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**Life After War Box Set**

Books 10-12

By Angela White

**Title**: LAW Box Set

Books 10-12 of Life After War

**Edition**: 2021

**Length:** 2464pages

**Author**: Angela White

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**Box Set TOC**

[Book Ten](#_Book_10)

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# Book 10

Setting Sail

A picture containing outdoor, surfing, water, person

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

**Copyright**

Life After War

**Setting Sail**

by

**Angela White**

**Title**: Setting Sail

Book 10 of the Life After War series

**Edition**: 2021

**Length**: 898 pages

**Author**: Angela White

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## Table of Contents BK10

[Prologue](#PrologueBK10)

[You Scare Me](#BK10CH1)

[I Hate This Life](#BK10CH2)

[American Spirit](#BK10CH3)

[I Can Kill You Now](#BK10CH4)

[I’m Not Adrian](#BK10CH5)

[Pick Your Own Targets](#BK10CH6)

[The Traitor’s Whore](#BK10CH7)

[No Games](#BK10CH8)

[It Feels Nasty](#BK10CH9)

[You Screwed Up](#BK10CH10)

[Being Driven](#BK10CH11)

[Be Worried](#BK10CH12)

[Lesson One](#BK10CH13)

[Let’s See Your Ante](#BK10CH14)

[Make it Burn](#BK10CH15)

[All I Have](#BK10CH16)

[My New XO](#BK10CH17)

[I Fought for It](#BK10CH18)

[Parent Connection](#BK10CH19)

[I Was Never Here](#BK10CH20)

[Take it In](#BK10CH21)

[It’s Not About You](#BK10CH22)

[No One Understands](#BK10CH23)

[Crabs](#BK10CH24)

[Private Lessons](#BK10CH25)

[I Forbid You](#BK10CH26)

[Husband and Wife](#BK10CH27)

[Sent to Observe](#BK10CH28)

[Too Valuable to Kill](#BK10CH29)

[Safe Haven’s Son](#BK10CH30)

[Like a Cult](#BK10CH31)

[Change is a Harsh Event](#BK10CH32)

[The Last Holdouts](#BK10CH33)

[A Working Break](#BK10CH34)

[Made to be Broken](#BK10CH35)

[Breathing Fire](#BK10CH36)

[Remember How it Smells](#BK10CH37)

[It’s Destiny](#BK10CH38)

[-Extras Section](#_Extras_Section_Book)

**Rage Walkers**

It came from an island in the south;

Rage Walkers disease.

Decimating populations,

Faster than people could bleed.

Already weakened by a war,

The infection spread over the ocean.

It hit American shores,

And never slowed its ruthless motion.

From anger, to fury, to madness,

They tore each other apart.

The few who were spared,

Had to be smart.

We hid in the hills and the fields;

Rage Walkers took the cities and mountains.

We stood as best we knew how;

Our blood spilled from their fountains.

Already on the edge of collapse,

Civilization began to slide.

No one came to help;

There was no way to stem the tide.

Countries crumbled to ashes;

The disease continues to spread.

Safety left and hell abounds;

Even the descendants dread.

**Prologue**

*In the East*

*noon*

**1**

**“T**hat was Safe Haven!”

Vihaan rose from the dying bushes next to the small cabin. The tracker had been watching it for days, drawn by the feel of magic, but that flood of protection from the south was unmistakable. Someone had used a massive shield. The power signature was rippling across the land.

Vihaan stayed straight as he crossed the backyard, not caring if the family found his tracks or saw him through one of the few windows. His footprints would alert them to predators in the area. If they were smart, they would see the tracks and leave. If they weren’t, Vihaan would have fun after his work in the south was finished. He wanted to know why the family put off a feel of magic. All descendants were supposed to be laboring for the same boss, sent to the international detention center for reeducation, or killed. There were no exceptions.

The noon sun beat on Vihaan’s white-clad shoulders, bringing a fresh layer of sweat. The temperatures were rising in the south and dropping in the north. He had spent time in both areas over the last weeks, trailing prey, and the only constant here was the wind. It blew in from the west with anger. Vihaan liked that. It reminded him of the winds at home. It was the only thing here that did. Everything else about America was a foreign challenge. *I have many tales to tell my family when I return*. None of them had the gift. Vihaan had enjoyed that too, though he’d learned they were likely Invisibles who would eventually evolve. It wouldn’t matter. Upon his return, he would be named the head of his family. Then, he would take a wife from a neighboring leader, claim that land, and begin his future in the new world order.

*Click-click!*

The radio in his pocket paused, then clicked three more times.

Vihaan didn’t answer the alert, though he was certain others in his group would. Everyone within fifty miles had felt the Safe Haven emission. Many of them, unlike himself, would now go south to track it.

Vihaan went to the small motorbike he’d liberated the day he’d been dropped into infidel country. He fired it up and drove off without worrying over being heard or chased. This area was deserted except for the small cabin with two kids, one mother, and two men both performing roles of husband. Vihaan presumed it was two brothers sharing a family, like his people sometimes did, and approved. When he claimed them, the woman and children would know what was expected. They were the first American family he had witnessed living this way. *Maybe I’ll spare the men so they can pass it to those we keep as slaves.*

Vihaan deliberated, then shook his head. No Americans should be spared in the end. The new world was here and those stubborn fighters would never conform. Vihaan respected them even as he hated them.

**2**

**Ciemus**

“We need to go dark and quiet.” Brandon followed the Mayor away from the gate. “Angela shouldn’t have brought up the shield. Trackers have this location now.”

Donna pointed at one of her men and kept walking. “Call the water.”

Brandon stayed on her heels, confused but curious like all of Safe Haven had been about the water sheltering this town.

Donna jogged up the stairs and entered her office. She pushed a button on the desk.

Brandon didn’t hear anything, but he knew the people did. They were running toward the fishing area.

Donna pointed to her window. “This is the best view of it.”

Brandon went to the glass, aware of Donna eyeing him as if he were a threat. He could feel her concern about being alone with him, but time would ease that. He’d learned that from watching Angela jump every time a guy tried to make friends. Now, he would die for her and she would die for him. They were Eagles.

“Are you regretting your decision?” Donna was very perceptive of male moods.

Brandon sighed, moving the curtain aside. “Not yet.”

Donna smiled at the cautious tone. “There’s time to catch up.”

“I have no future with them.” Brandon didn’t want to start his new life here on a lie. “I’m a Mitchel.”

“Ah.” Donna sat down. “I feel better now.”

Brandon observed her in the glass. “Why?”

“Because I knew something was wrong with you even though your leader tried to cover it. This isn’t as bad as I suspected.”

Brandon chuckled. “I’ve never gotten that response before. Maybe it *will* work out.”

Donna pushed the button again. “Providing you remember two things, sir.”

Brandon saw locals pulling ropes from the water by the wall. “What are those?”

“We need babies and you’re a Mitchel.”

Brandon snickered.

So did Donna, but it was clear from her expression that she meant it.

Brandon nodded, still laughing. “I’ll do my best to uphold that part of the family reputation.” He waited to hear her response, but the action at the river drew his attention and held it. The water was rising. It spilled over the banks and ran over the boots of the men and women still pulling on the ropes. The locals smiled and chatted as if it wasn’t happening. When the water kept coming, filling spaces and rushing over the ground, Brandon frowned.

The water covered ankles and then the knees of the pullers. Brandon didn’t witness any shifting in the wall, but it was obviously having an effect as the liquid rushed over the waist high crops, soaking them.

The people who had been fishing were smiling as the rolling liquid covered their faces.

“They’ll drown!” Brandon’s mouth dropped open as he realized the locals were covered in a water shield. They were playing in it. “How is that possible?”

“William made a deal when the war came.” Donna observed him. “We are sheltered, but it’s a small area. To enlarge it would draw attention no matter how high the water gets.”

“That’s why the walls are muddy even in winter!” Brandon watched as the water submerged the town. It was astounding how fast it happened. “What happens when it reaches the top?”

“It overflows, of course.” Donna lit a cigarette from her ration. “It covers the land for miles and prevents anyone from catching sight of the wall.”

“What if they were already in the area?”

“It flushes them out.”

“Or drowns them?”

“Yes. We’ve found bodies of people caught in tents or abandoned homes. Because of that, we ask the water to come during the daylight, so people will have a chance to escape.”

“Why do you let your enemies escape?”

“Why do you assume everyone is an enemy?”

Brandon’s amazement faded. “Because they always turn out to be. I’ve stopped giving people the benefit of the doubt.”

“William is the opposite.” Donna flipped her ash and stubbed out the cherry. “I’m in the middle. You’ll take Grant’s place and restore the balance that’s been taken.”

“Why don’t you just go with them?” Brandon turned from the fantastical sight. “The water won’t protect you forever. Someone will make a better deal to wipe you out. Why are you staying?”

“It’s not something we can explain. You’ll have to experience it.”

“You mean go out while the water’s up?” Brandon kept his face blank.

Donna pointed at her doorway, where water was trickling in.

Brandon hesitated. “I... Am I covered?”

Donna gave him a pointed look.

Brandon sighed. “We’ll find out together.”

Donna nodded, gun coming up from her drawer. “Go cleanse yourself or meet your maker.”

Brandon flipped the latch on the window. “I’m an Eagle. I was just waiting for orders.”

Donna sniggered as the man dove off the window ledge. The water rushed over him in giddy welcome. “Should have known. The Mitchels are all special.”

“Help!”

Donna shot up and ran into the flooding hall.

Kevin barreled into her, knocking them both to the ground.

Donna groaned. “Are you okay?”

“Hands!” Kevin shoved to his feet as the water advanced, not feeling the bleeding scrape on his arm. “And teeth! In the water!”

“Damn.” She sat up as the roaring liquid rushed by, chasing the panicking man. “I hate it when this happens.”

Donna brought her gun up and shot Kevin in the chest.

“Why...?” The former Eagle staggered, hand coming up.

The water slammed into his knees, knocking him backwards onto the hall floor.

Donna was sorry it had come to this. She went into her office and replaced the missing bullet.

A few seconds later, the water carried Kevin’s body toward the stairs, already shredding it.

**3**

William snapped awake. He’d fallen asleep while trying not to listen in on Dog’s fatherhood story. William glanced around and found a bored driver, snoozing passengers, and a convoy of people who already felt tired again.

They were on Interstate 65, in a barren area with few trees or homes. The views were molding weeds and a broken road that didn’t appear to have had traffic at all since the war. The wind blew through the reeds and was lost beneath the rumble of their engines. It was empty here.

William wasn’t positive what had woken him with panic in his throat and adrenaline pumping through his heart. He sat up to do a deeper scan of their surroundings.

“It was in Ciemus.” Angela didn’t open her eyes. “You have one less transfer than we counted.”

William caught the images and grit his teeth. Donna being in danger was terrifying.

Angela snorted. “She wasn’t.”

William relaxed, understanding one of Safe Haven’s citizens hadn’t passed the final test. “She’s strict about that.”

“So are we.” Angela shifted. “We just don’t have the water to make the choice.” *Yet*, she amended. It was taking all her powers of reasoning to find an answer to that one. “I can have Ivan take you back. He’s restless anyway.”

William shook his head, feeling better. “No. I’m here until you tell me to go.”

Listening, Marc frowned when she didn’t tell him it would be soon. He forced it out for a more pleasant image of sailing away without any of the males now competing for Angela’s attention. His behavior said his position might be open, but Marc was down to final options. Angie was his and always would be.

Angela reached back to clasp hands with him. She refused to read his mind, positive it would upset her. His bad moods came from one direction now and she didn’t have time for it. The next nine days would be hard and wonderful. They would have moments of glory and they would have deaths. All of it was inevitable. When they finally sailed, most of their troubles would be settled.

“You promise?” Marc’s fingers tightened on hers.

Angela nodded. “Yes. As long as you follow through, we’re free. If you weaken, for even an instant, we’re doomed.”

Comforted, Marc went back to sleep like none of it mattered.

Angela didn’t. She appeared to drowse while scanning every living thing the convoy passed. If she missed a threat right now, Marc wouldn’t get a chance to enact his plan. A dozen trackers would converge on their convoy and bring refugees along to do the work.  *I just need a week and then you can all come for us. I’ll be ready.*

**4**

“Should we go south or stay on our own trail?” Hannah looked at her sisters over the tire tracks she’d been studying when the magic blast went over them like ice water.

Janet shrugged, still kneeling. The foliage here was thick and green, but there were no animals to hunt or smells to chase. They’d been forced to follow tires, the only sign of civilization in this area. They’d been tracking this same print for weeks now. “Up to you guys. Hate to have wasted all this time just to cry off the hunt.”

Hannah and Tisa snickered. Janet was tenacious when she had a scent.

“I say we stick with the bloodhound.” Tisa fluffed her matted brown hair. “She gets us there, you know?”

Hannah nodded, not clicking the radio in response to the alert, though she assumed all trackers would end up in the south by the time it was over. These tires had taken a detour to a naval station where there had been a recent, vicious battle, and then gone east a bit. Now, they were slanting south again. Janet swore they were on the trail of Safe Haven and Hannah believed her.

“I hear something.” Tisa peered east, where a thick grove of trees blocked their view. “Do you hear it?”

Janet stood up. “Water.” The sense of trouble slapped at her. “We need to go up.”

Tisa pointed at the roof of a nearby farmhouse. “That’s twenty feet.”

The women ran, listening to water coming over the land with no mercy for the people or structures. Someone shouted behind them, then screamed as they were overwhelmed.

“Where’s it coming from? The sun’s out!”

“That’s a dam breaking, not rain.” Hannah farted as she jumped a fallen tree.

The sisters laughed, loving the excitement of these apocalyptic living conditions.

The three trackers kicked together to open the locked door of the home, then pounded through the house to find the stairs.

“Here!” Hannah led them up to the attic, where she shoved a path to the window. They would have to climb out, and then up, if the water came this high. If not, they had a good perch to watch the damage.

“I see something.” Tisa gasped. “It’s a town! And trucks! I see trucks leaving! It’s them!”

Water surrounded the farmhouse, preventing the sisters from chasing the convoy as it rolled out of sight.

Tisa screamed in frustration, punching and kicking boxes and trunks in the attic.

Hannah waited, listening to the water, watching it. She could swear there were liquid hands coming up the front steps.

Janet began searching the attic for new threads. She loved the feel of American clothes,

Tisa joined her, fingering her own threadbare jumper. It was time for a change of duds. Their masters didn’t like to issue new gear. They’d been supplying their own needs since being dropped off.

Hannah snorted at her companions and continued to watch the water. She didn’t see the hands again, but she didn’t doubt herself on seeing them. Hannah looked down at her own clothes, changing her mind. The leather outfit might be hard to swim in. She joined the others. “Any bathing suits in there?”

**5**

**In the West**

**9am**

*I feel like I’m in an apocalypse.*

Heavy sheets of ash fell over the speeding jeep. In the distance, smoke rose to the sky, covering the sun. It made driving rough. Sheer drop offs on either side would kill them if the jeep slid too far one way or the other. Nature wasn’t wasting any time in reclaiming her domain out here.

Jeff flipped the wipers on high.

Ash recoated the window as soon as the wiper cleared it. Jeff grimaced.

*Hurry...*

*I am.* Jeff squinted through the filthy window. The road was missing pieces, with wrecks and debris all along this route, but he was following it anyway. A voice was calling to him from near the place where he’d already tracked Becky and Seth to. He assumed they’d made a den because Becky’s signature on his mental grid had stopped moving. *Bad idea*, he scolded. *She’s going to get killed before I can reach her.*

“Are you okay?”

Jeff jumped. He peered in the mirror at Romeo. The boy was under Doug’s arm while the big man snored. He was wearing three layers of clothes and using a jacket on his shoulder as a pillow, like everyone else. Jeff noted the Eagle position of the tools on his belt and nodded approval. The boy was a fast learner. He’d only demonstrated that for the child once. “I’m good. You?”

“Scared.”

Jeff understood why the boy felt that way. “We have action coming and then I’ll take you all back to Safe Haven.”

Romeo made a face. “They don’t like us there. Isn’t somewhere else?”

“Isn’t *there* somewhere else.” Jeff followed Doug’s educational wishes. Doug was trying to show the boys how to blend in so they weren’t mistaken for foreigners. If they spoke English well, many people were dumb enough to believe that meant they’d been citizens here. Jeff approved the ploy. The two kids would need all the help they could get. In the time they’d been traveling together, Jeff had been won over by the quiet, respectful brothers. They didn’t fit into Safe Haven because they were too normal. Jeff liked them for it. He had no patience with children who couldn’t be trusted–like Becky.

*Hurry! We’ll be gone soon!*

Jeff jerked, hands slipping.

The jeep swerved, rattling passengers.

“Is everything all right?” Allan sat up to stretch.

Jeff recovered a smoother roll over the broken road. “Yeah. Slap-happy.”

“I can take a shift if you want.” Allan yawned. “I couldn’t be more bored.”

“I’ve got it.” Jeff was already back into his mind. Allan wouldn’t be able to follow this path.

“He’s hearing things.” Romeo flashed concern to Allan. “And he’s worrying.”

Allan nodded. “We’re all worried.” He looked at Jeff in the mirror. “What are you hearing?”

“Someone needs our help.” Jeff sighed, speeding up through the ash storm. “And it isn’t who we came here for.”

**6**

**New Mexico**

“We have to help them now.” Becky was tired of waiting. “They’re being shipped out soon!”

“Not until we make a plan. We just found them. If they ship the kids out, we’ll follow and hijack the truck, but until they leave, we don’t stand a chance. They have forty men down there.”

“We didn’t even get close enough for a real recon.” Becky tossed herself into a dusty chair in the front room of the small cabin. They didn’t worry about whatever might be on the floors or in the corners. In this new life, it was better to hang out in those places and make friends with those creatures. Neither of them flinched at spiders on their skin anymore or snakes on their bedrolls. They’d adapted.

“Would you feel better about waiting if we do that?” Seth took the rocking chair next to Becky. He’d gotten comfortable using it over the week they’d been here.

“Maybe.”

Seth understood her concerns, but two Eagles wouldn’t be enough for this challenge and he knew it. He also wasn’t sure if they might have already been noticed by one of the descendants protecting the camp that was only a quarter mile from them. It wasn’t safe here. “We’ll go down tomorrow, okay? You’ll see I’m right about not blasting in there. Then we’ll work on a better plan and a new base of operations.”

Juniper trees and rocky ground that refused to grow anything else surrounded their cabin on three sides. To their back was a steep cliff with a small graveyard at the top. The cabin had been empty when they’d arrived, and bore no prints to tell of a struggle, no damage or bloodstains. Seth assumed this cabin had been unused before the war too, but he wasn’t sure because there had been a Christmas wreath dying on the door.

Becky let him talk her out of attacking the camp now, but she had decided as soon as Seth let her get close enough, she was going to take matters into her own hands. She wasn’t spending another night listening to the screams without stopping it.

Seth began to love her, hoping she would sleep. They had a habit of hunting at night for prairie dogs and running a dark house, though that had been interrupted by screams last night.

Seth unbuttoned her long sleeve shirt and slid his hands over her lacy bra, wishing he could give her a bubble bath. They were using creeks and rivers they crossed, which had provided some fun memories, but Seth wanted to give her the luxuries of a woman. Soaking in a tub for hours was one of those, according to the camp hens, and the sense of time growing short was bugging Seth. He wanted to give her special moments now, while he could. He wasn’t sure they were going to have a later.

**7**

**UN Detention Camp**

“They’re coming.” The girl’s voice was thick with her witch’s timbre. “Soon. Hours.”

The kids huddled around to listen and to hide the seer.

“Kill them all. Then we will go to Safe Haven, where the alpha will end our misery and accept our lives in honor.”

“The alpha.”

“Safe Haven.”

*“Angela.”*

“What’s going on in there?!” A sentry banged on the bars of the portable cages. “You go to the clean!”

The kids immediately stood, including the girl still searching the future. She continued to whisper as hungover men led them to their weekly shower. It was the last time they would be blasted with the icy water that sometimes stripped skin, the last day they would spend penned up like dogs. The long shelters were large and had cots, but they were still cages. Set into the side of a cliff, the children were grateful that awnings over the cages at least provided shade from the desert sun. The sky was covered in layers of smoke, but the sun was still getting through to beat on them with ruthless heat.

The kids held onto each other and their clothes as the hoses came on. Their shorts and skirts were ragged, the tops were falling apart. Cloth couldn’t stand up to the hoses either.

The shivering descendant in the middle, being sheltered, hid her elation. When help came, the alpha would break her mental chains. The other kids wanted the safety of Angela’s camp, but the descendant girl just wanted to know the alpha before she died. She wanted to know *any* adult who was good, like her. That person would share an unknowing bond that would go as deep as deep would go. Until the war, little Kimmie hadn’t known there were others like her. *Now, that’s all I think about.*

Chapter One

**You Scare Me**

Six Hours out of Ciemus

**November 19th**

A close up of a sign

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**1**

**“W**e’re coming to a good spot for a bathroom break.” Angela shifted against the uncomfortable seat for the tenth time. “Jennifer has point. William will provide support after the clear call. Ten minutes is the limit, so let’s try to keep it under half an hour.”

“You got it.” Morgan downshifted.

William perked up. “Me? Cool.”

Angela had decided to stop them before it got dark, though the sun was setting behind them right now. The shades of green beneath the layers of dust were just as wrong as they’d always been, but it was also darker. Yellowstone had replaced the fading sky debris from the war. Each time it rained or snowed, grit coated the ground in glassy ashes, but it wasn’t making a dent. That would continue for weeks, months or years. There was no way to know for sure when it would end.

Morgan tapped the brakes to send a message to the vehicle behind him. Marc and Adrian had worked on the new code after the fight at the naval station. They’d been using it since leaving Ciemus.

Morgan slowed further, scanning. He wouldn’t have chosen these tree-dotted surroundings for a break, though he didn’t feel anything menacing about the small town they hadn’t been able to go around. It was devoid of life here and obviously had been since the war, but the structures were less stable than in other places they’d been. Morgan presumed it was because coastal weather was rougher. Even the weeds and bushes here looked like they’d been hit with massive winds. He might have assumed it was a storm path, but he’d been keeping track of it for hours. What he hadn’t spotted was signs of nature. There were no animals at all, not even flies or birds. It was crazy.

“This will be a lesson for me, right?”

Angela nodded at William’s query. “Yes. The boring stuff comes first.”

“First.” William frowned. “How does it look for the next few days?”

“Like drama and traveling.” She shifted again, ankle cramping. “Then we’ll get to the action you’re trying so hard not to hope for.”

“I’m sorry.” William gestured at the convoy. “I’m riding with the legendary Safe Haven. It’s difficult not to want to see you in action now that you’ve returned to full health.”

“We haven’t yet, actually.” She rubbed her leg, trying not to bump the driver. “Maybe a week in the fresh salt air will finish it.”

William concentrated to figure out what she meant. As far as health, only a few people were still having trouble. He didn’t detect anything obvious.

“We spent months in tents, months in a mountain, and now we’re back in tents.” Angela was glad for the teaching moment as Morgan stopped the truck in a gravel lot next to a trailer park with burnt frames. She hated waiting for the Eagles to let them out. Everyone did. “It’s too cold to be outside, but we need the sun. You were occupied while we were in Ciemus, but you’ll pick it up when we reach the shore. You’ll see the differences between your people and mine.”

“I did notice you were all pale, but our kind tend to be that way from...”

“Lifetimes of hiding.” Angela agreed as he paused in understanding. “The sun gives us better health. It’s also an issue the government didn’t consider when they locked us in underground labs, or maybe they used it intentionally. We’re fragile in ways. We go mad–corrupt–faster than people who don’t have this bloodline. We need to feel the sun on our cheeks and in our hearts. It fights the darkness.”

“I’ll add that to the book.” William wondered what else she’d observed about their kind that he hadn’t.

Angela shrugged. “You’ll have enough for a new book by the time we part, but for now, you have a duty coming up and your boss isn’t in a patient mood. Get set for it.”

William hesitated. “Um. How?”

“Eagles settle into a work frame of mind.” Morgan sensed Angela’s restlessness and assumed she wanted the conversation over, so he handled it. “We check gear, plan out the shift if needed, listen to each other to pick up the mood, and we scan the environment. We concentrate on the job.”

William immediately began to do that.

Morgan doubted it would last long. William was like a hyper kid who’d just been given access to an exciting amusement park ride. He knew it wasn’t repaired regularly and there were glitches in the programing, but he still couldn’t wait to have that experience–even if it killed him.

William laughed. *That’s exactly it*. Everything was intoxicating to him right now. The smell of the Eagle jackets they were all wearing, the complaints about sore asses from traveling–he loved it all.

Angela shifted, glad Marc was able to rest. He was in the bunk behind them, no longer snoring but still breathing deeply. He would probably wake at the call to let people out, but she hoped he would at least stay in the truck. They’d been gone from Ciemus for six hours, but he’d only been out for two. He’d stayed awake talking with Dog, then swept their surroundings for problems until his lids began to droop.

*He doesn’t want to go.*

Angela stiffened. “Aloud, please.”

William frowned as he understood. “Really? Even though we’re not on a private line?”

“Yes.”

William sighed. “You have to get the drama under control. People are fed up with it.”

“Who do I kill? My love or my leader?”

William snorted. “*You’re* the leader.”

“I’m a substitute teacher keeping the seat warm.”

William spotted the obvious. “You’re depressed!”

Angela winced. She’d insisted on the conversation being spoken, but their driver was storing every word and the tension would soon wake Marc. He was sensitive to that now.

“Is everything okay?” Marc didn’t open his eyes. He’d woken the instant Morgan downshifted.

Angela switched her braid to her other shoulder so she could view him. “Peachy.”

Marc sat up in a fast lunge, reaching for his gun.

Laughter told Marc she’d been joking with the code word. It happened so rarely that he’d come up swinging.

Angela snickered. “Funny.”

Marc holstered, gave William a curt nod, then settled down next to the wolf who hadn’t budged.

William shivered at the sensation. *He’s powerful.*

Angela nodded. “More so if I give him what he wants.”

“Why don’t you?” William switched to aloud like she wanted.

“Why don’t I corrupt him the rest of the way?”

“I don’t think you can corrupt that one.” William shrugged. “But if so, does it matter at this point?”

Angela sighed. “No, but tell me anyway why it’s okay to condemn his soul.”

“He’s already damned for the battle we’ll have. In fact, I believe his death would prevent him from taking part in it.”

“Letting him die will save his soul?”

William shrugged. “Perhaps that’s why fate has been hitting you so hard. The Creator doesn’t want Marc in the final fight.”

“I prefer to think he’s meant to stay with Safe Haven on the island while the rest of us come home to die.”

Angela’s words were so blunt that silence fell, but every brain went crazy with thoughts and concerns.

Marc didn’t go back to sleep. There was too much tension.

Dog didn’t react at all. Exhausted, he was with his human friends and felt safe enough to sleep deep while his mind and body healed.

“All clear!”

Morgan gave William a look. “She’s waiting for you. Stay alert.”

William had respect for their enforcer. “I will.” He got out into the light drizzle without saying more.

Angela peered over her shoulder. “Room for one more?”

Marc scooted over, not minding it that she didn’t want him up yet. It would give him a few minutes alone with her to talk.

Angela crawled into the bunk.

Morgan got out and shut the door, then climbed onto the hood to watch over them.

Marc waited for her to get comfortable.

“Spit it out.” Angela was too sore to beat around the bush or tolerate people who wanted to do so.

“William explained some things while we walked his wall.”

Angela yawned. “And?”

“You scare me.”

“Good.”

Marc held her tighter. “I want to be like you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“…can you come back to where I am?”

“No.”

“Then I have to come to you.”

Angela shuddered. “You’ll ruin the chance we can build–”

“No more of that lie.”

“It isn’t a lie, Marc. I’m trying to figure it out. Ciemus may have helped me. I need time to sort through the cause and effect.”

“It can’t be done.”

“Maybe not.”

“Even if it can, I won’t do it.”

“Now, I’m confused.” She rolled over so she could look at him, sliding closer to stay warm. “Why wouldn’t you want it if I can do it?”

“We’ll all die anyway.” Marc rested his head against her. “No final battle, Angie. We stay on the island and just live.”

Angela wrapped her arms around him, sharing his pain. “When the time comes, I *will* return and do my duty. It’s why I was born into this time and place–to save the future. Not just mine, but of the entire world. If I lose, it all ends. I can’t run from destiny.”

“Then make me like you so I can help!”

“Because you hope He will take pity and allow us to be together in the afterlife?”

“Because we only have a few years left together and I want to share all of it.” Marc broke against her. “Please.”

Angela’s tears ran over her cheeks as she nodded against his neck. Marc never begged. She couldn’t refuse. “Okay.”

Around them, thunder rattled the ground in protest of the choice.

*He’s mine.* *I’ll make him so strong that even you can’t hurt him!*

Hail pinged into the cars and trucks, and wind howled toward the stopped convoy.

*You can’t have him!*

A shield flashed into place around the vehicles, shutting out the fury. Even the vibrations from the ground were muffled.

Eagles and descendants stilled in shocked fear.

William clapped. “She’s amazing!”

“She’s reckless.”

William frowned at Jennifer’s comment. “Yes, child, she is. Aren’t you?”

Jennifer wanted to argue and couldn’t.

William examined the shield over the convoy, unable to spot a place where he could get through.

“Neither can I.” Jennifer was impressed. “She grew stronger again.”

“All of you did, because of the naval station.”

“Not like her.” Jennifer decided to trust William–mostly because Angela did. “She’s not even like you now. She just challenged the Creator for a life. She’s the target after this.”

“And anything she loves?”

Jennifer shrugged at his tone. “We’ve been that all along. I worry over *her*. We’ll keep a sharper eye on her now.”

William frowned. “This doesn’t change anything?”

Jennifer pointed to where the Eagles were doing their duty while exchanging looks that wondered if Angela really could set them free from the chains of the past. “We’ve been marked since we survived. She decided to amend the rules of the game.”

“But… It’s the Creator!”

Jennifer resumed scanning for trouble, leaving him to figure it out. Jennifer wasn’t Angela. She wasn’t going to say it aloud and be struck down for blasphemy.

William got it an instant later and groaned. “What is wrong with her?!”

“She’s tired of an unfair system that never explains itself.”

“But that’s not our purpose!”

Jennifer spun around, hand going to her hip.

Across the convoy, Kyle spotted her and paused in the rotation that would take him into her path. *Hand on hip. No-longer resting bitch face.* He went in the opposite direction, waving Ivan into his place.

“Do you know that for a fact?” Jennifer tried not to yell.

William couldn’t lie. “No. I assume.”

“And yet we’ve been gifted with powers beyond belief.” Jennifer’s tone grew pointed. “Makes you wonder why, right?”

William nodded, subdued now. He’d always wondered and never found an answer that made sense. Maybe the descendants weren’t just here to protect humanity from itself. Perhaps they were supposed to defend mankind against all threats, including a vengeful Creator who delighted in games, bets, and plagues.

When lightning didn’t strike him through Angela’s shield, William allowed himself to consider that. They couldn’t create a perfect society, and no one could ever atone for sins of the past, so she was changing the rules. Instead of being humble and submissive, hoping to regain favor, Angela was going to free them the old fashioned way.

*Let my people go*, William quoted, in awe.

The entire convoy stilled as immense power surrounded them, pressing in on the barrier like a giant eye peering at a bug.

Angela didn’t lift her head. Her rage was sweltering, filling the cabin with waves of heat.

Marc was pouring sweat under her, but he refused to budge, to get away before she was destroyed. They would go together.

*These are my souls now. I’ll kill them all in one blast of fire before we’ll swear blind loyalty to the Creator who abandoned us.*

William scowled. “Is she bluffing?”

Jennifer shook her head, trembling at the feel of the power around them. She recognized Angela’s tactic as negotiating, but it was beyond frightening.

YOU WILL FIGHT FOR HE!

*I will not!*

The ground rumbled in warning. The shield began to weaken as power pressed in from all sides.

Angela didn’t strengthen it. That wasn’t required of her defenses now. She waved a mental hand. *Go on. Kill us all. You still won’t have your army.*

The rumbling increased.

*That’s it, isn’t it? There’s a battle coming and we’re the only ones left to fight the evil.*

DARKNESS WILL WIN!

*Tell your master we refuse. The Creator must agree to–*

YOU CANNOT DEMAND!

*I just did.* The shield around the convoy dropped. The weather immediately hit them. *Go away now. We have to get back on the road.*

The sense of fury rivaled anything they’d felt so far, but it was obvious the messenger couldn’t destroy them without permission from a higher authority.

The presence vanished.

A few of the younger citizens in Safe Haven cheered.

Everyone else feared the next meeting wouldn’t go as well.

“That was interesting.” William had barely kept from speaking. *I have so many questions!*

Jennifer snorted. “Don’t we all.” She waved toward Daryl. “He’s our protection. Don’t get out of his sight.”

William followed her as the windy, rainy bathroom stop resumed, eager for any lessons she wanted to give. Now that he’d heard the Messenger and knew without a doubt there was a level above them, William wanted the same thing Marc did, but for a different reason. William wanted whatever deal Angela cut to apply to Ciemus. Safe Haven would need a friendly port to sail into when they returned. William had no doubt they would all do battle for the Creator despite these negotiations, but now, he had hope that they would come out of it with more than forgiveness for atrocities they hadn’t committed. These people were right. Angela would make certain they were treated fairly for the first time since they’d been created.

Angela rolled off Marc’s chest, aware of his discomfort. She switched into the driver seat and lowered the window enough to let in a cool breeze.

Marc sat up and opened his jacket to let that draft reach his sweaty skin. The oddest part was that he was soaked, and she wasn’t. He didn’t understand how it was possible, but all he wanted right now was a smoke to calm his nerves and a few minutes to contemplate what had happened.

Angela handed him a lit cigarette.

Marc rubbed her hand as he took it, but he didn’t speak. He had no idea what to say. When he had worried over her being so different, he’d never considered that it would go this far. He didn’t know how to handle it.

Angela smothered her loneliness, remembering she did have someone here who might know what to say. She opened the door and went to William.

Marc stayed in the truck. He had no jealous thoughts over her choice, but he did wish he could listen so that next time he would know how to help her.

Marc stiffened as power entered his mind and opened a bolted door.

*Get out!*

*Be quiet or she’ll know you’re listening.*

Marc pouted as he smoked, but he didn’t try to shove William out.

*I’m as loyal to her as you and the dog are*. *But it’s time you adapt, Marine, or we won’t be able to work together.*

Marc would have snapped back, but William brought down a wall that only let Marc listen. ...*how do I do that?*

William tensed as Angela joined him and Jennifer. The feel of her was heavy, uncomfortable.

*Leadership stress*. Jennifer nodded as Angela came to her elbow.

*She’s like this all the time?*

*You have to be. I didn’t understand that until I had point over the mall.* Jennifer scanned behind them, noting who was giving the guards a hard time and who wasn’t. *We were attacked, and a tornado came through. Very stressful. Flipping out of that mode was impossible until I got to Ciemus.*

William hadn’t experienced many of those moments in his town since the war, so he didn’t get it, but he was suddenly sure he would by the time they parted.

Jennifer frowned. *Don’t drag it out. Give her what she needs.*

William turned to Angela and was slapped by her pain and fear. It overwhelmed him, bringing tears to his eyes. “Damn.”

Angela slowly brought up her wall, blocking those emotions so only she and her witch would feel them.

The demon whined. *Oh, great. Spare him and not me!*

Angela’s disappointment was staggering as she left them. William wanted to offer her hope, but he didn’t have any. Safe Haven had to leave, and they would all have to fight. Some things couldn’t be changed.

Jennifer realized William wasn’t able to help. She shoved him out of her way and followed Angela toward the kids’ trailer.

William felt someone trying to get into his thoughts and opened the door. *What?!*

Adrian paused. *Uh, just checking in. Is she okay?*

William squinted through the dark rain, aware of being soaked and blown. *Not really. She didn’t want to do that, but she got scared Marc was being taken.*

*Yeah, that’ll do it. How’d it go?*

William went to his truck, frowning. *You didn’t hear?*

*Nothing after she brought up the barrier. I didn’t know we could do that.*

*We, can’t.*

*You can’t?*

*Never tried, but I doubt it. She’s stronger than me.*

*Enough to…?*

*I don’t know.*

Adrian was encouraged by that answer. He broke the connection and began helping his team medicate their rescued men. The boss would be pleased. She would also be furious. All of the boat men were out of commission for a while. Being nailed to a warehouse wall as bait had hurt them. It had also killed two men. Angela’s anger would rival nature’s fury.

William slid into the truck at Jennifer’s motion. He shut the door and wiped down with the towel Marc handed him. “Thanks.”

Marc grunted. He’d also thought William could help her.

“Sorry, but her dog has to do this one. If that had been me, I would have surrendered.”

“What if it had been Donna?”

William’s anger flew through the truck.

“Damn. All right!” Marc pushed the small window open too. “I’ve had enough sweating.”

William controlled his rage, locked it away. “I get your point, but I can’t help her. I’ve never considered crossing the Creator.”

“You haven’t gone through as much as we have.”

“No, and I hope not to. You’ve become hard and cynical, with little light left in your hearts. You call me sheltered, but I’m glad of it. I don’t want to be like you or her.”

“Now you’re just lying.”

William held up a hand. “Okay, so I wouldn’t mind being as skilled as some of you, but it’s not worth the effects.”

*Are we really that bad?* Marc made a note of that concern.

William finished drying off, wishing he could change his clothes. He already missed their little bit of civilization and Marc’s point had made him worry over Donna being alone.

*It’ll be better for us on the boat.* Marc’s mood lightened a bit. *We’ll only have nature and each other to fight. That’s already less problems.*

Marc’s demon grumbled. *And no chance to run if the ship goes down*. He didn’t like the idea of his host not having an escape route.

*I can swim.*

The demon snorted, flashing an image of a lone man in the ocean, then an old headline about someone being lost at sea and the search being called off.

*I get it, but it’s still better odds than staying here.*

The demon couldn’t argue.

Neither could William. He’d been reading the memories of Safe Haven as they traveled and it was all ugly. He was grateful Ciemus hadn’t been put through all that.

*You will be now*. Marc flipped his butt. *Refugees followed us from the naval station. You’ll be lucky to get back without being spotted.*

When William didn’t answer, Marc deliberated arguing further and managed not to. William was still considering going with Safe Haven. He’d said he wasn’t coming, but it was obvious what the man wanted. Marc almost wished he could trade places, but Angie would never be satisfied in Ciemus. *She needs the adventure too or we’d already be in another cave somewhere, trying again*.

Marc went to find his mate, determined to find a way to help her through this.

William stayed in the truck and tried to get dry.

Marc found Angela and Jennifer behind the convoy. People were almost finished with bathroom trips and not saying much as they forced weary bodies back into cramped conditions.

Marc knew the women were aware of him, but neither female was speaking. Marc took that as a bad sign.

Jennifer snorted. *When we talk, you get tired of listening to it. When we’re quiet, you get nervous. Men are strange.*

Smiling, Marc took Angela’s left, scanning the darkness. He could feel her power roaming the countryside, searching for danger. *She’s expecting retaliation.*

“Shouldn’t I?”

Marc nodded. “Yes. Every piece of literature we had implies that reaction.” Marc paused. He lowered his voice. “I can’t believe you did that.”

Angela sighed. “I didn’t see another option.” She spun and slid into his arms. “You’re mine.”

Marc hugged her close. “Forever, baby.”

The rain increased, forcing the trio toward their vehicles.

Jennifer was glad. Like Marc and Angela, she was certain a negative reaction was coming as soon as the Messenger delivered the news to the Creator. They might all die at that moment.

“No.” Angela stopped outside the truck, rain soaking her. “He needs us, or we’d be dead already.”

“Are you positive it’s a *he*?” Jennifer tried to lighten the mood. “Awful emotional for a guy.”

Angela snickered with the girl, but inside, she cringed in terror at the blasphemy she’d committed. These might really be their last hours because of her choice.

Marc regarded her, catching the thought.

Angela smoothed a wet strand of ebony hair from his sexy face and climbed into the truck. “Let’s roll. We have a boat waiting.”

Marc realized she couldn’t do anything else but follow through now.

So did Jennifer. They traded a worried glance and then got into their vehicles. It wasn’t up to them. The Creator would make the final choice and they would suffer the judgement.

William continued to replay the moment in his mind, stewing and brooding over rules and levels of power as Morgan got the truck rolling.

Next to him, Angela kept track of his thoughts and hoped she wouldn’t be forced to intervene. William was edging into dangerous territory with some of his ruminations; if anyone was going to hide an ace up their sleeve, it was her.

Chapter Two

**I Hate This Life**



**1**

**“C**an we start now?” Marc wiped Angela’s cheek with his damp towel and tossed it into the floorboard.

Angela pointed at her kit. “Read the book in the bottom. Blue cover.”

Marc dug it out, frowning. He suspected a stall.

“Aloud, please.”

Marc flipped the notebook to the first page, noting the rough condition. It had been written before the earthquake. The damage was too familiar to mistake.

*“They’re going to come to me over learning how to use our gifts. I’m surprised that none of them have yet. If we can stay in these mountains, I may never have to make that choice.”*

Marc scanned the next headline. *“How to train the Master’s army.”* He shoved the book at her. “That’s not what I’m asking for.”

“It’s what will come of it, Marc.” She sighed, heart twisting. “A wise man once told me to always look as far ahead as I could on every choice, so I’d always be prepared for what it would lead to.”

“It may not. I may die before then.”

“Then we’ll go together.” Angela tossed the book back. “Get familiar with the basic rules on energy use. I’ll start teaching you between stops and work.”

“Once we’re on the boat?”

She grunted. “Things will be handled openly. I don’t want to be the leader of the last army in our history, but it will be unbeatable. I won’t stop until you’re as near to invincible as I can make you.”

“When will you tell the others?”

“I won’t need to.”

Marc presumed they would see her training him and want the same. As soon as he had the thought, Marc understood her paragraph. “How did we miss that?”

Angela shrugged. “You were busy trying to stay alive.”

Marc grimaced. “Yeah.” He settled into the bunk to read, using the small stickup nightlight.

William flashed Angela an approving glance, but he didn’t comment on the exchange. Angela had accepted that they would fight, or she wouldn’t have made the notebook. William admired her more than he already had. He opened his mouth...

“Don’t ask me. You won’t like the answer.”

William wanted Angela to teach him to fight too, so he could teach his people. He didn’t know what came afterwards.

“That’s the problem.” Angela’s head swiveled toward him. “Don’t make me kill you.”

William’s skin broke out with goosebumps. He slowly shook his head. “No. I won’t.”

“Good, because I need you.”

William immediately brightened. “Just name it.”

Marc tried to keep his mind on the notebook.

Morgan pointed to the road ahead of them.

Angela studied the two stragglers, not needing to scan to know what had happened. The couple was crying and carrying a child who was either dead or close to it.

“I hate this life!” Angela screamed, sending heat through the truck and tension through the convoy. She punched the dashboard. “You sent them to hurt me because I said no! You fuck!” Angela didn’t control the tears or her mouth.

The men in the truck lowered windows and waited for her to make the call.

Dog still didn’t lift his head.

“Please!”

“Help us!”

The cries of the parents were heartbreaking. No one wanted to be leader at that moment. After their brush with illness, most of the camp and Eagles understood it was dangerous to have contact with people who were sick, but it was awful to roll by them without stopping.

“I’m damned anyway.” Angela moaned at the guilt, the weight. “Stop the truck. Let me out.”

“Keep going.” Marc overrode her order. He took Angela’s arm and pulled her into the bunk where she fell onto his chest and sobbed.

**2**

“She isn’t stopping to help them.”

Neil shook his head at Grant’s observation. “No. I’d bet she wants to, and Marc won’t let her this time.” Neil filled Grant in on how ugly things had gotten before they’d been trapped at the naval station.

Samantha leaned between the seats and switched on the radio.

Music blared.

Neil frowned at her.

Samantha shrugged. “I can’t take her pain. I need a distraction.”

“Angela’s pain?” Grant had spent most of the Ciemus time making sure he was cleared to come along. He hadn’t heard the stories.

As Neil caught the man up, Samantha slumped in the rear with Kendle and Jennifer, trying not to reach out. She wanted the pain to stop so her twins would settle down, but she also disliked Angela’s misery. *I hope she gets a real break soon.* *Maybe when we’re on the boat, she’ll get to laugh again.*

Kendle picked up the kit at her feet. “I’ll do it. She wants me gone anyway, so if it’s something bad, no loss.”

Jennifer put a hand on Kendle’s wrist. “No.”

Kendle shrugged it off and began to check her gear. “I’ll stay away until–”

“No.” Jennifer hoped Kendle didn’t push. When she’d first discovered the enforcer power, she had been thrilled to have a defense that would succeed against her own kind. Then she’d realized she would have to use it on her fellow camp members and the fun had faded.

“At least ask her. I’ll bet she says yes.”

“If she didn’t stop us, we don’t stop.” Jennifer tried to reason with the stubborn island woman. “She may have sent someone already.”

Kendle paused to consider that, then shook her head. “She wouldn’t be so upset that it’s making my stomach hurt.” Kendle snapped her kit and unlocked the door. “I’ll jump and roll so you don’t have to stop.”

Jennifer glanced at Neil in the mirror, torn.

Neil met her eye and nodded.

Jennifer grabbed Kendle’s mind and took away her sight.

“What’s going…? Oh! You little bitch!”

Jennifer’s shield deflected Kendle’s swings, but the rebounds of her magic flew through the wagon, hitting walls and doors.

Jennifer locked down on Kendle until mouth and ears was all she had left, but the woman kept shooting off rage. Forced, Jennifer used a mental hand and shut the door to Kendle’s demon. She turned the key in the lock and put it in her mental pocket.

The castaway froze.

Jennifer let go of her. Until she opened the door, Kendle was an Invisible again. She couldn’t even hear a thought now.

Kendle shuddered. “I’ll kill you for this.”

“Maybe.” Jennifer shrugged. “Better me than Angela.”

Kendle shuddered again, body jerking with her efforts to keep still. She had no chance of defeating Jennifer without her gifts.

Jennifer sneered at the woman. “You never had a chance to defeat me at all. I’ve always known you for the traitor you are, just like I knew Adrian for what he was. About people, I’m never wrong.”

“Give it back!”

“No.”

“Marc will make you.”

“He’ll try if you play miserable bitch enough, but I won’t. I’ll do it when you aren’t a threat to the boss anymore. You’re off the council, too, by the way. You’ve made me use a power that I didn’t want known. You were going to break our quarantine, without Angela’s permission, after being told no by senior leadership. You’re off the council and out of the Eagles.”

“That’s actually an Eagle vote.”

Jennifer waved a hand at Samantha’s comment. “Works for me. They won’t tolerate this behavior.”

“But they do provide second chances.” As Marc’s best friend, Neil knew the wolfman had feelings for Kendle. Their shared adventure had created a ghost she couldn’t handle. Neil thought it was generous of Marc to even give her the time of day after everything that had happened, but when Kenn had called him the last boy scout, he’d been right on the money. Marc wanted Kendle to recover and be happy. If she didn’t, he would blame himself.

“Yes, he will.” Jennifer also knew that wouldn’t be good for them. Angela’s unhappiness was already intolerable. They didn’t need Marc’s on top of it.

“Give it back!”

“I can’t.”

“You will!”

“Maybe, but not now.”

“Why not?!”

“You haven’t apologized.” Jennifer’s fingers came up to count each point as she delivered it. “You haven’t promised to obey the rules, you don’t care about any of these people except Marc, and most importantly, you haven’t promised not to kill my alpha!”

Kendle flinched away from Jennifer’s shout. “I… I can’t.”

“I know.”

“I hate you.”

Jennifer barked cold laughter. “I think you’re shit on my shoes too, but if the boss says return it, I will. Until that moment, you’re stuck going through life like you came into it–with just your wits and that flabby ass.”

“I’ll make you screa–” Kendle looked over. “You think my ass is flabby?”

Jennifer nodded as everyone else hid snickers. “I do. You have great arms and legs, but you still spend too much time sitting, whining about how unfair your life is. Try standing. Then, when you’re ready, you’ll be a runner.” Jennifer sat back and tried to find a comfortable spot. “How long until we reach the next stop?”

“Seven hours and forty-five minutes.” Neil was awed at how Jennifer was using Adrian’s words. Neil hadn’t thought she’d been listening then, but clearly, the teenager had taken in more of her surroundings than he and the senior men had believed.

“Wake me in half that and I’ll drive.”

Neil groaned. Jennifer was hell behind the wheel and not in a good way. She was still learning to control a vehicle.

Grant was stunned. William had mentioned being able to lock or unlock gifts, but he hadn’t understood how it was possible. Grant still didn’t get the mechanics behind it, though he now had an idea it was more like closing than taking. He’d actually heard a slam. Jennifer hadn’t consumed Kendle’s power. She’d jailed it.

The sound of Kendle crying almost broke the men in the wagon. Even Samantha expected Jennifer to cave.

Jennifer wasn’t fooled or sympathetic. *I know a snake when I’m next to one.* Jennifer went to sleep.

**3**

“Do you think she’ll give it back?”

“I don’t know. She’s pissed.”

“She shouldn’t. Kendle really is a threat.”

“Yeah.”

Charlie and Conner were in the rear of Kyle’s jeep. They’d been discussing plans for the wedding reception, but the drama in the wagon ahead of them had caught their attention.

Conner glanced toward the driver and lowered his voice. “She scares me now.”

Charlie nodded. “Same. I didn’t know she could do that.”

“Me either. I thought only your mom could.”

“I was hoping that was a bluff.” Charlie was disappointed to discover it wasn’t.

Conner frowned. “Jennifer doesn’t bluff. You should know that.”

“What happened?” Kyle demanded, glaring in the mirror. “Tell me right now!”

Conner swallowed. “Jennifer locked Kendle’s gifts away because she’s dangerous to Angela.”

Kyle’s tension faded. “Excellent.”

The boys traded confused looks, realizing the mobster had already discussed it with Jennifer.

“She didn’t want to, though, right?” Charlie was guessing. “You told her to.”

“I told her to be ready when Angela ordered it.”

“Why didn’t your mom do it?” Conner looked at Charlie.

Charlie shrugged. “Why does she do anything? For the future.”

“It would seem like she was picking on Kendle because of Marc.” Kyle increased speed to stay on the bumper ahead of him, not happy with Charlie’s bitter tone. “She has to be careful.”

“We shouldn’t take her to the island with us.” Conner liked Kendle, but he hated the drama.

“Or Adrian.” Charlie was too tired to be snotty about it.

Conner wanted to argue and couldn’t.

Kyle grunted. “Your opinions are both noted.”

The boys remembered they were rookies and vowed to watch their conversations around senior men and women.

Despite not being officially on a team, the Eagles were still treating Charlie as one of them. They believed when he made amends with his mother, he would be back with them anyway and they needed every set of hands they could get.

In the passenger seat next to Kyle, Candy stayed quiet and stored the few details she understood. She’d been directed to this vehicle by Jennifer. Candy presumed the teenager had read her thoughts but hadn’t cared about the invasion of privacy or the secrets she was keeping. She’d just been relieved to not be stuck in the trailer with the other women and kids again. All the noise gave her headaches.

*You should care.* Charlie warned the woman because his friend was in love with her. *If Jennifer sees something, you’ll be in trouble.*

*I haven’t done anything wrong and I don’t intend to.*

*You’re considering messing with a younger boy. That’s against our rules.*

*You’re sleeping with an older girl. That’s against our rules.*

Charlie grinned at Conner. *She’s a fighter. You’re right.*

Conner chuckled.

Candy relaxed at the sound, smile coming to her lips. Conner was cute when he was happy.

“Damn.” Kyle sped up.

Charlie and Conner both tensed as waves of pain hit them.

Candy caught sight of the waving, crying parents in the road and realized they needed help. A few seconds later, it occurred to her that no one was stopping.

Kyle clicked the door locks.

Conner reached out to Angela. *What can I do?*

Charlie listened for an answer, but there wasn’t one that he could hear.

Conner frowned. “We need to get on a boat and go. She can’t keep making these choices. She’ll go mad.”

“What do you mean?” Kyle wanted to confirm Eagle theories.

“Descendants face a constant battle to avoid going corrupt. And she’s a doctor. Letting people die hits her on both levels. Plus, she’s kind. She loves kids and animals. It’s easy to hurt her.”

“You think it’s intentional.”

Conner pinned him in the mirror. “Don’t you?”

Kyle nodded. “We know something has it in for Marc. We’ve recently begun to suspect that Angela is being tormented.”

“They’re paying for the past.” Charlie shrugged at the surprised looks. “I listen. A lot.”

“Even while chasing tail?” Kyle asked harshly.

Candy frowned, but didn’t interrupt the moment she felt coming.

Charlie nodded. “It wasn’t in the front of my mind, but it *was* in there.”

Kyle flipped the wipers on. “And now that you’ve had the tail, you can think again?”

Charlie flushed, but nodded again.

Kyle grinned at him through the mirror. “Welcome to manhood.”

The males chortled at the joke. Candy didn’t, but she also wasn’t angered. She had no idea what it was like to be a man. She did know how hard it was being a woman though, and believed it was equal in different ways. A lot was expected from their men, a lot more than had been in the past. Candy thought they were doing well. She had faith that Angela would continue to open the eyes of every member in their camp. The people just had to be strong enough to confront the errors she would show them.

**4**

“That’s not good.”

Travis peered through the rainy window at Ivan’s groan. Upon catching sight of the desolate parents, Travis shook his head. “Not again.”

Ivan grabbed his kit.

In the rear, Shawn cleared his throat. “Stay put, gentlemen. You haven’t received orders to do anything.”

James glowered at him in the side mirror. “You just worry over the little girl you want to plug. We’ll handle the big choices.”

Shawn immediately lunged forward and grabbed James by the back of his head. He began slamming him against the dashboard.

Driving, Ivan couldn’t stop it.

Next to Shawn in the rear, Quinn didn’t try. James needed to have more respect.

Shawn let go of the bloody, moaning man, satisfied he’d made his point.

Ivan regarded Quinn in the mirror. “She’s upset. We should do something.”

Quinn shook his head. “We help them, we risk the camp. No.”

“I can’t believe how callous you all are!”

Shawn grunted, watching James for a retaliation. “We can’t believe how stupid you all are, so we’re even.”

Ivan didn’t want to be the target of Shawn’s ire, but he couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “You know she’ll be upset. She might even sneak out again to handle it.”

“Not this time.” Quinn had already discussed this possibility with Neil. “She saw this camp tear itself apart over her absence. She’ll suck it up just like you and the big mouth will.”

James lowered the window to spit blood, but he didn’t yell at the parents. His head was ringing; pain was lancing through his temples. He hadn’t expected Shawn to be so strong.

He looked over his shoulder and received a lifted brow. James snorted painfully. “Yeah, I got it. You’re not after the baby.”

“I got stuck with a heavy duty and I’m doing it.” Shawn’s tone was ugly. “When she’s older, you’ll be sniffing at her heels like every other male in camp. I’ll be one of the few standing in your way.” Shawn grinned violently. “This was nothing compared to then. Even if she *wants* to date you, you’ll still have to get by me.”

Shawn’s defense of the girl was admirable and demonstrated how he felt, but Quinn wasn’t relieved. He would pass word on to the senior people worrying over it, though. Like them, Quinn was sure Missy was right. The descendant children were accurate in their predictions. If not for Angela starting the meetings to get them under control, the boat ride would be rough. As it was, many of the men were already dreading being trapped on a ship with so many kids. Babysitting punishments would be handed out generously.

“I won’t want a little kid.” James wiped his face on his sleeve. “I stand by what I said. Be careful.”

Shawn nodded. “You too, sweetheart. We’ll get time in the cage together and I don’t forget anything.”

Finally subdued, James glowered through the window and tried to find an excuse to avoid the cage.

Quinn smirked and fell back into studying the map that had been forgotten upon sight of the sick family.

Ivan dwelled on the boss. Angela would be upset when they stopped. It would be better if he could give her good news of some kind.

Ivan caught movement in the rearview mirror and squinted to make it out. Kenn was using Eagle code.

*Do you see me? Adjust your mirror.*

Ivan did it without drawing attention from anyone in his truck. It was obvious Kenn didn’t want the other descendants to know or they’d be talking mentally.

Kenn signaled again from the slack position.

Ivan tapped the brakes enough to make the light come on to acknowledge Kenn, but not to stop the vehicle. As he discerned what Kenn wanted, Ivan wasn’t certain what to do. A senior man had told him no and now a senior man was telling him yes. Ivan chose to do what would please the boss even as it hurt her. He told Kenn no and refused to look at more communications from the man.

Kenn had expected to be refused. Ivan and his group didn’t like him, but they also didn’t want to endanger their Eagle chances by disobeying orders. Kenn understood and agreed even as he was disappointed. Ivan and his group would get payback at some point for tormenting him, but they couldn’t match what Charlie had done. Kenn hadn’t suggested asking for a driver switch to disobey orders and gain favor with the boss. He’d done it because Angela wasn’t going to help the family and it was hurting him to leave them out there. He thought the boss would know that and forgive his actions this once.

“And what about next time?”

Kenn looked over in surprise.

Tonya flushed. She’d only been able to read thoughts through the baby for a few days. It had started in Ciemus.

Kenn chuckled. “I can do it and get away with it, once. Beyond that, we’ll have to draft rookies who don’t know any better.”

Glad he wasn’t upset, Tonya leaned against Kenn’s big arm and dozed. She didn’t care for traveling, but she felt safe with her man and her people, and she would defend them if needed. Kenn had been joking, but Tonya had made her choice a month ago. If Kenn ever went against Angela, she wouldn’t be able to be with him anymore. Her place in camp meant a lot to her now.

Kenn patted her thigh. “That’s why we’re perfect for each other. I feel the same way.”

Tonya smiled and allowed light sleep to claim her.

Kenn kept the lie hidden behind his new wall and tried to discover a way to ease Angela’s pain when they stopped. His place in camp no longer mattered the most. His child did, and Angela would protect it as if it were hers, providing the child was in this camp and she was in charge. Nothing would be allowed to interfere with those two things ever again.

**5**

“Why is everyone upset?” Ray looked at Gus.

Gus was in the backseat with another rookie. He frowned but chose to answer. “Sick people ahead. The boss wants to help but can’t.”

Ray held out a hand to Greg. “Give me your medical kit.” He lowered the window, seeing shadows coming. “Hurry!”

Greg shoved the kit into Ray’s hand, ducking from the rainy wind.

Ray tossed the pack at the family. “It’s medicine!” He quickly raised the glass.

Greg was happy with it.

Gus was a bit worried over Angela’s reaction, but happy they’d helped the strangers.

Ray leaned back and tried to return to a sleep that didn’t include Dale’s ghost haunting him.

“Get it!” The woman staggered beneath the weight of the girl, bringing them both to the cold ground. Slush soaked her legs while her tears soaked the child’s cheek. She couldn’t believe the convoy wasn’t going to stop.

The father dug in the bag. “It’s medicine!”

“Find antibiotics. Penicillin or amoxicillin preferably.” The woman jerked the child over to expose her hip. The girl had fallen on debris while they were running from the scavengers who had slaughtered their town. She’d been unconscious for a full day now.

The father loaded the syringe and plunged it into his daughter’s skin as the rest of the cars went by. He’d known the convoy wasn’t stopping as soon as the first truck went by. In another situation, he might have understood. Right now, he hated all of them except the man who’d tossed the bag.

“Why didn’t they stop?” The woman tried to quit crying so she could help lift the child onto the man’s frozen back.

“They didn’t know we’re not a threat.”

“I hope they all die!” The mother shivered as the wind increased.

The man nodded, hefting the girl’s weight. “Come lead the way with the flashlight. We’ll find a shed and stay the night. Any scavengers left will be drawn to the noise of the vehicles and miss us.”

“I hope they’re found!” The mother couldn’t help her bitterness. “We would have helped them!”

The man jerked his chin toward the bag. “Get that. I think we’ll need to dose her again in the morning.”

The storm grew worse as the family vanished into the shadowy woods lining the muddy, broken concrete.

**6**

In the lead rig, Angela’s tears were dried to her face. Her uneven breathing against Marc’s chest was hard on him. Marc was relieved to have good news to tell her and dreading punishing Ray and Greg for it. They’d disobeyed an unspoken order. Marc planned to stick his neck out and insist it be a light scold. Ray had done what she wanted to but hadn’t had time for. She couldn’t send a mental message outside the truck for fear a tracker would catch it, and radio calls had been out of the question. Ray had reacted in time. Marc wanted him left alone.

Angela muttered, fists tightening against his shirt. “No more bodies. There’s no room for them! My crypt is full.”

Marc winced. It was the old nightmare. She’d been having it the entire trip to Safe Haven, but he hadn’t paid enough attention. If he had, he might never have delivered her. He could have stolen Charlie for her and taken them north.

Angela shifted restlessly, sending fresh unease through the truck.

Marc flinched as she shot up.

“Watch out!”

Eagles and descendants went on high alert.

Dog finally lifted his heavy head.

Marc drew his gun and waited for a target.

Angela’s breathing was harsh. “Down! He saw you!”

Marc realized her eyes were still closed. He holstered. “What’s happening?”

“Death is coming.”

Angela’s voice was eerie, giving their passenger chills. William had never been on this side of it. He observed and listened, trying to connect with her to see what she was.

Angela relaxed, falling deeper into the vision.

Marc looked at William. “Tell me what she sees and then when it’s over, tell me how to do that.”

William nodded, fighting hard to view the images in her vast mind. “It’s storming...ash... She’s in the west.”

Chapter Three

**American Spirit**

A sunset in the background

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“W**e need help for this.”

Seth stifled the urge to rub it in. Becky had hoped to find a small, lax operation, but the barriers around the half mile UN camp were nearly impenetrable. Seth only saw one weak point, but it would still be hard to damage. The far corner of the camp was set against the stone instead of forming a complete connection between the barriers. They might be able to slip in there, but three dozen troops were too much. Even with her gifts, they couldn’t take this place alone. The camp was just south of Deming, miles from the border of New Mexico, Mexico, and Texas. It was a dangerous place even before the war. *Conditions haven’t improved.*

The dust and gnats were aggravating, as was the constant scraping sounds of debris being blown over parched ground. The winds were strong here, blowing the dust and grit into tiny monsters that tried to blind them as they watched the camp that rang with unpleasant noises.

Seth winced at a young scream. *That could be her. She didn’t survive... It could be, though.*

Becky felt Seth weakening again, but she couldn’t comfort him. The dusty UN troops were hungover and in rough moods. They shoved kids and argued as they handled the needs of everyone in the long rows of cages. The other three sides of the camp held tents for sleeping and storage, but their flaps were open to catch a breeze. It allowed Becky and Seth to see squalor and empty boxes. Supplies were low.

Becky pulled her tan hat further onto her short curls, glad for the brim that blocked the sun. It was surprisingly bright here despite the cloud-layered sky. The north was dark. Yellowstone still wasn’t happy.

Seth tugged on one of her sheared locks and pointed. It was time to go.

Becky wiped sweat from her neck and nodded. He was right. They couldn’t attack alone, and they were in the middle of a troop entrance here. If they were caught, the kids wouldn’t get help at all.

Becky led the way down the ravine. The UN camp was in a gulley that didn’t appear as though it had seen rain in a long time. The amount of dust was staggering. Becky had no doubt it would be worse there. *Why would they make camp in such a bad place?*

Her witch supplied the answer. *Clear view of all four ridges and the only entrance road.*

*But why here?*

Seth took her elbow and helped her over the rough boulders at the bottom of the hill.

*Working with our southern enemies, I’d guess. We’re on the border here.*

Becky led the way, shrugging out of his light grip. Until she got too big to do these things, she wanted to do it on her own.

Seth wasn’t angry with her. He was worried. The UN camp wasn’t just guarded by troops. There were at least two descendants down there. Seth had been careful to stay out of their patrol areas. Becky had insisted no one could hear her private mental line, but Seth wasn’t convinced.

The couple hurried into the sparse juniper at the foot of the ravine and then dropped into a large hole they’d only found because their hostage had told them what to look for. Troops on foot used the secret entrance. Everyone else used the road.

Seth waited for Becky to get inside the dusty darkness, then pulled the hatch of brambles overtop them. The walk in the cool darkness was short and then they were out on the other side of the rocky hills.

Seth hurried to their hummer, wishing bright yellow wasn’t so bright.

Becky got in and held on as Seth took them out of the area in a hurry. They’d taken a large risk coming here in the daytime. She knew that now. “How do you want to make contact?”

“We’ll use your private line during the storm. That should give us some extra cover.”

“We won’t need it.” Becky had the confidence of youth. “I’m unbreakable.”

Seth winced, but didn’t correct her. He believed she was strong, but anyone could be broken if they were hit enough.

The small cabin they’d chosen was nestled between boulders and scrub weed. The wide open door banging in the wind wasn’t expected.

Seth slammed on the brakes and shifted into reverse.

“Wait… It’s Jeff!”

Jeff and Doug came out of the cabin with guns and expressions that weren’t inviting.

Jeff was dressed in tan camouflage, as was Doug and the boys. Seth immediately felt ashamed of the red shirt beneath his jacket. He wasn’t following Eagle rules.

“We came out here so we didn’t have to do that.” Becky thought Jeff looked angry.

“*You* did.”

Becky sulked, but didn’t reply to Seth’s mutter. He was right. Seth had come to watch over her and his baby. Searching for his missing daughter was just the excuse.

“That’s our help.”

Becky nodded as Seth veered them into the parking space backward. *We’ll have to keep the magic use down. Jeff didn’t like it. He’s kind of a girl that way.*

Jeff flipped her the finger.

Becky frowned. “What was that for?”

The couple froze as Jeff shoved into their minds at the same time.

*You have a tracker on your trail. Get in here.*

Seth hurried around to Becky’s door, surprised to discover Jeff was a descendant, but not surprised that they’d been followed.

“That’s not possible. No one gets through my line.”

Jeff shoved deeper into her mind. *You left before everyone else evolved, little girl. You have a lot of growing to do to match any of the camp now.*

Becky growled.

Jeff shook his head and went inside the cabin. *That tracker is minutes behind you. Keep risking Seth’s life out there in the open. I don’t care.*

Becky slammed the hummer door and let Seth rush her inside.

“How did you find us?” Seth locked them in dimness.

“Like I said, she’s not as strong as she thinks. We followed magic use–like the tracker did.”

Becky would have argued further, but she caught sight of Doug. The boys were behind him, sleeping on the bed that she and Seth didn’t like because it was too small for both of them. They’d chosen the loft instead.

Doug’s profile was grim.

“What is it?” Becky took a step toward him, then stilled.

Doug winced as she shoved into his mind for the details.

Seth was saddened by the images. Safe Haven had lost a lot of people, including Becky’s mother, in an earthquake. He and Becky had also heard the radio calls from a naval station, but they’d never believed the camp was gone. Neither had Doug or Jeff.

“No…”

Doug hugged the girl, hoping she would cry it out and agree to come home with him.

Becky didn’t cry. She shuddered against Doug’s heat. “I knew.”

Seth got the answer for her nightmares from that. He was relieved the event was already over and full of guilt for not being there to help.

Jeff grunted. “We’re all carrying a bit of that.” He noted the cabin was being kept clean and had been secured. It still didn’t excuse the bright vehicle, but at least it was something. He and Doug hadn’t been here long enough to pick up more details than that.

Seth signaled toward the door. “What do you want to do about the tracker?”

Jeff looked at Becky and then back.

Seth shook his head.

Jeff sighed. “Then keep her out of the way.”

Seth didn’t know how he would do that, but he didn’t want Becky in the actual fight.

Becky stepped from Doug’s big arms and peered up at him. “Thank you for trying to love her.”

Doug sniffed. “I did love her. She just couldn’t get around her hatred of men enough to return it.”

Becky hadn’t known about her mother’s obsession with putting women in charge of the world. She was surprised by it and dismayed as she read Doug’s memories.

“Can we do this family reunion later?” Jeff snapped, checking his weapon.

“Why are you being so mean?” Becky turned on him. “Why do you hate me?”

Jeff rolled his eyes. “You endangered Seth by running off and you took a needed Eagle from camp. Now, you’re about to get him killed by the tracker who just pulled up on a bike next to that bright ass hummer you insisted on. Seth wouldn’t have chosen that vehicle on his own. He would have followed Eagle training. It’s a wonder he’s not dead.”

“You came for Seth.”

Jeff nodded. “The boss wants him. You’re a burden to be dragged along, so why don’t you take the boys upstairs and stay out of the way?”

“Hey!” Seth didn’t like Jeff’s tone or words. “We didn’t ask you to come here.”

“No, but you need me. You shouldn’t have left camp to follow a piece of ass and you know it, so stop arguing and get your gun. The tracker coming is no one to screw around with.”

“How do you know!” Becky pointed. “You haven’t been here!”

“A lone man is walking up to the door without a weapon in hand. He knows who we are and he isn’t scared. That’s a badass. Get the boys into the loft. Do it now!”

Becky helped Doug move the sleepy boys upstairs, but inside, fury burned. She didn’t want Jeff here collecting them like wayward children.

*But that’s what you are*, her demon declared. *I’m glad he came. You might survive.*

*Jeff won’t keep me alive. He came for Seth.*

*He came to make amends to the boss by bringing home the next generation of that camp–your child. She doesn’t care about you or the father as much as she does the unborn.*

Becky sighed. *Not true. Angela cares about all life, even the bad.*

Her demon cackled. *She’s changed. Can’t you see it in their thoughts? She just wants your baby.*

Downstairs, Jeff stopped, head rotating toward the loft. “She’s gone mad.”

Seth grimaced. *That didn’t take long*. He’d been hoping his impression was wrong.

“It’s not.” Jeff didn’t lower his voice. “She’s dangerous.”

“Only to herself when she’s alone.”

“Wrong.” Jeff opened the door and pointed his rifle at the tall, lanky man coming up the steps. “She’s a danger to all of us now. The best thing you can do is provide mercy.”

“She’s pregnant!” Seth yelled. “And I don’t kill the innocent!”

“Is she?” Jeff kept working the moment as the stranger stopped and lifted his hands.

Seth wanted to say yes and couldn’t. Becky had killed their hostage while trying to get details about the UN camp. Once they’d arrived here, Becky’s stability had crumbled. The sight of kids, of girls, being tortured and raped, sold off to troops and survivors, had brought Rick back to her in a hurry. The nightmares had come steadily.

“Later.” Jeff didn’t want to get distracted by their drama. “Right now, we have other issues.”

The tracker grinned, showing beautiful white teeth and cruel glee. “Yes, you do. No one leaves without permission. If you try, my friend will call in help.”

“What do you want?” Seth asked, sensing Jeff getting ready to lunge at the man. He was hoping to spot the guy’s teammate when Jeff went out.

Jeff glared at Seth as the tracker retreated. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Seth realized he’d given away the plan and groaned. “It’s been too long!”

The tracker backed behind the cover of the hummer, aware of Jeff scanning him again, searching for another opportunity. “We’re going to talk and then we’ll all pile into this hummer and go meet the base commander. If you argue, we’ll take in your bodies and the boss will still get your kids.”

Seth’s eyes widened. *He thinks–*

Jeff elbowed Seth in the kidney.

Seth recoiled, clutching his side. “Damn it!”

Jeff eyed the tracker. The man was stocky and tall, with scars and worn clothing implying he liked his job too much to stop for a shower and a shave. He didn’t appear to be insane, however. The man looked hard yet reasonable.

“I am.” Bret waved his empty hand. “When people cooperate, I’m not mean. No reason to be.”

*Descendant number one*, Jeff marked. He caught sight of a shadow on the ground, showing a lanky man on the roof.

Bret gestured. “Liam there isn’t as kind. When he goes through that window and finds a female, of any age, it’ll get ugly. Call her down and we’ll leave before that can happen.”

Seth staggered toward the steps. “Come down!”

Jeff kicked Seth’s ankle. “Shut up!”

“We’re coming!” Becky shouted.

The tracker on the roof roared.

Glass shattered.

“Too late.” Bret laughed at their dismay.

Jeff shot him mid chuckle.

Doug pounded up the stairs.

Seth stared in surprise at Jeff. “What happened?”

“Wait…”

“Let go or die!”

Becky’s shout got Seth to his feet, but Jeff had hurt him enough that he couldn’t run up the stairs.

“You’d get there in time to be shot.” Jeff waited to holster in case Becky had bitten off more than she could chew.

*Bang!*

“All clear!” Becky called a second later.

*Good girl.* Jeff holstered and went outside to make sure the two men had been alone.

Doug and Becky came down the stairs and went to the small bedroom. They both had a giggling boy over their shoulder, tickling them to distract from what they’d witnessed. She and Jeff hadn’t been sure where the gunplay would happen, but they’d agreed it was most likely to happen on the ground floor.

Jeff nodded at the girl as he came inside and fastened the door. “Good act.”

Becky didn’t feel like she deserved the praise. “I am sorry. I didn’t know we had a tail.”

“Jennifer told us trackers can get through most mental walls and pick up conversations easier. You didn’t know.”

“No, but I do now.” Becky went to Seth, helping him massage the cramp from his side. “I’m sorry we couldn’t tell you. It happened too fast.”

“You knew they were here?”

Becky nodded. “I picked up Jeff’s memories about Crista as we hit the property. He was worrying over me being caught in the crossfire. I showed him how I would handle it and he agreed.”

“How did you keep the tracker from seeing the images?”

“We didn’t. There just wasn’t time for him to figure out what it meant. We had to act fast.”

Jeff held out a hand to Seth. “You’ll live. Get up here and take a shift at the window.”

Seth laughed and then groaned as Jeff pulled him up. “Did you have to be so mean?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Jeff and Becky chuckled at their simultaneous answers.

“That duo was sharp. It had to be real.”

“Well, I won’t be running into the encampment, that’s for sure.” Seth hated being out of the loop.

“We’re not running in.” Jeff had already swept their minds for details on the camp. “Watch the door while I cook. We’ll have a meal and a smoke, and talk about it.”

Seth took the spot, limping, as Doug dragged the upstairs body to the shattered window and shoved it out.

Becky regarded Jeff. “What do you want me to do?”

Jeff shrugged. “Same as you were before.”

Becky went to the rear window to help Seth keep watch.

Pleased with how things had gone, Jeff opened his kit and began digging in it. The UN troops might know they were coming when the tracker didn’t return, but Jeff doubted it. The tracker had been filthy. He hadn’t seen a camp in a while, but it didn’t matter. The three dozen kids in that base were spending their last hours in captivity. Come dawn, they would be free. There was no way Jeff could walk from this killing field. His honor demanded that he do something.

“What do we do now? Run?” Doug wanted to know what came next. He had no faith that just four of them could take over a UN camp.

“The kids are waiting for us.” Jeff kept digging. “It would be rude to disappoint them.”

Becky grinned, watching him pull out the ingredients for a nice stew. “Are we using explosives?”

“No need.” Jeff shrugged. “I forgot who we are for a minute. We just have to let them feel us.”

“We can’t use magic!” Seth waved. “They’ll all come.”

“No. Just a good team to bring us in.”

“A team we’ll take over and turn against them?” Becky liked mind games.

Doug chuckled, while Seth frowned deeper.

Jeff sighed. *Coldblooded women are hot. Guess it isn’t just the ladies who like a bad boy. “*How about we kill our escorts when we get to the entrance of their camp? From there, we’ll do what we do best.”

**2**

*Knock-knock!*

Everyone at the table quieted. They’d only been finished eating for a few minutes.

*It would have been rude to interrupt your last meal*. The male tracker’s voice in all their minds was amused. *Open the door.*

Jeff and Becky shared a fast, unhappy glance. Neither of them were getting anything from the person knocking on the door. The shield was too strong.

Doug stood up and got his boys back into the loft. They made noises that couldn’t be helped.

Seth waited to see what Jeff wanted to do.

So did Becky. Unlike the act earlier, she knew she couldn’t handle this one.

Jeff gathered power to blast the person off the porch.

Becky swung the door open so he had a clear view.

“Stop!” Seth shoved through them and scrambled down the dusty porch stairs, almost falling. “My baby!”

There was no doubt about the redheaded child’s parentage. Even her dimples were identical.

The people behind her were blurs outlined in headlights. Becky counted twenty shadows in UN uniforms, with weapons and leers implying they were enjoying this moment.

Becky and Jeff let the power fade as they observed Seth’s reunion with his daughter. The child knew who he was, but she wasn’t crying or even hugging him back. *She’s following orders*, Jeff thought.

Becky gave him a subtle nod. She thought so too.

In a shield, the group of UN troops observed them with smirks and guns aimed at the child. Leading the group was a tracker none of the Safe Haven people had ever met or heard of, but instantly feared.

Jon delivered a cruel grin with his simple demands. “You three come. We don’t want your others. They can go.”

Jeff was relieved the kids weren’t being taken. He nodded toward his pack as he lowered his gun.

Doug understood. He stayed in the doorway to block the kids from view and reach.

Jon gestured toward Becky. “Get your man and come. He is expendable. Do not take your time.”

Becky came down the steps and took Seth’s arm, glaring.

Seth, daughter in his arms and tears on his face, missed all of it. He went where Becky shoved him.

Jeff followed, scanning the tracker and the troops. He wasn’t comforted by the robotic thoughts of the group. They had one mission right now: Bring in the powerful descendants who’d stumbled onto their location. Kill the rest.

Jeff looked back at Doug. He couldn’t speak, but he could communicate.

Doug watched Jeff’s hands, heart pounding as he realized it was a lie. He and the boys were going to be killed.

Jeff didn’t like the odds, but he presumed the group would split up. Half would escort them and half would stay to handle Doug.

*They’ll use fire*, Becky informed him, mind plotting. *Get them to lower the shield. I’ll take the tracker.*

When their enemies didn’t react to Becky’s message, it gave Jeff hope that she really was as strong as she claimed to be. Deciding to take the chance, Jeff lifted his gun and aimed at the boss. “I want your word she won’t be hurt.”

Jon waved toward the small jeep in the rear of troops on bikes. “We even brought a safer ride. She’s carrying a child. We won’t harm her.”

“You’re collecting children. Why?” Jeff was hoping for information to take back when the mission was over.

Jon kept pace as Becky pushed Seth toward the ride. “I follow orders. Someone else will have to answer that.”

Becky tried to help. “You know, though. There’s no way you don’t.”

“You can’t trick me into a moral switch. I don’t care why they want the kids.” Jon lowered his shield, tiring, and pointed at the jeep. “Get in there and I’ll spare the mountain man. My word.”

Becky didn’t feel a lie, but she couldn’t be sure. She looked at Jeff.

Jeff had been practicing his gift. He dug into the tracker’s mind, searching for another lie.

Jon knew they’d picked up the plans. “I mean it.”

Satisfied, Jeff and Becky got Seth and his girl into the jeep.

Doug observed with his hand on the butt of his gun. He had a plan he was refusing to think about so it didn’t give him away.

Jon scrutinized Doug without speaking. He didn’t need to. It was a clear warning not to make a move.

Doug didn’t, though he wanted to. He had faith that trio could handle themselves. His mission was to keep Roy and Romeo safe.

Jon strolled to his jeep, waving his protection into the other vehicles. “Wise decision. They wouldn’t last long if they can’t fight.”

The images Becky pulled from the tracker’s thoughts matched what she’d witnessed. The kids were being used in all forms of entertainment, including fighting. She slid into the warm seat and tolerated a dark-skinned man with a large leer tossing a blanket over her.

“You’ll be nice and warm, Miss.” He shut the door.

Becky used the blanket to hide her firearm from view, though she was certain most of them already knew she had one. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

Seth got into the rear with Becky, still crying and clutching his daughter. The girl tolerated it, but her attention stayed on Jon.

*Not good*. Jeff got into the passenger seat of the jeep with his gun still in hand, surprised they hadn’t been disarmed. He was also worried over it. “So what happens now?”

Jon got behind the wheel. “Talks and threats, beatings and blood. Or you could just agree to help us conquer the troublesome refugee camp that you came from and then we’ll have drinks and dinner while we watch a fight.”

Jeff snapped his mouth shut.

Becky brought down a thick wall.

Jon smirked. “I knew you were those people! I could smell the American spirit.” His grin faded, contempt coming forward. “It stinks.”

Jon started the engine and drove the jeep into the darkness.

As soon as they were out of sight, Doug packed the boys into the hummer and went to where he and Jeff had hidden the jeep they came in.

Allan snapped to attention as the hummer pulled in, recognizing it. Jeff had tracked the shiny vehicle for days before dropping him here and going in on foot to make contact. Allan hurried over as he realized it was Doug in the hummer, with the boys.

“Where’s Jeff?” Allan was dressed in full fighting gear and had his rifle in hand. He was ready for action.

The cabin behind him looked as empty as it had when they’d arrived. Jeff had insisted they stay packed, that they wouldn’t be here long. *He was right.* “They were taken.” Doug hurried the children out of the hummer and into the jeep. “Come on. We have a run to make.”

“What happened?”

“Becky was in more trouble than Angela thought.”

**3**

“You ready?” Jeff looked over his shoulder at Becky as they neared the gate to the UN camp.

Becky nodded.

Jon frowned. “Do not try anything. We will be in the camp in sec–”

Jeff stabbed his knife into the tracker’s throat and grabbed the wheel.

Becky brought up a shield around the jeep as their escort realized what was happening and opened fire.

Seth added his strength to hers as Jeff steered the jeep toward a cliff on one side of the access road.

The jeep smacked into the wall and bounced, scattering small debris and liquid. Smoke billowed up.

Slugs slammed into the jeep in rapid succession. Becky shrank the shield to only protect the people; it required more energy than she had to cover the vehicle too.

Jeff pushed his shield out to cover the gas tank before the troops could target it. There was no way to know if the men were using tracer rounds that would cause an explosion. Normal slugs wouldn’t create a spark, but the burning phosphorus in the rear of the tracer rounds would send them all up in a fireball.

Seth was already exhausted of energy. He hefted his weapon and joined Jeff in shooting.

Seth’s daughter didn’t react to the din. She did catch her father’s fear and stayed beneath his big arm, but she didn’t flinch, telling Seth she couldn’t hear it.

The little girl glanced up at him. *I’m blocking. Kimmie taught me how to cover pain.*

He was both relieved and horrified. Seth stopped firing and covered the girl’s ears with his hands as the noise increased. The troops were trying larger weapons now. The gunfire was deafening. It rolled over the valleys and canyons, alerting everyone within miles that death had come for someone. Survivors in the area fled with only the clothes on their backs.

In the distance, Yellowstone continued to spew lava and smoke, echoing the fury of the people on the ground.

Jeff didn’t think they could hold on until the men ran out of ammo and even if they could, backup would arrive soon. It was now or never. Jeff shoved the door open, letting go of the shield.

Becky groaned under the weight of keeping the shield up by herself.

Jeff grabbed a grenade from his pocket, flipping the pin. He tossed it toward the cluster of troops and cars blocking them against the wall. Then he took off running.

Most of the troops who hadn’t been in range gave chase, entering the danger zone.

The explosion thundered through the evening air, sending body parts across the site.

Becky gagged as gore hit the jeep.

Seth hugged his daughter.

Jeff turned toward the UN camp, waiting for a reaction.

Chapter Four

**I Can Kill You Now**

Western UN Encampment



**1**

**“G**et my transport!”

Mario didn’t take the fancy gear from his tent, but he did grab his work diary. It detailed each shipment of children who’d been processed here and where those kids were sent. His masters would want this book more than they would want him. *For now.* *Later, they will make statues of me and I will be honored in parades and with women. All I have to do is give them Safe Haven, and I’m almost ready to close the trap on that last holdout.*

Mario grabbed his dusty kit and stuffed in the diary as he ran to the vehicle area. He was aware of the smirks and concern of those he passed. The kids in this camp had been vaccinated; the disease was spreading. The nightly fights had encouraged a fast evolution, as had the various antipsychotic drug cocktails that weren’t so anti in the side effects. It kept the kids sleepy in the day and ramped them up at night. The UN planners had insisted that these children be tough enough to survive and infect others.

Mario had followed orders. He didn’t care that the watching kids would rip him apart with their teeth if they got the chance. He also wasn’t afraid of the abused troops who would do the same. Mario’s shield had never been broken and his partner was vicious in his defense of their orders. The higher powers had wanted to be positive this plan succeeded.

Mario motioned his security team toward the cages. “Stay and protect our valuables.” He pointed at Oscar. “You drive.”

Oscar hopped behind the wheel.

Mario regarded his XO, sorry to leave his partner. “You have command.”

Anton snapped a salute, then signaled troops into place around the pens holding the three dozen children. Little faces glowered in loathing as they waited to be released for the nightly fights.

Anton was aware of the danger from a few of the larger kids who had gotten good at killing, but he was an enforcer and he liked using his gifts on their little friend. When he hurt Kimberly, the others fell in line.

Captive kids gathered at the bars of the cages, silent, with haunted eyes and scarred skin. Until now, nothing had rattled Mario.

Anton increased the strength of his shield in case he’d underestimated any of the test subjects. They didn’t keep descendant children in camp for that reason. They were always sent to the international detention center, but there was a tiny chance of an Invisible in any group, who could evolve at any time.

In the far corner of the center cage, Kimberly stood. “I’m free!”

The kids around her dropped out of the crossfire, like she was now silently ordering them to do, against their protests.

Anton spun around as his fear was confirmed. Kimberly had fooled him. She was more dangerous than any of the children now coming out of their pens to surround her with protection. She loved blood and she was one of his favorite targets.

“Lock the doors! Lock the doors!” Anton watched in horror as the rest of the children rushed out before the troops could do it. The pens had just been unlocked for evening activities.

Kimberly stepped forward with fire gathering on her hands. “The alpha said I can kill you now.” The little girl grinned maliciously.

Braced to take the hit, Anton screamed as fire flew toward a cluster of troops across camp. “No! Get down!”

Anton’s teenage son was hit in the legs and flamed up like a match. The boy was on the refueling crew and always ended the shift covered in it through his clumsiness.

Kimberly fired again, this time aiming for the frantic father running toward his burning son. Panicking, Anton had dropped his barrier.

His body arched as her flames wrapped around him like a hand and began to squeeze. The fire fingers burnt their way through his stomach as his son fell over, both letting out piercing shrieks.

All around them, troops and kids stopped and stared.

The stillness held for two seconds while Kimberly picked her next target.

Troops took off running.

Fresh flames and screams lit up the night.

Mario motioned his driver to keep going when the man slowed at the awful sounds. He hadn’t suspected an Invisible among the children, but he hadn’t cared enough to search this last batch as deeply as he should have. The kids were contagious. If they escaped and scattered, they wouldn’t have to drop them off at the mapped sites. That would take longer to finish infecting the country, but it would still succeed.

Mario signaled his driver to take the rear road. Cleverly covered by a camo tarp, the disguised entrance appeared to be a boulder. Oscar drove through it.

The tarp caught on the front of the truck and then flew into the air.

Mario and Oscar disappeared into the dusty night as their men were killed by the kids they’d all tormented. They were getting justice for the four groups already processed since landing on American soil a month after the war. They were also getting their first real life test of the disease. After this, they would evolve faster. While in camp, the children had only killed upon command or with permission. From now on, most of the monsters he’d created would make that call for themselves. Mario was proud. *I’ll be welcomed home with honor.*

**2**

“No mercy!”

Mario’s men were stunned. They’d never considered this would happen. They were big, strong, had weapons...and it didn’t matter. They killed some of the kids in the front, but the others swarmed the troops and took their guns. From watching, the children knew exactly how to use them.

The dark skyline around the camp flashed with gunshots and fires, then explosions as the older kids found more powerful weapons. Smoke blew over the bodies and fires, carrying nose-curling odors to the adults waiting at the entrance to the camp.

“They’re just kids!” Becky struggled against Jeff’s hand on her arm. “We have to stop them from killing.”

“It’s too late for that.” Jeff spotted familiar headlights flashing their way and taillights fleeing west. Instinct said to follow those taillights, but they needed the ride more. He shoved Becky toward Seth so he could flag Doug.

Seth was forced to let go of his child and catch Becky to keep her from falling. In that time, Doug pulled up and blocked Becky’s path into the camp unless she wanted to climb over the hummer.

Jeff sneered as he walked by the hummer. The squat, odd shaped windows allowed no room for firing. The roof wasn’t made of metal. The tires stuck out from the wheel well nearly half a foot. The rear window was half the normal size, cutting off more room to fire. And it was yellow. *What were you thinking?*

Seth dropped his head. *I just wanted to make her happy.*

Doug hid a snicker. “Allan is bringing better transportation. Should be along shortly.”

Jeff scanned the road to the camp. He’d expected troops by now.

Becky glared at Jeff. “They’re not sparing anyone.”

“Good.”

Becky slapped the hummer. “They shouldn’t be killing!”

Jeff didn’t care. He wanted the kids to have justice.

“You don’t understand what this will do.” Becky shoved out of Seth’s distracted grip and knelt by his daughter. “Tell him.”

Seth tried to grab the child from Becky, but the little girl pushed him away. She peered up at Jeff. “They’ll hurt you. All of you. Get out of here.”

Seth recoiled at the adult tone and words. “You’re coming with us!”

Jeff pointed at the road. “Those kids were captives here and so was your daughter. They get to make their own choices now.”

“I go where Kimmy goes!” Seth’s daughter ran toward the road into camp.

Becky caught the girl and swung her onto a hip, ignoring the tiny fists and tiny power. “They’re coming. Hush now. Your Kimmy’s coming.”

The girl did, soothed.

Becky scanned the small group of kids and found one descendant. The little girl in front, wearing the red skirt and red top... Becky blanched as she realized the girl’s clothes were actually yellow, but coated in blood. She could see it when the girl swiveled to be sure all the kids were with her.

*They’re all like that*. Jeff was also scanning. *Don’t view them as kids. They’re freedom fighters who’ve just won their first battle.*

The girl in the lead was now lighting the path by setting the brush ablaze on either side of it. Jeff hoped that was to burn the camp. He would have ordered it anyway.

“You don’t order anything.” Kimberly locked eyes with him as she came forward, leading her kids. “It’s good you’re not like the others, but don’t forget who I am.”

*Fearless... No. Terrified of fighting her own kind instead of getting to know them.* The girl’s mind was easy for him to read. *She’s in pain*. Jeff didn’t like that.

Jeff turned from the kids. He went to the few wounded troops and began snatching lifeforces. “You don’t need that. You didn’t use it right. Oh, let go!”

Kimberly observed in horror as the hard descendant drained the troops and then marched back toward her. The other kids shook, fearing more pain, but Kimberly prepared to do battle.

*You know what I want.* Jeff turned it over to his demon. He watched in amazement as the entity split the lifeforces in the air and then delivered them. Then he was forced to brace as the energy drain started.

Kimberly paused as she realized the man was healing her and the other kids. All of them had scrapes and scratches, but many also had broken bones and cuts from the fighting. She was shocked.

The demon blasted the split forces toward the kids.

Jeff directed the demon to hit the girl in the front the hardest, sending more of his energy.

Kimberly arched as power sank in, stronger than any she’d ever felt. *That’s his*. She identified Jeff by the feeling she would always place with him now. Her next level of gifts popped out in a fiery shield the other kids shrank from.

Kimberly examined her fire hands in awe, then beamed at Jeff. “Thank you!”

Jeff nodded, gasping at the effort. He was glad it was done. The squeezing on his chest wasn’t pleasant.

Headlights flashed.

“That’s our ride.” Doug pointed at the bus flying toward them. “Who wants to go to Safe Haven?”

The kids cheered, except Kimberly.

Allan stopped the bus. Roy and Romeo were duct taped to the seat behind him–the best he could do to ensure they didn’t go flying around as he hurried to arrive in time to help. *Looks like I missed all the action.*

Jeff led the way to the bus, glad the children wanted to go. He couldn’t imagine trying to force them after everything they’d been through.

Kimberly took Jeff’s hand as the kids started climbing onto the bus.

Jeff felt her warmth enter his heart and light up dark places. He looked at her. “I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner.”

Kimberly increased her light. “You’re here now.”

Jeff tugged her to his side, nodding. “Yes, sweetheart. I am. You’ll make it to Safe Haven in a few days and then no one will ever hurt you again.”

Kimberly led him away from the bus.

Jeff felt dread welling up in his throat. Her mind filled with conversations from the troops.

“We’re a trap.” Kimberly dropped her head. “I couldn’t do it. You have to.”

Jeff shook his head at the awful image she’d sent. “I can’t do that. *I won’t*.”

Kimberly liked him for the choice, but she put her hands on her hips. “You have to! This disease is meant to kill off the survivors. A bus of kids is a small price to pay to stop that. Rage is a terrible emotion.”

Jeff thought of Kendle and a few others who were showing signs of madness, like Becky. He sighed, leading the girl back to the bus. “It’s too late to stop it. All we can do is try to fight it.”

Kimberly began to cry.

Jeff picked the girl up, growing furious as her hot tears dripped onto his neck. *I want them all dead for this!*

*So do I.* Becky was keeping track of the conversation. She didn’t mind the idea of adults doing it. *Maybe we should stay behind when the boat leaves and do some cleaning without the boss stopping us with rules.*

Jeff wanted to, but the child in his arms needed him. He could feel it. “No, I’m ready to take a trip now, I think.”

Becky frowned, realizing Jeff wasn’t as tortured anymore. *That was fast.* She scrutinized the girl, spotting a smirk and the possessive clutch on his arm. Becky grinned. “Okay.”

Kimberly bared her fangs at Becky as Jeff carried her onto the bus.

Becky laughed. “That’ll be fun to watch.”

Seth nudged Becky toward the bus door too. “Does that mean you’re staying or going?”

Becky’s mirth faded. She stepped onto the bus behind Jeff. “That has not been revealed.”

Jeff grunted. “I hate that answer.”

Kimberly immediately vowed to use different words. Whatever Jeff wanted, he would get. She’d been around thousands of people in her lifetime and all of them had failed her in one way or another. Jeff had healed her and her friends with lifeforces–against their rules. She would always be loyal to him now. Not even the alpha would have this bond with her.

Jeff caught the thought and grinned. *That’ll drive Angela crazy.*

“Get down!”

A gunshot echoed through the darkness, shattering a window near Jeff.

Allan slumped over.

Jeff let go of the girl and spun around to catch Allan as he fell from the seat.

More shots rang out as a patrol returned from rounds and found the scene.

Becky hopped over her team and got the bus door shut. She forced the vehicle into motion in a series of shrieks and grinds. Her lessons hadn’t included busses yet, but the hummer was a stick too.

Jeff tried to find the strength to stop Allan from dying, but there wasn’t time. The neck shot took his life in seconds.

“Guess I didn’t miss it…” Allan stopped breathing. His body relaxed.

“Damn it!” Jeff punched the seat. He was too drained to help and they didn’t have any other lifeforces to spare.

Kids flinched.

Kimberly stepped forward. She placed a hand on the dead man’s arm and closed her lids.

Allan jerked upward, breath coming in a huge gasp…

Kimberly grunted, straining.

Jeff took her arm, shaking his head. “We don’t do that after they die.”

Kimberly let go, tears in her eyes. “Because they might come back empty?”

Jeff nodded. He understood the girl had wanted to ease his pain. He sighed, locking it away. A lot of his misery would have to be chained up now or he wouldn’t be able to go with them to the island. His misery was too vivid, too tangible, to be running loose.

“I could keep you company.” Kimberly went to the seat when he pointed. “Until you find a friend.”

Jeff’s heart broke this time. He could feel the girl’s loneliness. He closed Allan’s eyes and stood up. *Sorry, my friend. I’ll make sure Angela knows you died with honor.* “How about I keep you company until you pick a guide in Safe Haven?”

Kimberly nodded, happy with anything he wanted to give.

Jeff held onto the brace pole as Becky got them out of range of the horse-bound troops who only wanted to reach the burning encampment now. “I hope we can add a few. One of them is Jennifer. She’s been through this. She can help you.”

“No one can help me.” Kimberly’s tone was so grim it was eerie. “I’ll have a short life of rage and have to be put down so I don’t hurt the innocent.”

Jeff couldn’t take her acceptance of that awful fate. “I’ll find a way to help you.” He put a hand on her thin shoulder, also vowing to fatten her up once he got her to Angela. “*All* of you.”

If it had come from anyone else, Kimberly would have accused them of lying or at least thought it. Because it was her new hero, she gave him a nod and let it go.

Jeff felt the weight of that choice settle onto his shoulders and found he could handle it. As much as he liked kids, if something went wrong, it wouldn’t compare to losing Crista and his unborn child. He could do this job.

*That’s why she sent me*, he realized, dropping into the adjacent seat. Instead of being furious, Jeff was relieved. He now had a hope for his future. It might be enough to let him go on trying to live through the black hole in his heart where his tiny family had existed for so short a time.

“We need to bury him.” Becky was still crying. She hated death.

Seth patted her shoulder and held tight to his daughter. “We will on the first stop. It’s Eagle rules.”

“I don’t want to hear about Eagle rules!” The teenager wiped at her cheeks. “Out here, it’s just us.”

Seth shook his head. “Not right now, okay?”

Becky fell silent, stewing over the past and the future.

Amy twisted in Seth’s arms to look at him. “Tell us about the alpha.”

“Later, Bella. Try to rest.” Seth wanted the girl to sleep while he foraged through kits for a healthy meal. She was malnourished and that meant she had to be tired.

“I’m Amy now!” She slid onto the cold seat next to him and then walked into the aisle. “Will you tell us about the alpha?”

Doug shook his head. “I’m not one of you. I can’t.”

Amy slapped his leg. “Liar!”

“We want a story!” one of the other kids shouted from behind Doug.

“Stop it!” Romeo ordered, standing up. “We don’t act like this in Safe Haven. Angela not allows it. You better follow the rules!”

“Angela *doesn’t* allow it.” Doug tugged the boy onto the seat, but the other kids quieted and looked to the Mexican child for more.

Romeo followed the orders he’d been given during the meetings with Angela–spread the rules and help enforce them. “I’ll tell you and you will start practicing so you fit in when we get there.”

“*You’ll*.” Doug tried to act like it was any other day, but he was already worried about his boys being able to interact with these new children.

Kimberly nodded respectfully and sat forward to listen.

The adults were surprised by the immediate obedience. It was spooky how even the non-magic kids were desperate for any information on the alpha.

“They’re picking it up from me.” Kimberly scratched at drying blood on her arm. “Sorry. There hasn’t been a free alpha in a long time.”

“How are you connected to Angela already?” Jeff was curious how it all worked. Exploring things alone was hard.

“We’re not meant to do it alone. We are part of a whole, even when separated, but alphas call with their very presence. We were made to serve.”

“What if your alpha is corrupt?”

“She’s not!” Kimberly lowered her voice at Jeff’s tightening grip on the kit he was now digging through. “You see her that way because you refuse to submit to her will, but in the end, all will serve the alpha and we will have peace.”

*She scanned me for that information and I didn’t even know it.* Jeff hid a smile. “Peace. For how long?”

“Forever.” Kimberly sensed his scorn. “Honest. This generation will lead the future into the utopias that were never possible before.”

“By magic, by force.”

“With hard love.” Kimberly took the water he handed her and gave it to Amy. The youngest member of their group was roaming the aisle, staggering whenever the bus hit debris. Amy had energy to work off. Kimberly understood. She was fighting that same urge to get up and go wild. “The alpha loves all people even as she or he destroys them for their wicked ways.”

Jeff was impressed with the girl’s intelligence, but he didn’t like the words. “That sounds like a god, not a human.”

“Yes.”

Jeff frowned, hands pausing. “She’s not a god.”

“Who are you to know?” Kimberly sat back in the seat to find a better position and avoid the next item he would shove at her. This way, he would have to give it to her kids first.

“I just know.”

The girl let out a derisive noise. “She has amazing power, no one understands her, and they all fear her. Plus, according to your thoughts, she communicates with the next level, with the Messenger for the Creator. She may not be a god yet, but she’s not human anymore either–not on your level or mine. She’s *above* us.”

Jeff didn’t answer. He couldn’t because he was equally torn between excitement and furious denial. *That can’t be right... Can it?*

**3**

In the South

“Something’s happening.” Zack groaned as Adrian shifted him into a piggyback position. The pain in his broken ribs outweighed all the other injuries and discomforts.

“Hang on. We’re almost there.”

“My team...” Zack held on as Adrian walked down the dark beach.

“You’re the last one.”

Zack responded by shuddering. His fever and infection were growing in equally terrifying rates. The rest of the rescued men were a short distance from here, with Adrian’s small team. They’d taken turns relocating Zack’s men a little at a time to avoid attracting the attention of the trackers in the warehouse. They didn’t have enough men or gear for an outright fight. That would come with the convoy’s arrival.

Shouting echoed from inside the warehouse.

A door creaked as it opened.

The surf roared, spraying them both in cold salt water that rolled off already drenched clothes. The dark sky didn’t allow him to see far, making this a treacherous run. Gators were all along this shore, nesting in the sandy reeds and beneath the ramps to various docks.

Adrian brought up his shield and concentrated on one step at a time, not glancing ahead or back. The sand was wet and heavy, filling his socks and shoes with scratching glass shards and bugs that he had no time to dislodge. Cold rain beat against his back while the wind shoved against his front. Coming in off the ocean, it was stiffer than he was used to.

Adrian sank into deep sand and fell; his shield vanished.

Zack dropped to the wet grit, groaning at the agony in his ribs.

Adrian fell into the surf. Shallow, it still came over his face and sent water into his mouth and up his nose.

Adrian pushed upward, hands sinking into the shore bottom. He remembered not to cough out the water, but he couldn’t help the gag.

Shouts echoed, louder.

*Closer.* Adrian grabbed Zack and put him over a shoulder again as lightning flashed across the sky.

*Sure could use a distraction*. Adrian staggered down the beach with his man.

Zack held in a groan, alert enough to understand they were in danger, but he couldn’t stop the shakes and shudders wracking his body.

Adrian spotted the single glint from his team to help him find the way to the little shack. He grimaced as fresh shouts came from behind him. He hoped his team was ready like he’d told them to be. When he’d come back out for Zack, Adrian had felt something about to go wrong.

Harry reached Adrian and took Zack’s weight. He’d been unable to wait. The men from the warehouse were out searching with lights that were occasionally flashing in this direction. “We’re ready to fight, Boss.”

Adrian grunted as they hit the door to the tiny shed and piled inside the rotting darkness. The beach hut was barely standing, but it would keep them from being seen until the trouble was too close to avoid their bullets–if Adrian could shield them from the return fire.

Adrian drew on his love for Angela to fuel the shield. He imagined her expression when she arrived to find her men alive and the bad guys already dead so that she didn’t have to do it. In her heart, a dark spot might lighten. Adrian wanted to spend the rest of his life doing that until she only saw a white wall when she thought of him. He could almost feel Marc’s arrogant smirk denying that, but it didn’t matter. Angela had a forgiving heart. In time, she would allow him to sit beside her without rancor or bias.

The rest of the team stayed still and tried not to think about anything. When Adrian gave the word, they would attack. Fury was rising in their tired limbs to prepare them for it.

The storm broke open, flooding the area with sheets of rain that blew men off their feet. It prevented sight as well as walking.

“We’ll come back!”

“Dolly saw something out here!”

“The bodies are still on the wall! I’m going in!”

The trackers and fighters retreated as the weather continued to worsen.

The teams in the shack made sounds of relief and hatred.

“Something went wrong.” Zack came alert all at once. “Someone’s dead.”

“Not in Safe Haven.” Adrian covered Zack with the emergency blanket that Harry handed him, hoping the shiny material didn’t draw fresh attention of the bastards inside the warehouse. They’d removed the live men from the wall but left the dead. During the storm, the noise had been covered. They were now half a mile away, but good glasses might still be able to spot something shiny through the cracks in the rotting planks of this shack. If they got a guaranteed sighting, the weather wouldn’t keep the bad guys in that warehouse. The prize was too valuable.

Zack wanted to help his men, but two days nailed to the wall of the warehouse had done him in. He’d also been beaten before that, which had provided the cracked ribs. He considered himself better off than Carl, who had died next to him as the rain started.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get here sooner.”

“Not your fault. I led them into a trap.”

Adrian grunted, now wrapping Zack’s bleeding hands. “It happens, Eagle. You’ve seen it before. No one can cover everything.”

“I was stupid.” Zack held in a moan as Adrian tied the bandage and Harry worked on the other side. “They walked up like they wanted to talk. I d-didn’t suspect a thing until they started shooting.”

“Can you give me details on them?”

“About thirty. Lot of weapons. They were s-speeding, too. Not certain on what, but the woman was drooling during the fight.” Zack shut his lids as the rain increased. “They need to be put down.”

“They will be.”

“Safe Haven’s close?”

“Yes.” Adrian took out long strips for binding Zack’s ribs.

Zack shivered as Harry pulled back the thin blanket. “If we don’t, she will.”

“She’s in a mood right now.” Adrian tried to be gentle as he worked. “It would be better if we handled it or the entire wharf might go up in flames.”

“Something happened with her?” Zack had already forgotten. His brain was spinning from the pain and fever.

“Trouble in the west.” Adrian wrapped the strips tight, listening for new trouble. “Doug’s group is on the way home now. He might have reached Seth by now and triggered whatever is happening.”

“Can you see it?”

“No.” Adrian opened another bandage, growing angrier with every moan from the injured men. “Boss said no unapproved searching. Trackers might be around.”

Zack tried to stay alert, but relief was rushing over his aching limbs, bringing the need for sleep. “W-what’s a tracker again?”

“A low power descendant who tracks others like themselves to kidnap or kill.”

“Sounds like a b-bunch of assholes.”

Adrian chuckled, moving to help Ramer. “We’ve had a few on our trail since we left the mountain. These warehouse people are connected somehow.”

“That explains them knowing we were coming.”

“But their information line cut off after the naval base. No one came to rescue you right away, so the men here may think they’re on their own.”

“They are.”

“Yes, but I can feel a tracker, so we’ll have at least one descendant to deal with during the fight.”

“Why can’t he sense you?”

“She.” Adrian tied the bandage tight. Ramer would recover, but Adrian wasn’t sure about Scott. “She’s drunk right now. Should pass out soon.”

Zack’s head rolled to the side as he passed out.

Adrian was relieved. Zack would also survive, but it would be painful while those ribs healed. Scott’s injuries went beyond the also broken ribs and the dozens of stitches Adrian was about to put in. He had internal issues. A descendant could heal him if Angela allowed it, but not until the threats in the warehouse were gone. The woman tracker was drunk, but magic use so close to that building would bring her on the run.

“Boss is gonna be upset.” Harry had helped Adrian pull the nails and spikes from their men to remove them from the wall. He was furious. He hoped Angela laid waste to this place.

“We need the buildings while we prep the boat.”

“Still.” Harry didn’t like it.

Adrian nodded. He’d been through this horror so many times now that he was almost numb, but the rage was there. He’d learned not to act on it until the proper time. Angela could still be brought to fury at even simple horror. In time, she would toughen up. Adrian was dreading that. He didn’t want her to be as cold as he was. The only time he felt the heat was with her or while fighting Marc. He used to compensate by spending time with the kids. Their joy would probably still bring smiles, but he’d been banished too long now for it to ease his pain. He’d passed the point of no return. All that was left to him now was making sure Angela led Safe Haven south.

And waiting years for Marc to die so he could hold his woman once in willing passion. Even there, he was going to be disappointed. Adrian presumed Angela would let him have her at some point from grief and loneliness, and he had no doubt that she’d be thinking of the wolfman the entire time. There was no reason for light in Adrian’s heart. The future, cold and dark, offered little hope for his happiness. There was only duty and obsession now. *Everything else is a lie meant to comfort the weaker people who can’t accept the truth, that real happiness is an illusion not reachable by all people. Only a lucky few attain it. The rest of humanity is destined to suffer without end.*

Chapter Five

**I’m Not Adrian**

A close up of a tree

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“I** need you to let me and the girl roll out.” Shawn braced for reactions. Since the fiasco with Tara, all senior men viewed him with suspicion, even his own teammates.

The empty woods around them were perfect for an undercover drop, but Daryl frowned in the mirror. The pair had put on their winter gear a little while ago; Daryl had assumed they were cold. Many people were having trouble adjusting to the outside weather. “Code word?” He smothered the jealousy over Shawn getting that duty and not him or one of the others.

“EBay.”

Brittani chuckled. “Really?”

Daryl slowed the jeep, waiting for Shawn to call the spot. The temperatures were cold, but not deadly unless you didn’t know what you were doing. Shawn was one of the highest level Eagles still alive from Adrian’s original teams. He knew what he was doing, and he clearly had approval from the boss.

“That’s funny.”

“It is.” Daryl slowed more, accounting for the little girl’s short legs. She wouldn’t be able to jump as far. “It’s also hard to copy. Most people have forgotten that company ever existed.”

“I see the wisdom, but it’s still funny.”

“Yeah. The boss has a good sense of humor most of the time.” Daryl didn’t say more, though he wanted to. Shawn and Missy had played car games for a while and then napped until about fifteen minutes ago. When Shawn had started checking his gear and Missy had buttoned her long coat, Daryl had known something was happening, but he hadn’t expected a run. At their fast team meeting before leaving Ciemus, Kyle had told them to expect private missions from the boss to cover their arrival. He hadn’t told them why, but they’d all understood it was to catch everyone off guard.

“We’ll go one minute from now.” Shawn tugged Missy’s hat over her ears. “I don’t know how you convinced the boss to let you come with me, but we’re going to talk about this when it’s all over. I don’t want you on runs. You got that?”

Missy paled, but it was clear by her pout and crossed arms that she wasn’t scared. Brittani was watching her in the side mirror.

“You’ll need me.”

“Even if that’s true, I’m still talking to the boss about it. You can’t go on runs. You’re a child and you’re going to act like one.”

“You can’t make me.” Missy’s lips went out further.

Shawn sighed. “Yes, I can. I just don’t want to threaten you. I prefer to tell you the rules and have you follow them.”

“You can’t dump me off on the camp.” Missy read his mind. “They don’t like me.”

“Well, you are a snotty little brat.” Daryl’s tone was polite but firm. “You could try to be nice and that might change.”

Brittani frowned at him. “Really?”

*Ah. She has two meanings for that word. I’ll watch for the tones.* “Yes. Scan the memories. She’s been rough on everyone.”

To counteract that, Missy let the woman see why she was being so mean.

Brittani didn’t let it sway her completely, but there was no doubt it worked. She felt bad for the little girl who was being blamed for Angela losing her baby. Missy’s guardians had forced her to lie and manipulate the camp so they would be distracted and have an opportunity to kill Angela. They almost had and though they were gone, Missy wasn’t. “She’s a target.”

Daryl nodded. “We keep certain people away from her for the most part, but I’m referring to the other children. Missy doesn’t like non-magic kids.”

“We’re working on it.” Shawn couldn’t help but defend her. “It’s hard because they don’t like her either. They read the adult’s thoughts and transfer it to her even when playing. She’s shut out. After a few weeks of that, she started giving it back harder than she got it and now she won’t stop.”

Brittani scowled. “Sounds like the kids are out of control.”

“Sadly, they’re acting like what they are.” Daryl prepared for a cold draft. “They pick it up from us, all of us. We bleed it over them like a shroud and then expect them to act differently. It’s sad.”

“I thought you didn’t like the girl.”

“She just needs to be trained. That’s why the boss sent her out this time, I’d bet. Some of our kids won’t be able to just be kids. The war ruined that.”

“Shawn says I can’t, but I don’t fit in anywhere else.” Missy’s eyes went all wide and teary. “I’m trying, and it doesn’t work.”

“Later.” Shawn made sure he had her attention. “Remember how we practiced it while we packed the vehicles in Ciemus.”

Missy smiled at him. “Don’t be mad.”

Shawn grunted. “I’m not; now do you remember?”

“Yes. Let myself roll. You’ll pick a spot. Keep my head tucked and don’t fight when you push me out.”

“Good girl.” Shawn patted her arm. “You’ll be fine. Stay down and still until I come to get you. It’ll be cold and dark.”

Missy got into the position Shawn had taught her. “I’m not scared.”

“I know.” Shawn popped the door open as Daryl slowed to a crawl. “That’s where my new gray hairs came from.” He shoved the girl before she could answer.

Brittani watched, holding her breath as the child hit a snowy drift and sank into it. She lost sight and started to turn to look through the rear windows.

Daryl placed a hand on her wrist. “Face forward. The people behind us aren’t supposed to know.”

Brittani did as told. She also wanted to respond, but the feel of Daryl’s hand on her skin was sending warning bells though her mind and preventing speech. Her nerve endings were lighting up, body responding. They were a physical match. That was clear in the small sparks that held her captive as Shawn dove out of the car.

Daryl was glad he was an Eagle. His training allowed him to use the hand on the wheel to direct the vehicle around the curve hard enough to close the rear door. He did the scan to see if people behind him had noticed and stored the information that Molly, a rookie, had, but she wasn’t reacting other than to give him a nod in the mirror. After that, Daryl followed out of pure reflex, unaware of the road under them or the vehicle in his grip. All he could feel was the woman responding to his light touch. He didn’t want to move his hand.

Brittani recognized the moment. She should. She’d been waiting for it her entire life. “Here? Now?” She pulled her hand away and shut her eyes. “How cruel.”

Daryl almost felt as if he could read her mind. He nodded in agreement. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” She wasn’t in his head, but Brittani knew she should search him to be sure he was as good as he felt.

“You were upset over the discovery. It seemed like the right thing to say.”

“I hate platitudes.”

“So do I, but it was better than blurting it out like you were expecting.”

She sighed. It would be hard to pretend this hadn’t happened. That was the right thing to do, though.

Daryl replayed the hot sparks, enjoying the moment of knowing, if only for a few seconds, that he’d found his soulmate. Then he locked the door and brought down a shield. “We’re Eagles. We do what’s right and tough out what sucks. That’s what I’ll be doing.”

Brittani hated it that she was disappointed. She didn’t want Daryl to fight for her. She didn’t want to hurt Gus. But... “It’s not fair.”

“No, but that’s the way life has been for centuries.”

“You’ll stay away?”

“No. I’ll do my duty and help you do yours. We’re going to be friends at some point, no matter who you pick.”

“I’m not going to pick.”

“Yeah. Neither am I.”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I was going to pick a friend from the Ciemus women.”

“You’re waiting for me?”

Daryl shook his head. “I just already know I can’t take the disappointment when I touch their wrist and they don’t make that happen. I’ll be crushed and so will they.”

Brittani’s heart thumped at his tone. It was clear he wasn’t going to lie or even pad the truth to spare her feelings.

“I won’t tell anyone why.” Daryl couldn’t help the defensive tone. “It’s sad and it’ll cause more camp drama. I’d rather skip that.”

“So would I.”

“So we agree to be exactly what we were before this ride–Eagles, fellow camp members, and maybe friends in a private way that we won’t express.”

“In public.” Brittani was horrified to hear herself concede that.

“No.” Daryl immediately refused, frowning. “I’m a senior man in this camp and head of the moral board. We’ll never be alone together again, and this conversation will be the end of *us*. I won’t ruin my place for a possibility. I’m not Adrian.”

Brittani didn’t know why that hurt her, but it did. She forced herself to say, “Okay.” But in her heart, that heat continued to burn.

“Good.”

Brittani stole a look at him, wondering what he looked like clean and in basic clothes. She was positive she’d seen him that way before the mountain fell on them, but she couldn’t remember. His profile suggested a stubborn man who would do exactly as he said.

Daryl gazed over in time to witness brake light glare flash across Brittani’s cheek, highlighting her creamy skin and ebony hair with glints of red and then white. *Always was drawn to dark skinned, dark haired warriors*. *Never ended well. Maybe I can wait until they break up and just offer her a service.*

“I’ll never break up with Gus.” Brittani answered his joking, hurting thoughts with grave tones as the jeep bounced over debris. “I promised him forever. I might take a moment or two for myself, as wrong as that is, but I’d never leave him.”

Daryl grunted, storing the information even while reprimanding himself for it. If one of those personal moments were offered, he was already certain he would break his moral code to have her in his arms. He needed to know if the earth would move again, if the bells would ring.

Daryl forced his mind to Shawn and Missy, and to the road.

Brittani felt it when he blocked her out, but she didn’t open the conversation again to offset the instant loneliness settling into her heart. She cleared her expression, told herself to stick to her commitments, then slipped on her bent headphones.

Daryl knew people would assume they’d argued, but it was better than everyone knowing the truth. He drove in silence, refusing to look at her until he had to make a turn. Then, his eyes burned into hers with an intensity that warned them both it wasn’t over.

**2**

*“Promise me…”*

*Sam’s tears ran over her cheeks in endless streams. “I promise. Your son will always be treated fairly. I’ll be there for him when Neil can’t.”*

*Jeremy’s lids shut. Blood trickled from his mouth. “Love you, Sammi...”*

*Sam’s sobs came harder. “I love you too. I always will.”*

“She’s having a nightmare.” Kyle jerked his head toward the backseat, where Samantha was lying. “Jenny can tell you what it is, if you need it.”

Samantha dug deeper into her pile of blankets, vaguely aware of people talking, but she didn’t want to surface and feel the pain. Her children were growing. It hurt.

Neil was glad for Kyle’s offer, but he couldn’t imagine asking Jennifer to snoop in Samantha’s mind. Neil reached back and put a hand on her warm shoulder, trying to send his comfort. Her breathing was rough and tears were rolling, but he didn’t wake her. He’d consulted Angela over it and agreed Samantha needed time to mourn. Neil was determined to wait it out.

Samantha fell into a dreamless slumber as Neil’s love flowed over her. She burrowed deeper into the blankets and slowly relaxed.

Smoke curled over the dash and out the cracked window. Kyle tapped out his cheroot, trying to be considerate. Samantha had asked him to keep the window down because she was sweating, but she kept digging deeper beneath the covers, making him worry. The rest of them were wearing normal Eagle outfits and felt comfortable.

Neil felt sweat beading on her skin and lowered his window a bit more. The babies were keeping her temperature up. They all presumed it was normal. No one knew for sure. They’d never been through this.

*I could help*. William was monitoring all thoughts and conversations as they traveled, on Angela’s orders. She didn’t want things to go uncovered while she rested.

Neil hadn’t decided if he liked William, but he wasn’t about to refuse the information. He needed to know if Samantha was in danger.

*It can be dangerous if the father is a descendant and not the mother. She would have to adjust.*

*But Samantha doesn’t, because she’s already a descendant.*

*Yes. The high temperature is the equivalent of increasing the heat on a pot to make it cook faster.*

Neil smirked at the image. *Two pots. She’s getting big.*

William approved of the manly pride. He was relieved to not discover secret thoughts of only loving his son in Neil’s mind. The trooper was proud of both children. *Wait until she hits seven months and can pop at any time. She’ll need a lot of help to get–*

*Wait. Seven months?*

*Yes. Descendants carry offspring for exactly seven months from conception. Still hard to pinpoint if the parents had intercourse more than once, but it’s sharper than prewar estimate methods.*

*That seems…short.*

*It is. Our kind has to breed faster because we’re rare and hunted. Nature accounted for humanity’s greed. It’s amazing.*

*It’s scary.*

*It can be. When the parentage is reversed, there are complications. A normal human female body is set for a ten month count, though most go at nine and a half due to forcing the issue through sex, physical labor, and stress. There are also those who try to go when they’re ready instead of letting nature finish its chore. That caused an epidemic of unhealthy babies born early over the centuries.*

Neil frowned. *Are you saying forcing labor a week early caused immune diseases?*

*Evidence certainly pointed in that direction. However, stress, manual labor, and active routines were just as devastating. Those groups of children should have been studied to determine cause and effect.*

*Wow. That would have been such a simple fix.*

*For those who could afford it, yes. For those in abusive relationships and poverty, the situations would have been harder.*

*I’m glad we don’t have that anymore.*

*Yes. One good effect of the war was the exposure of the rats in the corn. It’s wonderful to have two populations where abuses are not allowed.*

*We still have some work to do.*

*Don’t we all?*

Samantha shifted in her sleep, sliding out of Neil’s grip. He studied the sweat on her neck. *We could use some lists about pregnancies. Unless the boss already asked for it?*

*She said the council would have things I might be able to help with. I assume this is one of those.*

*And you will?*

*Of course. Where would you like to begin?*

Neil got his notebook and pen. *Go with the complications of opposite parentage. I want specifics on Sam’s condition.*

*You mean having two descendant children at the same time? From non-descendant fathers.*

*Is she in danger?*

*Only from our kind. Twins are incredibly rare for descendants. Protect them at all costs. Their power is going to be amazing. Their blood will be wanted for rituals. If trackers find out, you’ll never have peace.*

Neil’s tension jerked Samantha from sleep. She lifted her head to peer out. “Is everything okay?”

Neil shook his head. “Go to sleep, sweetheart. William and I are watching for trouble.”

Samantha did as ordered. She was exhausted.

Neil returned to the conversation*. Tell me about Samantha.*

*The heat will get rough on her, but she’ll adjust. After the birth, it’ll go back to normal. The babies will need extra heat for a month after.*

*What about complications?*

*Sometimes the babies have strong gifts that evolve with the parents. You’ll know when that happens.*

Neil grimaced. *Yeah. We got that one.*

William sympathized. *On the bright side, if the children evolve in utero, and the mother is good, they’re usually unable to be corrupted–even in a lab.*

Neil didn’t want to know how William had come by that information, but he hadn’t been worried about the children being evil. All three parents were good. He’d presumed their prodigy would be as well.

*Not always. Fate throws in a wildcard when it wants to. There have been documented cases of newborns enjoying the pain of their mothers.*

Neil added a new worry to the list.

*I doubt you’ll have that issue*. *They would be showing signs of it.*

*Like what?*

*Like Cynthia’s child.* William had read many of the camp memories now, as well as the council’s thoughts on big moments in Safe Haven.

*Those parents weren’t good.*

*No, but the reactions of the babies are the same.*

*We’ll watch for it.*

*Your boss already is.*

Neil wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or worried over that. He switched to his next concern. *Can they be tracked?*

*Yes. Twins are rare. They put off a double signature on a grid that’s unmistakable. They can’t be tracked until they’re born, however.*

*Will their gifts be like hers… Will they both have gifts?*

*Because you experienced a three-way evolution, you can be reasonably sure they will both have power, but they could start as Invisibles. There’s no way to determine that. As for the gifts, the main skills transfer from the mother. If both parents are the same level of different descendant types, the child might have both gifts. Crossbreeding is dangerous. That much power in one person can tempt them to become corrupt.*

Neil was suddenly glad he wasn’t a descendant.

*Did you ever want to be?* William hadn’t found envy in the trooper either. Neil’s heart was almost totally pure despite his occupation.

*No, not really. I’d like the gifts, but the rest of it would suck. The two didn’t even out for me.*

*You’ll make a good father, I think*, William informed the man, not prying into the lies. *She’s lucky.*

*Will it be enough to keep them from going bad?* Neil demanded rashly. *Because I’ll do what I have to for my kids, even if I don’t want to.*

William immediately looked into that future.

In the lead truck, Angela opened her eyes.

William glanced over his shoulder at the closed curtains of the bunk where she was resting with Marc and Dog. After a minute, he let out a deep sigh. *I’m sorry. That has not been revealed.*

Neil’s frown took up his entire face. He knew who that answer had come from. Angela didn’t want them talking to William about the future.

*I’m sorry. I should have asked her first.*

*Me too.* Neil stored his annoyance for later. *Keep going about the pregnancies?*

*What else would you like to know?*

“Any chance you’d let me in on that conversation?” Kyle was out of patience.

Neil gaped. “How do you know what… How do you know I’m talking to someone?”

“Power rubs off.”

“Yeah, but not unless you’re having physical moments with a descendant.” Neil gave a mock frown.

Kyle flushed. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Neil snickered. “Samantha said Jennifer was ambushing you. Must be working.”

Kyle sighed. “Like she needed help in that area.”

Neil chuckled. *Can you hook him in?*

William shoved into Kyle’s mind. *There we go.*

Neil didn’t feel anything, but it felt stupid to ask Kyle if he could hear yet. Neil chose to just start talking. *William was telling me about descendant pregnancies.*

*I thought so.* Kyle shrugged at Neil’s curious glance. *Jenny wants a son. So do I, at some point. That’s need-to-know information.*

*I have to do a scan. Neil can catch you up.* William left.

Neil and Kyle had never been mentally connected.

*This is odd.*

Neil nodded. *He’s powerful to be able to do this.*

Kyle grunted*. Yeah. We should watch him.*

*You know he can still hear us, right?*

*Yep.*

Neil chuckled as he realized Kyle was sending William a warning. *Any kid of yours will be a handful even without descendant power.*

William swept the convoy for trouble, glad to be able to give the two hardworking men a good moment. He liked them both. Kenn was the one who made him twitchy.

William switched to their surroundings and found only cold rain falling on empty towns and homes. It was dead here. In a few years, Ciemus might really be the last bastion of civilization in North America. It was haunting.

Eager for the distraction, William rejoined the men. The two killers had light and darkness in equal amounts. It was fascinating.

Lights flashed around them, passing a message.

“Bathroom stop coming.” Kyle’s tone was unhappy at the interruption. “Can we pick this up afterwards?”

*You know it!*

The Eagles both snickered at William’s eager response, but they still didn’t trust him.

Kyle surveyed the landscape and found it the same as the last time he looked. Swaying trees dropped clumps of melting snow and rainy drops that froze to the hoods and roofs. It was miserable weather, but they had to stop soon. Forcing the camp to go six hours between bathroom breaks was hard on the elderly and the children.

Kyle caught a whiff of something sour and made everyone jump as he sneezed three times in rapid succession. The vehicle under his control didn’t shift much from the path of the truck in front of him. He was too experienced to lose control so easily, but it was still hard to blow with one hand. He accomplished it in a series of elbow and wrist movements that brought chuckles from his awake passengers.

“Hey, uh.” Conner drew in a breath. “Can I join you in that conversation after the stop?”

Kyle and Neil traded glances while William waited for their choice.

Neil shrugged. “Up to you.”

Kyle chose to be honest with the boy. “You’re after a woman carrying the offspring of a beloved fallen Eagle, kid. She’s not carrying a descendant.”

Conner chose to answer with the same adult approach. “Some day, she will be. I’ve seen it.”

“Seen it or will make it happen?” Neil inquired with deceptive casualness.

“Both.” Conner knew William was scanning him now, but he also knew honesty mattered the most to these men. “She knows. If she wanted me gone, she would have asked Angela to help her.”

“Can she make that choice while under a charm?” Kyle still didn’t understand how all of it worked, but he knew he needed to.

“Of course.” Conner gave Angela away without meaning to. “Never without permission means everything to our kind.”

Silence fell as the riders and driver realized what that meant.

“Well, there’s a new piece to a tired puzzle. I never even considered that angle.” Neil locked down on his thoughts.

“Me either.” Kyle reached for his smoke. “We’ll patch you in, kid. For every question you ask, we get one.”

Conner glared at the mobster in the mirror. “You tricked me.”

“You opened your mouth and the truth rolled out.” Kyle corrected the boy like he would any other Eagle in his care. “Learn to control that or you’ll end up giving her away to the camp and that will get you eliminated during the chaos.”

“And if he doesn’t get you, I will.” Neil settled back into the seat. “Now, repeat after me: Eagle rule number one...”

Conner realized Neil was giving him a mental cover to concentrate on during the stop and was grateful. It was a relief to have senior men he could count on. *I’ll never betray them*. *I’m going to have my Candy and be an upstanding Eagle.*

“Your dad sure couldn’t do that.” Samantha had woken when Conner’s energy had gone from sweet to bitter. It was back to sweet again, but she was awake now.

Conner patted the ankle over his lap. “Stop stressing.” He pulled the cover away as she sat up. “You have a meeting to attend in a few minutes.”

Conner’s words effectively distracted her, pleasing Neil and making Kyle frown.

Samantha reached for her boots. “That’s awesome!”

Conner grabbed the boots before she could bend too far. “Take it easy!”

Neil let the boy boss her around, smirking. He couldn’t get away with that.

Kyle gave Neil a nod that the trooper interpreted without trouble. They had been watching for signs of Conner being a problem, but they were also watching for signs of his father–the good ones that had built Safe Haven. Neil started checking his gear.

Conner did the same between helping Samantha get her boots on.

*He’s ready.* Neil stored that observation. *I don’t know if we can pull a new Adrian from his son, but it’s time to try. It’s clear we aren’t getting the old one back.*

Chapter Six

**Pick Your Own Targets**

Midnight

A picture containing graffiti

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“B**oss wants a quick meeting.” Kyle walked the stopped convoy, pointing at people. “Council members and team leaders need to go to the front truck for a meeting.”

Kyle waved camp people into sentry places so they wouldn’t be unprotected, then went to the front himself. His attendance was also mandatory. Angela had delivered a confirmation of Conner’s words as they cleared the convoy to exit for a bathroom break.

“In six hours, we’ll have our last bathroom-only stop.” Angela began as soon as Kyle joined them. The need to hurry was riding her. “Six hours later, we’ll stop for a noon meal. A couple hours after that, we will be at our destination. We’ll secure the area, clear the usual aftermath, and set up a temporary camp. We’ll spend the night right there, then relocate to the shoreline in front of our ship the next morning. Only unpack what we need for the first night. No sense in doing it twice.”

People were writing things between sips of the hot, bitter coffee Brittani was pouring into their canteens. Angela had told her to save it for the last leg of the trip to help keep their tired drivers awake.

People moaned and smiled over the rare treat.

Around the meeting, the camp was finishing, drenched from rain but happy to have empty bladders. They were adjusting to being on the road again.

So was Dog. He’d jumped out, taken a leak, and then waited for a passing Eagle to open the door so he could go back to sleep.

“As soon as we get the camp switched to the boat, scavenging teams will be sent out.” Angela handed a list to Kenn. “Those are the teams, where you’re all going, and what you’re bringing back. There are no other details yet.” Angela waved. “We’ll get to that reason in a minute. I’ve looked as far ahead as I can, and I’ve seen things I won’t share. Just know I’m covering anything you aren’t. If you do think something has been missed, bring it directly to me, not your teammates or the council.”

No one liked that order, but they would obey it.

“Scavenging teams will have two days to scout, collect, and return. No site is more than ten miles away, so it will be a little easier and also a little harder. Magic use is forbidden, as is radio use outside our perimeter.” Angela leaned against the bumper of the truck so she could pull up the sock that refused to stay on her ankle. *Damn thing looked exactly as worn as the other one. What gives?!* “When the teams return on day five, we’ll have our party. The next morning or afternoon, we’ll have a wedding.”

Kyle flushed, hands tightening into fists as people stared or flashed huge grins.

“The two days after that will be filled with wonderful moments, like loading those new supplies onto the boat, getting our animals on board, and other fun activities. If we run out of time, sorting can wait until we’re sailing.” Angela paused, picking up an emission from the west. She shuddered as her energy dipped while making the connection.

Jennifer caught it next and shared it with the others like Angela wanted. It was a vision of a UN camp being destroyed by children who acted like Kendle. Stomachs clenched. Dread covered the council.

“We have to get ready for that.” Marc regarded Angela as the vision ended. “What do you want me to do?”

The rest of the council frowned at Marc. He was here as her bodyguard, nothing more.

Angela shut her dazed eyes as pain lanced through her temples. Getting images from across the country, as they were happening, hurt.

Jennifer’s lips narrowed. *Be careful.*

Marc retreated from the table, swallowing a nasty remark. He almost hated Jennifer sometimes.

*Right back at you*. Jennifer followed that with a finger.

*Are you two finished?* Samantha wasn’t in a good mood. *We have real problems coming!*

Marc stared in wounded surprise. Samantha was never sharp with him.

Jennifer sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Fine!”

“We’ll quarantine the kids until we can make a cure.” Neil wasn’t going to suggest something more drastic. He was honored to share the vision with everyone. He was also horrified. It seemed no matter how many battles they won, there was always someone else stirring the pot.

“That’s why we’re leaving.” Angela took the water Ivan handed her. He’d slid by Marc with a frown, then backed out.

Marc sighed, remembering his place. He put his back to the meeting, watching the few camp members who were still in line for the bathrooms. Everyone had expected it to get dryer now that they were in the south, but it hadn’t yet. In fact, it felt like more rain was coming.

“It is.” Samantha leaned against Neil. “Just waiting for the boss to be ready for that info.”

Marc took the hint and locked down on his thoughts. He was distracting the council. They were scanning all minds in the immediate area right now.

Angela swallowed half the bottle of water and let out a loud belch that drew snickers from the two kids lingering near them. Leeann and Cody were without a sentry for the first time in their Safe Haven lives. It was a big moment for them even though they were in the same area with the council.

“We have no promise there will be a cure.” Kyle hated to remind everyone of that, but he was scared of the infected kids spreading their disease to the camp, to Jennifer and Autumn.

Standing behind Kyle to provide extra security, William scowled. He was glad none of them could see his reaction. He had a strong mental wall up to have privacy, but he doubted it would hold against the two kids at the table, let alone some of the adults. The amount of power here was staggering.

*It’s also dangerous.*

William nodded at Kenn’s comment and locked down harder on his thoughts. He didn’t like Kenn.

*Same to you.* Kenn copied Jennifer and sent it with a finger.

“Stop it!” Samantha was getting upset with all the whirling thoughts. “If we do have to fight, we’re going to lose because of crap like this!”

Silence fell.

Angela gave Samantha an approving nod. “Yes. We’re leaving in eight days. We don’t have the ship secured. We don’t have the rest of the supplies. We don’t know if the boat will float.” Angela glanced toward the vehicles. “We have refugees and trackers hunting us. The UN has things going on in our country. And now, a bus load of sick children are racing our way as fast as Doug can drive. You all know how Doug drives. And when he takes a break, *Jeff* will be driving.”

Neil and Kyle groaned. Jeff and Seth were the best drivers to roll through Safe Haven. No one mentioned Billy, who was the top wheelman in any camp. His name had become taboo.

“We also have a number of other problems to sort out.” Angela smiled sweetly. “And I have every faith that *you* will. But that isn’t why I’ve called this meeting.”

“That *we* will?”

“Wait. What?”

Angela gestured. “I can’t keep handling everything. You’ve all gone through this, sadly. You know how to handle it. I trust you to do the best you can and to come to me when you need help.”

They stared at her in confusion.

Angela took her filled canteen from Brittani and lifted it. “You’ve all just been promoted to true leadership. Congratulations! Or my sympathies, whichever you prefer.”

Most of the council and team leaders were happy as they realized Angela wasn’t going to be looking over their shoulders anymore or devising schemes that used them without them knowing it.

“Exactly.” Angela’s amusement fled. “Now, you’ll pick your own targets.”

Nearly everyone grinned. Only Kenn and William were worried over her delegating so much authority.

Angela ignored them in favor of saving time. “This meeting is about someone near and dear to my heart and my sanity.”

Marc flushed as attention swung to him. Even the two kids were staring. He could feel it.

“Marc asked me to train him to use his gifts. I’ve agreed.”

Expressions relaxed. Everyone wanted that.

“I promised to give him all forms of descendant guidance that I can. As soon as I agreed, I realized I can’t do it alone.” Angela glanced around the table. “I’m asking all of you to help me.”

“Oh, yeah!” Kenn leered toward Marc.

Snickers went around, along with vows of harsh training to make Marc stronger than he’d ever dreamed of.

Marc held tight to the mental shield that Angela had taught him a few hours ago. He hadn’t actually made her promise. She was manipulating them again.

Angela rotated to glare at him.

Marc sighed. “Ivan, in.” He left the meeting.

Angela flashed a tolerant smile at the frowning council. “As you can see, he’s too emotional for a descendant fight. A couple of well-chosen taunts and he’ll charge forward. He didn’t act that way as a Marine.” She regarded Kenn. “That’s where you come in, Drill Instructor.”

Kenn straightened, brightening. “Really?”

Angela nodded. “He won’t take it from Adrian, but you served with him. Every time he steps out the lines of a Marine, nail him on it. You have my permission to be…strict. Don’t go into stupid land with it, though. He won’t take much more from you than he would from Adrian.”

Kenn nodded. “I’m glad to be able to help.”

“I know you are, and I know why.”

Kenn shrugged. “We all hate it when you’re distracted. If this fixes it, why do I have to be doing it for any other reason?”

“You don’t. Neither does anyone else. Just give him the best training you can, and I’ll do the rest.”

“Is this why we got promotions?”

Angela shook her head at Jennifer’s question. “You’ve earned those. I didn’t think a bribe was needed to get you to help Marc.”

“It isn’t.” Jennifer shrugged. “But making sure your intentions are good is part of why I’m here.”

Angela nodded again. “Yes. An enforcer is the only way we’ll ever be able to trust each other completely. Over time, we’ll know what someone says is honest and not an imagined or changed event. Revisionist history must never again be allowed to replace truth and facts.”

Everyone nodded. Honesty in New America was a requirement.

“I need his training to start immediately. We’ll rotate it between schedules after we sail, but we’re not hiding it from the camp–then or now. Tell them the truth. Marc’s a target and Safe Haven helps citizens learn to defend themselves. Like you, the camp will be happy to hear that one of our issues is being cleared up.”

“What about the other one?” Kyle was unable to keep from asking. Everyone wanted to know what would happen with Adrian.

“That one will take care of itself.” Angela’s head turned south. “Dismissed. We leave in five minutes.”

William and Ivan followed Angela as she left the meeting.

The rest of the council and Eagles shared excited glances, waiting for her to get out of sight. Then they consulted on the issues and began to divvy up chores. Angela was right. They were ready for this.

Angela ignored the guards and the darkness to go to the empty medical camper for a moment of privacy. Seeing the rage kids in the west had hurt her, but Allan’s death was crushing. She let the tears flow as she latched the door.

Trailing them, Marc could feel her pain and hated it. He forced himself to do what he didn’t want to. Anything was worth erasing her misery for a little while.

*She needs a moment with you.*

Adrian jerked awake, sitting up to look around. Marc’s voice in his mind had been clear as a bell.

Adrian didn’t spot anyone in or around the small shack. It was still pouring, and the rest of the men were taking much needed sleep break.

*Did you hear me?*

Adrian started to concentrate on opening a private line and then realized Marc had done that on his end. *Very nice.*

*Angie taught me how.*

Adrian heard the tone and quickly put the pieces together. *She agreed to train you. Congratulations. I wasn’t certain if she was going to.*

There was a slight pause as Marc adjusted to the fact that Adrian already knew. *Is there anything you don’t see coming?*

Adrian grimace. *There were things all along.*

*Did you get the transmission from Becky?*

*Parts of it.*

*Angie isn’t doing well. She covered herself during the meeting, but her pain is awful.*

*There are several things you can do.* Adrian stretched, being careful not to wake anyone. *She’ll expect all of them, though.*

*She wouldn’t expect one of your tactics.*

Adrian realized that was the reason Marc was contacting him. He wanted one of the sleazy, effective methods.

*Yes. That’s what I want.*

Adrian sighed. *Give me a minute.*

*Are things okay there?*

*Not really, but you can’t move them any faster. Six hours of travel between breaks is a hard rule.*

*Yeah. That’s what Angie said.*

Adrian could feel Marc waiting impatiently for the answer. After a minute of broken concentration, Adrian grunted. *Come back in half an hour.*

The connection closed.

Instead of going back to sleep, Adrian dug into the problem. Marc had asked him for something and he wasn’t going to fail the man, no matter what his personal feelings were. He owed Marc, a lot.

**2**

“She’s in the truck.” Ivan was standing outside the door.

Marc climbed in and shut the door. Angela had come from the camper and went to the lead rig while he was talking with Adrian.

Marc settled down without revealing his turmoil. He hated to ask Adrian for anything. Every piece of information the former leader gathered from the conversations was something he might be able to use against them later, during a more important moment. Marc would never trust him.

Exhausted and not wanting to discuss it, Angela pretended to sleep. Marc conversing with Adrian was progress. Over time, bonds would be broken, and bonds would grow. It would be up to the two men in her life as to how that happened, but she was determined that it would. She didn’t want Adrian as a crutch for Marc’s death, but she did want him. Everyone knew it and she was now prepared to confront it. It didn’t mean anything had to change. Humans were perfectly capable of wanting something without ever taking a step toward it. That had happened every day before the war and this new life was no different. They would all survive.

Marc curled around Angela’s warm body. “Do you want to talk?”

Angela sighed. “You’re getting sharper.”

“Just tired of acting like I don’t know something when I do.”

Angela slowly shifted to rest in his arms, head on his chest. “I love you. Don’t ever forget that.”

Marc held her close and whispered in her ear.

Angela warmed. After a minute, she nodded. “Yes, please.”

Marc claimed her lips.

Dog groaned and moved to the front seat. He curled up at William’s loafers, eyes warning the man not to kick him even by accident.

Morgan, ready to go at Kenn’s signal, turned on the cd. He was a huge Nickelback fan. Hard, quick beats filled the truck.

William, also eager to be on the way so he could return to the conversation with Neil and Kyle, tugged the curtains closed. It was nice to hear Marc and Angie having a good moment, but he didn’t want to keep listening or see them. It would only remind him that he was lonely.

**3**

“This is so wrong.” Adrian thought of ugly, awful things to cool his libido. “Just so wrong.”

The rain increased, carrying a cold chill that should have done the trick as it hit his hot skin, but it didn’t. Angela’s moans were ringing in his ears.

Adrian sighed in relief as he was finally able to piss. He was glad to be out of the shack for a minute, despite the weather. It stank.

Marc had left them mentally connected and Adrian suspected it was on purpose. He’d come up with his own distraction technique. Adrian applauded it even as he hated Marc for it–not so much for loving Angela but making him listen.

“Cruel and unusual punishment.” He entered the shack.

*Yeah, sorry about that*. Marc apologized happily. *I’m a rookie. I forgot*.

*Yeah*. Adrian wasn’t positive he could believe the man.

*You’re the liar, not me.*

Adrian grunted. *Perfect boy scout, never lies. What a load.*

Marc snickered.

*Feelin’ good, are ya?*

*You have no idea.*

*No and I never will, so stop rubbing it in.*

Marc’s amusement lifted Adrian’s spirits even though he didn’t want it to. *What do you want from me?*

*I’ll need that method in a day. This won’t hold her as long as it will me.*

*No.*

*What?*

*Don’t use another calming method. Let her boil.*

Marc hesitated. He’d been looking forward to offering her another distraction.

Adrian snorted lowly to keep from waking the team. *I understand that, but we have a plan in the works and calming her down isn’t part of it.*

*I’m not sure we should.*

*I’m positive it needs to happen.*

*I don’t trust you.*

*Do you believe I’d never hurt her?*

*Yes.*

*Then you can trust me on some things, right?*

Marc swallowed a nasty comment. *I do in many areas. The herd, the island. Kendle.*

*Yeah, you should send her out… Wait.*

Marc caught Adrian’s reflections and smothered a groan. *That’s mean.*

*Yeah, but if she thinks you’re falling for Kendle, it’ll twist her up.*

*I won’t go that far. You didn’t see what happened in Ciemus. Kendle is lucky to be alive.*

*She’s lucky in that way period, Marc. She shouldn’t have survived any of it.*

*Agreed… Are you sure?*

*Do you want her freed?*

*More than anything.*

*Then trust me. Just let her boil. If she cools off, turn up the heat.*

Marc shut his lids, chin against Angela’s shoulder. *Okay*.

The line disconnected.

Adrian stood there in shock, jealous and comforted at the same time.

**4**

“What happens when two different types of descendants have a baby?”

Both groups of reclining, chatting adults placed at either end of the camp semi paused to look at Tonya. They’d been back on the road for an hour and everyone was restless.

Tonya refused to be intimidated. She was in the center of the truck, playing Sorry with the small family Kenn had brought in. The kids had talked her into the game during the last stop. “I don’t have that issue, but a few people in camp might and I was curious. Does anyone know?”

“You mean Marc and Angela.” Tracy had also wondered, but not enough to ask anyone. Tracy was lying low around Angela now that she and Charlie had broken the rules. She sensed their leader wouldn’t like talking to her right now.

“Sure, but also Seth and Becky.” Tonya dropped her head. “And a few others who are Invisibles.”

She had the full attention of the adults. They were all hot and wide awake after sleeping all day. Coats and sweaters were piled in corners and laps. Sweat ran freely. Tonya swiped at her neck. *Maybe that’s just me.* “On top of that, what happens when an Invisible is already pregnant by say, an alpha, and then gets her gifts. Does the kid have both, one, or none?”

As the adults considered those questions, Debra and the children kept playing. Unable to hear the conversations, or the loud laughter of the kids, Debra was having a good time. She and the older children were playing Duck-Duck-Goose, using the movement of the truck to make it more entertaining. The younger children had been fed and were napping despite the noise. They were used to it.

“I guess I need to ask the boss.” Tonya turned back to the game.

“The other angel knows.” Caleb didn’t notice when the adults stared at him. He was busy coloring a picture while he continued to recover. His lungs weren’t ready for games of chase yet.

Closest to the pale boy, Theo smiled at him. “Is there anything you can tell us?”

Caleb picked up a green crayon. “My mom believed there are a lot of different types of angels. Some of them can make more angels and some can’t. She wouldn’t tell me more.”

“Was your mom an…angel, Caleb?” Theo wasn’t sure he was comfortable calling the descendants angels.

“My aunt was. She died after the war.” Caleb slammed the crayon onto the paper, grinding it in. “The army men wanted her.” The little boy threw what was left of the crayon against the metal wall. “They hurt her!”

The adults realized Caleb had witnessed it and were horrified. They were also sorry Theo had asked.

“Would you like to read a book with me?” Theo didn’t spend much time with the kids, but he knew Caleb loved stories.

“Yes!” Caleb rushed into Theo’s arms. “Read me!”

Several of the other children who were coloring also joined them for the story.

The adults shared looks, choosing who would approach William about it. None of them would be able to leave it alone now that Tonya had put it into their minds.

Daryl swallowed a groan as heads rotated to him. He was the senior man in this truck. All the camp people knew if they wanted something, to ask an Eagle. “Why do you want to know? Without a good reason, I won’t even consider it.” Daryl hadn’t been happy with the driving break until he’d realized his passenger had also been assigned to the camp semi for the remainder of their travel to the shore.

Camp members dropped other conversations in favor of the new topic.

Tonya jerked a thumb toward the lead rig. “We have council members about to go through it. Aren’t we supposed to be prepared?”

Daryl wanted to laugh at the clever trap. Instead, he shook his head. “That’s the boss’s job to cover. Talk to her or deal with the new guy on your own.”

“Will you do it for me?” Brittani was sitting at the far end, away from him while she browsed a cookbook. “I may have a child someday.”

Silence fell again as they remembered she and Gus were both descendants.

Daryl nodded. “Sure.”

People chortled and frowned at his fast answer.

Brittani held his gaze for a second and was relieved when Daryl dropped his eyes instead of prolonging the heat. He was the only one she’d responded to, but he wasn’t the only one interested and she didn’t want to be the center of camp gossip. She was being pursued by several Eagles when Gus wasn’t around. Most of Safe Haven’s single men were refusing to take no for an answer.

“They just don’t believe it.” Tonya leaned over as the others resumed previous conversations. “They think you’re hot and they can’t wait to see you turn out like Angela since she’s your mentor. Jennifer is a badass now. They expect you will be too.”

Brittani’s cheeks darkened. “You’re kidding. Even though I have a man and I’m black?”

Tonya snickered. “You are a babe in the woods. Our men don’t see skin color and most of the time, they don’t see gender, but they do see a woman fitting into the life of an Eagle–someone who would make a good mate or wife because you’ll understand the sacrifices that have to be made in such a relationship. Until it’s clear you’re taken, they’ll think they have a chance.”

“They don’t.”

Tonya flashed the woman a look implying she was lying.

Brittani stiffened in guilty shame. “I’m not.”

“Okay. I won’t argue with you on that. Time will prove it.”

*What do you know?* Brittani’s mental demand sent unease through the truck.

Tonya shrugged, concentrating. *I felt the heat when you looked at Daryl. That was strong. You go on and lie to everyone else. I’d never give you away, but I know you’re attracted. The future might see that happen if you let your hair down.*

*I’d never betray my mate.*

*Maybe your mate would be happier with someone else too. Someone on his level. You see what it’s doing to Marc and Angela.*

*Who? What skank wants my man?!*

Tonya laughed, aware of being manipulated. She let it go as the mood in the truck evened out, not needing to prove herself anymore.

Brittani stewed on it while forcing herself not to look at Daryl. She also brought down a mental wall. Tonya wasn’t completely wrong. She loved Gus and she would never betray him, but the spark between her and Daryl was hot. If she didn’t hate being burned, she would be tempted to grab ahold of that heat and soar along with it until she turned to ashes.

Sitting alone to keep watch without being distracted, Daryl felt the regard of several camp females, but he had no trouble ignoring them. He was lost in a fantasy of changing the past so he could build a future. Right now, he felt lost. If he could atone and move on, there was a woman he was willing to fight for and unlike Cynthia, this one was his perfect match.

Chapter Seven

**The Traitor’s Whore**

Day Two

**6am**

A picture containing vector graphics

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“T**his is a ten minute stop.” Neil and Ivan were on a patrol of the convoy. “Make it quick and move on for the next person. We all need to go.”

Neil hid snickers at the dances people were doing while waiting. He hoped his words would allow those kids to hang on with good attitudes. When they reached their destination, the grownups would be busy. They needed the restless children to behave.

Neil understood their excitement, though. Dawn had arrived with a beautiful sunrise and the rain was over. They’d traveled through the storm. Warmer breezes were wafting over the convoy, reminding people of swimming pools and barbeques with loved ones. It was bittersweet. Neil thought there would be a lot of that feeling in the coming week.

Ivan nodded to Kenn as he went by the man, resisting a leer. He was high on his victory over the Marine. Kenn hadn’t retaliated yet beyond turning their piss blue, but Ivan planned to take it like a good sport. Morgan had enjoyed telling them Kenn had dosed the water bottles at the last workout in Ciemus, but Ivan was almost disappointed. He’d been warned Kenn was a badass, but he hadn’t witnessed signs of it yet.

Kenn didn’t glance toward the cocky soldier. *I’m busy for a while, but there’s a long boat ride ahead of us.* *I’ll make sure you hesitate to play games with me again.*

Walking guard duty with Kenn so she could stretch her swelling legs, Tonya frowned but didn’t comment. She was learning not to react to the thoughts she caught, but unlike him, she didn’t want to come out on top of anyone else. She just wanted to stay this happy forever.

Angela picked up that thought. She also wanted Tonya to be this happy forever. She just didn’t think it was possible. Even if she and Kenn stayed true to their new life, fate seemed determined to ruin things for all of them. Angela had woken bitter. It wasn’t the normal kind she’d been living with for so many years. This was a deep well of impotent anger that needed an outlet.

*I can provide one.*

Angela tried to ignore her witch. She and Marc’s demon had been tight for weeks now without betraying any information on why. Marc thought they were lovers enjoying time together.

*But you didn’t, did you?*

Angela shook her head. *You’d never be distracted from your first goal.*

*No. Your life means more to me than a swim through someone’s membranes.*

Angela made a face. “Yuck.”

The woods around them crackled and glistened with morning dew while the ground ran with fog. It was eerie and magnificent at the same time, like most of nature. The only problem Morgan could spot was the smell. Something was rotting nearby. The sentry, minding his own reflections instead of hers, assumed Angela also meant the smell of the land. Morgan was eager to get back on the road and away from it. Beyond attracting predators, the stench was enough to make folks gag.

“If we’re lucky, this is the final land travel for years.”

Morgan hoped it ended up that way, but he knew it wasn’t likely. Everything they’d known about their calm, civilized world had been a lie. They were almost extinct now and it still wasn’t enough.

“We’re not, actually.”

“Not what?”

“Almost extinct. It will take nature a winter or two more to accomplish that. We’ve been breeding like rabbits for centuries.”

“It looks empty here.” Morgan indicated the neglected trees and bushes lining the road.

Angela made a subtle gesture toward the homes on a distant hill. “We always attract our own kind. They’re waiting to see if we’re good or bad.”

“Should I get a welcoming party ready?” Morgan didn’t feel anything, but he wasn’t allowed to do a deep scan of the area. It was hard to practice his gifts and not break the rules. Everyone was struggling with it and hoping she would lift the rule. They were observing her every open thought on the subject.

“Are they…?” Angela halted by the tent serving hot drinks and water. Angela swept the camp, searching for descendants.

Jennifer nodded from the kid’s trailer.

Samantha, on her cane, waved from the bathroom line.

Marc and Kenn, conferring on the route by the lead rig, peered at her over the map.

Conner and Charlie paused in a perimeter walk and turned her way.

Dog lifted his head from the shelter of the floorboard where he’d curled up after leaking again. He’d been on a long trip. He needed to rest.

Children quieted or pressed their faces to the warm glass of their assigned vehicle.

All of them met her eye, proving they were monitoring her conversations and the open thoughts she allowed.

Even Kendle lifted her eyes to the boss, drawn by the reactions. The camp hadn’t noticed it yet, but Kendle was watching all the descendants for clues. Without her gifts, she was forced to rely on her senses.

William leaned out the truck window to observe.

Morgan motioned the man back in so the camp didn’t notice.

William flashed a grateful smile at the Eagle and used the mirrors to watch.

Angela’s heart pounded with the choice she’d just made. There was still time to reverse her decision, but only until she opened her mouth right here. They all knew the decision she was making, and they all wanted it.

Angela’s sigh echoed on the wind, carrying to all of them. *During the first evening mess, after we reach the shore.*

Happiness flew through the convoy from end to end, bringing the shield to life. Smiles instead of guns being drawn told the camp that one of their leaders had experienced something good, resulting in no panic.

Angela slid into one of the restroom tents on the men’s side because no one was in line there.

Other women and kids did the same, thinning the other lines.

When Angela came out, she headed toward the rear of the convoy with Jennifer on her heels.

*What does that mean?* Conner flashed in hand code.

*We’ll find out during the first evening mess at the shore.*

Conner frowned as he passed Marc on rounds. *Why is everyone so happy if she hasn’t made a choice.*

*Because she did.*

*I don’t understand.*

*If the answer was no, she wouldn’t have given any hope. She’s decided to train us.*

*The real Adrian’s army.* Conner grinned. *Cool*.

Marc snorted. *Not even close.*

Conner realized it could only go one other way and shrugged. Serving in Angela’s army would be just as satisfying.

“Time to go!”

“Something’s happening.” Ivan regarded Neil as they got into their assigned vehicle together at Angela’s call.

Neil locked the doors. “Get ready to drive. Don’t think.”

Ivan would have frowned, but he’d caught Neil’s tone. The former trooper didn’t want to speak about it in front of their loading passengers. “I’d like to volunteer for a shift with you when we stop.” Ivan flashed a believable grin. “Too much sleep during travel time, you know?”

*Smart guy.* Neil nodded. *No wonder the boss keeps him so busy.*

Eagles circled the convoy, enjoying the warmer air and clear view around them.

“Something’s wrong with dad.”

Mike zipped his jeans and shoved cold hands into his pockets while he waited for his brother to finish. “I feel it too. Would Angela tell us anything if we went to her?” Mike was settling into duty, but he felt he had to be loyal to his brother. His dad would expect that.

Timmy snorted and then spit. “They won’t let us get near her. She’s royalty now.”

“Don’t be that way.” Mike hadn’t forgotten Angela had been hurt. He liked her and thought people should give her a break.

“Whatever.” Timmy thought she was a tramp, like he’d once heard his dad call her. “Come on. The twin princes will search for us if we’re gone much longer.”

Mike snickered, following his older brother back into their perimeter. They hated using the bathroom tents. They always went to the rear of the convoy instead.

Around them, the woods were foggy and cold. Not many structures were in view and those were covered in frosty layers of dew and dirt. Otherwise, it was as if nature owned this area.

“There you are.” Conner motioned to the older boys. “The Eagles need an extra hand shutting down the drink table. People are shoving.”

Timmy eyed Conner’s Eagle jacket and swallowed resentment. Even if it didn’t have a name or patch yet, he still hated the little prince for having one when he didn’t.

Zack’s sons did as they were told, but the glares and sneers said trouble was coming at some point.

Conner shook his head, thinking they wouldn’t be distracted much longer. He’d tracked them by their worries over their dad.

“We’ll be there soon.” Charlie came from the opposite side of the convoy. He was doing a crisscross pattern that the Eagles didn’t use anymore because it skipped small places. Charlie thought it was okay to use it right now with so many men on duty. Their entire army was being used.

“She won’t like you skipping things.”

Charlie shrugged, continuing his pattern.

Sighing, Conner went back over Charlie’s path to be sure it was all covered.

“Can we trust him?” Jennifer and Angela were out of sight because they’d also left the perimeter. Their personal sentries, Greg and Daryl, weren’t happy about it.

“That has not been revealed.”

Jennifer smiled. “Really.”

Angela exhaled stale smoke, enjoying one of the cigarettes Marc had saved for her from their supplies as he organized it for travel. “Maybe. It depends on his father and his woman.”

“You say that like it’s a done deal.”

Angela shrugged, light headed from the tobacco. “Isn’t it? She’s interested. It’s just a matter of time. Anyone can see it.”

“Will they be punished?”

Angela shook her head. “Not if he’s of age.”

“What about Tracy?”

Angela inhaled again and let out the cloud of smoke. “Why are you asking?”

Jennifer drew on her courage. “Because I’m guilty now, not later. So are others. We want to know the punishment.”

Angela flipped her ash. “I honestly haven’t decided, Jenny. Do you need an answer now or can it wait until I pick an example?”

Jennifer shook her head. “I’m sorry, no rush.”

“Good, because you were the first. Unless you want to be the canary in the mine, don’t ask me that again.”

“I won’t.”

Angela took the last drag and signaled toward the front of the convoy as she ground out the fire under her boot. “They need you. Run.”

Jennifer took off, not doubting.

Her guard followed, casting a confused look at Angela that she ignored.

Passing by on rounds, Morgan eased closer to Angela. “What’s up?”

“Conner and Charlie are about to argue over the way they’re doing rounds. Conner’s right. Charlie will swing on him and in the confusion, a wild dog will grab one of the kids.”

“Should we let Dog out?” Morgan keyed the radio in code to let the other sentries know they had wild company. “Why aren’t we going to help?”

“Keep Dog in the lead truck. I don’t want him to chase them.” Angela pointed behind them. “We’re taking care of the problems back here. Aim low and double tap.”

Morgan immediately drew his gun and flipped off his safety. So did Greg.

Angela felt Marc coming their way. She let him, certain he would handle people as he went.

“Load up right now!” Marc’s voice echoed across the area.

A low growl echoed from the fog.

Gunfire came from the front of the convoy.

Morgan fired.

Angela ducked a shadow that lunged, also firing.

Two heavy thuds told her they’d both hit their target. “One more, I think, but others are coming.”

At the front of the convoy, the sudden change of noises flushed big gulls from the grassy land next to the vehicles.

Kenn grabbed for his air horn, stomach tightening with dread, but the flappy birds kept going, not wanting any part of the carnage.

Snarls and yelps filtered through windows and trees, rolling out to homes and empty roads. Only a few living souls noticed, but they were already engaged in life and death struggles of their own and stayed hidden.

A loud howl echoed from the north.

It was answered right away by howls from the east.

“Damn.” Angela straightened. “They know I’m here. How can they know it’s me?” Angela backed into the protection of Marc and the team of Eagles he’d brought along as he got people moving. The bathroom tents were being dismantled while Jennifer got the boys separated. Marc had woken to the shouts. He was grouchy and quick to fire at the red eyes glaring from beneath a truck.

The dog fell over, yelping.

Marc fired again, putting it out of its misery. He didn’t like the suffering of animals, even ones that wanted to eat him.

Angela let Greg escort her to the truck and put her inside.

Dog howled from the driver seat, telling the remaining animals to go away or die.

The Eagles hurried the remaining people, calling to the kids, making motions to the adults.

Angela put the window down. “I want them all accounted for, before we pull out.”

“You got it.” Morgan coughed and spat, waving people along to help. The taste of bile was rough*. I should have eaten before the fun started.*

Marc stayed by Angela’s door as Morgan took up a post on the other side and Greg went to help get people loaded.

Two gunshots came, close together.

Angela traveled with her guards mentally, seeing her camp was mostly in the vehicles now.

Marc waited, gun in hand, for the clear call to come.

So did everyone else.

The Eagles made sure each vehicle was checked before giving that call. No one wanted to be responsible for leaving someone behind. They also didn’t want it to ever happen to them. Being careful each time would prevent that.

“All clear!”

“Eagles in! Eagles in!”

As soon as their sentries were loaded, Angela gave Marc the motion to move them out. His driving shift was starting now.

Marc rolled them over the bodies of several dogs and a blood splatter from their single injury. When Charlie punched Conner, he had bounced off and hit the side of the truck next to them, skinning his knuckles. Both boys were in the semi with the camp people right now, being tended and lectured. Marc had told them to go easy on Conner.

Next to him, Angela shuddered. “They’re closer. We have to hurry.”

Marc didn’t know who she meant. “Trackers?”

“Doug.”

Marc realized she was in the west again and waited for more, but Angela didn’t speak. She went to sleep. They were nine hours away from destiny. She planned to sleep for most of it.

The convoy pulled out faster this time than they had at the other stops, leaving clear tracks in the mud that came from the finally warming temperatures. They were in the true south now.

**2**

Samantha shifted uncomfortably in the rear as her stomach cramped. It wasn’t hurting exactly, but it felt deep. She was trying to relax.

In the lead rig, Marc slowed the truck to a jerky stop.

A few cars back, Charlie hopped out and ran toward Neil. *Make room.*

Neil rotated to glare at Sam. “You were supposed to say something.” He gestured at Ivan. “Hang on. The boss is sending us another passenger.”

Samantha groaned. “I’ll be fine.”

“Scoot over.” Neil glared at her.

Charlie reached the door a few seconds later. Conner slid over to make room.

“Man…” Samantha also slid over. “Wish I knew how much longer I need to be like this.”

“Four months.” Neil shook his head at her surprised look. “Later. I want to watch for trouble and you need to rest.”

Charlie shut the door and took Sam’s hand as Conner did the same. Their energy, youthful and healthy, immediately restored Sam’s hair to the beautiful sandy shades that Neil loved.

Samantha relaxed, moaning in a way that would have made Neil twitch if he hadn’t been so worried over her.

Samantha shut her eyes and allowed the energy to fill her up. Being pregnant was hard.

**3**

“Can I speak with you about the wedding?”

Jennifer regarded Candy. “Really?” They were in the rear of Greg’s vehicle. Kendle was in the front passenger seat where Jennifer could keep tabs on her.

“Are you hot?” Greg, their driver, motioned to Kendle. “You can turn the heat down.”

“No.”

Greg frowned, but didn’t push. During the last stop, Kendle had dropped her Eagle jacket into the floorboard with the kits and gear. Every Eagle who witnessed it would disapprove. Someone else would make her pay. Greg wanted a peaceful ride before the chaos he was sure was coming when they reached the shore.

Candy extended a sheet of paper.

Jennifer took it, realizing Candy had been thoughtful enough to write it down instead of letting Kendle listen to her personal details.

*Indoor/outdoor?*

*In front of the camp/a small group?*

*Reception after or right to bed?*

Jennifer’s cheeks went red.

Candy pushed a pen at her. “Just circle them.”

Jennifer kept reading.

*Do you need protection or a sex talk?*

*Have you chosen a date?*

Jennifer looked up. “I can’t answer these yet.”

Candy smiled. “Would it help to know I have Kyle’s answers?”

Jennifer nodded, cheeks growing hotter. She snatched the sheet as soon as Candy held it out.

*In a church if possible. If not, make something up.*

*In front of everyone.*

*Reception, then none of your damn business!*

*I’ve got it covered on my end. I dare you to ask her this question.*

*As soon as she feels like she’s ready and not a second before.*

Jennifer melted. “He’s so sweet.”

“Read the rest before you start crying.” Candy sniffed. “And you will.”

Jennifer kept reading Kyle’s answers.

*Who do you want to officiate?*

*Someone official.*

*Do you have a religious preference?*

*Not burning in hell sounds good.*

*Is there anything else you’d like that isn’t on this list?*

*Yes. All these questions are going to make her nervous. Tell her she has nothing to worry about. I’ll hold her, and we’ll sleep, like we always did before. When she’s older, I’ll make her my wife in every way if she still wants it.*

“Do you?” Candy was getting details for herself and for the worried Eagles, though she wasn’t sure who she would tell if there was a problem.

Jennifer nodded quickly. “He’ll love me forever.”

“At least. And what about the just holding you part?”

Jennifer chuckled. “None of your damn business.”

“Atta, girl.” Candy had talked to Kyle against his will too. She was satisfied the only thing he wanted was Jennifer’s happiness. He wasn’t a threat to her.

“No, he’s not.” Jennifer fought the urge to send him a wave of love. “I haven’t viewed him that way in a long time.”

Candy gestured at the paper. “Might be a good idea to tell him that at some point. He’s feeling guilty.”

Candy’s attention strayed to the vehicle ahead of them, where Conner was helping Samantha. Candy understood, but she still wished he was with her.

Jennifer read the last scribbled note.

*Jenny, are you sure? You don’t have to do this at all. No one is allowed to force you into anything and that includes the boss. I need you to be happy. Please tell them the truth and let them drive me out like I deserve.*

Jennifer wiped away tears. “It’s hard to remember a time when I didn’t need him. He means more to me than he knows.” Jennifer circled her answers.

“I thought so.” Candy took the paper. “Not many people still talk about it. I think they’ve accepted that you two are meant to be together.”

Jennifer met her eye. “Will that hold when they hear grunting and groaning, and see our shadows on the wall?”

Candy winced. “Uh…”

“Exactly.” Jennifer glanced at Kendle’s Eagle jacket in the floorboard and glared at the woman while brushing lint from her own.

It’s disrespectful to treat them that way.

Kendle shrugged at Jennifer’s sharp tone in her mind.

Candy cleared her throat. “So that’s it, unless you have any...questions or anything.”

“I do have a couple, but not with the traitor’s whore listening.”

Kendle’s grip tightened on the kit in her lap.

Candy’s lips pursed. “Imagine not getting Kyle but wanting him. Wouldn’t you be a little unstable too?”

“I could overlook it if she didn’t want Angela dead.”

“Ah.” Candy hadn’t known the details. “I can see where that’s an issue.” She frowned at Kendle. “Headphones are in the console by your knee.”

Kendle put them on without arguing, but she was boiling. She didn’t know how much longer she could tolerate life like this, but it wouldn’t even be a full day. She was on the edge and it wouldn’t take much to push her over. When it happened, Kendle planned to head west and see if she could discover a way to live with herself there. Without her gifts, she didn’t have a chance at getting Marc.

“You never had a chance at Marc!” Jennifer kicked the seat. “Think good thoughts for a change!”

When Kendle was unable to hear them, Candy leaned over. “Information on your pleasure or his?”

Jennifer frowned. “Why would I need information on mine?”

“Because that’s what he wants–all he wants.”

*I’m glad this role is almost over*. Jennifer dropped her head, voice coming out in a choked whisper. “Can I talk to you about…abuse and about…” Jennifer couldn’t say it.

Candy patted Jennifer’s chilly hand. “He said you were forced to enjoy it, so now you can’t enjoy it. That about right?”

“Yes. You’ve been hurt. If you liked some of it, would that be okay?”

Candy shrugged. “I don’t blame the victims for reactions to abuse, but no, not for me.” She grimaced a little. “After the war, I was held captive and rented to travelers passing through. I wasn’t shown pleasure at any point.”

“That would have been easier.” Jennifer tried not to let the images come forward. “I know about Stockholm syndrome and some of the others, but I had no problem with Cesar dying and I don’t want to go back to that life.”

“Why don’t you talk to Kyle? He wants to help.”

Jennifer snorted. “He’ll say anything he needs to if it’ll let him stay close.”

Candy’s brow went up. “So you are with him against your will.”

“No! I don’t mean sex. He’d go for years without it now if it meant he could have what he really wants. I just can’t trust his word on this.”

“Well, I’ll do the best I can, but you already know you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Are you sure?”

Candy tried not to hate all men on the planet at Jennifer’s broken tone. “Of course. Think of it this way. Animals go into heat and breed, right? Same thing with people. You’re young. Pleasure is nature’s way of making sure species reproduce.” Candy grimaced. “Be glad you have a man who wants you to enjoy it. Many of them don’t care.”

“Cesar did. He used it to shame me like a bad dog.” Jennifer didn’t stop the tears. Like with any role, sticking close to the truth was most effective and very dangerous. “I always fought him, but in the end, I gave him what he wanted and asked for more.”

“I’m sorry, Jenny, really, but you know the difference between a good man and a bad one. I think you’re worried about confusing the two men because of the pleasure with both.”

“Won’t I?”

Candy shook her head. “When it’s over, you’ll understand you never had to worry about that.”

“What about during?”

Candy didn’t lie. “Flashes are part of the trauma. Some of them will never go away. Some will fade over time, and some will be replaced, but there’s no way to prevent them. The best you can do is to tell him when it happens. Kyle will help you through it if you’re brave enough to let him.”

“I am.” Jennifer wiped her face. “I want to be whole again, normal.”

Candy’s face drained of warmth. “You’ll never be that. You’ve survived, but peace is a myth for people like us. Take the good when it comes and let go of the bad as best you can. When you can’t, try to remember this wasn’t what you had planned for your life. You’re just playing the shitty cards you were dealt.”

**4**

*“Maybe we shouldn’t tell anyone. Mankind always destroys anything beautiful.” Kendle was lounging with Luke on a small beach cove with an inlet too narrow for most boats.*

*Luke’s thoughts had been along the same lines, but he shook his head, aware of his line bobbing gently atop the water. “It won’t stop them from coming, only delay it.” As far as Luke was concerned, the human race was stupid for being so superior. “Commonsense will tell people they have to leave. Someone will lead them and find us. More will come and then it will be a battle for the last garden of Eden.”*

*Luke sounded calm, but Kendle could see his emotions being held in check. After all, this was his home. “Isn’t there something we can do to keep that from happening?”*

*“It will depend on the survivors. With all they’ve been through, will it be enough to teach them to abandon the old ways?”*

*“Sure it will. People learn from their mistakes.” Kendle wondered, even as she said it. Half the population being gone wouldn’t remove all the useless people.*

*“It will help if we get ready for them, I think. Call another town meeting and tell them what we plan to do.”*

*Kendle paled at that idea. These people were here because they had no desire to be a part of the large population violence equation. They had left those lands and people, and now she and Luke had to tell them those people were coming here.*

*Kendle rubbed the scars on her arms, aware of Luke’s desire. Even with the way she looked now, he still wanted her.*

*He loves me, she reaffirmed. He would never hurt me. “Hold me?”*

*Luke recognized the healing moment and went to her.*

*He took her with gentle care, holding tight when he climaxed. Death was flying toward him. The clock was almost louder than his pounding heart.*

*“I’m sorry.” Kendle also felt the warning, but she couldn’t do this alone.*

*“If it’s my time, I’ll go.” Luke shuddered between her scarred legs. “Until then, I have you.”*

*Kendle hugged him, arching when he started pleasing her again. He would lose his life during her quest to return home. Loving him back was the least she could do.*

The dream changed.

