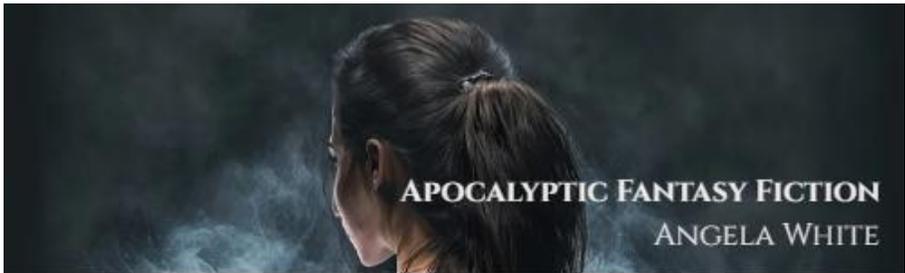
She spotted Darren and Megan climbing in through the window of the barn. Two more bodies in support let her relax. Darren was lethal. Marc was okay now.

Angela started to withdraw. *Thank you.*

Adrian smiled at her. *We're ready to help when you send orders.*

If Marc wants you, he'll call you. Angela broke the connection.

Audio



Did you know the Life After War series is now
available in audiobook format?

[Audiobook Page](#)

Author Note

Hi! Hope you enjoyed the ride. I did!

It's come to my attention that some readers are unhappy with any disease, infection, contagion, or outbreak plots right now. I understand that completely, I really do. However, the plot lines for this series were planned out long before the pandemic happened and they can't be changed now. I hope you'll understand.

On a happier note, we are a lot closer to that final battle. Safe Haven has made it to their island and settled it. This has been a long journey. Will you stay with me for the rest of it? There's a lot more in my head, waiting to be put on paper. I've spent the last ten years bringing you these stories, and I'm not done yet! Is that awesome, or what?! Lol

Have a wonderful year, Eagles.

Angie

Thank you Drew, Allison, Angie H, Crystal, John, Jeff, Wendy, Marleen, Kristi, Harry, and Jim for all your hard work!

Book 16



[Facing Destiny](#)

1

“It’s been a good day.”

Angela nodded, rubbing her stomach. “I can’t eat another bite. I may sleep right here.”

Marc laughed, nodding. He swept the eating, lounging, happy camp. Then his eyes went to the clifftop. Adrian had moved to the shade of a tree to keep watching. He’d been there for hours, writing

and occasionally servicing Sadie. That satisfied female was sleeping next to him between bouts. Marc wasn't sure that was what he'd planned as a punishment for the man. *But I do need to talk to him.*

"Ivan will take you." Angela smiled.

Marc sniggered. "Come on, Ivan. Push me up the hill."

Ivan complied willingly enough. The mood was perfect right now. Of course it was time for something to screw that up.

People noticed Marc moving through the crowd. When they saw where he was heading, they kept track, curious. A few of them had wanted to go up and visit with Adrian, but they hadn't been sure how leadership would feel about it.

Adrian saw Marc coming. He swept Sadie's naked, love-marked body. "Company is coming up the hill. Would you like my jacket?"

Sadie growled at being interrupted. She was tired. She'd spent all night digging out.

Adrian chuckled. He slipped out of his jacket and draped it over her.

Sadie snuggled under it, inhaling deeply.

Her moan made Adrian's ego swell. *I did a good job.*

Adrian returned to his notes until Marc arrived. It was a long hill and he had too many thoughts floating through his head to waste time. Copying the other parts of the book he'd lost was possible, but these new pieces had to be captured when they arrived. As he'd watched Safe Haven grill and

picnic, a powerful piece of the past had appeared in his mind.

Marc didn't notice the rough ride up. His mind was centered on what his demon had told Angela.

"Create a world where evil is valued even as it works for the good."

He didn't know yet how they would do that, but Angela had spent hours on it last night and they were both working on it now. They had been all day between the good moments. With both of them digging for that option, Marc was sure they would find a solution. He'd been afraid to ask his demon because he'd feared there wasn't anything they could do. It was a relief to know that wasn't the case.