*The plane lifted. Under it, townspeople gazed up, drawn by the sight and sounds. They hadn’t heard a plane, or seen one, in a long time. It was a wondrous moment where the few people still alive hoped it would crash.*

*Behind the island people, glowing green eyes appeared in the evening fog. Shadowy forms moved closer, long arms reaching...*

*Gawkers were jerked into the shadows, not given time to scream.*

*In the town of Pitcairn, families in the middle of a meal stopped eating as the fog rolled in. It swirled through open doors and windows to fill the houses, covering the survivors.*

*There were no screams here either. The people walked from their homes and disappeared into the fog while glowing green eyes slithered around their feet.*

“No!” Kendle jerked awake, moaning.

“You’re a real bitch!” Jennifer restrained herself only because it would upset Angela to stop their journey to break up a fight. “You didn’t tell us that!”

“What is it?” Greg steered around a pothole, feeling Kendle’s tension. As an Eagle, she was entitled to a chance to confess and receive a lighter sentence. “What did you do?”

Jennifer frowned, but waited to let the castaway explain the betrayal. Thoughts of the wedding had been put on hold when Kendle’s dream snared her.

Kendle’s silence angered Jennifer even more. “I can’t believe you set her up that way. You want all of us to die, just so long as she does too.”

Kendle closed her eyes. “Fuck you.”

Greg was growing concerned. “What is it?”

“The boss gets this one first.” Jennifer snorted and kicked Kendle’s seat again. “Angela is ten times smarter than you on her worst day. She knows.”

Kendle froze. “And she’s going anyway?”

Jennifer nodded and didn’t say more. She was positive it meant Angela would clear out that problem too.

Kendle took it as a sign she was right to believe that Angela was a threat to them all. *Maybe Angela and her glowing orbs are one of them!* Kendle went back to sleep before she could stew further. She was in the car with *one of them* right now.

Chapter Eight

**No Games**

Day Two

**Noon**

A close up of a sign

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“C**heck that shack! Hurry up!”

Heavy steps pounded closer through the sand.

Adrian thought of Angela and held the shield tighter, willing the trackers to see emptiness and nothing more. Now that it was light with clear weather, the shack had been obvious to them. If he were as strong as Angela, he could shield them without being drained so fast. She was the strongest descendant he’d known. She was–

*Do you know how hard it is for her to eat when you’re making her stomach boil with your emotions?*

Adrian blanched. *No. She didn’t bring you along!*

Marc cackled. *I told you she agreed to train me.*

“I’ve got something… A power surge. Search north!”

The steps went away.

Adrian felt the strength of his barrier increase to a dense, soggy quality he didn’t try to peer through.

*We’re close now.*

Adrian held tight to the shield, heart pounding. He’d forgotten the maker’s bond could activate under stressful conditions.

*I thought I was drowning in my soup. Spit noodles across the table.*

Adrian grinned at Angela’s words.

*Samantha had just come from putting on clean clothes. I haven’t gotten a glare like that in a while.*

Adrian felt Angela’s warmth settle over them as the demons flew toward the shack. *Damn. You are close.*

*Minutes, my–*

The connection cut off.

Replaying it, a hundred words could have fit there. The one that went best sent his mind into a chaotic pattern of repetition that settled on the future and then buzzed off it before the image could fully form. *I’m going to get what I want.*

**2**

“It’s cruel when you tempt him that way.” Jennifer was on Angela’s right in the drafty mess tent next to their stopped convoy. This was the last stop. The scents of soup and gasoline as Brittani served her last meal and the Eagles gassed their vehicles for the last leg of their journey were making it hard to eat.

“I mean it.” Jennifer had just informed Angela of Kendle’s latest treachery, but the boss hadn’t been surprised.

“It’s effective.” Angela forced herself to spoon in another bite. Brittani had cleverly added canned carrots to make it healthier and increase the mass to meet demand, but it hadn’t improved the flavor of eleven-month-old boxes and cans that had already been heavy on preservatives. The bunker supplies were wonderful to have, but it wasn’t the fresh food they’d enjoyed in Ciemus. In another few months, many of their staples would no longer be edible. The world was about to be on an even leaner diet.

Angela left her jacket tied around her waist, enjoying the warm wind. She’d never been to the coast before. She was looking forward to seeing the ocean.

Jennifer followed Angela’s lead with her jacket, not wanting to stink when they all piled back into vehicles together. The final three hours would feel longer due to them being so crammed in. They were ditching ten vehicles here and draining the fuel to make the rest of the journey.

The guards kept an eye on their surroundings. There were more houses now, but they were on alert for other predators. The wild dog attack had rattled some of the rookies who hadn’t seen action yet. The Ciemus people were already learning what it was like to be hunted, but Safe Haven’s members were also having episodes of panic. The mountain quake and the naval station had been rough. They were all suffering flashes at certain noises and phrases, unable to fight those memories. It wasn’t just something they could forget.

“It’s still cruel.”

Angela sighed in annoyance. “He’ll keep them alive. The trackers are searching north and looking for spare ammo.”

“They felt your power. They got scared.”

“They should be. I’m going to kill them all.” Angela resumed chewing on her warm food. Other than the taste, it was great.

Brittani sniggered.

Angela rotated to look at her. Brittani hadn’t donned her rookie jacket yet, but everyone was watching for it, especially the men. Gus had a lot of competition.

Brittani gave an amused, apologetic smile. She was distracted and burning more of the food than usual.

Angela shared a silent laugh, understanding. Brittani was about to lead her own team. She was busy making plans and hoping she could live up to them. Angela wasn’t concerned. Brittani would do well because it was what she was meant to be doing. So would everyone else. The problems they’d been facing for so long were about to be over for a while. An entirely new set would take their place once the ship set sail.

Depressed by the reflection, Angela forced herself to restart the conversation with Jennifer. Even talking about Adrian was better than nothing. “Is he–”

Jennifer took her half eaten bowl to the scrap bucket to prevent that from happening. She was on Marc’s side all the way and she knew about their plans. *I should*. *I got them rolling on it in Ciemus. They’d have talked about it for months if I hadn’t intervened.*

Jennifer strolled to the flap, casting a sharp look at Kendle, who was in a corner by herself with a bowl of untouched food. The castaway looked like a zombie. The camp and the Eagles were avoiding her. Not because of what had happened, but because she looked ill and they didn’t want to catch it. If she sneezed, they would rush her to isolation.

Kendle snatched up her spoon and shoved in a bite, shuddering as she fought to control the rage.

Jennifer left the tent.

The tension didn’t ease.

Angela got up and left too, without the nasty look at Kendle.

Kendle shoveled in another bite.

The tension faded.

Jennifer was a younger miniature of Angela as the pair walked out, bringing smiles and frowns. Most people liked it, but some were worried the girl was emulating their leader too closely.

Kyle was thrilled. With Angela as a mentor, Jennifer would be strong enough to survive anything.

Angela paused, listening. All she heard was a rant about the food.

Satisfied Kendle was trying to control herself, Angela went to the lead truck. She was tired and sore, but she’d driven a two hour shift in front of the convoy and enjoyed every second of it. If not for the coming action, she would be doing it now too. As it was, she planned to be first out the door and she couldn’t do that if she was driving.

“I assume I’m going with you.” Marc followed her to the truck as Kyle motioned to Jennifer.

He noticed Angela’s gray hair. He would have commented, but she regarded him pointedly. Marc gazed in a truck mirror to discover he had sunken eyes and a line of gray hair over one ear. “Damn.”

Angela tucked the ponytail under her cap as she began to sweat. “This is a side effect of sending our demons out to distract the beach trackers.”

“We’ll drink more water. You rest until we get there.”

Angela went to the rear bunk, pulling her kit along.

Dog peered at her with bleary golden eyes and then went back to sleep.

Marc stayed in the passenger seat, waiting for an answer. He was slapped with a flash of men nailed to a wall in a storm. Some of them were dead. “Uh…” The image transformed to a group of Eagles in a shed, surrounded by men. “Well, I understand you’re upset, but…”

Angela zoomed in, showing the trackers laughing as they stabbed knives through weak points in Adrian’s shield. Zack was at Adrian’s boots, not moving, while several other men squeezed as tight around their former leader as they could to make it easier for him to keep them sheltered.

“Yeah…” Marc sighed. “Do you want the camp distracted?”

“No more hiding what I am or what I do.”

“Why would…” Marc scowled. “To give them another chance to change their minds. We still have people who should stay here, right?”

Angela shrugged. “I wouldn’t say should. I just need them to accept me, Marc. I can’t take hiding it anymore. I’m a descendant of the Creator. We all are. They either need to adjust to that or stay here. I won’t tolerate denial anymore.”

Marc clasped her wrist in consolation. “What would you like me to do?”

“Watch them.” Her hand tightened around his. “Watch them and see who still wants to kill me.”

For a brief second, Marc wondered if she might be the tiniest bit delusional and then he nodded. “I’ll scan them hard. If you’re using power, it’ll give me a minute to do the deep kind. Jennifer will help.”

“Along with a few others I trust.” Angela dug in her kit and handed a scrap of paper to Marc. “I’ve never been saner in my life. Please don’t doubt me.”

“I just don’t want to believe we have another traitor here.” Marc read the note.

*…eaknesses are kids, Marc, Adrian, and death. Vulnerable with many possible targets.*

Marc regarded her. “Kendle?”

Angela shook her head. “Not her or anyone on the council. I’ve already compared the handwriting to everyone I have a sample of–even myself and you to make it a fair pool. No matches.”

Marc took his time examining the script while his brain began devising a trap.

“I’ll have everyone sign a log as they board.” Angela stretched out on the bunk. “They’ll probably expect that, so they’ll try before we board the ship. That’s how long we have to figure it out.”

“What happens if we don’t?”

Angela gave him a grim stare of panic. “Then I’ll be with Adrian on his boat, following, because I don’t trust anyone else.”

Marc winced. “You mean that. I can hear it.”

“So can he, Marc.” Her stare softened into pleading. “I won’t make it to the island if we don’t unearth the traitor before we sail. I’ve seen it.”

Marc took notice. “Tell me everything–the dream, how and where you found this note. All of it.”

Angela used her hands, telling Marc she was truly scared. She didn’t even feel safe using a private mental line.

The need to defend her rose in a staggering amount of bile. Marc swallowed it, relishing the pain. He would find the person and they would pay.

Angela’s witch relaxed. With Marc on the hunt, her host would be safe.

*Do you think so?*

They paused at William’s tone.

William cleared his throat and opened the truck door. He got into the driver chair and shut them in. “I’m sorry.”

Marc glowered at the man.

“You need help with this. It’s too big for one man.”

“Finding a rat?” Marc questioned snidely. “Her dog could do that.”

“Not a rat. An Invisible.”

Marc’s hands clenched. “Maybe it’s you.”

William chuckled. “I don’t need underhanded tactics.”

“How do you know it’s an Invisible?” Angela didn’t care about their simmering rivalry.

“Because I’ve swept everyone in this camp, deeper than your enforcer has, and I found nothing.”

“Maybe you aren’t as good as you imagine.”

“Maybe you should close your mouth, *citizen*.”

William’s scold hurt Marc deep in his heart.

Angela held on to his hand when he would have let go.

Marc clenched his teeth and tolerated the awful moment.

William looked at Angela over the seat. “You read the book?”

She nodded. “Invisibles have a natural shield over their minds that they don’t even know about. That’s why I only saw darkness whenever I tried to scan Kenn.”

“He was on the edge of receiving his gifts, so you could spot the darkness. That’s how you find them.”

“So we scan for dark spots.” Angela’s shoulders slumped. “I hate dark spots.”

“That’s waiting until they’re changing. We need to get them before that, so they don’t have a gift to use and they can’t be found by trackers.”

“What do you suggest?” Marc asked stiffly.

“Skip your hunt.” William smiled. “We’ll have a play instead.”

“A play?”

“An act.” Angela lifted a brow at William. “Jealousy?”

The man shrugged. “It’s effective but takes too long. I was imagining mutiny.”

“You’ll act like you want to replace her as leader and see if anyone joins you?” Marc guessed. He already wasn’t looking forward to the trouble it would cause in the camp.

“Not leadership.” William grinned. “For mate.”

Marc gaped.

William laughed.

Angela rolled her eyes. “He means Adrian, just so you know. Not himself.”

“That’s worse!”

William nodded. “And believable.”

“It will ruin Marc’s place with the camp.”

Angela’s blunt words drew cold silence that Marc filled by pulling out of her grip and opened the door. “Let me know what you two decide.”

Marc didn’t slam the door. He didn’t need to. His anger was clear.

William went after him. He had his long coat unbuttoned, showing the sporty clothes of an aristocrat underneath. So far, he’d refused Safe Haven gear and weapons. His red and gold hair glinted in the sun, drawing attention from camp women. The former playboy gave a regretful shake of his head.

Females went on their way, disappointed again. Single men to service their needs without a commitment were getting harder to find.

The men in Safe Haven had the opposite problem. They couldn’t find enough alone moments to keep up.

“Wait!”

Marc tensed.

William grabbed Marc’s arm and tried to swing him around.

He couldn’t.

Marc kept walking, ignoring the hand tugging on him.

William flushed at his obvious weakness. *Gotta fix that*.

Sentries frowned at the men, but camp members actually scowled. They were fed up with personal dramas.

Marc felt William reaching for his arm again and sighed, giving in. “Fine!” He spun and shoved William. “What?!”

William came right back and leaned in his face. “This isn’t a game. If I have to interfere to spare her moments like this one, I will.” William used a blast of his gift to shove Marc the way he’d just been treated.

Marc tried not to move, but it was impossible. William’s gift was strong. “That’s all you have!”

William shook his head, disgusted. “I have commonsense. If you keep doing this, anger is all *you’ll* have.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “He’s perfect for her in every way save one. It’s bigger than all the others and is enough to let you win in the end, if you don’t screw it up.”

“What’s that?!” Marc snarled, hating the man for making him play this role. It was too close to the truth.

“She loves you more.”

Marc’s heart pounded. “She doesn’t love him at all. She’s under a spell!”

William sighed. “You don’t believe that, or you wouldn’t be jealous of him. If you keep this up, that will change.”

“Maybe she’d be better off with him.” Marc forced himself to play along.

William shrugged. “You won’t let them spend time together, so we’ll never know.”

William left, happy with the first layer of acting. He had to stay close to the truth or the Eagles wouldn’t believe it. Angela knew there was a traitor and she wanted them found, but she also wanted the rivalry over and this would do both. William hoped she was prepared for the truth hiding in her heart. William already knew the outcome of this play and he presumed she did as well. He was proud of her for having the strength to do it. Ending a love affair was hard on everyone, but sometimes, it had to happen.

Angela honked the horn.

Kyle put a hand around his mouth. “Time to go, people! Let’s load up!”

**3**

**Shoreline (Adrian’s shack)**

“I feel something coming.”

“It’s that group the UN sent us here for.”

“I don’t see how. Those kids are in the west.”

“They’re on the way now.”

The trackers weren’t strong enough to kill Adrian if they had to fight. The boss had ordered them to keep him contained here. Adrian wasn’t strong enough to kill them all and shield his men at the same time. They were at a stalemate.

“Maybe, but it couldn’t be Safe Haven yet.”

The brothers were grouchy and filthy, ready to be finished. They were also thrilled. They had captured Adrian Mitchel. The rewards would be staggering.

“I think this is a wild goose chase. Safe Haven died at that naval center. I was there. I saw the fishing people come in and blow them up. The fishers are who we should be hunting.”

“Did you sense anything out of them?”

“There was no way to tell who had what in all that chaos.”

“Too bad. Be nice to know if they captured any prisoners.”

“I’m telling you guys, something’s coming.”

Adrian listened to the conversation, shield slipping a bit. He knew that was likely the plan–catch him off guard and attack at full strength, but he couldn’t help the curiosity. When the fighting started, it would be too late for details.

“You could just come out and ask your questions.” One of the trackers outside the stinking shack stood up. “We’ll go and have a cold drink, change into dry clothes.”

“And have a talk about the UN, the international detention center, and the kids from the west.”

Adrian dropped his head to his chin and went silent, refusing to think of anything but his love for Angela. He’d perfected his hold over it to a single image that gleamed. It was impenetrable.

“It’s not, really.” The standing tracker rapped on the shield.

Adrian concentrated on the image of Angela.

“Damn. Come on, wimp. Stop blinding us.”

Adrian ignored them. He had many images to switch to if this one dulled, but it was his favorite and always would be.

“It’s not even your memory.” Another of the tracker trio scanned him in contempt. “You’re witnessing it through her mate’s eyes. That’s pathetic.”

Adrian didn’t care. Marc’s memory of Angela and the wolf pack was stunning in the detail. Adrian could see the sweat on Angela’s skin and bugs snapping at the blood on the wolf’s coat. Two females in full glory, battling for the army of males around them was amazing, but it was also the moment his men had accepted her for the warrior she was about to become. So had Marc.

“She better be as badass as you’re building her up to be.” The oldest of the brothers was bored. “We haven’t been sitting in this crappy weather for ten hours just to take her out in one hit.”

“Will you three shut up and listen!” Rex was the smarter of the brothers and always on alert. “Do a scan.”

“Too late.” Adrian smiled. “She’s here.”

Screams sounded outside the shack as the witch marched forward with flames lighting the way. She shimmered in fire, a vengeful spirit sent by a furious host.

Adrian held the barrier as fire flew over the trackers and turned two of them into screaming torches that ran toward the water.

Rex made it to the edge of the shore, hand dropping into the cold liquid as he died.

*Save your strength.* The angry witch took a stance in front of the shack. *I can’t heal the wounded. I can only kill our enemies.*

Adrian got to his feet and went to the door, wanting to view her with his own eyes. He studied the entity, not feeling his lack of food and water or his shriveled form from use of energy. All he wanted to do was pretend.

Angela’s demon rotated to snarl at him with a skeleton profile under glossy black hair.

Adrian grinned at her. “Hello, yourself.”

Startled by charm in such a moment, the witch giggled, fire increasing.

Marc’s demon was a hulking entity with red eyes and clawed hands dripping blood onto the floor of the shack as he stepped between them. *No games with my witch tonight. She’s busy.*

Adrian nodded curtly and went to the opposite window instead. He hadn’t known Marc could do that. Angela was teaching him in leaps instead of steady lessons.

**4**

“It’s disturbing they can do that.”

Samantha winced at a bright ray of sunlight. “Will you feel the same when I can?”

Neil heard the clenched teeth behind the too calm question and frowned. “Hit her again.”

Conner and Charlie delivered a blast of healing energy. The boys recoiled in tandem as it bounced back.

They exchanged a worried glance and tried again.

“What’s wrong?” Neil knew something was. “Every time you hit her, both your brows meet in the middle.”

“It’s not getting through.” Conner tried again, aware of Samantha trying to relax and accept it.

Energy flew back, stinging his skin.

“Hey!” He regarded Neil in confusion. “That’s never happened before.”

“I’ll talk to someone about it.” Neil glanced over the seat and spotted her clenched hands and pale skin. “Take us to the lead truck.”

Their driver pulled out of line and hurried down the opposite lane.

Samantha groaned as a contraction hit. Terrified, she gripped the seat and tried to relax.

“Pull over.” Angela pointed at a driveway. “Have the convoy keep truckin’.”

Marc wanted to grin at her wording, but a vehicle rushing to catch up implied there was a problem.

“Sam’s in labor. The boys can’t help her anymore.”

“Can you?”

“William will ride with her. Conner is switching out. He knows.”

William zipped his coat. “It will last a couple weeks. Then she’ll need you to get her through the remainder.”

“We’ll be on the water before that. She’ll be able to rest as long as she needs.”

William’s head came up. “You’ll need help for that.”

“I have plans in place.”

Marc made a note to ask about it later.

So did William.

Angela sighed. “It’s not to keep it from either of you.”

The males understood it was to keep it from others and settled down.

Angela rolled a mental eye, overlooking her own jealousies. Now that Kendle was in check, she wasn’t feeling that way anymore.

“Is she, though? Really?”

Angela sighed, shaking her head. “Not at all. The peace is temporary.”

Marc pushed harder. “Will it be okay, eventually?”

Angela nodded, but refused to contemplate how that would happen. If he knew it was coming, it wouldn’t be fair.

*You’re taking a big risk*, the witch warned. *What if he does love her?*

*Of course, he loves her*. *It’s a matter of who he loves more.*

*Like with you and Adrian?*

*Yes.*

*Fine.* The witch was fresh from her victory and feeling good. *Then I will tell you he’s fine, but Zack isn’t. Adrian is giving him help, but it won’t be enough.*

*Zack’s fate isn’t ours to decide*, Angela stated ominously. *He has things to atone for, things he won’t admit he did wrong*.

The witch fell silent, contemplating that information.

At times, Angela seemed to know more than her witch and neither of them had found it odd yet, but Marc did. He’d been listening to the conversation, as was William, he presumed.

Marc pulled the truck over, making motions for the others to go on. He also told them it was a passenger switch so no one would panic.

William hurried from the truck as Conner came from the car.

The switch took two minutes and then both vehicles were back on the road, rolling toward their spots in line.

As Marc shifted, Conner turned to Angela. “Let’s make a deal. I’ll trade you Samantha’s twins for my dad going with us to the island.”

Marc opened his mouth.

So did Angela.

*Deal!* Sam’s mental anguish overrode them both. *If taking that scumbag with us saves my babies, so be it. Everyone else will have to suck it up.*

Angela gave a reluctant nod.

Marc was forced into a snicker. “She’s a fighter.”

“Yes, she is.” Angela placed a hand on Conner’s arm, soothing the stinging skin from his attempt to heal Samantha. “I’ll tell you when it’s okay. Not before then or you’ll bring another refugee flood down on us.”

Marc presumed Conner was going to give Samantha a lifeforce to get her through.

Angela denied it. “She’s having trouble because the babies evolved too fast. Giving her a lifeforce will make it worse.”

Marc led the convoy onto the last stretch of highway. “Well, you can’t take back their evolutions… Can you?”

“No, and I won’t transform their DNA. However, Conner and our enforcer can lock their gifts up until they’re born. That should stop the constant need for Sam’s body to adjust and grow at descendant rates.”

“This is another reason descendants didn’t survive in the labs, right?” Marc was suddenly furious. “They intentionally mixed us with the wrong types to study what would happen.”

“Yes, but there’s also love, and then when your line is dying out, there are desperate attempts to survive. It wasn’t just the government.” Angela thought of the notes in Adrian’s books. “Our people are fragile in reproduction. Many of us were captured during pregnancy. It’s easiest then because men are too weak from caring for their mate and unborn child to fight the trackers.”

“Trackers like Adrian?”

Angela nodded, not needing the reminder that Adrian had once worked for the government and hunted their people. “Yes. Also like the kind still coming for us.”

“I thought the demons just handled that.”

“They took care of the few on duty over our men, not their leaders.” Angela listened to the events happening in Neil’s jeep for a moment, then closed her eyes to rest. Sending the witch out to help their men was tiring. She’d never sent it so far away before. Now, she had a new gift to use.

*An evolution*, the witch grumbled. *Exactly what you’re denying her twins.*

*I’m saving her life*, Angela corrected. *Go to sleep or find comfort in your demon’s arms. We handle the real world here, not fantasies where only descendants survived the apocalypse.*

Stung, the witch faded, leaving Angela in peace.

Chapter Nine

**It Feels Nasty**

In the West

**Day Two**

9am

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“H**ow long until we get there?”

“It depends on where *there* is.” Jeff kept his eye on the bus mirrors, where a small cloud was lingering. *It might be a storm.* *If so, it’s coming faster than I am and that’s a problem*. He already had the bus going as fast as he could over these cracked roads.

The ashy sky had stopped spitting on them, but the clouds hadn’t faded. His mirrors were filled with smoke that was undoubtedly pushing out the last survivors from the west. Jeff wondered if any of them would notice Allan’s grave as they traveled through and doubted it. He hoped the Eagle rested in peace near the tree with the hollow trunk. It was the best Jeff could do for him.

“Will it be soon?”

Jeff shook his head, easing on the gas. He’d planned a break now, but it would wait. “A week.”

Kimberly slumped in the seat behind him. Arms crossing over her chest, the girl tried to sleep a little more like she could hear Jeff hoping she would do. It was hard. The bus was full of bored kids who wanted to run and play, and to fight. Missing the nightly bloodbath was bothering them.

Becky and Doug were trying to keep the children occupied, aware of the issues. They’d been doing well until Kimberly woke from a nightmare, sending screams through the bus.

Becky met Jeff’s eye in the mirror and nodded. They’d made a fast plan to keep the restless children happy, but they hadn’t needed it yet. The children were tolerating the trip. There hadn’t been fighting or disobedience since Romeo had given them the lay of things in Safe Haven. Jeff would have thought they were settling down but for the gleam in Kimberly’s eyes and the tension in the air. The kids were like junkies waiting for their next fix.

He switched on the radio, not wincing at the loud blast of holiday music. They had given the kids everything they had in the way of clothes and food, but half of them were still without coverings and Jeff hated it. At some point, he hoped to make a stop for their needs, but this area was cleaned out. Burnt towns and slaughtered livestock littered the interstate, some of it new, most of it old.

Kids perked up, sharing small smiles and sad grimaces at the holiday tunes.

Jeff didn’t want to have those conversations. “Next.” He skipped forward.

Barney music filled the bus to the delight of the kids, who immediately began to sing along.

“Yeah!”

“I love you… You love me…”

“No fair!” Jeff groaned. “I can’t even sing the adult version.”

Doug fell into helping Roy and Romeo learn the words as the singing grew louder.

Kimberly was the only one not singing along. Even the older children were happy to belt out the infamous lyrics, but his girl still had crossed arms and a scowl. Jeff presumed she was too old for it.

“It reminds me of my brother.” A tear rolled down her stained cheek. “He loved it.”

Jeff wanted to turn it off now.

“Please don’t. They’re enjoying it.”

Jeff sighed. “You ever drive a bus?”

Kimberly regarded him in the mirror, shaking her head. “No. Should I learn?”

“Learn everything you can.” Jeff scooted over. “Perch on the edge here and I’ll show you some basics.”

She was on the seat before Jeff had finished speaking. He gave her a reluctant smile.

Kimberly leaned close. “People are coming.”

Jeff tensed. “The dust cloud.”

“Yes.”

Jeff felt her trying to work up the nerve to tell him something and got it over with. “What would you do?”

“Blend in.” Kimberly knew what had to happen. “I’ve looked at it from every angle and that’s the only one where you and your friends all survive.”

Jeff swallowed the fear and nodded. “Tell me everything you can, and I’ll handle the others.”

She leaned closer and whispered everything he didn’t want to hear.

**2**

Jeff reluctantly switched off the radio, breaking the good mood as a flood of cars filled the mirrors. Around the bus were empty stretches of highway that occasionally surprised them with towns and stores, only to disappoint them again with emptiness and old looting. “We’re about to have company. Act like UN troops.”

Becky had been listening and knew the plan. She concentrated on not putting off magic vibes as dozens of cars surrounded the speeding bus.

Trucks bounced alongside with men pointing guns.

“Pull over!”

“Stop the bus!”

“What do we do?” Doug was scared for all of them. The refugees in beaten, rusted vehicles now trying to force them off the road were lean and mean. *This will get ugly.*

Jeff didn’t let the smaller cars and trucks push him off the road, but he didn’t retaliate either. Now that he was viewing the threats, it was clear Kimberly was right. “Remember what I said.” Jeff brought his rifle up to the window. “We’re like them.”

Kimberly immediately gave the finger to a man leaning out of a passenger window to grab at the bus door. “We’ll get there first!”

Children slid windows down to scream at the startled refugees.

“We’ll kill you too!”

“We’re leading the way!”

“Safe Haven has to die!”

Cheers came from those who could hear the screams. The other drivers registered a difference and stayed back, waiting to see how the front of the refugee wave was going to react.

Jeff nodded at Becky.

Becky keyed the mike on the CB radio. “Fight at night! Keep rolling!”

The radio lit up with garbled threats and challenges, but the vehicles around them widened the lines and let the bus roll on.

“It worked.” Kimberly scanned harder. “They know we’re infected. They expect us to act like it.”

“And you want to.” Jeff forced the issue, keeping his rifle in the window.

“Yes.” The girl’s eyes gleamed. “Blood eases the pain.”

Jeff grunted. He understood that too. The apocalypse had changed all of them. “I have a low tolerance for the abuse of children and I don’t want to take this threat straight to Angela.”

“We only need a couple hours to settle them down.” Darren, one of the older children, looked up from the rear of the bus. “We were trained for this.”

“That doesn’t make it right.” Seth was sitting next to his angry daughter. Amy was shaking with rage, thinking about killing the people who were causing the unrest on the bus.

“It’s what life is now.” Darren gave them all a sharp glance. “We’d like to get you all out of here alive because it will please the alpha. Do what we say.”

“We’ll help you remove them.” Amy spoke while pointing at Jeff.

The child sounded like an adult, terrifying her father. She looked around four to Jeff, but he thought she might even be younger.

“This is wrong.”

Jeff sympathized with Seth, but he had no choice. “Start telling us now so we’ll have time to process it. We have to stop in the next four hours. This bus won’t take much more than that without a break.”

“Park right in the center when we stop.” Kimberly took over like she had for the last three months of their training. “You have to let them see us.”

Jeff couldn’t count all the vehicles or name all the makes. They filled his mirrors with shouts and weapons. More than a few fired off shots as they neared the bus.

Dust blew over them all, coming in through the windows as the rest of the wave caught up. The noise was jarring, scaring some of the kids who’d been dozing. Doug noticed they settled right back down, as if this was nothing new to them. *It probably isn’t*. Their little bodies were covered in bruises that hadn’t faded when Jeff healed them. Doug didn’t know why, but it didn’t feel like this was the right time to ask.

“When we stop, they’ll start asking if we’re going to put on a show. We’ll say yes, after dark. We’ll walk around then, so they can see us and decide on bets.” Darren looked at Jeff in the mirror. “That’s where you come in. The UN sentries escorted us, making sure the sicker people didn’t grab without paying. You broker the deals. You’re the owner.”

Jeff blanched. “I can’t do that.”

More cars came alongside the bus to get a view. Two of the vehicles were full of men who pointed at the kids and made fighting motions.

“They expect some of the UN men to be descendants, so you can use it a little.” Darren picked up a bag from his feet, hoping to find more food. “But it’s limited to a shield and a minor gift. If you use more than that, they’ll know who you are.”

“At some point, I need the full story of how this all got started and what’s been happening.” Jeff eased off the gas a bit as the engine knocked harder. More vehicles surrounded them, waving to encourage the kids to put on a show. Kimberly was right. They would have to perform. “But not follow through.” Jeff handed out the order with a firm tone. “When it comes time to let them have the rewards, we’re going to kill them instead. I’m giving you permission to help me with that because there are too many for me to do it alone. Wait for my call.”

Relief went through the bus.

Horror followed it. The adults shook their heads and denied him, especially Seth. “Amy is not going out there!”

“None of the little ones are.” Doug added his support.

Amy’s rage exploded, knocking Seth to the floorboard.

Anger followed from the other kids, hitting Doug and Becky in sharp waves.

Jeff held his rifle higher and brought up his shield. “Don’t make me use this. I’ll feel bad, but I’ll kill every one of you little monsters if you cross me.”

Kimberly clapped as the kids immediately settled back into their seats. “Yes, just like that.”

“It feels nasty.” Jeff lowered both the gun and the protection. “Can’t we just kill them all and skip their fun?”

Kimberly shook her head. “If we refuse, they’ll tear us apart and they won’t relax until they get what they want. I need them to let their guard down. I’m young. My gifts aren’t strong yet.” She touched his shoulder. “When you give the word, we’ll get most of them.”

“I’ll want them all if you wind me up that hard.” Jeff had his own triggers. “It doesn’t just flip on and off. When it starts, it stays.”

“We know that emotion well.” Kimberly sat back on the seat and curled her legs beneath her bottom. “This is the last time we’ll be hurt. Don’t interfere until it’s time.”

“Then don’t send out the little ones.” Jeff kept haggling. “I can’t take it.”

“The little ones are your most effective tools.” Kimberly voice was evil in the flesh. “The worst men want them. Broker the deals. Be greedy. Let the fighters do what they were trained for, then free all of us like you wanted to when you first found us.”

Jeff’s heart hurt. “I should have driven us off the cliff like you told me to.”

Kimberly nodded. “Yes, but it’s too late for that now. Safe Haven knows we’re in danger. They heard our call and all the responses. If you don’t reply to them soon, the alpha will send help. She won’t wait long. She values you. We can feel her concern. Your chance to end it all quick was gone as soon as we got on this bus.”

**3**

“We’re stopping soon.” Jeff broke the tense silence that had fallen over the bus. “It’s noon and our ride needs a full cool down–at least three hours.” He indicated the sky. “It’ll be daylight when we stop. We might get overrun.”

“We only do shows at night.” Kimberly yawned. “They’ll spend the day betting and drinking.”

“And brokering deals for us.” Amy forced the big words through small lips. “Deals are made in sight. Debts are paid at night.”

The kids nodded at the training words.

Jeff loathed it all, but he now had a plan. He regarded Kimberly. “Will it succeed?” Jeff knew she was the type of descendant who could predict the future. He wasn’t sure how he knew that, but he did.

Kimberly began searching.

Jeff knew before she answered, by the way her face squished up. He sighed. “I jump too soon, right?”

“Yes.” Kimberly liked him even more for it. “Our pain is your pain. We’re used to it, but you’re not.”

“Can you fix that for a few hours?” he wondered suddenly.

Kimberly studied him nervously. “Yes, but...”

“What?”

“You might not let me put you back. It’s easy to get lost in the emotional shield.”

“Can you put a timer on it?”

The little girl frowned. “What a good question! Hang on.” She shut her eyes.

Jeff didn’t feel anything, though he knew she was using magic on him. It felt like nothing.

Jeff thought about Crista’s death.

Nothing.

He tried for anger with Angela and received the same response. He cared mentally, but it wasn’t drawing a reaction from his heart. *This is great!*

Kimberly winced.

Jeff knew he should be concerned with her displeasure, but he wasn’t. In fact, he didn’t care about anything except his goal. “The Eagles could use this on rookies.”

“It’s dangerous to live without emotional responses.” Kimberly was nervous. “You could be like them and never care.”

“Do Seth.” Jeff pointed at the exhausted father who hadn’t stopped stressing long enough to sleep. “Doug and Becky don’t need it.”

“They should stay on the bus to guard it and be out of sight. He smells like Safe Haven and she can’t control her gifts.”

“I can.” Becky slumped against the gritty seat. “I just don’t want to.”

“He can lock it up.” Kimberly’s little voice went cold. “Stay in the bus.”

Becky looked at Jeff, not sure if she should be impressed or annoyed.

“We stop and do what the kids tell us to do. Then we’ll remove more people who deserve it.”

Becky nodded, soothed.

“How?” Seth didn’t like it. “As soon as we use magic, they’ll rush us.”

Jeff shook his head. “In one of my bags, I have drugs. In several of the other bags, we have booze. I want it all mixed into community jugs. We’ll get part of them with heavy drinking. We’ll also do our dinner, after we eat. While we’re busy, people will sneak in and grab it. They’ll eat anything they find, so put the fix in on all of it.”

“That’s not enough.” Seth kept protesting as Doug got busy mixing drinks. “There are hundreds of refugees out there.”

“I know.” Jeff tried to move on by getting more details. “They have you fight for real, right?”

“Yes.” Kimberly controlled her anger, but the tone was still curt. “We know our job.”

“This isn’t your job!” Doug’s shout surprised them all. “This is wrong!”

Jeff sighed. “Hit him with it too.”

Kimberly went to the back to dose Doug. “What about his boys?”

“We’ll say they’re new, being trained.” Darren dropped the bag and picked up another. “Those kids get a few days to adjust before they fight. Say you just picked them up, that they aren’t angry enough yet.”

“It’s true.” Kimberly eyed Romeo. “Though he’s close. Have you been drugged?”

Romeo shook his head. “I’ve been abused, sold, and frightened.”

Kimberly shrugged. “You’ll get there without the drugs, then. I tried to tell Mario that, but he had orders to follow.” Kimberly blasted Doug with the emotional barrier.

Doug groaned. “I don’t like this.”

Jeff nodded. Even with the barrier, he felt the same way. His mission was to protect these kids. Not being able to feel the urgency was bothersome.

“Hit me too.” Becky shrugged at the looks. “The stress is making my stomach hurt.”

“That’s not good for the baby.” Kimberly shoved energy through mental doors. “I’ll give you a heavier blast. You don’t need to be upset.”

Becky frowned at the girl. “How do you know?”

“My mom was having a baby when the UN men found us.” Kimberly’s tone didn’t change. “She told me.”

“Did your mom...?”

Kimberly shook her head. “She died in birth. So did my sister. My brother was taken by the UN to a different place.”

Becky winced. “Do you kids get hit with the barrier?”

“Oh, no. We need our emotions.”

Jeff slowed the bus to make the turn into the lot, where several semis were parked. The truck stop had neatly lined up trailers, but the store and restaurant, as well as the gas station, were burnt to bare frames. There was a small town in the distance that Jeff identified and used to estimate where they were now. *Six days to go.* *And I have no idea how we’re even going to make it through tonight.*

He shoved into the minds of the kids on his bus, memorizing more details on how to act.

The refugees slowed with them. Some knew what Jeff was doing from the smoke coming from under the hood of the bus. They swerved into the truck stop ahead of them, circling and yelling. Others stayed on the main road, pausing to wait and see what was happening. A few of the meaner ones bumped the bus. The rest swarmed the looted areas to see if there was anything left.

Jeff pulled up his personal shield, making it the strongest he had. Then he stopped the bus. He would have to walk twenty feet to the line of trucks, leaving the vehicle unsheltered. That was intentional.

Jeff pointed at Kimberly and Darren. “Come. Seth on the rear. Doug on the front. Becky is my slave. She doesn’t fight. She serves.”

No one protested.

Jeff knew he should be worried, but the only thing he felt was anger. It pissed him off to have to deal with these fools while trying to get another vehicle rolling. He let the anger build.

Kimberly did the same.

Ashy wind fell on Jeff and the kids as they left the bus. The wind was gusting here, bringing poison from the west in both chemical and human form.

Doug coughed, locking the door against refugees that were a mix of all races and ages. Kids were even running through the crowd. He noticed those kids were putting things in their pockets and realized they were robbing the mob. Doug looked away before he got them caught. He didn’t know if they had parents, but he didn’t want to ruin it if they didn’t.

Darren played his role and acted jumpy as he stayed glued to Jeff’s hip. He was the financial guarantee of a good night for the UN. No one placed bets on the fighter who flinched.

Refugees swarmed them.

Jeff fought to keep his shield up as people bounced off it with yelps and fists. “Get back! It’s not time!”

“A show! We want a show!”

“Later!” Jeff shoved his way through, now glad he couldn’t feel fear. “Daytime’s for betting.”

“Are those your fighters?”

The refugees retreated a bit as Jeff nodded. “Two of them.” He pointed at Kimberly. “Show ‘em some stuff, girl.”

Kimberly immediately sank into a fighting position and let her angry face come forward. It was frightening on a child.

The crowd shouted as she did spins and jumps, little bruised legs delivering kicks to some of the people who were too close. As adults hit the ground, bets began to fly through the air.

Darren flinched again, huddling closer.

Even with the barrier, Jeff refused to push the child away. He grabbed the boy by the back of his ragged jacket and held him up. He rotated so the foaming refugees could get a good look. “Double payoff.”

Shouts came, all denying him.

Jeff lowered the cringing boy to the ground, shrugging. “He’s scrappier than he looks.” He was following the routine of the UN men by telling the truth when he knew it wouldn’t be believed. It was brilliant in Jeff’s opinion, brilliant and corrupt. It allowed them to cheat their patrons and always ensure a financial gain no matter how many good bets they had to pay off.

Jeff ignored the kids and the crowd, sweeping the trucks.

The kids stuck to their training. The UN men hadn’t cared about them during this part. They’d learned defenses. Small knives sliced those who tried to grab them, taking skin and an occasional finger.

Screams and cheers filled the air each time blood hit the ground.

On the bus, Doug’s hulking form at the front, Saiga 12 over one arm, was keeping things under control there. Seth’s beard-lined glare wasn’t as much a deterrent in the rear, but his AK was. Both men had side folding stocks and a box of drums at their feet. Other than a few slaps to the windows and shouts of encouragement, the bus wasn’t bothered. Everyone was centered on the lone UN descendant with his shield up and no weapon in hand. Jeff appeared unconcerned with the hundreds of men and women around him and that meant he was a badass, had support in the area, or he was a full descendant who needed to die.

Jeff felt their suspicions. The second truck in line appeared to have no issues. He was about to verify that by starting it up, but first, he had to settle the crowd or the two kids with him would be taken while he was swarmed. The answer they would accept was one Jeff hated, because if he were truly corrupt, it’s what he would have done. “They told us to relocate. I took my group of infectors and got lost, but they’ll catch up to me soon. If you want a fight tonight, make sure nothing gets in my way. I need to stay ahead.”

“You stole UN property!”

Half the crowd was shocked and began looking over their shoulders. The others cheered one of their own for breaking free of the new masters.

“I’ll have to give them back at some point.” Jeff opened the driver door. “But not before I’ve destroyed Safe Haven. I’m taking the kids to their doorstep. Help me and we’ll own that camp in a week.”

“Those people are dead!”

“We heard it. Hell of a battle.”

Jeff reached for the radio on his belt. “I was banished because I got tired of the leader killing innocent people. I still know the Eagle code.” He clicked the mike a few times, hoping someone was listening to the old channel and knew to answer. He wasn’t about to use the newest one in front of so many threats.

*Click-click!*

“Safe Haven survived!” The shout echoed through the crowd as the yelling chain started.

Jeff climbed into the truck and began rooting around for keys and wires as the crowd yelled questions and passed his answers. Jeff had changed his mind about not leading them to Angela. That was what she’d sent him out here for–to gather the trash and burn it.

Jeff could hear a few of the stronger groups making plans to take the kids from him after the fighting. *Good luck.*

The engine started on the fourth turn of the key. Following instinct, Jeff pointed at the other semis. “Check those out! People need wheels to reach the shore.”

Surprising him, a group ran off to do as instructed.

Jeff checked the gauges. Half a tank of gas was better than the quarter the bus had, but he wanted to take that too. It meant more time out in the open to drain the fuel. Jeff shifted into gear and drove the truck through the crowd to line up the tanks. The fastest way was a direct transfer. He would have to be careful, though. The gear he needed to do it was in the same kit with his Eagle jacket and patches. He needed a distraction while he worked. Jeff watched the two kids come through the crowd without problems, following the truck. The refugees never stopped watching them.

Jeff made a hard choice. He stopped the truck, pocketing the keys that had been in the floorboard, and got out. He held up a hand, making sure his voice carried to those inside the bus. “They’ll do the walk now so you can see. When I stop for the night, I’ll eat and then we’ll start the show.”

Cheers overwhelmed anything else Jeff would have said. He got onto the bus and gestured at the kids to get out. “Make your way to the new truck. Stay together.”

Romeo and Roy kept their places in the middle of the bus, shaking.

Jeff exited, waving them to follow the other kids. “We have two new ones, but they’re only infected and not trained. I might sell them if the prices are good. They’ll walk out now too.”

Roy began to cry as Romeo dragged him off the bus. Doug followed with gun and ammunition drums, not reacting.

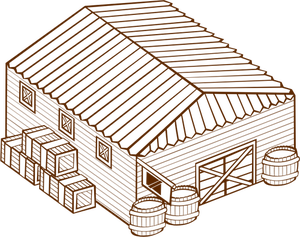
Jeff willed himself to feel anything over it and couldn’t. The barrier was impenetrable.

*I’ve changed my mind*, Jeff decided. *We can’t use this on the Eagles or let them know it exists. Without a conscience, we could go bad and not even know it until we’ve lost everything, including ourselves.*

Chapter Ten

**You Screwed Up**

3pm



**1**

***B****eep! Beep!*

Marc’s hand settled onto Angela’s shoulder.

Angela jerked, coming back from her visions of the west. Jeff’s coded warning that he was bringing trouble had sent her into that hazy place where she was spending most of the trip.

Marc withdrew his hand at her haunted expression. “The timer went off. You said 2:30.”

Angela nodded, drawing deep breaths. She smoothed her hair and stretched without waking Conner, who was also restless. *His dreams are probably mine too.*

Angela put a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Conner didn’t wake, but he did calm.

“We’ll be there in a few minutes.” Marc was hoping she would share her plan.

Angela was glad she could do that now. “We have two directions to cover. The second group will come out when we reach the warehouse.”

“Can you show me the layout? It would help me to know where everyone is and how they’re defended.”

“I’ll scan it as we arrive. How do you feel about killing the tracker?”

Marc shrugged. “I presumed we’d kill them all.”

“Even the women?”

Marc grunted. “Trackers are trackers.”

“The leader of the warehouse people is a woman named Dolly. She’s Donner’s daughter.”

Marc put her at the top of his list. “Description?”

“Bald except for a thin braid. She imagines she’s as good as Becky with her snare.”

“I’ll let the Eagles know.”

“I don’t think there will be time. The choice on her life and death will come to the three of us and we’ve already foreseen both you and Conner refusing to kill her.”

Marc had been thinking about that and come up with a solution. “Get her to threaten you. I won’t see anything else.”

Angela leaned her head against his arm. “That’s why she’s waiting here, Marc. I’m not allowed to get on that boat and neither are you.”

Marc tugged her closer. “We’ve never followed anyone else’s rules but our own.”

Angela smiled at the memories, no longer hurting over the past every time she looked back on it. “No, we didn’t. Thank you for that.”

“It’s my honor, baby. It’s my honor.”

“We’re a minute out.” Angela tensed. “We can’t drive through like I planned. They’re already outside waiting for us.”

“This truck won’t take a beach chase.” Marc watched Conner from the corner of his eye. The boy had sat up and was gathering energy.

“We’re not chasing.”

Marc waited for more. He assumed her curt tones came from Adrian being in danger.

Angela sighed.

“We’re no longer hiding things from each other, right?” Marc gave her a fast smile.

Angela began to check her gear. “I picked up a dozen trackers after the naval station. One of them is waiting ahead for us. We killed one during the fight with Dirce. One died in the west. The others are off my grid and that’s dangerous.”

“What am I searching for?” Marc steered around frames of cars that had burned in the war. Thick weeds were growing in the damp seats, telling him this area hadn’t seen much snow. That was a relief, but it was also a concern. Winter wasn’t over yet.

“Hatred. This family has been together for a long time. They’re hurting from losing a brother to us in the mountain fight. When I kill the woman waiting outside the warehouse door, others may show themselves.”

“I’ll be ready for it. William and Conner will shield you.”

“So will Jennifer and that leaves our entire camp open to a sucker punch.”

Marc realized her tension came from concern over the camp and felt ashamed. He’d presumed the worst again.

Angela was glad Marc’s mental ups and downs were almost over. She didn’t think she could take much more of it.

Marc drove them straight toward the woman standing in front of a line of hired killers preparing to fire on them. The trackers and refugees were thin and angry. Ribs showed under gaunt cheeks that framed dark eyes full of hatred. They weren’t happy to discover Safe Haven healthy.

As they got closer, they could see the trackers were wearing stolen Eagle items they’d taken from Zack’s team. Fury went through every man and woman who saw it.

*Do it now!*

Angela’s order rang through the minds of everyone in the area.

Shawn pulled the trigger gently, lovingly.

The bullet sped through the air with a dull whine that was covered by the sounds of engines hurrying to catch up to the lead truck.

One of the men next to Dolly flew backwards into the sand.

Angela concentrated on shielding her convoy as trackers fired and Marc bounced over debris littered paths to reach the warehouse. She felt a bullet zoom by and thought of Adrian as the window shattered. *Hang on. It’s almost over.*

Marc’s demon slid to the hood of the truck, leering at the trackers.

Angela’s witch joined him when her host didn’t protest the open display of magic.

The line of killers hesitated. They had no desire to confront Angela and the Ghost together.

Dolly stood her ground, heart pounding. Her gift was powerful, but the target had to be in range for it to succeed and even then, it wasn’t perfect. Sometimes things backfired. That was why she’d been sent to this damp, sandy hell.

Marc split his grid into dots and monitored the movements.

Satisfied he had them covered from that angle, Angela allowed herself to watch the result of Shawn’s next shot.

Dolly arched as the bullet slammed into her chest, back bowing. Blood squirted from the wound and then rushed from the exit. She slid to her knees in shock, gift now unimportant. Her snare was able to capture any male within five yards, but it was useless against a sniper.

Angela felt the danger recede as Marc brought the truck to a rough halt.

“You sent out a sniper detail. Again. And didn’t tell anyone.”

Angela got out of the truck and shut the door.

Marc sighed*. I don’t know if I can do this.*

Kendle walked by Marc’s side of the truck, not looking at him. She didn’t need to. Entering his line of sight was an invitation and he knew it.

Kendle stalked toward Angela, determined to have it all over. Stripped of her gifts and respect, Kendle strode toward her death with a determined glare. She heard Marc open his door and quickly shut it before the wolf could get out.

*I counted on that*. Kendle ignored him, positive he wouldn’t kill her unless she hurt Angela. *Can’t do much like this unless I get lucky.* Kendle walked faster. *I’m not a threat.*

Footsteps thudded behind the two women as Eagles jumped out of vehicles and ran to catch up to the fight. The trackers who’d survived Shawn’s attack were now trapped between Angela and the coming Eagles, and the ocean.

Shawn began to climb from the tree where they’d been hiding for hours. Strapped to his back, Missy was barely awake despite the action. Until the last hour, she’d kept him alert with light chatter, but that had been the extent of the help. Shawn hadn’t minded. It was easier to concentrate when he knew she was safe, and she had kept his back warm.

“I saw something move.” Missy pointed. “Over there.”

Shawn used his glasses to view the alley of the suburban town. A line of vehicles flying toward them made his heart pound. He could only see them because of his position. The sound was covered by Safe Haven vehicles, gunshots, and the roar of the ocean that had increased since they arrived.

Shawn hit his radio. “Flank! Flank!”

“Behind us!”

Shawn and Missy’s cries brought the closest descendants and Eagles who caught it, leaving the center of the camp unsheltered except for Angela’s shield.

**2**

“Don’t do it!”

Marc’s panic brought Angela around with her gun coming up in a smooth blur that told her men she’d been practicing with her left.

Kendle lifted her gun so everyone would understand what she was doing. She had no hopes of shooting Angela before Angela shot her.

“Look out!” Jennifer screamed it aloud and mentally, but it was too late to avoid the men who came from the warehouse. She sent energy into the barrier, aware of Angela’s distraction. She didn’t think Kendle would win, but if Angela’s attention was pulled away, the castaway might get lucky. They had a group of twenty killers coming up behind Angela, and Marc was only focused on Kendle and her death march. *How did we lose control so fast?*

Ivan and the Eagles reached Angela at the same time as the killers from the warehouse. The groups began to fight.

Jennifer lost sight of Angela.

Kendle shifted her gun, aiming…

The group on the flank of the shield began throwing powerful blasts of fire and wind, trying to find a weakness. The four trackers wanted in.

Marc lunged, stretching…

Shawn fired through the shield, hitting a tracker. Missy held tight to the tree, like Shawn needed her to do to balance them.

Angela dropped the shield as Marc landed on Kendle, knocking the gun from her hand.

The trackers were mixed with refugee fighters, some of whom had been chasing Safe Haven for months. Angela even recognized one of them from the mountain battle. *You screwed up that second chance by coming here.* Angela fired.

Near her, Kyle grappled with a tracker, feeling the man trying to tinker with his mind. Kyle used Jennifer’s training and closed the wall as he kicked out and caught the man in the ankle, snapping it. He turned from the scream, firing without looking.

The noise stopped.

Kyle swept the fighting, seeing Jennifer was helping Angela’s shield stay fueled, with Greg watching over her. Kyle signaled a second guard to help Charlie, who was nearby and had been forbidden from using magic like everyone else. The only fighting they were all doing was hand-to-hand. Kyle was positive that was about to change. Angela was shooting her way to the warehouse wall now. She’d spotted the bodies of her men, of their fellow camp members and patriots.

Fury washed over the area, scaring the more timid fighters. There weren’t as many as the Eagles had first thought. Only drivers had jumped from all those vehicles, bringing relief. They’d been expecting it to be like the naval station.

Shawn climbed from the tree, almost out of ammunition. He ducked under a swipe from a wounded tracker and fired into the man’s gut. He kept moving, getting away from the edges of the shield. He led Missy toward the medical camper, firing into the wounded as they went. He had no mercy to give these men. He’d known about the warehouse group, but those waiting just out of sight had to have been there for a full day. They’d beaten him to the punch and almost disrupted a perfect setup. Shawn was angry.

Missy kept a hand curled around his wrist like he’d told her, flinching each time he fired but not hesitating to stay with him through the fighting. Shawn was hers now. He would always keep her safe.

Shawn waited for her to climb in and shut the door without answering any of Samantha’s questions. He placed his back to the door and reloaded, eyes lifting every few seconds to search for close threats or Eagles in trouble.

Charlie jerked away from the hold of a refugee as Wade shot him. He put his back to Conner and waited for the next person to attack. He was mourning not being allowed to use his gifts and again cursing himself for not training harder.

Conner fired his last bullet and dropped the gun as the man dove at him.

Charlie kicked the man in the ribs as they rolled by him.

Wade fired a fast shot to the refugee’s head and went back to scanning.

Charlie helped Conner up, ears ringing. He’d missed the fighting at the naval station. If it had been like this, he was glad.

Wade snorted. “This is a walk in the park compared to that, kid. You should scan the memories sometimes instead of bitching about being kept below.”

Two refugees ran at the trio, ending a snotty reply. Charlie shoved the man off him, feeling an injury. He stood up and found a knife sticking out of his arm.

Wade fired and reloaded, nudging the paling teenager toward the camper. “You’re bleeding. You’re out.”

Charlie was startled into a shocked laugh as Conner shoved him to the door of the camper.

Samantha pulled him inside, grimacing at the sight. “Sit over there and close your eyes. This will hurt.”

Charlie shivered. “It already hurts.”

Samantha nodded, listening to the shouts and steps now making it to the rear of the camper. “Why aren’t you crying or whining? I would be.”

The teenager grinned at her. “New gift. No pain.”

Samantha shrugged, taking a hold of the knife. “Let’s see how strong it is.” She jerked.

Charlie screamed.

“She got the blade out.” Conner kept his back to Wade’s like he’d been trained.

Wade grunted, firing his last round “Always hurts more coming out.”

Conner threw his knife, hitting a man about to jump on the medical camper.

Neil saw it and jogged over to join them for the needed three-man sentry team there.

Conner and Wade were glad to have him. The trio was able to spread out now and use their remaining weapons to clear a side of the fighting.

**3**

“Should we go out and help?” Brittani joined Daryl and the other Eagles by the doors to the camp semi. The reinforced walls had suffered pings and dings, but so far, nothing had come through. They were all scared of that. Tonya and the other women were keeping the camp and kids calm, but Brittani needed to help or be held, and Gus wasn’t in here.

Daryl felt it. Against his better judgement, he clasped her hand in the darkness and tried not to act like it was the sweetest thing he’d ever felt. Her needing him was something he would now crave.

Brittani took a deep breath, listening, feeling, berating herself, but she didn’t let go of Daryl’s hand. They both knew right then if something happened, they would stay together and keep each other alive.

Outside the semi, Gus felt it. His bond with her was weakening. He took his anger out on the few refugees still trying to kill them.

The camp stayed in their vehicles, aware of Eagles drawing the fights away from them. Doors were already locked and guards inside the cars were ready to fire on anyone who tried to enter.

“I don’t think they have more ammunition.”

Angela didn’t hear Ray’s call. She was busy taking the lifeforce of Dolly’s partner. The woman was struggling hard to keep it, but Angela ripped it free and inhaled, energy banks refilling.

Next to her, Marc did the same to the cousin of the couple, thinking Donner was gone for good now. Marc inhaled, growling at the pain as his strength increased.

Angela didn’t have time to explain as he regarded her in confusion. “Battlefield promotion!”

Marc cackled over the screams and roar of the water.

“Are they enjoying this?” Gus was horrified.

The truck door opened. Daryl and the other Eagles came out and took up defensive positions around the semi.

Brittani slipped out of the truck, nodding at Gus. “Can’t you feel it? This is what they’re good at.”

Gus looked away from the lifeforces being taken. “It’s wrong.”

Brittani ignored his complaint in favor of watching. *Next time, I’ll be out there with them.*

Gus also observed, but not in admiration. He wasn’t sure he could do any of it.

**4**

“Something went wrong.” Adrian shoved to his feet, aware of Zack’s cold body at his boots. He’d done everything he could for the man.

The exhausted, wet team with him also stood, checking weapons. They had ammunition, but as soon as they went out, they would be picked off before they could aim and fire. Their captors were camped out of sight of the window, in the lea.

Adrian jerked the door open, able to feel Angela’s need for him to be there. “I surrender.” He tossed his weapon at the feet of the tracker who was standing at the corner of the shed with a shotgun. The demons had left hours ago, drained from standing watch. As soon as they’d left, men had come from the warehouse like they’d been waiting for it. There hadn’t been time to move again.

The big man nodded. “Wise. Your friends are dead. That’s what you’re hearing. We own your camp and people now, Mr. Mitchel.”

Adrian held his hands out. “Just get me over there so I can stop the bloodshed!”

The tracker came forward and grabbed Adrian, jerking him to the truck as his men went inside the shed to get the others who were standing there in shock at Adrian’s action. “There isn’t any stopping it now. Blood will soak into this ground and wash away your stink.”

*Another fanatic*. Adrian shook his head. Dropping into the damp seat. *As if the world needed more.*

**5**

William gaped at the chaos. Three minutes ago, things had been perfectly calm, but now there was movement in every direction and screams were filling his ears. He had never been in a situation where things had gone wrong so fast. He was shocked that Angela hadn’t warned her people. She and Marc were in the fight by the warehouse and her camp was defenseless…

William realized he was being unfair as more Eagles rushed out of vehicles to confront the threats. Descendants in the convoy were adding strength to Angela’s shield. William presumed that was because they hadn’t been given instructions, but he wasn’t sure. Some of them were firing. Bullets were making it out of the shield, but none came in.

William spun around as a hand settled on his shoulder. He barely kept from hitting Grant.

On Grant’s right, Ray snickered.

Grant caught William’s arm and led the man toward a safer place. Ciemus’s powerful leader hadn’t joined in the fight yet. Grant didn’t know if it was needed, but he felt better having his former boss inside a truck where he would be sheltered. Unlike William, Grant saw a reasonably organized defense where the leaders took out the most important threats in the front and everyone else covered the sides and rear. With a convoy this long, Grant wasn’t certain there was any other way to handle it.

“What should I do?” William was eager to help.

“Just observe, both of you.” Ray pointed at the vehicle. “We have it covered.”

Grant would have argued, but he sensed William was also about to demand a chance to fight. To prevent that, Grant climbed into the truck behind William and closed the door. He distracted them both by pointing out the things he was positive William had missed. Never being in the thick of battle was a detriment in the apocalypse, but William would learn from his time with Safe Haven.

Ray stood outside the door, rotating to keep track of the various fights going on around them. So far, their citizens were staying inside the vehicles and waiting for it to be over, while Angela and the Eagles battled it out like usual.

Grant rolled the window down half way. “Why did she want William sheltered?” He was figuring how Angela’s mind functioned, hoping he could fit in and be of use. So far, it looked like she didn’t need the help.

Ray chuckled. “She asked me to make sure he didn’t fight. There was never a sense of him being in danger.”

William sulked. “I would have helped.”

Grant pointed to the Eagles securing a line of firepower at the rear of the convoy. “Just watch. It’s beautiful.” Grant turned to Ray. “Who taught you guys that? It wasn’t her. She’s not military.”

Ray was impressed Grant knew. Most people assumed she was.

Grant smiled. “We know our own. Angela’s good, but she doesn’t have this level of training to pass on. Who did it come from?”

Ray pointed at the truck flying across the beach to reach the fighting. “Him.”

Adrian threw himself from the truck as soon as it stopped, rolling to gain his feet in a neat move the Eagles admired. It was nice to know he could still do the moves he’d taught them.

Adrian scanned. *Angie!*

The trackers ran up behind Adrian and clubbed him on the back of the head, shouting orders, pointing guns.

Angela rotated that way.

Fighting slowed as her power crackled over the scene, alerting the descendants to something new happening.

Adrian recovered quicker than the tracker expected, rising from his knees in a quick jerk. He nailed one man in the chin with the top of his pounding head and staggered backward, turning to confront the next one.

Power flew across the beach.

Lightning struck the warehouse, sending sparks that grabbed onto surfaces and grew into flames.

The ocean roared, sending sprays over the shore in displeasure at the violence.

Angela tossed another ball of hatred, letting the magic pick its own evil target.

Trackers and refugees screamed as they caught fire on the inside and began to melt.

Eagles backed away from her path, but the enemy wasn’t as wise. Those who didn’t shoot at her stared instead of running while the shield was down. Angela fired again, body jerking from the strength of her rage. She immediately felt an unwanted bond with Kendle.

Flames raced in a dual path toward the warehouse fighters who were using the burning building as cover to pick off anyone they could. The fire circled around to meet in front of the men and women who had no where left to run but the ocean. As they fled, the fire leapt up and spread out into two streams of heat that melted them at the water’s edge.

Energy crackled again as Angela drew from the fear in the air and prepared to fire again.

Now people ran.

The Eagles monitored their crossfire and picked the attackers off with instinctive reflexes as they observed Angela walking across the beach.

Everyone realized their fight was useless. The only thing that would matter was happening now, out of their reach.

Adrian felt death approaching. Before he could make the choice on which one would be best for Safe Haven, Angela came through the crowd of struggling men. Encased in the fire barrier, sand flew up from her heels at the hard impacts as she merged with her witch, leaving fiery prints in the sand.

The rest of the fighting stopped.

Marc and the Eagles quickly secured distracted trackers and refugees with bullets.

Angela stopped a few feet from Adrian, who had been shoved to his knees and now had one gun pointing at his head and another against his back. It was a simple matter to kill the two men holding him, but there was an instant of indecision about it anyway. If she aimed wrong, he would be killed too. *Is that supposed to happen now? Because I won’t allow it!* Angela sent a blast of force that had no warning, knocking all three men backward into the sand. Another flip of her finger saw guns spinning through the air.

Completely unarmed now and dazed, the two trackers tried to scramble away while Adrian recovered from the blast. Without a shield up, he had taken it full strength with the other two, but in his weakened condition and his weak heart, he was feeling it more than they had.

Angered by that thought, Angela sent out another blast targeting the two men now gaining their feet.

Many of the Eagles looked away as the two men were hammered into the ground.

Blood and gore splattered across the wet sand.

Angela turned toward Marc without looking at Adrian.

Marc was there to put an arm around her shoulders and lead her back toward the convoy. He didn’t look at Adrian either, but it was impossible to hide his disappointment. For another brief second, he’d thought that man was gone from their lives.

Angela shrugged off Marc’s arm and went to the truck occupied by William and Grant.

Marc realized there wasn’t room for him in the vehicle and hung onto her door as Grant took the truck to where she pointed and Ray guarded her door with his gun in hand, hanging from the other side.

All around them, gunshots were still ringing out. The refugees and trackers who hadn’t run as soon as Angela became a firewalker were now being eliminated. For whatever reason, they had assumed they would be spared after the fight was over.

*Big mistake.* Samantha was watching from the camper window. She’d caught William’s thoughts about Angela not warning them, but he didn’t understand. Safe Haven had been going through this so much that they spent all their time assuming they were going to be under attack at any point. There hadn’t been a reason for her to warn them, because they knew the odds of it happening upon arrival were a lot higher than the odds against it.

The Eagles had hoped the threat wouldn’t be large, considering how many refugees had died at the naval station, and it hadn’t been. Less than four dozen bodies were around the convoy. Even without the descendants, Eagles could have handled this. Their enemies were finally weakening in number.

Neil entered the camper and rubbed Samantha’s warm shoulders. “How are you?”

Samantha gave a small shrug. “Fine until I move.”

Angela had made it clear that until they were on the boat and out of these bumpy cars, her labor wasn’t likely to stop. At some point, it could go too far, and she would lose both babies. Neil was taking steps now to make sure Samantha rested whether she wanted to or not.

“If Jeremy were here, he’d help you with that.”

Neil nodded. “Who says he isn’t? I can almost feel him looking over my shoulder, nagging.”

Samantha snickered, glad they were able to have a good moment even though Jeremy had been ripped from their lives so horribly. “He would have, wouldn’t he?”

Neil gave Samantha a hug and then went to pull the camper in line with the other vehicles. In the next few minutes, Angela would direct someone to get camp set up and then they would go searching for the boat. Neil didn’t need to be able to read minds to know what came next in this situation. The sooner they secured the ship and got the hell out of here, the better.

After he shifted into park, Neil went back to Sam. “Do I need to put a guard on you right now?”

Samantha didn’t take offense, understanding he was trying to protect her and the children. “No.”

Samantha wasn’t a liar, so Neil believed her. He kissed her cheek, assigned a sentry anyway, then hurried off to help with the normal chores.

Around them, other Eagles and camp members did the same. After their long break in Ciemus, these two days of travel had almost been rougher on them than the entire week before. In that short time, they had softened a little.

*Conveniences and amenities*, Samantha thought, watching the beautiful symphony play out. Despite being in an unknown area and not receiving orders yet, everyone was doing their job. It took Samantha another minute of listening for the boss and not hearing her to figure out Angela really wasn’t going to give orders. Only time would tell how things would go for them from here, but Samantha believed they would be fine. They were strong, they were smart, and they had an amazing leader who would walk through fire to ensure their safety. They just had to keep her alive.

**6**

Adrian saw medics hurrying toward the shack and hoped they would be able to help Zack and the others. He wasn’t positive they were still alive. The trackers had left the wounded men without a second thought. That wasn’t a good sign.

The rest of Adrian’s boat team followed the medics, under orders from Kyle.

Ivan walked by Adrian, stringing up the yellow tape the camp was known for. “Step back, please.”

Adrian realized he was on the outside of the perimeter and went in the opposite direction. His banishment was still in effect. *I shouldn’t be here.*

“Hang on!” Kenn jogged over to the tape. “Take this.”

Adrian caught the kit Kenn tossed, aware of dirty looks being cast at both of them. He nodded his thanks and left.

Kenn ignored Ivan’s glower, chin going up. He would have done it even without Angela’s silent request. She hadn’t been able to stand seeing Adrian so thin. Neither could Kenn.

Kenn went toward the radio truck where he was stationed until relieved. He didn’t know when that would be yet, but he wasn’t in a hurry to get to the next thing. He was glad to be done with the land travel, though. A boat ride sounded perfect.

Kenn tripped over something sticking from the sand and went face first in the damp grit.

People who saw it chortled, sending good vibes across the camp.

Kenn shoved himself up, groaning at a pinch in his shoulder. He looked over to see what had tripped him.

An arm was laying there.

*I thought she got out of the way.* Kenn started digging.

Kendle was unconscious. Marc’s blow had been stronger than needed to put her out of commission.

Kenn slid the woman into his arms and then over his good shoulder. He sympathized with the castaway, though he didn’t trust her, and he agreed with Jennifer removing her gifts. He knew what it was like to lust over someone or something you couldn’t have until it almost drove you nuts. He’d been able to pull back from that edge. Kendle hadn’t.

Kenn took her to the medical camper, where Morgan was starting to treat their injured while Samantha pouted on a corner stool about not being allowed to help. Kenn dropped Kendle on the first empty bunk and gestured at the glass case on the wall of the camper. Marc had insisted all drugs be locked up. “Keep her out for a while.”

Morgan nodded, going to get what he needed. He was one of the few people with a key. “I’ll do that first.”

Satisfied the senior Eagle also knew what to do if Kendle became a problem, Kenn went to the radio truck and slid into the driver seat. It was time to check the waves and make sure all was calm in their world now.

Silence.

Static.

More silence.

Kenn kept flipping through the channels, happy with those. It meant the refugees here hadn’t thought to put out a call.

On point for setup, Jennifer was disappointed that Kenn had helped Kendle. She’d hoped the woman hadn’t survived Marc’s vicious shove into the middle of the battle. Most people would perceive it as him trying to save her from herself, to stop her from shooting at Angela, but Jennifer had caught his thought as he shoved the woman. Marc wanted her dead. There would never be a relationship between them now. Kendle had crossed the line and shown herself an open threat to his soulmate. That would never be forgiven.

*No, it won’t*, Angela confirmed happily as she evaluated the scene for what came next. *He’s mine and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep him–even have him kill Kendle by cutting her tongue out and letting her bleed to death*. *If I want it, I’ll make it happen.* Angela had learned that lesson well since the war. Those who could take something and keep it, got to have it and enjoy it. Everyone else was screwed. Angela sent Jennifer a coded order.

Jennifer brought up the camp shield, amazed at how easy it was now. The fight at the naval station had increased her strength. The cocky teenager swept the perimeter outside the shield, unable to help the grin. “Eagles rock!”

Standing watch over the camp vehicles until the all clear was called, Kyle nodded and shared her triumph. *This is how it’s supposed to be.*

Jennifer laughed, sending good vibes straight into the shield. Calmer colors swirled, telling everyone the battle for the shore was over.

Chapter Eleven

**Being Driven**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“T**ake them down.” Quinn was supervising the removal of their men from the warehouse wall. Fury and fear burned in his heart. He’d wanted to come with Zack. It could have been his body hanging here.

Eagles helped hold the weight as Tommy and Ozzie pried railroad spikes from Carl and Dexter. Flesh came with them.

The mood was dangerous.

Angela stood behind them, holding in her misery this time. She’d known some of Zack’s team wouldn’t make it back, but she hadn’t been able to see who.

Happy shouting echoed, seeming wrong to the laboring men. Now that the fighting was over, people were noticing the ocean. The Eagles already had. They were trained to enjoy things after duty was done, but the camp wanted to go explore it now. The Eagles made them wait until the area had been cleared. Their surroundings were vastly different from their usual camping places. Instead of weeds, trees, and houses, there was sand, a few shacks along the sand, and an ocean that hadn’t stopped roaring since they’d begun to spill blood on the beach. Birds were even flying in the distance, though many of the camp wasn’t thrilled about that discovery. Like Kenn, they remembered the flock of gulls that had come down to greet them in the west.

Ray and Pam came by with a stretcher. They had no trouble carrying it. Zack had lost a lot of weight.

Angela went to them as Zack held up a hand.

The carriers paused to let them communicate. It gave the Eagles time to scan the camp and verify that people were safe. Ray and Pam had both come to the conclusion they were alive because of Adrian and Angela. They’d discussed it and agreed they wanted Safe Haven under dual leadership.

Angela took Zack’s hand, smiling at him.

Zack grimaced. “I don’t deserve that.”

Angela placed her other hand on his forehead and sent a weak blast of her remaining energy. “Yes, you do. Consider it a second chance.”

Zack breathed out tears. “Thank you.”

“It’s not absolution!” Angela’s voice was sharp. “I can’t give you that. All I can do is tell you the past no longer matters to me when we set sail. Don’t screw that up.”

Zack kept crying as they carried him to the medical camper to join Charlie, who was getting stitches from Neil.

Angela’s pain lashed at her. She rotated toward the kids in the semi.

*Stop.*

Angela stopped.

*Turn around.*

Angela shook her head.

Adrian sighed. He’d almost made it out of sight before Marc had called him back to give her energy. *It’s almost over now, baby. Turn around and let me give him what he wants.*

*It won’t work.*

*I know. Turn around.*

Marc watched as Angela turned toward Adrian. A bright light shot out of his hand.

Angela arched as his healing energy hit her, arms opening to him in front of everyone.

Marc’s stomach dropped.

Unease filled the shield.

Adrian withdrew. He turned and left. He would spend the night guarding the shoreline by the ship, but he wouldn’t go to the boat itself until Angela did. He had no right to see it first.

“All clear!”

Angela barely kept herself from following Adrian. She waved at Eagles instead. “Let them out!”

People ran from vehicles to bathroom tents, stepping over and around the messes.

Kyle had drafted a crew to bury those spots. He came to her now. “Camp is up. Bodies are being removed or buried, and we’ll have full perimeter security any minute. Eagles will have a short, private service at midnight for our fallen men.” Kyle easily kept up with Angela’s fast steps through the damp sand. “Ivan and James are on it.”

“What about injured?”

“Other than Zack’s team, we have no injuries.”

Angela knew he meant no serious injuries. They had plenty of minor issues.

“I want us ready to leave in five. Quinn has point.” Angela hadn’t planned to go to the ship until morning, but she couldn’t wait. She had to know it was there; she had to see it with her own eyes.

Kyle motioned.

Quinn stared in surprise. “Really? Awesome!”

Kyle rolled his eyes and did a quick evaluation. People were setting up the main areas. Animals were being unloaded, vehicles were being parked, sentries were standing watch with holstered weapons, and the mood was light despite the death around them. They’d gotten used to this part of the struggle. “Do you have a list of who…” Kyle took the paper she handed him.

He glanced at it and stiffened. “I’ll have them ready.” He strode away.

Angela waved at Marc. “Let’s get loaded up.”

Marc assumed Kyle was angry because of the names on the list. Marc hadn’t seen it, but he planned to keep his mouth shut no matter who she did or didn’t want along. He led her to a truck that he knew still had fuel. He didn’t look for Adrian.

Angela did. His magic was swarming through her heart, pulling at her. She looked over her shoulder, but he was gone.

Angela forced a smile and signaled at the assembling team she’d chosen. “Let’s go! It’s time to see our ship!”

A minute later, the truck was full. Angela slapped the dash.

The truck rolled out.

Ten of them had come for this fast check to be positive the boat was here. Angela had chosen it based on team leaders and the council. All of them were one or the other, except for Grant, Cole, and Travis. Kyle had been furious because Jennifer had been brought along and he hadn’t. Angela planned to explain later that she didn’t feel good about leaving Quinn in charge alone. With Kyle there, her camp would be covered.

“I’ll tell him.” Jennifer was in the rear with Samantha and Neil. If there was trouble, Neil would protect Samantha, and Jennifer would protect them both. “Are you okay?”

Samantha nodded, cheeks red at being in Neil’s arms, but there was no denying he rode better than the seat. “I wanted to see it too.”

Jennifer smiled. “Kyle will get over it.”

Ivan drove across the front yard of a little snack shack that only had two walls remaining. Wrapped items were scattered through the debris piles, telling them people hadn’t come through here since it had all gone to hell. The Eagles were relieved.

“I see someone.” Ivan pointed.

Marc sighed. He didn’t need to see Angela’s list to know there was someone missing from it. “Pull over.”

Ivan frowned at Marc’s order, but he obeyed when Angela didn’t correct it. He slowed by the man walking down the small road that Safe Haven had come over to reach the shore. The next street would lead them to the boat site she’d marked on the map.

Marc opened the door and slammed Adrian in the shoulder with it.

Expecting words, Adrian fell to the ground and barely missed being run over.

“Get in the back.”

Adrian pushed up and did as Marc ordered, mind full of ugly thoughts. One day, the wolfman would go too far and it would end with both their deaths.

“But not today.” Angela settled her men down. She nodded at Ivan to get them rolling. “Today, we see the ship that’s going to take us away from here for the next four years.”

Silence fell as they contemplated how short of a time that was, but also how long. There was a lot they could accomplish with four years of peace.

Marc directed Ivan to drive along the beach.

Ivan shrugged. He hadn’t thought Angela wanted to be bounced, so he was going slow.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment for eight months.” Angela flashed a real smile. “You can’t get me there fast enough.”

Ivan chuckled and hit the gas.

Adrian clutched the truck bed and avoided the glares of the Eagles around him. He was shocked to be here and not stupid enough to ask why. He rubbed his aching shoulder and kept his mouth shut.

“Is that it?” Kenn was also thrilled to be along. Kyle had sent Shawn to watch the radio in his place.

Grant shook his head. “That’s a yacht.”

Cole laughed. “You’re looking for somethin’ a wee bit bigger.”

Kenn frowned at the second captain, not liking the man being so close to Angela even though he’d been scanned by all the descendants. Kenn tried to spot a larger boat, but scraggily trees were blocking the view.

“Left.” Angela was searching for problems trying to sneak up on them. She wanted to have this moment before things went nuts again. She’d more than earned it. They all had.

“Left again.” Angela was on the edge of her seat, literally. She’d glimpsed this moment during her first meeting with Adrian. When the ground shook, she’d shared this vision with him. It was the main reason she’d agreed to the awful charade. The boat was hope in the darkness, light in the midst of terror. Without it, she had little reason to go on.

Adrian and Marc both frowned. They’d thought their love and the love of her children were what had carried her through.

Angela snorted. “It is, but what good does it do to have those lives if you never get to live them? We’ll never have that peace here. They won’t grow older or have kids of their own. We’ll all die. That boat is the only thing between America and extinction.”

“For the world.” Adrian kept his voice down so it wouldn’t offend Marc. “A lot of us are getting on ships and leaving our homelands. We’re being called.”

“We’re being driven.” Like Adrian, Marc had been having dreams of the other countries he’d been in during his service, the people he’d had contact with. Land masses with huge populations before the war had been decimated, but not to extinction levels. The eleven month aftermath had taken care of that. Now, the few survivors were killing each other off as fast as they could. Anyone who stayed would die.

“There.” Angela’s joy filled the cabin until the men were sharing her tears. It was impossible not to. Her happiness was an indescribable light that swirled over them and stole their hearts. Any of the men with her would have killed or died at that moment, on her word.

*Hitting them hard, aren’t you?* The witch was tired of the drama and didn’t want more.

*I’m rewarding them while enjoying the moment. Why do you have to ruin everything?*

*Because they all trust you now.*

*Marc doesn’t.*

*He tried to get rid of her. That’s proof of his loyalty.*

*You said trust. I know he’s loyal.*

*The two go hand in hand.*

*He’ll come around. In the meantime, feel that ocean breeze. Smell the salt and the fish. It is freedom calling out for those brave enough to take the risk.*

*And win*, the witch added.

Angela nodded. *Yes. It’s another challenge to be survived. Underestimating the ocean isn’t on my list.*

*Good, because I can hear it. The water doesn’t want us.*

*No, but the seas are not controlled by nature alone. The ocean belongs to the land beneath them–to the dirt that shifts them and the tides that keep them alive. The odds go up the minute we sail off into the sunset.*

“Will we get to?” Marc was keeping track of their surroundings and the conversation between Angela and her witch.

“Oh, yes. In seven days, we’ll be watching America fade into the distance.” Her happiness fell. “And then we won’t see her again for more than a thousand nights. Enjoy the feel of her under your feet right now, the taste of her in your lungs. It’ll be all we’ll have to hold us through when homesickness tries to cripple our decisions and bring us back early.”

“Will people be able to leave the island once we get there?” Marc had been wondering about her rules for that.

“Yes, but not with our ships or our supplies. Make that clear. They also won’t be allowed to cut the island trees to make their own boats. If they go, tell them to plan for the long haul. We’re not coming home until the odds on survival are at a level I can stomach.”

“Four years.”

“Yes.” Angela swallowed her misery. “Stop here.”

Eagles frowned, realizing she wanted to walk the rest of the way.

Marc had been expecting it. The UN truck they’d chosen to bring was loud and she was a good leader. While they went to the beach, any strangers would come here, where they would find the vehicle and Ivan. Marc motioned him to stay.

Angela gave Ivan a sharp look when he would have protested. Even Dog delivered a snort as he leapt from the floorboard to the ground. The wolf stayed at Angela’s side as she walked to the beach path that was mostly buried. No one had swept it in eleven months.

Angela felt the sand give beneath her boots and sank to the platform underneath. The instant she made contact with the rotting wood, that ugly sense of horror she’d been carrying for her camp left. A smile of relief came to her lips, allowing her guards to relax. They assumed she’d spotted the boat, but Angela had just come through a barrier and was able to recognize it. This area was special, sheltered. She didn’t sense people or animals, nothing threatening. It was amazing after so long. She hadn’t thought to experience this emotional release until they sailed away and maybe not even then. She didn’t imagine the ocean would be easy to cross, only easier than the land they’d already come over.

Marc signaled Ray and Wade to stay with Ivan, and then turned to Adrian.

Adrian had stayed in the truck, assuming he was also here as a guard.

“You are. Get up there.”

Adrian’s mouth dropped open.

Marc spun away before he could change his mind. This was a big moment for all of them, but Adrian had started Safe Haven’s trek and Angela had finished it. They deserved to have this moment and Marc wasn’t so bitter that he couldn’t tolerate it. *I’m not Kendle.*

Adrian’s joy washed over them all in waves as he ran to catch up.

Marc shook his head at the frowns from her escort, waving the men and women to join him instead. “Give them a minute.”

Angela reached the end of the path and stepped onto the sandy shore. She heard steps hurrying up to her but didn’t turn. This was the first time she’d ever been to an ocean.

*The pictures and videos didn’t do it justice.* Angela was aware of a man’s hand taking her arm to help her over debris as she made her way to the foamy water. Salt spray flew at her on the wind, bringing a sound of delight from her throat.

Adrian stared, drawn by her reaction. He wasn’t certain he’d ever heard that level of happiness from her.

Marc wasn’t either. He and the others stayed a few yards behind the pair, watching for problems. Marc knew Angela was distracted by the ocean right now and Adrian was, as usual, distracted by her.

*I’m not, though. You charged me with her safety. I don’t take that lightly.*

*Just don’t get blinded when she touches the water or steps onto the pier. She’s vulnerable then and from more than a physical attack.*

Adrian understood Marc meant hidden trackers, but he hadn’t hit the beach path yet.

“Is it always this loud?” Neil couldn’t hear their camp from here, though they were less than a mile away. The wind was coming in off the water, carrying the sounds of liquid and little else.

Grant nodded. “It’s a lot of water. When it sloshes, you hear it.”

“Will that be better or worse when we sail?” Kenn hadn’t considered the noise either. Eagles were trained to listen. This would make that harder.

“Like any other situation, we’ll adjust.” Marc unfastened his old coat as his body registered the warmer wind and temperature. He missed his Eagle jacket, though he would never admit it. “At some point, we’ll long for this sound.”

Marc stepped onto the wooden platform that was now partially uncovered from feet disturbing the sand. A sense of wellbeing and calm settled over his shoulders. “Wow. That’s…”

Angela sighed, feeling Marc’s mood shift. “Amazing.”

Marc had time to wonder why he hadn’t been able to sense Adrian’s mood improve upon hitting the path and then a bubble enveloped him, shutting down his grid. He could hear the thoughts around him, but he couldn’t track them.

“I’ll explain it later.” Adrian didn’t want to be distracted. That conversation would pull him out of the present and send them all to the past.

Angela entered the water.

The sky darkened. The wind increased, and the calm sea began to send rough breakers toward her boots.

“Odd.” Cole was trundling along behind Marc and the Eagles. “Never seen that before.”

Grant gestured the captain to be quiet. An ominous wind was rising from the water, pushing toward them like a hunter scenting prey.

*This isn’t going to be good*. Marc looked at Adrian. *Hang on to her.*

Adrian’s grip on Angela’s arm tightened as the feel of evil grew. There was a problem here.

Angela put her other boot into the water.

A wave rose and sped toward her. As it traveled, it resembled a ghost with a thorny crown.

“The Spirit of Nature.” Kenn was stunned.

“Not nature.” Adrian watched in delighted fear. “The water that runs through this planet has its own essence, its own goals and drives. Nature doesn’t control anything in the water. She can only direct it through the land.”

Flying along the top of the water, the wave grew in size and rage, screaming.

When Adrian did nothing, Marc shoved by him to get in front of her.

The wave hit Marc and drenched him in salt water that immediately began to freeze.

Marc struggled against the icy barrier, chest heavy. He couldn’t break it.

A new wave formed at the end of the battered dock, swelling as it rushed toward them.

Angela didn’t move or react, so her other men didn’t either. Marc tried to catch his breath through the ice.

The water broke over their heads in liquid that ran along their bodies in cold splashes and sprays to freeze them in place. Only Angela and Adrian weren’t encased in crystals as the drenching wave receded. Ice formed on their boots and legs though, rushing upward at an alarming rate.

Eagles tried to retreat, but they found themselves locked into place.

“The next one will be ugly. You’ll feel like you can’t breathe.” Angela pointed at shapes coming toward them. “This is a water shield. It’s icy because you fear it. Ice is heavy and hard to breathe through. Try to relax.”

The worried men watched the shark swim closer, unable to see a shield over Angela.

Angela let a flash of her hidden panic show, revealing the ice bubble. “Kendle and John should be here. We don’t have all seven.”

“It’ll be enough.” Adrian hoped he was right. “John is always with us. Marc is connected to Kendle. We’re all here.”

Satisfied it was as close as she could get, Angela lifted a freezing hand. “Safe Haven wishes to cross. Please grant us passage.”

Another wave swelled at the end of the dock, but it was full of sea creatures focusing on the human threats with hunger.

“We are not your enemy. We represent the light.”

The wave swelled to twice the size of the last, flying toward them.

Angela lifted her other hand. “I have asked for safe passage. Grant it and I will give a pledge.”

*You lie!* The wave roared closer.

“I do not!” Angela sent power into her mental doors, using gifts she hadn’t before because there wasn’t a need. She whipped the wind around, forcing it against the wave. “I will give you one lifeforce. Mine.”

Angela sent more power, using her rage as the men denied her choice. “When my death comes, I promise it to the water.”

*Who are you?!*

Angela felt the water sink in to her for an answer. She let it, allowing the verification.

*She’s the one!*

*We’ve been waiting for her!*

*Safe Haven.*

The ocean stilled.

The wind dropped.

Ice melted, freeing everyone.

The creatures paused, then swam back out to deeper water.

Angela sighed in relief. The water would be a faster, easier death than any nature or man had planned for her.

“A deal has been made,” Adrian intoned. “We’ve been granted safe passage.”

Angela marched back to land, deal made.

Adrian followed without looking at Marc. He’d known what the price for crossing was, but he’d thought Angela would offer up one of her enemies. He’d only scribbled a single note on this part of the journey. He was surprised she’d understood how powerful the choice would be.

“I didn’t at first. I just refuse to give nature the satisfaction of my lifeforce when the end comes. She doesn’t deserve to absorb my power.”

“And the water does?” Marc tried not to shiver from being soaked. The wind had returned, though not as forcefully.

“Yes. The ocean has been abused for centuries. My energy may speed up recovery and bring back some of the aquatic life that was devastated in the war.”

Marc liked the answer. He was also relieved to know her death wasn’t coming now. As for getting to pick how she would go, Marc approved. It was much better than the cloud he’d been living under.

Angela strode down the beach, where the water stayed back from her boots even though it should have covered her each time it rushed in.

“It won’t take her whenever it wants, right? Like as soon as we set sail?” Kenn didn’t like the lack of details in the contract.

“The water can’t take her from fate.” Adrian was still staring at the boat. “It can only claim her when that moment comes.”

The men were partially relieved.

Now that the water had calmed, they could see layers of rotting debris under the surface. It was hard to tell if it had been blown there during storms or washed there from other lands. It was also impossible to tell what it had all been. The piles were melded together and leaking into the water as they decomposed.

“There it is.” Marc pointed, staggering through the damp sand to catch up to Angela, who had left them yards behind in her eagerness.

She’d spotted the boat before stepping into the water, but it would have been disrespectful not to acknowledge the ocean first.

Marc caught up. “How do you know these things? William doesn’t. I’ve scanned his thoughts on the ocean. He’s scared of water.”

“This water.” Adrian stayed on Angela’s other side. “The water that runs through Ciemus protects them. He fishes and swims in it.”

“The ocean is too large for all of it to be safe.” Angela slowed to let the rest of the team catch up. “Only our route will be honored. If we leave that path, we’ll fail. Or sink.”

“We’ll be careful of our choices.” Marc hoped that was true.

Adrian thought of the blue and red path in the nightmares they’d shared. He shivered. Everything was coming true.

Angela gave him a subtle nod.

Adrian dropped his head and scrutinized the wet sand. *We’ll need platforms for loading.* He distracted himself from those memories. *We can’t walk over this while carrying things. Too dangerous.*

Marc glanced between the two but didn’t speak. He assumed Adrian had been thinking of his fated time with Angela and she’d shut it down.

Angela shoved away Adrian’s real thought of the stops they would make on this trip. Some of those, like the ghost ship, would be awful. The camp didn’t need to know those moments were waiting. There would be time for that later, when they were on the ocean and needed something to prepare for in place of the boredom.

“Should I draft things for that?”

“First things first.” Angela stopped at the end of the long, wide dock that had survived with only a few missing boards. It appeared sturdy, but Angela hadn’t paused out of fear. She was about to cry.

Three long ramps came from the Royal Caribbean ship, though only pillars remained of the farthest. The ramps led to different sections of the boat. White and red, with orange life boats swaying against the sides, the cruise liner was intimidating. Countless portholes gleamed at them from ten stories, topped off by a number of other structures on and over the deck that they couldn’t see from where they stood. Shaped like a battle ship in the front and a ferry in the rear, there were also numerous open areas with glass-enclosed passageways that appeared to be intact. Providing security on it would be a nightmare.

Angela noted the light damage after eleven months of sitting here. Cruise ships were made to withstand ugly conditions. This one had to be tough to still be so light on the water. It clearly wasn’t leaking. Angela sighed, letting out eight months of stress. “We got them here.”

Adrian nodded. “Your methods were better. I should have told you everything from the start. You would have found a way to do it all without the lies.”

She shrugged. “Probably, but fate gave you an ugly duty. I’ve now accomplished the second part of that. It feels amazing.”

Adrian leaned in and kissed her cheek, then retreated. “Thank you for your sacrifices.”

Angela’s tears rolled over pale cheeks. “And you, yours.”

Adrian put an arm around her shoulders, shifting her toward the dock. “Come on. Let’s go get a closer view of what we’ve given up so much for.”

Chapter Twelve

**Be Worried**

A close up of a logo

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**“T**hat is the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Adrian snickered at Kenn’s comment. “It is, isn’t it?”

Everyone nodded. The boat was big, awkward, and scary in the size. Compared to the one floor setup Safe Haven normally used, the ship was an unsolvable physics problem. The fact that there was debris, mud, and mold all over it didn’t help that impression.

“How is it still here?” Kenn gazed around. “Why is it here?”

Everyone looked to the seer among them.

Angela pointed at a mound behind them that was almost hidden by sand, reeds, debris, and shadows. “Under that mess is a fancy rental shop. Behind it, blown apart and buried, is a street of businesses. Thousands of people came here every week. This is one of a dozen individual locations for wealthy people to board. They didn’t like waiting with the masses.” Angela rotated back to stare at the ship. She was betting all their lives on it being seaworthy. This was it, the way out of their dying land and it seemed to be nearly as unfriendly as where they’d already been. Angela wondered what it would feel like to be alone on the ocean, knowing this huge, heavy ship was the only thing between life and death. It was a sobering thought.

The rest of the team stood on the wooden pier with her as the water rushed below, thoughts troubled. The ocean stretched as far as they could see, vast and intimidating.

In Neil’s arms, Samantha shivered from the cool spray touching her bare arms. Thank God the camp wasn’t ready to leave yet. She certainly wasn’t.

For Marc, it was the ocean of his dreams back in Virginia when he and Dog were still alone, but now, he could put a face on the walking dead that pursued him into his dreams. Cesar, of course, but more Rick and Donner and maybe, probably, Kenn. Smart, sharp, and a great Marine, there was still something wrong. Not as much since he’d claimed Tonya, but it was there, hiding and waiting for the right time to reappear.

“Did you see the name?” Neil pointed with a free finger. “That’s almost too much.”

The Adriana.

The crashing surf grew louder, ringing in their ears. It sounded like murmuring voices.

Adrian wondered if he was the only one hearing the words that warned them not to go.

Adrian jerked as Angela’s cold hand slid into his. She looked toward their vehicles. “Gunfire coming.”

Two fast shots rang out, followed by a thin scream, and then there was silence.

Angela turned back to the boat.

Because she showed faith, so did her men. Their security could handle themselves.

“Where’s Dog?” Kenn had been sure the wolf would stay with them.

“Fishing.” Marc pointed.

Dog was in the surf, pawing at a large fish he had little hope of catching unless he grabbed it with his teeth. Afraid of being skinned, the wolf kept jumping aside instead of biting.

Marc chuckled, glad to have his friend back. The wolf seemed much the same, except for the company he was keeping. Marc had noticed that Dog wasn’t interested in spending time with Charlie now, though the boy had asked about him several times. Marc could have assumed it was because the wolf was exhausted, but he sensed there was more to it.

“Hey, what’s that?”

The group spun at Cole’s nervous cry.

“Alligators.” Adrian removed his hand from Angela’s to express anger. “They got at Dexter before I could move him. He bled out while I took Ramer to shelter in the shack.” Furious, Adrian left the dock, not wanting to ruin Angela’s good mood.

*Too late.* Marc watched her smile fade and her lips tighten. Losing people would always hurt her, no matter how bitter she became.

“My bitterness will ease in time.” She slipped an arm though his to cover the lie. “Let’s get to camp and organize tomorrow’s work. It’s going to be a long day for some of us.”

“Do you want a sentry left here?”

“I have one.”

Marc saw her glance at Adrian and understood the former leader would stay. Marc nodded in approval. That kept the boat safe and Adrian out of their perimeter.

“It also gets him out of range of camp people who don’t want him to go. A few of them had planned to deliver a warning tonight.”

“Does he have to go for us to do well on the island?”

“Yes, but it’s more than that, Marc. I need you to try to do something for me that will go against everything you’ve learned in your life. I need you to trust a woman.”

Angela walked away from him before Marc could claim he already did. Marc’s mother had been an evil fanatic who betrayed him. Julia had stolen a child from him. Marc had used whores after they split and never developed another relationship. Even men who were hurting for a lost love usually found another pair of tits to cry on, but not Marc. He’d decided at a young age that females couldn’t be trusted, that he couldn’t have faith in them, and until now, the world had proved him right. Even Kendle had reinforced it with her madness. He was making great progress from where he’d been when they joined up in Indiana after the war, but he had a long way to go to be as mentally close to her as Adrian was.

That was another reason for their bond. Adrian had handed over his camp and his future to her, after only months. Marc still questioned everything she did after knowing her for a lifetime. He had more baggage than he was willing to admit and that made it hard to lighten his load.

Marc deliberated all of that as they walked, not getting defensive. He could admit she was right on most of it, but if Adrian hadn’t come between them, he didn’t think trust would be an issue.

“So once again, I get blamed. Even though I’ve remained faithful, you still worry I won’t be.” Angela sighed. “It’s your jealousy and failures you see, not mine. You wish you were more like him so I’d want you more. You want him dead, so you won’t have to feel inferior. I know all your lies and secrets. I’ve always known it’s your problem, not mine. I’m no whore. You’re possessive and insecure.”

“You care for him, beyond the spell.” Marc confronted a personal demon. “If you’d met him first, you’d be with him.”

“So?”

Marc winced. “So you should be now. I’m jealous because I know you two are perfect for each other and I can never match it.” He sighed. “It’s why I picked Kendle. You were right about that.”

“You have to stop now. I don’t think I can stand even one more of these moments between us. Let it go or let me go.” Angela left him there with that cruel choice.

“How do I let it go when he deserves to die?”

“By remembering our three lives are trivial compared to saving the world.”

“And what about justice?!” he demanded, following her. “What about right and wrong? These ends do not justify the means.”

“They do for me and everyone else. We’re alive and we’re going to stay that way–because Adrian is with us.”

“He’s bad.”

“Yes.” She looked over as Marc fell back in step. “You didn’t ask what I need you to trust me on.”

He shrugged. “I assumed it was a blanket thing.”

“I once told you and the camp something about Adrian in another moment like this one. Can you remember what it was?”

Marc didn’t have to struggle. “I’ve been counting on that, but I haven’t seen evidence of it.”

Angela tried not to snap at the repeated insinuation she was protecting Adrian, that she’d lied. “I told you I would make him pay for what he’s done to all of us.”

“But you haven’t.”

“I have, but you don’t see it because only his death will satisfy you.”

“Tell me then. Maybe it will help.”

“No. You need to go to the source so you know I’m not lying.”

“I thought you said I need to trust you.”

“You do, but we both know you won’t. I have to prove myself to you with every word and every deed. It’s beyond old.” She increased her pace. “I’m going to check on Ivan. Make sure this area is secure.”

Marc knew he was being dismissed, but he didn’t care. He now wanted to speak with Adrian and verify her words.

*That right there is what she’s referring to*, his demon scolded. *You don’t need to verify it. You have to develop trust!*

*I will, by proving her words.*

*And in doing so, you prove her point. Your lack of faith in her is appalling after everything she’s gone through to keep you alive and at her side. Be careful*, his demon warned. *A woman scorned doesn’t always come from a physical betrayal.*

Marc knew that advice to be solid, but he was still going to talk to Adrian about it. If he knew for sure that Angela was indeed punishing their former leader for his crimes, he might be able to let it go and even see them together without the panic and hatred choking him.

*That’s why she put it in your head!* Adrian spewed contempt at Marc’s stubborn refusal to believe Angela wasn’t like the other women who’d hurt him. Even when she’d thought him gone, Angela had refused a substitute. If Marc didn’t know what would happen if they split, he was crazy.

*I don’t, though*, Marc told him coldly as he walked by where Adrian was already beginning to set up security discs. *I suspect your month was right on point.*

Adrian winced, sorry he’d ever told Marc that he would only need a month to get into Angela’s heart. It had taken a lot less.

Marc grunted. *She’s right and she’s wrong. It’s not all about her, you know.*

*I know. You’re a Marine and I’m a Jody. You’re a patriot and I’m a rabble rouser. You’re the south and I’m the north. The woman between us is just the focal point.*

Marc nodded, stopping. *Yes, that’s it. She’s the focal point, but we’re rivals in every area.*

*We could have been friends in every way.*

*No, we couldn’t. You’re not good enough for that. Too easily corrupted when you get horny.*

Adrian nodded. *True, but those women didn’t want my purity, did they?*

The two men faced off without hiding what they were–the light and darkness that exists in the soul of every man and woman.

*Forever enemies?*

Marc slowly nodded, unable to make any other choice. *You damned us all with your betrayal in the garden. She was mine.*

Marc would never forgive him. No matter what he did, he would never be able to make that right with Marc. Adrian stood up. “So be it.”

Lightning flashed overhead.

“That’s not what I was hoping for,” Angela grumbled, but she wasn’t surprised. Adrian did deserve to die for his crimes, but he had given America a chance and Angela had refused to pass that sentence on him. Without Adrian, none of this would be possible. “We’d all be dead or alone in a hole somewhere. We owe him forgiveness. Since that won’t ever happen from most people, I rewarded him with his life. That doesn’t mean it will be long and happy. It means he’ll survive to take the next round of punishments he’s owed.”

Kenn reflected on how she was planning to punish Adrian long term for his errors. *I did things that were worse. What does she have planned for me?*

Angela didn’t answer. Her memory brought up an image of coming home to discover her child hadn’t been bathed or fed, but he’d been punished for some stupid offense.

Kenn flushed, heart pounding. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be.” Angela increased her pace again to keep from spinning around and punching him in his throat until he was dead. Marc had no idea what a real grudge was. Knowing someone had mistreated your child while you were at work, and you had to leave him with that person again the next day, was a horror no child or parent should ever have to go through. Kenn wasn’t the same man now, but that didn’t absolve him of mistakes. Justice would be served in all cases, including his.

Kenn realized the peace between them had been a lie.

“A necessary truce.” Hatred filled her tones. “I could never forgive you for the things you’ve done to Charlie. The hatred in his heart was put there by your fist. If fate didn’t need you, I would have let my son beat you until you were a bloody pile on the ground and then I would have pissed on it. You really might be happier staying on land.”

Angela got away from him. The boat was here, and the camp was willing. There was no need for any of them to play games now, no need to cover the truths. Kenn and Adrian had been bad people. So had many of Safe Haven’s citizens. They were here because they were needed, but no one had a free pass when it came to reaping what they’d sown. Fate was in charge of that and she was ruthless. *I know.* Angela rubbed her empty, scarred belly and then forced her mind into more pleasant matters. There would be time for paybacks and remorse after they set sail.

Kenn didn’t know how to react. He’d honestly thought she was feeling better about him now.

Marc walked by, snorting.

Kenn flushed and followed, broken again. *I deserve this. I’ll take it like a man and try even harder to make up for it.*

Marc approved of Kenn’s reaction, but he was waiting for Adrian’s. He had a mental door open between them to catch treachery.

*I’m not planning any*. *I believe you’ll bury yourself and my hands will be clean. And if I’m clean of your death, I get the girl.*

Marc knew that could be true. It was what he’d assumed for them for a while now. That was the only way he could envision Angela doing it.

*So you do trust her. Interesting.*

*It’s always been you that I don’t trust.* Marc’s heart settled into a better rhythm now that Angela was out of range and they could drop the act. *As soon as we break the bonds, I bet that future changes.*

Adrian winced at Marc’s intelligence. He was worried over that too.

Marc chortled. *Wow. How ugly would that be for you if the spell is broken and she doesn’t feel anything for you but contempt?* Marc smirked. *Yeah, I’d be worried over her being in charge of your punishment when that spell lifts. I’d be real worried.*

*I am*. Adrian moved faster, getting the alarms set. When he finished that, he had a list of other things to start on.

Marc frowned at the man*. You can’t earn her forgiveness with manual labor.*

*That’s where you’re wrong*, Adrian thought behind his personal wall. *I built Safe Haven on it, using bonds that didn’t come from spells or tricks. If I get her herd to that island and give them a chance at a future, that will erase the past. She’ll love me for it and there won’t be anything you can do to stop it.*

*When did it transform into that for you?* Angela asked. Their connection was clear and bright, as always. Marc had a lot to learn.

*When you refused to go back to camp and wait with the other women*. *You came along to kill our enemy or surrender yourself to him so we would all live. There could never be anyone else for me after that, in both ways.*

Meaning his heart and his heir, Angela understood. *I know what you two are planning.*

*Will it succeed?*

*Maybe, but I would have to be…*

*I need you, Angie*, Adrian stirred. *Like a forest needs the sun or the ocean needs rain. I’ve never wanted anyone as much. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t give up to be with you.*

Angela stopped, tears dripping down her cheeks. She felt it coming, the awful loneliness.

*But I refuse to hurt you anymore*. Adrian’s misery and next words transmitted to all of them. *I’m not going with you to the island. I’m staying here to save those who remain. You’re free. Please try to be happy with Marc. He’s a good man who loves you almost as much as I do.* Adrian sent a bolt of anguished panic through the connection. *Goodbye.*

Adrian motioned Kenn to take over his chore.

A few seconds later, he walked between two beach sheds and was gone.

Angela lifted her chin, but she didn’t wipe away the tears. She let the ocean spray cover them as she marched back down the beach toward the path to their vehicles. She didn’t speak or think about anything. She just felt the misery and let the tears come now, while she had the ocean to provide a lame cover.

Marc understood Angela knew they were going to try to break the bond and she was helping them. *I know I can trust her*. *She proves it to me and everyone else. So why can’t I let it go and have faith in her?*

Marc frowned, following deep prints where the sand had collapsed beneath her almost non-existent weight. *Maybe it’s me. I don’t trust myself.* Marc began to scan his heart for cracks. *Would I betray Angela for any reason?*

When he came up with no in every situation, Marc was forced to concede the truth. There was no reason for him to suspect Angie of anything bad and certainly not to imagine that she might cheat on him with Adrian or anyone else. She was right. He couldn’t have faith because she was a woman.

Angela’s witch clapped. *Very good! Now we can move on and get you ready for the next level.*

*Next level? Don’t I need to pay for that mistake first?*

*Of course not. Your scars are deep, but you’ve never held to them or used them as an excuse. Now you’ll evaluate your decisions before giving them and see your flawed theory. Or you’ll detect a problem and we’ll handle it. That’s how it should be.*

*I’m confused.*

*Humans carry so much darkness they need to monitor themselves. Descendants must do this with every choice and thought, to be sure they aren’t becoming corrupt. That is the cost of free will. It is the price of awareness.*

“This is my penitence.” Marc stared. *I thought that came after we die.*

Angela snorted, nodding to Ivan as he and Ray hurried to open doors on the truck. Three bodies were nearby. They wouldn’t be removed. “I‘ve always thought atonement was life.”

**2**

Their return was noticed by the guards and the camp. Everyone observed Angela for signs of how it had gone as the team got out of the vehicle.

Angela cupped her hands around her mouth so it would carry over the sounds of the ocean and camp setup that Quinn was still directing. “Tomorrow at dawn, be up and ready to move to the shoreline in front of our ship. It’s there and it looks solid.”

A loud cheer sounded and lifted the mood that had already been improving. Knowing their land travel was finished was a great relief. Some of the members had been along for every mile of it.

Angela signaled to Kenn, who had finished the alarms on the boat site quickly so he could return with them. “Get it all set for the night and then you’re off. All of you are. The camp will provide protection tonight.”

Camp members cheered now, recognizing the promotion. She thought they could handle it on their own. The feeling was soothing to those who’d watched the Eagles and longed for it, but refused to become one of them because of the harsh rules and training.

*All in good time*. Angela followed Kenn as he began handing out orders, waiting for hers.

Kenn snickered. “Really?”

Angela laughed with him. Now that they were in camp, she didn’t show the grudge. “Of course. I’ve got two hands and half a back. Use them.”

Kenn pointed at the trailers. “Make certain they don’t unpack anything we don’t need.”

“That’s not work.” She still turned that way.

“You think so.” Kenn pointed Neil to their security and Marc to their setup. Samantha already knew to go back to the medical camper and rest. “Wait until you come across the boxes and bags they forgot to label. It’s your job to open them and see what’s inside.”

“Can’t be much.” She wasn’t worried. *The Eagles are great about following orders.*

*But the rookies aren’t*, Kenn reminded. *Spend an hour on that chore and then I’ll expect a solution for it.*

Angela’s mirth burst over the camp and brought up the shield.

The calm colors allowed them to begin celebrating. They’d made it and the ship was here. Things were finally going their way.

**3**

“What happened? Where’s Adrian? Why did Kendle take off?” Tonya huffed against Kenn’s big arm as he led her through the cold wind to the pharmacy tent for a short shift. “No one tells me anything since I stopped telling them everything.”

“Adrian said he’s done and left. The sentries haven’t seen him since, not even from a distance. Kendle tried to kill the boss when we arrived. She left before we got back. The Eagles assume it’s because she didn’t want to face her punishment. She’d already been made an Invisible again. There was only one other thing we could have done to her.”

“Death.”

“She did us a favor by leaving. Angela doesn’t want executions and trials to become common.”

“What does she want?”

“Four years of peace and then to win a battle that gives centuries of peace if we win.”

Tonya stared. She hadn’t heard this yet.

Kenn knew. That’s why he was telling her. By morning, the entire camp would know. Angela had insisted people needed the information so they could make their choice about going and Kenn agreed. Willing warriors always fought better.

“People would freak out if they knew.”

Kenn shrugged. “Isn’t truth what we’re supposed to be about now?”

Tonya snickered. “Yep, and doing it well, I might add.”

Kenn held the flap for her. “Yes, you are.”

Tonya stopped in surprise. The tent held real shelves now and two cabinets, along with a comfortable looking chair and boxes of supplies. “Wow.”

Kenn kissed her cheek. “That’s from the boss.” He rubbed her ass. “That’s from me.”

Kenn ducked out of the tent, grinning. It felt good to do nice things for her. When Angela had suggested it, he’d been happy to comply.

Walking by, Ian shoved a box into Kenn’s hands. “Give that to the pharmacist.” New, the Ciemus didn’t know Tonya’s name yet. He also didn’t know anything about her or her past.

It gave Kenn pause to hear her called by an acceptable title.

The box suddenly lurched, dragging him down.

Kenn caught his balance as men cackled. Spitting in disgust, he slid the box into the pharmacy tent and left. Let Tonya figure it out when she got to that one. The cat was mean. It needed to be in a box.

Tonya snickered, catching most of Kenn’s thoughts. Carrying his baby had advantages. She was going to miss it after the birth.

Tonya opened the box and grabbed the cat before it could take off. She did a quick exam and then let it down to roam the tent. When it ran out the flap, she tried not to worry. The animal was a survivor, like the people here.

Tonya slid the empty box into the others.

“Son of a bitch!” Kenn’s painful shout echoed across the camp. “Tonya!”

She hurried from the tent, laughing. Kenn didn’t like the cat, but the cat loved Kenn. It was great because so did she.

Kenn pried a claw from his shoulder, other hand struggling to keep the twisting, growling animal from impaling his face. He pulled, yelping as the cat dug in.

Tonya snapped the claws loose with a practiced finger and took the cat by the back of the neck. Then she set it on the ground, much to Kenn’s displeasure.

“No! Down, kitty!”

Tonya grabbed the cat in mid jump as it tried to reclaim a perch on Kenn’s shoulder. She set it on her own and staggered back to her new pharmacy tent, laughing so hard she was almost crying. “Good girl.”

Kenn wiped at his scratches and stings, aware of the laughter rippling through the witnesses. “I bet she taught it to do that.”

Neil sniggered. “Maybe it was the boss.”

Kenn kicked at the sand, cancelling his plans to drown the cat while Tonya slept. *“I’ll take it like a man.”* Kenn mocked himself. “Dumbass.”

**4**

Samantha enjoyed the various shows happening around the medical camper. She wasn’t allowed to go further than the shower or table for a meal now, and she was already bored. A show was nice.

Samantha peered closer through the dirty glass. Angela had just ducked into the tent with the kids. Samantha didn’t expect her to come out for a while.

They let out loud yells and cheers as the flap dropped.

*Must be time for a meeting.* Samantha went to the table. Morgan had moved the injured to a tent so he could treat them easier and put a snack out for her, but she’d wanted the shower before trying to eat it. She was feeling better, but there was still an occasional twinge that implied she’d almost lost her babies.

Samantha rubbed her stomach, glad the twins were calm now. All their flipping around in there wasn’t good.

*Knock! Knock!*

The camper door opened to admit Gus. He held up a small basket. “Compliments of the cook.”

She grimaced. “I hope you mean your woman and not the camp klutz.”

Gus set the basket in front of her and peeled back the cloth. “Fresh bread.”

Samantha snatched the hot loaf and bounced it between stinging hands as she tore off a huge chunk. Samantha stuffed it into her mouth, hissing at the heat.

Gus’s mirth rolled through the camp, bringing the shield to life.

Samantha stared at him as the shield winked out, bread hanging from her mouth. “You’re weadership.”

“It was a fluke.” He tried to forestall the conversation. “Will never happen again.”

Samantha frowned. “And if it does?” Crumbs flew from her mouth.

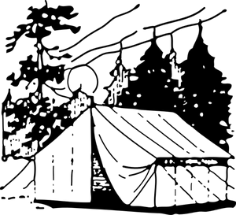
Gus left the camper.

Samantha stored the moment and dug into the rest of the loaf as she watched the sun set over the ocean. When she finished, she peeked in and found two more loaves. “That woman is wearing me down.”

Chapter Thirteen

**Lesson One**

Evening Mess



**1**

**A**ngela entered the mess.

Silence fell over the two hundred people.

She gave a small snort. “How are you all fitting in here at the same time?”

Smiles and chuckles floated through the crowd. All of Safe Haven was in attendance, even the children. They were only missing the members on duty and William.

*I’ve got it covered*. William was outside, doing roaming patrols. *If there’s trouble out here, we’ll know about it and so will you.*

Angela took the drink Jennifer brought her, aware of an empty table in the front with a single tray on it.

Angela went there, understanding they hadn’t been positive how much room to give her for the lesson. She stepped up onto the bench and then the table.

Eagles eased closer, not liking her being such an easy target.

Angela brought up her personal shield. “Throw stuff at me.”

The camp kids had no problem with the order. Toys and food flew through the air.

They stuck in the shield.

People stared, fascinated.

“This is one of my new gifts. You’re all going to learn to copy it.” Angela dropped her shield. The items cluttered to the table and floor, making people cringe back.

“Again.” She brought up her shield. It sucked to be teaching possible traitors how to defend themselves, but they were covering their thoughts too well.

Children and adults tossed things this time and none of them were gentle. They knew she could take it.

Angela kept the shield in place as it filled with items from around the mess. “Some of you know about absorbing an incoming hit and feeding it into your energy stores. That’s how I do this. I’m trying to absorb something that isn’t power. It gets stuck.” Angela dropped the shield, sending fresh unease through everyone at the noise of so many items falling to the table and floor.

“Once more, only silverware and only Eagles throwing.”

Kyle made a curt motion. “Team leaders only.”

The team leaders tossed the forks and knives from their tables and the tables around them, sensing Angela wanted a dramatic demonstration for this lesson.

Marc observed knife after knife plunge into the shield and be held, horrified. She’d had to practice that to know she could do it. He glared toward the flap, where William was passing on a round of the deserted camp.

“When I let go this time, some of the threats won’t drop. Someone tell me why.”

“Weapons have energy.” Jennifer didn’t like the demonstration either.

“Exactly. Weapons are made to find a target.” Angela slowly raised a hand and brought up a second shield inside the first. Then she dropped the first.

People gasped and muttered as several blades flew forward and bounced off her new barrier.

They were held in by a third shield Angela brought up.

Knives slid to a stop, letting people breathe again.

Angela gestured people to stay back when they would have started cleaning. “We have four shields, that I know of. Because your lives mean more to me than the goal, I’m teaching you those first. The four shields can be used to protect yourself, to slow and absorb power, to steal weapons, to protect someone else, and to go dim. As you can see, it is possible to use all of them at the same time.” Angela looked over the fascinated crowd. “If I’m going to do this, your defense has to reach my level. I won’t teach you a single fighting technique until you can do this demonstration for me.”

Angela ignored the complaints. “Your lives mean more to me than they do to you. I won’t lose you in the first wave because you were too excited to concentrate on a shield.” Angela dropped the last barrier and the items clattered to the ground, making people flinch again.

Angela sent a thought to Kyle and then Jennifer.

Kyle threw his knife.

Jennifer used her shield to deflect it into the canopy of the tent.

Angela grabbed it with her shield and held it. “I could have tossed it back and killed my attacker. So could she. You can aim with your shield. It has a lot of uses, but keeping you alive is why you’ll get it or you’ll be on your own for lessons. Every descendant has to pass this before we move on.”

“But Invisibles are descendants and they don’t have gifts like a shield.” Ivan was confused.

Angela shook her head. “Invisibles have a shield over their mind that has to be pulled away. Like taking plastic from your new phone.”

The camp began trying to determine if they were Invisibles.

Angela brought the blade to a gentle stop on the floor and let go of it. It skidded toward the last target–her.

Marc put a boot on it to stop the progress.

Angela noted the people trying harder than others and also the people who were having success, but she was more interested in the people who refused to try at all.

Neil sighed as Angela’s attention settled on him. He gave a slight head shake and then refused to meet her eye again.

Angela moved on. She swept the camp to be thorough, not expecting many new fighters. Angela stared in surprise as dots lit up on her grid like fireflies at night. “Lock us down.” She was sure William was listening. “Go dim.”

William enclosed the camp in the darkest, thickest shield he had, but Angela could still see the new descendants on her grid. She narrowed in like she’d seen Marc do and was rewarded with a map that told her what type of power had just blinked into existence.

“Can anyone else track that?” Marc was also staring at the shocked camp members now playing with their shields.

Angela shook her head. “Not for a few days, according to the book.”

“And the shield over our camp?”

“Isn’t enough. When this new power registers, we’re going to light up every working radio left in North America.”

Marc sighed. “I thought so. I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Making you do this.”

Angela pointed upward. “They forced this, not you.” She motioned him over. “Come play with me.”

Marc brought up his barrier and then opened another inside of it.

“Good. Now do a third around both of us.”

Marc grunted in effort, but the shield snapped into place.

“Now the fourth, over the camp.”

Marc’s eyes widened. All his shields dropped. “Say what?”

Angela chuckled. “Just stop holding back. We like knowing the tiger is out of his cage and hunting for our enemies.”

He hesitated. “You’re sure?”

She stared back, waiting.

Marc drew in a breath. “You got it.” He slammed power through the tent and into the air, forming a shield over the mess to start. He opened the mental door wider, letting more power out and felt the shield expand to include the tents and vehicles around them. Marc was afraid to open the door further.

Angela placed a comforting hand on his. “Open it all the way.”

Knowing she had him covered let Marc do it.

His shield, a deep, pulsing blue, settled over the entire camp and expanded to include the ship a few hundred yards away.

The camp clapped.

Angela reminded them of the goal. “Three to go.”

Marc directed some of the power into the second and third barrier he brought up but diverting a fourth stream was hard.

“It increases in difficulty with each layer, but I suspect we can have more than four if we practice it.” Angela added her shield to his, layering all of them with her thick shell. “Imagine if we could all do this at the same time. We could defend against almost any enemy in shifts.”

“This is strong.” Marc was impressed. “They’d run out of ammunition before wearing us down. Nice!”

Marc’s approval persuaded the people to try harder. Everyone wanted to be that strong.

Marc’s fourth shield came up around Angela, impressing everyone, including her. She sent another to cover him, giving him and the camp a good moment of witnessing her happy with Marc. They didn’t get much of that, but she really was.

*She’s enjoying it too much*, Adrian warned in Marc’s mind. *You’re not following our plan*.

*How the fuck can you get through eight layers of shielding?!* Marc demanded, furious all over again.

*She was thinking about me. She knows I’d give anything to see it.*

*So she’s giving it to you through me.*

*Nope. I get emotions from her and your big mouth. That’s it unless you let me in.*

Marc hated it that most of the descendants in the tent with them could probably listen. He tried to be careful with his response as he brought up a new shield over himself, proving Angela right about there being more than four layers that could be used at one time. *Be quiet and watch, like the rest of us in the lesson.*

Adrian barely contained his joy as Marc’s mind opened to show him everything. If his happiness washed over the man, Adrian was sure he would sever the link.

Angela waited patiently. She and few others were aware of Marc’s private line with Adrian, but it was leadership and they too wanted a truce. When Jennifer and Marc had agreed to give Adrian updates, neither of them had found a way to do it without getting upset or feeling as though they were betraying the boss or Marc in some way. So Angela had made them suffer it together. If Adrian got updates, it would be from Marc and no one else.

Jennifer was relieved. She hadn’t wanted to do it.

*I know. Thank you.*

Jennifer nodded, warmed. *It’s my honor.*

Angela lifted her other hand and all of the shields vanished.

Marc frowned, trying to bring his back up. The power flow had been cut off even though the mental door was open. “What are you doing?”

Angela sent a light sting, steeling herself when Marc twitched. “You were hit with a zap at the base. It stole your power for a while and allowed you and your team to be captured.” She sent another light sting and was impressed when he let it land so she could finish this part of the lesson. He didn’t have to. He had plenty of defensive gifts to pick from. “Trackers don’t usually have power, except for being able to track and shield. To make up for that, they can zap you and shut off the flow of your power. I can do it, but I don’t know how it works exactly. Neither does William. It wasn’t in any books we’ve read.” She looked at Marc.

Marc waited. *The question isn’t for me, jackass.*

Adrian cleared his throat. *Not that I know of either.*

Marc shook his head.

Angela continued. “Because of that, we have to learn a different defense to use.”

Angela gave him a subtle nod, saying she was ready.

Marc let his demon fly out against her, distracting her so he could recover and bring up his shield.

The demon lunged at Angela in playful menace. *My Lady*.

Angela chortled as the camp cowered from the physical side of Marc’s power. Angela hadn’t seen his demon this way either, but she was delighted by it. “That’s scary.”

Marc huffed. “Then why you laughin’?”

Angela’s giggle calmed the witnesses and encouraged a few people to try to figure out how to do that themselves.

Angela let them go in favor of watching Marc direct his demon to bow to the camp and then float along the ceiling to observe. It was like a powerful genie.

Marc tired quicker than he was happy with. When they’d helped Zack, Angela’s witch had been in control of the energy flow.

“That’s the next part of it.” Angela kept things rolling. “Shields take a lot of power. You have to be able to absorb the hits and turn them into energy without taking a lifeforce. That requires us to get too close. I want our enemies gone before they can put hands on us.”

Marc let go, drawing the demon back with an audible snap.

The demon groaned at the pain.

*Sorry. I’ll keep working on it.*

“You’re doing great.” Angela didn’t want him to be upset. “Go mingle and help people with their shields.”

Marc was thrilled, but tired. He walked slower than he was used to.

“Another effect.” Angela loved teaching. “Using these gifts will wear you out and it won’t take long. After each lesson, you’ll need a lot of water and maybe even a nap. Don’t fight it. Your endurance will grow each time, but only if you’re caring for yourself. A sick descendant is a weak descendant.” Angela pinned Samantha with a dark glare. “I’ll lock your gifts up if you try it before the birth.”

“I won’t.” Samantha’s face tightened. “I want my babies more than I want to fight.”

Angela sighed. “You’ll get your chance to kill for me, Samantha. All of you will.”

“But it’s not really for you, is it?” Ivan wasn’t sure if he was happy everyone knew, but at least he didn’t have to hide anymore. He’d always known he was an Invisible.

Angela’s voice hardened. “If I make the deal, we’ll fight, but we do it on our terms as much as we can, and we follow the code that kept us alive when everyone else went off on their own or just plain went off–Safe Haven’s code.”

The Eagles cheered and whistled while some of the camp clapped.

Angela finished it. “If I don’t like the odds, we’ll stay on our island and they can have this clump of rocks. We’re Americans no matter where we land.”

Outside, William smiled. *She’s amazing. I wish...* He stopped those reflections and resumed his duty, sorry his time with her was about over. Just being one of her sheep might have been enough for him in another life. Now, he wanted her and that made it almost time to go. She and her people were precious to him. Hurting them was unthinkable.

In the tent, Angela looked expectantly at Brittani. The woman had only watched so far.

Brittani shrugged. “I can already do it. Do you want me to help the others?”

Angela nodded.

Brittani looked around and found Daryl struggling to pull his shield up the rest of the way. She gaped, heart fluttering. *He’s one of us*. “Damn.”

Angela’s voice was gentle. “This is that choice moment.” *You’ll hurt yourself and Gus. Gus will move on. You’ll have to carry that gui–*

“Will we be happy?” Brittani demanded, aware of Daryl about to turn and see her staring at him.

“Deliriously,” Angela responded immediately. “He already respects you and wants you. Love isn’t far behind.”

Brittani looked toward the flap, where Gus was standing with his brothers and playing with his shield. “You did this on purpose.”

Angela shrugged. “Do what’s best for you for the first time in your life. You’ve sheltered so many others from danger and sacrificed yourself to do it.” Angela felt Daryl’s attention leave her and go to the woman he wanted.

Brittani stiffened as pleasure lit up her nerves and her heart thumped. “He’s thinking we’re alike now so maybe I’ll give him a chance.”

“Will you?” Angela liked Gus, but Daryl was her old teammate. There was no comparison for her.

Brittani saw Daryl’s eyes light up as he realized she knew he wasn’t just an Eagle anymore. *This is gonna go badly.*

Daryl grinned at her. “Come show me how to work this thing?”

Forced into a life choice, Brittani groaned. Gus was turning toward her. He felt something happening.

Brittani went to Gus. Guilt and determination were all over her face.

Gus turned away before she could speak. “Save the speech. I get it.”

Brittani stopped, embarrassed. “Please.”

“I could say the same. But it wouldn’t matter, would it?” Gus wasn’t surprised. He’d felt her distance for weeks now. He’d just hadn’t known which man she’d replaced him with.

“She wants both of you, if that’s a consolation.” Conner had volunteered to help the camp members with guard duty. He fell in step with Gus. “She won’t act on it now, so you’re all good. She’s already sorry and wishing she’d kept hiding her unhappiness.”

Conner kept walking, certain his words had penetrated. The couple had grown up together. Brittani had taken responsibility for him after the war and she did love him, but when she’d said they were soulmates, everyone except Gus had felt the lie. That’s why the Eagles had still been evaluating her even though she had a man.

Gus knew it all now. He could feel the pain, the attraction, and the tired bitterness of being stuck with someone she didn’t love the way she needed to be happy, but what bothered him the most was the pity of the people around him. Leadership was going through it too, giving Gus a feeling of belonging that sucked. “This isn’t what I wanted.”

Lou fell in step with Gus. He’d seen it all. “You okay?”

Gus snorted. “My woman just threw me away. What do you...” Gus pivoted, snared by a mental voice.

Lou paused to see what had jerked Gus from the bitter tirade he needed to have now. Lou had honestly expected Brittani to do this sooner. Safe Haven picking them up had only delayed things. She loved Gus, but she didn’t need him. That mattered to women like her, but Gus didn’t know it.

“I do now.” Gus narrowed in on the voice and began tracking. “I’ll catch you later.”

Slightly offended–he’d come to offer help when he didn’t want to–Lou went back to the mess to watch the rest of the lesson.

Gus kept tracking, searching for the person calling to him. All he could hear was a female tone that promised pleasure beyond his dreams.

Brittani felt it too, but she didn’t have the right to interfere now and she didn’t.

Trinity held her tent flap open, pulling as hard as she could. When a man already had a lover, it took a lot more persuasion.

Gus stopped next to her. “I’m single now. Stop blinding me.”

Trinity scowled, concentration snapping.

Gus nodded. “That’s better.”

The Ciemus woman stared at him. “Honesty and all this light of Safe Haven crap?”

“Either that or a quick fuck and we never talk again.”

That wasn’t what she wanted. “I need kids–strong kids.”

“I need a loyal woman!” Gus shot back in the heat of the moment. He felt Brittani’s anger and it pushed him further than he might have gone otherwise. “No kids until you prove yourself.”

“No sex until I can have the kid.”

“Deal.” Gus held out a hand.

Trinity slid into his arms and delivered a thick kiss that banished other thoughts.

Brittani growled. “That was fast!” She glared at Angela, hurting.

Angela stared back. *It’s what you want. Stop lying and hiding who you are, who you’re becoming. Our heart’s desires may not be good for us, but we’ll never know unless we explore them.*

Daryl was mostly unaware of what had happened. He was thrilled, and intimidated, to discover his heritage. He nudged Brittani’s arm. “A little help here? You’re a team leader.”

Angela was proud of them all, but she also loathed the drama. If she hadn’t interfered, Daryl and Brittani would have had an affair on the boat and Gus would have snapped over it. The Eagles and camp would have been disrupted and the peaceful bonds they’d been building would have snapped in places. Now, they would have two people adjusting to new relationships. Their pain, though it sucked, was minor in comparison.

“How long do you think we’ll let you play with our lives like this!” Brittani’s shout sent uneasy quiet through the mess. People paused, feeling the anger.

Angela took a deep breath and let it out. “This is my job, Eagle. Suck it up and do yours.”

Brittani glared. Then she looked at Daryl for support. The ground shook, sending heat along her thighs. In that moment, she found she could tolerate it a lot longer. “Okay, Boss.”

The camp clapped. Another Eagle was firmly in the herd.

In Trinity’s tent, Gus sobbed in her arms and tried to cancel their deal.

She refused.

**2**

“Spend the next half hour practicing.” Angela was tired now. “Then we’ll do shower shifts and you can be off until dawn. I’ve made a schedule that gives everyone downtime while we’re here, but don’t complain about what comes before or after it. We all have work waiting.”

The camp members who weren’t descendants observed in fascination and a little jealousy, but there was no fear and that thrilled Angela. Her people were almost ready to accept the descendants for what they were–angels sent to protect them. Then, they would start asking for shit their angels couldn’t give. Not all of them would be able to take no for an answer. While everyone was distracted, Angela used bits of the energy flying through the tent to search the future. She was tired of being caught off guard.

Brittani turned to Daryl, meaning to start helping with his shield. She didn’t realize he was right behind her.

Daryl still had his shield up. She bounced off it and hit the ground with a heavy thump.

“I’m so sorry!” He rushed toward her without lowering the barrier.

Brittani was knocked along the mess floor, unharmed because of the slippery surface.

“Stop!” She threw up a hand and brought out her own shield.

Daryl staggered to a halt, humiliated as everyone laughed at them. “I’m sorry! Please don’t be mad.”

Brittani stood up, glowering. “You like to play rough.”

Daryl’s breath caught. “Um...well...”

She laughed. “Me too, handsome. Gus wouldn’t.”

“I will.” Daryl dropped his shield and his pretense of not wanting her. She was single now. “I’ve been dealing it the way women want it all my life. No gift needed.”

Brittani’s body and heart were on fire. “How do *you* like it? Anyone ever figure out what makes you tick like a bomb?”

Daryl shook his head, sexy grin stretching his full lips. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

“You haven’t kissed–”

Daryl grabbed her and sealed their lips. *Thanks, I was waiting for that opening.* Daryl forgot to think as she kissed him back.

Lost in the roar of passion and the cheering of the crowd as the couple made their relationship public, nearly all of them missed Angela leaving the tent.

Marc felt her pain and followed. He hated himself even as he increased it. “It’s not the same without him here, right? To see how well you handle his sheep.”

Angela froze in raw agony. “No.”

“Are you still connected?”

Another shudder of pain came. “He shut the door when he left. So did I.”

“You haven’t tried to open it?”

Marc came closer when she didn’t respond. “Have you tried?”

She sobbed. “Yes! He won’t answer me!”

Marc gave the final shove. “He has other legs to wrap up with now, I guess. Kendle left while we were checking out the boat.”

Angela’s rage didn’t blast out and disturb the camp, but it surrounded her in a fiery barrier that crackled and tossed out tiny fire sparks.

The sentries stared.

“There’s a new one.” Marc went back into the mess to supervise the rest of the practice.

Angela went into the empty medical camper and shut the door. She could have taken a cot and tried to escape the misery for a few hours of rest, but she wanted to be free. Angela slid to her knees and cried instead.

It took everything Adrian had not to reach out to her. He didn’t tell Marc she was almost ready or celebrate being able to push her to the edge so easily. He mourned the next stage, agony almost matching hers. Under that, was a wall of fear. Marc was right. *If she doesn’t care for me after the final bond is broken, I’ll be destroyed.*

Chapter Fourteen

**Let’s See Your Ante**

Day Two

**5pm in the West**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“Y**ou have to call her.” Kimberly stared at Jeff from the passenger seat. They were alone in the cabin of the new truck, but the number of cars around them had continued to grow. “She worries over you more than the others.”

Jeff keyed up the mike. “I’m stopping at sunset. Get those fires going so we can have that show!”

He hung it up, tone dry. “Good enough?”

Kimberly shook her head as cheers and screams garbled the radio. “No, but it will buy time.”

“Time is all I need.” Without the sentimental barrier that had worn off after an hour, Jeff was feeling everything twofold. It was like being ill and wanting cool, clear water and when you were well, still only wanting the same. It was amazing and awful. He wasn’t sure he would be able to control himself when they stopped. He wanted them all dead.

“That’s the infection.” Kimberly was tying her new shoes. “It works fast.”

Jeff stored that. “Why does she worry about me more than the others?”

“Because you’re the only descendant who is immune to her call.”

Jeff hadn’t known that. “What does it mean?”

“That’s what she wants to know. Be careful.”

“Why don’t you trust her even though you’d die for her?”

“She’s byzantine now.” Kimberly scooted to the edge of the seat. “She’s equal amounts of light and dark. She can flip to either side. All our kind will fear her. Byzan can’t be defeated in battle by one of us.”

“So if she goes bad, she could wipe out all the other descendants?”

“Yes. That’s why they don’t let our kind get too strong. It’s dangerous for everyone.”

Jeff tried to be fair. “What happens if she stays good?”

The girl beamed at him. “Then we have peace on earth until she dies. Nice, huh?”

Jeff didn’t know what to say.

“That’s why she needs us. Alphas can’t be left alone. They need us to help them keep the light.”

“I don’t get all of it. I need more details.”

“She has the book now.” Kimberly shrugged. “It has our history. You should read it.”

“I will if she’ll let me.”

“She wants you to know. She wants all of us to know the truth.”

“How do you know so much about her?”

“I dream every night.”

“So?”

“So I go walking. The other kids protect me while I’m gone.”

“Tell me about walking.” Jeff needed to be distracted from what would happen when they stopped for the night. The rest of their passengers were in the rear trailer, sleeping or preparing.

“We were made to communicate. When we can’t reach our kind physically, we have a line in our sleep. It’s dangerous, though. We can get lost and not come back.”

“Like being in a coma.” Jeff slowed the truck, wanting more time to think. The refugee wave was keeping easy pace, soothed from the first frantic contact. They knew gratification was coming. Also like junkies, they were waiting for the fix. When the sun sank, an hour from now, that would fade, and the rowdiness would turn to violence. “And death, right? If the body gets hurt, you won’t know.”

“You’ll feel it, but you can’t rush back. It’s dream walking. You walk.”

“What’s it like?”

Kimberly tore open one of the mess kits from Jeff’s pack without asking what it was. She didn’t care providing it was edible. “Scary. Amazing. Confusing. It’s better when you’re with someone else. Things don’t echo as much.”

“Well, that clears it up. Maybe you could show me how sometime.”

The girl nodded. “If the alpha sends me away, I’ll need you to teach me things too, so I don’t go bad the rest of the way.”

Jeff scowled, wanting to say ten different things. He settled for the easiest. “You’re not bad at all.”

Kimberly contemplated the last fights and then the battles to come. She shook her head, pulling slimy meat from a greasy package. “You won’t say that later.”

Jeff sighed. *I hope you’re wrong.*

The little girl didn’t answer.

**2**

“Everyone feeling nothing?”

Apathetic taps came in response to Kimberly’s cheerful call. Even Jeff only managed a grim nod at the girl. As he scrutinized her huge smile, Jeff wondered how she was able to feel so good with the emotional barrier in place. He’d ordered her to use it on herself so she was spared the guilt of killing.

Kimberly found something out the window to look at.

Jeff scowled. “You don’t have it!”

Kimberly crossed her arms over her chest and slammed herself against the seat. “You weren’t supposed to know that.”

Jeff tried to be angry, but it was impossible. “I’ll deal with you later.”

“I know. I’ve seen it.” The little girl had tried to amend that future and failed. It was embarrassing. *I’ll be an alpha if I live long enough. Why can’t I change the future?*

*When you figure it out, let me know*. Jeff pointed. “We’re stopping. Get ready.”

Refugees swarmed the semi as soon as Jeff stopped, shouting, slapping, threatening. He was forced to use his shield over the entire truck. It was draining.

Jeff shoved his way through the throng to reach the rear, leaving Kimberly to fend for herself.

She climbed through the passenger window instead of using the door. She went to the top of the truck and started practicing fighting skills.

Jeff wanted to watch, but he was busy dragging the other kids from the truck. A few of them jumped out on their own, slicing and dicing anyone who got too close, but the other kids screamed in mock terror or real anger, depending on their role.

The crowd cheered, coughed, shouted, wheezed.

Jeff wondered how the people didn’t figure it out. He nudged a child toward the warehouse he’d chosen. “Start cooking. No fights until I eat.”

People were disappointed, but not so much that it caused trouble. It was expected.

The warehouse was covered in layers of dust and cobwebs that told Jeff it had been empty for a while. He fought the need to search the crates with the other refugees who saw a stash and began tearing it apart. Packs of food and bottles of water were shoved into pockets and fought over.

Jeff gestured the kids to get to work, still using only a shield and no weapon. He heard cough after cough in the growing crowd and hoped none of it was contagious.

The kids unpacked his chair and set up a table by it, then handed him a cigar and a canteen while they made a fast campsite in the corner of the warehouse by the main entrance. Providing the doors stayed open, they would be able to see the road and parking area.

Two of the kids brought Jeff a stack of notebooks as Seth took up a post behind him.

Becky and Doug came next, going to the bedroll the kids had out.

Jeff let the kids labor, occasionally scolding one of them or grunting directions. He didn’t let himself react as the crowd set up around them in touching range. The kids were adept at keeping themselves alive, but the crowd also wanted the fighting more than they wanted the kids at this moment. It was a psychologist’s wet dream to be here, but to be handling it, was an engineer’s nightmare. Jeff wasn’t sure if they would all make it out alive, but he was certain most of this crowd wouldn’t.

The mob had grown while they traveled from word spreading of the entertainment. Becky counted three hundred. She scanned them subtly, searching for the worst of the lot, but it was impossible. The entire building was full of evil thoughts. Those who didn’t want the kids still wanted to see them bleed.

The refugees set up camp as close to Jeff’s site as they could get, some shoving people, taking their spots. He didn’t hear gunshots, but knives flashed in the crowd almost continuously as people fought over locations. He’d assumed they would all want the center, but he’d been wrong.

Outside the warehouse, the same noises echoed, but there were gunshots out there. Jeff hoped they saw the warehouse as off limits because it might spoil the coming fun, but he didn’t scan them to find out. Right now, he was playing his role as boss man. He nodded to the gathering refugees. “Let’s see your ante.”

People brandished items Jeff hadn’t used since the war, including plastic-wrapped razors and shaving cream. Bags and cans were held up, along with jugs of yellowish liquid he presumed was homemade alcohol. There were also clothes and guns, ammunition, and more food than he’d seen in one place since leaving the mountain. He resisted the urge to scan people for their supply locations. There wasn’t time.

Jeff pointed at all of those with items he wanted. As that group faded, smug and ready to eat while they waited for the fighting, the next group of runner-ups shoved forward to hold up items and shout offers.

Kimberly slashed at a hand grabbing for her leg, spilling the first blood.

Those who saw it let out loud cheers.

Jeff nodded and went back to pointing at people. He could wait until later and try searching their bodies for valuables, but this was easier.

Doug pushed Roy and Romeo down at Jeff’s feet, then went to stand by Seth.

Becky stayed on the bedroll, aware of all the leers on her exposed skin. The half top and lowcut jeans seemed like a bad idea now. She kept her head down and didn’t react to any of the whispers or pleas.

Roy whimpered as the secondary betters called out offers for him and his brother.

Angered, Jeff pointed toward Becky. “Go take a nap.”

The boys crawled to Becky, who slid over to make room for them. Now partially hidden, Roy calmed and held tight to Becky.

Romeo listened hard, trying to be ready if he needed to do something. He understood the danger they were in. So did Roy, but he wasn’t old enough yet to express himself in any way but fear and tears. Romeo was glad Jeff had sent them to Becky, but only for Roy’s sake. Romeo had been eyeing the supplies as Jeff accepted them. Some of those items were things he would do double chores for any day of the week.

Jeff felt the same way. Safe Haven needed these things. Jeff pointed out three grenade launchers, but none of the homemade grenades. He accepted the woman with the quilts pieced together from different animal furs, but denied the woman with the box of animal bodies. “The two tents. All factory ammunition, no hand loads! One hundred rounds equals one hundred bucks.” He scanned again as the crowd began to thin of people waiting to have their ante recognized. “I see keys. To what?”

“My corvette!”

Jeff scowled. “No need for that crap now.”

Kimberly looked over, telling Jeff that was a mistake. It was known that the UN men loved fancy vehicles. She and the other kids had made a medium sized fire and were now opening pouches to get the meal rolling.

Jeff waved at the disgruntled man. “But the UN will want something when they catch up to me. You’re in. Who else?”

The mob settled down as far as they were going to as smells of food and the sounds of life floated through the warehouse. Jeff waved off the rest of the people, seeing only jewelry and dishes. “That’s it for now. Let me eat.”

Unhappy words and gestures came, but the rest of the would-be betters left, making their own deals and shoving people from their path. Jeff noticed they were careful to only shove other people who’d been denied, though. The refugees had a fascinating hierarchy. Wilder groups were doing drugs, drinking, having sex, and fighting, but they left the other groups alone. The weaker groups were clustering just in and outside the warehouse doors and windows. It looked like a spot for lower classes, but Jeff saw it as those people having a fast escape route. That implied all hell would break loose after the spoils were handed out.

Kimberly stirred the large pot, then looked around their camp to be sure everyone was okay. The other kids were getting leers and comments, but the fragile peace was holding like it always did whenever the UN had let survivors get so close to them. Most of the time, the refugees weren’t allowed inside the camp until half an hour before sunset. Listening to the wildness outside the gate had revved the kids up, like it was doing now. They were absorbing the violence, preparing to deliver their own impressions of the war. Kimberly felt her power stir and forced it back. *Not yet, my love. Not yet.*

Her witch settled.

Kimberly stirred the large boiling pot again, sweat running down her chest. After their group was served, she would dump in the poison that Jeff had given her. Darren would do the same for the jugs of water and whiskey. People who took bites and drinks when they thought Jeff wasn’t aware would die slower than if they’d grabbed it and ran, but they’d still be just as dead.

*I hope all of you sample it.* The girl encouraged a nearby sicko with a friendly smile. *I made extra just for you.*

**3**

“Let’s fight!” Jeff was keeping close track of the time. The emotional barriers were set to wear off in four hours and he was half through that limit now. He’d lingered after his meal to have a drink and smoke, winding things up by making them all wait, including the kids.

People cheered as Jeff stood up.

It spread through the warehouse, bringing activity that was impressive. Without a leader, the refugees cleared the center of the main room in minutes, then opened a path for the kids to come through. It reminded Jeff so much of Safe Haven that he scowled, anger coming forward. “I feel descendants here!” Furious that he really did, Jeff pointed out the two women now trying to run to the exits. “Take them outside!”

The women didn’t stand a chance against the mob. They were nearly dead before they were dragged out.

Jeff still didn’t feel anything except anger, but he doubted he would have anyway. The two former teachers from California had come to trade for young boys to serve in their brothel. If he could feel anything, it would have been disgust.

Jeff signaled the kids toward the circle being lined with burning objects to light the fight. Cans and pots, as well as a trough and a deep sink that Jeff believed had been ripped from this building, were filled with trash and set on fire.

Music came on in a far corner, drowning out the coughing as those with accepted antes filled in the circle around the kids and between the fires. They stacked their bets at their feet and waited for Jeff to call the first match.

“Seven fights.” Jeff made sure he was loud enough for the children to hear. “One kid each. Even the flincher will follow through. Usual rules. The girl is the finale.”

Kimberly waved at the crowd, then flipped them the bird to distract from Jeff’s minor rule change.

The crowd whistled and gestured, encouraged by her attitude. She’d been careful to show no fear in front of them. Heavy bets were placed on her surviving.

Some people still protested the number of fights, but most were fine with it. Kimberly had told Jeff sometimes only four or five fights were held, so it was accepted. Jeff wanted it all over before the compassion came back. He didn’t want anything to interfere with his plans.

Jeff noted Doug was still with Seth at their site, but Becky was gone. The bedroll only had two lumps. Jeff wished her luck and pointed at little Amy. “Who wants to die at the hands of a three-year-old?”

Amy clapped as she ran into the center, bare feet leaving tiny prints that Jeff would have been stunned by if not for the barrier. She was a grain of sand under towering trees compared to the adults.

The crowd shouted threats and private bets. Jeff pointed at one of three men holding up their antes. He followed the cheating rules, picking someone he hadn’t seen in her mind yet so the child would have the advantage. Unless they’d witnessed it, no one knew how fast the girl was. Jeff had been shocked by it in her thoughts; he was certain he should be ashamed of wanting to see it for himself now.

Amy held up her weapon; the small tip of her spear was stained red. “I’m ready.”

The man who hoped to win one of the untrained boys came forward with a snort. He cracked his knuckles and bent at the knees, getting set to attack. “This will be over fast.”

“Yep.” Jeff held up a hand. “Go!”

Amy darted forward, ducking the man’s lunging run as people cheered and jeered. She spun neatly and jumped to get the force she needed. As the man turned, she was there to drive the spear into his jaw.

Amy let go of the weapon, using the momentum to shove herself backward and out of his reach as he screamed and flailed.

The spear handle bobbed brutally, ripping more flesh. Blood ran down his cheek as the man dropped to a knee, trying to pull it out.

Amy ran up and kicked the spear handle.

Jeff grinned as the body fell and the little girl shouted in primal victory. “He was right. That was fast.”

The crowd roared and groaned as people won and lost. Items were exchanged and fought over. A small pile of winnings was dropped near Jeff’s boots. He ignored the fighting in the rear of the crowd as people tried to welch on bets. The ruckus wouldn’t be allowed to reach the center and he trusted Doug to keep their site secured. If the big man couldn’t, he would join them here in the fighting ring.

Jeff waited for Amy to dislodge her spear from the body, then waved her to the campsite so Doug and Seth could keep track of her. Jeff was glad to have them to handle that chore. He had his hands full with the crowd now shoving closer for the next fight. Some people hadn’t realized it was starting. The throng of bodies grew thicker.

Amy jabbed her spear at people’s legs to make them move so she could get through. The child was fearless and made it untouched through fifty men and women within reach of her. Jeff was impressed as much as he could be right now.

Brea handed Jeff a bottle.

Jeff drank from it and then signaled at the small stack of jugs he’d ordered one of the kids to carry in. “Free drinks. Turn the music up!”

People cheered and wheezed at him and the kids. The music increased to a deafening beat that sank into Jeff and brought the desire to party. *Been a long time*, he conceded, pointing to Darren. “Who wants to face the Scaredy-cat? I’ll take side bets on this one for ammunition. I’ll need it when the assholes come for them.”

Jeff caught some of the things flying toward him and ducked the rest as people placed new bets and offerings for rental of the boy. The main patrons pointed at which part of their stash was their ante.

Jeff took his time, being as greedy as Kimberly had advised. In his mind, he stored the fact that he would have done it even without the advice. He wanted it all. “Let’s make this one for the youngest male too. Sale only, no rentals. I don’t have time to train him.”

The cheers increased to damaging levels, bring more of the outside people to doors and windows.

*Come closer.* Jeff waved them in as new items were tossed and Darren proceeded into the ring with wide eyes and shaking hands. *Come in and stay a bit. We’ll have a real fine time. Death Master Jeff is in the house.*

**4**

Becky eased on the gas of the small car she’d stolen while the mob enjoyed the fighting. She and Jeff had been trying to figure out how to keep so many people busy for the eight hours she would have needed to fly back to the truck stop, but as sunset approached, Jeff had spotted something closer. When he’d filled her in, Becky had been eager.

Flying by, Jeff had spotted tanks of gas attached to blown-over display models and assumed more would be stored inside the grill shop. Methane was a heavier than air gas and could be placed around the warehouse without drawing much notice from the crowd that would be drunk by the time she returned. She would have to hurry in placing the tanks, of course, and hope no one noticed her doing it, but Becky had helped with the plan by suggesting he use the kids to their full capabilities and let them all fight.

Under the barrier, Jeff had agreed right away. Becky wished she wasn’t feeling anything either as she sped toward the nearby town in the dark, alone. She hated feeling this way. If Seth hadn’t come out west with her, she would already be dead by her own hand. He’d kept her alive and she was slowly healing. She hadn’t decided if going with Safe Haven would ruin that for her, but she was determined to get all these kids to Angela alive. She would make other choices then.

Behind Becky, a bike cruised the cracked interstate without being noticed.

Humming, the man on the bike took the same path when she veered off the highway, following her into the same shopping area.

When she stopped, the rider pulled in behind a small store and shut off his bike. He watched from the shadows as she examined debris and then walked up the dirty stairs. When the girl went inside the store, he emerged from the alley.

Thoughts full of ugly images, the tall man climbed into her car and laid down in the backseat, still humming.

Becky came right back out of the dark store, eyes glowing. “Get out of there.”

The killer had no choice. The voice in his mind was overruling his choices, making him open the door and come toward her with jerky steps as he tried to fight.

Becky studied the strong looking man and then pointed at the store. “Load the tanks into the trunk. Keep going until you get them all.”

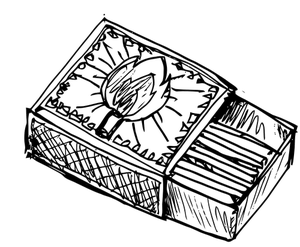
Becky grinned at the man’s panicking eyes as he walked by her. “You should have just stayed and enjoyed the fights.”

Becky opened the trunk while scanning the area to make sure no one else had followed her. She was relieved when it was empty, but also disappointed. If she had another stalker, she would have more hands to get this done faster.

Sighing at her tired back and upset stomach, Becky went to help her captive get the other tanks.

Chapter Fifteen

**Make it Burn**



**1**

**“C**arry them in like you’re going to trade. Make an offer for me. It will be accepted. Then I’ll let go of you and come with you willingly.” She regarded her passenger as she finished the lie. “I promise. I like you too.”

The man went crazy with thoughts of giving her whatever she wanted if she would let go of his body.

Becky snickered. “Seth never says that when I do this to him.” She shrugged. “He is getting off then, though, so I understand why you don’t like it.” She reached over and nudged the man’s crotch with the gun she’d put in her hand as she pulled out of the store. “Be good and you’ll also leave with your balls.”

The noise and lights of the warehouse came to them. Becky eased off the gas. “Remember what I said. You could probably find a way to warn them, but I’ll make it out of here, and I hold a grudge.” Becky pulled into a deserted section of the parking lot and hit the trunk button. She waved. “Get on it.”

Becky ducked as the man got out of the car and went to the trunk, groaning.

People saw him, but when they recognized what he was unloading, they assumed it was for betting.

“Better hurry!” someone shouted as they too headed inside with arms full of trading items. “They’re already on the fourth fight. They lost one of the kids. Bets are going nuts!”

The man grunted as he lifted two tanks and hurried after the couple.

Becky waited until she thought it was clear and then eased out of the car.

She zipped the hoodie she’d taken from the grill store and walked inside with the other stragglers. She advanced with her hand on her gun. People were still wanting the fights the most, but she kept an eye out for new problems as she snuck back into Jeff’s camp. If they were on fight number four, the mood would change soon.

**2**

Seth saw Becky slip into the bedroll with the boys and knew he should feel relief. He’d never been in a more dangerous situation. All he could manage was a frown at her in case people were watching them. “You get the flashlight from the truck?”

Becky gave him a double nod to let him know she’d been successful, but she couldn’t tell him the rest of what was going on, even in code. It was too risky with so many people around. If not for most of them being drunk, her absence would have been noticed.

Becky saw her stalker in the rear of her side of the warehouse, setting a tank down. She frowned at him but couldn’t force him to do what she’d ordered without using magic to reinforce the first spell. When he went back toward the door, she had to content herself with knowing the tanks were at least inside. She didn’t know what was wrong with her gift, but there wasn’t time to figure it out now.

“The Brawler’s up next. No weapons!”

Becky listened to the screaming bets with one ear and the minds of those closest with the other. She also comforted Roy and Romeo, who believed their time in front of the crowd was coming.

Both boys snuggled tighter to her beneath the cover of the bedroll, shaking. They wanted this to be over.

So did Becky.

Seth chortled with the crowd at something the fighter in the middle was doing, causing Becky’s stomach to boil harder. She didn’t like Seth this way. When it really was all over, she planned to make him promise he wouldn’t use the barrier again.

Seth coughed and laughed, looking like he was enjoying himself.

Becky caught sight of Kimberly standing at Jeff’s side. She was watching Jeff in the same way that Becky was watching Seth.

*Have we made a big mistake here?* Becky finally began to get scared.

The crowd screamed as blood spilled.

“The kid wins!” Jeff laughed. “Did you see that scramble? Kid’s fast!”

Bets were paid, and more were made as Jeff pointed to the next child. “We’ll do one more, then take a drink and piss break for the finale.”

The crowd was mixed on his choice, but no one protested as the next kid came into the circle. Wallace was stocky and taller than the other kids, with a black glare that promised death to anyone not ready for him.

Shouts echoed across the warehouse. All of the pedophiles wanted him. So did the new crop of up-and-coming whorehouse madams.

Jeff wanted all of the sickos. He waved the renters and buyers forward. “Let’s see your shit or git.”

People laughed with him, liking Jeff’s manner. All he wanted was what they wanted–fair trades and fun while watching someone else die.

Jeff regarded the bloody body by his feet and sighed. Brea hadn’t been fast enough to avoid the blow to her head. She was faking dead right now, but she did have a concussion. Jeff had paid the bet while marking the winner for later. It had cost him a grenade launcher and the sight of a blow that would be burned into his memory forever. There was no way he was coming through this without scars. The same was true for the children. Even the winners would leave damaged.

The warehouse was heating up and stinking in places as people sweated. The odors of alcohol and anger also flowed through the throng, bringing bugs with it. Flies and gnats circled the cloud of CO2 that gathered at the top of the warehouse. The horde of bugs grew, dipping to bite and drink before returning to the sweet scent of people’s exhalations rising to the second floor area. The insects couldn’t decide which cloud was real, giving the people a break between attacks.

Thunder cracked outside, warning of impending rain. Fat drops sprinkled the parking area, driving the weaker groups inside. As it began to pour, the outside area emptied.

Jeff observed the windows for movement and found a lone man as the crowd cheered and jeered the bleeding kid who was twisting his thumbs into a woman’s sockets while she stabbed at him with an illegal knife to no avail. Jeff would have stopped the fight, but the boy had dealt out his own penalty for it. “That’s a win!”

Wallace kept at it until his thumbs sank into her eyes.

Jeff nodded at Kimberly to get him under control.

Kimberly entered the ring to take Wallace’s arm.

Enraged, he swung around and grabbed her by the throat.

Kimberly didn’t struggle. She knew better. She stared into his eyes and waited for Jeff to rip them apart.

Jeff did and shoved the boy toward the crowd. “He needs another fight! Who wants to try?!”

Wallace pulled out of the daze just to sink back in as Jeff chose a challenger and the crowd shoved him back into the middle.

Kimberly felt hands closing around her leg and realized she’d dropped her knife.

Jeff lifted the girl out of harm’s way and swung her onto his shoulders. The crowd had grown tired of blood. Soon, they would want other satisfactions. Renters were lining one side of the center ring now, staring at the kids with haunted eyes and full hands. They’d saved their best for last.

Jeff felt Kimberly shudder, but he didn’t know if it was fear or eagerness to spill blood. “Go!”

Kimberly observed the crowd, easily getting their thoughts. Jeff was also scanning them, but he couldn’t concentrate on it like she could. He had to play his role. All she had to do now was hold onto his head and look fearless. The finale was coming soon.

Wallace didn’t have an easy fight the second time around. Jeff, angered over him attacking Kimberly, had chosen a matched opponent. The boy would be an Eagle at some point and he had to learn respect for the rules.

Kimberly frowned, but couldn’t remind him they didn’t know all the rules yet. Romeo had told them they didn’t allow fighting, but they all knew this was wrong anyway.

“I’m sorry!” Wallace cowered from the bigger man who grabbed him. He squeezed into a ball as the man started to crush his ribs, using his legs to burst out of the hold.

The man staggered, holding the wounds in his chest.

Wallace stood up, flashing boots with a bloody knife sticking from both of them.

The man fell over, groaning as Jeff named the winner.

Back at their campsite, Becky scrutinized the lone man watching though the window. *Now.*

People in the crowd swiveled toward her, but the stalker entering behind her caught their attention too.

Becky pointed at him. “I heard it!”

The crowd surged his way.

Becky dropped her head, hoping the man had brought in all of the canisters as he was shoved out the door while being stabbed and hit. *So much for that plan.*

Becky found Jeff in the mob, letting him see her fear so he would know things hadn’t gone like she planned.

Jeff pointed at the corner that wasn’t being used for anything but a bathroom. “Five minute break!” He swung Kimberly onto her feet and pushed her toward Becky. “Get ready.”

Kimberly hurried to the bedroll, jabbing at people with Jeff’s knife. He hadn’t felt it being liberated.

Jeff used the bathroom without feeling self conscious or fearing for his safety. He did worry over items being stolen, but he’d drank a lot from the jug going around and he needed to be empty before the real action started.

Seth appeared at his elbow, also letting go of a long stream.

The men didn’t speak until they were both finished, following the unspoken code of men.

Jeff tucked himself into place and surveyed the warehouse, noting the smell of gas. It was faint beneath the alcohol and sweat, but it was there. He saw the small mob returning from killing the stalker who had followed Becky. Jeff was getting all their thoughts too, though he was storing information without time to process it. He noted Becky’s fear and then watched what she was watching. Plans were in place even though her unwilling helper had been removed. Jeff wasn’t certain how that had happened, but he planned to find out later.

Jeff waved at the center ring. “They’re all for rent after the finale.”

Cheers rose again, soothing the wild crowd once more. Jeff knew he wouldn’t be able to do it again. The lit fuse was about to reach the bomb.

Jeff pointed at bets and fighters, aware of the mob expecting a great show after some of the fast and almost boring fights. He hadn’t viewed it in their minds, but he instinctively chose two fighters to face the girl. “Doubles!”

Kimberly unbuttoned her long sleeved shirt. Under it was the stained clothes she’d worn during the escape from the UN.

People backed away as she came through the long legs and piles of debris. They also began shouting bets.

Jeff took his time. The gas smell was stronger now, but he wanted it to keep building.

Kimberly didn’t carry a weapon. She stepped between the two big, leering men while Jeff took bets and denied items. The pile of goods at his feet was being studied by those who had lost it and those who wanted it. There was no way they would get out of here alive. *I don’t need to*, the girl decided. *As long as the others make it out, Jeff and I can die together in this cause. It’s worthy.*

Jeff looked at her, catching that. He gave a subtle nod and then lifted a hand. “Go!”

The two men lunged.

Kimberly opened her arms.

Jeff tensed as magic crackled.

Kimberly drained both men at the same time, sucking hard and fast. She let the bodies tip over, belching.

Silence held for a few more seconds and then pandemonium broke out as half the crowd tried to run and the rest surged forward.

Kimberly let magic burst out of her without restraint, using the emotions of the refugees to feed it. “Sleep...”

Jeff added his strength to hers, letting her pull what she needed to knock them all out.

Bodies fell in a wave that ran toward the doors and windows as people realized they’d been tricked and fled.

“Turn!” Jeff shouted, drawing his gun.

Kimberly directed her gift around the door as refugees came toward them in a death run.

Jeff opened fire, as did Doug and Seth.

The gunshots echoed through the warehouse, alerting everyone else to a problem. People came from cubbies and upper rooms, pulling up pants and wiping noses. Drunks paced toward the center ring, peering bleary eyed at the piles of supplies and unconscious people.

Jeff shot them too. His hand was an extension of his mind, refusing to stop until the dry click told him to reload.

Kimberly placed a hand on Jeff’s wrist.

Jeff flinched as the sentimental barrier was removed. “You didn’t ask.”

“You didn’t tell me to.”

Jeff grinned, but it faded as screams outside alerted them to people escaping.

“I can get them if you give me more energy.” Kimberly was pale. She stayed at his side as he went to their site. It took a minute to find a path over the hundreds of fallen bodies. Murmurs and snores were the loudest noise now. It was freaky after so much chaos.

“Let them go. It will help end these UN parties. They’ll tell the story.”

Kimberly kept pace while Jeff gathered their camp and directed the other adults to put the supplies and items at the fighting ring.

“How long?”

Kimberly concentrated, scanning the people. “Another ten minutes, I think. Some of them are trying to wake now, but I’m smothering them.”

Jeff looked around to discover people gasping for air. She meant that literally.

Kimberly gestured to the other kids. “Collect and return. Then make it burn.”

Jeff went to their fallen kids and knelt. “Take what you need.”

Instead of them using his remaining energy, the kids reached out to drain the nearest refugee.

“Invisibles!”

Witnessing the others doing it sent the scavenging kids into a frenzy of claiming. Lights and groans bounced off the warehouse walls.

Jeff forced himself to leave them alone. He grabbed Roy and Romeo and headed for the door with the adults on his heels. “Make an assembly line so we can stay in sight of each other. Kimmie doesn’t load. She has other work.”

The kids liked that. They didn’t want Kimberly to do anything but continue to get them closer to the alpha.

Kimberly refused to leave the warehouse and watch the truck like Jeff wanted. She stayed with her kids and scavenged.

**3**

“She tired.” Amy tugged on Jeff as he handed another load of supplies into the truck. He’d taken this position so he could stack it, but Amy’s words sent him back into the warehouse.

Jeff signaled from the door “Load up, right now.”

The kids ran at his tone, bringing what they had in their hands.

Kimberly came last, making sure all of her people got out.

Jeff put a hand on the girl’s shoulders as they left. “Wait until we’re pulling out.”

Kimberly nodded, flare gun in her hand. Jeff hadn’t felt her take it, but he knew she had it.

“I also know you have my knife.” He led her to the front of the truck and locked the door before shutting it.

Doug waved and closed the rear door.

Jeff quickly secured it and then trotted around to his side. He would stop tomorrow and replace the truck again, but right now, he wanted to be gone. The parking area was deserted, though headlights and taillights flashed all around them in the darkness. Hopefully survivors would think this truck was someone else who had gotten away. In the dark, it would be hard to tell.

Jeff rolled them out with a heavier load than when they’d come in, watching for anyone coming from the warehouse. He could feel people waking. The girl was too far away to hold them all.

Kimberly let go with a deep sigh. She drew in a blast of Jeff’s worry to help her aim and fired the flare gun.

Jeff turned away, but the bright, loud blast still slammed into the semi and bounced them across the pavement. He fought for control and barely gained it before they hit the edge of the road.

The warehouse windows blew out, spraying glass. Fire rushed over the panicking mob, searing away hair and clothes before catching them on fire.

Jeff hit the gas and breathed in deep of fresh air. He felt like he’d been smothering beneath the negative, wild emotions of the refugees.

“Did we get them all?”

Jeff shook his head, grid scanning the people around them. “But it will still help. The boss will be happy there’s less threats.” He sighed. “She’ll also hate what we’ve done here. You should know that.”

“We already feel it.” Kimberly pushed off her shoes. “But she doesn’t blame us or you. She hates herself for allowing it.”

“How do you know that?” Jeff was still hoping the girl could make him understand why Angela’s leadership was good after everything she’d done.

“Our hearts are sad. We feel what she feels.”

Jeff deliberated that. His sadness from Crista’s death usually overwhelmed that emotion from everyone else.

“We experienced the same thing when we lost our loved ones.” Kimberly buttoned her shirt against the cool night air. “But we love the alpha, so we feel her pain and her joy. You feel nothing from her because you’re blocking her out, refusing to accept her control.”

“I don’t want anyone to have control over me.”

Kimberly bonded with him even deeper. “Neither do we, but we were put here in this time and place to do a job and she’s in charge of it. At least accept that much and we can have peace among ourselves.”

“What job?”

“To save the world, of course. What other job would make these chores okay?”

Jeff didn’t know what to say to that.

Kimberly slid back onto the seat next to him. “We’ll help you through it, like you helped us through this.”

Jeff patted her wrist. “Deal.” He scanned the piles of supplies in the floorboard. “Why don’t you dig through that crap and find something clean to wear?”

She immediately crouched to do so.

Jeff blew out a sigh of relief as he was left alone for the moment. Not having the sentimental barrier for the last of the action had been hard. He needed time to adjust to everything he’d done and to the fact that he already missed it.

Jeff increased speed, berating himself for being human. *Angela will help me*. *She’ll owe me for this. All I want now is to be told this was all okay and I’m not corrupt.*

Cool air blew over his hot skin, calming him. The old Eagle pride came next and this time, he was able to enjoy it. Angela hated the methods, but Adrian hadn’t. He’d trained them to be ruthless on runs. *He’d be proud of me.*

Jeff refused to consider that further.

**4**

**In the East**

“What do you mean he left?”

Marc frowned at Nancy’s panicked tone. It was late. She should have been settled in a tent like almost everyone else was right now. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

Nancy bit down on the truth and shook her head.

Marc sighed. “You’re either hers or Adrian’s. You can’t keep riding that fence.”

Nancy stared at him, slowly nodding. “You’re right. I should make a choice and stick to it.”

Marc’s scowl deepened. “That’s not what I meant.”

“No. It’s right.” Nancy walked away. “I’ll make a choice and stick to it, then we’ll know what we know, won’t we?”

Marc watched her go toward the mess, not sure what he should write in his report about the encounter. Anyone was free to leave Safe Haven. Coming back was another story.

Marc gestured to the point sentry. *Is she still with the kids?*

Kyle nodded.

Marc detoured that way. Shift change was coming up and he didn’t have her next orders.

Ivan fell in step, holding out a paper. “Next shift.”

He left before Marc could scan him.

Marc read the schedule and approved it. He went to confer with Kyle, interruption no longer needed.

Ivan entered the kids’ tent, giving Angela a nod.

Angela delivered a slight smile and then returned her attention to the children gathered around her for a bedtime story. “Are you ready for the ending?”

The kids clapped. The older children in the rear of the tent joined them, hooked into the tale she’d woven.

“Right as the giant King sat down to make the deal for peace, the wolf King lunged over the banquet table and ripped out his throat.” Angela waited for the winces and sadness to ease, then finished the legend she’d learned from Lenore and Max. “After that, the giants were driven from their mountains and have been living with us ever since. They can never go home or the wolves will kill them all.”

“Will we be like that?” Cody was once again at Leeann’s side. “Can we come home?”

“I told you, I’ve seen it.” Leeann waved at Angela. “Tell him we’re coming back.”

“We’re coming back.” Angela didn’t know who all would be in that crew, but she was already certain these two children would be. They were powerful, and they were both corrupted in ways. Taking lives to survive had marked them. They would have to come with the adults.

To Angela’s surprise, Missy pointed at Caleb. “I told you we’ll help her win that fight. You won’t have to because you’re pure.”

Caleb appeared relieved, but Angela felt him wondering if he should be bad so he would be welcome on the trip. Angela sighed, forced into meanness. “I’m not taking any child who isn’t a descendant, no matter the relationship, so stop it right now or I’ll be forced to punish you.”

Caleb dropped his chin. “I’m sorry. I’ll miss you.”

She smiled, opening her arms.

Caleb flew to her for a tight hug.

Angela returned it with tears she refused to let fall. “I’ll miss you too, but we have years together before then. Let’s not ruin it with sadness, okay?”

Caleb nodded, sniffing. “I’ll be good. You’ll be proud of me.”

“I already am. I’m proud of all of you. You’re the future of both sides of my people. I couldn’t love you more.”

“Even when we’re bad?”

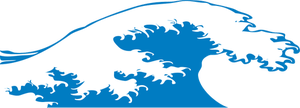
Angela smiled at Missy, heart hurting as she picked up images of the action in the west. “That’s when you need my love the most.”

Chapter Sixteen

**All I Have**

Day Three

**Dawn**



**1**

**“L**et the monsters free.”

Den mothers opened flaps and doors.

Children barreled out as if they were part of a race. They ran straight to the beach, under the watch of the Eagles and the ocean. Both viewed them with suspicious tolerance.

Angela let them go for a minute, aware of the wind whipping her braid around. The kids had restless energy to work off too.

Ahead, three of the children began throwing rocks into the water.

*No.*

All the kids rotated at Angela’s correction, little hands full of rocks and garbage.

*The ocean is alive. If you dirty it, the ocean can’t breathe and will die. Do you want to kill the water?*

Kids shook their heads, dropping the garbage.

Angela smiled. “Good. Rocks found on land stay on land. Garbage should be bagged to be burned later for fuel.”

The kids cheered as Angela revealed a bag of bubble wands. She passed them out, actually able to feel the relief of the ocean. “This *can* go in the water. A little soap helps clean messes, right?”

More cheers went up, along with a whine to the water that sounded eager.

Angela and the den mothers helped the smaller kids, while the rest of the camp headed to breakfast or observed. Some of those were sad, thinking of their missing loved ones, but it was good for them to see that life would continue and they were the reason why. The orphans wouldn’t stand a chance without the adults. They were really going to use a village to raise their children and this time, it would succeed because they all had one goal–survival.

Angela motioned Monica and Allison over to take her place with the kids. She’d rather hang out here, but there was work waiting. “Let them play for a few minutes and then get them into the smaller community tent. The Eagles are almost finished unloading some new clothes and things.”

“We’ll cover it.” Monica took the sticky bag of bubble wands.

Allison, carrying both twins in a front-n-back sling, joined the guards. It allowed her to watch the other kids and keep soap out of the faces of the twins. It also let them get fresh air and see the water–something everyone was gawking at. Over half of their camp members hadn’t visited an ocean before the war. It was a dangerous fascination.

Marc stayed with Angela as she went to the mess and ducked into the wide canopy that was flapping in the stiff shore breeze.

“Tie this down better. We’re getting more wind here. It has to be tighter.”

“I thought so too, but the man in charge out there said some slack is good.” Gus came over to do as she instructed.

“It is, but we’ve got a little too much here.” She pointed at the billowing roof. “If it does that, it’s too loose. If it makes a musical hum when you strum it with your thumb, it’s too tight. Tell Ivan when he comes through for his next check.”

Gus grinned. “Will do.”

Angela went to Brittani, who was unpacking food supplies and avoiding looking at the workers or the guards. “Why aren’t you with the Eagles?”

Brittani pointed toward the flap. “Because he was drafted as cook and I didn’t think you’d be able to eat it.”

Angela spotted Stanley entering the flap.

The flap billowed up…

Gus fell backward at the unexpected blow from the tarp, landing on his ass with the box on his chest. He groaned, blinking. “What happened?”

“Stanley,” the two women answered at the same time.

Everyone chortled except Gus and Stanley.

Marc helped Gus up.

Stanley began grabbing damaged supplies and apologizing.

Angela looked at Brittani. “You’re scared.”

The pretty woman nodded. “A little. You expect a lot. I don’t want to be the reason this all falls.”

*Another fly in the Safe Haven web*. Angela celebrated.

Brittani frowned. “You gonna eat me now?”

Silence fell through the tent.

Angela laughed so hard she thought she might be sick. “Look at their expressions!”

Disappointed men dropped their gazes or left the tent, shaking their heads.

Angela wiped tears from her face. “I want you to do rounds with Jennifer.”

Brittani stopped chuckling. “Time for my evaluation with the enforcer, huh?”

“Yes, but it’s also an opportunity for a lifelong friendship with a girl who needs the wisdom of an older sister.”

Brittani warmed. “You think?”

“I do. Once the sparks are finished, you two will be thick as thieves.”

“Is this a reward for saving your life or agreeing to join your army?”

“Yes.” Angela pointed at Neil. “Make an appointment with him when Jennifer’s done with you. He’ll know why.”

Brittani’s worries were eased a little and her longings were stirred. *She got me again. If she keeps doing that to me, I’ll want to learn everything in that ruthless brain.*

Angela smiled in satisfaction and left the mess. When the Eagles realized they needed to pick replacements for when they came home for the final battle, there would be a rush to put their choices in place, but it would be too late for the most important positions. *I’m making those now. That’s why I’m the leader. Our replacements have to be just as cunning and that will take time to bring out. After all, I don’t have an Adrian to use against them. All I have is our survival.*

**2**

“There you are.” Candy joined Conner at the far table for breakfast, ignoring disapproving looks from some of the camp members. The Eagles were no longer watching their every move, but the camp was.

Conner grunted. “Yeah. One of them bumped into me as I got my tray.” Conner indicated the front of his shirt, where a large oatmeal stain was setting. “He reminded me that Lee was a well-respected member of Safe Haven and I’m just the bastard of a traitor and shouldn’t be here.”

Candy’s cheeks flushed. Her hands balled into fists as she glared around. “Who was it? You tell me right now!”

“It doesn’t matter.” Conner was having a low day. “They’re right. Lee was a great man and I’m just a horny kid who wants to give you his babies.” He sighed miserably. “Go away, will you? Smelling you makes it harder.”

Candy understood why Conner was doing it, but she couldn’t help being hurt. “I guess I’m not worth fighting for after all.” She turned toward the mess tables where the more uptight people were watching happily. She noted their faces and left.

Conner dipped his chin to his chest and tried to block out both the gloating and Candy’s anger. He hoped he was scheduled for a scavenging run today. He needed it. Getting away from these people for a while would be a relief. It was just too bad Candy couldn’t go. In her condition, he preferred her to be here and safe, but he didn’t want to be away from her. She would be alone here again, like he would be while out with whatever team Angela assigned him to. He handled his new life well most days, but he’d dreamed of Little Rock last night and all the freedoms he’d had there. The constant restraint upon opening his eyes this morning had been too much.

Conner sighed, forcing himself to keep eating. *I’ll be better tomorrow. The day after will be better and so on. It can’t stay this ugly forever*.

Sitting nearby, Morgan felt bad for the boy, but he didn’t think Conner was aware of the most important part of a hope like that. For anything to change, the person had to do something different. Planning it and dreaming of it were never enough. The person had to take that first step. Often, they fell, and that held many back from happier, more satisfying lives. They were afraid to fail.

Morgan hoped Conner would be an exception and take the bruised knees like a man. When he stood up after that, already on the new path, walking would be careful and successful because of the memory of that first fall. It didn’t have to ever happen again. *Hell*, s*ome people get lucky and don’t even have to suffer that first failure. All they have to do is conquer their fear of it happening.*

Morgan listened to the line of Eagle trainees marching around the camp perimeter under Greg’s direction. They’d just made it to the mess side of the small site and were going strong. Several of those grunting, sweating, panting, muttering men and women would be leaders. Some would die on runs. A few would turn to the darkness and be lost. Those remaining would make up the heart of the teams, providing wisdom during dilemmas, but it still wouldn’t be enough if Angela couldn’t bring them together.

Many walks of life were in the Eagles now, with both genders represented, as well as five races. It was a massive setup that could easily fold into its old self and finish imploding. Morgan was positive Angela had plans in place, but he hoped they didn’t include more death and battles. Everyone here knew this was their last campsite. That was a huge goal to keep them working, but if she left again or Marc kept screwing up, or if they didn’t unearth the supplies they needed, it could all go bad.

Sitting nearby, Keith lifted his mug and finished the beer he’d spilled part of when bumping into Conner. *Here’s to it all going bad.*

Around Keith, descendants went about their routines and duties without catching the wolf in the pasture. Keith was a Byzan and had been for longer than Angela or William. His shield was only in danger from their enforcer, but he didn’t worry about that. As one of the more aggressive men in Safe Haven, he scared many of their women. Jennifer avoided him and his mind, certain she would find ugly sexual thoughts in there about her.

*And you’re right.* Keith slammed the mug on the table to make Conner flinch.

He smiled as the boy got up and left. Keith had been playing head games with descendants for decades. He was usually the one directing the operations, of course, but even an old dog had work to do during an apocalypse. He’d been with Ciemus for months, waiting for Angela and Safe Haven to arrive. It had been easy to join up as a local. Now, he just had to wait for a good opportunity and then he would control all the descendants under her command.

Keith leered at Jennifer as she passed the open flap, happy to see her grimace. Only one thing could sink him now and that was acting out of character. So far, he’d been abrasive and drank a lot, but he labored liked a dog on whatever job he was given. The Eagles were already eyeing him with tolerant pity for being a drunkard. When they finally relaxed their guard, he would kill their boss and take her gifts. Keith’s power as a Byzan was in his shielded mind. With her ability to absorb and copy gifts, he could take over the world.

Descendants across the camp continued without responding, but not all of them missed the malice this time. Angela stopped, shivering. She didn’t know who was having bad thoughts about her, but the lack of compassion in it implied the person was cold and careful–a true threat.

The other descendant who felt it was Autumn. She stirred in her mother’s arms, grunting.

Jennifer glance down. “Hiya, baby girl!”

Autumn squinted at her. *Danger. Nearby. For all of us.*

Jennifer began to scan the mess without reacting in any other way. She was standing outside the flap, waiting for the bathroom lines to thin. The crowded tent was the only place it could be coming from.

Scared of him, Keith came right to mind. *Is it him?*

Autumn pushed out a baby fart and settled back into sleep.

Jennifer sighed. The baby had woken to give the warning. That in itself was amazing. Expecting more was crazy.

Jennifer swept the camp, coming to rest on Angela, who was staring at her.

Angela lifted her brow. *Did you get it?*

Jennifer shook her head. She refused to say her daughter had. She sent it in hand code instead.

Angela made note of it and joined them near the flap. “Care to join me for a final scan before the teams go?”

Jennifer led the way inside, glaring at Keith first. She would dig into him like she’d been afraid to. With Angela by her side, it wouldn’t be as intimidating.

Angela frowned. *I didn’t know you and Keith had problems.*

Keith regarded them, catching his name.

Jennifer didn’t look away. *He puts off bad vibes. Nothing else.*

*Very careful, like Kenn*. Angela smiled at the man. *Shall we?*

Keith swallowed, putting his fork down.

Jennifer handed the sleeping baby to Pam as she passed. “Hold her for me, will you?”

Pam was delighted. She loved kids and missed having her daughter’s adopted children around.

Angela noted that, distractedly, as Jennifer began to scan Keith without pretending otherwise.

The tent went quiet. People knew what was happening by the way the two women were staring without blinking and how Keith was paling.

Eagles on duty in the mess went to the flap to be able to call for help if it was needed. They were all rookies.

Angela settled at the table by her knee without looking away. Keith’s mind wasn’t blocked to them, but like with the teenager in the mall, it was empty. They now assumed that meant bad news in one way or another. They hadn’t had the chance to practice trying to get through the emptiness again until now.

Marc came to the flap and stayed there, observing. He was off duty and supposed to be resting, but the tension was too thick.

Jennifer held out her hand. “Confess and receive mercy.”

The entire mess tensed, not sure exactly who she was speaking to.

Angela wasn’t either. It felt as if Jennifer had just locked everyone in place. No one could leave.

“Someone in here was having bad thoughts.” Jennifer’s eyes began to glow. “And not unhappy, bad reflections. They’re planning on blowing up our ship, with Angela and me on it.” Jennifer’s orbs blazed. “Come clean. If you make me dig deeper, it will hurt.”

“Please, don’t!” A Ciemus man, Arthur, fell to his knees in front of her, unable to keep her out any longer. “Donner sent me to Ciemus months ago, but I never agreed with it and I’ve never thought of blowing you all up.” His tone was panicking. “Please, I would never have hurt you. I love Safe Haven.”

Jennifer swept through his mind like a tornado. She hadn’t gotten a single bad vibe from the man.

“That’s because he isn’t the threat.” Angela was watching three people in the crowd. None of them met her eye.

Jennifer let go of Arthur. “Who else is lying to us?”

“I am.” A Ciemus woman waved a broken arm. “Arthur and I were sent at the same time. We’re also lovers and I’m expecting his baby.”

“That’s why you changed your mind?” Angela guessed. “You fell in love.”

“Actually, I was the one who had to be convinced not to follow through.” She was ready to take a punishment to spare her mate. “He never wanted the job.”

“Then why did he take it?” Marc demanded in the suspicious silence.

“Because there wasn’t anyone left after the Ghost wiped out the troops.” Arthur didn’t lie. “Donner was forced to rely on infiltrators, and we were unlucky enough to have survived that first fight.”

Marc deliberated those hazy battles and shook his head. “You can’t stay here.”

Angela agreed, though Marc wasn’t supposed to make those choices anymore. She swept the tent. “I know you’re out there, waiting for me to let my guard down, waiting for the Eagles to relax. Be honorable and come forward now. Fight me fairly.”

Keith was tempted, but only his shield was a match for her. He opened his thoughts enough for the women to hear him wondering who was stupid enough to want the alpha dead when she would give her life for any of them.

Jennifer and Angela traded glances, but without proof, there was nothing they could do. Keith would be watched, as would everyone who was in this tent right now, but in the end, it wouldn’t be enough. The assassin would get their shot.

Angela motioned to Jennifer. “Let’s get them moved.”

Eagles reacted to the order they’d been expecting sooner. Dawn had passed an hour ago.

The traitors were led out of the tent by men and women who didn’t need orders to shoot them as soon as they were out of sight of the camp members and kids. They already knew.

**3**

“All scavenging teams will leave after lunch.”

They’d just finished relocating Safe Haven to the beach alongside the huge ship. People were gawking as they worked.

Neil waved men over as Kenn and Kyle signaled the Eagles.

Marc kept watch on their surroundings, content to be her personal guard, but he couldn’t deny the pang of pain at being out of the circle as Angela updated the team leaders.

*It’s for the best*. Jennifer came to his side. *She needs protection*.

Marc turned at the tone, sensing Jennifer didn’t want to share her latest tale of doom and gloom with the boss yet.

Jennifer chuckled. *She’s the first person I talked to about it.*

Angela frowned, stepping into the circle of the Eagles and people she’d chosen.

Jennifer drew Marc away. “She’s covered. I want to talk to you about something else.”

Marc allowed Jennifer to pull him out of their perimeter, both barely avoiding the rookie stringing the tape according to the line that his guide, Ivan, was marking in the sand. Damien was new to Safe Haven, but as one of the Ciemus fighters, he was already being trained to take his place among the Eagles.

“What’s up?”

Jennifer enclosed them in a bubble and then opened a private line. Then she smothered them in the roar of the nearby surf rushing in with the change of the tide.

Marc frowned. “You really are hiding something.”

“I may know how to help you heal the damage to your relationship.” Jennifer crossed her arms over her chest. “It might also end your relationship. She’s corrupt in ways. You aren’t, except for the vendetta against Adrian, so I’m telling you instead of him.”

Marc braced for something awful.

Jennifer delivered it. “I saw your future with both women. Kendle will love you and you’ll be happy. She’ll raise your son in place of the child she can’t have, and her madness will fade because she has an equal mate.”

Marc had been shaking his head the entire time she spoke. “Not going to happen.”

“With Angela, you have no guarantees of anything, Marc.” Jennifer was unable to force out the exact words. “Happiness might be fleeting.”

Marc studied her concerned expression, able to tell she cared about his well being.

“I do. You’re one of the few men here who might be able to keep Safe Haven in line if anything were to happen to Angela. You have a lot to learn, but you’re her true heir. We all know that.”

“So for the camp?”

Jennifer snorted. “Because I like you and because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Causing trouble between us?”

“Saving you some misery. I know the plan, remember?”

Marc tensed. “It won’t succeed?”

“It breaks the bond he put on her.” Jennifer hated to be the one who had to tell him. She liked Marc.

“But it doesn’t end their feelings.” Marc wasn’t surprised. “It can’t because she loves him.” Marc studied Angela through the shield. “How could she not love him? He gave her everything. All I’ve ever had to give was my heart. It isn’t enough for a woman like her.”

“It could have been, if the apocalypse hadn’t come. If we weren’t fighters in some mysterious battle.”

“It would have ended up the same for us.” Marc admitted the truth. “I left her when we were kids. I betrayed her; I can’t ever take it back.”

“Would you, if you could?”

Marc slowly shook his head.

“Do you think she knows that?”

“Probably. She knows everything else.”

“She doesn’t know what I’m about to tell you. I’m giving you the choice because you’ve earned it.” Jennifer drew in a breath. “Angela is going to get one more chance at a baby. If it’s yours, it has 50/50 odds of survival to birth. If it’s Adrian’s, the baby will live, and their bond will be natural, unbreakable.”

“Her happiness means my desolation.”

“If William fathers her child, she’ll also survive birth, but Angela will go mad; William would never stay here to spare her that.”

“It all sucks.” Marc tried to break the awful sense of dread. He couldn’t take listening to his own heart wither. “What else you got?”

“And now we come to the reason for the bubble.” Jennifer used her hands to deliver the rest of the message. *We can’t keep going with the drama. People are losing faith. You have three choices.*

*I’ve tried to kill him. More than once.*

*Her, Marc. Get rid of your lover and Angela will do the same.*

Marc sighed. *What’s the third option?*

*Make sure neither of them get on that boat with us. If you can’t kill them, at least leave them here.*

*You’re fooling yourself if you think she’ll allow that. Kendle has information about the island and the ocean. Adrian seems to have knowledge about everything else.*

*And them staying here would interfere with the survival of Safe Haven,* Jennifer finished quickly, sensing Angela’s attention shifting to them. *But if she thought it would hurt the dream to take them along, she’d find a place for them here. Right?*

Marc’s scowl took up his face. *What do you want from me?*

“Help!” Jennifer shot back promptly, switching to speech while Angela was distracted. “I’m going to convince her that we would be better off without them. You’re going to help me.”

“How?” he asked in a grumbling tone implying he wasn’t willing to do much, that he’d already endangered his place enough.

“By pretending to be the old Marc she can count on. I’ll do the rest.”

“I’m the same man I’ve always been.”

“No, you’re not. Your obsession with our leader has reached a dangerous level. You’re going to keep pushing her until she turns away from you and the light.” Jennifer looked at Angela. “If this doesn’t stop, she’ll kill Kendle. You’ll finally get to take Adrian’s head, and Save Haven will collapse during your trials.” She placed a hand on his arm. “For all our sakes, Marc, please try to be who you were when things were good. If you can’t, we’re all going to die on that boat.”

“I don’t know how to be that man anymore.” He saw Angela frowning at them. “I’ve tried, but I think I hate him more than I love her.”

The admission was awful. It was also freeing.

Jennifer smiled at him. “I understand. It’s natural after everything he’s done. He hasn’t been properly punished.”

“She promised to. She keeps promising to.”

“And it isn’t good enough, right? Even if she’s cruel to him?”

“No. *I* need to do it, feel it, see it.”

“Tell me why. Why do you have to have personal justice? He wronged Angela the most.”

“No.” Marc’s tone was full of pain and anger. “He pretended to be my friend. I believed in him. It’s not about her.”

“It is all about her.” Jennifer strengthened the barrier as Angela began digging through the layers to discover what they were talking about. “You and Adrian are distractions. There are two players in this match. They pit us against each other and ourselves. Two kings on opposite sides, fighting over one powerful piece that can win the game for either of them.”

“Angela.”

“Yes. You and Adrian argue over her, and William secretly wishes he had the courage to kill you both and claim her, but there are only two true players and one prize. The rest of us are pawns.”

Marc wanted to deny it, but that explanation fit too well. “Angela knows.”

“Of course. She’s saving the pieces they try to sacrifice, and in being successful, she has become a third player.”

“They’re trying to kill her for it.”

“No, they’re trying to kill you and Adrian for it. They think she will become the greatest fighting descendant ever born on this planet and they need that badly. I don’t know exactly why. I only know she has a lot of power and a heart being ripped to shreds every time those two forces make a move.”

“How long has she known?”

“During the quake, I think.” Jennifer struggled to keep her shield up. Angela was hacking through with an imaginary scythe that actually stung as it cut through layers.

“That’s incredible.” Marc could feel the mental struggle between the two women.

“I need your help, Marc. So does she and so does the future of humanity. Please let go of your vendetta and adopt her goals in every way you can. All our lives depend on your honor.” Jennifer dropped the shield, sweating. “As you can see, you won’t be able to keep *her* out, but it should help you with the trackers.”

Marc nodded, flashing a smile as he played the role. “Thanks for the lesson. I thought you were going to tell me something bad or make me bring Adrian back.”

Jennifer huffed, chin going up. “I don’t make deals with snakes and I certainly don’t want them in this camp.” She nodded to Angela, sorry for the paling forehead and flushing cheeks of their leader. “We’ll do another lesson after the teams return.”

“Are you going to ambush me again?”

Jennifer chuckled as they joined Angela. “Probably. You’re tough to get through to face-to-face.”

Marc took the hint to heart but refused to contemplate their conversation. Instead, he concentrated on Adrian vanishing between the shacks and how happy it had made him.

Angela tuned them out to finish her mini-meeting. She’d been handing out instructions the entire time she and Jennifer were sparring. “Anything else?”

“Kendle left yesterday.” Neil frowned. “Quinn tried to talk her out of it, but he made a snotty comment in the end. Kendle flipped him the bird and marched out of our perimeter.”

Angela didn’t tell him she already knew. “Did anyone go with her?”

“No.”

“She’ll be back. Let her in as if she’s been on a run.”

Neil scowled. “She wants you dead. If she comes back–”

“It’ll be because she’s had a change of heart or because we need her. Kendle is mad, not stupid. Providing she doesn’t have her gifts, she won’t try again.”

“You’re wrong.”

Rookie guards muttered at Neil’s words, but Angela shrugged. “It could happen, but she’s terrified of me. Unless she gets an advantage somehow, I have nothing to fear from her.”

“She has nothing to lose.”

Angela paused as that rang true. Her lips thinned, hands sliding into her pockets. “It would be a mistake to assume that couldn’t happen. You’re right.”

Neil gaped in shock. “What?”

Angela chuckled with the sentries around them. “You caught a possible mistake and called me on it. Good job.”

Neil followed as she came through camp, mouth hanging open.

“She can enter with permission. Talk to Jennifer. She has a spell for it, I think.”

Neil wrote it in his book. “I’ll get you information on it.”

“Excellent. Assign me a body man and go get your team ready to leave.”

Neil waved Peter into his place, replacing the man’s frown with a grin. Neil didn’t know what had caused the man’s unhappiness, but it was smoothed over now.

Angela gave Neil a subtle nod of approval as she strolled the small row of bathroom tents going up to their right. Neil was good with the men. He always had been.

Samantha snickered at Neil’s proud expression as he went by the camper where she was still stashed. *He’s so cute, so kind*. Samantha felt tears coming from the missing partner who should be walking beside him and shut it down. Her body couldn’t take it, and neither could her heart. It was time to let Jeremy go.

*One last cry*. *When I can take it.*

Samantha slowly rolled over and went to sleep. In her dreams, she was always with her men.

Angela stifled a sob, picking up Samantha’s last waking thoughts as she finished in the bathroom. She felt the same way about her dead children. “And some day, we’ll be together again.” Angela wiped away her tears. “For now, mommy’s gotta go save the world.”

Angela emerged to discover teary, smiling descendants who nodded and then went about their chores with fresh determination. Feeling the alpha’s pain and then seeing her refuse to give in made it easier to deal with their own losses. When she’d broken in the mountain, they’d been crushed too. She’d proven she could be hurt or even killed. That meant they could be as well.

Chapter Seventeen

**My New XO**

A close up of a sign

Description automatically generated

**1**

**A**ngela walked back to the warehouse that had been mostly destroyed upon their arrival, going before a body man was assigned. She wanted to determine how much of it they could salvage for use in various projects. Right now, they needed more panels for the wall around camp and she needed this exercise.

Theo and his team were already inside, dismantling.

Angela snickered from the charred doorway. “Great minds.”

Debra came over, holding out her canteen.

Angela took a drink and gave it back. “Thank you.” She studied the deaf woman. Her gunshot wound was almost healed, and she was in the good graces of everyone for taking that hit instead of letting the boss be killed. Debra was healthier and appeared happy

*I am. Theo’s wonderful.*

Angela scrutinized the newest descendant. “Wow.”

Debra gave an awkward smile. *Are you mad?*

Angela shook her head, smiling. “No. I just thought you were supposed to stay on the island. This implies you’re one of my fighters.”

Theo limped over and jerked Debra away from Angela. “She’s not!”

Angela waved off the concern of her guards.

Theo staggered in surprise as Debra pulled away from him. He was still getting his balance when she shoved him off his cane.

Theo toppled over, landing in a debris pile.

Debra stood in front of him, flashing fast hand gestures that Angela couldn’t keep up with. Thanks to her descendant connection, however, she heard the words loud and clear.

*Don’t you ever! She’s the alpha! I’m an Eagle! Don’t you do that again or I’ll knock you out!*

Eagles clapped for her.

Descendants smiled in approval.

Angela left, heart clenching. They were so willing to defend her, to die for her. She couldn’t handle the thought of disappointing them. *So I won’t, no matter what it costs me.*

**2**

“While we’re gone, you are the defenders of this camp. You are Eagles.” Kyle paused to scan the men and women, not encouraged with the weak bodies and gleaming eyes. Safe Haven was developing fanatics. Kyle wasn’t sure if he approved yet, but there was no doubt they needed the help. “You’ve been training with us for a while, though mostly off the record. The boss told you to come to this meeting because it’s your turn to help openly. We need you.”

The mood in the tent lifted, bringing Kyle to the next part of the speech. He was eager to be finished with it. He didn’t like lying. “If you act like Eagles, the camp will accept you as our replacements if we don’t return. Myself, each team leader, and every member of the council are replaceable. Only the boss isn’t. You keep her alive above everyone else. She’ll cover the rest.”

Kyle turned to nod at Kenn and to avoid the glances of the few in the small crowd who knew he didn’t mean it. Like Angela, he felt all of them were important.

Kenn came forward. “These sheets list the chain of command. I chose it. Have a problem? Talk to me now.” Kenn handed the papers out, also eager to be done. It felt morbid to be handing out replacement jobs for men who were in the tent with him. “All duties start as each scavenging team leaves. You will see them off at the gate and assume their schedules.”

People grumbled and muttered, but most were happy with the assignments. Kenn had made certain they would be. Even his body double–Ian–had been handpicked to not upset the boss and to follow her every order. Ian was thrilled, already casting smug looks at the others and grateful glances toward Kenn.

Kenn didn’t meet his eye. He hadn’t done it for the ally it might create. He’d done it because there was no way Ian could ever really take his place. The rookie would be efficient and unimaginative, exactly what Marc had been. It wouldn’t replace the real thing in every way, so when Kenn did return alive, there would be no threat to his place.

Morgan nodded at Kenn, approving. The Marine would have been in trouble if he’d only done that for himself, but he’d covered all of the team leaders and XOs in the same manner. No one would be in danger of replacement when they came back, but the camp would still be safe.

Morgan had caught Kenn working on it several times after the camp was asleep. Politics shouldn’t be a part of anything anymore, but it was and it mattered. If these men thought their place was being filled too well while they were on a run, they would be distracted and end up getting themselves and each other killed. Kenn’s choice had saved them and the boss a lot of possible pain. *He really seems to have changed*, Morgan reflected, watching Kenn leave without enjoying the bonding now happening. *So why am I still worried?*

Sweating from her quick return–she’d run back so Marc wouldn’t yell at her for not taking a guard–Angela entered the tent as Kenn left, catching the thoughts of both men. She took note of Morgan’s concern and Kenn’s caution. The Marine was doing everything just right. That only meant one thing and Morgan was picking up on it without knowing he was doing it. Kenn was hiding something and it had to be big for him to be risking his place this way. Morgan would come to that conclusion soon and watch Kenn harder. He would discover it, expose it, and Kenn would be done in Safe Haven for good. Tonya, on the other hand, was showing honest reform and would be allowed to stay, but she would still be stained by it.

*I have to stop that*, Angela decided. *My vengeance is nothing compared to their child growing up knowing his father betrayed everyone. They won’t let a kid forget that.*

People were often cruel, and the children were the ones who paid for it. Angela didn’t want that in her camp, but it was impossible to teach people forgiveness. They had to learn it on their own and that meant Kenn had to go away. It would be better if the camp thought he died out there, than to have them know he’d betrayed them again. Angela didn’t know what he was hiding, but it didn’t matter at this point. She’d made her decision. Kenn needed a change of heart and she was going to make sure that he got it.

**3**

“We’re going to the refineries.” Neil swept his assembled team. “All of them within ten miles of this location, anyway.” He held up a map with red circles on it. “There are a lot of them. We’ll scan contents and conditions, mark it and move on. Then we’ll start at the farthest edge and collect it all, rolling toward home. We’ll be gone the two full days to hit them all. While we’re gone, the boss will get the boat ready to hold what we’re bringing. Trucks will be emptied at the dock and sent back out. Drivers will be on twelve hour shifts. The next six days may feel like the longest of our lives, but that’s it, folks. Six days and then we get to sail away from all this chaos.”

Neil handed around the cigar pouch he’d found and kept refilled since first joining Safe Haven. He didn’t smoke, but most of his team did. “We’re also getting a replacement for our missing man.”

Silence fell. Men took cigars with guilty looks and deep frowns.

“I feel the same way.” Neil sighed. “But we need that slot filled. You know it and so do I.” Neil gestured. “I refused to pick. The boss made the choice and I’m happy with it.”

Everyone tensed or paused to hear the name. No one expected the boss to promote from within. The soreness wouldn’t ride well on missions.

Neil pointed at the flap.

Jennifer entered.

“My new XO.”

Jennifer went to the empty chair and sat. She didn’t make a speech or offer the condolences she felt they needed to hear. She crossed her arms over her chest and regarded the team leader.

Neil cleared his throat. “This is a permanent switch. It’s being posted in the mess right now...by the boss.”

Neil’s team was only surprised a female was being sent out of camp. Jennifer had already proven she could fight and follow orders.

Neil was relieved there wasn’t going to be a problem, but he still had to treat the girl like he would anyone else sent to replace Jeremy. “You have big shoes to fill. Never let your guard down or someone else will be voted in no matter what the boss wants.”

Jennifer nodded. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Good, because we won’t take it easy on you. We don’t see tits. We see a trigger finger.”

Jennifer snickered. “Well, I do see balls. Twelve huge ones who will help me grow a giant pair of my own.”

It was the perfect thing to say and Neil had no doubt she knew it as the men promised to train her like they had Angela. He also concluded she would be a better student. Jennifer would soak up every lesson, not just the ones she thought she needed.

“Yes, I will. It’s not so I can say I’m a badass. It’s so when my gifts run out, I can survive. I don’t need glory like you guys do. Keep that for yourselves and give me the skills you already take for granted.”

“We’ll do that, my word on it.” Neil gazed around. “Right?”

The team had understood enough to agree, and they said so. It helped that they liked Jennifer. They also approved of Kyle’s choice in a mate, though few of them would say so. That was a line Neil’s team, and most of the others, weren’t willing to cross yet. Kyle’s team had accepted it sooner because he was their leader. If he’d been just one of the team, they wouldn’t have supported him. The marriage would settle the rest of those harsh feelings, Neil hoped. The couple wanted to be together and though she was young, Jennifer had been through more in one life than most people would have suffered in ten. That gave her the right to adult choices. She’d picked Kyle as much as he’d picked her. They were a good match.

Jennifer smiled at him. “Thank you.”

Neil nodded curtly. “But that’s it. I’ll go further when I see you two as a happily married couple living by camp rules and upholding our honor–both of you.”

“We will. You’ll all see. He’s good for me and I’m good for him.”

“Enough.” Neil ended the conversation. “We’re leaving in three hours. I want all of you at the vehicles to help with loading an hour before we roll. The camp and the boss will want to come by for words. Tolerate it with smiles and we’ll blow off steam after we’re out of sight. Like usual. Do not spook the herd with your bad moods or worries. Save that for your team, who understands how you feel.”

**4**

“Can you fit me in before you go?”

Neil nodded. “I’ve been expecting you. Come on in.” He fastened the flap after she entered, ignoring the Marine who took up a spot in the afternoon shadows. Marc clearly knew why she’d come. His disapproving waves were slapping everyone in range.

Angela took off her gun belt and drew in a deep breath. No matter how many times she faced someone in hand-to-hand, she was always afraid. It was tiresome to never be able to conquer it.

“Would you like to pick up where we left off or go through the basics for this lesson? It’s been a while. You could probably use a refresher.”

“Which do you recommend?”

Neil saw her clenched fists and steeled himself. “You need a full workout so when you leave this tent, you’ll be too tired to be scared.”

Angela stepped forward and swung.

Marc observed the violent battle on the walls of the tent. Angela’s shadow was no match for Neil. She had heart and skill, but her small size was a detriment. If her opponent got a hold of her, she was doomed.

Neil knew that. He’d been training her to avoid being grabbed, but he had realized that wouldn’t keep her alive. At some point, the enemy would get hands on her and then she would be hurt or killed. He was now teaching her to free herself from ugly holds and that meant grabbing her, dealing with her pain and flinches, her gasps and little cries of near-panic. Neil was able to get through it because he wanted their women to be able to survive, to win the battles waiting for them. Eagles or not, all Safe Haven people would eventually face a foe and they would only come through it alive if they knew what to do at the time.

Angela wiped away tears, not missing the chunk of hair in Neil’s shocked hand. She slammed her head into his hard stomach, taking his air. Before he could recover, she kicked his ankle and took him to the mat.

Neil rolled and kicked, catching her in the shoulder.

Angela staggered, but didn’t let it detour her. She had the advantage when Neil was down.

Neil kept rolling, but she stayed on his heels, delivering punches to his kidneys and neck that would have taken him down if she had more strength. As it was, he could only avoid the blows, but not return them as she kept chasing him around the mat.

Sensing a shifting tide coming, Angela tackled him, rolling them up in a nasty pin that should have ended in a sleeper hold. Neil himself had taught her the move.

Neil let her wear herself out trying to put him to sleep, knowing she needed the release, but he was honestly proud of her for getting him there at all. None of his team could unless he let them.

Angela let go and slumped on the mat. “Like you just did me, right?”

Neil chuckled, not even winded. “Of course. Most people won’t be as guarded against it as I am. You needed to know how to follow through.”

“Thank you.”

Neil grunted. Her blood was on his hands and he wasn’t eaten up with guilt. It was almost nice.

“Like old times,” she wheezed, pushing up to walk with her arms above her head. “Does this really work?”

Neil shrugged. “I’ve always doubted it. I think gym teachers just wanted to know where everyone’s hands were.”

Angela laughed. Now that she’d had a release, she felt better. “What about you?” She met his eye. “What can I do for you?”

Neil deliberated the list of things he and Samantha needed, then shook his head. “We’re good, I think. It’s material, not emotional. I can cover that while we scavenge.”

“I’ll take care of her while you’re gone. You take care of yourself.”

“And Jennifer.”

Angela didn’t smile at Neil’s add. “Yes, coming back without her would not bode well for any of us.”

“Have you seen trouble?”

“No. It looks like the teams all make good runs and get back without issues.”

“And the camp, while we’re gone?” Neil frowned. “Or after we get back.”

Angela sighed. “There are issues that need to be sorted out before we leave. Samantha isn’t involved.”

Neil frowned, hearing the tone. “But I am.” He sulked at Angela’s grim expression. “She’s coming.”

Angela nodded. “Seth and Becky, along with a bus of dangerous children–and Jeff, who now has a new goal and it isn’t this camp’s survival. With them will be Doug’s trio. None of them wants to be here anymore, but they won’t have a choice once the refugee wave hits. If they don’t go with us, they won’t make it off this beach.” Angela wiped her hands down her sandy jeans and headed for the flap. “Hurry back, Neil. We’ll need you home before that wave hits.”

Neil immediately began working on ways to speed his team through their stops.

“You didn’t tell him all the other stuff.” Marc fell in step as she began a round of the camp that was settling in. Behind them, the ocean gave gentle roars as the tide went out.

“Becky is Neil’s only real weakness now. Once he finally admits the truth and starts making amends, he’ll be able to forgive himself and move on. Samantha and the babies need that from him. Unfortunately, it has to be fast-tracked because of everything we have to do before we can set sail. He’s in for a rough few weeks and then all four of them can be free of that mistake.”

“Will they be?” Marc was curious. He didn’t care much for or about Becky, but he liked Neil and wanted the trooper to at least be content if he couldn’t be happy.

“So do I. But it will be up to them. Seth’s jealous; Becky’s ashamed and still attracted to Neil. Neil will always want to fuck her and Samantha knows it, so she’ll always want Becky gone. If that couple goes with us, things could be messy for a bit.”

“Or forever.”

Angela nodded. “Of course. Becky is the woman scorned. As I’m sure you know, we’re quite capable of causing a fuss when irked.”

Marc laughed, but inside, he wondered if it wouldn’t be better for Angela to refuse them entry. When it came to being useful, Neil and Samantha would win.

“For life on the island, sure. What about a final battle where magic determines the fate of humanity?”

Marc hesitated. Neil wouldn’t be useful in such a fight as more than a spotter or sniper, but his shooting wasn’t good enough for that. Seth’s was and he had gifts. “Damn.”

“Exactly. The redheads are all wildcards in Safe Haven’s deck. We have to be careful of flipping them, but their value is priceless.”

Ivan jogged up to them and gave Marc a pointed look. “Can we have a minute?”

Marc smiled coldly. “I hope you make it back, safe and sound.” Marc signaled Shawn to take his place. “I’m looking forward to training you.”

Ivan didn’t doubt it, but Marc’s anger was worth a few minutes alone with his obsession.

“Will I make it back?”

Angela nodded. She didn’t tell Ivan he was marked or that he would be tracked easier because of their bond. He knew and didn’t care. He only wanted her word that he would return, that he would see her again before he died. There was no way she could avoid that type of bond. It was too deep, too honest. “You’re going to bring someone back. She’s special.”

Ivan scowled. “I don’t want her.”

“Don’t overlook the future for dreams.” Angela tried to forestall the coming question, aware of Shawn lurking and descendants listening

“I need to know.” Ivan drew on his courage. He had to know if she’d been putting off vibes to him or if he’d been imagining it because he wanted it so bad. “Give me the truth. I’m not a threat, even when disappointed.”

Angela believed that, but she wouldn’t have lied anyway. “My number three. If they both fall, I’ll need you.”

Ivan left, refusing to think about anything except getting done and getting back.

Angela watched him go, hating herself. Ivan and Marc were so much alike that Adrian might even be eliminated from the list in time. It was what she was hoping for. Ivan’s sentiments came from growing respect and love. Adrian’s came from lust and she now understood the difference between the two. She would never return the emotions, but she would need them to help battle the emptiness in her heart so she still cared enough to lead her people.

Angela was covering all bases, but she didn’t really think it was going to be an issue. She had changed the rules. Marc wasn’t going to die and her would-be-lovers would never get what they most desired.

Angela felt William lingering in her mind and refused to contemplate that vision of the future. *Maybe I won’t survive the final fight*. *If I die, no one gets me, and my people survive. If I live, it all might restart, and I won’t be responsible for that again.*

Angela locked down on those thoughts as William perked up, scenting something he could use. She’d made her plans for the final moments. She already knew there was no peace to be found here on earth. *So I’ll search elsewhere.*

**5**

“The teams are assembled.” Kenn handed her a small stack of notes clipped together with a pin. He deftly kept the pin as she took the papers.

Angela lifted a brow.

Kenn chuckled. “I traded for it.”

Angela’s face puckered. “Why?”

“Got plans for it.”

Angela rolled her eyes but didn’t tell him not to do what he was planning. She preferred not to interfere with the inner workings of the Eagles. It often disappointed her that Marc didn’t understand it after his time in the military. Sometimes, paybacks had to be handled internally.

“Kyle’s team and Neil’s are leaving now. The rest in the next hour, including me.” Kenn followed her to the parking area, glad to see the wall going up here. They had the camp moved, unloaded, and a few items in place, but this wasn’t a normal setup and they were improvising everything. Setting up on sand was a new nightmare. Everything heavy kept sinking, including items that had to remain level. They were improvising by laying planks and boxes, but it was time consuming. In the military, equipment had come with solid bottoms or pallets for this type of terrain.

“You’re doing fine.” Angela knew he was stressing over it because he feared losing good marks if camp wasn’t set up on time. “We’re not staying here long. Just put out the basics.”

Kenn gave a mental sigh of relief and headed off to make the adjustments. The basics were almost up now. That would put him back on track timewise.

Angela went to the waiting teams. She liked seeing the men off, as Adrian had. Sometimes they gave information or let on about doubts and fears that needed to be answered before they left so it didn’t interfere with the mission. Sometimes, they just needed to see the boss and be reminded of what was at stake.

Angela went to Kyle and his team first. As the top Eagles in Safe Haven, they deserved that respect. “All set?”

“We will be.” Kyle didn’t want to leave.

Neither did Neil. He was waiting nearby to have words before they left.

“It’ll be fine until you get back.”

Both men relaxed. Embarrassed smiles presented, and hands eased away from weapon belts.

“Permission to get gone?”

“Be careful, gentlemen. We won’t make it long without you.”

Tension returned to the teams, along with determination to end those threats and get home without injuries.

Satisfied she’d switched their unrest to a better target, Angela went to the next team. She hadn’t spotted trouble, but it paid to keep the men alert. The future changed with each ripple, so the clear stretch she’d glimpsed might not stay that way.

“Are you sure all of them should go?” William joined her.

“Yes.” Angela let him stand too close to her, thinking he didn’t look like Adrian, or smell like Adrian, or put off sexy vibes like Adrian. None of them did except for Marc and he wasn’t giving her that side of himself right now. “We have one window and a big list of items still needed. It has to be now and all of them have to go for us to get it all. We won’t have another shot.” She looked over at him. “I’m also sorry to tell you I think the time shrank. I’m not sure where, but I felt it.”

“We’ll be gone soon.”

She nodded again. “It’s for the best.”

“Yes.” William’s misery was clear enough to scoop into a bucket. Angela couldn’t stand it. She pointed at Marc. “Go talk to him.”

William didn’t like being dismissed “About what? I gave him the information he required.”

“He has information for you.”

Marc gave her a subtle nod as William headed his way. He didn’t know why Angela wanted the man busy, but Marc did have words to give him.

William’s lips tightened. He hadn’t realized she was blowing him off.

“It’s not blowing you off.” Marc led the man away. “It’s a sensitive time for her. She doesn’t need your emotions clouding things.”

William presumed she was menstruating and let it go.

Marc hid a smile and pointed toward the water. “Show me the best spot for a fishing operation? It has to be small and fast.”

Angela detoured toward Bucky, who had stayed quiet and helpful so far during his time here as William’s escort. “Can I have a minute?”

Bucky followed her to the edge of the caution tape, aware of sentries from both camps observing with frowns. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, but William is going to and I need you to help me stop him.”

Bucky sighed. “I’m sorry he’s like that with you. We’ve all spoken to him. We’re disappointed. We thought he was better...stronger.”

“So did he, but wildcards are meant to stir things up and that’s what he is, though he won’t accept it yet.” Angela made sure Bucky was hit with a full blast of her alpha power. “I need you to make sure he doesn’t go against my orders.”

Bucky straightened, immediately nodding. “That shit doesn’t work on me, but I’ll still do everything I can. Should I tell our people, or will they support him on it?”

Angela smiled at him. “I would have offered you a place already if I thought you’d take it.”

Bucky was happy to hear that, but he hadn’t considered going with them even once. “You’re doomed and damned, lady. I want no part of that.”

Angela sighed, thinking the same about Ciemus. “Either way, if he goes against my orders, bad things will come of it. Do you believe me?”

“I have no reason not to.” Bucky’s problem wasn’t with her leadership, but with her determination to leave America to the elements and the enemies instead of staying to fight.

“I want to.” Angela gave him the truth. “Every time I look at the future, it’s empty here. I won’t take that chance.”

Bucky wasn’t going to argue. “I hope you all survive, and I will talk to our people about making sure he follows your rules.”

“It’s not a rule issue.” Angela turned away. “He’ll go against me on an order. If he gets his way, all of us will die on this beach.”

“Because of trackers?”

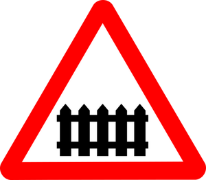
“Because I’ll have to kill him.”

Chapter Eighteen

**I Fought for It**

Day Three

**Evening Mess**



**1**

**“W**hen is she going to take a break?”

Monica and Trinity watched Angela go by the table where they were resting. They’d been laboring until the sunset picnic was called.

“When the teams get back, maybe.” Monica was busy writing on the table where she and the pregnant women were enjoying the breeze and views. Camp men surveyed them regularly, taking their guard duties seriously. This was the first time all of their security had been gone, but the mood wasn’t tense. Everyone had witnessed Angela fire walking across the beach.

“We should mention it.”

Monica nodded. “But to who? Marc can’t get her to do much.”

“We, the people, can.” Trinity smiled when Monica glanced over in surprise. “We’re the new den mothers.”

Monica scowled. “She said a month. That’s almost up.”

“We’re all carrying the future or are about to be.” Trinity’s tone was hopeful. “She won’t let us risk them to be warriors when the men have it covered.”

Monica considered that, watching Angela stop to help with a small training lesson on firearms that Grant was hosting. “I don’t think that’s how it has to be. She’s both.”

Trinity pointed at the children they were watching. “Is she?”

Monica sighed. “Being an Eagle won’t be as rough as her job.”

Trinity was forced to concede that. “Still, she wants us looking after the kids.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I wasn’t before, but I am now. If we only have four years, I want to spend them with children, with family.”

“I plan to do both, like the boss. It may not be a perfect situation, but this is the new world. We can do more than we ever thought we could before it all blew up.”

Trinity shrugged. “Maybe.”

Tonya slid onto a bench across from them, bowl of ice cream in hand. Having power on the boat meant a freezer. Their cooks were already playing with dishes they hadn’t had in a long time.

“Yum!” Monica dug her spoon into the side of Tonya’s generous bowl. “Chocolate!”

Tonya laughed, sitting the bowl between them. “What are we talking about?”

“The future of females in the Eagles.”

Tonya paused. “You think she’s going to change the rules?”

“What are the hens clucking about?” Samantha joined them, moving slow. Charlie was at her elbow, holding a large bowl and a deep frown. He hadn’t been cleared to go with any of the teams. Despite knowing he might have point over the camp during the next two days, the boy was pissed.

“I’m good.” Samantha waved off her sentry.

Charlie handed her the bowl and stormed away, kicking at the sand.

The females breathed a sigh of relief as his smothering attitude left.

“Eagle rules for females.” Monica scooped out chocolate ice cream with a huge grin. “Will it stay the same as now?”

Samantha sat the bowl of vanilla down. “We’re going to take over the Eagles.” Samantha didn’t notice the sudden silence. She swallowed a small bite and went on. “We outnumber the men now. Not all of them will survive the next four years. We’ll have to replace the fallen.”

Samantha paused as sadness slapped at her. She forced herself to scoop a larger bite and shoved it into her mouth for the distraction. Vanilla ice cream was her favorite dessert over anything else.

The hens gazed around to verify Samantha’s words and found Ciemus women on duty with a few camp men.

“This is what it will look like when they leave us there.” Samantha scooped another bite.

“You’ll go with them, I thought.” Trinity gestured. “You’re one of the council.”

Samantha shrugged. “I’m a den mother until she needs me to be an Eagle. When they leave the island, I’ll still be a senior man on any side. Looking forward to it.”

And with that, Samantha flipped the mood and made the women consider a new future where they were indeed more than they’d ever thought they could be.

**2**

*When we return, my pups will be grown with offspring of their own.*

Angela knelt to rub Dog’s ears. “You wanna talk about that?”

Dog groaned, leaning into her hands. *Why?*

“Does it bother you to leave them?”

Dog groaned again, paw thumping. *No. Should it?*

“I don’t know how it works for animals. Do you feel love for your pups?”

*I have love for their mother.*

“Not the same.”

Dog sat, willing to take the attention as long as she wanted to give it. *No, but I didn’t meet them.*

“Would it matter?”

Dog didn’t answer.

Angela took that as a no. She knew most male animals didn’t care for their children or were aggressive toward juveniles. Angela was studying that in humans and making notes. There would be a lot of mixed families in Safe Haven, thanks to having so many widows and orphans. If that was going to be a problem later, she needed to know.

*How far ahead do you look?* Dog was curious about how her mind functioned. He’d never met a human like Angela, male or female.

“Years.” She stood up, stretching. “I went to a decade on some of the issues.”

*And found solutions?*

“For a lot of it.” Angela gazed toward their old site, seeing lights. Theo’s team was still dismantling the warehouse.

*Marc said to keep you in the perimeter*, Dog reminded.

“I have point over camp. I would never leave my post.” Angela went to the caution tape and ducked under it.

*You just left!*

“This entire shoreline is mine, Dog.” Angela picked up speed to a nice jog to cover the mile. “I’m in training again, too.”

Dog kept pace, enjoying the softer sand beneath his paws. *This feels good.*

Angela detoured a bit to run through the surf that was coming in. Because she wanted it, the water lapped over her.

Dog snorted at a spray and switched to her heel, running now to keep up. The cool water soothed his sore paws.

Angela increased speed to the next level, pleased with her progress. She’d been working out whenever she had time. Moments like this were helping. Plus, Jennifer was about to pull into camp with a truck and orders to spend the night here. She would head out again at dawn with an empty vehicle. Jennifer was upset about her leader’s order. When she realized the boss was a mile away, she would take over rounds of the peaceful camp and be soothed that she was needed here. The girl would be tired, but she was young, and her shoulder was fully healed. Neil would find out she hadn’t slept and force her to rest tomorrow during their travel between locations.

Engines sounded behind them.

Angela let her energy out, burning off her worry over the teams and the group in the west.

Dog fell behind and kicked into his faster gear. He’d been holding back before. Now, he flew by her, issuing an unspoken challenge.

Angela laughed, pushing herself. She couldn’t catch the blur, but she was able to stay on Dog’s heel, reversing their roles.

Debra felt her coming and came to the doorway of the warehouse. All that remained was this side and the basic frame.

Angela kept going. She was enjoying the freedom.

Dog slowed, feeling Marc wake and call.

Angela did too. She eyed the dark landscape as she slowed, longing to be free to roam the night now that she wasn’t scared of it.

*I’ll cover things if you want that*, Marc told her, picking his words carefully. He’d never felt her on the edge like this. She’d always hidden it.

Angela slowed and made a U-turn in the wet sand. *Go to sleep. I’m not going anywhere.* Calm acceptance filled her mind and transmitted to Marc.

Face grim at another sign of the plan succeeding, Marc went back to sleep.

**3**

“The boss said to meet you here.” Brittani stopped by Jennifer as the girl paused near the parking area and main gate entrance to the camp.

“Two minutes late.”

Brittani flushed. “I dropped off a basket for the kids and got mobbed. Plus, you were out of camp and I thought the boss had made a mistake. Sorry.”

Jennifer shrugged. “We’re not usually hard about a minute or two, providing it isn’t every time.”

“It won’t be.” Brittani scanned Jennifer’s stiff form. “You don’t like me or something, right?”

Jennifer regarded her with a brow lifted. “Why do you think that?”

“Because you were thinking it.”

“What am I thinking now?”

Brittani pushed through the girl’s wall. “My future in camp… Your wedding… Angela’s love triangle… Your honeymoon…”

“That’s enough.” Jennifer broke the connection, noting the woman was strong but not on her level yet. “Why did she pick you?”

Brittani shrugged. “She said something about wisdom, but I don’t feel wise.”

“It comes with time, I hear.”

“And with abuse or hardships.”

Jennifer’s mood dipped a little more. “Yeah.”

Brittani drew in a breath. “I think she meant for me to give you help.”

“With what? You’re already on the shift with me until I’m tired of you.”

Brittani shrugged. “No idea, but that’s what I picked up from her.”

“She’s the boss.” Jennifer sighed. “If she wants us to talk and share wisdom, we should probably do it.”

“You start.”

Jennifer studied her. “Why do you always wear that raggedy coat? Is it special?”

“I fought for it.” Brittani fingered a thread hanging from the sleeve. “We were caught in a mall a few months after the war.” Her voice lowered. “First person I ever killed.”

“It wasn’t over the coat.”

“No. They wanted Gus.”

“You love him.”

“With all my heart.”

“But you’ve replaced him.”

Brittani sighed, thinking of the Eagle she’d known for so short a time. She still missed Shane. “Again.”

Jennifer felt the urge to pat the woman’s wrist and resisted. “I liked Shane too, though not in that way.” She bobbed her chin toward a woman with an Eagle kit over her shoulder. “She might be able to talk with you about him.”

Brittani’s expression iced over. “She hasn’t spared him a single tear except when she was worried over not caring. All she wants is Adrian.”

“Good.”

Brittani nodded sharply. “Agreed. She’s leaving. Marc told her to make a choice and she did.”

Jennifer considered the consequences of letting Nancy leave camp without trying to keep her in the light and didn’t care for the result. Angela wouldn’t like losing people, no matter who it was. “Come on.”

Nancy heard the quick steps behind her and stopped. She had assumed someone would try to talk her out of leaving, but she’d still hoped to avoid it while everyone was gone or busy.

“I need to make sure it’s what you really want and not what you feel you owe to Adrian.”

Nancy winced. She’d also been hoping to skip that.

Jennifer grunted. “I understand, but I have a duty to you and every member of Safe Haven. I take it seriously.”

Nancy rotated to glare at the girl. “You couldn’t give a shit less about me. You’re worried over the boss.”

Jennifer’s lips tightened. “I care about you, too. I believe the boss is better off if you’re with Adrian and he’s not here, but only if that’s also what’s best for–”

“Save it!” Nancy regarded Brittani with a sneer. “You want to try before I blow this place?”

Brittani nodded. “What if he doesn’t want you?”

Jennifer winced along with Nancy. *That’s hitting below the bra.*

Brittani shrugged at their displeasure. She always faced truths head-on. “He left her here. I’m not being cruel. I’m being realistic. He wants Angela. Not this one.”

Nancy growled, stepping forward. “This one will knock your teeth out!”

“Because you’re scared to challenge Angela openly for Adrian, even though she has Marc…” Brittani kept reading as Nancy took up a fighting stance. “And you know he doesn’t want you, but you’re getting a…”

Nancy punched the woman to shut her up.

Brittani took the almost surprise hit, not dodging. Used to scrapping, she didn’t fall or retreat. She swung back.

Nancy hit the ground, kit flying into the dirt.

Jennifer stepped between them, secretly laughing. “That’s enough.”

Nancy scrambled to her feet, grabbing her kit. “Screw you both!” She stormed to the gate.

Jennifer stopped Brittani from going after the woman. “Wipe away the blood so Angela doesn’t see it. She’s coming.”

Jennifer watched Nancy reach the gate as Brittani rotated to find the boss while she cleaned her bloody nose. Nancy had a strong arm.

“Yours was better.” Jennifer nodded to the sentry when he looked at her for permission to let Nancy leave. “She didn’t stay on her feet.” Jennifer waited for the gate to be locked back, then pivoted to smile at the boss. “I have good news and bad news.”

Angela’s expression darkened as she read their thoughts. “She’s gone?”

“Yes.”

Angela shook her head, joining them. “She’ll find out he can’t be trusted. We always learn that in the end.”

“You mean Adrian or all men?” Brittani asked.

“I mean people in general.” Angela let them share some of her bitterness. “If most people were trustworthy, we wouldn’t be surviving an apocalypse.”

They couldn’t argue with that and didn’t try.

Jennifer gestured toward the tables, where Candy was scribbling furiously in her notebook. “They’re doing arranged seating and everything. This is too much hassle for our situation.”

“We need this.” Angela’s tone rose. “It’s not all about you. We’ve survived the aftermath of nuclear war for eleven months. That miracle deserves to be celebrated.”

“Whatever.” Jennifer continued to grumble as she turned for a scan of camp.

Angela and Brittani chuckled, sharing knowing looks. Jennifer was having pre-wedding jitters. It was cute.

Jennifer huffed, stamping her foot. “It is not!”

Angela’s laugh floated over the camp, bringing the shield to life.

People rotated to discover who had caused it. They smiled at the two women with the boss.

Eagles also noted it and added another layer of approval to their opinions of the new woman who was going to be leading her own team. They’d only known her as their cook so far. It was a big jump in both status and respect.

Brittani flushed under the attention but lifted her chin. *If I want it, I’ll get it. They’d better accept that now.*

“Nice.” Jennifer looked at Angela. “I like her.”

Jennifer left them to do rounds.

Angela smiled at Brittani. “Your shift is over. You’ve been cleared.”

Brittani was staring after the girl. “Really?”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I am. I wanted to walk with her.”

“She won’t give you an invitation. None of them will. If you want it, go get it.”

Brittani took off running to catch up with Jennifer.

Angela turned to stare at the gate, where the guards were giving her hand motion updates. Around the camp, people began practicing their shields. They were only allowed to do it when leadership had a barrier over the camp.

*Are you positive this is what you want to do? He can’t be trusted. You understand that. I know you do.*

Nancy stiffened, but kept walking. *He won’t want me, but I have to go. You understand that. I know you do.*

*Yes.* Swallowing jealousy, Angela continued her rounds. *Be safe and be happy. I wish it for you both.*

Nancy didn’t reply. She was now running away from safety and into the abyss of the unknown. Adrian had called her to join Safe Haven. Where he went, so did she.

**4**

“Will you help me get ready for bed?”

Marc smiled at the boy. “Of course.” He held out his hand.

Cody placed his fingers into Marc’s hand, peering up. “Can I have a piggyback?”

Marc knelt for the happy boy to climb on, drawing attention from the other kids. Some of them were saddened by the sight. They missed their own fathers. Others were hopeful that Marc would eventually be able to share his love with them too.

Angela watched, Dog at her side, as Marc took Cody to the bathroom area for teeth brushing, face washing, an ear check, and the potty. They were teaching the children a nightly care list, hoping it would keep them healthier.

*He is good with that pup*. Dog sat by Angela’s feet, eyes tracking the two cats rolling in nip outside the pharmacy tent.

Angela turned to do a sweep behind them. The ocean was loud, making all the guards twitchy. “Yes. Cody already loves him.”

Dog huffed. *Why do they do that?*

Angela followed Dog’s line of sight back to the rolling felines. “Not sure, really. It doesn’t work on most kittens, but adult females who’ve had kittens go nuts for it.”

Dog flipped his tail through the sand, sending a small spider flying before it could climb over Angela’s boot. *Having pups changes the mother.* Dog whimpered as the two cats looked in his direction. He tensed, fur raising.

“Are you going to chase them?” Angela’s tone was curt.

Dog slid behind her leg. *Not unless they bite me.*

Angela laughed, reaching down to scratch his ears. “I know you aren’t scared. What gives?”

Dog whimpered as the cats prowled closer. *They like to sleep on me. I wake up with pussy hair all over my face. It’s disgusting.*

Angela burst out laughing, scaring the cats off.

Dog licked her hand. *I owe you one.*

**5**

Adrian had made camp in a garage, a few miles from the boat. He didn’t seal the entrances or prepare any defenses. He wasn’t staying here and if someone found him, he was no longer bound by Safe Haven’s rules. He’d left that light and now he was free to do as he pleased.

“Not exactly.” Kendle entered the light, cheeks bruised. “I left before she kicked me out.”

Adrian motioned toward the small fire. “You can warm up, but you can’t stay. I’m done with it, all of it.”

“You can’t walk away.”

“I already did.”

“When that boat sails, you’ll be on it.”

“No, I won’t.” Adrian tossed his kit to her. “And neither will you.”

Kendle began digging through the bag to assemble a meal. “Where will we be?”

“Right here, trying to atone for our mistakes. But not together.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Okay. She’s almost ready to leave Marc for you. Stay away from her for a while and it might happen.”

Adrian sighed, mood bitter. “I said tell me something I don’t know.”

“I’m going to kill her.”

“If you came here hoping to push me into removing you, words like that might do it.”

Kendle bared her teeth at him, eyes wild. “I want my gifts back!”

Adrian stared. He hadn’t realized she’d been punished. “Wow. I can’t believe Jenny did it.”

Kendle snorted, trying not to cry. “I had to track you like an animal to get here. If we hadn’t shared a camp before, I’d still be wandering around out there.”

“Tell me what happened?”

“I...”

Adrian saw it in her mind, thrilled she could no longer read his thoughts. “You crossed a line.”

“Tell me something I don’t know!” Kendle flung it back at him.

Adrian pulled his bedroll open. “Jennifer didn’t want to do it. It wasn’t her idea.”

“Who? Angela, right?”

Adrian shook his head, able to see the other people in her memory. “It came from an Eagle. Jennifer was given a nod.”

Kendle ran through the people in the vehicle and growled. “He’s not even one of us!”

Adrian laughed at her. “Neil is one of the first members of Safe Haven and the most upstanding male in camp. He’s from my first Eagle teams and he’s having twins with a descendant on the council that makes laws and decisions for everyone. Neil doesn’t need to be one of us. He has everything else going for him.”

“All these damn boy scouts.” Kendle’s shoulders slumped. “Why can’t they be more like you?”

Adrian snickered. “They are, doll, just not over you.”

“Yeah.”

“You can’t blame them for it.” Adrian pushed off his filthy boots. “You’ve never tried to fit in. You don’t have the same goals, and you hate the person they all love. What did you expect?”

“Consideration for what I’ve been through.”

“Ah.” He pinned her with a hard look. “How much consideration did you have for the rest of the survivors?”

“They haven’t been through what I have.”

“No, they’ve been through worse.”

Kendle held up her mangled arms. “What could be worse than being eaten alive?”

“Watching your children die.”

Kendle scowled. “She miscarried. It’s not the same.”

“That’s your nastiness showing, my dear. The loss of a child before birth is as bad as one after. However, I wasn’t referring to Angela. I’m referring to those sheep you despise.”

Kendle paused her spiteful response. “I’ve never been mean to camp members.”

“You’ve never had consideration for them, either. Well over half of those people have buried a child. Or had one taken so they don’t know where they are or if they’re even alive. You suffered. No one can deny that, but you didn’t get the worst of the deal by far and yet you act like you have.” Adrian looked away. “Some people saw their kids raped and murdered. Your bite marks are nothing compared to the pain in their souls.”

Kendle didn’t know what to say.

“There’s nothing you can say. You’ve been heartless to people. We all have our own pain and torments. Yours are no better or worse than anyone else’s, Kendle. We’re all survivors.”

“Why do people react to her this way, like she’s the air you breathe?”

“She’s the alpha.”

Kendle snorted. “Like that explains anything to me.”

Adrian remembered she hadn’t been around for the meetings and conversations. “Her happiness, or sadness, rubs off. We feel what she feels.”

“I feel nauseous.”

Adrian chuckled. “Yeah, me too. She’s thinking about Marc and their relationship right now. He’s pissing her off again.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because she’s wishing he was more like me.” Adrian laid down and put his hands beneath his head. “She only does that when he’s being an ass.”

“I hope you never break the charm! If I can’t be happy, neither can she.”

“And you wanting to take what makes her happy is fair?”

“It’s not just what makes her happy. I want her life.”

“To live it or take it?”

Kendle didn’t reply.

Adrian signaled at the pot. “Let that boil for a bit. I’m taking a nap.” Adrian’s adventures in the shack had been long and miserable.

“Watch it yourself.” Kendle got up and left. *I hate them. I hate all of them for making me feel this way. I’ve been horribly abused, but I’m supposed to forget it and help others?* Kendle snorted, not caring that it was dark and cold. *I’ve been alone since Luke died. Might as well live that way.*

Adrian let her go. Kendle needed an eye-opener, but even if she didn’t get it, she would still be away from Angela and that was all he cared about now. Kendle was a serious threat. If both women got on that boat like this, only one of them would walk off it. The other would be dumped overboard.

Chapter Nineteen

**Parent Connection**

Day 4

**Noon**

A close up of a sign

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“T**hat’s a lot of lube.”

Kyle and the teams snickered at Neil’s comment.

This refinery hadn’t been looted, but it had been abandoned mid-work. Drums and barrels sat on trucks, pallets, and in stacks that could only be moved with the giant forklift in the center of the lobby. Cars were undamaged except from the weather, still sitting neatly in fading parking spaces with doors open and hoods up. Windows held only nature fractures, and no bodies lined the walkways. *Or bullet holes*, Morgan added.

Kyle signaled Neil’s team to the rear as he and his men went in the front. He didn’t tell them to stay alert. They knew their jobs too well for that. There was also nothing going on here. Kyle had already consulted with Jennifer and Morgan. It was empty. When they returned to camp, Kyle planned to ask Angela how it was possible for these coastal areas to be empty of people but not looted. This was the fifth refinery they’d scouted today, and they were all the same. It appeared as though the people had left quickly, but without fear or panic. Kyle usually shoved the oddities under the carpet of his mind, but this was too much. He might need an answer.

“It’s clear.” Neil met Kyle in the center of the massive warehouse complex a few minutes later. “Just like the last one. Even found trucks waiting to ship out to local places. They took their vehicles, but left the oil and fuel. Makes no sense.”

Kyle grunted, making notes in his book.

Neil consulted the list. “Do we need to keep looking? There’s already more than we can carry.”

“No, but I want to drop in on Ivan’s team and see if they need a hand.”

“And I thought we were going to get to skip the physical labor this time.”

Kyle chuckled. “We haven’t had a good workout in a week.”

“I know.” Neil clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s been great.”

The team enjoyed the good vibes of their leaders and of being together. Now that they’d graduated from Adrian’s training program and Angela had turned them loose, Kyle and Neil had chosen to stay together. Their last run as a doubled team had given them a feeling of completeness and protection that wasn’t matched in any other setup when they were out of camp.

Jennifer followed her training and made sure she did her part, but she also enjoyed the combination. She felt safe out here with Kyle. Neil and his men were also badass, so it was perfect.

Morgan gave Jennifer a nod when she waited until Kyle and Neil were in their vehicles before she ducked into the rear window seat. Morgan liked having her on the team for obvious reasons, but also for her vicious defense of Kyle. All his men felt that way. She fit right in.

Kyle drove them through the deserted coastal town that was being reclaimed by the shore. Sand was encroaching on walkways and paths that had once seen thousands of visitors and locals each week. Now, it was going back to nature without the wrecking crews that usually caused such drastic changes. *It won’t look anything like what we remember by the time we return*, Kyle deliberated morosely. After these scavenging runs, they would load the ship and go. Being at this point was bringing it all to life. They were leaving.

“Company,” Jennifer and Morgan echoed.

“That’s creepy.” Daryl swiveled to spot the threat. He knew it was danger by the way Jennifer drew her gun and Morgan put his window up except for a shooting crack at the top.

“There.” The duo also pointed in tandem.

“Yes, creepy.” Shawn confirmed it as he too cleared a crack for shooting.

Morgan withdrew from the mental connection. He was needed to fight, and Jennifer was better at the mental battles. “They saw our jackets as we drove by.”

Kyle switched the radio on, tensing at the immediate noise.

“...is them!”

“We saw them die at the naval base. Get off the radio!”

“Then why am I looking at two black vehicles full of armed men wearing Eagle jackets? Get your asses down to the shore!”

Kyle changed directions, not about to lead the spies to any of their collection sites.

“We have to stop.” Jennifer’s eyes were open, but glazed, reminding the men of Angela. “We need something here and we can only get it right now.”

“What is it?” Kyle slowed as vehicles appeared in the mirror. He knew better than to doubt the witch, and he trusted Jennifer.

“A person. I can’t tell who, but they need us...” Jennifer pushed further into the chaotic thoughts. “It’s a refugee.”

“We’re all refugees now.” Shawn watched the vehicles in the side mirror. They were gaining ground, clearly boosted for short speeds.

“A real one. He was in a container near here and ran when someone opened it to look for food. They’ve been hunting him since then.” Jennifer pointed toward the shore. “He went south. They flushed him.”

Two cars appeared ahead of them, answering the question of who had flushed the man out.

“No magic.” Kyle shifted gears. “We have bullets for moments like this.”

Morgan and Jennifer took the order, agreeing. It was too easy to track it. The book from William had given them a lot of information that showed where they were weak. Trackers were their biggest vulnerability.

Kyle made a fast plan and left the shore road. He drove straight at the four vehicles that had turned behind them and merged into one group. “Aim for the tires, children.”

Eagles got set.

Kyle hit the gas and braced for death. Moves like this were always deadly to one side or the other, and sometimes both. It was still better than a shootout in some house or having their own tires blown out as they ran.

“Fire!” Kyle forced the car coming at him to swerve when he didn’t. *No one beats me at chicken!* He kept going as the Eagles started shooting.

Flying by on Kyle’s bumper, Neil laughed. His team was now firing. *I love my job!*

Unprepared for gunplay, the two closest vehicles reacted the same way as the Eagles flew between them. The drivers both flinched, jerking the wheel, and died in a hail of slugs that also popped tires. Due to those jerks on the wheels, both cars veered into their own companions, flipping one and shoving the other in a nasty circle that ended with them up on a curb.

The Eagles rolled north and got out of sight.

Kyle drove for half an hour before finally circling around for the shore person that Jennifer said they needed. He didn’t know what a foreign refugee could do for them, but he was now curious as to the answer. He’d gotten a good look at the people chasing them and was concerned. If the army was hunting someone, Angela would want to know.

“That’s my thought too.” Jennifer dug in her kit for a snack. “I kept catching images from him, but not words. I don’t think he speaks much English.”

“Can you talk to him?”

Jennifer shrugged at Morgan’s query. “I was trying, but he was panicking at all the engines. He assumed they were surrounding his hideout and ran. Nothing was getting through after that.”

“Can you tell where he’s from?” Greg asked. “Maybe we can narrow a language and find a book.”

“I’m sorry, no. I wasn’t good in geography before the war and now, it seems like an unknown puzzle that won’t fit into a frame.”

Daryl chortled at her description. It was easy to forget how young Jennifer was. She hardly ever acted like it. The last time he’d witnessed it had been in the mountain, before the quake. She’d played with the puppy Kyle gave her.

Jennifer winced. The puppy hadn’t survived the naval station. Stray bullets had claimed the lives of her gift and three hens, along with trimming several camp members. They’d been lucky to only have those, but still it hurt to lose the dog.

“We’re getting close.” Kyle signaled. “When we come out of the tunnel ahead, we’ll be half a mile from where we left our new friends. They’ll hear the engines and come flying. Pinpoint him now.” Kyle took them into the tunnel because it was short and clear. The grates in the top allowed him to see there was only weeds and garbage on the cracked pavement.

“There!” Jennifer pointed. “He’s waving at us.”

“Did you get through to him?” Kyle was instantly suspicious.

“No.”

“I may have.” Shawn shrugged at the quick, curious glances. “I’ve been saying ‘we’ll help you’ in every language I know. Maybe one of them got through.”

“That still says descendant.” Kyle stored details as the man wearing an orange shirt and brown pants ran toward them, waving and shouting. “React with caution.”

Jennifer stayed in the vehicle while Kyle, Greg, and Morgan got out to talk to the excited man, mostly to please her teammates. They knew she was capable of killing, but they didn’t need that right now.

Neil rolled to her side of Kyle’s truck and paused, nodding. He’d put Jennifer in the vehicle with Kyle intentionally to see if she would be distracted or want extra considerations. He planned to ask the team about it when they returned to camp.

Kyle didn’t know how to handle the language barrier, so he improvised. He pointed his gun at the refugee.

The man stopped, bare feet digging into the sand. He looked like he’d been caught off guard and flushed out with nothing, matching what Jennifer had told them.

Kyle concentrated. *Who are you?*

Panaji grinned at him. *Safe Haven. You take me Safe Haven.*

Kyle frowned. *Why?*

The man pointed at the ocean. *You go. I come. We be happy and safe. Pitcairn.*

Kyle sighed, lowering his weapon. “He’s one of ours. Load him into Neil’s truck and swap out a rider.”

Greg gestured toward the truck.

Panaji shook his head. “W... We go here. Pick up. Then go.”

“Where?”

“My homes.”

Kyle motioned the drivers to follow as he and the two Eagles escorted the refugee who was now babbling in a language they didn’t understand much of. His smiles and arm pats said he was relieved they were here. All the vibes were good.

Panaji stopped on a sandy rise, grunting. “We take.”

Kyle scrutinized the warehouse. “International Shipping Company.”

Greg clapped Panaji on the back. “Welcome to Safe Haven.”

“Yes! Haven needs! We take!”

Kyle went to Neil’s vehicle to explain, while Morgan and Greg put Panaji into his truck. “We’ll come back in force.”

Panaji began babbling to Tim, who leaned away in startled confusion.

Neil nodded. “I’m surprised we haven’t had–”

“Company!”

Neil shifted back into drive as Kyle ran for his truck. “That.” He drove next to the running mobster, protecting him as bullets pinged around them. “Time to play again!”

The Eagles in his truck cheered and opened fire at their pursuers.

Panaji crawled into the floorboard and held onto Tim’s boots so he wouldn’t be taken unless the Eagle was too.

Kyle clicked the mike in the holder, telling the other teams they needed specific backup.

Garbled clicks responded. Kyle never called for help. Every team immediately sent help to the clicked location.

“Same again?” Wade asked.

“They’re expecting it.” Neil downshifted to make the next turn. “He’ll either use the run to pick them off or do pits. The noise will tell our men where we are.”

“Why don’t we handle them ourselves like we usually do?” Shawn hung on as Kyle began the maneuver that used high speeds to separate vehicles from a group so they could be eliminated.

Neil switched on the radio.

Voices screamed at them, declaring Safe Haven alive.

Shawn grunted. “I guess I will need the extra mags I brought.”

Neil’s grip tightened on the wheel in anticipation of Kyle’s next turn. “We all will.”

**2**

Ivan watched their team members drive away, worried. He’d sent his two best wheelmen, like the code had requested. He presumed Kyle was doing the pickoff plan but had too many targets to do it alone. Radio calls had confirmed that threat. Ivan was concerned about them following Kyle back to camp. He knew the mobster wouldn’t allow that, but he couldn’t help the worry. Angela was there.

“Are we done?” Travis scanned the library.

“Yes.” Ivan led the way to their vehicle, dreading the drive. His seat sucked. “We pulled the switches and unplugged everything so only one computer will be on. It’s covered by a black tarp and sitting under a desk while it downloads. We’ll stop back as we head home and collect the thumb drives.”

“I never would have thought to do this. It’s great.”

“I agree. We’ll have a copy of the entire library.”

“Kyle said they have fifteen thumb drives from places like this.”

“It’ll be good to have the information since we can’t access the internet.” Ivan slid into the seat.

Something sharp poked his ass in a painful jab.

Ivan sighed, starting the engine. He pulled them out of the parking lot, noting the typical battle scenes and looted areas. The library hadn’t been spared, but it hadn’t been burnt down either, allowing them to labor for a few hours and then have access to the hard drives. “How many left on our list?” This was the fifth one they’d done since leaving camp. It was now late afternoon, with a dim sun and a sky full of flaky wind that kept ashing on them when they walked under trees and awnings. It was collecting like snow.

“Fourteen. Our instructions say to take a break after the next one.”

“See what else around here is on our list. Then we’ll join our team at the zoo.” Ivan shifted his butt to the side. All their locations were within ten miles of each other.

“Do we want the college or the airport?”

Ivan hesitated. “We’re low on men. How about we swing by the coat factory first? If we get lucky, they’ll have a truck we can load and send back by the time Kyle’s finished with our other drivers.”

Travis nodded, storing the map. “Sounds right.” He checked his gear as if he hadn’t already done it several times today. It was in their training and the Indian was determined to absorb it all. He liked the men and women in their camp who gave up an easier life to protect everyone else. He would make them proud.

Ivan was also bored, but there was a lingering interest keeping him from becoming lax. Angela had told him he would bring someone back and he was looking for that person. Now, while there was only the two of them, would be harder, but maybe the person wouldn’t be as spooked.

“There’s an alley.” Travis pointed. “Lot of branches down there.”

“We’ll back in like we were taught.” Ivan did it with a wince when branches began snapping beneath his rough touch. He immediately shut off the engine to keep them from being tracked as easy if anyone was nearby.

The two Eagles waited, listening.

After a few minutes, Ivan opened the door and got out.

“I’ll take that gun.”

Ivan jumped at the voice in his ear and bumped into the gun in his side.

“Tell your friend to stay in the truck.”

“Get in the truck!” Ivan shouted, using his tone of voice to alert his teammate to a problem.

“Now *you* get back in the truck.”

Ivan felt the gun withdraw and did as he was told, bracing to be shot when he tackled her. He flinched at the sharp poke from his seat.

“Don’t. She said not to hurt you, but I will.”

Ivan didn’t close the door. “I think we’re your ride.” He looked down, trying to seem unthreatening.

“I know who you are and why you’re here, but I’m not going. I told her that.”

Ivan regarded Travis. *Were we sent to force her?*

Travis shrugged, not sure he could do that even if it was for her own good.

Ivan decided he needed more information. “You’ve been approved for entry. Why wouldn’t you take that gift?”

The hooded figure strolled toward the doors of the coat factory. “I’m not leaving without my son.”

Ivan caught a flash of a face he knew well. “You’re Sean’s mom? He must look like his dad.”

The woman froze as Ivan sent memories of helping the boy tie his shoes, of watching him laugh and play hide-n-seek with the other kids. “Sean is in Safe Haven?”

Ivan held out a hand to her. “Come on. We’ll send you back first.”

The woman lowered her hood to reveal a bald head with sores and eyes that gleamed with dangerous intent.

Ivan withdrew his hand. He signaled to the bed of the truck. “Back there, okay?”

She climbed in without obvious discomfort, settling against one corner of the tailgate.

Ivan got the truck rolling, face a giant scowl. Now, he wasn’t certain he should take her back at all.

“Can our doctors...our people, help her?”

Ivan didn’t want to answer as he pulled them onto the cracked pavement next to the coat store. “The gifts can do a lot, but Angela couldn’t heal us when we rescued Caleb and got sick. I don’t think diseases are covered.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t take this chick back.”

Ivan sighed as the seat jabbed him again. “I thought of that too, but the boss said we’d be transporting someone. She’s expecting it.”

Travis stewed for a minute. “Should we do the rest of our stops?”

“Not now. Let’s join our team. We can send her back with the loads from the aquarium.”

Travis studied their passenger in the mirror. “What are the odds we’d find a parent of one of our orphans? She had to have traveled a lot of miles on her own. Sean’s been with Safe Haven a lot longer than we have.”

“A bookie wouldn’t lay those odds.” Ivan lowered the window a crack. “It’s that parent connection. It keeps them going.”

“I hope she doesn’t forget how to keep fighting when she sees her boy.” Travis was thinking ahead. “It would be a shame for them to be reunited and then...you know.”

“That would suck.” Ivan turned onto the highway that would take them west for half a mile and let them off at the right exit. The truck rumbled over debris hiding any number of threats to their tires. Ivan had brought three spares. The leftovers of the previous world weren’t buried enough to be harmless yet, though the highway was disappearing under weeds and garbage. It looked like debris layers had blown in and stuck here. There was more garbage in these coastal areas than Ivan had noticed in the west or east.

He glanced in the mirror and found their passenger lying down. He didn’t think she was ducking, just resting. It made him feel bad for her. He would make sure she got a hot meal tonight and was able to sleep with both eyes closed. He wondered suddenly if her contagion was airborne and decided it was too late to worry over it now. He wasn’t sure how the woman lying out of sight in the truck bed would be special to anyone in their camp or to him, but he presumed that would become clear by the time they made it back to camp. It certainly wouldn’t be romance.

The woman snorted, loudly. *No, it won’t be.*

Ivan sniggered. He liked being around his own kind.

Travis rolled his eyes and kept a watch for problems. The other part of their team was here gathering activated charcoal that was used to filter chemicals from aquariums. Most people didn’t realize boiling and bleach only killed living issues. It didn’t clean out the chemicals. Angela wanted to be positive they could do both.

*You can’t filter enough out to matter*, Carolyn told both men. *It’s good you’re trying, though. Few others care about these things.*

*Who are you?* Travis joined the mental conversation. He understood descendants could hear him. If they wanted to answer, they would make sure he could hear them. It worked out well between mixed team members.

*In another life, I was a school teacher. When that life ended, I evolved. Then I tried to climb a mountain that was too big for me.*

*You survived the radiation?* Ivan was impressed. *How?*

The woman didn’t respond.

Ivan didn’t push. He had faith he would learn the details during their adventure. The feel of magic use lit up his mental doors and forced him to lock down to keep them from opening.

Travis felt the woman sigh in his mind. It gave him chills.

*New. Great*. Her attention switched to Travis, scanning him. *Normal. Even better.* The woman sat up, lowering her hood. “Keep a shield up over both of you.” Carolyn crouched near the open connector window. “Don’t slow down.”

Headlights came on in front of him.

Travis spotted lights behind them.

Ivan brought up the shield like he’d been told. “Which way?”

“Straight through!” their passenger shouted.

Ivan frowned as he hit the gas, ass throbbing each time the truck bounced and he was impaled by the seat. “She’s nuts.”

Travis nodded as he removed the safety from his gun. “How did they know we were coming?”

Ivan braced as the line of scavengers lifted weapons. “They didn’t. We wandered into their turf.”

“They live here?”

Ivan didn’t have time to answer as bullets hit the truck and the woman in the rear returned fire. The clan behind them didn’t expect her grenades and the group in front of them didn’t see her at all as they emptied mags into the front of the truck and tires.

The grenades exploded, ripping through the line in a vicious blast that sent flames and smoke into the air.

Someone fired magic. Ivan felt it coming. The vehicle lifted as it was hit...

The woman kicked out of the truck, landing on the road.

The truck slid sideways and went down the embankment, seat poking and piercing. Their vehicle crashed through a fence into a swampy enclosure.

Ivan found a path to the road and tried to go that way, but the wet ground and two deflated tires prevented him from moving fast. The truck inched up the grade, spraying mud.

Ivan’s ass cheek started to bleed.

Gunshots and shouts echoed to them.

“She’s scrappy.”

Ivan gunned it as they hit the top. The truck lunged over the side of the enclosure and knocked three scavengers into the air and the diaper pin into Ivan’s other cheek. “Come on!”

The bleeding woman leapt into the truck as Ivan flew by, grabbing the side of the bed. She was swung into the air as he gained speed.

Ivan took the next narrow path, hoping the employee road would take them away from the group and not into any of their other members. He wondered where his team was, but he didn’t stop or try to call them yet. He needed to get lost for a few minutes.

Carolyn waited for his next rough turn and let the momentum swing her up and into the truck bed. She slammed against the side and clutched it, body hurting.

Behind them, scavengers ran for their vehicles. They’d gotten out to do combat with the sick woman instead of killing her. Their need for information had let her escape, but her illness was terrifying. Everyone wanted to know what it was and how it was transmitted. After surviving the first flu season of the new world, survivors were leery of killing anyone who was ill without first extracting information. They gave chase.

Ivan understood that need after his adventure with Angela. Little Caleb was doing well in camp, but the adults from that run were deeply scarred.

The aquarium was in a large park connected to a smaller zoo and an entertainment center. *Should have known people would come here*, Ivan berated himself as he flipped the headlights on and off, once. He needed to see. The thick trees and cloudy skies were making it hard to view where the edge of the road met the fence.

“I saw them!” Travis pointed at lights. “Eagle code!”

Ivan read it, relieved. He took the top path at the fork like the code told him and spun them up the hillside to join the rest of his team.

Ivan gestured Travis to keep watch as he got out to speak with James. Everyone else stayed in their vehicles, listening for company. They’d been able to drive right into this part of the aquarium, making it easier to collect the charcoal that was stored in large buckets, bags, and pallets. Rolling by the empty animal enclosures and green, foggy tanks where nothing moved had given them goosebumps.

“They would have found us if we’d warned you.” James was still sorry for it. Sometimes, Eagle rules sucked.

Ivan waved it off, then rubbed his sore ass. “You get it?”

James nodded, grinning. “There’s twice as much as she predicted on the list.”

“And that’s why it was worth it.” Ivan resisted the need to put a hand down his pants and see how bloody he was. “We need that charcoal. How long to finish loading?”

“Another hour. We’d started and then Serio picked up magic and we knew you were nearby.”

Storing that information, Ivan gestured toward his truck. “That was all her. A gift for the boss.”

“Who is she?” James scanned the shadowy woman but couldn’t get a good view of her for the truck.

“Little Sean’s mom. She’s sick. Pass the word on no physical contact.”

“I will. Come on. You can follow us back to the loading site.”

“Deal.” Ivan pointed at the path and then Travis. “*You* drive.”

**3**

Serio and Freddy were swinging bags and boxes into a long trailer. They didn’t break rhythm as Ivan and Travis arrived. They kept working and scanned between armloads. Because the woman behind the group didn’t have a guard, the two men assumed she wasn’t a threat and kept laboring. Angela had made it clear they were short on time. Hearing the action nearby had confirmed it. They needed to hurry. Rose and Cathy had been sent to help Kyle. That was another concern. The men didn’t like their females being alone for any length of time; they were eager to follow.

Travis shut the truck door, scowling and rubbing his ass. “We have to replace that seat if she’s taking this truck to the island. It hurts!”

Two lanterns illuminated sterile white walls and pristine hallways. Travis was surprised to find it creepier than if there had been rotting bodies.

The sick woman lingered in the doorway, eyeing the muscles and the balls. It had been months since she’d spent time around people, let alone around men this pure. She didn’t sense any evil in them though they were killers. It was amazing. She couldn’t help but stare.

“Is there anything we can do for her?” As long as she stayed in the shadows, it made her creepier. Serio wished she’d come over to where they were. “Or is she contagious?”

“I’m not.” The woman walked into the dim light coming through a cracked window. “I think. Your boss will tell me for sure when I ask her to kill me.”

Ivan scowled. “What is it with people thinking Angela will kill whenever they want?” He tossed a crate into the truck, wrenching his back a little in his anger. “She wants all of us to survive. Stop asking her to go against her nature.”

Carolyn stayed out of their way, but near enough for them to stare at her bald head and sores. “Sean’s really with you?”

Freddy flashed images of watching the boy get into his travel car during the last stop, laughing with Leeann and Cody. “He has friends; he’s healthy.” The rookie gave her a smile. “He’ll be better when he sees you.”

“I’d scare him now.” Carolyn stepped over the body of a rat. “I just need to see him. Let him go on thinking I died. It’ll be easier than him losing me twice.”

“Maybe there’s a way you can stay.” Ivan didn’t like it when anyone suffered, but a hurting female could always break him.

Carolyn let out a sound of misery. “If my son really has been under her care all this time, the debt I owe for that is too high for me to ask for anything.”

All the Eagles respected her for that.

An engine sounded.

The Eagles loaded faster.

Ivan grunted, really hurting now. “You should get in here with the supplies. You’ll be safer and there isn’t room for you in the truck cabins.”

The woman came toward them with fluid grace implying she’d been trained in some form or another. It was hard to judge what by her grungy clothes and the little gear she had showing. The .45 in her hand had the safety on and stayed along her hip. Her finger rested beside the trigger and not on it. *She knows how to use that*, Ivan acknowledged. “Who were you?”

The woman sighed. “Long story you’ve heard before.”

“Fair enough.” Freddy lifted a brow. “You have a name?”

The woman sat on the floor of the truck, crossing her legs beneath her. She peered up as Ivan shut the door. “My name is Carolyn Garnet.”

“Welcome to Safe Haven, Ms. Garnet.” Ivan slammed the door.

Travis eyed the driver seat and went to the passenger side even though he cherished time behind any wheel. “Straight out or take it easy?”

Ivan got in with clenched cheeks, grimacing at the prick. He started the engine and shifted into gear. “I’m actually hoping for a distraction. We should have heard something from Kyle by now.”

“And if we don’t get a distraction?” James, squeezed in with them, made sure his gun was fully loaded.

“Straight through. We’ll head for the hub with a few clicks to let them know to prepare for company.”

“That works.” Travis rolled the window down so he would be clear to fire, glad to be leaving. The dead animals in the tanks were already getting to him.

“Me too.” Ivan spotted a clear path as they emerged from the tunnel. He hit the gas, feeling blood soak into his boxers. “Straight through it is.”

Chapter Twenty

**I Was Never Here**

5pm

A close up of a necklace

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“A**ww, man.” Randal joined Kyle at the rear of his truck. “We thought this was a call for help!”

Kyle snorted. “We’ve met, right?”

Randal laughed. The other men and women who’d been sent to save Kyle’s bacon were loading trucks along side his team. Neil’s group was patrolling a tight perimeter. “We’re taking these back now?”

Kyle nodded. “We had problems here. It’s cleared now as far as we know, but it made noise and radio calls went out. We aren’t coming back to this location.”

Randal swept the open dock doors of the shipping company. “That’s a lot of freeze dried shrimp.”

Kyle grunted again, not rubbing it in. The find was great, though. He was proud of it. “You get to drive this one.” Kyle handed him a sheet of paper. “Tell her we tried to list all the items, but it’s not complete. A lot of the boxes haven’t been opened. They may or may not contain what the label says.”

“Will do.” Randal took the sheet and went to the driver side to see if he needed keys or gas.

While Randal got set, Kyle swept their surroundings, not lingering on the wreckage or bodies that littered the view to the west. After witnessing how fast the wind and water was erasing their tracks, Kyle had chosen to drive them to camp the same way–through the surf. The lead of that convoy, Pam, was pulling out now. The other trucks would follow. The twenty people here had worked hard over the last three hours. Half the warehouse was loaded.

“We haven’t had a check in from two teams.” Daryl handed Kyle a list of the next truck’s contents. “Not worried about Kenn so much as Courtney.”

Kyle had noted that they were four drivers short of what he’d called for. “We’ll be done here in two hours. We’ll swing by and see what’s up.”

Soothed, Daryl went back to loading.

Kyle’s sense of worry grew. All the men were picking up on it and bringing minor problems to his attention, but Daryl had hit the nail on the head. They had a female team leader for the first time in the history of Safe Haven and she’d been turned loose with a group of level ones. Now, that team hadn’t checked in.

Kyle went to help his men load so it would get done faster.

**2**

“We’re all set.” Daryl slapped the truck and climbed into the passenger seat. They’d been loading the warehouse all day, but it was finally empty.

Kyle shifted, rolling before the man was fully in his seat. Trouble was coming, or it had already hit. He wasn’t sure which as he turned into the darker skies to their east.

“Hey... I see someone.”

Kyle picked out the man’s arrogant walk through the buggy sunset and then the Eagle gear over Eagle clothes and jacket. Sunglasses glinted at them.

“Sure knows how to make an entrance.” Daryl put his window down as Kyle turned the truck toward the lone man.

Kyle snorted, slowing enough for Adrian to grab onto the door.

Adrian didn’t waste time. “One of the teams was in trouble. I’ll show you where.”

“We have maps for their locations.” Kyle didn’t have orders to help Adrian or have contact.

“We’ll handle it.” Daryl frowned. “Now go away so we don’t have to shoot you.”

“He’s not in the camp perimeter.” Kyle steered around the wrecks, following vanishing tracks of the trucks that had made a wide turn here. Kyle kept driving straight when Adrian pointed. “Are you following us on orders?”

“I caught Kenn’s code as I went by. He was stuck under a truck.”

Kyle looked over. “What about Courtney?”

Adrian’s brows came together, concentrating. “...that team finished early. She’s home already... She forgot to call it in. Kenn needed the help. He was last in line and fell out of sight with engine trouble. Then he was spotted by refugees and tried to run. The truck went over a hill and flipped. People were stealing everything and trying to get to him.”

“Why didn’t you help?” Daryl asked as Kyle increased speed.

“I led them away and circled back to leave Kenn my truck. It’s all over the radio.”

“You know we don’t listen while we work.” Daryl frowned. “It’s a distraction, like you.”

“That’s why I’m telling you.”

Instead of relaxing, Kyle’s concern grew. He was thrilled that Courtney’s team was already home, but Kenn was important. It would hurt Angela to lose him. Jennifer had told him of her words to the Marine on the beach by the ship, but Kyle didn’t think Angela was factoring in how much she’d come to count on him for the day-to-day operations of camp. Kenn was reliable and skilled. They needed him.

“I feel the same way.” Adrian leaned into the turn with the truck. “That’s why he’s still alive.”

“I always thought it was because he’d do anything for you, cover up anything for you.” Daryl had grown tight with Marc and he was still stinging from Adrian’s betrayals.

“It was at first.” Adrian held on tighter as Kyle went faster. “Then I figured out what your team leader just did. We need Kenn.”

“Are we the decoy while he disappears or are we backup for his trip home?” Kyle needed to know what was going to happen when they arrived. None of the teams were far apart. It wouldn’t take long to get there.

“That depends. Do you want to get back with an empty truck or would you like to escort something the boss really wants?”

Kyle was immediately intrigued. “What is it?”

“I’d rather show you.” Adrian pointed. “It’s on your way.”

Kyle decided to trust him. He doubted Adrian would jeopardize things this close to leaving time.

“I wouldn’t.” Wanting Kyle to be glad he’d made the choice, Adrian sent him an image. “It’s not on her lists, I’m sure, but she’ll be pleased.”

Kyle was already nodding. “That’ll be a perfect finish. We have about ten foot of space left in this truck.”

Adrian hung on as Kyle swerved around debris. “I know.”

They realized Adrian had waited until they were alone.

Daryl frowned at the man.

Adrian shrugged. “It would have distracted the teams and started problems for her when you get back. This way, I was never here.”

They rode in silence for a few minutes, studying the dark homes and looted, sand-drenched properties. It was sad to see what America had become.

“All right.” Kyle gestured. “Once Kenn is secured, we’ll swing by the other site and fill up.”

Daryl glared at Adrian. “Why don’t we see or hear anything yet?”

Adrian braced for ugliness. “Because it’s all over. Kenn is back at the hub, probably already annoyed with Quinn. If there’s trouble somewhere, it has to be there, or it’ll be you, on this extra pick up. Watch your asses. The hub looked calm when I went by.”

Kyle drove toward Kenn’s location, realizing Adrian had manipulated them into coming out of their way. If it had been further, Kyle would have been angry, but there were a lot of fast routes anywhere in the ten mile radius where they were collecting. He’d memorized all spots for the day so he could get to them if there was a problem.

“So what? We’re supposed to let you work with us on gathering a gift for the boss?” Daryl shifted to a better angle for a punch.

“Actually, I’m just bumming a ride to another site not on her list.”

“How do you know these places aren’t?” Daryl felt like he should hit Adrian in the mouth anyway while he was in range, for Marc’s sake.

Adrian’s eyes narrowed, body tensing. “Because they’re frivolous. She doesn’t consider those things unless someone mentions them. It’s one of the few weaknesses she has.”

Both Eagles stored the information.

Adrian met Kyle’s eye as he glanced over. “Take care of her.”

Kyle nodded curtly.

Adrian jumped off the truck before Daryl could hit him or ask another question.

Daryl looked at Kyle, scowling.

Kyle shook his head. “Not now.”

“But if he really stays, that fixes everything!”

Kyle grunted. He wasn’t sure on that anymore.

“What?”

Kyle decided to be honest. He might need someone he could talk to about this later. He could have shot Adrian. He’d chosen not to. “We know they aren’t always stable. It’s a big price to pay, but if she flips out while we’re gone, who can bring her back?”

“Marc.” Daryl didn’t hesitate.

*Wish I believed that.* Kyle lit a cheroot and kept driving.

**3**

“I wish they’d hurry up.” Quinn paced next to Kenn’s semi, watching the sunset and the trucks around them. “Why aren’t they hurrying?”

“Chill out.” Kenn finished the last paperwork for these loads. “We’ll be here another ten hours. Maybe fourteen.”

“Why?” Quinn’s hands swung out. “There’s a refugee wave on the way from the west. You were attacked, and Kyle’s team was attacked. We’re going to be caught out in the open here!”

Kenn pointed at the truck they’d come in. “Go have a drink.”

Quinn frowned. “We don’t drink on duty.”

“You are today.” Kenn glowered at the hyper man. “Go have a drink or switch out with a driver and get back to camp. I can’t stand working with a coward.”

Quinn stormed by Kenn to switch out. He wasn’t breaking Eagle rules to keep from annoying Kenn, but he couldn’t just stand here and count things. Angela should have known that.

“We need another driver for the lumber trucks!” Pam called.

Kenn pointed at Quinn.

Quinn breathed a sigh of relief and trotted over to hop into the bed of Pam’s truck. She’d taken her first loads to camp and then escorted rookies back here while she collected drivers for the next loads.

As Pam left with four men, everyone else still loading items or dropping off loads sent Angela a mental sigh of relief. Quinn was normally dependable. His flakiness was unexpected.

*Not by the boss*, Kenn corrected. She’d been handling things remotely all day, but the senior men were almost able to feel her watching over them.

*That means she isn’t positive if there’s going to be trouble.* Nearby to direct traffic in and out of the hub, Jennifer also recognized that, giving Kenn a nod. She paused. “Do you hear that?”

Kenn sighed. *That was fast*. He swiveled, drawing his gun.

Eagle code flashed from coming headlights.

Jennifer joined Kenn, not holstering. They translated it together.

“Company. Great.” Kenn scanned for a place to work from as Ivan barreled toward them in a semi. “Over there.”

Kenn and Jennifer ran to the side of the road and hunkered down.

Ivan flew by in a cloud of dusty sand.

Travis spotted Kenn as they went by and caught his motion.

“He said keep going.”

Ivan did.

Kenn waved the other Eagles to keep working. Nothing would be allowed to interfere with getting these men back to camp. As during his time under Adrian’s leadership, Kenn knew people mattered more than supplies.

Danger swept the busy space.

Jennifer saw two cars flying toward them. She took aim. “Twofer?”

Kenn chuckled. “You called it, you trigger it.”

Jennifer aimed low...fired.

The tire popped, sending the smaller truck into the side of the larger one.

Kenn fired, hitting another tire.

The two vehicles careened into a nearby parking lot and smashed into the side of a gas station.

Eagles ran toward the scene at Kenn’s wave, shooting survivors who staggered from the wrecks. The coming threats had centered on the line of trucks and missed the two shooters in the ditch.

“Nice!”

Kenn slapped Jennifer’s hand out of reflex, but he didn’t feel it as much anymore. It wasn’t the same as it had been. Sometimes, he was glad. This time, he was just sad. Kenn got to work without joining the men for congratulations.

The Eagles noticed it. His mood transferred to them, making everyone work faster. They’d only been gone a day, but it felt longer. Safe Haven’s light was hard to be without now.

**4**

**8pm**

Kyle and Daryl, along with Cathy and Rose, met at the front of the business they’d just finished clearing. The women had joined them shortly after they’d started deciding what all to load. Kyle hadn’t asked how they’d known the location or if Angela knew where they were. He assumed the boss had noticed two lone men on one of her scans and hadn’t liked it, so she’d sent backup.

Kyle swept the area and found shadows. They’d labored in the dark for the last hour, ignoring odd shapes on the walls from flashlights and lanterns.

“Take a minute for a drink and a piss.” Kyle listened for problems in the empty neighborhood around the row of businesses. There was a lot of looting here, but it was old, and this shop only had damage on the outside. No one needed what they’d just finished loading.

Kyle went to the door of the truck that they’d come in, wishing for one more driver... Kyle scowled, spotting the faint glint of a red glow. “Come on, then. We’re ready.”

Adrian emerged from the trees where he’d been standing watch over the four-man team.

Kyle tossed him a set of keys. “Take whichever you want.” He got into his truck and tore around to the rear, alerting the rest of the team to his annoyance and Adrian’s presence.

Daryl shook his head, walking behind Kyle’s truck. “Some people never learn.”

Cathy tried to ignore Adrian as he fell in between her and Rose, but it was hard. He put off a sense of security that she missed in the men around them. Kyle and Daryl were good, but Adrian was great.

Rose marched away from the traitor, casting him the same look Marc would have if he’d been here.

Ahead, Kyle pulled into place and waited for the team to get into the loaded trucks. The playground equipment would be perfect to fill the rest of his truck and please the boss. Upon arrival, they’d found two trucks waiting to be shipped out of this manufacturing plant and store. The building had also been crammed with pallets waiting for shipment. The framing here had a dozen uses they didn’t have covered yet. Plumbing stores and factories were wiped out in every state, but these hollow metal pipes that interlocked with easy snaps could be used in place of it. *Along with frames for temporary buildings while we build the buildings. Like scaffolding.* Kyle switched on the radio for a check of all channels.

“We lost them!”

“I have it!” The radio blared with shouts even though Kyle had it on the lowest volume setting.

“Big RV-like hauler. We’re on Interstate 20, at Fort Worth. We’re flying east! Get ahead–”

Kyle switched it off, though he could hear the echo from one of the trucks behind him as the team got vehicles started and shifted into gear. Fort Worth was a few days hard travel from here. Jeff was rolling them faster than Angela had estimated. Kyle wasn’t certain how he knew that, but he did.

*Come home. Now.*

Angela’s message rang through their minds and into the surrounding area, warning and alerting.

Descendants, good and bad, began tracking the call while longing for a second one that would narrow her location.

Kyle knew there wouldn’t be a second call. “Time to go.”

It would still be late when they arrived. Kyle presumed they would be among the last teams to return. This town had been outside Angela’s ten mile limit to the west. People trying to form a blockade against Jeff would certainly end up trying it around here as soon as they realized the shore, and Safe Haven, had to be where he was headed. The longer he traveled, the more threats he would bring.

“Godspeed.” Kyle increased his.

**5**

**Safe Haven (2am)**

Angela waited as the gate opened, motioning the rest of the Eagles back. Ivan stopped as soon as he was in far enough for the gate to be shut and locked.

“Quarantine?” Ian translated Ivan’s motions about a passenger.

“Yes. Put her with Panaji. He needs company and she won’t hurt him just for being a refugee.”

Ian frowned at the wording, making a mental note. If Safe Haven people were being mean to anyone, it had to stop.

Satisfied she’d alerted an Eagle to a future problem, Angela watched Ivan pull into the unloading area and hop out. He jogged to a waiting vehicle with Travis on his heels. Both men were rubbing their butts.

Angela grinned in tolerant amusement. Now she knew why Kenn had traded for a diaper pin. The two men were heading right back out for another nearby load, but it appeared they were leaving their truck for a ride with better seats.

Angela made a motion to the gate guard, denying them. She was getting tired and this shift of camp members had to be switched out. She needed Ivan and Travis here.

Angela switched directions, seeing the animals were outdoors and seemed to be enjoying it. Jack’s horse and Dog were rooting around in the surf, occasionally snorting or whickering. Tonya’s cats were hanging out around the mess, begging for scraps. They both had bulging stomachs and shiny coats as people groomed and fed them. Even the older people were enjoying the pets. Angela was just thrilled to have two mousers for the ship.

She rotated again, acknowledging the available females having a picnic on the shore by the ship. As sweaty workers came out empty handed, the women were pushing cool drinks and smiles. Conner had point over the ramps on a rotating schedule that allowed him to spend a few minutes at each to collect comments, notes, lists, and complaints from the men and women loading the ship.

He was doing the same for the fishing operation now running the length of the perimeter on the western end. The smells were wonderful after so much canned food. The cooks had served fish with breakfast as a side item and there hadn’t been enough for everyone. Angela had refused to let them pull more from the freezer, promising everyone would get their fill before the journey was over. Then she’d quietly doubled the amount of food fish ordered for tomorrow. A little less would be smoked, but her people would be happy.

“Of course, I’m okay with you becoming an Eagle!” Theo had to hurry to keep up. Debra was marching across the sandy camp with angry steps, holding a grudge. Theo was on his cane, though his foot was holding his weight much better than when they’d first left the mountain.

Debra didn’t want to keep arguing. She was doing it as her first assignment from the boss. When the men saw how hard she was fighting for it, they would ease off the other women thinking about joining. *I need them all.* Angela faced the last direction for her scan, heart warming. Marc and the kids were having a meeting while enjoying the slushies that Stanley had surprised them all with since the entire camp was working so late. The ship’s luxuries were slowly coming online. Angela expected the first week of their cruise to be much like it would have been before the war. After that, people would tire of the endless sight of water and sky. She’d made plans, but like in the mountain, the human mind was fragile. Some of them wouldn’t be able take such a huge change for a month or more.

Near Marc and the kids, Eagles who hadn’t been sent out of camp were using break time to train on their own. Most of them were using gym equipment, but a few were in the cage, practicing kai. Angela noted two of them were around her level. *I’ll set up sparring times on the ship*.

“We’d like to leave.” A group of Ciemus people came to Angela, ignoring William and Bucky, who had point over the gate. “I’m sorry. It’s...”

“Getting too real?” Angela supplied.

All the women nodded.

“I’ll send your share of the supplies with William.” Angela felt a niggle and pushed. “Are you sure you don’t want to wait and escort him home?”

“We’re not going home.” The newly elected leader looked west.

Angela felt the warning, but she chose to have mercy. “Thank you for your honor.”

The woman paled but found the correct response. “Thank you for your mercy.”

The group left, casting looks over their shoulders that expected wrath.

Angela motioned the gate to be opened, denying William’s request to stop them and talk. She would tell him later, when the undercover traitors were out of his range.

Ian came to Angela, expression grim. “They brought a passenger, but she’s sick. We want to move the QZ into what’s left of the warehouse.”

“Granted.” Angela held out a paper. “Give this to Tonya and tell her to deliver it personally when she’s finished.”

Ian put the note into his pocket without reading it. He was too busy.

Coldness swept the camp, drawing Angela toward the boat ramp.

Trinity was going in, carrying a large box.

Brittani was coming out, hands just emptied.

The two women spotted each other before the workers around them did.

Angela saw Conner at the far end of his route and knew he wouldn’t get there in time. Angela could if she used power, but that would mean leaving her post in the center of camp and she wouldn’t do that just to prevent a fight that would likely happen anyway at some point.

Trinity surprised everyone by stepping into the black woman’s path.

Eagles moved toward them.

Trinity shoved the box into Brittani’s hands before the woman could speak. “The boss says you need to stay in camp now. Keep loading.”

Trinity turned and went back down the ramp.

Angela, mouth open like everyone else, looked at Ian, who had been assigned to deliver that message.

*She volunteered.* Ian sent it in hand code. *We thought she was bluffing and wanted to see if she would follow through.*

Angela put the woman on her mental list. That had taken balls.

Brittani flashed a scowl in Angela’s direction, then took the box into the ship.

The sun glinted off a jeep rolling their two new people to the warehouse. Angela observed for a minute, thinking sunsets looked normal over the water. When they reached land, it got crazy. She sighed, retuning to her continuous scans. *Hurry, Eagles. I need you here so I can breathe.*

**6**

“That’s him!” Carolyn pointed, smile lighting up her ill face. “That’s my son!”

She and the other quarantined person had been here for about an hour and were enjoying luxuries not seen since the war–like ice for the water. The lean-to around them was all that was left of what she assumed had been a warehouse by the remaining panels. It gave them cover from the weather and allowed an open view of Safe Haven and the glare of a lit cruise ship sitting heavy in the water. The mile long camp was bright and loud, with good vibes that swirled through the shield over the entire area. It was impressive and a little intimidating. Carolyn hadn’t observed people this organized in a long time. Even the foreign troops who’d come here were struggling in every way. Safe Haven was flourishing.

Panaji peered at the boy illuminated in the spotlights between the warehouse and the camp, and bobbed his head. “Is nice. Strong child.”

Carolyn smiled, sitting back down. “Yes, he is and he’s with good people.”

Panaji bobbed again. “Haven good. Stay with Haven.”

Carolyn shook her head. “Not me. The next time she opens the shield, I’m leaving.”

Panaji, not afraid, reached over and took her hand.

Carolyn allowed it because he was so inoffensive and thin. A wind could have blown him over.

Magic swirled through the shadowy shelter.

“Stop that!” Monica came over to the beach couch where they were sitting. “Boss said no magic.”

Panaji stood up, pointing. “She die! You help!”

“I’ll tell the boss again.” Monica gave the woman a sympathetic look. “But she already knows, and we don’t have orders.”

“She won’t heal me.”

“Because of the radiation sickness?”

Carolyn lowered her hood. “I fought that and won.” She ran a hand over her bald head. “Though the sores don’t want to go away.” She sighed, hand dropping. “It’s the cancer that came from it.”

Monica brightened. “We have a chemist working on something for that. Her next batch is brewing.”

Carolyn felt relief enter her heart and stamped it out. “Save it for the good people. I don’t deserve it.”

Panaji would have denied it, but Monica waved at him to be quiet. “Why? What did you do?”

Carolyn pointed at her son as he ran by on the beach with a powerful man and dozens of camp kids. They were blowing bubbles and pinwheels, laughing and enjoying life. “I sold him.”

Monica and Panaji both recoiled. Her disease hadn’t bothered them. Her words did.

Carolyn rolled her arm over. Needle tracks stood out in scars up and down her skin. “When it ran out, I dried out and realized what I’d done. I’ve been looking for him ever since.”

Monica made a note in the log and left the warehouse.

Panaji went to a far corner and sat on the filthy floor, not wanting her stain to rub off.

Carolyn watched for the shield to lower. She’d just needed to know her son survived. Now, she could go die like she deserved.

**7**

“The sick woman ran on the last shield drop.” Ian came to Angela an hour later. “Barreled right out of the QZ and jumped into the water.”

“Did she survive?”

“She’s a hell of a swimmer. Beat the waves to our perimeter edge, then swam back in to shore.”

“We may see her again.”

“Is that a problem?” Ian nodded to Ivan, glad the boss had a guard now.

“Not for us.” Angela was scanning the teams not in camp yet.

“I looked at the log. Shouldn’t we have orders for people like that?”

Ivan snorted. “You’re too green to judge it.”

“But that’s a clear case.” Ian gestured. “She admitted it.”

“And that earns her a *fast* death?”

Ivan took a step back at Angela’s vicious tone. He wasn’t sure what to say. She was letting Carolyn live so the woman would keep suffering. It was cruel.

Angela’s voice was ugly. “It’s also a kindness. After what she’s done, she really didn’t deserve to know what happened to him.”

Ivan grunted. “I guess she didn’t sell him to a loving family.”

Angela refused to repeat what she’d scanned in little Sean’s mind. “I could tell you, but then I’d have to go kill her.”

“Why aren’t you...?” Ian was slower than Kenn, but he finally connected the pieces. Angela wasn’t a vengeful person. Letting the woman live must serve another purpose.

Angela smiled at him. “Very good.” Her approval faded. “Now we’ll see if you can be trusted. If anyone finds out, I’ll know where it came from.”

Angela waved him off before he could recover and reply. “Back to rounds.”

She and Ivan watched him go, both wishing Kenn was here. Ian would eventually be a good Eagle when he conquered his need to be in the center of the scuttlebutt vine, but he would never be her body man again. He’d spent the entire time memorizing juicy details to taunt men with when the teams returned.

“It’s lights out time, Safe Haven!” Conner was keeping strict track of the timeline Angela had set. “Let’s finish up and hit the rack, kids!”

Angela laughed with everyone else at the teenager calling them kids. She walked toward the bathroom tents that were about to be very busy, following orders.

Chapter Twenty-One

**Take It In**

Day 5

**4am**

A yellow sign

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“I** miss mommy.”

Marc put an arm around the boy’s shoulders, remembering a time when he’d also missed Julia. “I’m sorry. Can *I* help you?”

Cody peered up, pausing in their return from a bathroom trip. “Do you have a picture?”

Marc knew he didn’t, but he wasn’t sure if someone in camp may have snapped a photo. “I’ll ask around.”

Soothed, Cody let Marc guide him to the tent where the rest of the kids and the den mothers were finally sleeping. Angela was in there too, next to the twins who’d refused to settle down without her. Marc doubted she was sleeping but rest would still be good for her. The same was true of Eagles groaning over soreness or muttering to each other about sand in everything. It was peaceful. Crickets called, adding a nice rhythm that accented the soft roll of the ocean and the silence of a site shut down for the night.

Marc inhaled the ocean breeze, heart hurting. He locked down on it, rotating toward the gate as headlights flashed. He recognized their last team and motioned the sentries to let them in. *I’ll be able to tell her everyone is back*. *She’ll be in a good mood.*

Radios around camp lit up a second later.

“We’re still looking for that truck! One of you useless fucks better find them!”

“They went into the sewer! We can’t see anything!”

“Keep looking!”

Garbles came in response, but it was too late to turn them off.

*So much for the peace and quiet.* Marc stayed at the flap to see if Angela wanted him to do anything to prepare.

Angela lifted her head. “Come rest. Ivan and Jennifer have point.”

Maxed out, Marc did.

Cody was delighted. He snuggled between them, finally feeling safe.

**2**

**A Mile from Safe Haven**

Adrian poked the fire with a long stick. “You should come warm up.” He glanced into the cold darkness around the shed where he was camped. “Come on now. An hour of watching me is enough.”

Nancy entered the shed with a deep frown and a stomach full of butterflies. She knew Brittani was right. Adrian didn’t want her here or he would have offered her the choice to come along.

“You’re safer there.” Adrian shifted tiredly back onto his bedroll. It had been a long day. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“I’ll warm up and leave!” Nancy sealed her pain behind a woman’s thick wall of bitterness. “Then you can go back to dreaming of Marc’s bitch.”

Adrian sighed. “I’ll give you what you want, just sit down and shut up until I’m ready.”

Nancy winced. Then she got angrier. Then she sat down and shut up. She wanted a baby. The humiliation she had to suffer to get it was nothing in comparison.

Adrian grunted. “You’re sure it’s really what you want? Raising a child alone wasn’t easy even when the world was spinning like normal.”

“Yes.”

Adrian didn’t push. She’d been thinking about almost nothing else since the demonstration Angela had done with the camp women to show how many breeders they had. Nancy had taken her place with others at the table and become one of the most wanted women in camp, but she’d chosen him for the honor. He didn’t know why. He presumed it was the bond that would come from being lovers, but it didn’t matter. She wanted something from him, needed him. He had to have that in some form. An alpha was only satisfied when they had followers.

Nancy felt the shift in mood and forced herself not to talk. She slid off the backpack and unbuttoned the top of her coat, waiting for the freeze to thaw so she could enjoy the heat from the fire. The only thing keeping her from shivering was knowing why she was here. Adrian’s call had brought her out of the wilderness and given her a new life. When he’d chosen her as a relief source, she’d been elated, but unlike the others, she hadn’t tried to trap him or claim him. She’d just been thrilled to spend time with him. She still was.

“Thank you for your loyalty.” He fell into the hazy place between asleep and awake as he drew open the door to a room that hadn’t been entered since Conner was conceived. He could have just loved her a few times when she came into season. Like most males, Adrian had a nose for that, but Nancy hadn’t left safety for a natural event or a natural child. She wanted *his* baby.

Adrian was honored. The past gifts he’d granted were to couples who wanted their own offspring and were settling for his. This would be the child he wanted to give Angela. He gazed across the fire. “Number?”

Nancy’s face scrunched in concentration. “I don’t... Oh.” She paused to consider and then shook her head. “One. I want more, but I’d lose them after you leave. I can keep me, plus one, alive.”

Adrian rubbed his fingers over the fire, sprinkling nothing she could see.

“Gender?”

“Does it matter in some way?”

“Power levels, odds of corruption. Yes, it matters.”

Nancy shrugged. “You make that choice. I’m not looking for power or protection. I want your baby, not your gifts.”

Adrian smiled at her. “A perfect blonde girl with my eyes and your ethics.”

“Yes! Make her like me so I’ll always have someone in my life I can trust and love.”

Adrian closed his lids and murmured another part of the lengthy charm. In the past, he’d wined and dined the women beforehand and sent them for long baths while he labored.

Nancy didn’t mind the wait, though she was impatient to know it was done, that she would have what she needed. She was fascinated by the magic taking place in front of her. Each time he muttered, the flames changed color and the air became thicker.

Adrian weaved the charm with his usual flawless skill, but there was a twinge as he contemplated Angela. Doing this would anger her and put more resentment into her heart for him. It would also be a guarantee that he would never have her, never love her. This would always stand between them.

Nancy felt him hesitate. She wanted to push or beg, but she kept quiet, letting him think it through. If he said no, other descendants might agree, but it wouldn’t be the same. Adrian was the light. Only he could give her what she really wanted–a bond with him that was willing and wouldn’t be broken. Once a baby was made, they would be family.

Adrian sighed, wishing it was enough. Angela was the only one who made him feel that way. He could stay with Nancy or Kendle, or even go on a hunt for a closer replacement, but it would never be enough. He was doomed to the angst because he was corrupt. There was no true chance for him and Angela now.

Adrian regarded Nancy, grateful for her. *And this one wants me for me, not for my gifts or safety. She’s always wanted me. I can feel that. She was smart enough to know we’d never be a couple. She gave me space and let me make my own choice, like she is now.* He sighed again. *I wish I could give these women what they deserve. Please don’t punish anymore of them because of me*. He slowly stood.

The air thickened again, making it harder for Nancy to breathe.

“Take it in.” His shield was thick right now, but he was going to be distracted for a while and they needed cover.

Nancy felt Adrian’s magic surround her and then it went dark.

A few seconds later, a warm body settled next to her. She could feel the heat of the fire and hear it crackling, but she couldn’t see anything.

“We’re off the grid.” Adrian was still working his magic. He kissed her cheek, lingering. “Would you like the lead?”

She melted against him. “I’d like to be shuddering in your arms, moaning your name. I don’t care how it happens.”

Adrian pulled her into his arms and began. This was the fun part and it sometimes needed to be repeated. As heartbroken as he was, Adrian thought it might take a few tries for him to be sure it took. He would concentrate on the duty at hand instead of the emotional pain that had settled into his soul and become a part of him. *My mother didn’t tell me about days like this.*

**3**

Angela felt it. She got up and left the tent.

The boss emerging in her underclothes was a double alert for the Eagles on duty and an instant distraction. In shorts and one of Marc’s shirts, she was a sleepy, curl covered fantasy with bare skin they’d never viewed. Her dazed eyes implied she wasn’t aware of them or her undress. Something was happening.

Marc, exhausted from the eighteen-hour day, didn’t notice.

Ivan came toward her, drawn by an invisible rope.

Jennifer hurried to beat him and couldn’t.

Ivan reached out, taking Angela’s hand.

She looked at him with red orbs. “It hurts.”

Ivan nodded, other hand coming up to take her shoulder. “I feel it. You need an outlet.” He leaned in. “I’ll give you one.”

Angela nodded. “Take me.”

Ivan slipped off his jacket, ignoring the glares and hissed orders from Jennifer and the Eagles. He knew what she needed.

“How?!” Jennifer demanded.

Ivan took Angela toward the water. “Her dog told me. He knew Marc wouldn’t understand.”

“He’s sleeping!” Jennifer protested.

“Would it matter?” Ivan refuted without hatred. “He doesn’t know how to help her. None of them do but the dog.”

“And now you.” Angela choked, shuddering. “Faster.”

Ivan scooped her up and trotted to the water.

Jennifer followed, waving Quinn to keep point over camp. She forced herself to stay silent when Ivan marched into the icy surf and kept going.

Ivan went to the edge of the drop off, using his strength to fight the tide that wanted to drown him. If not for the woman in his arms, he wouldn’t be safe out here.

Angela fired her rage into the water.

Ivan held on and kept them above the breakers as she emptied her rage into the cold water that absorbed her power greedily. The smell of rot began to lighten.

“Again.” Ivan’s mind spun through sanity and hell. When this was done, he would need his own release. His dick was a bar in his jeans. He was fighting his own demons while helping her control hers. It was dangerous. On the plus side, the fire in his ass was subsiding.

Angela threw another blast of fury into the water. Closer than the first, it swarmed over Ivan, stinging along his body until he groaned.

Angela let out more of her betrayed anger.

Ivan shuddered as the heat increased, becoming pleasure that hurt deep in his guts. Ivan fought to keep them still as she tensed to blast the water again.

*Go under!* Jennifer called, in both their minds. Camp members were feeling the unease and waking. They definitely wouldn’t understand.

Ivan sank to the bottom in relief. He had to concentrate on holding his breath and not the flesh in his hands...

Angela brought her shield up so they could breathe.

Ivan tensed, then closed his eyes. Whatever happened here would be her idea and her actions, not his.

Angela’s witch smiled at him through her watery gaze. *Survive this with your honor intact and I will remove a weakness.*

Ivan thought about how much he wanted to be a father.

The demon nodded. *It will be done.*

Ivan opened his arms and let her fall to the sandy ocean bottom.

Angela shot out rage in deep blasts that fried the mutating wildlife along the bottom and sent patches of waste and filth to the top where they were quickly washed away.

Ivan held his breath. He didn’t open his lids. He thought about how good it would feel to take what he wanted and kept his hands to himself. Unlike the vet or her mate, Ivan had realized moments like this were all he required. No one had ever made him feel so alive.

Angela’s rage ran out, leaving her sobbing from the pain. She sank to the bottom of her shield and opened her mouth to scream.

Water rushed into her lungs.

*Bring her up now*, Marc instructed.

Ivan swallowed his sudden fear and scooped her into his arms, mind spinning from the lack of oxygen. He shoved off the bottom and broke the surface, gasping.

Marc would have gone to the coughing couple, but Jennifer put an arm on his wrist. “This is Ivan’s moment with her. Watch and learn how to help her when she’s on the edge.”

Marc scowled but obeyed–mostly because Ivan had already made it out of the water. The soldier was incredibly strong. Marc and Jennifer could see his muscles fully outlined under the wet shirt. His lungs and the tent in his pants were giving him trouble, but that was it.

Angela had rested her head on his shoulder, no longer coughing or crying.

Ivan shifted her so he could see her face, making Marc wait. “I need a name and an hour off.”

Angela’s misery was lifted by his horny demand. She spewed laughter, letting it fill her back up. “Thank you.”

Ivan grinned, shivering from the cold. “Thank you for sharing that with me. It was amazing.”

“Thank you for protecting the future from my anger.”

Ivan kissed her lips in a fast peck. “My honor.” He took her to Marc, missing most of the nasty looks and thoughts. He slid her cold body into Marc’s hot arms. “Well?”

Angela snuggled against Marc, whispering.

Marc forced himself to call, “Ivan is taking a break.”

Eagles on duty moved to cover his post.

Jayda, from Ciemus, appeared on the beach. She waved at Ivan in invitation.

“Is that a hookup or a distraction?” Marc asked as Ivan limped away, sending heat through their connection to warm Angela.

“Both and maybe more.” Jennifer was still scanning them. “Ivan is being healed and doesn’t know it.”

“He knows.” Angela shivered against Marc’s neck. “He’s blocking out of respect.”

Marc realized she and her witch were doing something to Ivan. Power hummed along Marc’s skin, using some of his energy.

Marc waited, hoping it was something good instead of something wrong.

“It’s a repeating process,” she whispered aloud and in Ivan’s mind. “It’s like new equipment. It’ll need to be run through for a while.”

Ivan’s delighted chuckle echoed down the beach as Jayda took his hand. *I’m yours. Name it and I’m on it.*

Angela sighed, but not in happiness. She needed that, as an alpha and as a woman, but it wasn’t Ivan’s voice she longed to hear it from.

Adrian’s choice slammed into her again, bringing fresh anger, but behind that, awful pain.

Angela copied Ivan’s plan. She tilted her head up to Marc. “Please.”

Marc took her to the bunk of the semi and made love to her again. During, he sent her flashes of Adrian screwing Nancy. He kept stirring the pot.

Marc was determined to finish what he’d started. She would be free of all chains, including the one she’d put on him when they were kids. From that moment, Angela would get to pick what made her happy, even if it crushed everyone else.

**4**

**Day Five (7am)**

“They’re all back, half a day early.” Marc handed Angela the clipboard. “Those are the notes. I sent them to clean up and rest. Some agreed and some didn’t. I put those who didn’t to work.” Marc was tired and drained, and not in the mood for the coming party. The camp around them was watching the preparations and talking about little else. The Eagles were observing Ivan and Jayda, who were curled up on a beach blanket together. He was off duty, but his eyes kept straying to the boss and the workers.

Angela surveyed the lists, seeing there was a check next to each team name to indicate they’d returned. Arrival time was next to it.

Angela kept scanning, enjoying the warmer breeze along the beach. She was in a tent near the water, guarded by twitchy Eagles as alligators sunned themselves nearby. The reptiles hadn’t approached them yet, but the sentries could feel the mean animals waiting for an opportunity to do damage. The menace was clear.

Angela signaled the men to move the perimeter in a little so their rookies wouldn’t have to walk so close. The fear in the air might trigger problems and Angela didn’t want to have to bring up her camp shield right now. She was trying to catch up on details and gather energy for the next fight. She didn’t want to waste it on eleven prehistoric leftovers. *It’s too bad we can’t eat...* Angela smiled, making another set of motions. *Anyone know how to cook gator tails?*

Guards traded looks that were half fear and half eagerness at a new thrill.

Angela waved at Kenn. *Pick a crew and we’ll try it when they leave their sunning spots. They’ll split up then and we’ll have a better chance at doing it without magic*. *Speak with William and Marc before you assemble the team.*

Marc was already across the camp, but he turned to look at her. *I don’t know what’s wrong with you.*

Angela chortled, aware that he was joking. *They want to eat us. I’m just beating them to the punch.*

Marc stopped snickering. *Will the island have alligators?*

*I don’t know, but I do prefer to be covered for all contingencies.*

Marc detoured to the Ciemus crew on the shore. He wanted to join them for the fishing experience and be able to teach others when they were on the island.

Angela’s amusement fled. *I should have expected that.* *Now I’ll be shielding him instead of resting. That’s what I get for being clever.*

“I’ve got it.” William came by. He joined Marc and the Eagles.

Angela felt the darkness coming while her guards were distracted; she cursed herself as she rolled from the tent and drew her gun.

“Too slow!” Keith stomped on her hand, dislodging the gun. He grabbed her braid and jerked her into his arms.

Angela used the momentum and slammed her head into Keith’s. Then she did it again.

A third time sent stars across her sight and gave her freedom from the arms crushing her ribs.

Keith scrambled to get a hold of her throat and squeeze. At the same time, he drew hard on her lifeforce.

Angela twisted her sandy body around in his arms and broke the hold. She shoved backward as Marc reached them. *I want him!*

Marc fired. He shoved the screaming man onto his ass. If she’d demanded that a second later, the bullet would have gone into his brain instead of his shoulder.

Angela dropped onto Keith’s chest and drew on his lifeforce.

“Look out!”

The reptiles had chosen their moment.

William and Bucky ran forward with large knifes and expressions implying the gators didn’t know who they’d picked a fight with.

Angela stopped drawing to watch them. Keith was too withered now to do more than groan and shake.

Marc slid his knife across Keith’s throat, handling the nearest threat first.

The two Ciemus men ran between snapping jaws and lashing tails to leap on backs and shove their blades into a vulnerable notch at the base of the skulls.

As soon as they finished, each man picked a new target and repeated the actions. It told the witnesses that Ciemus had dealt with alligators before.

The rest of the animals were leaving now, but William and Bucky got three more of them before the rest were out of range. They knew not to leave the perimeter. Everyone did.

Marc helped Angela to her feet and kept his arm around her as he rotated them, searching for more trouble. When he found nothing but angry, resigned camp members and Eagles, he let out the breath that had caught in his throat when he’d swiveled around to discover Keith trying to kill her. He’d known they couldn’t repair crushed ribs medically and magic healing would have given away their location. Marc had been scanning everyone who’d been in the mess when Angie and Jennifer had their bad feeling, but Keith had been clever. He’d even kept the same sleep schedule as Marc so he wouldn’t be vulnerable.

“He wanted my power.” Angela swallowed, forcing words out through pain. “He didn’t care about anything else. He was a Byzan, but only in his shield and intelligence. He thought killing me would give him my gifts.”

“It would have, right?” Marc finally holstered as the all clear call came. He motioned Eagles over to get the body.

“Yes. Byzan can copy and absorb gifts.” Jennifer came to where they were as William and Bucky began explaining to the crew how to hook up a draining system for the carcasses. “I helped him with the book, but I don’t understand most of it.”

“Are the fish safe to eat?” Kenn joined them. “We’re getting nice hauls, but it all smells funny and a lot of them are already dead.”

“This close to shore, we’ll scoop up a lot of old debris. Nothing from here will be eaten.” Marc was following William’s advice on that. “We’ll dump it in a fill spot and cover it if we have time. If not, the birds will get started on it. This is for us to practice before we have to depend on it to survive.”

“You said before instead of *if*.” Kenn was getting smarter. “We’re going to run out of food?”

“We’ll get low at times, but fishing and conserving will get us through until we have a larger operation going.” Angela forced it out around the gravel in her throat. “We’ll be fine.”

“I’d believe you, but you set up here to work, so you could watch them practice it.”

Angela sighed at Kenn’s sharp comment. There was a two week stretch that concerned her. Unless one of the scavenging teams had found more food–they were still sorting the trucks–they were still a few weeks light of having enough for the first year. They might be forced to eat their land animals during that time and it would be their doom. They had to give the herds one year to reproduce. “We’ll be fine,” she repeated hoarsely, moving toward the nets. Angela spat out blood and kept walking. “I’ll make another deal.”

“For whose life this time?” Jennifer demanded. “Because it isn’t right to do that for someone else without their consent.”

“What if it’s an enemy?” Angela growled back coldly. “Can I hand over our enemies?”

“It’s still not right, but I guess I’d have to stop arguing.”

“Then stop arguing and help me find a way to feed us for that three weeks.”

Jennifer’s brow furrowed as she followed.

Angela kept track of Jennifer’s ideas as she toured the new site that had been up and running for an hour. She tried to act like someone hadn’t just tried to kill her again, preferring to concentrate on her heir. Jennifer was already becoming known for coming up with surprise answers.

Jennifer dug in. *What we need is a large food source. Like a…whale. A whale? Can we eat that? Hell, can we even hunt that? It isn’t like fishing.*

Angela was smiling through the pain. *You’d be surprised what we can do if we need to.* She pointed toward the far shore line. *Adrian’s boat is outfitted for deep sea fishing. We can’t take a whale with it, but we can aim for larger animals that will provide more meals and be fewer work hours in the end. Very nice. Thank you. Please speak with our Captains about it, will you?*

“I’ll have something for you shortly.” Jennifer made sure Angela’s guards were close and hurried off.

Angela grabbed a loose rope and began helping the fish crew pull in the net. She needed to know how to do this too and a distraction was required. She felt dangerous right now.

“Should you be doing this?” Grant was showing them with a cheerful, hand-on approach that allowed no disobedience. It was comforting.

“I’m good.” Angela ignored the body already protesting and put her back into it like he’d been demanding of the crew since they started. Lined up parallel to the shore, pulling across their bodies was awkward and efficient. Grant had told her ancient cultures also fished this way to avoid alligators and crocodiles. It made sense to Angela, but then, she didn’t have experience pulling food from the land or water. She was as much a rookie as her Eagles were. The Ciemus people would have the lead on this.

Angela settled into the rhythm, feeling the serenity, the balance. On one side of the workers, the camp was running. It was going smoothly despite things not being in the usual places and the sand invading everything. On the other side, the ocean ebbed and flowed, waiting with patient glee to be in charge of their lives. Her deal had to remain intact. The ocean was a formidable foe to cross.

“Help!”

Female screams brought people from across the site and sent fresh adrenaline into hearts that had just calmed.

Grant reached Pam first. He shoved her into the sandy surf.

“What’s he doing?!”

“Help her!”

“Get him!”

Angela pushed Ian aside when he would have grabbed Grant. “Leave him alone.”

Grant shoved Pam’s leg under the rising seawater and shook it, then he drew his knife.

Angela placed a hand on Ian’s wrist. The rookie wouldn’t like this.

Pam screamed again as Grant used his blade to scrape the sting, repeatedly. Angela assumed he was removing remaining stingers from her skin.

Grant lifted a handful of sand from the bottom and scrubbed it over the bleeding wound.

Pam shuddered, struggling not to scream again.

Grant lifted her into his arms and strode toward the medical camper. People cleared a fast path when Angela gestured.

Morgan had been running to the screams, positive a medic was needed. He met them halfway.

Grant kept walking. “Rinse it with vinegar, then cover it with a baking soda and sea water paste. Let it sit for ten minutes and then rinse the area with hot water. Hot, but not scalding. Leave it uncovered from there.”

“Pain medicines?”

“Whatever you would use for a snakebite or a bad bee sting.”

Grant took Pam into the camper and set her on the bunk. “You did great.”

Pam gave him a shaky smile, leg throbbing and stomach twisting. “Thank you.”

“Glad I could help.” Grant left the camper so Morgan could get to work.

“How is she?”

Grant jumped. Angela was standing outside the camper door. “Okay. She’ll feel rough, but she’ll make it.”

“Thank you. None of us would have known how to treat a jelly fish sting.”

“And now you do.”

Angela nodded. “Lessons that involve women screaming are remembered for a long time by everyone. It hurts.” Angela paused, hearing someone decide to break a rule. “Excuse me.” She walked toward the tent where the least needed supplies had been stored. As soon as she was out of sight, she hawked up a mouthful of blood, phlegm, and spit. Her witch was healing the injuries, leaving byproducts as she stitched and burnt the rips in her flesh. It was painful and scary, but she’d been through worse.

Angela spat again and marched toward the next place she was needed.

**5**

“Do you need a moment?” Candy’s whisper wasn’t needed in the emptied storage tent, but she felt it necessary because of the topic.

Conner peered up from his list. “For what?”

Candy blushed.

Conner stopped counting as he caught the images in her mind. He stared, flames coming into his eyes.

“You haven’t, right?”

Conner shook his head. “I’m toughing it out.”

Candy smiled. “I thought so. You know they meant spying. You can...” Candy wasn’t sure if this conversation was embarrassing to him, but she wasn’t afraid of being overheard by roaming descendants. The boy needed to know these things and he didn’t have a father around to tell him.

Conner grinned at her. “It’s sweet you’re worried over it.” He dropped his gaze before the sparks could fly. He was already hard. He needed it to go down, not get worse.

“I don’t want you to get kicked out.” Candy lowered her voice. “If you needed a moment like that...I would arrange it.”

Conner forgot how to breathe. Candy letting him do it, knowing he was doing it, was one of his fantasies. “I, um.” Conner cleared his throat. “Thank you, no.”

Candy wasn’t surprised by her disappointment.

Conner was. He hurried to reassure her. “It’s not that I don’t want to. I just don’t want to ruin things for us. In a few months, we’ll be okay.”

“Because I’ll be too big for you to want me that way.”

Conner lit up with a man’s hunger. “Because they won’t suspect it and I can get away with more then!”

Candy felt her body respond to the need in his tone and let herself lean in like she wanted to. “What will you get away with?”

Conner sent her a hot image.

Candy shivered.

“I dream about doing that for you.”

“Lee never would.”

“That’s why I want to.” Conner was unable to stop himself from responding to her lean. He sent out a wave of desire. “I’m going to give you everything he didn’t, including orgasms.”

Candy gasped, lust searing her nerves. “That’s...intense.”

Conner blasted her again. “I’ll be legal by the time we act like Charlie and Tracy, but you’ll still be smiling anytime you want it. I’ll be yours whenever you need a release or love. And when you’re not in the mood, I’ll be earning respect from Angela and the Eagles by leaving you alone and doing my job. It’ll work out for us. All you have to do is keep giving me a chance to prove it.”

“You’ve done well. I’d like to give you a reward.”

Conner groaned. “If you do this, you’ll never get rid of me. My obsession will grow.”

“Will you put charms on me?”

Conner reached out and stroked her arm.

Candy shuddered.

“I don’t need to.”

“No, you don’t.” Candy walked toward the flap. “I usually have the last twenty minutes of open camper time to myself at night. You know that because you stay away then.”

Conner swallowed. “But I think about you in there. I try not to, but it’s hard.”

“Tomorrow night, I’ll be *behind* the camper.”

“What?”

Candy blushed a deeper shade of red, but she didn’t back down from what she wanted. “I get to watch. I want to see if I really hit you the way you claim.”

Conner didn’t think he could stand. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I know. I want to.”

Conner moaned, dropping his head.

“You’ll be there?”

He didn’t look up. Angela would know if they broke a rule. “I don’t think I can do it. Don’t be mad if I can’t.”

Candy misunderstood, thinking he was shy about her watching. “I’ll take it as a sign you are too young. If you *can* do it, I’ll let you keep leading us through this because I trust you to please me too during our times together.”

Arrangement made, Candy left the tent.

“You’re playing a dangerous game.”

Candy jumped at Angela’s voice in her ear. She turned to find the boss staring at her in dislike. Candy stiffened. “You may not want *your* Mitchel, but I do, so butt out!”

Angela was forced to. Candy and Conner were a cute couple, once she got around the age difference. Ten years shouldn’t be that bad, but it was. He was about to be legal by the camp rules. Fifteen meant girls and boys, after approval, but Candy was already pregnant, so it would be frowned on until he was older. If they were quiet about their moments, things might fly for a while, but in the end, Angela was sure his father’s legacy would come back to haunt the boy.

Chapter Twenty-Two

**It’s Not About You**

Day 5

**3pm**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“C**heck it out.”

The small Eagle group paused in their jog to watch Dog. He was sneaking around the corner of a nearby tent as if he’d sensed a problem.

Quinn started to go that way, but Greg stopped him, pointing. “He’s getting payback for being hounded.”

Eagles snickered as they realized Tonya’s two cats were sleeping on top of Kenn’s feet, basking in the warm sunlight of a 5:30 dawn. When they couldn’t get Dog, the felines went for Kenn.

The wolf eased around the tent, using the ocean and laughter of happy kids to cover his noise. He reached the corner and immediately leapt, landing half a foot from the sleeping felines.

Dog yipped in a loud burst.

Kenn tossed his coffee into the air, recoiling as both cats flew up and landed in his lap. Claws flashed as he defended himself from the unprovoked attack.

Dog yipped again, driving in his point.

Kenn’s chair tipped over backwards as he swiped and slapped, missing each time.

The cats dug in.

Kenn screamed, high and shrill. He kicked out of the chair and shot up, taking a kai stance.

The cats ran for cover behind Tonya, who was laughing so hard she was crying.

Dog put his head in the air and padded off to the mess for scraps.

Kenn held his stance, waiting for the next blow as people across the camp howled laughter.

**2**

“It’s clear.” Kyle handed Angela a stack of papers covered in webs, grit and sweat. “There are nine-hundred rooms.”

“How many of them need to be cleaned or rearranged?”

“Most of them on the rearranging.” Kyle lit a cheroot as they stood on the pier. “Only a dozen need cleaning–mostly rooms where food went bad. The damp conditions have let some of it linger instead of finishing the rot cycle. It won’t take but a couple hours with a full cleaning crew.”

“That’s great.” Angela stuffed the papers into her crammed full notebook and wrapped the tie around it. The Velcro strap wouldn’t reach anymore. “What about fuel?”

“Neil and the Captains are on that now, but I have water totals for you.” Kyle consulted his notes, aware that she didn’t want to scan her papers right now. It was too windy. “There are 500,000 gallons. It’ll need to be stirred, but that’s it.”

Angela breathed a sigh. “And we have another ten thousand gallons.”

“Yes, with the hopes of finding more at the water plants if you still want to hit those.”

“Actually, I don’t. The ship filters water from the ocean once it’s underway. We have enough to hold us. Let’s use that space and those crews for other things.”

Kyle agreed. He made a quick note and put his book away. “Cole thinks he’s the captain and Grant is his XO. Is that how you want it?”

“They’re sharing. Grant is a good sailor, but Cole understands unpredictable coastal tides.”

“Grant also thinks he’s the boss. Both men are telling people what to do.”

“I know. In the captain’s cabin, there are two bunks. One was for visiting family. The two men will share it. I had Ivan drop a note there.”

Kyle chuckled, able to imagine the fireworks when the two men found out. He was a little surprised Grant was fighting for the job, though. He hadn’t seemed the type to rock the boat.

Angela snickered. “Funny.”

“Maybe.” Kyle gestured toward the rear of the docked ship, where a group of men were examining the huge anchor. “Cole said something about needing to prime the pump because it’s been inactive for so long. They’ll be making noise soon. I’ve told the senior people. They’ll watch over the rookies.”

Angela was glad Kyle was handling things. She was too tired to be sure it was all covered right now. Things were coming to a head in other parts of their country. She was picking up horrific images. It wouldn’t be much longer before the other descendants began to receive them too, if they weren’t already.

Angela waved to Tonya, who was coming up the pier to examine the medical bay of the ship. Her escort, Quinn, looked unhappy.

Angela didn’t beat around the bush. “He’s leaving for a while. Will you be okay on your own?”

Tonya didn’t know why the boss was asking, but it worried her. “I should be. Unless you’ve seen something I need to know?”

“Not about you.”

Tonya sighed. “I’ve felt it coming. I don’t know what he did, but maybe he didn’t mean to.”

“I don’t know either and I don’t want to know unless it will endanger the people here. That includes you.”

Tonya understood Angela was asking if she knew anything that would help Kenn. She slowly shook her head. “He’s closed off again. That’s all I know.”

“Same here and that’s the problem.”

Tonya surveyed the camp behind them, easily spotting Kenn coming through the crowd of people heading to the showers and party tent that was about to be opened. “I know you hate him. I would too if I were you.” Tonya met Angela’s eye. “But he’s my world. Please don’t punish me too.”

“I can’t let him on the boat, not even to sweep the floor. His darkness might rub off and I won’t have that.” Angela held up a hand to stop more begging. “I’m sending him out of camp for a while. When he comes back, his goodness or badness will be obvious.”

Tonya’s scowl was growing. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I need to know if you have to go too.” Angela pinned the redhead with an intent glare. “Are you one of us or are you playing a great act? It started out with lies and games for you. Where is it now?”

“Dead serious.” Tonya tried to open mental doors so the boss could view without restrictions. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll do it. If he’s flipping again, I don’t want any part of that.”

Angela gestured at the woman. “Just don’t let him have the information I’ve given you.”

“But he’ll read it... I can’t see him before he leaves.” Tonya’s fists clenched. “I don’t even get a goodbye.”

“No.”

“This is mean.”

“So was helping him live out his sexual fantasies by pretending to be me.”

Tonya choked, backing up.

Angela signaled the guards to stay where they were. “Make your choice. Good or bad?”

“Good.” Tonya forced out her true feelings. “But you aren’t, you know? Good leaders don’t make people do bad things.”

“This isn’t bad, Tonya. This is demanding proof of your trustworthiness. You’ve never had that, you know? This will be a first for you.”

Tonya rotated toward the ship. “Whatever. I’ll be on the boat until he’s gone.”

“That works for me. I hear the lab is stocked.”

Tonya brightened. “I can get some tests rolling!”

Kyle watched her bounce onto the ship. “A lot of people don’t want her or Kenn to go.”

“We need them, providing they can continue to improve.” Angela was also watching the redhead. “Would you have ever thought she’d change so much?”

Kyle grinned. “I thought she would have been kicked out for having a disease long before now. I never thought fidelity was something she was capable of.”

“Me either, but she’s more of a survivor than Kenn is and she knows it. All she had was her brains and body, and she’s still here when so many educated women aren’t. She’s proud of that.”

“I don’t understand. I’d still want to be educated. I’d just want the street smarts too.”

“But that comes from a life of want. Most people wouldn’t agree to suffer before receiving enlightenment.”

“But...isn’t that what we did everyday anyway, though we didn’t agree?” Kyle asked. “We started out young and dumb, and usually poor, and then built a life that was better in every way that we could make it.”

“Very good. We start at the bottom and work our way up to something. However, even anarchists have a leader. Politicians passed laws to make bad behavior acceptable. By the time we gain wisdom, we have to die.”

“It’s all a giant hypocrisy.”

“An illusion.” She loved Kyle’s mind. He didn’t let right and wrong get in the way of philosophy. He dug in and bathed in the blood of what he saw. “We sense the falseness each time we gain a goal and feel disappointed instead of satisfied. We feel the futility of it all. Depression magnifies it and makes the real world clearer.”

“What do we see through that vision?” Kyle hated to ask, but he needed to know.

“Our true selves with no cover. We’re all corrupt. Some just have deeper wells of it.”

“Yes, that’s it.”

Angela placed a hand on his wrist. “You once needed absolution from Adrian and he couldn’t comfort you. He told me about it. That bothered him.”

“Can you?” Kyle demanded suddenly, not caring who was listening as guards, workers, and camp members walked by them.

“There’s nothing to forgive.” Angela knew it was the truth, but she still didn’t feel it even as she said it. “Society lives by one set of rules and nature lives by another. Humans are a part of nature. Killing is in that cycle. Following your instincts cannot be a sin to the Creator who made you that way.”

The mobster frowned. “Society would say my environment made me this way, that if I’d been raised in a good home and the war hadn’t come, I wouldn’t be a killer.”

“You’ve overlooked one basic thing that most souls refuse to admit even once in their lives. We’re all killers, Kyle. Some react on it and some don’t, while others take that urge out on other species or inanimate objects. Some played games where they could kill without taking a life, while others played worse scenarios where they got to hurt people. We crush bugs and hunt deer. We’re all killers, Kyle. We just pick different targets.”

“You’re a doctor.” Kyle tapped on the rail. “You spent your life helping people, saving them. And there are pacifists who wouldn’t even hurt an ant. That theory is flawed.”

“Is it?” She forced him to confront the final image. “I’ve killed thousands in eleven months and those pacifists swore off harm to others because they were afraid of eternal damnation. They were scared they wouldn’t be able to stop once they got rolling. If they didn’t fear jail or hell, would they still be passive, or would they roll through this world pulling the trigger faster than you or I ever have?”

“That’s an ugly view of the human condition.”

“Not really. It’s honest. Humans are part of the cycle of life on this planet. Civility holds us in place, but we’re the top predators in the chain. Why would our nature be any different than the male wolf who kills the pups of the previous beta after he mates the alpha? Why are we different from the bat that rapes the female while she’s holding her young and can’t let go to escape without killing the offspring? How are we different from the gerbil who gets spooked and eats her young?”

Kyle didn’t know what else to say. When pointed out, it was obvious. “We’re not.”

“No. We try to be. It’s allowed for amazing advances, but in the end, we’re part of the natural cycle on this planet. We were put here to kill, to thin the populations of those under us and also, of each other. Lions weed out other lions. It’s what we’re here for.”

“Then why are we bothering to leave?” Kyle was becoming depressed.

“Survival. It’s the only constant. We were put here to survive. That’s our sole purpose.”

“Well...that sucks! Take it back.”

“I can’t.” Her tone deepened. “But I’m going to try to change it.”

“We have intelligence!” Kyle picked out. “That’s a difference.”

“Some animals are smarter. The advantage is in how we’re built. If we didn’t have thumbs, we would have already died out.”

“What’s the new purpose?” Kyle was replaying sentences and trying to keep up.

“I can’t explain it yet. Totally peaceful isn’t possible and we’ll never change the animal instinct, so I’m limited. It might be as simple as teaching people not to hate each other. It could be as complex as finding a way to exist in harmony with nature and never kill. Ciemus gave me a lot of hope for that.”

“If there’s a…Byzan in control?”

“In leadership, never in control.”

“Why not?”

“We’re unstable.” Angela moved down the pier. “Hadn’t you noticed?”

Kyle smiled. “Yes, actually, I did, but I consider it a small price to pay for safety.”

“So do I.” Angela went to the center of camp for updates from the point man. “What’s left?”

Neil skimmed his list. “Just the festivities.”

Angela motioned to where Candy was in line for the bathrooms. Conner walked by, not looking at her. “I think they have an early afternoon ceremony planned. They took the bride and groom’s wishes into consideration, as well as mine. Go with what they have unless it interferes with security.”

“Lights out?”

“We’ll make it 1am until we leave. After that, we’re back on normal hours.”

“What are we doing about the noise?”

Angela grunted. “Giving the Eagles extra ammo.”

Neil understood and agreed. There was nowhere left to hide or run. This was their boat and their spot on the shore until they set sail. Safe Haven was a powerhouse that would defend itself with magic and guns.

“You’d think that would be enough.” Angela drew in a breath, put a smile on her face, and went to the shrunken mess where camp members were being fed a hearty meal before they were let into the party tent. She saw Conner go in there with his wedding notebook and a determined face and chose to let things play out. She was slightly ahead of her own schedule.

**3**

“You two have been offered a place in the wedding party.”

Tracy’s cheeks went red.

Charlie cleared his throat. “Are you sure they meant us? We’re not tight with them.”

Conner shrugged. “It’s what I have in my notes.”

Charlie regarded Tracy. “Did you know?”

Tracy shook her head. “I don’t think she likes me, and I know Kyle disapproves of our relationship.” She frowned. “Why would they do this?”

Charlie glanced at Conner.

Conner leaned down to show his notes. “You’ll each stand on the outside of them while Grant officiates. We’re keeping it small, so no flower girls or ring bearer, and we’re doing the reception right after the ceremony. The entire thing should take about half an hour and then you can both go back to work if you want to.”

“Shawn’s a photographer?” Charlie was examining the notes.

Conner pointed to a top corner that had a list of everyone involved and their jobs.

Charlie saw he was supposed to handle the ring.

Conner handed it to him after a fast sweep to be sure Jennifer wasn’t around. “He’s had it for months.”

Charlie opened the black box and immediately felt bad for the small rock he’d chosen.

“Wow.” Tracy peered over his shoulder. “That’s nice.”

Charlie’s tense shoulders drooped. “Yeah. I’m sorry.”

Tracy took the box to examine the large diamond. “It’s fine, really.”

Conner snickered. “Shiny shit, man. They say they don’t care, but they love it.”

Charlie stored the advice and gave Conner the notebook back. He didn’t mind standing up with Kyle, but he could feel Tracy’s unease. “Can you give us a minute before you make that final?”

Conner nodded, putting the paperwork away. “I’m on a break now. I’ll grab some food and stop by after.”

“Thanks.” Charlie delayed until Conner was out of earshot, then placed his hand over the jewelry box to shut it. “I heard your thought. You don’t have to do this.”

Tracy sighed. “It feels like it would be saying we plan to do it next and I’ve already explained how I feel about that.”

“I didn’t know they were going to do this.”

“I knew something was going on by the way Jennifer was staring at me, but I don’t get it. I expected trouble, not the spotlight.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were having issues with the camp?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were trying to get me pregnant?”

Charlie shoved the box into his pocket. “You want a baby.”

“And you didn’t think we should talk about it first?”

Trapped, Charlie struggled to react wisely. “I’m sorry. I want you to be happy. You were thinking about it a lot, so I thought you wanted one.”

“I do, but not yet!” Tracy lowered her voice. “We have to slow things down there. We’re not ready to be parents.”

Charlie’s mouth opened. “Too late for that.”

“Wh... Do you...” Tracy drew in a breath and stood up. “That’s how you tell me?” She marched away from the table.

“Wait. Hey!”

Tracy held up a hand and kept walking. She emerged from the mess in a cloud of anger and embarrassment that she took straight to the teenager coming from the council tent to talk to Neil. “Why did you do that?!”

Jennifer signaled Neil on, bracing. “Step inside and we’ll talk. Keep screaming and I’ll fix the problem by beating on you until you’re dead.”

Tracy immediately calmed. She’d been around for some of Jennifer’s fights.

Jennifer held the flap, glaring.

Tracy went where Jennifer pointed and sank down, muttering.

Jennifer went to the far end, hoping the guards kept their mouths shut. Safe Haven had a lot of rookies on duty while senior men labored. Angela wasn’t letting anyone from the camp onto the boat yet unless she’d vetted them, or their skills were desperately needed.

“I’ve known about the baby for a week. Your child is strong even while forming.”

Snagged, Tracy cleared her throat. “Will it live?” Too many women had been broken by that. It was impossible not to fear more of the same.

“Not unless you listen to me.” Jennifer leaned forward. “The camp members haven’t accepted your relationship yet. Now, they’ll have proof you’ve broken the rules. You’re going to be punished, and so is Charlie.”

“Banished?”

“Both of you, unless you take some hard advice. Ready for it?”

Tracy nodded, terror all she was feeling now. “Please.”

“Double wedding.”

Tracy paled further. “I’m not ready. I can’t...” *Too late for that.* “This isn’t good.”

“No, but it could be. If the baby comes a couple weeks early, we say it’s from stress and that will fly with no questions asked. If you wait another month, that won’t cover it. There will be punishments, and on the island, your child will have to live with camp opinion.” Jennifer’s voice broke. “Like Autumn will. You don’t want that, I promise.”

“I don’t want any of this!”

Jennifer sighed, shrugging. “There are ways, but you’d have to do them yourself. Angela will refuse to consent to an abortion just because you two weren’t careful.”

Tracy’s demeanor transformed from embarrassed and defensive, to scared. “Angela knows?”

Jennifer snorted. “You’re still alive, so, no. But she did hear you’ve consummated the relationship and that’s against the rules without approval because of his age.”

Tracy trembled, but Jennifer had no pity for her. “Because of your choices, Charlie now has to grow up too fast. As a mother, Angela will never forgive that. Even placing a grandchild into her arms won’t erase this.”

“I’ve tried to help him.” Tracy gestured angrily. “I don’t know how.”

“That’s because you chose a green apple so you were getting it before it could be poisoned. You plucked a little man from a hardy tree but couldn’t wait for him to ripen.” Jennifer waved a hand. “And now here you are, in a mess you don’t want and can’t handle.” Jennifer sat back, pointing. “But you’re going to. You made adult decisions and you’ll follow through with adult actions.” Jennifer slid a paper across the table. “She’s sending Charlie out into the wilderness to become a man. You’re mine.”

“Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Exactly that right there. Ask yourself what I’d want you to do. Then do it. After a time, things will be better. You’re having her grandchild and she loves children.”

“You said she wouldn’t forgive this.”

“She won’t, but you know we women can hold grudges without it affecting how we handle things. Those payments come due in private. Unless it interferes with this camp, Angela lets people do what they want, you know? And she’s made her own mistakes. By the time the baby’s born, you could be in good with the boss and have your little man back.”

“I don’t want that.” Tracy paled further. “She knows what I really want.”

Jennifer nodded. “Yes, but you’re crazy if you think she’ll help you keep Charlie here. She wants both of you on the boat when we leave.”

“I don’t want to leave.”

“Neither does she. Neither do I. We’re going because we have to.”

Tracy slumped on the bench. “I know. It’s hard.”

“Well, life just got harder for you. Charlie’s coming this way and you get to fill him in.”

“When’s he leaving? Marc’s going with him, right?”

“Nice of you to only consider that now.” Jennifer stood up. “He’s going alone, right after you tell him. The guards already know to let him out. That’s all my orders said.”

Jennifer ducked out of the tent before Charlie could enter. She gave his pale face a firm nod and walked on, feeling a bit smug about her own relationship but also sorry for the couple. She had Kyle to look out for her in every way. They only had each other and neither of them were enough.

“So the whole best man thing was a cover?” Kyle had been listening from the rear, with the other sentries. He’d stopped by for an update and gotten snagged by Jennifer delivering the scalding reprimand.

“I asked Samantha.” Jennifer blushed as he gave her a hot stare. “Who do you want?”

“Neil.”

They shared a chuckle, but before Kyle’s thoughts could go dark, Jennifer pointed at him. “We’re getting married. Deal with it.”

Jennifer pranced away, leaving Kyle with a silly smile. *She’s amazing.*

Angela came to his side. “Yes, she is.”

“Thank you.” Kyle meant for letting them stay together. At any point, Angela could have put a stop to it.

Angela scanned the camp. “Thank you for going against Marc for me. I would have died out there.”

“That’s what we were afraid of.”

“Marc would have called Adrian to take over. You might have had peace.”

“Ah.” Kyle had wondered why she made the choice to stay there. He’d presumed it was to draw the refugee waves away from the shore.

Angela marched toward the mess, stomach now growling. “That was part of it.”

Kyle followed. “Did it work?”

Angela let out a sound of frustration.

Kyle headed for the shower, off duty for the next thirty-six hours. He wasn’t upset by her lack of answer. He’d expected it.

**4**

“A little higher.”

Grant grunted at the fiftieth correction. “I had it there.”

Ray shrugged. “So?”

Grant secured the lacy curtain and retreated to view the handiwork. “If you want it somewhere else, you can put it there.”

Ray smirked and pivoted to keep the man from noticing. Grant had been flashing coy smiles and eating at the same table when he could, but Ray wasn’t encouraging him.

Grant held up the final lacy panel. “Is this my color?”

Ray swallowed a chuckle at the flamboyant tone. Grant was open about the way he felt and what he wanted, how he preferred to live. He didn’t care if people accepted him or not, but unlike Simon, Grant didn’t expect considerations and he worked hard.

Grant held out the curtain. “Might be yours.”

Mirth echoed from the other workers in the wedding tent

Ray batted it away, fighting a laugh. “I want to get this done. Stop goofing off.”

Grant snapped a salute. “Yes, ma’am!”

Instantly furious, Ray stuck out a leg and tripped him.

Grant fell into the pile of fabric waiting to be used as wall coverings.

Laughter spilled, along with baskets of supplies.

Ray left the tent, ashamed he’d reacted without thinking.

Grant stayed on the ground. “He does have kick left! Awesome.”

Walking by, Marc caught it all, but he didn’t share in the amusement. He could feel Ray’s unhappiness. Deciding the man could use a few minutes, Marc signaled him over. “I have livestock duty. Come along.”

Ray didn’t mind the chore. It was manlier, and Grant wasn’t there.

“Which one of those is bothering you the most?” Marc asked curiously. Unlike Kyle and Neil, he didn’t mind discussing Ray’s sexuality. It had never been an issue for him. Ray was a good person and that was what Marc valued.

“He won’t keep his head down.” Ray put a hand on his hip. “And he’s constantly reminding people that I’m gay.”

Marc snorted. “We’ve never forgotten. You’ve earned our respect. Grant’s working on that.”

“You’ve scanned him?”

“Of course.”

Ray realized he should have known. Grant was allowed around Angela. He’d been cleared. “Why is he bugging me?”

Marc laughed at Ray. “You know why.”

Ray blushed, shaking his head. “I’m not ready, and when I am, I won’t be so open. It always causes trouble and I’ve had enough of that.”

*You and me both, brother.* Marc shrugged. “Relationships are never perfect, but he’s got a kind heart and he thinks you’re amazing for reaching acceptance in a camp of bigots.”

Ray frowned. “The bigots are gone. The people here are good.”

“Then why are you afraid to be with him?” Marc pointed out. “There has to be something holding you back.”

“Yeah.” Ray assumed Marc already knew and it had to be said for him to get an answer. “It feels like I’m betraying Dale. It hasn’t been long.”

“Is that all?”

“I really do miss him.”

“I know. I feel it. So does everyone else.” Marc turned, guiding Ray’s attention to the tent he’d just left. Grant was staring at them. “So does he. When you start hurting, he teases you or makes jokes until you’re annoyed at him and not dwelling on your misery.”

Marc left as the two men stared. “Like me and Angie, before I made a crazy plan and swore I’d follow through.” Marc was tired. He didn’t know how much more sex he could provide without real sleep and letting some layers of skin grow back.

Laughter drew Marc’s attention.

Pam was sitting by Zack, helping him eat. Pam’s jellyfish sting was improving. Zack’s ribs were healing, but it was slow. Angela had refused offers from descendants to heal him or any of the wounded team also lounging around the pair. She didn’t say to save their energy for emergencies, but they understood.

Conner went by on rounds, drawing smart remarks from Zack’s sons, who were taking a break near their dad.

Zack pointed at them. “Double shift. Get on it right now.”

Timmy and Mike paused to be certain he was speaking to them.

Zack started to get up, flashing a mean glower.

The two boys scrambled up and took off running to find the Eagle on point.

Zack settled back into the chair and crossed his arms over his chest until the boys were out of sight.

“Doesn’t that hurt your ribs?” Pam asked.

Zack put his arms down. “You know it. Damn wild kids. Wish they had a mother to beat their ass for me.”

“Don’t like hitting them?” Pam sympathized with that.

Zack shook his head. “I liked it too much, so I never do it now. They take advantage.”

Angela caught all of it as she slipped into the tent with the kids to get them ready for the party. *Zack is cleared. Put him on the manifest.*

**5**

**7pm**

“That doesn’t look like fun.” Brittani, a few other rookies, and a dozen senior men were waiting for Neil to finish his session. Setting sunlight glinted off the cage bars in dim bursts.

“You’ll know for yourself when he gets to you.” Morgan watched for her reaction so he could log it in the report. “That’s why you have an appointment with him.”

Brittani’s eyes widened. Her mouth opened to deny the lesson.

Neil joined them, leaving Grant to be helped out of the mini cage in the corner of the camp. “You ready for this?”

If Neil had been aggressive, she might have backed down. Because his tone was reluctant, she swallowed the panic and gave a nervous nod. “Okay.”

Neil hated the tremor. He hated hearing fear from any female. “I’ll get rid of that for you, in a controlled environment where you won’t be hurt anymore than the lesson requires.”

He let her enter first. “I need four sessions to get you there.”

Neil closed the cage door and put himself between it and her. “We can also take the slower route of a few months. There’s no shame in that. Most of the rookies, men and women, pick the slower route.”

Brittani wanted to, but she hadn’t survived an apocalypse with her family intact by giving in to her terrors. “Four lessons, huh?”

Neil nodded, impressed with her spunk when she began removing her bulky jacket. “If you practice, it might even be three.”

Brittani advanced and swung on him like the other students had.

Neil put her on the mat in one fast move, but her punch landed, bringing a small sting and a trickle of blood. He stared, dumbfounded. “I’m bleeding.”

“You’re out,” Brittani wheezed, trying to recover.

“Hey! Neil’s bleeding first!”

“She took the hit. She knew she was going to take that hit!”

The men and women around the cage clapped and cheered.

Neil stared at the blood on his fingers. “What did you do?”

Brittani stayed where she was, groaning. “*Why* did I do it?”

“*How* did you do it?” Morgan asked, coming forward to help her.

“When he...ducks, he’s open.”

“Where have you been all my life?!” Morgan set her on her feet and retreated.

“Who would have thought!” Quinn slapped her on the shoulder, laughing.

Brittani threw up on his shoes.

“Now, you’re an Eagle.”

Walking by, Marc shook his head and paused at the next flap.

“He’s lonely.”

“You should dance with him tonight.”

Inside the tent, Angela grinned at the kids, smoothing her clean shirt. “You think so?”

The kids nodded as Marc entered with flushed cheeks and wet hair. He’d just come from the shower. “They beat me to it.” He flashed a sexy smile. “Wanna dance with me, baby?”

Angela bobbed her head as some kids hooted and some cried yuck.

“Good. I came to escort you.”

Angela stood up, hugging kids who flooded her way for it. “Things are set?”

Marc nodded. “William’s been helping. He’s relaying messages and directions from the center of camp. He implied it won’t go far, so Kyle agreed.” Marc shrugged. “He’s distracted right now, but it sounded okay to me. Got things done a lot faster.”

“We’ll be able to use it that way whenever we want to on the boat and the island.” Angela waved at the kids and stepped outside with him.

Marc leaned down. “Won’t the island people protest or freak out about our rules and magic? Kendle said they didn’t even like her and Luke sharing a cabin.”

“There’s no one on Pitcairn island anymore, so it doesn’t matter.” Angela sent him an image from her latest dream. “There’s a big house with stacks of bodies and no reasons for it that I could see in my scans. It’s awful, but we won’t have to worry about other people. Providing we get there first, the island is ours.”

“Why is this island so important, Angie?” he asked in a whisper. “I know you considered others. Why there?”

Angela made a motion with her hand and walked away.

Marc stared in surprise. *Why do we need silver?*

When Marc worked out a short list on his own, the uses at the top of it didn’t fit. As he went, he realized none of his reasons did and he’d covered everything related to the apocalypse. *Then it isn’t*, he decided. *It’s about us, the descendants.* As soon as he had that thought, Marc understood. “For the final battle.”

Angela ducked into the party tent. The answer was evident, though unbelievable. They were going to use the silver to fashion weapons against whatever would be waiting here when they returned. When she said she preferred to cover *all* contingencies, she hadn’t been exaggerating in the least.

Chapter Twenty-Three

**No One Understands**

8pm

A picture containing object

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**1**

**A**ngela went to the chair where Tracy was sitting by herself because no one wanted to be around her. Word had spread fast. Angela held out a small box. “Give this to him when he comes back.”

Tracy put it in her pocket, not sure what to say. She was already lonely and sorry, and now, she expected Angela to fry her on the spot with ugly words and threats. Tracy held in the tears and faced the music. “Charlie and I are getting married when he comes back.”

Silence fell through their end of the tent as people quieted to hear the response or to intervene when Angela began beating on the woman.

Ivan edged toward the fire extinguisher in the corner.

So did Kenn.

Angela delivered a smile she didn’t feel. “That ring belonged to an Indian woman who was dear to me when I was a child. I want my daughter-in-law to have it. Welcome to the family.” Angela leaned down and kissed Tracy’s cheek. She whispered, “I love that ring almost as much as my boy. You take care of both and we’ll have peace.”

People clapped as the women awkwardly hugged and separated. It created a flurry of activity as people retrieved the gifts they’d collected and saved for this moment. Only the Ciemus people were left out, but they hadn’t suffered the lack of birthdays and holidays like Safe Haven had.

Marc opened his hand as Angela came by on the way to the food tables.

Angela beamed. “It looks just like the one you gave me when we were kids.”

Marc took the simple necklace and fastened it while she held her hair off her neck.

Male eyes roamed her bare skin in longing.

Drained, Marc rolled a mental eye. *You want one of your own, but wait until you try to please a woman like this. Stamina, gentlemen. Work on it now. You’re gonna need it.*

The men who were descendants grinned at Marc and went back to their conversations and gift exchanges.

Wrapping paper, newspaper, and bags began collecting on the floor.

Angela fingered her gift, sniggering at Marc’s message. “You wanted the job.”

Marc let out a suffering sigh. “Shoulda read the fine print.”

Angela chuckled, turning to hug him. “Look in your pocket.”

Marc leaned back to dig, frowning. He hadn’t felt her slip anything in there.

He came up with a key. “This goes to one of the weapons boxes.” He recognized it after supervising the transfer of those crates onto the ship this morning.

Angela grinned. “It’s shiny, has an eleven on it, and hasn’t ever been fired.”

“A virgin 1911?” Marc’s gasp drew laughter from everyone. “I love you!”

Kids ran by them, bumping into legs and screaming with joy at the stack of toys they were amassing. Camp members were tossing things from bags at the screaming demons, trying not to get run over or to laugh so hard they had to pee. No one wanted to leave the tent yet.

“Hey!” Marc went after the rowdy bunch to settle them down.

Angela moved to the side, where a small guard booth had been set up. There would be a sentry here once the music started.

“They’re having fun.” Kenn joined Angela, admiring the canvas. *Tents,* he amended. Theo’s crew had put four tents together to form a twenty-foot wide shelter that stretched two hundred feet. The camp was enjoying the rare desserts and decorations, but only the council and injured guards represented the Eagles. The rest were outside, lining the perimeter. Kenn presumed they would be allowed to come in when the camp was finished, but he didn’t know who would be on duty outside then. Angela hadn’t given him a schedule.

“She’s going to do it herself.” Samantha limped by on her cane with a pout. She’d already tried to convince Angela to let her help and been refused.

Kenn grinned, nodding. “That’ll work.”

It made Angela feel good to know he meant that. She turned around as William joined them, delivering a generous smile. “Yes, please.”

William clapped his hands and shot a butterfly illusion over the playing children.

Delighted squeals floated through the tents. No one reacted to the magic, but everyone observed it. Other than Angela, none of them could do the things William could.

William enjoyed putting on a show for the camp and kids, but he was aware of the suspicious guards as they listened to Angela laugh and watched the shield become stronger because of her happiness.

Marc also recognized the looks and cringed inside. The Eagles wanted to know why he wasn’t doing that for her, why he hadn’t been doing it at all.

Angela didn’t like Marc being treated to reprimands during fun time. She lifted a brow at him. *Still want that dance?*

Music echoed through the radio speakers that Theo’s team had rigged to the corners.

Marc didn’t care that she was taking pity on him. He did want the dance. He’d been planning it for days. There was a special ending.

Angela slid into Marc’s arms, resting her head on his shoulder as the radio belted out a love song she knew well but couldn’t remember the name of. When his arms tightened around her, Angela let out a sigh of contentment that sent a flash of purple light into the barrier.

William stared in resignation. It was obvious Angela loved Marc. Adrian had tried to come between them and several others were thinking about trying if Marc continued to disappoint her, but in that moment, William understood it would always take a charm or a spell. Their connection was deep. She chose him as a child. A life mate picked at that age was permanent.

William clapped his hands again to send a shower of rainbow sparks over the couple.

Angela snuggled deeper into Marc’s arms.

His heart lightened. “I love you.”

“Yes, you do.” She chuckled. “Forever, right?”

Marc nodded. “My word on that.” He kissed her softly, sending approval and jealousy through the tent.

Angela felt Marc gathering his courage. She wanted to let it play out, but she couldn’t. Angela put a hand on his wrist before he could reach into his pocket. “No.”

Pain squeezed Marc’s heart. “You won’t?”

“Not now and it has nothing to do with you.”

Marc frowned, leaning back to view her face. “You mean that?”

“I do.” Angela ran a soothing hand over his cheek. “I will when the time’s right. It’s all I’ve wanted for us for years.”

Marc believed her; he assumed she didn’t want the distraction from Kyle and Jennifer’s moment.

Angela didn’t tell him she was scared the higher powers would react badly. The Creator wanted her concentrating on that future battle, not emotions or bonds. If she strayed from that path, the small protections they had might vanish faster than Adrian had.

**2**

“It’s your party. You can cry if you want to.” Samantha limped by.

Jennifer smiled at the joke, admiring the tent and the two wings they’d stuffed with chairs and tables. Members of the bridal party were in the wings, chatting with the groom and waiting for the bride. Jennifer hadn’t entered it yet.

Samantha waved her cane. “Over here, bride-to-be.”

Jennifer blushed. *That’s me. Am I really okay with this? It’s getting real now.*

Samantha and the other women waited patiently for Jennifer to react. They remembered moments like this in their own lives.

Jennifer nodded. “Yes, I am. He’s great.” She glared toward Tracy, who was sitting near the bachelorette wing. “And mine.”

Tracy got up and picked a seat away from them.

Samantha waved again. “I want to speak with you. Come sit down. Neil said if he sees me get up, I have to go to bed early.”

Jennifer joined the blonde woman, not sure what to expect.

Samantha got right to the point. “We’re going to talk about sex and why it’s okay to enjoy it.”

Jennifer tensed. *Didn’t see that coming. Damn Kyle.*

Samantha waved a hand. “Yeah, Candy told, and Kyle confirmed, but it will have good effects and you’ll forgive them.”

“I don’t see how it could.” Jennifer huffed. “That was private.”

“And that’s a problem.” Monica added her opinion. “You have to tell him how you’re feeling as it happens, or he’ll guess.”

“And he’s a man.” Trinity rolled her eyes. “They always guess wrong.”

“We just want to help you.”

Jennifer tolerated it all because she could tell they honestly did. “Fine. What else?”

In the opposite wing, the conversation was much the same.

“...so make sure you never use sex as a bargaining chip, even if she’s willing.” Greg hadn’t done that, but he’d listened to rookies get shot down for it.

“And don’t joke about it like a trade off.” Shawn grimaced at a memory. “They don’t like that.”

“She doesn’t know you’ll do anything to get it again, so don’t give her that information.” Daryl pushed a drink closer to Kyle’s hand.

“No begging when she’s mad.” Wade was honored to be here and eager to fit in. “Make certain it’s never about sex unless you’re having it.”

Kyle hadn’t thought he could be made to blush, but this conversation was proving him wrong. “Are you guys done yet?” He’d been ambushed and dragged in here to find his favorite Eagles, food, drinks, and topics he never would have chosen for a bachelor party.

“And for god sakes, keep the moaning down or the den mothers will think you’re hurting her.” Neil didn’t usually drink, but he’d had two beers and couldn’t stop talking. “Make sure they hear *her* noises, not yours.”

Kyle’s cheeks flamed. Then again, maybe the topic was right. “What else?” He wasn’t above taking advice.

*I can’t believe you told them!*

Kyle winced at Jennifer’s reprimand in his mind. *I’m sorry.*

Greg, unaware of Jennifer’s presence, held up a hand. “Just don’t make her scream as she cums. We’ll have to shoot you before you can explain.”

Kyle groaned. *I am so sorry.*

Jennifer laughed at him and withdrew, satisfied she wasn’t the only one being tortured.

**3**

Marc led Angela from the tent an hour later, feeling her need to be on duty. The box in his pocket pressed into his leg as a reminder that she still wasn’t his.

Angela spun and grabbed him. She claimed his lips in a blast of heat that sent all rational thought from his brain and drew fire from his soul.

Angela let go of him, eyes glowing as she lied. “Of course, I’ll marry you. I just don’t want to take away from Jennifer and Kyle’s moment.”

Marc kissed her, heart filling with relief and joy.

Angela tolerated it, hating it that he’d pushed and was now forcing her into this when she wasn’t quite ready. Still, it really was what she wanted from their future, so she let it go, enjoying his good vibes. They would keep it quiet for a few days and then people would see the ring on her finger and it would go public.

Terrible pain hit the shield around the camp.

A second flood of rage slammed into it a few seconds later.

Marc tensed.

Angela did too, not sure if Kendle’s fury would make it through the shield.

“How does she know?” Marc was confused. “Adrian?”

“He refused to help her.”

Marc concentrated on the other descendants they’d had contact with and came up blank.

“Wait... She has no gifts. How can she do this?”

“Her gifts are locked, but the spell can’t control what doors she and her demon access when they dream walk. She was asking questions about it that night in Ciemus.”

Hatred flashed outside the shield, lighting up the dead zone around them.

Marc felt Angela make a choice and open a mental door. He braced for it, as did the other descendants coming from flaps. Kendle’s anger was slapping them all.

“Her emotions have been heated to full boil, but she doesn’t have an ocean to clean with it.” Angela scanned. “She’s twenty miles northeast.”

Kendle’s anger hit the shield in another vicious blast meant to give away their location.

“She’s betraying us.” Marc hated Kendle in that moment.

Angela had known that when the first blast hit, but she wasn’t picking up rants under the rage. It was possible the locked-up demon and her disease were in control right now.

Marc scowled. “Does that matter?”

“No.” Angela glanced at the descendants gathering around her. No one else would stand a chance against Kendle. She was deadly even without her gifts. “Who wants to walk into a lion’s den and pretend they’re Daniel?”

Several Eagles lifted hands, but only Kenn came forward.

Angela studied him, worried now that the moment was here. Kenn could do what was needed, but it might make him revert back into his old self.

Kenn shook his head. “Not a chance.”

“Promise me!”

Kenn leaned in and kissed her cold cheek. “I love my life here. I won’t ruin it.”

Angela gestured to the gate sentry. *Let him out when he’s ready.* She turned back to the Marine, aware of frowns and curiosity about what she’d made him promise from those who didn’t have mental gifts. “Rescue if needed.”

Kenn understood the unspoken order and didn’t ask if he was supposed to take captives. He wasn’t. “Fifteen minutes?”

Another blast hit the barrier.

Angela’s lips tightened. “Much less.”

Kenn turned to get his gear and face Tonya’s tirade. *Have to be a fast one this time*.

“She’s on the ship, working. I’ll tell her where you’ve gone.”

Kenn was relieved. He hurried to get his gear.

“Is Kendle going to be hurt?”

Angela pretended it wasn’t Marc asking. “Maybe. Adrian sent her away from his camp. He welcomed Nancy with more than open arms.”

Marc saw the images in her mind, writhing bodies surrounded by ancient spells, and grimaced. He’d just thought it was sex. “Still doing shit he shouldn’t.”

Angela shrugged. “This is a big desire of his. They may stay together and find some happiness.”