He was also fascinated with Conner's blinking theory. He hadn't had a chance to ask Angela any questions about it yet. Their morning had come early and been busy, but he wanted to know if she felt it when she blinked. *Does it hurt? What happens to the thought she's working on? Is there a way to speed up the body processes to adjust for the new mental load? Is it dangerous to her?*

That was the one Marc was worried about. Now that they were on the island and they'd had a good day here, his mind had flashed images of the charm he'd learned and how to make it happen. He just needed to pick the time. He was almost settled on right after they fought the UN. *I don't want her to be pregnant for that battle. I'm not taking chances this time.*

Ivan didn't get into Marc's thoughts. He pushed the chair, enjoyed the good vibes, and refused to think about a redhead with a talent for curse charms.

Marc felt Ivan's relief, but he didn't ask about it. He already knew. Kenn's thoughts had been full of it this morning. Marc had been shocked to find out Tonya had caused so much damage. He hadn't realized curses were physically dangerous. Angela had made it clear there were several different kinds. When he'd asked her how she and the other women knew how to perform them, Angela had shrugged and blamed it on being a girl. Marc wanted a real answer to that mystery.

Ivan shoved, reaching the top of the hill. He admired the view and gasped for air.

Marc set the brake on the chair.

Adrian finished his sentence and put the book down as Marc stood and limped over on his cane. "May I?"

Marc moved closer.

Adrian put a hand on Marc's leg. The healing energy he sent was ancient, powerful. It sank into Marc's bones and speeded the healing process.

Marc sighed as the dull ache faded. *I really wish we could do that for ourselves.* "Thank you."

"It's my honor." Adrian smiled at Dog, who'd insisted on walking up the hill next to the chair. "May I?"

Dog growled, snapping at him.

Adrian snatched his hand back as Marc chuckled.

The wolf dropped next to the chair and stared at Adrian in dislike.

Adrian shook his head as Marc reached into his pocket. "I don't know anything about it. I can't tell you anything."

Marc stared, trying to understand what Adrian wasn't saying.

Adrian motioned toward Conner, who was on a blanket near the tall grass with Candy and a few others. "He knows most of the old stories."

Marc nodded, now getting it. Nature would have access to Adrian's thoughts. If the antler piece could help them, she didn't need to know they had it.

Marc scanned Sadie, seeing evidence of a satisfied woman. "Will she be moving into the shack with you?"

"No. She just doesn't have that information yet."

"I see. What about the others?"

Adrian shrugged. "I didn't ask. I assume they'll use Luke's bunker."

"Tell Kendle the cabin and his bunker are hers, as his widow." Marc carefully dug a picture from his pocket. "This is too."

Adrian scanned the image. *That explains some things.* Adrian put it inside his notebook. "I'll make sure she gets it."

"And the other thing? The one you discussed with Dog?"

Adrian tensed as that conversation flashed in his mind.

If drawn by a bright enough light, lost souls might come, ready to mend old hatreds and be reborn in peace. That might shift the balance of good and evil back to man's favor.

Adrian tried to estimate the number of lost souls and couldn't. "How do I convert them once called?"

Dog looked up at him warily. The same as you do your living herd. Very carefully.

Adrian was careful with how he phrased it. He wasn't sure how much Marc wanted Ivan to know. "I've studied it from several angles. I don't have answers yet, but I have a trail I'm following."

"I assumed we'd need a restful walk?"

Adrian nodded, glad Marc wasn't openly talking about dream walking. "And only the founders."

"I'll let her know." Marc shifted on his broken ankle, letting the cane hold his weight. "What do you know about blinkers?"

Adrian's brows came together. "She's blinking?"

Marc nodded.

Ivan stared in confusion. "I thought that was a couples' thing." Ian had asked him about it this morning. Ivan had guessed.

Marc snorted. He waited for Adrian to answer.

“The labs didn’t mess with them often. It’s addictive to be in your head while thinking that fast.”

Marc nodded. He could see that. “They didn’t mess with it because it’s dangerous, right?”

Adrian shrugged. “I think they just didn’t get anything from it. Blinkers take years sometimes, but then they solve an amazingly hard puzzle or challenge. The government wanted faster results.” Adrian’s face darkened. “But it can be dangerous if the person forgets to come up and live in reality.”

“I’ll keep an eye on it.” Marc continued to the next item on his mental list. “She’ll be setting up training schedules and classes soon. They’ve already been asking about it. When she drafts your part, we’ll have Tommy bring them by. He’s free to come and go—everyone is. Angela said Safe Haven means the freedom to pick your own friends.”

“Thank you. I told Kendle to make up with him. When he comes by, I’ll push it.”

“No, let her be herself. I want Tommy to see he has better options.”