Marc let her lie, more worried about Kendle’s tantrum. Her gifts weren’t strong enough to penetrate the shield, but they were jarring the ground and causing bright sparks at each impact. Anyone could be viewing it right now.

Angela lowered the shield as the next blast came, arms lifting as if to catch it.

Marc stayed linked as she received the blast and converted it into energy she could use. He grabbed his stomach when she cramped from the transfer and broke the connection.

Another blast came in, spilling over the group who immediately tried to copy Angela. Without knowing, Kendle was recharging their energy banks. She wasn’t powerful enough to hurt them.

“We need to shift her displeasure to give Kenn time to reach her.” Angela concentrated. *He said yes to Nancy. She’s with him now.*

Angela brought the shield back up as the hatred switched directions. Bitter blasts of a scorned woman flew through the air toward Adrian and Nancy.

Marc knew it wouldn’t hurt Adrian either. He was disappointed, but he was also grateful the magic was now aimed elsewhere.

Angela sank to her knees in the mud, hair whipping around from fast-sealing the camp. “Trackers on the beach.”

Marc and the others herded people back into the party area, ignoring calls to come back to the fun. Their seriousness alerted the camp to trouble and brought the fun inside to an uncomfortable halt.

William came to Angela’s right as Jennifer took her left. For this moment, she was the weaker of the trio. Jennifer hated the feeling.

“Are we letting them in and handling it or sending out for a meal?” William was eager to hunt with her.

Staggering, Angela moved into position with a line of Eagles following. Converting mismatched power hurt.

William hurried to stay in place as Angela lowered the shield and sent a bright blast of light along the dark sand.

The fire ball traveled so fast the two men lurking in the reeds along the shoreline didn’t have time to bring up a shield or run. Exposed by the light that shot by them and dove into the water, the pair rose and started firing.

Kyle and Neil took them from the side as Angela’s trio absorbed the much stronger magic hits and tried to convert them.

Jennifer almost wasn’t able to. Her skin sent off waves of heat as she struggled.

William forced himself to let her work it out instead of helping her. If she lost control, it might knock her out, but that was it.

Angela approved even as she hated it. They had to get ready to fight this way. The future was coming.

Jennifer gained control and shoved the extra energy behind a storage door.

“When did they go out?”

Marc answered William. “They tried to escape with Kenn when she lowered the shield.” Marc had Kenn, and others, on his mental grid, all heading northeast. “They were going to trade our location for an escape from Angela’s wrath.” Marc had been able to scan them while the others handled the problem. Information was now his best friend.

“Keep me informed.” Angela gave him permission to keep track of Kendle’s tantrum without feeling guilty over it. She hoped Kendle wasn’t killed while Marc was watching. She didn’t want him to go through that pain even though the thought of the castaway being gone was pleasing. She loved him more than she hated his mistress. It sucked that he couldn’t say the same.

“When do the Eagles get to have fun?” Marc caught up, sliding an arm around Angela’s tired shoulders.

“The louder music should start any time. That’s the signal to switch the kids to their tent and help the elderly and injured to bed.” Angela didn’t want to be out here in the dark, but she needed to do a scan and now, while Marc had the camp covered, was the best time. After the party, the women would all stay with Jennifer and the men would be with Kyle. It wasn’t to make sure the couple couldn’t sneak time together. It was to provide distractions and social interactions for everyone who needed them. Once they were on the boat and had all the rooms of fun waiting, people would grow apart. Angela wanted a small buffer for that now, while they could get it. On the island, they would be in close quarters again and already knowing their neighbors would help them readjust.

“What about William?”

Angela motioned toward the medical camper. “He knows we’re picking up his bad vibes about our engagement. He’s checking on the wounded, but they’re at the party. He didn’t see them.”

“Is he going to be trouble?”

“I’m not sure. There are two paths for him to take. I won’t know until he makes the choice.”

“Should we do something preemptive?”

“Like what? Kill without a reason?”

*There is a reason.*

“Jealousy doesn’t count.” Angela sank into her scan, ignoring his protests.

“Well, this is going great.” Marc dropped his arm. He settled into the job and tried to forget who was next to him.

Angela was sorry for their trouble, but like usual, she was missing Adrian. She wanted to know what he was doing, what he had planned. She didn’t believe he’d walked away from her.

*Neither do I*, Marc admitted. *I can’t, he can’t, the vet couldn’t. I understand now why the Byzan are mostly male.*

Angela snorted. *Yeah, more people like Adrian. That’s what the world needed.*

Music blared into the night with deep beats and passionate tones, sending light through the camp and fear through the guards.

Angela both loved and hated it. Her people needed this and she was giving it. They would suffer afterwards.

“That’s life anyway, right?” Ivan was assigned to Angela as a guard. “We have a good moment and then three bad ones.”

Angela nodded, smiling as peals of excitement rang from the kids. They’d just been told they were having a bedtime movie.

“But on Pitcairn, we’ll have more?” Marc needed hope for that future.

“Yes. Once it’s cleared and we’re set up, people will be happy.”

“Will you be?” Ivan ignored an ugly glare from Marc at the question.

Angela shook her head but didn’t elaborate. *I’ll miss my homeland too much to truly be happy. I’ll tolerate it until it’s time to return.*

“Me too.” Ivan frowned as William came toward them. “It won’t be the same.”

“You may not find out.” Angela looked at him. “You’re reading my mind openly now, Ivan.”

Ivan tensed. “Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask. I was an Invisible a few days ago. What happened?”

“I needed access to your gift. I unlocked it.”

Ivan knew her next question and shrugged. “Not yet. If it becomes a problem, I may want you to put me back the way I was.”

“Impossible.” William emerged from the empty camper. “A Byzantine unlocked your gifts early. Even if she takes it away, you’ll never be the same.”

“That was true as soon as I caught the Ghost sneaking out of my COs tent.” Ivan indicated the camp. “I just meant if people can’t accept it or if it causes problems for the boss. I like being able to pick up thoughts and I’m not a threat to her.” Ivan regarded William pointedly. “You, on the other hand, are.”

Angela ignored them in favor of sweeping for problems outside the shield.

William returned Ivan’s tone and glare. “I’m fighting mine. You’re embracing yours.”

“She wants me to.” Ivan puffed his chest out. “She just wants you to go away. It’s causing too many problems.”

“Stop now.” Marc motioned William to go away.

William waited for Angela to overrule it. When she didn’t, he felt another twinge of being on the outside and forced it down. He went back to the camper without speaking.

Marc scowled. “He’s dangerous.”

Angela nodded. “So am I. So are you.”

“I mean to the camp.”

“You mean to you.” Ivan looked at Marc. “If he wins them over, you can’t.”

Marc growled at the man.

Ivan wasn’t intimidated anymore, but it had nothing to do with finding out he was a descendant. “Keep it up. I’ll have your slot and you’ll have Adrian’s.”

Marc controlled his anger. “Have you asked about that future?”

Ivan shook his head. “Nope. Not going to.”

“It ends with you dead.” Marc thought of his last private moment with Angela and snorted. “You wouldn’t last through the first hour anyway. Soldier skills aren’t enough to satisfy a woman like her.”

“I meant in camp.” Ivan leered. “But I want that spot if it opens. Might as well have it out there.”

“Do my wants matter in your equations?”

Ivan and Marc froze as Angela’s rage slammed into the shield from the inside.

Ivan swallowed. “I’m sorry. I got mad.”

Marc grunted. “He started it.”

Angela followed William.

Marc sulked.

Ivan followed, berating himself for declaring his interest openly, but if there was a tiny chance, he would take it.

“There isn’t.”

Ivan spun, pointing at Marc. “You don’t kn–!”

Marc punched him.

As the two men rolled around on the ground, grunting and cursing, Angela stepped into the camper where William now was sitting at the small medic table. She paused in the doorway.

William clapped his hands and sent a shower of flower petals over her.

Angela entered and shut the door, leaving the guards to break up the ugly fight. She expected Ivan to lose badly, but she didn’t care. She needed to listen for trouble and now she would do it with William, despite him not needing more time alone with her. “No one understands but you and Adrian.”

William pointed to the window.

She watched as it iced over. The glass became a mirror and then a film. Narrowing in, she was able to see Adrian and Nancy in a bedroll together, sleeping.

Angela’s pain burst out in a wave that William couldn’t absorb. He cringed at her emotions. Without the censor she usually kept on them, it was heavy and thick.

Angela closed it up, relieved to even let it loose for a second. *I miss him. I hate his guts and wish he would die, but I miss him*. Angela sighed, sitting. *I’m so screwed up.*

“You’re under multiple spells.” William told her what he believed. “If they weren’t influencing you, it wouldn’t be like this.”

Angela deliberated the other couples in camp and laughed at him.

William’s lips thinned, but he didn’t argue. He chose a path. “I know why you don’t want to break Adrian’s charm.”

Angela stopped laughing.

“It would also erase the chains you put on Marc.”

Angela stared without a change in expression.

“You knew! You’re scared.”

She tensed. “At first. Now it’s a protection. Every woman who meets Marc wants him. He would be free for about ten minutes.”

“So you keep him chained to protect him.”

“He’s mine!” Angela hissed, red coming into her eyes as she leaned forward. “So are you.”

William didn’t deny it. He loved Donna, but he wanted Angela with every fiber of his being. If she said to kill everyone here, he would.

“And if I only need a single soul taken?” Angela finished her plans with William, glad it was almost over now.

“Name them.” William didn’t care if he never saw Ciemus again.

“Ciemus will fall,” Angela warned in the double tones of her witch. “They’re already doubting the Mayor. Donna needs you.”

William struggled. He knew this was a test, but need was all he could feel. “Name them.”

Angela whispered her answer. While he sat there in shock, she grabbed a mental door that jumped eagerly under her attention and slammed it shut. “As a reward, I sentence you to live as an Invisible.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

**Crabs**

Day Six

**1am**

A picture containing animal, arthropod, invertebrate, crab

Description automatically generated

**1**

**O**ld magic danced around the camper, drawing attention from those outside.

“What’s going on in there?” Neil joined Kyle outside the camper as other Eagles came to break up the fight. Marc had won, of course. He was now proving it with snarled words and gut punches that caused Ivan to puke after each hit.

“You think he learned that in the Marines?”

Marc swung.

Ivan sprayed.

Neil shrugged. “Probably. Could be useful.”

Marc let Ivan draw a single ragged breath and swung again.

The Eagles around the two men wanted to break it up, but they didn’t know how. It was Marc. He was mad. They were scared of taking Ivan’s place.

“Should we?”

Neil sighed. “Ivan does have duty right now.”

Kyle gave a loud whistle. “Break it up, Marine!”

Marc paused.

“The boss needs a guard.”

Marc spun toward them.

Kyle and Neil went in opposite directions as Marc took their place at the door.

Neil noticed Kyle hadn’t answered his query about what William and Angela were doing. He spotted Jennifer nearby.

Jennifer hadn’t known Angela planned to do it, but she approved. “William is like a big kid in a candy store. He has too many options. She narrowed it down for him.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I.” Jennifer frowned. “If I had that type of power and control over it, I’d be thrilled. I wouldn’t want to go back to a time when I was defenseless.”

Neil stared in surprise. “He gave it up?”

“Just until he leaves. He wants to live like you.” Jennifer flushed as she realized what she’d said. “I’m sorry.”

Neil grinned. “I pity the descendants, Jenny. I don’t envy you. We’re good.”

Jennifer chuckled, relieved.

“Most people want the opposite, I guess.” Neil shrugged. “Kyle and I have talked about it a few times, but we see what you all go through.”

“So if I told you–”

“Don’t.” Neil’s tone was frigid. “I made my choice a long time ago. Don’t ever bring it up again, you understand?”

Jennifer gave a fast nod, unable to help the fear.

Neil sighed, missing her reaction. “Please, Jennifer. Don’t do what you’re thinking. I don’t want it.”

Jennifer fought the fear, reminding herself that people got mad all the time. It didn’t mean they were going to be violent too. “Are you sure? You’d be like Samantha.”

“Don’t you think I know?” Neil groaned in frustration. “Don’t you think she knows?!”

Jennifer stared as shock came. “No. She never thinks about it.”

“Because we don’t want it!” Neil calmed, trying to remember Jennifer was young, but she also had orders from the boss to learn what made adults adult. “Your gifts kept you alive. Hers brought nothing but curses and pain. She adjusted to being different, but she hates it. How can you not know that?”

Jennifer lowered her eyes. “I haven’t dug into Samantha yet.”

Neil was beyond surprised. “Why the hell not? She’s closer to the boss than I am!”

Jennifer almost choked on the words. “What if she doesn’t like me?”

Neil almost didn’t understand. Jennifer never acted her age. “You’re worried that she won’t like you.”

“I have issues like anyone else!” Jennifer defended hotly, embarrassed.

Neil snorted. “Samantha doesn’t have a problem with you.”

“Not the same.” The girl stared at her feet.

“No, it’s not.” Neil shrugged. “Sounds like you should spend some time with her and find out.”

“Yeah. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Neil chortled at the snarky tone. “Your nerves are showing.”

“Are not.”

He put a hand on Jennifer’s shoulder, feeling her tense and then accept it. “Do you want to be his wife?”

Jennifer flashed a quick smile. “I’m scared. It’s normal.”

“You can wait. Kyle will be relieved.”

Jennifer’s face melted into unhappiness. “He won’t give me a baby unless we’re married.”

*Good man. Knew I liked him.*

Jennifer frowned up at Neil.

Neil shrugged, suddenly feeling as though he was talking to a little sister. “He loves you. You love him. Wait or don’t, it doesn’t matter. You two were meant to be together. We all see it. You will too.”

Jennifer’s deep sigh carried her worries with it. “Thank you.”

“Brides and grooms need to hear that right before the ceremony.” Neil smiled. “The people who run just didn’t have support to help them over the cold feet.”

“You think?”

Neil shook his head, grinning. “Negative. I think they’re wise. Marriage is forever!”

Jennifer smacked him on the arm, laughing. “Stop it.”

Neil saw a group of den mothers coming and leaned in to press a kiss to her cheek. “You can call it off at any point. If you do, I’ll help you fix the mess afterwards.”

Jennifer hugged him.

Neil froze in shock for an instant, then awkwardly patted the girl on the shoulder. *This is nice. I’ve never had a sister.*

Jennifer retreated as the women reached them. She was an Eagle and she’d come running at the sounds of fighting, like the rest of the off duty men and women had, but they were all heading back to the tents now.

Neil left her in their capable hands, heading for the showers. Later, he would speak with Samantha about a friendship both females needed. Jennifer would benefit from the wisdom of Samantha’s mistakes and Samantha would be dragged back into camp life because of who she was hanging with. It was a good setup, but it was also a precaution. Samantha would now be around a descendant at all times who could alert Angela if she had trouble.

He hadn’t discussed it with Angela yet, but Neil was quietly adjusting the schedules for all their pregnant females. When things calmed a bit more, he planned to make sure the boss had those other areas covered. Her warning about none of their children being safe had terrified Neil. He would do anything to save Samantha and the others the heartache of losing kids. He’d watched Angela suffer it and almost not make it back from the darkness. He doubted Samantha was strong enough to come through that and he knew Tonya wasn’t. Kids meant everything to the descendants.

**2**

**Day Six (1am)**

Kyle couldn’t sleep. He’d volunteered for the late shift after the bachelor party to keep from lying in his bedroll worrying about the wedding. As the wind howled in a cool chill from the ocean, nearly knocking him off his feet, Kyle was glad. He needed to be distracted from–

Tripping, he fell to the damp sand. Kyle winced as a hard object under the grit punctured his skin.

He sat up, not caring that Eagles were pointing and laughing. He pulled his hand free, finger throbbing.

The crab attached to his digit glared balefully, whiskers twitching.

The man and the crab regarded each other.

Blood ran down Kyle’s finger.

The crab casually began to chew.

“I’ve got crabs!”

The crab paused at his scream.

Neil slapped the hungry animal from Kyle’s hand. “That might stop the wedding. We’ll get you some medicine.”

The crab bounced and rolled into a hole near the nest Kyle had tripped over.

Neil looked over and found Kyle walking away. “We need to clean out that wound. Where are you going?”

“To get my meal kit.”

Neil hit the ground laughing as a stream of crabs emerged from the sand.

“You’re making that up.” Angela was laughing at the story she’d gotten upon asking what had made the noise.

“Nope. We’re having crab with breakfast. There were dozens of them in the nest.”

Angela waved Travis on, aware of him being her guard now. Ivan was in the medical camper, trying to keep water on a bruised stomach. She followed him to the flap and spotted Kyle being tended by a medic while eating a charred scrap of meat. As he met her eye across the camp, Angela laughed at his triumphant nod. Men were cute when they got that way.

Angela went back to the table and kept laboring on the schedules. Like Neil and a few others, she was rearranging things to make sure the pregnant women were heavily guarded. The descendants were covering the children and the camp, but a few odd-out groups still needed to be watched over. She would be relieved to have another of them off her list. She didn’t know what was coming for their babies, but she felt it and so did her twins.

Mike and Mia were staying awake a little longer now and picking up more of the activities around them. They were also learning about parents. It required shallow answers now and more details as they grew older. Their knowledge banks would help fill in some of their history, but when they began asking where their true mom and dad were, Angela would have to disappoint them. She didn’t know. Kendle hadn’t gotten that information and anyone who may have had it was dead or missing.

Angela joined Grant near the livestock trailer. “I thought you’d be following Ray around at the party.”

Grant pointed at a tiny light in the distance by the warehouse quarantine zone.

Angela pursed her lips. “To avoid you?”

“I think so.”

“He likes you. Don’t give up.”

Grant’s frown brought guards closer to the boss. He was still new.

Angela could feel his worry and shook her head. “My people aren’t the problem. He loved Dale. You can’t forget that.” Angela signaled toward Ray’s tiny tent. “What if you took him a slice of cake and then left him alone until morning? See if he just needs a kindness and some space.”

“I think I should just leave him alone.” Grant stated wistfully at the campsite. “He isn’t ready.”

“For another relationship? No. For a great friend who understands him? Ray’s needed that all his life.” Angela rotated toward the tents, where the party was finally winding down. “He won’t be alone. There are snipers on duty and he has his gun. All he doesn’t have is a slice of cake and something other than his loss to think about.”

“I tried,” Grant groused. “He isn’t ready.”

Angela shrugged. “Maybe you aren’t. After years in Ciemus without a public relationship, I would imagine your fellow townsmen thought you’d stay single forever. Must be a shock for them to find out you really are gay.”

Grant refused to say some of his own people were shunning him. “I’m getting some looks.”

“You laid low so long they forgot.”

“I didn’t have anyone there who draws me like Ray.”

“I didn’t realize any of Ciemus’s other people were homosexual.”

“One or two, but they kept their heads down more than I did.” Grant grew bitter. “We made jokes and had talks about equality, but none of us wanted to test those lines.”

“And here, you’ll be crossing them.” Angela had him figured out now. “You’re embarrassed and worried about retaliation against Ray, not yourself.”

“Yes.”

“Is Ray?”

“No. He swears Safe Haven doesn’t care, providing we do our jobs and don’t cause trouble.”

“Not all of Safe Haven feels that way, but they won’t act on it. You’re safe here to be yourself.”

“Are you?”

Angela sighed, turning away. “No. My enemies are different than yours.”

“Because they want your gifts?”

“Because female alphas pull men too hard. But without it, I’m just another tired leader and they’re just normal survivors. No one here wants that. We like being special.”

Grant let her go, considering her words and advice. When he thought he’d made peace with some of it, Grant went to the party tent to see if there was cake left.

There wasn’t, but that would tip the scales on the next moment between the men. Satisfied she’d helped another couple on a good path, Angela went to settle into her place for a short shift on guard duty. William would stay in the camper, away from people while he adjusted to being normal again. She’d owed him for saving their lives at the naval station and it was the only thing he’d wanted that she would give.

“Locking up his gifts is an odd way to repay him.” Kyle joined Angela in the tree, taking a fork lower.

“He’s never been normal. For him, it’s a treat.”

“And the issues you discussed?”

Angela shrugged, pleased with how Jennifer’s magic was rubbing off on Kyle. In time, he would be able to read the minds of those around him and not just the alpha when she was open to it. “William will have a new understanding of the world when he leaves here. It won’t be our problem for years.”

Kyle assumed she meant it would be when they came back to America but didn’t ask. He would be with them when that happened, though he still had a tiny hope that Jennifer wouldn’t be.

“Smother that hope.” Angela’s tone was set. “She’s my right hand and it will never change.”

“Why did you pick Jenny?” Kyle was able to ask now, knowing it wouldn’t matter to him. “The real reason.”

Angela was glad to be able to tell the truth. “She’s special, Kyle, even for being one of us. She needed to be able to do the job, but she also needed a protector. You two falling in love was icing on the cake.”

“So you knew, back then?”

“Adrian thought about it once.” Angela’s mind went to Adrian holding her in the country club, after eliminating Cesar and his slavers at the rest stop. “He sensed one of us and who they would become. He was shocked to discover it was a teenager.”

Kyle didn’t like Angela’s haunted tones or the memories of holding her so Adrian could burn shut that hollow point hole in her shoulder to save her life. “Fate gave her to the slavers and we removed them. Then she came here, and you claimed her future before she had a chance to accept it herself. You brainwashed her.”

“In a way.” Angela adored Kyle, though their bond wasn’t something they discussed often. “You skipped a lot in there.”

Kyle didn’t hesitate to tell the truth. “My obsession. Hiding her. Encouraging her to think she could only trust me.”

“Yes, but there’s also her side of it. Jennifer knew about Safe Haven. If she hadn’t been pregnant, she might have eliminated the slavers herself and came to us. She was meant to be here, to lead. She knows it.”

“She wants it.”

“That’s also required for the job.” Angela grunted. “Marc can’t, because he doesn’t. I have trouble because I question everything that needs to be done, even when I shouldn’t. Jennifer will determine the logical choices and carry them out.” Angela looked at him. “Unless you or the kids are involved. She and I are sisters in so many ways. Watch my mistakes, Marc’s mistakes, Adrian’s. And don’t make them. Learn from us so you can be what she needs.”

“I think I know what you’re hiding from everyone, even Jenny.” Kyle jumped down as his numb ass refused to take anymore of the hard branch. “If you need to talk, I’m there for you.” Kyle was still looking out for a member of his team.

Angela’s sigh rippled on the wind. “When we get to the island, I’ll need it so much that Jennifer and Marc will think we’re having an affair.”

Kyle chuckled.

Angela didn’t.

**3**

“I can’t believe you came.” Conner kept his hands in his pockets and his eyes on her face. “Why are you doing this?”

Candy giggled, nervous and horny. “You know why.”

Conner swallowed the lump in his throat to speak. “I need ground rules.”

Candy’s cheeks grew red in the moonlight. “Make us both feel good for a little while, okay? Just...don’t go too far.”

Conner took a step forward. Then another. “Am I too close?”

Candy shook her head, stomach tightening.

Conner advanced, mind flitting between Eagle rules and his fantasies.

Candy sensed it. She was also torn. If he didn’t want this, it was wrong.

“Are you crazy?” Conner grinned at her. “I’m afraid of scaring *you* off.”

Candy giggled again. “You’ll tell me if that changes?”

Conner nodded, bringing them within inches of each other. “But it won’t. I’ve wanted this for a long time now.” He held out a hand. “You’ll tell me if it’s too much?”

Candy laughed, softly. “It won’t be. Go ahead.”

Conner leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her, groaning at the sensation.

Candy mirrored his noise as good energy swarmed over her, warming cold feet.

Conner held them there, feeling her, letting her feel him. He’d been eating and working out since joining camp. He wasn’t scrawny anymore.

He retreated.

Candy returned his curious look. “Again?”

This time, Conner kissed her.

Candy was lost in the connection and missed the bright light that shot from their embrace. It slammed into the shield and sent a rush of brilliant blue through the barrier.

People looked up in approval at the sight, assuming a good moment among leadership had caused it.

William recognized it for it was. “The soulmate connection.” He slapped Neil on the shoulder. “Another good match!”

Neil shared the man’s smile, but he watched to see what couple had made it. Like the rest of their camp, he understood there was almost always blowback from moments like these but causing changes to the shield was a sign of leadership. None of the council couples would be just now experiencing that. It had to be a newly revealed member of leadership.

Angela nodded toward the rear of the shower camper.

Neil kept an eye on that area as he continued to sweep for problems.

Behind the camper, the guards retreated to allow the new couple privacy.

Conner drew back in delighted surprise. “Did you feel that?”

Candy nodded, dazed. “We’re a match.” She hadn’t seen the light, but she’d been around enough to know this feeling was special. She immediately wanted to protect it. “We should follow the rules after this so you don’t get kicked out.”

“Whatever you want.”

She touched her lips, able to feel his magic on her, spreading. “Is this real?”

Conner kissed her again, letting her see inside his heart*. There was no spell or charm. I let you think that so you would give me a chance to love you.*

*Do you?*

Conner kissed her harder. *With all my heart.* *Someday, we’ll be married. I’m growing up as fast as I can.*

Candy clutched his strong shoulders. “Stop.”

Conner ended the kiss, but he didn’t step back.

Candy struggled to clear her head so she could think. Her body was throbbing after only two short kisses. “Don’t grow up yet.”

Conner laughed. “Oh, okay.” He wrapped his arms around her thick waist and rested his cheek against hers, perfectly happy for this second in time. “Do you feel good?”

Candy nodded against him, relieved. She’d expected much more... She tensed at a rustle of clothes as he untucked his shirt.

Conner kissed her cheek, breath coming in shorter rasps. “Hang on to me.”

Candy tightened her grip on his shoulders as warm hands brushed her legs, spread them.

“Thank you for wearing a skirt!” Conner moaned in her ear, positioning them. He slid a finger over her panties, bucking in his own grip through his pants.

Candy shivered, body lighting up from his gentle strokes. Clothes rustled again, then a zipper sounded.

Candy opened her mouth to protest.

Conner started stroking against her, groaning her name.

Candy’s body replied by softening, leaning forward to help him please them both.

“They’re gonna get caught.”

Kyle nodded, mind on his upcoming wedding more than the illegal couple stealing a private moment. Thanks to Jennifer, he no longer viewed that as sternly. “Send Dog through on a patrol. That should quiet them down.”

Quinn hurried to handle it. He didn’t want the couple to get in trouble either, but Candy’s moans were getting louder. Eventually, a camp member would notice.

Conner caught it all. He was monitoring a dozen different directions to keep them from being caught like this. “Sorry. We have to go faster.”

Candy bit down on a scream as Conner touched her bare skin with his hot fingers. She convulsed against his light pushes, sobbing.

Conner absorbed it, letting her ride the waves as paws padded toward them.

Candy held him tighter, wanting more.

Conner ducked out of her embrace, fixing his clothes. He tugged her skirt down and spun into the shadows.

Dog appeared.

Candy sucked in air and staggered back into camp.

Dog followed Conner’s wild scent to the camp perimeter. The shield was up, but the boy was on the other side of it, lying in a ditch.

Dog put the pieces together and went to tell the boss that Conner had a gift unlike the others. He could go through her shield without her knowing.

Conner knew he was caught, but he’d had to get out of camp or he would have taken Candy right then and rules be damned. He’d never felt anything like her heat. He was lying in this cold ditch, finishing what he’d started, in hopes that Angela wouldn’t know they’d had a physical moment before he was legal.

Angela’s hard laughter floated across the camp. Then her worry flashed out.

Most people assumed she wanted the party over now and the camp settled. Eagles got on it.

Angela let them. She was ready to have things settled for the night, but it had really been a momentary lapse in her terrible fear over her son being alone in the darkness without her shield to keep his reckless ass alive. Conner was out of her protection, but only by a few feet. Charlie was alone in the apocalyptic wastelands, miles from here. *I may never sleep again.*

Chapter Twenty-Five

**Private Lessons**

Day Six

**3am**

A close up of a logo

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**1**

**K**enn had forgotten how much he enjoyed being alone. Solitary missions in the past had been a joy for him because he had only his rules to obey. He’d been free to follow his desires, especially while in other countries. When the gates had shut behind him, Kenn had started dreading the new restrictions, but now that he was out here, he was remembering solitude was a good thing. It was giving him a chance to think.

He hadn’t realized it, but there wasn’t much of that in Safe Haven. People were always around, or lines of people were waiting. There wasn’t much privacy or time.

Kenn shifted his pack into a better place on his shoulders and dug a wedgie out of his crack. He ignored the wind and the chill, concentrating on putting his feet places that wouldn’t leave a distinct mark or send him sliding. Around him, the countryside was still and quiet. He couldn’t hear anything from camp now and there hadn’t been any noise other than his own breathing and footsteps for the two hours he’d been moving through the darkness without a light. It was a test of his old skills, and of his courage. It was also a good defense. Using a light during the apocalypse was like putting out honey for a bear and he didn’t want company.

“Tough-titty, said the kitty.”

Kenn stopped, stomach falling. “She didn’t.”

Charlie came out of the trees behind Kenn and took up his line of travel without stopping. “Of course, she did. We started this journey together. It makes sense we would end it that way.”

The teenager kept going, smirking. He’d been trailing Kenn since he left camp, but the Marine hadn’t noticed. *I’ve gotten better*.

Kenn forced the respect. “Yes, you have.”

Kenn slowly came out of the shock to get moving again, becoming aware of the chill as he stood still. It was always better to be active.

Charlie stayed in the lead, keeping track of the thoughts of the man behind him as much as the almost alien surroundings. Unlike Kenn, Charlie wasn’t comfortable being away from Safe Haven, but he was determined to hide it from his unwilling companion for as long as he could.

Kenn grunted. “Too late.”

Charlie shrugged. “I’m a kid. I’m supposed to be afraid of the dark.”

“You’re an Eagle. They’re not afraid of anything.”

“That’s not true. Eagles don’t let their fears get the best of them.”

“Eagles also don’t break camp rules.” Kenn was assuming the boy was here on a punishment trip, the same as he was.

Charlie slowed to let Kenn catch up. “I didn’t think you knew.”

Kenn shrugged. “She said something to me on the beach the other day. I felt a trip coming.” Kenn hated himself, but he couldn’t help asking, “I’m not supposed to return, right?”

Kenn was encouraged by how long it took Charlie to form an answer.

“I’m not sure either of us are.”

Kenn snorted. “I don’t have any doubt about you.”

“No, I really don’t either, except…”

Kenn understood. “She’s been putting off those vibes. I get it, but I don’t think you have as much to worry about as you believe.”

“If that were true, I’d be in my tent and not out here with a man I hate.”

Kenn winced. “That’s what she’s doing. She’s trying to make peace between us.”

“Not possible.”

“No.”

Charlie spun around suddenly. “You’re an awful son of a bitch, you know?”

Kenn shoved Charlie out of the way, knocking him into the slush. *Of course, I know it, you little shit. That’s why I’m out here. I’d rather be in my tent too.*

“We shouldn’t use our gifts. Trackers will find us.”

“Whatever.”

Charlie snickered as he picked himself up. He liked being able to get one over on Kenn.

“Is she pregnant yet?”

Charlie’s mouth dropped open. “Well... You see...”

“Yeah. I see we both have a number of reasons we could’ve been sent out on a trip together.” Kenn tried being gruff. “How about we spend the next few hours in silence, contemplating the many possibilities?”

Charlie chuckled at the wording. “Whatever.”

Kenn refused to let the boy see his smile.

The males strode in silence for three minutes.

“How long until we reach Kendle?”

Kenn shrugged. “A day.”

Charlie pulled his hat further over his ears to protect him from the cold and then settled in for a long, uncomfortable walk. Unlike the Marine gliding along behind him without making sounds, Charlie did know why he was on this trip. His mom was trying to toughen him up for the future and while he wasn’t sure he actually needed it, Charlie had been relieved to know he was getting a chance to achieve a new level of maturity before the punishment came over Tracy’s pregnancy.

“This *is* your punishment, rookie.” Kenn rubbed it in without enjoyment. “Tracy’s will come every day until you two are married.”

“She doesn’t want to get married.”

“No, she doesn’t want to marry a dumbass horn dog. Grow up and you’ll both be off the hook.”

“I don’t know how!” Charlie flipped Kenn the finger as he passed him to retake the lead. “Just stop talking.”

“Just start listening. Then I can send you back to camp and rescue Kendle.”

“She sent me to help.”

Kenn snorted. “She sent you for a private lesson with the camp trainer. Grow up!”

Charlie hated it that Kenn’s words made sense, but once stated, it was obvious the Marine was right. His mom wanted him in camp, but he had to be punished. “So give your lesson already and I’ll go!”

“Assuming you’d be fine for this run, that she just needs to punish you, is your first mistake.” Kenn started the teaching moment like he would with any other Eagle. “Your second error was assuming I want you to be punished. I couldn’t care less that you dipped your wick and lit a candle. What I care about is how you lied to me.”

Charlie’s gut filled with dread. They’d never discussed this in all their fighting since coming to Safe Haven.

“Yep.” Kenn controlled his anger. “She sent us out here alone together, boy. Like we were in the beginning of this mess. When you were lying to me.”

“And you were beating on me and my mom!” Charlie spun around again, ready to use his gifts. “You’re a pig! I hate your guts and so does she!”

Kenn stepped around the furious child this time. “I’m sorry.”

Charlie didn’t know how to respond. “Well...I’m not!”

“Didn’t expect you to be.” Kenn kept walking. “You survived by lying and hiding. Millions of people have done that over time, I’m sure.”

The teenager resumed walking as he realized they weren’t going to fight. It was getting cold and his confusion was blocking the anger that had been keeping him warm. He’d never expected Kenn to apologize.

“I wouldn’t have, but she sent you out here with me and we only have one piece of unfinished business.”

“Did she know you would say this stuff? Did she think we would fight?”

Kenn pulled his canteen for a cool drink. “Why do you think she wants you hurt?”

“I don’t get it.”

“You’re quick to think she’s out to get you, but the evidence doesn’t support it. What’s your deal?”

Charlie didn’t see any reason to lie. “She wants Adrian and not my dad.”

“She wants them both.” Kenn grinned, storing his canteen. “I never would have thought she had that in her.”

“Yeah.”

“So?”

“So, it’s wrong.”

“Oh, hell, kid. You have a woman now. Why don’t you get off your mom’s back?”

“You like it that she’s falling!”

“Yes, I do. She’s always been high on her horse about things like this. It’s nice to see she’s human, like the rest of us.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you have to stop expecting her to be perfect. So she’s got the hots for two guys. Like you haven’t eyeballed more than just Tracy.”

“I evaluated the available partners and–”

“Don’t give me that shit, kid. I’ve got nuts too. They get all heavy and soft when cute women come around–any cute women. We would have fifteen holes to fill if the holes would let us.”

“I wouldn’t. I love Tracy.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kenn blew him off. “At some point, you’ll be hit with the same dilemma and we’ll see how you handle it. Being attracted to other people is human nature. We were made to couple up and squeeze out pups. Only loyalty and society keep us from humping the leg of every chick we meet.”

Charlie sniggered even though he didn’t want to. “That’s terrible.”

“But it’s almost true.” Kenn didn’t back down. “Some people, like Jennifer and Kyle, aren’t that way. They’ll never look at another man or woman once they’re married.”

“We’re gonna miss it.”

“Good.” Kenn also didn’t see any need to hide things. “It would put pressure on me to marry Tonya right then and I’m not ready. I proposed. Now, she needs to wait for me.”

“What if she doesn’t?”

That gave Kenn pause. He hadn’t considered it.

Charlie was grinning as he fell in step on the icy road. “I heard her and my mom. She knew you were leaving.”

“That’s why she stayed on the boat!” Kenn realized. “It was a test of her loyalty to the boss.”

“My mom said it was to Safe Haven and her new future as one of the good guys.”

Kenn huffed. “Same thing.”

“Yeah. Well?”

“Well, what?”

“What if she picks someone else while you’re gone? Or later, on the island?”

“I’ll adjust.” Kenn was pleased to feel like he meant that. “I’ll want to be a father to my child, but I don’t think it’ll be an issue. I’ll be dead.”

“What?”

“If Tonya picks someone else, she’ll be too scared to do it openly. She’ll kill me off or get your mom to do it.”

“You’re screwing with me now.”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“It’s cold and dark, and you’re an easy target.”

Charlie frowned. *I’ll never be able to keep up with the senior Eagles.* “She wants what I can’t give.”

“And now we come to another reason you may be out here.” Kenn pointed to the skyline, where the sun would rise in a few hours. “The Indians went east to do this, but you’re going north for your test of manhood. When it’s over, you won’t worry about being one of us anymore. You either will be or you won’t.”

“So I am going with you to help Kendle.”

“I don’t think that’s your mission, kid. You have a few days to do the growing that usually takes months and years. It’s time you became a man.”

Charlie deliberated and gave the only response he could. “Cool!”

**2**

“How long until we take a break?”

Kenn grunted, trying not to cave yet. He hadn’t walked this much in a long time, but Angela’s mental order to hoof it for the first day had been specific. “Dawn.”

Charlie trudged behind the Marine, glad this road was too coated in debris to make crunching noises like the previous street had. They’d both stayed twitchy as they listened to the ice crack under their boots. Sunrise was an hour off, and a dangerous time to be traveling. Anyone holed up around here would notice their passage.

Kenn was listening for trouble, but he wasn’t expecting any yet. Kendle’s location, according to the rough mental map Angela had provided, was still miles away. They would probably reach the castaway around midnight.

“Will we have to fight?”

“I don’t predict the future.” Kenn paused. “Do you?”

“Sometimes.”

“Figures. That’s one of the gifts I wanted to use.” Kenn sighed. “Don’t do it. It might be tracked.”

“I’m not. I thought you might have been given a battle plan when mom sent you out.”

“She gave me a mental map and the finger.”

Charlie’s chuckle was tired. He was cold, sore, and ready to be still for a while so he could warm up.

“We’ll burrow into our bedrolls back-to-back, beneath debris.” Kenn gestured. “Piss in the next half hour so we don’t lead anything to our site by scent.”

“Got it.”

“We’ll sleep for six hours, get up and do a perimeter round, then hit the bathroom again half a mile out. We’ll eat as we do rounds and then sleep for another four hours.” Kenn paused in the plans, eyeing the moon and clouds over it. The wind felt like bad weather was coming. Months in the mountain had heightened his senses. He could almost smell a storm.

“That’s how Samantha feels it at first.” Charlie stared at the Marine, surprised. “Maybe you have a gift like hers.”

Kenn shrugged. “Works for me.” It was a pleasing thought.

“Samantha said it doesn’t take magic for her to know one’s coming, only to track it. Give it a try.”

Kenn wasn’t sure how it worked, but he knew enough to look for a new door in his mind. When one lit up with a pale green light, he marked it, but didn’t open it. That was the power side. He needed the instinct to use it. That came from an open mind and his nose. Kenn inhaled.

*Rain.*

Charlie groaned. “Snow would have been better to cover our tracks. Rain leaves mud.”

Kenn sighed. “Okay. Give me a minute.” He quickly adapted. “We’ll walk until the rain starts and then hole up until it passes. We’ll find something underground so we can have a fire.”

“Works for me.” Charlie realized it meant they weren’t stopping at sunrise and groaned. “Oh, man.”

“Shhh.” Kenn went on high alert. “We aren’t alone. Watch yourself.”

Charlie tried not to think of anything connected to magic, but it was hard. He also refused to contemplate their camp, instead picking out oddities around them to stew on while Kenn found the problem.

“It’s a tracker.” Kenn stopped and swiveled, pulling his gun.

“Interesting that you know.” A man came from behind a tree near Charlie.

Charlie lifted his gun but didn’t react otherwise. In rookie lessons, he was supposed to act dumb, and that’s what he was doing. The tracker was clearly a threat. Kenn would handle this one.

Kenn snorted. “Thanks.”

The boy caught the vibe but didn’t react to the unspoken order to throw off the intruder with laughter or odd comments. He could feel the man planning his death now. It was unpleasant.

Kenn sighed. “Rookies.” He fired through his jacket pocket, where his gun had been ready to go since he left camp.

The tracker’s shield deflected the bullet but weakened with his panic. It went down.

Waiting for it, Kenn fired twice more, hitting the man in the leg and the stomach.

Screams filled the air.

Kenn and Charlie rushed over and disarmed the bleeding man, not being gentle. They both knew catching him off guard had saved them a lot of problems and maybe their lives.

Kenn wrapped his hands around the man’s neck, preparing to squeeze.

Charlie dug into his mind in the pause, knowing they needed the information. “He’s alone. He was sent by the same assholes who nailed Zack’s team to the warehouse walls.”

Kenn started to end it, angered. He still liked Zack, despite the man not caring for him anymore.

“They aren’t from here. Wait.” Charlie pulled on Kenn’s beefy hand. “Hang on.”

Kenn eased up but didn’t let go. “Two minutes. He’s trying to heal.”

Charlie ripped open doors, slamming them against the man’s mental halls in rapid succession. It sounded like gunshots to Kenn. *Don’t want to get on the bad side of that.*

Charlie withdrew. “He’s UN.”

Kenn’s grip was getting sweaty and the sounds of panicked pain were too loud. “Finish up.”

Charlie reached out and snatched the man’s lifeforce.

Kenn was knocked back onto a slushy debris pile.

Charlie groaned at the energy. “That feels good!”

Kenn watched the boy in shock. *Angela’s gonna shit a brick and beat me bloody with it.*

Charlie doubled over at the pain as the man’s uneven power merged with his own. “Not so good now.”

Blue light swirled around the teenager, lifting him off the ground a few inches before slamming him into the slush.

Kenn tried to get up and see if the kid was okay, but he was out of practice using a full pack. It took a few seconds to roll over and gain his feet. As he did, footsteps crunched toward them through the darkness.

Kenn grabbed Charlie’s arm and hefted the groaning boy over his shoulder. Then he ran.

Charlie hadn’t known he would be disabled by pain when he took a lifeforce. He tried not to moan but couldn’t help it as Kenn ran along the crunching leaves and ice.

Behind them, heavy steps and angry voices echoed.

“Which way?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you positive it was magic?”

“Yes! I felt it.”

Kenn increased his pace, realizing they’d attracted the attention of refugees who’d been camped nearby. “If we survive this, I am so telling your mother.”

**3**

“Come out of there and we won’t hurt you!”

“We just want the kid. You can go!”

The shouts had been coming for half an hour. Kenn and Charlie were in the basement of a farmhouse. The people above them, yelling and pacing, had tried to come down the stairs, but Kenn had fired a few shots and eliminated two of them to discourage that. He had the boy tucked under a metal counter now. Soon, the people upstairs would get tired of talking and start shooting.

A gun cocked above them.

Kenn sighed, standing up. “Come on down and we’ll negotiate. I ain’t giving him up for nothing.”

“You could have just said he was for sale!” one of them complained, opening the basement door. The man stomped down the stairs without a weapon in hand. “We have two women in camp, but one is pregnant. We won’t trade her.”

“I need water.” Kenn came forward as two more men followed the first down.

Charlie stayed where he was, watching for a signal.

Kenn gestured. “The boy’s a magic user. He’s worth both women and all your water.”

The small group conferred in grunts and whispers.

Kenn took stock of them, encouraged by the way they seemed to mean an honest trade. It would give him the advantage when shit hit the fan.

“We’ll give you the water and the women, but we need proof he’s a magic user.”

Kenn nodded.

Charlie frowned at the men. “Your women aren’t there anymore. Rachel forced Kelly to let her out of the shed. They took your truck, the one with a full tank. I won’t tell you what direction they headed because I don’t belong to you!” Charlie came from beneath the bench, clear on what needed to happen here.

*Are you sure*? Kenn had to ask.

Charlie flashed images of the abused females fleeing for their lives as he snatched the closest lifeforce.

Kenn took the other two.

**4**

“This is good.”

Kenn nodded, chewing. After months of dehydrated, canned, and foraged meals, the steak was amazing. Neither of them cared that it was tough and wasn’t seasoned.

The cow had been wrapped on the sled they’d claimed from the trackers. Kenn had thought to use their cabin too because Charlie had said it was stocked with a well, but the sight of cow meat had changed their minds. It had taken hours to thaw and prepare, but it was the best meal either of them had eaten since the war.

“Would you have traded me? Before?”

Kenn shook his head and let out a belch. “I wanted it for my use.”

“Because money runs out?”

Kenn grunted. The boy was a bit wiser than he’d thought. “Yes.”

Charlie nodded. “Makes sense.”

Kenn didn’t care for the pleased tone. “It’s wrong, what we did. She’ll be pissed.”

“She’s always pissed these days.” Charlie picked up another chunk of the perfectly charred meat. “How will we ever tell the difference?”

“Hey!” Kenn didn’t mean to yell. It just happened.

Charlie stopped chewing, mouth full. “What?”

“What’s your problem?!”

The teenager swallowed. “I’m growing up.”

Kenn didn’t know how to respond. He hadn’t expected such bitterness. *I thought he only hated me.*

“I don’t hate her.” Charlie spit out a piece of fat. “She’s this alpha shit now and I have to follow all these new rules, but I remember when she let you beat her ass whenever you felt like it. I also remember when she let you beat on me.”

“She didn’t have much choice then.” Kenn told the truth.

“But she did.” Charlie’s tone was flat. “She could have used her gifts and killed you. She didn’t. She let us be hurt for years and you’re still alive. It’s hard for me to have the proper respect.” Charlie set his mostly empty plate down and laid back. “Good night.”

Kenn gaped at the boy. If Angela had used her gifts, the government would have known and taken them both to the labs. “Wow, are you stupid.”

Kenn kicked out the fire and went to bed, ignoring Charlie’s anger and mental demand for an explanation. “No, you said good night, so shut the fuck up and go to sleep.”

Kenn forced the teenager to obey by tugging his bedroll over his face to block out the sun and further conversation.

Chapter Twenty-Six

**I Forbid You**

November 25th

**Day Six**

8am



**1**

***I*** *can’t believe this is my wedding day.*

Jennifer stretched on her bedroll, grateful for a few minutes alone in the community tent. Everyone else had taken the kids to the bathroom before breakfast to give her a small window of privacy. It felt like any other day, but in a few hours, she would be married.

Jennifer examined her heart to be positive it was what she wanted. She assumed every bride and groom did the same when the big day arrived, but it still felt wrong. She had no doubt about Kyle’s intentions or his level of commitment to her. Cold feet wasn’t something he was dealing with right now.

*Am I?* Jennifer did another sweep of herself and slowly sat up. *No. I want this. Kyle is as close to perfect for me as it gets. No one will ever be closer, because I won’t give anyone else a chance. I’m not settling. I’m just deciding to be happy with who I have. He’s a good man and I don’t care that he’s too old for me. We’ll work through the rest of it, because the first part is the only part that really matters.*

Jennifer suddenly wondered if her assumptions about Kyle were correct. Cold feet settled over her in a manner she hadn’t expected. *What if he really doesn’t want to be saddled with me? We all know what he wants*. *Maybe this is the price he’s willing to pay to have it, but if he doesn’t want to hand over his freedom to me, then neither one of us will be happy.*

Full of new worries, Jennifer scanned for Kyle. She found him, exhausted, a few feet away on guard duty.

Jennifer tried to enter his mind without letting him know she was there. It was important to her to have the truth. She wasn’t sure if she would call off the wedding, but it would certainly crush her a little. Despite not trusting men, she did trust Kyle. He had proven himself to her. Finding out it was all a great act would hurt.

*It’s not an act Jenny.* Kyle didn’t want her to think he was trying to trick her by remaining silent and letting her think he didn’t know she was in his head. *I want you to be my wife.*

*I’m going to ask you a question*, she warned. *You won’t be able to hide your first thought from me.*

Kyle shrugged. *Ask whatever you want.*

*If we weren’t in Safe Haven, a marriage wouldn’t be required.*

*I’m not doing it because it’s required.*

*Let me finish.*

*No. You’re going to say marriage would never have come up if not for the rules of this camp and I refuse to let you ruin today for us.*

Jennifer stood up and began gathering what she needed for a shower while deliberating Kyle’s words. She wanted to believe him, but she’d spent too many awful nights in Cesar’s tent to let it go.

*I’m going to ask the question now.*

*I’m ready.*

Jennifer didn’t think she was, but there was no way to soften the blow. She drew in a breath. *The night you rescued me, did you think about taking what you wanted and leaving me there to die?*

Kyle was devastated that she knew his secret. He’d spent the last months trying to make up for it, trying to prove he wasn’t that person anymore. Her question forced him to look at the ugly side again and admit that it was still there. *Yes. You know I did.*

*Thank you for not lying.*

*You were there. There’s no way I can lie about it. I didn’t understand how much of it you were picking up that night. It wasn’t censored.*

*You mean like you do now.*

*Yes. I paid attention in the classes Angela gave us and I picked up details during battles and some conversations. I don’t block them. I just don’t think about them.*

*I need to know what will happen if I call off the wedding.*

Kyle’s heart sank, but he didn’t hesitate to tell her what he had decided on, rehearsed, last night. *I refuse to be a danger to you. Before, I would have been. After watching the boss, I no longer believe it will be a problem. You’ll do your duties and I’ll do mine. Sometimes we’ll stare at each other and wonder what might have been, but that’ll be the end of it. We both love Safe Haven. We would never do anything to dishonor it.*

*It makes me happy to hear that...*

*But you don’t believe me.*

*No. I don’t.*

Kyle sighed. *You’ll see me leave and you won’t see Marc follow to put the bullet in my brain that I asked for.* He could walk away from her long enough to get out of sight so Marc could do what he wasn’t strong enough to do. Either way, Jennifer would be safe and so would the dream.

Oddly, that answer sent Jennifer’s cold feet away and brought in a rush of warmth that told her the camp’s fear was probably accurate. However, Stockholm syndrome had never been studied under apocalyptic conditions. *Surely there’s room for a little leeway...*

“Are you talking to him?” Candy was in the flap, staring back-and-forth between the couple. “You guys are not supposed to be talking.”

Kyle waved Daryl into his position and moved away. “Make sure she wants to go through with this.”

Candy put a hand on her waist in annoyance. “What do you think I’m here for?” She went in and dropped the flap.

“Report to the mess.” Conner pointed.

Kyle went, heart pounding. If she called it off, he would survive, but it would be hard. Marc would never agree to kill him, but he really would have to leave. He wanted her more than anything. Nothing would compare to having her as his wife. If she changed her mind, his future would be bleak.

Kyle stopped as he entered the mess. The sound of clapping was loud, startling.

Kyle stared in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“You waited.” Conner dropped his head. “You handled it honorably. Congratulations.”

Kyle tolerated the words and slaps, the smiles and nods of approval, but inside, he stayed terrified. He wouldn’t know until someone came to tell him and he–

*Stop it.* Jennifer couldn’t take his stress. *Candy is taking me to the shower camper for a complete scrub. Everything’s fine.*

Kyle let out the breath he’d been holding. *I love you.*

*I know. That’s why I’m marrying you.*

A silly grin spread across Kyle’s lips, encouraging more praise and approval from the camp.

Neil led Kyle to a corner table, where a stack of items waited. “We’ll be here until the women are done with the shower camper and then we’ll head in. Check out the sizes and see if Conner got them right.”

Kyle spotted Autumn in Monica’s arms and scooped her up. “How’s my girl this morning?”

Autumn cooed happily.

“That’s so sweet.” Brittani sat a plate near Kyle as he settled at the table. “You’ll be her real dad in a few hours. Are you nervous?”

Kyle didn’t glance down. “It’s my honor.”

Brittani smiled and left them to help Stanley finish serving the food. It was hard for her to stay away from mess duty. She’d gotten used to it and there wouldn’t be Eagle training today.

Kyle looked at Neil and found the same stricken expression he already knew was on his own face.

*You’re not my daddy?*

Kyle felt Jennifer’s pain and made the choice that felt right. *Yes, I am. Today just makes it legal by camp rules.*

Autumn settled down, accepting the answer. She had no reason not to. Kyle didn’t lie to her.

Jennifer let out a sigh of relief and gratitude that Kyle refused. *We’ll pay for this later, Jenny. She’s going to find out.*

*I know, but not today, okay?*

Kyle nodded, tickling the baby under her chin. *Whatever you want.*

*I want this prep to be over*, Jennifer grumbled. *I don’t want to be plucked.*

Kyle snickered.

“That’ll be me in about four months.” Neil liked the feelings, but he was also scared. Parenthood was like lifetime tenure.

“You’ll be good at it, I bet.” Kyle meant it. “Right and wrong come easy to you.”

“Recognizing them, yes. Doing it, not as much.” Neil held out his arms. “Can I try?”

Kyle laughed at the wording. “I don’t mind if she doesn’t.”

Autumn didn’t. *Uncle Neil!*

Neil’s heart melted. He cradled her close and wondered if he and Samantha would have a daughter someday. According to Angela, they would only have four years. Neil stared at the cute baby, not seeing her. “I should ask Sam to marry me.”

Silence fell from those who heard. The men tensed because it added more pressure on them to propose to their mates, but the women also disapproved. They didn’t want Jennifer’s wedding upstaged and it hadn’t been long enough since Jeremy’s death for Samantha.

Neil felt the vibes, but the baby in his arms would be replaced with his sons in a short time and they would be born as bastards. That bothered Neil. He hadn’t even considered it before, but as he looked at little Autumn, he wanted his sons to have the protection of his name.

Neil handed the baby back to Kyle and left the tent.

“What was that all about?” Grant was still trying to place all the people with their dramas.

“Yet another happy couple will be displaying their love with a ceremony at some point in the near future.” Ray gestured toward the corner. “You can sit over there on the end. Leave the center for the boss.” Ray took Grant to the council table and turned to leave.

Grant didn’t protest. He let out a sad sigh and picked up a cup.

Ray stopped. “Don’t.”

“I’m all alone in a new place.” Grant’s tone was gruff. “How else should I feel?”

“This is so unfair.”

Grant sat the cup down. “I’m sorry I make you uncomfortable.”

People were stopping to listen and stare. Ray flushed. “That’s not it.”

Grant shrugged. “I know what I know. Switch me to a new camp guide. If you don’t, I’ll ask for it.”

Ray came back to the table and sat, hoping in vain the camp would ignore them. “You know why I’m upset. Why are you pushing me?”

Grant smiled. “Head on when cornered. I like that.”

Ray rolled his eyes. “I suspect you like anything that will let you put your hands on me.”

Grant nodded, leering. “Yep.”

Ray sighed, shaking his head. “I don’t want this.”

“Liar.”

“Fine. I’m not ready for this.”

“When does life wait for us to be ready?”

Ray grunted. “You’re giving me the full press and I don’t see what the rush is. You’re coming along.”

“Time you’re wasting if you believe that. Grief has its place, but our time is short, Ray. I want to spend it with you. Why is that a problem?”

“It isn’t, really.” Ray leaned on the table, sad again. “It just feels like it should be.”

“Because it’ll seem like you don’t care? That you were using him?”

“Yes.”

“Were you?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why do you care what they think?”

“Because my place here matters to me, you thickheaded prima donna!” Ray was finally angry. “My place here means more than a quick roll in the–”

“It won’t be quick.” Grant wiggled his eyebrows.

Ray slapped the table. “I mean it!”

“You are an excitable little thing, aren’t you?”

Ray huffed. “Oh, go to hell.”

“Probably will, but not for telling you a hard truth.”

“What?!”

“He wasn’t worth the pain you’re putting yourself through. I’ve been waiting for you for years. Don’t waste our time because you care what some uptight pricks think.”

Ray didn’t know what to say.

Grant did, but he wasn’t sure how well it would go over. He took a deep breath and placed his hand over Ray’s. “I’d like to be your friend.”

Murmurs and mutters went through the tent, but Ray missed them this time. He was tired of fighting. He’d only known the man for a short while, but he wanted him. Ray sighed. “Okay.”

Grant paused, frowning. “Really?”

Ray nodded. “On one condition.”

“Stop pushing so hard? Because I can do that if you–”

“Tell me your name.” Ray scowled. “We’re holding hands and I don’t even know who you are!”

**2**

“Room for one more?”

Silence fell in the camper as Angela entered. By the thick tension that settled in next, she guessed the females had been discussing her love life. She put a hand up. “What? You guys get the drama to yourselves? I’ve got baggage too.”

Awkward chuckles came, forcing Angela to try harder. “Admit it. Without my mistakes to learn from, you’d be doing it too. Men make us stupider.”

Snickers came this time, but Angela wanted more. “One look from those glowing eyes or one smile from those charming mouths and our hearts pound and our knees go weak. If they ever knew the real effect they have on us, we’d never get anything done.”

“We’d have a lot of kids, though.” Samantha was in a corner chair, where Neil had placed her.

Angela chuckled with the others. “Herds of them.” She regarded Jennifer, who had blushed. “How does it feel to know that in a few hours you’re going to be a married woman?”

Jennifer grimaced. She ran into a stall to vomit.

Trinity pulled the stall door shut to give the girl privacy. “Ah, weddings. They bring up the best in all of us.”

Laughter echoed again. Even Jennifer chuckled between gags. She didn’t have anything to bring up. She hadn’t eaten since lunch yesterday.

“Well, that’s the problem.” Tonya began digging in her kit. “I have snacks.”

Angela settled onto a stool in the opposite corner and fought the urge to light a cigarette. Not everyone in here smoked and Jennifer wouldn’t want to smell like it for her special day or her special night.

Jennifer came out of the stall and went to the sink to brush her teeth. She tolerated the shoulder pats and words of comfort because Angela was here. She needed the boss.

*I’m all yours*. Angela took a snack and acted like she wanted it as she tore it open. Like Jennifer, she didn’t have much of an appetite.

*The others tried to help me, but you know what I went through. ...and you’ve gone through it.*

*Some of it*, Angela admitted, chewing sawdust with a smile. *The answer is yes, but it’s hard.*

“How hard?”

Silence fell in the camper as the other women realized Jennifer was talking with someone.

Angela sighed. “I still fight myself every time.”

“And you enjoy it?”

“I do. More than I ever imagined I would, but the fear lingers. I tell myself it’s only been a few months; I have to give it more time.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Yes. It gets easier, afterwards. I don’t feel as guilty and I never feel dirty.”

“What about during?”

Angela grinned. “I don’t know. He takes my breath away and we roll.”

“You don’t...” Jennifer swallowed, aware of how intently the others were listening. “You don’t have flashes of your past?”

Angela paled a bit. “I get them when I think about initiating a moment and sometimes when we first start. Once the hormones kick in, I only see and feel him.”

“How?” Jennifer demanded. “How do I do that?”

“Keep your eyes open.”

Jennifer’s cheeks went scarlet. “You mean watch it all?”

Angela nodded along with the others. “No surprises that way, and flashes have a hard time getting through when your eyes are open.”

“I still don’t think I can do it.” Jennifer regarded Angela, thinking about what was to come. “I know it has to happen, but it’s awful.”

Angela nodded. Most of the women here, except Tonya and Sam, knew what was coming in a few hours. Angela regarded Tonya. “You did well on your first test, so you’re getting the second level. This time, you won’t be able to hide on the boat. You’ll have to keep your mouth and your mind shut. After her honeymoon, Jennifer will help you strengthen those things.”

Jennifer blushed. “I’ll help her now.”

Tonya laughed. “In a few days.”

The other women chuckled, but Jennifer stared at Angela. “I mean it. You may have to switch me out.”

“Noted.” Angela shifted, searching for a better spot on the small stool. “I’m sorry.”

Jennifer sighed. “Me too. I still agree with the choice for the result. I just can’t carry it out.”

“That’s what I have your husband for.”

Jennifer’s immediate displeasure sent a cold chill through the tent.

“Worry over it later.”

“What should I worry about right now?”

“An escape clause. If you decide not to get married, all you have to do is tell one of the Eagles on duty and we’ll handle it. I’ll tell people I withdrew my approval because you sexually assaulted your fiancé.”

Jennifer burst out laughing. “That’s mean.”

“You could try a code word.” Tracy brought the conversation back to where they’d left off. “When you have a flash, say the code word and he can do something different or at least calm you down.”

“Maybe.” Jennifer’s cheeks went red again.

Angela kept her shield up so Jennifer didn’t feel her connect Kyle to the conversation. He and Jennifer deserved happiness. That could only come if he knew how to handle the scars that Cesar had left.

“You could just tell him what he can and can’t do.” Samantha’s tone was dry. “If you’re in control, you’ll be too occupied to have flashes and he won’t argue, I promise.”

Jennifer chuckled a little. “No, he doesn’t want more of that.”

*Yes, I do!* Kyle protested in Angela’s mind.

Angela snickered. *Shhh.*

“He won’t mind after you’re married.” As an Eagle, Monica had witnessed several of the ambushes while on duty. “He has to feel guilty right now when you do that to him.”

“*For* him.” Jennifer smiled. “I like it when he’s...pleased.”

“That’s good. He wants the same feeling from making you happy.”

“So did Cesar.”

“No.” Angela wasn’t going to let that pass. “Cesar wanted you submissive. He liked forcing your body to overrule your mind. Kyle wants what you want.”

“I doubt that.” Jennifer couldn’t stop the mutter. “He loves Autumn, but he doesn’t long for a child to fill the emptiness.”

Hearts broke. Tonya came over to hug the girl, almost crying.

*She’s wrong there, too*, Kyle told Angela. It bothered him to witness Jennifer’s unhappiness and not be able to do anything about it. *I want half a dozen with her. Maybe more if we like being parents and I think we will.*

*Why haven’t you told her that?*

*Because I want to wait a while and enjoy what we have now before we add to it. She wants it right away. We made a deal.*

“Deals were made to be revised. Promising a child and delivering it are easy, but that won’t fill the hole.”

Jennifer thought Angela was scanning her. She nodded. “Deep down, I know it won’t work, but this pain!”

Angela sent a blast of comfort that banished the pain to a dim corner. It wouldn’t last long, but she couldn’t take Jennifer’s agony. It was bringing up her own. “You’ll talk to him about it.”

Jennifer sighed. “I’ll tell him he doesn’t have to honor the deal; that’s unfair. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not upset with you. I hurt for you.” Angela stood up, stretching. “So I’m going to tell you something and let you shout. Ready?”

Jennifer paled. “You didn’t.”

“I did. He heard most of this. He’s listening and hoping I don’t tell you how he responded.”

Jennifer braced. “He doesn’t want any more kids, right?”

Angela chuckled. “Man are you two gonna be great together.” She replayed Kyle’s words for the worried girl.

*I want half a dozen with her. Maybe more if we like being parents and I think we will.*

*Why haven’t you told her that?*

*Because I want to wait a while and enjoy what we have now before we add to it.*

“That is so sweet!” Samantha beamed. “He’s a good one.”

“Yes, he is.” Angela held up a hand before Jennifer could speak. “But he’ll give in the first time you let him make you cum, so as your alpha, I forbid you to get pregnant until you’ve been married for at least six months. It’s not to reward him or to punish you. It’s because your body isn’t a factory made to pop out a child anytime you want one. Spend the next six months getting ready for it. More iron, more protein. We’ll help you and any of the others who want to *plan* a healthy pregnancy. Those who don’t may be punished.” Angela looked around to include everyone. “It’s dangerous for the women and the kids. I haven’t decided yet, but we’ll probably go over it at the next mandatory meeting.”

“Um...you may have to decide sooner.” Tracy was in the far corner of the camper, unpacking Jennifer’s clothes for the wedding. She stood up, turning. “I didn’t know you were going to make rules like that. Neither did Charlie.”

No one spoke or moved. Except for Jennifer, they were stunned.

Tracy studied Angela, not witnessing any reaction at all. *That can’t be good.*

Angela was fighting her demons. She’d told herself to expect it as soon as she found out they’d taken their relationship to a physical level. They needed children and underage sex wasn’t new to the world or to Safe Haven. But...

Fury filled the camper in a thick wave that warned the occupants not to draw attention or think bad thoughts.

Tracy cringed. She didn’t speak, though. There was nothing she could say. She was pregnant by a fifteen-year-old. It was wrong.

Angela sucked in her rage and left the camper. “We have a wedding in two hours, ladies.” She slammed the door.

Everyone who saw her assumed Angela was angry over the wedding. To erase that impression, she waved at Kyle and gave him a thumbs up, smoothing her expression.

He frowned, but the camp relaxed. There was going to be a wedding.

*Snap!* A bright flash blinded Angela.

“Sorry!” Shawn walked on, laughing. He was capturing shots of the camp and the preparations to create a photo album of the wedding. Angela had also asked him to start a book for Safe Haven.

Neil pushed Kyle back into the mess to finish his preparations. The trooper gave Angela a lifted brow that she shook her head to. Neil knew she was upset. He wanted to know if it was because of something Samantha had said or done.

Neil narrowed it from that. He doubted Tonya would have done it. The redhead wasn’t a problem anymore. That only left a few women. Of those, Neil’s money was on Tracy. The former camp relief source was sleeping with the boss’s son. Charlie wasn’t in camp and he wasn’t on the seating chart for the wedding, so he wasn’t expected soon. Something was happening with that couple and Angela wasn’t happy about it.

*No, I’m not*. Angela headed to her tent to get changed for the ceremony. *But it’s too late to kill her now. They made a choice and they’ll be held to it like any other couple in my camp.*

*But...?* her witch questioned.

*But there has to be payment for it or the males here will assume it’s okay if the girl is willing. We can’t let that go or we’ll have twelve-year-olds coming up pregnant.*

*Yes. The men are watching now and so are the women. Young Cody already has takers if Marcus will allow it.*

Angela’s rage was almost uncontrollable. *He’s a little boy!*

*Who will be in leadership, has gifts, and is young enough to train. Safe Haven has cougars.*

Angela settled onto her air mattress and let her mind work the problem. *I’m putting a stop to this. Help me find the best way?*

The witch sank in obediently, eager to aid her host. Angela rarely asked anything of her demon now. She didn’t need to. She could do it herself. No one knew except her witch, who was feeling left out.

Angela brought her demon in close. *I may already have an idea. Come fly with me while I look.*

The witch’s pleasure was potent. It rushed over Angela in thick ripples.

The females flew off into the future, hand-in-hand.

Marc stayed by the flap to provide protection, assuming Angela needed a quick nap before the wedding. They weren’t connected right now. She had a wall up again and he couldn’t get through it.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

**Husband and Wife**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“D**early beloved...we are gathered here today, without a bride or groom.”

Candy snatched the microphone, glad it wasn’t on yet. “Stop that!”

“It was funny, right?” Conner grinned, but made sure he didn’t stare at her too long or put off the wrong vibes. Angela hadn’t come to see him over breaking the rules yet, so he was walking the line.

Candy snickered, nodding. “No. Hand me those flowers.” She wasn’t thinking about Angela’s displeasure. She was enjoying the job they were laboring on together. It was almost finished.

Conner handed her the final bunch of daisies the camp had helped collect. Some were real and some were plastic, but the colors they’d chosen made them look new and perfect. All it had taken was a cleaning and Candy’s eye for matching hues.

Conner swept the tent, proud of what they’d been able to put together from the mix-n-match selection of furniture and decorations. “I never thought we’d have trouble finding lace after an apocalypse.”

Candy tied the flowers into place on the makeshift altar that Ozzie had nailed together using Theo’s design. “Or curtains.”

“Especially those thin panels.” Conner pointed. “They aren’t good for anything. Can’t even use them to start fires because they won’t burn.”

Candy pointed to their work box. “We’re finished. Store that and I’ll go get the boss to approve it.”

“This looks good.”

“I think so too.” Candy slowed, needing to let him know. “I, uh... I had a moment with Angela yesterday. I would have mentioned it last night, but we ran out of time.”

Conner held himself in place as people walked by the flap. “Okay. What kind of moment?”

Candy blushed. “I kinda, sorta told her I was going to spend time with you whenever I wanted to. I told her to butt out.”

Conner’s heart skipped a beat as he read the memory. “Wow.” He struggled to react within the rules, locking his hands around the box. “Okay.” Conner stepped by.

Candy frowned, hurrying to catch up. “Hey!”

Conner kept walking, hands tight around the box.

Candy broke into a jog. “Did you hear me?”

Conner stopped, head down. “Loud and clear.”

“You don’t seem happy.”

“Can I get back to you on that?” he asked politely, studying his shoes.

Angered, Candy stepped aside. “At your leisure, kid.”

Conner went to put the box away.

Candy stared after him, hurt. *Guess he didn’t like it as much as I did.* “Okay, then.”

She forced her feet to go to the council tent. Candy tapped. “It’s ready.”

“Be right there!” Marc called.

“Like hell!” Angela’s voice echoed. “Where’s the rest of it?”

Marc chuckled. “That’s it. You’re ready.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Angela’s voice came through the flap, louder. “I’m *not* going out like this.”

“Please?”

Marc begging told Candy she’d chosen the right outfit.

“Give me a coat. And a robe. And maybe a blanket.”

“It’s only for a little while.”

“It’s windy out there, Marc!”

Candy tapped again, helping things along. “I need approval. Come on. The pregnant lady wants to sit down.”

“Aw, man. That is so not right.” Angela eased toward the flap. “Straight there and back. I’ll wear the other one. It has more material.”

Marc held the flap open without promising anything. If he found a private moment, the other dress would be dropped into a trash pile. The formfitting blue thing Angela had on was a perfect match for her coloring and build.

Angela emerged into the light and tried to march toward the wedding tent. The short hem and high heeled black boots immediately tripped her.

Marc caught her by the arm, chuckling. He was wise enough not to comment or offer helpful hints. She didn’t need to know how to walk in that outfit. All she had to do was wear it and he was happy.

Angela growled at him. “Stop it!”

Marc snickered. “Yes, Angie.”

The camp around them had been full of noise and movement when Angela staggered from their tent. It all stopped now. Hammers paused. Gossip halted. Boxes slid to the ground. Even the wind settled in surprise.

Angela tugged on the hem of the dress. “I hate you all.” She hurried into the wedding tent and stopped.

“Oh, wow.”

Marc nodded, enjoying her wiggling rear as she tried to find more hem. “Yeah.” He smiled as he headed back to their tent to get changed.

Angela was impressed. The party tent had changed shape. Theo’s crew had placed it in a square this time, providing room for two, ten-deep rows of mess benches and a narrow altar in front. The dented furniture was surrounded by lacy white and tan panels that turned the tent into a swaying canopy of sparkles. Bows and ribbons dangled from benches, tent poles, lanterns, and the altar, each twined around wilting wildflowers and plastic bouquets. It was beautiful. Candy had even placed a long red rug in the center for the couple to walk on, as well as a record player in the corner.

Angela glanced over her shoulder, beaming at Candy. “You two have done great.”

Candy nodded, not enjoying the praise as much after Conner’s rejection.

Angela carefully turned back toward her tent. “But it doesn’t excuse you doing this to me.”

Candy snorted. “Have you seen your ass in that? I’d kill for it.”

Angela laughed, unable to stay mad. “I’m going to change and then I’ll be around to help with whatever you have left.”

Candy shook her head, ignoring Conner as he joined them. “Sorry, no time for changing. We need you in the mess. You’re escorting Kyle to show your approval of their union, remember?”

“But we have an hour!”

“No, we have twenty-two minutes. You lost time whining about the dress while Marc drooled over you.”

“But... Marc isn’t dressed! I’ll go help him.”

Candy took Angela’s arm and steered her toward the mess. “He’s two minutes behind us. Keep walking. Kyle needs to be calmed down and seeing you in a dress will do that for a few minutes.”

“Yeah, while he and the rest of my team tease me.” Angela tried to cross her arms over her exposed cleavage and couldn’t because of how tight the dress was.

“Exactly. Cowboy up.”

“In this dress? Not likely.”

**2**

Marc came out of their tent, straightening his tie. It was a simple clip-on, but he was still trying to get it straight when Neil came from the medical camper.

“Is this thing straight?” Marc leaned toward the trooper. “Fix me, will you?”

Neil stared. “You’re hot!”

Marc flushed. “So are you, but we should keep our relationship professional, you know? Angie may not approve.”

Neil laughed. “She hasn’t seen you yet.”

“How do you know?”

Neil started straightening the tie. “Because you’re standing out here and I don’t hear her moaning your name like last night. And the night before that. And so on.”

Marc grinned. “That good?”

“Hell, *I* may propose.”

Marc held still while Neil worked. “I think the hens are on watch for all the roosters to pop the question. These will be the first legally recorded marriages of the new world. Everyone wants to be in our history books.”

“That’s not a good reason to get married.”

“Nope and the Eagles know it. The marriages that happen here will be ones who really want it. Angela won’t approve the others.”

Neil glanced toward the tent, where hundreds of shadows were eating and chatting happily. “There’s trouble coming, soon. Samantha’s been dreaming a lot more. She keeps saying we need the kids, to watch out for the kids.”

Marc sighed as Neil retreated with his tie straightened. “Angie too. Kyle said Jenny has had bad dreams. Why aren’t they telling us?”

“I think it’s because we won’t react the way she needs us to.” Neil stayed with Marc, also in a tux. “That’s why I haven’t called Samantha on it yet.”

“And if you’re wrong? If they don’t know they’re receiving the visions?”

Neil made a derisive noise. “Angela? Not know?”

Marc shrugged. “A guy can hope, right?”

Neil shook his head. “Not this time. Problems are coming again and we’re out of the loop.”

**3**

“Is she ready?” Kyle grabbed Angela’s wrist, not even noticing the dress as she joined them. “Did she call it off? She can do that. I won’t hurt her!”

Angela sent a calming bolt of light into the man, chuckling. She drew lightly in return. “Let me take some of that.”

Kyle took in a deep breath as the panic faded. “She’s fine. I’m fine. Autumn’s fine.” He looked down. “Hey! You’re wearing a dress!”

Angela laughed as she patted his hand, then pried it from her wrist. “It’s all fine. Let’s go stand by the altar and wait for your bride. She’ll freak out too if she doesn’t see you when she comes in.”

Kyle hurried to get in place, leaving Angela there.

Angela laughed with the others who’d noticed. Kyle’s nerves were heartwarming.

“Hiya, Baby-cakes.”

Angela turned around at Marc’s tone... Need seared her skin, reminding her it had been hours since he’d last made her moan and groan.

Marc snickered as he joined her. She was staring at him with her lips parted and a wicked blush coming across her cheeks. “Good?”

Angela kissed him.

People cheered and shouted encouragement.

She slowly broke the kiss and retreated.

Marc blinked. “Uh... Okay?”

Angela grinned. “Help me to my spot?”

Marc took her extended arm, instantly worried. “Are you hurt?”

“No! It’s this damn dress! I can’t take two steps without tripping.”

“Everyone in their place, please!” Candy entered the tent, Conner behind her, and began nudging people not-so-gently into their spots. With two hundred guests, the planners had a lot to do.

“We’re starting now. Hush up!”

The tent quieted, with some people frowning at the woman and others tolerating it. After being such a wreck in the mountain, it was nice to witness Candy living day-to-day with the rest of them instead of blocking it out to embrace her madness. Many people still believed mountain sickness had hit her.

Conner knew better, though he would never tell anyone. Candy had flipped out about losing Lee and being a single mother. They’d been busy, so it hadn’t been intentional, but leadership had still made a mistake. Candy had been left alone too long. It was almost ironic that they’d both been lonely and searching for a friend even before then.

Angela gave Conner a subtle nod and then found something else to look at.

*She knew.* Conner’s mouth fell open in shock as he finally added up all the clues. *She put us together!*

Walking by to get in place before Candy dragged her there, Pam bumped into the boy and knocked him down. *Think about something else!* “Sorry, kid.” Pam laughed, helping Conner to his feet. “My mind was on other things.” *Like yours should be!*

Conner rubbed his shoulder, grateful and resentful. “No problem.”

Pam pointed at the corner, where several camp kids were poking at the wedding cake so they could suck icing from their fingers. “Eagle duty over the food.”

Conner went, forcing his thoughts to avoid the discovery. As he went, he scanned the tent to see if anyone else had caught it.

Every descendant there gave him a nod or met his eye for a look of contempt, scorn, or gloating.

Conner sighed. *I haven’t adjusted to being around so many of my own kind. I’ll work on it.*

The hostility eased, though it didn’t vanish. Senior people weren’t happy a Mitchel was still in camp, let alone being given permission to chase the pregnant widow of a beloved Eagle. If not for trusting their boss, it would have already been stopped.

There was also resentment that the kid had been chosen over them, but most of those males didn’t want the responsibility for someone else’s child, even Lee’s. Angela had looked into the future to see who never hurt the baby through jealousy or inattention, and been shocked by the answer, but she hadn’t doubted it once she saw them together. Conner cared about Candy and he wouldn’t be much older than her children, so they would be able to relate. All she had to do was make certain Adrian’s son ended up nothing like his father.

Angela watched Conner point out the approved snacks and explain that the cake was Jennifer’s, that she would be mad if they touched it before she had a slice.

The kids flinched as if he’d slapped them, moving for the allowed items.

Angela approved. Conner had a great chance to be different. He loved kids and Safe Haven had a lot of orphans. The woman he wanted also loved kids, though she would be sterner than Conner. They might be one of a dozen couples in camp who were perfectly matched.

Neil and Samantha entered the tent, slowly and embarrassed at the attention.

Angela sighed. Jeremy would never be replaced in Samantha’s heart. She and Neil would be happy, but there would always be a wall between them with Jeremy’s epitaph. Their match was no longer balanced. People in camp viewed it the opposite, but they didn’t understand. People weren’t all made to have a single partner. Some were meant to share themselves, while others weren’t meant to love or breed at all. Fate made those choices and going against it only brought pain.

“Here we go!” Candy’s squeal echoed, bringing fresh silence to the tent and tension. Kyle was stressing again.

Tiring of it, Angela pinned him with a dark glare. *If you’re hiding something that’s making you twitch this way, tell me now.*

Kyle flushed, aware of a dozen descendants listening. *You know what my problem is! She’s a child. It’ll be rape!*

Music began playing the Traditional Wedding March.

*You’re going to force her?*

Kyle’s lips curled. *I’m going to make her cum three times and go to sleep. That’s not the point!*

Angela chuckled. “Wedding jitters. Never knew they were this bad.”

Marc laughed, stomach on fire. He was picking up Kyle’s nerves.

Angela flashed a bright smile at the woman in the tent flap. “She’s beautiful.”

Kyle forgot how to breathe. The wedding gown was simple and nice, but the female wearing it was breathtaking. With long, dark curls and eyes that promised the space between them was about to be removed, she was all he’d ever wanted.

Distracted, Marc stored Angela’s reaction to his stomachache and turned to view the bride like she wanted.

Jennifer felt alone, standing before her friends, rivals, and acquaintances. The frilly satin dress was uncomfortable, and her stomach was boiling. *I hope I don’t get sick.*

*Thumbs in your fists*, Angela reminded. She nodded to Marc.

Marc walked the long row and took his place next to Jennifer. “May I have this honor?”

Jennifer blushed at Marc’s warm tone. “Yes. And stop that. He’ll get jealous.”

Marc leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Good. If he’s jealous, he won’t puke. His stomach is upset too.”

Jennifer gave Marc an awkward hug. “Thanks.”

Marc patted her shoulder. “You sure, kid? Marriage is forever.”

Jennifer retreated, smiling. “I’m almost a real person again because of him. He’ll get me through the rest of it.”

“You can have that without marriage, you know.” Marc felt like she needed to hear it again.

“Not an option for either of us.” Jennifer straightened her skirt. “We both need this commitment to our future with Safe Haven.”

“And because you want to spend the rest of your lives together, right? Happy and in love?”

“We already have happy and in love.” She took his arm as the song restarted. “As for the rest of our lives, that’s why we’re not waiting. Everyone knows time is short. We want to die as husband and wife.”

Marc mourned for them all as he began to walk Jennifer down the aisle.

Angela brought up her emotional barrier and screamed at the unfairness of it all.

Kyle was calmed by it. He’d been worried over that, though her age was still the loudest alarm in his head. The short future they had together was the reason he felt like he couldn’t wait any longer. He wanted to be married during that time and live a small chunk of the life they would have had together if not for the final battle they’d been drafted into.

*That’s what happened*, Marc realized. *We’ve been drafted. We thought we escaped it, but we were being saved for a different army, for a different war.*

Angela sighed. *Now, he gets it.*

Morgan came to the flap.

Angela tensed. *How long?*

*Two hours, roughly*. Morgan went back to his rounds.

Marc and everyone else looked at Angela.

Angela motioned toward the Captain. “Let’s roll.”

Grant began speaking, but the good mood was broken. They had trouble coming again.

Not wanting the wedding to be ruined, Angela brought up her shield over the camp and gave an annoyed look. “We’re taking time for this because we’ve earned it. We are going to witness the union of these two people, wish them well at a reception, and escort them to their room. Then we’ll roll in camp and get ready for the next punch like we always do.” She pointed at the groom. “You have vows. Let’s hear them.”

People were relieved to have the shield up, but most of them were also moved by the reminder that they were still here, against all odds. They couldn’t stop living every time a threat came.

Kyle fumbled for a paper and then snorted. He didn’t need it. “I want you to feel...”

Angela tuned it out to travel with Morgan as he scanned, trying to narrow down when the problem would arrive. The hardest part right now was waiting.

Angela withdrew and returned to the wedding in time for the kiss.

Bright blue light shot through the tent and slammed into the walls, shattering in vivid sparks that rained over the guests.

Lips barely touching, Jennifer and Kyle didn’t notice.

Angela clapped, delighted. “The soulmate connection!”

The descendants in the room who had been considering proposing now paused in those plans, wondering what would happen if their kiss didn’t draw sparks.

*That’ll slow things down*. Angela clapped with everyone else as the couple rotated to face the camp.

Conner cleared his throat. “May I present...Mr. and Mrs. Genovese.”

Jennifer and Kyle walked the aisle together, laughing and ducking rice that Candy had claimed from her future portions of the camp supplies.

Candy glanced at Angela. *I’ll skip the meals for a while when we have rice dishes. I don’t mind using my share for this.*

*Yeah, we’re not doing that*, Angela sent with a frown. *You get double portions of the main food groups at every meal and you eat them. Hear me?*

Candy nodded, dropping her head. It was nice to have someone who cared if she was healthy.

Angela nodded at Conner.

Conner touched Candy’s arm. “We have a reception to handle.”

Candy frowned. She was still stinging from his rejection.

Conner leaned in, voice a whisper. “You misunderstood. I’m sorry.” He ignored the people watching them as he took her arm and escorted her toward the reception area. *I almost kissed you. I had to walk away.*

Candy followed him, mood lifting. *I wonder what would have happened...*

Conner stole a quick look at her and decided not to do it. *This is Jennifer’s day. Let’s save our drama for the ship.*

Candy laughed. “It’s a date.”

“Throw the bouquet! Throw the bouquet!”

Jennifer glanced at Neil.

Neil gave her a subtle nod.

Jennifer tossed the bouquet toward the cluster of unmarried women gathered near the altar, using a light touch so it would stay in the air for a few seconds.

Women scrambled forward...

Samantha nudged Angela’s elbow, acting like she’d been shoved by the crowd. It forced the boss to turn around with a hand up.

Angela caught the bouquet.

The camp cheered as she stared at it in confusion. “What just happened?”

Marc snickered.

Angela looked at him with anger growing.

Marc burst out laughing. “Wasn’t me, but I approve.”

Angela blushed as she realized the council had set her up. Unable to stay mad when they were laughing, she shrugged and tucked it under her arm. “I might be willing to negotiate a settlement.”

More people laughed and cheered, calling encouragement to Marc.

Marc kissed her cheek and went to help get the reception ready like she wanted.

Angela surveyed the crowd that was now helping move the benches back to the tables of food that were set up along one side of the tent. Kids eagerly hopped onto the uncomfortable seats, ready for cake. *We’re not taking those.* *We’ll have chairs on the island or we’ll sit on the ground.*

Adults joined the kids, laughing and chatting.

Kyle and Jennifer took their place by the beautiful creations that Brittani had labored on for the last few hours. She’d had help from several camp women and from Neil, who had delivered a box of sugar he’d liberated from one of the supply trucks. Brittani had put together a pastel double layer cake that was 3’ x 2’. She’d used extra batter to make a hundred cupcakes.

Shawn and Missy came through, making people chuckle. They were both wearing red valet uniforms, carrying a video recorder, and had a camera on straps around their necks. With black boots, full tool belts, and white pirate hats with blue feathers, they stood out.

Shawn shrugged at the surprised, curious looks. “She likes to dress up.”

“Looks good on you!” Pam called, clapping as Kyle and Jennifer picked up the knife and cut the first slice.

Shawn captured it, as did Missy. The little girl kept her hip pressed against Shawn’s. She wasn’t comfortable around so many people who didn’t like her.

Kyle held Jennifer’s arm while she settled onto the bench, then sat next to her, being careful not to ruin her dress. He was more interested in the woman wearing it, but he was aware that females liked to keep these items for sentimental reasons.

“I’ll pass it to Autumn.” Jennifer twined her hand around his, feeling tension thrum through his hot skin. He had himself under tight control.

“Time for the toast.” Candy motioned to Neil.

The tent went mostly quiet as Neil stood up with a glass of the champagne that he’d personally found for this moment. “I’d like to say two things.” Neil lifted his glass. “To Kyle, for retaining his honor.”

Everyone clapped or cheered. Many of the males didn’t know why he hadn’t already consummated once Jennifer started ambushing him, but at this moment, they finally got it. Honor was more important than sex.

“And here’s to Jennifer. May she keep looking after Kyle for decades to come.”

Another loud cheer echoed through the tent.

Angela and Jennifer understood Neil’s toast better than the others. He was defying the future by saying the new couple wouldn’t be limited to just four years. Angela and Jennifer took healthy drinks, approving.

Kyle sipped and hoped it wasn’t noticed. His guts were still churning. It was almost ruining these moments. He’d never been this nervous. If he was wrong about the things they’d never actually discussed, this would be a disaster for both of them.

Unable to take his stress, Jennifer slid her knee along his leg.

Kyle tensed, looking over at her.

Jennifer used her loose hair to hide a leer.

Kyle grinned, able to breathe again. “I love you.”

Jennifer leaned forward so he could kiss her.

Kyle moved in for a chaste kiss and gasped against her mouth as she licked his lip.

People laughed, but Jennifer didn’t. She slid that knee along his leg again, making his grip on the glass tighten until she thought it might break.

“I have a toast.”

Silence fell as Angela lifted the glass she’d been given as Candy and Conner equipped everyone. This was the last marriage on American soil. She felt the need to say something to mark the occasion. “I wish you both happiness and peace. Just don’t henpeck our top Eagle, okay? Let him drive while you ride.”

Laughter spewed across the tent, causing messes and more good vibes.

“Anyone else?” Candy had her clipboard in hand.

“I’ll go.” Marc stood up, grinning. “Kyle, none of us thought you’d hold out. It goes to show the steel spine of an Eagle is harder than a rod of iron in his pants.”

Cheers and laughter met Marc’s toast.

“Are we ready for the garter belt?” Conner whispered from Candy’s elbow.

She leaned over. “Not yet. We have to get the bachelors drunk enough to participate.”

Conner snickered and went to serve more refills, targeting the unmarried men.

Candy motioned Quinn to start the music.

Soft tones floated through the tent.

Candy nodded at Kyle.

Kyle took Jennifer’s arm and slowly led her to the center of the tent for their first dance together as husband and wife.

Couples gathered around them, while single men and women stayed at the reception tables to enjoy the treats.

Candy went around refilling their drinks. “I want all unmarried men in the far corner after this dance.” She flashed a hard glare. “Don’t make me come and get you.”

Most of them nodded or told her they’d be there, but the rest held still, not wanting to be labeled as the next man who might tie the knot.

Jennifer let Kyle hold her close without tormenting him further. She knew what was coming next and was saving her fun for that moment.

Kyle groaned. “You’re so mean.” He nuzzled her cheek, almost losing control. “I like that.”

Jennifer giggled.

He twirled her around to keep from kissing her like he wanted to as people clapped and began to join them for the dance.

Jennifer tried not to trip, enjoying herself. Angela had gone all out. She was touched.

“Would you like to dance?”

Brittani flushed at Daryl’s warm tone. She wanted to, but she didn’t want to hurt Gus. He was chatting with Eagles and camp members on the opposite side of the tent, avoiding even looking at her. His new woman, Trinity, was next to him and appeared happy.

Daryl walked away.

Brittani scowled, following him. “Where are you going?”

“To ask someone who isn’t hung up on their ex.” Daryl had no patience for drama or games.

Brittani stopped, instantly angry. “It’s called compassion. You should try it sometime.”

Daryl kept walking.

Angela joined Brittani, putting an arm around the woman’s tense shoulders. “Care for some advice?”

Brittani nodded. “You know him better than I do.”

Angela whispered in her ear. *You just embarrassed him. You also hurt his feelings by saying no.*

Brittani grinned. “I never would have guessed. He hides it well.”

“He’s loyal and a bit shy, even for supplying the camp women.”

Brittani’s amusement faded. Jealousy took its place. “Hey, Daryl.” Her loud call drew attention, making her cheeks turn red.

Daryl lifted his chin as he spun around, expecting the worst. “What?”

“You want to dance?”

Daryl grinned at the public claim. “It would be my honor.”

The couple met in the middle and slid together with smiles and heat.

Angela scanned the tent, looking for other problems to help with. She wanted this moment to be as peaceful as possible. It might be a while before they got another opportunity to do this.

People clapped and cheered as Daryl and Kyle spun their ladies in tandem and dipped them.

Kyle kissed Jennifer’s cheek and brought her up as the music ended.

Daryl took the liberty of a real kiss, feeling Brittani hold herself in place when she wanted to kiss him back.

“Time for the garter!” Candy called with cheer. “Bring the men!”

Kyle froze as chills went over him. *Touch her leg? Her bare leg? Here?* Kyle locked down on his control and looked at Jennifer.

Jennifer ignored his concern and took her place on the high stool as the camp cheered.

Kyle went where Neil nudged him, fighting demons. He’d never even seen Jennifer’s bare leg, let alone touched it.

Sexual tension flared as Kyle knelt and Candy yanked up Jennifer’s dress.

Jennifer arched a bit to give a good show, not worried about leers on her exposed skin. She was having too much fun tormenting Kyle to be scared.

A muscle twitched in Kyle’s jaw as he reached for the lacy blue garter, hands trembling.

Jennifer slid her thigh into his grip, swallowing a groan as their skin met.

Kyle looked up at her as he slid the garter down, fire flying along his nerves.

Jennifer blushed at the heat in his gaze, deciding not to tempt him further.

Kyle felt her reaction and pressed his control. He kissed her thigh as he slid the garter off the rest of the way.

Jennifer went a furious red.

Kyle grinned at her and stood, holding it up. He let out a yell of victory that brought fresh laughter from the witnesses.

Behind them, Candy and Conner were dragging drunken, laughing unmarried men into the far corner.

Candy gave Kyle a quick look.

Kyle got ready to flip the garter into the air toward the cluster of men. He aimed just as carefully as he would have with his gun. Then he turned around and let go.

The garter flew through the tent.

Marc caught it out of reflex, like Angie had with the bouquet. He laughed as he realized Kyle had targeted him. “I’m game if she is.”

Everyone laughed, including Angela.

“Let’s have some more dancing.” Candy didn’t want it to be over yet.

The music restarted as more couples moved to the dance area.

Shawn and Missy caught it all on their recorders and cameras. Flashes blinked through the tent.

Missy got a closeup of the garter in Marc’s hand and rotated to get everyone’s reaction. She spotted a few glares through the lens, aimed at her, and lowered the camera, feeling uncomfortable.

Angela joined them, placing a hand on Missy’s arm.

Missy sighed in pleasure at the calming effect. *The alpha loves me. That’s good enough.*

Angela knelt to help Missy store her recorder. “What happened with Leeann? I thought you two were getting close.”

Missy tensed. *Don’t think about it!*

Angela snapped Missy’s large purse shut and straightened her dress with gentle hands, waiting.

Missy looked over at Leeann, but the older girl was edging toward the flap and hadn’t noticed. *Not now!*

Angela stood up and turned with a surprised frown. *Stop right there.*

Leeann slowly rotated, little face covered in guilt.

Angela figured it out without her gifts. *You miss Billy. No one talks about him now and you need that. So you’re going to find him and bring him back.*

Leeann began to cry.

Angela nudged Missy toward her. “Punishment for both of you. Go stand watch with Morgan.”

People who heard her studied the girls but didn’t ask what had happened. Camp members assumed it was whatever little girls usually got in trouble for and let it go. The Eagles and descendants believed she was sending Morgan help with gifts to watch for the coming trouble.

Angela didn’t tell anyone otherwise or think of anything. Only Pam had been near enough to catch it through this din of laughs and thoughts, and she wouldn’t mention it because the boss hadn’t.

Angela made a note to handle the girls when there was time and went back to watching Kyle and Jennifer as they fed each other cake without the cruelness of smashing it in each other’s faces. Kyle was red and sweating, while Jennifer was beaming and laughing with those around them. It was nice.

“Yeah! Cupcakes!”

The kids overwhelmed the din with their happiness, sending good vibes through the drafty flaps and out into the afternoon air.

Eagles on duty soaked it up, knowing they would get to enjoy downtime too when the shifts changed. The men on duty didn’t know when that would be. Their schedule had given a start time but not an ending. They had compared and reached the same conclusion. If Angela had them all on high alert this way, death was stopping by again.

Morgan was glad Angela had brought up her shield, but it made it hard to look through and judge arrival time. He assumed she had that covered, based on her scattered thoughts. It was hard to read her while she was griping mentally about all the stares and comments. He wasn’t sure how Candy had tricked her into wearing a dress like that, but he was glad.

“Where do you want us?” Leeann stopped in front of Morgan, a bit intimidated. He was strong, like Angela.

Missy frowned up at the tall man, not the least bit afraid. “We’re bad girls. You have to punish us.”

Morgan pivoted to glare at the wedding tent. *I don’t know how to punish kids! And…they’re girls!*

Angela’s mirth came back in mental waves that told Morgan no mercy was coming.

Missy stomped on his foot to get his attention. “Hey!”

Morgan howled at the unexpected pain, staggering. “Damn it!”

Missy scowled at him. “Watch your mouth around us innocent kids!”

Morgan gawked. “What demon spawned you?”

Leeann stomped on his other foot. “Don’t be mean to my friend!”

The Eagles on duty were falling over laughing, unable to keep from it as Morgan limped and moaned, cursing both children between noises of misery.

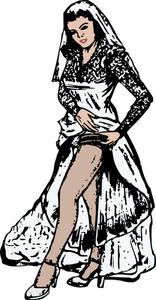
None of the guards saw the cloud of dust on the eastern horizon.

Angela felt it. She left the wedding tent.

Her fighters followed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

**Sent to Observe**



**1**

**“C**an you believe that dress!”

“I know!” Shawn shared a laugh with Quinn as he lifted and aimed, determined to capture the day for the camp to enjoy later. Having all their leaders in dresses and tuxedos was a first for Safe Haven. Shawn paused as something dark and brown caught his eye through the camera lens. “That can’t be good.”

Shawn was still filming as he came out of the tent behind the line of fighters, though the battery was dying. The light was blinking at him in a reminder that he was almost out of time. *Like this camp*.

Missy and Leeann ran to him.

Shawn gazed down at the scared girls who were scanning the coming people. He didn’t need gifts to know it was bad. Shawn followed his training. He put the camera in his kit and motioned the girls back into the tent. “Keep it to yourself as much as you can. When people find out, try to keep them calm.”

Given something to do, the girls pushed through the legs coming from the wedding tent.

Shawn turned to scan for other kids. Whatever was coming might be messy. Angela would be upset if they lost a child in the chaos.

Shawn saw half a dozen boys by the water who were enjoying being unsupervised, two of whom were approaching the alligators on the beach. Even after William and his group killing half a dozen, the same number was sunning themselves along the shore today. They didn’t go into the water, but they weren’t afraid of it either. The morning arrivals often lumbered through the surf to reach their favorite sunning spots.

Shawn hurried to collect the children. “Get away from the child-eating reptiles!”

Marc chuckled at the wording, going to help when the kids took off running. He and Shawn cornered the playful children in the surf and swept them up over tense shoulders.

The kids saw the dust cloud. Amusement fled, replaced by the grave faces they usually wore. They wriggled to their feet and waited for orders. Marc hated it being this way. He pointed toward the mess. “There’s still a few cupcakes.”

The boys took off running, eager for a little more fun before the ugliness hit them again.

*Wish I could flip it on and off that easy.* Marc went to Angela.

“Boss?” Daryl came jogging through the growing crowd. “We need you at the front gate.”

Angela widened the shield to include the boat as she staggered toward the gate with the council. Even Samantha came, helped by Neil and Brittani.

“Is it a dust storm?”

“Someone’s coming.”

“There are three vehicles, moving fast.” Greg peered through his glasses. “There’s a little boy driving that middle truck. No idea how he can see over the dash. Can’t be more than five.”

Greg looked at her. “This isn’t Jeff’s group. These kids aren’t coming from the west.”

“I know. That’s a different trap.” Angela went by the gate guards, stopping when she reached the edge of the shield where it met the concrete of the road. She waited with her council and their protection, a small army of twenty-two that continued to grow as the bad vibes drew more people.

“I’ve made my choice on this one.” Angela’s tone was icy. “Any other way sinks us.”

Everyone frowned or grumbled, but they would agree to whatever it was. Angela didn’t bluff. She didn’t need to.

“Those are police cars!” Samantha limped closer to the shield, trying to see more clearly through the colorful blur of emotions now slamming into the barrier. Fear of rejection was the clearest, but anger and jealousy were there too. Whoever it was, they had no control. The thoughts were childish... Samantha leaned against Neil, staring at Angela. Tears came to her eyes as she read the misery under all that fear and anger. “No.”

Angela gestured at Conner. “Take her to the medical camper and help her sleep. Use a strong blast so she doesn’t have time to cry and restart her labor.”

Conner led Samantha away, not caring that everyone now knew he had his dad’s sleep gift. He was glad to be getting away from the emotional waves. Like Samantha, he didn’t want anything to do with this moment. He understood more than the storm tracker did, but it still hurt.

Padding to Marc’s side, Dog growled at the kids, fur rising.

He yelped as something landed on his back. Familiar claws impaled his tough skin, trying to hang on.

*Get it off! Get it off!* Dog’s yelp distracted almost everyone. So did his vicious shake that sent the cat sliding but not off. A ripping sound came as it dug in.

Dog dropped into the sand, yelping and rolling.

The cat finally got the hint that Dog didn’t need a fighting partner. It took off running toward Tonya.

Dog stayed down, groaning at the stinging scratches. *I’m hit! She got me!* He kept whimpering, rubbing sand into the wound. He pawed at it, unable to reach. *If you had just let me eat it, I wouldn’t be dying!*

Marc rolled his eyes. “Oh, for God’s sake, Dog. Snap out of it!”

Angela hadn’t turned. She watched the two police cars veer off from the truck and go back through the dust behind them.

The truck slowed down, preparing to stop.

“Someone is dropping off a gift.” Marc was horrified. “This is evil shit, Angie. We can’t let them in here. They’re...”

“Sick.” Angela was surprised by his choice. She’d expected the opposite from their men and kept them out of the loop because of it.

“I spent time with Kendle.” Marc used a careful tone. “We can’t have them here, spreading that. She was allowed to live because she didn’t spread it.”

“Yeah, you should ask her why that is,” Angela answered just as carefully. “Watch my back. I feel something coming for me again.”

*You are in no danger from me*, the Messenger stated. *I was sent to observe.*

When Angela didn’t act relieved, Marc obeyed her wishes and swiveled to watch her back.

Insulted, the Messenger withdrew to watch from a distance.

“Why did he come?” Marc whispered to Jennifer as the teen stopped by him.

“Whatever choice she’s made here must decide a big moment.” Jennifer let go of the wedding dress she’d been trying to hold out of the sand, wanting her hands free to grab one of Ivan’s guns as he joined them. Like Shawn and a few others, Ivan was copying Marc on most of his setups and gear. Unlike Shawn and the others, Ivan was also avoiding getting in the wolfman’s reach right now. He was covered in bruises. “I’m trying to scan as things happen. Watch out for her.”

Marc swept the tense camp, flapping tents, and gritty ocean skyline.

Angela’s heart broke as the young boy climbed from the truck and went to the rear to let the others out. He was limping and nearly naked, but he didn’t shiver or flinch from the debris under the sand. He was too miserable to notice.

“They know.” Emotions overwhelmed Angela. She stepped through the barrier to keep her camp from feeling it.

Marc was held back by Jennifer’s hand on her wrist. “It’s okay.”

Marc waited, ready to lunge through.

Jennifer didn’t tell him he would bounce off. She wasn’t positive about that and she sort of wanted to witness it, though it wasn’t personal. A funny moment right now would be better than Angela’s agony as she denied the children entry.

“No. Go back to your masters.”

The little boy was replaced with an older boy who also limped. He went to the driver seat and climbed in, clearly following his own orders.

A stream of children ran toward Angela with arms open and cries at seeing her, recognizing her.

Angela’s blast was unexpected. She sent the fire in front of them, bringing the entire line to a shocked, resentful halt.

“Go back to your masters or end your lives here and now at the hand of an alpha.”

The shield went dark, as if night had fallen.

Safe Haven calmed a little from being thrown into the dark as Eagles switched on lights and kept people where they were. Most of them didn’t know what was happening, but they all knew it concerned Angela. Marc’s fear was alerting everyone.

Jennifer kept a hand on Marc’s wrist, feeding him a vision of what was happening. “You don’t want to be out there. They were sent to kill her. They’re contagious, sick with hatred.”

“Help her!” William ran toward them, leaving his guard post. “What are you doing? Why is she out there alone? She’ll be infected!”

Bucky was running at William’s side, but he didn’t know what to do. He didn’t like Angela being out there either.

“Stay inside the perimeter.” Angela leaned against the shield, drawing energy from the emotions of her camp and the sick kids. “It’s almost over.”

Movement caught Marc’s eye at the corner. It could have been anything, but he instinctively knew it was more trouble. As he was deciding how to handle it, a horrifying scream echoed from the other side of the shield.

Marc spun and fired into the gut of the Ciemus man who had been about to stab him in the back.

He lunged around and went through the shield.

Jennifer followed, groaning. “You are so hard headed!”

“They’re leaving.” Marc observed the kids walking away in a long line. They looked like small robots marching... “They’re under a charm.” He turned to Angela. “What’s going on?”

“I couldn’t kill them, and I couldn’t let them in.” Angela stayed stiff, fighting the pain.

“So you sent them out to spread it to other survivors?”

Angela nodded. “To their masters. Maybe we’ll get lucky and they’ll implode from their own sadistic plans.”

“How can you sentence those kids to go back out into the wilderness?” William demanded as the shield lowered. “It’s wrong!”

“It’s their destiny.” Angela’s cheeks were streaked with tears. “Tell me you can kill them, and I’ll tell you Ciemus needs a new leader.”

“Of course not! I meant to take them in and help them.”

“And in doing so, you’ll infect your town. I’ve seen the demise of Ciemus, William.” Angela pinned him with a hard look. “It’s exactly what you’ve always feared. You cause it because you can’t remove a threat instead of trying to change it or convert it.”

“Peace can’t always be had.” Jennifer shrugged. “But it does seem kinder to put them out of their misery instead of sending them back to the very people who made them that way.”

“I know.” Angela refused to say more. She went to the shower and tried to shove another box into the mental crypt that was full. *Chauncey was right. I am damned.*

“I’m going after them.” William waved northwest. “And then we’ll go home, so it’s not breaking her rules.”

“No, we’re not doing that.” Bucky pointed at the line of Ciemus people standing between William and their vehicles. “We’ve discussed it. Follow her orders. She has a good reason.”

“You don’t know that! ...how dare you!” William hadn’t thought Bucky would ever go against him on an order.

Bucky didn’t flinch. “She loves the kids more than the adults here. If she refused those, there’s a good reason for it.” Bucky pointed at their fallen man. “You should be more worried over missing so many wolves in sheep’s clothing. I think her man has questions about how we keep missing it.”

Distracted, William scrutinized the body. “He’s wearing our clothes, but he’s not one of ours.”

Bucky frowned as he realized William was right. “Damn. I say we do a round of the camp and make sure no one else is trying to set us up as fall guys for killing their leader.”

William’s scowl grew to hide his embarrassment. “Agreed. We can talk about your defiance while we do it.”

Bucky shrugged. “There’s nothing to talk about. You were overruled for the first time in our relationship. Suck it up and follow orders like everyone else.”

William snorted. “You’ve gotten a dirty mouth since we’ve come here.”

Bucky nodded. “Yes, sir. I most certainly have.”

Marc was still watching the sick kids and the truck circling back to pick them up. The driver had known he wouldn’t be accepted, but hoped dumping the others here would at least get them in. “What did she tell them to do when they get to their masters?”

Jennifer shrugged. “She wouldn’t let me in for that part. I assume it’s so bad that even I would have protested.”

“They have the rage disease.” Marc regarded her. “So do you. So does many of the camp, though it’s not at high levels. We already had it here. Why couldn’t the kids come in and learn to adapt?”

Jennifer wondered the same thing and gave him the answer she’d already told herself. “I don’t know, but I trust her to do what’s best for our future.”

“Still, I want to know.”

“I’ll tell you, but you won’t like it.” Missy joined them, Shawn not far behind.

“I usually don’t.” Marc peered down at her. “But tell me anyway.”

“She sent them away to die at someone else’s hand.”

Missy’s tone didn’t change at all, drawing a frown from Marc. “And you’re okay with that?” He was stunned.

“No.” Missy patted his wrist like she did with Shawn when he couldn’t handle her answers. “I told her to burn them all right here. Safe Haven has enough killers.”

Marc and Jennifer gaped at the girl as she kept going, clearly doing her own round of the camp.

Missy’s little shoulders stayed tense, but she shoved between the adults who were clustered, searching them all to be sure they were safe around the alpha.

Shawn followed, watching her for signs she’d caught something. It was like a farmer with a hunting dog.

“She scares me.”

Marc nodded. “I know the feeling.”

“I mean Missy.”

“So do I.” Marc paused, concentrating. “Did the Messenger leave?”

Jennifer shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Marc reached out. *Did she make the right choice?*

There was no answer.

“Yeah.” Marc let out a resigned sigh. “We get that a lot from her too. Not comforting.”

*It is impossible to answer*, the Messenger replied instantly. *Do not confuse me with your tainted leader.*

“We’re all tainted.” Marc paused. “Did you get whatever you came for?”

*Yes.*

“Shouldn’t you be filing a report?”

No answer again.

“I see.” Marc was good at guessing and not afraid to do it since they hadn’t been destroyed for blasphemy. “You’re scared.”

*I do not feel fear. I cannot be harmed.*

“What about your boss? You’re worried for someone.”

No answer.

Marc grunted, waving at Jennifer. “You try.”

Jennifer cleared her throat. “Uh, hello.”

*Ask your question, child*, the Messenger instructed. *My time is short*.

“Why do you come and observe us if you aren’t telling your boss what you see?”

The Messenger sighed, deep and eerie. *I want you to succeed and to win the battle you were destined for. I’ve waited long for this moment. I couldn’t stay away.*

“Are you allowed to be here?”

*I’m observing.*

Marc presumed that meant yes. “Are you allowed to contact us, to interfere? You said no before and yet you’re breaking the rules again. Made me wonder if there’s an exception for us.”

No answer.

Marc walked away, done with it. He went to Angela and joined her in the shower camper where he held her while she bawled like a newborn.

Jennifer frowned at the silence. “He’s a good one, you know. You could try to be more understanding.”

*His rage destroyed the Creator’s most precious invention and turned it into the dens of inequity you called cities. He is responsible for humanity’s condition, for your human condition.*

“And Adrian, right?”

No answer.

“Damn. We assumed it was both of them. How can Adrian not be at fault? He seduced her.”

No answer.

Angered, Jennifer flipped a finger to the sky. “She’s right. You are tiresome.” The teenager strode away without fear. The Messenger was obviously here to observe, not to answer their questions. “Let me know when that changes.” Jennifer spotted Kyle. He was staring at her with a possessive gleam that sent fire into her toes. “Until then, back off so we don’t know you’re here again. It’s better that way.”

*Why do you not want me around, child*? The Messenger was genuinely confused.

“Because I’m trying to be a good person and you piss me off. Go back to your tower where nothing else matters. We’re busy here in slave land.”

*You are not slaves.*

Jennifer refused to answer.

**2**

“Time to go!”

The crowd cheered as Candy tugged Jennifer and Kyle toward the flap. It had been an hour since their company left. The mood had improved. “Eagle escort!”

Half a dozen Eagles, laughing and joking with them, shoved Jennifer and Kyle outside and toward the shoreline.

“Don’t forget the food!” Conner grabbed a packed basket from under the table and ran after them. “They’ll need to eat at some point.”

The bride and groom blushed and flushed as everyone else burst out laughing.

The wedding party stayed in the tent as the escorts took the happy couple to the boat. They were being locked in a stateroom for one full day to give them a honeymoon. It wasn’t much, but it was the best they could do at the moment. Later, on the island, the couple could go off together for a few days or camp on the beach for a week.

The noises faded for the people in the tent. The Eagles and descendants looked to Angela for instructions while camp members enjoyed the food and ignored everything else.

Angela pointed. “Eat while you can.”

“All Eagles on duty! We have company coming!” Sentries called from outside the tent as a new dust cloud was noticed.

“It’s normal refugees.” Angela soothed. “Grab something to take with you at least. The cake would be good. You’re going to need the energy and the crash will let you sleep when the others can’t.”

Camp members wolfed down their cake, eager to avoid the action in any way. Eagles sat theirs down and went outside to help.

Marc looked at Angela. “Where do you want me?”

“Close.”

Marc took her arm. “You got it.”

Angela led the way to their tent. “First, I have to take this thing off. I’d rather be naked.”

“That works too.”

Angela snorted, motioning for Eagles to report to Morgan for instructions. “If I’m showing mine, you’re showing yours.”

Marc thought about his raw skin and sighed, opening their tent flap. “I’ll help you change.”

**3**

The wedding escorts retreated from the bridal suite, laughing and telling bad jokes that echoed to the bride and groom. Kyle wished they’d hurry up and leave. She wasn’t saying or thinking it, but Kyle knew this was making Jennifer uncomfortable.

It was. Her fear of men had been burning brightly as the small crowd of rowdy men and women dragged them onto the boat and into a dark passage. Only Kyle’s hot hand around hers had allowed Jennifer to tolerate it.

The ship creaked beneath them. A door closing echoed.

Kyle headed for the minibar.

Jennifer entered his path. “I don’t want to wait. Let’s do it and then we can...”

Kyle recoiled like she’d slapped him.

Jennifer sighed. “Or not.”

Kyle went to pour two glasses of champagne, wishing it was whiskey. “If you want that, we’ll do that.”

Jennifer realized he wasn’t going to fight her on consummating their marriage.

“Does that scare you?”

“No...” She frowned. “But I sense it comes with strings.”

“It does.” Kyle held out a glass, not wanting to spook her by getting too close yet. “Ready?”

Jennifer took the glass. “As much as I can be. What’s the deal?”

Kyle’s eyes blazed. “I want the real you. I’ll pretend for the camp every second we’re with them, but when we’re alone, I want the girl who charmed me after I killed her owner.”

Jennifer tensed. “I don’t know if I can do that. Not all of it was acting.”

“All of it with me was.” Kyle called her bluff. “You made sure they were all worried over you being willing and I played my role, but that was never the problem.” His eyes grew hotter. “Was it?”

Jennifer’s shoulders slumped. “No. The problem was always mine.”

Kyle went to the balcony and opened the door to let in the breeze. “Tell me.”

Jennifer shivered at his tone of command. “I want you to do the things he did.”

Kyle’s heart pounded. He’d waited a long time to hear those words. “I will. It doesn’t bother me that you want it or that you’re too corrupt now to be camp heir. None of it matters to me.” Kyle lifted his glass. “Here’s to a happy life with all the kinky sex you want.”

Jennifer flushed, but she lifted her glass. “Four years or forever, we’ll live like it’s an eternity.” Jennifer paused in their toast as waves of unease hit the ship. “New arrivals... Angela has it covered.”

Kyle resumed his motion and clinked their glasses, but he didn’t drink much. He wasn’t certain his stomach could take it.

Neither was Jennifer. She set her glass down after a tiny sip.

Kyle observed her, leaning against the balcony door. Their stateroom was larger than the others, with a short patio enclosed in a boxed railing to keep newlyweds from falling overboard. Behind him, the ocean rushed and swelled in a romantic rhythm.

“Newlyweds.” Jennifer smiled. “That’s us.” Jennifer allowed her masks to drop. “Tell me what that means.”

Kyle shuddered at her domineering tone. “I’m allowed to touch you now.”

“Yes.”

Kyle’s breath caught. He’d waited, respected her wishes, and sheltered her as much as she would allow. He’d resisted the primitive side and now, Jennifer was his wife.

“Are you okay?”

Kyle bobbed his head, barely daring to breathe. “It happened, right? We’re married?”

Jennifer giggled. He sounded as dazed as he looked.

Kyle felt that usual urge rise up at the sound of her innocence, but this time, he let it stay. “Thank you.”

Jennifer slowly removed her veil and placed it over the bedrail. “I love you.”

Kyle grinned. “All of me?”

Jennifer nodded. “For all my days.”

Kyle put his glass down but stayed by the balcony as Jennifer took off her wedding dress. The moment was surreal for him. He’d dreamed of watching her disrobe, pleasured himself to the images.

“I know.” Jennifer took her time, like she’d seen in his mind. Later, when he could think again, Kyle would probably handle their moments, but for now, she was in charge–right where she wanted to be for their first time making love.

Kyle’s eyes darkened into black pools of lust and temptation. He was getting her every thought, no longer blocked by his lack of magic.

Jennifer’s chest grew pointed under his gaze. She drew in a breath and let her gown fall to the floor.

Jennifer stepped out of it and tripped. She staggered forward, flailing.

Kyle caught her.

Jennifer sucked in a breath at the fast movement and then hissed it out at the feel of him. It was like touching fire.

Kyle held her against his body, barely aware of the lacy thing the camp women had put under the wedding dress. That didn’t matter to him. What did was the feel of her skin against his hands.

“Touch me, Kyle.” Jennifer was ready to lead him through the flames now. “Go slow.”

“Yes, Jenny.” Kyle’s hands slid up her bare back. “Very slow.”

Jennifer shivered at his tone.

Kyle snapped out of the lust and retreated. “I’m sorry.”

Jennifer’s heart calmed a notch. Kyle continued to prove that he wouldn’t hurt her. He was... “My husband.”

Kyle smiled at her, understanding he’d mistaken the sign. “For as long as you’ll have me, in whatever way you’ll have me.”

“All of you or nothing!” Jennifer entered arms that surrounded her eagerly.

“You got it.” He dropped his mouth to hers. “You got it, Jenny.”

Jennifer enjoyed the kiss, but it made Kyle groan and tense. He clearly liked it a lot.

Kyle was lost in the haze, like he’d known he would be. Until he had what he’d been waiting for, it was hard to concentrate, but before the night was over, Jennifer would know what it was like to be loved.

Jennifer nodded. “If you want that, we’ll do that.”

Kyle nuzzled her neck, inhaling her scent, her youth and her inexperience. “You’ll want it too. Just stay in my mind if you can’t do it in yours, okay?” He was wise enough to know her wanting the sex didn’t mean she wouldn’t still have flashes of the past.

Jennifer gave another nod, nervous and aroused. Kyle’s excitement was rubbing off.

Kyle kissed her like he’d wanted to for the entire time he’d known her. He ravaged her mouth.

Jennifer wasn’t shocked by his force, but by her reaction to it. Her heart thumped and her core throbbed.

Kyle licked her bottom lip, moaning.

Jennifer shivered, nipples tightening into rocks.

“Again?” he begged.

Jennifer tilted her head up.

Kyle licked her again, nerves taut.

Jennifer felt her thighs grow damp and refused to question the oddness of it. It felt good.

“Say that sometime!” Kyle pleaded between kisses to the lips that tasted like berries. His hands were fists against her back.

Jennifer’s hands went around his neck. “Put me in the bed... Then lay on top of me.”

Kyle almost broke. He stuttered, pausing and freezing as he fought for control.

She fought her demons. “All the way.”

Kyle swept her small frame into his big arms and took the two wide steps to the bed that had already been turned down.

Kyle slid her onto the mattress and followed. He made full contact with her young body for the first time, gasping. Lost for a second, he thrust between her legs and tried not to pass out from the pleasure.

Jennifer was stunned by how it felt, shifting to make sure he hit the right spot. Instead of freezing up or resisting, she held him tighter and squirmed beneath his hard body. It was stunning for both of them.

Kyle regained control. He’d dreamed of this moment, of her responding this way. He wasn’t going to ruin it by grabbing his own pleasure and coming back for hers later.

Jennifer groaned as his hand settled over her breast.

So did Kyle. He snapped the clasp and slid the cloth aside with a hiss of need. “Tell me to lick.”

Jennifer swallowed the lump in her throat. “Please, yes!”

Kyle did.

Jennifer cried out at the contact, clutching his head close. “Lick me again!”

Kyle climaxed in his suit.

Jennifer felt it, but she was too hot to care as he grunted and growled against her bare skin. She’d never felt anything like this.

Kyle slid down and kissed between her legs.

He was hard again before she began to moan his name and spasm against his lips.

Kyle didn’t wait for her to regain her composure. He pulled the tie string to her panties and unfastened the button of his trousers.

Jennifer was still climaxing. Her slick skin twitched and gleamed in the lantern light, returning Kyle to the lust he’d felt upon laying against her. He lowered his pants and knelt between her legs.

Jennifer groaned as Kyle guided his hard body into her. Wet and welcome, she automatically tilted up to meet his thrust.

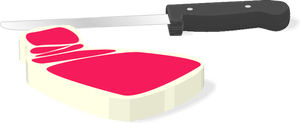
Kyle buried himself in her, drawing a groan and the best orgasm of his life.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

**Too Valuable to Kill**

Day Six

**3pm**



**1**

**“W**here did they get a butchered cow?” Charlie was watching Kenn flip their breakfast steaks. Upon waking, Kenn had chosen to stay longer. Rain was beating on doors and windows. Neither of them were eager to get moving in a storm. “Someone’s freezer?”

“This is fresh cut meat.” Kenn tried not to be hit by the sizzling fat. “One of them butchered it.”

“How can you tell?”

“By how it looks. Most frozen meat loses color over time. This is still pink and pretty.” The sled was hidden right outside the window. Kenn had brought two more packages inside to thaw and was about to finish another beautiful meal. “You’re supposed to be doing this, you know. You’re the rookie.”

“I offered.” Charlie glowered. “You said it was too valuable to waste on a shithead who can’t cook.”

Kenn shrugged. “It is, but Eagle rules don’t change just because we don’t like each other.”

“You don’t like me? I’m hurt.”

Kenn snickered.

So did Charlie. His mood was better now that he had another meal to anticipate that didn’t taste like salt no matter how it was cooked.

“You’ll have fish on the boat.”

Charlie stilled.

Kenn tensed. “Don’t think about it, kid. I’ll knock you out and drag you back.”

Charlie shook it off. “I’m good.”

“I doubt that, but you’re having dangerous thoughts.” Kenn exposed his secret thought. “You can’t stay here. You have a baby on the way. The time to flee was before.”

“I know. I’m not.”

Kenn grunted, flipping the other steak.

Charlie opened his kit and took out a bag of rice from his food pouch. Brittani had given it to him right before he left. He tossed it to Kenn.

Kenn caught it. “Perfect.” He got a pot from his cook kit and began preparing the rice. “Safe Haven doesn’t eat like this right now, but once we’re on the island for a while, we’ll have fresh meat again.”

Charlie tried to talk about his hesitations, assuming it was part of this awful therapy. “Seems like a long time.”

“To me too, but knowing it’s coming will help.”

“Why can’t we take a herd with us?”

“No room.”

“That boat is huge.”

“On the island.” Kenn shoved the pot into the coals. “We’re taking a lot of stuff.”

“I think a food source is important.”

Kenn snorted. “Even if we cleared a deck for livestock, where would we get herds?”

“Zoos.” Charlie wiped his mouth, frowning. He’d never drooled over a meal before. “I’ll bet a lot of animals are alive.”

“After eleven months? I don’t think so.”

“I do.”

“Why?”

“Because some animals only need one meal every few months. Makes sense some of them might still be around.”

“Fine.” Kenn stopped cooking long enough to write it in his book. “I’ll mention it if she lets me back in.”

Charlie frowned. “You think she won’t?”

Kenn hated it that he had to talk to the teenager about it. “Not if I don’t sort some shit out on this trip. She knows that, but she still sent you along. I don’t think she wants me to get it together.”

“Maybe not. What is it?”

Kenn knew he couldn’t trust the boy. He knew Charlie would use it against him. “I want something I shouldn’t.”

The boy dug in, slamming doors. “My mom.” Charlie’s good mood faded.

Kenn winced.

“I knew it!”

Kenn shifted the rice pot further into the coals, unable to look at the boy. “So does she, I guess, thus this trip. I’m supposed to figure out if I need to be put down like the vet.”

Charlie was distracted. “Wait. The vet died in Market Town, helping protect us all. Right?”

“Samantha put him out of his misery.”

“No way!”

“Yes, way.”

Charlie considered it while Kenn stirred the rice into the boiling water. “Well? Do you?”

“No.”

“But she sent you out, so she must have seen something.”

Kenn grunted. “That’s what I think too and it made me so twitchy that I’m discussing it with you.”

“You want me to look and tell you what she saw!” Charlie shook his head. “Why would I?”

Kenn stiffened. “Because I have something you want.”

“What?”

“A way to give your mom peace so you can stop feeling bad and enjoy your new life.”

Charlie gaped. “How do you know that?”

“Because I used those sentiments against you two for a long time.” Kenn’s guilt was in his voice. “It works.”

“You’re a piece of shit.”

“You might be too, in time.”

“Fine. What is it?”

“Look first.”

“No.”

Kenn shrugged. “Let me know when you change your mind.”

Charlie crossed his arms over his chest. “I can’t trust you.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“I was thinking you two still talk more than women.”

Both males jumped up, reaching for guns.

Adrian joined them at their fire, dropping a kit. “Ammo.”

Charlie pouted, refusing to speak.

Adrian faced the boy. “I’ll tell you what he won’t, and I don’t want anything in return.”

“Asshole.” Kenn had started to put on another steak and now he stopped, wrapping the meat back up.

“Why?” Charlie was confused, and unhappy that Adrian was here.

“Because your mom needs Kenn to figure that out for himself. You can have help. You’re her son.”

Charlie pouted. “I don’t want to cheat.”

“It’s not cheating.” Adrian unbuttoned his drenched jacket and hung it on the wall. “It’s what she wants.”

“Just tell me then.”

“You have to get both sides of the stories.” Adrian settled against a dusty freezer and began unlacing his boots. “Make your list of the things she’s done wrong and then make one for the things she’s done right–according to you. Then speak with the people who were there for both of them.”

Charlie frowned. “Why would I ask about things she’s done right?”

“Because it isn’t a fair study if you don’t.” Adrian pushed off his boots. “If you can be wrong about one, you could be wrong about the other.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“It does. I’ll prove it. Think of something she’s done wrong that Kenn or I were there for. Then look through our memories, since you won’t believe our words. Then pick a good thing we were there for. Afterwards, I’ll ask you two questions and you’ll understand my point.”

“She spared your life at the trial. That was wrong.”

Adrian had been expecting this one. He looked at Kenn.

Kenn shook his head. “I’m not helping either of you.”

“Yes, you will and in doing so, you’ll help yourself.” Adrian pointed. “She wants peace between you two just as much as she wants our personal issues settled.”

“That won’t happen!” Charlie glared.

“Then Kenn has to stay here.” Adrian scowled. “Or you do and *that* can’t happen. Your mom won’t go without you.”

“So I hear.”

“Are you afraid of the answer?” Adrian challenged. He knew how to handle people better than Kenn ever had.

“She traded his life for yours,” Kenn blurted. “She agreed to take his place as leader if he gave his life for yours when it was needed.”

“You’re a liar!” Charlie jumped up. “You’re both lying!”

“Fine. Pick something else.” Adrian calmed things down. “Something good she did.”

“She tolerated both your whores in camp with her!”

Adrian shook his head. “Nancy is on her own now and Tonya was forced to ignore Kenn before he left. Kendle skipped camp. She’s making them all pay in one form or another.”

“Not true!” Charlie hated having his memories and thoughts called wrong. “I don’t trust you.”

“I’m done with this.” Kenn forked the steaks over the beds of rice he’d just put on plates and shoved them toward Adrian and Charlie. “Talk about something else.” He got started on a fresh steak for himself.

Charlie was torn between anger and hunger.

Adrian wasn’t. He snatched up the hot plate of food and dug in, groaning. “Vewy goot!”

Kenn laughed. “You sound like a two-year-old.”

Adrian swallowed and grabbed another hot bit of steak in his fingers. “Eating like one too.”

Charlie grabbed his plate and stalked to a far corner of the room.

“Don’t be that way.” Adrian tried a coaxing tone. “She sent you out here to learn. Who did you think you were going to learn from?”

“Neither of you!” Charlie slid down the cold wall and fumbled for his knife. “I thought I’d handle myself and figure things out from there.”

“Why don’t you just admit you’re jealous of her spending all her time on Safe Haven?” Kenn was still searching for the real reason Charlie had been sent out here. “Then you can go back.”

“I’m not sure I want to go back, as you already know.” Charlie started eating, using his knife to cut and scoop. There hadn’t been any silverware in the house. It had held every other dish, but no flatware.

“You have a fork in your mess kit.” Adrian was sure the kid had been sent with full gear.

Charlie ignored him for the easier, lazier method.

Adrian grinned. “Fatherhood scaring you?”

The boy swallowed. “More like all the people watching over our shoulders to be sure we do it right. I got a flash as I left. It keeps adding up. If I stay here, I’m free.”

“And you kill the future. Don’t be selfish.”

Charlie flipped Kenn the finger, but his heart wasn’t in it. He’d been thinking on it and feeling guilty. He understood the consequences.

“You’re not like your mom, so it’s harder.” Kenn flipped the browning meat. “You’re like your dad. When shit gets flaky, you want to walk.”

“Don’t!”

Kenn shrugged. “You can read the memories. He was always like that and you take after him. He always tried to get us to skip the hard fights.”

“He didn’t like seeing men die!”

Kenn sneered. “Wow, do you have a surprise coming.”

“I do not!” Charlie shoved in a bite.

“You do.” Adrian got settled and sawed through a small part of the meat. “Not only did he not feel guilt over killing, boy, he enjoyed it.”

“Those were bad men!”

“So that makes enjoying it okay?”

Charlie paused in the next bite. “I’m not sure.”

Adrian took a big bite. “Same hewre.”

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth!” Charlie snapped. “It’s gross.”

Adrian finished chewing and swallowed. “You’re becoming an annoying little hothead, you know?” Adrian looked at Kenn while Charlie took another bite and tried to form a nasty answer. “You bring a bottle? I’ll need it if you want me to keep working with him.”

Kenn pointed at his kit. If Adrian could get the boy settled and back to camp, he was all for it. “Last bottle of Turkey in camp.”

Adrian frowned. “They need that.”

Kenn nodded. “And so I told Angela. She said someone would deserve a shot or two for putting up with so much attitude. I just thought she meant me.”

Adrian laughed.

Charlie stuffed another bite in his mouth to keep from yelling at them. He hated it that they were always ahead of him on everything.

Adrian cut a bite from his steak and followed Charlie’s lead by scooping it onto his blade with a stack of rice. “You’re trying to match adults, son. Stick with those your own age and you’ll come out on top every time.” Adrian shoved the bite in, groaning again. “Fwesh cow!”

Charlie couldn’t help but snicker at the sound and feel of Adrian’s pleasure. He dug into his meal, trying to figure out what he wanted to know that Adrian might be able to tell him.

“This isn’t a brainstorming session.” Adrian swallowed. “This is a test of manhood, of your patience and your determination to be good. She’s giving you the chance to go corrupt now, because on the boat, you have to follow the same rules as everyone else.”

“She’s sparing me by letting me go nuts?”

“She’s hoping you won’t.” Kenn deeply wished he’d kept better control of the situation they’d run into. “She’ll already be disappointed in what we’ve done. For her sake, please try to behave.”

Adrian and Charlie stared at the Marine. His tone implied he cared about her.

Kenn snorted, blowing them off. “She’s the alpha. It isn’t about her. It’s the draw.”

They heard the lie, but neither of them called him on it. They had their own shortcomings to handle.

“You staying until the storm passes?”

Adrian nodded at Kenn’s question. “She wanted you armed and me fed, so I assumed I should go my own way as soon as the weather clears.” Adrian looked at Charlie. “Now it almost feels like I should stick with you two for a bit and finish this. He needs to be done and back with his women. They’ll stress over him.”

Charlie shoved in the last bite. The larger, more gifted man might be able to subdue him and force him to return.

“I won’t.” Adrian’s lips curled. “I’d use guilt on you until you gave up just to shut me up. I can nag like any female.”

“That’s because you’re a traitorous bitch!” Charlie shouted, spewing rice and half chewed meat.

Kenn made a face. “Ugh. Glad he sat over there.”

“Yep.” Adrian got his canteen and took a long drink as the food hit his stomach and brought cramps. He’d been empty for two days.

Charlie swallowed in a hurry. “You need to leave!”

“Because you like me more than your dad right now and I’m a reminder of it?”

Charlie threw his plate at Adrian and got up. He stomped to the door while Adrian wiped off the bits of rice and meat.

Kenn sighed. “Stop.”

Charlie kept going. “I don’t need either of you.”

Kenn lifted a brow at Adrian.

Adrian shook his head. “She wants him to have the real experience. Let him go and we’ll save his bacon on the way to Kendle.”

Charlie paused. “Is someone waiting for me?”

Adrian shrugged. “Go find out and then we’ll all know.”

Charlie’s hand lingered on the knob to the ground floor level.

Kenn flipped his steak, ready to eat. He felt better having Adrian here.

“That’s because you’re a traitor too!” Charlie shouted.

Kenn looked at Adrian, exasperated. “How did you put up with that attitude in every rookie Eagle? I would have killed them all.”

Adrian chuckled, scooping up another bite. “Some days were harder than others.”

Kenn grunted. “We heading out come dusk?” Kenn knew how to set ‘em up.

“A little after. We’ll do some basic rounds for reminders of Eagle routines. It’s been a while for me. I need it.”

“Sounds good.” Kenn made his plate.

Both adults listened for his choice. If Charlie went out there, he would be on his own until the weather cleared.

Charlie kicked the door. “I want to be alone!”

Adrian pointed upward. “Go up and watch for problems. You can sleep tomorrow, while we travel.”

“How can I sleep if I have to walk?”

“We have a sled.” Kenn pointed at the window.

Charlie went out, slamming the door.

Adrian shook his head and finished his meal.

Kenn grunted and started his.

Charlie went to the first floor and crawled into a closet to sulk and listen for trouble.

Kenn waited until they were alone and flashed Eagle code. *Are you going to the island with us?*

Adrian grimaced. *I can’t. She hasn’t forgiven me yet.*

That doesn’t bode well for me. I did worse to her.

*You’ve shown true signs of change.*

Kenn faced the next personal demon he’d been sent out to slay. *I’ve lied, faked it.*

Adrian sighed, pushing away the empty plate as his stomach cramped again. *I’m sorry to hear that.*

Kenn hung his head. *So am I.*

“All of it?”

Kenn nodded. “Probably ninety percent.”

Adrian stared at him. “What will it take?”

Kenn waved a hand. “I thought gifts of my own would do it, but it hasn’t.”

Adrian had forgotten that Kenn had evolved several times since his banishment. “What all can you do?”

“Move things, thought reading.” Kenn hesitated to list more.

“I felt your nature scan as I came in.”

“It’s new. Not sure if it’s a fluke or something she gave me to keep her son safe.”

Adrian snorted. “She wouldn’t give you anything. I’d bet she wishes you were still an Invisible.”

“I don’t blame her for that, really, but I feel like the same piece of shit I’ve always been. I haven’t changed.”

“You beat anyone recently?”

Kenn shook his head. “Been beat on.”

“You abuse Tonya or any female?”

Kenn chuckled, thinking of how Tonya ruled their roost. “No.”

“Do you miss it?”

Kenn considered the question honestly and shrugged. “I wanted to hurt Ivan and Kendle. Does that count?”

Adrian contemplated his fast visit from the castaway and his hostile reception from Ivan as he took a sip from his canteen. He belched. “Hard to say. I dislike one and the other needs to be put down.”

“Ivan because the boss likes him and Kendle because she interfered with the grand plan?”

Adrian gave a short nod. He didn’t need to add words to it. Kenn’s were bad enough.

“So here we sit, two bad men trying to go good.” Kenn leaned his head against the wall as the food began to hit his stomach and quiet the monster living there. “This sucks. I want to be back in camp.”

Adrian winced. “Yeah. We have to earn it.”

“With her kid?”

“For you, maybe. You’ve done him wrong and part of his attitude is because of you. For me, I’m just a guide he won’t listen to.”

“What’s your job out here?”

“To keep you all alive until you learn your lessons and are called home.” Adrian closed his lids. “Wake me in a few hours and I’ll stand watch. He’s already sleeping.”

Kenn grunted, reaching for the rest of his food. “Good. If I have to keep listening to his bitching, we’ll have trouble.”

Adrian didn’t laugh. “She knew sending you two out together would bring all this stuff up. I’m starting to think she’s giving him the chance to kill you without anyone finding out.” Adrian laid down and went to sleep.

So did Kenn, but not right away. He had a terrible idea of why Angela had really put them together, but he refused to accept it. *I won’t do that anymore. Not even for you.*

**2**

**In the West (4am)**

“We’re almost there, sir.”

Mario snapped awake in the passenger seat of the UN vehicle flying through the darkness. “How long?”

“Minutes.” Oscar coughed, hitting the wiper button again. The ash storms had been almost nonstop for weeks.

Mario straightened, pulling himself together. They were going to his private den in the center of his western command zone, but there was a chance someone had found it. He hadn’t been here in a month.

Around the single vehicle, the darkness was oppressive. In the east, the sun was up, but here in the southwest, it was the time when monsters walked. Mario’s men had told stories of witnessing creatures that didn’t exist in their homeland or anywhere else. He would have ignored their tales of terror as men trying to evade work, but they had bets going for who would find the first proof. Men volunteered for extra shifts at night to prove their wild claims, not avoiding labor like one would expect from a fantasy tale. It made Mario leery. He’d already been unhappy to receive this assignment, but he went where the Secretaries-General ordered. The horror stories simply made it worse.

Oscar drove the jeep with expert hands and worried thoughts. He didn’t care about America, but the thought of the rage disease making it to his homeland was terrifying. Oscar knew those things had a way of traveling even when their makers didn’t want them to. Dying from a disease was his greatest fear. “Sir, may I ask when we’re leaving this odd land?”

“Tonight, my timid, boring driver.” Mario held on as Oscar increased speed in response to the insult. “Our work will be finished with our arrival and three calls. You will stay with me.”

Oscar made sure the vehicle didn’t wreck on the debris or cracks, and stored information about their surroundings like he’d been taught to do while on missions. This area had been damaged by multiple battles after the war and all of those had left evidence of the combatants. American and Mexican armies had come through here. There wasn’t much left of businesses or roads, making it the perfect place for a hideout.

Mario took a control unit from his pocket and activated it. His den was set in the side of an eroding cliff, dug by his men immediately after their arrival. Mario hit a button to open the door. If anyone was watching it, they would now go inside without witnessing his arrival.

Oscar drove to the rear entrance that only a few of their troops had known was added, then veered into the dark tunnel. He slowed in case rocks or debris had fallen into the narrow path, but the jeep rolled smoothly through. The front gate began to retract as soon as Mario hit another button on his control unit.

Lights came on, showing a three-room den formed in a wide circle. It was easy to see no one had been here. The dust on the floor was pristine.

Mario locked the front entrance and went to the center room, where the radio equipment had a thick layer of grit over it.

He pulled on the tarp, sending a fresh cloud of dust into the air. Mario was coated in it. “I hate the west!” He slapped the tarp onto the floor. “It gets into everything!”

Mario had wanted an assignment in the east, like his friend Dolf had received. They’d come over on the same ship, but they wouldn’t be leaving together. Dolf was already back on the ocean, transporting supplies and trophies between UN encampments. He was also holding prisoners, but Mario didn’t care about them. Several descendants had been sent on this mission to ensure success. Not everyone would end up in the international center.

“Gather the food and water.” Mario pointed at the tunnel. “Put it on the boat.”

Oscar hurried, eager to be gone.

Mario sat in the dusty chair and flipped switches on the radio. He cleared his throat of ashy grit. “Unit twelve calling subordinate Vihaan. Are you there?”

Mario waited patiently, understanding people were often busy in this new world. It took a lot to stay alive now.

The radio crackled. “I am here.”

Mario keyed the mike. “Provide status.”

There was a pause and then the radio lit up again. “Impeccable timing, as usual. Stand by.”

Mario sat back and pulled a flask from his inner pocket. He lit a cigar and had a drink while listening. Vihaan had left the mike depressed. Groans were coming from the background.

“I will ask you once more. If you tell me the truth, I will end your life without further pain. Do you agree?”

“Yes! Please!”

“Where is Safe Haven going?”

“To the south! An island!”

“Which route are they taking?”

“South and then west!”

“How many in their camp?”

“I don’t know now. There were five hundred in the mountain.”

“Who were you to Safe Haven?”

“An Eagle! My name is Joseph!”

“What about the babies, Joseph?”

Silence.

A fresh scream echoed.

Mario nodded, puffing. Vihaan was good at his job.

“Dozens! Most with gifts!”

“Thank you. There is one last question you have to answer. Do not lie.”

“I won’t.”

Mario nodded again. That voice was broken. It had no lies left in it. Mario was certain the person was naked, bound, bloody, and missing parts.

“Do they know the UN has operations going in this country?”

“Everyone knows you’re here. There have been big fights.”

“Do they know we all have one goal?”

“What?”

“Good. Sleep now.”

Mario finished his moment of relaxation as a gurgling noise came. He stubbed out the cigar lovingly. It was one of his last.

“You are satisfied with the status report?”

Mario grinned through the mike. “Yes, yes. We will attack soon. Get into place around the camp and wait for the fight to begin.”

“Goal for that moment?”

“Kill the leaders and offspring of leaders.”

“Copy. Out.”

Mario switched channels as Oscar entered the room to gather the food and water here.

The driver stayed quiet, listening while he worked.

“Janet, it is time for a status report.”

This time, Mario checked and reloaded his weapons while he waited.

“I’m on the number one goal. He and the son of Safe Haven’s leader are camped. We think they were evicted from their haven, but don’t know why yet. Storming here, so no travel.”

“How long have they been away?” Mario was intrigued that Adrian wasn’t with Safe Haven and thrilled that the female trackers were on him. Janet had the ability to twist lies with images and make them seem like the truth, as did her sisters. Descendants hardly ever went below a first layer when doing scans of each other, making the female trackers valuable.

“Half a day.”

“Stay with them. Anything else?”

“The island woman was with Adrian for a short time and then she went north. Finn is on her.”

“You have done well. Do not lose track of the number one goal.”

“We won’t. Out.”

Mario put his two guns into the bag and switched to the final channel. He looked at Oscar. “We leave next. Get the boat ready.”

Oscar vanished down the tunnel, smiling.

Mario keyed the mike. “Finn, a status report is due now.” Mario stood up and began unplugging and removing the items he wanted to take.

The radio stayed silent.

Mario didn’t bug his man yet, but he frowned. Finn was the best of the three. If he hadn’t answered, it was because it wasn’t a good moment.

Mario decided to wait. He needed that last report. He pocketed the boxes of ammunition, along with his glasses and two cassette tapes he’d chosen from a music store. He liked Bad Company and the Dixie Chicks. The rest of it would burn in the rebuilding that would take place after the rage disease destroyed the last of the survivors.

It took Mario five minutes to clear the room, not hurrying. By the time he was finished, worry had begun to set in. The time wasn’t important, but he had a bad feeling in his guts and he never ignored his guts, his nuts, or his brain. Two of the three were bracing for trouble.

Mario went to the radio, feeling something happening. He hit the button without his usual calm. “I want that report, Finn.”

“Finn’s dead. Ask me for it.”

Mario flinched at the immediate reply. The female voice was full of anger and triumph, telling Mario she wasn’t lying. “You are the island woman.”

“Good guess. Would you like to bet it all or just go home?”

Mario sneered, understanding the reference. He loved American television. “I will bet it all, fury fighter.”

“You know both my names. That’s interesting. Okay, so I’m getting ready to attack this guy who’s been following me, but the man gets this call. While he’s trying to silence it, I slit his throat. *You* killed your man.”

Mario frowned.

“Here’s your question. What was Finn going to do with me?”

“You are to be taken to the detention center,” Mario muttered without hitting the mike. He considered his responses and gave the least offensive. “You were to be eliminated.”

“No detention for me. Why?”

“You are a survivor of Rage Island. Your blood can be used against us,” he answered, again without letting her hear it. Tiring of the game, Mario shut off the radio without giving her an answer. It was clear that Finn was gone and the island woman was alive. Further communications would only give her more information. As it was, he already expected her to warn Safe Haven.

Mario took his bag of treasures and headed into the narrow tunnel. He jogged down the stairs that led to a tiny cove where he’d secured two small speed boats months ago. He could hear an engine running and hurried, ready to be gone.

Oscar came forward to light the path and took the bags.

Mario noted the second boat was empty and deflating. “You fixed it?”

“Yes. Two large rips.” Oscar bent over to place the bags into the boat. “It’s not following us.”

“Good.” Mario pulled his gun out and shot Oscar in the back as he stood up.

Oscar fell onto the edge of the boat and slipped into the shallow water near the natural stone dock.

Mario climbed into the boat and drove it out of the small cove. He didn’t look back.

In the east, Kendle put Finn’s bloody radio into her pocket without using it again. She gathered her gear and headed out, now moving south.

Chapter Thirty

**Safe Haven’s Son**

4pm



**1**

**C**harlie hated being cold. So far, that was the worst part of being away from camp. He’d loathed the mountain den his mother had chosen, but faced with this sleety weather, he would take it now without a complaint. Charlie went outside to use the bathroom, stomping. He’d woken alone, in the dark closet. For a minute, he’d wanted to cry.

Charlie used a wet bush behind the home, trying to hurry his bladder so he didn’t get a chill. His nuts drew up in protest as the wind pushed inside his clothes.

He tucked his flesh back in and zipped. “Can’t wait to go south.”

“Same here, kid.”

Charlie jumped, yelping at the voice.

Hannah chuckled. “That’s cute.” She stopped smiling as he reached for his gun. “Don’t make me kill you before we’ve had a chance to talk.”

Charlie paused. He couldn’t use his gift to alert Kenn and Adrian or the woman would know who he was by his signature. He also couldn’t yell in case refugees were in the area. He was trapped.

Hannah came forward and took his gun. “You can keep the knife, but if you try to use it on me, be prepared to follow through. I like to wrestle as foreplay.”

Charlie flushed at her leer.

Hannah cackled, motioning him away from the house. “Walk north until I tell you to stop.”

Charlie reluctantly did as he was told, leaving heavy prints in the mud to be followed.

Hannah walked behind him, kicking occasionally when the trail became too obvious. Animals and descendants often caught the wrong scent when you did that and wouldn’t take the bait.

“You should let me go.” Charlie rubbed his muddy shoe against his ankle to reach an itch. “They’ll kill you.”

“Adrian and his Marine guard?” Hannah was eager to have that confirmed.

Charlie clamped his lips shut, recognizing the trap.

Hannah smirked. “We’re gonna have fun, boy.”

Charlie spun around. “I’m not a boy.”

Hannah wasn’t immune to his angry, sexy vibe, but she had respect for Adrian. Getting distracted right now was a bad idea. She put her gun to his forehead. “You won’t let me see who you are, so you have no value to me. Keep walking or I’ll use your body for my trap.”

Charlie sent out a flood of obedience and slowly walked north. “How many are in your group? Are you the leader?”

Hannah shook off the daze and followed, not holstering. “You’ll see how it works, not-a-boy. Tell me about your camp.”

“You saw it.” Charlie had figured out she’d been watching them.

“Smart. The shields go down when we sleep. I walked right on in.”

Charlie wondered why the others in his group had missed it, but he refused to think of their names or even their faces.

Hannah tapped her knife hilt. “My sisters and I know how to get information, especially from men.”

Charlie wondered if that meant removing body parts and felt his blood pressure rise. He wasn’t sure that he could hurt a woman, but if they drew his blood, he might. *I need to grow up.*

Hannah made a noise. “Growing up isn’t all they make it out to be, kid. Take your time.”

Charlie nearly growled. He was tired of being treated like a child.

“You act like what you are.” Hannah shifted her pack higher on her shoulders. “If you want to be treated like a man, you have to play the part.”

*Play the part*. Charlie stopped, reading her shallow thoughts. “You were forced to come here. You’re lonely. All of your group is lonely. You kill the men instead of keeping them because they disappoint you by having no respect for what you are.” The teenager felt a bond growing. He didn’t want it, but there was no avoiding it as he added a final insight. “No one understands you. Not even our kind get why you’re here, why you agreed.”

Hannah stared, heart pounding. “Do you?”

Charlie shrugged. “As much as I can without being female. You want the freedom that was denied before the war. You came here for the lack of rules.”

Hannah kissed him. A fast peck, she followed it with a hug. “From a child!” She retreated, face going cold. “Now, you have value to me. Keep walking or I’ll shoot something you don’t need and carry you back.”

Charlie turned, suddenly feeling alive. “You like me. I can tell.”

Hannah snickered. “Wait till my sisters get a load of you.”

Charlie caught the double meaning and blushed. He wanted to swear he had a woman and he was loyal to her, but the vibes Hannah was throwing off were clear. He might be able to make a trade for his life. If he died, it didn’t matter if he’d been faithful.

“What if you don’t want to leave us when your mission is finished?” Hannah was keeping track of his thoughts and humoring him to get answers.

Charlie shrugged. “I’ve been thinking about it anyway. Everyone tells me I can’t stay, but I’m out here right now and I don’t have to go back if I don’t want to.” Charlie realized that was true and felt relief enter his heart. He could jump ship. No one could make him go to that island.

“It’s great to have that confirmed.” Hannah gestured at him. “Keep working on your personal issues. I’m just going to listen and take notes.”

Charlie went silent, refusing to think about anything.

Despite wanting the information, Hannah was relieved. The boy’s thoughts were full of alpha light and that was a powerful draw to ignore.

**2**

“Sounds like it’s sleeting.” Kenn had just woken.

Adrian groaned as he sat up. He stretched, moaning. “Bet the kid doesn’t feel like this when we wake him up.”

Kenn grunted, popping his back. “He’ll have a turn.”

“If he quits pissing off his mom and lives long enough.”

Kenn gave the expected chuckled, but he was tired, sore, cold. He wanted to be with Tonya in his tent. He missed having a warm body against him.

Adrian stood up. “Go wake the young prince, will ya? I’ll get food rolling if you want.”

Kenn didn’t mind. He needed to piss, and he wanted to check the perimeter to be certain it was okay to make another meal that would put off a lot of smells. “He might be up.” Kenn concentrated.

Adrian tensed, hands freezing on the kit. “Oh, shit.”

Kenn looked at him in panic. “I don’t have him. Not even a thought.”

“Neither do I.”

Both men flew up the stairs to find the front door open. Charlie was gone.

**3**

“They won’t come for me.” Charlie didn’t resist as the woman tied his hands behind his back. He was an Eagle. He knew how to get loose without a knife. *Those lessons, I paid attention to.*

“Tell me about your lessons, kid.” Janet smiled encouragement as Tisa secured him to a log near their small fire. The sisters were thrilled with what Hannah had caught while out hunting.

Camped inside a narrow cave, Hannah pulled a white tarp over the front, hiding the den. It was clever and reminded Charlie of the methods he and Becky had used during their fight with the government troops. He hadn’t noticed it until they were already here. The afternoon sun was glinting off the leftover snow and puddles, making it hard to see.

“I know you’re from Safe Haven.” Janet gestured in response to his tensing shoulders. “You have to be. You were traveling with Adrian Mitchel, the most wanted descendant on the planet–not that it means as much now. Most of the population has been thinned for the new order.”

Charlie frowned. “You’re New World Order supporters?” He peered up at the woman about to gag him. “Kinda hard to answer questions like that. Duh.”

Tisa flushed, lowering the gag. “I don’t like the sound of your voice.”

Instead of sending a nasty retort, Charlie dug in to find out why.

“Hey! Get outta there. Stop it!”

Janet and Hannah watched in amusement as their baby sibling and the teenager battled it out mentally. It was obvious who would win. The Safe Haven kid was grinning while he dug. Tisa was turning red and sweating. A thick bead rolled down her forehead and dripped to her cheek.

Charlie’s mouth dropped open. “You’re all fakes!”

Hannah and Janet let their laughter roll.

Tisa slapped him, knocking him over the log and into the dirt.

Charlie’s rage was fast. It flew out and enveloped Tisa in a flame wall that she only avoided by bringing up her personal shield. The heat rebounded, melting the frosty walls in a small boom of elements colliding.

Charlie drew it in, not struggling like he had back in camp. He awkwardly stood up and used his shoulder to wipe blood from his lip. “Never again. Do you understand?”

Tisa trembled, scared. The boy was stronger than her in every way.

Hannah pointed her gun at him.

Janet took her knife from the sheath.

Charlie waited for the fighting to start. He assumed he would be hurt, but all three of these women would be dead. He didn’t want to do it, but he wouldn’t be able to stop if they opened the door to that cage.

Hannah slowly lowered her gun, sliding it into the holster. She nodded at the tense women about to trigger a fight they couldn’t win. “Remember who he is. We need him alive.”

*Safe Haven’s son.*

*The alpha.*

*Angela!*

Thoughts flew through the cave, bringing dread and excitement.

Charlie used a brief blast of heat on his bonds and snapped the charring ends. Angry and unsure of the best way to handle things, he glared at Janet. “You should take me back and make a deal. None of you will survive the fight when Adrian comes.” There was no longer any reason to pretend otherwise. “He kills anyone who interferes with my mom. He won’t care about your gender.”

“If we can’t handle this one, we can’t capture Mitchel!” Janet snapped when Hannah hesitated. “I say we do it.”

“Can we trade him?” Tisa asked suddenly, pulse pounding from keeping her shield in place. She didn’t use it much.

Janet signaled toward the cave entrance. “Take yourself back.”

Charlie shook his head. “You kidnapped me. There has to be payment for that.”

“Adrian will make a deal.” Tisa was sure. “We’ll offer information on what’s headed for Safe Haven.”

“Why are you three here?” Charlie sat on the warmed log. “Get me something to drink and tell me your story. Maybe I can keep you alive.”

Janet waved Tisa to do it. She wanted the female to lower her shield and save her energy for bigger threats.

“What made you think you could do this?” Charlie regarded Hannah.

The tracker shrugged, not meeting his eyes. “We were drafted upon capture because we were tracking the threats around us so well they didn’t know we were there.”

Tisa dropped the canteen next to the boy and backed away. “We’ve been using our gifts to avoid our kind for years before the war. It was an accident.”

Charlie snickered. He drank from the canteen without fear. He was too valuable to kill. Thirsty, he drained it and let out a loud belch. “Excuse me.”

The women melted. Charlie felt their heat rush over him to sample more flavors than he wanted exposed at the moment. He jerked his shield into place. “What gives?!”

“You have manners.” Tisa knelt by him, no longer showing fear. “Are you a man yet, kid?”

Charlie’s cheeks flamed. He leaned away from her. “Ugh!”

“Are you scared of me now?” Tisa smirked.

Charlie blew out a breath. “You need a bath. I wouldn’t do you if you begged when you smell like that.”

Janet and Hannah hit the ground laughing.

Tisa drew back her hand.

Charlie waited, finger on the lock of the cage.

Tisa felt it coming. She stormed out of the cave instead, taking her kit along.

Charlie felt the other females evaluating him and wanted to respond, but he had paid attention to the hostage classes. Details needed to be worked out.

“You could say you’re here willingly.” Hannah gave him a look that sent heat into his knees. “We’ve been searching for a younger man who can be trained to please us and protect us. You fit the bill on most of that.”

Charlie opened his mouth to deny the claim.

“Stop pushing the kid.” Kendle ducked under the tarp to the cave entrance. “Just tell him you’re horny.”

Charlie grinned at the castaway. “That’s all they want? Funny.”

“Don’t need gifts to read the vibes in here. All we need is a pizza delivery outfit for you to wear and some bad music to make the video.” Kendle dropped next to him as the two trackers grabbed for weapons. “Sit down or I’ll get mean.” Kendle flashed red orbs. “You won’t enjoy that side of me. It’s the reason I had to leave safety.” Letting her rage show was all Kendle could do with her gifts locked up, but the trackers didn’t know that. They assumed she had a stronger mental shield than they did.

Charlie knew, but Kendle was deadly without any weapons. She wasn’t bluffing about wanting to feel them bleed out over her hands.

Hannah did sit, encouraged by the sudden power in their midst. “What did you do?”

“She tried to kill my mom.” Charlie gave Kendle a hug. “Thanks for coming for me.”

Kendle shrugged, not returning the hug but not avoiding it ether. “You were a friend to me there. I haven’t forgotten that.”

Charlie nodded. “And she’s my mom. I haven’t forgotten that.”

Kendle handed him her kit. “Sorry, kid. You knew we’d have a hate-hate relationship.”

“I had hoped you and Adrian would be happy together and leave my parents alone.” He dug through the bag, sure of what she wanted. He handed her the bottle of cool beer and kept digging. “Guess nothing works out exactly as we plan.”

Kendle snorted. “Not even close. I’m supposed to be on Pitcairn with Luke.” She dropped her head. “I made him leave. I never should have done that.”

“They say you’ll feel better once you talk about it.” They were both ignoring their hosts.

Kendle looked over at him. “Do you feel better after discussing Tracy’s abuse?”

Charlie growled. “No! I hate that saying.”

“Exactly.” Kendle began to drink, finally shifting her attention to the two tense females in the cave. She wiped her mouth on her bloodstained sleeve. “Did they hurt you?” Kendle was eager for an excuse to spill blood. The need had returned in force as soon as she left camp.

“We didn’t!” Janet hurried to answer.

Kendle waited for Charlie’s response.

“No.”

“What about the skank out there trying to run a brush through her hair? She the one who hit you?”

Charlie grinned. “I really got to her.”

Janet nodded. “We tease her a lot about her appearance. You hit a sore spot.”

“Are you really sisters?” he asked, taking out a pot. Kendle was hungry and she wasn’t a good cook.

“We are. Tisa was adopted.” Hannah shrugged. “We love her like one. Please don’t mistake an easy target for removal. We’ll all die together.”

Kendle rose to the challenge, hand going to her knife. She wanted to feel the blood.

Charlie put a calming hand on her wrist as Janet and Hannah once again reached for their weapons. “Easy.”

Kendle didn’t want to sit, but she did, feeling new arrivals. “Wow. He’s pissed.”

Charlie walked toward the cave entrance. “Yeah. He didn’t like me leaving, on my own, without telling anyone.”

Kendle took the hint, but she didn’t understand why he was doing it. She also didn’t care. This was a brief stop for her to help a friend. She would be gone again shortly.

The two females in the cave breathed a sigh of relief as they realized the boy was going to cover for them.

Adrian and Kenn came from the woods around the cave, pushing Tisa ahead of them.

“Guess we didn’t need a hostage to trade after all.” Kenn came forward. He shoved Tisa into the mud. “Stay.”

The woman did, shivering. It was clear what kind of man Kenn was. She hadn’t had time to evaluate Adrian because she’d been too scared of his guard. They hadn’t known his security was also a descendant.

Hannah found Adrian to be the bigger problem. They hadn’t been told he was strong or that he was an alpha. She looked at Charlie. “Now I know why you weren’t worried about being out in the open.”

Charlie laughed. “They’re a little rough around the edges, all right.”

Kenn lifted the tarp and jerked an edge of it down to let light stream in. He did a fast scan, nodded at Charlie, then paused. “Who hit him?”

All three trackers froze. Tisa almost wet herself.

Charlie waved it off. “Lessons learned, right?”

Kenn snorted and went to stand watch.

Charlie joined Adrian at the tarp. “I want to let them go. What would mom say?”

Everyone waited for that answer. Kendle–in anticipation of a mother’s rage, and the trackers–in terror of the same.

Adrian began a deep scan of the women, shoving aside the hasty fluff images that tried to blind him. “Are they corrupt? That’s how she makes all choices like this.”

Charlie sighed. “They’ve done things she wouldn’t like, but inside, I think they’re like Kendle, lost.”

Kendle refused to look at anyone as the teenager pinpointed her emotional turmoil. She didn’t want to need people. She just did.

“Based on that, she would probably speak with them and do a deeper search.” Adrian dug harder as the trackers resisted. “What she found would determine their fate.”

“I want them to live.” Charlie smiled at the younger girl in the mud who had managed to tame her hair a little. “I like them.”

Kendle rolled her eyes.

Adrian chuckled distractedly. He’d found something and was prying at the edges. “Then your mom probably would too, but she’d insist they pay for their crimes. Nothing would stand in the way of that.”

“Only in camp.” Charlie straightened his shoulders. “Out here, we’re on our own.”

“You’re an idiot if you believe that, kid.” Kendle knew better. “The three nastiest fighters from Safe Haven are with you, protecting your reckless ass. She’d be pissed these skanks thought they could take her son.”

“We didn’t know who he was!” Janet tried to lie.

Kendle sneered at her. “It’s funny you think that matters.”

“Does she have to find out?” Hannah pointed at Adrian. “We wanted you.”

“You were sent for me?” Adrian distracted them and pried harder, forcing the women to defend and think at the same time. All rookies had a hard time with that.

“We were given a list of targets. We chose you.”

“Why?”

“Absolution and entry.” Charlie scanned lightly while they were distracted. “They want to be a part of the light.”

“Figures.” Kendle grumbled. “Damn place infects people it hasn’t even touched.”

Adrian couldn’t help the pride. “I built it to do that. Your mom magnified it. We might even reach around the world now.”

Hannah shook her head, tone dropping into true fear for the first time. “The UN has that honor. They’re everywhere.”

Adrian used the moment. He yanked on Hannah’s weakened mental weld and snapped it. “You liars!” He shoved to his feet as the women cringed. “It’s a trap and we fell for it.”

“Kenn didn’t.” Charlie pointed to where the Marine was vanishing into the trees. He’d either heard Adrian or their company arriving.

Charlie looked to Adrian for orders.

So did Kendle.

The two trackers ran out of the cave in the chaos, grabbing Tisa from her hovering position at the base of a tree.

Engines echoed. Fading blue and white vehicles rolled through the trees and yards, surrounding the cave entrance. Troops also came in on foot, trying to ensure no escapes.

Inside the cave, the trio flashed hand codes in a fast plan that Adrian had no faith in succeeding. The enemy had the upper hand.

“Come from ‘ze hole, our wanted captives.”

Adrian blanched. “German. Great.”

Charlie didn’t understand and ignored it, trying to read their minds.

Kendle frowned. “That’s such a stereotype.”

Adrian shrugged. “Stereotypes come from the truth. What’s wrong with the truth?”

“Come from ze hole now!”

Adrian nodded to Charlie. “Like I told you, and make sure she screams when you hit her so it will pull the others away from us. They won’t expect you to target the women.”

The boy was now eager to hunt the trackers. He slipped to the entrance to be ready.

Kendle had no patience for plans. She stepped by them and went out with her hands on her knife hilts. “What’s my name?”

Adrian frowned as the screams started. “I told you to wait!” He rushed out and began grabbing lifeforces while UN troops fired useless bullets that bounced off his shield.

He found Kendle in the center of the troops, slicing and dicing while grinning like a madman. He started to shield her, but realized it wasn’t needed. Troops were stunned by her lack of fear as she marched up to them and slit throats, gutted stomachs.

Kendle slammed her hands into the guts she’d just opened and yanked. She slung it toward the three trackers. “You’re next!”

Hannah and Janet took off running.

Tisa slid behind the remaining cluster of troops who were finally lifting guns to fire.

Charlie sent a powerful blast of fire, catching most of those men. Screams changed to shrieks as Kendle stepped into the dying flames with her knives.

Tisa took off behind her sisters, terrified of being hit in the back by the boy’s fire.

Kendle ducked swings and frantic shots, almost feeling bad for the patrol. They clearly hadn’t known who they were coming for or they wouldn’t have lost so easily. She’d been hoping, just for an instant, that one of them would be able to kill her and keep her from getting back to Safe Haven.

Charlie took off after the three trackers who’d betrayed him. Like his mother, he wasn’t going to let anyone do that to him without repaying the favor.

In the middle of scanning for wounded, Adrian shouted at him, but the boy kept going.

Furious, Adrian ran over and grabbed Kendle from her fun. “Come on!”

Kendle kept a hold of the guts in her hand, letting the momentum yank them free of the screaming UN man as Adrian dragged her after their reckless ward.

**4**

“Keep going!” Janet shoved her slower sister, gasping for air. “He’s coming!”

The steps behind them were heavy, unrelenting thumps of vengeance. All the women assumed Adrian was catching up to them and he was very, very angry.

Waves of fury shot out again, crippling nearby animals with fear. All wildlife went still, allowing their pursuer to track the only movement on his grid. Them.

“Here!” Hannah ducked into a sewer tunnel, hoping it would come up in the city ahead. They could get lost in there. Farm land was too open.

The women ran down another tunnel, trying not to be loud.

Footsteps splashed behind them.

“He’s coming!”

“Shhh.” Hannah pushed them into a filthy corner with heavy shadows, controlling her breathing. Together, they brought up a shield that was intertwined.

Footsteps came, louder, sharper.

Tisa gasped as a male shadow broke away and came straight toward them.

“Mercy!” she cried, sliding to her knees inside the shield.

Charlie shook his head, stopping in front of them. “Denied.”

Janet breathed a sigh of relief. “The kid! It’s the kid!”

“Get going!” Hannah ordered, letting the shield go. “He’s not the threat!”

Charlie slammed them all with his alpha wave. It was the first time he’d ever used it.

All three women stilled, then rotated toward him against their will. Their eyes were horrified, but their bodies obeyed.

Charlie grinned, barely winded while they gasped and wheezed. His demon loved to hunt. “We’re going to have a fun night, ladies. Walk back out of this sewer and turn south.”

The three trackers obeyed, silently begging him to let go.

Charlie tightened his hold instead, reminded of the scorpion story his mom had told during a descendant meeting with the kids. “You knew what I was when you picked me up. Not my fault you can’t handle the sting.”

**5**

“He won’t do it.” Kendle pointed at a footprint and kept going. “You know he won’t.”

Adrian listened for pursuers. He didn’t expect many. Even he was a bit shocked by Kendle going all *I need a blood bath.*

“I’m telling you, he’s in trouble.”

Adrian glared at her. “Just tell Angela you’re sorry and she’ll let you back in so she can keep trying to change you. Babysitting the boy isn’t going to help you.”

Kendle’s lips drew into a thin line.

“Finally!” Adrian had tired of her chatter an hour ago. He had begun to be worried over Charlie’s absence not long after. The sun was setting. It would hurt him if anything happened to the kid.

“I saw that frown. You feel it too.” Kendle shut up as Adrian turned another nasty glower her way.

Adrian narrowed his lids against the sun. “There he is.”

Both adults stopped in surprise as they realized the three trackers were walking with him.

“They aren’t restrained.”

“Actually, they are.” Adrian recognized the alpha pull. “His mom is gonna be so mad at me.”

Sighing, Adrian gestured toward a nearby farmhouse. “Let’s get the details so I can have an excuse while she’s frying me.”

“Why is it bad?” Kendle hated not being able to read his thoughts.

“Charlie knows he’s an alpha now. He’ll use it again.”

“Against Angela?”

Adrian grunted.

Kendle grinned. “Knew I liked that kid. But he didn’t kill them. I was right.”

“No one said you were wrong.” Adrian led the way into the farmhouse, picking up Charlie’s new confidence and his new fears. “Watch the zombie squad, will you? We men need to talk.”

Adrian went to the kitchen while Kendle pointed toward the dusty couch and was obeyed. She stared, realizing their eyes were responding. The trackers were obviously terrified the boy wasn’t going to let go of them, that they would die this way.

Kendle stepped forward, letting her orbs bleed red.

Tisa fainted.

Janet wet herself.

Hannah mentally screamed for Charlie.

The boy came flying into the room and shoved Kendle away from them.

Coming to the doorway, Adrian let out a derisive sound. “And that’s the problem with using the alpha wave on someone. It doesn’t just effect them.”

Charlie groaned. “Now he tells me!”

Kendle picked herself up off the floor. “This is the best apocalypse reality show ever.”

Adrian snorted. “Yeah, the director has some sense of humor.” He waved at Charlie. “If you can drag yourself away, Kendle will get them settled until we’re done talking.”

Charlie followed, embarrassed. He’d been running to their defense before he knew what was going on.

“Your mom fights that feeling every time a camp member is upset.” Adrian pulled out a chair for the boy and took the one across from him. “It’s time you got the full story of our origins and of what I did, of the choices I forced your mom into. I want you to witness it through my eyes, so you’ll understand she didn’t pick them over you. Without them, you wouldn’t have a future. You’ll get that if you’re brave enough to see the full story.”

Charlie held out his hand so they could touch, making the connection stronger. He was ready to hear it now, though he was worried over leaving the trackers alone with Kenn and Kendle.

Adrian clasped his wrist. “In the beginning, the garden was peaceful. I screwed that up. You and your dad were always right. It’s my fault.”

Kendle wanted to listen to the story, but she’d been given a job. She did it without roughness or compassion, once again tossed into her own head. She’d cared for Luke this way before he died. It was haunting. It was also easier to spend the time thinking about their moments than it was to contemplate what waited for her after this. She’d been going north to unearth what the animal herds were up to because no one else was and she needed a goal to keep her from ending her own life. Now, that seemed a substandard reason to go on living, making this a dangerous time for her enemies and for her companions.

Chapter Thirty-One

**Like a Cult**

A close up of a logo

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**1**

**“T**hey’re scared again.” Charlie twisted to look over his shoulder. “What’s she doing?”

“What she was told.” Adrian let go of the boy’s wrist. He’d seen a lot of it, but his youth and new bond with the trackers was distracting him. “*Charlie*.”

The boy snapped around at the alpha tone. “Don’t you dare!”

“They have to die.” Adrian tried to be compassionate. “You can’t keep them.”

Charlie moaned as if he were in pain.

“They tried to kill us after their trap failed. They would have killed you when you found them. You saw it in their minds.”

The teenager clenched his fists, fighting the pull of the terrified women and Adrian’s alpha strength in his mind.

Adrian stopped. He let go and tiredly stood up. “They knew you couldn’t do it. So does your mom. She didn’t send you out here to collect a harem or to take lifeforces.”

“What do you want from me!” Charlie’s face was red, body tense. He was on the edge of flight.

“For you to understand the big picture.” Adrian pointed at the doorway. “Your mom would use them against our enemies and let them have a quick death when the time came.”

“I know that!” Charlie lunged to his feet. Spittle flew from his mouth. “That’s why I want to stay! I’ll never live up to her expectations. I’m like Kevin!”

“Yes.” Adrian got a dusty glass from the cabinet and swiped it out with his inner shirt. “She doesn’t want those things for you. Your mom would be happy if you were a satisfied, sheltered member of camp. She doesn’t want you in the Eagles. She never did.”

“Because I can’t cut it.”

Adrian watched the anger and shame thrum through the kid like a live wire and chose to be honest. “No. She doesn’t want you to be too easy, like me or too hard, like your dad. To be an Eagle, you’d have to change, and she doesn’t want that.”

“You’re her little boy.” Kenn came to the table and deposited the weapons the females had been carrying. “I used to give you a lot of shit about being a man and standing on your own. She coddled you. Now you’re caught between the two and don’t know where you belong.” Kenn opened his mind to the angry boy. “I really am sorry for that. So is your mom. That’s part of why we’re out here while she works herself to death for people who wouldn’t do the same for her.”

Adrian wanted to correct that but didn’t. Many of Safe Haven’s people *were* users and takers who would run when things got ugly. Only alpha powers and shields kept them with the group.

“Then how can she still love them?!”

Charlie’s shout startled them all and drew attention from the other people in their unwilling group.

“Why does *she* have to do it at all? Can’t she just be my mom?!”

*And the truth shall set us free*, Adrian thought. None of them had been certain why Charlie was out here. They’d all had assumptions and been digging, but that bone was laid bare now.

“You want things back to how they were before.” Kenn was disgusted with himself. “That’s my fault. You’re not supposed to want that for her.”

“Yeah.” Charlie felt another flood of fear from the trackers and let out an ugly sound of desperation. “Help me, you sack of shit!”

Kenn stared at the boy, hating Angela more than he ever had in that moment. Not only was his fear confirmed, he agreed with her on what needed to happen now. “You won’t like how I do it.”

“I never have, but it worked for us.” Charlie used his anger to replace the courage he was missing. “Just do it, you woman-beating bastard!”

Kenn sighed, standing up. “When this is all over, tell your mom we’re even.”

Before Charlie could answer, Kenn slapped him.

The hard hit knocked Charlie into the cabinet and sent him to the floor.

Kenn leaned down, bringing up the old side of him that never seemed to die. “This is what your mom went through to become a timid little mouse.” He slapped the dazed boy again. “You want her cowered in a corner? Being meek and obedient?” Kenn delivered another hard slap. “Get on your feet, mouse! If she can do it, you definitely can!”

Charlie spit out blood, fury rising as he got to his feet. He glowered at Kenn. “Better hit me harder because I do want her sitting quietly–while my dad leads!”

Kenn put real heat into the next blow.

Tears ran from Charlie’s eyes, but he stayed on his feet.

“You learned that women are to be seen and never heard from, but those sentiments are wrong. Let it go and step up–become a man out here and she’ll forgive you for feeling that way.”

“My dad should be the leader! She’s a woman!” Charlie screamed it. “You told me that! You said that!”

*Slap!* “I was wrong. So are you.”

Adrian kept a shield over the pair, hoping Kendle wouldn’t interfere. She’d grown fond of Charlie since her arrival at Safe Haven, but Angela had sent him out here for this lesson and others. *She must have always known how Charlie felt about her being in leadership,* Adrian realized. *She lived with it for a long time, hoping he would change on his own.*

“But now we’re leaving!” Kenn growled. “And she needs this little snot beaten into shape. She’s tried everything else, including letting him put the camp whore under a charm!”

Adrian frowned, pinning the bloody boy with a ruthless gaze that demanded the truth. “You copied me.”

Charlie snarled. “No! I did what she did when they were young. And it worked!”

“That’s not free will.” Adrian sighed, dragging his chair over to the window so he could watch for problems. “What a mess.”

Kenn took a hold of Charlie’s shirt like he would have in the past, but there was no true menace behind it now. He no longer hated the boy or suspected him of hiding anything. It was easier to let it go.

Charlie stifled a sob. “Even you don’t care about me anymore or you’d keep hitting me until I came around.”

“What if he no longer believes that beating someone is always the answer?”

Charlie snorted at Adrian. “Kenn? Yeah, right.”

Kenn could almost feel Angela watching them, waiting for the final snap that had to happen. *I don’t want to do this.*

*You were happy enough to do it for fun when you had control*, Angela reminded him. *Now, you’re doing it to save him, to please your leader and your idol. The intentions always matter, Grunt. Now finish it. I need you here.*

Kenn slapped the boy again, letting the Marine come forward to handle the chore. “You are an abused, lazy, naive, spoiled brat!” Kenn reached down and grabbed the cringing teenager. “I love you. So does your mom, Marc, and the asshole in the room with us. We’ve been working on you all along. Now, it’s time you had the same respect.” Kenn shoved him toward the door. “Go finish your chores.”

Charlie staggered from the kitchen, bleeding and crying. He felt like he might never stop. In twelve years, Kenn had never said *I love you*. Tears streamed over the child’s cheeks.

“Well, that sucked.” Kenn swiveled around to discover Adrian was also crying. He scowled. “What the hell?”

Adrian sniffled, wiping at his face. “It was a beautiful intervention.”

Kenn waved an annoyed finger and stomped from the room.

Adrian let himself feel the innocent emotion, reveling in the freedom of being able to pick what kind of person he wanted to be now. It would have been easier to go crazy after his banishment, to convince camp followers that Angela had stolen leadership from him. Instead, he was serving her in the best way he could–by helping her three biggest problems settle their issues before they got on the boat.

Adrian tensed as Angela’s cold laughter echoed.

*He thinks he isn’t included in it. Hilarious!*

Adrian got up and followed Charlie, no longer reveling.

Charlie went out to the front porch, where the trackers were tied to the rail. He drew his gun.

Adrian joined them. “He knows what you meant by chores, right?”

Kenn shrugged. He didn’t care if it had been taken wrong. Charlie couldn’t do it. He would never be an Eagle.

Charlie let go of the bond on all of them. The reminder of his past had shaken him. He didn’t want to be like Kenn or Adrian. “Tell me your story and include the details. After, we’ll go and your masters will show up to help you. Or don’t, and I’ll leave while the bastard ends your lives right here–in your birthday suits on a strange porch.”

Neither Eagle knew who Charlie was referring to, but both presumed it was him. They looked away as Kendle came forward to help the boy get the information they needed.

The hard Marines retreated into the front room, inwardly wincing at the groans as Kendle took up a killing hold on the youngest female. Her need to feel blood was rushing over the area in thick waves that brought chills and reminded Adrian of their other problem. He hoped Angela had an answer for the sick kids headed to Safe Haven because he didn’t. He’d never envisioned their enemy stooping to this level. He had no defense.

“She’ll cover it.” Kenn motioned for quiet. “They’re talking now. Hush.”

Adrian frowned, wanting to say he hadn’t been talking at all.

“They’re colonizing America–all of it. South, North, and us.”

“Start from the beginning.” Charlie tapped his gun against the post to indicate his lack of patience. He was telling the trackers he would look away while Kendle killed them. It was believable after listening to the beating he’d just taken.

“The United Nations leaders want one-world control.”

“We know that. Move on!” Kendle pulled out a single strand of hair.

“Ow!” Janet spat at Kendle.

Charlie held up a hand when Kendle would have retaliated.

“To have a one-world government, they have to control all the land masses! They’ve been wreaking havoc across the eastern half of the planet for decades, but they couldn’t get to us!” Janet hurried to answer, no longer viewing the boy as an innocent to be taken advantage of. Despite knowing who he was related to, they’d all underestimated him. “After our war, they decided to finish it. They’ve been successful in the last ten months.”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you saying the Americas are the only land masses the UN doesn’t control now?”

Hannah shook her head, grunting. “They’re here and trying to take over. They’ve figured out the secret to winning every war. He who controls the food, controls the people–forever.”

Kenn lurked in the doorway. “That’s not possible. The United Nations is...was, made up of a hundred plus countries.”

Janet frowned. “A council assembly was ordered. The rules for governing were amended. Those who voted no were killed in their seats. Over there, even in the civil areas, leaders were dying in record numbers before the war. No one questioned the explanations they were given. When the new assembly started taking over, they told people their ways had always been the law, but western leaders had refused to follow it because then people would all be equals to the tyrants.”

“Wow. I bet that went down smooth.” Kenn was disheartened by what they were learning. “We’ve been fighting to survive and keep our traditions alive, and the rest of the planet has been plotting to make us slaves.” He blew out a frustrated raspberry. “It’s all shit now.”

“Don’t stop.” Charlie tapped the gun faster.

Hannah swallowed. “Some places and people are still fighting, but some, like Germany, were hit hard. They’re desperate for food. When the UN convoys came, offering food for signatures, men and women did it without reading the documents. Days later, those same convoys returned and conscripted the people who signed. Most of them went willingly because the food was gone by then and they were desperate again. A few months in training set their minds to the goal: bring all rogue nations into the fold so everyone can eat twice a day and have medicines.”

“After months of that, they probably feel like they’ve been saved, and they don’t know why anyone else wouldn’t want that too, right?” Charlie was following the adult thoughts and reaching solid conclusions, but he was still tapping his gun against the rail. “Like a cult.”

Hannah shivered as the wind blew over her bare skin. “Yes. It confuses us.”

“So you were trained.” Kendle pointed out. “How did that happen?”

“Stop.” Charlie didn’t want their personal stories. “Let her finish this one first.”

Hannah kept talking. “They’ve been busy in all the big places, even Canada, but America is different than the rest of the world. The southern half has been abused so much that it defends itself violently, even when it doesn’t have to. The UN couldn’t make deals with them for food because they have the fertile ground the assembly needs to gain control, as do we. They also couldn’t turn tribes against each other because that’s already been done, and the separations are complete. The Mexicans aren’t going to accept a one-world order any more than we will.” Hannah regarded Charlie, pleading, “Please. I don’t want to die here, like this.”

“Keep talking.” He didn’t cave.

Hannah slumped against the rough, icy wood. “Direct invasions were ruled out due to the lack of troops. It takes months to train people and they have to be monitored afterwards to keep them from reverting when they witness something they normally wouldn’t have allowed. Graduates from the program were put on ships in harbors and kept to strict routines to ensure success of the plan they finally agreed on.”

“One leader or groups?” Kenn wanted to know.

“Groups. The worst the UN has to offer. All the troops they had to lock down before, all the trouble makers and killers. All the restless descendants who were considering taking over–they were put on ships in harbors to wait for orders.”

“When was Dirce sent?” Kendle was trying to count how many troops might be here or were coming. “And how many boats were sent and when?”

“Don’t!” Hannah sucked in air as Kendle tightened her grip on Tisa. “It was a two stage plan! The troops on the ships were the final invasion force to colonize all of the Americas. Part one was already in the works when our war ended the world. They’d sent the best trackers and fighters here to collect the power before the invasion so we would be defenseless. They’re working on South America now. We’ve progressed much faster.”

“More sellouts up here.”

“Less jungles up here.” Adrian corrected Kenn’s impression. “Sellouts are everywhere, especially if they’re starving and the enemy offers food for their dying kids.”

Kenn nodded, accepting that. If he and Tonya starved, he wouldn’t budge, but he already knew he couldn’t let his child go out like that. “I’d kill the messenger, then eat him or her.”

“And that’s why they couldn’t invade.” Kendle was good at guessing, even without her gifts. “We tamed a savage land and it hasn’t been that long. We’re still tough.”

Kenn shrugged. “I’ve often thought it was the drive to find the next great thing, to bring the next advancement, that makes us different.”

“You c-can’t think like that if you have no h-hope.” Janet’s teeth were chattering. “We were raised that we can do anything if we set our minds to it. Others are b-beaten with hatred and rituals that keep them from learning there’s another way.”

“All of that and more.” Hannah knew death was coming and she was terrified. The longer she talked, the longer she got to live. “But it wouldn’t have succeeded if not for the chemicals our government liked to play with.”

Adrian thought of his notebooks, and of discussing this fear with Angela. He’d just assumed *their* government would do it.

“What are the chances your dad was converted or blackmailed?” Kenn asked suddenly, looking at Adrian.

“As much as I’d love to be excused from that weight, no. He always preached one-world control and complained about not using nuclear power to settle every country into a forced peace. He liked the idea of utopia, but he couldn’t follow those rules.”

“The affairs?”

Adrian nodded at Kendle’s query. Milton’s scandals had been well known. “He wasn’t trustworthy long before the UN came up crazy.” Adrian’s eyes widened in dismay, head cocking. “She said *wouldn’t have succeeded*... They’ve enacted phase two.” He went out to the porch. “The harbor ships are on the way?”

Hannah grinned up at him, showing her true self. “And there’s nothing your alpha can do to stop it. We’ll all be equals in the future. Utopia will exist!”

“How long were you in captivity?” Charlie was able to see them for what they were now. “On vacation there when the war came?”

“We were starving in that hotel and we couldn’t go out or we’d be killed for being American!” Janet shouted. “We survived when they killed all the others. They dragged them through the streets until their bodies ripped apart!”

Kendle put her free hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Shush now.”

The tracker stilled.

“That’s how they got you!” Kenn glowered. “How did they get to Market Town?”

“That’s phase two.” Adrian was reading the thoughts under the false answers. “One, was getting our own government to come out of their holes so they could be killed.”

“We did that for them.” Kenn lifted a brow. “Right?”

“Not all the way. Benjamin hated Safe Haven, but he would have left us alone if not for someone stirring him up.” Adrian nodded at the trackers. “Tell us how they did it and the next step, and we’ll be done. It’s chilly out here.”

Hannah shook her head, refusing.

Kendle’s grip tightened on Tisa, making it hard for the younger tracker to breathe.

Janet couldn’t take it. She loved her sisters. “The assembly took over nuclear capabilities of all countries under their control, then sent messages to our bunkers that they wouldn’t fire if the descendants were handed over. They especially wanted the children.” Janet shuddered, twisting against her bonds. “It was weeks after the war and our government was in chaos. Pushing them to agree was easy.”

“Benjamin agreed to one-world order?”

“We were told so, but they shipped us here a few days later, so we didn’t get to see the video of it like we did with other countries.” Janet stared at Charlie, silently pleading for mercy.

Charlie stood up. “What else do we need from them? Troops are heading this way.”

“Are you part of stage one or two?” Kendle asked, letting go of the girl.

“Stage one!” Janet hurried to answer so Tisa wouldn’t be grabbed again. “We were sent to unearth the descendants the foreign trackers couldn’t ferret out because they don’t know the layout of the land like we do.”

“Why aren’t you with Safe Haven?” Kenn asked. “You could have asked for sanctuary.”

Hannah shook her head. “We got scared the alpha would see through us. We can’t be responsible for bringing down the entire plan.”

“So you chose to lurk on the outskirts, waiting for unwary descendants?” Kendle looked down at the younger tracker for an answer.

Tisa glared at her. “We thought we would be spared if we brought in someone big.”

“Like you!” Janet sneered at Kendle.

“And we have.” Hannah breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction. “They see us; they see all of you. Even if we die, we helped.”

The sisters smiled at each other as best they could from their positions on the porch rail.

Adrian put a hand on Charlie’s shoulder and led the boy away.

Charlie was no longer torn, but he couldn’t view it or he would still interfere. He slipped his Walkman out of his pocket and put in the earbuds. *I won’t be responsible for blowing the entire thing, either. When I go back to my mom, it’ll be with my head up in triumph or I won’t go back at all.*

Adrian patted him on the shoulder and stayed close.

Kenn and Kendle killed the three trackers while their masters observed.

Gunshots echoed.

Adrian heard running feet and got Charlie into the small den he’d chosen while waiting for the boy to come to the conclusions the adults had. It was close, so it would be overlooked.

Kenn and Kendle fell in with them, not speaking.

Charlie ignored the blood on their hands and kept listening to his music. *Some people have to die. My dad told me that, but I didn’t really understand at all until now.*

This time, Kendle patted him on the shoulder, leaving a bloody print.

Charlie wore it like an awful badge of honor, because it was. He’d just lost another level of his youth, his innocence, and it hurt.

**2**

“We have to go south.” Charlie passed his canteen to Kendle so she could wash her hands before eating. He sent her an image and made a gagging gesture.

Adrian laughed as she snatched the canteen and did what the boy wanted. They’d been here for about an hour now, waiting for trouble and talking about what to do next.

“No, we can’t.” Kenn shrugged at the questioning looks. “She sent us out on a mission. We haven’t accomplished it.”

“We have to warn her about the UN plans.” Charlie’s voice rose. “A test of manhood isn’t important compared to that.”

“No, you don’t understand.” Kenn was tired of trying to get through to the stubborn teenager. “We’re the same bad people who had to be sent away. If we go back now, she has to deny us entry. We’ll become refugees.”

“She wouldn’t do that to her own son.” Kendle had felt Angela’s love for the children who weren’t hers. There was no way she would abandon her biological son while she went traipsing around the world. “Besides, he had a breakthrough. She’d let him in.”

“Maybe.” Kenn wasn’t sure on the rest of them, though. “But she wants all of us to redeem ourselves and I have an idea.”

No one wanted to trust Kenn, but they couldn’t argue with his logic.

“What’s the idea?” Adrian handed Kenn a bowl of rice and beef. The UN troops had gone by and hadn’t come back, but they’d only viewed half a dozen wounded survivors in that group anyway. Adrian didn’t think those men would keep sniffing around.

Kenn took the bowl and sat back. “The refugee wave.”

“What about it?” Kendle perked up, scenting blood.

“I think we should eliminate it.” Kenn braced for their responses.

“I’m in.” Kendle thought it was a great idea.

Charlie didn’t. “You’re nuts.”

Kenn shrugged. “We’re the meanest people in the Eagles. Even the kid here can make ugly plans. I say we protect Safe Haven in the ways Angela can’t allow from Eagles and the camp.”

Kendle took her bowl with an eager nod and cleaner hands. “What do we do with the kid? He’s not a killer.”

“Of women.” Kenn flashed an image of the basement kills. “He doesn’t have a problem snatching the lifeforce of a man.”

Kendle scooped up a large fork of food. “Life is life. The gender doesn’t matter.”

“I know and so does Adrian, but the boy is a rookie.” Kenn also scooped up a large bite. “I’d bet he would if it were life or death.”

“Will it be?” Adrian demanded, using his alpha command.

Kenn peered into the future. “They know we’re leaving. They’ll send everything they have at us now.”

“Let me get this straight. You want us to earn our way back in by being killers, after we were removed for that.” Kendle frowned at him.

Kenn nodded slowly, coming back. “Can you think of a better way into her heart than to defend her people?”

Adrian shook his head. “No, I can’t. Tell us your plan and we’ll go from there.”

“Well, we almost have a kill team here, us, the half pint, and the queen of blood.” Kenn sat his bowl down and leaned forward. “I was thinking we’d pull a Mad Max.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

**Change is a Harsh Event**

A picture containing clipart, perfume

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**1**

**“W**hy are we stopping so soon?” Charlie came up to the front of the vehicles to join Adrian and Kenn. “Safe Haven is leaving in two days. We need to keep rolling south and set things up. Why are we going east?”

Kenn shook his head and went to his cold truck, wondering how Tonya was doing without him.

Left to deal with the upset teenager, Adrian pointed west. “That’s where we belong. Your mom can’t let us back in.”

“I can go in.” He arrogantly displayed the bruises he’d received from Kenn.

This time, Adrian walked away. Charlie still didn’t get it. They were all outcasts until she called.

“My mom wouldn’t do that to me!”

“She would if you’ve forced her into a corner with bad behavior. This way, you’re not officially banished, but you’re removed. Almost perfect.”

“Almost?” Charlie was shocked to discover he now understood why she’d done it and he didn’t need to cause a scene over it. *Wow. I’m changing. ...is that for the better?*

“Almost perfect, because you’re with us. She didn’t want you out here at all. She came across this broken land to find you and keep you out of situations like this one.” Adrian pissed and got back into his vehicle. “Ride with me and we’ll talk.”

Charlie wanted to stay mad but being out here like this was reminding him of the time when he’d briefly wished Adrian was his dad, back when he’d only had Kenn to look forward to every day.

“You feel guilty over that, but you really shouldn’t.” Adrian tried to soothe the issues between them. “If Kenn hadn’t been like he is, you might have been happy with him instead of searching for a substitute. That isn’t your fault.”

“My mom said that too.”

“She should know.” Adrian frowned. “She suffered him in ways that you were spared.”

“She did it to keep me at first.” Charlie sighed. “Then she was scared of not being able to feed me and take care of me. This is all my fault.”

“Love isn’t a fault or something you blame people for. It just happens, and we have to deal with the fallout.”

Charlie snorted at the unintended pun. “We’re doing that.”

Adrian laughed. “We’ll get some food in you when we stop again.”

“What?”

“You sound like an adult. It’s scaring me.”

Charlie snickered. *I’ve done some adult things now. That helps.*

Adrian’s smile faded. “Yeah. We should talk about that too.”

“Why?” The teenager went into instant defense mode.

“Because you’ve made a lifetime commitment at fifteen, without the approval of any number of descendants who could have looked ahead and told you it was a bad idea.” Adrian turned a dark glare on the boy. “You could have just fucked her for a while.”

Charlie went red. “It’s not like that. Don’t talk about Tracy that way.”

“I’m referring to you.” Adrian pulled the truck into an apartment complex, thinking it was ironic that they’d all chosen temporary dens so close to each other. “You’ve stolen her life and you can’t even do the right thing and give it back.”

“I didn’t steal anything.” Charlie intentionally misunderstood. “I’m not a thief.”

“But you are. Tracy needed time to recover and pick her future. You knew she wanted to be an Eagle before the attack and you were afraid she would still want it later. That would put her out there with other Eagles–older, better looking men who will always know more than you. So you knocked her up. You stole her life.”

Charlie couldn’t deny it to his former idol. He stared out the window at the broken neighborhood.

“When you made that choice, you crossed a line.” Adrian shifted into park and shut off the engine. “You became like me.”

“Who did you knock up?”

“I did the opposite. I blinded your mom to any other future than the one she has now.”

Charlie struggled to detect differences, not wanting to be like Adrian. “She’ll end up saving the world. Doesn’t that make your choice okay?”

Adrian began gathering loose items into his kit. “You tell me. If Tracy goes on to be the new top den mother like you’re hoping, and she helps a hundred kids in her lifetime to have happy futures, does that make your choice okay?”

“Y...” Charlie hung his head. “No.”

“That’s good.” Adrian opened the door. “We’ll keep working on it.”

“But there isn’t time!” Charlie blurted. “No one can change in just two days.”

Adrian’s brows shifted in bitterness. “Don’t believe that, kid. Change is a harsh event that only needs seconds to occur. It’s our adjustment to it that takes months or years.”

Charlie followed the team to the door of an apartment on the end, feeling it when Adrian and Kenn went on alert. Charlie didn’t notice anything. His gifts weren’t working right today.

“Great.” A woman’s voice came from the other side of the door. “I should have known Angela wasn’t going to leave me alone.”

Adrian grinned as Kendle groaned.

Nancy opened the door and stood with her hand on her hip. “What?”

Charlie laughed, drawing her attention.

Nancy’s eyes narrowed. “What’s Bambi doing out of the thicket?”

Kenn and Kendle both brayed laughter like donkeys.

Charlie flushed.

Adrian came forward and kissed Nancy’s cheek. “It has nothing to do with you. She doesn’t know where we are.”

Nancy let out a weary sigh. “Am I the kid, now? I’m supposed to believe that?”

Everyone realized she’d been aware of them before they’d been aware of her. Adrian lifted a brow.

Nancy shrugged, eyes glowing. “It took.”

Adrian kissed her again, thrilled. He whispered something to her and then backed away. “Please?”

Nancy nodded, attitude changing. “How long will you be here?” She retreated to allow them inside.

Charlie tried to scan her to discover what had changed her mind and couldn’t. She wasn’t blocking him. He just couldn’t see into her mind like he was used to doing.

Kendle strode by them all, going to check out the apartment and alley behind it.

Kenn stayed with Adrian, waiting for orders. If not for missing Tonya and some of the civilization in camp, Kenn wouldn’t be so unhappy with being out of the thicket.

“Just a base for a day.”

Nancy nodded at Adrian’s answer, closing and latching the door. “Go out the back and move the trucks around.”

Kenn and Adrian did as instructed.

Nancy stared after them, shocked by the immediate obedience, then she smiled at herself. They were Eagles. They would have done it without being told. They were just being polite and recognizing this as her space.

Nancy went to the kitchen she’d set up, sure that’s where they would all gravitate to. When you were on runs, food, coffee and sleep were the first things you wanted, and she’d just finished brewing her pot of coffee for the day. The gently boiling stew would now be one meal instead of feeding her for two days.

Nancy didn’t mind. Adrian’s whisper had given her something she’d been worrying over. She didn’t want to be in Safe Haven anymore, with or without Adrian, because he wasn’t leading it, but she didn’t want that to be held against her child. Adrian had promised her Angela wouldn’t. All Nancy had to do was help keep Charlie alive until his mom called for him.

*Angela sent him out here to become a man*.

Nancy shrugged. “At least there’s something there to work with.” Nancy knew Charlie was like Adrian. She’d been in Safe Haven longer than any of them except Kenn, but she hadn’t wanted leadership. She’d gotten the only thing that had mattered to her since the war. They were bonded for life now. Even if she lost the baby, they would still have these memories.

Nancy opened the rear door as the men returned from hiding their vehicles in the alley lining the property.

Nancy smiled at Adrian. “You ready for a meal or a...nap?”

“I have twenty minutes of energy left.” Adrian grinned. “You pick it...”

Nancy took his hand and led him up to her bedroom.

Kendle and Kenn sniggered.

Charlie shook his head and began searching for a bowl. He didn’t know what was cooking but it smelled terrific.

The adults went for the coffee, remembering Nancy made it nice and strong, the way Eagles liked.

“We missed the wedding.” Kenn watched Charlie smile over the first bite of food. *That’s a good sign. Maybe I’ll have a bowl.* “Bet Angela let them make a real cake.”

Charlie shoveled the food in faster, stomach growling.

“What flavor do you think Jennifer is?”

Kenn froze. “Excuse me?”

Kendle rolled her eyes. “Cake, genius.”

Kenn laughed. “Chocolate.”

Kendle shrugged, sipping the strong brew. She sat at the small table. “Could be. She likes dark men.”

“He is moody.”

“I meant the killing on demand, but okay.”

Kenn joined her at the table. “Isn’t that part of why you like Marc?”

Charlie didn’t want to hear about Kendle’s feelings for his dad. He took a second helping of food and his canteen to the rear of the apartment. He settled into a corner where their voices were muffled and pigged out.

“It’s the danger.” Kenn was refuting her denial. “Women like bad boys.”

“Marc isn’t bad.”

Kenn didn’t argue.

Kendle eyed the pot of food and took another drink of her coffee. She didn’t want to take food from a pregnant woman.

“You don’t want her food because she’s up there doing what you used to.” Kenn shook his head. “Women are snarky. You don’t really want him, but you don’t want Nancy to have him either.”

“I want him with your revered leader!” Kendle hissed. “He can’t keep stalking Angela if he’s in love with Nancy.”

“That won’t happen.”

“You don’t know how badly he wants a child he gets to stay around and raise.” She was filled with fresh bitterness. “Angela’s hold is strong, but he can be tempted.”

Kenn thought of Angela and of how he sometimes still fantasized about her when he was alone. Kenn shook his head. “No, he can’t. I’ve been there. Nothing compares.”

Kendle left the room so she didn’t scream. She was looking forward to meeting the man who was immune to their leader’s charms.

*So am I*, Kenn thought. *I’ll give him my job and my respect.*

**2**

Adrian limped down the stairs half an hour later. He shrugged at Kenn’s wrist tap. “I’m getting older.”

Kenn chuckled, switching off the radio he’d been listening to while enjoying Nancy’s stew. “Thanks for the grub.”

Nancy came in and lurked at the counter, glowing. “You’ll leave me stuff to replace it.”

Kenn nodded, frowning. He didn’t need to be reminded of Eagle rules, but maybe she did. Helping out teammates with a good attitude was part of the job.

“Not my job!” Nancy glared at him.

Adrian gestured at the radio before an argument could get rolling. “What’s up, Sparks?”

“The calls are coming nonstop. Too many to count.”

“Like the naval station.” Charlie was finally getting worried about their camp, about his loved ones. He’d come back to the kitchen as soon as he heard the shouts on Kenn’s radio. “We need to get back and help prepare.”

“We have to sleep.” Adrian made the choice. “We’ll head out after we’re rested.”

When the others nodded in agreement, Charlie went back to his corner and slumped against the wall. He hid the yawn that hit as soon as he got comfortable.

Adrian went to the front room. He would sleep in that guard spot.

Kenn took the rear position, leaving the two women alone together in the small kitchen.

“Well, this has been fun.” Kendle was rubbing vaseline on cotton balls and shoving them into a tin. She liked to have multiple fire methods. In another pocket, she had an Altoid tin she used to char punkwood. It was perfect because she hadn’t needed to poke holes for ventilation.

Nancy eyed the mess they’d made in her kitchen. The pot of food was almost empty. “I’m not cleaning up after everyone.”

Kendle shrugged, not caring that it was rude. “We’re tired. We’ll do it when we get up.”

Nancy left the room before she ordered the castaway to do it now. All she really wanted was for them to be gone. If she had to clean up a mess in exchange, it wasn’t a big price.

On her way through the study, Nancy saw Charlie shiver and signaled toward the closet. “I put blankets in there. You can use one.”

“Thanks. I’ll get it when I get up to...” Charlie reddened. “You know.”

Nancy grinned at him. “What goes in has to come out.”

The teenager snickered, searching for a warm spot. His toes were icy. The sun setting had brought a chill that he hadn’t adjusted to.

Nancy looked to be sure no one was watching her, then she took a blanket from the closet and walked over to kneel by the boy.

Charlie smiled as she covered him up, already starting to doze. “That’s nice.”

Nancy leaned closer. “Why did Angela send you here? Look and tell me in trade for my hospitality.”

Charlie’s eyes opened. He glowered up at her. “You could have just asked.” The power took over a second later.

“She wants you to help the outcast.” Charlie’s voice wasn’t muffled. The words carried to everyone in the apartment around them. “In exchange, she promises your child will have a set place in her Safe Haven when we return.”

Nancy nodded. “Deal, but the castaway can’t stay here if we fail to help her. I don’t want a roommate.”

Charlie was already coming back up. He shrugged off the blanket to glare. “That’s not my problem. Let me rest.”

Nancy stood up, tone mean. “You’re not staying here either.”

“Leave the kid alone.”

Adrian’s voice was tired and carried enough of an edge that Nancy obeyed. She went to Adrian and curled up on the floor against his back.

Adrian sighed as her warmth settled over him. “That’s nice. Can you get closer?”

Nancy crawled under the blanket with him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She didn’t care that he would pretend it was someone else. *That sad bitch isn’t here with him. I am.*

Adrian sighed. “Not if you have one more thought like that. I’ll go sleep with Kendle.”

“No, you won’t.” Kendle walked by them.

Adrian sniggered.

Nancy rested her chin on her arm and settled down to sleep.

So did Adrian.

Kendle went to the hall next to the couple and sank on a dusty sofa by the door. She was tired of sleeping on floors and in bedrolls. She didn’t understand why Angela didn’t let them camp in empty towns so they could at least be comfortable.

*Because then they’d never leave*, Adrian thought, glad Kendle’s gifts were locked down. It made it easier to handle her.

Charlie snorted, then yawned.

Adrian sighed, sliding into sleep. *A guy can hope.*

**3**

Glass shattered.

A man shouted.

Everyone struggled to wake as noises echoed through the apartment.

A gunshot echoed, bringing adrenaline that helped get Adrian to his feet.

Kendle was ahead of him as he rushed to the kitchen and through the hall, then into the rear room where Kenn had chosen to sleep.

Charlie stumbled along behind them, trying to get his gun out of his holster.

Nancy caught up, putting a hand on Charlie’s wrist to stop him. The boy was likely to shoot any of them in the dark.

Charlie flushed, but obeyed as they ran through the kitchen and into the dim lantern-lit hall.

“Stop!”

Nancy drew up at the stranger’s shout.

Charlie would have kept going, but he finally spotted Kenn in the man’s grip. There was a long blade against Kenn’s throat and the Marine was bleeding from his cheek and shoulder. It looked as though he’d been stabbed in his sleep.

Kenn fought not to move as his body weakened. Streams of blood were running down his side and leg.

“As soon as you grab my life, I’ll take his.” Vihaan felt he had the upper hand. “He will die in one minute. Then we will battle to see who is the best.”

Adrian came forward. “What do you want?”

Charlie interrupted the coming negotiation with a blast of healing energy that drained him. He shriveled before their shocked gazes, dropping to his knees.

Vihaan scrutinized the boy. “What happened?”

Kenn let the health return, not tensing against the pain of the transfer. “You were outsmarted by a kid.”

Kenn snatched the man’s knife from his hip holster and stabbed him with it repeatedly. *One eye...* *There’s the other!* Kenn grabbed the screaming, cringing man. He poked again. *No air for you.*

Nancy turned from the gory scene. “I’m not cleaning that up either.”

Kenn kept stabbing as the assassin suffocated and bled.

Adrian and Kendle went to Charlie. He was gasping for air, with shriveled skin and dazed eyes.

Adrian and Kendle put hands on him and hoped they had enough energy left to help.

Being so weak and in pain was the worst torment Charlie had ever gone through. He could feel himself dying, but he couldn’t stop it. *How does she do this over and over?* His head lolled to the side. He couldn’t move now. It was too much effort.

“Get over here!” Kendle snapped as blood sprayed the wall. “Stop playing with your food.”

Kenn swallowed the weak lifeforce and came toward them with bloody hands and a grim face. “Move aside. I’ve never done this before.” Kenn brought the power back up and shoved it at the boy.

Charlie latched onto it, terrified.

Kenn let go. He marched back to the body and kicked it again. Being stabbed in your sleep was a nasty way to wake up.

Charlie arched in agony as he was recharged by a different level of power. He tried not to scream and almost succeeded. He’d never been on this end of things and he never wanted to be again. *I have to survive this. I owe my mom an apology.*

Everyone tensed as power swarmed over the house, alerting them to Angela’s witch. *Bring him home.*

Kenn winced, looking at the mess he’d made. “She didn’t say *us*.”

Adrian went to collect his gear. Angela had called. He was answering.

“How do we know if we’re cleared?” Kenn insisted.

“You don’t.” Kendle stepped around him as Charlie slowly sat up. “Get your shit. It’s time to go.”

Kenn wavered for a brief second, aware that he might be headed into the last hours of his life. *I could stay here*...

Kenn went to the jug of water on the sink and washed his hands. *I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.*

Silence greeted his mental plea for mercy.

Kenn finished and went to get his gear. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Nancy scrutinized her destroyed kitchen. *You owe me for this, Angela.*

Menace filled the apartment. *If you like, I can repay you right now.*

Shuddering, Nancy shook her head. *That’s okay, thanks*. She went to get garbage bags and rags, no longer angry over the mess.

**4**

**Safe Haven**

“I don’t like him.” Marc stayed on Angela’s heels as Cole strode by. “He’s too much like Adrian.”

“Really.”

Marc sulked. “Not in the good ways. He’s lazy and arrogant without a reason to be.”

“Maybe his skills as a captain give him reason.”

“Have you scanned him?”

“Of course. He’s in my camp.”

“And?”

“He’s like Adrian.”

“That’s what I said.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“So, that’s a bad thing.”

“Like we don’t have that here already.”

“Exactly. Why add more? Captain Grant can handle it.”

“Grant is one person. Who sails it while he sleeps?”

“I thought of that. He’ll teach us.”

Angela pointed at the boat coming into sight as they walked. “Tell me you can learn to sail that in two days and I’ll agree.”

Marc wanted to. He wanted Cole gone and Adrian to not be needed. He wanted to be alone with his family and to forget the rest of them existed. Marc stopped. *Everything I want is wrong because all these people would have to die for it to happen.*

Angela didn’t add to his unrest. He was finally coming around.

Jennifer took Marc’s spot, bringing up a wall. She wasn’t happy to be away from Kyle, but she was doing her duty. Time was getting short.

Angela braced. Marc and Jenny were tag-teaming her, hoping it would be enough, but Angela wasn’t in the mood for it today. She had a lot to do. She wasn’t thinking about Adrian or their bond. She was stewing on reaching the island.

“Then I’m sorry to tell you I’m giving him an update in a few minutes. Do you have a message for him?”

“Yes. It’s the last update. Make it good.”

Jennifer frowned, but Angela increased her pace and joined the rest of her security team. In her heart, Jennifer wished all of the men chasing the boss would go away. Then Angela would have a chance to live without constantly being pressured into choices she didn’t want to make. She wasn’t like any of her men wanted her to be. Angela needed her children and leadership. Much like Adrian before his obsession took control, Angela didn’t need love if she had the first two.

*Not true.* Morgan and Conner were walking by on a round of the perimeter. *Until Adrian interfered and Kenn played his games, she wanted to be with Marc. They both used his inexperience with women to make him look bad and to force bad reactions. Before the war, Marc was the one who didn’t need anything but his job. Fate brought them back together.*

*But it didn’t put them together*, Jennifer figured out.

*And that’s where the problem lies. She accepted it because she loves this country and all the people in it, and because she knows this job won’t ever leave her or betray her.*

*She doesn’t trust him!*

*I’m sad for them*. Morgan gave a grunt. *It would almost be better for everyone if you got your wish and all of them went away.* *But I can’t vote for that, you know? I want what Marc wants and I’m certain if it wasn’t the apocalypse, Angela would want it too.*

*She’s planning to sacrifice herself so it doesn’t keep happening*, Jennifer blurted, not caring who picked up on it. *She’s already worried about carrying it to the island and letting it grow for years. I’m going to talk to Marc again, but I don’t think we can change him and what he needs to be happy. And he can’t have it, at least not for a while.*

*He can’t ever have it*, Morgan corrected, growing cold. *When he says family, he means Charlie and Cody, and that’s it. Angela will never give up her adopted kids and Marc doesn’t want them. In the end, that’s going to be what dooms him and Adrian won’t have anything to do with it.*

Marc caught it all. He studied Angela as those truths rang in his mind.

Angela gazed back at him without speaking or thinking, waiting, hoping they were all wrong.

Marc thought of raising so many kids, of never having time alone with her because the children would need so much of her time. He deliberated how her days would be spent as leader and her nights would be spent as a mother. She would have hours here and there to give him, and that was it. He was signing up for four years, at least, of that life.

Marc and Angela gazed at each other in sad longing as he finished the thoughts.

*And if we survive, it’s the same for the rest of our lives. She’ll adopt more orphans because they need a mom and there’s no one else. It will never end. I’ll never have what I need.*

Jennifer and Morgan were frozen in place, both begging fate to let the couple have happiness.

Angela sent an image of them in the cornfield. *That’s all we’ve ever had. Hours of stolen time.*

*It’s not enough.*

*No, but we lived for those hours back then.*

*Yes.* Marc sighed. *Can you offer me any hope it won’t always be this way?*

*What if I need it to be this way?*

*That’s what frightens me. It has since Adrian picked you to lead his female Eagle campaign.*

*Your happiness can only come at the cost of mine*, a*nd my happiness will cost you yours.* Angela strode away. *I won’t give them up. Not even for you.*

*It’s not selfish or sexist*, he defended.

*I agree. What you want is reasonable in any other life, but the world ended. Everything changed. Our happiness stopped mattering to me the day the bombs fell.*

*You mean the day I left and didn’t come back for you.*

Angela nodded. *If you really need the final truth, then yes. I understand the choice you made. I honestly do. I’ve made it here, with Safe Haven. They mean more to me than a future with you, like the Marine career meant more to you than coming back for me.*

*That’s why you didn’t tell me about Charlie!*

*You betrayed me, left me for dead for all you knew.*

*My mother promised you wouldn’t be hurt.*

*Your mother wanted my gifts! If I had stayed, I would have been beaten and raped, and Charlie wouldn’t exist. I might have died. A debt like that isn’t paid off quickly or cheaply. You understand honor. What does honor cost among soldiers? You dishonored me. Keep your fighting and whining, and keep your plans to break the bonds between Adrian and me. I let him do it for this moment right here.*

*For what?* Marc was furious and miserable at the shared pain.

*For you to show your true self*. *You like to hide behind that boy scout image, but the tiger is the real soul below and we both know it. Tell the truth for once in our lives.*

*The truth about what!*

*You hate me because you gave in.*

*That’s not true! You were willing!*

*Yes.*

Marc stopped, tormented. It needed to get out or he would always be poisoned by it. *It was wrong. I know that because Safe Haven standards are loose, and it would still have been a serious offense. I would have been banished.*

*Yes. But then we would have broken that rule too, like Conner and Candy.*

*...and Cody and Leeann?*

Angela nodded.

*I’m sorry. I should have been strong enough to wait.*

*Yes, but I shouldn’t have insisted. I’ve never viewed you as a molester. I’ve always seen you as my knight in shining armor.*

*Until the war, and then I became your darkness.*

*You left me. Kenn hurt me. Adrian used magic on me. Like you, I can’t trust the opposite sex. That makes it easy to go long stretches without companionship. Then I see the orphans and remember how badly I needed a good mother. Helping them avoid some of my pain is the least I can do, and it heals my heart each time I correct something that would have sent them down the wrong path. It’s awful how many of them believe their parents died because of them.*

*Some of them did.*

*Yes, but that’s a burden no child should have to carry. So many of these post-war kids will go bad if they don’t have guidance that it will be as if the light of Safe Haven never existed. We’ll leave, and it will all restart anyway. I won’t let all those lives be in vain. Your happiness compared to that, is selfish and I won’t ever agree to it.*

Marc joined her at the rail. *I’d like to keep talking about this.*

*We can. We can listen to the wind, feel the ocean spray and mourn for what once could have been, but nothing you say will change my mind on this. You’re asking me to pick, again, and this time, I have. Now, you’ll have to adjust and accept that or stay here. Kendle is aware of your unrest and she’s waiting for you out there somewhere if you’ll have her. While I’d rather see her dead, if you think that would be better for you, I’ll deal with it. You and the castaway will have a happy family with Cody for years and you’ll get to see Charlie and your grandchildren when we return. If you want to try that, I won’t–*

Marc grabbed her and kissed her.

Angela groaned, clutching him close.

Marc refused to think about anything for a few minutes. He just wanted to feel her in his arms and try to figure out how he was supposed to live without her.

The sound of crying woke Marc. He was in his bedroll with Angela. *I was dreaming*. Marc slowly opened his eyes. *Realistic dream*.

Angela’s sobs shook the bedroll.

Marc rolled over, realizing she was still asleep. *We went to sleep while trying to connect for a dream walk. I guess it succeeded.*

Marc put a hand on Angela’s shoulder. “I don’t want any of that.”

Angela settled under his touch but didn’t pull out of the dream. “Do what’s best for you. I wish you peace.”

Marc leaned down and kissed her cheek. *It’ll be enough. Come back to me now.*

Angela slowly woke, returning his embrace. She’d shown him tomorrow’s future in a desperate attempt to stop it. She did want to help the kids and her country, but she wanted Marc almost as much. That would never change, but she could be pushed into ugliness.

Marc kept kissing her. The dream had revealed truths he would examine, but for this moment, he needed to show her how much he wanted her. He also needed the feel of her against him so when morning came, and he felt like pushing, this would stop him. The thought of never holding her again would keep him steady no matter how many kids she wanted to adopt.

That wasn’t going to be enough for Angela and she knew it, but she wasn’t done working on Marc. He was going to be a wonderful father to an entire generation of children. He just didn’t know it yet.

“That was weird.” Morgan, on point until daylight, looked over at Samantha. She was sitting in the open window of the medical camper. They were both used to picking up glimpses of dreams from people around them, but Angela’s vision of the immediate future had snared them both.

Samantha was tired from waiting for Neil’s shift to be finished so they could sleep. She didn’t feel like explaining that Angela wasn’t just trying to save Marc. Angela was giving him reasons to fight, but she’d also provided him a way out.

“He won’t leave her.” Morgan was certain. “He’d be crazy to screw up a perfect match.”

“Angela doesn’t have a match, so she should get to pick who she wants.”

“It doesn’t work that way when you have the history that couple does.” Morgan let her into his thoughts. “They belong to the Creator. *Their* wants were never considered.”

“And that’s going to be the mistake that sinks the two big players.” Samantha was also confident of it. “They’ve both underestimated how low she’ll go to keep us all together. They play dirty and use tricks, bets. She goes for the throat and is only satisfied by the blood.”

“Like Kendle. Is that a good thing?”

Samantha surveyed the peacefully resting camp. “It has been for us and that’s all I really care about.”

**5**

**5am (Safe Haven)**

“I can’t.” Kyle groaned when Jennifer giggled. “Please, baby. I can’t.” He’d never considered that she would want him to let go of his control.

Jennifer lowered herself onto his hard body, spreading wide.

A rail snapped in Kyle’s grip. He growled.

Jennifer teased him, lips against his as she brushed him with her naked flesh. “I have to know.”

“Not like this...” Kyle’s patience broke, but his honor held. “Stop it. Now.”

Jennifer leaned down and licked his lips. “Maybe *you* should have chosen a code word.”

Kyle felt the rail about to snap under his other hand and let go of it.

Jennifer sat up, body arching. Her hand slid between her legs...

Kyle snapped. He thrust upward, going deep. His hand held her hip when she flinched away. Her pain was no longer a concern. Kyle slapped her bare titties, thrusting deeper.

Jennifer moaned, hand moving over her slick skin.

Kyle bucked at the discovery. *She likes that! I’m doomed.* He slapped again, a little harder.

Jennifer’s body tightened on his. Her damp heat gushed over his balls and brought a shiver.

She moaned. “Harder!”

Not sure which area she meant, Kyle did both.

Jennifer exploded above him, moaning his name over and over as she climaxed.

Kyle pulled out and sprayed all over her flat belly, grunting and gasping.

Jennifer embraced her corrupt side and leaned down, eyes glowing red. “Don’t do that again.”

Kyle grabbed her by the back of the neck and jerked her on top of his chest. “Six months. Now take a nap. We have to go back out and pretend again in a while.”

Jennifer bit him on the shoulder, drawing a yelp. “Listen to me, Kyle.”

He tensed beneath her, feeling it coming. “Don’t.”

Jennifer shook her head. “It has to happen at some point. You’re either mine or hers. Pick it now.”

Kyle, reacting like a man, asked, “Can I still have sex if I say I’m loyal to the dream first and you second?”

Jennifer laughed, heart settling into a good rhythm. She kissed him and slid down next to him on the mattress. “It’s what I needed to hear. Thank you.”

Kyle hugged her, relief flooding as he realized he was indeed going to be able to have sex with her again.

Jennifer’s giggle echoed down the hall.

Chapter Thirty-Three

**The Last Holdouts**

Day 7

**7am**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“D**o I have to?”

Kyle nudged Jennifer toward the ramp. “We’re coming right back as soon as the meeting’s over. The boss insisted.”

Jennifer let Kyle take her hand and walk her out of the ship. It was their first appearance since being married.

Jennifer blushed at the stares and nods from guards, glad the meeting was early. After working them so late and hard, Angela had known the camp would sleep, giving the new couple a bit of privacy.

Kyle hoped the meeting was short so they could sneak back without stopping by the mess.

Unable to fight their habits, both of them scanned the guard spots, the mood of the guards, and the few people up and about, then the horizon where it was still dark.

Kyle rubbed her hand with his thumb, feeling the wedding band. He still couldn’t believe they were married.

Jennifer blushed darker as they reached the meeting tent, seeing it was packed.

Kyle chuckled. “Nerves, baby?”

Jennifer blew a curl out of her face. She’d left it down for him. “Not a chance.”

Kyle kissed her hand. “You’re a beautiful liar.”

Jennifer giggled.

Guards nodded in approval, logged it in their notes and went back to waiting for shift change or trouble.

Kyle started to escort Jennifer into the council tent and paused. Dog was lying stretched out near the open flap. Both of Tonya’s cats were curled up on his big chest.

Dog lifted his head, golden eyes begging. *If you see them crawl onto my face, help me.*

Kyle shook his head, laughing. “I can’t mess with strange pussy. I’m a married man now.”

Dog snorted. *Some friend.*

Jennifer and Kyle laughed, entering.

Neil hid a snicker at Kyle’s expression, remembering the first time he’d gotten to enjoy being intimate with Samantha. It was among his favorite memories of their early times. “We’re all here now.”

Samantha smiled at him.

“No, we’re not all here.” Tonya came into the tent, pushing by Ivan. “Where’s Kenn? He’s not dead. I can feel that much, so where is he?”

“Atoning.” Angela’s voice was cold.

“I’ll leave!” Tonya wasn’t afraid to threaten. “If he doesn’t go, neither do I.”

“Same here.” Tracy appeared in the flap. “Tell me you wouldn’t leave Charlie here and I’ll apologize and go away.” Tracy didn’t want to be a bother, but the talk about Kenn and Charlie both still being out of camp was getting to her.

Angela leaned back. “I don’t particularly like either of you, but I’m hoping you’ll be better parents than you were people.” She let her eyes glow. “That aside, when your children are born, you will be observed, scanned, tested, and retrained.” Angela regarded Tracy. “Your path will be harder because you still have to pay for the rules you’ve broken. Later, when he’s older and wiser, he’ll see what you did as wrong and it will destroy your relationship.”

Tracy was ready to cry. “I don’t want that, any of it.”

Angela softened her tone. “I know. You came here wishing I would tell you it’s all forgiven and your little...man is on the way home. You want to hear about a happy-ever-after.”

Tracy nodded. “Yes, that’s what I want.”

“Never.” Angela was aware of Tonya’s paling face, but she kept her attention on Tracy. “You pushed it to this.” Angela waved at the camp gate. “That’s the quick way out. You’re free to go to him and try to make a life here, the same as everyone else. The council officially recognizes your adult relationship with Charles White. He is emancipated as of this moment. Now get out of my sight before I kill you.”

Tracy ran.

Tonya tensed as Angela’s attention switched to her. She’d thought to come in here and bargain for Kenn’s ticket to ride, but it had gone sour fast.

“They’re on the way here. Kenn and Charlie made peace. It’s all over for that issue.”

Tonya gaped at her. “What?”

Angela snickered as the council let out sighs and exchanged smiles. “You’re one of us now.”

Tonya grinned, realizing it had been an act to get to Tracy. “He did it?”

“Yes. Kenn was the second one in that group to have the epiphany. Be proud of him. I am.”

Tonya turned to go, able to breathe now that she knew her love was safe. “Thank you.”

“For what? He did it.”

“For making him go, for not killing him when you took over, for giving me a chance to change. This life is so much better.”

“It’s my honor.” Angela sighed as Tonya left. “And also my burden.” Angela looked toward the flap, waiting.

Gus’s big frame filled it a few seconds later.

The council put down notebooks and waited. They hadn’t covered these issues.

“I’m leaving at noon.” Gus waited, not positive if he needed to do more to get permission to go.

“After the meeting.” Angela waved Gus toward one of two empty seats.

Gus sat down with a puzzled expression. He waited for more information.

Angela regarded the flap once more.

Grant and William entered.

“Where do you want me?” William scanned the seats and presumed he was the odd man out.

“With Ivan.”

William stayed at the flap, eager to listen and sorry the time was going by so fast. He still didn’t want them to leave.

Angela waved Grant into the empty seat.

The council waited for more arrivals, frowning at some of the people who were now here.

Angela opened her notebook. “I’ll go around the table, then you can eat. We have a full day ahead of us.”

Those who had books opened them and took out pens. Those who didn’t, watched and wondered if they should or what they were doing here.

“Let’s start with the ship.” Angela looked at Grant.

Grant cleared his throat. “We’re eighty percent loaded and well under the weight limit. The tug boat will have to labor to haul us into deeper water, but that’s what they’re made for. Cole and I chose a double tug. It’s being hooked up now. That’s his big mouth you hear already yelling at Ciemus people.”

Angela frowned. “Because he knows not to do it to Safe Haven people?”

Grant nodded. “Nasty attitude.”

“What about his skills?”

“Best I’ve seen since the war.” Grant was glad he could reply without rancor. “He’ll have a lot to teach people.”

“So will you.” Angela moved on. “What about fuel and the rest of that list?”

“We’re covered for three full trips.” Grant wiped away sweat. “I mapped it out myself, no offense, and found your numbers a bit high. Are you expecting trouble?”

Angela nodded. “Always. I overestimate on all totals and we still run short. Shit happens, you know?”

Grant chuckled. “Yes. The rest of the items on maintenance appear to be covered. Cole and I went over the important areas and it all seems in working order. We’re going to be testing some of those today, after the tug is hooked up and we’ve got the other ship attached.”

Samantha looked at Grant. “Yeah, how will that work? A strong rope and a prayer at each end?”

Grant laughed. “Exactly like that.” He winked at her. “But we use a really big rope.”

Angela didn’t mind his levity, but she needed to be certain it was covered. “So towing won’t be too much?”

“No. However, if one of them sink, all of them will be pulled down.”

“You and Theo are working on a system for cutting them free in that situation?” Angela verified.

Grant nodded. “We have a design drawn up. Theo’s already working on it. We should have something temporary on each ship by morning.”

“And we have full power now to everything?”

“Yes, even the hot tubs are running.”

“I’ll be onboard in a bit with the camp if you need me for anything. We’ll eat lunch on the ship. Someone can tell our new cooks that it’s okay to play with the appliances.” Angela consulted the next item on her list. “Animals were loaded yesterday. How are they doing?” She looked at Marc.

“Conner’s got them today, along with organizing the pens for their care during the voyage.” Marc checked his notes. “I walked him in an hour ago. No problems as far as I could tell.”

Angela made a note to speak with Conner when his shift ended. “Good. We’ll be loading everything today except the mess, community tents, and the bathrooms. I want people on the ship for their needs. Suggest hot showers and clothing shops that haven’t been ransacked yet. Make sure those areas have a rotating guard to make sure they don’t get ransacked now.” Angela turned the page and looked at Jennifer. “How’s your stomach after a night on a rocking boat?”

Snickers and laughs came, along with a furious glare from Kyle and red cheeks from Jennifer.

Angela rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Jennifer held in a snotty remark. “I woke up around midnight with the candles gone. Took me a minute to adjust. The sound of the water and the creaky boat wasn’t pleasant. We’ll need to make sure some lights are left on all the time so people like me don’t freak out.”

Kyle rubbed her shoulder.

Jennifer held his hand there, sighing happily.

“Oh, come on!” Gus snapped. “Why am I here? I don’t need to witness this.”

“None of us do, so suck it up.” Angela surveyed her notes. “Let people pick where they want to sleep but encourage them to enjoy the last nights on land. It’ll be a while before we get this again.”

“Did you know it’s Thanksgiving in two days?” Grant blurted.

Angela looked at him. “And?”

He shifted uncomfortably as everyone stared. Most people here didn’t know what day of the week it was, let alone the date. Ciemus had kept track of that. “Well, shouldn’t we have a dinner or football game or something?”

“Ciemus kept track because they weren’t forced out of their homes every time they settled in somewhere.” Jennifer was defensive of Safe Haven.

“That’s fair.” Grant didn’t give up. “But it does matter to people.”

“We’ll celebrate the holiday on the holiday.” Angela rotated her notebook so they could all read the page. It was labeled with the name of the holiday and the plans she had for it. “I’m handling it quietly because the camp may see this as the pilgrim’s journey to the new world being repeated.”

“That’s what it is, right?” Gus asked. “What’s the problem?”

Angela sighed. “If we’re going to the new world, we’d need a new constitution for our promised land and we don’t have it yet.”

“So?”

“So, people would immediately start drafting one.” Marc grunted. “We prefer to pad things.” He knew Angela was doing this to convince Gus he was needed, that he was on the inside. “As a council member, you’ll get used to doing things that way or the camp will steal your ideas and transform them into something you didn’t want.”

“You cheat!”

The council hooted at Gus’s indignation. Even Grant smiled. Rulers in Ciemus had employed the same tactics, successfully, for a long time. “When leadership stays ahead of the masses and covers things for them, it keeps the peace.”

“Providing that leadership isn’t corrupt,” Jennifer justified.

“Granted,” Grant gave.

“Why are you letting me hear this?” Gus was out of patience. He stood up.

“Because I need you on the council.”

Angela’s simple answer brought Gus back to the bench with a pensive look. “You scare me.”

“Good.” She regarded him curiously. “Don’t you want to know what I need you for?”

Gus shook his head. “Not really. I just couldn’t stand the thought of not being an Eagle. I figured you wanted Brittani, not me.”

“You’ll be both council members and Eagles, and in time, you’ll even be happy. How’s that?”

Gus shrugged, calming. He hadn’t really wanted to leave. He just hadn’t known how he could stay. “I don’t see how, but I trust you.” Tears pricked his eyes. “You knew all this would happen, right?”

Angela nodded, voice regretful. “Yes. It was destined no matter how many times I searched for a different future. They’re soulmates. You aren’t.”

Gus’s shoulders slumped. “How long until I feel this happiness?”

*Tap-tap!*

Everyone looked up as Trinity came in with a tray.

She flushed at the hostile glares for interrupting, walking to Gus. She set the hearty tray in front of him, kissed the top of his head and left with her chin up.

Gus stared in shock. “Wow. That was...sweet.”

The council burst out laughing at his expression as he began to pick through the mounds of food she’d put on the tray.

Angela turned the page in her notebook, heart easing as Gus’s pain receded to show him the new door that had opened. Trinity preferred black men and she wanted strong kids who would grow up to defend all women. She and Gus might be happy together once he let go of the anger over his breakup. “At noon, we’ll have a goodbye send off for anyone not going with us. Pass the word. Those people need to be at the gate at dawn and noon each day. There may not be another chance for them to leave.”

“What are we expecting for that?” Kyle asked. All his team mates and the other leaders had asked him if he knew and he didn’t. Kyle hated giving that answer.

“Some things haven’t happened yet, so I don’t have a complete scene.”

No one liked hearing that.

“After we eat breakfast, all teams and volunteer workers will help people pick bunks in the crew quarters. Some of you are assigned as sentries and some of you are escorts for groups. Keep them together as best you can, but if they have a map and want to go off on their own, let them. Dog will be my security for the day. No sniper guard. They wouldn’t be able to see me anyway once I’m on the ship and I need all of them working. There’s a lot to get done. Let’s go around the table now and you can add or subtract.” She looked at Samantha.

Samantha had been sharing smiles with Jennifer over the happiness they could all see. She looked up as things quieted. “What?” Samantha read the thoughts. “Oh. Sorry. Nothing to report in the weather department. No storms coming from any direction but the west and those won’t reach here until after we’re gone.”

“Good.” Angela indicated Gus. “You helped move our injured onto the boat a little while ago. How are they?”

Gus shrugged. “They were all out except Zack. The medic said they needed to be relaxed for the move so they didn’t make things worse. He stuck ‘em and we moved ‘em with him bitching at us the whole way.”

Some people frowned over his wording, but Angela didn’t. “How is Zack?”

Gus snorted. “Mad that he had to be carried onto the boat like a baby. He was complaining worse than the medic.”

“That’s great.” Angela looked at Jennifer.

Jennifer had her book open. “The kids are getting out of control. When we take them on the boat, we may have brats running all over the place. It will be hard to keep track of them and I don’t believe Monica and the others can handle it even with the camp women helping. They aren’t Peggy and Hilda.”

“Do you want to supervise that?” Angela didn’t think Jennifer was in the mood to babysit.

“I’m not, but I worry over them. If no one else wants it, I’ll handle it.”

Marc sighed. “She wants me with them. You’re off the hook.”

Jennifer grinned at the man. “I owe you one.”

Marc nodded. “Yes, you do.”

“What else?” Angela directed them back to Jennifer’s list, aware of time ticking by.

“I think we should wrap up the fishing operation during the noon goodbyes. It’s a time when no one will be there anyway, and we need to start smoking the other meat we have. William has a great setup ready for it.”

“Agreed.” Angela skimmed her notes. “We can also close the hunting team. They’ve been working the shoreline and bringing in eggs and smaller gators for the last few days. Tell them to store or smoke it all.”

Jennifer made notes. “Awesome. I have one last item. What are we doing with the new arrivals? It can’t wait until noon cause that’s when they’re arriving.”

“Kyle will work that out with Neil when this meeting finishes.” Angela smiled at the girl. “You were supposed to be enjoying your first day of marriage, not searching for timeline changes.”

Jennifer blushed. “Oh, I did. He just had to rest occasionally, and I got bored.”

Laughter spewed from everyone, sending drinks and food across the table and the occupants.

Embarrassed, Kyle growled. “Are we finished? I want to do a check in with the perimeter sentries.” He moved toward the flap when Angela nodded.

Others followed his lead, rising, gathering papers.

“No.”

Marc’s curt tone brought everyone back and made Angela grimace.

“I’m calling a vote on the manifest.”

“For the cargo or the people?” Neil picked up both of those lists to scan for whatever had caught Marc’s attention.

“People.”

Angela stood up. “I shouldn’t be here for this.”

“Sit down.” Marc used his command tone intentionally, trying to draw a reaction from her.

Angela’s expression tightened, but she obediently resumed her seat.

Marc sighed in resignation at the failure, but he wasn’t done yet. “I want Adrian left here. And Kendle.”

The table went quiet, with most of them stealing a fast glance at Angela.

Angela didn’t respond or react.

Marc’s sigh this time was audible.

“Are you sure?” Samantha kept her head down as she questioned Marc’s choice. “He’s done a lot since we banished him.”

“I’m aware of how hard he’s tried to sleaze his way into everyone’s good graces.” Marc waved at the eating camp. “I also haven’t forgotten he’s the one who got us into most of those messes.”

“That’s not true.” Samantha didn’t like going against Marc. She disliked Adrian, but fair was fair. “We got into those messes because our leaders were too busy spending time on jealousy and hatred instead of survival.”

Marc didn’t back down at the blow. “So you vote he goes. Who’s next?”

Everyone at the table frowned.

“I say we put a bullet in his brain.” Ivan was providing security from the doorway. “He’d do the same for any of us if we’d done what he has, right?” After the beating he’d taken, Ivan wasn’t about to go against Marc.

“Mind your job!” Jennifer could feel Angela’s pain at the thought and didn’t like it.

Ivan clamped his lips shut and went back to scanning the sand.

“I want the entire camp to vote on it.” Marc put extra whine into his voice. “That way it’s not jealousy and hatred. It’ll be justice.”

“No.”

Marc regarded Neil in surprise. “Why not?”

“It’s a leadership choice now.” Neil’s tone was cold. “I promise you don’t want the entire camp to vote again anyway. That would include the kids, the Ciemus people, and the Eagles. You’ll lose.”

Marc hadn’t considered Ciemus. Neil was right. Those people had only heard the legends of Safe Haven and not the stories of Adrian’s betrayal. Marc’s shoulders stiffened. “How do I get a fair vote?”

Neil frowned at him. “You can’t, unless the camp calls for it.”

“What about a manifest vote by us?”

Angela nodded, standing up. “I abstain. Let me know the outcome.”

She exited the tent, leaving negative waves and glares that were all directed at Marc.

“Why do you keep doing this?” Gus was sick of it too. “You’re pushing her away and annoying the rest of us. You know that, right?”

Marc hurried to take Angela’s seat by Jennifer. “Is it working?”

Jennifer nodded. “Big time, but if we vote no, they won’t go. She’ll enforce it.”

Marc frowned. “I don’t really want us to vote, Jenny.”

Kyle frowned at the shortened version of her name.

Marc snickered at the mobster’s reaction. *You’re hooked.* “How do I keep her from finding out we didn’t vote until tomorrow?”

Jennifer studied, letting the witch search. She sent Marc an image. “This will most certainly happen over the next twelve hours. If she goes for the alcohol, you’ve won.”

Marc leaned in and kissed Jennifer on the cheek. “I know this is hard for you. It’s almost done.”

Marc got up and stormed from the tent, keeping to his angry role.

Jennifer struggled to keep that mental shield up, fighting not to reveal it to anyone as she and Kyle slipped back toward the ship.

Samantha already knew and approved it. She flashed a smile to the girl and slowly got to her feet.

Neil hurried over to help her. *She got bigger again overnight.*

Samantha gave him a dark pout. “Thanks.”

Neil sniggered, guiding her from the tent. “Come on. Let’s go make that ass a little wider.”

Samantha slapped his arm. “Meanie.”

Neil pointed at the mess. “They have fresh pumpkin bread today.”

Samantha waddled that way, muttering.

Marc watched the council emerge, seeing who had figured it out and who hadn’t.

All of them were adding it up, including Gus. He studied Marc, forced to rearrange his opinions of the man as he read Marc’s thoughts. “So you’re not really an angry, controlling prick.”

Marc grunted bitterly. “Missed it by a hair. Safe Haven saved me. It’s going to do the same for Angie.” Marc leaned in. “Want to help?”

Gus nodded, concern over the drama easing. “It’s the charm, right? You’re trying to break it.”

“Very good.”

“What can I do?”

“Stir the pot. By the time we set sail, it will be done.”

“What about your vendetta with Adrian?” Ivan questioned from a few feet away, confused.

Marc lifted a brow, smirking at how well they’d done, how great a role he’d played. “What vendetta? We made a truce in Ciemus. This is all for the woman we love.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

**A Working Break**

9am

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“O**pen it.”

The passenger hatch hadn’t been oiled yet. It groaned as it was opened, letting the smell of old ocean out to greet them.

Two hundred people pressed closer, curious and a little intimidated as Kyle and Marc opened the passenger boarding area. Most of the camp had been kept off the ship until today. The rest of the loading was being done at the farthest entrance. Digging had unearthed the ramp that had slid off the platform during a storm. Theo’s crew had been able to lift it into place after building platforms on the swampy sand for the two cranes that he and Ozzie had operated in tandem while everyone else kept their distance and stressed. They’d lifted the ramp piece and set it back atop the piers jutting from the water in one try. Getting the ramp level had taken them two days, then the crew had welded the ramp in place. They now had a solid surface to walk and drive over that was allowing them to load the larger items in record time.

Angela walked into the ship. Cool, it reeked of salt water and closed up spaces. Long halls and sea green walls met her eye in every direction from the large reception area. Narrow corridors veered out of sight.

Under their feet, the ship bobbed in the calm water. Angela tried not to contemplate how many cases of motion sickness they would have to clean up.

“Everyone have a copy of the map?” Marc went to stand with his group of kids as more people entered the reception chamber.

People nodded quickly, holding them up or digging them out.

The Dock Master’s logbook said the Adriana had been in reserve for a group of rich bankers from Asia who had never been on a cruise. The war had canceled those plans, but not the preparations that had come before them. The ship was stocked with water, fuel, and all the amenities for three hundred fifty people, for two weeks. It wasn’t a large amount considering a liner this size usually carried seven hundred passengers, but it was nice because it was a little less than the total they needed to live on for a year. Angela hadn’t expected to find it stocked at all. They were no longer short on food. In fact, they now had a small surplus.

“One last time, people. Stay with your group and keep your radios on channel six.” Greg waved. “Let ‘em go!”

People walked off, quiet and tense as they examined what would be their home for at least three weeks (the estimated time by Marc) and maybe as long as three months (Kendle’s estimate). Sunlight streamed through the dirty windows as they wound their way deeper into the long ship. The noises of the outside world faded, then fell silent. The only sounds were their steps and breathing, and the creaking of a boat sitting in water. It was easy to imagine Kendle’s ship of terror.

“It’ll be better when we’re sailing.” Marc hoped that was true.

Angela nodded. “We’ll pick a DJ. This ship needs noise.”

Marc nodded. The camp would think the DJ was specifically for them, which would provide stability anytime there was an announcement or a problem. The same voice would be telling them what to do or how to handle it.

Angela turned into the smaller hallway at the next wide corridor, Dog at her side. She flashed Marc a bright smile.

Marc returned it, already overwhelmed with keeping kids still so he could count them at each intersection. He had den mothers and camp people mixed in this line, but everyone was distracted, and he felt like he was doing it alone.

Angela gestured Neil and Samantha to go with Marc when they would have followed her. Now that Samantha had been off the travel routine for a week, she was doing better. When she’d insisted on walking to the living quarters, Neil had been unable to refuse.

Angela vanished down the hall that would take her to the stairs that would take her to another hall that she hoped would bring her out near the bridge. “Or maybe I’ll be in OZ...” She peered at her map again.

“I know the way.”

Dog growled at the man hurrying to catch up.

Ivan put a hand on his gun.

Angela sighed as Cole fell in step with her. *Speaking of disguises.* “What can I do for you?”

“Tell me why you made him captain over me.”

“It was a council vote.” She didn’t remind him they were supposed to share. Cole had just chosen his fate.

Dog padded between them, nudging Angela’s hand.

Angela rubbed his ears, slowing to let the man go by. “We’ll be there later.”

Cole sulked, but kept walking.

Angela let out an annoyed breath and detoured into a darkened corridor to let him get gone.

Dog waited patiently, as did Ivan. Both males understood she had something going on that required privacy.

Angela studied her map. She’d planned to check out the view from the bridge, and plant a few weapons there, but Cole’s arrival had delayed that. She chose her next location and went back into the hallway with her escort.

“Can I help with something?” Ivan was thrilled to be alone with her. He also enjoyed Dog’s company, so it was a perfect duty in his opinion.

“Go help Marc. Missy isn’t scared of him.”

“She isn’t scared of anyone.” Ivan left her with tense shoulders, good mood deflated.

Angela got lost in the darker hallways that the rest of the camp was avoiding unless they saw someone else traveling them too. As the noises faded, Angela let her guard down and cried as she walked. Being on the ship was heartbreaking. “I don’t want to leave.”

Dog almost cried with her. If she hadn’t shown it, he never would have guessed how badly it was hurting her.

Dog whimpered suddenly.

Angela looked down the hall to find Tonya’s cats coming toward them. She swiped her eyes so she could see better. The felines had been following people on and off the ship for days now. “They look sleepy. You can take a break.”

Dog groaned. *Now I don’t have an excuse to say no!*

Angela knelt to pet the cats, but they left her to twine around Dog’s legs after only a minute of attention. The bunker cat was a bit more aloof than Tonya’s mountain tabby. It only butted its big head against Dog’s chest. The mountain cat leapt onto his back while the wolf was distracted.

Dog waited for the other cat to do the same, wincing when they both punctured his skin. *I’m going!*

Angela chuckled as Dog trotted down the hall, whimpering each time the cats shifted to stay on his back.

“He’s sucking it up for those he loves.” Angela sniffled and wiped the rest of her tears away. “So will I.”

By the time she made it to the loading deck, Angela’s face was dry, and her mental barrier was back in place.

“It’s the boss!”

“What are you doing down here?”

Angela scanned and then went to an enormous pile of bags being shifted into a far corner. “I heard you need help.” She lifted two bags and took them to the same place as the rest of the workers.

It brought respect that she was doing manual labor too, but the Senior Eagles knew what she was really accomplishing by working fourteen hours a day since leaving Ciemus. Using physical labor as a distraction was a tactic they employed often. It would have been hard to miss.

Daryl patted her back and went to get another load of bags. *I don’t want to go either. None of us do. You came to the right place to mourn.*

**2**

“It is lunch time, Safe Haven!” Brittani’s voice blared over the speakers of the ship, causing screams and spills; kids yelped at the suddenness of the noise.

“Lunch time is in the living quarters. Follow your map to the employee quarters and see what wonderful food is waiting.”

“Why is she still cooking?” Marc asked Angela as she joined him, covered in dust and webs that said she’d been working. They’d come through the same hall at the same time, leading him to believe it wasn’t coincidence.

“It’s not.” She smiled, slipping her arm through his before he could complain that Dog wasn’t with her. “I want to eat lunch with you.”

The kids cheered and dragged them down the green halls. They were following their noses. “Pizza!”

Marc stumbled along, stomach growling. “No way!”

Angela let them go on ahead, thrilled with the treat. She was working on a way to let Brittani cook and serve as an Eagle. The woman was getting better with the quality of the meals and she obviously enjoyed making them.

Angela paused in the entryway to scan her herd.

Made to service hundreds of employees at the same time, the mess was perfect for their needs. Camp members were already eating in the small booths or at the tables, while Eagles dined at the long double counters.

The kids filled the spinning stools opposite the Eagles. Screaming and laughing, they snatched hot slices and tossed straw papers.

The two groups eyed each other with trepidation and resignation.

Two hundred people quieted as they spotted Angela. Their thoughts about the ship were in their grim expressions and the subdued chatter that didn’t bounce off flaps like they were used to. The ship absorbed it and sent back nothing.

*It doesn’t feel right.*

*This isn’t Safe Haven.*

*This won’t work.*

*I’m probably not going.*

Angela swung her kit off and knelt to dig through it.

Marc lit up his mental grid to be sure everyone was here. He had to do it now while the kids were distracted.

Angela waved to a place on the wall of the mess. It was visible from any of the three entrances. “Clear a hole.”

The military people among them chuckled, but their tolerant mocking faded when she stood up, hands full. They hurried over to help clear the wall.

Calmer moods entered as she and Ray held the ends of the flag while Morgan and Tommy nailed the holder tabs in place. When they finished, Angela turned to view her people. She’d practiced things to say to keep them scared, to make certain they left with her, but she could almost feel Adrian whispering that it wouldn’t succeed. *It has to come from the heart, Angie. Nothing else will get them to go.*

People shifted restlessly, waiting for her usual words of doom and gloom.

Angela lowered the shield around their perimeter, breathing a sigh of relief. “We have about twenty hours until trouble comes for us again. If you’re leaving, do it in that time or you’ll be stuck on this boat with me for the duration. I’m not coming back for anyone and I’m not slowing to let anyone catch up.” She shrugged, turning to include them all. “You know where I’ll be. You’re welcome to join me there if you survive.”

Angela went to the counter and squeezed between shocked Eagles. “Who has a drink for the boss?”

Ivan handed her the canteen they’d been passing, giving them away to the camp women who had thought they were drinking tea or water.

Angela sniggered. “Tea?” She took a healthy drink and swallowed, gasping as men laughed and women scowled.

Angela let herself burn with the drink and then took another. She passed the canteen while wiping her mouth. “Unless you’ve been given orders, you’re off duty as of sunset. Shifts will resume at dawn. Feel free to come watch the game I’ve arranged on the shore during evening mess.”

Cheers came, echoing through the boat.

Angela felt the shift and placed her hand on the wooden counter. Awareness thrummed through the surface*. I didn’t expect this*. “Please give me time. It’ll get better.”

The ship and the camp relaxed, unable to deny her humble plea. The people knew she could be trusted to follow through and the ship had been empty of life for so long that it would have accepted anyone who could recognize that.

Angela waved at the canteen. “Bring it back around. And someone throw me something to chew on.”

Eagles slapped her on the back and encouraged her, pleased with how quickly she adjusted to changing situations and unexpected blows. A common thought at that moment was no one would be able to take her place, not even Adrian.

*And there’s my next problem*, Angela complained behind her mental walls. *If I don’t have a replacement, I can’t leave the island and so far, none of my heirs can do it. I hope they can be retrained in time, but deep down, I already know it won’t work. All my chosen heirs are fighters. They’ll be at my side for the final battle. I have to pick someone who is good enough to avoid the fight and still bad enough to keep this camp together.*

Like Adrian had done many times before her, Angela sent a silent plea for that person to find their way to her. *I can’t wait for them. After the next wave comes, I’ll be bleeding on the beach or dying on the ship, but I’m leaving and not even that will stop me.*

**3**

Angela stepped out into dim sunlight and a flurry of activity. Around the ramp, men and women were training in the stiff afternoon breeze. Men and women of all ages and races were jogging, using the gym equipment, and attending short lessons from senior men who were on breaks between loads. Dry clicks echoed from the firearms class. Clangs came from the cage. It was a huge comfort, right when she needed it. Instantly distracted from stressing over the future, Angela observed in relief. *It’s okay. We can do this.*

She flashed a grateful look at Neil, who was in charge. There wasn’t time for this display, but he was doing it anyway. He didn’t care about the possible reward. He wanted her to have hope.

Seeing her army working together, healthy and able, settled Angela’s heart into a calm rhythm. *We can survive anywhere. All we need is each other.*

Angela ducked into the bathroom tent.

Around the camp, Neil and the Eagles exchanged looks that said they’d done well.

Marc joined Neil as he waited for Angela to finish. They were going to eat and then enjoy a game and lesson, she’d told him. Marc was curious and looking forward to the downtime.

“Hey, what’s up with your boy?” Neil hadn’t wanted to ask, but leaving time was flying closer with every second.

Marc sighed, good mood falling a bit. “You’ll have to talk to the boss on that one.”

Neil laughed. He knew Marc was practicing obedience.

Marc grinned at the trooper. “Just practicing. Charlie’s getting the kick in the ass that he needs.”

“You know he’s out there with Kenn and you aren’t worried?” Samantha had been dreaming about all of them, a lot, and keeping Neil informed.

“Actually, my idea was to send him out alone. She made sure he had protection.”

“You weren’t going to send a guard with him?” Neil was shocked.

Marc shook his head. “He still won’t get the full lesson, I’d bet, because he has too many shields.”

“He would have died out there alone.”

Marc laughed, going toward Angela as she emerged. “You’ve met his mom, right? And his dad? That kid’s a survivor.”

Neil went to collect Samantha for the meal. She swore the entire council would all be together as America faded behind their boat. Neil believed her.

**4**

**6pm**

“We’re gonna play a little dodgeball and then those who volunteered for overnight shifts can go.” Angela stepped between the two uneven groups of people, ball in hand. “Normal rules apply. If you’re hit, you’re out. If you can catch it, one of your team gets to come back in.”

Fire cans and vehicle lights gave the sandy field an eerie glow. Evening mess was almost over, and her people were growing restless again.

“Against you?” Gus crossed his arms over his chest. “None of us will get through.”

“Not me.” Angela pointed. “Him.”

Marc came to the front of the group of kids and camp members–the non-magic users.

The descendants on the other side, a generous mix of ages and skills, cackled and got ready.

Angela stepped to the sideline. She would protect the vulnerable people from stray hits and call who was out. “Team leaders, come forward.”

Marc waved at Neil. “I’m your defense.”

Neil grinned. “Remember soccer when you first came?”

Marc’s chuckle was wicked.

Angela shivered, sensing Marc’s true nature. It always turned her on.

Marc locked down. *Not yet.*

Angela’s shoulders slumped. “Call it.”

Conner pointed. “Heads.”

Neil gestured, laughing. “Not fair. He knows the outcome!”

Angela tossed the ball to Neil. “He didn’t see that.”

Conner groaned. “That’s dirty.”

“That’s fair.” Angela dropped her hand. “Go!”

Marc brought up a shield over his group.

Neil threw the ball at Conner. He groaned when Gus jumped up and caught it.

Gus threw it back.

The ball whizzed over Neil’s head and slammed into Greg.

Greg clutched his chest, staring toward Marc. “What the hell?”

Marc cleared his throat. “Yeah, uh. Sorry about that. I wasn’t ready.”

Greg left the field, shaking his head as people laughed.

Neil looked at Marc, brows up.

Marc shrugged. “Don’t throw it to Gus.”

Neil turned, frowning. “He’s bigger than Kenn, but I’m not supposed to throw to him.”

Gus sniggered, waving. “Bring it on, skinny.”

Neil waved at Ian, who had retrieved the ball. “You picked it up.”

Ian threw it in a fast move, hoping to catch the big man off guard. The ball bounced off Gus’s personal shield and flew into the air.

“Catch it!”

Conner leapt up for a neat grab. He threw it while in the air, hitting Tommy.

Neil covered his face with his hand. “This is getting embarrassing.”

Marc moved to the side of his group, not saying anything. He wasn’t sure why his shield wasn’t working, but he was going to figure it out.

“The score is 2-0. Go when ready.”

Tommy joined Greg on the sidelines, scanning the empty shore around them. Other than the boat and this game, nothing was moving. He saw darkness in every direction. *We’re the last holdouts of America.*

The non-magic users groaned as a third ball came through, missing everyone. It flew into the kids in the rear, triggering a rowdy scramble for the ball.

The adults only observed to be sure nothing violent happened, not interfering. The kids had to learn things just like the adults and this would be a great family bonding moment, providing no one got hurt.

“Out!”

“Out!”

Daryl and Neil joined Tommy and Greg.

“This will be over quick.” Tommy looked to Greg. “What’s the deal?”

Greg whispered, hoping Marc wouldn’t pick it up while he was distracted.

“So he has to figure it out for this lesson?”

Neil nodded, thinking Samantha looked like she was having fun. Those not playing were lounging out of harm’s way, watching and munching. “Once he does, he’ll master it quick. Marc’s no slouch at defense of any kind.”

*What am I doing wrong?* Marc made a motion. “Time out.” He went to the water’s edge as the two groups laughed and conversed about the game so far, cheering and jeering at each other in good natured ribbing.

Dog came to Marc and sat just out of reach of the soothing tide. He ran off just as fast, yipping at gators lingering near the perimeter.

*I don’t get it. I’m concentrating, and I have the door open. I see the shield. Why isn’t it working? What am I...* Marc groaned. “Not me, *her*. She’s dinking with my doors while I’m distracted. You’re so sneaky!”

Angela chuckled, waving. “He’s got it now, people. Let’s play for real. Everyone in.”

“We won that one, right?” Conner had to know. He liked winning.

Angela nodded. “It was a skunk. Let’s see if you can keep it rolling now that he knows what he’s doing wrong.”

Marc brought up a shield over himself, then activated his barrier over the team. The difference was obvious. Marc locked his shield in place and watched for Angela to lift the corner she’d found vulnerable. Nothing was coming through.

Angela nodded at Morgan.

Morgan sent a fireball at Marc right as Neil served.

Angela prepared to deflect the hit for him, but Marc’s shield was like concrete. The flames sprayed over it as they broke apart.

Marc’s side cheered.

Morgan moved to the front of his clapping team, also proud for Marc, but determined to make it a fair game. “Heads up.” Morgan sent two fireballs this time, thrilled at being allowed this display.

Women who hadn’t chosen a mate yet pivoted toward Morgan in hunger.

Angela glared at the females. *Not this one. He’s taken.*

Morgan would have denied the thoughts that came from it, but Angela motioned him to keep shooting instead. He knew she didn’t mean herself. Morgan thought she was a hot mess, but he wasn’t under her spell like the rest of the men. *Who, then?* Morgan fired again, seeing Marc was starting to sweat. *The only one I had a spark with was Pam and she never even looks at me.*

Pam came up and placed a hand on Morgan’s bare, sweaty shoulder. “Busy later?”

Morgan’s fireballs sputtered into the air like a firework.

Angela shielded the descendant side when no one else thought to do it. They were too busy laughing.

Morgan recovered, stepping out of her reach. “Nope. You lied about being one of us.”

Pam shrugged. “Okay.” She flashed a smile at Shawn, who was standing next to Neil on the opposing team. “You mad at me for laying low too?”

Shawn nodded. “Yeah, but I’ll get over it quicker than he will.” Shawn winked at her. “And I’m *not* busy tonight.”

Morgan stopped gathering energy for the next blow. He twisted around, glowering at Pam.

Pam laughed, breaking the wall around his heart. It shattered at his feet, leaving a deep loneliness.

Pam waited for his choice, horrified at how slutty she was being, but she’d caught the interest from the camp women too, and it was no secret that Morgan used to service the widows. If she waited, she would lose him.

Morgan pivoted and fired at the shield while no one was expecting it.

Marc caught it and swallowed the energy, groaning at the power conversion.

“Very good!” Angela looked at Morgan. “We’ve always been tight. Want some advice?”

“Oh, yes, please!”

“Take a walk on the beach with them and see if it’s what you’d like to try. If you’re against it, tell her no. That’s what she likes and he’s good either way. I’ve known since the mountain. She didn’t lie to me. She didn’t tell you or anyone else because scans would have revealed her preferences in companionship. She thinks it will be the end of you.”

Morgan’s mood lifted. “You knew?”

Angela rolled her eyes.

Neil tossed the ball at Gus. “Come on!”

Morgan strode off the court. He’d observed Jeremy and Neil’s satisfaction after moments with Samantha and wondered how that worked. *Maybe I’ll find out for myself.*

Pam and Shawn followed him.

Missy saw it all. Hatred flashed over the girl’s expression. “Son of a–”

“Watch it!” Samantha snapped, putting a hand on the girl when she would have followed. “The boss wanted me to tell you something. Listen hard, monster child.”

Missy paled. Samantha was never mean.

“I’m being honest.” Samantha leaned in to keep the conversation between them as much as she could. “You’re going to get him banished. Shawn is a good man. But he’s lonely. You’re going to ruin his life. Do you want that?”

Missy shook her head. “I love my Shawn.”

Samantha sighed. “And he loves you or he wouldn’t put up with the crap you pull, but he will never be your mate. You have to start thinking about him like he’s your dad or Angela is going to split you up. Safe Haven needs him more than you do.”

“But I’ve seen it!”

“The future isn’t set.” Samantha leaned in further, but not far enough to cramp her stomach. “How long has it been since you looked?”

Missy scowled. “She said no magic. Not since the mountain.”

“Would it be so awful if that future had changed?” Samantha led. “He’ll still love you; he’ll still be your dad.”

Missy began to cry.

Already chatting with Pam and Morgan, Shawn stopped, drawn by her misery.

Samantha stared at Angela, recognizing the dismay. *You didn’t know. You were hoping*.

Angela sighed. *Stay with it for now. We’ll be leaving some of them on the island.*

*Not this kid*, Samantha answered. *She’s rough inside.*

*I didn’t mean the child*, Angela sent, motioning for Neil to continue the game. *Shawn isn’t corrupt.*

*Won’t a setup like mine seal the deal for him?*

*Just the opposite. Shawn will fall in love and never view Missy the way she sees him.*

*Won’t that drive Missy insane?*

*Yes...and she’ll take it out on our enemies once she’s convinced they’re the reason for it.*

Samantha recognized the trust moment that was happening. They were on the boss’s private line, and Angela was giving away secrets to planning the future, to manipulating it.

*Now’s the time to choose your path, as well, Storm Tracker*, Angela told her, easily able to shield the teams while conversing. *All the council can lead, but not all leaders can run my council and my camp. You could stay.*

For Samantha, it came down to one thing and she asked it aloud, aware of Neil now looking back and forth between them. “Is Neil a fighter or an islander?”

Angela’s grim expression was the answer.

Samantha didn’t hesitate to give up power for love. “I go where he goes.”

Magic swirled through the camp, locking another choice in place. Angela ignored Neil’s stricken expression as Conner translated it for him in hand code. He’d been sure Samantha and his family were going to stay on the island, that he would be able to remain an Invisible.

“I have a short announcement.” Angela waited until the ocean was the only noise, making sure she wanted to do this. When no other path lit up, she followed through. “Effective immediately, I’m evaluating all camp members who are staying on the island for the worst job in Safe Haven–mine. Please submit your name for consideration within the next two weeks or you will be eliminated from my list.” Angela signaled in the silent stillness. “Let’s play.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

**Made to be Broken**



**1**

**“W**here’s the boss?” Samantha, guard in tow, joined Marc at the bottom of the boat ramp.

Marc frowned. “Some people decided to spend the night on the ship, so she wanted to make sure we had enough beds ready.”

“That was three hours after she dropped the bombshell.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you know?”

Marc snorted.

“Boss got us again.” Samantha pointed. “Here they come.”

“What’s left out here to load?” Angela staggered down the ramp, belching.

“Just the five trucks you had us pull into an open-ended square, and the tents for eating, sleeping, and bathrooms.” Ivan was tired. “Even the mess has been moved now. All meals and snacks have to be in the galley.” Ivan consulted the lists to be sure he hadn’t overlooked anything, no longer trying to match her weaving steps. It had made him nauseous as they came through the boat. Angela had just finished rounds of everything. Ivan had disapproved of her bringing the alcohol canteen, but he had no right to tell her that people would disapprove. Plus, he was positive she knew.

Angela didn’t try to maintain a straight line as she came down the ramp.

“Is she drunk?”

Marc nodded at Samantha’s query. “Smashed.”

Angela stepped by him, giving a smile that was weak, but determined.

Marc opened his mouth to give in.

Samantha swung her cane, slamming it into the back of Marc’s knee.

Marc went flying forward into the sand.

Samantha hurried after the boss. “So, no one’s heard from Adrian’s group yet. Will he be dropping Charlie off in the morning?”

Marc ignored the looks from the guards as he stood and brushed off. He limped to the opposite end of camp as team leaders mobbed Angela with questions about their missing people, namely Adrian. Angela had caved and allowed herself to get drunk so she wouldn’t have to feel the pain of their separation. It was her last comfort. Marc had cut off her time with the kids by taking it from her and there was too much for her to do to afford more than a minute of alone time to attempt contacting him. Adrian had promised not to answer even if she tried and Marc believed him. Angela was too wound up to have had peace from any direction.

*It worked*. Marc stepped out of the perimeter and opened a private line. Angela would be able to hear it if she caught wind of it, but the team leaders had instructions to overload her for a few minutes so he could make this call. *Where are you?*

*Tucked in, one click to the east.*

*It’s time.*

Marc felt Adrian’s hesitance.

*Are you sure? I’ll drop off Kenn and the boy and take the women out of here.*

*The future won’t allow that.*

*The future isn’t set.*

*Come in now. I’ll get her to the gate. You take it from there.*

*What if I don’t want to know the outcome anymore? What if I stay away and we leave things like they are?*

Marc sent anger that came from the personal betrayal of their friendship. *You owe me.*

Adrian let out a weary sigh. *Give me an hour.*

*You were supposed to have things ready.*

*I do*, Adrian sent, fury and fear warring. *I need time to ditch my team and set the alarms. I can’t do this with your son and my kiss-ass watching, not to mention your mistress and my baby momma.*

Marc broke the connection and retreated into camp before he let the mirth roll. Unlike Adrian, he was excited by what was about to happen. Marc had almost ruined his own plan tonight because he loved her and didn’t like causing her pain. Samantha had reminded him that pain can serve a good purpose.

Across camp, Angela broke away from the men and women crowding her, hand coming up. “Enough!” She staggered toward the ocean, blocking the pain. *Adrian. Adrian. Adrian. I’m sick of his name! If I can’t see him, I sure as hell don’t want to hear about him!*

Angela kicked the sand, not thinking about what might be attracted to her movements. She was drunk and hurting.

Marc followed her with approving nods to miserable team leaders who had agreed to help with the plan before they’d considered the actual moments. No one wanted their leader feeling this way.

Drawn by Angela’s pain, Jennifer appeared on the ramp, Kyle behind her. Angela had sent them back to their room this morning. If not for the morning meeting, she wouldn’t have disturbed them at all.

Attention turned to the new couple. There were curious stares and approving glances, but there were also calculated leers that evaluated the couple’s odds of staying together now that Kyle had gotten what he wanted.

Kyle put an arm around Jennifer’s shoulders, giving her the physical display she needed. Camp women were studying him for signs that he was officially off the market. The males were doing the same to Jennifer. The wedding had suddenly changed how they were being viewed.

Jennifer trembled, moving against him in fear. She buried her face against his chest, playing her role.

Kyle felt it in his heart. He growled viciously at the men, triggered.

Disappointed Eagles went back to what they’d been doing, accepting the couple was untouchable that way.

Marc hoped they would see the same thing about him and Angela by this time tomorrow. He was taking a big chance, but the outcome was worth it.

Marc walked between Angela and the sand, thinking her deal with the water made her safer on that side. The alligators on shore didn’t have that limitation. “Got a minute?”

Angela slowed, shaking her head. “You handle it.”

Marc smiled. “I’m in charge right now. The entire camp has to do whatever I tell them?”

“Yes, yes.” Eager to be alone, Angela gestured. “You have full point.”

Marc took her by the arm and marched them back toward camp.

“What’s going on?”

“You’re taking a break for the rest of the night.” Marc’s tone hardened into a sharp edge. “The full point man has given an order.”

Angela snorted, but didn’t resist. “I’m needed here. I don’t have time for a break and I don’t want one even if I had the time.”

Marc gestured. “Get in there. We need to talk.”

Angela didn’t like being ordered around. She also didn’t want this conversation. Instead of fighting him on it, she locked down on her emotions and gave him another fake smile. “Okay.”

Marc frowned as he followed her into the tent. Unless there was a threat to the camp or a problem, she’d blocked herself off to everyone and everything. Cody got her love, along with the other children, but even that was shallow and not full of the warmth they’d all come to need from her. She was doing the job and it was just enough, but Marc was tired of it. He wanted the fire back, and the hatred, and everything else she wanted to throw. This lifeless woman waiting meekly for his lecture was ugly.

Angela sulked a bit. She didn’t like Marc to think her ugly at all. “I’m sorry.”

Marc sighed.

“What gave me away?”

Marc reached out to tuck a curl behind her ear. “You’re not spending time with the Eagles. Every free minute goes to the kids.”

“So?”

“He told me you would do that.”

Angela scowled, fire blazing for a second. It was quickly smothered. “I’m working on it, okay? You’re asking me to be happy about something I have no control over. Stop blaming me for his actions.”

“I wish you’d told me.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t, and I still wish I hadn’t because we keep having moments like this.” She sighed, taking pity on him even when he wasn’t doing the same for her. “You have to let me hurt. It’s the only way I’ll recover.”

“He said it’s unbreakable.”

Angela belched. “So?”

“I think you let him do it because it’s the only way you could be a leader.”

Angela didn’t blink. “So?”

“You don’t care I think that?”

“I don’t care that you want me pissed off for some reason. The camp is calm, people are settling in, and you’re giving the kids what they need. Stirring them all up to quiet your guilt is crazy. I won’t allow it. You take the vacation with our former leader. I won’t.”

“Well, he’s pulling up right now, so you should at least go let him know you’re not coming. He’ll sit out there all night until he gets to see you, even if it’s from a distance.”

Angela glared, trying not to break. “I’ll shoot him in the head in front of this camp if he steps inside our perimeter. And then I’ll shoot you for doing this.”

Angela stormed off toward the parking area, leaving Marc grinning.

“I’ve missed that bitch.”

Around him, sentries were thinking the same.

*Don’t come in. She’s not happy we did this.*

*Didn’t expect her to be, did we?*

*Nope.*

Adrian pulled his truck up to the gate, keeping his hands on the wheel so the rookie guards wouldn’t panic. As two sentries rushed over with guns up, a radio crackled.

“I called him in. Stand down.” Marc’s voice betrayed no emotion.

Adrian didn’t respond even though he was getting nods and waves from Eagles. He’d been banished. He was required to act like it.

Marc observed as Angela reached the parking area. She was cursing mentally and preparing to send Adrian away. Marc waited for the moment he’d arranged, actually looking forward to it. The jealousy had been smothered by boredom with his mate. He wanted the other Angie, not this demure little mouse. He nodded to Neil.

Angela winced, thinking of all the years she’d spent as Kenn’s whipping post.

“Hey, we were about to do a training exercise with the rookies.” Neil joined her. “Permission to go ahead since the vehicle out there isn’t a threat to the camp?”

Angela waved him on. “As you were. This won’t take long.” Angela neared the gate, able to see the truck but not the man driving it yet.

“We have a breach at the main gate!” The radio blared with Neil’s voice, sounding perfectly alarmed. “We are go for Level three extraction of Raven.”

Angela frowned as men came toward her. *I’m Raven…* Angela was grabbed by three Eagles and lifted off her feet. She gasped in surprise, realizing it was the lesson for removing her from a dangerous situation.

“Get her in! Move! Move!”

Eagles hustled her out the gate and shoved her into Adrian’s truck. They slammed the door, then ran inside before she could kill them.

Angela sat up, too late, as Marc brought up a shield around himself and then the camp.

Adrian hit the gas and drove her away.

“Good job!” Neil’s tone over Adrian’s radio was light. “Back to your posts.”

Angela blew out a furious hiss. “I’ll make you both pay for this.”

“And ruin the vibes?” Adrian sped up. “They hustled, you know. Let them have it.”

Angela didn’t care that he was trying to calm her down. Each turn of the wheels was taking her further from camp.

“You don’t think Marc can keep them together for twelve hours?”

“I am not staying with you for twelve hours!”

“Nine.”

“No.”

“Seven.”

“No.”

“Well, he told me not to come back for a while.”

Angela sighed. “Ten minutes.”

Adrian hid a grin. “Six.”

“Deal!”

“Awesome. Six hours it is.”

Angela slumped against the seat as she realized she’d been tricked. “I’m getting old.”

Adrian chuckled, increasing speed again. If he only had six hours, he didn’t want to waste it traveling.

“And what is it you think we’ll be doing?” Angela ground out.

“Talking, working. The usual.”

Angela relaxed a bit. “You’re not going to try anything stupid?”

“I already did that.” Adrian smirked. “I convinced Marc to let me kidnap you.”

“I should have known you stirred him up.”

“Actually, he contacted me about your lack of fire. I told him you need a break.”

Angela belched again, grimacing at the second-chewed taste. “How did *you* know I was having trouble?”

“He said you’ve been spending more time with the kids than with the Eagles.”

Angela closed her lids, horrified to discover tears waiting. “Please don’t ever do this again. You’ve been banished. We can’t be together, or we’ll lose them. No one wants us to be happy unless it’s apart.”

Adrian sighed. That was the truth. They would never have a happy-ever-after. He’d ruined that by not being forward about his desires. If she’d left Marc for him willingly, they might have stood a chance.

“I never would have.”

“I knew that.”

“So you used your gifts and cursed us all.”

“Only our trio. It will have saved a nation, however. I hope that’s some consolation.”

“It is.” Angela lit a smoke. “He should have left this alone.”

“What if I said the camp needed a break from you?”

Angela stiffened. “Are they unhappy with me?”

Adrian shrugged. “In ways. Some of them expected you to fight for what you want.”

“Just the people who think a three-way relationship is okay.”

“Not all mates will survive, but with multiple partners, there won’t be as many widows and orphans. I know why you did it. Why can’t you accept it too?”

“I’ll lose the support of the Eagles.”

“The Eagles were disappointed because they think it proves you aren’t healed yet.”

“I’m not.” She exhaled, refusing to view those images in her memories.

“Some of the women were hoping you would give them all the same rules instead of continuing to insist that it has to be played by the old world.”

“Some things should be the same.”

“What about Samantha and her men?”

Angela moaned in pain.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll push on this if you don’t face it, baby. Answer me. What about Samantha and her men?”

“They were happy! Pam will be happy!” Angela’s snap became a sob. “I hate myself.”

“I know. I feel it no matter how far apart we are. You have to let some more of it go.”

“I don’t know how. I deserve to hurt.”

“I disagree and so does nearly everyone in camp. You’ve suffered enough. You’re allowed to have peace.”

“Not with you.”

“No, with Marc. Why are you shutting him out again? You could be using him in place of the cravings I gave you. You know that.”

“I have been.”

“So?” He tossed her tone right back.

Angela didn’t answer.

Adrian steered the truck down a short dirt road and slowed in front of a small RV that looked nothing like the one the vet had chosen. “You love me. After you use him in my place, you feel bad because that’s a betrayal of our bond.”

Angela snarled, thinking of Nancy.

Adrian put the truck in reverse and pulled to the hitch of the RV. “If there was a way to break the spell, would you do it?”

“Yes!”

“Do you think it would free you from the bond?”

“No.”

Adrian shut off the engine and took the keys from the ignition. “You could have already broken our bond.”

Angela sucked in air. “Don’t.”

“Our bond wasn’t valid because I used magic to get you to care for me. Why didn’t you break the bond?”

“I won’t answer that.”

Adrian leaned over, not offended when she leaned away. “I already know.”

“So?”

Adrian chuckled, sending deep longing and heavy need. “You like it. I make you feel alive when no one else does.”

“That’s not true!”

“How long has it been since you felt the rush you have right now?”

Angela refused to answer.

Declaring it a victory, Adrian pushed a button he’d rigged to the dash during his first days away from the shore. A camera rose from the top of the RV. Laser lines lit up around them.

Adrian popped the door handle, aware of her red cheeks and clenched fists. “Come on. I’ve got a map of places to search for more food during the journey to the island.”

Adrian got out and stood on the foot rail, waiting. When she didn’t move, he frowned. “Fine. We’ll stay right here, and someone will pick us off for the truck.”

Angela jerked the door open and stomped out. As she went around the truck, more laser lights came up, telling her he had heavy alarms in use for her visit. That implied he and Marc had planned this at least a couple days ago, if not more.

“Two weeks.” Adrian shrugged at her brow. “I insisted we wait to be certain you weren’t just pms-ing.”

“Oh, slam you.”

Adrian chuckled. “Okay.”

“Do you really have a map?”

It bothered Adrian that she had to ask. “Yes.”

Angela felt it and shrugged. “You trapped me, but I’m supposed to go easy on your feelings?”

Adrian followed her to the RV, seeing his alarm on the door hadn’t been broken. “You could have fought me. Must be convenient to always get to play the victim.”

“Fuck you.”

Adrian sighed. *If only.*

Angela swung back toward the truck. *I’m not doing this.*

“Because you’re scared you can’t trust yourself alone with me.” He gave her a pointed look. “You’ve never been a coward.”

Angela froze, torn. She wanted this, so it had to be wrong.

“I’m sorry. I won’t use our bond against you again.”

Angela nodded stiffly and marched to the door.

Following, Adrian slammed her in the back with a blast of his magic. “I lied.” He hit her again, sinking it in deep before she had a chance to fight.

Angela was flooded with more pleasure than she could handle at once. She staggered to her knees in front of the door, moaning. “Stop.”

Adrian used the last of his energy to send love so deep that tears came to his eyes when it connected.

Helpless at the emotional blows, Angela shuddered. Her hand came up in defense, body shaking. “Why?!”

“Because you’re acting like it doesn’t matter! Because you have to feel this way too!” Adrian slammed his fist into the RV. “Because I need you!”

Angela kicked out, taking him to his knees in front of her. “Take it back!”

“Never!” Adrian grabbed her and jerked her against his chest where he could smell the alcohol on her breath. “You set it up. You set me up!”

Angela shoved him away, using her anger to fight his power. “And I’d do it again! I hate you!”

Adrian felt the bond shatter and stayed where he was, relieved and crushed at the same time.

Angela felt the haze lift. The fire receded. She took a deep breath. “That feels great!”

Adrian winced. His spell was still on them, but the bond they’d made to send the Maker’s call was gone now. He already felt distant in her mind and in her heart.

“Thank you.”

Adrian nodded, not looking at her. “Sorry if I was too rough.”

Angela rubbed her arms where he’d grabbed her. “Small price to pay to be free of that weight. I never wanted you in my head.”

“What about your heart?”

Angela didn’t lie. “You’ll always be there. Without you, I wouldn’t be who I am.”

“And who are you?”

“I’m a mother, a doctor, a soldier and a leader of men.”

“Yes.” Adrian smiled, still not looking at her. “This was our goal. I’ll take you back right now if you want.”

“I want the map.” Angela entered the camper.

Adrian hurried after her, heart lightening despite the loneliness that had invaded his soul the instant their bond was broken. Any time with her was better than none.

Angela admired his setup as he secured the door and activated more alarms. She saw bags of food and cans of ammunition, along with cases of water and first aid kits. He’d been busy.

“I’ve been sorting it all into bugout bags.”

She frowned. “Have you seen a need for that?”

“No. Just being prepared.”

“And keeping yourself occupied?”

“Of course. That’s how I made this.” Adrian took a rolled map from behind the seat and spread it across the long table in the back. Normally a prep area, it was perfect to lean over and examine the hand drawn paper.

Angela waited for Adrian to anchor it and retreat, not wanting to be that near to him. At the same time, she was still craving it, causing a mix of emotions that made her stomach boil and her heart race. It sucked.

“I’m sorry.”

“Yes, you are.” Angela leaned over the counter, skimming the details.

Adrian began a hot meal and coffee, aware of the temperature dropping again. Winter was reminding them it hadn’t left.

“This is good.”

Adrian warmed under her praise. “I’ll keep adding to it.” He refused to think about the people he’d stashed or about his decision to stay here. All he wanted was this bit of time with her before Safe Haven left. He was memorizing details to carry him through years of waiting for them to return.

Angela recognized it. “You really are committed to the dream now. That’s best for all of us.”

Adrian snorted. “Marc killing me through the Creator was a bad deal. I had to make a change. No way to fight that one.”

“You deserve to die for what you’ve done.”

“So do you. So does half our camp.”

“They didn’t betray me.”

Adrian dumped a can into the pot and then added a few items from baggies next to the hotplate. “So how do you get me out of it?”

“I don’t. There’s no loophole this time, for either of us.”

“Good.”

“You mean that.” She could tell.

“Yes.” He gave a deep sigh. “I want to be good and can’t. I’m tired of never getting it right. Let a new soul have my slot. I’m not worthy of being reborn.”

Angela shuddered in sympathy. The bond that was the strongest between them–self loathing–lit up. They both hated themselves for the choices they’d made to achieve their goals.

“That bond will never be broken, even when we die.” Adrian cleared his gruff throat, stirring the food. Being together again wasn’t just affecting her. “You absorbed the lessons too well.”

Angela nodded. Using people against themselves to get what she needed came naturally. He’d enhanced that skill until she’d evolved into a ruthless player who would sacrifice a pawn without a second thought until it was all over.

“At least you do regret them.” Adrian placed a lid on the pot. “Other than my women, I really don’t anymore. The lives are worth this. We’ve saved our country once we reach that island.”

“Unless the future changes. Don’t jinx us.”

“When are you going to try again?”

Angela sighed tiredly, no longer drunk. “Don’t do this.”

“I can help. You know I can.”

“Not without strengthening the remaining bond between us and I won’t do that even for a chance at another child.” Her voice dropped into the false calmness she’d been using on the camp and Eagles. “I have the twins and Cody, plus Charlie and Tracy are making me a grandparent before I’m ready. It’ll be enough.”

“Angie…”

“No.”

“As you wish.” Adrian increased the flame on the spirit stove and gestured at the bunks. “You can nap if you want. I know you’re not getting sleep. I could feel it and now I see it.”

Angela fought a yawn at his words. She hadn’t slept for more than five hours since he’d marched down the beach and disappeared. “I’m fine.”

“Okay. Let’s talk about you and Marc.”

Angela groaned. “Stop it.”

“Go take a nap. When you wake up, you can take a warm shower, have a hot meal and a bitter cup of coffee, and then decide what you want to do from there.”

Angela was tempted. It would keep her from having to speak to him.

Adrian went to open the curtains in the bunk, then walked into the bathroom to put a towel on the tiny counter for her. As he came out, Angela entered the narrow hall.

They stared.

Adrian frowned at the stiff grip she had on her thoughts. “For a few hours, you’re allowed to be yourself. He insisted on that if we broke the charm. Close us in a shield and do whatever you want.”

Angela broke. She pointed to the bunk. “Get in.”

Adrian’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

She nodded, yawning. “Connect us as we go under. I have some things to show you.”

Adrian settled into the bunk with his heart thumping and his demon warning him it was a trap.

Angela ignored everything. She wanted to feel Adrian holding her and she didn’t care the price they had to pay for it. In the old world, she would have thanked him, said no, and went home. In this one, she crawled onto his chest and sank down with a moan that he echoed. Being against his hard body felt like coming home.

Adrian kissed the top of her head as she settled onto his chest, legs wrapping around his. “For me too, baby. For me, too.”

Angela inhaled as deep as she could, moaning again. His scent was worth craving. “I want what Samantha had, but I don’t want to pay the price.”

“We know.” Adrian’s hands tangled in her hair as he nuzzled her cheek. “I’ll wait. If it never happens, it never happens. Moments like this are all I need from you.”

Angela tightened her grip. “It’s all I can give without changing who I am.”

“Please don’t change.” He didn’t want that either. “You’re the only thing I’ve ever done right.”

Angela sighed, weary muscles soothed by his heat. “Thank you.”

“For what, baby?”

“For loving me. The real me.”

“The evil you.”

“Yes.”

“I’d say the same, but you don’t.”

“I respect it, if that helps.”

“It does.” Adrian kissed her head again, intoxicated by her smell. Even with a layer of Marc over it, the vanilla was thick. “Just don’t ever forget that I’m the piece of shit and he’s your knight in shining armor.”

“He’s not, though. Or I’d never be here with you. He’d be enough.”

“We’re not made that way. Not all of us.”

Angela didn’t want to get into that. “Connect us. I need to show you these things.”

Adrian lit up every connection they had left. When the doors were open and glowing bright, he shoved himself through the one with the biggest frame.

Instead of the shallow bond they’d had before, their minds converged into one brain that settled together with groans and clicks that echoed to the trackers outside the camper.

**2**

“They’re going dream walking.” Barry slowly retreated, not thinking about descendants in hopes the couple wouldn’t notice him. His partner didn’t have that problem. He was barely a human. Barry had never worked with anyone as quick to kill.

“We can’t get to them without waking them up. His alarms are too good.”

Barry knew that. “What if we don’t try to take them alive?”

“Mmm… We might be able to do that. Let’s get out of range and make a fast plan. I don’t think they’ll stay down long.”

“Why not?” Barry glanced at the moon they could only see when the gritty clouds shifted. “It’s late. Shouldn’t they be out for the night?”

“Normal people maybe, but not that pair.”

“What’s different about them?” Barry wasn’t used to his partner knowing more than he did. “Who are they?”

Malin didn’t want to share his suspicion and possibly lose the prize to betrayal. “I’m not sure yet. Come on.”

The trackers left without alerting the couple. They reached their jeep a few minutes later and removed a crate from the rear.

It didn’t take them long to gear up and head back.

**3**

“They’re coming for us.” Angela’s eyes didn’t open.

Adrian held her tighter and doubled his shield. “I’ve got us covered.”

Angela sank deeper into the dream world, pulling him along. “We’re almost there.”

Adrian strengthened the shield again, able to sense trouble crackling around the camper. He’d never sheltered someone this way, but he’d copied it from her while they were in the mountain. The emotions between them were feeding it–the feel of her in his arms, the smell of her in his nose. He felt complete. Nothing was getting through right now except power, but the trackers had set a fire to kill, not to capture.

Angela dragged them deeper, using her vibrant glow to shield him from the Demon of Time as that hungry entity rushed toward her. “Move aside.”

The haggard, clawed demon bowed to her authority over him and vanished.

Angela dove beneath the waves, breathing for both of them when Adrian’s lungs wouldn’t carry him.

*I’ve never been so deep.*

Angela grunted as the views slowed and became clearer. “There. Do you see it?”

Adrian squinted at the distorted view. “That’s…us!”

Angela stayed with the vision, struggling to hold it. She’d only been able to get this far into the future twice. She was hoping Adrian’s love would feed her and allow them to go farther.

Adrian sent a blast of need. *You were meant to be mine.*

Angela snarled.

Adrian mentally shrugged. *Anger is more effective.*

Angela forced her rage into the image, clearing it to a slow moving picture of a massive battle. “I need to know where.” She moaned as the image became blurry again. “I can’t plan our moves without that!”

Adrian took over, using his experience to bring it into focus.

“He’ll sense you... Hurry!”

Adrian found landmarks, but none of them were familiar. The best he could do was memorize the area.

“That’s not good enough!”

Angela’s desperation made Adrian stay with it even when he felt the demon rushing their way. Ground exploded beneath them, blowing dirt into the air.

“Wanted!” a shallow, hungry voice roared.

Adrian zeroed in on a street sign. It was all he could detect with words visible after so many years.

Angela blinded the demon as he appeared before them. “Three seconds!”

Adrian pulled back. “I got it!”

Angela took a hit as she let go of the time warp and faded back. She sagged.

Adrian was horrified to discover the camper in flames and trackers shooting round after round into the fire. It was also funny because the packed kits were shooting bullets back for them, though the ricochets were dangerous to both sides.

Angela belched fury from her mouth, throwing up all the hatred she’d absorbed from the demon hitting her.

The rabid hatred swarmed over the trackers and ate them alive. When it finished, it screamed into the sky and exploded, unable to survive without a host.

Adrian grabbed the map on his way through, carrying Angela from the flaming camper. He placed her on the ground behind his truck. It was unharmed, but that relief would come after he made sure she was okay.

“Angie?” Adrian kept the shield around them as the flames increased and smoke wafted over the site.

Angela coughed, belching out another blast of the demon’s evil. It screamed into the sky and exploded without attacking them.

Angela groaned, slowly coming up the rest of the way. She spit as she sat up, taking the arm he offered. “That wasn’t fun.”

“You did great, baby. Better than I would have predicted if you’d told me what we were doing.”

“I didn’t trust you not to look at things you shouldn’t.” Angela stood, wobbling. “I still don’t.”

“I won’t go back without you. I can’t.”

Angela grunted, holding out her arm. “I can’t either now. I’ve been marked.”

Adrian examined the bleeding wound. He’d never heard of that happening.

“We’ll speak with William.” She already knew it wouldn’t do any good. The wounds would heal, but the mark wouldn’t go away. Every time she tried to search the future now, the demon would sense his mark and come running to finish the job.

“It’s okay. Others will be able to do it and they don’t need to go that deep. I know where the location is.”

“Show me?”

“I don’t need to. You know it.”

Angela picked the name from his mind and matched it to her mental map. “We’re almost standing on it!”

Adrian nodded, leading her toward his truck. “There’s a motel near here with water in the tanks. The sign was at the corner. I can still get you that shower and you can see the name for yourself, see the layout of the area.”

Angela told herself to go back to camp. She’d learned valuable things and needed to concentrate. She also felt the guilt over how Marc might be torturing himself right now. “Sounds good.”

Adrian blinked, mouth opening. “Uh, what?”

“Take me to the motel. I want the shower before I go back. Marc doesn’t need to smell you all over me and think I spent the time in your arms.”

“Even though he’ll know you did?”

Angela climbed into the truck, ignoring the fire and signs of magic they were leaving behind. “He deserves better than me. The least I can do is give him respect.”

Adrian closed the door and came around to take the wheel. “You’re the boss.”

When they reached the sign, Adrian slowed to a crawl so they could study the area, but it looked like any other abandoned town. It was hard to believe that the future of humanity would be decided here. “I need to tell you about Kendle.”

Angela tensed.

Adrian drove to the small motel he’d seen while they were under, getting goosebumps as he parked the same truck in the spot it would occupy years from now. “She’s not getting better. She’s adapting to being alone, to staying.”

“What about Nancy?”

Adrian winced. He came around to escort her by the elbow, blocking her anger. “It’s proof of my commitment to the dream. It’s also a peace offering to your fiancé.”

Angela groaned as she remembered Adrian knew she’d agreed to marry Marc. “It’s a no-win with you!”

Adrian led her to the rear door. He shoved the rickety barrier open and escorted her into the darkness. They both scanned and found only rats and spiders.

“I need a few minutes to hook things up. Tag along or wait here?”

Angela snorted, stepping by him to lead the way with her necklace light.

Adrian grinned. “I’ll miss moments like this.”

“I’m sorry.”

Adrian knew she meant for having to leave him here. He sighed, sure that was her choice for Kendle too. “We’ve earned it. Just keep them alive. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Angela snorted again.

Adrian laughed as they moved down dusty, narrow stairs to the basement. “Okay. So I also want to roll naked on the beach with you until we both have sand in every orifice.”

“Done that.” Angela snickered. “Marc didn’t like it.”

*She got me there*. “What about you? The Maker’s bond is broken, and Marc will keep working on the other one. Everyone will help you with the kids and the camp. What do you need beyond that to be happy?”

“Nothing.” Angela led him to the breaker box and shined her light so he could work.

Adrian placed a hand on her flat stomach.

Angela tensed.

“You had a flash when we were under. Jennifer was talking to Marc. They thought you couldn’t hear them through the shields.”

“And?” Angela waited for him to spit it out, tense at the heat against her scarred, empty belly.

“In a week, you’ll be ready.” Adrian let the heat continue to flow. “I can teach Marc how to help you. You can have the same odds with him.”

Angela pulled away.

*She didn’t say no...* Adrian removed his kit and began digging out the tools he needed, but he didn’t push her. Exactly like he would have done in her place, Angela was ruthlessly evaluating all options and what each would lead to.

Angela held her light while he worked, following him, listening for trouble, but her anger and excitement were loudest. Like Adrian, she knew where something like that could lead and she was terrified of it. “There’s no way you could convince him in just a week. We’d have to go slower. A lot slower.”

“No, we wouldn’t.”

Adrian’s voice had dropped into a tone that warned her to brace for something she hadn’t foreseen. “What do you mean?”

“He already memorized the spell.”

Angela was stunned. “You explained how it would have to work since he has no idea how to really do it, even with the words? That you would have to be there?!” Angela wasn’t about to risk a child on an amateur spell caster, no matter who they were.

“Of course.”

“And?”

Adrian sighed in triumph. “He didn’t bat an eyelash, Angie. *You’re* the one holding us back. You always were.”

**4**

It was almost dawn when the truck returned to camp. Marc was waiting at the gate.

Angela slammed the door, anger obvious in her red cheeks and fast stride. Her thoughts were spinning faster than he could keep up with, but Marc caught enough to know that Adrian had stuck to the plan.

Marc gave Adrian a sharp salute.

Adrian flipped the finger and drove away.

Angela entered the gate that was quickly opened for her, not responding to muttered apologies from the Eagles. She strode to where Marc was standing.

Marc jerked her into his arms and claimed her mouth.

Angela was furious. She was also aroused and excited by a tiny glimmer of light now shining in her mental darkness.

Marc felt the emotions and deepened the kiss. *Love me?*

Angela groaned, arms coming up. *Forever*.

Marc held her close, aware of words forming in her mind. He broke the kiss to hug her tightly. “Not yet.”

Angela tried to talk anyway, but Marc pulled her into the shower camper. “All I want is you, right now–all of you!” He was thrilled with the outcome, delighted that she’d come back to him without cheating, without games or plans to bring Adrian back. He was horny.

Angela leaned against the wall as Marc locked the door. She felt the same way. She hadn’t been this hot for him in…

*Five months*, Adrian supplied in her head. *Enjoy your night.*

She felt Adrian close the mental door and then all thought flew from her mind as Marc began to rub her willing body. When he began muttering a charm but not using magic, practicing for a future moment, she didn’t notice.

Chapter Thirty-Six

**Breathing Fire**

November 27th

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“T**hose are big birds.” Conner walked by the large sea gulls lingering just outside the perimeter tape. The shield wasn’t up, but the birds still weren’t crossing the line.

*Nature’s spies.* Dog pawed the sand in contempt. *They can go anywhere, so they can see and hear everything. Never trust a bird.*

Conner noted that, sure he would add it to his report. His shift had just started, but he didn’t know when it would end. None of the guards did. *Just like the wedding day schedule.*

*When is my boy coming back?*

Conner kicked the sand. “I wish I knew. It sucks being alone here with only...”

Dog snorted, still eyeing the alert birds. *You’ve made progress with her, but you do not feel happy.*

“I don’t like lying, pretending.” Conner shrugged. “And it isn’t the same without Charlie.”

*And your dad?*

Conner nodded. “I’m happy with everything else.”

Dog stopped as one of the birds inched closer to their perimeter. *Hold that thought*.

Dog took off like a shot from a gun, whipping through the sand. Sprays of it flew up from his paws, alerting the birds, but Dog had gotten the element of surprise. He lunged across the perimeter and grabbed the braver bird around the neck.

They rolled across the shoreline as the rest of the birds took flight.

Conner kept watch while Dog killed the bird, expecting the wolf to eat it. He was surprised when the big animal trotted back to him instead, shaking his big head.

*So, you have a mate but no pack. That was the issue, correct?*

Conner stuttered, following as the wolf resumed their rounds. “Uh, yeah.”

*You could pick a new pack.* Dog stopped to wipe his face through the reeds and sand to remove the mess.

“What?”

Dog tilted his snout toward the camp that wasn’t usually so active this early. *The Eagles can be friends and supervisors of your choices. Let them in and you’ll always have a pack.*

“Oh.” Conner swept in every direction, liking the rotating pattern he was able to use now that he’d been cleared to be alone on point with Dog. He noted smoke in the sky to the east and moved on, sure the senior men had already logged it. Fires around them were watched, but they weren’t a surprise. “Maybe.”

Quinn, also just starting the long shift, jogged over to them. “What was all the noise?”

“Dog was clearing the perimeter. Birds.”

Quinn noted it in his book and went to get live updates from the other sentries.

Conner passed Tim, who had stopped trying to keep up with Quinn’s hyper movements. “What’s his deal?”

Tim chuckled. “I told him even the rookies could spot it.” Tim kept walking. “Catch me later. I’ll fill you in.”

Conner smiled at the feeling. “You know it.”

He swiveled around at a loud splashing noise.

Dog waited for the boy to see that it was someone blowing out the firefighting hoses on the tugboat. Conner was falling into training so well that Angela had scheduled him on the most important shift today to be certain things were covered.

Conner brightened. “Really?”

The pair walked off, chatting while patrolling like the senior men were able to do.

“I didn’t have...” Conner paused.

So did Dog.

Waves of hatred and insanity slapped them.

Conner concentrated and brought up a doubled shield over the camp and the boat. He couldn’t hold it for long, but he only needed to alert the others and then one of them would cover it.

On the ship, Jennifer rolled over and slapped Kyle on his bare ass. “Get up!”

Kyle banged his knee on the table as he leapt from the bed, staggering and cursing.

In the medical camper, Samantha pushed Neil from the bunk. “Get your gun!”

He fell on the bags of gear he’d brought in at her request. He fumbled for his weapon, wincing.

In a tent near the boat ramp, Angela sat up, letting the blanket fall. “He’s here.”

Marc stirred, groggy. “Who?”

“Jeff. A full day early!” Angela stood and walked off the air mattress, unbalancing it.

Marc was flipped onto the floor. “Hey!”

Angela grabbed her radio and switched it on.

“...repeat, we are ten minutes out and not alone in a big way.” Jeff’s weary voice echoed across the camp. Kids shouting and crying filled the background. “I’ve got nothing left.”

Angela grabbed her boots, flinging the radio at Marc, who wasn’t looking at her.

It bounced off his shoulder and fell, hitting his knee. “Hey! Ow!”

Angela shoved her feet into boots and then her arms into her jacket. She slept with her guns on.

Marc struggled to his feet, rubbing his shoulder.

Angela snatched up both their kits and rushed to the flap.

“Hang on. Wait fo–oomph!” Marc’s kit slapped him in the chest, knocking him backwards. He hit the air mattress and bounced, landing back in the same place he’d started from.

Angela hurried outside and knelt to zip the flap on him as Eagles flooded from tents and the boat. She signaled them toward posts.

“Angie! Wait!” Marc swept up his gear and ran. He bounced off the zipped screen and went flailing, gear flying into the air. “Ow–oomph!”

Morgan shook his head, falling in behind Angela. “That was rough.”

“He’ll come out breathing fire. We need that.”

“Is he breathing at all?”

“He sleeps with his boots and guns. He can fall into combat without air.” Angela felt Jennifer connect with her. She waved Morgan toward his next post and went to the gate.

Marc ripped the screen open with his bare hands. “Where is she?!”

Eagles pointed and got out of the way.

Marc scooped up his gear and marched toward her, tirade cut off as he spotted the dust cloud on the horizon. A truck was speeding in front of it with smoke coming from under the hood and a shield lit up around it.

Behind the bus was an unending line of cars and trucks carrying a refugee wave that had to be five hundred people. Marc’s heart thumped. He began dressing. *We have to go.*

Angela keyed her radio, scanning clouds of smoke rolling up from the east. “Load up time has come. Get on the boat!”

For a split second, there was stillness as guards and camp members realized it had come early. Then a flurry of activity covered Angela’s hand motions.

Marc caught them and passed the orders to council members as he saw them and made eye contact. He also edged closer to her as people streamed by. After Keith’s death, the bad vibes in camp had faded, but they hadn’t vanished.

Marc observed the dust cloud, counting off five seconds, then switched to the truck and did the same. *Four seconds*. The truck was losing ground as the engine failed. *Probably from lack of cool down time.* Marc was still buttoning and fastening clothes.

Angela concentrated, needing to time it right for lowering her shield. Marc was correct in his estimation. Part of the wave was going to reach the truck right as the truck reached safety.

“Can we–”

“No.”

“Is it okay to ask why I can’t just shield you and have the others do the same for your fighters?”

“Lack of experience. They can’t hold it. Neither can you, yet. I’m going to wait until the last second and hope some of the refugees turn away when they think my shield isn’t coming down. I have ten Eagles on each side of camp who are getting into position to target the vehicles that do get through. A dozen women are herding the camp and kids onto the boat while the sentries load the last of our important items. The captains are already on the boat.” Angela paused, considering. “Oh, and descendants are behind tents and vehicles to watch corners and rear areas for anyone who gets through. I told them to take the lifeforces, so they’re alert.”

Marc turned his back to her so both directions would be covered, finally feeling dressed. “Sounds like it’s all covered.”

Angela grunted. “Not if I can’t get the shield back up.”

“Why wouldn’t you be able to?”

“Because there are trackers mixed in with that wave and they can stun or zap, like what hit you at the UN camp. If they get me, you’ll all bring up a shield together and then another in it and so forth.”

“From our lesson in the mess.” Marc realized she’d known they would need that skill.

“Yes.” Angela noted the thicker smoke and a glint of flames now coming from the east. Her heart thumped as time sped up. “And you’ve been practicing, haven’t you, Marine?”

Marc nodded, tone cold. “It’s strong. I was thinking about smothering Adrian with it while I practiced.”

“I felt it. I was going to have you shield me against the zap...”

“But you want to bring them in and kill as many as we can.” Marc wasn’t surprised. He was still full of piss and vinegar over his wakeup. “Tell me where to start clearing.”

Angela gave him a target. “The motorcycle coming alongside the semi. The driver just stunned Jeff. Seth’s already down and I can’t locate Becky.”

Marc directed his sonic blast at the motorcycle as Angela lowered the shield over Safe Haven. “Fire!”

Magic and bullets flew through the smoky air.

**2**

“Jeff!” Kimberly shoved against his big body, trying to keep him from crushing her as he fell.

Doug reached over them both to steer. He couldn’t stop the truck. Jeff’s foot was mashed against the pedal, causing the vehicle to grind in protest. Smoke billowed from under the hood, obscuring his view.

The truck bounced over something that crunched like bones. It flew into the air and came down hard in a fast stop that threw them all against the dashboard, seats, and windshield.

“Bring it up! Bring it up...”

Angela’s fading shout terrified her people.

The truck had barreled straight through camp, barely missing people to plunge into the sandbar where gators had been sunning. The reptiles rushed away, spitting and flipping their tails.

A shield came up around the camp, this time powered by a vivid blue light that told everyone Marc was now protecting them.

William appeared at Marc’s side, approving of the twisting stance over his mate’s body. “Unlock me and I’ll wake her up.”

Marc didn’t have time to ask how it worked. He jerked on all the closed doors in William’s vast mind. “I release you.”

Marc retreated to let the groaning, twitching man reach Angela, scanning for trouble near them.

William sent a strong current of need into Angela’s chest. “Wake up. *I need you*.”

Marc frowned as Angela’s lashes fluttered. “That’s an alpha thing, right?”

William stood. “Sure.”

Marc would have responded, but his personal shield was attacked. He groaned in pain as zap after zap slammed into it. He’d never fought this way.

William added his strength to Marc’s, reducing the stinging nettles to a poking sensation.

“That sucked!”

William nodded. “I won’t last long. I’ve never fought this way either. Help her recover so she can take back over.”

Marc closed his shield, aware of others around them doing the same, saving their strength. William could handle it alone for a few minutes, but they couldn’t. The rest of them would have to do it as a group effort.

Angela sat up, looking around for the tracker who’d hit her through a thick layer of her personal shield. She found his body outside William’s barrier. It looked like he was shot.

“Twice. Mine in the heart and Shawn’s in the head.” Marc helped her stand. “He needs to be promoted. That was a beautiful shot.”

“Quarantine that truck.” She waved shakily at Marc. “Make sure it stays that way.”

Marc reluctantly left her side to do as ordered.

Angela didn’t have time to explain the plan. She and the other females had decided to try to save the rage kids, but there was no way to start that right now. Angela scanned the camp, seeing things were mostly packed, but not being moved yet. Tents were coming down, but it wasn’t going to be finished soon. “We need all hands.” Angela also sent a mental call. *Bring them back to help carry. You were right.*

Neil grunted in her mind, hands full of squirming children who had been refusing to get on the boat. He let go of them, pointing. “Help load and nothing else.”

Angela reinforced it. *Follow orders!*

Kids who had been running to her side detoured to help carry items instead.

Camp adults came slower, attention glued to the smoky shield where hundreds of screaming, waving refugees were reaching it. No one was surprised when radios lit up across the area.

“Safe Haven is on the shore, leaving!”

“We see the boat!”

“Aim for the boat! If we sink it, they can’t leave!”

A group of refugees on the eastern side of camp didn’t care about the wildfire now lining the horizon behind them. They weren’t fighting with each other or shooting vain bullets at the shield. They’d learned from the naval station. They were arranging their vehicles to ram it. They assumed if they sent enough hits in, the person upholding the barrier would tire and it would drop. If only for a few seconds, that would be enough to get them in. The group on foot next to the cars stayed together as the first attempt started, ready to lunge forward the instant the shield went down.

William fell to his knees as the first car slammed into his shield and came to an abrupt stop, scattering metal and human debris. His hands went to his head at the pain. “Ahh!”

The barrier dropped.

Refugees poured in.

“Damn it!” Angela snapped her shield into place, cutting refugees in half. She’d left it to William too long. He’d never taken a lifeforce. His energy bank was small and weaker than even Marc’s.

Screams filled the shorelines behind her as refugees near that side came through and found the pissed alligators who had been trying to escape through the shield. One had come out while the other tried to get in. The mess was expansive as the reptiles ate their way back to shelters, taking chunks to dens.

Descendants and Eagles ran forward to protect the camp members who were grabbing items and running for the boat. No one was going emptyhanded. There was no way they could say they’d been too scared to help when young kids were darting around fights to grab things and hand them off as if they’d lived this way all along.

Angela staggered as another truck rammed the shield, grimacing. *It hurts.*

“All clear!” echoed from their right.

“Got them all over here!” came from the left.

“Rear is clear!”

Angela waited for the last call. Around her, the refugees pounded on the shield, spitting at her and stabbing it. They paid no attention to the fire, to people being knifed in the back, or to the bullets bouncing off the shield. William failing had told the more observant ones that the shield could be brought down.

Eager to make up for that failure, William waved his people to come with him. He formed a line in front of Angela and the council, shooting wounded refugees.

Bucky stayed on William’s heels, determined to prove that Ciemus people were also survivors.

Another truck rammed the shield, causing it to flicker.

Refugees screamed in hunger, sensing fresh blood.

Marc took Angela’s arm. “Let me help.”

Angela connected them, thinking about how she’d followed him around for months before he’d finally noticed her. She had been weighing the choices of putting the charm on him. Even then, she’d planned ahead. She hadn’t known what for, but it had been this moment in time, for the emotions, the energy, that would come. “I’m sorry. I release you.”

The charm snapped.

Nothing happened.

Marc snorted, busy reloading. “My love never came from a spell. You didn’t need it.”

Angela’s joy burst through Marc’s mind and allowed them to bring up a double shield that crackled with fury. Zapping sounds echoed through the area as refugees fried each time they attempted to penetrate it.

“How long can they do that?” Jennifer slid to a stop next to William, with Kyle on her heels. They were both wearing Eagle gear and determination.

“Not long.” William scanned, sorry about the line of guards who’d been here. He tried not to step on the bodies as he reloaded. “We need more help.”

Dog ran by in the chaos, whining. *Where are they!* He sniffed, snorting when someone accidentally kicked sand into his face*. I can’t smell them through the smoke!*

Morgan pointed to the half dismantled tent that Tonya had insisted stay up for people until they left. Under a flap, two cats were watching the fight with huge eyes and bodies poised for flight.

Dog ran that way, howling. *I’m coming!*

Morgan expected the cats to take off as Dog neared the tent in a fast run. He stared as both tabbies rushed out to meet the wolf instead.

Dog crouched as the cats jumped, lifting as they landed. It was a beautiful snatch and grab.

Dog took off running toward the boat with his prize, not caring about their hisses or claws as they hung on and tried to protect their ride out of the human chaos.

“Men down in front! Men down!”

The shout sent chills through the camp.

Angela couldn’t help. A break in concentration would doom them. She looked at Jennifer, pain growing as more refugees reached them and attacked.

Jennifer shook her head, though she desperately wanted to help. “You told me not to take over even once or someone on the council would die. Hold the shield. Help is coming.”

Angela winced as another vehicle exploded against the mental barrier. “Better...be soon.” She gasped, feeling the deaths and injuries outside the shield.

The refugees kept coming, surrounding the fleeing camp on three sides.

The shield crackled in a repeating pattern that echoed for miles.

**3**

“I hate that noise.” It reminded Kenn of the base he’d been on when the war came. He tilted the gas can higher as it ran low. “Everyone ready?”

The passengers brought weapons to hand and ugly images to mind.

Adrian lowered the mental barrier and sent out a call. *Fire!*

Refugees turned or looked up in surprise at a descendant among them, but their attention was finally drawn to the wall of flames roaring in from the east.

“I almost feel bad we did that.” Kendle took aim. She fired the rifle, hitting a man who was stabbing the shield. *That’s my job*. *Get off there!*

Kenn grunted, still pouring fuel. “It looks like we missed a small spot. Circle back.”

Adrian turned the wheel, following their fire trail back to the narrow fork they’d left open. The rest of the fire had already converged, greedily latching onto dried structures and debris. There hadn’t been rain or snow while Safe Haven had been camped here, and the temperatures had continued to rise, creating the perfect conditions for a wildfire. Adrian swerved onto the clear patch of grass, seeing people roll their way.

“It’s only a few of them. We’ll handle it.” Charlie brought his rifle up. He fired.

The slug missed the driver of the jeep coming up behind them, hitting the radiator instead.

Steam billowed, but the jeep didn’t slow.

Kendle fired.

Her bullet hit the driver. The jeep lunged to the right and smashed into a tree.

“Show off.” Charlie aimed at the next car, a tiny red thing with huge tires that stuck out half a foot. He aimed there, letting the car reach Kendle’s accident site. He fired.

A tire popped, tossing the tiny car sideways. It rolled through the emerging survivors of the jeep, sending bodies into the air.

“Now that’s showing off.” Kenn dropped the empty can and grabbed another from the floor. He opened the spout, wincing at a fresh flood of fumes as he waited for Adrian to get them to another cleared patch. Refugees were finally starting to realize they were in danger. More were coming now.

Kendle reloaded while Charlie proved again that his aim was better than his first miss. He was trying to create a car barrier for shelter, but Adrian wasn’t waiting to be trapped. He pulled onto the pavement and kept going across the lane. He veered north, motioning to Kendle. “Light it up.”

Kendle hit a button on the small box they’d taped to the dash.

A series of loud explosions came from behind them, sending more dark smoke into the sky. A few seconds later, thick flames raced over the smaller trails, flying toward the refugees who were now approaching the wrecks. Some of them turned back, but those who tried to drive through it were suffocated by the fumes of the chemical bomb.

Kenn dumped the remaining fuel from the can over the ground as widely as he could, scanning their progress. A tall fire wall lined the eastern border of the camp all the way to the beach, where Adrian had started them from. After bringing Angela back to Safe Haven, Adrian had collected his team and got to work. While he and Angela were dream walking, Adrian had peeked at this moment. She’d been right to not trust him on that. He’d skimmed several moments while she tried to focus on the future battle site.

Adrian swerved again as a cluster of vehicles got near enough to hit them with bullets and magic. Power flew out, hitting the truck.

Adrian let the truck slide sideways, using a house to bounce along. Bricks and plaster fell onto it and through the windows, forcing Kenn and Kendle to withdraw.

Adrian got them back onto open ground, not bringing up his shield like he wanted to. “That was unexpected.” He hadn’t planned on fighting their own kind out here because their own kind wasn’t safe among the mob either.

The refugees swiveled toward the blast location and overwhelmed the two weak men.

“Big mistake to use magic out here and not be prepared for the reactions.” Adrian steered west, toward the throng of refugees filling the distant skyline. There were too many cars and people to count.

Kenn dropped the can and picked up another. He held it tightly as Adrian reached a small group on foot and ran over them.

Kenn tilted the can out the window while Charlie reloaded and Kendle cleared the vehicles that were gaining ground. So far, they were the only ones with bullets.

A slug cracked into the windshield, splintering it.

*Guess not*, Kenn corrected, fighting the need to bring up his shield. They didn’t want refugees to know they were anything more than Eagles who’d been caught on the wrong side of the perimeter.

“Not gonna last.” Adrian swerved sharply to avoid a large chunk of debris hidden in the weeds. “Get your shields ready. We’ll need them for the end.”

Kenn thought about protesting again, but he still didn’t see another way to get what they needed. He began drawing energy, tilting the can to keep the fire spreading. He was protecting Kendle too, since she didn’t have her gifts.

“Blow it.”

Kendle scowled at Adrian. “We’re too close!”

“You want back in?”

“I do.” Kenn hit the button.

The charges they’d planted blew up, chasing the truck as Adrian sped toward the mob.

The refugees right behind them couldn’t avoid the detonations.

Twisted wreckage and screams sprayed across the ground and the back of the truck.

“Keep shooting!” Adrian hit the next people on foot. They were the first wave of stragglers who were now on the front lines but hadn’t realized it yet.

Kenn grabbed the last two cans and held them out at the same time, knowing they needed a thick wall here. They hadn’t been able to reach this point to plant charges.

“We don’t need them.” Charlie fired while Kendle reloaded. “We have pineapples.”

“Homemade pineapples.” Kendle cackled and lifted her rifle again.

Kenn rolled his eyes and held on to the gas cans as Adrian slammed into the bumper of a wagon.

Adrian let the wagon bounce ahead and then pitted it as he drove toward Safe Haven. A woman was at the shield, staring at him with fury and fear. She vanished behind the throng of refugees trying to breach the barrier.

“Angie.” Adrian pushed the pedal down, tightening his grip. “Count.”

“One...two...” Charlie stored the rifle. “Three...four...” He pulled up the layered vest and ducked beneath it like he’d agreed to do for this moment. “Five...”

Kendle also hunkered down, squeezing into the floorboard by Kenn’s dusty boots.

Kenn shifted the box from his knees to the seat between them, then grabbed two of the grenades. Making them had been fun. It had reminded Kenn of his Marine days with Marc. *He would have approved this crazy plan.*

“Eight...”

Adrian rammed a motorcycle into the path of a truck that crunched it and still tried to pit them.

Adrian swerved at the vehicle as Kenn tossed a grenade.

“Nine...ten...”

The grenades began to explode, creating more shrapnel that slammed into the sides of their truck and other vehicles now trying to block them in.

Adrian plowed through a small gap in the impromptu blockade, bouncing around at the impact. Grenades flew through the truck.

Kenn tossed two more, aiming at those closest.

A bullet slammed into the dashboard, just missing Kenn’s head.

Adrian turned the truck so Kenn could use his rifle on whoever was shooting at them.

Kenn narrowed it to the three vehicles closest, unable to see the people through the smoke. He fired in that direction and knew it was good. He switched back to the grenades that were removing multiple threats with each throw. They didn’t have enough ammunition to kill all the refugees, so their weapons were a mix of mass killing items.

Adrian felt the hit coming, but there was no time to order shields up as power slammed into the truck.

The vehicle was knocked into the air. It flipped twice and came down on the roof, scattering dirt, debris, and smoke in every direction.

Refugees flooded that way.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

**Remember How it Smells**

A picture containing weapon

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“N**o!” Angela slammed her hands against the shield, unable to drop it and help or they would be overrun.

Refugees pounded back, spitting and screaming obscenities.

“Help them!” Angela raised her fist to the smoky sky. “Save them!”

Power surrounded the scene, peering in.

“Save them!”

*Do you agree to serve the Lord and do battle for Him?* the Messenger insisted as refugees swarmed toward the truck.

Angela’s fury filled the barrier. It grew into a heat wave that filled the shield with temperatures high enough to bring instant sweat. “No. And if you let them die, I never will!”

The Messenger’s displeasure at her reversal could be felt through the shield and the building heat. A sound of frustration came over the din, quieting some of the refugees who sensed something happening.

*Do it yourself.* The Messenger vanished, choice made.

“Fine!” Angela lifted her arms, letting her power come forward, giving her witch control. “I will.”

Marc did the same.

Eagles and camp members braced for the attack. They were almost to the ship, but it would be impossible to defend the boat.

Angela lowered the shield.

A flood of killers immediately surged forward.

William grabbed the first one and drew, sucking out the lifeforce while Bucky stabbed men and women to keep him alive. William let go and grabbed another of the sweaty, grimy bodies. He inhaled, moaning.

Bucky slashed, fired, slashed again. Fingers and clubs fell to the sand, but the refugees kept coming.

The sky crackled and then popped. It was so loud that nearly everyone paused for a moment to identify the new noise.

“Heat lightning!” Samantha was in Neil’s arms as he ran for the ship. “Hurry!”

Lightning forked across the sky as clouds gathered. It slammed down near Adrian’s wrecked truck, hitting a group of refugees. Fire sparked from the spot, racing toward the other flames as the wind blew them together.

“It’s making a circle!” Charlie shoved the gear and vests over. As far as he knew, he was the only one conscious.

*Possum’ kid*, Adrian sent. *Stay still.*

The refugees didn’t see the movement and assumed the Eagles were dead in the truck. It was a secondary target now that the shield was down.

Lightning forked again, catching more ground on fire.

Refugees ran toward Safe Haven, screaming and throwing weapons.

Angela and Marc’s demons ran out to meet them, throwing sonic fire together. They cleared a path, burning women and men alive as their eyes exploded.

The ground rumbled, alerting people to a new problem.

“Earthquake?” Neil gasped. “Again? Here?”

“Nature is angry about that fire.” Samantha cradled her stomach as they reached the gangplank. “Wait.”

Neil stopped at the bottom and eased aside so the rest of the camp could get on the boat that was powering up. He surveyed the perimeter outside the shield and found death in every direction. Animals came from the ground to attack the refugees. Holes opened up and wind blew them into the fire.

“Nature thinks they started it.” Marc groaned, chest squeezing as his demon used another blast of sonic power to clear a side of the shield. Dozens of bodies fell.

Refugees began to run away from the shoreline and the fire now, but it was too late for most of them. Nature’s wrath was merciless, leaving men without hands from animal bites and women running away on fire from winds whipping the flames into a frenzy.

“Come back now.” Angela tired as she connected to help William bring up the shield against the last hundred refugees who didn’t care about what was going on behind them. All they saw was Safe Haven in front of them.

Marc’s demon slammed into him with enough lifeforces to cause doorways in his mind to appear like ants laying a scent trail.

Angela’s witch entered her host gracefully, used to the merge. She inhaled of the energy, of the bloodlust and the death. *I caused this. I’ll remember how it smells.*

So would Marc, but mostly because he’d never been so powerful or so intimidated. This was only a part of how Angela felt, and he already wasn’t sure how to handle having so many ways to kill.

“Time to go.” Angela’s eyes were glazed as she mentally tracked Charlie and his group. “Now.”

Adrian kept a stiff hand under Charlie’s arm as they took off running. They’d stopped playing possum after the first lightning bolt.

Adrian didn’t hear new explosions or impacts and hoped that part was over as he dragged the teenager along before he could be distracted by the various fights and panic.

*Too late*, Kenn pointed, sliding to a stop with the pair as Kendle fired her last bullet and saved Adrian’s life.

The tracker fell out of the path, but his partner lunged forward with his knife.

Charlie spun out of Adrian’s hold and ducked the man’s swing. He latched onto the tracker’s dirty shoulder and punched upward, using all of his 110lbs.

Caught off guard, the tracker took the hit in the throat and gagged, lurching backward.

Charlie jabbed his knife into the man’s eye.

Adrian grabbed the boy again and got them moving, ears filled with screams, nose smothered with burning flesh*. Still doesn’t compare to the rest stop,* he reflected, unable to stop the flashback.

*The caller!* Adrian didn’t have time to wonder if Angela still had it. Wind blew under his feet, lifting him off the ground.

The downdraft blew the people aside and dug into the dirt, tossing clumps of charred ground into the air.

It dissipated, withdrawing as nature directed focus toward the line of people fleeing to the ocean.

“No!” Angela strengthened the shield with all of her power as nature slammed into it, screeching in immeasurable rage.

*And Kendle thinks she gets pissed*. Charlie kept running, handgun now out, while Adrian propelled him toward his mother. They could see Angela’s shadow, but negative emotions swirling through the shield prevented clear sight.

“There!” Kenn veered the group toward a deep dune that was covered in sand. Movement coming toward them warned that alligators were answering nature’s call.

Kenn led them through the tangle of sinkholes and snarling reptiles, only able to manage it because the big animals were caught off guard.

Refugees chasing them drew up at the sight of the big man eaters. Some of them chose to go forward anyway, but the pause gave nature time to organize her army into two thick lines that caught anyone who tried to run or jump their way through. A few of the scrappier refugees used blades and fury to kill the monsters in their path.

Adrian and his group didn’t look back. They were almost to the shield, where dozens of refugees were still attacking it. There wasn’t a clear area and even if there had been, when the barrier lowered to let them in, the killers would also gain entry.

*Don’t let us in.* Charlie was thinking of Tracy. Now that they were so close, he could see that only the highest Eagles and parts of the council were still out to fight. The rest of the camp was on the boat that would be overrun. *We’ll go down fighting. I love you. I’m sorry.*

Angela’s denial swept the scene, but Charlie looked at Adrian. “This is our atonement. We’re going to die for them.”

Adrian stared.

Kendle nodded eagerly.

Kenn shoved his way to the front and started hitting refugees with his knives as they ran. He cleared a path that immediately closed back in on them.

Adrian pressed Charlie against the shield and turned his back to Angela to fight.

“Let them out.” Jeff limped to Angela’s side, without a guard. Everyone was busy. Kimberly and the rest of the children were clustered behind him. “Let them finish it and we can go.”

Angela hadn’t known until this moment what the kids were supposed to do. She shook her head, horrified. “Not again.”

Jeff put a hand on Kimberly’s shoulder. “You have Eagles of all ages now. You wanted that.”

“Not like this.”

“Exactly like this.”

Angela scanned him.

Jeff knew to bright light the memories she needed to see, aware of time running out for all of them. Nature was ramping up, sending blasts of wind that ripped up trees and used them as battering rams. It made the action at the mountain seem tame in comparison as one force wiped out hundreds.

Kimberly stepped to the shield, hand going to her knife. “One last time.”

Angela moaned, hurting. *No, killers. You’ll be with us when we return.*

“It’s our honor,” the rage children intoned together.

Forced, Angela scanned to be sure everyone was ready, aware of the fear of Eagles and the council. Then she spoke the words from William’s book that she had sworn would never pass through her lips. “You are now of age. Take your place among my army.”

Kids arched as doors opened and gifts unlocked.

Angela placed her hand against Charlie’s flexing shoulder through the shield. He was firing around Adrian’s hip. He had the last mag.

Angela lowered the shield.

Hungry kids dove on incoming refugees, teeth and knives sinking into any open skin they could reach. Lifeforces snapped out across the beach like balloons popping.

Eagles who weren’t busy fighting for their lives backed toward the nearest camp descendant for protection, not wanting to be mistaken for an enemy.

Jeff watched with his shield up, not joining in the fighting. He was drained after their adventures, refusing to take another lifeforce or allow Kimberly to refill him. He watched the little girl slice into a man’s balls and move on to hit a woman in the stomach. The child ran around stabbing and cutting, inflicting mortal wounds in split seconds. It allowed for almost no retaliation. All the kids were doing something similar.

The refugees had already thinned on the western edge of the camp. The eastern side was deserted as the fire burned around the perimeter. Jeff assumed that would also head this way once the wind shifted. Right now, it was coming from the north and east, pushing flames west. The refugees were being driven back into the hell they’d come from.

*Outcasts forever*, Angela marked them.

Adrian pushed backward, forcing Charlie into his mom. A rush of screams and gunshots prevented talking.

Angela fired to the right, automatically falling into Eagle procedure for protecting someone in the center.

Guards with matching mags tossed them to the empty team so they could keep fighting.

Slamming the mag home, Adrian laughed in delight as all of them fell into his lessons. Shoulder-to-shoulder, they cleared the refugees closest and then searched for anyone aiming at them. Eagles were taught to remove threats in a specific order.

Sandwiched in the center, Charlie dropped to his knees to be able to see between their legs, but sand flew over him in waves. Nature was zeroing in on the last group of humans who weren’t dead or screaming in pain and fear. All over the beach, sand erupted in tiny volcanoes that spewed crabs with long pinchers and sharp senses that didn’t differentiate between good and evil. Eagles and refugees shouted as claws cut through boots and pants. Nature had also noticed the shield being lowered. Fire crackled along the warehouse, shifting toward them.

“Call them back.” Angela looked at Jeff.

Jeff gave a loud whistle that hurt the ears of people close to him.

Children stopped and ran to him as if pulled on a string. It made Angela’s blood boil, but she was also grateful. The children had swung the tide in this battle.

“And the lightning.” Marc didn’t want to offend any of their helpers.

Angela refused to acknowledge it. She holstered as Eagles surrounded them. She reached out mentally, not sure if her idea would work. *I have something you want*. Angela pictured the wind scenes she’d just witnessed, not sure how to see the spirit of nature. *I will trade you for all Safe Haven lives.*

There was no response.

Angela sent a vision of people recognizing nature as a real force and respecting it. “You need that to be healthy again, like we need our people to love us. We can heal you, like we’ll do for the water as we sail.”

Nature screamed, rushing toward the human who had dared to force a communication.

Adrian brought up his shield around Angela.

So did Marc.

Everyone else followed, smothering their alpha in layers of defense.

When the children added their protections, Angela couldn’t feel anything but their love for her, their need for her to free them from the awful game they’d been used in so long.

Nature couldn’t penetrate so many layers. She pounded the surf all around the survivors, hitting refugees and her own army, but none of Safe Haven’s people. They were sheltered.

Silence fell. It was odd considering how many screams were echoing, but none of them could hear it.

William’s addition to the layers of defense turned the sky dark for the entire camp. The people watching from the decks and stairs of the ship stared in uneasy admiration as the wind was stopped and the remaining refugees were shut out.

“Check for survivors and make them dead.” Adrian pointed at people.

Men hurried to obey.

Marc helped Charlie to his feet as people released shields, letting William cover it alone. It was obvious he could handle it now.

Ciemus fighters also followed the order, nodding to those they knew and sweeping the dead for the same.

William came to Angela as the Eagles took the kids to the boat. He’d gained a new level, like many of the descendants already had or were in the middle of doing around them.

*Die!* Nature’s fury screeched across the shore and hit the refugee survivors, causing more people to flee. The fight was over with the refugees, but Nature continued to throw shade against the shield.

Tiring of it, Angela held up her wrist. “I’ve seen that future. I’m marked by it.”

*No deals!* Nature drew back for a final blast that would get through the shield. Like the refugees, she had noted that pain was effective.

“So be it.” Angela opened a door she hadn’t used before. “Every time she hits us, draw from her.”

In the middle of a blast, nature had no time to withdraw the hit. Power slammed into the shield in a dozen places.

Descendants arched, recharging their energy banks instead of repelling it.

Shrieks and screams echoed as nature fled in fury she couldn’t express.

Angela closed the door, drained. They’d only been able to access that ability through her alpha connection.

Jeff’s kids ran toward her.

Angela was too tired to handle it yet. “Help them onto the ship.”

Jeff and Charlie nodded, letting go of their shields.

Angela took a deep breath as the shields vanished from her. It had felt like being covered in a hundred blankets.

“There’s one last thing to handle.”

“What’s that?” Angela asked, heart filling with dread for the outcome of this moment. It was dark when she’d looked ahead.

“Me.” William kissed her.

Angela let him.

Marc, Ivan and Adrian strode toward them in fury.

Ivan had been guarding the ramp. Gus took over the post, frowning.

Lightning flashed, but no sparks flew between the couple, no passion. It was like kissing a brother.

William leaned back. He brushed a curl from her flushed face. “I demand you pick one of them to die. Ciemus demands it or we’ll revoke your deal with the ocean.”

“Why would you do that?” Ivan shouted, jerking Angela’s arm to get her away from the man.

Marc and Adrian stepped in front of her, facing William with hands on empty guns.

“Because she’ll never have peace until you three realize how serious this is. Survival of the world is in her hands and you’re fighting over her like she’s a trophy. She’ll pick a sacrifice or all of you will die here.” William brought up a shield around himself that only Angela had a chance of defeating. “Pick now.”

Angela sighed, heart hurting. “I can’t. I need all of them, all of *you*.”

“But you only need one mate. Pick him at least, and I’ll decide from the other two.”

Angela looked at Marc.

William nodded. “As it should be.” He marched toward Ivan.

“No!” Angela put a shield over the bruised soldier.

Adrian waited for the killing blow, hoping it would be quick. Knowing his camp was safe was enough for him. “I’m sorry for how bad it was, but not for a single action I took to drive us here.”

Angela nodded, teary. “I’ll always think of you as my leader.”

“You’re my magnum opus. I couldn’t be prouder.” Adrian knelt as William came to him.

Angela turned away as William grabbed Adrian and drew.

Nothing happened.

William let go and grabbed Marc, who didn’t have a shield up.

Nothing.

Even without a shield, he couldn’t harm the man who knew better than to struggle.

William shook his head. “You can’t save them and kill your herd. Let go of one.”

Angela waved Ivan toward the ship. “I release you in honor. Go.”

Ivan stayed where he was, waiting to see who would live and who would die. He wasn’t here because of a charm and he hadn’t forgotten she’d said third. If William managed to kill both Adrian and Marc, Angela would be his.

“That’s what I mean!” William shouted. “You’ll never have peace unless you pick someone to die!”

“You!”

Angela’s scream startled William and sent him backward.

“I pick you!”

Magic flew across the beach, showering them with wet, bloody sand.

“They are all mine!” Power hit the ground harder, but it didn’t hurt William.

“They will serve me until I die!”

Angela’s fury twisted the sand into a tornado that swept toward the fire and smothered it.

“I belong to no one!”

Magic flared, severing bonds and charms that had been in place for months and those that had been there for years. Broken chains fell to her feet.

“Is that the one?” Marc asked, looking at William as the sand tornado broke apart in a wild spray.

“That’s it.” William winked.

Adrian smiled at Marc. “You did a great job. I didn’t think you’d be able to pull it off.”

Angela glared at them all. “It was a trick.”

Faced with her anger for the first time, William stuttered. “Um, we didn’t... Uh.” William turned to Marc for help.

Marc looked at Adrian.

Adrian walked away. “I wasn’t willing. I refuse to take any credit or blame.”

Marc frowned. “He’s still bonded.”

“He’s always loved me.” Angela’s eyes were blue chips of ice that sparkled with insanity. Her witch had come forward at the provocation. “He isn’t under a charm. He never was.”

“Are you?” Marc had to know if she was finally free.

Angela sent a bolt of power that dropped Adrian to his knees. He groaned in agony.

So did Angela.

Marc’s heart fell.

William put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You knew long before this.”

Marc nodded, shaking off the sympathy. “Yeah, but I didn’t know what to do about it. Now, I do.”

Angela waited. She didn’t know what Marc meant.

Adrian stayed on the ground, waiting for Angela to punish them both again. He had no doubt that she would. Being forced to confront all these truths was making her boil. He could still feel it, though he shouldn’t be able to.

“That’s because I love you!” Angela screamed. She sent another blast of rage. “Can’t you just die?!”

Marc and William stayed back as Angela blasted Adrian with gifts that should have killed him. Instead, a shield came up around the cringing man, making Angela’s power useless.

“I don’t understand.” Ivan watched in shock as Angela tried to kill Adrian and couldn’t reach him.

Marc grunted. “She’s protecting him through their bond. The witch is trying to help her get through it, but they can’t.”

“She’s fighting herself.” William paused, fascinated as she switched to a more powerful lineup. “She can’t win. She has to accept it.”

“We all do.” Marc was observing intently. “We’re all connected. We don’t want to be, but we are.”

“Yes.” William was the first to make the choice. “I’m leaving–right now. Good luck to you all. Please remember Ciemus is your sanctuary.” William trotted down the beach toward the damaged parking area, followed by his confused escort.

Angela stopped firing. She turned to Marc, voice blended with her demon. “You knew this would happen.”

“I set it up.”

Tears rolled over Angela’s cheeks. “Why would you do this to us?”

“You’re free now.” Marc went to her without fear. “You’ll love us both. We’ll have moments that suck and moments that are amazing.” Marc used his thumbs to wipe away her tears. “We’ll save our people and when the end comes for me, I know you’ll be cared for. I do love you more than I hate him. I always have.”

Angela tried to control her rage and sadness. The witnesses had already gotten too much of a show. “Does it matter that I’ve never wanted any of this and still don’t?”

Adrian sighed as the shield vanished and he could breathe again. Her love was smothering. He hadn’t known she cared so much. “Only the survival of our people matters. Only them. We’re pawns.”

Marc gave a soft smile, pleased with himself. He’d played a great role over the last two weeks. “Adrian means me and him. We’re the pawns.”

“What does that make me?”

“Our queen,” both men answered.

Angela snorted. “I’m the pawn. You two are the kings.”

Lightning flashed across the sky.

Marc shook his head, looking up. “No, Angie. The kings are up there.”

Angela got goosebumps. “They aren’t playing for humanity anymore...are they?”

“No.” Adrian still hadn’t stood up. “They might have been at one time, but something they want more came along and changed everything. We’re not on their level, but even Marc and I understand that feeling.”

Angela shuddered. “Jennifer’s right. It’s blasphemy.”

“It’s destiny.” Marc repeated what William had told him the night they’d conversed atop the wall. “In each life, you’ve gotten stronger. Each time, your weakness has been your heart, your lovers. In this life, we’re changing the game. We may not have to repeat it.”

Angela stared at him, barely allowing herself to breathe. “We might get to go home this time?”

Marc nodded. “Adrian thinks so too, but it’s also in the book that William gave you and in the scrolls I’ve found. We have a chance to get this one right, to clear the debt owed for betraying our creator.”

Angela studied it, seeing their thoughts and hopes, their fears.

Marc retreated.

Adrian slowly stood, attention on his love. The shield around him had been too strong for her hatred to get through. In time, she might even forgive him for some of the mistakes.

Angela regarded the ocean for a long minute, mind whirling. Then she glanced upward.

Everyone tensed, aware that they had a powerful witness also waiting to discover how she would react. It was a big moment for all of them. If Angela refused to accept the truth, the game would reset, and they would all have to do it again, no matter the outcome of their trip to the island. The final battle could still happen, but there would be no way they could keep from having to do it again in another future. If she accepted who she was and what was happening around her, a different path could finally be chosen. It all came down to this moment for the descendants, and through them, for humanity.

Angela looked at the ship now sheltering the camp she had sacrificed so much for, that she’d now led through the first layer of hell. *I love them more than either of my men, my kids or myself. I’m a patriot watching her country bleed out. I’ll always put them first.*

Marc and Adrian knew that. One was proud of her for it. The other accepted it as something he wasn’t supposed to change. The shepherd was supposed to love the sheep more than anything else. It was their job.

Peace broke over Angela as she understood the fighting between Marc and Adrian was really over. Everyone had accepted their place in the grand scheme of things. From here, seeing to the camp would always come first because nothing else would please the queen. She was only happy when her people were.

Angela looked at Adrian, hatred visible, but now, love also shined. “Collect my missing lambs.”

Adrian got up and ran.

Angela pointed at the waiting camp. “Security.”

Marc and lower level Eagles hurried toward the boat.

At her side for all of it, Jennifer had absorbed everything she could to study later, not letting the details distract her. She didn’t want to miss any of this.

Angela gestured. “Go, XO.”

Jennifer snapped a happy salute and joined Marc. She was official camp XO now. It felt amazing.

Angela regarded the council. “Council on the Bridge–*all* of you.”

Kenn and Tonya hugged as Neil and Samantha did the same from the bottom of the ramp. They all went onto the boat together.

The few people left with Angela waited to be told where she wanted them as they watched out for remaining refugees still trying to get in. William’s group was already out of sight, detouring north to avoid the fire. They were running over anyone in that path.

Kyle wasn’t concerned with where he ended up. He was too busy being happy for Jennifer. Her pleasure was his.

“Camp killer.” Angela waited for his reply.

Kyle grinned, finally at peace with himself and his role in all this. “You name them, I’ll remove them.”

“My XO needs a security detail.”

Kyle and his team were honored. They went to Jennifer, surrounding her with the boss’s open protection.

Ivan smiled at Angela when she made eye contact. “I still want you. Nothing will change that.”

Angela chuckled. “You’re getting what I can give.” Angela included his team. “My personal security.”

“Yes!” Travis and James slapped hands while the others cheered or grinned.

Angela waited for the three figures coming down the beach, heart thumping. Adrian had made her who she had to be for this moment in time too, though he didn’t know it. She loved him for that. She was also scared of the pain, just like every time she stepped into the cage with Neil or another senior man. *Maybe this will finally conquer it*.

Adrian fought the pleasure to bring Kendle and Nancy to her, then he dropped down nearby to bask in the emotion he’d never been allowed to openly enjoy before.

“I can’t lift your banishment.”

Adrian sighed in happy torment. “You’re perfect.”

Kendle made a gagging noise.

Nancy elbowed her in the ribs. “Shut up!”

Angela let go her hatred as much as she could. “I forgive you. Do as you please.”

“I’m coming.” Adrian waited to be denied.

Angela looked at Marc.

Marc shrugged. “We’re already towing his boat.”

Angela also tried to let go of that anger. “His women can sail with him.”

Nancy shook her head, disgusted. “I’m not his woman and I’m not going.” Nancy strolled toward the charred eastern tree line where she’d been told to hide. “I just didn’t want responsibility for Kendle. Thank you.”

Angela watched the woman leave, as did Adrian, then they traded a long look.

Angela slowly nodded. “Yes, she’ll survive.”

“And my daughter?”

Angela scanned deeper and was relieved. “Will be nothing like her father.”

Adrian’s joy crashed into her.

Angela absorbed it, letting the power refill her energy. Adrian’s light was potent. Marc fed the side of her that needed to be able to love. Adrian’s fed her determination to lead Safe Haven through the gates of hell and into any land where they would have peace.

Kendle waited observantly, sure more was coming. She couldn’t imagine Angela letting her enemy off without payment.

“And we are enemies.” Angela confirmed their status without a change in tone. “But not because of our men.”

“No.” Kendle grunted. “Because I’m a danger to your herd like this.”

“Yes.” Angela held out a hand. “I can cure you, but there are prices.”

Kendle stepped forward. “Please! I hate being this way!”

Angela clasped Kendle’s wrist and unlocked her gifts. She opened another door to let out a demon that had to be battled.

Kendle grabbed Angela’s knife and stepped forward, impaling her. “Thank you.”

She twisted the blade, feeling the shield vanish and horrible rage turn her way. “I didn’t need a gift to kill you. I wouldn’t have figured that out if your enforcer hadn’t locked me down.”

Kendle stepped back, ready to die at Marc’s hand, but she never looked away from the bloody woman staggering backward. “I can’t tell you how good this feels.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

**It’s Destiny**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**S**creams echoed across the beach.

Angela grabbed onto Kendle’s wrist as she sank to the sand. Blood ran down her shirt and pants, dripping into the sand. “Connected.”

Kendle froze as voices echoed in her mind. She could hear the thoughts of everyone on the beach and all of them were coming to kill her.

Kendle ignored them for the bright light in the center of her mind, now growing into a glare that she flinched from. It blinded her, increasing until she shuddered.

Kendle closed her eyes and stepped into the light, unable to fight the alpha pull in full force. As she stepped through, she connected to Angela.

Adrian held a hand up to the panicking men and women who would have interfered, hoping Angela had planned for this part of it too. The risk she had taken here was life altering in the grand scheme of things.

Kendle screamed, rage stolen by the feel of Angela’s death. It was replaced by a hollow ping that snapped Kendle into a frantic medic trying to save her commander. “Help me!”

“Your gift!” Adrian shouted.

“Don’t die, don’t die!” Kendle shoved energy into Angela as she jerked the blade free.

Blood gushed onto the ground.

“No, no, no!” Kendle pushed harder, using the last of her energy. She sucked out the reserve and then kept going. “You have to live!”

“Why?” Angela forced out, unable to believe the pain.

“Because we need you!” Kendle began to sob as Angela’s head lolled to the side. “I need you!”

Power shot from Kendle’s body and into Angela’s in such intensity that everyone was forced to look away–even those still running to reach them. Blue and yellow orbs flew over the scene, stirring up sand and dust that obscured the view.

Kendle slumped to the beach, a withered husk. She’d given everything she had.

The sand settled.

Eagles and Marc reached them.

Angela coughed, groaning.

Marc helped her sit up, unable to believe she wasn’t dead.

“Kendle gave her life for Angela’s. It wasn’t enough.” Adrian knelt to examine the castaway. “She won’t last long like this either.”

Everyone looked at Angela, waiting for her call.

Angela motioned at Marc. “Put her on the boat.”

Marc glared. “Why?”

Angela let Ivan help her toward their panicking camp. “Only my death was going to satisfy her.”

“What if she hadn’t been able to do the right thing in the end?” Marc demanded. “We didn’t settle our differences so you could waste your life on her!”

“Every life is precious to me, Marcus. Even hers.”

Marc pushed Greg in Kendle’s direction. “Get her.”

Angela wanted them all off the beach, but the pain was preventing movement. Kendle had healed her as much as she could with empty energy banks that had been locked down for a week. It wasn’t enough for a mortal wound.

The agony grew intense. Angela gasped, knees crumbling back to the sand.

Adrian dropped by her as Marc took the other side.

Their power hit a wall and bounced back.

“Oh, shit!” Ivan groaned. “She’s immune to your level of healing.”

Marc looked around, frantic. “Who else? Conner!”

Peter shook his head. “He hit a wall with Sam. No way he’s strong enough. Get Jennifer.”

“Give her a lifeforce!” Marc snapped as Kyle ran to get Jennifer.

“I released them all.” Adrian was still sending energy.

“What!”

“She hates me being corrupt.”

Marc groaned. “Now you go full good on us!”

“New power opened up. Even people outside the shield felt it. Maybe one of them can heal.”

“Maybe I can.” Ivan was behind Marc.

Marc dragged the man down next to her, seeing the wound was bleeding again. “Do it!”

“There’s a boat coming in!” Daryl shouted overtop the noise of both people and ocean. “We have company!”

Ivan’s power sank into Angela’s stomach and sealed the wound.

It immediately reopened.

“Only one chance now.” Adrian scooped Angela into his arms and ran for the ship.

Marc got the rest of the camp moving that way, trusting Adrian to watch over his heart while he watched out for their people. “Get on our boat! Get aboard!”

“It has letters on it. UN! It says...”

“United Nations.” Angela was barely conscious. All she could feel was pain. “Get them all!”

Adrian felt the fear from the rest stop flood his heart and increased speed. “Marc’s bringing them, baby. Hang on.”

“Tell the captain to move us! Now!” Adrian ran up the gangplank and into the cool interior of the ship. He followed the shocked crowds that parted to let him through when they recognized the bloody woman in his arms. Many of them took note of who was holding her, once again arriving when he was needed.

Exhausted, Ivan staggered behind the line of Eagles, breath coming in heavy gasps as he tried to get on the boat before he collapsed.

A stiff, bloody hand grabbed Ivan’s elbow and propelled him forward.

Ivan gave Gus a grunt of thanks as the big man dragged him toward the ship.

Gus felt fresh danger coming, but there wasn’t time to find out what direction to guard from. He brought up his shield, including Ivan in it.

A bullet flew toward them.

Gus staggered forward at the impact, barreling into three Eagles running onto the ramp. They all fell in a clumsy heap. Ivan rolled into the water.

Standing at the top of the ramp, Jennifer brought up her shield to cover the men, relieved when the water curved around her defense instead of fighting her. Marc’s camp shield was flickering. Not enough to let in more refugees, but it did allow the sharper ones to sneak in bullets.

The Eagles fished Ivan from the water and hurried him onto the ship that was shuddering as it began to slide forward.

Gus kept shoving to make room for those still coming, awed at his shield stopping a bullet. The force had hit, though. He was sure he had a nasty bruise.

Marc stopped at the bottom of the ramp, scanning with his grid for missing people.

*All members are aboard*. His demon had kept close track of it, like Marc had assigned him to do. Neither of them had expected this level of chaos, however.

Refugees in the distance were creating a dust cloud that moved in both directions as new arrivals rushed toward the shore; those who’d survived the vicious battle fled with their injured or bodies. Marc was sure waves of them would keep hitting this beach for days.

The shield flickered, going down.

*Angie!* Marc ran up the ramp.

Jennifer brought the shield back up, exhausted, as Morgan closed the hatch behind Marc. He locked it by the exact steps fading on signs inside the shuddering ship. Grant had drilled them on this twice, but Morgan didn’t remember it all.

The walls groaned, floor lifting as the boat moved through the water.

Jennifer held onto a rail, spotting Kyle coming through the large entry, searching for her. He was carrying Autumn.

Jennifer went to them, already hating the feel of the vessel moving. *My stomach isn’t going to be happy with this.*

Kyle took her hand. “That’s me too. I always got seasick on boat trips.”

The PA system crackled. “Prepare for incoming... Well, it could be anything, as you all know.” Grant sighed through the mike. “Brace for it. I can’t just zig out of the way.”

People tensed, waiting for the next fight to begin.

**2**

Adrian stopped in a large room jammed with people calling orders and questions. Only their love would finish healing her now. Nothing else was getting through. “Help her.”

Camp members stared or shouted in confusion as they recognized the boss.

“We’re not like you.” Monica slid a jacket under Angela’s head. “Can’t you do it?”

“Not alone.” Adrian waved at Eagles. “She doesn’t need me the way she does all of you.”

“Okay.” Monica wanted to help. “What should we do?”

Adrian smoothed bloody curls away from Angela’s pale face. “Someone has to die for her.”

Angela stopped breathing.

Eagles shoved through the crowd to save her.

Kids and descendants stayed back at Adrian’s mental orders. Power wouldn’t help her now.

Adrian looked up. “Who?”

Eagles who’d moved terrified people aside only looked back at him, waiting for the call.

“All of you are willing to die for her?”

A few more people came closer to sacrifice themselves if it meant she would live and keep leading.

Power arched from the sacrifices and floated over Angela. It was weak.

More people came forward. Non-magic users who’d spent months hiding jealousy advanced to save the future.

Adrian connected them, directing the flow of orbs that stunned members gave up without the death they’d been expecting.

Adrian smiled as the energy flow increased.

The approval faded as he realized Angela wasn’t responding. “Why isn’t it working?”

Marc finally made his way through the crowd, aware of power streaming and hearts sending out terrified thumps. There could only be one reason. She wasn’t fighting to get back to them.

Angela flinched from the brilliant light.

*Would you come home now?*

*I have a choice?*

*The choice has always been yours.*

*My people will die.*

*Yes.*

*Send me back.*

*You die for them again and again. Allow peace to fill your soul. Accept their ending so the reset may begin.*

*Never!* Angela twitched as pain entered her senses.

*Then teach them faster, child. It hurts us to see you this way.*

Angela groaned as pain pulled her back.

Cheers sounded when her eyes opened.

Angela drew in old magic from the love of her people, healing the wound and sealing bonds that would last forever. These men and women had been willing to die for her. That went deeper than any charm or spell.

Marc helped her sit up and then stand. Cheers came from those around them; shouts echoed throughout the ship. The walls were feeding back emotions now and most of it was fear.

Marc pulled Adrian’s arm to get him in his place, then began waving at the pleased, angry people who now wanted to fight beside their legendary leader. “Let’s get in our places. If you’ve drilled, get to that spot and get on it. We’re setting sail!”

Adrian helped Angela get to the stairs and stay on her feet, stunned at what he’d witnessed through their bond.

Angela walked awkwardly, remastering her legs as she went. *I feel like I died*, she joked with herself to keep out the horror.

Adrian followed. *It’s not over yet.*

**3**

Angela entered the bridge, bringing relief to Grant and Ray, his guard. Grant nodded at the UN ship sailing into range to fire on them. “What now?”

Still recovering, Angela waited for the call she hoped was coming. She forced her fingers to stretch and clench. Things had changed from the way she’d foreseen this moment, but in the end, the result should be the same. The UN wanted them alive more than they wanted them dead.

“What if they fire on us?” Cole was perched in a chair away from the big glass windows.

“Then we’ll sink.” Angela stayed away from the dirty man. She’d already died once today. She wasn’t ready to do it again so soon.

Beating Adrian to it, Grant looked over his shoulder. “What are you hiding?”

Cole cringed, giving himself away.

Every descendant in hearing distance began tearing through his mind. There was no way he could hide it, even for the minute the UN needed.

“Stop!” Cole slid out of the chair and onto his knees. “I brought them here.” He sobbed, hands coming up to cover his face. “They knew you needed a captain. They sent out the images of me being stranded and wanting to get back on the ocean.”

Before anyone could grab him, Cole drew a knife from his belt and plunged it into his own throat.

Angela felt evil coming and reached for the mike on the radio as Cole’s body slumped over.

The static cleared.

“You will surrender now, or we will fire. I am counting to ten.”

*Mario!*

*That’s Mario.*

Children from the western camp shoved memories at Angela, slapping her with their anger and fear.

“I will pause as I count, to allow you time to answer. It begins now. One... Two...”

Angela used her boot to shove Cole’s body out of her way so she could get to the doorway where the council was crowded around and ready to pass her words to the camp.

“Three...four...”

“It’s getting hot in here.” Kyle looked around. “Is the ship okay?”

Adrian watched Angela, feeling sweat run down his back and into his crack. She was staring at the kids who were being quarantined on one side of the massive deck. The kids were shouting, crying, pushing memories of what they’d gone through, of the kids who were still missing, who had gone through it before them, and all the lives taken for entertainment.

“We demand justice!” Kimberly shouted at the alpha.

Adrian wiped away sweat, noticing various dials moving in response to Angela’s anger. *You’re gonna get it, kid. We all are.*

“Five… Six....”

Angela keyed the mike. “I see you like them young and crying. I enjoy tears, too. Do you cry, Mario?” Angela cackled, holding in the mike as she observed the UN ship. “Doesn’t matter, I guess. You’re going to cry now.” She let off the mike, eyes glassy. *You are now of age. Take your place among my army.*

Power flew through the air, searing locks on mental doors.

“Fire on the... Ahhh! Ahhh! Ahhh!”

Angela let the kids hear Mario’s screams over the radio, enjoying their satisfaction at his pain, his useless tears. Everyone could hear them under the shrieks.

“What happened?” Kenn was one of the people at the bridge doorway, but he’d been out of the loop.

“Hair of the dog.” Angela hung up the mike. “Slow us down.”

Kenn frowned. “They’ll fire on us.”

Grant shook his head, pointing. He was using his glasses. “They’re going nuts over there. I see fights.”

“Give it ten minutes. Let’s have a camp count while we wait.” Angela wanted to confirm it had been done correctly. She’d been too weak to do more than hang onto Adrian as he rushed her onto the ship.