Adrian followed Marc’s line of sight to the sad woman sitting alone near the beach. Megan had helped with the kids, helped with delivering food and drinks, and then helped herself to solitude. She hadn’t moved in hours. “It’s a shame about her and Darren. I thought they were a good match.”

“So did I, but he and Hannah had apparently started something too. Now he swears he wants to be a bachelor.”

“We know you can love more than one person at a time. Our hearts are big enough for that.”

“Yeah. Angela wants to know if she should expect more of that or if you believed it would fade when you made the breeding tree predictions.”

Adrian chuckled. “Angela wants to know?”

Marc sniggered.

Adrian understood Marc was curious. He shrugged. “I didn’t get that far.”

“I was only asking because we’ll need to know how big to make the rooms.”

“Uh-huh.” Adrian grinned.

Marc smiled.

The moment was nice. Adrian stiffened, scowling. “Why are you up here making nice with me? What’s going on? Am I dying for real this time?”

Marc laughed. “I’m showing the camp you can get along with someone you hate, and in the end, maybe even come out with a powerful bond.”

Adrian made a rude noise. “And you expect me to believe that?”

Marc chuckled again. “I’m finally facing destiny?”

“You’re making her happy so you get laid tonight.” Ivan sank down in the grass. “She may not recognize your moves, but I do.”

Marc swept the camp, finding Angela in the crowd of pleased people. “She’s getting a look at all three of us together right now, each time she glances up here. It will turn her on; the sex will indeed be

amazing tonight, but it also shows her three men who will do anything for her. She rarely feels safe. We give that to her.” Marc shifted toward the chair. “I’m ready.” He lifted Dog into his lap.

Ivan smacked the ground. “I just sat!”

“I know. That’s why I’m ready.”

Adrian chuckled, thrilled with the jobs and locations they’d been cleared for. Kendle and Quinn would have to cover themselves, but he would help with Sadie. When the time was right, he would piss her off and she would turn to Safe Haven and Angela. She would be trained, polished, and matched with someone who was worthy of her. Adrian knew that wasn’t him. He’d been trying to avoid this type of relationship with her, but she’d insisted and he was a single man. *It would have been rude to keep refusing.*

Sadie rolled over, waking. Her eyes went straight to him. “Get over here.”

Adrian thought about Angela’s perfect ass and slowly rose from the chair, grinning. “A man’s work is never done.”

Ivan brought up a private line as he held Marc’s chair and kept it from rolling away and flipping. *He didn’t see it.*

Marc held Dog as they hit another bump. *He was hiding his own betrayal. He couldn’t dig through ours at the same time.*

Ivan strained, keeping the chair at a steady pace. *I’ll make contact with Sadie in a few days.*

Make sure you show her a side of men she won't see from him. Despite Angela's claims that she wants a man who encourages her to take risks, she's marrying the one who protects her.

Ivan was floored. "I never would have made that connection."

"You would have, once he becomes *your* rival." Marc forced a smile and pushed away those ugly thoughts. No matter how many times he avoided death, the clock was always ticking in his head now.

Tick-tock, Safe Haven. Tick-tock...

Marc's head whipped to the side, searching for Nature and those giant snapping teeth.

Ivan reached the bottom of the hill. He put a hand on Marc's shoulder. "Easy, Boss."

Marc shuddered. "I'm ready to go back to the ship and get drunk."

Ivan was relieved. He didn't like it here either. *This won't ever be home for us even though we're safe here. Nature saw to that.*

Marc nodded. "After we handle the UN, I'll talk to Angela about that recon run Kenn mentioned."

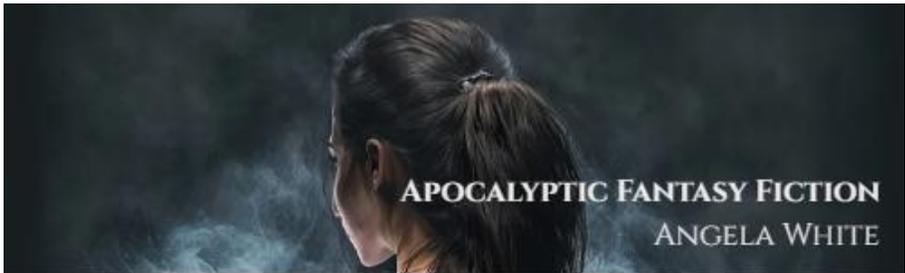
"Cool. Where are we going?"

Marc's eyes turned northeast. "Home."



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