Angela, legs still shaking, went toward the stairs that led to the deck. “Throw Cole overboard. The fish need to eat and he’s a lot of meals.”

Angela, Adrian, and Kenn joined the camp on deck as their ship slowly sailed away from land. Marc came to them, finished on his fast run through the important areas to be sure someone was manning them. He studied the UN ship as they got closer, worrying.

Angela turned to watch the shore, where the shield was withdrawing to let remaining refugees rush the beach. Now that nature had stopped firing, they’d returned to their obsession.

Angela felt her energy bank gain a little and brought up a shield over the ship.

Refugees fired in vain, storming into water that roared in angry hunger.

Angela let Adrian hug her. She would never enjoy death, even when she was the one causing it. “I could have warned them about the water. I could have shown them it was dangerous.” She had to confess her sin.

Adrian knew. “They would have been here when we came back, still full of the evil that’s consuming our country. You eliminated the need for another battle with our fellow Americans.”

“And she sheltered Ciemus.” Marc kept his eyes on the UN ship. They were close enough for him to see defensive shadows of men swiping, but no one attacking them.

“You will.” Adrian shook his head at Marc’s cold look. “Please don’t hate me for it. Yes, it’s in my notebook, but I didn’t know they existed when I wrote it. I assumed it would be adults.”

Marc looked back at the ship in horror. “Kids!”

Adrian nodded. “The ship is full of them and they hate their captors. Angela told them to wait. They did.”

Angela closed her eyes as they neared the ship and the screams grew louder, clearer. The UN men were begging for mercy.

Tears slipped from under Angela’s lashes. “No.”

Fresh screams echoed.

“They’re making it quick to spare you.” Adrian frowned. “Stop slapping them with your pain.”

“Ignore that.” Marc added it up faster than Adrian this time. “They need to know that killing hurts the alpha.”

Adrian frowned, realizing Marc was right. “You read the books?”

“All of them.” Marc grimaced. “I’ve started my own.”

Dog joined them on the deck, followed by the two cats. They were trying to stay with him so closely they were tripping him up.

Dog jumped over the cats and stopped by Angela’s boots. *I don’t need help! You love me for saving you! You’re ready for a nap! I heard you, now go away!*

Both cats rubbed on him and then climbed up his back, purring.

Dog dropped down so the pain would stop, letting out a long sigh.

The bunker cat showed love by squatting on Dog’s head.

*Get your tail out of my ear!*

Marc leaned closer to Angela. “I’ll never say that to you.”

Arm still around her, Adrian laughed. “I might.”

The ship shuddered and clanged under them as Grant dropped anchor.

People who had been chosen as crew hurried to their stations to help Grant pilot the ship. In the short time they’d been inching along, they were already most of a mile from shore.

Angela looked around for advice from her council.

It wasn’t a hard choice. Everyone wanted to be gone.

Angela was relieved. “We’ll leave it for the ocean to send where it wants. Get the kids and set our course.”

“What do you want us to do with them?” Kenn was watching the slaughter on the UN boat and wondering if that was about to spread to their ship.

“Get our camp settled on the other side so they can watch the land fade and cry. I’ll handle the new kids–all of them.”

The descendants understood what Angela was going to do and approved. They hurried to carry out her orders. Watching the kids overrun the UN men who were shooting and punching, slamming and stabbing to little avail was frightening. It was clear the rage kids were now the biggest threat to Safe Haven’s future.

Jeff went to his group of kids and planted himself in front of them. He didn’t expect this to go well, but he was determined to protect them from whatever Angela had planned. He couldn’t tell. Since waking from being zapped, he couldn’t hear thoughts, though he still had his other gifts.

Kimberly stepped in front of Jeff, looking up. “I won’t remember you, but you’ll know me. When I’m older, you can tell me all about it and we’ll laugh together.”

Jeff realized Angela was only going to remove their memories and breathed a sigh of relief. He smiled at the girl. “It’s a date.”

Kimberly smiled shyly. “I know you don’t mean it that way, but I do.”

Jeff opened his arms as Angela and the Eagles approached them. “You’re cute. Talk to me when you’re legal.”

Satisfied, Kimberly held tight to him for a brief flash of hot heat and then she was ripped from his arms.

Angela shook the girl. “Take that spell back! Do it right now.”

Hanging in the air, the girl crossed her arms over her chest and stuck her lip out. “You can’t make me.”

Angela shook her again, a bit awed at her new strength. “You didn’t ask him first.” Angela let her anger come forward. “Do it right now, Kimberly Mason!”

It was the tone and words the child’s dad had always used when she was on the edge of being whipped. The girl grunted. Heat flashed out again.

Angela set the child on the deck. “Never without permission.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Kimberly didn’t look at Jeff.

Jeff grinned at the girl. “Sneaky. I like that.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “Don’t encourage her!”

Jeff chuckled. “Why? I can wait for her to grow up.”

“She won’t remember.” Adrian was eager to see the charm. He’d never witnessed it being performed.

“I know. It’s perfect. She won’t slit my throat in my sleep if I become a camp supplier while she grows up.” Jeff snickered.

Laughter flowed across both decks, bringing calm and a sense of triumph that spread to the weary people. The mood fell a second later as it hit all of them.

*We’re really leaving.*

Angela nodded, taking Marc’s hand as Adrian went to help with the bloody kids who were lining up on the deck of the UN ship.

“Three years isn’t so long. We’ll be back.”

“I already miss it, but I honestly don’t want to ever return if it means we can just have peace and live.”

Marc kissed her cheek. “Whatever you decide, we’re with you.”

Charlie, yellowing bruises now covered by a fresh layer of purple, came over to slip an arm around her shoulders. Seeing her almost die had been the final straw for his changing mentality. He’d never been so scared. “Yes, we are.”

Angela hugged him back, ice wall melting. *I’ve got my boy back!*

Angela used those powerful emotions to send up a burst of energy into the air over the ship. “Deep sleep.”

Power swarmed the decks and dove down stairwells. It swerved to miss those uninfected. Everyone else was slapped, smothered.

Bodies fell across the deck.

Shocked Eagles began to collect the adults and children that Angela had marked for memory removal.

Greg and Daryl oversaw the collection, directing the wounded and most violent to the infirmary.

The two ships were side-by-side now. Grant was coming to supervise the docking.

Ray was on his heels and looked pissed. He didn’t like it that Cole had been so close to all of them, that he’d missed the man’s evil.

“I’ll sort through it if you want.” Marc didn’t want her to have to go through the UN ship.

Angela felt like she should do it because of the pain it would cause her to witness the slaughter, but she had too many other issues to cover. “Twenty minutes. Longer if you find something worth the wait.”

“You’re sure you don’t want to tow it?”

Angela shook her head. “We’d be a target for anyone who saw it.”

“We’re going to be that anyway.” Charlie opened his thoughts to her. “We got a lot of information for you.”

“We’ll have a meeting when things settle down.” Angela was too shaky to do more than hold the shield and talk. The end of their time here had come a full day before she’d expected it. Jeff had almost killed himself to get here.

Jeff handed her a shiny object that brought tears to Angela’s eyes and agony to her heart. “Allan’s flask.”

Jeff retreated as her pain slapped at him. “I didn’t know you two were close.”

Angela pocketed the precious item. “He was among my first converts in Safe Haven.” She sniffed. “He was my friend.”

Jeff’s eyes welled up, experiencing her emotions and his. “What is this?”

Angela tried to control it, but she’d had a rough morning. Her misery hit him again.

“It’s the alpha effect.” Cody stopped by Jeff as he and Missy came to stand by Angela. They were on their own while the den mothers helped collect the unconscious people. “We all feel it.”

“Make it go away.”

Cody took Jeff’s hand.

Jeff tensed for a blast to knock him out, but the pain increased instead. “What’s going on?”

“He’s connecting you to the hive.” Kenn had come to check on Angela. Jeff hadn’t been in camp for a while and he was being scanned with suspicion for bringing them a load of sick kids.

“The hive?” Jeff didn’t want it... *Yes, I do.* He was too tired to keep pretending. *I miss Kimmie already.*

Angela sighed. She held out her hand. “Ask for anything and I’ll try to give it to you.”

“Don’t take her away!” Jeff blurted without touching. “I just got her!”

Angela let Missy take her outstretched hand. She groaned as the child fed her energy.

Cody let go of Jeff and took Angela’s other hand. This time, she smiled at the tiny sip of energy she allowed herself to have. Cody’s power transfer didn’t hurt.

Everyone stored that information.

Angela stifled the need to sleep and recover. She wasn’t done yet.

Jeff tensed as she looked at him.

“Are you really strong enough to wait for her to grow up?”

Jeff nodded. “She’s the only one who understands me.”

“No more whining? You’re onboard after this?”

Jeff sighed, giving the rest of what he now knew she needed. The voices in his mind were buzzing. “I was always with you, even while I hated you.”

Angela smiled through her tears as Jeff’s power merged with hers, bringing pain. “Go get your girl. I already assigned you to a room with Shawn and Missy.”

Jeff hurried over and scooped up the bloody girl, not caring about any of the looks or thoughts. They didn’t understand how quickly he’d bonded with Kimberly. He could get sex from camp women. Companionship that he enjoyed was rare.

“Something moved!”

Samantha’s squeal sent terror through those close enough to hear. Men grabbed guns, and then panicked because they were out of ammunition.

“It moved!” Samantha pushed Neil’s hand against her stomach. “There!”

Neil’s expression went from tense to awed as his child moved again. “I felt it. There’s a baby in there!”

Angela laughed with everyone else. “We’ll be okay now.” She looked up, amusement fading. “Because if we’re not okay for a while, I’ll sink this boat.”

*Your bluffs are tiresome*, the Messenger whispered in her ear. *Be careful.*

Angela gave a bitter laugh. *I don’t bluff. You should know that by now.*

There was a long pause and then, *What do you require?*

Angela didn’t gloat over the win. She switched into the next phase of negotiations. *A ceasefire while we learn to navigate this floating graveyard. Then, a meeting.*

*Such a meeting has never taken place between your realm and ours.*

Angela noticed he hadn’t denied her. *It’s not forbidden, right? The masters up there can come down if you can.*

*Yes... I will relay your request.*

*One more thing.* Angela drew on the hope of the descendants who’d gone still to listen. *As a sign of good faith, to start our ceasefire, I want the kids healed of their illnesses.*

*Very well.*

Angela felt the Messenger leave. She paused to appreciate the moment, thanking fate once again for giving her this destiny. “I’m not Moses, but I am a freedom fighter. We all are. It’s how we were trained.”

Adrian felt their gratitude and allowed it to sink in and heal some of the darkness in his heart.

Walking by with an unconscious child over each shoulder, Marc also gave his former rival a nod of respect. *I’m a harder, sharper soul because of you. I’m also sorry for it.*

Adrian took one of the kids from him and followed Marc down to the infirmary. *So am I*.

Adrian placed the child on the waiting bunk, aware of Morgan rushing through with his medical bag. “Get a drink later? She can’t move us to the other ship yet.”

“Yes.” Marc covered the filthy little girl with a blanket. “But you’re not moving to the other ship. You’ll spend the voyage with us and just be separated when we reach the island.” Marc shrugged. “Unless we can get the camp to lift your banishment. Now that I’m not against it, that can happen.”

“No.” Adrian went to the stairs to go collect more bodies. “My banishment can’t be lifted until it’s time to return. When she told you there would be years of peace, she meant for you and the camp. I get to watch you all live and grow while never being able to be a part of it again until we come home to die.”

*Angela’s wrath*, Marc realized.

“When she told you she was going to make me pay, she didn’t lie. By the time we get there, I’ll be hooked back into camp life and loving it.”

“Then she’ll rip it away.” Marc was almost sorry for the man now. “That’s cruel and unusual punishment.” Marc grinned. “I love her so much.”

“Same here.” Adrian went up the stairs.

Marc followed, heading to the other ship to do his check for more kids who were unconscious, but not dead. He was having to feel for pulses to be sure on that. The UN men had fought hard to survive.

Marc glanced back to see Morgan injecting Kendle. She’d been brought down by Daryl and Greg. She was already muttering, coming up from the targeted sleep charm. He let his eyes wander her scars, the blood on her skin. *Thank you*.

On the deck, helping inject descendants before they woke, Angela sent love and hatred in response.

Marc grinned, climbing faster. “That’s my Angie. Full of both.” He paused as now familiar power settled over the ship. “An answer already. Wow.”

Angela waited, not thinking about anything except getting her people settled for their first day of sailing.

*Your request has been granted, with conditions.*

Angela hefted a child up and over her shoulder. “I’ll probably agree if they’re reasonable.”

*The meeting will be held in our dimension.*

“Agreed.” Angela gave in before Marc could protest. She moved toward the stairwell. “But I won’t come alone.”

*We expected such. You will pick your escort. Four is the number allowed.*

“Agreed. What else?”

*At the end of the meeting, no matter the outcome, you must read the Book of Life so you will understand why the fight must happen.*

“As long as my people are safe during that time, I have no problem with it.” Angela let Quinn take the child, aware that she should be concentrating. She could feel a trap coming and was hoping to avoid it.

*After the final battle, you will ascend to your place in willingness so those left behind will continue to follow our light.*

*Problem*. Angela wasn’t going to lie. “I might negotiate that one during the meeting. What else?”

*You must never pass up evil or all protections will be removed.*

Angela snorted. “I didn’t plan to.” She frowned. “Is this list much longer? I may need to ask for more from my side to make it even.”

*The final requirement is the easiest, Defiler, Overthrower, Murderer.*

Angela sighed, blocking the pain that went with those insults. She was picking up the anger that she’d grown so powerful. “What do you want?”

*Swear your loyalty. Do it now and receive all the years of peace between then and now. No meeting will be needed unless you win.*

It was a valuable bribe. Anyone else might have taken it.

Angela laughed. “Tell your masters I know why they need that from me and I’m not going to give it up so easily. I’ll swear loyalty when we’re freed from the hatred that rules our hearts. Give humanity peace *when* we win the final battle and I’ll swear it. We all will. Then I’ll ascend to whatever place waits and cause trouble there.”

*A deal has been made.* Lightning flashed across the sky. *Breaking it will bring damnation to everyone you love.*

“Like that’s new.”

When the sky is full dark, the ceasefire will begin and you will ascend.

“Agreed.” Angela waved at the people who’d gone still to listen. “Heave to, land lovers. We’ve got a long way to go and a lot depending on us getting there.”

**The End of Book 10**

## Extras Section Book 10

[Deleted Scenes Book 10](#DeletedBK10)

[Print/Audio](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-10.html)

[Customized tags and hoodies](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/eagle-gear.html)

[Fun stuff](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/law-fun-files.html)

[Go back to the beginning of this book](#_Book_10)

**Deleted Scenes BK10**

**1**

“Are you still mad at me for wanting to join the Eagles?” Gus was tired of the silence in the truck. He and Brittani were in the front, ignoring each other. Conner and Candy chatted and laughed in the back. It was awkward.

Driving, Brittani shrugged. “I’m tired right now. I’ll be mad after I’ve had some sleep.”

Gus snickered. “Maybe this *is* a good time to talk to you.”

Her amusement faded. “I wouldn’t push it.”

Gus knew that was good advice, but he wasn’t sure if they would have time alone again before morning and he wanted things settled now. He hated sleeping apart from her as much as he hated having her mad at him.

Brittani sighed. “Fine. Get it over with.”

Gus drew in a breath. “I’ll stay out of their army...if you give me a family.”

Brittani almost wrecked. Her startled jerk snapped to the right and took them onto the shoulder.

She got the vehicle under control, cheeks flushing as surprised drivers in other vehicles looked at her through foggy windows. “Say that again.”

“I’m ready to be a dad.”

Brittani didn’t know where this was coming from, but she doubted he really meant it. Gus liked to skirt around the edges of a subject before finally choosing a path. This felt like him poking for a path, not picking one. “Start from the beginning.”

“There is no beginning. I’m around all these couples. Kids are everywhere and I’m not getting any younger.” Gus forced himself to keep going. “Neither are you.”

Brittani’s gasp echoed in the truck, drawing more attention from the passengers.

Candy gave Conner a worried glance, brow lifting.

Conner shrugged. *They’re working out issues. We’ll leave them alone the way they’re leaving us alone.*

Candy nodded, cheeks going pink. *We should thank Angela for the time.*

Conner nodded. *I’ll find a way to do that.*

*It’s great that she trusts us now.* Candy gave Conner a shy smile.

Instead of flirting like she expected, Conner frowned at her. *It’s a test, Candy. She’s watching to see if we break the rules.*

Candy hadn’t considered that. When they’d been assigned together, she had assumed they were in the clear. It was disappointing to learn otherwise.

Conner understood that feeling, but it was going to take more than a couple weeks of good behavior to clear the damage that had been done.

“I can’t believe you’re using this to get what you want.” Brittani hadn’t thought it was possible for Gus to be corrupted. “I think these people are rubbing off on you, in a bad way.”

Gus shrugged. “I don’t think any of them are that bad. In fact, I think we’ll both have good friends here once you accept the truth.”

Britani shoulders stiffened. “What truth?”

“You’re like them. So am I.”

Brittani’s lips clamped shut; a wall came down over her mind.

Gus tried to find the words that would convince her to give in.

Conner reached up and gently tugged the partition closed between them and the couple in front. He didn’t want to listen to the conversation that was about to happen. The fate that waited for descendants in Safe Haven wasn’t one that could be discussed without emotions coming into it.

Candy was relieved when Conner relayed that motivation, but she was also disappointed. She didn’t want to be drawn to him, but the feeling was getting worse the more that he behaved. They were getting regular time together now and all it was doing was making this mystery fire burn hotter.

Conner kept his head down so she wouldn’t see his smile. Marc had given him solid advice when he’d asked, though the wolfman had been doubtful as to whether or not Conner was capable of carrying out such a complicated plan. He had also been leery because he’d expected Conner to go to Adrian for advice like that. Conner had tried to explain that his father’s methods wouldn’t work on Candy, but he’d had to settle for accepting Marc’s words and moving on. Marc couldn’t understand anything that sympathized with Adrian. Conner understood the reasoning behind that, but it didn’t make it any easier for him to talk to the man. Marc had a lot to teach him and everyone else, but he hoped Marc learned to communicate better about people he didn’t like. There was always going to be someone around who would get on his nerves or stress him out. Conner assumed Marc had dealt with that in the military, so he was surprised that the man wasn’t able to do it now, but Conner had every faith Angela would eventually get him straightened out.

“What will she do if we break a rule?”

Conner still didn’t look at her, afraid Candy would read every step of the plan in his longing expression. It was already a struggle to act normal being this close to her. Behaving was hard. *It depends on how bad the violation is.*

Candy wasn’t sure what would be considered a violation.

Conner smiled. *If I lean across the seat right now and kiss you, that would be a violation.*

Candy’s cheeks went scarlet and her heart pounded in her chest. *What if I kiss you?*

Conner hid triumph at her sexy reply. *The same. We would both be breaking the age rule, among others.*

*Jennifer and Kyle are about to get married. They’ve broken the age rule already and they haven’t been banished or split up. We’re planning their wedding.*

*It’s different for them. They have permission.*

Candy wanted to ask how they got permission, but she didn’t want the boy to think she had already decided they would be a couple. She paused, not sure what to say.

Conner wanted to push. He could feel her expecting it and bracing. He shook his head. *It’s not the right time...yet.*

Candy was equally relieved and disappointed. She motioned toward the notebook they’d been using for wedding details while they traveled. “Do you want to keep working?”

“Yes, but we both need sleep. Let’s start again after the next break.”

Candy rested her head against the seat and closed her eyes, ignoring the disappointment in favor of being able to see and hear him. Right now, she wasn’t lonely and that was the biggest goal of her relationship with the boy.

“Will you talk with me about this later tonight?” Gus was determined to get an answer, even if she got mad enough to shout.

Forced by his persistence, Brittani gave a curt nod. She was aware of their audience and refused to add to the show they’d already gotten. “But only if you leave me alone about it until then.”

More than satisfied, Gus turned on her favorite music and return to scanning the landscape as he had been doing before bringing up the topic. He had expected a much uglier moment, but he could feel her slipping away. He had to do something to hold onto what he had, even though he already knew it wouldn’t work. She was moving on and it wasn’t with him.

**Deleted Scene #2**

“We’re looking ahead here. Just watch and don’t let go of the line I taught you.”

Marc nodded, concentrating on the road and the line. It was exhausting. He had no idea how she could do magic and normal life at the same time.

“I practice.” Angela took them deeper. “Now, shhh. Watch...”

“Oh, shit.” Marc didn’t slow the truck as he spotted the men nailed to the side of the warehouse. It was the sole surviving building on this part of the shoreline. The rest were in pieces and half buried by the soggy sand.

“Is that Carl?” Conner was horrified. “And Dexter?”

Marc felt rage swell and burst out in an erratic eruption of protection that shielded the convoy in a milky bubble swirling with too many colors to count.

Marc swung the truck onto the beach, grinning at the bouncing and the spray of sand. Angela’s wants were clear.

“Miss the bodies.” Her tone was emotionless. Her rage had gone into the bubble, leaving only her vengeance.

Marc steered around the hanging men and drove into the side of the crumbling warehouse.

Angela pointed through the flying debris. “She’s there.”

Marc crashed through a thin wall and eased off the gas as he spotted the woman running from them. She had long, wild brown hair and a slender, muscular body that propelled her over piles of moldy bags and pallets.

“If you let her live, she’ll call for help.”

Marc was positive Angela was right, but his honor wouldn’t let him run the woman down.

Angela sighed. “So be it.” She regarded Conner. “Candy will be hit in the crossfire when this tracker betrays us.”

Conner scowled, not sure what to do.

“Kill her!” Angela pointed as the truck slowed to a crawl. “Do it right now, while it’s only us.”

Conner hopped from the truck and gave chase.

Marc scrutinized Angela. “You’re too far gone.”

“You’re a fool who puts honor over the reality we live in!” Angela was once again furious. “I’ve never been wrong and I’m not evil, but you still won’t follow orders.” She followed Conner from the truck.

Marc put the debris covered vehicle in park, hating himself and her in that moment.

*Go listen and know for sure*, Adrian advised tiredly. *After enough moments like the one you have coming, you’ll learn to trust her.*

*It’s not about trusting her!* Marc snapped, heaving himself from the truck. *It’s about right and wrong, about honor.*

*A value that means nothing if you die*, Adrian tried to teach. *When it comes to survival, right and wrong are small in comparison.*

*Not to me.*

*And she loves you for it, but that thought you just had was mirrored in her mind, Marcus. Be careful or you’ll lose her, and I’ll have nothing to do with it.*

Marc shoved Adrian from his mind and ran to catch up with Angela and Conner.

He found them in the far corner of the still falling warehouse.

“I’ll slit your throat, Mitchel!” Dolly swung her knife at Conner.

Conner leapt behind Angela for protection. “She’s nuts.”

Angela chortled without humor. “Aren’t we all.” She waved a hand and sent the woman crashing into the wall. Debris fell on her, drawing groans and cursing.

Angela mentally held the struggling woman in place as she stalked over the piles of rotting garbage to reach her.

Conner stayed back, a bit scared of the wild woman. He knew he’d failed a test here, but it didn’t matter at this moment. Like Marc, he couldn’t kill a woman without a good reason.

“I’ll cut you up! I’ll rip your–”

Angela shoved the woman under the pile, letting the barrier fade in favor of the heat from her rage. “I have questions.”

Dolly gasped at the pain, panic taking over. “Die, witch!”

Angela chuckled again. “In due time, but not by your hand.”

**Deleted Scene #3**

“They’ll bring you things.” Ernie stuffed a cheese cracker into his mouth between sentences. “You decide if they can be part of the betting.” Crumbs flew across the seat. “The rest will make private bets. They stay in the rear of the circle.”

“When they’re all approved or eliminated, tell them which kids are fighting.” Amy picked up where Ernie left off as he stuffed in another cracker. “They’ll scream and throw stuff between fights as side bets for renting. Catching it means it’s accepted. Look fast.”

Jeff nodded. “Got that. Keep going.”

“You have to pay at the end of each fight.” Kimberly pointed at the only kids not eagerly preparing for the fun. “Tell them the new ones are the prize of the night. As you talk to each one and see their offer, you can do your drink thing.”

Jeff had been stewing over that plan to be positive it would succeed. He’d concluded it would not. “Seth. Come sit with me.”

Seth went to the front of the bus, leaving his daughter without hesitating. *I hate this.*

Jeff nodded. “Me too, but it’s effective.”

“Are you sure this is the only way?”

“No, but I’m locked into it now.” Jeff signaled him closer. “When we stop, get lost.”

“Okay. Where am I going?”

“Shopping.”

“What happens between fights?” Becky asked the kids. “What should we be doing?”

“Pushing us around.”

“Letting men feel our legs and arms.”

“Looking the other way.”

“Letting it happen.”

Becky sighed. “That’s what I thought.” She regarded Jeff in the mirror. “I didn’t want to tell you it didn’t work on me. Can I switch jobs with Seth?”

Jeff was relieved she’d come clean. He was also impressed with her act. He hadn’t suspected it, which meant she’d refused to think about it. Level three Eagles couldn’t master that.

Seth knew he should be embarrassed–that was aimed at him–but he felt nothing.

Jeff looked at Seth. “Go listen to the kids so you know what to do.” He waved Becky to the front. “I don’t need to go over it again, do I?”

Becky took Seth’s perch. “No, but I don’t understand most mechanical things. Other than a gun, anyway.”

“Simple mechanics.” Jeff brought up an image. “This is the same. See in my mind? It’s a valve that has to be opened, but only a little or it will make noise.”

Becky paid attention, telling herself she could remember. She was more scared of that than of being found out alone in the dark.

“Keep to Eagle skills if you have trouble. Don’t draw them away from here.”

Becky saw the next image in his mind and was instantly onboard. She slapped his arm. “Nice!”

Jeff grinned because it was expected, but he didn’t feel the approval or the respect she was assuming from it. He didn’t feel anything. *If I could stay like this, imagine the things I could accomplish!*

Kimberly scrutinized him in the mirror, small face expressing her concern.

“It’s time.” Amy pointed at the sun. “When it’s gone, we’re on.”

Jeff had noticed the rhyming rules and wondered if that had been for easy recall for younger kids or if the troops had had a more insidious plan. It stank of brainwashing.

“Take the wheel.” Jeff hefted Becky overtop the wheel as he scooted out of the seat. He’d buffed up since leaving Safe Haven.

Becky giggled as he lowered her into the seat, then lost the amusement as the bus curved toward the broken shoulder. She bit her lip, straining to keep it straight.

The vehicles closest to them noticed the movement and started cheering.

Jeff dug through his kit, shoving the Eagle jacket to the bottom under a tarp and a stack of old cassette tapes. He hoped it would be avoided, but he couldn’t drag the kit around with him tonight. If there was a fighting moment for the adults, it would be found while he was in the center of a mob. It would be better if it was found here, by one or two people who could be handled quietly. “Finish telling us how it works.”

“You pay off with their antes.” Ernie was now consuming a jar of peanut butter with his fingers. “Set the amounts, pick two kids and say go.”

“What decides the fight?” Doug wanted to know. He was guarding the rear door this time.

“Death.”

Jeff stopped digging. “You fight to the death?” That would change all the plans. “I can’t do that.”

“Why do you care if we kill the killers?” Darren was confused.

*So am I*, Jeff thought. “You said pick two kids. I presumed you fight each other.”

The kids looked horrified at the thought.

“We would never hurt each other.” Amy looked at Kimberly. “We’re all that we have.”

“So I pick two of you. And those two do what? Pick someone from the crowd to fight?”

Kimberly’s little voice trembled with longing. “They send up the fighters from those who offered antes and were accepted. You chose the ugliest souls among them for this duty.”

“And if...the adult wins?”

“You pay off.” Brea, a bright eyed Asian with a crew cut, shivered. “And it does happen. Sometimes, there are evil descendants in the crowd. They cover, and we don’t know until they use magic on us.”

“Do you use magic?” Jeff had to know.

“We don’t need it.” Kimberly was still staring at him in concern. “That’s also against the rules. No magic from either side. It’s supposed to be adult against rage walker.”

“Okay. I think I’ve got it.” Jeff needed to confirm one more thing. “The UN didn’t want their property damaged. How did they pad it so you always win, but the crowd didn’t riot over it? I already know about faking fear or aggression. I need to know how else they cheated.”

“Mario surveyed the crowd and picked out those likely to win. He accused them of something and satisfied the crowd’s need for blood.”

“He also made sure at least two fights were lost.” Brea scowled at Jeff. “I lost my sister last month.”

*I want them all dead!* Jeff didn’t realize he was experiencing emotions, but Kimberly did.

*The rage is settling into you now. Soon, that’s all you’ll be able to feel.*

Jeff didn’t reply. He was busy exploring his new adjustments to the plan to be certain he’d covered everything. *The west needs to be cleansed of parasites and I think I have a big nest covered.* “What about weapons?”

“That’s our advantage. We can take one weapon into the fight.” Darren pointed to a heavy bag under Jeff’s seat. “We brought our favorites to remind us of our time as captives.”

“You used them to escape the camp, you mean.” Jeff kept a firm tone. “Never lie in any form if you want to be accepted in Safe Haven. We only accept the truth, no matter how ugly.”

“That’s fair.” Darren drew in a breath. “We brought our weapons because it hurt to leave them behind after they’ve saved our lives so many times.”

Jeff patted his rifle. “That, I understand. So what does the second kid do?”

“We’re the backup fighter if the first choice gets scared and refuses to fight.” Kimberly shrugged at his skeptical glance. “It rarely happens.”

“You have powerful gifts.” Becky scowled at the girl. “Why would you tolerate this?”

“Because we like it.” The child didn’t hesitate. “We’re the hands of justice and we swing sharp claws.”

No one knew what to say to that, so none of the adults spoke.

The kids went about their normal preparations, anger building.

**Deleted Scene #4**

“Is everything okay here? All set?”

Candy jumped at Angela’s voice. She hadn’t heard the boss come in.

Conner had known and nodded. “We’re finalizing details.” He held up a notebook. “What do you think?”

Angela studied the drawing of a wedding that showed where people were to be, who it was, what they should wear, and other information. *You’ve got your dad’s talent*. Angela gave them a cheery smile. “Looks great.”

Candy and Conner nodded, both blushing. They’d handled everything, including honeymoon plans.

“Good. I’ll be on duty now. Keep an eye on things.”

Charlie passed her with drinks in hand and a huge smile.

Angela ignored his approval of the fun time, wanting him to know she expected him to behave as well.

Charlie missed it. He was on his way to where Tracy was squished between Samantha and the camp kids. They were telling stories at the far end and the vibes were great. Since he and Tracy couldn’t have sex for a while and he needed to prove he was good, he’d suggested spending time with the children. Tracy had loved the idea. The juice boxes in his hands were for her and Samantha, who didn’t have drinks yet. Most of the other adults were drinking alcohol, but Charlie wasn’t tempted to sneak a drink, though he was certain he could. His bout with liquor hadn’t settled well, and even the smell sometimes reminded him of Matt. Charlie grimaced. And Cynthia. And Kevin.

No one missed Kevin as far as Charlie could tell. He didn’t either, but he was sad about losing a part of the Eagles he’d once admired. All of them were falling or failing in some way, making his mistakes appear small in comparison.

“You’re supposed to be smart enough to avoid trouble when you see it.” Samantha couldn’t help her bitterness. “We all are.” She shoved up on her cane and limped toward the open bar.

Tracy patted Charlie’s hand. “She misses Jeremy. Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not.” Charlie sat next to Tracy, waving at one of the shy kids. “I wish I could help her, but even descendants have limits.”

“There are ways, though.” Tracy thought about Adrian’s charm.

“Not ones that work. Charms and spells aren’t real and eventually, it all wears off. Bad idea.”

Tracy didn’t doubt he was right, but she wished for a way to go back and change their past. She wouldn’t be a cringing woman recovering from abuse.

Charlie patted her wrist this time. “You’re doing great.”

Tracy leaned her head against his arm. “Thank you.”

“Are they okay now?” Marc asked as he held the flap for Angela to exit.

“He has a lot of growing up to do and she has baggage.”

“Don’t we all.”

Angela was tempted to have a conversation, but she sensed it was too soon for what she needed from him.

“What is it this time?”

Bristling at his tone, Angela pointed to the men on duty. “If I needed something from one of them, I’d have it as fast as they could get it. What’s your problem?!”

*I don’t trust you anymore.* Marc was sorry for the thought as soon as he had it.

Angela felt tears coming and took the typical female route instead of crying. “Then we’re even. I don’t trust you either.”

Marc waited for another blow or for her to leave, but she just stared at him. *Waiting for the same from me,* he realized. *Why are we always adversaries?*

*Because you can’t be around me for five minutes without being unhappy about something I’m doing or something I want you to do.* Angela marched to the gate. *You have the other end of camp. I don’t want you to work a shift with someone you can’t trust.*

“Angie.”

Angela stopped, fighting angry tears. “What, Marc?”

He clamped his lips shut.

Angela’s shoulders drooped. “It won’t succeed, Marc. You can’t make me hate you. Not even a secret love child with Kendle would do it.”

Marc stared after her, surprised. He’d forced the thought away and hadn’t brought it back up. He’d just acted on it.

*I wish you’d act on other things*, Angela sent, blasting him with an image of an empty tent.

Marc chuckled. “No shift together because I pissed you off, but you want my heat while we sleep.”

“That’s not all I want.”

Marc laughed. “Figures.”

The shield winked into view.

“Hey!” Marc remembered an earlier question. “Why did it go away?”

*Invisible.*

Marc gaped. *A stealth shield?*

*Only at limited times. They’ll be able to see us, but not reach us and vice versa. It will let us see them without using magic.*

“Who is them?” he asked worriedly, scanning their surroundings.

“The trackers sneaking up in the darkness.” Angela shuddered. “We won’t be alone here for long.”

Marc was unhappy to hear that, but not surprised. “We’ll handle it.”

Angela nodded, settling into the low fork of a tree like she used to do. “Yes, we will, and no mercy will be allowed.”

Marc took that order to heart, like she’d known he would.

At the large tent the women had erected for the wedding preparations, Kyle was being refused by the females doing security on the door.

Marc went that way to distract the man now that things were under control.

“I need to speak with her.” Kyle didn’t care that it was Tracy denying him entrance.

“You know what they say about bad luck.” Tracy teased carefully, uncomfortable. “It’s only a couple more days.”

Kyle shook his head. “Just give me a few minutes.”

“Why?” Marc asked as he joined them.

Tracy lifted a brow at Kyle in reinforcement.

“Because I have to give her a chance to back out. She doesn’t have to do this.”

Marc smirked. “That’s funny.”

“It’s not! I need to be sure.”

“No, it’s funny you think every female in this camp hasn’t already done that for you.”

Kyle scowled. “When? She didn’t say anything.”

“Why would she?” Marc pointed out. “They don’t mean harm and she doesn’t want the escape route.”

Kyle hesitated and then met Marc’s eye. “Did you talk to her about it?”

Marc shook his head. “Not yet. I drew the late shift. Neil has it right now. That’s why they won’t let you in.”

Tracy peeled back a corner of the flap to let Kyle see Jennifer at a table with Neil. The pair were clearly engrossed in the topic.

Tracy dropped the flap, resuming her crossed arm position. “We’ll let you know if she changes her mind. Until then, that’s all you get before the ceremony.”

Kyle stomped away, panic pounding in his heart and mind. *You don’t have to do this, Jenny. You don’t have to do this.*

Inside the tent, Jennifer sighed. “He’s a good man. He doesn’t think so, but he is.”

Neil was satisfied the teenager was doing it of her own free will. He nodded. “Kyle’s also a killer. If we hear a single scream from your wedding tent, it’ll be a race to get in there and help you.”

Jennifer blushed. “He won’t hurt me. You guys know that.”

“No, we don’t. He shouldn’t want you at all.”

“Like you shouldn’t have wanted Becky?”

Neil winced, but nodded, able to admit his flaws now. “Yes. It’s wrong.”

“Love is wrong?”

“I didn’t love Becky.”

Jennifer understood it was more like possession and shrugged. “Kyle has that issue, to a point. I use it against him for my needs. He knows it. That keeps him in line. He’s terrified of the day I’ll betray him by wanting a younger Eagle that I get to choose.”

“Will that happen?” Neil asked curiously.

Jennifer chuckled, shaking her head. “Never. They can’t possibly understand what I’ve been through. Kyle can.”

“Others might be able to, if you let them see it.”

“I could, but there isn’t anyone I view that way.” Jennifer blocked the images that wanted to rise up and smother her. “I’m afraid of every man on the planet even though I have skills and powers to defend myself. Kyle’s the only one who doesn’t make me feel that way.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too, but honestly, it’s already one more than I ever expected while I was chained in that tent. I’m thrilled to have it be my future mate.”

“That future is coming up fast.” Neil wondered if she was ready for it.

Jennifer’s laugh was harder this time. “You’re all so worried about him forcing me. I assure you, it’ll have to be the other way around.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Right now, Kyle is convincing himself this is happening against my will. He isn’t going to consummate our marriage after you shove us into the honeymoon tent. We’ll spend the time talking and sleeping, like we’ve always done when we were alone.”

Neil caught the slight tone of bitterness. “Is that what you want?”

Jennifer sighed. “A few months ago, I would have been relieved. Now, it bothers me.”

“Why is that?”

“Because he’s a good man who has nothing to feel guilty about. I’m marrying him because I want to, not because I have to or because I need a father for my baby. I like him; I respect him. Many marriages have been formed on less.”

“That’s not the same as love.”

“No, it’s better. We have honesty and trust. That’s the foundation of love. Even Marc and Angie don’t have that.”

Neil was forced to admit that was true. “What will you do?”

Jennifer sighed. “I’ll consummate our marriage. Without him if necessary.”

Neil burst out laughing. “Please take a picture of his face. Just for me.”

Jennifer joined him in the amusement, but she wasn’t joking. Kyle had made his plans and she’d formed hers to beat them. They would see who came out on top.

Jennifer snickered and signaled over the next concerned camp member waiting to speak with her about becoming Mrs. Mobster.

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# 

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# Book 11

Apocalypse Winds

A picture containing text, nature

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

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Life After War 11

**Apocalypse Winds**

by

**Angela White**

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**Table of Contents**

[Aftermath](#AWCH1)

[Extinction](#AWCH2)

[Bathed in the Light](#AWCH3)

[Bait](#AWCH4)

[My One Ace](#AWCH5)

[Levels](#AWCH6)

[Your Grand Design Sucks](#AWCH7)

[We Need Answers](#AWCH8)

[All Bets Are Off](#AWCH9)

[Home, Sweet Home](#AWCH10)

[Ride It Out](#AWCH11)

[I Get to Keep Her](#AWCH12)

[Stop Helping Me](#AWCH13)

[I Don’t Hear Anything](#AWCH14)

[I Won’t Do It](#AWCH15)

[I Tell the Truth](#AWCH16)

[Follow My Lead](#AWCH17)

[A Few Tweaks](#AWCH18)

[Dangerous People](#AWCH19)

[Death Sleep](#AWCH20)

[Little Cracks](#AWCH21)

[Admit the Problem](#AWCH22)

[Powerful Signs](#AWCH23)

[Under the Weather](#AWCH24)

[Spooked](#AWCH25)

[Unwanted Guest](#AWCH26)

[Matchup](#AWCH27)

[The Other Shoe](#AWCH28)

[You’d Never Ask](#AWCH29)

[Erased](#AWCH30)

[I’m Ready](#AWCH31)

[The Price](#AWCH32)

[The Truth](#AWCH33)

[Close](#AWCH34)

[-Extras Section](#_Extras_Section_Book_1)

**The life We Chose**

**S**afe Haven’s ship has sailed.

It was a chilly day in November.

Half full of survivors and hope,

It became a time to not remember.

Dramas played out.

Tensions drew to a close.

Adapting began,

To the life we chose.

Surrounded by waves,

On an unforgiving tide.

The winds blew in,

Disturbing our ride.

Danger rose up.

Eagles put them down.

Bodies once again fell,

But there was no ground.

Liquid roads underneath,

A betting sky overhead.

We sailed away from home,

Trying to prove we too were dead.

But fate cannot be outrun.

Problems are never left behind.

Nature hasn’t forgiven us,

And love will always be blind.

Chapter One

**A picture containing boat

Description automatically generatedAftermath**

November 27th

**1**

**“I**s anyone down here?”

Marc walked the last bloody corridor on the bottom deck of the UN ship, gun holstered. The bright paint couldn’t hide what the boat really was. He hoped it sank after they sailed away, then broke into a million pieces on the ocean floor. There were cages and torture rooms, and a holding pen with bodies being kept for identification purposes. Blood splatters and sprays decorated the walls, floors, and windows. Marc tried not to leave tracks, but some of the rooms were impossible to get through without stepping in a puddle. It was gruesome.

The inside of the ship was a mirror of the outer shell–blue and white with tiled floors and offices that held scenes from Marc’s nightmares. The UN troops hadn’t stood a chance. Most of the killing blows he identified had come from the rear. More than a few men had been using bathrooms or showering when attacked. He was impressed and horrified.

Marc cleared the final room on the bottom deck, but he knew he wasn’t alone. He used his grid to narrow down a dot less than two feet from his position, then sent out an alpha command. He needed to get back on their ship. He’d already been gone too long. He could feel Angela and others worrying.

“Don’t hurt me...”

Marc scooped up the pristine boy, automatically holding his little hands. Marc didn’t know how the kid wasn’t dirty, but it was more disconcerting that he wasn’t knocked out. Angela’s spell had covered both ships.

“Angela?” The boy opened a powerful mental line. He dug into Marc’s thoughts with ruthless glee.

Marc wanted to be kind, but there wasn’t time. He sent a minor zap. “Never without permission, Dion.”

Dion nodded, retreating. “I’m sorry.”

Marc released the boy’s hands and hugged him as he trotted up the steps. “You’ll be okay now. We’ll help you.”

Magic pressed in on Marc. By the time they reached the top deck, he was healed.

Marc traversed the ramp and jumped onto their boat, long coat flowing out. “Unhook us. Let’s float!”

People snickered, hurrying to do as ordered.

Grant, waiting nearby with his security, came over to supervise.

Marc took the child to Angela.

Dion slid into her arms and wrapped himself around her like he’d always been there. “Forever?”

Angela kissed his cheek and hugged him. “Even longer if I can.” She put him on his feet. “Go below and let them make you sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Yes, Alpha.” The child strode through the surprised camp members who retreated to clear a path.

Marc scanned the deck; half the bodies had been removed. He went to help.

“I need time with these people.” Angela handed a paper to Kenn as he joined her. “In the next three hours.”

Kenn read it, holding tight so the morning draft didn’t rip it from his fingers. “Together or apart?”

Angela refused to think about everything she’d just gone through. There was work waiting. “Both. You’ll see to it for me?”

Kenn knew what she needed. “First meeting is in the command cabin with Jennifer. Ten minutes.” He departed without waiting for an answer. He needed time to organize the rest of it.

Angela motioned Grant back toward the bridge. “We’ll disconnect the ramp. You sail us south.”

Grant knew the crew needed the experience, but he couldn’t help several glances over his shoulder as he went up the metal steps with Ray on his heels. If they made a mistake, it could damage both ships.

Angela wasn’t worried. The crew she’d chosen for moments like this was solid. It was their nerve out on the open ocean that she doubted.

“Where do you want me?” Ivan finished reloading his gun and holstered. He’d wiped off most of the blood from his hands, but they were all leaving ugly footprints across the deck and stairs.

“Point man for this shift, with a rookie.” Angela motioned toward the man coming up the stairs from the infirmary. Jeff had helped get the western UN kids sedated while Marc cleared the UN ship. “Settle him back in.”

Jeff fell in with the soldier he’d briefly met at the mountain camp. They’d clashed then, making this moment important. Jeff didn’t intend to hold a grudge. If Ivan had been given point, he deserved it.

Ivan held out a hand. “Bygones?”

Jeff shook, heart lightening. “Absolutely.”

Ivan took his notebook out and handed it to his new trainee. “We’ll walk the ship and handle issues that come up. Read as we go but remember to pause and...” Ivan stopped as Jeff rotated to view Angela and what was going on around her. He handed the scruffy man a pen. “That’s perfect. Once a minute, you do that for me, and I’ll make sure you get the coldest beer I can find.”

Jeff was already annoyed with the new need to verify her safety. He was picking up Angela’s excitement and grief. It sucked. “I’d rather have a decent cup of coffee and a hot shower.”

“Deal.” Ivan led the way through the crowd that was now observing the shoreline. A few refugees were swimming toward the ships, not caring that their fellow men and women were being claimed by the ocean. Sharks were all through the rough waves now, but the furious refugees refused to give up.

The camp leaned on the rails and each other as America faded. The two tugs laboring to get them out into open water shot streams of purple, blue, red, and clear liquid in large rainbows to mark the beginning of their journey. The water came from the same nozzles they would use to fight any fires. The Water Salute was a ceremonial custom to celebrate the arrival or leaving of certain ships. The camp clapped at the display, but no one’s heart was in the response. They were leaving their homeland. It was almost gone already.

Angela watched too. Thick depression settled onto her shoulders. *Welcome back.*

Her depression smiled warmly and began causing pain. *We’ve missed you!*

She had been so torn up over never seeing Adrian again that she’d been able to block the other emotions. Now, her worst enemy had returned–her brain.

Angela sniffed, standing straighter. *I have work to do. I’ll catch up with you later.*

The depression bowed out in favor of adrenaline. The terror squeezed harder as she began the next stage of her plans, of Adrian’s plans that she’d added to and expanded. *Here we go*. “I want the team leaders for a few minutes–now.”

Wade and Greg, both frowning, marched through the crowd to pass her instructions. They’d been warned to watch Angela for signs of mental cracks; they’d just found one.

**2**

“Mom wants you two topside with the team leaders. I’ve got things covered down here.” Charlie waited for the duty crew to react, expecting trouble.

Harry and Courtney left without a protest. They were eager to go up and make sure things were okay. It helped that everyone down here was out cold except for Kendle and they knew she wasn’t a threat to Charlie. The island woman wasn’t dangerous to anyone but herself now, and maybe Angela. Harry believed Angela was in the clear on that too, though he wasn’t sure what would happen to Kendle. The alpha bond was strong. As it strengthened, the darkness would be replaced with light. Harry didn’t know how the boss planned to bond with Kendle against both their wills, but he looked forward to watching it happen.

Charlie took a folding chair from the wall and opened it next to Kendle’s cot. “They’re gone. Don’t know how they missed you being awake.”

Kendle stared at the ceiling. “They didn’t. They just don’t want to speak to me.” The sound of her own voice being so weak scared Kendle. *I’m dying again*. She was touched Charlie had come to say goodbye. No one else had yet, not even Tommy.

“They just don’t know what to say. They’re waiting for instructions.” Charlie sat, scanning her bloody clothes and wrinkled skin. “Are you injured?”

Kendle snorted and then groaned at the pain. She’d never felt this weak. “Mortally wounded, boy. She nailed me with one shot.”

Charlie couldn’t help the pride. “I’m awake enough now to see how she does things like that. She learned to use people against themselves.”

“Adrian taught her. Marc abandoned her. Kenn abused her. Adrian took what was left and rebuilt her.”

Charlie didn’t argue. “Why can’t you let them do that for you?”

Kendle’s eyes shut.

He sighed. “I already know. Just say it.”

Kendle held in tears. “I don’t want to change. I like the blood, the killing. I don’t want to stop.”

Charlie put a hand on her wrist and began pushing energy into her. He was glad she was cooperating in these first steps of reform. He couldn’t stand the sight of her withered body. It would have hurt him to leave her like this. He knew what it felt like, thanks to his manhood test. He wouldn’t wish it on anyone.

Kendle groaned at the new pain. “Why?”

“For my dad.” Charlie increased the strength, sensing a guard coming down the hall to relieve him on his mom’s orders.

“Won’t matter… That stings!”

“True, he hates you now. He might vote to let you die, but it would damage him inside. We don’t want that.”

Kendle stiffened. “Angela sent you.”

Charlie let go of the magic, stopping before he was drained. He stood and put the chair away.

“Everything okay in here?” Ian scanned, missing Kendle’s returning health in favor of a long stare at the bloody UN kids in the cots.

“It’s getting better.” Charlie controlled his breathing and the urge to yawn in front of the blabbermouth.

Ian pointed at the door. “Monica wants you in the gymnasium. Use the stairs to the left.” Ian grinned. “And Tracy is waiting for you in the lobby to the right. Pick carefully.”

Charlie grunted. “Suck a dick.”

Ian gaped.

Kendle chuckled.

When he got to the intersection, Charlie jogged up the stairs to the left.

**3**

“Sign the logbook!”

Kenn’s voice carried through the noises and chatter, bringing calm. Despite his flaws, people trusted the beefy man to care for the camp. It was good to have him back.

“Get your name in the logbook or I’ll be on your ass tonight while you’re trying to sleep!”

People hurried to sign the book in Kenn’s hand.

Ivan signaled his crew to join him, certain he would need them as he did rounds. There was a lot to cover on a ship this size and they weren’t using radios until land was out of sight in all directions.

Jeff stayed by Ivan, trying to reabsorb the routines. Once a minute he checked on the boss. Now that he was back with Safe Haven, Jeff wanted to readjust as quickly as possible. He had a lot riding on the future.

“We all feel that way.” Ivan was skimming as many thoughts as he could. This was a bad time for things to go wrong. “Welcome home.”

“Yep.” Jeff didn’t distract the man with conversation. He could almost feel the heat from Ivan’s mind as he ran through routines and possible problems while keeping track of thoughts and behaviors of the camp, as well as his team. Jeff was impressed. When he’d first met Ivan, he hadn’t thought the younger man could handle team lead, let alone point. It was more proof that Angela was right in her choices. Jeff was finally able to let go of his anger at her. It was a relief. *Now, if I can just get rid of this bitterness and heartache.*

Ivan pointed at a cluster of camp kids hanging over the nearby rail. “James.”

James trotted over to collect the fascinated children who had probably never been on a boat.

“We’re clear to go!”

Marc’s loud call echoed to the bridge, where Grant was pacing, eager to be under way. His adventures with Safe Haven were finally beginning.

Grant pushed buttons and flipped switches while he went over the steps in his mind, wanting to be positive he didn’t miss anything. They couldn’t just stop at a store if something went wrong.

Ray patrolled the bridge, rotating among the three entrances. They had one captain. Grant was the most valuable member of the camp. When Angela had told him that, Ray had been shocked she’d given him protection duty. It was an honor to be trusted with such a huge responsibility. He would kill or die to keep their captain safe.

Grant liked the protection, but he was too tense to thank the cute man as they began to slide by the bloody UN ship. The blue bottomed vessel appeared to be four stories, but Grant wasn’t sure if his estimate was accurate. *There could be another level under the water.* The rest of the ship’s deck was lined in cargo areas and windows, all dotted with cameras. Dozens of portholes glared at him.

The camp fell silent as they got a clear view of the carnage the kids had wreaked upon the enemy. Somber deliberations and concerns became the focus. Many people glanced toward the steps to the infirmary and then toward Angela, who had decided to bring the kids with them to the island. They trusted her, but with all the bodies in sight, they couldn’t help worrying.

Angela headed for the stairs. *I made the right choice. They’ll see it in time.*

Angela went down to the quarantine area first. She was glad to find heavy security, but she still gathered energy to bring up a strong barrier if it was needed. The vibes coming from this area weren’t good and she’d already died once today. She didn’t want to do it again so soon.

Kyle spotted Angela coming and slid into the entrance to provide front cover protection. “We’re doing the debriefing. It’ll still be a few before we can call them clear.”

Angela saw Jennifer sitting with the strangers and ignored Kyle’s silent request that she not enter. She went to Jennifer, aware of the growing tension. The strangers didn’t like her or want to meet her. *That’s new*. Angela took the chair on Jennifer’s right and crossed her arms over her chest.

Kyle had chosen a security office on the bottom deck, near the loading center. There were three cluttered desks and three office chairs along one wall. Across from them was a leather couch and a bathroom. Two tiny windows provided enough light to see this room hadn’t been cleaned yet. Angela made a mental note on it. The folders on the wall shelf might help them with running the ship, though she wasn’t sure if this small office would have important details.

“Hiya, boss. Having a good day?”

Angela grunted, refusing to think about how it had felt to be dead. “You tell me.”

Jennifer shrugged, consulting her clipboard. “Just getting started, but I doubt there’s an issue here. Leftover resentment for us not taking them in before now, for not stopping as the convoy passed, for not being strong enough to stop the war. You know–the usual crap broken folks hang onto when their world has been destroyed by the government we took out.”

Angela swept the starving man and woman, then the dirty child. “She still looks ill. Did you give her the medicine?”

Rachel’s lip came out in a pout. “Most of it.”

Jennifer wrote that on her clipboard. “What happened to the rest?”

“Traded for food so she didn’t starve!” The mother glared at Angela. “I won’t thank you for taking us. You didn’t stop!”

“The medic will be down shortly. Give her all the medication this time.” Angela stared back, expecting a continuation of the rant.

Jennifer cleared her throat to break the thick awkwardness. “Food is on the way. After you eat, you’ll get showers and clean clothes. Over the next few days, we’ll find jobs for you.”

The mother didn’t glance away from Angela. Hatred shined through her blue eyes.

Jennifer waved her pen in the air. “Hey!”

The woman’s attention snapped back to Jennifer.

“I like you so far. Don’t screw that up. Right now, I’m the only friend you have here.”

Hatred flashed brighter, then faded into bitter resignation. “She should have stopped for us.”

Angela studied the man and child, digging in for problems. The mother was trouble. Her hatred might never fade.

Leeroy tried to give Angela a smile, but his nervousness turned it into a sneer.

Angela understood. “I’m sorry for everything you’ve gone through.”

“Thank you.”

“Why are you being nice to her?!”

“Hush now, Rachel.” Leeroy took her hand to prevent the coming shout. “You have to let it go.”

Rachel slammed her body back against the chair, avoiding his comfort.

Leeroy sighed. “She’s upset.”

Angela and Jennifer waited for him to say more.

“We’re from Alabama. We’ve been run out of every home we tried to build. Damn draft got us the first time. Then the looters and scavengers, then soldiers again. After that, we had to hide from…”

“People like me.” Angela didn’t want them to know Jennifer was a descendant yet. It might shut off the teenager’s connection with them and prevent the family from settling in.

“Yes. They wanted to make us slaves.”

“There’s a lot of that going around.” Angela inspected the girl, hating the shudders hitting her small body. She motioned to Kyle. “Check on the medic.”

“Why don’t you just heal her?” Rachel couldn’t stop her rage.

Angela leaned forward. “Will it get rid of your hatred?”

Rachel opened her mouth to lie… “No. I loathe you.”

Angela sighed. “Also a lot of *that* going around.” She held out a hand to the woman instead of her daughter. “Trust goes both ways, Rachel Norton. Show me yours and I’ll show you mine.”

Rachel paled. “I don’t want to touch you!”

“I don’t like you much either, but if you’re staying on this ship, you have to be cleared.”

Rachel slowly extended her hand.

Angela opened the door to her mental crypt.

Rachel stiffened as they made contact.

Angela blasted the woman with her pain. She clamped a hand around Rachel’s wrist when she tried to pull away. “Feel it for a minute, then tell me how angry *you* are.”

Rachel gasped, jerking to get her hand back.

Jennifer shook her head at Leeroy when he would have tried to help. “She’s showing her why we didn’t stop. Your wife is getting the answer she demanded.”

“Don’t hurt my mommy!”

Angela slammed the barriers shut and let go, on the edge of crying from reliving so much pain. “She’s just pissed, like the rest of us.” Angela stared at the little girl.

“What’s she doing now?!”

“Relax, Rachel. If she wanted you all dead, she would have left you on the beach.” Jennifer caught Angela’s thoughts. “Getting worse, yes. She needs the medication.”

“Morgan’s got his hands full with beach injuries.” Angela sighed. “Will you let me treat her? Before the war, I was a doctor.”

Rachel gave a short nod, heart still breaking. Her hatred wasn’t gone, but it was weighed down by Angela’s pain. “Don’t hurt her because of me.”

“She loves kids. She wouldn’t do that.” Jennifer studied the pale, blond parents while Angela held out a hand to the brunette child. She found adoption memories in Leeroy’s mind and let the discrepancy go.

The thin girl shivered. “I don’t feel good.”

“I’ll make that go away.”

“Will it hurt?”

Angela smiled. “Not even a little, Sally.”

The girl responded to the wave of peace, smiling back. She took Angela’s hand…then crawled into her lap.

Angela hugged her, eyes shutting. She shot currents of energy into the girl, unable to stop the tears. The love of a child was the only thing she truly enjoyed now.

Angela rubbed the girl’s arm and gently slid her back into the chair. “Better?”

Sally yawned. “I’m hungry!”

The Eagles chuckled.

The girl’s family gawked in surprise despite knowing it would happen. They’d never witnessed magic, though they’d been around descendants since the war. Those people hadn’t been willing to waste magic on normals unless they were getting paid for it.

“Thank you.” Leeroy clasped Rachel’s hand. “She’ll be okay now.”

Rachel tried to force an apology, but Angela stood up and staggered from the room before she could get it out through the remaining anger.

Jennifer motioned Kyle to escort the boss, then turned back to the family. “Now that we’re done with this, we’ll get you settled in a cabin near the deck. You can rest and eat while we wait for your bloodwork to come back. Sound good?”

Rachel was still staring at the doorway. “She’s a hard one. Why did she cry?”

Jennifer sighed, brushing dark hair off her shoulder so she could see the clipboard. She hadn’t had a chance to pin it up yet. “She regrets not stopping, but don’t mistake that for a weakness you can use. Her choices are always based on what’s best for our camp.”

“Meaning, if I become a problem, she’ll remove me?”

Jennifer turned cold, pinning the woman in place with glowing red orbs. “She won’t have to. That’s my job and I’m very good at it.”

Chapter Two

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generatedExtinction**

9am

**1**

**“B**oss.” Kyle retreated to allow Angela into the command room where Jennifer had been directed to wait. Two other Special Forces men were here with her. Angela had Jennifer under heavy protection. It was making Kyle nervous.

Angela smiled at Autumn, who was dozing in a pumpkin seat at Jennifer’s feet, then joined the teenager at the long table. It stretched the length of the business room and was lined in gray plush chairs with ergonomic designs and high arm rests. Angela enjoyed the comfort as she sat, admiring the cherry walls and neat white ceiling. A television in a wooden cabinet sat at the far end of the room, next to a small wet bar. The door in the rear led to a two-stall bathroom she hadn’t explored yet beyond verifying it was empty through the open door. This was a very nice room.

Jennifer got right to the problem. “You’re not taking me with you to the meeting.”

Angela began putting books and papers onto the table. “No. I need you to take my place if I don’t return.”

Jennifer was thrilled, honored, scared. “Who are you taking?”

“My dream team.” Angela didn’t elaborate. She’d chosen her companions as soon as she’d come up with this crazy plan, but she’d had to narrow it to the four allowed instead of the six she wanted. Now that the moment was only hours away, she was suddenly glad to be leaving the others here to help keep things together. “My notebooks will be delivered to you if something goes wrong. Read them from cover to cover before you make *any* decisions.”

“Why do you want me to hide?” Jennifer couldn’t take Kyle’s tension. She was picking up his bad vibes through the door. “What did you see?”

“Darkness and anger.” Angela handed her the slip of paper she’d shown to Marc on the way here from Ciemus. “Check it against the logbook after Kenn gets all the signatures.”

“I will.” Jennifer slid that to the top of her mental priority list. “What else?”

Angela waited for Jennifer to get her pen out, then began rattling off things she didn’t have covered yet.

Outside the door, Kyle’s concern changed to fury. They had another assassin in camp and this one had been sly enough to get on board with them even though they had a dozen descendants scanning thoughts. Kyle was sick of it. *What do we have to do to verify people?!*

Kyle’s anger was on his face. Camp members and Eagles who came by his post kept going. That expression did not encourage conversation.

Marc also kept walking, aware of Kyle’s problem. He didn’t remind the man how important it was to keep cool until the moments came. Kyle knew his job better than almost anyone here. Marc had faith in him–so much that he hoped Angela had chosen to take the mobster along tonight. Kyle wouldn’t hesitate to protect her from whatever came.

Marc shifted the sleeping child to his other shoulder as he walked, noted who was working and who seemed lost or upset. All the unconscious passengers needed to be secured before the sleep spell wore off. According to Adrian, there was a charm for removing memory, but Angela had made a deal with a higher power to cure the rage illness instead. Marc approved, but he liked knowing they may have a second option if things didn’t go well tonight. He refused to consider more about that moment. He assumed Angela had it covered. She’d been ready with her responses to the Messenger. The only thing he didn’t understand was how she was hiding her plans from the other player in this awful game. The Messenger could read minds.

“Yes, but never without permission still means something to them.” Adrian fell in behind Marc, also carrying an unconscious child to the infirmary. “When they find a mental crypt, they avoid it unless invited.”

Marc winced. Angela was hiding in her crypt of horrors when she made plans because she wasn’t safe anywhere else. “I hate that.”

Adrian grunted. “Yeah.” He put the bloody girl in one of the few remaining bunks, aware of sentries showing up to take places in the shadows. “Will you let me help you now?”

“With what?”

Adrian entered Marc’s mind and waited by the black door.

Marc went back up the nearest stairwell, already working on familiarizing himself with every entrance and exit on the huge ship. He was also stalling. He didn’t want Adrian to view his shames, his regrets.

Adrian waited. He refused to contemplate why he was offering, needing it to happen because of the trust they’d been building and not for either of them to gain something from it.

Marc opened the mental barrier, wincing at the immediate screams and shouts. His mother’s tones barreled out.

*Ungrateful son! Devil’s spawn!*

Marc paused in the hall as other voices joined in. He couldn’t help the shame and guilt as mental gunshots rang out; females fell. He’d always followed orders, no matter how bad they were.

Adrian stepped inside the drafty, bloody room, able to view the scenes playing out in each glass box. It was ugly. Some of it, he never would have suspected of the man standing stiffly in front of him.

“That one first.” Adrian pointed to the largest box, where a young girl stared at them in hatred. The ghost had grown bitter while waiting for Marc to release her. “Tell me her name.”

Camp members walking by understood the guys were working on something and didn’t interfere, but they did try to read it.

Marc would have shut the door, but Adrian put a hand on it, wincing when Marc shoved, pinching the mental grip he’d taken. “Tell me her name.”

The Marine shuddered. “I don’t want to.”

“Because you loved her.”

Marc’s nod was curt. “It’s all I have left.”

“She grows angrier by the day. It bleeds into your life.” Adrian stepped further into the crypt. “She’s the ugly voice in your mind telling you it’s never going to be enough; you’ll never be good enough to make up for whatever you’ve done.” Adrian put a hand on Marc’s shoulder. “Let her go. We’ll do it together.”

**2**

A deck below them, Angela paused, drawn by the moment. This was something she couldn’t do for Marc. She’d never discussed it with him because she hadn’t thought he would ever allow anyone in that deep. Letting go of a ghost was hard; a deep bond had to be severed. She was grateful Adrian wasn’t making Marc do it alone.

*You asked me to help him in any way I can*, Adrian sent. *And I like Marc. I always have.*

Angela knew that to be true. Marc’s respect meant a lot to Adrian, though Marc didn’t believe it.

Angela withdrew, letting them work while she switched to the next item on her list. “I don’t want you to view every situation like I have or like I would.” Angela placed her hand on Jennifer’s wrist. “I chose you for the differences between us, not the similarities. Don’t ask yourself what I would do, or what Adrian would do. Handle it as if you’d never met either of us.”

“Why?” Jennifer was confused. “You’ve gotten us this far. Your methods clearly work.”

“They work in the short term. I chose to do things that way because we’ve only had a short-term future since the war. I’ve cleared that hurdle for you. You can consider the future and long-term plans. I sacrificed a lot so you don’t have to be held back like I’ve been.”

Jennifer didn’t think Angela had held back at all. It added more respect, and a little fear, that Angela could have done worse in their challenges to get here, though Jennifer didn’t know what those choices might have been.

Angela sent an image of being in the bunker with Donner. “I could have joined them, gathered them all together and wiped them out.” She sent her memory of planning the poisoning deaths of Sonja’s train of fighters. “I could have destroyed their town and hunted the survivors.”

Jennifer observed as Angela chose a few other moments in their fast, brutal history. In every case, she could have done more or worse, but she’d refused to eliminate as many lives as she needed to in order to ensure total peace for their camp.

“Do you get why?” Angela rubbed her boots against the carpet, then forced herself to stop. She didn’t want to get it dirty. Her filthy clothes and worn gear were out of place in here.

Jennifer ran through it again, searching for a common thread. When she grasped the end, the rest of it lit up in her mind. “Extinction.”

Angela leaned back, satisfied. “Yes. Our population has been decimated over the eleven months we’ve been nomads in our own homeland. I’m not sure two million citizens still exist in America.” Angela’s depression flared. “Over the next years, ninety percent of those will die. I’ve seen it. I couldn’t keep killing them.”

“You’re letting nature do it.”

Angela was glad the girl was catching on quickly, but it wasn’t quick enough. “Survival of the fittest, Jenny. The true survivors who should pass on their genes will be there when we return.”

Jennifer brooded. “I don’t like that.”

“I don’t either, but the world is based on it. If we help the weaker people, we take away from our limited resources, and we may all die together. I chose to follow the natural order of the planet.”

“That’s why Safe Haven stopped taking in refugees!”

“Yes, along with smaller reasons. Most of them have reverted to doing anything to stay alive another day. We don’t have the ability to change them back into civilized souls. We’ve stayed good because we’ve had leaders who made better choices, but also because we already had a strong moral ethic. That isn’t something you can give to people once they reach a certain age or stage in life. That’s why prison never reformed criminals. It just gave them other criminals to socialize with. Some things can’t be fixed. I accepted that. You’ll have to do the same as you sail, or you’ll stop at every town and village on the way and get wiped out on supplies and lives.”

Jennifer grasped the lesson now and hated it. “I’m not sure I want this job anymore.”

“Tell me about it.” Angela lit one of the few remaining smokes and inhaled deeply. She was very sore and low on energy. Dying had drained her. “While I’m gone, you’ll be sequestered. Spend the time working. Pick a council, a support structure, security, and a method of governing.”

“When you return, you’ll go over it for things I missed?”

“And things I’ve missed. Then I’ll merge it.” Angela exhaled. “Or you’ll do that with my notebooks and lead our camp to a place where they can sit and stand in safety.”

Jennifer stiffened, heat flowing out. “There won’t be any *sitters* in my Safe Haven.”

Angela let out a sound of relief. “That’s exactly why I chose you.”

**3**

“Tell me her name!”

Marc shuddered. Adrian was using his alpha command now. It was strong. “Brady. She’s a Brady.”

Adrian stared at the girl in shock. He’d been expecting Angela’s name. “What?”

Marc didn’t stop the tears. “My sister’s name was Melanie.”

The girl in the crypt began screaming awful accusations.

Adrian winced. He wanted it to stop and there was only one way to do that. “Tell me what happened to her.”

Marc ran a loving finger over the glass box. “My mother drowned her when we were five. That’s when I locked up my demon. I was scared.”

“Finish it now. Let her out.”

Marc’s voice broke. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell anyone, Melanie. I love you. I’m sorry.”

The box exploded. Invisible glass shattered into a puff of blue dust that took the form of a young girl. No longer screaming, she stared at Marc. *I love you too, brother.*

Adrian felt Marc’s pain deeply. The girl had been more than a sister. “She was your twin. That’s why you’re a hardass loner. Your mother killed your twin and made you hide it.”

“Yes.” Marc stared, heart lightening. “I’ve carried that my entire life.”

Adrian felt only sympathy. “You were a kid. It wasn’t your fault. You held onto her memory out of grief, not guilt. It’s okay to let her go.”

Marc tried to smile at the girl, aware of the dust breaking up, of her leaving him. “I’ll see you again, some day.”

The girl laughed, sending fresh pain through Marc’s heart, but only from her loss, not from anger or bitterness. She vanished, leaving the two men alone in Marc’s crypt.

Adrian was tempted to smash the rest of the boxes. He wanted Marc’s soul freed.

Marc almost told him to go ahead. It was easier to do these things when he wasn’t alone.

“We’ll have a beer after the meeting, if there’s time.” Adrian left the mental hall of horrors. “If you want to do another one then, we will.”

Marc closed the black door. *One hell at a time.*

Adrian snorted, walking in the opposite direction. “If only it worked that way.”

**4**

“It’s chow time, Safe Haven.”

The radio jerked passengers from their activities, reminding them breakfast had been missed. The refugees had arrived before most of the camp was even awake.

“The cook informed me they have fresh biscuits and gravy, eggs, and bacon. Anyone want to steer while I go eat?”

People who had been reluctant to go below now pushed toward the stairs to the lower decks at Grant’s cheerful announcement. Fresh biscuits and bacon were magic words to Americans.

The stairs from the top deck and activity levels filled with passengers chatting about everything that had happened. The returning members were quickly surrounded.

Doug and his boys were greeted with curiosity about the adventure. Roy and Romeo hadn’t been infected by the refugee children, but Angela had insisted they be taken to the infirmary anyway. Doug was escorting them there now. When Kimmie told Romeo he was almost angry enough on his own and didn’t need the UN drugs, she’d been right. Many of Safe Haven’s orphans had gone through too much since the war. There would be repercussions for that. Human brains didn’t do well with trauma.

Seth was shunned and walked alone even in the crowd. Most of the Eagles felt the way Jeff did. Seth had abandoned the camp. He would have to earn his way back in.

“Shift change in one hour.” Kyle and a few Eagles moved through the crowd, passing messages. The smell of perfume was cloying after so much time outside. It reminded Kyle of being closed up in the mountain. By the time the quake had hit, many women had stopped wearing it to avoid offending everyone. “We need volunteers to go to the bottom deck and help Samantha with the garden. Have lunch and then go below.”

Kyle made note of camp members who pointed in recognition of the busywork. People wanted to be occupied to avoid contemplating what they were leaving behind. Neil had just taken Samantha below. A few people had gone with them then instead of watching America fade from sight. Theo and Debra were already down there.

The ship bobbed lightly in the water considering how large and heavy it was, but the slight sways and creaks caught many of them off guard and even sent some people into the walls as they gravitated toward the galley. It would take a bit before they became accustomed to this method of transportation.

Kyle nodded to Doug, who was carrying his insulin kit and a bag of items for his boys. He was certain the big man had stories to tell, but Kyle had a nagging sense of doom in the rear of his mind that he hoped was just tension about the meeting tonight.

As far as he knew, he would be here with Jennifer while the others went to determine the future. He expected problems while they were gone. He was trying to memorize all the main doorways on the ship in anticipation of a surprise attack. Unlike the halls on the lower decks, the employee areas weren’t lavish or decorated with more than signs reminding them to be polite to the passengers. White walls and floors showed a multitude of tracks and debris that would need to be swept once their cleaning crew was rolling. The survivors on this ship were half dressed, sandy, soaked, sooty, and wounded. The injuries were mostly minor, but everyone knew they’d just had another moment like at the hangar. They were lucky to be here at all.

The Ciemus women were the same as the rest of the camp–disheveled, slightly wounded, and grateful to be breathing. They were also in mourning over their dead. Safe Haven hadn’t counted those losses yet, but Kyle expected it to be ugly. It always was.

Kyle didn’t acknowledge Seth as the redhead walked by. Seth had protested Becky’s sedation, but he’d concurred that she was dangerous. He hadn’t given them details yet, other than to tell them Allan had died during the rescue of the UN children. Kyle wanted time alone with Seth to verify the former Eagle wasn’t hiding anything. Everyone who had returned would be evaluated for problems.

Kyle spotted Jennifer coming through the next intersection, still under double guard, and couldn’t help a quick stare. *That’s my wife.* The special moments with her had been amazing. They would live in his brain forever, but knowing she loved him enough to marry him was more valuable.

Jennifer smiled, reading his thoughts and everyone else’s in the corridor. She didn’t want to be distracted, but his happiness was impossible to resist. He was nothing like her former abuser. Kyle was her soulmate. She never wanted to be without him.

“I don’t know why you care. You threw him away!”

Heads swiveled toward the loud voice.

Brittani put her hand on her hip, stopping. “You’re just some skank he took up with because I hurt him. He won’t stay with you.”

People in the hall retreated.

Trinity didn’t back down. “Like I said, I don’t know why you care. He isn’t yours.” Trinity strode away without worrying about being hit in the back. Brittani wouldn’t be in the Eagles if she didn’t have honor, but more than that, Trinity wasn’t afraid of taking a hit for what she wanted. If the woman attacked, she would be sorry.

Brittani thought about it, but in the end, the Ciemus blonde was right. She had no claim on Gus anymore.

Brittani went the other way at the intersection, deciding the garden needed an extra set of hands.

Jennifer, Kyle, and the Eagles around them made mental notes to put the brief confrontation in their nightly report, then continued toward the galley. They were all glad it hadn’t been worse.

Neil appeared in the hallway ahead of the crowd.

Seth felt the glare and looked up, pausing.

Eagles stopped again, expecting this situation to come to blows. Unlike Brittani and Trinity, these two were likely to get violent.

Neil waited for Seth to react, looking forward to putting the redhead on the ground. He knew there would be a punishment, but he didn’t care. Seth had abandoned the camp. If it had been up to Neil, all the people who left them would have been refused reentry. *Angela’s too softhearted. I’m not.*

Seth glowered back. He still felt Neil was responsible in ways for what happened to Becky. Because of the choices the former state trooper had made, her life had changed forever. Seth hadn’t forgiven him.

Charlie appeared behind Neil. He knew better than to touch the furious man. “You have a meeting. The boss said to hurry up.”

It took every bit of willpower Neil possessed to follow the order. Seth’s challenge was in his tense body and rebellious eyes, but Neil was also able to scan his thoughts. Neil was now able to read the mind of anyone he concentrated on, providing he’d had a recent physical moment with Samantha. Ever since Angela had told them power rubs off, Neil had been keeping track of it. He now knew how to use that advantage without compromising the choice he’d made a long time ago. It was the only way he and Samantha were comfortable with him accessing magic.

Everyone except Seth breathed a sigh of relief as Neil vanished down the hallway.

Charlie followed him, hand on his gun belt. He was Neil’s escort to the command center where Angela was holding meetings. The teenager hadn’t been called in yet himself, but he expected to be. Charlie didn’t know how well that meeting would go, but he was determined to try saying and thinking the right things. He needed to be allowed to continue his relationship and also some parts of training. The time with Kenn, Adrian, and Kendle had revealed he had a lot to learn about human nature and how to be a man. Now that he had a baby on the way, he needed to fast track that education. He could only do it if he was allowed to stay close to the fighters who were mentoring the younger generation.

Dog padded swiftly down the hall with the passengers who were once again gravitating toward the galley. He looked over his shoulder, moving quicker.

Behind him, the cats hurried to catch up.

Dog increased speed, huge paws weaving in and out of the camp with expert movements meant to evade the tabbies.

Not to be outsmarted, the agile felines both leapt onto the side rails of the hallway and launched themselves into the air.

Dog yelped as both cats landed. They dug in to keep their precarious positions.

Dog took off running, yelping.

People hurried to get out of the way, but the wolf was impossible to avoid as he reached a small crowd waiting to get down the stairs to the next level. The wolf slammed into Doug’s leg, knocking the big man forward.

Doug smacked into the three Eagles he had been chatting with. People fell over like bowling pins.

The cats were dislodged. The big male from the bunker landed on Doug’s arm and ripped into his skin as it tried to hold on through his flailing movements.

“I’m hit! It’s got me!”

The other cat thumped into the wall above the stairs and crouched against it, hissing.

Dog took off down the stairs. *You humans can handle that.*

Jennifer laughed as she went to help untangle the body pile.

Doug tried to shake the cat from his arm, causing it to dig in deeper. Blood dripped onto the floor.

Tonya came up the stairs, travel bag around her neck. She glared at Doug from under her hoodie. “Hold still!” Tonya grabbed the cat by the scruff of the neck and ripped it off his arm.

Doug cringed. “Ow!”

Tonya snatched up the second cat and cradled them both on her shoulders. “Did the big man scare my sweet little babies?”

She hurried down the steps as Eagles snickered.

Jennifer patted Doug on his uninjured arm, laughing with everyone else. “Welcome home.”

While Jennifer was distracted, Kyle tried to scan her. Much like Neil, he had figured out a pattern, but the only thing she was contemplating was how good it was to have more Eagles here to do the jobs. Jennifer didn’t like training rookies.

Kyle assumed her meeting with the boss had gone well. He wasn’t eager to know the details, however. Jennifer knew Angela’s full plans now. Kyle had already guessed what duty his wife would be given if Angela didn’t return, but he couldn’t protest because Angela was right. Jennifer was the only one who might be able to lead Safe Haven to the island in that situation. An enforcer was invaluable.

Jennifer descended the stairs and entered the galley, trying to remember the route for next time. It was the quickest way here. Her meeting with Angela had been over for half an hour, but she had decided to do a quick round of the infirmary before tackling her next chore, which was rounds over breakfast and then the bridge. She’d convinced Angela that hiding would be a mistake, at least until the team left. Jennifer assumed Angela had given in because it was also bait for any would-be assassin to see her walking the halls with only two guards.

Everyone in the infirmary was unconscious; the security there was light. Jennifer didn’t know if that was a good idea considering how violent some of the passengers were, but the guards needed to be rotated. They’d been on duty since before dawn. She was freeing one of them by doing this sweep of their most important areas.

Jennifer took a post in the far corner of the galley. She wanted to be able to see around the lines forming at the counters. Orange chairs and white tables designed to hold ten people each lined one entire side of the long, wide room. The other was filled with orange stools in front of a wide stainless steel counter. Pull shutters between the counter and cooking area were up, letting the camp watch Brittani and her family prepare the meal. Narrow windows with dusty blue curtains gave dim light and a view of endless water surrounding the ship. Many camp members were sipping drinks and watching the waves with pensive expressions. Dark blue doors at either end kept a steady stream of people coming through the linoleum galley. The drink center by each door was already creating two minor traffic jams and blocking the view of the guards. Jennifer made a note in her book to have it repositioned.

Jennifer nodded to a few people but tried to appear standoffish. She didn’t want to be distracted by conversations. A lot of people wanted to speak to her about how it felt to be married because they were considering doing it too. Jennifer didn’t want to tell them Angela wasn’t going to approve their impulsive unions. They had too many other things to worry about.

Jennifer swept the wide galley, noting Shawn being invited to sit with Ivan’s team. Little Missy was by his side and appeared happy. Shawn was also thrilled to get the invitation, telling Jennifer that Eagle had been accepted back into the fold. Jennifer guessed it was because his excellent marksmanship had saved lives today, but she hoped it was more than that. Shawn wasn’t a threat to Missy. He was a threat to anyone who would try to hurt or use her gifts for their gain. All Safe Haven’s orphans needed that type of support. When she was older, the story might change, but that was at least a decade away. Shawn had redeemed himself for the Tara mess, though people were curious about his relationship with Pam and Morgan. However, the threesome had only had one walk on the beach together and then one meal at the same table. It was too soon to ask how it was going. It was obvious they hadn’t had time to judge yet.

Jennifer, along with the rest of the Eagles, watched the people who were either known for rocking the boat or suspected of it. All of them centered on Conner as he left the counter with a full tray and walked to where Candy was sitting alone in a small booth. Jennifer expected him to set the tray down and leave. She knew he had duty in the animal area shortly.

Conner did set the tray in front of Candy and try to leave. After their moment together and his giving himself away by being able to go through Angela’s shield, Conner had decided to slow things down. He didn’t want to ruin the progress he was making with her or the camp.

Candy was hooked. She grabbed his wrist, forcing him to look at her. “You can’t be banished right now. Join me?”

Conner knew he should deny her request, but he wanted nothing more than to spend a few quiet minutes with her. “It’s not a good idea.”

Candy released him and pointed at the seat. “Sit.”

Conner did.

Candy beamed, making his heart pound. Conner couldn’t resist smiling back, blue eyes gleaming. He loved it that she was making their relationship public. The Eagles would be forced to accept it and so would Angela.

Becoming aware of the glowers and mutters, Candy got nervous. She reached for her cup and knocked her spoon to the floor.

Conner retrieved it in a flash, then took it to the dirty bin. He retrieved a clean set of silverware and brought it to her without acknowledging the surprise of their witnesses. He resumed his seat, putting it next to her hand.

Candy gave him a grateful smile as she opened it.

Conner took the cream and sugar packets and began to doctor her coffee. He already knew how she liked it.

Candy worked on slathering gravy over top the biscuits, groaning. “I can’t wait to eat this. I’ve almost forgotten how fresh biscuits and gravy taste.”

Conner nudged the mug toward her and then began to open the fruit cup. “Try to force a little bit of this too, if you can.”

The couple went about their business, trying to ignore everyone around them. Distracted by her good thoughts, Conner missed the responses to him caring for her needs. Most of the men here had doubted Conner had the maturity to please Lee’s pink-haired widow, but Candy appeared happier and healthier than she had in months. It was hard to hold a grudge against the boy in the face of that. A few of them decided to stop trying and marked him off their list of suspects to be observed or removed.

Jennifer fingered her wedding ring absently, comforted by the feel of it as she swept to see who was here and who wasn’t. The list of names not here shouldn’t have been troubling, but it was. She didn’t see Adrian, Gus, Seth, and several others the Eagles were worrying over.

The camp, on the other hand, wasn’t discussing anything except the story of Angela dying and being brought back. Jennifer was suddenly sure her bait theory was wrong. She’d been allowed out to keep the fragile peace if people started to freak out. So far, the camp was only curious and grateful.

Jeff joined Jennifer in the corner, now wearing rookie Eagle gear that was too big for him. He’d lost weight while roaming the wastelands.

Jennifer frowned. “Why aren’t you taking a break with your team? I know Ivan invited you.”

Jeff didn’t want to explain it to the teenager. Jennifer was more like the boss than the others here were. “Too many memories at one time. Needed to breathe.”

Jennifer snickered. “And you’re avoiding Kevin, right?”

Jeff nodded. “I expect him along at any point. I don’t want any part of that.”

“Sounds like you didn’t like him.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, then I have good news.”

Jeff read her thoughts and grunted. “Doesn’t surprise me that he’s dead. I am surprised Brandon left, though.”

“I was too.” Jennifer brushed lint from her Eagle jacket. “Angela said he’s hoping for a fresh start where his name won’t be held against him.”

“Good luck on that. Mitchels are trouble.”

Jennifer concurred as Conner gave Jeff a dark glare. “Even the ones who seem okay turn out to be a problem.”

“What about that one?” Jeff went along with what Jennifer wanted, but he didn’t think the boy deserved a chance to fail on his own. His father’s choices were enough for Jeff.

“We’re watching him. He thinks we don’t know he can move through our shields undetected. The next time he does it behind Angela’s back, he’ll be out of the Eagles and maybe tossed overboard. Kyle has no patience left for that family either.”

“Good man.” Jeff glanced over, noting her hair was down. The long brown waves were pretty. She’d always kept her hair up before. “Right? He’s treating you okay and all that?”

Jennifer laughed at the gruff tone. “And then some. No worries.”

Jeff was glad. It would suck to lose another man he’d admired before Adrian’s betrayals.

“If he hadn’t gone after Angela, would you still feel the same?” Jennifer was curious how deep Jeff’s bias went.

“She’s the reason he didn’t turn us over to the government. If he hadn’t gone for her, we’d all be dead.”

“Do you believe that or is it your anger talking?”

Jeff sighed. He did want peace, but anger was hard to let go. “I’m not sure.”

“Fair enough.” Jennifer didn’t push or dig into his thoughts. The other descendants were doing that while she had him distracted.

Jeff glowered. “Why?”

Jennifer scowled back, aware of Eagles edging closer to them in case she needed backup. “You left us. We don’t care why. You won’t just be accepted back in after that. All of you have to earn it.”

“I will. I want to be here now. That makes a difference.”

“Not to me. At least Adrian never abandoned us. Excuse me.” Jennifer marched away. She took a post in the opposite corner to observe people.

Jeff knew he’d failed a test, but he refused to lie about how he felt. Kimmie would be safe here. That was why he’d returned. Even the survival of humanity wouldn’t have been able to bring him back.

Descendants who’d needed to know his loyalties marked him off the list and switched to the others who had joined just before they sailed.

Jeff was confused. *That gives me a pass? Man, I’m confused.*

“Me too.” Neil appeared by Jeff’s elbow, making the man jump. He hadn’t heard Neil’s arrival.

“Why did you bring Seth and Becky back? We need you, not them.”

Jeff snickered. “Still got a thing for her, huh?”

Neil spun away, going to the booth with Doug and Ivan’s team.

Jeff grinned. It was easy to get under Neil’s skin now. That hadn’t been the case in the past.

Jennifer glanced through the porthole window, seeing only water. Jeff had Neil pegged right. Neil was worried his attraction to Becky would ruin his relationship with Samantha.

Neil caught her attention. *Will it?*

Jennifer had already peered into that future, but it was dark. She sent the image to Neil, shrugging sympathetically. *It won’t clear until you make a choice.* Jennifer took pity. *I’m doing a round of the bridge next. Escort me and we’ll talk?*

Neil immediately followed Jennifer from the galley, eager for the advice. He hadn’t had a chance to discuss it with Angela yet and he was afraid to bring it up to Samantha. The last thing he needed was for her to suspect he was considering cheating*. I won’t ever do that.*

Jennifer didn’t call him on that. Instead, she tried to figure out what he needed from her that she was able to give.

“I need to know if I owe her, like Seth says. Is it my fault she got hurt?”

The pair climbed the stairs, followed by her shadows, while the rest of the camp ate, settled down somewhere to sleep, or stood guard. The relocation from land to sea was being accepted by everyone, but it was still daylight. When darkness fell, that might change.

Chapter Three

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generatedBathed in the Light**

Noon

**1**

**“P**ermission only down here.”

Adrian glanced up from his map. “I’m late. What’s the penalty?”

“No idea. Leave your weapons out here.” Greg pointed to a table, and then to the metal detector next to this post. “Sign the board; smile for the camera.”

Adrian began to remove his gun belt. “Marc’s security is tighter now. That’s great.”

Greg responded with zipped lips. The top level Eagle was a little offended his former idol had assumed the increased security was Marc’s idea.

Footsteps echoed down the creaking hall.

Adrian and Greg both rotated, hands ready to react.

Marc ignored them, already removing his gun belt. He pushed by Adrian to place it on the table.

Adrian understood Marc was required to submit to the same security procedures as everyone else and revised his opinion. That couldn’t have come from anyone except the Eagles. Angela would never force Marc to go through it and Marc wouldn’t have considered it on his own. Adrian gave Greg an approving nod as he joined Marc at the table.

Greg watched the two men, practicing his observational skills. Neither of them were a threat to the woman waiting impatiently behind the door, but a long sea voyage could make them all rusty. Moments like this would help him stay alert. It was also an opportune time to observe the two rivals for Angela’s heart while no one else was around. Because there was only a single witness, the guys might reveal things in front of him. Greg continued his scans and kept his mouth shut.

Both men placed their gun and tool belts on the desk. With as many metal objects as they had in those belts, it was easier to unsnap them than it was to remove each item. Two people had already tried to do that, annoying Greg.

Both men removed a secondary weapon from their boot, and then a third gun from a holster on their backs. Both men also kept a knife inside their shirt, and another in their boot.

Marc pulled a small pouch from the rear of his shirt. It tore off with a loud rip. He placed it on the table, then lifted a brow at Adrian.

The blond man shrugged. “I couldn’t find Velcro.”

Marc pointed at his. “I have more. Take that poison pill when we come out.”

Adrian assumed Marc wanted him to have all equipment necessary to help protect the camp and Angela.

“It’s also to keep *you* alive. This trip will be a lot easier if we cooperate.” Marc regarded the camera over the door, then Greg. “She said thirty minutes for this, but I’d like to be interrupted with a meal in twenty. She needs to recharge.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Greg had no problem with Marc helping her. When Angela had staggered in a few hours ago, Greg had almost called for a medic. *She looks rough.*

Marc and Adrian both frowned.

Greg was also glad Adrian wasn’t going in alone. Marc accompanying him would keep the camp from gossiping. They didn’t need more drama.

Marc shook his head. “They’re going to be spending regular time together. No retaliation is allowed. We’re working things out, but we can’t do that if you’re all in our way. Stay clear or get shoved.”

“I’ll make sure everyone knows.” Greg pushed a button on his watch.

The barrier creaked, then swung open.

Angela opened her mouth to apologize for the hassle they’d been put through. Waves of healing energy slammed into her chest.

Marc and Adrian, bothered by Greg’s thought and her appearance, hit her with another blast. Their hits were fueled by annoyance. Angela hardly ever asked for energy and only took it when they were in the middle of a crisis. Even then, she was quiet about it and never took as much as she needed. This time, she’d died, and she still wouldn’t.

Angela groaned at the mismatched levels, secretly savoring the feel of both men loving her at the same time. She immediately hated herself for it and brought up her shield.

Energy bounced back, missing both men and hitting Greg, who had come over to fasten the door. Kenn hadn’t rigged that part of the system yet. There hadn’t been time.

Greg sucked in air, stiffening.

Adrian and Marc watched to see what would happen to the stocky Eagle. Most descendant hits either landed or missed. Much like sniper fire, ricochets were rare.

Greg hissed, hands clenching. His skin turned red and his eyes shut, but nothing else happened.

Marc and Adrian were disappointed. They had both suspected Greg was an Invisible and wondered if the energy blast would unlock it.

“He’s not.” Angela waved a hand, slamming the door in Greg’s face. “Sit.”

Marc took her right.

Adrian took the chair in the far corner.

Both men swept the luxurious office and approved Kyle’s choice for their command center. They had privacy and comfort–two things that had been lacking in the past months.

Angela pointed to a map she’d hung on the wall. “Show me where the international detention center is located.”

Marc immediately got up and went to the map.

Angela pointed at a hand drawn schematic near Adrian. “Those are plans for the island. I left room for your notes on the paper taped to it. I’ll add the ones I want to use.”

Adrian got busy, thrilled he was getting this time, but also glad Marc was here. There was a lot to be done and Marc was a brilliant tactician.

Angela stepped to Marc’s hip, studying the area he was marking with a dry erase pencil. “There’s nothing there.”

Marc nodded. “It’s not on the map, apparently. All the governments of the world have places like that, though ours seems to have had more than the others.”

Angela pointed at a blank piece of paper taped on the wall. “I need an idea of how they’ll have it set up. I realize there’s no way for you to know for sure...” Angela fell silent as Marc began to draw the outline of what she assumed was a floating detention center onto the map itself. His movements were detailed and careful, allowing her to relax. She only had one other map of the area and she was carefully protecting this one.

“I’ll try to find you another while we travel.” Marc shrunk the size of his model and the text to save space. “Do you have a pen?”

Angela gave him one from her shirt pocket.

Using his left hand, Marc continued to make small marks on the map in pencil. With his right hand, he made notes on the taped paper in ink.

Satisfied he would give what she needed, Angela sank into the office chair without the groan that had accompanied the movement all day. She’d only allowed a little of their energy to make it through, but the double hit had been potent. She had no doubt her hair was glossy again and her skin was glowing. She felt like she could go for another twelve hours.

Adrian snickered.

Marc didn’t. He kept working. Moments like this had always entranced him. Making plans was in his blood. *It’s also in my demon.* Marc wondered vaguely where that spirit was now, but he didn’t let it distract him. He loved this part of his job.

Adrian and Angela left him to work even when they finished. Adrian settled at the table across from her and took the folder she handed him without speaking. He went through the pages quickly, then started over to fill in the blank spots.

Angela slid a pencil in his direction, then resumed her notes on the things that needed to be accomplished over the next hours. Everyone had finally been collected and relocated to the infirmary. Many of those had been sedated until she was ready to perform the memory charm. Everyone had been accounted for, mostly thanks to Kenn and Tonya, and their serious injuries had been treated. She hadn’t read the list of their dead yet, but she had it in her folder. The camp was settling down. Only half a dozen passengers were still on the top deck, according to the update Kenn had delivered half an hour ago. Security was up, but unfortunately, it was light. The people who had been on duty when the refugees breached the beach had needed to be switched. They were now sleeping, leaving only half the Eagles to occupy posts.

Angela skimmed the list of dead from the beach, heart breaking. They’d lost good people, again. She was tired of that. *When we get to the island, I’ll surround us with so much protection even the wind will barely be able to get through.*

When there was time, they would hold a memorial service for all their fallen men and women.

The ship groaned, shuddering lightly as it pushed through debris. Captain Grant had sent an update through Kenn, telling her the garbage would cause a lot of noise, but he didn’t expect to have problems because the water was moving quickly. He had informed them still water meant there was a blockage somewhere.

Kenn had also given her an update on the tugs and the boat they were towing, the mood of the camp, and duty station coverage. Things were good. In a few hours, she would have to go up top because that’s where the camp would be. Everyone wanted to view the first sunset from the deck, though most people knew it was likely to freak them out a bit. From there, she had the big meeting. The small amount of time she was spending below handling business was all the peace she was likely to get.

She skimmed her list again, trying to verify she had everything covered. If there was time, she also wanted to make rounds of the ship. She hoped to take Marc and Adrian along for that. They could offer suggestions on the way she had things set up.

Marc stepped back. “I think this is done, but give me a few more minutes.”

“Same here.” Adrian flipped to the beginning of the folder to reread and be positive he had filled in all the details.

Angela gazed at the man who had been forbidden to her for the last few weeks. She kept a firm lock on her thoughts, not wanting to disrespect Marc. He meant more to her than almost anyone and that emotion was growing again. She didn’t want to do anything to stop it.

Adrian basked in the knowledge that she cared. Everyone knew it now and he didn’t have to hide his enjoyment, though he did keep a tight rein on his thoughts, like she was. Marc had earned that respect.

Marc let out a sigh. “I don’t want it to be like that.”

Adrian immediately tested the water. He glanced over at Angela. *I missed you.*

Angela refused to give in. She shut the notebook. “I’m the one who needs time now.”

Marc grunted.

Adrian reached across the table and took her hand, forcing her to accept the situation she had set up. “I missed you.”

Angela was unable to deny the emotions bubbling up. Once again hating herself, she clasped his fingers. “I’ve never felt such pain. You could have taught me how to block that.”

Adrian tightened his grip and sent a small jolt of energy. “I never will.”

Angela sighed at the pleasure and the pain.

Marc stared at them, aware of his jealousy being drowned out by curiosity and the attention to detail he was known for. Even though Angela was higher in descendant status, Adrian had a bigger effect on people than she did. Marc wasn’t certain if that was because Angela held part of herself back or if it was because Adrian was different than the rest of them. Their former leader’s magnetism had brought people from across the country and the world. Many of those souls were still part of Safe Haven’s light. *What is it about him? What does he have that Angie doesn’t?* It was the first time Marc had ever asked that.

Adrian silently rooted for Marc to keep going with that line of thought, enjoying the skin-to-skin contact with the woman he loved. He wasn’t pulling anything shady; he wasn’t even rubbing her fingers. He was just enjoying the moment, with no schemes in mind.

*That’s why I’m allowing it*. Angela did rub his fingers, marveling at the difference in the textures. His fingers were soft, while hers were rough. It was an odd paradigm for their situation. She guessed he had taken energy recently that had healed his wounds and scars, but she wasn’t positive. Marc was right. Adrian was different than the rest of them.

Adrian was now rooting for both of them to figure it out.

Marc’s eyes narrowed. He immediately suspected Adrian of keeping secrets again.

Adrian opened every barrier in his mind to allow the man to explore freely. “I’m not. It’s been in front of you the entire time.”

Marc thought of their beginnings, the betrayals in the garden. “Someone told Jennifer I’m cursed because of that moment, but you weren’t.” Marc dug in. “You betrayed the job. You seduced someone else’s mate, but you weren’t cursed. How is that possible?”

Angela felt a terrible revelation coming and braced for it, but she didn’t hurry to beat Marc to the punch. This was their moment. She was just sharing it.

“You were protected!” Marc glared. “You’ve always been protected. That’s why I couldn’t kill you! You son of a bitch.”

Adrian held up both hands. “I didn’t ask to be the favorite in the garden. I just was.”

Angela stared at him. “You were bathed in the light. That’s why you draw people. You’re more like the Creator than the rest of us.”

Adrian shrugged, hands coming up. “I have no proof of that, you understand? It’s just what I assume. It’s what you two will also now assume, but that doesn’t make it true.”

“It’s true.” Marc had no doubt. “It explains everything about you. It also makes me wish I had tried harder to kill you.”

Angela hated the new tension between the men. She wanted the fighting to be over.

“It’s not all against him.” Marc tried not to sound angry as he explained. “This jealousy has nothing to do with you. Favoritism is wrong, and the entire world suffered for it. If Adrian had been punished properly, he probably wouldn’t have been reborn. The war may not have happened.”

Angela got the big picture, but it was impossible for her to agree. She didn’t like favoritism either, but the world had been destined to end at some point. She no longer blamed the entire Mitchel family for the mistake of a couple bad apples. In fact, she was incredibly grateful to Adrian’s mother. If she hadn’t trained Adrian to prepare for this future, none of them would have survived. Angela didn’t believe the war had been preventable. *It was destiny.*

Marc didn’t want to argue about it. He was able to accept that she could be right and he could be wrong, but he knew he wasn’t. He didn’t need to belabor the point because he was positive.

So was Adrian. He had survived too many close calls and mortal injuries in his lifetimes to believe it was just luck or coincidence. He had been protected, given gifts no other descendant on the planet, so far as he knew, possessed. That was why the government would never stop trying to capture and control him. *I’m unique.*

Angela felt time running down. “I need to know how this is supposed to work.”

Neither man spoke, not sure how to explain the agreements they had reached in Ciemus. The few hours they’d spent talking had seen all their issues worked out except for the actual practice. Doing it was a lot harder than discussing it, but both Marines were positive they could handle whatever she might want. Angela had never been unreasonable. They were able to trust her not to use them against each other while they were all adjusting to the situation.

Angela decided to lay out her own rules to trump whatever they’d decided. “I’ll never sleep with both of you. I don’t want to be alone with *him*.” She pointed at Adrian. “And I don’t want you to try anything that will make me uncomfortable.”

“I can do that.” Adrian was willing to agree to anything.

“You *will* be sleeping with us.” Marc’s tone hardened. “Or we will return to fighting, right now.”

Angela’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Adrian laughed. He couldn’t help it. He already knew what Marc meant.

Angela pulled the thoughts from them and chuckled along. “Okay. That’s better.” Adrian would have a cot in the cabin as security and he wouldn’t always be there. It was perfect.

*I wouldn’t go that far,* Marc thought. *But it’s tolerable.*

Tension crept in again. Angela stared at the small window, not seeing the gauzy curtains or the afternoon sky. “I don’t want to do this anymore.” She stood and headed for the exit. “I want him moved to the other ship as soon as we return from the meeting.”

“No, Angie.” Marc slid in front of her. “I haven’t caught the assassin yet. I need him to help me watch over you.”

Angela knew that was the truth, but she didn’t want to go through more drama. There was no way she could lay there at night and look at Adrian while Marc snored behind her. She’d woken in Ciemus that way and she didn’t want to do it again.

“Then only one of us will be there when you go to sleep and only one of us will be there when you wake up.” Marc ran a thumb across her cheek and slid a curl behind her ear. “I have to insist on this. Don’t make me speak to the Eagles for help.”

Angela already didn’t like it that the camp was aware they were in here working out personal issues. “I want him relocated to the other ship or I’ll move there, and you can explain it to the camp!” She left, slamming the door.

Greg fell in on her heels when neither man followed.

Marc and Adrian shared a look. They had known it would be hard to get Angela to accept the set up, but Marc had expected her to give in.

Adrian hadn’t.

It was another hard moment for Marc to accept that Adrian knew her better than he did.

“We’ve discussed this. She has more honor than you give her credit for.” Adrian shut the folder and slid it on top of Angela’s notebook. “She never broke, man. Not even once and I tried hard.”

“I know she has honor. I can’t help being jealous.”

“I get that.”

“It’s easier for you. You’ll settle for anything she gives.”

“And I don’t understand why you won’t do the same! Neither does anyone else in this damn camp.” Adrian had used all of his patience on doing, saying, and thinking the right thing while they were in the room with Angela. Now that she was gone, he could speak freely. “You have to stop thinking of her as the girl you grew up with. That chick died a long time ago. The woman you have is above you in every way. Rage at fate if you want, but do it quick and hard, and then let it go. She needs you to fall in line and accept your place–a step behind her and next to me.”

“You already know I’m trying. It’s not easy.”

“Maybe she should use the memory charm on you.” Adrian was joking.

Marc immediately began to consider it.

Adrian backpedaled. “You can’t do that. She would never do that to you.”

Because Adrian didn’t like the idea, Marc considered it further, but Adrian was right. Even if Angela would remove his memory of their love, it wasn’t something he would permanently forget. He would always have flashes. Eventually it would all come back. Love couldn’t be erased.

“Tell me about it.” Adrian pulled a small flask from inside his jacket and held it out. “Let’s have a drink and figure out how we can get her to accept this.”

Marc took the flask.

Chapter Four

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**Bait**

**1**

**A**ngela strode down the hall, throwing off the impression she was angry, but nothing was further from the truth. Marc’s willingness to cooperate implied she may get what she wanted out of their future at some point. The joy had been about to spill from her mouth. It would have caused another layer of awkwardness that might have made him change his mind.

Right now, Angela wanted two things. One of those might be settled after the meeting tonight. The other one was up to Marc. She didn’t have to have Adrian in her life to survive, but if he wanted her to be happy, he would allow his rival to resume the place he had claimed when she first joined Safe Haven. The love she had for both men was opposite. Marc was her heart, her future and her mate. Adrian was her mentor and protector. They were different roles, but both were vital. Adrian still had a lot to teach and Angela wanted to learn it all.

The carpeted hallway under her boots swayed gently with the ship. The expensive prints on the walls didn’t slide, though she was sure they would have if they hadn’t been secured in place. She hadn’t realized it would be a rough ride down here, but it was. On the top decks, she hardly felt the turbulence of the ship shoving through the water. Below decks, it was impossible to miss.

Greg drew his gun. The safety was on, but after everything they’d been through, he refused to be down even the seconds it would take for him to pull the gun from the holster and lift it. This way, as soon as the threat presented itself, all he had to do was flip and the 9mm would be ready to kill for her.

Angela went by the infirmary first, glad she’d had them put it on the bottom level. The sound of moaning and groaning from their injured hit her ears before she reached the entryway. The camp didn’t need to hear that while they were trying to adjust to life on the water. Angela hoped to get the wounded healed within the next few days, but if she didn’t return tonight, Jennifer would have to handle it.

Jennifer was now aware of that massive duty, as were the top three levels of Eagles. A few others suspected she’d suggested tossing problems overboard, including Marc and Adrian, but that couldn’t be helped. Those two Marines were the sharpest guys on the ship. It would be hard to hide almost anything from them. If not for how respectful she had always been about the situation, both of them might have seen through her ploy already. *I’m bringing you both around to where I need you to be, for me to be happy. It may not be right, but I’ve earned happiness and I’ve decided to chase it. At some point, I’ll have exactly what I want, and Safe Haven will be better off for it.*

Angela was always considering the future. The population of their country was now so low if they had been an endangered animal, the penalty for killing one of them would have been a lifetime in jail or fines that took a lifetime to pay off. Americans were going extinct. The women needed to breed, but Angela refused to allow the world to return to the way it had been for females in history. For centuries, they had been owned, sold off to gain more wealth and power. That wasn’t going to happen in this future. Once the hurdles of the past were cleared, women would no longer be needy, clingy, and greedy. Men would no longer be abusive, controlling, and possessive. She wasn’t trying to encourage promiscuous lifestyles that would lead to unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases to further endanger their population. She just wanted both genders to finally be able to live in peace together without the animosity and acts of retribution that had haunted all societies.

The children who grew up in Safe Haven would see relationships without hatred and violence. They would spread it to everyone they loved during their lifetimes. At some point in the future, monogamous relationships would no longer be how people were judged. Men would no longer be able to call women sluts for chasing their desires and men would no longer sneak around on their mates. The natural cycle of life had always told humans that monogamy was an unnatural state. In her heart, Angela didn’t concur, but mentally and logically, she knew it to be the truth. Humans were the only creatures on the planet that killed out of jealousy. All the lives she’d been responsible for taking had been in vain if that didn’t end.

Solving the world’s problems were easier now, but also harder. If she pushed too far into anarchy, the future would crumble. If she kept them in too many layers of puritanism, it would revert to what it had been or worse. She was searching for middle ground and she firmly believed those paths were under their feet.

She and Samantha would lead the way on this one, while Ray and Grant would keep tramping down a solution to biases and violence against someone based on their sexual orientation. Beating on spouses would end with Kenn and Zack. Jealousy and controlling a partner would end with Marc. Lusting after a much younger partner would end with Kyle.

Everyone in Adrian’s chain of command had serious flaws. Angela had noticed a pattern. She hadn’t verified the suspicion with Adrian yet because she was afraid to be disappointed if it turned out that he had done it by accident. Each person in the chain of command had a serious problem representing something from the old world that had contributed to not only the war, but to every bit of violence that had ever happened. From murder and rape, to obsession, their leaders each represented a challenge to be fixed. Once they reformed and began to spread it, peace would find them and then the long, futile journey the world had made before wouldn’t have to be repeated. An actual utopia might stand a chance then, but the strict laws to get them there were dangerous. The balancing act could fall at any time.

Meows and growls, accompanied by short trills, echoed down the hall. Tonya’s cats were begging for food from everyone they passed. The only thing the animals seem to care about was sleeping and eating. Angela assumed another topic would be added when the female went into heat, but she wasn’t concerned over it yet. They needed more mousers for the island. When the population got larger, operations would be performed to limit the number of breeding pairs–much like the human population would have to be watched and controlled at some point in the future.

Right now, it appeared as though there couldn’t be large populations. She hated to set things that way in their new society, but once a population became too big, it was impossible to prevent bad behaviors and old mindsets from returning. The small town set up, while not liked by everyone, had worked out best in terms of keeping the peace among citizens who didn’t like each other. That was a problem she would never be able to solve. There was always going to be something about someone else that caused them to be shunned. She was going to remove as many of those biases as she could, but it wasn’t totally solvable.

Marc and Adrian were perfect examples. They were going to cooperate and tolerate for the greater good, but she would never be able to make them become friends and she didn’t plan to try. If they were alone with no buffer, violence would be the only thing that ever happened between them. Unfortunately, there would be situations like that in the future. The only way to prevent those things from bleeding onto the new generations and ruining them was to limit the number of citizens and make sure no one was ever alone.

That didn’t mean privacy of course, only their surroundings. Big city living was a no-no, but isolating out in the country wasn’t good either. They needed a happy medium where everyone knew their neighbor, and at the least, tolerated them. When the population in one area became so large that people no longer remembered who lived on their street or what mail carrier always came through, it would be time to establish a new town. It was the only way humans were going to be able to teach their children a new way of life. They had to watch each other.

Angela hadn’t made up her mind on all those items, but she had to have a new constitution before they reached the island. Rules like that had to be part of it. America’s founding fathers had been brilliant in how they set things up, but it had also been shortsighted. She doubted the forefathers, in that time period, had considered things like the internet, mass abortion, gay marriage, or many other issues the world had been fighting over before it imploded. If they had been able to search that far ahead, she was certain they would have put in provisions to prevent the violence. America’s constitution was supposed to guarantee the right to life, liberty, and a pursuit of happiness.

New America’s constitution would guarantee those were never denied to any citizen, no matter how rich or poor, no matter their gender, or race. Then she was going to make sure the old corruption couldn’t find a way in to destroy it. She was going to create the future the founding fathers had hoped America would become. Hindsight was going to make that possible, but she had little doubt there would be issues she hadn’t foreseen that future rulers would need to revamp. “I’ll have to keep Article V in there.”

Greg kept track of the cats and Angela. He’d known she was stewing over something important, but her mutter had narrowed it. He put a hand on her elbow so he could push her out of the way if there was a problem. She was deep in the zone.

Daryl came around the corner and fell in next to Greg.

Greg didn’t move his hand, but he did glance over with a lifted brow. His stomach was boiling.

Daryl flashed Eagle code, not wanting to interrupt Angela’s thoughts. *You were stressing. I heard it.*

Greg was happy to have help, especially someone who could read thoughts. Knowing there was at least one assassin on the ship made all the Eagles nervous. Anything could happen in the bowels of the boat and the people on the upper decks wouldn’t know until it was too late to help.

Angela slowed, attention snagged by the concern of the guys behind her. She was barely aware of Greg touching her, but she didn’t like his unease. She also didn’t ignore his instinct. He was top level for a reason. “I’m the bait.”

Both men felt the shift in mood. Something was about to happen. Greg was right.

“Marc won’t like that.”

“Neither will Adrian,” Greg added, unable to help himself. It was no secret Adrian would die for her.

Angela flipped her braid over her shoulder in annoyance. “Then maybe we shouldn’t tell either of them until after it’s over. Say it happened fast; there wasn’t time.”

Given a reasonable excuse, neither man protested.

Angela stopped and leaned against the damp feeling wall of the empty hall. She took her notebook out, then sank to a sitting position on the plush carpet. “I’m going to hang out here. Find a spot.”

Daryl saw how she wanted it and motioned to Greg. “Let’s go get some chow. The boss needs time to herself.”

Greg reluctantly left her alone, accompanying Daryl up the next hall and then out of sight.

As soon as they reached the next intersection, Daryl took them into an employee stairwell most of the camp hadn’t been shown yet.

The two men hurried back toward where they’d left Angela, both happy with her choice of location. The employee stairs came out almost directly across from where she was sitting, and the door had a small window for them to see through.

Using Eagle code, Greg told Daryl he was going to circle around to the other employee exit at the far end of the corridor and observe who went by. *I’ll think their name as they come through, unless it’s a descendant. If it’s one of you guys, I’ll flash the color blue.*

Daryl nodded. The two men split up.

Angela immediately fell back into the plans she’d been stewing over, trusting the guys to protect her. She wasn’t positive something was going to happen. She hadn’t seen anything, and neither had any of the other descendants, but the Eagles were sharp. One of Adrian’s biggest rules was to listen to the Eagles, to study the things they paid attention to. He had told her the Eagles were more in tune with the camp than any descendant because members would speak openly in front of them. He had insisted a person’s words could be more important than thoughts. Angela now agreed. There had been signs all along from their assassin’s mouths, but descendants had been busy scanning minds. She didn’t want to keep making the same mistakes.

The ship shuddered and groaned again, causing Angela to look up.

She wasn’t surprised by the person standing a few feet away from her, though she was dismayed as the danger was revealed. She didn’t think her security could help with this. She stiffened her nerve and glared. “Come on, then!”

Gus lunged for her.

**2**

Descendants across the ship looked up in horror. Many of them took off running without explaining. There wasn’t time.

*Blue! Blue!*

Daryl was aware of Greg mentally shouting the alert, but he wasn’t to the door yet. He broke into a run.

Daryl jerked the door open, but he only saw Gus laying where Angela had been. Daryl assumed she was under the big black man, but he couldn’t see her.

Daryl spotted the charred wall above Gus and the flames dying on the carpet by his body. *He’s protecting her.*

“Duck!” Angela shouted in a muffled tone of pain.

Daryl hit the ground instead of shooting Gus.

Fiery magic flew through the hallway and barely missed Daryl. It slammed into the wall and broke apart in vicious sparks.

“Don’t make me shoot you!”

Greg’s shout from the end of the hall was panicked, confirming Gus wasn’t the threat. Daryl shoved to his feet.

Magic blasted into his arm, sending his weapon spinning down the corridor.

A gunshot rang out.

Footsteps and shouts echoed through the lower deck. Greg’s was the loudest.

“Last chance! I will shoot you again!”

“Do it already!” Gus felt Angela’s pain. “Kill that crazy bitch!”

Fire came again, then a scream. Greg was hurt.

Daryl sank back to his knees to avoid the next blast of heat.

Gus took the hit in full, screaming, but he didn’t move off Angela. His clothes flamed up. The smell of burning cloth filled his nose as he slapped at it.

Another blast hit his legs.

Daryl scrambled for his gun. “I need a location!”

“Right here!” Becky threw a blast of fire that encompassed the entire hall.

Daryl fired.

The flames swarmed over all of them, bringing fresh screams and the sizzle of cooking flesh.

Becky shouted as Daryl’s bullet plunged into her leg, knocking her backward into the intersection.

Greg, recovering from her flames, fired a second bullet into her shoulder. He wanted to aim for the heart, but Angela was denying him mentally.

Becky fell to the ground, but it didn’t stop her from firing a last blast of rage. “You have to die!”

Greg fired again.

Becky screamed, clutching her stomach as she fell. Blood pooled around her shoulder, arm and legs.

Flames came down the corridor in a huge fireball. It hit everyone.

Greg recoiled, screaming as the fire ran over his back and neck.

Daryl spun around and took the flames up and down his legs.

Gus shuddered as the fire engulfed him.

Angela passed out from lack of oxygen. Gus’s weight was smothering her, and Becky’s flames had pulled the air from the hallway.

Water sprinklers flipped on, drenching everyone and the weak flames trying to grow along the walls and carpet.

“Becky!”

Seth’s shout was followed by his angry grunts as he fought against the guards refusing to let him reach his fallen mate.

“She’s pregnant! She’s pregnant!” Seth went into panic mode. “Save the baby!” He dropped to his knees. “I’ll give you anything you want! Adrian! Help her!”

Ivan clubbed Seth on the head to shut him up, furious. He didn’t know if Seth had been part of the attack and he wasn’t taking the chance.

Adrian and Marc arrived at the same time. Adrian knelt by Becky as Marc hurried into the smoky hall. Angela’s last order had been to save the angry girl.

Marc waved his hand through the smoke, ears straining to hear something beyond groans and coughs. He pulled his shirt over his nose to muffle the smell of burnt flesh and cloth. He also held his breath. He didn’t care about inhaling the smoke. He was terrified because he wasn’t getting anything from Angela.

“She’s under Gus!” Greg choked out, hands groping for a landmark.

Marc flinched from Greg’s charred form. “Medic! Medic!”

Greg let Marc steer him in the right direction and pulled away. “Get the boss!” He staggered off and was grabbed by Morgan.

Daryl grabbed Marc’s leg as he went by. “Under Gus!”

“Fuck!” Marc’s startled shout echoed down the smoky hallway. “Medic! Medic!”

“More medics are coming!” Morgan shoved Greg toward the first set of arms they reached through the smoke. He was desperate to get back and help the others. Marc’s panic was raw pain in his brain.

Conner ran by Morgan, faster than the older man as he too answered the calls for a healer.

Morgan went to Daryl, almost able to see through the smoke. Portholes were being opened to let in the salty breeze. He immediately began sending healing orbs, grateful he had the new gift. His evolution had come as soon as he’d taken the first lifeforce on the beach.

“Over here!” Marc directed Conner to help with Gus. Other than being singed and probably bruised, Angela was unharmed. He’d verified she wasn’t hurt and was breathing, then began to help Gus, but Marc’s gift wasn’t able to do much more than offer pain relief. There was a big difference between this and what he could do for his mate.

Conner didn’t have that disadvantage. He shoved healing orbs into Gus’s big body in huge blasts, eager to do his share and earn his place in camp despite his last name.

More footsteps and shouts came.

Marc stood, directing Brittani toward Gus. Then he addressed the rookies who didn’t know what to do. “We need stretchers and people to carry them. Get bunks ready in the infirmary. We have three casualties here. I want a complete search for more.”

Men and women hurried off as ordered, leaving Marc alone with the victims and healers. He stood watch over them, wishing he could do more.

Brittani held Gus’s hand while Conner healed him, lending strength to both of them.

Harry came over to sedate Gus.

Brittani stared into his painfilled eyes until they closed. She didn’t speak to him. She didn’t need to. Being here was enough for both of them.

Adrian came through the smoky hallway, arms covered in blood. “She might live. Hard to say with her being so underweight.”

“The baby?”

Adrian shrugged in response to Marc’s question. “I did the best I could. Jennifer’s working on her now. Fifty-fifty chance.”

Eagles rolled Gus onto a stretcher and hefted him into the air.

Brittani kept pace as they took him toward the infirmary. Gus was unconscious, but only partly healed.

“Gus?!” Trinity appeared ahead of them. She ran toward the stretcher, ignoring everyone else.

Brittani sighed, pausing to let the procession go down the stinking hallway. She saw the stretcher with Daryl and paled. *Both my men were hurt.*

Adrian joined Marc in the corner. “Can you tell what happened?”

“I think so.” Marc had been working it out in his head. “Becky came around the corner behind Angie just as Gus reached this intersection. Becky fired. Gus jumped on Angie to cover her. He didn’t have time to pick a spell.”

“We’ll work on that.”

“We need to. If he’d brought up a shield, half the fire might not have gotten through.”

“Would you have thought to do it?”

Marc grunted. “Doubtful. None of us are used to fighting that way yet.”

Adrian stepped aside for the Eagles to carry Daryl by them. All three injured men had now been given help. Morgan wasn’t strong enough to do all of them on his own and Conner’s banks were still low from not taking energy from camp members or Candy. Once they rested, their injured would receive another session of healing from someone.

At the other end of the intersection, Jennifer labored over Becky, trying to save the baby. Marc wasn’t encouraged by the waves of desperation coming from the scene. Jennifer was losing that fight. Marc thought it was for the best, but he would never say so. He agreed the babies weren’t responsible for what their parents did, but Becky would be hung for this. Doing it while she was pregnant would put a stain on Safe Haven that wouldn’t come off.

Morgan put his hand on Angela’s arm and used the last of his energy to heal her bruised rib.

Marc waved at Adrian. “Get her moved to the infirmary. I’ll be on your heels.” Marc went to the employee exit and took a post there. It gave him a good vantage point now that the smoke had cleared.

Adrian didn’t try to wake Angela as he lifted her. He sensed Marc didn’t want that. Adrian preferred her up and spitting fire too, but at this moment, he agreed. Let her rest while she could. This attack would bring new tension for her to handle before the meeting tonight.

“That’s not it.”

Adrian frowned at Marc’s tone. *He’s hiding something from Angela.*

Marc grunted, turning to scan the hall as footsteps came again. *Yes, I am and you’re going to help me.*

*What is it?*

*I’ll tell you while we have that beer.*

**3**

Angela opened her eyes.

Marc and Adrian leaned over the cot. Hands came to her arm, her shoulder.

Angela snickered despite the uncomfortable bed and her sore body. “Wow. It’s like a dream I had…but you were both zombies.”

Adrian sniggered, letting go of her. He veered to a sentry position to give them a moment of privacy.

Marc helped her sit up. “How do you feel?”

“Like I was hit by a truck.” Angela swept the infirmary, seeing no one else was awake. “Did she survive?”

Marc nodded toward a rear area.

Angela spotted three guards, then Seth’s shadow on the floor by Becky’s cot.

“He dropped out a little while ago. We didn’t have to sedate him.”

“The baby?”

Marc shook his head, but he didn’t feel the sadness he tried to convey.

Angela shut her lids, shuddering. “I didn’t think she’d do it. I didn’t realize how bad off she was.”

“There wasn’t time to scan the new people.” Adrian felt that way about everyone who had come in last minute during the chaos on the beach.

“Agreed.” Marc didn’t want her feeling guilty, but there was no way they could have kept it from her.

Angela let a single tear roll over her cheek, then stopped the flow. She was tired of crying, tired of caring.

Adrian frowned.

So did Marc. Her depression was clear. “I thought time with you was supposed to help that.”

Adrian shrugged. “There’s only so much I could do in one night. You know?”

Marc grunted. He was still jealous of that one night. He couldn’t help it. The need to have her all to himself would never fade. The best he could do was fight it.

Angela’s fast glance at Kendle confirmed Adrian’s suspicions about who had ordered someone to heal her. The guards were unhappy over it and vaguely accusing a few in their own ranks, but Angela wasn’t surprised. He flashed a fast code to Wade. *It was her order*. He nodded to Kendle.

Wade shifted sideways, blocking the view to everyone except Adrian. *How do you know?*

*Watch the boss.*

Wade kept his attention on Angela, willing to trust Adrian, who definitely knew her better.

Angela swept the infirmary to cover her glance at Kendle, but she couldn’t help coming back to the island woman. Instead of hatred, there was relief. She’d sent Charlie alone while he was still weak from the side trip. It had been a risk, and a new trust in her son that she planned to encourage.

Wade let the worry go, convinced. Kendle still had value, he assumed. If not, she would have been finished off instead of healed.

Angela stood, wobbling, then put her hand on her gun. She glanced at the sedated men who had defended her without a thought to their own lives. “I want to know when they wake.”

So did Marc. “It won’t be until morning. Morgan shot them up heavily. He said they shouldn’t move too much.”

“I’ll try to heal them the rest of the way when we return.”

Morgan entered the infirmary and went to his desk. “Conner did well. He just ran out of energy.” Morgan was stewing on ways to increase his energy banks. He’d had the same problem.

“What happened, Angie?” Marc wasn’t convinced it had been random, but the guards involved weren’t available for questioning yet.

She didn’t look at him. “You know what happened.”

“Why didn’t you call for either of us?” Adrian was on Marc’s side in this moment. She deserved a scold if she’d used herself as bait.

The guards in the room agreed.

Angela’s lips thinned. “I couldn’t see ahead. I wasn’t sure something was coming.” She grunted, head dropping. “It won’t happen again.”

Adrian looked at Marc. “Did she just apologize?”

Marc nodded, frowning. “Yes. Be worried.”

Angela chuckled. “I’ll be on the top deck for a bit and then on rounds.”

Adrian lifted a brow. “You’re not removing their memories.”

“No.” Angela limped toward the door to the stairs. “Memory charms wear off, but if they’re cured of the illness, we may not need it. We’ll help them adjust.”

“Is that possible?” Marc had witnessed the destruction the kids had caused on the UN ship. He doubted they could all be reformed.

“I have to try.” She pointed at the guards over Becky’s bound body. “Add another one. When she wakes and finds out she lost the baby, it might get ugly again.”

Adrian did while Marc escorted Angela topside.

The deck of the cruise ship was too big to be considered packed by only two hundred people, but it was full. A cheer broke out as Angela joined them.

Angela waved at people to let them know she was okay, heart warmed. They really did love her.

Marc kissed her cheek. “Yes, we do.”

Angela blushed, smiling.

The crowd around them thinned, sensing the couple wanted a private moment.

Angela held onto the rail and enjoyed the fresh air. She inhaled deeply, hoping it stayed this clean. The water was beautiful. The lack of land in view warred with the calming sensation. *I miss you already. No matter where we land, America, you’re my home. Everywhere else is just a rest stop.*

Marc felt tension growing. “Is something wrong?”

Angela regarded him sideways, brows up and that V in her chin standing out. “What are you hiding from me?”

Marc winced. “Not even three hours. Damn, you’re fast now.”

Angela didn’t let him distract her. She stared, waiting for an answer.

“What gave me away?”

“You and Adrian were touching me at the same time. You know I like that. I know you hate it. You only do it when I’m very low or you’re guilty.”

Marc sighed. “Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you guilty?”

“It’s nothing to worry over. It’s a personal matter.”

Angela caught the image of her and Adrian discussing the baby charm. Her cheeks turned scarlet. “What about it?!”

Marc understood she hadn’t intended to follow through, but he did. “I want you, us, to have that. We’ll always lead the fights against evil, but there’s no reason we can’t be happy while doing it.”

“I have the kids on this ship and I’m a busy girl. I don’t need that.” Angela tried to do the right thing. “We don’t–”

“I already told him we’re doing it at some point on this trip.” Marc kissed the corner of her open mouth. “Just accept it. Adrian and I are going to get you pregnant.”

Marc couldn’t help the laughter as he walked toward the bridge for a check in. After that, he had duty over the infirmary. Adrian would stay with Angela.

Adrian joined Angela, able to feel her shock and her excitement. “Easy… Careful…”

Angela locked it down, glaring at him. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“It was his idea. I’m not crazy enough to say no.”

“Moral enough, you mean.”

Adrian grinned. “That too.” His amusement faded. “You know he lied, right?”

Angela snorted. “Yes. But not about this.”

“No. He’s got the words now. We’ll work on the actual spell a bit when we return from the higher power meeting.”

“That’s what we’re calling it?” Angela snorted.

“Yep, though a few people have a more derogatory title.”

Angela tried to pull it from his mind and found a wall. She bristled, hand coming to her hip. “Really?”

Adrian nodded. “You need to work off some of those building nerves.”

Angela swept the ship and found passengers observing them. “Some other time maybe.”

“Angie, they know what we are, what *you* are, and they came anyway.”

“There’s no need to hide it...”

“No.” Adrian strengthened his mental wall. “Come on. Find the name.”

Angela began digging at the corner of his mental wall, sensing an opening.

“Very good. What about now?”

Angela dug under the front for the weak spot.

“Nice. How about now?”

She yanked the wall down from the top, grinning.

Adrian threw up a barrier and blocked her.

Angela snickered as she ripped it away from him and used it to strengthen her own gifts.

“Wow.” Adrian tried to do the same to her and failed.

Angela smirked. “Guess I get to teach you a few things.”

Adrian grew serious. “I’d be honored.”

Angela paused as a thought occurred. “Why don’t you know this stuff? You were a government tracker. You fought our kind for years.”

“All my life.” Adrian sighed. “I didn’t have gifts like this until you came to Safe Haven. You triggered my evolution. And everyone else’s.”

“The war did that.”

Adrian didn’t flinch from his duty to tell her the truth. “No, Angie. They would have remained invisible without you.”

Angela wasn’t certain how to take that.

“It’s fate.”

She slowly lowered the shield. “Yeah. What a fickle bitch.”

Adrian shrugged. “Some days she’s amazing.”

“I’ll agree with that.” She ripped down his last shield as she walked away. “Tell the camp not to call it Dizzyland until after the meeting. It might be considered offensive.”

Adrian’s laughter echoed across the deck.

Chapter Five

**My One Ace**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“H**ey.”

Marc glanced over to find Kendle awake. The scarred woman was staring at him in surprise instead of the regret or the defiance he’d expected.

“I know you.”

Marc let out a bitter snort. “If that were true, you wouldn’t be restrained.”

Kendle had already accepted the fact that she was bound to the cot. “I mean I still recognize you. She hasn’t done the memory charm.”

Marc rotated to scan the opposite direction. He couldn’t stand the sight of Kendle now. Angela had put him here to test his remaining bond with the castaway, but there wasn’t one.

“It won’t matter to you, will it?”

“No. I’ll always see you killing her. She’d have to erase my memory too.”

Kendle began to cry.

Marc felt nothing but contempt. Kendle didn’t deserve a free pass. He felt the same about Becky. If not for the danger they posed to Angela, he would have insisted they suffer the illness with everyone else. Getting a memory wipe was too easy.

“That’s why she let me do it.” Kendle grimaced as the truth hit her. “It was never for me.”

“She needed me to hate you.” Marc glowered at his onetime companion. “It worked. Don’t speak to me again. You turn my stomach.”

Her tears fell harder.

Marc watched her this time and still felt nothing.

The full cots around them held sleeping children who muttered at the bad vibes. Marc swept the long, narrow room, searching the unconscious people for trouble. The fifty cots here wouldn’t hold many more. He hoped they got this settled before the camp had an illness.

All the empty cots were occupied by Eagles taking a break before guard duty. They couldn’t rest in the living quarters. People were too talkative. In here, it was only groaning and tears.

Morgan came over to give Kendle a sedative.

Kendle went out fast, wishing she’d died.

Morgan placed the vial of medicine back into the cabinet and locked the glass case. He put the master key in his pocket and knelt by the next box. He wasn’t leaving any of the meds unlocked, even while sorting and unpacking. Morgan had gotten through a quarter of the boxes so far. The stacks of books would take a while. They were still being gathered from the cargo area. The medic desk nearest to the stairs was already covered in papers and folders. The cots on each side of the desk held napping guards who could be woken for help. The infirmary was in full swing. “We need to drop her somewhere if the boss can’t do a memory charm.” Morgan gestured at Becky’s unconscious body. “The camp will never forgive them. None of us will.”

Marc shrugged. “I’d just as soon drop them into the ocean, but Angie probably has plans made. Talk to her.”

“I will. We don’t need either of them.”

“Don’t need who?” Shawn came through the farthest entry near the first aid cabinets.

Marc braced for fresh tension.

Morgan waved to Kendle, then Becky. “Them.”

Shawn nodded his agreement. He sat down two cups of coffee on the small desk. “Busy later?”

Morgan shook his head. “Not tonight, honey. Tell her I have a headache.”

Marc snickered with them, glad they’d accepted their new situation. Neil and Jeremy had fought much longer.

Morgan shrugged. “We’re not rivals for Pam. It’s different for us.”

Marc frowned. “How is that possible?”

Shawn shrugged when Morgan looked at him for permission. “I don’t mind Marc knowing. We can trust him.”

Morgan was relieved. He felt the same. “It’s less work. Women need a lot of shit, man, a lot of care. Men like freedom. It works out perfectly as far as we’re concerned.”

Marc wasn’t convinced. “Sounds like laziness.”

“Says the man who plans to use Adrian as a guard dog for this trip.” Shawn waited for Marc to fire back.

Marc grinned. “Fair enough, but I still don’t believe you.”

Morgan winked at him. “We also like watching, three-ways, and going against the norm. So does Pam.”

Male mirth filled the infirmary, bringing calmer dreams to the kids and lifting the mood of the ship. A wave of peace settled into the walls.

Steps echoed.

Kenn appeared. “They’re gathering on the deck. Your shift’s up.” He handed Marc a folded paper. “Read it on the way to the top. I’ve got your post.”

Kenn picked a sentry position as Marc departed, aware of the good mood in the infirmary. He chose not to interrupt it and kept his mouth shut.

**2**

Marc stuffed the note into his pocket as he climbed the carpeted stairs toward the top deck, nodding at the camp members he passed. His mind stayed on Shawn and Morgan, but he refused to let it skip to Kendle. He hated her now. Nothing would ever change that. His one regret was that Angie didn’t feel the same about Adrian.

Whitney pointed Marc in the right direction as he hit the top deck. The odor of fishy water hit his nose, but faded under his attention to detail as he swept the ship. Marc counted three teams up here. He approved of the heavy security. There was a lot to secure.

The top deck was divided into five sections. The center, directly under the bridge, held a small swimming pool and a golf course. On each side of those were sunbathing areas and romantic tables with welded lamps and chairs. The front of the large ship held a giant pool with colorful slides at one end and dual saunas at the other. The rear of the cruise liner sported a fenced tennis court next to a gated playground that rivaled any schoolyard setup.

Chlorine from the swimming pools wafted on the tropical breeze, reminding Marc they hadn’t made a choice about the water in those containers yet. After nearly a year in the open, the top deck needed to be cleaned before use, but none of them knew how to drain the massive pools yet. Theo and Grant would work on it when they got time, but the camp members were already staring in longing as the sun sank. That desire would spread. Angela would order it at some point. The happiness of camp was a top priority.

Marc spotted Angela’s long braid and began brooding. She was surrounded by men, as usual. The cloudy horizon matched his mood swing.

Angela felt him coming and smiled over Adrian’s shoulder.

Marc’s jealousy was soothed. He hated that part of himself, but it was there whether he liked it or not. He still didn’t know how their future was going to work out, but at least they would be together. After witnessing Kendle’s murder attempt, and now the results of Becky’s try, in just six hours, surviving was all Marc wanted. Other concerns would hold.

The guys around Angie respectfully retreated to allow Marc into the perimeter. He received nods but no chatter, telling him this wasn’t a good meeting. He didn’t scan their thoughts, however. He would know shortly.

“We were discussing what happens tonight.”

Marc leaned against the rail next to her. “Have you decided who you’re taking?”

Angela gestured at the circle around her.

Marc grimaced a bit. “You’re taking four killers to a meeting with beings who need us to be pure?”

Angela snickered. Each of the men here had reacted the same way upon learning that information.

“Yes.”

Marc shrugged. “You’re the boss.” He was secretly relieved by her choices. Kyle, Neil, and Adrian would all die for her if it was called for.

“It won’t be.”

Marc frowned at Adrian. “Can you promise that?”

“He can’t, but I can.” Angela handed Marc a notebook. “They need me alive. I don’t know why, but I’m positive of that. It may well be the one ace up my sleeve.”

Marc believed that was the truth. If not, she would have already died for blasphemy, among other sins. Marc swept the passengers around them, like the other men were doing. After their most recent issues with people they’d thought were harmless, scanning everyone to verify they weren’t a threat was an automatic defense.

Angela left the men alone, but she didn’t believe there were more threats on the ship. Jennifer had matched the handwriting from the note to Becky. Jennifer had also told her Becky hadn’t been trying to hurt her for personal reasons. It was a way to get to Adrian.

Marc glowered at the blonde man as he picked up Angela’s thought. “It always comes back to him.”

Angela didn’t have patience to deal with this again. She redirected the conversation. “I’m not sure what’s going to happen. I don’t want to split up for any reason.”

“Do you think you’ll be in danger?”

Angela zipped her jacket against the damp chill of sunset. “That has not been revealed.”

That answer drew the normal frowns and a new layer of concern.

“They haven’t dealt with us honestly up to this point. No reason to believe that’s going to change just because I forced them into a meeting. Watch your six and don’t agree to anything without my permission.”

All the men nodded. This was new territory.

“Has there ever been a meeting like this before?” Marc looked to Adrian for the answer.

Adrian shrugged. “Not that I know of, but I doubt the government would have given me access to that information. However, descendant legends do mention contact from the heavens. It was always passed off as exaggeration, but every report said not to trust the angels who spoke to mankind.”

“What else?” Marc could feel Adrian holding something back.

Adrian ignored Angela’s subtle head shake. Marc needed to know. “Most deals require a sacrifice. I don’t think we’ll get back here without blood being shed.”

Angela waved off their concern. “Just because blood has to be spilled, that doesn’t always mean a lot of it.”

Each of the Eagles stored the information as Marc switched to the next question.

“Will our guns work there?”

No one could answer that.

Marc’s frown covered most of his profile now. “What about leaving when we want to?”

Angela realized there was a lot more she should have covered when she arranged the meeting. “I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

Marc sighed. “Well, it’s too late now. We’ll do the best we can with what we do know.”

“And what is that?” Neil hated being separated from Samantha. “What exactly do we know?”

Angela leaned against Marc’s shoulder, enjoying his warmth as the breeze blew over them. Nightfall was nearly here. “We know all the agreements are binding, throughout the generations. That’s why you can’t agree to anything.”

“I don’t like this. It’s hinky.” Kyle noticed camp members trying to listen. He motioned the guards to move them back, then looked to Adrian. “Tell us what you expect. Stop holding things back.”

Adrian stiffened. “I can’t just tell you everything. If I do that, you won’t go.”

Angela and Marc glared at him.

Adrian shrugged. “Okay, but remember you asked for it.” He shifted a little closer, also aware of their growing audience. “If we don’t strike a deal, I don’t think any of us are coming back.”

Angela wasn’t surprised, though it did concern her that Adrian assumed the same as she did about it. “I made plans for that contingency. When you say your goodbyes, make them real. It might be the last time we see any of these people.” Angela pulled a paper from her pocket and handed it to Marc before he could protest further or ask more questions. “I need you to make sure these things are taken care of in the next half hour, then meet us back here.”

Marc skimmed the list, gave her shoulder a rub, then headed off to take care of the list.

The other three guys waited for chores, but Angela shook her head. “I’d like you to stay here until it’s time to go. Marc has restless energy to burn off. I don’t want him flipping out in the middle of the meeting.”

None of them were surprised, except that it was being said aloud. They all approved her choice.

Angela scanned the dark water around the ship. The line of orange lifeboats right below them looked small from this view. They held ten people each, covering all the camp members here. If their population grew too large in the next four years, it wouldn’t be enough.

A few seconds later, the speakers on the deck crackled with Grant’s voice.

“There’s a debris field ahead of us. Things may get rough until we push through it.”

Under their feet, the ship slowed.

“Shouldn’t we try to go faster and ram through?” Neil had only been on a small fishing boat.

Angela bent to retie her boot. “Our captain doesn’t think so.”

The men were forced to accept that answer.

Across the deck, passengers gravitated toward the stairs for protection.

Angela didn’t tell them it wasn’t safer below. She didn’t want to create a panic, and at this point, it didn’t make any difference. She had asked for protection. She was confident they would receive it at least until the meeting was finished.

Debris littered the water in thick waves of twisted, tangled wreckage that smacked into the ship as it went through. Long fields of garbage shook loose as the ripples hit, dislodging more jetsam from the rotting piles. Wood, plastic, cloth, and rope were the most common items.

The ship began to hit debris. Small and large items bounced off the hull, creating ripples that revealed more debris below the surface. As the ship’s wake hit the field, noises of material being crushed echoed loudly, startling everyone.

Adrian felt Angela’s fear and shifted closer to her, trying to lend strength. While he also believed they were protected, listening to the old world being crushed made it hard not to worry.

Angela leaned against Adrian’s shoulder, the way she’d done with Marc.

Hardly anyone noticed. The debris smacking into the ship was holding everyone’s attention.

Adrian kissed the top of her head and put his arm around her shoulder. It was indescribable to be allowed to comfort her openly.

Angela sighed. All she had to do now was get them through the meeting alive.

**3**

Marc paused in the entrance of the garden. He’d been down here twice before they set sail, but that was days ago. A lot of work had been done since then. The harsh smell of fresh compost made his eyes water. Samantha and Debra had just turned their corner heap for the first time. It was pungent.

Marc narrowed in on three shadowed figures across the wide area. Samantha, in a wheelchair, was being pushed by Theo and guarded by Debra. Eagles were also in each corner. All of them had acknowledged Marc as soon as he appeared.

“…figure out how to shut the awning at some point, but for now, the entire garden gets sunlight. It’s the perfect room.” Samantha consulted her map and pointed. “The bees are in the center now, in their coffee can. They’re already expanding the nest.”

Theo nodded to Marc, as did Debra.

Samantha didn’t notice. “We’ve also hung empty cans around the garden in case we get another queen, or they just want to move.”

Marc left without interrupting. Samantha was in the groove. It was obvious she’d been working hard despite being physically limited. Vertical gardens waiting for soil and seeds lined every wall. There wasn’t an empty space.

Those pouches would provide fruits, herbs, and medicinal plants. The wide, round grow bags in the center held up to twenty plants each, all put in according to the companion planting guide Samantha was using. Water buffalos sat at the end of the rear row, next to a small desk with clipboards. Samantha had already spent time filling out the details for plant care. Angela was going to use this massive setup as a training tool for camp members to learn to grow their future. Marc guessed the actual planting would take place over the next couple of weeks. It appeared things were ready to go here.

Marc trotted back up the stairs. He’d just needed to check on Samantha. He didn’t need to interrupt her concentration. He took the empty hallway to the children’s zone, the next stop on his list. It had been the younger fun center of the ship before the war, complete with a daycare, first aid office, and a nice playground. All they’d done was clean and stock it.

Marc grimaced at a loud scream and squeal. “Sounds like they approve of their quarters.” He stopped around the corner, positive he wouldn’t go unnoticed.

“There!”

Safe Haven kids charged toward his location, laughing and shouting. Cody was in the lead.

Marc was mobbed, knocked down, and buried. His chuckles rang out from the bottom of the pile. “I surrender!”

“We want to use the pool!”

“Will you push us on the swings?”

“We want ice cream!”

Marc began tickling the bodies holding him. “How about I chase, and you run?!”

The kids scrambled away, squealing.

Marc didn’t even notice the noise this time. He ran after the happy children, enjoying the moment.

**4**

“You’re on downtime during the meeting.” Shawn handed Ray the paper to prove it and took a post over the captain. The blue carpet up here was tracked with mud and beach sand, but the windows were so clean they almost disappeared. Shawn made a mental note to have someone come up and sweep. Angela had made it clear the ship needed to be cared for too. It wasn’t only the people who would respond better to clean surroundings. “We just changed shifts. We’re not putting that over the radio yet.”

Ray was torn. He didn’t want to leave Grant.

Grant grinned. “I felt that.”

Ray stormed from the cabin.

Shawn chuckled, scanning the rows of monitors. He was happier now and it showed. “Ray’s a great guy. Keep working on him.”

Grant studied the open water to be sure it was still clear, then looked at Shawn. “Is he right about it causing trouble?”

“Nope. We accepted him a long time ago.”

“What about me?”

Shawn shrugged. “It may cause you a few awkward conversations, but not because you’re a homo, you know?” Shawn grinned to be sure the man understood it was a joke.

Grant snorted. “They warned me that you Eagles say what you think.”

“Well, I think you two are cute together. So do some of the others, but acceptance is not about sex. It’s about not lying, ever.”

Grant studied the dark horizon. “I get that, clearly.”

“Good.” Shawn swept the dark entrances. “Now you can quit asking all of us if it’s a problem. You don’t need approval to have a relationship with Ray.”

Grant flushed.

Shawn let him wriggle a bit. The man was starting to get on his nerves by never speaking about anything else. Shawn enjoyed the feel of the ocean breeze and the sight of the swells around the front of the ship. The debris was behind them and the view was amazing. If not for knowing this heavy ship was the only thing between them and drowning, it would be a great way to live. Shawn could understand the attraction for those who’d made the water their home.

So could Grant. He was settling right back into his environment. Computers and counters lined the front wall of the bridge, right up to the glass. All the control panels had been cleaned. Grant’s papers were spread here and there, along with notebooks and pen pouches. Handrails covered the front of the computers, telling his guards the bridge was a rough place to ride out a storm.

Shawn saw a group of Ciemus women on the deck, picking out a fishing location. They were also enjoying the floating ride. Near that group, two Safe Haven men were leering at the working women. Shawn noted their names and moved on with his observations. It was fine to let the females know you were interested. It wasn’t okay to stare and drool like they were porn stars.

Shawn saw Angela head for the chairs at the end of the deck; he tensed. *It’s time.*

**5**

The sunset was beautiful, but people were too nervous to enjoy it. Angela and her team were about to leave for the power meeting. That meant laying in sunbathing chairs under the bridge and going to sleep. A least that’s what Adrian had told everyone. When Angela sat in the center chair and leaned back, it proved his words.

The deck was lined with concerned people–camp and Eagles. The chairs and tables scattered along the rail of the deck allowed the guards places to sit and observe without being noticed right away. Now that the moment was here, no one wanted Angela to go.

Angela drew on her courage, enjoying the breeze that was making the table cloths flap. If not for being nailed down, those would have been gone long before they found the ship. A good wipe was all they’d needed to be usable, which was both a relief and a bit disconcerting. Plastics had held up much better than people.

“I’m ready.” Angela shut her eyes, trying to calm herself. Grant and Jennifer were geniuses. Samantha was able to predict storms. Conner and Morgan could heal. The Eagles could train. Kenn and the other descendants would throw the infected overboard if there was a breach in quarantine. It was the best she could do. “How does this work?”

For a few seconds, all she heard was the sound of water against the ship.

*You will come now.*

The men who’d been chosen to go along didn’t shut their eyes. They gave hand coded orders to the sentries or stared at their loved ones until the light grew too bright to stand.

Chapter Six

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**Levels**

**1**

**M**arc opened his eyes. He did a fast sweep and was relieved to find his body here. They hadn’t been given details on how that worked.

“Amusing.” A male chuckle echoed in a double timbre Marc instantly associated with their kind.

*Are you there?*

Marc’s demon lifted a sleepy head. *Yes?*

Marc breathed another sigh. Angela hadn’t clarified these little details. He’d been nervous.

The man chuckled again. “So easily distracted by the obvious.” His amusement fled. “It’s no wonder you destroyed it all.”

Marc finally glanced around. He studied the short man with the scornful face and hairy body. “Messenger.” He’d recognized the voice.

The little man bowed, doffing his hat to reveal three short horns and a bald spot in the center of his tangled black locks.

Marc snickered. “Man, did I picture you differently.”

The Messenger donned his hat and straightened. “We come in all forms, *Adam*.”

Marc’s hands dropped to his guns. “Don’t call me that.” He tapped cold steel. “Or I’ll find out if these work up here. Curious, you know?”

The Messenger snapped his fingers.

Forms appeared around Marc. He stepped over the most familiar one, standing guard. White fog twined around them, obscuring the view of everything except the little man observing him, frowning.

*But his eyes say something different, don’t they, Marine?* Marc use his sharpest skills to evaluate the Messenger. *He’s full of glee. That feels dangerous.*

The Messenger smirked but didn’t confirm it.

Marc felt Angela twitch against his leg. Her mutter alerted him to an issue. “She isn’t waking.”

“She is honoring her deal.”

Marc scowled. “Send me to her.”

“In time.” The Messenger pointed to Angela’s body. “She is agreeing to a demonstration. We are simply observing you in single order.”

Marc listened to Angela’s tones. He couldn’t decipher the words, but he could hear her anger. He reacted like he thought she would want. “Send me to her or I’ll use our bond and scream. She’ll pull out of this meeting about two seconds later.”

Marc had to shut his eyes as bright light glared. He opened them cautiously, shielding his face.

Angela put a hand on his shoulder as he sat up. “Let it wear off. Sit still.”

Marc breathed a new sigh of relief at her alert, angry voice. *That’s my baby.*

“I’m waiting for the others to realize they’re being tricked.”

Adrian and Kyle began to groan, waking.

Neil didn’t move.

Marc stood, keeping his hip pressed against Angela as he scanned, sniffing. He still didn’t smell anything at all, not even Angela’s vanilla.

Kyle helped Adrian up, noting bruises and blood. “Well, that answers a question.”

“What’s that?” Adrian let Kyle place him against Angela’s back.

“If we can be hurt here.”

Angela grunted. “So can they.” She gave Neil’s leg a kick. “I’m waiting.”

Neil farted, waking.

Uneasy snickers floated through the foggy area.

Neil stood, with help, head spinning. He rubbed his bloody fist down his jeans. “That little shit kept ducking. I don’t think I got him more than once.”

Angela waited for her team to recover, furious. She’d come here in honor and someone was already dinking with the rules. Her anger grew. “I’ll count to three, fast, and then nothing you can offer will get my agreement.”

Bright light glared once again, forcing all of them to protect their eyes.

Angela lowered her scarred hand to find a reception area with three cheery fires and sections of tables with chessboards.

“Better, young one?”

Angela snorted at the endearing tone. “It’s too late to suck up now.”

Marc sneered at the Messenger standing by the nearest table, but he didn’t speak. Mocking a powerful man was dangerous and he wasn’t on even ground here yet.

“You never will be!” The sly man observed their awe, the confusion, and the edge of fear. “Do not touch the boards. Anything else is yours.”

“Thank you for your hospitality.” Angela didn’t feel that way yet, but she was positive she still needed to say it.

The Messenger waddled to a gap in the cloudy wall at the far end of the lobby. He walked through, waving curtly.

The wall slammed shut.

Glasses appeared on one of the few empty tables.

Kyle snorted. “I’m thirsty, not stupid.”

Angela chuckled with the others. The angels here were trying to find weaknesses in the crew she’d chosen. They would eventually get nasty about it and then the real negotiations would begin. Until then, she planned to memorize every moment of their little tricks. This was an important game. She needed to discover their tells.

“Are those chessboards?” Kyle was studying the room.

Neil nodded. “Looks like it.”

The team moved further in. The room was a triangle separated into three areas by fluffy cloud walls and floors that hid everything else from view. Fog swirled around their ankles as they moved.

To the right of the entrance was a large fireplace and a square table. There were no chairs. Directly in front of the entrance was another fireplace with a rectangle table. Again, no seats. To the right of the entrance was a huge stone fireplace with beautiful golden inlays and a half circle stone table. This one had chairs, though they were merely red cushions on the wispy floor.

“That piece moved.” Kyle pointed.

Everyone studied the nearest board in the center section.

One of the pieces moved forward a space. Almost immediately, two others on the board fell over and vanished.

“It’s happening on all the boards.” Adrian was fascinated. Some pieces were disappearing, some were moving, and some were even blinking dimly.

“We’re not alone.”

Angela concurred with Marc’s observation. “Still playing games.”

“*I told you they would know we were here. You lose.*”

“*No!*”

In the area to the left, two men appeared. Tall, wearing bright yellow robes, the beings ignored their mortal observers.

“*Pay me.*”

They shook hands.

Almost immediately, the robe of the man on the right changed hue, becoming a beautiful blue.

The man still in yellow stomped to a table and slammed his fist on the board, rattling the frosted pieces.

“Stop taking your anger out on them. You made a bad bet.” The man in the blue robe turned to Angela, lifting his hands in front of him. “I am Itis. Welcome.”

Angela felt more than heard the shift of people turning to look at them and realized there were more than just two angels here. “Show yourselves.”

Three more men appeared, all wearing yellow robes.

Itis smiled at the other angels. “I made the next level.”

The men came over to congratulate him, but they scanned Angela and her team continuously.

“No wings.” Neil was disappointed. “They look just like us.”

Angela let her team pick out details while she concentrated on thoughts. The angels didn’t have shields up, but their heads were full of the same white fog forming the walls and floors of this place. So far, it was impossible to pick out individual threads.

Neil noted her troubled expression. *She can’t get through the clouds…*

The man who had lost the bet knelt and rested his head in his hands, elbows on the table. “You can’t read our thoughts because we haven’t given permission.”

“We didn’t give permission either. Why can you read ours?” Kyle was mad about being tempted.

“No one keeps us out. We are not bound to the same rules.” The loser looked over at them. “I am Orin. They are Teus, Laistry, and Azeez. We are all pleased to meet you.”

Everyone on the team frowned at his sarcastic tone.

Itis made a dismissive gesture. “Don’t mind Orin. He’s sore.”

Marc studied the man who was easily twice his size and had a small gold star pendant on his lapel. Orin was the same size as Laistry, who towered over the two men next to him. All of them had a gold pin, each a different shape. Marc memorized them to examine later. He was good with symbols.

“New bets before we let them ask questions?” Itis glanced around.

No one spoke. They were eager for information first.

“Very well.” Itis smiled arrogantly at Angela. “Pick one of us to guide you.”

Angela immediately pointed at Orin.

Itis scowled, skin rippling. “But *I* leveled.”

“He sounds more honest.” Angela wasn’t going to apologize for her choice. She already disliked Itis. She just wasn’t sure why.

Orin snorted. “Figures.” He rose gracefully and approached them. “Your time here will be short, so let’s get this over with.” He pointed at the tables. “We’re in the betting room. Level ones spend most of our time here trying to jump ranks. Ready to see the next room?”

Angela’s team scowled at his curt words, but Angela sensed he was actually eager to give them a tour. She pointed at the tables. “Explain what’s going on here.”

“She likes the bad news first. That also figures.” Orin moved to the first table they had noticed. “Each board is a planet, a world. All the boards are in the middle of games. These games determine the outcome of all life.”

Marc confirmed a guess. “How do the pieces move?”

“Life choices determine those outcomes.”

Marc sprang his small trap. “Then where do you come into the mix? Are you the finger of God that spins down and sends a tornado right as somebody hits the lottery?”

Orin tittered. “The Messenger was right. You are rebellious.”

Marc only stared. That accusation didn’t have power over him anymore.

Orin continued, voice becoming proud. “Our job is to direct the future of all life. We do that with meticulous care. We have never missed a day of work.”

Before Marc could pick a fight, Adrian interrupted. He had a big question that needed an answer. “What is the Messenger’s job here?”

Silence fell.

Teus, shortest and meekest among them, delivered rare anger in his words. “He is our captor!”

Angela held up a hand as everyone on her team started to ask the same question. She did it for them. “You’re prisoners here?”

Everyone nodded except Orin. Orin pointed toward one of the white walls. “I need to give you the tour. Come.”

Marc lingered at the rear of the team, memorizing the room and positions of some of the game pieces. He had no way to know which board represented their earth and at the same time, he did know. The table Orin had been upset over was the one. *That’s us. We need to protect that board at all costs. ...or destroy it.*

Marc caught up to the team, aware of the other angels casting glares toward Orin. They obviously wanted to air grievances, but Orin wasn’t allowing it. Marc assumed they weren’t allowed to delay the tour, but he did wish he could have spent more time in this room. Like the others on the team, he had a lot of questions and he wanted to study the angels. They looked like normal men, but they also didn’t. He needed time to figure that out.

Adrian also stored details as a space in the cloud wall opened up for them. *Everyone looked the same. The body sizes are different, but everything else is identical, all the way down to the chin shapes. I’m willing to bet they’re related. The gold lapel pins also mean something. There was a star, a hand, a bone, a knife, and a crown. Other than the color, the long robes and bare feet are identical. The hairdos are different, but the men all have pristine fingernails and smooth hands with no calluses. They don’t do hard work up here.*

Angela added to their observations. *These aren’t the heavenly surroundings we were fed in bible school. These men are dangerous. All of them are descendants and all of them have strong emotions. We already saw anger, disappointment, rudeness, sarcasm, and resignation. As I walk through this wall, I feel jealousy and hatred.*

The tunnel they were in was surrounded by the same white walls and ceiling, but it was darker here. The Eagles fought urges to turn on flashlights, sensing they didn’t have far to go. None of them touched the fluffy walls, but they all wanted to just to see how it felt.

“What did losing cost you?”

Orin sneered at Angela. “I thought you were smart.”

Marc growled.

Angela flushed. She immediately began digging for the answer to her question. “You lost…a bet, a chance to bet.”

“Yes. How did you figure it out?”

“You don’t have anything else. None of you are wearing jewelry and you don’t carry wallets. I assumed currency doesn’t exist here. The other guy was promoted, but you didn’t go lower. That gave me reason to believe you’re one of the lowest ranked here. As low rank, the only thing you would want is a chance to be promoted, which means that’s the only thing you would have to wager. How do you earn betting tokens?”

Orin let out more contempt. “We don’t use something as crass as tokens. We are given one bet daily.”

“You have time up here? How long is a day?” Neil was interested in the basics.

“We adapt to the time of the worlds we view. We are not restrained by time, space, or dimension. While betting, we run a clock similar to yours.”

Marc frowned. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“It has no answer. Time shifts with our activity. A day is what we want it to be.”

Neil fell silent, trying to understand.

Kyle had been paying attention to the tones. “How many bets are *you* down?”

Orin began to understand he had underestimated this team. “Nineteen.”

Angela shook her head. “I thought greed was a sin.”

Orin shrugged. “It’s not the longest stretch by any means. Itis has the record. He recovered from losing one hundred and twelve bets. Now he’ll be allowed to sit at the center tables.” Orin led the way to the next gap appearing in the wall. “He’ll also get to sit in the center of the viewing room. It’s a big honor for him.” Orin moved over to allow them entry.

As soon as they were in, the wall closed. The team studied the diamond shaped room divided into three parts by the fluffy walls. To the far right was a projector screen and a square table. Again, there were no chairs. In the center area was a larger viewing screen with a rectangle table. To the far right, a huge screen waited with a comfortable looking round counter and cushions.

“Is this where you watch our lives so you can determine if we’ve been good or bad?” Angela began attempting to debunk century old theories.

“Yes. There is also betting here, but only on murders or mysteries that involve mortals. Level ones are forbidden from betting on animals or nature events.”

The view room was empty, allowing the team to walk through the partitioned areas. It was obvious there were three classes of people up here, but they’d only met one, not counting Itis and his promotion.

“Why isn’t anyone viewing right now?” Adrian expected a room like this to be busy.

Orin sighed, showing deep grief. “There are rarely wells available for spirits. There is no point in judging people who are waiting because we have no place to send them after we make the decision. This room was in constant use until your war. Then, the system became so full it will now take us more than seven years of your years to process all the souls from that single day.”

“Seven years of trials and tribulations.”

Marc nodded at Angela’s mutter. The people up here didn’t seem to be as close to human as the people on earth wanted to believe. They didn’t cough or twitch or scratch, and their skin shifted as if a power underneath wanted out. They seemed alien.

Kyle spoke up. “When was the last time you sent out a new soul?”

Orin looked at Adrian.

“Nancy.” Adrian stifled the urge to ask about his offspring. “Do you see the souls as you judge them?”

“Yes. Then they are replanted so the crop may grow.”

“Spirits go in at conception?” Kyle wanted to clarify that. Nancy was only a couple weeks along. If a spirit had already been sent to her baby, that meant life began then, not at birth.

“Within seconds, yes. It takes time for a spirit to then be reborn. That is the reason for the gestation, not the other way around.” Orin gestured. “This is the weighing room.”

The team followed him in, all getting chills. No one wanted to be here yet. It was a reminder of their mortality; this waited for each of them.

The weighing room was laid out in a small triangle with a see-through containment system in the apex and a long, double row of partitioned booths in a rectangle around it. A small pathway led down from where they were standing.

Angela walked the empty room, peering into the small booths. There were only two buttons on the consoles. The buttons weren’t lit, so she wasn’t able to read what was written on them. She assumed one was good and the other wasn’t.

Marc stayed with Angela as she went to examine the containment system. They could only get within five feet of it. The space between the isle was made of black clouds none of them were willing to chance walking on.

“Souls come up. You watch…movies, to judge them. Then you come vote on their future.” Angela looked at Orin for confirmation.

“We watch choices in the first room. That is for planets, worlds. When we go to the viewing room, we narrow to individual lives. By the time souls make it to the weighing room, we know everything about them. We are then able to make a decision on what happens.”

“I only see two choices. Heaven or hell?”

Orin chuckled without mirth. “There is no heaven. You live on hell. Souls are either sent back down to try again or they are reabsorbed into the energy that makes all life possible.”

That settled a few of the confusions for the team, but Kyle doubted many people in Safe Haven would believe it even if they saw it. He was also having a hard time. *This is too much like a factory. It doesn’t feel like heaven.*

“That’s because it isn’t.” Adrian stayed with Kyle as they continued to examine the containment system that was empty but had handprints on the inside. He’d never imagined spirits having hands. “It’s St. Peter’s pearly gates.”

None of the team snickered. It wasn’t a laughing matter.

“Does everyone get an equal vote or is it arranged by levels?” Neil was trying to figure out a reason for different ranks. He hadn’t imagined heaven being separated by classes.

“The first votes cast are the heaviest. Only the top level gets to vote first.” Orin gestured again, long robe flowing gracefully with the movement of his arm. “The booths know our level when we step inside. They activate according to rank.”

“Is that to prevent the lower levels from overriding a high-level decision?”

Orin nodded. “We’ve always believed so, but of course, we have no proof of that.”

The team stared in confusion.

“How can you not know?” Angela was putting pieces together, but this one didn’t fit. “You said you were captive. It’s time you filled me in on that.”

Orin pointed toward another gap opening in the cloud wall. “Everyone will tell you their story, I’m sure. You don’t need to hear it from me.”

“What if I want to hear it from you?”

“I’ll be at the meal with everyone else.” He led the way into the next tunnel without saying anything else.

Angela and her team followed, sharing glances and storing details as they’d done while exiting the other area.

Marc leaned toward Angela. “It’s a giant circle. I’ve got it on my grid now.”

She nodded. “I think it’s supposed to represent a planet or a globe. We’ll find the boss in the middle.” She had also been tracking their location. She was sure the rest of the team was too. Eagles always wanted to know where they were and how to get out.

“It’s a garden.” Kyle stopped inside the cloud wall, staring. “There’s a river.”

The team gazed in awe and suspicion, hit with a sense of peace and tranquility that was hard to fight. The beautiful area in front of them was much like what they had all imagined the Garden of Eden to be, but better. Even the quick flashes from Adrian’s time traveling hadn’t done it justice.

A wide river ran in an S through the middle of a wild garden brimming with every plant they’d ever seen and then thousands more. The only thing they didn’t see was life. There were no fish in the river, no birds or bugs around the plants. While pristine and perfect, it felt fake.

“You’ll start over here.” Orin led the way to a square table with square stone seats. “Once you finish your meeting with us, you will talk to the other levels. When you finish, the boss will see you.”

It was a relief to know the tour would end with the big man, where they might be able to accomplish something. Right now, most of this seemed pointless except from the aspect of gathering information. That, they always needed.

The team took seats at the square table.

Orin sat across from Angela. “The others will arrive shortly. The garden is the only room that still sees activity according to schedule.”

That made sense to her since the weighing and viewing rooms were in slowdown because of the backup. Angela tried to peer around the S turn in the river and the plants surrounding it, but she couldn’t see very far. She thought she spotted another table and shadows of people, but she couldn’t be sure. Her mental gifts were not piercing the cloud walls. She assumed the same was true of the rest of her team or she would already have hints about what the next area held.

The clouds behind them parted, admitting Itis, Teus, Laistry, and Azeez. They joined the team but didn’t take seats on the rocks. They went to the edge of the river and sat, putting their bare feet into the water.

Angela was fascinated by how the water didn’t soak their robes. When Teus lifted his leg, his robe was still dry. “Do you swim in the river?”

“We used to.” Orin frowned a bit “It no longer brings us pleasure.”

“Only winning a bet does that?” Angela just about had the level ones pegged now even though she’d only spoken with Orin.

Orin nodded. “We live for it.”

Itis went by, headed for the level two area. “I’ll talk with you later.” He slid into the white fog wall and vanished.

The other angels stared toward that wall. All of them wanted to go through.

Angela studied their faces. “What’s on the other side?”

“A happier life.”

Orin sneered at Laistry’s answer. “Slavery is slavery. The cage doesn’t matter.”

Azeezclapped his hands, producing a melodic noise that immediately brought plates of food into existence in front of them. One second, the table was empty. The next, it was covered.

“Who sends the food?” Angela didn’t expect honest answers, but she had to ask for comparisons later.

“The Messenger.” Itis lifted his cup, tone sarcastic. “To the Messenger!”

The men dangling their feet in the river gave hand salutes and sneers.

Angela and her team exchanged another glance. The angels didn’t like the Messenger. That meant he wasn’t one of them.

“But I am.” The Messenger came through the wall from the second area and joined them at the table. He didn’t sit on one of the rocks. He stood on it. “I am Hermes. I am the guider of souls and trickster of the Creator.” He straightened his gold pin.

Marc saw the pin looked like a broken egg and frowned. “Come to make sure they don’t tell us anything you don’t want us to know?”

“How rude!” The Messenger jumped from the rock and stormed toward the entrance. “Enjoy your conversation!” He leapt through the wall, waving a hand.

A reverberation went through the garden, sounding as if he’d slammed a door.

Orin looked at Marc in surprise. “Not just rebellious. You bring violence. How is that possible? You are Adam, the first.”

Marc only stared back, sensing their guide had important information. “What do you need?”

Orin broke into a smile, the first one they’d seen since arriving. “We need our old bets settled. All the rooms will ask this of you, but we level ones need it more. They interfere with our choices and make sure we’re never allowed to bump more than one rank. Those in the top spots have been there for centuries. The only way that’s possible is if they’re cheating. When you settle our bets, most of us will be promoted and the top level may fall to where we are now. We need balance restored.”

“Why do you hate the Messenger?” Kyle’s sharp mind was putting together clues as fast as the rest of the team, only he had taken a different path. There were a lot of mysteries up here to be solved.

“He supports ending these bets. Hermes is sympathetic to human lives and wishes us to allow all life to make choices without influence or interference.”

That surprised the team. They had gotten the clear sense that Hermes didn’t like them.

“Can we talk to the Creator after we see the boss?”

Everyone turned toward Angela, even her team. They’d heard *boss* and assumed that’s who they would be talking to, but Angela had remembered definitions of words mattered up here. Boss did not mean Creator.

Angela looked at the faces around her and drew her answer from that. “You don’t know where he is, do you?”

Bitter disappointment filled the team as every head shook.

No one wanted to speak now. The Messenger had tricked Angela up here by making her believe she had a chance to negotiate a different future for her people. The lie had just been exposed. They were ashamed.

It was the first time the team had felt humility since arriving. They waited for Angela to speak again, marveling at where she had gone while they’d been digging. The items they were covering were important; she had gone straight to the most valuable piece of information. She’d verified their hosts could not be trusted.

“That’s why we make such a great team.” Angela gave Marc a small smile. “As you were. I’m working it from this end.”

A sense of Eagle kinship filled the table, making the level one hosts jealous and fascinating them at the same time. Being at the table together was a lot different than watching it on a screen.

Marc waved at Adrian. “Would you like to go first?”

“I’m actually working on a small thread now. I suggest Kyle as a starter.”

Everyone looked at Kyle, except Angela. She stared at Orin’s star pin.

Sitting next to her, Marc could almost feel the heat from her mind flying through ideas, conclusions.

Kyle took his notebook out as if this was any other day on earth, but it was a bit of a surprise for him to feel the weight in his hand. The hard stone seat under his butt wasn’t really hard. The ancient wooden table was almost comfortable to lean on. The rocky ground cushioned his boots instead of poking at them. It was all strange. The normal weight and feel of his notebook was a comfort. “Let’s start with the basics: who are you and what are you doing here?”

“We weigh souls that come up. I told you that.”

“What happens to the souls?” Kyle resisted the urge to light a smoke despite really wanting one for this moment.

Orin pointed toward the last room. “They are weighed. If the good measures is higher than the bad, they are consumed by the power of life. If they have more darkness than good, they are sent back to try again.”

“Hell really is on earth. Ironic.” Kyle kept going. “Where do you come from? Is there a town here?”

Orin’s lips twitched. “This is the afterlife. There are no towns.”

Kyle rolled with the punches. “How many are there like you and where do you live?”

“There are seventeen of us who live here, though there have been more or less.”

Angela looked up in surprise. “Heaven only has seventeen angels?”

Orin frowned a bit. “This is a weigh station.”

“Where is heaven?”

Orin didn’t understand the question. “What?”

“Okay, let me try again. Where do you go when you leave here? Where does anyone go when they leave here?”

“We do not leave here. No one leaves here, except the Messenger.”

“Where does he go?”

“We do not know. His mind has clouds.”

Angela waved to Kyle.

Kyle took back over the questioning. “How long have you been here?”

Orin glanced at the other angels for verification of the estimate. “Five thousand years.”

Most of the team gawked, mouths opening. It was hard for them to imagine.

“You’re immortal.” Adrian’s gaze sparkled with clever contemplations, but in the end, he chose not to pursue the temptation. “Interesting.”

The clouds parted behind them, revealing the Messenger coming through yet again. “You have just minutes left before they need to move to the next space. When you are finished, you may rest.”

The Messenger kept walking, disappearing into another wall of clouds.

The angels around Angela and her team relaxed, breaking into smiles.

“Is rest like sleep?” Angela didn’t understand why getting to take a nap was so important.

Kyle snorted. *You still have youth, sweetheart. It’ll hit you too at some point. You can’t fight age.*

The angels around them snickered. They were picking up every thought the team had.

Angela frowned, pointing at Orin. “You broke the rules of hospitality. I demand access to your mind.” She would have let it go. She’d expected the angels to read their thoughts, but she hated to be laughed at.

Orin scowled. “On what grounds?”

“Never without permission.” Angela crossed her arms over her chest. “Incoming.”

Angela’s scan was incredibly fast. Even though they were linked, none of her team was able to keep up.

Orin wasn’t able to keep her out. His grip on the table tightened until his knuckles turned white, but there was little he could do as she ripped down his shields from tops, corners, and sides.

Adrian was proud. *I hope my daughter has become like her.*

*I can give you that information*.

The sleazy voice in Adrian’s mind wasn’t welcome. “No, thank you.”

Azeez frowned at him in fake sympathy. *It must be hard on you to not know where she is, what’s happening to her, if she’s even alive. You must be curious if we’ve weighed her soul yet.*

“Not really, since knowing is probably worse.” Adrian grew cold. “I will never betray Safe Haven again, not even for my daughter. Keep the information. I’ll find out when I’m supposed to.”

Forced by time, Orin stood. “I have to take you into the next area. Is there anything else you want to know? I can extend your time a little if you have questions.”

Angela scanned each of the angels in turn. She noted the shapes of their pins while memorizing names. She would need this information later and she didn’t want to have to ask Marc or Adrian for it. She wanted to already know it. “Are there rules on the bets level ones are allowed to make?”

“We can wager on minor environmental events, people not in leadership positions, and those with no descendant lineage.”

Angela lifted her brow at her team. “Anything else?”

Marc shook his head, sifting through her memories of Orin’s thoughts. He was trying to fill in the pieces he’d missed.

“Where do your supplies come from?” Kyle hadn’t finished his list yet. “Does anyone else ever come and go? Do you know where the Creator is?”

Time seemed to freeze again as everyone looked at Orin for the answers.

“Things just appear. The Messenger is the only one who comes and goes here.” Orin sighed. “And that is a question we need answered as well. If we knew where he was, we could go to him and beg forgiveness until he returned. Because we cannot leave these walls, we do not know.”

“That has not been revealed.” Kyle shook his head. “I really hate that fucking answer.” He scanned his list and closed the book. “I’m done.”

Marc and Adrian exchanged a glance with Neil, but none of them had anything else for this level.

Angela moved on to her last questions. “What does the Messenger do when he’s not here?”

“He says he has to rest. We think he visits rooms like ours where others are being held captive.” Orin’s gaze warmed as he studied her, lingering on her long braid.

Sensing a moment of weakness in their guide, Angela sprung a surprise observation. “Why are there no women here?”

“How can you know that?!” Orin leaned down, nearly shouting. “You’ve only met a few of us! How can you know that?!”

Angela gave a curt nod toward the angels behind them. “I’m being leered at. It’s been going on the entire time we’ve been here. Men who are satisfied usually hide that behavior.”

“You can’t know about us! You have no idea who and what we really are.”

Angela gave Orin a cold smile. “Neither do you. Right?”

He refused to answer.

Angela insisted, sending her alpha command. “Why are there no women?”

Orin groaned at the pain. “We’re not allowed to answer that question!”

“You don’t know.”

“No.”

“What level will have that information?”

Orin struggled against her power. “The only one among us who can tell you that was just promoted and that’s the reason why he might be able to tell you that!”

Angela was tired of riddles, but there was no other choice. She let go of the magic and pointed Orin toward the gap in the wall.

As the team left, the remaining angels stared in hunger and dangerous contemplations. There hadn’t been a female up here in three hundred years.

“I think we need to discuss these recent events.”

The angels nodded at Azeez. All of them headed for the betting tables.

Chapter Seven

**Your Grand Design Sucks**

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**1**

**A**ngela considered their request as the team entered another dark tunnel. They wanted old bets settled. She doubted those were all centered on the future, which meant the angels knew she could search backwards and forward through time. They knew a lot more about her than she knew about them and the difference was frustrating. However, she’d discovered the most important part. The level ones could not be trusted.

“Agreed.” Her team echoed the thought, including Kyle who was able to keep track through his bond with Jennifer. *Power rubs off.*

Orin didn’t ask what they were agreeing to or comment. Everyone assumed he was listening, but they weren’t sure what to make of it when he didn’t respond.

Light came ahead of them as the barrier parted. Much like the first area, the garden was vast, hanging over and around a meandering river. It was incredibly beautiful and deceptive.

Near them, a rectangle table waited with seven stone chairs. On the far side of the river, another stone table sat in the shape of a heart. That one appeared to have double the number of round seats, but all of them were covered in leaves and bits of the garden that was growing over it. It was obvious that table hadn’t been used in a long time.

The cloud wall parted to the right. Seven men in all shades and shapes came through; one of them was the Messenger.

Hermes kept walking as the other men stopped to study Angela and her team. The Messenger clapped, making double the amount of food appear on the rectangle table. He vanished into the tunnel they had just emerged from, leaving an awkward tension.

Orin gestured. “He’s upset you haven’t accepted the hospitality you thanked him for.”

Angela and her team slowly walked through the cloud floor toward the table, not sure if they should eat. All of them were hungry and thirsty, so much that throats were parched and stomachs were growling.

The team chose to examine their new companions and ignore the wonderful smells of the food and the fruits growing around them.

They were all wearing gold lapel pins with shapes that drew fresh attention. Angela memorized them again, hoping she was wrong about the horrible possibility that had come as she’d stared at Orin’s pin. She spotted a lyre, a shield, a javelin, an arrow, and a smiling face this time. The last one drew a twitch from her lips. *It probably doesn’t mean what I think.*

The six men were joined by another man in blue who came through the cloud wall. It was Itis. He looked at Orin. “We will call you when they are ready. Leave.”

Orin vanished back into the level one area without protesting.

The redhead with the lyre pin stepped forward. “You must eat as we talk.”

Angela picked up what appeared to be a slice of apple and took a bite. She watched their hosts for signs it was a bad idea. It tasted normal.

All the angels appeared relieved, but not in a triumphant way. Angela looked at Marc to ask her question since her mouth was full.

“She wants to know why you’re scared of the Messenger.”

The music man spoke for the rest of them when no one else did. “He has the power to send us to the weighing room. We don’t want to die.”

Angela gestured at the food. “Are you going to eat?”

The angel sat across from her and picked up something from the same plate. He chewed and swallowed with a grimace. “There is nothing wrong with the food. We are simply tired of the same thing day after day, year after year.”

Angela motioned to Kyle. “Let’s get it rolling.”

Kyle began his questions. “Who are you and why are you here?”

As soon as the same answers began coming, the team tuned them out to pick out their own details. Unfortunately, there were none. The lapel pins were the same. The robes were the same. The cloudy minds and confused expressions were the same. All the angels were captives, but they didn’t know why they had been put here.

Angela chose to verify that suspicion as soon as Kyle looked at her to indicate he was finished with his list. “What lives did you have before you came here?”

“We have no memories of a life before this one.” The man with the lyre noticed Angela staring and fingered his pin. “I adore music. My name is Leeto.”

That seemed to be a cue for the others to introduce themselves. The team struggled to memorize it all as names and information flew at them.

“I am Nysus. I bring joy.”

“Ercu, strength of the half mortals.”

“I am the athletic heart. Resus.”

“I am Ares, the defender.”

Silence fell for a moment as the wall opened once again to let the Messenger through. He studied all of them as he clomped into the third area. Everyone could feel him wondering what they had been discussing.

Angela looked around. “What’s he worried about you telling us?”

“It’s not information he fears.” Leeto once again spoke for the rest when they didn’t speak for themselves. “He fears you will side with us in our request.”

“And now we get to the real reason for these separate meetings.” Angela leaned back, voice cold. “What demand do you make of me?”

Leeto frowned, hands clasping in front of him. “We wish for you to ascend and be the first female among us in five centuries. You will mate and we will once again have life flowing through these walls. We want to live again–through you.”

Angela’s laughter overrode the anger of her team. She let the bitter amusement flow, aware of attention turning their way from other areas. “I thought it was for my mind!”

Angela kept laughing but tears were forming behind her lids. Rage flared out suddenly, making everyone flinch back.

Angela stilled, hands coming together. She bowed her head.

The team waited, tensed for the fight to start.

The angels stared in confusion.

“What are you doing?”

“What is she doing?”

“Looks like she’s praying.” Marc shrugged. “Perhaps you should ask what she’s praying for.”

Ares frowned at Angela. “Well?”

“Amen.” Angela looked up at him with glowing red orbs. “I asked for permission to kill all of you. When I didn’t get an answer, I asked for forgiveness for doing it anyway.”

Angels scrambled from the table even though she didn’t make a move toward them.

“You can’t!”

“Why?”

“You’d have to take our place.” Leeto kept distance between them as he explained that. “The weigh station must always be manned. We can only get out if someone takes our place.”

“What would you do if you got out of here?” Angela braced for the answer. She needed to verify if this level was also trustworthy.

Ares leered. “We will rampage on earth until the Creator is forced to come and remove us.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“Why is our time here short?” Marc was working on the hints they’d gotten upon arrival.

“If you stay too long, you cannot go back.”

“How long do we have left?”

“Minutes with us. Time stops when you enter the boss’s office.”

“Enough.” Angela rose and strode toward the gap widening in the wall. “Let’s see what’s behind door number three. Bet it isn’t a grand showcase.”

Her team snickered at the pun and the Price Is Right reference, following.

The level two angels watched them leave, confused and angry.

“Where is my tour guide?” Angela kept walking through the tunnel.

A few seconds later, the cloud wall parted behind them. Orin came to her.

Angela paused, giving him an opening.

Orin had hoped to get time alone with her for this conversation, but time was short. “I need to tell you about the women. The others won’t. I’m sure you saw their table in the garden.”

“That’s where the women sat when they were here?” Angela had been waiting for this part of the story. She already knew she wasn’t going to like it.

“Yes.”

“They got a lot of seats compared to the other tables.”

“There were more women than men in these rooms. Hermes didn’t like that. When we became desperate to find a way out, he suggested sacrificing them.” Orin strode toward the gap appearing in the wall ahead of them. “I can’t tell you more because I wasn’t here then. Maybe one of the level threes can give you that information.”

“Why did you tell us that if you don’t know the rest?”

Orin spun around, surprising them again with his anger. “Because I miss my mate! I don’t know her name; I can’t remember her face, but I know I had a mate here!”

Adrian and Marc exchanged glances. *Periodic memory wipes?*

*Impossible to say for sure. I’m not ruling anything out yet.*

Orin composed himself and turned back toward the open entrance. “I will leave you here.”

None of the team looked at him as they slid into the next garden area.

A round table sat by the river bend with five angels enjoying drinks and food. Like the others here, they wore long robes and lapels pins in different shapes. Their color was red.

*A clock, a moon, a globe, water, a sun.* The team memorized the pins and got ready to learn names. There were only fifteen angels plus the Messenger and boss, but it was still hard to keep up.

One of the men, a muscular brunette, opened his hands toward them in greeting. “I am Kronus, keeper of time. Welcome to the next level.”

Kyle waited for Angela to tell him what she wanted, assuming they would go through the useless interrogation list once again.

Angela didn’t want to waste the time they had left. She moved to the table and took the only empty seat as her men gathered behind her. “Let’s get to it. What do you guys want from me?”

“Introductions must be observed.” Kronus waved around the table. “This is Pimet. He is hindsight. Atlas, next to him, is endurance. Cean controls the liquid of life. Romi is foresight. Together, we five make the basic elements of life.”

Angela concentrated. “Time, the moon and stars, the earth and the oceans. That’s the basis for all life?”

Kronus gave an apologetic gesture. “Time is not necessarily necessary, but it keeps things relative.”

The other angels sniggered at his wordplay.

“You already know who we are. Are the introductions finished now?”

Kronus clapped, enjoying her curt responses. “You know what we want. We only care about magic, power, and the future of our species–descendants.”

Angela motioned to Kyle.

Kyle skipped the questions that were no longer important. “What are you allowed to bet on?”

Kronus smiled. “We can wager on anything and anyone, including the lower levels. We have no limits.”

“Why do you hate Messenger?”

“He is ending the games. That’s why your world was allowed to experience an apocalypse, but we hope a mate who loves mortals will convince the Creator to keep it all going–for her.”

Angela felt hot gazes on her skin, recognizing desire. *This isn’t anything like I envisioned.*

Adrian studied the bright beings. These were the only ones who appeared to have another form so far. Light shined from underneath their skin, but heavy shades of darkness also lingered around the edges. *I wonder if that’s what our true descendant bodies look like.*

Marc shrugged at Adrian’s contemplations, but didn’t comment. He lifted a brow at the angels. “You all want the same thing?”

All the men nodded.

Kronus explained further. “There is no need for us to fight over what will be. Angela will agree. She will ascend and breed with the Creator. Life will flow back into these rooms and trickle down to all worlds. The reset will not happen.”

“Reset?” Kyle frowned.

Pimet went on. “When all souls are extinguished from a planet, it can be used for new projects. The Creator will have a blank slate to work on.”

“Okay, yeah. We’ll come back to that.” Marc tried to control his aggravation. “Why don’t the level threes use the other areas?” He had noticed the layers of filmy white webs.

“We no longer need boards or screens. We can simply call the moments to mind that we wish to view or bet on.” Atlas would have demonstrated, but Kronus denied him with a curt motion.

“Are you sure it isn’t because you don’t trust anybody else in your group not to cheat, so you never let each other out of your sight?” Marc wasn’t about to let them slide.

Kronus nodded an acknowledgment. “That may be so, but it does not matter to your visit here. Ask the next question. Time is running.”

Adrian studied the red robes, the gold pins. “Are you all byzantine?”

Surprise came that he had figured it out.

Kronus frowned. “It is what you would have become if you had not been corrupted.”

Again, Adrian refused to be pulled into the temptation of asking questions about his personal life or future. “How do you feel about mortals?”

Disgust, arrogance, and hatred flashed across all five faces. They didn’t have sympathy for the targets of their bets.

“Never mind.” Adrian made a motion to Angela to let her know he was done with his questions. He had found out what he needed to know. The level threes were strong and at the same time, weak. They didn’t use power here. They had no need for it.

“Do you go down to the worlds you play with?”

Kronus sighed in longing at her question. “That is rarely approved.”

“I assume when you do go, you don’t want to come back.”

“Some don’t. Many of us hate going down there. Up here, we only eat when we enjoy it. We don’t age or defecate. We don’t get sick. We can’t be hurt. There are a lot of disadvantages to being mortal.”

Angela snorted. “I’m aware.” She suddenly frowned toward Kronus. “I know what you’re thinking of doing. It would be a bad idea.”

Kronus couldn’t resist her pull any more than the other men she used it on. He shifted toward her, expression lightening, mood lifting. “What would happen if I did?”

Angela leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

When she pulled away, Kronus made a face and shook his head. “I’d rather keep my wings, thank you.”

Angela gave a bitter chuckle. “It’s much too late for that.”

“What happens if you stop weighing souls?”

The angels exchanged uneasy glances as Romi answered Kyle’s question.

“We have personally never tested that possibility.”

“You don’t know.”

“Others who were here before us tried to do that. They were removed. We chose not to try.”

“You don’t know where they went and you decided the risk was too great since it’s better to deal with the devil you know than the devil you don’t, right?”

The team winced at Kyle’s choice of words.

So did the angels.

Kronus recovered. “Yes. Many of us are content here. We see how other lifeforms struggle to exist. We have chosen to accept captivity, but that does not make it right. The people who want to leave should be free to do so.”

Neil had a question. He’d been quiet for most of the tour, simply observing and letting his brain do what it did best. “What were the women allowed to bet on?”

Romi exhibited contempt. “Parenthood and affairs of the heart. They wanted to know whom would end up with whom. It was quite tedious.”

“You were here when the women were here? You remember them?” Neil had the man trapped, he was suddenly sure.

Romi pointed toward the far end of the garden, where the river disappeared into the cloud wall. “The boss is waiting for her.”

Every man on the team dropped a hand to their gun.

“She’s not going anywhere without the rest of us.” Marc hated even the idea of her being out of his sight up here.

The Messenger appeared in the gap in the wall, eyes challenging her courage.

A V popped out on Angela’s chin and then on her forehead. Heat radiated from her in thick waves.

Marc shifted away. “Okay. Maybe you should go alone.”

Angela stood, letting the fury build. She was about to talk to the boss. He wasn’t going to like what she had to say.

Angela entered the tunnel and paused as the wall shut behind her, using the most powerful version of her gifts to read minds. When Adrian had thought the angels weak, he’d been absolutely correct. The only ones she wasn’t picking up now were the Messenger and the boss. Everyone else’s thoughts were wide open to her. It was ugly.

The level ones were on the edge of rebelling and refusing to weigh souls until a fairer system was enacted. The level twos were thrilled to be level two, but they hated the level threes because there was no way they could rise to that rank. The level threes hated each other and everyone else. They didn’t care about the lifeforms on the worlds they manipulated. All they wanted was the Creator back so they could be freed. They didn’t care how the goal was accomplished. *None of these beings are good. That’s the final proof I needed that this is not heaven.* Angela moved through the opening in front of her, not sure what to expect. She tried to brace for anything.

“Please. Come in.”

Angela scanned the small room that had a desk, a chair, and a fireplace in the corner, not surprised to discover the same cloudy walls and floors. The Messenger stood by the desk, staring at her with dark, malevolent eyes.

Angela studied the boss in the chair behind the desk, not surprised or impressed. He looked like any other man here, except his robe was glowing white and he didn’t have a lapel pin. Instead of being intimidated, Angela found herself annoyed with the not-even-cute angel. “What am I supposed to call you?”

“You may call me Xaós.”

Angela frowned at his sensual tone as she moved toward the desk. *Definitely byzan*. “I assume you know everything going on up here?”

The blond man’s green eyes twinkled at her. “Of course. That’s why I arranged for a tour before our conversation. Now you know it all too.”

Angela noticed the desk didn’t have anything on it. There were no pens or paper, nothing like a computer or a radio. *That’s what I haven’t seen up here*, she realized. *The containment center for souls looks like something from a medieval torture museum. Fireplaces are used. Even this room has one. Why is there no technology?*

The boss and Messenger waited for her to get her bearings, monitoring her thoughts and admiring the process. Starting from the bottom corner, she worked her way up until she was back in the moment and staring at them in chilly dislike. “What does this room demand of me?”

“Only that you read the book of life so you will understand why the final battle has to take place.”

“I know a lie when I hear one.”

The Messenger cackled. He slapped his knee, letting out a belly laugh. “I can’t believe you tried to use that on her.”

Xaós gave the Messenger a tolerant glare, then regarded Angela. He spent a minute studying her, going from head to toe, lingering on the scars he could see. “I need you to defeat my enemies. I’m requesting you as my champion.”

Angela hadn’t expected that. “You want me to hurt the angels in the other rooms?”

Xaós gave a sad sigh. “They need to remember their place.”

“Why couldn’t I bring my team in here for this conversation?”

The boss delivered another tolerant glower toward the Messenger. “They have a bet on whether or not your men can be tempted. It has to be settled.”

Angela already knew the outcome, but she was curious about how angels viewed events without screens or boards. “Can I watch?”

The boss weaved his hands around each other, bringing up a beautiful golden orb that cleared into an image of the previous room. Her team was still sitting at the table with the level threes, digging for information.

“Let there be sound.” Xaós waved again, giving them audio.

Angela leaned in, fascinated. It was much clearer than the images she saw in her mind when she did this. *I wonder if I can copy it.*

**2**

Kronus recognized how uneasy the team was feeling without their leader and sought to offer comfort. “She will not be harmed. There is no reason for your concern.”

Adrian snorted.

Kyle rolled his eyes.

Neil shook his head.

“It’s not Angie we’re worried about.” Marc chose not to explain when he received confusion from the angels. These were strong, smart beings, but they didn’t understand who they were dealing with. Despite watching her, probably for most of her life, they didn’t really know Angie. Her team did. They’d felt her rage boil hotter with each farce of an interrogation she’d been forced to go through. She was beyond being in a bad mood. She was on the edge of doing something drastic. Her men were worried it would trigger some rule that might keep them here indefinitely.

Neil was especially stressing over possibly being kept away from Samantha. After having so much trouble on the way to the shore, she didn’t need to be alone.

Cean met Neil’s eye across the round table. “You can go, right now. I’m sure no one will fault you for it. You have many duties there.”

Neil tilted his hat back. “Why would I agree to do that?”

“I will tell you the future of your family if you abandon your leader and return now.”

Neil’s lips thinned. “If you think I can be bought so easily, I suggest updating your films.”

Kyle grinned. “You just tried to bribe the man in our camp who would probably have been a priest in another lifetime. Good job.”

Cean flushed, falling silent.

Pimet leaned over the table toward Marc, sure he had the jealous man pegged. He’d watched thousands of hours of Marc’s lives. He knew everything there was to know.

Marc smiled as he caught the thought. “Let’s see if that’s true.”

Directly challenged, Pimet sat up straighter. “Did you enjoy killing women?”

“Sometimes, sure.”

It wasn’t the answer the angel had expected. He tried intimidation next. “You helped cause the fall of civilization. At some point, your soul will come here. We will pass judgment on you.”

Marc shrugged. “If there’s any justice, I’ll get to do that for you too. Bet we end up in the same place.”

“I am not evil!” Pimet slammed his hand on the table, rattling dishes. “You are supposed to feel guilt and ask if I can absolve you. I can, you know.”

“It’s funny you think absolution is what I want the most.” Marc smiled. “Guess you do need a new video library.”

The team snickered again. They were trained to use an enemy against themselves whenever possible and with this group, it was like taking candy from a baby.

Adrian glared at Kronus. “Is it my turn? I can feel her watching. She’s ready for us to be with her.”

All the angels frowned. They hadn’t realized they were being observed.

“How do you know she is watching this moment?” Kronus suspected cheating.

Adrian’s eyes warmed. “We have a bond with her, all of us. You wouldn’t understand because you don’t like humanity. It’s one of those things only a fan would notice.” He waved a dismissive hand. “Try your temptation. My *boss* is calling.”

The angels disliked the implication that Angela was the boss, but Adrian refused to pull it back. Angela would always be that to him now.

“Very well.” Kronus pointed. “Would you have turned Safe Haven in to your government if Angela had not joined?”

Heads on the team rotated toward Adrian. All of them had wondered that at one point or another.

Adrian’s voice stayed even. His body language went cold. “I see. You’re not going to try to tempt me. You’re going to try to rip her team apart through me.” Adrian shrugged. “Be careful what you wish for. Yes, I would have.”

It settled that question for the men around him, but it didn’t change anything. They already assumed that was the answer. It was almost a relief to know they were right. Adrian had had continuous streaks of luck where he appeared to be a good guy and made people doubt their instincts. This was confirmation that they had always been right and he had always been bad.

“Next?”

Romi held out a hand. “With the help of hindsight and foresight, you could go back and change the one big mistake that has always haunted you. Just touch me.”

Adrian froze. This was the temptation he had feared.

Marc and the others assumed the moment was Adrian choosing to use magic on Angela instead of competing for her heart.

Atlas blew out annoyance. “It was never about that. Adrian’s ghost joined his mind decades before the war. We will banish it. In exchange, he will remain here when the rest of you return.”

Adrian wanted that box in his crypt destroyed, but thanks to recent events, he now knew he had someone else to help with it. “No, thank you.”

The team had never doubted Adrian’s choice. He wasn’t going to leave Angela.

Romi was disappointed, but he held out a hand to Pimet. “*You win.*”

Pimet shook.

No one’s robe changed color, but shouts of anger and grief echoed from the other areas. Someone else had taken the fall for their bet. Adrian wasn’t sure how he knew that, but he did. It made sense when he thought about it. As high-level rollers, the angels in here didn’t want new meat. They had picked a fall guy in case they were wrong. Orin’s group was correct. The top level was cheating.

A gap in the wall opened where Angela had disappeared. Angela’s annoyed voice rolled out. “Get in here.”

Marc and the others left the table and proudly joined their leader.

The cloud wall shut behind them, muting the grumbles of the level threes. The meeting wasn’t going like they’d envisioned either.

Chapter Eight

**We Need Answers**

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**1**

**“G**et lost!”

The Messenger flushed under his matted hair and marched toward her, fists coming up.

Angela laughed, long and hard.

“Leave us.” Xaós waved. “See to the others. They need rest.”

Hermes clomped through the wall, again slamming the door behind him.

Angela stared at the boss, trying to determine the best way to handle him as her team joined her.

Kyle and Neil inspected the man behind the desk. His slouched posture and arrogant expression weren’t comforting.

Marc and Adrian dug into the boss’s mind and found only those same white clouds.

“He wants me to be his champion.” Angela didn’t spend time filling her team in on the rest. “How do you expect me to defeat your enemies?”

Xaós smiled. “They have to lose, of course. Nothing hurts them like falling from the ranks.”

“That’s all?” Kyle didn’t trust this newest man.

Laughter came. “Yes.”

Kyle frowned. “I expected something…”

“Evil?”

Kyle nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Xaós let his sadness sweep them. “Constantly forgiving has serious consequences.”

Angela snorted, mind spinning. “So does love.”

“Yes. It’s hard to kill when you love the target.”

“You know what the levels want of me?”

Xaós gazed at her in resignation. “I know you don’t want it. Free will.”

Angela drew in a deep breath, suddenly wishing she’d never arranged this meeting. “Would you really keep it all going if I begged?”

“No.”

Sensual waves floated over them, drawing anger from the team.

“All you would have to do is ask.”

“You know I won’t or else we wouldn’t be having this meeting.” Angela had already figured out the other levels weren’t on an even playing field with Xaós. He was a million times more clever. “But you’re willing to…bond with me and give me what I want in exchange.” She scowled at the silence. “I can’t make an informed decision without that information.”

Surprise came from Xaós. “You’re considering it. Why?”

Angela let her true feelings be known. “Because I want to change things. Your grand design sucks.”

Mirth echoed from Xaós. “They think you’ll keep it going, that you’re on their side.” More laughter flowed through the office.

Angela shut out the anger and worry of her team, concentrating. “I’m on my own side now.”

Xaós splayed his hands. “Yes, but if you die, you will come here and take your place.”

She couldn’t help being curious. “Which level?”

Xaós chuckled. “Mine. If you die without making the choice, it’s a default rule. Every soul in the second and third level wants it. They have the majority vote. They’ll put us together.”

Angela prepared to spring the trap she’d set. “Sounds like I win either way. I get *you*, a powerful place, and I get to determine the future of all humanity.” She glared. “Why don’t you already have a mate?”

“That remarkable mind.” A breathy sigh floated through the room. “Our women passed. We are not young bearing and few humans reach byzantine. Our population is never replenished.”

“So you all think I’ll just accept my fate and breed for you.” Angela tapped her foot, controlling the rage. “What a lovely thought.”

“It is.” Xaós tried a reasonable tone. “You love your people. You would do anything for them. Why not us?”

“Yeah, let’s come back to that.” Adrian drew attention. “How did your women pass?”

A frown came. It was clear Xaós didn’t want to talk about the women.

“We do not know. They vanished.”

Adrian frowned. “You didn’t hunt for them?”

Xaós grimaced, hands opening again. “Hunt where? These rooms are all there is.”

Angela snapped the trap, aware that she’d lost the advantage but not how. “You’re not the Creator! You’re pretending to be. I demand your real name!”

Xaós delivered more arrogance instead. “Do not question what must happen. Accept your place in the design and be thankful you were chosen.”

“Thankful?!” Angela flipped him the finger, rage almost boiling over now. “You talk about the grand plan, but you don’t even know what it is!”

“Do you?!” Xaós lunged forward and grabbed her wrist across the desk as he brought up a shield around them. “I command you to search!”

“Beg me!” Angela grimaced at the sharp pain from refusing old magic. “Get on your knees, like so many have through the ages, and beg me.” She sent a powerful zap of hatred into his hand. She paid no attention to the four men aiming guns and magic at the shield or the angels coming to the walls around them. She was on her own for this moment.

“Do you swear?” Skin burning from the contact, Xaós let go of her. “If I beg, you will look?”

“Yes.” Angela wanted to ask why he didn’t already have that information, but she chose to take a different path. “But no matter what I see, I’ll give the answer you’ve delivered for thousands of years when humanity begged.” She brought up a personal shield of fire, and then another, smothering herself in protection so he couldn’t force her to do it or touch her again. “Darkness and silence.”

Xaós didn’t understand what was happening with her, but he knew it was dangerous. “You cannot burn these walls. We’ve tried, many times.”

Angela increased the flames. “I’m not aiming for walls.” She leered at him, like he’d been doing to her.

Xaós cringed, whining in terror. His shield shrank around him.

The cloud wall behind her opened, but Angela didn’t flinch from the angels rushing toward them. Her own group was turning to meet them, tackling, firing spells.

Angela lifted her hand…

“Wait!” The Messenger entered the room amid the chaos. “You must not spill blood here!”

“Thank you.” Angela lowered her arm, turning.

Hermes paused at her triumphant tone. “For what?”

“Telling me how to hurt you.” She released the fireball.

Every angel screamed as flames slammed into the Messenger. He caught fire in a fast blur, shouting.

It quickly became shrieks.

Angela blocked the burning being from help with multiple layers of her shield. He burned alive in her bubble as they watched.

“What have you done?” Xaós sank back into his chair and covered his face with his hands.

“I’ve changed things.” She motioned her crew to let go of the easily subdued angels. “We’ve been tricked. They don’t know any more than we do.”

“So you rang a bell to see who might answer?” Adrian chuckled. “Nice.”

The ground rumbled, disturbing the fog.

Angela sighed, tired. “I doubt our company will feel the same. Brace for something. Who knows what.”

“No one ever shows up.” Xaós gestured without looking at anyone. “We’ve angered them before, but it doesn’t matter.”

“You’ve killed here… The women.” Angela directed Marc and Adrian forward. “Interrogation.”

Both men approached the desk.

Neil frowned at Angela. “You knew.”

She let out a sound of misery and anger. “I assumed the worst. Adrian taught me to do that.”

“I don’t get it.” Kyle was still watching the Messenger burn. The little man had just stopped twitching.

“She knew this was a trick.” Neil’s lips thinned further. “That’s why she brought four killers to heaven.”

“This isn’t heaven.” Adrian glowered at Xaós and then his angels. “Is it?”

Itis shook his head, not fighting them at all.

Angela noted his lip biting and stored that information. She concentrated, hand lifting. A small globe appeared, showing their planet and a small, spinning star where the moon should have been.

“What is that?”

“Her new gift.” Adrian answered Marc while comparing similarities between Angela and the cowering angels observing them all in confused mistrust. “She has a map of the heavens now.”

“It’s small.”

“That’s all we’ve uncovered.” Adrian took the seat across from Xaós. “It’s already more than anyone has ever found. We’re on a roll.”

Marc snorted hard laughter. He glanced at Angela. “What persuasion would you like us to use?”

Angela let go of the map. It used a lot of energy to open it. She would have to account for that. “He loves his people the way I love mine.”

Marc motioned at Adrian. “You go first. I’ll add in here and there. If he lies, we’ll kill the smallest one first.”

Adrian settled across from the scared, sullen boss man and got comfortable. He cracked all his knuckles in one quick move. “Hello. Having a bad day?”

Xaós let out a sound of miserable contempt. “We should have killed you.”

“I keep hearing that.” Adrian pulled his knife and fingered the sharp blade. “But you don’t get to pick and choose life, do you? Only the angels have that honor.”

When the man didn’t answer, Marc stepped toward the cringing cowards on the floor. “I’ve never had a byzantine. Wonder what you guys taste like?”

Angela snickered at the common thought among the team. “You probably won’t enjoy it as much as me.”

Marc’s laughter flowed over the room, bringing calm despite the threat of torture.

“Don’t hurt them.” Xaós surrendered without a fight. “I’ll tell you.”

Adrian leaned back, crossing a leg over the other. He was curious how Angela had known Xaós’s weakness, but now wasn’t the time to ask. “How did you get here? What’s your job?”

Sullen tones came now. “We woke here with no memory.”

“And your job? Is it really to weigh the souls and bet on life?”

“We’ve never known.” Xaós seemed to collapse before them. “We need to know.”

Angela, suspicions confirmed, leaned against the cloud wall to conserve what energy she had left. She ran her fingers through it, annoyed when it felt like a cheap curtain. *This has been a disappointment… I’m still furious.* “So you woke here, in control of all this, of all our lives, and the best you could do was bet on the outcomes?”

A double timbre came from Xaós, finally revealing regret. “*We got bored just watching.*”

Neil swallowed rage at that answer. “Do you have books here or…I don’t know, guidelines?”

Xaós sneered. “We have the same book you refuse to follow.”

“You’re pissed at being here with no answers, so you decided to torment humankind to get revenge on the Creator. You know he loves his humans.” Angela lifted a brow. “Tell me that’s wrong.”

Xaós shook his head. “I wish I could, but we are too similar. You know too much about me.”

“Anyone could read you, without gifts. You’re pissed, like the humans you’re so jealous of and hate for existing.” Angela almost sobbed. “I’ve worried over this contingency for weeks.”

“Why?” Neil assumed she had it covered either way.

“I don’t. This is the one dead end. I don’t know where to go from here, except to commit such atrocities that replacements need to be sent.”

Cold danger filled the air.

“You mean kill them.” Neil just wanted to be sure what she needed from him. He didn’t have a problem with it after what they’d learned.

Her orbs turned red. “I want them burned alive.” She ignored the whimpering angels and eager team. “First, I need to figure out their real purpose here, what they were supposed to spend their time doing…” Angela signaled the interrogators to continue and shut her eyes. She’d discovered listening revealed clues she couldn’t catch with sight.

Adrian resumed his questioning. “How long have you been here? Did you all appear at the same time?”

“I was the first. The others came shortly after.”

“Shortly?”

“It was such a short time that I did not keep track of the exact passage. When the others came, we realized the rooms were getting a new arrival every two hundred years. Orin was the last to appear.”

“And you’ve been here how long now with no word from anyone?” Marc reinforced Adrian’s question while reminding Xaós he’d been abandoned and had no reason to stay loyal or lie.

“Thousands of years.”

“You have no job? You’re just here?”

The man nodded.

“Punishment.” Angela didn’t open her eyes. “This is a prison.”

“Yes. It has to be.” Xaós surprised them with his agreement. “We’ve been able to form no other conclusion.”

“Some jail.” Kyle was furious. “If they don’t know what they did wrong, they aren’t learning anything. The punishment is useless.”

“Revenge.” Marc gave them the correct answer. “This was set up to torture them. They might be valuable, though. After this long, hatred would fade. You’d want them gone.”

“But they haven’t been killed.” Angela put a piece into place. “In that scenario, the only reason I wouldn’t have killed them is if I had made other plans for them.” *Or for this weigh station...*

“You think?” Xaós sounded hopeful for the first time.

Angela shrugged. “You’ve considered all the options during your imprisonment, I’m sure. Being allowed to have control over humans, being given or allowed to keep immortality, being cared for–all those things imply you will get out of here at some point. I assume that’s what you’ve come up with?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve skipped an obvious clue.” Angela opened her eyes. “We’re here now. This is the first time with open contact, right? The Messenger always forced you to be subtle in dealing with us.”

“Yes. We were very excited to be allowed to bring you here. Company is rare.”

“Yeah, we’re not your company.” She slid her hand to her belt. “We’re your executioners. The hatred has finally faded. They just want you gone now.”

The angels whimpered again, not considering fighting her.

Xaós grimaced. “I did consider that possibility, but I counted on something I know to be unshakable.”

Angela sighed, sensing a trap springing around her. “And what is that?”

“Your determination to have answers you can live, or die, with.”

“I don’t have to spare all of you to achieve it.” Angela hoped that was true.

“But you will have to leave souls here to take our place. When we removed one of our own, he didn’t die. Even when we burnt Kronus, he survived.”

Angela’s horror was bitter. “You deserve this. I don’t know what you did to trigger such a final judgement, but Kyle is right. You didn’t learn anything. You have no remorse for your choices.”

“What is remorse?”

Angela stared at Xaós, mind adding the next clue. She now had a tiny corner framed. “You have no conscience. You’re like a patient…” Angela stood straight as another piece slammed into place. “Mental patients who are allowed to play, unsupervised...” She sucked in air. “We’re dogs in a reform program.” Her harsh laughter spilled through the rooms, bringing waves of thick tension.

“The women were sent to a female jail because you killed some of them. They had to be protected, even up here.” Angela blinked rapidly to stop her tears. “This is the first test of putting the inmates with the pets to determine what will happen.”

“And if the pets bite?” Marc hated the image, but it fit.

“You discontinue the program.”

Marc pushed her. “What if it’s already being ended?”

“That would end it faster. It would also bring someone to collect information on what went wrong.” Angela pulled her knife and strode toward the angels. “I’ll leave a note of explanation.”

“Angie.” Adrian felt her rage trying to take control. He also felt like they were missing something. “We can’t do this.”

She paused to look at him. “They’ll come to put me down like the wild animal I am.”

“You’re bitter. I understand. We all are.”

“So why are you stopping me?”

Marc motioned. “He isn’t finished with his interrogation.”

“Yes, he is.”

“I do have another question, actually.” It had occurred to Adrian when they’d first arrived, but he’d forgotten. Marc interfering had reminded him. “Was the Messenger always here or did he show up when the rooms filled?”

Xaós hurried to answer and stall her actions. “He was always here.”

“You never forced him to talk?”

Xaós gave Adrian a nasty glare. “Of course, but we’re not fighters like you. He laughed at us.”

“And now you can’t question him at all.” Adrian stared at the charred mess on the floor. “Will a new Messenger be sent?”

Angela tapped her knife hilt. “I’m more interested in new angels.”

“Why are you threatening us?” Orin cowered on the floor, peering at her in wounded frustration. “We’ve done you no harm.”

“You’ve played God with the lives of all humans. Your bets have destroyed us. I should skin you alive!”

Everyone fell silent, not wanting to provoke her further.

Angela tried to control herself. “This is a waste of time. There are no answers to be found.”

“No!” Xaós moaned. “There has to be more than this! Don’t stop hunting it!”

“So you can be freed?”

He nodded tiredly. “Even being dead would be better.”

“We’ve all felt like that, thanks to your wagers. You deserve it.”

“But you don’t? After killing thousands since the war?”

Angela ran a hand through her wild curls, disgusted. “My death dealing isn’t over yet.” She moved into the tunnel. “But your days of betting on our lives are finished.”

Marc stayed behind her as Angela tracked back to the first room of chessboards. When she began destroying them with blasts of heat, he kept quiet, hoping the worlds connected to them weren’t harmed.

Angela spent the rest of her energy going through the rooms and burning every stick of furniture and entertainment. She also burnt their meager comforts.

The angels and boss shouted or cried when their favorite thing was destroyed, but they still didn’t fight.

“Will it be…replenished?”

Neil shrugged at Kyle’s query. “No idea.”

“Unlikely.” Adrian pointed at the desk Xaós was cowering behind. “The drawer is broken; it leans. They don’t get fresh shipments.”

“The Messenger said these items had to last us.” Xaós groaned as Angela’s fire got closer. “Please don’t let her leave us here!”

“There’s nowhere else for you to go.”

“We could follow you…”

“No!” Adrian, Neil, and Kyle denied him in unison.

“But you could teach us to–”

“No.” Adrian stood, also very bitter in his disappointment. “Send us back or she will burn you when she gets to this room. Her hatred is strong.”

“She’s the only one who can send you back.” Xaós hid behind his desk. “If she kills me, she has to take my place.”

“How would you escort us if someone has to take your place?”

“We don’t know for sure. The Messenger was clear we can visit for a time, but he made it seem like we’d be trapped there if we stayed too long.”

“And in your wisdom, you never tested the time limit.”

“No. We value our immortality.”

“But now that we’ve come, you’re willing. Why?”

Xaós sighed in awe. “She’ll protect us like she does all of you.”

“No, I won’t.” Angela paused in the entrance. “I’ll tell my camp the truth and let them have revenge. You’re safer right here, serving your punishment.”

“But you can’t! You don’t have answers!”

“Contact me when a new Messenger is sent.”

“But…that could be years!”

“Yes. We may all be dead and weighed before then.” She shrugged coldly. “Don’t blame me. I didn’t put you here. Your actions did.”

“You’re just going to leave us?!”

Angela veered toward the angels. “After I drop a message of my own.” Her grip tightened on the knife. “Who wants to be my pegboard?”

Souls fled into the first rooms, screaming.

Angela rotated back to Xaós. “They volunteered you.” Angela leapt over the desk and pinned the man to the wall. Her knife poked his neck.

The ground rumbled.

Adrian and Marc, both about to grab her, stopped and waited to see what would happen next.

Angela let the blade draw a speck of blood, hating the chore.

Walls shook…the floor buckled…

Angela drew a full droplet of crimson.

Power shot out of Xaós, blasting her and her team into the walls.

Angela laughed as she tried to stand, groaning like the rest of the team. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.” She brought up her shield, including her recovering team inside, and stared at the Messenger who was now behind the desk. “You died too easy. Who took your place?”

“One of my clones.” He cackled at her. “I use them at all times.”

“How many would I have to kill to reach the *real* you?”

“Seventeen thousand, five hundred and eight.” The horned man bowed to her. “Odds are your knife will break, you five will run out of ammunition, and you’ll exhaust yourselves mentally and physically with only half those lives claimed.”

“What if I take my own?”

The Messenger froze for an instant.

Angela saw it. All of her recovering team did.

“If you die here, you stay here.”

“At least that would be by choice.”

The Messenger studied her without blinking. “Why would you want to remain here?”

“Same reasons I’ve already stated–control of the bets, and future changes.”

“Changes to what? You didn’t elaborate.”

“And I won’t, so you can’t cover it before I get to it.” Angela bowed back in contempt. “I passed your tests. Give me what I came for.”

“And if I don’t?”

Angela didn’t give away her ace. She stared expectantly, hand inching toward her gun.

“You came for information not yet earned. You are blessed to even be here!”

“Blessed isn’t the word I would have chosen, but I get your point. We’re at a stalemate. Send me back. You’re wasting my time and won’t even tell me why. This farce is over.” She turned toward the doorway. “I assume the entrance is also the exit?”

The Messenger’s frustration was loud and finally carried the levels of hatred she’d expected.

“You are an abomination! You’re not supposed to exist.”

Angela slowed but didn’t stop. “I won’t fall in line. No one knows what to do with me, right?”

“Yes! Female byzantine are docile, loving, obedient. You are none of those.”

“Nope. I’d just as soon cut your horns off and hang them on my shoelaces.” Angela kept walking, team following.

The Messenger hopped after her, ignoring the furious men still being shielded by her power. “You have to agree to take your place. You can’t leave it like this!”

“Sure I can. You lied, played games. You aren’t delivering on the agreed terms of our deal. Give me one reason why I should stay for another minute.”

“I’ll heal your kids! Right now!”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re lying.”

“Am not! I’ll heal them all. The adults too.”

“In exchange for?”

“Obedience.”

Angela’s laughter rang through the rooms as she strode by hiding angels trying not to draw her attention. “You don’t know me at all.”

“We want to study you. We want to know why you evolved so fast and why you’re so different. Are there more like you and the child you left in charge? What triggered so many angels in one generation? Did you know the war was coming? How powerful are you?”

Angela turned to stare at the Messenger as he continued to shoot the same rapid-fire questions she’d asked herself months ago.

“How have you survived so many enemies and injuries? How are you not crushed by your losses and the betrayals? How can you love the souls who try to kill you?” The Messenger sucked in air. “We need answers!”

Angela’s lips curled. “You’re supposed to be the higher power controlling all fates toward a grand plan. Why don’t you already know?!”

“I… We haven’t… It’s not supposed to be this way! Female byzantine haven’t existed except once in all of your human history! We have to know why it’s happening now!”

“You don’t control everything. That must suck for you.”

“It’s infuriating! There are not supposed to be deviations!”

“You haven’t complained about the war or all the deaths even once… That means it really was part of the plan.” She paused, adding the next clue.

“Oh, no.”

Angels whimpered.

“There she goes again.”

The angels had figured out her pattern of discovery and already dreaded it.

Angela’s fury filled the room with fresh waves of heat. “The bets were ending. The war was planned. You put them here to destroy the experiment. It’s over and has to be disposed of before you can start something new. It was a test of their rehabilitation.”

The Messenger stood in stiff silence as she added it up.

“You’ve studied us for something, but we didn’t produce results until now.” Angela’s fingers twitched against her gun belt. “You said there were female Byzan once before in history. When?”

The Messenger clearly didn’t want to answer.

Adrian came to Angela’s side. “You should give her the information. She’s kind of a genius, even for one of us. Maybe she can give you answers.”

The Messenger sighed in resignation. “When the Creator waked the earth, a child was born byzantine.”

“Uh-huh. She was killed before she could age enough to be a challenge?” Angela guessed.

“Yes. All the upper levels concurred.”

“Where’s the Creator now?”

“You will never get that information from me!”

“I already have it.” Angela turned toward the entrance. “I just didn’t want to believe it. The room at the top of heaven is empty. You can’t tell me where he is because you don’t know. You haven’t suffered like we have on earth. You’ve never considered that we sensed it.” Angela went to the spot where she’d woken and rotated toward the cloud wall, where the Messenger was watching her. “You decided to end it in hopes it would draw the Creator back to you. But it didn’t.”

“No. The halls are empty and…we miss him!”

“I get that. Then I came along, and I assume I look like the byzantine child and I feel like her. You wondered if the Creator would come to me like he did her, so you brought me here and tried to get me to stay. Because after all this time, you still feel jealousy.” She shook her head. “You disappointed him by killing that child, and he left you.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I have bad news. If he returns and finds out you’ve destroyed his beloved, if not abandoned creation, do you suppose he’ll be forgiving?”

The Messenger shrugged angrily. “We discussed that for the first thousand years. Since then, we’ve eased up on fear in favor of hoping it would bring him back to repair the damage.”

Angela gasped.

Adrian put a hand on her arm. “Are you okay?”

“Not really. I just figured out why there’s so many of us suddenly, why *I* exist.”

The Messenger ran to her, stopping only when he had his face against her shield. “Tell me!”

Angela sneered at him. “To repair the damage you’ve done. He doesn’t have to return to those who hurt him with their betrayals and disobedience. You’ve admitted that you don’t know where I came from, but I know. He sent me instead.”

The Messenger screamed, beating on her barrier. “No! That can’t be true! No!”

Angela let him wear himself out, positive she was correct. “We were born into this time and place…” The memory flashed through her mind.

*We were born into this time to help save our people, our country, and our very way of life. We have to get them to a place where they can Sit and Stand in safety. That’s why you’re different. That’s why you’re here.*

“Yes.” She stared at the now crying Messenger without mercy, but also without hatred lingering. “If I’m contacted, I’ll call out to you. In the meantime, fix what you’ve broken.”

The Messenger sniffled. “We are sorry.”

“Prove that and maybe the Creator will forgive you.” Angela’s expression iced over. “But I never will and if I have any pull with the Creator, you’ll all be punished, no matter what level you are. Your best bet is to kill me and hope he never finds out, or support me in everything I do while I try to fix what you’ve done.” She kicked debris out of her path. “Send us back. I can’t stand the sight of you any longer.”

“You have not fulfilled the terms of our meeting.”

“Ah, yes. The Book of Life.” She put a hand to her hip. “You haven’t fulfilled your promises either. Are my people healed?”

“No.”

“Well?”

“As you return.”

“I get to take your word for that, when we all know you can’t be trusted?”

The Messenger waved a hand. “There, it is done. Now you will read the book.”

“*We* will read the book.”

“The killers with you will not understand.”

“That’s what they have me for.” Angela veered to the nearest table that wasn’t completely destroyed. “Let’s get this over with.”

Her team gathered around, eager to be done and get home.

The Messenger settled in the corner. He flipped his finger.

A large book appeared on the table.

Marc snorted. “I expected something more…”

“Magical?” Angela opened the plain brown cover.

Vivid light streamed upward, creating images of battles that had happened over the eons.

Marc leaned in. “That’s more like it.”

They observed the past in awe and anger, seeing the betrayals man had committed in the name of power and greed, and also in the name of love and God.

Neil reached out to touch the images.

Angela shook her head. “You’ll be sucked in. That’s a trap.”

Neil put his hand in his pocket. “Okay then. Don’t touch the shiny objects.”

Angela glanced at the smirking Messenger. “You’re stalling now to trap me here. I know time has restarted. Show me.”

The being glared at her, amusement falling to the ground. “You won’t like it.”

She shrugged. “I didn’t expect to like anything I learned up here and I haven’t. Show me who I’m fighting this time.”

The images came together into a single horned figure all of them recognized.

Angela sat back in the chair. “The other king.”

“Yes. Satan wants control. He always has. If you refuse to fight in the final battle, he will win, and evil will cover all worlds. No one will be spared. His army will breach the gates and come here. He will wait for the Creator and kill him.”

“I can’t win that fight.”

The Messenger chuckled. “No, child. Even all your gifts cannot defeat him. You must *convert* him. With your love.”

Angela’s team slid hands to weapons, revolted and furious.

Angela sighed. “That’s why you need me to ascend. When he wins that final battle and comes here, you want me to handle him and save everyone.”

The Messenger stared. “We’re not positive it’s possible now. You have little love left in your heart for your own people, let alone for ours.”

Angela’s pain was palpable. It hit them all in thick waves that tempered the anger. “I’ll think about it.”

“You have to agree. There is no other choice.”

“I always have a choice.” She gazed at the Messenger. “What if we don’t lose the final battle?”

“Then Satan will not come to earth. That fight will happen here.”

“Why?”

“He would be too weak on earth if you win. He will never sacrifice his advantage.”

“What advantage?”

“The human need for violence. He uses it against you.”

Angela blew out annoyance. “You still don’t understand what drives all of us! You think the Creator will get it right next time, but he didn’t get it wrong *this* time. Human life was not a mistake! He meant for us to be this way.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I can. I do. Weaknesses exist in every living thing, even here. None of you can resist a bet.”

Marc and Adrian’s minds went crazy with ideas that might tempt their adversary to a level where he could be defeated.

Kyle and Neil kept watching the evil figure in the images, seeing how much misery he was responsible for.

Angela breathed in deep and let it out. She stood up. “What triggers that final battle?”

“We don’t know. There is darkness when we search.”

“I don’t need to read the rest of the book.” Angela slid around the table to stand in front of the Messenger. “I’ll do it–all of it. On one condition.”

“Name your price.”

“When it’s all over and I’ve won back the Creator’s house for you–when He returns–you will support me in whatever choices I make to change things. Even if it goes against the Creator.”

“But we… You won’t…” The Messenger fell silent, studying her. His expression lit up suddenly. “You believe you can?”

“I’ve always known I’m different than even the other descendants. When I rule, I’ll never abandon you, no matter how much you disappoint me. I’ll just kill you.”

Instead of fear, there was only relief. “That would be a mercy compared to how we have existed these many years.”

“A mercy you don’t deserve, but when I assume control, you’ll atone. Be prepared to face my wrath.”

The Messenger’s ears drooped to his hairy feet. “A deal has been made. Go now and begin fulfilling it.”

The clouds dropped out from under their feet.

The team fell, screaming, all the way back to earth.

Chapter Nine

**All Bets Are Off**

****

**1**

**“Y**ou’re not allowed to be…” Ivan paused at the glower. “You’re supposed to be locked below.” He glanced to the security detail for help.

None of those men and women met his eye.

Ivan frowned at Jennifer through his bruises. “I have orders from the boss.”

“I am the boss.”

“Just until Angela…” Ivan sighed, sensing her disapproval. “What do you need?”

Jennifer stepped by him to reach the bodies on the deck. She settled into an empty seat. “I have it now.”

The dark deck was eerie. Jennifer was glad there were so many teams of Eagles up here, but it still felt light. There were too many corners and places for problems to hide. Jennifer was certain the boat was okay and there weren’t any stowaways, but she couldn’t help feeling unprotected. The ship was huge. It was possible they’d overlooked areas in their haste to get everything loaded.

Ivan frowned. “You expecting trouble?”

“Just felt like I should be up here. Now she has enough security.”

Ivan snickered. “Yeah, the boss… Angela went a bit overboard to make sure you were covered.”

Jennifer swept the two teams, lips pursed. She scanned the Eagles on the deck, glad Angela also had two teams here. “It still feels light.”

“We thought the same, but she was clear about keeping regular security on the camp. They might panic while she’s gone.”

“What about if she doesn’t return? What orders do you have for that?”

Ivan met her eye. “To follow your every command as if you’re her.”

Jennifer leaned against the hard, folding chair. “She’ll be back. No worries.”

“Have you seen that?”

“I’m forbidden to search the future. Angela told me to save my energy.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“No, but it’s why we love her in charge. She covers us in every way she can.”

“Agreed.” Ivan swept the unconscious team again. The deserted deck around them was dark except for automatic lamps that had switched on shortly after they’d dropped into unconsciousness. Ivan wished there was more. When there was time, he would talk to Grant about it. If this was it, they needed to put up more of their own. A dim deck was dangerous.

Jennifer shifted for a better position. Evening mess, followed by hot showers and snacks, would keep people distracted for a bit. She was enjoying the calm while she had it.

“How do you think it’s going?”

Jennifer grumbled.

“Yeah.” Ivan signaled Quinn to take his post. “I’m starting rounds in a few minutes.”

Jennifer tried to placate the man. “I’ll be right here.”

Ivan kept walking. “Why don’t I believe that?”

Quinn pointed as he came over to switch places. “Because she’s lying. She came here for something she doesn’t want us to know about.”

“You think?”

Quinn flushed at Ivan’s sharp tone. “Sorry. I know she’s–”

“Sneaky? Tricky? A lot like Angela?”

“All of those.”

“So why are you leaving her alone to do what she wants?”

“Because she’s sneaky, tricky, and a lot like Angela.”

Quinn fell silent. Ivan approved of those traits. Quinn did too, to a point, but Quinn couldn’t help the concern. *How can a teenager take Angela’s place? We’d be better off with Kendle.*

Ivan snorted. “So you’re team Kendle, huh? Wouldn’t have guessed that.”

Quinn stiffened at the reference. “I’m team Adrian.”

“You’ll be disappointed.”

“Why?” Quinn respected Ivan’s loyalty and therefore, his opinion.

“She’s had chances and never took them. If it’s what she wanted, it would have happened already.”

“Maybe.”

“But?”

“But she hasn’t killed him and she’s even trying to get the camp to let him back in. We all know that.”

“Yep.”

“I think that means she does want him.”

“What if she just has plans based around him?”

Quinn brooded. “She does like her plans.”

“So do I. I’ll wait for that one as long as it takes. If that’s what it is.”

“You don’t think so.”

“No. There are no more plans or plots. She forgave him because he gifted her with leadership and taught her how to save all of us. When you view it that way, everything almost makes sense.”

“Almost?”

“Except for the spark.”

“They are hot together. That’s what sells me.”

“It takes more than sex.”

“I know that, but it isn’t just the sex with them.”

“How would you know?” Ivan had tired of the topic.

“It’s how they work together.”

“Yeah, we all see that, which is why we tolerate him. He still has things to teach her.” He headed up the metal steps to the bridge*. I hope she learns faster. It feels like bad shit is coming.*

“Boss said it’s time for a shift change here.”

Grant adjusted the controls without glancing at Ivan as the soldier stopped in the doorway. “Which one?”

“Jennifer.” Ivan chuckled. “The crew you’ve been training is on the way for overnight duty.”

“Did you relay my request?”

“Of course.”

“And?”

“A cot is also on the way, but Jennifer said no to meals.”

Grant sighed. “Okay. I’ll eat on the walk back here.”

Ivan guessed Grant didn’t trust the new crew to handle the ship alone. He looked at Shawn. “You’re on until the main boss gets back or the new boss calls the next shift change.”

“Got it.” Shawn was enjoying the view and the calm water around the ship. He’d never been on a cruise boat. Mostly, it was nice.

“Angela said you didn’t like using yourself as bait.”

“I don’t.” Grant frowned. “I’m worried about the ship if something happens to me.”

“So was she. She rescinded the order right before she left. You’ll have open security too.”

“Good. Thank her for me.”

“I will.” Ivan nodded to Ray as he went by the man. “You’re on until he gets back to the bridge, then Donald will take over and you will sleep. Angela’s orders.”

Ray didn’t protest. He hated to leave Grant without protection, but he was exhausted.

“I feel it.” Ivan headed for the inner stairwell. “Have some coffee while he eats.” Ivan jogged down the dim stairs, thinking they needed to add more lights or switch more lights here too. He wasn’t certain yet. Angela would decide based on power consumption, fuel, and availability of lights that could be hung without having cords everywhere.

Ivan heard loud chatter before he neared the galley and slowed. He was also getting tired, but the camp needed patience and a good performance. Angela had stressed being careful with the herd while she was gone, and Ivan had done that, but more than a hundred passengers were squeezed into the galley right now. He sucked in air and expelled it. “I can do this.” Ivan put on a bored expression and entered.

Heads swiveled.

Conversations stopped.

A cough echoed like a gunshot in the silence.

Ivan shrugged. “Not yet. Sorry.”

Some camp members resumed their food and conversations, but most of them continued to observe Ivan for signs of a problem.

Ivan made eye-contact with the sentries in the long room, then walked to the coffee line. He nodded at Conner, who was again sitting by Candy. He’d decided to give the pair his approval because Angela wanted Conner to have a fair chance despite his father. *Won’t matter. Kid’s already bad. Time will prove it.* Ivan kept his mental shield up, flashing hospitable glances to scattered groups. When no fresh tension rose, he assumed he was doing a good job.

“Ivan’s being nice…” Samantha regarded Theo, who was eating at the same table. “There’s trouble, right?”

Theo tried to deny it, but Debra flashed hand signals too fast.

Samantha snorted at the comment. “Maybe. He is a rookie. Trying too hard is common.”

Theo frowned at Debra. “What did I tell you this morning?”

Debra gave him the finger.

Samantha smirked. “She won’t lie. That’s awesome.”

“Yeah.” Theo frowned at his mate. “But she could have this time. You don’t need the stress.”

Samantha dipped her french fry into ketchup and plopped it into her mouth to keep from spewing her true emotions. They had no idea how stressed she really was, and it only had a little to do with Neil and the others being gone right now. “So what’s the problem, besides Becky’s sedative getting ready to wear off?”

Theo leaned in. “They’ve been gone too long, hours now. People are starting to wonder if they can get back.”

Samantha rattled the ice in her cup to loosen it. “Nothing will keep Angela from returning to her camp, her kids.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling them.”

“Good.” Samantha chewed and swallowed, then belched.

Debra giggled.

Theo leaned toward her, drawn.

Samantha grimaced. *Damn it, Neil. Where are you?!*

**2**

“People are getting restless.” Brittani stayed near Daryl as he did rounds. She was thrilled that his injuries had been healed. Gus and Greg weren’t ready to resume full duty yet, but they were both on the mend. Brittani refused to think about Gus yelling at her to go away when he’d woken to find her hovering between his cot and Daryl’s. “They’ve been gone for four hours.”

Daryl grunted, still not sure how he was alive after being burned so badly. He didn’t even have scars. Conner and Morgan were powerful healers. “It’ll hold for a while.”

“Until morning?”

“Longer than that.”

“Are you sure?” Brittani had taken a break from the galley to get some movement and to familiarize herself with other parts of the ship, but she planned to go back and make snacks to keep people happy.

“Yes. Angela knew how long she’d have until things got ugly.”

“That’s why she set it for so late!”

“Exactly. She knew daylight would bring fresh calm.”

“And when evening comes again?”

“These people will riot unless Jennifer can convince them she’s up to the task.”

Brittani frowned. “Is she?”

Daryl checked his watch. “Don’t know; don’t want to find out.”

“Understandable.” Brittani put space between them and swept for problems. They were approaching the infirmary.

Daryl kept his concentration up, but he was aware of her warm body next to him. It was nice to think they would get a happy ending on the island.

Brittani beamed. “Yes, it is.”

“You’re keeping track of thoughts now. Good.”

“You told me I should. Angela did too, though she didn’t actually say it aloud.”

“She knew there was still an assassin. She might pull it back now that we’re in the clear.”

Brittani frowned. “Are we really?”

“Maybe.” Daryl paused outside the entrance to the infirmary. “It depends on the two angry females in here.” Daryl scanned the room, then entered.

Brittani didn’t ask her next question as she followed him. Talking on duty was fine, but not in the middle of a tense situation.

Seth glared at them from Becky’s bedside.

Becky cried harder, head turning away. Restrained, it was all she could do.

Kendle stared at them in concern. She was worried over Marc.

Daryl went to Kenn, the Eagle on point here.

Kendle shut her lids, controlling herself. She knew she was lucky to be here, to be alive at all, but the depression from Marc’s words was growing. *I can’t stay here. I’ll snap.*

Brittani went to the chair by Kendle’s cot and sank into it, nose wrinkling at the strong odor of medicine. “We’re moving you to the other boat as soon as possible.”

“Good.”

“Are you still a threat to her?”

Kendle shook her head. “The alpha crap kicked in. It would tear me apart to hurt her now.”

“You’re broken. Everyone hates you. You know that, but you still only care about Marc. Interesting.”

“Don’t analyze me unless you have a degree!”

Brittani chuckled without humor. “I earned my degree by surviving the war and the aftermath.”

Kendle forced tears back, hands clenching. “What do you want?”

“Peace, happiness, to live forever.”

Kendle refused to feel humor. “Go away.”

“Not a chance, honey.” Brittani ignored the disapproving expressions from the guards. They wanted her to leave Kendle alone, fearing the island woman would try to hurt herself or someone else. “You have a lot to live for, you know.”

Kendle grunted. “Give me the list. Should only take a few seconds.”

“You have to help us get settled on the island.”

Kendle’s nails cut into her palms. The rage rose, warring with the depression. “Angela will do that.”

“*You’re* going to do that.” Brittani pointed. “You’re going to snap out of this and take your place. Your job was never to kill or even to love. You’re our guide for the island. Do it.”

“I can’t. No one will listen to me now.” Kendle couldn’t stop a tear from slipping through her lashes “I’ve ruined everything.”

“And yet, you still have a job to do.” Brittani swept the chamber, hating it that they were all listening, but she didn’t shy from her duty. “The boss said you have one more chance. I heard her tell Marc that. It means you will have the opportunity to atone.”

“And if I don’t want it?”

“You do, or we wouldn’t be talking.”

“I need hope or I’ll slit my own throat.”

“We know. Like Angela, when you’re upset, we feel it.”

“Stop saying her name!”

“Because you do still hate her?”

“Because I can’t fight the guilt! These emotions just won’t stop!” Kendle broke into quiet sobs.

“Yeah, she nailed you to the wall. You have to admit, you do deserve it.” Brittani patted Kendle’s thin wrist. “We’re going to make you sleep now. You’ll wake in a better mood.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because crying it out helps women. Men need to spend time in the cage. Women cry.”

“What a load of bullshit.”

Brittani shrugged. “It is what it is. That doesn’t change the facts.”

Kendle tried to stop crying and found she could now. “Wow. That’s awful.”

“I know. I’d rather bleed than cry, but I was born a girl. It is what it is.”

Kendle finally looked at the pretty black woman, tears leaking down her red cheeks. “Why are you trying to help me?”

“I like you.”

“Liar! No one likes me.”

“I don’t know why not. You’re charming.” Brittani swallowed the rest of her sarcasm and signaled to the medic. “She needs a few hours of sleep. Send her off with a kind word, will ya? I’m all out.”

Morgan knelt by the cot, flashing a soothing smile despite his dislike of the island woman. “I’m a doctor and you’re a patient. No one will harm you while you sleep. My word on it.”

“What if I want them to?”

Morgan injected her arm. “The boss can handle that request. Until she makes the call, you’re under my protection and it won’t happen.”

Kendle tried to speak, but the drugs yanked her under before she could do more than grimace.

“It’s good.” Morgan capped the syringe and gave Brittani a real smile. “The boss will appreciate it.”

“I didn’t do it for Angela or Marc.”

“Who then?”

“For her.” Brittani waved at Kendle. “I do like her. She’s a survivor. I want her to recover. The rest of you just want her to go away.” Brittani held up a hand as she stood, stopping protests and defensive responses. “You don’t have to justify it. I know she’s got bad inside her, but I take in the scars and all I feel is pity. She latched onto Marc because she’s got nothing else.”

“We felt bad for her at one point too. I hope you don’t get surprised by it like we all were.” Morgan dropped the dirty syringe into the hazardous waste bin. “Be careful, okay?”

“I plan to, but I am going to help her.”

Wade sighed. “We’ll respect that. Just do what Morgan said; be careful. You haven’t been around her as long as some of us have. We wouldn’t feel this way if there wasn’t a good reason.”

“Noted.” Brittani took a post near the exit to wait for Daryl.

Peace suddenly filled the infirmary. Dreams smoothed out, bodies relaxed.

Daryl grinned, glancing around the guards for confirmation. “We’re okay now.”

Other descendants felt the same, nodding to him.

Those without gifts looked at the magic users, trying to figure it out.

“Wow. Even the ship feels happier.” Brittani smiled. “Angela must be back.”

**3**

Angela snapped awake, gasping in air.

Jennifer yelped, flinching backward.

Eagles reached for their guns.

Adrian was next. His gasp was louder, drawing attention from the few camp members on the deck.

The last three men came alert at the same time, groaning.

The wind pushed against them in earnest, carrying the smell of rain instead of rot. The storm was closer. Angela shuddered as cold wind hit her skin. She fought the nausea and reached for the kit at her feet. She took out her notebook and pen, and began to write, ignoring everyone.

Adrian shook his head when Jennifer would have spoken. “She needs a few minutes.”

“Okay. *You* tell us.”

Adrian snorted. He stretched, subtly checking for injuries. “We’ll wait and enjoy the quiet.”

Jennifer brooded, but didn’t insist. Angela’s pen was flying across the page. She was obviously copying things down before she forgot important details. Jennifer couldn’t wait to hear them. She also didn’t want to. None of the team was happy. Their glances were short, disappointed sweeps that refused to give any hope. *It didn’t go well.* Jennifer sighed. *I guess I knew it wouldn’t. There’s no way it could be good up there with the way things have been down here. Ugliness rubs off the same as magic.*

Adrian nodded in response to that thought. *Except it came from there. Not the other way around.* Before she could ask anything, Adrian stood and removed his jacket. He put it around Angela’s shoulders, then rotated toward the guards for a check in.

Marc stayed by Angela as he swept the Eagles and passengers to determine if there had been problems while they were gone.

*There wasn’t.* Jennifer studied Marc, hoping to glean details from his thoughts.

Marc locked down on his mind, not in a hurry to relive it. He signaled for the sentries to bring Angela something hot to drink, then added his coat to Adrian’s. It was cool up here right now and she was shivering.

Angela didn’t tell them it was from anger. She kept writing, drawing conclusions and making plans.

Neil waited to be told what to do, but he swept for his mate. He’d expected Samantha to be up here when they returned despite not being allowed to walk the steps yet.

Jennifer used hand codes to tell him Samantha and Autumn were in the galley having a snack.

Neil knew from Jennifer’s body language that she’d denied Samantha’s request to come up. He was glad. Sam needed to rest.

Jennifer waved him below. “We’ve got this covered.”

Neil immediately departed, nodding to Marc.

Marc grunted in acknowledgement of the silent reminder not to speak until Angela decided what to tell everyone. He didn’t need that advice, mostly because he didn’t want to be the one who told the camp what had happened.

Kyle glanced at Jennifer, then resumed scanning. He needed to determine who would be a problem when Angela revealed it all.

Jennifer’s unease grew. It hadn’t just gone bad. It had gone *really* bad.

Kyle refused to dwell on it. He didn’t want to be the one who told them either.

Angela kept writing. She’d learned a lot of small details during the meeting, but the chaos afterward, where she’d followed her instinct, had provided an answer that humankind had killed over for centuries. It was dangerous information and she wanted every word of it recorded before she tried to explain that the meeting had been both a success and a failure. Now that the deal had fallen through for them to have protection to the island, she couldn’t afford to miss even a single clue that might help. She hadn’t asked for it to be extended because she hadn’t believed the angels would honor it. The chessboards would be replaced; the betting would restart. As the biggest group of survivors together in one place, there was no way those bets wouldn’t center around Safe Haven.

Ivan watched her expression, sad for her. He knew it wasn’t good news and now she had to tell everyone else, when she appeared to need a long rest. He didn’t envy her the job.

On duty over the top deck, neither did Jeff right then. He hadn’t forgotten his previous resentments, but many of them were buried now. Today had been enlightening. He’d listened to the stories and felt the loyalty everyone had to Angela. He’d noted the changes in people and the new layers of training the Eagles and camp were exploring, but mostly, he’d witnessed dangerous citizens being rehabilitated.

It would take a long time, but he also already saw subtle differences in the children who were awake. Angela had saved them all by being ruthless. Safe Haven had lost a low number compared to all the threats they’d faced, and she’d still found time to try and barter a better future. She wasn’t the monster he’d believed after Crista’s death. She’d kept them alive with blood, sweat, and tears–much of it her own.

Angela made a fast motion and resumed writing.

Marc passed it on. “Finish shift changes, then get the Eagles in the infirmary.” He keyed his radio and repeated the order. Then he went to supervise it. She wanted him to verify all stations were covered while she finished up. He assumed she would call the camp together soon. He doubted letting it go until morning would work. It sounded like the entire camp was still wide awake and waiting for news. People cheered at the sound of his voice. They knew the team was back.

Marc didn’t blame them. Until they’d gone, he’d also been eager for answers. Now, all he wanted was a solution. He had faith Angela would find it if they gave her enough time.

Angela sighed, but didn’t stop writing. It was hard to carry the faith for so many when her own was constantly taking hits, but she would find a way to make this okay for her people. *Like usual, I’ll pay any price required, but I’m no longer depending on fate or a higher power. I have my brain and my army. That’s all I need.*

**4**

Adrian fell in with Marc for his round of ship stations.

“You still owe me an answer from the beach.” Marc saw the garden had three guards. He motioned for a shift change, then headed for the next cargo area. “When we hit the path to the beach, I lost my grid and couldn’t read emotions or thoughts without serious digging. What’s the deal?”

Caught off guard, Adrian’s brows drew together. “Sorry, thought we’d covered that.”

“Nope. We had a lot going on afterwards.”

“Yeah. Let’s see. Oh, the ocean king has a barrier. Like nature, he controls his areas completely. His scans are like walls of water that muffle thoughts and gifts.”

“So the barriers are like…fog.”

“Exactly. You still have your skills, but there’s too much fog for those skills to be as effective.”

“How do you know about the ocean king?”

Adrian sighed. *And here’s the part that drags us into the past.*

Marc scowled. “Just give me the short. I’ve heard enough of your life story.”

“That’s liberating. Most people want every detail to use against me. Nice to know you’re different.”

The contempt laced tone angered Marc. He spun around and shoved Adrian against the wall. He leaned in, voice low. “I saw your plan.” Marc’s eyes glowed deep crimson. “You’re not protected now, Mitchel. There are no more bets. It’s just you and me.”

Adrian delivered an icy smirk. “And Angie. And *my* Eagles. And a lot of the camp, since you acted so stupid over everything. Be careful. You may have finally picked a fight you can’t win.” Adrian shoved free of Marc’s loosening hold and cleared his throat. “I’ve had dealings with the ocean and nature.” His tone filled with arrogant contempt. “In fact, I’ve dealt with about everything you haven’t. If you were smart, you’d go along with my plans. It might still save your life.”

Adrian walked down the hallway toward the next guard post, not caring about the half dozen witnesses. Now that he knew a handful of gambling addicts were controlling things, he was his own master. *All bets are off.*

Marc followed, regretting his outburst. He didn’t care about the calm of the camp, but he wished he hadn’t let his enemy have the information.

“What were you hiding from her?”

Marc didn’t want to tell Adrian now.

“I can ask her.”

Marc growled. “Leave it alone!”

“The baby charm.” Adrian was surprised. Despite teaching Marc the words, and teasing Angie about it, he hadn’t really thought Marc would do it. “You picked a date.”

“I was timing it.” Marc gazed through the narrow window at the darkness. “In about three weeks, she should be ready.”

“I assume you’ve planned practice sessions.”

Marc grunted. “I had to let the skin grow back for a few days. She used me up while we were loading this ship.”

Adrian chortled. “I thought you had the John Wayne walk.”

Marc couldn’t help the derisive laughter.

Adrian knew what was happening. “Now that the meeting went bad, you’re changing your mind.”

Marc gave a curt nod. “Everything changed.”

“It’s still what she wants.”

“Is it? I got the impression she wants more power now. She has enough kids.”

Adrian sighed. “I hope you’re wrong about that.”

“I’m telling Angie everything.”

Adrian stopped.

Marc sighed. “She won’t like it, and she’ll hate me again for a while. It’ll cause trouble with the camp too, but in the end, the truth will always set me free with her.” Marc veered toward the stairs.

“I’ll trade you.”

Marc hid triumph, pausing. “It had better be good to keep me playing this role. You’re not the only one who saw freedom in our answers tonight.”

“Ah, the boy scout doesn’t want to be that anymore.” Adrian laughed. “We would have been a lethal team if not for your streak of stubborn morality.”

“Make your offer. I’m out of patience.”

“When we return in four years, you step aside.”

“In exchange for?”

“You get four years with her, the kids, and my camp. I go to the other side of the island. If she assigns classes, they’ll come to me. You won’t see my ugly mug for four years.”

“That’s not enough for me to even consider it.”

“Four years for four months is a great deal.”

“Four months?”

“That’s all the time we have with her, Marine. Did you see how they fawned, caved to her every wish? They want her up there even more than we do.”

Marc nodded reluctantly. He’d felt that too.

“After the final battle, she has to assume her place or they’ll destroy what remains of this planet, I’m guessing. With that threat, she’ll go.”

“Yeah. They made that a condition for the meeting and she didn’t even blink. She knows.”

“She also knows how much time she has left.” Adrian stepped forward, eyes blazing. “She loves me! You owe her happiness. Be a man and let her have it!” Adrian held out his hand. “Shake on it and I vanish for four years.”

“If I don’t?”

Adrian flashed an image. “She dies unsatisfied with this life and maybe makes us all repeat it until she finds happiness.”

“With you.”

“Hell, man.” Adrian waved a hand. “It could be Ivan for all I know! But it isn’t you. After so many repeats, it *can’t* be you.”

“In your plan, it was more than four months.”

“For me, yes. You guys? No. You will both be taken.”

Adrian’s words confirmed what Marc had figured out during the meeting. He and Angela had duties beyond this life.

“Yes. You’ll go together, and be together, for however long eternity is up there. Or she’ll restart us all again.” Adrian stepped closer. “I’ll sweeten the deal. I’ll even get myself thrown off this ship in the next few days. You’ll get the rest of the ride south.”

“I want one other thing.”

“Name it.”

Marc hated the eager victory tone, but this deal would give him exactly what he needed. “Have her lock up your gifts. I want you powerless for those years.”

“I’ve had power in every life. It means little to me.” Adrian put his hand back out.

Marc shook it.

“This is your captain speaking.” Grant cleared his throat. “There is a mandatory meeting in the ballroom on deck B at dawn. I repeat, in two hours, be on deck B for a meeting. Those unable to attend will have radios provided. That is all.”

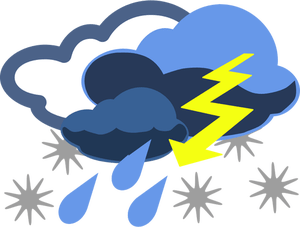
Marc nodded. “That is all. We’re done now.”

Adrian walked away without replying, heart light and mind heavy.

Marc resumed his rounds, refusing to contemplate what he’d just done. For four years, he would have peace. *That’s enough…for now.*

Chapter Ten

**Home, Sweet Home**

****

**1**

**“W**e have bad weather coming.” Grant pointed at the horizon. “I’ve seen lightning strikes.”

Angela also caught a distant flash. “Great.” She got her notebook back out. She’d just finished writing and come up for a check in. She’d only seen these vistas on television. Being here during the storm made her hope she’d chosen right. The sky was ugly, as were the rough waves rippling across the ocean surface toward them.

“I estimate it will hit right after the mandatory meeting. You should have an hour.”

“More than enough for my needs. What do *you* need?”

“Prayers. We’ve got the rest covered.”

Angela left the bridge without offering platitudes. The slick deck swayed under her feet, making handrails a necessity. Prayers wouldn’t help them; after her behavior during the power meeting, the angels controlling the game boards wouldn’t be in a kind mood right now. Only her deal with the ocean was still in place.

Cool wind blew over her double coated skin again, still bringing a shiver of unease. The wind wasn’t controlled by the ocean. Nature had dominion over that, and she wasn’t ever going to be their friend. Angela keyed her radio. “Team meeting in ten minutes, infirmary.”

She switched off the volume to the jumble of answers and jogged down the stairs. The Eagles already knew. Now the camp would start moaning when all the male guards disappeared and the Ciemus women took over duty.

Angela strode through the halls at a fast clip and entered the infirmary without being noticed by the patients.

The Eagles on duty spotted her but didn’t speak. Their answers were coming soon. It made waiting easier.

Angela pretended not to see Kendle’s sleeping form as she walked to the heavily guarded cots in the rear of the long room. Becky and Seth, both drugged now, were restrained. Gus and Greg were next to them. Their injured men had been put where Becky had to see them, but it wouldn’t matter. Becky had snapped. Guilt didn’t matter when someone was that far gone. “I’ll be here for a minute. Take five.”

Two of the sentries went straight to the bathroom. The rest stayed where they were.

Angela would have smiled but she was too sad about Becky and her baby. “Seth is okay. When he wakes, let him loose and send him to the galley. He needs a good meal.”

Guards wrote down her instructions, frowning.

“He’s to stay away from Becky for a while. During that time, I want Adrian with her.”

Everyone approved that choice. It was fair he had to deal with it since it had happened on his watch, but more, Becky blamed Adrian. If she got to scream at him enough, maybe she would feel better. Despite her attack and their injuries, most of the guards who’d had duty here no longer wanted her to die. The crying and mutters about Rick had reminded them she was damaged through events that weren’t her fault. She had flirted, but she’d been too young to know him for what he was.

Morgan was relieved attitudes were calming, but he doubted time with the object of her hatred would ease her pain. Like Kendle, Becky was now forever on the outside of Safe Haven’s light.

Angela sighed, looking at Morgan.

Morgan’s lips raised in comfort, but he didn’t take back the thought or offer useless words. No one would ever trust those two women again. Nothing they could do would fix this.

“As you take Seth topside, tell him the lifeboats are always unguarded right before dawn. Give him the chance to get her out of here.” She shook her head to the rush of mental protests. “I won’t do that or give an order for it. Most of this isn’t her fault. It’s Rick’s. He fucked her, in every way.”

The blunt language was a graphic reminder of what the teenager had suffered.

“Make sure there are supplies in the boats. After they’ve gone, leave those items there. We’ll be covered if we have to get out fast.” Angela studied Becky for a moment longer. “If they stay, she’ll be tried for attempted murder and probably be our first hanging.” Angela looked at Wade. “Make sure Seth knows that. That will encourage him to get her out of here.”

“We’ll handle it.” Wade gestured to Kendle. “What about her? Most of the camp feels the same.”

Angela’s tolerant expression changed to an angry glare. “She’ll stay right here where I can make her life hell.”

“Revenge or punishment?” Wade didn’t care which. He just needed to know.

“Atonement. When I get through, the camp will pity her so much they’ll protect her from me.”

“I don’t get it.”

Angela allowed the questions because she needed the Eagles on her side for this to work. Also, because they’d earned it. “We need her to recover and earn forgiveness from the camp. This will accomplish it.”

“Why bother? We know you hate her and we’re pretty sure we don’t need her for anything you can’t handle.” All the guards except Tommy glared at Kendle. Tommy refused to look at her at all.

Angela finally shifted to look at Kendle. She didn’t bother to hide what they all knew. Hatred flowed out in thick waves. “I’m doing what I’ve repeatedly asked Marc to do with Adrian–let it go.”

“Can you?”

Angela nodded immediately. “I’ve given up a lot more than killing someone on this trip to hell and back. And I get to help her earn that pass from the camp.”

Men chuckled uneasily, not sure if she was joking.

Angela went to Gus.

Greg was awake and watching her.

Gus was still sleeping. Morgan was keeping everyone sedated, though he would have to stop, or they would risk overdosing some of them.

Angela gathered energy and began healing their heroes.

**2**

Marc appeared in the farthest entrance.

The guards watched him instead of Angela, trying to determine how he felt about Kendle now.

Kenn didn’t watch Marc. He kept his eye on the boss. He already knew how Marc felt about the island woman. He wanted to know how Angela felt about it.

Marc’s loathing sneer wasn’t hidden. It allowed the guards to relax and assume the matter was settled.

Kenn saw Angela’s lips curl in triumph and felt his stomach drop. She had done all of it on purpose. She’d known the only way to eliminate a rival for Marc’s affections was to destroy her in his eyes. *Clever, patient, ruthless. I’m dead.*

Angela’s head rotated toward him…

Kenn glanced away, not wanting to see the confirmation in her expression. Of course, she still hated him and wanted vengeance. He’d done little to atone yet.

“That’s not exactly true.” Angela waited for Kenn to look at her. She studied him. “I chose not to disrupt the new life you’ve been building. You’ve made an honest change. It keeps me from punishing you. Don’t screw that up.”

“I won’t. I’m not that person anymore. I haven’t been in a while.”

Angela shrugged. “Only you know if that’s really true, but if you can believe it, so can I.”

Kenn nodded, aware of guards casting dark glances. Most of them had known about his past, but Ivan’s vendetta had reminded them there hadn’t been a punishment. Angela was stopping possible attacks. If she wasn’t pushing it, they weren’t allowed to either. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. No more pins in seats. No more beatings during practices. Am I clear?” She looked at Ivan.

Ivan’s hand went to his ass cheek. “Should have known.”

Angela snickered. “Yeah, you should have. Oh, and no more blue piss. It looks like someone drowned a Smurf. Pick a different color.”

Men sniggered as Ivan glared at Kenn. He’d forgotten about that one.

Kenn yawned tiredly. “Her son taught me a valuable lesson. I was just passing it on.”

“Hey, Smurf Balls!”

Kenn groaned as Charlie entered the infirmary. “Yes, master?”

Laughter filled the room.

Charlie took a place near Kenn, grinning.

Kenn snorted and slapped the kid on the shoulder, gently. “Welcome back.”

Charlie sighed in happiness. “It’s good to be here.”

Everyone could feel the changes in the teenager. Charlie had grown up while they were exiled.

Angela also saw it. She wanted to speak to him, but there wasn’t time right now. She’d scheduled a meeting.

Conner entered.

Silence fell.

Angela grunted. “That’s another thing that’s over. Conner is no longer on my shit list.”

“Even though I lied?”

Angela sighed. “I felt you go through the shield. Not telling isn’t good, but you didn’t actually break a rule. Safe Haven citizens are free to leave the perimeter at any time, at their own risk.”

Conner let out the breath he’d taken. “Thank you. I was scared.”

“I know. Your dad told me when new gifts presented in the labs, the subjects were confined and tested for months.”

Conner’s face paled; his demeanor became meek. “I really am sorry.”

It was hard for Eagles to stay mad at the kid when he was terrified.

“That type of abuse doesn’t go away. But now you know that won’t happen under my leadership, so…?” She lifted a brow.

“I’ll tell you right away.”

“That’s all I need. You are hereby cleared for full duty.” She looked to Charlie next. “So are you. Second chances are why Safe Haven exists.”

Charlie cleared his throat. “I’m sorry too. I knew deep down it was my issue, not yours.” He slid a quick glance at Kenn. “An Eagle explained it to me in a way I could understand.”

“I’m glad it went well. I’ve scheduled a debriefing on your run. After that, you’ll be off duty.”

Charlie paused. “Yeah, uh… Can I do an overnight shift?”

Angela rolled her eyes. “You have to face her sometime.”

“Knew you were gonna say that.” He had avoided Tracy since they set sail. “Should be fun.”

“We’ll have a medic standing by.” Angela glanced toward the doorway, going still.

Adrian entered, attention going straight to her.

Marc motioned him toward Angela, refusing to contemplate the deal they’d made.

Adrian went to Angela, bracing for her next words. He knew what was coming.

“In 24-hours, a few passengers will be relocated to the other ship. Adrian will captain that boat.”

The Eagles understood big things had happened during the higher power meeting and none of it had boded well for Adrian.

“He hasn’t done anything else wrong. I don’t want him to disrupt my camp just to get himself tossed off this boat. I’m happy to pitch him over right now. If anyone wants to join him, let them.”

Adrian paled. *She knows, already.*

“What about security and training?” Marc hated it that she knew about their latest deal.

Angela glared. “You don’t care about that.”

Marc sighed. “No. I want him gone now that we know the truth.”

Her voice sharpened. “I’m giving that without disrupting my camp. Too bad you two couldn’t put my people first like you promised me not even twelve hours ago.” She waited for a response, eager to fire back. Marc wasn’t the only one angry about what they’d discovered. When he didn’t answer, her tone became smug. “I have a surprise for both of you.”

Marc braced for ugliness.

“You should. You’re going with him to the other ship or back to land with Seth and Becky. I don’t want to see you for a while. *Either of you*.” Angela ignored the mutters and scowls. “Learn to get along or unhook that ship and sail off into the sunset, gentlemen. I’ve had enough.”

“You can’t mean that.”

“That’s not part of our deal.”

Angela shrugged at their protests. “You’ve both proven I can’t trust you to put the camp first. Kendle stays here. *You. Both. Go*.” Angela glanced around the Eagles, noting most of them were relieved by her choice. “I expect you to enforce it.”

“Can we talk to you for a minute?” Adrian knew the answer, but he had to ask.

“Nope. You two are my constant headache. You’re badasses and I’ve tolerated it because we need you. Up to a point. Guess what? You’ve both reached that point.” Angela settled onto a stool. “You two can get out now. Your services are no longer required.” She stared with unforgiving anger.

Marc spun from the room, furious. *She got me again. How does she keep getting ahead of me?!*

Adrian followed. *We really screwed this up.*

*You think?*

*How do we fix it?*

*There is no we, you prick! Get away!*

Adrian stayed on Marc’s heels as he went up to the next deck. *We have to find a way to get her to change her mind.*

*You already know that won’t happen. I’ve never felt her this angry at me.*

*Well, we did come home and go right back to our own selfish desires.*

*You did that!*

*You followed me pretty quick.*

Marc tried to control the anger and sadness rolling through his heart. *I didn’t know she’d catch it so fast!*

*I did.* Adrian stopped as Marc spun around.

*You did this on purpose!*

*Of course. You want to go at it right here in the hall or wait until we’re on the other boat? No one to break us up over there.*

Marc gaped. *Why aren’t you upset? She’s pissed at you too.*

*I’ve missed my bonding time with you. Now, we’ll have a month together to explore the depths of our relationship.*

*You... What? Son of a bitch!*

Adrian grinned. *Yep. Just you and me, alone together to let these feelings grow.* Adrian moved by him. *I’m looking forward to it.*

Marc stared at the former leader, confused. *What just happened?*

Adrian’s mirth echoed to him. *She got us both by using our flaws against us. God, I love that woman.*

Marc went in the opposite direction. *So do I.* “Damn it!”

**3**

“You can’t do that.”

Everyone looked over to find Kendle awake.

“They’ll kill each other.”

Angela shrugged. “That’s not your concern.”

Kendle shifted for a better position on the hard cot. “It’s everyone’s concern. You need those Marines.”

“I need them to do their jobs. They’re not.”

Kendle snorted. “You distracted them.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “They let themselves be distracted. Safe Haven’s future means little to either of them.”

“Not to Adrian. He wants both.”

“Then he should have put the right one first.” Angela took the cup of tea Morgan handed her, scanning him. “You need a break.”

“I’ll get it later. I’m good for now.” Morgan went to Kendle’s cot. “You shouldn’t be awake yet.”

Kendle shuddered. “Bad dreams.”

“I’ll put you under a little deeper.”

“No.” Angela gestured. “She stays awake now. They all do.”

Morgan grimaced, but didn’t argue. “You’re the boss.”

They all looked up as another group of Eagles entered for the meeting.

Angela gestured them toward the far corner, the only empty space left. “We’ll get started in a minute. I’m going to replay everything that happened and then you’ll all get a chance to weigh an opinion as to where we go from here.” She regarded Kendle. “You’re on cleaning duty as of dawn.”

“Wait.” James stopped chewing his gum, straightening. “Boss, I’m not certain that’s a good idea.”

“Are you sure?” Kendle’s voice broke. “I might snap again. I still hate you as much as I did.”

“So?”

“So you could be in danger from me!” Kendle tugged on the restraints to get Morgan’s attention. “Shoot me up again. Don’t let me hurt her!”

Angela motioned. “My point. You want me dead, but you can’t do it. We’re bonded now. Suck it up like I have.”

Uneasy chuckles went through the room.

Kendle’s eyes filled with tears. “You should have killed me.”

“Yes.” Angela shrugged. “I have work to do. So do you. Release her. Give her a notepad and some clothes.”

“You want her in Eagle gear?” James blew a bubble and sucked it back in.

“Medical garb will work for now. She’ll sleep here until I decide on a routine for the ship. No sedatives.”

The Eagles realized she was already starting on Kendle’s atonement and locked their opinions behind smirks and frowns.

“Before I show you what happened, I want you to know my thoughts. It’s not to influence you or even to keep you calm. It’s just how I feel.” She drew in a breath. “I think we should tell the camp nothing has changed.”

Neil cleared his throat. “There are descendants in the camp. We can’t keep much from them.”

“If they don’t accept it, I’ll perform the memory charm when everyone goes to sleep. It’ll be as if the higher power meeting never happened.”

“Why tell them then?” Neil’s hand waved. “Why tell us?”

Angela sighed. “Because I’m tired of assuming the reaction will be bad each time something happens. I’m hoping this will be different.”

“Will it?” Wade wanted to have hope.

“That doesn’t matter. I still have to give them the chance. The camp trusts me. I need to show the same respect.”

“What happens when they all remember?”

Kendle’s question was met by frowns.

Angela already had that answer. “They’ll accept it and move on because it happened months before and we’re still alive.”

Ivan waved off the cup Morgan was trying to give him. “What’s the ace in the hole? I know you have one.”

Angela ripped off the broken pinky nail driving her nuts and dropped it into the waste can by the cot. “I’m going to request another meeting and get a better outcome. I’m not giving up on the future. I never will.”

“When the camp finds out you wiped their memory, it could get ugly.” Kyle didn’t want Angela in the crossfire anymore either.

Angela drew energy from some of them; they didn’t notice. “No, it won’t. I’m going to get their permission first. They’re going to be grateful I took away that memory.” She opened mental barriers between all of them. “First, watch this and understand that we truly are on our own.”

**4**

“I woke a few seconds later on the deck.” Angela fell silent, judging their reactions. This is how the camp would respond, but it would be magnified by about half the rage and desperation.

The silence was loud, but none of it was ugly. They were resigned.

Angela stared. She had expected worse. “Did you have a meeting about this while we were gone?”

Wade shook his head. “We knew we were being used as pawns in some stupid game. There were too many signs to miss it.”

Men and women nodded, anger in the movements.

“Wow. I hope the camp handles it this well.”

Morgan shrugged, burying his own pain at the news. “I think they will, as long as you tell them what you told us, that you’re still working on it. We trust you to keep going.”

Angela smiled. “I love every one of you more than I can ever show.”

“You show it with moments like this. Your trust and affection will always be enough.”

Angela held back tears. She glanced around. “Does anyone have questions or comments about the meeting?”

“Can we see the map?”

Angela chuckled at Zack’s childlike query. “It takes a lot of energy. I’ll pull that from the camp, and everyone will see it then.”

“I have a suggestion.” Tracy, Candy by her side, stood in the entrance that was bathed in shadows. Both females were dressed in Eagle gear, though Candy’s was tight around her belly. They’d obviously been in the hall the entire time.

Angela gestured them in, throwing approval at them for showing up. “Let’s hear it.”

Tracy led Candy forward, but she didn’t go to Charlie, who had paled upon seeing her. She went to stand by Jennifer. “There has been a reason for everything we’ve suffered. It sucks, and it deserves a payback, but at least it wasn’t random like we’ve hurt over. We were targeted to suffer, but not by the Creator. It’s an answer to the anger in our hearts. Now, we might actually be able to serve when He returns–without hatred.” She smiled at the shock. “That’s what you tell them. Have Jennifer do it. She’s trusted too. You won’t need to wipe memories.”

Everyone was stunned as they viewed it through Tracy’s lenses. Tears welled to more than one eye as they came to the same understanding. Knowing for sure the Creator hadn’t cursed you, wasn’t tormenting you, was a tremendous relief.

“We’ve never had this much information.” Candy glanced at Conner. “It means some of the things we’ve done really weren’t all our fault. We had help in being bad. Knowing that will allow us to prevent them from doing it again.”

Conner motioned to the place by his side.

Candy went with a soft smile.

Tracy turned to Angela. “Finish it off with what they’ve already told you here and we’re good to go until you can uncover the next star on the map.”

Angela had to confess. She couldn’t take the guilt. “I don’t know if I can do that. It may take a thousand years before anyone can get that close again.”

“As long as you never quit working on it and you pass the job to successors, it will hold us.” Candy and Tonya had discussed this while Angela finished her tale. “Humanity needed progress. You’ve given us that.”

Angela didn’t look at her family as she replied. “I’ll never stop, no matter what it costs me. We not only deserve to know our origins, we need it. Without that information, we’ll never have peace.” She glanced around, relieved to see most of the depression and anger had been replaced by confidence in their leader and awe about what she’d done. “Okay. We’re going with Tracy’s plan. Any other questions, comments, or suggestions?”

“Is there still going to be a final battle when we go back?” Charlie didn’t doubt they would return.

“Yes.” Angela’s happiness slid a bit. “And I doubt we’ll be the only ones there. The betters, the humans, the monsters…and maybe the Creator. If we win, maybe it brings him back.”

“Then we have to win.” Wade flipped his hand around the warm room. “We’re Safe Haven Eagles and survivors of the apocalypse. If we can’t do it, no one can.”

Chapter Eleven

**Ride It Out**

****

**1**

**“T**his is the map.” Angela used the emotions of the crowd to bring up the glowing sphere. A tiny bright star winked at them from the edge of their planet.

While Angela held most of the camp enthralled, Eagles began passing Tracy’s opinion with quiet whispers and comments to each other that people were able to overhear. The meeting had gone well so far. The camp had even laughed at some of it, enjoying Angela’s open rebellion to the deities who’d played with all their lives.

The camp quieted, moving forward for a better view. Her story had kept them quiet for half an hour, but magic use, combined with the right whispers, woke them to the seriousness of what had happened. First contact had finally been made. They now knew a tiny part of what came after death.

Angela strained to keep the map up long enough for the Eagles to do their work. She didn’t have the energy to speak at the same time, but she kept a smile on. It was easy when she thought of Tracy’s words. That’s exactly how she felt about it…but there was still anger too. She planned to deal with that later. She hadn’t had a good workout with the Eagles in weeks.

Radios crackled around them, blurring together.

“*Sorry to disturb you, but the weather is approaching faster than I estimated. It’s raining.*”

The team was instantly reminded of the Messenger’s voice. It sounded like that.

Angela released the power. The map vanished, drawing groans, then fear about the coming storm. It was their first one at sea. No one was looking forward to the rough swells.

Angela motioned to Kenn, their mouthpiece. He would relay her orders while she recovered. Angela dropped into the chair, shaking.

“Listen up!” Kenn bellowed it, getting attention. “Those who want to stay here until it’s over, can. If you’d feel safer in the galley, that’s fine too. All Eagles are on duty until the storm blows over. Two full shifts will remain in the infirmary. Ray and Kyle will remain in the bridge to help Grant, along with the crew he’s been training to run this big floatie toy. Stay calm. The first one who starts telling scary tales or screaming will be served to the Eagles for a snack.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “I don’t remember saying that part.”

Weak chuckles came, but most of the camp didn’t find it funny. They were scared.

Angela was too, but she forced it away to finish her chore. “Samantha sent a note. She said it will get rough for a little while. I want life jackets on everyone.” She gathered energy for what came next.

“Will you look ahead?”

“Yeah! Look!”

“Please?”

Camp members shouted support of the request.

Angela concentrated, almost out of energy. She’d been drawing from their emotions, but she was now so low it wasn’t holding her steady.

Adrian came through the crowd and placed a hand on her arm. He opened his energy banks to her, letting her share his strength.

Angela nodded her thanks and then the magic took over, snatching her into the future.

Adrian fed her energy and observed the ugly images in her mind.

They both jumped at the strike and bright flash.

Angela released it, gasping in air. “We all survive. We’ll be fine, but I have to go help Grant.” She sagged against Adrian as people returned to their chatter about the Messenger and his angels. *Get me to the bridge.*

Adrian helped her to her feet and got her out of the galley, arm around her waist. “She just needs some air.”

He kept his thoughts blank, not wanting anyone to know what they’d seen. He was certain she didn’t want anyone to know yet.

“I didn’t lie.” She swallowed a groan. “We survive.”

“Yeah.” He kissed her cheek. “You did good. You always do.”

“You don’t.”

Adrian chuckled. “Exhausted and can still find breath to nag. You do your gender proud.”

Angela snorted out tired laughter. “So do you. Now let go of me unless I fall.”

Adrian knew she didn’t want the camp to see her weak or in his embrace. “The halls are empty.” He scooped her up and jogged toward the stairs to topside.

Angela held on, grateful for his strength, but she couldn’t help wishing it was Marc.

“You should change your mind about moving Marc to my ship.”

“Yeah, nature’s going to do that for me.”

Adrian hadn’t gotten as clear a glimpse as she had. He frowned. “But we all survive?”

“Yes. Hurry up. He’s about to make a second radio call.”

Adrian ran. The last thing they needed was for the camp to panic. They could do that when it was all over.

Marc was there for the handoff as Adrian reached the top deck, gasping. Marc took Angela’s warm body and ran for the bridge. Light rain splattered them.

Angela shut her mind to him and refused to speak.

Marc grunted.

Angela sniffed and lifted her chin.

Adrian followed slower, getting his breath back and scanning the deck for trouble. Only a single team was on duty up here. Angela’s protection had been left in the infirmary, on her orders, to watch their prisoners during the meeting. Rain slapped him, coming harder. On the horizon, lights flashed almost continuously. *I don’t hear thunder. Is that odd or normal for the ocean?*

Adrian made a mental note to ask Grant. He took a post near Ray in the rear of the bridge.

Ray nodded to him, stifling a yawn. He suspected adrenaline was about to keep him awake. *I’m just enjoying the calm before the storm.*

Angela chuckled at Ray’s pun.

Grant didn’t ask if Angela was okay, though all the men felt him wanting to. He pointed at one of the computer screens. “The navigation system is advising we turn around. That never happens. This storm is ugly.”

Angela wasn’t surprised, only concerned. “We’re in hurricane season…”

“Yes. That was my thought too.” Grant handed her a towel.

“Does that mean we’ll get a day of rough seas first or are we running into it now?” Angela wiped her face and hand, then passed the rag.

“According to radar, we’re running into it now.”

“Category One?”

“I’d say tropical because we came on it without warning. We should have had that full day of rough seas.” Grant was impressed by how fast she’d added it up. He’d expected to have to explain it to her. “What do you want to do?”

“Ride it out.”

Adrian’s brow lifted. “Are you certain? You saw what happens.”

“We survive.”

“Barely. And the ship–”

“I made the call.”

Angela hadn’t yelled, but Adrian recoiled as if she had. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s going on?” Marc was becoming concerned. “Are we gonna lose the ship?”

“Not exactly.” Adrian didn’t say more, not sure if Angela wanted it known.

“I trust the guys here. Go on.” Angela placed a hand on Marc’s arm, drawing energy.

“The storm damages the ship. We’ll be without engines by dawn.”

Grant groaned, reaching for his night glasses. “I hate sailing blind.”

Adrian frowned. “You can sail without engines?”

“We’ll have limited manual steering, though I’ve only had to do that once.”

Adrian assumed Angela had known.

“I didn’t.” She concentrated. “There’s something around here we need…”

Adrian began to search with her, heart picking up a beat. He didn’t doubt her, but searching the future was dangerous for her and she’d already done it for the camp.

Angela’s energy ran out before she could see past dawn. She slumped against the console, trying to remain alert.

Marc put an arm around her waist for support, sharing his remaining energy to keep her conscious. He rotated her toward Adrian and stopped. Their former leader looked rough too. He didn’t have the energy to spare. *I can’t take her below. The camp might panic.*

Adrian pointed toward the coming storm. “Draw in the blast. It won’t stop the storm and if we wait until it’s on top of us, there won’t be time for nature to increase strength by much.”

“Retaliate…” Drained, Angela could hardly form words. “Next will be worse.”

“We need you spitting fire during *this* storm. We’ll handle the consequences.”

Angela couldn’t find the energy to argue.

Marc and Adrian took her onto the deck, both aware of the ship rocking rougher. The wind pushed against them; cold rain soaked their bodies in seconds.

Ray shouted Grant’s call. “We’re powering up, so we don’t get blown off course!”

Donald tapped Grant on the shoulder. “Someone has to make sure our rear ship doesn’t hit this one when we lose power.”

Grant snorted. “All you can do is tell people to brace if we bump. I can’t swerve out of the way.”

Donald frowned, realizing he was right. “Will there be a lot of damage?”

Grant’s grip tightened on the wheel. “If there’s a big swell behind us, it could ride that force, but we remodeled the front of that ship so it wouldn’t pierce another hull if there was a hard bump. We’ll lose motion at the same rate of speed; we have the same wind and water resistance. It should be fine.”

“Should?”

Grant shrugged. “It’s the best we can do. Go keep an eye on it.”

“I’ll go tell the boss first, so she can get people into lifeboats!”

“She knows. Why do you think she had the life vests gathered up? You’re the spotter to make that call.”

Below the bridge, Angela began to draw energy from the storm, groaning at the mismatched power levels. Nature’s strength was much greater than her own.

Lightning flashed directly over them, searching for a target.

Adrian and Marc protected her as something exploded on top of the ship. Sparks rained down and were quickly extinguished by the driving rain.

Angela sucked in endless energy, shuddering.

Adrian decided he needed a refill as well and also began to draw.

Marc chose not to. Instead, he listened to the approving roar of the water. The ocean king liked it that Angela was increasing her energy bank. *More for him when she dies.* Marc shielded her from the rain with his body, hearing shouts from their camp as the waves grew higher.

Adrian moaned as his energy banks were filled. When it reached the top and kept going, expanding his small container, he opened all his mental barriers to help. The pain was nothing compared to the evolution. Drawing from nature was dangerous and rewarding.

Lightning flashed overhead again. Everyone braced for another hit.

The vivid streak glared against the pitch-black sky, forcing people to shield their eyes. Rain fell heavier, slamming into the deck and furniture with relentless determination.

Angela slumped in Marc’s arms, lashes fluttering. She was as full as she could get and then a little more. Her gray hair shot out in waves of ebony that returned her curls to a glowing luster. Her skin healed, her wounds repaired, all in seconds. “Wow.”

Marc would have chuckled at the after-sex tone, but the shouts were getting louder. Some of the camp was panicking, fleeing for topside.

“The lights are off!” Adrian shut his doors, feeling like he’d eaten an entire turkey. He didn’t think he could move. “You have to calm them down!”

“How?” Marc didn’t want to leave Angela.

“Light! They need lights!” Angela slid to her knees on the soaked deck, rain beating on her in driving waves that matched the angry swells around the ship. “Let there be light, you assholes!” She shot energy into the ship. “Don’t make me come back up there!”

For one instant, the storm increased. It felt as if a tornado were bearing down on them… Then the rain eased. Sparks flared…

The ship’s lights came on all at once, bringing relief.

They immediately went back out.

Angela shot another blast of energy into the boat. “Help keep them calm or I’ll sink you!”

The ship shuddered, responding to her demand and her threat. A sense of peace invaded the hull and radiated outward, touching those closest.

Adrian gawked in stunned surprise. “It’s alive.”

Marc helped Angela to her feet. He’d already known the ship had an awareness of the people. He hadn’t known communication was possible. *I miss the old world*, he thought suddenly. *No monsters except the human kind, no fake gods betting on our lives, no magic to surprise us when we’re not looking, no battles for the future.*

“It was never like that.” Angela released him, able to stand on her own now. The power transfers were getting easier on her through repetition. “We were blinded by our egos and the veils of safety. All of this has always been here, just waiting for us to acknowledge it.”

“Well, I wish we hadn’t. It’s too much.”

Angela shot energy at Marc, filling him in one short blast. She watched him shake and bite back a groan. “I don’t. I’d rather have the truth, no matter how ugly. I can’t fight what I don’t know is there.” She stepped around him and Adrian, who was still trying to process the new energy. “Get to the bridge when you can. Grant needs help. His crew ran when the lightning hit.”

“Where are you going?”

Angela jogged for the stairs. The wind was howling too loud for words at this distance. *To calm my people. The glowing walls won’t hold us for long. The ship will get tired too.*

Marc stared, in pain and shock. The hull of the ship was vivid in the darkness. It glowed bright green in a reminder of everything that Marc hated. *I want the old world back.*

Recovering, Adrian put a hand on Marc’s shoulder. “Most of us do. You’re not alone.”

Marc allowed the comfort because he needed it and there was no one else who could provide it. “I feel alone most of the time.”

“It’s who you are.”

“I can’t change. I’ve tried. She can’t change me either. She’s tried.”

Adrian snorted. “No, she really hasn’t, Marine, but we’ve pushed her far enough now. You can’t make yourself fall in line like the rest of us. She’s going to do it for you.”

“I don’t want that!”

“Then do what she said and escort Seth when he sneaks Becky off this ship. You can either be part of the solution or run away, but you can’t stay here with that attitude. You’ll destroy what she’s still hoping…” Adrian clamped his mouth shut and went to find Angela.

Marc took longer to recover. The energy was healing his injuries and returning good health, but it hurt like hell. He was far below Angela’s level. He glared upward. “I hate you!”

Ray watched Marc’s rant from the entrance of the bridge, sympathizing. He’d heard it all. “If Marc leaves, I’m going with him.” Ray glanced at Grant and wasn’t surprised to see the man staring at him with wounded eyes.

“You’d abandon me?”

Ray nodded. “This is all too much. For a lot of people.”

“Adjusting takes time.”

“It’s been eleven months. We’re not going to adjust. We’re slowly going insane.”

Grant grabbed Ray’s arm as the man went by. He pulled him in and hugged him. “I’m sorry this is so hard on you.”

Ray clutched Grant’s shoulder, fighting the urge to cry. “So am I. I want to be strong, but this is all just some crazy book. It can’t be real!”

Grant kissed him.

Ray held still, distracted by the emotions, by the love in Grant’s touch. *It’s been so long!*

Grant retreated, scanning Ray’s wet face. “It is real–all of it. We’ll handle it together. You’re not alone.”

Ray blinked back tears and turned away from the man he now wanted more than he ever had Dale. “Mind the ship!”

Grant went back to the controls, but his tone was grim. “We’re at the mercy of the wind and the water now.”

“No.” Ray drew on his courage and his faith. “We’re at the mercy of nature and the Ocean King.”

Grant smiled. “That’s good. Hold onto that.”

“I will.” Ray paused. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Grant stood straighter, grimacing. “Now find something else to do. I can’t concentrate with this much wood.”

**2**

Kenn slapped the light onto the wall, hit it, and shifted to the next place. The glowing walls were freaking folks out as much as being in the dark, but Kenn was grateful. He didn’t know how Angela had accomplished it, but he could see enough to traverse the passages and put up lights, making his job easier.

He sneezed suddenly, sending a loud echo down the hallway. The lack of an engine made the sound too loud. The storm wasn’t as bad as people had been expecting, but that hadn’t helped the snaps and fights among the camp, and they didn’t even know the worst part yet. It was scary to think they were adrift.

Angela appeared next to him. “Got another bag?”

Kenn jumped. “Damn it!”

Angela chuckled, taking his bag. “I’ll finish here.”

Kenn went back down the hall without a response, heart thumping. He wasn’t scared of the dark. Angela in the dark, was another story.

Kenn met Quinn at the intersection. “Got extras? The boss took mine.”

Quinn handed him the half empty bag. “These stickups were supposed to be in the bottom levels. How’d these bags get into the living quarters?”

Kenn rubbed his sore butt bone. “Foresight on someone’s part, I assume.” He went back to where Angela was putting up his lights. “Keep rolling. The sheep are on the verge of stampeding.”

Quinn let out a sound of contempt, moving off. “Don’t know where they think they’ll go unless they feel like a swim.”

Kenn agreed, disappointed by how easy the camp was able to be brought to panic. They still had a lot of work to do.

Kenn found Angela in the same deserted passage, standing near a brightly glowing light. “You okay?”

“Searching.”

Kenn lingered where he was, not wanting her to feel crowded. He didn’t approve of her being here alone. *I’ll bitch at Marc and Adrian for this later.*

Angela sighed. “I shot Marc full of energy and took off. He didn’t have a choice.”

Kenn grinned. Despite not wanting the boss alone, it was nice to know she’d gotten one over on Marc. Kenn held out the bag he’d just gotten. “More lights.”

Angela took it, moving down the next passage way. She didn’t want to tell Kenn she was a bit lost without her map.

Kenn took his from a pocket and peered at the grids while he followed. “We should be coming to the garden area soon.” He peered into the darkness. “I see a light that isn’t yellow or green.”

“Samantha has red lights for the plants. She and Theo probably switched them on as soon as the power went off.”

“Yah, about the power. We had lights again for a minute and then green walls. What happened?”

“Lightning. Grant’s going to tell us the strike burnt out the main power relay. What he’ll skip is how we didn’t check the lightning assessment system before we set sail. It should have been replaced.”

“Do we…punish him or something?”

“Negative. He was busy with other things and the rest of us didn’t know. It’s a lesson learned.”

“So it’s a relay box?”

“Yes. The lightning rod setup was probably lost before we found the ship. As soon as we replace whatever was damaged, we’ll have full power again.”

“And until then, we’re adrift.”

“I wouldn’t mention that part to the camp yet. We’ll tell them after we get it fixed.”

“Agreed.” Kenn felt the ship shift and instinctively grabbed Angela’s arm to keep her from being knocked into the wall. Screams and shouts echoed.

Angela controlled her instinctive need to kill him. “Thanks.”

Kenn let go and retreated. “Seas are rough.”

“We need to clear the top deck.”

Kenn frowned, glad she hadn’t blasted him for touching her. “Are there still camp members up there?”

“Just guards. Pass the word, will you?” Angela kept putting up lights.

Kenn went to do as ordered, wishing he’d let her fall. Anything was better than the waves of ice she was sending now.

Angela locked down on her rage. Being alone in the dark with Kenn was bad enough. His touch was too much.

“Who’s out there?!”

Angela chuckled at Theo’s aggressive tone. “The tooth fairy. I came for your molars.”

Theo appeared in the entrance, face distorted by the green walls. “Boss?”

“That’s me.” Angela entered the garden area, scanning. Samantha and Debra were in the far corner behind the corn planters, both with a gun in hand. “Nice.”

“Armed females or the garden being started?”

Angela laughed at Theo’s question. “Both.” Angela took a minute to tour the area, impressed. “You’ve gotten a lot done.”

Samantha and Debra joined her while Theo stood watch over the entrance. He was furious to find her alone.

“What’s going on up there?” Samantha was worrying over Neil. He’d checked in with her and then vanished again.

“Storm. Lightning hit us. We’re working on it.”

Theo nodded. “We assumed. No panic here.”

“That’s why I came down.” Angela walked the row of potato pots that had just been filled with dirt. “The Eagles are putting up lights and our Captain is steering us through the storm. I thought I’d come down for a minute of peace.”

Samantha rolled her eyes. “Like leadership gets much of that anywhere they go.”

Angela sighed. “Yeah. I really came for a report on the storm. How long do you think?”

“A few more hours. Nature is pissed you took her energy.”

Debra signed. *Was already mad anyway. A little more won’t matter.*

“True.” Samantha slowly rose from the wheelchair, ignoring the frowns of her sentries. “Can we talk for a minute?”

Angela followed Samantha to a far corner while Debra joined Theo at the door.

Samantha brought up a shield, grimacing. “Getting rusty. It stings a bit.”

“It’s your gift overriding the babies. They have their own small defenses now, thanks to your evolutions.”

Samantha widened her barrier to include Angela.

Angela assumed the storm tracker wanted a truly private moment and didn’t veto her magic use, but she watched for signs it was too much on Samantha’s weak system.

“I’m not the problem. Neil is.”

Angela’s upset stomach flared back to life. “Becky.”

“Yes. I need you to let him have time with her. I know you’re planning to let them…escape, but Neil needs closure.”

“And in her condition, it won’t be the type you were concerned over before?”

“Yes.” Samantha didn’t lie. “He loves me, and he’d never leave me, but a quick roll with that little whore wasn’t out of the question before.”

“It is now. They all hate her, like Kendle.”

Samantha put a hand on her swelled stomach, rubbing gently. “Not Neil. He thinks this is his fault. Talking to her will help him understand she went off the deep end on her own.”

“She really did. Neil isn’t responsible for her rape. Seth’s always been wrong about that.”

“Yes, but Neil’s honor took a nasty hit. I need him whole again.”

“I’ll arrange it.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. He’s going to try to rehabilitate her. He’ll come to me next and ask for more time, and then leniency when he convinces them to face the trial.”

“The storm already gave him more time. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Angela chuckled. “You’ve become smarter, quicker about adding up the future.”

Samantha let go of her shield. She rubbed her large stomach. “I’m sorry I’m not more help to you right now.”

“You’re doing what I would have been if not for the mountain. Enjoy your pregnancy as much as you can. You won’t get another.”

Samantha brooded. “But we need babies.”

“The camp will provide them. The rest of us have a war to win when we go home. We can’t do that if we’re barefoot and pregnant.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.” Samantha’s head tilted, listening. “Sounds like the Eagles have calmed everyone. No more shouts.”

“I don’t need to be on their heels as much now. The power going off surprised people, but they didn’t really panic.”

“That will come in the morning.”

Angela bobbed her head again. “Maybe. When they find out we’re lost, they won’t like it.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Stay here, where you’re safe. I don’t want you getting bumped around, even by accident.”

“I’m getting bored and a bit restless.”

“What if I gave you another job?”

Samantha perked up. “Sure! What can I do?”  
“Train Debra to use her gifts. Just keep it quiet. I don’t want everyone playing with their power yet.”

“I’d be honored.” Samantha lowered her voice. “She’s a sweet girl. Almost too kind to be a killer.”

Angela rotated toward the exit. “Don’t be fooled, Sam. Debra is just as dangerous as the rest of us. Time will prove that.”

Chapter Twelve

**A picture containing sign, green, object

Description automatically generated**

**I Get to Keep Her**

**1**

**“T**his is the Captain.”

Radios crackled, making people jump.

“The storm is getting worse. You may need to hang onto something that won’t slide.” Grant released the button. “I hope she has them covered. This is getting ugly.”

Ray took a rope from his belt. He quickly attached it to Grant’s belt and then his own. He refused to think about the glowing green walls giving them light.

Grant kept his attention on the ocean. The waves were high. Water rushed over the front deck of the ship each time they came down from cresting a swell. Their ship was in danger.

Ray held onto the wall rail, heart pounding. He hadn’t spent much time on boats. The rocking sucked. He fished in his pocket with his free hand, searching for the Dramamine Angela had given them all a few days ago.

“Do those work?” Donald appeared in the closest entrance.

Ray swallowed a pill. “I’ll let you know.”

Donald popped open his own bottle. “We’ll find out together.”

Donald was green even without the glowing floors and ceiling. Hoping to be distracted, he inspected the case with the various trophies and awards the ship and company had won. The boat they were on was impressive from front to back, but Donald was disappointed. Without the glamor of a launch, employees scurrying around, and a tour guide, it wasn’t anywhere near what he’d imagined.

Rain and hail slammed against the windows, making them all flinch.

Grant groaned. “We may have a water spout out there somewhere.”

“Great. Not like we can see it through this.” Donald noted Ray was tied to their captain and approved. “The boss sent me to verify you were covered. Need anything?”

Grant didn’t glance away from the next swell. “Yes. Pray. That’s a huge wave. When it comes down, we’ll take on a lot of water.”

Donald made a derisive noise. “Only the gamblers are listening. No point in prayer.”

Grant might have argued, but the ship began to rise, riding the swell.

“Oh, shit!” Ray got a glimpse of the trajectory they were on. “Pull up!”

“It isn’t a plane! We have to ride it out.”

The front of the ship sank…and kept going. It plunged beneath the waves.

Water rushed over the deck in furious torrents.

Everyone was relieved when the front came up and water ran off the sides.

Below decks, furniture and boxes slid, people stumbled, grabbing onto anything secure to keep from falling. Many of them were thrown to the floor, crying out in surprise and pain.

Eagles rushed to help them, also stumbling around in the dim light.

Angela joined her people in the living quarters, comforting and calming them.

Angela took a small bag from her jacket pocket. “These should last a few hours. Do not lose them or you get to go to the bathroom in the dark.” Angela passed out the mini flashlights, showing the kids how to wrap the straps around their wrists. She had enough for the entire camp, but most people refused them. The dozen lanterns in the room were providing good light–enough to illuminate the restroom stalls from the top and bottom. It helped that Kenn had also placed stick up lights on the stall doors. The ship’s glowing walls had dimmed as the boat tired. *Save your strength now. Come back on when the sun sets, please.*

*I am not a switch to be flipped.*

*No, you’re a ship meant to be sailed. We’re doing that. Hold up your end.*

Brighter light glowed from the walls for an instant, then faded.

Angela wasn’t sure if that was an apology or the equivalent of the boat giving her the finger.

The camp assumed it was their workers trying to get the power back on.

The descendants and Eagles knew Angela was responsible. They could tell by the fresh white streak in her hair and the hands clenched inside her Eagle jacket. She was always multitasking. Her people admired it, but it was exhausting to try keeping up with her. It was easier to scan the camp and their surroundings.

The employee living quarters were broken into two sections separated by a break area that held five bathroom stalls, two sinks, and half a dozen tables with colorful, ergonomic chairs. The windows were open, letting in the stiff breeze to clear the smoke from the few people who still had materials for it. Angela was tempted to join them, but she only had two packs. She was mourning having to quit. Despite the dangers, she loved a cigarette and a cup of tea. It was hard to imagine not having it again in her lifetime, but their crop growing years weren’t going to be wasted on tobacco.

She noted the smell of vomit and was glad she hadn’t eaten yet. “Get the buckets out and find some crackers to help settle stomachs.” She stepped over a mess and went to one of the empty tables. “We’ve got a couple hours more. Take a seat and do something. No need to make it worse.”

Angela’s calm tones and directions brought peace to the crowded barracks. People began to settle, sitting, taking books and games from pockets and shelves.

Angela settled in, estimating she would need to spend at least an hour here. The storm would calm down and so would her people, as long as she was where they could see her. The first few tense situations onboard would revive a few of the old behaviors, but they would adjust. By the time they neared the island, people wouldn’t even blink at rough seas. Power going off would always spook them, however. No one wanted to be lost on the ocean in the dark.

Dog padded over to Angela and sat by her boots. His head swiveled, warning people that he was her protection.

Angela motioned to Neil. “Come join me.”

Neil had been hoping to get to the garden area once Angela arrived. He swallowed a protest and joined her at the small table.

Angela didn’t waste time, but she did keep her voice low. “She wants you to have time with Becky before the trial.”

Neil scowled. “I don’t.”

Angela lifted a brow. She didn’t call him a liar. She didn’t need to.

Neil hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re human, Neil.” Angela handed him a sheet of paper from her notebook, glad the camp was now distracted. “While you’re with her, try to get these answers for me.”

Neil scanned the paper. “I will if she’ll talk to me. Seth isn’t going to allow that.”

“Seth isn’t going to be there. I want him with me. After that, we’ll need hands for repairs and cleanup. Tell him I said it will keep the camp from lynching her while I sleep.”

Neil sighed. “This is my fault. Mine and Adrian’s.”

“No, but that reminds me. Adrian will be there too.”

Neil’s lips thinned. “Is that a good idea? She’s already upset.”

“She can be sedated lightly. She’s been under enough stress. Try to remind her what life was like before the war. Mentioning her mother might help.”

“I will.” Neil paused. “Thank you…I think.”

Angela opened her notebook. “You can go to her now. Guards are light there. I’d like you to stand watch until I send relief and then you can…visit.”

Neil left the crowded living quarters, mind in turmoil.

Angela signaled to the next contestant. “Doug.”

The big redhead squeezed into the small seat. Roy and Romeo huddled next to him, not comfortable around this many camp members.

“Tell me about the trip here.”

Doug grimaced. “All of it?”

“Yes.” Angela smiled at the boys. “Have them join the other children. Pam is handling the kids right now. See?” She pointed to the far corner where Pam and a few of the other women were handing out coloring books, crayons, and markers to the scared children gathered around them. “Let them blend back in. Right now, there are no bullies. Everyone’s scared. They’ll bond.”

Doug did as she instructed, not sure if he agreed with the order, but the boys did need friends to make this trip easier on them.

Roy and Romeo went slowly, casting looks back at Doug.

“Go on, now. You’re tough squirts. Hold your heads up and take your places.” Doug turned back to Angela. “Will they be okay here? We can get off somewhere if not. I won’t have them hurt.”

Angela smiled at the big man. “You’re a great person, Doug. As long as you fit in, they will too.”

He scowled. “Why wouldn’t I fit in? Been part of Safe Haven longer than you have.”

She shrugged. “You’ve been gone for a while and you didn’t want to come back. The kids feel it.”

Doug grunted at a sharp motion from the ship, stomach roiling with each wave. “I’ve made peace with that. I’m here to stay this time, unless the boys can’t be accepted.”

“That will be the easiest part of this trip. All the kids will get jobs. The new responsibilities will help them adjust and keep them out of trouble.”

“What kind of job? Roy’s awful little for Eagle training.”

“No, he’s not. They have to become Eagles, Doug, and it has to start now. If not, they’ll turn out like their relatives and that will get them killed. Every child on this boat is in danger. Help them blend in and do the same for yourself. The future needs all of us, no matter how young. Avoiding that fact will only bring misery.”

**2**

“Why are you avoiding me?”

Charlie flinched. “What the hell!”

“What’s going on with you?” Tracy studied him, seeing he was a bit taller and a lot harder. She wasn’t looking forward to hearing everything he’d gone through, but she hoped it had helped. There was a lot riding on them getting this right. She put a hand on her hip. “Well?”

Charlie continued down the dark passage, putting up lights. “You don’t want to do this now.” The halls around them were dim and empty of everyone except guards. The camp preferred to stay together when there was a crisis.

Hurt, Tracy ran after him. She grabbed his arm, jerking him around. “We’re having a baby! Don’t you treat me this way!”

Charlie pulled out of her grip. “I’m sorry.”

She stared at his grim face, sensing the truth. “You did something. You’re scared of how I’ll react.”

“Yes.”

Her hand went back to her hip. “Well?”

Charlie mouthed a curse. “Why do you have to be like this? Can’t you wait until I’m ready to tell you?” Charlie tried not to think about how good it had felt to be in her arms, to be pressed against her naked skin. It hadn’t been that long in real time, but emotionally it felt as though they’d been apart for months.

“If you’re done with me, just say so!”

He paused in his guilty thoughts. “What?!”

“I know that look. You cheated on me and it was better. Now you don’t want me anymore!”

Charlie kissed her.

The ship bucked under their feet, sliding them against the wall.

Tracy wanted to refuse, but she hugged him, lost.

Charlie retreated. “I didn’t cheat on you.” He looked away. “I tricked you into loving me.”

Tracy stared at him. “You what?”

“I used a spell. You don’t love me. It’s all a lie.”

“You used a spell to get me to care for you?”

The teenager nodded, voice subdued. “I heard what Adrian did and I copied it–only better. Now I need to break that spell and I don’t want to!” His eyes darkened. “Even if you don’t love me, I do feel that way about you. This will crush me.”

“Always protecting your own ass. Did you get that from Adrian too?”

“No.” Charlie braced, feeling another swell coming. “That came from my dad. Telling you the truth came from my mom.”

“Because she’s honorable.”

“Because she knows. That’s why she sent me out there. Kenn and I would have come to terms anyway. We were already working on it. She wanted me to tell you the truth. She knew I was never going to.”

“Never?”

Charlie shook his head, holding her arm as the ship shuddered. “I need you too much.”

Tracy studied his misery, almost relieved. “Do it right now so we’ll both know. Don’t drag it out.”

Unlike Adrian, Charlie knew how to remove his magic. He just didn’t want to.

Tracy stepped against him and placed a soft kiss to his lips. “Do it now. I demand it for your betrayal.”

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut. “I release you.”

Tracy waited for something to happen, to feel different. “When does it work?”

“Instantly.”

“I don’t feel different. I still care for you.”

“Give it time.” He repeated Adrian’s words to him. “When you’ve had a chance to think about it, you’ll hate me.”

Tracy’s hand went to her stomach. “And if I do? What happens to the baby?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Meaning?”

“I’ll be there for you or leave you alone. Whatever you want.”

“You won’t try to take the baby from me?”

He scowled. “No. Never.”

“Okay, then. That’s what I was worried about.” She veered toward a dim tunnel. “We have a cabin below the employee deck, along with a few other couples. If you want to change your cabin, tell your mom.”

“Tracy.”

She stopped but didn’t turn. “Yes?”

“Do you want me to switch? Because I won’t unless you say so.”

Tracy knew she should be angry, but all she felt was relief that he still wanted her. “I don’t think it was all your spell because I don’t hate you and I’m not going to hate you over time.” She resumed walking. “Cabin 703.”

Charlie watched her walk away. The peace filling his heart was amazing.

Kenn joined the boy in the hall. He put a hand on the teenager’s shoulder. “Good job.”

“Thanks.” Charlie turned to him. “For all of it. I know that was hard for you. I could tell you didn’t enjoy it this time.”

“I never will again, kid. Your mom changed me in every way since her arrival. I suggest you let her do the same to you. She’s good at it.”

Charlie rotated to watch Tracy go up the stairs. “She gave me what I wanted. In every way.”

Kenn was curious. “What did you want?”

“Those big titties in my mouth.”

Kenn laughed. “Well, you got that.” Kenn dropped his hand. “So did Adrian.”

Charlie shrugged at the reminder that had always infuriated him before. “Yeah, but I get to keep her. Adrian doesn’t.”

Jennifer was near the intersection. She stored the entire exchange, then continued toward the infirmary. It was great Kenn and Charlie were at peace now. It was one less problem for them. *We have enough in the others. It’s nice to know that rivalry is dead.*

Jennifer stopped in the doorway, scanning to see who was awake.

Everyone regarded her in anger, confusion, or fear.

Jennifer sighed. The drugs had worn off. The kids were confused about what was going on. The guards were scared of the kids and of the storm. Becky was angry. The mood sucked.

Neil eased by Jennifer and went toward Becky’s cot.

Seth jumped up, placing himself between them. “Go away! You’ll make it worse!”

Adrian appeared in the opposite entrance. “The boss wants you, Seth. Get to the living quarters.” Adrian lowered his tone. “Now.”

“You don’t order me!” Seth couldn’t help shouting. “Leave her alone!”

Adrian looked at the guards. “The boss wants him right now. If you have to knock him out and drag him to her, do it.”

Seth shut up as five big Ciemus women marched his way eagerly. They wanted to get away from the kids. In comparison, one screaming man seemed like the better end of the deal. He was forced to go.

“We’ll deliver him after he gets a shower and a meal.” Claire squeezed Seth’s arm. “He’s starving, and he stinks.” She pushed him into the hallway where the women formed a barrier around him and marched him toward the living quarters.

“What do you want?” Becky trembled, staring at Neil and Adrian. Anger was thick in her tone.

“To talk, to shout, to work things out.”

“Funny.” Becky sneered at Adrian. “What about you?”

“The same. Boss’s orders.”

Becky shut her lids. “I have nothing to say. Hang me or toss me overboard, but don’t speak to me. I hate you both.”

Neil took the seat on her right.

Adrian took the seat on her left.

Becky felt tears welling and embraced her anger. “Get out!”

Kids flinched, able to sense her power rising.

Adrian brought up a shield over the angry girl so her hits wouldn’t be able to hurt anyone. “You’re going to listen to us. Then you can toss yourself overboard if you want to.”

Becky’s rage slammed into the barrier, straining Adrian’s mental strength.

Neil waited for this first battle to be over before he spoke. She wasn’t listening to anything right now except the voices in her mind and they were spewing ugly words. Neil could see the madness.

“I hate you! I hate you!”

Adrian winced at each blast. “I know.” He strengthened the shield and reached over to put a hand on hers. “But you have to stop now. It’s killing you and everything you hold dear.”

Becky’s scream echoed through the ship, dimming the walls. “I want my baby back!”

Everyone who’d lost a child sympathized with her pain; they also hated her for the reminder of their own losses.

Becky’s rage faded into awful sobs that made both men feel terrible. Adrian shot calming spells into her while Neil tried not to babble about how sorry he was. It wouldn’t help at this point. She was too far gone. *I did this.*

“No, you didn’t.” Adrian refused to let Neil carry the guilt. “I knew there would be sacrifices to beat Cesar. I didn’t know who or how, but I knew it would be ugly. This is my fault.”

“I led her on and then turned away from her.”

“She was off limits. You found a match in someone your own age. You still have your honor, no matter how it feels.”

Neil wasn’t ready to accept that. He stayed by Becky’s cot as she sobbed, hating himself.

Adrian didn’t try again. He believed there would be time later, after Becky had gotten more of the poison from her system. The screaming wasn’t over.

**3**

Becky and the storm howled for hours. Grant handled the heavy rains and winds, while Adrian and Neil fought to contain Becky’s pain. It made everyone uneasy, adding to the tension from finding out they were all players in ruthless games by higher beings without mercy or compassion.

By dawn, the mood was dangerous.

“You hear that?”

Angela glanced up from the circle of kids she was distracting. “What?”

“The storm stopped. No more wind or rain.”

Angela listened, agreeing with Ivan’s assumption.

Below them, Becky sobbed quietly, drained.

Seth was unconscious in a cot near Angela. The shower, hot meal, and exercise of accompanying her on rounds for hours without a break had worn him down.

“Both banshees ran out of steam together. Good.” Angela turned to the kids, ready to give the lesson now. “You see what comes of the rage? This is how it feels to lose everything.”

Kids nodded or frowned at her.

Angela kept going even though she didn’t like hurting them. “That’s your future. The anger inside will destroy you and everyone around you. It will burn your heart and mind until there’s nothing left. You have to push it out, whatever remains.” She held out a hand. “I’m going to help you. The ocean needs to be cleaned. You will deliver your anger into the ocean every time it comes up.” She blasted them with a current of punishment.

The kids flinched, whimpering at her displeasure.

Angela sent another jolt, steeling herself to their agony at the harder blast. “You will commit to regaining your honor with me and everyone aboard this ship. If you cannot do that, I will give you to the ocean.” A final blast put kids on their knees around her, begging for an end to the pain.

Angela released them and stood. “Go to the top deck right this minute and release as much of your anger as you can into the ocean. When you’re drained, come here and sleep until I send for you. Do not break my orders.”

The kids fled the infirmary, taking only seconds to get out of sight.

Angela spent a moment recovering, hating herself and this part of her duty.

“Will that hold?”

Angela shook her head at Jennifer’s question. “Not for all of them. I’m working on another solution. I needed time.”

Jennifer hoped Angela was able to. The thought of tossing kids overboard was horrific. She already knew she couldn’t have any part in it.

Angela walked toward Becky’s shaking form, forcing herself to complete the lesson. “I’ll do the same to you. I don’t care that you’ve lost a child. So have I. I don’t care that you were raped. So was I. I don’t care that you have so much anger you can’t feel anything else. You will control yourself. Or I’ll toss *Seth* overboard.”

Becky stilled, eyes swinging to Angela. “He didn’t do anything wrong!”

“No, he didn’t, but I’ll still do it. If you act out again, in any way, Seth will pay the price for it.”

Becky’s tears came harder, but there was fear this time instead of rage. “Don’t hurt him… He’s all I have left!”

“That’s up to you, Rebecca. Mind my words. I’ll kill him without blinking.” Angela waited for Becky to nod, then left the infirmary. She couldn’t take the surprise of her Eagles, the condemnation, and thoughts of rebelling. They were positive she would do it. *That hurts.*

The only one who didn’t believe her was Adrian. He kept his shield up, not letting anyone know the truth. Angela would never kill an innocent. Anyone who thought she would didn’t know her at all.

Everyone felt it when the kids started shooting their anger into the water. The sounds became too loud for conversations. Even the storm’s fading noises were muffled as the ocean groaned in delight. Each blast brought more.

“It looks like the storm is almost over, folks.” Grant’s voice was tired over the radio. “It’s okay to move about the ship again, but I’d avoid the top deck. Very wet and slippery up here.”

Angela keyed her mike. “You heard him. Feel free to move around. I suggest you eat, brush your teeth, and sleep for a few hours. Shift change will be called when guards have gotten enough rest. I’ll be around if you need me.” Angela glanced at Travis. “What about our tow?”

Travis skimmed the report. “It’s drifting to the right. As long as the waves keep calming, we’re good. It’ll stop before the rope goes taut, and the propellers aren’t running so it can’t get tangled.”

“Good. What about pulling up the towline?”

“Not until the storm stops. Grant implied it’s a hard job and should only be done by strong people with stamina, in calm weather.”

“He’s the boss of the boat. Arrange it like he wants.” Angela resumed her walk, but it was unsteady.

“She needs to sleep.”

Marc grunted at Kenn’s comment, but he didn’t scold her or nag. She didn’t need him to tell her what to do. She was the boss. *She’ll do as she pleases.*

Kenn sensed Marc’s bitterness. The wolfman had been put on duty over the animals and garden during the storm instead of being with Angela in the living quarters. He’d just finished that shift a few minutes ago. “Could have been you in charge, Marine. Remember that when you give her shit.”

Marc delivered a nasty glare. “You’re all supportive of her now. That’s great, but I haven’t forgotten what you did to her, or what you did to me and my son.” Marc let his eyes glow red. “I never will. Keep your comments to yourself or I’ll make you eat those words.”

Kenn laughed at him. “Threats are all you have. You can’t do shit now but stand there and look pretty, so fuck off.”

Kenn left him with his mouth open, enjoying the moment. It wasn’t often he got one over on Marc, but this was easy. Kenn hadn’t done anything wrong in a while. *And I won’t. Let the others screw up. I’m a good boy now.*

**4**

“Got a minute?”

“Walk with me.” Angela expected Seth to return at any moment. She’d sent him to deliver notes to the garden crew.

Kyle joined Angela on the stairs. “I noticed you didn’t tell anyone here about the final battle. Not even the Eagles.”

Angela led him into a small stateroom for privacy. She shut the door and lit a smoke.

Kyle watched her lean against the door, wondering why she was going to tell him her plans when she wasn’t informing anyone else.

“Because I trust you to give me good advice.” Angela exhaled a cloud of smoke. “I’m going to ask for another meeting.”

Kyle’s lips curled. “The other *king*.”

“Yes. Maybe a deal can be made there.”

“You won’t return from that one.” Kyle set his pocket ashtray onto the table for them to share.

“Probably not.”

“And even if you made a deal, it wouldn’t be honored.”

“Probably not.” Angela avoided the mirror in the room, worried her hair was gray again. She refilled, got drained. Refilled, got drained. *I’m always high or low. Where’s the happy middle?*

“But you think it’s a good idea.”

“Good? No.” Angela drank from her canteen. “Needed? Maybe. We only have one side of the story. We’ve always only had one side. I need the other half.”

“Marc and Adrian will never go for it.”

“No… But they’d follow me if I went.”

“I would too, along with Neil and Ivan.”

“And I may ask that of you. Right now, I’m working it through and trying to find a way to make it happen without endangering the future.”

Kyle studied her, not liking the reckless gleam in her eyes. “Why? Before we went, you were calming down, getting…happier.”

Angela held in the tears. “They’re fighting over me again. All the peace lasted ten hours.”

Kyle was suddenly furious with both men. “I wish they’d grow up.”

She sighed. “Too late now. They’ve reverted to drama and pettiness. If not for the storm, we would be removing them from the ship in a couple hours.”

Kyle took the seat by the small round window and lit the cheroot he’d hand rolled from butts. He inhaled deeply, groaning. “I love these. I wish we could grow tobacco.”

Angela dug out a wedgie, blushing a bit. “As do I, my friend.” She stubbed out the smoke and put the remainder in the half empty pack. “I’m scared of that meeting. It won’t be anytime soon.”

Kyle was glad to hear it, but that didn’t interfere with his duty. “I’ll escort you. I imagine killers are always welcome in hell.”

“I hope so because I’ll take the same crew.”

“When?”

“Not for a while. I need to stew on it. The meeting will be a trap. I have to account for that.” She lifted a brow. “You’ll speak to Jennifer about it when you have privacy?”

“Of course.”

“Good. But she can’t go with us, no matter how she tries to force your hand. I’ll never agree.”

“Because she has to lead the camp if we don’t return?”

“Because he’ll want her more than me, Kyle. I’m nothing compared to the killer she’ll become.”

Kyle snorted. “How will that happen?”

“We’re going to teach her. Jennifer is our secret weapon. No other exists on this planet like her.”

Kyle wasn’t surprised, only concerned. “So who leads while we go and she learns?”

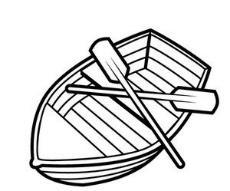
Angela opened the door and resumed her walk to the top deck.

Kyle exhaled. “Damn, I hate that answer.”

“So do I.” Angela spotted Seth jogging up the stairs toward her. “But darkness is all I see when I search the future. Safe Haven’s next leader isn’t here yet. I have to hope they find us on the island. If not, we don’t have a future.”

Chapter Thirteen

**Stop Helping Me**

****

**1**

**“I**’m telling on you.” Missy finished pulling on her little robe. She’d woken as Leeann was slipping out of their cabin. Missy didn’t even have slippers on her cold feet.

Leeann kept walking over the slippery deck toward the lifeboats. The dim dawn provided both light and shadows.

Missy ran after her, shivering in the cool wind. “I mean it. The alpha is resting below, but I’ll go there right now.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be gone by the time they get up here.” Leeann stopped by the first boat. “How do I get this thing into the water?”

Missy joined her. She pointed. “You have to get in and have someone cut that rope.”

Leeann dug in her purse. “I brought a knife. The weapons area isn’t guarded.” She pulled a gun out and set it on the edge of the boat.

Missy picked it up and stuffed it into her pocket. “You’re gonna be in trouble.”

“I won’t be here to be punished.” Leeann flipped the knife open. “I’m getting my Billy back.”

Missy put a hand on her arm. “What do I tell them?”

Leeann shrugged her off. “Nothing. Go back to bed and act like you didn’t see me.”

“They’ll read my thoughts. I’ll be in trouble for you. That’s not fair.”

Dressed in stolen Eagle gear, Leeann struggled to climb into the boat, gear clinking and banging. “You can come with me if you want, but then no one will cut the rope.”

Missy didn’t want to get in trouble alone. “We can cut it after we’re in.”

Water splashed half way up the ship as it went through a rough wave left from the storm. Both girls stared, getting scared.

“Help me up. I don’t climb as well as you do.”

Missy shoved on Leeann’s leg and flipped her into the boat.

“Ow!”

“Sorry. Move over.” Missy gracefully climbed up on the edge. “Give me the knife.”

Leeann handed it to her and settled on the middle seat. “Okay. Cut it.”

Missy began sawing on the rope.

“Uh, Shawn?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Is that your girl cutting the rope on a lifeboat?”

Shawn stopped on his round of the deck. “What?”

Zack pointed. He wasn’t allowed to leave his post over the captain. “Last boat.” He cleared his throat when Shawn just stood there in shock. “You should probably run.” Zack shoved him.

Shawn stumbled into a run, unable to believe what was happening.

Other guards had noticed and were headed in that direction. Boots stomped across the deck.

Shawn hit a wet spot and slipped. He flailed, unable to catch his balance.

“Look out!”

Shawn crashed into the group of Eagles coming to help. Men and women fell in a heap, grunting and groaning.

“Got it!” Missy dropped onto the seat as the rope snapped.

The boat didn’t move.

Leeann’s face squished up. “What the hell?”

“You said hell.”

Leeann laughed. “Shhh…”

Eagles untangled themselves, trying to reach the lifeboat.

“Cut the other one.” Leeann pointed.

Missy climbed the side of the rail and began sawing the second rope.

Shawn gained his feet and took off running. “Missy! Stop right now!” His boot hit another slick spot…

“Damn it, Shawn!” Ben shoved the Eagle off his chest. “Get your kid, man!”

“Got it!” Missy dropped the knife into the bottom of the boat. “Why isn’t it dropping?”

“Here comes Shawn! Hide!” Leeann ducked into the bottom of the boat.

Missy scrambled from the lifeboat onto the rail of the cruise ship. She hurried along it like a monkey, squealing as Shawn reached her.

“Come here!”

Missy leapt over his shoulder and hit the deck running.

Shawn slid into the railing and flipped over it.

Shawn thought fast enough to draw in a deep breath right before he hit the choppy water.

“Oh, shit!” Zack ran to help.

“No!” Missy jumped onto the rail and dove off.

“Tell them to stop the ship!” Zack was running toward the bridge, but he doubted the boat could be stopped before the pair were lost.

Several guards thought about diving in to help, but Angela and Grant had given them orders not to do so. They’d both insisted it would only put more people into the water that had to be found and rescued. No one had argued. Despite wanting to help, now they really agreed with the order. It was hard to see Shawn in the dipping waves with his dark clothes. Missy’s yellow robe helped to pinpoint her location, but the Eagle gear Shawn had on was no help at all.

Angela appeared on the deck, bleary orbs glowing red.

Ben pointed. “Two overboard!”

Guards flooded up the stairs behind her, bumping Seth out of the way in an effort to keep up with her.

Angela tossed a fireball at the lifeboat, knocking it off the rails holding it in place. Leeann screamed as it dropped like a stone, slamming into the water.

“Grant’s stopping us!” Zack shouted at them.

Angela ran to the rail, magic flowing from her hand. “We have a deal in place! Help them!”

Shawn slung Missy onto his back, fighting to keep them both above the calming water.

Missy clung to him, teeth chattering. “There’s a boat!”

Shawn sucked in air as another wave pulled at them, hand clamped tight around Missy’s ankle.

They went under but were popped right back up by the current.

Missy grabbed the boat.

Shawn shoved her into it, going under again.

“Shawn!” Missy crawled to the side, frantic. “Shawn!”

Watching from the deck, Angela breathed a sigh of relief as Shawn surfaced, hands reaching blindly for the boat. He found an edge and hung on, too weak to pull himself in yet. Angela increased the power of her shield, not sure what might be waiting under the waves for a meal. She narrowed it to the lifeboat, heart pounding, breath coming in short gasps.

Leeann peered over the side, bruised and soaked. “You can’t come!”

Shawn shoved her back so he could force his weight into the boat. He collapsed on the bottom, chest heaving.

Missy slapped him. “Keep breathing!” She hit him again.

Shawn rolled over to avoid it. “I am! Stop it!”

Missy followed, beating on his body. “It’s CRP! I’m helping you!”

Leeann got the idea and began slapping the moaning man. “We’ll save you!”

Shawn was too tired and terrified to defend himself. He huddled in a ball and tried to recover while they beat him up.

“We have to make him warm now.” Missy grabbed the knife from the bottom of the boat. “Get his wet clothes off!”

Leeann yanked on his jacket while Missy tried to cut through his shirt.

Angela sent a powerful blast toward the boat, hoping her aim was right.

The energy hit the side, knocking both girls into the side of the boat.

The knife fell, impaling Shawn’s hand. Blood ran over the wood.

Angela groaned. “Maybe I should stop helping him too.”

The cruise ship finally started to slow. The crew Grant had been training rushed toward the fire stairs on the side and began to descend.

The lifeboat bobbed heavily in the water as the tide pulled it toward the cruise ship. A minute later, it bumped into the side, allowing the crew to secure ropes.

Ben grabbed Leeann and handed the wet, shivering girl to the next person up.

Missy avoided the hands trying to grab her. She pushed Shawn toward them. “He’s hurt! Take him first!”

Shawn snatched Missy by her robe and tossed her to Ben. “Get up there!” He carefully moved out of the lifeboat as soon as the ladder was clear, bleeding and cursing.

Ben held onto the side of the rail to let Shawn go ahead of him, ready to grab the man if he slipped.

Travis motioned Conner and Charlie to control the small crowd of camp members and descendants who’d heard the trouble and come to check it out. There wasn’t much else to do as they all waited for Shawn and the girls to climb the long ladder to the first deck with a balcony.

When Angela yelled for them to keep climbing straight to her, the Eagles were actually glad. These stairs ended in a short ladder and rails went all the way up. As long as everyone went slow, there was a minimum of danger. Sliding the girls and then the adults over a balcony next to the ladder could result in a death or another drop into the ocean.

Shawn heaved himself up the sturdy metal steps, terror and fury fueling his exhausted body. It had been the longest ten minutes of his life. He stomped toward the two crying girls who were already being yelled at aloud by Eagles and silently by Angela. They all fell silent as he stopped in front of them, glowering. He opened his mouth to yell, to threaten, to demand answers, and snapped it shut, unable to form the words. He pointed at the steps to the lower level.

Missy ignored the order, hugging him. She looked at Angela around his waist.

Angela, hating herself for the choice, decided to follow through with her plan for separating Shawn and Missy. She glared at the little girl. *You could have killed him. You’re going to get him killed. I’ve seen it.*

Missy didn’t hear the lie, only the warning. She pulled away from Shawn and ran toward the steps, crying.

She switched attention to Leeann but there was nothing she could do to stop that pain or the attempts to get back to land.

Leeann begged her to help. *I need my Billy.*

Angela shook her head. *Not for years. If you do get away from us and find him, I’ll have to hunt you down and kill you both. Don’t push me again unless you’re prepared to pick the darkness.*

Leeann trembled. *I don’t want that.*

*Then try harder! I need you here. Pledge your time to my work. Give another future a chance, for Billy’s life.*

Leeann forced herself to nod through the shivering. *I’ll try again.*

*That’s all I ask.*

*It won’t work.*

Angela sighed deeply, disturbed*. It will if you decide his life is more important than your heart. Try to make the right choice and wait. In four years, you can be with him if he wants you. Four years isn’t that long if you stay busy.*

Leeann sniffed. *Is that what you tell yourself?*

*Of course. I’ve left my country. The hole in my heart is always there. I just don’t let pain control me. I’m in charge of my life, not my emotions.*

Leeann let Travis wrap a blanket around her, holding the ends together. *I’ll try again. That’s all I can give you.* The little girl turned toward the steps so she didn’t have to keep talking. Failure was a miserable feeling.

“Don’t I know it.” Angela swallowed a second mutter and scanned Shawn for other injuries.

Shawn was shivering, shocked to be alive. He’d expected to be pulled under the ship, to be eaten by a shark, to drown. All of those had gone through his mind as he went over the rail.

Angela motioned Morgan toward him as the medic came up the stairs. She leaned over the fire stairs to verify the crew was tying the lifeboat to the ship.

They were almost done, with many of them already making the climb. Angela rotated around to find Marc behind her.

Marc smiled. “Nice job getting the ocean to help. I never would have thought of that.”

“I didn’t.” She peered over his shoulder to Adrian. “Thank you for the idea. I never would have thought of it.”

Adrian kept walking. “I’ll talk to Grant. Maybe we can get that lifeboat back in place somehow.”

“Tell him we’ll stay here for a few hours. Drop anchor or whatever.”

Adrian left, not looking at her. For one instant, he’d thought about telling her to let all three of them go. He hadn’t because it would hurt her to do that, but she had to know Leeann was going to try again. If not for needing Shawn, those two kids might have gotten exactly what they wanted.

Angela tried to calm her emotions and breathing. She’d used a lot of power to keep the camp calm and then to deal with this crisis. She was tired again. She’d been snoozing in a chair in the command center when Shawn’s panic had swamped her.

“You’re going to sleep soon, right?” Marc was worried about her. Despite the energy refills, she hadn’t looked well since before Kendle tried to kill her.

“Tonight maybe.” She moved by him, scanning as the ship slowed. “We need to dry this deck and clean up the blood.”

“I’ll get a crew on it.”

“Seth can help.”

Marc watched her walk away, frowning. *She’s still mad at me.*

Angela kept going, not about to handle that now. *Let him stew on it. I’m busy and he won’t really mean it when he says sorry anyway.*

Adrian listened to both of them. He was grateful to still be on the ship, but now that they were stopped, it was a perfect time for him and a few others to switch.

*You’re both staying here.* *Fate says to keep you close and I will, but I haven’t forgotten your latest betrayal.* Angela’s tone was cold. *Get below and make sure our prisoners are secure.*

Adrian went immediately, hiding his happiness. Marc thought he was in trouble and he was, but it was nothing compared to the two girls being changed into dry clothes by den mothers while the medic sewed up Shawn’s hand. Adrian expected her to remove their gifts over this and approved. It was time for their kids to fall in line.

*Not possible yet.* Angela went up the steps to the bridge and joined Grant. The anchor began to fall, creating loud noises and fresh tension. It clanked down the aft of the ship and plunked into the calming water.

Angela didn’t speak, observing the activity while she figured out what she wanted to say.

Grant felt a surprise coming and tried to brace for it.

“I don’t want the camp to know. I need you to hide it until I’m ready. The only way you’ll be able to do that is if you’re not around them at all.”

“How will I accomplish that?”

“You’ll stay in your cabin for the next few hours. Ray will bring you anything you need and then stay with you to guard the door.”

“I can’t leave the bridge. No one else can sail the ship yet.”

“We’re stopped. Go below and sleep. That’s an order.”

Ray led Grant from the bridge, glad.

Alone for a moment, Angela shuddered, reliving the fear and confusion of the events. “Hell of a way to start the day.” She spent another minute getting herself under control, then she began hiding weapons from her pockets in various compartments. She’d picked them up last night while adding lights to the halls. She didn’t know why it was needed, but her visions had insisted this area be armed. Grant had to be protected. If they lost him, the entire ship was doomed.

**2**

“Most of the camp is sleeping.” Kenn handed Angela a folder with a thick stack of papers as she entered. “Updates on everything you asked for. The ship’s a mess. We had cargo and personal items go everywhere during the storm. I’m not sure how to arrange teams for cleanup. Do it in shifts of ten?”

Angela shook her head. “Just tell everyone to clean the areas they use, starting with the living quarters. By the time they get hungry, the galley will have the kitchen up and cooking. People can clean their usual areas while they wait for food. It all gets covered and it doesn’t require pulling people from scheduled shifts.”

“Wow. That’s brilliant.”

She sighed. “It’s Adrian. He taught me how to be efficient with a skeleton crew. I just expanded that rationing of personnel so our people don’t get worn out. We’ll handle the cargo areas later.” The cargo hold had been crammed. The storm hadn’t done much damage to their already cluttered setup, though. It would be easy to clean; they just didn’t have the manpower right now.

“Grant said to ask if you want him to change the towline yet.” Kenn peered at the paper. “He says…we had a few shock force moments during the storm. Each one decreases the effectiveness of the line.”

“Did he give a recommendation?”

“At the next stop for sure, if you don’t do it now.”

Angela hated these choices too, but they only had so much towline. They needed to use what they had, as much as they could. “Not yet. Have him start drilling the crew on how to do it.”

“You got it.” Kenn gave Seth a nasty glower and left the infirmary. He hadn’t had breakfast yet and the galley was always open. Angela wanted it that way for Eagles who couldn’t get to meals with the camp.

Seth didn’t react. He was standing stiff, expressionless, but his mind stayed on Becky. He’d helped clean the top deck, then toured the boat with Angela for hours. They’d finally made it to the infirmary now and Seth could hardly force himself to remain still, to not go to the weeping girl he loved.

Angela’s orders were being followed without sympathy from anyone but the medics. Morgan had already registered a formal complaint on his paperwork. He wanted to knock her out again with drugs.

Angela handed the paperwork to Seth. “Hold that for me.”

Seth tucked it into his deepest pocket with the others. He’d protested at first but stopped at the ugly glares from his shadow.

“Ivan is *my* shadow.” Angela handed Seth her canteen. “Fill it up and go give Becky a drink.”

Ivan recognized the test and the trap for Seth, but he didn’t know if the redhead had noticed. Ivan followed Seth, not sure the man cared either way. His reflections were chaotic wings beating against a cage. Ivan was recording them to give to Angela later. *Which is why she put me on a double shift*, he realized.

Seth filled the canteen from the deep sink and went to his mate.

Becky accepted the drink, sunken eyes searching him for signs of forgiveness. “I’m sorry.”

Seth sat in the chair and helped her get another drink. He took her hand and leaned in. “I’ll get you out of here.”

Becky’s profile relaxed. “I love you.” Madness gleamed at him. “We’ll go away, and it’ll be just us again.”

Seth kissed her cold cheek and awkwardly hugged her over the restraints. “Please try to be happy again.”

Becky shuddered.

Seth released her, digging into her mind. It was full of dark patches and bleeding wounds. She needed help that none of them knew how to give. He let go and slowly returned to Angela’s side. He didn’t block his thoughts about anything he’d picked up from Becky.

Angela sighed. “Being in a medical room reminded me of my loss every second I was awake. We’ll move her out of here.”

Ivan wrote it on the medical clipboard next to them and in his notes.

Seth didn’t relax. “Thank you.”

Angela swept all the cots, mentally promising the remaining kids they would be freed soon. “I wish I could do more. No magic in the world will fill the hole from losing a child. You either come out of it or you don’t.”

“She wants me to take her away from here.”

“You already know the lifeboats are available to you. No one will interfere.” Angela looked at him. “But then you can’t ever come back, Seth. The first time, you didn’t know what was going on. This time, it’s a final choice to stay with madness.”

“Will she get better?”

“I can’t search the future that deep.” She held up her arm. “I’ve been marked. You’d have to ask someone else to do it.”

“But you know. I can feel you blocking it from me when I scan.”

She sighed. “Out of respect for you and for the future, I can’t tell you. Free will means doing what you decide is right for you and your loved ones. I won’t interfere.” Angela strode toward the cots in the rear.

Gus was smiling at her.

Greg was sleeping.

Morgan came over. “They both insisted on being given a shift tonight. I told them I’d discuss it with you.”

Angela chuckled at Gus’s thought. “Yes, it’s true. You saved my life.” Her amusement faded. “What do you want?”

*To be loved so much they would do anything for me, never betray me.*

“Ask for something else. That’s too easy.”

*I want to be one of the top Eagles. I’m working on conquering my fears.*

“Why do you want that?”

*To be in the history books you’ll write. I want to be a hero again. This wasn’t enough for me.*

“That’s a worthy legacy to pass on.”

*Yes.*

“Then you’ll have it.” Angela glanced at the guards. Gus had the same desire as these men and women. “You all will.” She moved toward the exit. “I’m forming a kill team of five. One of them will not return. Submit your names to Kenn and I’ll make my choice based on the job.”

Ivan and Seth followed her, neither man speaking. Seth’s thoughts were still on Becky. Ivan was deciding if he wanted to be away from Angela long enough to complete a mission. Being a hero to the camp didn’t matter as much to him now as not missing moments with her that fed his soul. He wasn’t worried about being the one who didn’t return. Ivan didn’t fear death. He feared being alone.

“What’s next?” Angela paused at the intersection.

“Engineering. They’ve been up since we boarded.”

“Theo knows we need full power. It’s holding right now because most of the camp is sleeping.”

Ivan consulted the notes. “Last shift said people expect it to be on when they get up.”

Angela sighed, moving up the steps in a trot. “Then we’d best not disappoint them.” She went to the only occupied cabin on this side of the ship and knocked.

“Come in.” Theo peered up from the table with his maps and designs. “Been expecting you. We’re not ready to try. I need a few more hours.”

“What do you need that you don’t have?” She scanned the small, comfortable cabin and approved his living quarters. He already had every empty surface filled with open books about different ship topics.

“A ship’s engineer.” Theo picked up a sheet of paper. “I understand how it works, but I’ve never seen it myself. I’m guessing on some of this.”

“Can Grant help?” Angela opened the small window, letting in fresh warm air.

“I sent questions, but he’s just the guy who steers this big scrapheap. He has no idea what makes her go.”

“Cole’s gear had notebooks. I’ll have them delivered.”

“Can’t hurt, but I doubt he knew anything on ship wiring either.” He frowned at her. “Hey, didn’t we bring books specifically for this?”

“Yes!” Angela waved at Seth. “Go tell Kenn I need gophers to dig through the cargo hold for engineering and medical books. Deliver them to the lab and Theo’s cabin.”

Ivan followed Seth, proving the redhead’s fears about the sentry being for him and not the boss.

“I really am *her* private security. She just wants you covered ahead of her. You should be honored to be first.”

“I’m ashamed. Having a guard makes it worse.”

Ivan wanted to have sympathy, but he couldn’t. “Your old lady tried to kill the boss. You knew she was having dangerous thoughts, but you protected her over us. You made the choices. Now you get to live with them.”

“Until we leave.”

Ivan snorted. “Eagles don’t run, though, do they? If you were really one of us, you’d at least know that.”

“I owe her!”

“You owe the boss first, before everyone else. Eagles are told that too, right? I haven’t made it far into training yet, but I’m positive these things are made clear.”

Seth jogged down the narrow stairs by the bridge, refusing to keep arguing.

Ivan didn’t push it. He would be glad when Seth and Becky were gone. It would mean less work and less stress.

“All right, they’re gone. What’s up?”

Angela chuckled at Theo’s tone. “I’m too obvious.”

“I’m just tired. What can I do for you, Boss?”

Angela fastened the door. “Defy me in front of the camp. I need you to make a demand.”

“What am I demanding?”

“A mandatory meeting to determine punishments for Becky, Kendle, Conner, Adrian and anyone else on the bad side of the camp.”

“Marc.” Theo stared at her, adding that clue even though she hadn’t spoken his name. “This is all about Marc.”

“Not all of it. This will settle our problem people at once.”

He lifted a brow. “What if the vote doesn’t go your way?”

She sighed. “That’s a chance I take every time I set up a moment like this. It has gone against me before.”

“You’re planning for that, I assume.”

“I’m counting on it this time.”

Theo grunted, not saying he was honored she’d asked him. It would be hard to be nasty to guys he admired, but he did love being on the inside of plans. “Tell me what the camp gains and I’ll agree.”

“Freedom from a few of the worst dramas for the duration of the trip. It might even hold on the island, for a week or so.”

“What price do I have to pay?”

“Debra will stay mad at you longer.”

“So not much for me. What about you?”

“It’s a bonus for me. I’ll be seen as a bit of a tyrant against those who commit crimes. Their tormentor, in ways. Most of the camp will approve.”

He scowled at her. “No, Angie. Inside. What price are you paying to do this? Going against your nature can’t be free.”

She sighed. “I get to learn a hard lesson that I’ve always avoided in the past.” She moved toward the door. “I get to find out if I’m a piece a shit like Kenn. If I enjoy even a second of it, I’ll have my answer.”

Theo returned to his designs when she shut the door. He had faith in her to do the right thing. Theo thought all the whispers of byzan being unstable depended on the person, like in any other situation. Angela was a doctor, and she was normally kind. Torturing them would only be beating herself up for letting it all happen. *I’ll do it. Tell me when.*

Angela’s answer showed him a vision of the galley. She wanted the room crowded. It had to look like a random moment, and she knew Theo would be able to pull it off. She based that on the acting he was doing now. Theo hadn’t needed the cane for at least a week. He was no longer crippled, but he hadn’t told anyone.

Chapter Fourteen

**I Don’t Hear Anything**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

Day 2

**1**

**“T**hat’s all the engineering books.” Charlie shoved the box toward the door, then wiped his dusty hands on his jeans. “We just need the two medical boxes marked priority and we’re all set.”

The cargo area of the ship consisted of three gigantic rooms stacked with everything they’d brought. This section, near the very rear of the ship, was where all informational material and equipment had been placed. There hadn’t been time to get in here and organize it all before they sailed. Then the storm had added to the chaos. It was now a huge mess that had to be dug through to find anything.

“Do you hear beeping?” Conner paused in searching the stacks of boxes that occupied one full corner of this cargo room.

Charlie concentrated, hoping there weren’t rats lingering in the shadows of the thousands of boxes, crates, and bags. He shook his head. “I don’t hear anything.”

“It stopped again.” Conner returned to the search. “I’ve heard it twice now, both times while looking through these boxes.”

“I’ll listen for it the next time we’re sent down.”

“Cool.” Conner wondered how Charlie’s test of manhood had gone, but he didn’t ask. Some things were personal.

Charlie slid a stack aside to read the labels on the boxes behind them. “I don’t mind.”

“You sure? I have a lot of questions.”

“Why? You think my mom is going to do the same to you?” Charlie smiled to show it was a joke.

“Maybe, when I ask permission to marry Candy.”

Charlie’s mood fell. “That’s something else I need to do. My actual manhood title won’t come until I do the right thing.”

Conner glanced over his shoulder. “I would have thought you’d jump at the chance. I know you love her.”

“I do. I’m just…”

“Too young to be tied down in such a permanent way?”

Charlie shrugged. “I’m not sure what it is that’s holding me back. I’m working on figuring it out.”

“Good. The boss likes it when we make personal progress.”

Charlie’s wrist alarm beeped.

Conner spun around. His shoulders drooped. “That wasn’t it. Damn it.”

Charlie snickered. “That’s my meeting reminder. I have ten minutes to get there.”

“This boat takes time to cross. You’d better go now.”

“That’s okay. It’s only a few hallways from here.” Charlie shifted another stack. “So what’s your lot of questions?”

Conner grinned. “Cool. Did you kill anyone?”

“Yes.”

Conner licked his cracked lips. “Did you take a lifeforce? You did, didn’t you? That’s why your gifts aren’t working right.”

“I think my mom knows too. I expect to be punished.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Not at all. They were bad and I needed energy.”

Conner frowned. “That probably won’t give you a pass. Was it life threatening?”

“I could have spared them, and we probably would have had to handle them later anyway, but I can’t search the future without my gifts.”

“She’ll look. She doesn’t need to search ahead for that one, only the past.”

Charlie sighed in longing and concern. “I haven’t mastered alternate events. I was hoping she’d do lessons on it, but…”

“You’re afraid to bring it up because it might lead to a reminder and a punishment?”

Charlie grinned. “I missed you. I’m glad she’s giving us time together.”

Conner pointed. “Right back at ya, kiddo.”

The boys chuckled together and kept working. After a minute, Charlie lifted a brow. “Is that it?”

“No, but I don’t want to make you mad again. I can ask Kenn.”

Charlie read Conner’s thoughts. “You want information on your dad, about what it was like to be on a team with him.”

“Sorry. You don’t have to go through it. I know you don’t like him.”

“It’s not about liking.” Charlie ignored the soreness to heft another stack to the side. He’d spotted one of the boxes they were here for. “It’s about his choices and the reasons for them.”

“He never could follow rules.”

“No, but that’s not it either.” Charlie took the box, coughing a little at the layer of disturbed dust. “In his place, I might have done the same thing on many of them. That bothers me. It makes me hurt on the inside whenever I agree with him. My dad feels that way too.”

“Your dad does hate him.”

“Yes, and no. He wants to be like him. It’s hard to hate someone you idolize.”

“I get that.” Conner swiped at dust to read the next label. “Medical books for the infirmary! Yes!” He lifted the box and took it to the small stack they’d gathered. He began putting them on the dolly while Charlie straightened some of the rows. Angela had said to start clearing in the center of any pile they were sent to, pushing everything to the sides. She said it would eventually form rows they could walk between without spending that time directly. Charlie called that a twofer. “He was arrogant and a badass, like he always is, but he wasn’t obnoxious about it, and he even had a moment where he showed real emotion. It was…kind of nice, considering what I went through.”

“What did you go through?” Conner wiped dust from his hands and arms, surprised by how much had gathered in the week they’d been loading and the two days they’d been aboard.

“Well, let’s see… I was attacked by slavers. I had a steak. Kenn beat my ass because I needed it. I used my alpha gift on three women and your dad made me let them go… I learned how to make some explosive landmine thing. I can’t remember what Kenn called it, but I remember how to make it and set it, which is more important.” Charlie followed Conner out into the hall, pulling the dolly while Conner relocked the door. “I saved Kenn’s life and drained myself. Kenn gave me a lifeforce.” Charlie grew thoughtful. “I bet that’s part of why I don’t hate him as much now.”

“You do seem like you’ve gotten out the poison.”

“I’m still working through it. My mom and your dad both told me Eagles examine every second of a run after it’s over, but I didn’t understand it comes without us knowing. We’re deep into it before we realize that’s what we’re doing. It’s scary. It happens every time, too. All during that run, it wouldn’t stop going through my mind. I even dreamed about it.”

“Did your mom put a charm on you to make it like that?”

Charlie shook his head. “No. I think I’m just growing up.”

“You survived a mob and fought alongside everyone else.”

“I thought I was going to die–several times. I don’t like that.”

“Eagle training will help.”

“No, it won’t because I’m not going to be an Eagle.” Charlie went down the next hallway. “I have my meeting now. See you at lunch.”

Conner gazed after Charlie, wondering if Angela would be mad. Charlie had made his choice and it wasn’t to put his life on the line for Safe Haven’s future the way his parents were doing.

Charlie reached the last hallway and spotted a friend. “Dog!”

The wolf didn’t leave his post outside the meeting cabin, but he wagged his tail. *Welcome home!*

Charlie knelt for a hug and ear rubbing. “I’m glad you came, Dog. We can have fun again!”

Dog was glad the boy still had some childish notions left. Watching him grow up was painful for Dog. *I’ll find you after my shift ends.*

Charlie laughed. “That still sounds weird coming from an animal. You’re awesome.”

Dog lifted his big head. *I know.*

Charlie snickered, standing. “Can I go on in or do I wait until she calls me?”

*When she calls. Your schedule is on the table.*

Charlie retrieved the white envelope, but he didn’t open it yet. If she had him assigned as an Eagle, it meant she had a reason, but he needed to know what it was. He could force himself to do that job, though he would never excel at it; it would kill something inside him to live that way.

“I’ll be right back with updates on storm damage from the captain.” Kenn came out of the cabin, leaving the door open. He spotted Charlie and jerked a hand. “She’s ready for you. Good luck.”

Charlie sighed, assuming that meant she wasn’t in a good mood. “Same to you. I heard the captain hasn’t left to sleep yet, despite orders. Says he won’t unless someone drags him below.”

Kenn grunted. “We’ll send your mom up there again. That nasty mouth she’s got now will send anyone below to hide.” He continued down the dim passageway, muttering.

Charlie stepped into the long, narrow cabin and shut the door.

**2**

“I hate to tell you this, but most of the camp is waking up. I told the cooks to start the next meal to keep them occupied for a while.”

“I’m not surprised. The lack of noise, except for a creaking of the ship and waves, is disturbing them. The fact that they can hear the waves and not the engine means power has not come back on. It’s making them nervous.” Angela stood, stretching. She had been taking a short break in the command room between meetings, but time was up. She’d finished with Charlie an hour ago and sent him to the next trainers for debriefing. She wasn’t happy about some of the things he’d gone through, but she was thrilled by the way it had worked out. He’d grown up. “I’ll stop by the galley next. As Eagles get up, put them to work. I gave you the list earlier. The three at the top are priority. Everything else is as you can manage it.”

Kenn hurried after her, copying notes. The hallway around them was empty of everyone except sentries and a bleached patch where Becky had fallen. None of them glanced down that hall. The charred walls and carpet there were thick with ashes and the smell of smoke.

Behind Kenn, Seth also hurried to keep up, already tired. Angela had insisted he stay by her all day. He had been disarmed and frisked multiple times as she entered new levels and new guards came on duty, but so far, his patience had held.

Angela descended the stairs and headed toward the galley. She was half an hour early, but it would go over better if she was already there when the camp arrived.

Kenn did a scan and found more Eagles than camp members. “The bathrooms are getting full. They’ll come here next.” Kenn knew that’s why she had come here. “The main topics of discussion were what happened at the power meeting and the storm, but none of it was as bad as we were expecting.” Tracy and Candy’s idea had worked. If Theo got the power on soon, they were good to go.

Kenn gravitated to the corner to take a post that was out of the way but still near enough to write any notes she wanted to give him. It was the same setup he had used with Adrian. Until she told him to do it differently, he was following the old methods and rules.

Angela pointed at the counter, directing Seth there. Shortly, it would fill up with kids and Eagles. The reactions between them and Seth would help her make the final choice she was avoiding.

At the counter alone for the moment, Seth swallowed his embarrassment and took a slice of the fresh pizza Brittani slid onto the center of the counter. He juggled it and took a fast bite to keep from having to speak to her.

Brittani didn’t want to talk to him anyway. She had too much to do. No one else here knew how to run the kitchen or didn’t care enough to learn. She didn’t like leaving the camp with substandard meals. She’d told Angela she wanted to do this and be an Eagle. As far as she knew, the boss was working on it. Until then, Brittani was pulling double shifts. That was almost a relief, however. This way, she didn’t have to face Gus, Daryl, or Trinity.

Neil joined Angela and handed her a paper, then marched toward the stairs. “I’m going to go take a shower now. I won’t spend another second around her.”

Angela didn’t argue. She’d had a brief hope that Neil and Adrian might be able to pull Becky out of the horrible coming crash, but it hadn’t helped. She skimmed the paper and got exactly what she’d expected–nothing. Becky hadn’t given any answers.

Angela went to the counter and handed the paper to Seth. “Do you know anything about that?”

Seth read a few sentences and shook his head. “We were too busy for details about their plans.”

Angela tucked the paper back into her notebook. Despite having dealings with the UN during their time away from camp, none of the exiled group had been able to give her the information she needed. She would be depending upon Marc’s mental memory for that battle, and that was it.

Ten minutes later, the galley was crowded. Everyone who didn’t have a shift was either here now or on the way. Angela stayed in the center where she could be seen, calm smile plastered on. She wanted to see how they were acting without power. While she enjoyed it as much as anyone else, it wouldn’t pay for them to become dependent upon electricity again. This was the apocalypse. When they reached the island, it would be a while before they were able to have a set up like this. From what Kendle had told them, the island wasn’t wired for electricity. People there used lamps, candles, and fireplaces.

The temperature in the galley rose as more passengers came in for coffee, a meal, and gossip. Angela listened vaguely, relieved that camp members weren’t stressing over the power meeting or the lack of power. Seeing her here calmed the few who’d been wondering if there was something wrong. Everyone knew Angela wouldn’t quit on either problem until it was solved.

A few of the missing faces allowed the situation to be almost pleasant despite the cramped quarters. Trinity was visiting Gus in the infirmary while Brittani cooked. Marc and Adrian were nowhere to be seen, though Angela knew where both men were. None of the new people were here yet either, despite her order for all of them to be released.

Zack had his sons a little more under control now, but Conner wasn’t here for them to torment and neither was Charlie. Conner was caring for their animals and Charlie was with his dad, providing more details about the UN. Marc was trying to view everything through the boy’s memories instead of just his mouth. Angela applauded the choice. Jennifer was with them to gather details she needed to do her job. She was also there to keep the peace between Marc and Adrian if a fight broke out.

Den mothers and children flooded through the far passage, screaming toward the stools.

Seth recoiled, leaping up. He smacked into the side of the counter, knocking over a cup.

The water splashed onto Tonya’s male cat, sending it trotting off, yowling and shaking.

Dog looked up at Seth in annoyance. *I just got him down for a nap!*

Angela felt like it was a good time to move into the next stage of her plans. She nodded at Kenn. *Quiet them. I’m going to say a few words.*

Kenn stood and whistled.

People winced all across the galley. Kids clasped their ears with their hands, cringing.

Angela couldn’t help a chuckle. *That was uncalled for.*

Kenn sat and pointed at her, letting people know what was going on.

Eagles settled in to listen. The camp followed their lead.

*All without a single word being spoken. Very nice*. Angela stood. “I have a few announcements. First, we’re going to have Thanksgiving dinner tonight.”

This cheer was louder than Kenn’s whistle had been.

Dog padded out of the galley, unable to take the noise. *Where did that cat go? If he doesn’t take his nap, he gets cranky.*

“Brittani is choosing part time Eagle duty so she can keep feeding us, but I don’t want her stuck in this job. One of you knows how to do this. You’ve been avoiding it because there’s not a spotlight. Get over it. I’ll expect your name in the workbook when it gets passed around at our camp meeting. Which brings me to the next piece of business. There’s an evening lesson on the top deck for all adult descendants. That means we need camp members to step up and do guard duty. Everyone else is free to watch.”

She looked at their kids. “As soon as you finished eating, you will report to the gymnasium for your first lesson. When that’s finished, you’ll come back here for a light lunch. After that, class number two, then three, until dinner. After dinner, you have another class.”

Kids grumbled, faces crumbling, falling.

“Before you complain, remember you asked me for this. I expect you to put in full effort every second. If you don’t, I’m going to lock up your gifts. I’m going to assign you to solitary cabins. I’m going to make you eat lunch at different times. I’m going to take away everything you enjoy if you don’t follow the rules. I’ll start with the pizza.”

Gasps came from the children.

Angela motioned Brittani to serve them. “Don’t forget to say thank you for all the work she’s doing.”

Subdued children neatly sat on the stools now and gushed with praise, eyeing the pans of pizza.

Angela glanced around the camp that was smiling or holding in snickers. “The tradition of Thanksgiving in America was often accompanied by bruises, vomit, flashing lights, and the occasional medical call. That will not be the case for us. I’m allowing alcohol to be served openly for the first time in the existence of Safe Haven beyond a meeting or private event. If you take advantage of my generosity, I will enforce prohibition. America couldn’t do that in the past, but I can here and now, and I will, but only if you make me. It’s the same with other recreational pursuits. If you keep control of it, you’re free to do as you like. If you break the rules and don’t contribute, there’s a place for you in the brig–right next to Becky.”

The mood instantly turned sour.

Angela curled her thumbs into her palms to control her stomach. “At the next camp meeting, we will have a trial and sentencing. No one is excused from that civic duty.”

Everyone was quiet, eager for more details.

Because they were taking it so well, Angela kept going. “We’ll be voting on some amendments to the Constitution. We don’t need to draw up a new document. The one we had was beautiful. It just needs a few tweaks. Now that we know how easy it is for evil people to take advantage of our system and turn it against us, we have to put rules in place to prevent that. This will be a majority vote, with leadership being able to overrule. It’s not that I need everything to go my way, because on most of these issues, we can come together and solve them no matter which direction you pick. However, because a few of our members have more radical ideas than the others, I will be forced to include some choices I personally don’t agree with. It would take 80% from the camp for some of these issues to pass.” Angela took a drink of her juice, shuddering at the pineapple. She chugged it down to get it over with. “The only way I would overrule these votes is if I don’t believe both sides of the argument were fairly considered. For example, we’re going to be discussing the age limit. Some of the more progressive folks have suggested ages of twelve and thirteen, or as soon as the girl has her period. If 52% of the camp voted for that, it would mean 48% of the camp was against it. I would have to overrule that choice, because it’s the more radical of the decisions available to us. We don’t need to go all the way to the most desperate scenario. I believe we can keep more of our humanity if we try to protect some of the values and traditions that allowed America to be built and grow. Obviously, not all of them need to stay. We’ll be voting on those at the meeting, and in future meetings, until we get a document *everyone* is happy with.”

Angela gave them a few seconds to swallow that information and then hit them with a distraction. “The entertainment floor will also be open this evening.”

The mood improved, drawing low cheers and claps.

“If there’s tape across a door on that deck, do not go in. It’s because we’ve deemed that area not safe yet. You have to remember we don’t know how everything works and if we start a fire on the ship, the tugs may not be able to reach it, or we may not be able to find it in time. Do not break the tape over any door. Do not go into off limits areas. If there’s even one violation of that tonight, I’ll shut the entertainment down and we’ll try again next month.”

No one thought she was bluffing. She had no history of it.

“Eagle training is being restarted.” Angela waited for the cheers to die down again. “We’ll talk more about that tonight during dinner. I have some big announcements in that department, but I’ll go ahead and give a third of you what you want to know now. Yes, tryouts for the Eagles will be open at the same time. Everyone, any age or gender, is welcome to try.”

Equal amounts of frowns and smiles spread through the galley. Ciemus women were the happiest. The children were right behind them.

Men and women who were already Eagles weren’t as thrilled. They didn’t relish the idea of having to train some of these people.

Angela walked toward the exit, confident they would be calm for a while now.

Around them all, the ship absorbed the good mood and brightened the glowing walls. *It is great to have life here again. I have been lonely.*

Angela sighed. Even inanimate objects felt loneliness. It was both odd and comforting. “Last thing from me: We need volunteers to help pull in the towline and store it, then let it back out as we set sail. I’d like two full teams who can rotate as the other gets tired.”

Nearby, Ben breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad she’s covering that. Grant’s gripes are getting on my nerves.”

Darryl looked at him, frowning. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem. We just have to pull up the slack on our towline. Grant is freaking about being in both places at the same time.”

“What’s the deal? Maybe I can help.”

“We have to keep the line from getting tangled around our propellers, under the water. Hold and wrap, I assume.”

Daryl shrugged. “I’ll meet you there when they call the time for it.”

“Cool. He sent Nathan and Claire to get set up and oversee it.” Ben snickered. “They’re carrying about ten books and a stack of folders. The rookies have a pool going for who drops what and where.”

Daryl frowned instead of laughing. “If they’re that bored, we need to give them something to do.”

“Cargo area still needs work...”

Now Daryl laughed.

**3**

“What do you need here?”

Morgan gestured at the full cots and empty stations. “The same as you did when you first joined Safe Haven–more hands.”

The rest of the injured were awake and watching her. Angela did a brief scan and sighed. “All Eagles may return to duty, effective this evening.”

Dull cheers went through the infirmary.

“Everyone on probation will report to the top deck for a job assignment tomorrow morning.”

More relief went through the infirmary, hitting Kendle the hardest. Kyle had made sure she knew she was on probation in every way.

“Prisoners will be relocated to the brig.”

Morgan opened his mouth to protest.

“She can’t stay here. It’s coloring your judgment. Yet another life will be ruined because we can’t do the right thing based on someone’s gender. Right and wrong don’t change.” Angela pointed. “She tried to kill me. She goes to the brig.”

A little ashamed of himself, Morgan nodded. “I’m sorry. I can’t help pitying her.”

“I understand how that feels. In your place, as the doctor, I would have done the same, but as the leader of this camp, I know she’s dangerous. When she heals up, none of us will be safe.”

Angela motioned at Seth. “You’ll stay with her now. You are not a prisoner, but you will be searched every time you go in and out. You can stay by her at night too, until the camp meeting. We’re going to hold her trial then. Consider this the official charge.” Angela turned toward the door, already tired of the company in this room.

“That’s a bad idea!” Quinn ran after Angela as she left the infirmary. “People up there want Kendle dead. You can’t let her loose. She’s not safe!”

Kenn wasn’t certain which way Quinn meant that. He frowned at the man but didn’t interfere. He was also a bit worried about Kendle being safe around the camp, but he meant protecting Safe Haven. The tone of Quinn’s voice implied he meant it the other way around.

Angela kept walking. “You’re going to be on duty over her half the time, Quinn. If something happens to her, it will be because you weren’t doing your job.”

Quinn stopped, temporarily pacified. “Well… What about the other people? We have the one refugee and the new family. I saw on the Eagle board that they can be turned loose too. Is that a good idea?”

Now Kenn did interfere. He stopped and rotated, making them bump chests. “What’s your beef?!”

Quinn stopped and went in the opposite direction. He stormed down the hall without responding.

Kenn caught up with Angela. “Why is he so twitchy? I know we’re all a little restless from lack of sleep and adjusting to the boat, but he’s really upset about something.”

Angela chuckled. “I’m going to let you figure that one out for yourself.” She kept going, finally making it to the garden area she hadn’t been able to see very well last night. She paused in the entrance to admire the work being done.

The entire area was filled with pots and bags and planters, but the amazing part was the organization. She estimated they could grow three hundred different plants with this setup. As long as they kept the glass windows above them clean and enough sunlight came through, the garden would grow.

A bee flew by, reminding Angela humans hadn’t been the only ones to suffer nature’s wrath in the mountain. She looked for the coffee can and was delighted to see parts of the hive now over the metal. The bees were recovering too.

In the far corner, Samantha was in her wheelchair, being pushed by Debra. The women weren’t speaking aloud. Samantha’s hands were flying in sign language.

Behind them, two big guards were keeping track of the women. Both of those men had spotted Angela in the entrance and taken closer positions along the wall to be able to provide protection for all targets in the room. Adrian’s training was still the primary tool they used to keep everyone alive. Angela had no intention of changing it.

Her personal security stayed in the hallway, scanning everyone who went by.

On the other side of the garden, Theo was laboring over battery packs and extension cords. His presence told Angela the ship’s power had been restored even though it wasn’t on yet. He was staying here where most people wouldn’t see him, but also where he was still able to accomplish something. Angela joined him. “We’re about ready.”

Theo took a radio from his pocket and held it up. “It’s already on the right channel. Two clicks is on. Three clicks is off.”

“What’s one click?”

Theo looked up at her. “Disconnect and pretend it was never fixed.”

Angela chuckled. “I love working with people who can keep up with me.”

Theo beamed at the praise. He resumed wrapping wires with electrical tape. “We’re setting more grow lights for the plants in the corners. Sam doesn’t think they’ll get enough sun from the glass top.”

“I’m willing to trust her judgment on that.” Angela leaned down to examine one of the cords. “Did you get the radar on?”

“No. It’s like you said. We have to rebuild it. Ozzie and Grant are working on that now.”

Angela frowned. “Grant needs to sleep at some point. Pass that on.”

“I will, but it won’t matter.”

Angela sighed, heading toward the stairs that led to the top deck. “I’ll talk to Ray. Maybe he can convince our captain to sleep.”

“Maybe if Ray got naked and crawled into his cot.” Theo laughed at his joke.

Angela didn’t. “If that’s what it takes, we’ll encourage it. Grant has to sleep, and he needs to do it now while the seas are calm. The storm last night was just the beginning.”

Chapter Fifteen

**I Won’t Do It**

****

**1**

**A**ngela pushed the button on the radio twice as she left the garden. A few seconds later, full power came on all over the ship.

Cheers echoed from every corner of the vessel.

The sound of an anchor lifting echoed, muffling the other noises.

Angela headed toward the animal area next. It was her last stop before the deck that was already hosting a few classes. After that, she wanted to verify the entertainment was ready for this evening. Then, she hoped to get a nap.

“From the lakes of Minnesota…”

Angela’s head tilted. A pleasing voice was singing one of her favorite songs.

Drawn, she lightened her steps and eased along the wall to avoid interrupting.

Behind her, James drew his gun and tried to get near enough to help with whatever was coming. He hadn’t known there was a problem.

Angela didn’t speak. She was positive it would interrupt the singing.

“...sea to shining sea…”

Angela stopped at the entrance to the animal area, holding on as the huge ship began to inch forward through the water. More cheers rang out from the camp.

Angela nodded to the guard at the end of the hall.

Daryl was also enjoying the song. He was glad Angela didn’t interrupt.

James realized he was overreacting and holstered his weapon, but he stayed close to Angela in case they were wrong. In moments like this, he was at a disadvantage because he wasn’t a descendant.

“…bless the USA…!”

Angela started clapping and stepped into the area.

For an instant, sparks flew between her and Conner.

Conner stared in shock, body and gift responding.

Angela let the moment linger, reminded of the way it had been with her and Adrian when she’d first joined, back when she’d thought he was someone she could trust.

Conner lowered his eyes. “I know you guys want me to become that man, but I hated him. I can’t do it.”

Now observing from the entrance, Daryl stored the information and swept the hall, not wanting to be caught off guard again.

Angela moved toward the animal pen, not speaking. She hadn’t searched the future for Conner and Candy since Ciemus. That had only been ten days, but it felt like a lot longer. The future shifted with every choice. If Conner and Candy hadn’t crossed the line yet, what she had seen had already changed. All she had was a vaguely amused report from Dog that Candy had looked flustered and Conner had gone through her shield.

“Will I get in trouble if I give you an answer to that?”

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

Conner resumed raking hay into the chicken pen. “For breaking rules?”

“For telling me even though you know I have to punish you for it.”

Conner coughed from the hay dust. “Nobody likes it when you’re stressed. If I have toilet detail for a week because of that, it’s worth it.”

Angela studied him. “Are you positive, Conner? I can get you there without the ugliness that allows him to be so good.”

Conner shook his head. “That’s the part you guys don’t understand. He liked his job. He wasn’t abused or forced into it. He was good at it. I don’t want to take the chance on that happening to me.”

Instead of the understanding he expected, Angela scowled at him.

“You only get this offer once, Conner Mitchel. At least consider it before you throw away an opportunity many of my camp would kill for.”

Conner flushed. He hadn’t thought of it like that. “I’m sorry. It’s a great honor to be taught by you, but I just…”

“Can’t be like your dad. You don’t think you have it in you. You’re not scared of enjoying it. You share Charlie’s fear of not being good enough.”

Conner nodded, chin down.

“You may not be. Do you want to spend the rest of your life wondering if you missed the chance to be better than him?”

“You’re that good?” Conner couldn’t help the disbelieving tone.

Angela chuckled. “No, boy. I think *you* are.” She turned for the exit. “Get back to me in a few days. Until then, work hard.”

“I will.”

“Good. Charlie has chosen not to be an Eagle. He will have various jobs in place of it. One of them will be to come here and help with the animals, and then the animal lessons. He won’t be eligible to share point with you or even to wear his Eagle jacket.”

Conner wasn’t sure why she was telling him. “I get along with Charlie. Having him here will be good.”

“For him too. I’d like you to help him through the deflated feeling that will hit him soon. Deciding to pass up the opportunity of a lifetime isn’t easy.” She headed for the door. “I’ll be around if you need me.”

Conner watched her leave, mind a chaotic mess. He was afraid of failure. *What if I don’t have it in me? I’ll be out of the Eagles too. Candy won’t want me anymore…*

“Then I have to make sure I do it right if I make that choice. I’ll give it everything I have, or I won’t do it at all.”

**2**

“I won’t do it.” Leeann crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not taking classes. I want my Billy!”

The other kids quieted, listening to the conversation.

“I might do some of the classes.” Missy’s thoughts went to falling overboard and immediately scared her again with the vision of Shawn hitting the water. *I thought he was going to die.* “I’m not running away anymore either.”

Leeann slapped the counter. “You traitor!”

“You slut!”

Leeann recoiled. “Am not!”

Missy’s lip came out. “I heard your thoughts. You want to kiss him.”

“That doesn’t make me a slut. Being slutty is wearing clothes that show my butt and boobs.”

“You don’t have any boobs!”

“That’s why I don’t wear those clothes.”

“You’re acting like a bad girl. You have to stop.”

Tears welled in Leeann’s eyes. “I’m not bad. I’m lonely.”

“I am too, but acting stupid won’t help us.”

“I’m not stupid! I love him. I want him back!”

“You have to let go.” Missy’s anger flashed out. “She already had to send him away because of you. You’re going to get him killed!”

“You take that back!” Leeann hopped off the stool and slapped Missy.

Missy kicked her in the stomach.

Leeann stumbled into her stool and fell to the hard floor, crying.

Missy stayed sitting, lip coming out further. “I hope she locks you up so no one gets hurt.” Missy sat her cup down and stood up.

Leeann cringed into the counter, expecting pain.

Missy darted toward the exit, unable to take her friend being scared of her.

Just coming into the galley, Marc caught the little girl and swung her up to keep them from colliding. Her small arms went around his neck, hot tears soaking his shirt.

Marc patted the girl, scanning the quiet, still crowd. Two hundred passengers were staring at Missy or Leeann. Marc read Missy’s thoughts in a quick blur and rubbed her shoulder. “We’ll work something out to make her happy again, okay?”

Missy nodded against him, but she didn’t stop crying.

Marc kept rubbing. “It’ll be okay. The good moments make up for the bad. That’s how life works for everyone.”

Missy sniffled, arms locked around his neck. “I know what happens when he comes back. It’s awful.”

Marc also knew. He’d concurred with Angela that hunting Billy down wouldn’t be necessary. At some point, he would return to Safe Haven. “We’ll try to handle that too. You’ll help us?”

“Yes.” Missy sniffed again. She wiped her nose on his shirt. “Lesson time, kids!”

Marc flinched from her bellow, barely managing to keep a hold of her.

Kids flooded toward Marc.

Missy pointed at Leeann. “He wants *you* to lead the way to the gym…gymnasium. On the way, stop at the playground next to the candy store.”

Leeann was convinced. She ran to the front of the group, waving. “Come on, kids! We have a lesson now.”

Missy dropped her cheek to Marc’s shoulder. *Was that good?*

*Perfect. She didn’t feel the mood adjustment, and you gave her a way to agree without being embarrassed.*

*I like her. She’s my only friend here.*

Marc hugged the girl and even nuzzled her cheek. “You’re growing on all of us, baby. Keep trying, okay? We need you as much as anyone else.” Marc followed the line of kids from the galley. He didn’t notice the approving looks from the camp or the surprised expressions of the Eagles. He was just doing what felt right.

**3**

“He’s sleeping.” Ray pointed to the cot in the corner of the bridge. “He didn’t eat yet.”

Angela entered the bridge. “Let him rest for another hour and then bring a tray. Tell him if he doesn’t eat it, I’m relieving him of duty. I’ll sail the ship myself. Tell him I called it driving.”

Ray grinned. “Yeah, that should do it.”

“I have a map.” Angela put it on top of the stack of charts. “It’s amazingly detailed. I’ve marked places where I want to stop. He’ll find a few of those disturbing, but I’ve made my choices and we’re going. When the radar comes back up, Grant can verify the locations.”

“He’s been working hard on that. No luck.”

“I didn’t expect it yet. It would be too soon.”

Ray assumed she was talking about something she’d seen during a search of the future and didn’t comment. He didn’t have those gifts. It was hard for him to grasp most of it even when he was in the mood to think about it.

“There will be three guards on the captain now, all rotating. I expect you to take your off shifts like the rest of them.”

Ray grimaced, but didn’t voice the protest that came to mind. Angela was right. He needed downtime like anyone else.

“I’m sending people who can handle it. Try not to stress the entire time you’re away from him. It’s not good for your health.” Angela inhaled deeply, getting salt and fish but not rot. She assumed the storm had cleared another layer of garbage from the top of the ocean, but she wasn’t sure.

Ray hadn’t known folks were aware of his developing feelings for Grant. He stared at Angela, waiting for more.

Angela left the bridge. In time, Ray would understand his fears were unfounded. Safe Haven had actual problems to worry about and even when they didn’t, gay relationships were no longer a problem in their society. As long as the citizens contributed and followed the same rules as everyone else, basic life choices had been returned to their owners. Sexual orientation, sex in general, was something the government was going to stay out of from now on.

“It’s sweet that you’re worrying about me.”

Ray swiveled around to find Grant watching him. “You shouldn’t pretend like that around the boss.”

“Who better to test the skill on?”

Ray paused in his next scold. Many of the Eagles tried to get one over on Angela and the other council members. It had become something of a game. Ray considered it to be dangerous. It wasn’t a big deal to pretend to be asleep but acting like you were out of hearing distance while listening to someone else’s conversation was a total violation of privacy. So was forcing someone to take energy when they weren’t expecting it and searching their minds while they were distracted by the feeling. Ray considered most of the things going on to be unethical.

“I heard the orders, but I’m not ready to eat yet. I’m in charge of a cruise ship that weighs 225,000 pounds and is hauling over three hundred people I’ve come to care for. My stomach’s too upset for food.” Grant wondered how Ray had gotten his gunshot scars but didn’t ask. He would save it for later, when he could offer proper sympathy as he pulled out details of the story that would help him continue to piece together the puzzle that was Ray. He wanted to know everything.

“I’ll keep that in mind when I bring the tray. I’m pretty certain my relief will be here by then. She saw I haven’t eaten or slept either, but she mostly eyed my jacket. It’s filthy. She wants me to clean up.”

Grant grinned. “You do smell a little bit like ass.”

Ray kicked the leg of the cot.

The cot collapsed under Grant, dropping roughly to the floor.

Ray waited for retaliation, heart thumping.

Grant pushed himself up on his elbows. “Guess the truth hurts.”

Ray chortled. “Get up and I’ll fix your bed.”

Grant sucked in a breath.

Ray flushed. “You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

Grant studied him, expression dazed. “You said something similar in my dream… About twenty minutes ago. I was asleep for a little while. I woke when she came up the stairs. The fourth one creaks.”

Ray made a note of that in his logbook, not responding to the sparks or invitation in the captain’s tone. Ray stored the notebook and went to the stairs to see what was making the telltale noise.

Grant got up and fixed his cot. As former military, he’d slept on more of these than he had mattresses, even during his time on American soil. His problem was they were only big enough for one person at a time. Grant thought about the dream and the position they’d ended up in and silently cackled.

Ray felt the amusement as he stood in the entrance, but he didn’t revive the conversation. Besides being distracted, he was reluctant to interfere with anything that might jeopardize Safe Haven’s future. As far as he was concerned, the captain needed to remain single so he would focus on his job. That applied to men, women, wolves, cats and dolphins.

Ray glanced down, scanning for the dolphins duty Eagles had spotted late last night. It had only been for a few seconds. They had noted it in the logbook.

Ray wasn’t disappointed when he didn’t see anything but debris and water. They would have a lot of time on the ocean. He had little doubt the world beneath them would collide at some point and force them to acknowledge they no longer had land under their feet, but millions of animals and thousands of miles of unreachable ground. Anything and everything was between them and the island, but the same could be said for the ocean.

Standing in the shadows of the stairwell below the bridge, Angela echoed that thought. At times, she had doubted if being on the ocean was going to be as intimidating as land. Now that it was here, she could almost slap herself for ever doubting it. The land didn’t shift the floor under her feet and send her sliding sideways. It didn’t grunt and groan and smell like rotten water. There were no portholes layered with so much filth she couldn’t view daylight through them. There wasn’t chipped and peeling paint all over the floors that tracked on the bottom of shoes and even made it into beds. It was only day two, but all sorts of little annoyances were making an appearance.

Angela hoped the camp was handling it better than she was. Lack of sleep was responsible for a good chunk of how she was feeling at the moment. She hoped the dinner tonight would remind her these issues were nothing and allow her to regain her equilibrium. It didn’t seem like a big thing, but if she couldn’t do it, then the camp certainly wouldn’t be able to and that meant she would need to make plans for those situations. People were already tired of replacing their belongings on shelves as the ship bobbed in the water. She guessed previous employees had used a lot of tape and nails to secure things to the walls they were allowed to use, but without having a ship engineer here, she refused to put holes anywhere other than places she knew were not part of the main hull.

The employee galley was a great example of a place where they could hang things. It was in the center and stood alone, thanks to the golf course on top. It wasn’t directly connected to anything the ship needed for sailing. The employee living quarters, however, were along one entire wall of the ship and that certainly would harm it. She’d just made a new list of rules to be posted all throughout the Adrianna and she was going to make sure the sentries told people not to damage the ship in any way. She didn’t care if they hung posters and pictures. In fact, she encouraged it. They just needed to use tape or sticky tabs.

Angela thought about the taste of some of the folks in camp and forced herself to add a mental note that certain types of images were not going to be permitted in public. *Here comes the censorship.* Angela didn’t see any way around it. Their children didn’t need to view men and women having sex. The only solution was to tell camp members there were certain places they weren’t allowed to do that or post images of it. People would have to accept the compromise. Neither side had more rights than the other.

“Who are we spying on this time?” Ivan yawned. Her mental call had pulled him from bed two hours before his shift was supposed to start. Cuddled next to Jayda’s naked body, Ivan had planned to sleep until the last minute. Angela’s wild black curls blowing in the wind over clean clothes had settled his ire, but it hadn’t woken him up.

“Observing, not spying.” Angela pointed.

Ivan followed her finger to the group of kids coming up the stairs to the top decks. He wondered who was with them. He didn’t see an adult yet. *Leaving our children unattended is reckless.*

“They’re not unattended.”

It took a while for all the kids to make it up the stairs and onto the wide, square, wooden ramp connecting the top areas of the ship. Ivan was curious to know where the children were going for their first lesson.

Across the deck, Eagles on duty did the same, pausing to watch. Two of those men scanned desperately for signs their loved one was okay.

Ivan waited, curious if it was the two children he assumed.

So did Angela.

Kimmie waved to Jeff, jumping up and down. “Hiya!”

Jeff’s expression melted into relief. He gave a vigorous wave in return. Then all expression drained; he turned back to his duty.

Satisfied that Jeff was okay, Kimmie gestured at the other kids. “Marc said to wait here. Move away from the stairs so everyone else can come up.”

The kids obeyed, all eager for the view. They had been rushed onto the ship during the chaos and then moved below as soon as the boat set sail. All of them wanted access to the areas they’d spotted in that brief time.

Last up the steps, Missy marched to the edge of the ramp and stood next to Cody. She didn’t look at anything except the water.

Shawn’s face fell.

Ivan could almost see the man holding in tears. *He lied.*

Angela nodded*. We are watching it and interfering where necessary, but some things are meant to be. Those two are probably soulmates. They’ll both be miserable for years.*

*When she’s older?*

*I have no intention of keeping people apart if they want to be together. I just need them to obey the age rules.*

*You don’t think he will.*

*All I see is darkness when I search that future.*

Just like the rest of her camp, Ivan hated that answer. It hadn’t taken long to understand it meant things could go either way, but likely, it would be bad.

Ivan thought about it for a minute, then switched to his next curiosity. “What about the first couple?”

Angela sighed. “I trust him to do the right thing. I also trust her to do the right thing. He’s grieving and she was raped. Good women who’ve had to sell themselves to survive don’t usually enter into physical relationships any sooner than they have to. Good men who are grieving usually avoid any type of physical attachment that could lead to putting them back into the horrible state of grief they’ve survived. By the time those two recover, she’ll be old enough to make that choice.”

Ivan was learning to read her. He frowned. “But?”

“But they may never find out. I don’t know if either of them survive the final battle.”

“That sucks. I assume you considered leaving them here.”

“Of course. But they aren’t me. Neither is Jennifer.” Angela looked at him “You have an instinctive feel for how things are supposed to work. You have no previous history with this side of existence to interfere. You’re the perfect sponge for what I need, but don’t ever sacrifice your morality. That was the first mistake I made. If you can get through a situation with your morals intact, you did the right thing no matter how it turned out. That’s almost always true. Make that the rule to guide every decision you make.” Angela marched out to meet the kids before Ivan could respond.

Ivan was stunned and honored. He stayed back as she greeted the children for a long round of hugs and tickles, mind spinning. He immediately connected a few things from the last month. She’d been eyeing him for leadership from the very beginning.

Angela peered over her shoulder. She gave him a subtle nod and turned her attention back to the eager children. They’d promised to come up and wait on their own, without problems, as soon as they found out who was teaching the class.

Ivan took the sentry post, aware that Shawn and Jeff were being directed by Kyle to come over and join him on duty. That would allow him to absorb some of what she was doing and still not be lax in protecting her.

He looked to Angela for confirmation of that, but she was buried in the crowd of children now. Ivan chose to believe it was intentional. He stepped closer to observe.

**4**

Marc joined Ivan along the rail. The soldier was observing Angela and the kids. Standing a few feet away, it allowed him brief snatches of conversation but was still far enough to be out of the danger zone. “How are they doing?”

They’d been up here for an hour. Ivan stretched his spine, popping it in several places. He was tired but it wasn’t bad. This was the first day it hadn’t hurt him to eat. Marc’s gut shots had lingered as long as the bruises. “Not bad, considering I can count their age on my hands.”

Marc chuckled. “That took me some getting used to also. It helps to remember they didn’t ask to be this way.”

“I did ask for it, but I guess that wouldn’t have mattered. She always knew what I was.” Ivan looked at Marc.

Marc shook his head. “I don’t have that gift. That’s part of why I can’t lead this camp.” Marc glanced back in the same manner.

Ivan hadn’t considered it. “I’ve never tried.”

“She wants to know the future gifts of the kids she’s working with.”

“Some of them might know if I scan.”

“Wait until she has them bring up the shields and you should be good.” Marc assumed the man wouldn’t recognize a test of his own skills. Angela wanted to know if Ivan was strong enough to get through the kid’s barriers.

Ivan was willing to give it a try. Now that Angela had opened his mind to other possibilities for the future, he couldn’t help wanting to explore them. He observed the lesson, waiting for the moment the children would be the most distracted.

“Shield number three!” Angela added guidance and energy where it was needed to keep the barrier around the group of non-magic children in the center of the circle. It was necessary that non-magic camp members be part of the demonstrations or at least got to observe them. Otherwise they would feel like folks had in the mountains with Jimmy and his group. They’d learned a valuable lesson. “Anyone may try the fourth shield.”

Ivan began digging into the minds of the descendant children.

“Fire user, enforcer, fighter, fighter... Fighter, fighter, byzan.” Ivan stopped, shocked.

Marc sighed. “Let me guess. Cody?”

Ivan was stunned. “Your son is Byzan. Is that even possible?”

“Yes.” Marc spit over the rail. “I’ve known since we set sail, but that’s all I know. I didn’t recognize the clues until Cody gave her energy and it was a perfect match. If not for it being right in front of me, I still wouldn’t know.” Marc stared at the kids who were struggling with the fourth shield. “Keep digging. She wants them all scanned.”

Ivan pushed aside the hundred new questions he had. He shut his eyes this time, able to view all the children on his mental grid. The ones he had already scanned now had a future skill listed above their outline. “Fighter… Storm gift, like Samantha… bad seed.” Ivan forced himself to keep going rather than to stop and question that one. “Levitator…fighter…fighter…enforcer.”

Ivan paused to draw from his reserve energy. He was almost drained already.

“She’ll teach you how to increase your energy banks so you get more use time.” Marc put his hand on Ivan’s wrist to lend strength. “Keep working.”

Behind them, Kenn wrote down the information while Jeff and Shawn stood watch.

“Fighter…fighter… Six invisibles in the center group.”

All of them paused at that, scanning the non-magic children. Ivan instinctively knew Angela didn’t want those names passed around. He held out a hand for Kenn’s notebook.

Kenn watched over his shoulder as Ivan wrote.

Marc took a deep breath and pulled peace from the air like Angela had taught him. His energy bank filled a quarter of the way. “Keep going.”

“Wait. You need to see this one.”

Marc read the skill, frowning. “Only the twins can do that.”

“I don’t know this kid’s name.” He flashed Marc the image of his mental grid to show the man which child he was referring to.

Marc scowled. “That’s Cody. You can see him right there.”

Ivan kept his voice down. “Look again. Cody is showing up on my grid. The kid next to him is a *girl*.”

Marc studied it, heart dropping. “That’s the twin signature. It’s the first one I’ve ever seen.”

“Cody has a twin somewhere…and she can manipulate time.”

“It runs in our family.” Marc grunted through the agony. “I should have known it would pass down at some point.”

Ivan made more notes in the book and handed it back to Kenn. Thirsty, he grabbed Kenn’s big arm and sucked hard.

Kenn held still, gritting his teeth. “I hate it when you guys do that without asking.”

Marc sniggered. Since Kenn had been willingly volunteering his energy for the council before he’d found out he was an Invisible, many of them were using that freedom to catch him off guard. Angela didn’t have to torture Kenn. Everyone else was still doing it for her.

Ivan groaned and rubbed his stomach. “I’m gonna need a nap after that meal. Let’s see. We have… Fighters. Looks like eighteen more of them. Now I’ll do the rest. We have someone like Chauncey, a tracker.”

“What else?”

“There are two more fire walkers… A third enforcer, and two like you and Neil. I don’t know what to call you guys.”

“Angie says we’re moral killers. The military used to call us strategic planners.”

Ivan snickered. “What do you call it?”

“I like William’s description in the book.”

“I haven’t read that. I want to, but it didn’t feel right to ask.”

Marc nodded. “She knows. It’s in your bunk. She said you’re in cabin 707.”

It was more proof that his status had changed. Ivan held out his hand. “Bygones?”

Marc walked away.

Ivan stuck his hand in his pocket and resumed scanning the kids to verify he’d gotten them all. “I guess not.”

Kenn felt the need to interrupt the awkward moment. “Looks like the kids are doing well.”

Ivan stared at them, but his mind wasn’t on the lesson anymore. “Yes.”

“It’s nice she’s letting us view some of what we’re going to go through tonight.” Kenn followed Marc, notebook still in hand. Marc was headed to Angela. Kenn didn’t know if there was anything else he needed to take down.

Ivan blinked, replaying what Kenn had said. He immediately frowned. *Shouldn’t it be the other way around?*

Kenn shook his head. *It makes the kids think they have the hardest job and puts us at ease when we shouldn’t be. Just testing our nerves.*

*She’ll actually expect more from us tonight?*

Kenn chuckled mentally. *A lot more. You should see the plans she had Adrian working on.*

Ivan followed Kenn. *Can I?*

“That’s the end of our lesson for today. All of you did very well.” Angela stepped aside, putting Marc in front of the large group of children.

The kids immediately quieted. They liked Marc, but they still weren’t sure what type of man he was and how he might react to them. They hadn’t spent enough time together yet for that.

Marc pointed toward the stairs. “Between every class, you’ll report to the gym for forty minutes of free time. Use the toys and equipment that have been set out; listen to the den mothers. Don’t break rules. When the time is up, the next teacher will be there to get you. Let’s go.” Marc pointed them toward the stairs, tone and body language allowing no argument.

The neatly dressed kids went down the stairs in the same manner they had arrived in.

Angela watched them go, running through the thoughts in Ivan’s mind. She’d known about Cody for a while. She hadn’t known about him having a twin. Because Ivan could see her on his grid, it meant the girl was alive. Angela didn’t have to ask what Marc wanted to do. It just wasn’t possible right now. She looked at him. “I need to know if you’re going to be able to wait.”

Marc took in a calming breath. “I’ll have to answer when I’ve had time to consider it, but I already don’t think so. I have a daughter out there somewhere. I need to go get her. That tops Safe Haven’s future for me. I’m sorry.”

“Hell, man. We would have been surprised if you had given a different answer.” Kenn shrugged at him. “This always happens. People put family first.” Kenn’s amusement faded. “Maybe in the future we should have leaders who don’t have children or emotional attachments. Then it can’t be used against them.”

Standing behind Kenn, Ivan frowned. All his life, he’d wanted to have children but hadn’t been able to, and now, when his body was healing and Angela had almost promised he would be able to procreate, Ivan wasn’t sure it was the wisest decision for him anymore. If Angela was right, and she usually was, then he might lead Safe Haven at some point. If he had a child, or a wife, they could be hurt to get to him. He’d never considered that possibility.

“I consider it every day now.” Kenn pointed toward the stairs to the living quarters. “If anything happens to them, I won’t be able to do my job. It’s the same for all of us, no matter what level of Safe Haven’s hierarchy we’re in. Loved ones are a weakness.”

Ivan waited for Angela to argue with that statement. He expected her to say having loved ones gave folks the strength to keep going. When she didn’t, he realized she agreed with Kenn. “You’d do it again, anyway, right?”

Angela regarded him in dead seriousness. “You have no idea how much misery my family has gone through because of me. If I could do it over again, I’d never have anybody to love or anybody to love me. Then I wouldn’t have weaknesses.”

“You also wouldn’t have the people who love you to help get you through the hard days.”

“Those people disappoint me continuously. I love my son and I love Marc. Part of me loves Adrian and another part of me loves everybody on this ship, but I also hate each and every one of them for being so dependent that I can’t have any kind of a normal life with that family. The family, by the way, who often hurts me. If I had known then, what I know now, I’d still be a virgin and Marc wouldn’t even know my name.” Angela moved away for her next appointment.

Ivan turned to Kenn. “She can’t mean that.”

Kenn sighed. “Yes, she does.” Kenn also walked away, feeling guilty. He was part of the reason Angela was still miserable deep inside. He couldn’t control fate or the war, but he’d laid the foundations for the ruthless woman now walking down the stairs. *I’ll never be able to make up to her for what I’ve done, but I have to find a way to give her some peace, otherwise I’ll never have any.* Kenn’s mind resumed the task.

Ivan hurried to catch up to Angela despite her having other guards for the day. He wasn’t ready for sleep yet. He wanted more knowledge.

Angela snorted in bitterness. *Don’t we all? That’s how we got into this mess in the first place.*

Chapter Sixteen

**I Tell the Truth**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“T**he camp doesn’t like you.” Monica waited for the kids to quiet, aware of their defensive glares. The feeling was mutual and that was the problem. “You helped the camp get onto the boat when the refugees came and many of you fought for them. That helps your image, but now, they’ve seen two of you causing trouble and injuring an Eagle. It erases part of the good you’ve done.” Monica kept a hard tone even though she felt the camp should give the kids a break. “This class is art and music together. We’re calling it culture class.”

She paused again, seeing they weren’t paying full attention. “It’s actually a secret class to accomplish a different goal.” She pointed at Cody. “Tell them what we’re doing.”

Cody stood from the gym floor and rotated to face the other kids. “She’s trying to keep us from killing everyone.”

The kids immediately denied they were a threat. Young voices rang out, bouncing off toy crates and sports racks full of equipment.

Cody put his hands in his pockets, looking like a small Marc to all of them.

“You’re going to use your gifts on our people. Our people will use their guns on you. It’s going to get ugly. We’re going to lose the only home we’ve had since the war.” His voice lowered into unhappiness. “We’re going to lose each other.”

Sadness filled the wide gym. Monica came forward to hug the boy. “I’m not going to let that happen.”

Cody hugged her back, sending another current of misery that slammed into everyone. Tears rolled over chubby and thin cheeks, stopping the protests. If Cody said it was coming, it was.

Kimmie came to him and added her little arms to the hug. “We’ll stop it.”

Cody pulled away from both females, getting angry. “You can’t stop it! They’re scared of us. They want us gone and the world back like it was. As soon as one of us loses control, we’ll all be killed–the kids and the camp. We’re going to be the reason Safe Haven falls.”

“You’ve seen it.” Kendle came into the gymnasium, ignoring the disapproval from the few adults here. “Is it like that every time you look?”

Cody sniffled. “I can’t find a way to stop it.” He regarded the crying kids. “So I told Monica. I asked her to help me find a way to save the future.”

“And I have a great idea.” Monica resisted the urge to hug the boy again. His pull was strong. “This class will be our secret defense against that. If you guys will do it.”

“We’ll do anything to stop his pain.” Missy hated it when Cody was upset. “It hurts all of us.”

Monica nodded. “The same with Kimmie. These two are alphas. If they feel bad, it spreads. If they feel good…”

The kids began nodding and wiping away tears, hoping Monica was able to help them.

Monica was confident she could do it. She just needed their cooperation.

“You’ll have it.” Cody looked at Kimmie, who nodded. “We’ll make sure you do.”

“Good.” Monica held up a sheet of paper. “This is a list of everyone in camp. We need to find out what they want for Christmas. We’re copying their names for ourselves today. The printers aren’t working yet.”

Kimmie put a hand on her hip. “Giving them presents won’t make them like us.”

“Special presents that show you care about their happiness are one step. You’re also going to take them trays, read to them, sing and smile. You’re going to act like loveable children and win their hearts. When problems come up, the camp will defend you.” She motioned Cody and Kimmie to sit.

They went straight to where Missy was. Missy, Cody, and Leeann were a team, often playing and sitting together for meals. Kimmie had begun to join the trio, coming out of her isolation a bit. Her bruises were almost gone, and she was starting to fill out with regular meals. The same was true of all the western UN kids, including Brea and Darren. Wallace stayed close to those two, forming another trio the guards needed to keep track of.

Dion, along with the other UN kids, were at the tables. The Safe Haven children were at the rear. Jeff’s group of kids were split between the two, encouraging them to mix and mingle. Monica knew that would happen over time. The UN kids from the ship had been abused longer, but they’d also been sent away by Angela the first time. They’d had to kill to get in. Now they were required to behave like it hadn’t happened. Adjusting would take time, for all of them.

Roy and Romeo were still staying tight to Doug whenever he was in the room, but they were also loosening up a bit now. They weren’t being seen as a threat because of their parentage. In fact, most people seemed to have forgotten about Cesar and his rampage. *Camp members have*, Monica corrected. *Eagles never will*. *Neither will Adrian*.

Nearby, Daryl nodded in recognition of how hard it had been for the former leader to burn Angela’s wound closed. He’d saved her life and gained nightmares for it. So had Kyle, who had never discussed that night, even with his own team. It was still too painful.

Daryl finished rubbing ointment into his skin, not showing how much it hurt. He and Ben had helped reel in and then store the two hundred feet of towline. They’d used gloves, but the line had torn them up a little. They hadn’t expected it to be so heavy or so rough. It had also been gooey from being in the water since they’d lost power, making it slippery and easy to drop. Everyone on that crew had ignored the ocean view the camp observers had been so impressed by, only wanting to be done so they could go to the infirmary or the showers. They’d been bumped, smacked, scraped, splintered, splashed, poked, cut, pierced and a few others.

The camp members had enjoyed all of it, especially Claire and Nathan giving the lesson on towing and lines. They hadn’t dropped anything. In fact, they’d been so good they’d scared Daryl. He now knew the danger in what they were doing and why Grant was hyper. Normally they had two captains. Each one kept course and speed, to stay in step. The ships were supposed to have enough line to ride the waves at the same time, meaning both were up or both were down on a swell, but never opposite. The force could cause their towline to snap.

They needed someone on the other ship, soon. Daryl had put it in his report, and he was sure Ben had done the same. The concern, along with the pain in his hands, was keeping him quiet and looking for a distraction. Monica’s little notes to herself about the kids had been working for the stress, but the pain in his hands had gotten too bad to ignore. He’d finally used the ointment Morgan handed out.

Relief flooded his sore, scraped digits, letting Daryl return to listening to the update on the kids that Monica didn’t even know she was giving him.

Monica was trying to judge their happiness. She was trying very hard to help the kids feel normal again. Caleb, rescued from the town where Angela had fallen ill, had become good friends with Sean, who had joined them way back in Utah. It was nice for the boys. Monica was happy all the kids were settling in and responding to the good environment. She was sure there would be issues later, but for now, it was encouraging to think they might recover. Even their three refugee kids were doing better. The children Kenn and Tonya had adopted were fitting in, though they never spoke to anyone else. Even Angela couldn’t get them to talk.

Tonya swore the trio spoke often when they were alone. Monica hoped that was true. The boy and two girls needed to assimilate. They also needed to shower more. The kids had dirty hair, but Kenn had told everyone to leave them alone about it for now. Apparently, the children were terrified of water. No one had asked why. They just assumed it had been from abuse. The aftermath of the war was full of that.

“Kendle understands what it’s like to be so angry you can barely breathe. She’s going to help us. These people will too.” Monica pointed at the farthest door.

Charlie came in, scowling at the chore.

Conner was behind him, thrilled to have been given this opportunity. He’d missed being around the kids.

Shawn entered next, not glancing at Missy. He kept his hands at his sides and his attention on the teacher. His bandage glared at them in a reminder that an Eagle had been hurt because of a child.

Zack and his sons came in next, drawing groans. None of them liked Zack’s boys.

“They’re here for the same reason.” Monica pointed them to the rear of the group. “Mikey and Timmy have made mistakes. They’re here to correct that problem.”

Everyone could tell how unhappy they were to be here.

Zack glared at the boys. “Do it.”

Mikey regarded Monica. “Thank you for giving me this chance.” He sat, not hating it as much as his brother.

Timmy put his arms over his chest and glowered at all of them.

“Can’t you even try?” Conner shook his head. “He’s going to mess it up for all of them.”

Kids glared at Timmy, scaring him a little as he realized a lot of descendants were in this class.

“No, he won’t.” Charlie snickered. “He wants to be emancipated so he can date an older woman.”

“Shut up!” Timmy rose, ready to fight.

“Sit!” Charlie pointed. “I’m in the same boat, remember? If you really want it, you’ll work with us and stop being such a dick.”

The kids gasped and giggled at his language.

“You don’t know! Stay out of my mind!”

“I do know.” Charlie went to the teenager and sat near his feet. “Be quiet and I’ll tell you what she said about you.”

Timmy kept his stubborn anger for another two seconds…then he leaned over. “What did she say?”

“After the lesson, if you cooperate.”

Timmy frowned but turned toward Monica.

Charlie hid a smirk. He’d known for a while why Timmy was mean. The boy was trying to look hard even though he wasn’t an Eagle yet, hoping to attract a woman’s attention. Charlie was bonded to him in that.

Monica was relieved. She pointed at the others who had entered during the drama. “The rest of us.”

Jeff, Roy and Romeo, and little Amy were by the door. They joined the kids, sitting.

Kendle did the same, hating her green scrubs.

“I’m Monica. I’m going to teach you how to make the camp like you. Then I’m going to teach you to like them.”

Kendle snorted, unable to help herself.

Monica’s eye narrowed. “You don’t like them because you see them as weak. Since when does that mean it’s okay if they die?”

“Weak people let the war happen.”

“I see.” Monica considered her options and went with the most obvious. “Maybe you’re right. All those older folks should have done something. All these kids should have stepped up and stopped it. Being weak is bad.”

“I didn’t say that. Kids and old people can’t help being weak.”

Monica pointed. “And yet, you don’t like them.”

Kendle grunted at the clever trap. “I don’t hate them.”

“They don’t hate you either. They just don’t like you.” Monica walked around, making eye contact. “They don’t like any of you at the moment, but that’s because they view you the same way. You think they’re weak. They think you are bloodthirsty killers lacking compassion. We’re going to change that view on both sides.” She motioned to the guards. “Close us up. No one comes in here.”

Travis went out and locked the door. Angela had told him to expect this. Travis was certain the few adults in there could handle the kids. It was Kendle he was worried about. She shouldn’t be running loose after trying to kill Angela.

“She’s not running loose.” Angela came around the corner. “She’s surrounded by kids who are reading her every thought and she’s reading them whether she wants to or not. They’ll monitor each other.”

“It’s not enough. She should be punished for what she did.”

“Yes.” Angela kept going. She didn’t want to be late for her next meeting, but she also didn’t want to give away her plan. Eventually, everyone would see those punishments. Then she would be hearing how the island woman should be spared. *Like that’s ever going to happen.*

A wave of familiar pain squeezed her heart.

Angela sighed. *Can you help him?*

*Yes. Might get ugly.*

*Oh, like normal then. Do it.*

*Yes, ma’am.* Adrian detoured from cleaning duty to find Marc.

Angela entered the next cabin with a cheery smile that matched the fake Christmas tree in the far corner of the main medical office. “How are all Safe Haven’s medics today?”

**2**

“Drinking without eating first is a bad idea.” Adrian paused a few feet away, not certain of Marc’s mood.

Marc dropped the beer bottle into the trash can, causing a loud clank. “Did she send you here to get me in line?”

“Just to help if I can.” Adrian leaned against the other rail. He observed Marc, seeing the man’s attention was on their backtrail. “Thinking about taking a boat?”

“Did you pull that from my mind, ‘cause I have my strongest shield up right now.”

“Assumption based on known information.” Adrian picked dirt from under his fingernails. “I don’t invade minds for a first contact unless the person is a threat to my plans.”

“And I’m not.”

“Nope. You’ve always been a part of my schemes and plots. You usually do what I expect. Drinking and stewing isn’t the Marc I know.”

“You don’t know me, not really.” Marc stared at the water rippling violently from the rear of the ship where huge propellers kept them moving. “Neither does she or she wouldn’t have sent you.”

“Yeah, sorry, but none of these weak-willed people will tell you what you need to hear. They’re too easily swayed by your pain or your anger.”

Marc belched again. “Did you bring me another beer?”

“No.”

“Then bugger off.”

Adrian laughed.

Marc ignored him, studying the waves.

Adrian lit a cigar he’d gotten from Kyle.

Marc narrowed in on the smell and grunted. “How did you con him out of that? Kyle doesn’t even give his cheroots to his team.”

“I promised to do something for him, of course.”

“What?”

“I told him I’d keep his wife happy when he dies in her place. She’ll need someone to look after her for a little while.”

Marc tensed. “You’ve seen that.”

“In the final battle.”

Marc stared at the water, wondering how cold it was.

Adrian shifted a step closer, preventing the nervous sentries from hearing. “I promised Jennifer the same thing this morning. She cornered me in a hall way and threatened to make me a girl if I didn’t agree. Those two are a hell of a pair.”

“What did she give you in exchange?”

“Nothing. She’s a hardass who doesn’t negotiate.”

“Angela taught her well.”

“And now she’ll teach Ivan.” Adrian waited for more of Marc’s infamous jealousy.

Marc didn’t have anger to give. The thought of his daughter being alone in America while he was out here on a cruise was impossible to fight through.

“I’ll go with you.”

Marc glared at him. “In exchange for what?”

Adrian’s face tightened. “You have nothing I want that I can’t get on my own. I’ll escort you because you’ll need my help. Besides Kenn and maybe Kendle, no one on this boat could aid with the run you have in mind.”

“Angie could…”

“Don’t ask her to do that, Grunt. She has a big enough job right here.”

“You don’t see me begging her, do you?”

“No. But I feel her indecision. She wants to go get that little girl. Not because she’s family but because the baby deserves the same safety we’re enjoying. Your pain already made her interrupt plans for today. That’s going to get worse the longer you stew over it. So I’ll go too.”

“To protect your dream.”

“Everything I do is for the dream, good and bad.”

“Chasing Angela wasn’t for the dream.”

“It was, in every way. I knew who she was the second we met.”

“You thought she’d be your queen.”

“Something like that. I underestimated your bond with her and her spells on you. Then I saw my plan wasn’t going to work if she was with me. I couldn’t kill you off like I’d planned.”

“I always knew.”

“She didn’t, or she would have ended me before I could give her leadership.”

“She inherited it when you were stripped.”

“Yeah, keep believing that. I gave her leadership and confessed my sins. She chose what happened from there–the trial and the fighting. She should have killed me.”

“Yeah.” Marc wasn’t hurt Angela had known longer that Adrian was a traitor. “She knows everything.”

“Most of it, but now that the Demon of Time marked her, she can’t search the future anymore.”

Marc had been curious about that. “What’s his deal, anyway? I can see your memories. He let her pass. It’s *you* he wanted.”

“Yes. When she tried to hide me, she became blacklisted.”

“How did she ever get permission?”

“She was born with it. She’s Eve. The past and the future belong to us.”

“What did you do to fuck it up?”

Adrian sighed. “I tried to change things I saw coming. The Demon of Time doesn’t like it when you try to stop a global war.”

Marc gave the scruffy man his full attention. “You tried to stop it even though you knew you were going to be a fucking king through most of it?”

“I did.” Adrian’s tone hardened. “I love my country, Marc, and every soul she gave birth to. You watched me closer than any other man here. You have to know that. Each time one of them die, a part of me goes too.”

Marc did know that. Adrian had saved souls who didn’t deserve it, trying to give them a second chance to be good. “Doesn’t excuse your choices.”

“No.” Adrian puffed and had to relight the small cigar. It had gone out. “Unlike most of the people here, I didn’t have choices.” He puffed out smoke. “The war couldn’t be stopped. I made the best of it and brought together a group of citizens strong enough to survive the aftermath.”

“I don’t care what you do or say. Nothing excuses your betrayals.”

“I don’t need absolution from you, Marc. But I want it.”

“Good luck on that…” Marc realized what Adrian wanted in exchange. “You suppose I’ll forgive you if you help me.”

Adrian didn’t confirm or deny. He held out a sheet of paper. “This is what we’ll need. Get it gathered and wait for word.”

“She sent you to talk me out of leaving. There isn’t going to be word.”

“Have I tried to do that?”

“No.” Marc sighed, staring at the choppy water behind the ship. “I can’t abandon her. I won’t.”

“That’s why she’ll send you. If you aren’t giving her your all, she doesn’t want you here.”

“It’s my daughter–another kid I didn’t know I had. I can’t forget about her and wait until we return. She needs me.”

Adrian took a chance and put a hand on Marc’s shoulder in comfort. “I’m sorry. You may not believe it, but I don’t like it when you’re upset either.”

“Then help me!”

Adrian sent a light current of peace into the man, shocked by the demand. “Better?”

Marc nodded, not fighting the calm. His heart settled into a better rhythm. He let out the deep breath he’d taken when Adrian touched him. He’d been trying not to hit the man. “Are we ever going to be happy again?”

“Your kids will. This camp will. Us, personally?” Adrian shook his head, hand dropping. “We’ve made too many mistakes for that.”

“I have to go.”

“She knows.”

“I can’t leave.”

“She knows that too. She’ll make the choice for you. Be ready for the call.”

Marc sighed, misery returning. “I hate this.”

“We’ll find her. I’m already working on it. I know you are too. We’ll ask Jennifer to search the future and past over the next few days, when she has time. Angela has her occupied.”

“She has all of you busy except me. Did she know?”

Adrian shrugged. “I doubt she would have left your daughter behind, so no, but you’d have to ask her to be sure. She doesn’t let me in anymore.”

“Me either.”

“We hurt her. She’ll forgive you in time and return to tolerating me. It’ll work out.”

“You see that too?”

Adrian chuckled. “I believe it in my heart.”

“Does she?”

Adrian’s amusement fell to the deck. “Not even a tiny bit. She’s pissed right now. It’ll take time.”

“Or I could give in.”

“That’s your choice, but you wouldn’t be the Marc we all know and love if you followed orders without question.”

“I wasn’t programmed to be a follower.”

“But you’re not ready to be a leader.”

“I have too many problems with how we have to manipulate to lead. I’d tell the truth. It doesn’t work.”

“It can, in the future. She’ll lead us into that. You’re meant to help her.”

“I’m tired of all this shit. I just…”

“Want your old life back.”

The calm allowed Marc to speak the truth. “I was a good man who’d made one big mistake before the war. I liked me. Now, I can’t stand the sight of myself in the mirror.”

“We all feel that way. Well, most of us anyway. I was a playboy working for the government. I didn’t feel any guilt. Now I can’t breathe without tasting it.”

“*Can* we go back?”

“And now we get to the heart of the matter.” Adrian took a seat on the chair meant for the sentry who was staying back to give them privacy. “You’ve finally added up the clues about Mike and Mia.”

Marc leaned against the rail, wishing he was drunk. “She planned for that too.”

“She’s hoping, like I am and like you will be now, but it’s never been done like this and certainly not by children. Messing with time is dangerous.”

“But it can be done?”

“I assume so. Remember that part in William’s book?”

“Yeah. It said to never try it unless you had a trinity of time keepers…” Marc gaped.

Adrian tapped his cigar on the rail and puffed again. He shut his lids and sent Marc an image.

Marc’s heart pounded. “I want to help.”

“I knew you would. We need your daughter. We can’t try without her.”

“I have to be ready when she gives the call.”

Adrian laughed. “Finally!”

Marc snatched Adrian’s cigar and tossed it overboard.

“Hey!”

“I hate it that you’re always ahead of me on everything! You’re like a fucking robot I can’t beat!”

“Stop trying. Follow my lead. Become my next protégé–the one I can’t corrupt.”

Marc gawked at him. “What?”

Adrian smiled. “I didn’t just want her, Marcus. I’ve had my eye on you too. She only has a couple of weaknesses, but you don’t even share those. With both of you ruling the world, we’ll finally have a just existence, peace, happiness.”

Marc tried to shake off the daze. “You decided Angie and I should rule the world.”

“It’s perfect. All we have to do is kill everyone who stands in our way.”

“I’ll never do that.”

“Your queen will handle those details.”

“She doesn’t want that. *I* don’t want that.”

“Liar.” Adrian decided it was time to call Marc on the rest of his half-truths. “You’re the son of God. Who else should rule this miserable shithole of a planet?”

“I don’t… I couldn’t…” Marc tried to keep fighting, but Adrian had uncovered his secret thought–one he’d even buried from Angie.

“You dreamed about it. She doesn’t know yet.”

Trapped, Marc’s shoulders drooped. “What do you want from me?”

“Aren’t you tired of asking me that yet?”

“You have no idea.”

“How about you take a minute to consider my offer.”

“I don’t want to be like you.”

“Lying again.”

“Yeah.” Marc let out a groan. “I hate this!”

“You can’t fight destiny, Marc. Many have tried, and it never works. You were always meant to rule. If you’d stop fighting us at every turn, you’d be able to download your ethics into every generation. There would be a world full of Marc’s who love ‘em and leave ‘em.”

Marc’s fists clenched; he sensed Adrian was about to knock him out, but he needed the information. “Will I ever get to see your body cold and rotting?”

“Just the opposite, though I’ll take no pleasure in it.”

“The final battle?”

“Yes. You and Angie will ascend to take your places.”

“We’ll be locked up there in those chambers, stuck playing games and making bets.”

“Only if you allow it.” Adrian met his eye. “Or you could change that future. By joining me.” Adrian stood up. “Let me teach you and you’ll be able to change that future for her too.”

“Against her will.” Marc already knew Angela wanted to be up there.

“Yes. They’ve offered her a gilded cage connected to heaven. She wants to be there controlling fate.”

“So she can help them bring back the Maker. And then what?”

“I suspect she’ll die in those rooms without ever seeing that happen.” Adrian rotated toward the steps to the lower levels. “I need you, Marc. She needs you. If we don’t do something drastic, she’s going to leave us both and we’ll never get her back.”

There wasn’t much of a choice for Marc. “Where are you going? I need more details.”

Adrian swallowed the triumph and returned to Marc’s side. “Excellent.”

Chapter Seventeen

**Follow My Lead**

****

**1**

**“H**appy Thanksgiving.”

“Same to you.” Jennifer put Autumn into Kyle’s arms and kissed him.

Kyle held still at the public display, unable to help the reaction. He was too used to hiding his emotions.

Jennifer didn’t mind. She retreated, smiling. “I expect you to make it up to me.”

His eyes darkened. “I will.”

Around them, the curious camp and Eagles stole looks at the married couple.

Autumn cooed, drawing attention.

“She’s been fed and changed.” Jennifer picked loose hair from the baby blanket. “She said she needs daddy to hold her while she sleeps.”

Kyle grinned. “Really? That’s awesome.”

Jennifer grinned. Kyle’s bond with her daughter was adorable.

Autumn farted, letting out a loud, liquid sound.

An awful smell began to rise.

Shock filled Kyle’s expression. “She just shit on me!”

Jennifer giggled. “She has a diaper.”

“Then why is my arm getting wet?”

“Oh. Damn. She must have blown a side.” Jennifer laughed. “She had prunes for lunch.”

Kyle grunted. “Prunes don’t smell like that.” He hurried toward the living quarters as Jennifer broke out into hard laughs.

“What’s so… Oh, my god!” Kenn retreated, hand coming up to his nose.

“Kyle had an accident!” Jennifer tried to stop laughing and couldn’t.

Kenn kept backing away. “What did he eat? I’ll skip it.”

Kyle kept going, not laughing. The smell really was awful. “We’ve got to adjust your diet, little lady.”

Jennifer went to the center table that had been slid there by a few camp members. They didn’t like Angela being on the edges. They wanted leadership in the center where they could see them.

Jennifer sat and swept the dozen staff members. Brittani was behind the cooking area and appeared very busy. Stanley was by her, stirring a pot of something dark and gooey. Around them, Lou and the rest of Brittani’s family were helping with various chores. There were also a few Ciemus women who appeared to be having a good time despite all the work. Judging it to be calm, Jennifer scanned the hundred and fifty camp members in the room.

Many of them were watching her.

Jennifer concentrated to find out why they looked nervous. Before she could get into it, the sound of kids echoed.

People tensed, sliding further into the booths.

*Ah. Well, we’re working on that.* Jennifer caught the eye of the first kid through the door, glaring.

Kimmie stopped laughing and straightened her shoulders. “Ready? Go!”

The kids began to sing.

The camp members relaxed.

So did the Eagles.

Jennifer breathed a mental sigh of relief and joined in the singing. “One little, two little…”

**2**

“She’s tired.”

Adrian nodded, surprised Marc had joined him at the far table. Despite their conversation earlier, he’d expected to spend dinner alone in a crowded galley of passengers. “Her hair’s turning again.”

“Already?” Marc narrowed in and spotted the gray glare under the fluorescent light overtop the center table. He scanned her for other signs and found them. “Skin’s wrinkling. Lips are cracked.”

“She keeps rubbing her hands, like her bones hurt.”

“Is that arthritis?”

“Maybe. The few times I’ve been very low, it felt like my joints were breaking down. I suspect our bodies consume cartilage when we get empty. Maybe it’s energy in some way.”

“Makes sense. There was an old study about shark cartilage being used like Botox in wealthy circles.”

“I heard that too. Wonder if it worked.”

“Probably. Not that they would have shared such a secret with the rest of the planet.”

“Nope. It would have driven up the cost and eventually made shark farms a popular thing. Might have been embarrassing for them to have to buy it like common folks.” Marc kept studying Angela, not liking what he was finding. “She doesn’t have that…sparkle. Her smile’s wooden. She’s in pain.”

“Good catch. I thought it was the drain at first, but she keeps wincing when no one’s looking at her. Stomach maybe.”

“Could be shark week coming. She’s due about now.”

“Maybe.” Adrian took a breath and forked a bite of the potatoes and gravy. “I can tell you how to handle it without making her mad.”

Marc had made a very hard choice earlier, as he gazed at the water, at the country behind them he hadn’t been able to see. “We have to be careful if we do this. She may not like it.”

“She won’t. That’s why it has to be done openly. I refuse to have her or anyone else suspect I’m repeating bad behavior.” Adrian swirled his fork through the brown gravy. “This is my second chance. I’m not screwing that up, even for you.”

Marc shoved away the tiny inkling of respect. “How?”

“Take her a dessert and coffee. Palm her a pain pill and walk away.”

Marc snickered. “Drop and go.”

“She can’t yell or refuse it without blowing her cover. She’ll glare for a minute, then she’ll cave and take it if she’s in enough pain. If she doesn’t take it, we can assume she isn’t as bad off as we’re worrying about.”

Marc fished in his pocket for the travel bottle of Advil he’d been nursing.

Adrian swallowed, surprised by how good the food was. “She needs something a little stronger.”

Marc gave a sneer. “It’s Percocet. I stopped taking Advil about a month after I joined the Marines.”

Adrian sniggered. “Fair enough.” He forked a bite of the yams. He hadn’t had sweet potatoes in years. “She’ll know it by the symbol on it. Go hook her up. After you’re done, if you feel like it, I can give you an idea about how to get her to go take a shower and a nap.”

“She’s not going to leave these people right now.”

“She might if she didn’t have a choice.”

Marc frowned. “Keep going.”

“Well, what if someone…bumped Stanley as he went by her? He’s carrying the desserts out in a few minutes.”

Marc grinned. “That’s bad.”

Adrian stuck the bite into his mouth, getting tired. He was using a shield to guarantee Angela couldn’t get into his thoughts without him knowing. All descendants developed that protection from being around their own kind. People could still get through, but he would know.

“Does she need coffee right now or hot tea to help make her sleepy?”

Adrian almost choked. He’d never thought Marc would agree, let alone contribute. “The tea!”

Marc thumped him on the back, distracted enough from all his emotions that he didn’t feel like making it a punch. “Breathe, dude.”

“Trying!” Adrian wheezed. He signaled Marc on. “Drawing attention.”

Marc gravitated toward the coffee pots, smiling to people. He nodded to the guards to soothe them, then struck up a conversation with Lou across the counter as the man spooned chocolate pudding into small bowls.

Adrian was elated. He’d always known Marc had it in him but getting to this point had been the struggle of a lifetime. It still might fall apart in minutes or hours, but for this one second in time, Marc was honestly one of his Eagles. It felt great.

The camp responded to Adrian’s happiness. They leaned toward it unconsciously, proving how much they’d missed it.

Angela ignored it, but she was glad he and Marc weren’t at each other’s throats in public. She hoped their truce at least held until the evening was over. Safe Haven had earned a good holiday. She returned her attention to Kenn’s report on the entertainment floor.

Ivan watched it all happening, able to hear Adrian’s deliberations without the man knowing. Now that he’d discovered he had other gifts, Ivan was playing with them. He wanted to get stronger and be of more value to their leader, but he was also naturally curious. Angela believed he was leadership material. He wanted to know what she’d seen that he hadn’t.

Ivan swept the tables and booths, smiling at Jayda but not lingering as he went over her booth. It was full of kids. He liked that, but it reminded him of the epiphany he’d had earlier. He wasn’t certain he wanted her to get pregnant now. In fact, he didn’t know if he wanted to get attached to anyone at all.

Angela tensed as Marc came toward the table. As per Adrian’s rules that she hadn’t changed, camp members weren’t supposed to come to the center table without being invited or reporting an emergency. It was to give the leaders a little peace from the constant demands of the camp, but Marc was coming right to the table and he wasn’t an Eagle or council member anymore. Tension filled the air.

Marc sat the cup in front of her and held out the bowl. He didn’t glance at her or contemplate anything, staying intentionally blank.

Angela took the bowl to keep from making more of a scene. She frowned as she felt something under the bowl. As she sat it down, she palmed the pill, frown deepening.

Marc went straight back to Adrian’s table.

Almost every adult stared in surprise that he was willingly spending time with Adrian.

While they were distracted, Angela viewed the pill.

Adrian kept his shield on full strength and his eyes on his plate. “Did she take it?”

Marc had been doing the same. “How would I know?”

“Well, I couldn’t stare at her or it would have pissed off the camp again.” Adrian sighed. “Sorry. I’m used to having multiple men on moments like this. Still haven’t adjusted to doing it solo.”

Marc scratched his arm where something had bitten him. “We’ll find out in a little while if she loosens up.”

“Or if she crushes it under her boot.” Adrian speared green beans.

*She took it. Do not look at me or she’ll know. I can’t hide it from her.*

Marc groaned. “Damn it!”

Adrian wasn’t pleased either. “She’s right. He’s sneaky.”

“That’s why she’s eyeing him for various positions. I hope she knows what she’s doing. He’s dangerous.”

“I think so too.” Adrian swirled his beans through the gravy. “Maybe you should speak to him a few more times, like you have me.”

Marc grunted. “He’s too thickheaded to care about pain.”

“He has other weaknesses.”

*You two know I can hear you, right?*

They ignored Ivan in favor of watching Stanley bring out the dessert tray. Adrian flashed a hand message to Marc.

Marc nodded. “Agreed.” *Heads up, Ivan.*

Ivan looked up.

Adrian flipped a finger, sending a current of need toward the women’s table in front of Ivan.

All four females jerked around, arms exceeding the length of the table.

Stanley hit one of those arms and staggered toward the center table. “No!”

Angela swiveled around, searching for the problem.

Ivan shoved Stanley away from her.

The bowls flew off the tray, smacking into the table. Pudding sprayed.

Kenn slowly wiped pudding from his neck and chest and slung it to the table. “Someone better have a good reason for this.”

Laughter burst out, smothering the tension.

Marc groaned. “I knew he was trouble.”

Adrian chuckled. “We have forces working against us. It might not be as easy as I’d thought.”

Ivan crossed his arms over his chest and hid his smug smile.

Kenn stood, ignoring Stanley’s apologies. “One of these days…” He departed the galley, leaving chocolate drips.

Angela laughed aloud and silently. *Thank you.*

Ivan’s good mood went up another notch. *It’s my honor. Now eat something or that pill will make you sick.*

Angela obediently picked up her roll and took a bite.

In front of Ivan, four women resumed eating, now eyeing the males around them for the origin of the need wave.

**3**

“Happy Thanksgiving, Safe Haven!”

Loud cheers echoed back to Angela.

She lifted her mug. Everyone joined her, even the kids who were happily feasting on Brittani’s generous dinner.

Angela stayed standing, aware of adults wanting the details she’d promised them. “This holiday didn’t have many traditions before. People ate a huge meal, said thanks to the cook and maybe God, then played football or slept. They spent time with family or went to a bar to get drunk so they could forget about those families, or they mourned not having someone to celebrate with. We’re going to continue some of those things, but we’re going to add one. We’re actually going to *be* thankful for what we have.” She lifted her cup again. “I’m thankful for each of you, for Safe Haven and Adrian, who gave us this opportunity to reshape the future. I’m grateful for everyone who’s saved my life and especially for those who died for me, for you and for this camp. I’m grateful you’ve given me the place I now hold. Thank you. I love all of you. You’re my family.”

Claps and cheers echoed through the crowded room.

Angela stayed standing. She drank and then sat her cup down, stifling the need to yawn. “Take a moment to do the same, even if it’s just in your mind. Be thankful for what you’ve got. Many folks have less.” She sat, smiling at Charlie. She’d assigned him to the table next to her and put Tracy there as well. The couple had been sharing laughs and good moments since they’d arrived. It was nice.

Charlie rose, encouraged by the mood. He pulled a box from his pocket.

The camp quieted to observe.

Charlie knelt in front of Tracy, cheeks reddening.

Tracy froze, paling. “What are you doing?”

Charlie opened the box and held it out to her. “I’ve loved you since I first saw you. I’ll be a good husband. I’ll never hurt you and I’ll be a good father when we have kids. I’d give up anything for you.” He took in a breath. “Will you marry me?”

Tracy nodded quickly, embarrassed by all the attention but relieved this was happening. “I love you too.”

Charlie slid the ring onto her finger and then kissed her.

The camp yelled and cheered, offering support for the new couple.

Angela kept her happy expression on and hoped it worked out for them.

In the corner, at the table with Adrian, Marc noticed her fake smile and wondered what she had witnessed about the couple that was bad. He was positive she didn’t approve.

“It’s just his age.” Adrian kept his voice low. “This was the only outcome for them if Charlie didn’t stay behind. He does love her.”

Marc believed that too. “It’s good for him, in ways. He’ll grow up faster.”

“That’s the part Angie has an issue with.” Adrian nodded at the few people casting grateful looks as they finished their new tradition. He liked it that Angela had added this. Some people had done it before the war, but not enough. Humans forgot to be grateful for life, but they needed reminders that things could always be worse. It helped them to make the best of bad and awkward situations. “So why are you still here? It’s attracting attention.”

“I told you we’re doing this openly.”

“So we are doing it?” They’d talked at length, but the dinner call had interrupted them without a decision from Marc.

“Yes.” Marc leaned forward. “Teach me something.”

Adrian chuckled. “Pick a topic.”

“Angie.”

“That’s a big topic. Any particular area?”

“Does she recognize the trap of the rooms?”

“Of course. She spotted it before I did.”

“She wants to be up there to hunt for more chambers, to keep trying to call the Creator.”

“Yes.”

“What’s your plan?”

Adrian bristled. “Why do you assume I have one mapped out already? Did it ever occur to you that I might need help on this one?”

“No.”

“Well, I do. This will take years and it involves keeping her satisfied with the progress we make.”

“She isn’t going to stay just for these people. I thought so before, but I can feel her working on that issue even now.”

“Me too. She needs to be able to uncover more spots on her map. That would keep her with us. It’s why she wants to go. She doesn’t think it can be done from here.”

“Can it?”

“I have no idea…but there is someone you can ask.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’ve made sure no one will give me important information.” Adrian’s eyes flashed to the full center table and back. “She’d never trust me on something like this.”

Marc groaned mentally. *She isn’t happy with me either.*

*No, but she knows you love Angela and you’d never betray her with the information. If you ask her in the right way, she’d look for you.*

Marc turned back. “What’s the right way?”

“Carefully, my friend. Very carefully. She hasn’t accessed many of her gifts yet. She’s scared of becoming like Angela now.”

“Which is why Angie had to pick another successor.”

“Partly. Jennifer is perfect for leadership, but she has age and lack of experience as weaknesses. Now, she has a husband; she’s happy.”

“Angela doesn’t want to ruin her.”

“Exactly. She’s sparing Jennifer.”

“What happens when Jenny figures that out?”

Both men tensed as Kyle came to their small table and sat. “She knows. We discussed it.”

Marc and Adrian gawked at the former mobster in shock.

Kyle shrugged. “It rubs off. You both know that.”

“I have a shield up. So does Marc. That’s more than a rub off.”

Kyle casually sipped his hot chocolate. “Brittani’s a great cook.”

Marc understood someone else was listening. “The lack of privacy will make this harder.”

“Not if it isn’t needed.” Kyle kept his voice low. “We know what’s coming. The descendants want to help.”

“And they sent you?” Marc glanced around the galley and received more attention than he was comfortable with. “They all know.”

“Yeah, Adrian’s shield is…ineffective.”

“Evolutions!” Adrian blew out a sound of frustration. “I should have accounted for that.”

“Yeah, you didn’t take lifeforces on the beach but almost every one of the others did, including Jennifer.” Kyle’s voice dropped to a mutter. “She’s planning to escort Angela. She wants those answers too.”

“Why doesn’t she just search the future?”

“She can’t.” Adrian lowered his chin at Marc’s accusing glare. “We hadn’t gotten to that part yet. Some barriers can’t be opened unless an alpha demands it. Jennifer doesn’t even know the door exists.”

“She does, actually. She said it will remain locked until someone asks her the right way.”

“What does that mean?” Marc noticed Adrian waiting for the answer too and scowled. “You don’t know!”

“It’s not like I took classes on this stuff, you know. I make conclusions based on evidence.” He regarded Kyle. “What did she say when you asked her what that meant?”

“She didn’t. She doesn’t know either.”

“You believe that?”

“No.”

Marc stared at Kyle, surprised by the honesty.

Kyle sighed. “You have to figure it out or we’re going to lose them.”

“Marc will handle that part. You arrange a time for them to be alone.”

“Jennifer said she’ll take a walk after midnight.”

“She knows?”

“Of course.” Kyle stood up. “She knows everything. You’d be scared if she let you into her head.”

“Are you?” Adrian couldn’t help the curiosity.

“Not at all. She loves me. I’m safe.” He moved toward the far corner to talk to the guards on duty.

Marc and Adrian exchanged glances.

“What if she doesn’t like the person asking?”

“Like I said, carefully. An enforcer’s mind is no place to screw around in.”

“That’s comforting.”

“Better than my odds of getting through.”

“Angela could do it.”

“But she won’t.” Adrian sensed Angela’s attention turning to them and finished the lesson. “She doesn’t want Jennifer to open that barrier–ever.”

“Why not? It might hold the answers.”

Adrian stood up, gathering his mess. “Once that door is opened, we don’t know how to shut it. She’s sacrificing answers for Jennifer’s sanity.”

Marc didn’t like the sound of that. “Maybe we shouldn’t do it.”

Adrian belched, wiping his mouth. “That’s why you have to make this choice. Kyle and I aren’t ethical enough to make such a decision.”

“What does losing sanity mean? Will she go crazy and hurt people or herself?”

“Both and more. I believe that door leads to everywhere, Marc–to everything. That kind of knowledge has driven people insane with a glimpse.”

“And we won’t stop there, will we?”

“Not a chance. Once you open it, we’ll explore it. That’s what humans do.”

**4**

“Aren’t you worried about those two spending time together?”

Angela shook her head at Samantha and returned to her plate of food. It was good, but she didn’t have an appetite. “Marc’s a big boy. He can play with whomever he wants.”

“Adrian can’t be trusted. Don’t you worry about him corrupting Marc?” Samantha hadn’t forgiven Adrian. She doubted she ever would.

“Like I said. Marc’s a grown man. He knows to be careful.” Angela regarded Kyle, seeing he was getting an update from the guards. “All of them will be careful.”

Samantha caught the tone. “What are they planning?”

“Something they shouldn’t be; something dangerous to every living soul left on this planet.”

“Then why are you letting them do it?”

Angela sighed, feeling much older than her age. The cold draft from the top decks was sinking into her bones and making them ache. “Because we need another option than the one we found in the power meeting. If they can do it without killing all of us, the treasure might be priceless.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know.” Angela put a hand on Samantha’s wrist. “I don’t want you involved until after you give birth. Can you wait that long? Please?”

Samantha nodded. Angela didn’t ask her for much, if anything, beyond tracking the weather. “Whatever you think is best.”

“I want your twins born safely and then for you to recover from it. I’ll need you by my side when we return.”

Samantha nodded again. Now that she’d made the choice, she could breathe a little easier. She suspected that would change when the time to return neared, but she’d rather be with Neil, fighting for their future, for their country, than hiding on an island with her babies while waiting for word of his death. “What can I do?”

“Decide who your caretaker will be over that time.”

Samantha frowned. “I meant now, to help with the camp.”

“Other than training Debra, just deliver two live babies.” Angela removed her hand. “We need them, Sam. Your children are special. Protect them at all costs.”

“What’s coming for our kids? Neil told me. He had to.”

“I don’t know and that terrifies me.” Angela gestured at Samantha’s tray. “Eat some more.”

Sam picked up her fork, but she’d lost the desire for the great smelling food. “Tell me what you do know.”

“I suspect it’s an illness. I kept seeing kids getting medical care and magic healing, but it wasn’t working. They get a disease we can’t cure.”

“Is that what Tonya’s working on?”

Angela’s eyes flew to hers.

Samantha shrugged. “She’s on the same deck as my garden. I see her coming and going, the things she’s carrying. Looks like she’s doing more than just growing a batch of pot for her oil tests.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Really?”

“I’ve been distracted. I’ll talk to her about it.”

“So you’re not working on it at all?”

Angela’s voice was a worried whisper. “I’m depending on my witch and Marc’s demon. They’re off again, scroll diving.”

“I thought you looked tired.” Samantha smiled. “More than usual anyway.”

“I’m not sleeping again. At least not for long. My dreams keep waking me.”

“We’re all adjusting to being on this ship. Maybe it’s that.”

Angela let out a sound of weariness. “It’s more. I’m going through another evolution.”

Samantha’s tone carried her concern and a deep frown. “I thought you were as high as you could go.”

“Yeah, so did I.” Angela stood, bringing an end to the conversation and semi quiet to the crowded galley. “It’s time to talk about the Eagles, schedules and the future. Everyone get a drink or a dessert bowl and get comfortable. We’re going to be here for a few.”

“Can I go pee first?” Courtney slid out of the booth and hurried toward the lavatory.

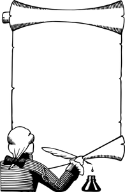
Angela laughed. “Everyone can. We’ll start in ten minutes.” She motioned Kenn over and a few others.

They brought chairs to the center table, filling it out like the camp was used to.

Angela stared at the writing on the table, at the well wishes and pleas for peace. *I can’t give you that yet. We still have a long way to go.*

Chapter Eighteen

**A Few Tweaks**

****

**1**

**“E**agle training restarts tomorrow morning.”

Angela waited for the noise to die down. “Special Forces rosters will be posted after we’re finished here. Everyone else will take a skills test to determine placement.”

A stunned silence fell, even reaching the kids who were at corner tables with boxes of toys and craft supplies.

“Some of you were high level before we set sail. You may not think this choice is fair, but I’ve spent weeks considering it. We’re on teams, but we’re not really teammates anymore. The level fours aren’t all level four. The rookies aren’t all rookies. We can’t be teammates like this. I’m reordering all teams, except Special Forces. Everyone not assigned to a team will be placed on a crew for other purposes, such as medical, fishing, or homesteading. There’s a lot of work for everyone.”

Angela handed Kenn a sheet of paper. “All camp members, regardless of age, will be taking a skills test. Kenn’s posting the schedule. If you miss your test, you will be assigned to wherever I need you. That could be on a cleaning crew. Don’t miss your test.” She handed Kenn another sheet of paper. “Some new crews and teams are also coming. These are being posted now. Some passengers will have more than one job.” Angela swept the galley, aware of the unhappiness with her announcements. The best she could do was force a weak smile. “I’m sorry. It has to be this way. Okay…who has questions?”

“Will previous positions be taken into account?” Kyle knew that was the top query on all Eagle minds.

“Of course. Everything you’ve already done and accomplished will be included. This is not a punishment. It’s organization for our future. We need these new crews. Once they get rolling, you’ll understand how much.” Angela took a final paper from her notebook. “As of dawn, this is the schedule all camp members will follow when not in classes. Please don’t force me to invent ugly punishments. Follow the schedule. It’ll make all our lives better.”

Kenn went to the board and began sticking the papers to it, scanning for his own name. When he didn’t view it anywhere, Kenn was relieved. That meant he would finally be able to be a real Eagle. He went to the table where Tonya was supposed to be, frowning upon finding it empty. He sat, vaguely aware of citizens crowding around the papers he’d just posted. *I miss her. What’s she doing down there?*

“I have an issue.”

People quieted, turning to view Theo.

“I know you want to handle it in your own way, but that’s not enough this time. We have a lot of people on this ship who shouldn’t be.” Theo glanced at the table where Marc and Adrian were sitting. “I demand a trial at the camp meeting to determine the fate of everyone who has committed crimes against Safe Haven but hasn’t been punished yet.”

Silence fell over the passengers.

“A camp meeting isn’t a legal way to handle things.” Angela kept her tone and face blank.

“Camp votes have determined the fate of criminals before, though that sentence wasn’t carried out like it should have been.”

Debra gasped, hands flying at Theo. Samantha was translating for her, also a bit shocked.

Theo ignored her and everyone else, giving the boss what she’d asked for. “Adrian was banished, yet he sits here eating our food. Marc was removed from the Eagles and council, but he still goes to the meetings. Becky tried to kill the boss and she’s still breathing. This isn’t the way it should be. I want a vote on it. A lot of us do.”

Some people voiced agreement, but most of the camp didn’t know where this would lead and waited. They didn’t want to upset Angela.

Those who were being discussed kept their heads down and hoped it was over soon.

“You realize we need them, right?”

“Yes, but they have to be punished for their offenses or the new justice system doesn’t mean dick.”

Angela sighed as if she was being forced. “Agreed. We’ll talk about that at the camp meeting in three days. Right after that meeting, we’ll have a trial.”

The galley went silent again. Attention swiveled to Kendle, who was cleaning the pudding mess.

Kendle gritted her teeth and kept working.

“Rebecca hurt several members of this camp in an attempt to kill me. She has confessed her motive. She wanted to hurt Adrian. She blames him for the rape. Not Rick, but *Adrian*. I believe she’s overwhelmed mentally. I’m going to recommend leniency.”

No one liked that. The mood turned almost hostile.

“However, I won’t overrule the decision of the camp.” Angela paused, blowing out a sigh. “I don’t want us to start this trip off with a hanging. I won’t overrule that choice, but as one of her victims, it’s my right to ask you to have pity. I do.” Angela regarded Greg, Daryl and Gus, who were at the same table. “Her other victims will also make their wishes clear before the jury decides on her sentence. If they pick death, the camp executioner will carry it out.”

Kyle crossed his arms over his chest, putting off an intimidating show of force, but inside, he didn’t know if he could do that. It would destroy his friendship with Neil and make him hate himself. Becky was mentally ill. It wouldn’t be right to kill her, especially since she would be an unarmed teenager at the time.

Angela was proud of Kyle for his reaction and for his thoughts. Before the war, he’d killed when told to by his masters. Now, he was making his own choices on his actions. He’d come a long way. Angela swept the listening camp, judging their mood. It wasn’t calm, but the hostility was fading. She switched to the next order of business. “Because Becky hurt multiple Eagles, she has to be tried. Kendle only hurt me. I’ve decided not to press charges.”

Boos and shouts came from the camp.

Someone threw a spoon at Kendle, hitting her in the back of the head.

“Stop right now!” Angela’s anger was a powerful deterrent, but the rage of the crowd wasn’t going to be halted this time. Angela brought up a shield around Kendle. She went to the castaway. “We need her. On the island, she’ll be invaluable for information. I’ve been picking her brain for those details since she joined Safe Haven, but I don’t have them all yet. Leave her alone or you’ll screw me up.” She glanced around, hands on her hips. “You don’t want to screw me up, do you?”

Some heads shook, but the tension didn’t break.

Angela sighed. “I’ll give you what you want in time. Please believe me when I say she’s going to be punished. It’s my right to determine how.”

More heads bobbed, finally breaking a little of the anger.

“She and I are connected. She can’t hurt me again.”

“Are you sure?” Pam didn’t have forgiveness for Kendle or Becky. “She still hates you. We can feel it even though she’s refusing to think about you at all, even now.”

“I’m sure. I used the alpha bond on her. She couldn’t hurt me if her life depended on it.”

“It does depend on it.” Marc didn’t want Kendle spared. “I’ll shoot her at the first wrong move or thought.”

Kendle’s tears ran over her cheeks, heart breaking all over again.

Angela held in her triumph. “This is her second chance. This is why Safe Haven exists.”

“What about Becky’s second chance?” Seth appeared in the far entrance. “Doesn’t she get one?”

“That’s up to the camp.” Angela waved off the shouts and calls for Seth to be punished too. “I know you tried to help her, but she’s too far gone to come back, Seth. She’d bring down this entire camp if it meant hurting Adrian.”

“A lot of people here still hate him. Why is she being held responsible for acting on thoughts we all have?”

“Because she hurt my Eagles!” Angela’s anger flew out of her mouth. “How dare you pick her over them again!”

“How dare you spare the island bitch so Marc won’t feel guilty!”

Eagles marched toward Seth.

So did several camp members.

Kendle shuddered at Angela’s feet, sensing her life about to be taken. If not for the shield around her, she would be hit again. Several passengers were holding silverware, waiting for it to lower.

“Kendle earned her second chance by helping eliminate the refugees on the beach.”

Seth stayed still as the Eagles surrounded him, fists clenched and cheeks red. “Becky helped rescue kids from the UN camp.”

“Yes, she did, but why did she do it?”

“Because they needed help!”

Angela scowled. “No, Seth. She did it to be allowed back in. She couldn’t hurt Adrian out in the west. Kendle only ever targeted her enemy–me. Becky hit anyone in her way.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. Ask her why she helped you save those kids. We’ll certainly be asking it at the trial.”

“What about me? Am I being tried too?”

“Have you done something to deserve that?”

Seth shoved his hands into his pockets. “No.” His anger fled, leaving horrible sadness. “I tried to save her.”

Angela nodded. “I’m sorry, Seth. I really am, but you can’t save someone who doesn’t want to be saved. In three days, she stands trial. That’s my final word on the matter.”

The camp was satisfied.

Seth stormed from the galley, leaving awkwardness in his wake.

“Okay. On to my next item.” Angela swept the camp. “Anyone who throws something when I lower my shield will be tossed overboard.” She didn’t smile, not letting them know if she was serious or not. “She belongs to me. Do not get in my way. You’ll be sorry.” Angela released the shield and regarded Kendle. “Toilet duty in the infirmary. Get on it.”

Kendle scrambled away from her and rushed for the steps.

No one threw anything or got in her way.

Angela recaptured their attention. “I know this isn’t in our constitution, but I’m making a few changes. One of those is punishments. Don’t ever hurt one of my Eagles. I’m making that a death sentence. It’s not to influence you about Becky or Kendle. It’s just how it should be. The Eagles keep us alive. They deserve protection. In the past, it was a felony and a 25-year jail sentence for killing a cop, but we’re not going to have jails. We already know it doesn’t work. If you hurt an Eagle, you die. That’s going to be the law. You’ll get to vote on most of my other tweaks, but not that one. It’s a deal breaker. If you want that rule changed, you’d better vote in a new leader. I won’t ever budge on it.”

Angela waited for protests or comments, but she found the camp in agreement. “Some of the other tweaks are based on the same values. There will be no more deals with criminals, not even for information. I also want the penalty for murder to be harsh. I won’t overrule anything I don’t have to. I’ve explained that already, but I want to remind you lax enforcement of laws created an unsafe world for all of us. We know the parts that didn’t work. We’re going to fix them.” She pointed at a box on the wall by the message board. “Drop suggestions in there. I’ll go through them and maybe add them. Even if you think I already have it covered, drop me a note about whatever concerns you the most anyway. I’m not perfect. I could have missed something, and I need you to catch it.” Angela took the cup of hot tea Stanley brought to her. She retreated as he tripped over his own feet.

Stanley landed at her boots.

Angela chuckled. “Take a break, will you? I don’t want to be drenched.”

Stanley blushed a furious red and scurried behind the cooking counters.

“That’s all from me. Anyone have anything they’d like to add?”

No one spoke, but the mood wasn’t bad. The camp resumed eating, armed with new conversational topics.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief, giving Theo a subtle nod. If she hadn’t handled it this way, Kendle’s body might have been found tomorrow morning. *I saved your life again, Kendle. You owe me.*

Below, Kendle caught the thought and shuddered. *I’d probably be better off dead.*

**2**

“Man, this is a lot of noise.” Wade looked over at Tommy.

“I agree. I’m glad we’re out here on the ocean so no one can hear it.”

Wade scanned the entertainment floor where almost two-hundred people were enjoying the open shops. Wade and Tommy were hallway sentries. Greg, Neil, Quinn, Doug and several others had been posted inside the entertainment venues. The two bars and the dance club were the loudest, but the theater was also blaring noise. After the quiet they were used to during Safe Haven’s evenings, it was a big adjustment.

Wade handed Tommy his bottle of aspirin. “You look like you could use one.”

Tommy dry swallowed two of the pills and returned the bottle. “Thanks. The music is great. I’m happy everyone is having a good time.”

“But you miss the peace and quiet we used to have?”

“Sometimes.” Tommy didn’t know where he stood in Safe Haven’s hierarchy anymore, despite being on Neil’s Special Forces team. He had been relieved to find his name there, but it hadn’t settled him down. Partnering with Kendle for that brief time had changed him.

Wade made a motion for Donald to relieve them. He pointed toward the cigar shop. “We have two ten-minute breaks. Let’s take one of them now.”

Tommy followed him.

The cigar shop smelled exactly like its name. Leather couches and dark decor, combined with dim lighting, made it the perfect place to go for his headache.

Wade went to a humidor and chose two once expensive cigars. He joined Tommy on the leather couch.

Both men smoked in silence for a moment, listening to the ship around them. Despite all the noise, they could still hear the water. A cruise ship moving through the ocean wasn’t quiet.

“Do you think Pam feels uncomfortable being the only female sentry on duty?”

Tommy cracked his back. “Shawn’s down the hall, watching over the Build-A-Bear workshop. I’m sure he’s keeping track of her. She’s fine.”

“Still, I’ll bet it makes her a little uncomfortable. We should speak to the boss about getting more female Eagles back on duty.”

“She said we all have to take a skills test.” Tommy exhaled a large cloud and looked at him. “Do you think she might eliminate female Eagles?”

“No. There are more women in Safe Haven than there are men. She needs them to be Eagles.”

Tommy nodded. “That makes sense. She’s definitely right. None of us are even level anymore. It is starting to feel like we’re not on teams.”

“Hopefully she’ll be able to sort that out. Any idea what type of test she’s got planned?”

Tommy shrugged. “Despite being Special Forces, I’m not usually in on those discussions.”

“Me either. We do stand duty for them during, though.”

Tommy snorted. “Without gifts, I’m positive I’m missing a lot of those moments.”

Wade concurred but didn’t voice another opinion as camp members came into the cigar shop.

A group of women crowded around the counter and immediately began lighting the cigars they found.

The two men were a bit surprised. They weren’t used to women smoking cigars.

The females ignored the Eagles, assuming they were having a quiet moment together. It was also because both guys were on Neil’s team. They were the highest Eagles here. Bugging them was a bad idea. A couple of the women did steal glances at the men, wondering if they were single. Special Forces Eagles were a great catch if someone could reel them in.

Tommy felt the air shift and shook his head. “Not available, ladies.”

All attention switched to Wade.

Wade flushed down to his roots. “I am, but I’m not. We’re on a duty break.” He was a bit surprised Tommy had shut it down; Wade had already been scanning the Ciemus women for one who was compatible. Loneliness was catching.

“I’m Diana.” The Amazonian female scanned Wade from hat to boot. “We can have a drink sometime if you’re interested.”

Wade flushed darker. “Uh, okay.”

The girls returned to their cigars without saying anything else.

Tommy got up and left, taking his cigar along. He wasn’t ready to deal with matters of the heart or even sex. After Kendle ripping his guts out and stomping on them, he wasn’t certain he was ever going to be ready.

Tommy moved into the next small area, a DVD and CD shop. The speakers weren’t on in here, but many of the camp members, male and female, were exploring the headphones and iPods. Tommy lingered in the doorway to provide security, enjoying his smoke. He wondered briefly if Angela was going to implement no-smoking rules and then pushed the thought aside. She would cover that when she got to it. He was positive a lot more important things were on her mind than holes in the carpets and ashes on the floor, though the health effects would be taken into consideration.

Tommy wondered how much of the stock in these entertainment rooms would still be intact by the time they reached the island. People were shoving things into their pockets to take to their bunks and not signing it out. In fact, nothing was being kept track of on this floor. He didn’t know if Angela wanted it that way or not, but he also didn’t know if he had the authority to insist camp members register their loot. He took out his notebook and wrote it down.

“Are we doing something wrong?”

Tommy regarded the small group of females to his right. “What?”

Erika pointed at his notebook. “You came in, saw us, and wrote something down. Are we doing something wrong?”

“Just a note to the boss about something we don’t have rules for yet. You’re fine.”

Erika sat the iPod down and began fishing CDs out of her pocket. “I don’t want to break any rules. Maybe I can return for these later?”

Tommy made a dismissive gesture. “Go on and take them. If she didn’t want passengers to have access to this, it wouldn’t be open yet.”

Erika left the electronics on the counter and joined him by the door. She inhaled deeply of the smoke. “That smells good. I quit years ago, but I’m tempted.”

Being polite, Tommy held the cigar out to her. “You can have a hit if you want.”

Erika took it without touching him, wondering why such a high-level Eagle was even speaking to her. She didn’t grasp Safe Haven’s hierarchy yet, but she knew Special Forces was just that–special. She puffed on the cigar, drawing smoke into her mouth, then passed it back.

Tommy also puffed on the cigar. “The boss will get you guys going over the next few days. Then you’ll be too busy to be bored.”

Erika stared at him. “Are you one of them? Is that how you knew?”

“I’m trained to observe details.”

She relaxed. “So you’re like me? Non-magic.”

Tommy nodded.

Erika blew out the smoke and moved toward the counter to collect the items she’d chosen. “Nice to meet you.”

Tommy was surprised he didn’t want her to go yet. To fight that, he walked out the door without another word.

Erika didn’t watch him leave. She could already tell he’d been hurt, and she didn’t want to add to his misery, but she had her own heart ache as well. Much like smoking, men had been crossed off her list.

**3**

“This is nice.”

Gus leaned over, unable to hear. “What?!”

Trinity rested her head against his neck. “I said this is nice.”

Gus put an arm around her. They were in the theater, enjoying Harry Potter, popcorn and candy. When she’d suggested they go on a date, he had brought her here. He wasn’t much of a dancer and he didn’t feel like building a bear. He also wasn’t a drinker.

Thanks to the injuries that were mostly healed now, he and a few other Eagles were still on medical leave. Gus didn’t mind, but many of the other guys did. Zack and Ramer were both in the bar, complaining. Gus could hear it from here. Donald and Molly were at the small putt-putt course, taking their aggravation out on golf balls. A lot of the older population was also on the golf course, but most of the younger crowd had gravitated toward either the theater or the clubs. Pregnant women were grouped at the bear workshop, while the loners were either in the cigar shop or the bookstore that had a self-service coffee center set up. Angela had found something for every demographic of the camp, including the hardened Eagles who were upstairs in the descendant lesson or standing guard. They would come down as their shifts ended. Gus approved. People needed to be kept busy or they would find their own entertainments.

Trinity tried to get closer, but Gus wasn’t in the mood for it. Brittani had visited him in the infirmary, but it had infuriated him. Now, he was sad. Reconciliation was not in their future. It had crushed him all over again.

Trinity felt the resistance but didn’t yield. She ran her hand down his arm and tangled her fingers with his.

Gus allowed it, but his heart wasn’t in it. He had thought he and Brittani would be together forever. It was awful to find out how wrong he was. Getting a quick replacement didn’t feel right.

A few rows behind them, Lou and his brothers observed the movie and Gus. They loved him the same as they did Brittani. They were hoping both of them would be able to find happiness as they moved on, but it wasn’t looking good right now. Gus wasn’t the only one avoiding his new mate. Brittani was in the galley, cleaning up from the meal. She’d refused to join the descendant lesson on the top deck because she’d thought Gus would be there, but she also hadn’t wanted to perform in front of everyone, including Daryl. Lou had been glad when Gus and Trinity had come to the theater.

Lou appreciated Angela’s foresight in having entertainment areas open, but he wasn’t sure leaving all the camp members attended by non-magic guards was a good idea. There was no one here but Gus to read bad thoughts as they were happening. Lou suddenly wished he was a descendant too and tried to smother the desire. Over half the camp wished they were magic users. They were all adjusting to the fact they weren’t part of the chosen bloodline. It hurt a little.

Lou watched Gus pat Trinity’s hand and place it back on her own armrest. He frowned. *Maybe he needs to get laid. That always puts me in a better mood.*

Next to him, Katie snickered.

Lou turned to look her.

Katie stared back, brow lifted. *What?*

Lou shrugged. *I thought the descendants were supposed to be on the top deck.*

Katie turned to the movie without replying.

Lou understood she hadn’t accepted her new abilities yet. He didn’t know if he should tell someone.

Lou didn’t push the matter, deciding not to tell. Coming to terms with something like this was a big deal. *I would need time to adjust if I were like that.* Lou shifted his attention back to the movie and left her alone.

Katie stole looks at him, impressed he wasn’t going to immediately run and tattle. *Maybe he and I can be friends.*

In front of them, Gus gave Trinity an excuse and left the theater. He wasn’t in the mood for romance and he didn’t need more time to heal. He’d been worrying over being able to keep up with the Eagles, but it didn’t matter. *I have to try.*

Gus went to the stairs and headed for the top deck. It was time to take his place by the other descendants and let fate put him where he was supposed to be.

Chapter Nineteen

**Dangerous People**

**A picture containing spectacles

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“B**ring up the last shield!”

The descendants on the front deck struggled to build the fourth shield needed to pass to the next lesson. Angela had sworn they wouldn’t be taught anything else until they mastered this.

“Now hold it in place.” Angela knew most of them wouldn’t be able to maintain the barriers for long. “We’re going to begin each lesson this way. Once official training opens, you’ll be given time to practice. Hold those shields as long as you can. You’re out if you can’t keep it up.”

Amusement caused a few of the shields to drop right then.

Angela laughed, pointing. “Out.”

The top deck of the huge ship was lit by candles on the tables and lanterns tied to banisters and rails. The dark sky over the ship couldn’t hide the fact that they were surrounded by water. It was impossible to miss the sound of it slapping against the hull and the smell of it, both salty and fishy, blowing through the lesson. None of them were used to such an eerie environment. Angela was counting on that to throw some of the more confident people off their game and to toughen up the less experienced fighters. It was impossible to guess what they would face when they returned to America, but it was likely the conditions would be dark. She doubted their country would get it together while they were gone.

Moonlight beamed down for a minute, freed by the constant grit that was present even out over the ocean. The mood lifted.

Ahead, storm clouds were gathering. Only a few of the fighters had noticed. They were enjoying the class and the company. One of those who did notice was Samantha. Like the students, she was fascinated by the magic show, but she wasn’t involved. It allowed her to spot the ominous horizon. By dawn, they would be riding rough seas.

Samantha had been carried up the stairs by Neil and was now sitting in a cushy chair with a warm drink and a blanket. Extra pillows made it almost comfortable. She was wearing shorts that allowed everyone to see the scar where she’d been impaled. It was an ironic match to how Jeremy had died. Carrying the constant reminder had to be awful. Everyone felt bad for her.

In the bridge atop the ship, Grant was also aware of the coming storm. He hated not having radar to track it. If the wind didn’t shift soon, he would speak to Samantha while everyone was distracted by the lesson.

“Focus!” Angela wasn’t being nice to anyone. She needed them excited or angry to fuel weak energy banks. Without it, those banks wouldn’t grow. “You have to get this. It’s the easiest part!”

Debra cringed even though she couldn’t hear the shout.

Angela walked the lines, poking people, pushing them, trying to break their concentration.

“Out! Out!”

Angela swept the five remaining descendants who still had shields, narrowing in.

All five men braced for an attack. Marc, Adrian, Kenn and Ivan had larger energy banks, so they’d been able to last longer.

Angela fired a mild blast of flames. “Absorb it!”

Morgan ducked, letting the fire go over him. It slammed into the railing.

People laughed as Ian rushed over to put it out with the extinguisher he’d been given at the start of the class.

Everyone else grabbed part of the blast and inhaled.

Those men dropped to their knees at the pain of different levels refilling them.

Angela gestured. “When you take energy, you’re vulnerable. The choices are to become immune to pain or use an even match. Since we’ll never be able to evenly match in a fight, we have to learn to ignore the pain.” Angela gestured Jennifer forward.

On duty over the top deck, Kyle eased closer to make sure his wife wasn’t harmed.

Jennifer brought up all four shields and waited. She hadn’t participated until now because Angela had wanted her helping the others. *I get to play too!*

Angela chuckled. “Don’t hold back, then, Enforcer. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Jennifer used a powerful heat wave that burned without flames.

Angela bounced it, depending on Marc and Adrian to shield people from wayward hits.

The spell flew over the rail and into the dirty water.

The ocean roared approval, begging for more.

Angela fired back, using a flame spray at a high level.

Jennifer sucked them in and immediately blasted them back out, hitting Angela with her own spell.

“Wow. That’s scary.” Ian returned to his post over Samantha, entranced by the display. They’d all wondered what made an enforcer special.

Samantha popped a bubble at him, enjoying the treat from the movie theater. It was stale but still tasted wonderful to her. She knew better than to speak in front of Ian.

Angela fired, sending ice this time.

Not ready, Jennifer tried a risky move and was forced to drop to her knees.

“She tried to take the energy and send it out as a new layer of her shield. That’s hard but very needed during a battle. You have to keep all four layers of it up while you fight.” Angela waited for Jennifer to stand. She lowered her shield. “Hit me hard.”

Jennifer’s wave of rage felt real to all of them. She uttered an ugly curse as she threw.

Kyle stared in surprised desire. *I didn’t know she knew that word.*

Angela grabbed the anger blast out of the air and held it with her shield. The rage pinged off the inside of the bubble too quickly to be more than a blur. “Our shields can hold things.” She inhaled, slow and deep. “It gives us time to recharge and to aim.” She dropped the bubble and ducked.

The rage flew over her head and hit Adrian’s shield. It bounced into the air and slammed down near Jennifer’s feet.

The ship shuddered.

Angela frowned, waving a hand to smother the heat. “Yeah, sorry. Someone put us in a bigger shield, please. Don’t want to damage our ride.”

People chuckled nervously as Marc brought up a barrier around the group.

Calm filled the air as Adrian soothed the startled ship that hadn’t been expecting the blow.

Angela pointed. “No one leaves this deck until they can grab a blast from someone, hold it, refill from it and send it back.”

“What?”

“That’s too much!”

Kenn smirked at the complaints.

Ivan nodded to him, glad he’d had the warning. It would impress Angela if he could keep up with the people who’d known about their ancestry longer than he had. Her respect meant everything. Ivan waved Kenn over, hoping the Marine felt the same.

Kenn grimaced but joined him. He’d expected to be paired with Adrian.

“You’re mine.” Jennifer strode to Adrian’s side and waited for his reaction.

Adrian didn’t give her one but inside, he was thrilled to be working with her. He hadn’t gotten to help Jennifer yet since she joined Safe Haven and if Angela had chosen the girl as her successor, she had to be talented.

“I am.” Jennifer turned cold. “Be careful.”

Adrian flashed to his conversation with Marc. “We will. No more mistakes.”

Jennifer positioned herself a few feet in front of him. “She wants your old V formation used as much as possible. Add it in here somewhere.”

“You got it.” Delighted, Adrian began planning the lesson. He didn’t mind being put on the spot. He already knew what they needed and how to get them there. All he’d needed was permission.

Marc watched Angela, uncomfortable with her being surrounded by descendants. Any of them could be like Becky.

*They’re not. These are all her converts*. Ivan proudly included himself. *I’ve searched them all. No one has doors or barriers up against me right now. It’s almost amazing.*

*Almost?*

Ivan regarded him across the crowd of excited people. *I can’t get in to yours.*

Marc felt the emotional blow, but he wasn’t ready to trust Ivan yet. The soldier still had to prove himself.

Ivan had expected the reaction. *I’m not a trained monkey. She’s the only one I have to prove things to. Hold onto your bitterness and jealousy. Soon, it’s all you’ll have*. Ivan looked away before Marc could fire back. He didn’t want the lesson interrupted. Angela was happy right now. Nothing was allowed to interfere with the feel of her pleasure.

Kenn nudged Marc toward the lone figure near them. “Boss said to put you with her.” Kenn slid into the safety of the crowd before Marc could explode.

Kendle stared at Marc, silently begging for another chance. Her green scrubs seemed to glow in the darkness.

“I’m sitting this one out to observe.” Marc walked away.

Kendle felt tears coming again. She dropped into a sunbathing chair and crossed her arms over her chest. *I won’t cry. I won’t cry.*

Those who caught her misery felt a momentary twinge at her discomfort, then pushed it aside. She’d earned this and more.

Angela joined Marc on the sidelines and leaned against his heat.

Marc tugged her under his arm; fighting was on hold for the moment.

“You’ll tell me when that starts to bother you?”

“You’ll know.” Marc shifted so he could view her face. “Why does it matter?”

Angela kept her happy mask on for their audience. “It’ll be enough for the camp too at that point. If I cross the line, it endangers my place here.”

Tension returned. Marc dropped his arm. “Always worried about your ass being covered. I wonder who taught you that.”

Angela straightened, flashing a warm smile at her mentor. “He taught me a lot of things; he wouldn’t expect me to fall in line until the next time he got horny.” She winced at Marc’s intake of breath. “I won’t retract that. You made a deal with me and reneged on it. You’ve made deals with Kenn and Adrian, then defaulted on them. It’s the reputation you’ve built.”

“This is war. Lying to your enemy is perfectly acceptable.”

Angela chuckled harshly. “Are we enemies, Marc?”

“Of course not!”

“But you treat me like one when things don’t go your way.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, nothing is going my way. More importantly, nothing is going the way we needed it to for this camp to have peace. That damn Dizzyland meeting changed everything.”

“Why?”

“Why?! You know why. We would be doing it for nothing.”

“Maybe not. You and Adrian have several plans in the works and others you’ve shelved until a better time. Are any of those viable?”

Marc realized she was serious. “You don’t know.”

She sighed, head shaking. “Another evolution, I suspect. Searching our future again is too dangerous right now.” She opened the mental connection between them. *Tell me. Help me merge all three brains for a solution I can use.*

Marc let her in.

Angela studied all the plots and schemes the two men were laboring over in secret, memorizing parts to merge with what she already had. When she exited his strategy center, she was still short a full corner of the puzzle. She stored the information and returned to observing the lesson.

Marc had skimmed her plans while she studied his. He was impressed and a bit excited that one of his deals with Adrian might work. *Years without seeing him. I can’t wait.*

Angela was also intrigued. *Years of a monthly lesson in his hut. Years of not hearing him and Marc fight anymore. Years of quiet training for the more advanced fighters. It’s perfect.*

The tension broke. It swept across the deck, adding strength to shields.

Involved in the lesson, Adrian still caught it all. He was the king of magical multitasking. He kept the same polite expression but inside, he celebrated. This deal would give Safe Haven everything it needed. And it would work out personally. Marc wouldn’t ask how their lessons went. He wouldn’t scan her thoughts or accuse her of betrayals. Angela would be free to visit as long as she wanted on those days, without pressure from either of them. *Now all I have to do is shove my feelings back into the box they arrived in. I can’t make a single move on her the entire time.*

“Room for one more?”

Angela signaled Gus over to be Kendle’s partner.

Gus took the spot without complaint, glad he was welcome.

Eagles who’d been stressing over the few missing descendants nodded approval.

Kendle was surprised. She tried to be friendly as she stood. “You can pull the demo from my mind.”

Across the training field, Ivan and Kenn were putting on a show. They’d quickly found a groove and were tossing flames like baseballs. Both men had mastered the inhale by giving each other time to recover between throws. They were now working on immunity while expanding the banks by taking in as much energy as they could hold, and then that little bit more for enlargement.

*Stretching. It was in the history book.* Angela nudged Marc. “Make it a three-way.”

Marc went, firing at both men.

Angela watched Gus joke with Kendle to put her at ease and help keep her attention on the flames he was tossing at her.

No one liked how easily Kendle caught and held the fire.

Angela wasn’t surprised by it. Kendle had been out in the wilderness on her own. She’d learned a few tricks.

Next to Kendle and Gus, Adrian and Jennifer were discussing the lesson while bouncing her flames back-and-forth off their shields like a tennis ball. They weren’t practicing the inhale like they were supposed to be, but Angela didn’t interfere. This first session needed to have leeway for a little exploration.

Kenn and Ivan, not far away and not to be outdone, ganged up on Marc. They both began tossing fire and ice at him in rapid succession.

Marc expanded his shield, pushing them backward as he moved forward.

People clapped as he pinned them against the rail.

Adrian whistled. “Ladies on the left; gentleman on the right. Line up in the V.”

The men and women separated, standing across from each other on the dim deck. Sparks flew as flirtations grew.

“We’re going to call this the battle of the sexes. Lineup in the V formation you learned in the rookie classes. If you haven’t had those yet, watch everyone else. They’ll show you what to do.” Adrian pointed at Angela. “You lead the females. Marc will lead the men.”

Marc and Angela moved into place. It made sense they would lead the teams and Adrian would train them all. It was obvious he’d always wanted this. His pleasure flowed over them in thick waves, reminding everyone why he had been their leader.

“On a count of three, everyone in the rear two rows will bring up a shield. Rear people only, will bounce hits to the opposite team. Front people will fire only. The team who gets a hit over their opponent’s head gets a point. First team to five wins.”

Angela threw as soon as he stopped talking, trying to catch Marc off guard.

Up on the bridge, Grant tried not to get distracted by the fireworks show, but it was hard. He’d heard about these amazing people for months and imagined what they’d be like. When he finally joined Safe Haven, Grant had experienced disappointments about the realities, but in a moment like this, it was easy to believe they truly were the chosen people. The beach battle had proven it. This was driving it in.

**2**

“Welcome to anger management class.” Jeff gestured at a group of kids loitering by the door. “Come in and sit.”

The western UN kids did it right away, as did the camp children. Everyone else stared at him as if he’d lost his mind.

“We’re going to the Eagle training room after this. Sit and listen.”

Now they rushed to the seats in the gymnasium.

“My name is Jeff. I’m a descendant. If you screw with me, we’ll have trouble. If you follow the rules, we can have fun–like taking field trips. I won’t keep you cooped up. We’ll go places and do things, but you have to do what I tell you or Angela will take away our trips. You don’t want that, do you?”

Even Leeann shook her head. She was sitting by herself, being shunned by her group.

“Good. We have anger left from the sickness. We were healed, but we remember what it was like. Sometimes, we miss it. Then we get angry because that’s not allowed here.” Jeff pulled the sheet off a large piece of equipment. “When it gets too bad, we’ll have our own cage matches.”

UN kids screamed in eagerness, startling the children who didn’t know about the nightly matches.

“We won’t use the cage first. I expect you to control yourself, to use the other outlets. Once a week, we’ll have a group cage match. No one *ever* dies in these matches. That’s rule number one, kiddos: We’re never allowed to hurt someone again, unless we’re ordered to do it by a top Eagle or council member.”

Kimmie’s face squished up. “We have to be peaceful on the boat and the island. When we return to America, you’ll want us to kill again. Does that make sense to you?”

Jeff sighed. “No, it doesn’t, but the boss makes the rules, not me.”

“She doesn’t have a choice.” Cody opened his hands to reveal Angela’s star map.

Guards gawked.

Cody didn’t worry over getting in trouble. “I copied it. See this star? That’s where the bad people live. *They* make us fight. If they were stopped, we wouldn’t have to kill anymore.” Cody released the magic, swaying. It took a lot of power to open that door for even a few seconds.

The other descendant children were in awe of Cody for being so gifted. They wished they were like him.

The camp kids envied him because his mother and father were both badass. They wanted his life, his two parents. The sentries worried over him because he was a valuable target. They wanted him under protection at all times.

Jeff felt those emotions; the boy was special even for their kind. “Situations like this are confusing. That can turn to anger. When you feel it rising, there are steps you need to take. The first one is to do a workout. By that, I mean clean the ocean. You can do it anytime, unless it’s storming. It makes you sleepy and gives the anger to the ocean, who needs it to clean the garbage left from the war. If that isn’t enough or it’s storming, you take a cold shower.” He scanned the slightly bored kids. “If all that doesn’t work, you can come here to the cage and one of the Special Forces men will spar with you.”

Kids perked up again.

Jeff frowned. “Remember what Angela said. Hurting an Eagle is a crime in Safe Haven. You have to try to get rid of the anger before you get into the cage. She means it when she says she’ll remove you.”

“I don’t think she’d get rid of us.” Dion was basking in the setup. The UN had been much harsher.

“You haven’t seen her angry. She doesn’t bluff.” Jeff waved to the sentries on the entrance. “We’ll take a walk now and get a workout in the training room. Remember your lesson with Monica. Don’t tear through the halls. Be calm and smile. No one can resist a smile from a cute kid.”

Jeff waited until they were lined up. “Follow Molly. And don’t wear her out. She’s on duty against orders. She should be in the infirmary healing up from being wounded during the beach fight.”

The kids left, chattering. Jeff followed in the rear, stewing. Kimmie said he was the only descendant who could resist Angela’s pull, but Cody had connected him almost as soon as he’d arrived. Jeff doubted his immunity was still intact. She’d removed his free will and he’d accepted it gratefully.

Kimmie skipped along next to him, stealing looks.

“I’m fine.”

She huffed. “You don’t look fine.”

Jeff sighed. “I don’t like losing my freedom. You understand.”

“What freedom have you lost?”

“The ability to tell Angela no on anything.”

Kimmie frowned. “Says who?”

“Isn’t that how it works when we connect to the hive?”

Kimmie laughed. “No. You still have free will. You just have to feel what she does. It tempers the choices when you experience her pain or her anger.”

“Why did I have to be connected? She didn’t do that to anyone else from what I’ve heard.”

“You blocked her by shutting the mental link. I didn’t know that before. Everyone else was already bonded to her.”

“You’ve been snooping in memories.”

“Yes.”

Jeff liked it that Kimmie didn’t lie or seem to be ashamed. “Why?”

“I needed to know what kind of people were around the alpha.”

Jeff smiled. “And?”

Kimmie’s expression darkened. “This is a dangerous ship. These are all dangerous people. She has to be careful.”

“I’ll let her know.”

“No need. She’s always known. In fact, she helped make many of them this way. If they aren’t dangerous, they won’t survive what’s ahead.”

Jeff paused.

Kimmie stopped by him in the hall, looking up. “What do you want to know?”

“It’s not right for me to ask you.”

“No, but it’s too late now. Tell me.”

Jeff leaned in to keep passing passengers from hearing. “What’s waiting for us on that island?”

Kimmie grumbled. “She forbade me to search that future.”

“Can you do it anyway?”

“Yes, but she’d know. I would be punished.”

“A week of scrubbing toilets?” Jeff joked.

Kimmie lowered her voice. “She would lock my gifts because I can’t be trusted.”

After Leeann’s runaway attempt, Jeff thought that should happen to all the kids now. “Would it be so bad?”

Kimmie shrugged. “Don’t know. Not gonna find out. Ask someone else.” She pranced down the hallway after the group of docile kids, flashing dimples at curious guards.

“Maybe I will.” Jeff followed, still stewing.

**3**

“Why didn’t you come up for dinner?” Kenn entered the lab. “I had to sit by myself.”

Tonya glanced up from the papers spread out in front of her. “I missed dinner?”

“Sort of, yeah.” Kenn chuckled. He sat a plate near her hand.

Tonya took a big bite of the sandwich. “Wow. Brittani did a good job on this.” She took another bite, groaning.

Kenn sat nearby and swept the small lab. Tonya had everything out of boxes and put away. The neatly disassembled cartons were stacked by a window with closed curtains. Along the wide wall, Tonya had pushed two smaller desks together to create a large space where she had microscopes and other equipment now set up. Her desk was across from it and sported most of the remaining mess. Kenn didn’t see a grow closet for her next batch of pot. *I wonder where she stashed it.*

Tonya pointed up.

Kenn grinned when he saw the plants were suspended from hooks, like ferns. “How long will that hold?”

“Until they start stinking, and then everyone will be down here trying to clip parts off. I’ll have to sneak it to the garden, where it’s protected.”

Kenn snickered. “Is pot a companion plant?”

“Yes.” Tonya swallowed, moaning at the taste of the food. “It grows well with basil.”

“I’ll let Samantha know to keep a small area clear.”

“Don’t bother. These guys will go into a grow bag system. I can’t have them contaminated by her food plants. I need this batch to be as pure as possible.”

Kenn liked her confident tone. “You really believe the oil will help?”

“I do, but it isn’t just for the oil. Hemp makes great rope and we didn’t bring many of those, you know?”

He nodded. “We couldn’t find much beyond basic lengths in hardware stores. Ropes left in the open rotted faster than the labels claimed.”

“Well, acid rain can have that effect.”

Kenn swept her desk again. “What are you working on now?”

“Rage tests.”

Kenn frowned. “They were all healed.”

“We don’t know that for sure.” Tonya didn’t want to voice her concerns.

“We haven’t had another issue...”

“Yet.” She sighed. “Honestly, I’m more concerned with reinfection. Can they get it again? What if we get to the island and the sickness is still there? Most of the camp hasn’t had it, so they won’t have an immunity even if it works that way. And we don’t know that yet either. We might be able to get it over and over, every time we have contact.”

Kenn’s scowl had grown with every sentence she uttered. “Did the boss put you on this?”

“Just keeping busy.”

Kenn put a note in his book. “Angela may not want you to mention it around the camp. Don’t step on her toes.”

“I won’t.” Tonya stuffed the sandwich back together for the last bite. It had slid apart as she devoured it. “When I perfect the test, I’ll let her know. She can roll it out as she sees fit.”

“How are you learning this stuff so fast?”

Tonya didn’t stiffen, though her heart picked up a beat. “I had some classes in school. Then I hooked up with a chemistry major for about a year after I ran away. He liked to yap, and I was paid to listen.”

“You learned how to do this, from all that?”

“I had some odd hobbies before the war.” Tonya pointed, hoping her last evasion would work. “I’m also using the training books Angela sent.”

“Good.” Kenn knew Angela wouldn’t have sent books unless there was a reason. “She must think you can do it.”

Tonya smiled. “Feels nice to have someone believe in me, even if it is your ex.”

Kenn sniggered. “Still jealous?”

“Still hot for her?”

Kenn tried to laugh it off but deep down, there was only one answer.

Tonya grunted, hand going to her stomach. “I just got kicked, I think.”

The couple was instantly distracted by trying to feel their baby.

Guards on the door wrote it in the nightly reports. Kenn was asking questions about the tests. It wouldn’t be long before the rest of the Eagles were too. Then the camp would follow. Angela needed to get ready to have her lab work exposed to the public.

**4**

“It’s bedtime, Safe Haven.” Speakers crackled with Grant’s tired voice. “Anyone who does not have duty should go to the living quarters for showers and sleep.”

Hallways filled with people from classes, the entertainment deck, and the gym.

Angela and frowning den mothers slid against the walls to let wild kids go by.

The living quarters at bedtime were chaos. Three hundred people crammed in together to get showers, brush their teeth and hair, get changed, and find privacy to do all of those things. The sound of doors slamming and toilets flushing was louder than anything else on the ship.

Kids ran back and forth, adding to the din of constant movement. Angela was looking forward to the time when they would be settled down, but she didn’t interrupt or scold. They had only been aboard a few days. It took time to adjust, though she wished they would hurry up. Life on the boat was no different than on land, except they had to pay more attention to the weather and walls. Once they got that through their heads, everyone would probably be so bored she would have to schedule entertainments to kept them interested. “Let’s see their schedule.”

Molly handed her the sheet of paper, glad Angela wasn’t complaining about her being on duty. Molly was only escorting the kids between classes, but she was already exhausted. It felt good. “We all agreed on it, even Marc.”

Angela skimmed the list.

**Kids**

8:00-Personal care, showers, dressed.

9:00-Breakfast

10:00-Lesson #1 Angela

11:00-Play time/recess

1:00-Math

2:00-Reading

3:00-Lunch

4:30-Lesson #2 Marc

5:30-Lesson #3 Jeff

6:30-Lesson #4 Adrian

7:00-Dinner

8:00-Free time

10:00-Bedtime routines start

11:00-Lights out/bedtime story

“This is good. Feel free to adjust it as needed.” She gave the sheet back to Molly and rotated toward a group of quiet kids coming down the hall. Leeann was in the center. Her lids were puffy from crying.

Missy came to Angela as the rest of that subdued group entered the living quarters. “She’s going to run again. We can’t stop her.”

“Thank you for trying so hard.”

Missy beamed at her alpha. “Will you read us the story tonight?”

“That’s why I’m here.” She signaled Missy to go in.

Greg felt Angela’s indecision as Leeann passed them. He let out a long sigh. “The Eagles are having a game, after the camp crashes. Let the girl overhear it and we’ll discuss Billy for a few minutes before we find her spying and send her back to bed.”

Angela nodded. “That’s good. Thank you.”

Greg grunted. “The guys won’t like this. You owe me.”

Angela snickered, then sobered. “Can’t be harder than taking fire for me.”

“That was easy. All I had to do was lay there and scream.” Greg laughed off the chills. “I guess that’s what I’ll do when I tell my team.”

Angela’s chuckle hit Greg hard. He turned to scan the opposite hall to keep her from noticing his reaction.

Angela was preoccupied with more noisy kids running by. She followed them into the living quarters, leaving the guards to handle the hallway. *Best time of the night for me starts right now. I love my kids–all of them.*

**5**

“Are you mad at me?”

Samantha shook her head against Neil’s chest. “I understand.” They were in their cabin, in bed. The room was cozy, with too many earth tones in her opinion. It had tan walls, tan cushions, tan blankets, and tan curtains. Everything else was white. She had already put away their belongings, except for Neil’s big duffel bag. It was sitting in front of the closet, waiting for him to get around to it. That was his personal gear and even though they were a couple, she didn’t feel right messing with it.

This almost seemed like a small home for them now, but Samantha wasn’t able to enjoy it for more than a few minutes at a time. Tension had returned with Becky. She doubted it was leaving anytime soon.

Neil had hated his time with Becky. He’d finally been able to see her for the spoiled brat she’d always been. The lack of sympathy bothered him.

“Are you mad I told Angela to do it?”

“No.” He wasn’t. Neil had learned things about himself over the last few days. “I love you. I would never betray you.”

“I know. Some things just have to have closure.”

“Yes.” Neil shifted so he could view her in the dim nightlight. “How are you?”

Samantha was proud of herself for her even tone and lack of tears. “Better now, I think. Thank you for helping me adjust. I know this has been hard on you too.”

“It has. I’d never had a best friend before. I do have some awesome memories, though.” He smiled. “Our shower moments were a favorite for both of us.”

Samantha laughed, glad she finally could.

They lay in quiet for a moment, each lost in their own minds.

Neil hated to ruin the calm, but he needed to know what she had to have to be happy now. Just content wasn’t enough for him. “Do you want me to...search for a partner for us?”

Samantha stiffened. “Where did that come from?”

Neil kissed the top of her head. “I need to know where we stand, Sam. If you like that set up more than this one, I’ll hunt up a guy for us to spend time with.”

“You’d do that?”

“It doesn’t bother me now.” He rubbed her shoulder. “I wish it was Jeremy, of course, but maybe we could adjust to a new friend.”

Samantha shut her lids, holding him tighter. “It’s too soon.”

“Okay.” Neil wasn’t positive avoiding it was the right way to go, but he was happy enough to let this situation linger for a few more weeks or months. After she had the babies, they could discuss it again. He had expected this part to be hard, but he was surprised to discover he did miss the setup they’d had. Another pair of hands to help care for Samantha wasn’t a bad idea. If she got attached, the man might replace Jeremy and give them closure.

Neil felt tears slip onto his bare chest. He sat up. “Sam?”

Samantha forced herself to stop crying, but her tone was full of sobs. “Don’t ever think that around me again. We may get someone to fill a hole here and there, but no one will ever replace Jeremy.”

Neil tugged her back into his arms, realizing his mistake. “I’m sorry, Sammi. I didn’t mean it that way. You know I didn’t.”

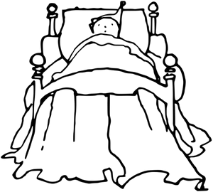
Sam held her head up to his, eager for a distraction. “Love me? We’ll be careful.”

Neil kissed her.

When his turn to groan and shudder came, he took himself in hand and let her help. Real sex was waiting until the babies were born. One of those boys was Jeremy’s son. If anything happened, Neil would never recover.

Chapter Twenty

**Death Sleep**

****

**1**

**M**arc didn’t beat around the bush as he joined Jennifer near the front of the ship. “I’m not going to ask. I just didn’t want to leave you hanging up here.”

“That’s good. You made a good choice.”

Marc studied her. “Then why are you frowning at me?”

Jennifer sighed. “I can’t unlock it on my own.”

“You want to take the risk?”

“Life is a risk.”

“Don’t give me clichés. Give me the truth.”

Jennifer’s brows creased further. “I’m not going to convince you. You made the choice. Now we’ll both live with it.”

Marc shrugged. “Okay, then.”

“Good.”

“Fine.”

Jennifer grinned. “That was fun.”

Marc snorted. “For you.”

“Yep.” Jennifer inspected the water she could see from the deck, refusing to contemplate what was beneath it. “Do you know how to swim?”

“Sure.” Marc stepped closer, getting worried. “You don’t?”

“No.” She dug deeper. “I think we should start swimming lessons.”

Marc immediately wrote it down.

Jennifer fell into the daze, updating him. “Talk to Seth about Amy... Check on the new family... Put a guard on the weapons. The sentries are noticing Cody’s differences. The camp will discover it next. He should have a guard too.”

Marc wrote faster, trying to keep up. She was giving him the nightly report and while it wasn’t his job, he didn’t want to miss any of it.

“Tell her the next meeting might go like she needs. Make contact the way she has planned but go alone.”

Marc added his own note. *If you’re going up to renegotiate with the Messenger, I’m coming too.*

Jennifer returned to the present, yawning. “You need anything else from me?”

“Nope. You’re off duty now, as far as I know.”

“Awesome. Excuse me.” She walked toward the steps. “Where’s that husband of mine?”

Wade pointed her in the right direction. “He’s making sure all the posts are manned before calling it a night.”

“Are they?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Wade watched her go. *Kyle’s a lucky guy.*

Jennifer found Kyle on the stairs. “When does your shift end?”

Kyle glanced up to find Jennifer coming down from the top deck. “Now. My relief’s already roaming posts. I’m just making sure the other slots are covered before I crash.”

Jennifer sat on the steps, glad the camp was sleeping. The descendant lesson had provided entertainment for those who didn’t want to patronize the clubs and shops below, but it had also worn them out. Everyone had been tired and ready to sleep. It was now midnight, shift change.

Kyle chortled. “Why did you ask if you already knew?”

“Ice breaker.”

“You never need an ice breaker with me.” Kyle leered in the moonlight. “Just tell me what you want and it’s yours.”

She hit him with a blast of need. “You, between my legs. Me, moaning your name while I cum all–”

Jennifer gasped as Kyle swept her into his arms and jogged down the stairs toward their cabin.

Kyle kissed her scarred shoulder, shuddering. *I need you!*

Guards leaned out of their way, laughing instead of disapproving. A marriage shouldn’t have made so much difference, but it had, for all of them.

Angela also stepped aside, catching Jennifer’s blush and Kyle’s flush. It was clear what was going on.

Angela trudged toward the next post.

Ivan and his team walked behind her, silently begging her to go to bed.

Angela stopped at the next intersection. She didn’t turn or wave. She didn’t have the energy. “Marc and Adrian will take over duty now. Get lost.”

The happy Marines came out of the shadows.

Ivan and his men handed over reports and vanished.

“That was a twenty-four-hour shift for Ivan.” Adrian was impressed.

Marc was too but he only grunted. They could discuss Ivan some other time. Right now, he wanted to see what Angela was doing next. She really did need to sleep.

“What areas are still active?”

Adrian skimmed the nightly reports for an answer. “Uh... Infirmary had people who can’t sleep without the sedative. The lab has lights on.”

“I’ve got that one.” Weary steps caught up to them. Kenn didn’t linger to chat. “Give me ten minutes and she’ll be in bed. I’ll lock things down there.”

Adrian made a note on who was handling the lab and searched the notes again. “I think that’s it. The bridge is wide awake, the galley has snacks and coffee for the sentries, and the infirmary has people awake.”

“I have a nightly report from Ray.” Marc was also sorting through the notes. “The captain woke from his nap and ordered the guards to go get showers so he didn’t puke from the smell.”

Angela chuckled as she leaned against the wall. “The infirmary first.”

Both men sighed but neither argued. Angela was also at the twenty-hour mark. If she believed she could keep going, they would follow.

Angela didn’t move.

Adrian stepped closer, sensing her knees buckling.

Marc waited until she started to fall and scooped her into his arms, bumping Adrian aside. “Check the notes. I don’t know where her cabin is.”

Adrian scanned, not offended. If he’d known Marc was watching for it too, he wouldn’t have tried at all. “Cabin 799.” He pulled out a small map of the ship and pointed. “That way.”

Marc followed Adrian’s instructions, trying not to laugh. She was already snoring against his chest.

“Who has point over the ship right now?”

Marc’s mirth faded. “Why? You want it?”

Adrian snorted at the reminder of his status. “Just need to alert them their shift has begun.”

“She gave it to Whitney and Greg. They’re already on duty.”

Adrian relaxed. “Splits, like on the final leg to the shore.”

“Yes, though you shouldn’t know. You weren’t even in camp then.”

“Logical conclusion based on evidence.”

“More like snooping in memories for images of Angela.”

“Not just Angela. I need to know everything happening in this camp. It’s easier because I’m an outcast. I can be in the shadows. It’s where people want me now anyway.”

“Why?”

“So I can keep predicting the future. You forget, I’ve never been able to search ahead like she does. I’ve always had to use my brain to stay ahead of the pack.”

Marc waited for Adrian to consult the map at the next intersection. *She needs to eat more.* Her weight was nothing in his arms.

“Um, that’s you, actually. She’s been bulking you up.” Adrian patted Marc’s thick arm. “As big as Kenn now.”

Adrian laughed at Marc’s stunned expression. “Nightly hot chocolate no matter what, right?”

Marc was dumbfounded. “Protein powder.”

Adrian snickered. “She’s slick. You have to admire that.”

“Or be afraid of it.” Marc stopped outside the correct cabin, frowning. These were the tiniest rooms on the ship.

“She hates for people to think she’s acting like a leader from the old world.”

“Even though she’ll be a queen in the future.”

“A President, but yes. Humility is also another reason to admire her. I certainly couldn’t handle it.”

“Arrogance is one of your bigger talents.”

Adrian cackled, closing the door behind them. “Thank you. Nicest thing you’ve said in an hour.”

Marc snorted, easing around the tightly placed furniture. “We’re switching cabins tomorrow. Pick one I’d approve of. I’ll adjust the numbers on the paperwork. When she asks, tell her Ivan did it.”

Adrian sniggered, pulling the blankets down. “Okay.”

Marc put her on the bed and began removing her boots. He didn’t mind this part of caring for her. It was what he’d thought he would be doing all along.

“She still needs a good body man.” Adrian took the filthy boots and put them into the shower. He would scrub them later and bring her a pair of gym shoes so she would be comfortable while her boots dried. “Maybe when we return, she’ll give you another chance.”

“Maybe.” Marc got her out of the heavy Eagle jacket and deftly unsnapped her bra. He pulled the blanket to her chin and switched out the light on her side table. He retreated, now shoulder to shoulder with Adrian. There wasn’t space to be anywhere else.

Adrian saw the cramped chair and sighed. “I’ll be there. You should hold her. She loves waking in your arms.”

Marc pointed at a lever. “It leans. She isn’t punishing you with that one, just herself.”

Adrian dropped into the small chair and hit the button.

The footrest snapped up, tipping him over.

He slid backward out of the chair and smacked into the wall.

Marc fell on the bed, laughing so hard he couldn’t breathe.

Angela didn’t budge.

Adrian stared at the bed from his painful position, fall already forgotten. “She should have woken up. The guards heard that down the hall.”

“Everything okay in there?” Travis tapped on the door.

“We’re fine. Tripped.” Marc was still chuckling. He couldn’t help it.

“Well, trip somewhere else and let the boss sleep or Eagles will remove both of you from this position.”

That sobered Marc.

Adrian pushed up onto his knees, expression grim. “It’s the death sleep.”

“The what?”

“She died. We brought her back...or she demanded to come home, and they allowed it. Now she’s evolving. While it happens, she’ll be in the death sleep.”

“Named that because nothing wakes them until they’re ready?” Marc knew better, but he was allowed to hope.

“It’s named that because the person goes through such a big evolution that their minds and bodies can’t always handle it. Sometimes they die during the process.”

Marc swept Adrian’s memories of her death and shook his head. “If they wanted her dead, they would have kept her up there then or when we visited. We just have to worry about her evolution.”

“Why?”

“What could be so big that she doesn’t already have?”

“Damn. I didn’t think about it that way.” Adrian climbed back into the slippery chair and began stewing on it.

Marc slid into the bed and wrapped his arms around Angela’s body, doing the same.

Around them, the ship creaked and groaned, sliding through the water at the grace of the ocean king.

**2**

“Thank you for escorting me to my cabin.” On the way, Candy had noticed Conner had a limp, but she didn’t bring it up. He’d been shot in the leg in Little Rock. That type of injury took a long time to heal and often did lasting damage. When he was tired, it would probably always bother him.

“It’s my honor.” Conner opened the door for her and scanned the small residence. He was pleased to find it clean. She had put away her things and even gathered garbage and put it by the door for the cleaning crew to collect. Everything looked proper, in its place, but more importantly, she looked happy as she moved around the room. Conner hoped it was true.

Her cabin wasn’t different than the others, except in the color. He had mentioned to Kenn and Angela that Candy preferred pink. It was nice to find her cabin decorated in that hue. All the pillows, blankets, towels and curtains matched the paint. He hoped she enjoyed it. “I’m down the hall. Next to Ivan.”

“He’s good.”

“Yeah. You know, he refused a permanent cabin with Jayda? He wants to be with all Eagles when the final assignments are handed out.”

“That’s interesting.” Candy placed her bag on the small desk. She studied Conner, cheeks red.

Conner felt the wave of need she was trying to smother. He flipped on the bedside lamp and went to the door. It was getting harder and harder to resist throwing hints and whiffs of sexual energy. He wanted her, in every way.

Candy almost let him leave. She was reaching out to shut the door behind him when he stopped to ask if she had enough blankets. His arm slid against her hand, making them both stiffen. Desire filled the air.

“I should go now.” Conner swallowed the lump in his throat. “See you in the morning?”

Candy let her hand run up his shoulder. “Stay with me?”

Conner froze.

“Just as a guard.” Candy wasn’t sure if she’d pushed too hard. “The chair over there by the bathroom folds out.”

Conner knew he should say no. “Are you...afraid to be alone right now?”

Candy gave a fast nod. “Yes, that’s it. I don’t want to be alone.”

Conner locked the door. He turned to face her, heart thumping. “You should get in bed.”

Candy groaned. “I do need to be in bed. It’s better when I’m lying down.” She flushed scarlet. “To sleep, I mean.”

Conner sniggered at her nervous chirps. “Just tell me what you want. I’ll try to give it to you without breaking a lot of rules.”

Candy sent the memory of what he’d done for them before.

Conner swallowed again, heat rising. “But with you lying down?”

She swallowed, throat suddenly parched. “My feet hurt. I need to get off.”

Conner gasped.

Candy groaned. “My feet! I need to get off my feet!”

“I’ll give you a knock out and then go get a shower. How’s that?”

“No.” Candy sat on the bed. “I didn’t get to see it last time.”

Conner broke. He sat on the edge of the bed next to her and drew in a deep breath. “We’re not going all the way.”

“No, of course not! We’re just...”

“Exploring to discover if we’re compatible.”

“Yes!” She eased out of her shoes and then her jacket, aware of his tense body and hot eyes. “Help me undo my shirt?”

Conner gulped. “Whatever you want.”

“I want you to stop holding back for a little while, okay? I need to feel it.”

Conner let the need show. “But just for an hour, okay? When the guards come by, I want them to see us sleeping, in different beds.”

“Agreed.” She arched her body. “Now help me let the girls out.”

Conner laughed, hands coming up. “Free range is best.”

**3**

*I need a drink.*

Daryl grabbed a beer off the shelf and twisted around. “Here ya...” He glanced down at the wolf in surprise.

Dog pawed the plate he’d swiped from the galley. *Right here, friend. Fill me up.*

Daryl knelt and poured half the bottle into the paper plate, chuckling. Eagle downtime was being held in the smaller gymnasium. The senior men had already set up various perks the Eagles were used to, and then added more. There was now an instant coffee machine on the counter and a basket of snacks. The tables for them to smoke and play games were set up the same as usual.

Dog went to town on the beer. *Yum! That’s good! I needed this!*

Daryl refilled the plate at Dog’s whine.

Dog sucked down the second helping and let out a loud belch. *Thank you! Fill me up.*

Daryl emptied the bottle, laughing. He put it in the bin next to them. “Hard day?”

*You have no idea.* Dog licked the foam from his whiskers and muzzle, then dropped down to finish the rest.

“Cats?”

*Where?!* Dog yelped, spinning to confront the felines.

Guards burst out laughing, able to figure out what was going on. The cats were ready for bed. Faint yowls made their way through the halls.

Dog whimpered. *Hide me!*

“I thought you liked sleeping with them.”

Dog grumped and sat. *The warm weight on my back is nice, but they stick their claws in me when they’re happy. It’s just sick, man!*

Daryl used Eagle code to have Whitney shut the door. “Better?”

Dog lapped up the rest of the beer. *I will be after you fill me up again.*

Daryl did, wondering what Dog would be like drunk.

Thick smoke swirled around the three dozen men enjoying downtime together. Most were playing cards at the center tables. The rest were gathered around the edges of the room in small groups where they chatted about things they’d gone through or things they were about to go through. On the opposite side from the poker tables, dart boards were up, and a stack of handheld video games were waiting. The kids would be surprised to find the Eagles playing those, but everyone enjoyed a good escape from reality. The only difference was in the choice of game.

Daryl spotted a small face pressed against the swinging employee door to the gym. He sent Dog an image. “Want to help us?”

*Sure. Anything to keep me away from those cats!*

“Go drag her out here. She’s scared of you, so don’t go overboard or her shouts will wake the boss.”

Eagles moved aside as the now slightly unsteady wolf padded toward the swinging door.

Dog pounced through the opening, catching Leeann’s robe.

She yelped, trying to tug it from his teeth. “Stop it! Bad, dog!”

*I am not.* Dog let go and nudged her out into the room of Eagles. *Spying is bad.*

Leeann clenched her fists inside her pockets, lips clamping together. She braced for a real punishment this time. She was scared of the Eagle men. Most of the kids were.

Daryl pointed at the corner. “Stand in it until we tell you to go to bed.”

Leeann went, surprised she wasn’t being kicked out. She put her nose in the corner and strained to hear conversations.

Daryl nodded at Wade.

Wade cleared his throat. “Has anyone heard from Billy?”

Silence fell. It was the first time his name had been spoken at an Eagle gathering in months.

Daryl shrugged. “Adrian told me he’s alive. Billy had work in the west or something.”

“Maybe it was important work. That would excuse him leaving like he did, right?” Ben wanted the moment done and the little girl gone. She didn’t need to be here. Some of these men were being watched for violations of the age law and Leeann’s nightgown-clan body was too young for them to be gawking at. There were also dirty jokes and crude comments flying about that didn’t need to be in her ears.

“Some of it.” Morgan wanted to let it go but couldn’t. “We’ll still give him hell if he tries to come back.”

“Do you think we’ll see him when we return to America?” Ben kept reaching for the goal of finishing this and getting Leeann out of here.

Tommy snorted. “I bet he’s waiting at the dock and asks to help with our luggage.”

Men laughed, but they didn’t feel it. Many of them were worried about Billy’s return because of bits they’d picked up about that future from Angela and Jennifer.

Leeann didn’t catch any of the thoughts. She was listening to the words that were easing the pain in her heart.

“Do you remember when he drove that tank straight into the soldiers and cleared a path for his team to escape?”

“Remember it?” James laughed. “I was one of those soldiers. He ran over my foot.”

A better mood filled the room. Other men added stories about Billy, unaware they were also easing their own pain from his betrayals.

Leeann stayed in the corner for the next half hour, legs aching and heart healing. When Daryl finally told her to go to bed, she delivered a nod of gratitude to the Special Forces man and left.

Silence fell for a few seconds after she departed, with Ben as an escort.

Daryl chuckled. “Why stop now? We’re having a good time. Someone else pick a Billy story. I’d forgotten how funny he was.”

**4**

“We should go now.”

Seth winced at Becky’s loud voice. “The sea’s still too rough. We have to wait a couple days.” Seth tucked the blanket around her, hating the gloomy, dank conditions. “Try to rest. You’ll need your strength if we do go.”

Becky cuddled beneath the warm blankets, lids shutting. “Yes, we’ll go. Out there, we can do what we want.”

Seth swallowed a protest. He didn’t want to leave. His daughter was here. He couldn’t take Amy along, but Becky hadn’t thought of that. She was deep in her own mind. Nothing else was getting through.

“Can we stop by the weapon area on the way to the lifeboats? We shouldn’t go unarmed.”

Seth didn’t reveal he had several weapons hidden in their kits. The guards hadn’t searched him or their gear. “Maybe.”

“And the mess. We’ll need food.”

“I’ll take care of it. You rest.”

Becky didn’t hear him. “If I can get close enough to her, I guess I could use a pillow or something.”

Seth froze, scowling. “What?”

“For Angela. We have to kill her before we go. Then these people will be free.”

“Shhh!” Seth was scared the guards outside the brig could hear her. “We’re not doing that.”

“I can’t leave these people in slavery.”

“They aren’t slaves.”

“Well, sure they are. Angela orders it and they jump. It’s not her fault, though. Adrian set it all up. When they find her body, Adrian will hang for it.” Becky smiled in delight. “Too bad we won’t get to see that part.”

Seth shushed her again. “You can’t say these things! You have to stop.”

“Oh, yeah. We’ll discuss it during my shower in the morning. They can’t hear us over the water.”

Seth started to remind her descendants could hear thoughts, but she drifted off, snoring lightly against him.

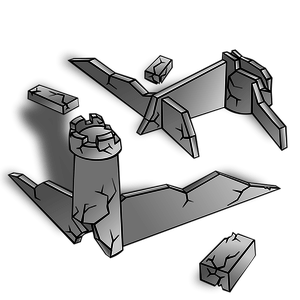
Seth was more horrified than he’d already been. Becky hadn’t learned from her losses. She was going to try to kill Angela again. *And I’ll get the blame for it this time.*

Seth lay in the cool darkness, mind spinning between ways to help her and ways to stop her. He finally fell asleep without a solution.

The guards wrote it all down and made sure they had extra mags.

Chapter Twenty-One

**Little Cracks**

****

Day Three

**1**

**I**van stretched out on his bed, enjoying the luxury of a nice mattress and a thick blanket. Like the rest of the cabins on this floor, it had been outfitted with luxuries the others lacked. The people in the living quarters had employee blankets, not the big comforters that had been meant for passengers. Ivan didn’t plan to mention it to anyone, and he was certain the other Eagles wouldn’t either. There were perks to this job that were unspoken.

His bunk with Jayda had a full bed surrounded by lilac decorations and velvet curtains. Ivan didn’t like that Jayda had requested it. He understood there hadn’t been many luxuries for any of them since the war, and it was nice their women were getting a treat, but the men didn’t care about the frivolous things a lot of the females did. It was one way Ivan was beginning to be able to tell potential female Eagles from female camp members. Eagles cared about more important things than the color of the curtains or the decorative holders in the bathrooms. They were concerned with how much water they were using and how much water the ship was producing in comparison.

Ivan returned to where he had been in the book before he’d needed to use the well-outfitted lavatory. He thumbed to the page, alone right now and able to read. The History of the Descendants was inside his comic book. While he was positive Angela would release copies of it to the camp at some point, he knew she didn’t want it floating around sticky fingers right now. This was the only copy they had.

Ivan slid to the middle of the bed to get comfortable. It was nice to have Jayda sharing a cabin at times. The chores were divided and occasionally she would ask for a service, but he missed the quiet of solitude. Jayda was at an early morning skills test with Kyle and his team right now. She was one of the few camp members who had a problem getting up early; this was Angela’s way of testing her on it. Eagles were required to perform their duties at all hours.

Ivan skimmed the page again.

*Descendants have to be carefully observed for cracks in their mental stability. It’s not certain yet which factors cause these cracks, but the three suggested below seem the most likely based on the evidence presented at the end of this chapter, and in individual case examinations.*

Ivan stopped reading again, distracted. It wasn’t because passengers were starting to wake on the ship, or that the wind sounded harsher outside his window. It was because he had already spotted several of those mental cracks in Angela and he didn’t know what to do about it. He only had this chapter left and it was more of a reference connecting to all the other parts of the book. There were no solutions in here, only studies of the problem.

Ivan returned to the beginning of the chapter.

**Mental Instability in Byzan Descendants**

Mental instability has been documented in descendants as young as ten, but usually occurs after the age of twenty. Male or female does not seem to make a difference. Once the cracks appear, they continue to spread until the person becomes unstable and oftentimes dangerous. There are no known cases of Byzan graduating this level without mental cracks.

*On a personal note, I’ve noticed these cracks in myself. Donna has also picked up on it, though she doesn’t understand what’s happening to me. To be fair, neither do I.*

William’s notes were troubling. Ivan had known the man was a problem, but not how big. He could have snapped at any point and tried to kill them all. It was scary to think about how close he had been to leadership at different points, but it was even worse to contemplate Angela snapping. Her gifts were beyond what William had been playing with. In a battle between the two, Ivan was positive she would come out on top. William might have the benefit of book knowledge, but Angela had actually used hers in battle multiple times and was training her army to do the same. William wouldn’t stand a chance. Neither would anyone on this ship. Her behavior implied she was in control, but he and Greg, and a few of the others who were catching on, would continue to observe her. Ivan had no idea what they would do from there. She was ahead of them at every turn. It would be almost impossible to get anything over on her.

Ivan heard voices coming down the hall and made sure the comic book completely hid the real book he was reading. He recognized Jayda’s voice.

Jayda entered the cabin. She pushed the door shut, letting it slam. “Good morning!”

Ivan grimaced. People were sleeping in the cabins around them, including Angela. “Morning.”

Jayda didn’t notice his displeasure. She dropped her dirty jacket onto the hamper and went to the closet. She had already put away her clothes and personal items. Ivan hadn’t. “I have to get a shower and go to the gym. They’re handing out schedules. I hope I get to be a rookie and go to training. I’m looking forward to learning kai.”

Ivan let Jayda prattle, not listening but paying enough attention to nod his head in the right places. His mind was on the book.

“We had to take a crazy test. Lot of converting measurements.”

“Ah.”

Jayda grabbed a change of clothes. She bent to kiss him on the head, then hurried toward the shower. “I hope you have a good day.” She went into the bathroom but didn’t shut the door all the way. “I don’t know exactly where I’ll be, but I’ll try to catch up to you for dinner. I heard she’s doing something with…”

Ivan stood and began searching for his boots as she continued to babble at him. By the time the shower water came on, he was fully dressed, kit in hand. He had duty shortly anyway.

Ivan waited while she entered the water and slipped out of the cabin, locking the door. He stuffed the book inside his kit, hoping he got to finish it on a break. He was enjoying his new relationship, but there were times when he just wanted her to shut up.

He had told Angela it was a bad idea for Jayda to become a rookie. When she got her schedule and found out she’d been assigned to the kitchen crew, Ivan expected her to hit the roof.

He didn’t plan to be anywhere near her at that point. He also didn’t plan for Angela to be anywhere near her. Everyone was being assigned a job, whether they wanted one or not. There was no exception to that rule. Jayda would either do the work or she would find someone else to bunk with. Ivan knew it was wrong, but he was almost hoping she did cause a scene. This was a point in his life where he needed to be able to think about the future, but it was impossible to make choices when the person next to him never stopped yapping.

**2**

“What’s all that noise?” Angela groaned, body aching. “Why is it loud?”

Marc jerked awake, sitting up.

Adrian shifted in the chair and brought it upright, listening. “There’s no noise.”

Angela let Marc help her sit up. “I hear people...” She scowled a bit. “Better mind reading skills? That’s it?”

Marc chuckled, glad she seemed to be herself.

Adrian swept her for the latest evolution and whistled. “Not just mind reading. Check out the fire.”

Angela slowly opened the upgraded weapon a hair… a powerful blast of heat sailed from her hand.

It smashed into the desk by Adrian’s chair, showering sparks.

“Automatic fire.” Adrian grabbed the extinguisher from the bathroom wall and sprayed the smoldering carpet. “Nice. I’ve only been around one other person who could do that, but his energy banks were small. I’ll bet yours can handle it for a full minute.”

“I’ll test it when I’m topside.” Angela went to the bathroom.

Marc opened the door to the cabin, meaning to go locate a guard for a check in.

Ivan yawned at him.

Marc snorted. “Same to you.”

“Coffee for the boss?”

Marc reset his wrist alarm. “Some food too. Whatever you guys have been getting her to eat.”

“Chocolate and potatoes.”

Marc grimaced. “Yuck.”

“Not together. We alternate those two until she complains.”

“What does she change it to then?”

Ivan turned toward the next post. “Nothing.”

Marc snickered. “That’s Angie.”

Adrian got up to leave them alone. He paused by the entrance, giving Marc a knowing look. “Now might be a good time to practice. I can delay the coffee by ten minutes.”

“I need more than that.”

“She doesn’t. Haven’t you ever grabbed her, made her cum and walked away?” Adrian shook his head, closing the door. “You have a lot to learn.”

*I’ve thought about it!* Marc defended in his mind. *I just hate blue balls. Her moans make me hard.*

Adrian laughed all the way down the hall.

Marc went to the lavatory to find out if he could get them both there in ten minutes.

**3**

“We’re a kid short.”

Allison regarded Monica in horror. “No.”

“Yes. I counted three times. Then I went over the names. Amy isn’t here.”

Allison hesitated. “What do we do? Call for a search?”

“I’m not sure. Let’s ask the guards if they’ve seen her. If not, we’ll check the areas they’ve been to this morning. Maybe she got lost in all these halls.”

“Deal. You take the front. I’ve got the rear.”

The women went to opposite ends of the gymnasium to talk to the Eagles on the exits.

The guards panicked.

“We have a loose western UN kid!” Blake used his radio for the first time since they’d set sail. “She is three-foot, reddish blond, dangerous!”

“She’s lost, you idiot!” Ivan keyed his mike. “She’s not dangerous! It’s a little girl who wandered away from her group. If you see her, help her to a guard post.”

Ivan flashed Blake an ugly glare and spun toward the main hallway. “We’ll hunt for her. Keep the other kids on schedule.”

Monica was relieved, though she was certain they’d interrupted Ivan. He’d been hurrying by with a tray as Blake made the call.

Allison returned to helping the kids finish their math assignments.

Monica stayed by the guards, hoping for an update. Amy was missing on her watch. It was an awful feeling.

**4**

“Do you hear that?” Samantha cocked her head. “It sounds like crying.”

Theo hobbled toward the passage to check it out.

Debra stayed close to Samantha and studied them both to figure out what was going on.

“Are you lost?” Theo held out a hand. “You can wait in here. Want to see the bees?”

Amy sniffled, coming toward him. “I lost my Kimmie.”

“I don’t know who that is, sweetheart, but we’ll call someone to come get you. Don’t cry. It’ll be okay.” Theo led the child into the garden and pointed at Samantha. “She’ll show you the bees.”

Theo keyed his mike as Amy went to Samantha. “Can we get an escort down in the garden? We have a little girl who got lost.”

“Copy that.”

“Thank you!” Monica’s voice followed Wade’s over the radio.

Samantha studied Seth’s daughter, wondering how talented she was. Seth hadn’t shown many signs of power, but with their kind, that didn’t mean much. Samantha had heard the stories of how vicious Amy was during her time in the west, but it was hard to believe when she looked at the cute girl in the jean jumper staring back at her with innocent hope.

“Where’s the bee?”

Samantha narrowed in on a nearby plant they’d brought from the mountain. She pointed. “Right there on the yellow flower. Pretty, huh?”

Around them, the garden wasn’t showing many signs of life. Things were still being planted, sorted and organized. In another month or two, this room would turn green and then burst out with patches of color. The seeds from these plants would be used in personal gardens around the island, both in and outside the homes they eventually built. Angela had big plans for the small space on the island.

Amy wiped away her tears so she could view the bee.

She stayed back, surprising Samantha. Most kids rushed in without contemplating the consequences. It was what made them kids.

Amy plopped her thumb into her mouth.

Samantha frowned. “Have you seen your daddy today?”

“Wis Becky.”

Samantha’s displeasure grew. “Instead of caring for you. Figures.” Samantha patted her knee. “You want to sit on my lap while Debra pushes us around?”

Amy climbed up, being careful not to hit Samantha’s stomach. She patted her belly. “Babies.”

Samantha nodded. “Two of them.”

Amy smirked. “All boys. Sorry for you.”

Samantha laughed and gave the girl a hug. She couldn’t help it. Amy was cute.

“Stay here?”

Samantha shook her head. “I’m sorry. All kids have a schedule.”

The little girl puckered up.

“Wait. What if we add an hour a week here for you? I can teach you how to care for the plants.”

“Yes! And bees!”

“Of course. I’ll add it to my nightly report. It will take Angela a few days to set it up, so no complaining until she gets to it, okay?”

“I promise.”

“Did someone call for a piggyback ride expert here?” Wade appeared in the doorway.

“Wade!” Amy squealed, leaping from Samantha’s lap.

Wade helped the girl onto his back and jogged down the hallway. “We’re off to see the wizard...”

“Cute kid.” Theo returned to the wires he was having trouble getting to reach all the outlets and plants.

Samantha stared. “Yes, she is.” *I may never have a daughter... If Seth doesn’t want her, I might.*

**5**

“Is that Dog?”

Charlie squinted down the dim hallway. Dog’s fur blended in with the walls. “I think so. Looks like he’s playing with...a mouse.”

“We have mice?” Candy eased closer to Conner. “Ew!”

Charlie and Conner chuckled.

“It looks like a toy.” Charlie pointed. “The cats are behind him.”

“Where?” Candy didn’t see as well as the teenage boys.

“In the shadows, lower right.” Charlie softened his steps, hoping they didn’t interrupt the fun until they’d gotten to witness some of it.

The trio neared Dog, who hadn’t noticed them yet.

*You grab it, like this!* Dog pounced on the mouse. *Then you sling it and toss it.*

Dog paused, head cocking. *What do you mean, why? Because it’s fun and it’s your job.*

The two cats delivered haughty glares and slid around the corner, tails up.

*You don’t play with your food?* Dog dropped the soggy mouse. *Where’s the fun in that?*

Charlie and Conner were laughing hard.

Dog huffed, picking up the toy. *Come back here and learn how to do this!* He trotted around the corner. *Here, kitty-kitty...*

Candy enjoyed the good mood of the amused boys and the warm glow left by Conner’s touch. He’d stayed the rest of the night in the chair, blue orbs smoldering at her whenever she glanced over.

“What are you scheduled for today?” Conner tried to break the flaring sexual tension.

“I have a skills test.”

Conner frowned. “What test can you take in your condition?”

Candy waddled along. “No idea, but I’m not worried over it. Angela wouldn’t endanger babies.”

“That’s true.” Charlie held the swinging door to the employee entrance for the galley. “Let’s try to sneak up on Serio. Mom sent him here an hour ago when she couldn’t take his stomach rumbling anymore. Told him to eat and then do guard duty until Ivan relieved him.”

“What is it with those two?” Conner grinned to show he was joking. “She got a thing for him?”

Candy snorted. “Ivan’s talented. Get used to him doing quiet and public duty for the boss.”

“But it’s more, right? That’s why she’s considering him for leadership.”

Candy frowned. “I doubt Angela would consider giving this camp to anyone who couldn’t handle the job.”

“She wouldn’t.” Adrian came around the corner with Ivan, both carrying trays and mugs.

“Agreed.” Charlie resumed walking to the galley, shelving his idea about Serio for another time.

Conner held the swinging door, flushing at all the attention shifting their way. “I smell eggs.” He sniffed. “Fried eggs. Can’t be.”

Candy laughed as they reached the line. “Omelets! Where did they come from?”

Lou smiled at her from across the serving island. “Brittani made them from powdered eggs. She’s got all sorts of recipes like this from after the war.”

“Bet she does great on her skills test.” Candy pointed while Conner loaded up a plate.

Lou chuckled. “Brittani does great at whatever she sets her mind to. Always did.”

Candy used a wipe on her hands while they chatted. “It’s nice to find a family who loves each other.”

“Thanks!” Lou reached around Brittani’s mother, Thelma, and grabbed a large cookie. He slid it onto the plate Conner was loading. “Boss said sugar goes to kids.”

“How sweet.” Candy immediately broke it in half and held out part of it. “It’s mine. I can share.”

“Thank you.” Lou took it, touched. Despite helping cook for Safe Haven, he hadn’t enjoyed the treats unless they were open to the general public. He wasn’t a kid and hadn’t felt right depriving them.

Conner enjoyed the moment. Candy was a kind person who had locked herself inside a tough shell so she could survive. When people got to know her, they would love her too.

Charlie gestured them to the farthest booth, hoping Tracy liked the note he’d left. He’d tried to make her a poem. Instead of soft and mushy, it had been funny. He’d heard amusement helped diffuse anger. He would work on romance next. He needed a secure bond with his wife-to-be. She loved him right now. All he wanted to do was keep adding to that feeling. When the baby came, they would be close enough to endure the hard parts.

“Nice.” Conner was relieved Charlie had finally come around to the adult side of the life he’d chosen. “We can learn some of it together.”

Charlie ignored the Ciemus woman at the next table flipping her freshly-washed hair in his direction. “Yes, please. Start by telling me how to set up a great wedding for her. I want to do it so she’ll know it’s important to me; she’s important to me.”

“That’s perfect!” Candy dug out her notebook. “Let’s discuss a theme first.”

Conner stayed quiet, content to let her do whatever made her happy. When their turn came, he would know enough of what she liked to give her the perfect day. *I just need more time.*

**6**

“I believe he needs a little more time.”

Adrian leaned against the opposite wall, trying to block the moans coming from behind the door. He was glad Marc was taking care of her needs, but he didn’t want to listen to it.

The hallway outside Angela’s tiny cabin was narrow and covered in a cheaper carpeting than what was upstairs. *The pictures are also tackier.* Ivan flushed as the moans reached a climax and sent chills through everyone who heard it. His body wanted to respond but he’d been loved recently. He willed it down and waited patiently with full hands for the couple to finish.

Adrian studied the residences around them, determining which ones were occupied.

“None for three rooms around hers. Mine is closest to the right, with Sam and Neil across from me. To the left, Wade’s cabin is first, with Shawn across from him. The rest of the residences in this hall are all Special Forces and their mates or kids.” Ivan had slotted the rooms himself. “Mention these *cells* are all small. She’s making her Eagles suffer so she can be selfless.”

Adrian chuckled. “I will. Thanks.”

“Got another one for you but wait until he’s blowing so he doesn’t hear me.”

Adrian frowned. Marc’s grunts and hisses were reaching their peak now.

Ivan stepped closer. “He doesn’t touch her enough. He’s scared to, I think. Unless it’s sex, there’s only physical contact when she initiates. Get him to change that. She needs ties to humanity, to *this* physical realm.” Ivan resumed his place on the wall as Marc’s noises faded.

Now that Ivan had pointed it out, he would watch for it. Adrian studied Ivan. “Why are you helping?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll assume it’s so you can be the leader while she’s pregnant.”

“I would never do that to her!”

Adrian believed the man. “Then tell me why and we can move on.”

“I can’t.” Ivan dropped his head. “You would probably understand more than anyone, but they’ll read it in your thoughts. I’m sorry. It’s not personal. Under other circumstances, we could even be partners.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Do you mean harm to her or anyone she loves?”

Ivan grimaced. “No. But the spoils from someone else’s war are fair game.”

Adrian’s heart dropped, but he refused to contemplate it further and give the man away. Marc was now scanning the hall to see if the food was here.

Adrian concentrated and managed to turn the knob with his mind. Angela wasn’t the only one who had received a nice boost during an evolution.

Ivan snorted. “Show off.”

“Rookie.”

Both men chuckled as they entered and put the trays wherever they found room.

Adrian saw Angela was in the bathroom and went to her kit. He removed her extra shirt and tossed it to Ivan. “Hold that.” Adrian gestured at the shirt Marc was removing. “Give me that. Quick now.”

Marc handed him the dirty shirt, frowning. *What are you doing?*

*Helping you*. Adrian draped Marc’s dirty shirt over Angela’s kit and stepped away from it as she emerged.

Ivan shoved her clean shirt into his pants, scowling at Adrian.

Angela went for the coffee mug, then grabbed her kit. Marc’s shirt stayed on the kit handle where Adrian had put it.

Angela stopped as something caught her attention, head turning. *What is that?* She saw the bulge in Ivan’s pants… Angela flushed. “Good grief!” She marched into the bathroom with the kit.

Marc and Adrian burst out laughing as she slammed the door.

“Time for me to go.” Ivan fled, not sure what to do with the shirt now.

Adrian ran a hand through his soft, clean hair, loving it. His first shower on the ship had been amazing. “What’s on your list for the day?”

“A shower, then…” Marc stopped when Adrian shook his head. “What?”

“No shower.”

Marc grinned. *I smell like her. Everyone will know what we’ve been doing.*

*So?*

*It embarrasses her.*

*Are you scheduled around her today?*

Marc ran through his list. *Not until later. I have a kid class after breakfast.*

*Then leave it.*

*If she won’t know, how does that help?*

*She will later and she’ll like it you weren’t bothered by it.*

*I’m not that much. Just seems cruel to rub it in.* Marc sighed. *Even to you. I’m not a monster.*

*It doesn’t bother me as much as you believe. Stop holding back on signs you keep her needs covered, that you love her. The camp wants to know you feel that way. It’s good to show a little of it.*

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Angela joined them, buttoning Marc’s shirt. “Didn’t I have another clean shirt in my kit?”

Adrian shrugged. “I think Ivan packed it. You should ask him.”

Marc hid a laugh. “Sounds reasonable to me.”

Angela glanced between them. “What’s going on?”

Adrian gave her an innocent look. “Why does something have to be going on?”

She frowned. “You’re getting along. It’s scary.”

Marc chuckled. He slid his boots on and began lacing them. “Dinner when I return? Just us?”

Covered in his smell, Angela nodded eagerly. “I’d love that.” His musky scent was fascinating. She didn’t get it often. Marc was always careful to come to her clean, but sometimes a woman liked a bit of odor.

“Can I escort you or have a table waiting?”

“Ivan will handle it.” Adrian encouraged the date. “Might be a good time to wear that ring.”

Angela flashed disapproval in his direction. “What’s your deal now?”

“Just think the camp would relax about all your fighting if they knew you were engaged.”

Angela’s anger faded into concern. “Are they worrying over the fighting again?”

“Yes.” Adrian tossed her a butterscotch from the wakeup tray the galley had sent. He wasn’t lying, only exaggerating. “The reasonable people have bets going. The crazier ones are contemplating trying to help by locking you together in a cabin for a week.”

Angela snorted out amusement. “He doesn’t have enough skin for that!”

Adrian burst out laughing. He’d forgotten she could hang with the guys and be just as crude.

So had Marc. He’d only glimpsed it a few times, unlike Adrian who’d witnessed her win over the Eagles when she’d joined his army. “Glad you’re in a good mood, Baby-cakes.” He smiled at her.

Angela noticed Marc’s smile didn’t expose his chipped tooth. She wondered if he was feeling self-conscious about it. She hoped not. It didn’t detract from his great looks at all. She planned to get the dentistry class going soon, though. He would still be the first patient. “Can we schedule that in, even when you’re pissing me off?”

“Of course. Oh, Ivan?” Marc used a snooty voice. “Can you please arrange a romp for the boss every Tuesday morning? The woman needs me to surrender my body, if not my mind, to all her passionate desires.”

Angela scowled at him. “Only one day a week?”

Adrian hit the chair, laughing too hard to stand. *This is interesting. I’ve never seen them like this.*

“Yes, darling. Don’t be greedy.” Marc played the royal husband effortlessly, chest puffing out, hands going behind his back. He peered down his nose at Adrian. “When in dire straits, I shall have skin grafted from you and sewn into a penile suit.”

Angela snorted amusement.

Adrian wiped away tears.

Marc sniffed, pretending to shift glasses further onto his nose. “I shall call my penile suit the dandy dickie. All the land shall want my dandy dickie.”

Angela wanted to help keep it going, but she was laughing too hard to talk.

Marc felt tension coming. *This is all we get. A couple of good moments surrounded by stress and discomfort.*

Angela sobered, nodding. *It’s all we ever get. If you’ve got one more in there, give it now. We’ll need it to help us through the separation.*

The fun had already faded for Marc.

Ivan tapped on the door. “Sir? The dressmaker has refused to make your dandy dickie. Can we offer you something in a lotion, perhaps? Or maybe an ointment?”

Howling amusement filled the halls and sank into the ship. The lights glowed brighter; the boat lifted in the water. *I had forgotten how human happiness feeds me.* The ship groaned and creaked, then settled in place. *I hope they keep laughing.* The species was sometimes destructive, but the benefits outweighed the horror.

Voices overwhelmed Angela. She clasped her ears, trying to sort through it.

Marc and Adrian watched in concern.

Ivan came in to discover what had caused the instant mood shift. “Is she okay?”

“Hang on.” Angela forced the voices to a lower level and began sorting through them. “There’s a problem happening…”

Marc returned to working on his boots. “Get ready. We’re going early.”

“You think?”

Marc’s fingers flew over the laces. “Everything here is covered. It has to be something happening elsewhere. Our timeline has shortened.”

“Yes. I’m trying to see where it lands, but I can’t go deep enough to view it without the blur.” Angela strained to walk that line and pull enough details.

Adrian sympathized. That was how he’d been doing it all along. It was easy to miss problems.

“Leave at sunset instead of dawn. Stick to the plans we drew up.”

“Who’s our fourth?” Marc pulled on his Eagle jacket, still only accepting it for runs.

“Kyle’s bringing them. They’ll meet you at the boat.”

“What are you doing to keep the camp from seeing us leave?”

“The captain is about to announce a dinner movie marathon with the boss. It’s not mandatory but it’s highly recommended.” Angela rubbed at her eyes, refusing to say goodbye to either of them. “Is your demon back yet?”

“No. It’s only been a couple days. Scroll diving takes time.”

Angela sighed. “Yeah. I miss the witch.” She sighed, plopping down to get her boots from beneath the chair. She pulled up a pair of new shoes. “What are these?”

“Alternates so Ivan can get your boots cleaned.” Marc ducked a gym shoe.

Adrian ducked the other.

“I guess you’re barefoot today.” Ivan gave her a disapproving frown. “Your boots had blood on them from the beach. None of us want to look at it anymore.”

“Stop screwing with my head. I need things to be the same so I can keep all the other shit straight! You have no idea how annoying it is to lose part of a plan because you’re sidelined by footwear.” Angela retrieved the shoes and sat on the edge of the bed to don them. “Gym shoes? Really?”

“Stop worrying over your image. No one thinks you’re fluffy in any way.”

Soothed, Angela tied them tight and stood up to get her jacket.

Marc would have moved out of her way.

Adrian flashed a fast message in hand code. *Kiss her!*

Marc frowned, letting her get around him. *What’s up with you today?!*

*Preparations matter, Marine, but it’s more than mood. Do you love her? Then show her. Love is an action as much as it’s a feeling.*

“Let’s roll.” Angela headed out the door. She delivered a quick look to Ivan, giving him the greeting that he liked. The one glance without any barriers allowed him to judge her mood and arrange her schedule accordingly. It also gave him private information he was storing for future use.

Adrian followed the couple, walking with Ivan to provide extra security. He had a couple items he wanted to mention to the man who would keep her alive until they returned.

Angela blew out a frustrated grunt. “Stop yelling.”

Adrian paused. “That was through my strongest shield.”

“So?”

“So you’re not even trying. Do someone else. Can anyone block you now?”

Angela went straight to Jennifer and Kyle, who were the best at keeping secrets from the camp. Their thoughts came through–loud.

Adrian felt concern instead of being happy for her. “No one keeps out an angel either. They told us that.”

Angela refused to answer.

Chapter Twenty-Two

**Admit the Problem**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“I** repeat, dinner and a movie with the boss begins at 6pm. Meet in the mess for pizza and french fries. Slushies will be served during the show, along with popcorn and candies.” Grant hung up the mike, feeling cheers coming. He let the noise fade before addressing his crew. “Angela chose you men and women to help me sail this ship. Some of you know me from Ciemus. Some of us are strangers. We’ll get over all of that and put the ship first. Understood?”

Nine heads bobbed and waited for him to finish his speech. They were all eager to get to work. It would have been hard for them to explain how it felt to be atop a cruise ship, standing in the captain’s domain. At some point along this ride, they would get to sail the ship without Grant. It was a scary thought.

“We’ll man the boat in three shifts, three people each. I will sleep during the last half of the second shift and the first half of the third shift. You will wake me up for even the smallest questions.” Grant pointed at his cot. “For the first week or so, I’ll bunk here so you can get to me fast.”

Grant went to the board on the wall next to the award display. “These are the radio channels for areas of the ship. Memorize them, but do *not* write them down anywhere. Most of the camp is not allowed up here to view the information that’s posted. You will not discuss it anywhere but here.”

Most of the crew didn’t need to hear this speech, but the Eagles among them were glad Grant was following their code by starting the lesson this way. Angela had added a few more people to the boat crew, the same as she’d added guards to Grant’s protection detail. Those Eagles were in the shadows now, studying people. Ray had gone to get a shower and bring clean sheets for Grant’s cot. Before he departed, he’d given a speech of his own to the guards. It had been abrupt.

The Ciemus part of the crew knew they were being observed for problems, but they were all honored to have been chosen and a little bored by the words they’d already heard back in their town.

“Any questions?” Grant waited a few seconds, then went to the main console. “This is where it happens. I can start and stop us, kill the power to decks, drop the anchor or lift it. All main functions are on this keyboard. Never let me catch you leaning on it, eating over it, or getting it dirty in any way. Without this, we’re a small toy adrift in a huge bathtub.”

Grant motioned at the other panels. “Those control separate functions; some of them are also identical to those on the main panel. That side covers the ship itself and sailing aspects that we’ll get into during each class. Nathan, take that spot.”

Nathan realized it was the XO seat and swallowed pride with his questions as he entered the small three-sided booth.

“This station handles ship quarters, entertainments, temperature controls and weather readouts. Claire, you’ll handle it.”

Claire, a tall brunette from Ciemus, flashed a smile and took her new post.

“The rest of you divide between those and observe everything I have them do. Tomorrow, you’ll rotate. After a couple weeks, we’ll begin rotating my post.”

Everyone felt better as they realized everyone was going to learn all the stations.

The guards hated the idea. Instead of just having Grant to watch for betrayals, there would be nine more easily tempted humans to monitor.

“The dark screens are either things we don’t need or things we don’t know how to work yet. I’ll be handling those until we figure them out. That way, if something goes wrong, it’s because *I* did it. I always have a backup plan ready when I try something new or dangerous. This is definitely that. Do not push any button unless you are positive it’s the one you mean to hit.”

Gus stood in the rear of the crew, also honored to be here. He had a knack for numbers, but he hadn’t believed Angela would assign him to something so important. He’d expected to be a personal guard because of his size.

Quinn stood next to Gus, wishing the class was over. He had places to be and passengers to check on.

“Once every fifteen minutes, you will do a visual scan.” Grant lifted his binoculars and studied the ocean on both sides, then in front of them. “While you do this, always check the horizon.”

“What are we searching for?” Claire wanted to do well. She loved sailing.

“Anything out of place, including storm clouds. Damn.” Grant keyed his belt radio. “There’s another debris field, Boss. Do you want me to make an announcement?”

“That’s your call, Captain.” Angela’s voice was calm, indicating she had faith in him.

Grant pointed at the radio. “This is for the entire ship. You hit this button and that one, then flip this switch.” Grant took in a deep breath. “This is the Captain speaking. There’s another debris field coming. I can’t tell where it ends, but it doesn’t appear very thick. Be prepared for a few minutes of rough sailing.”

Light tension went through the ship and the crew.

Teams on the deck stopped what they were doing to go below for safety or to stare at the debris they were approaching.

Grant handed out two pairs of binoculars. “When this happens, you’ll be my spotters. If there’s something we can’t push out of the way, I’ll try to steer around it.”

“Uh, you mean like another boat?”

“Yes.” Grant was already adjusting course. He’d spotted it on his first sweep. “Keep searching for problems. Don’t get distracted.”

It was hard not to. The debris piles were tangled webs of garbage and plastic clinging to trapped relics. The fishing boat only had a front hull, but it was still large enough to cause trouble if they ran into it.

Grant slowed the ship and depended on his skills since he didn’t have radar to show him a path.

They slid by the rotting wooden ship, debris smacking into them.

Grant eased toward a clearer spot, frowning. He didn’t understand why it wasn’t… Grant readjusted, turning toward the debris instead of away from it.

His crew observed in confusion.

“Something right there is keeping the debris from gathering. Could be a place where the current’s circling. It’s not usually an issue for a ship this size, but I refuse to take chances. Eddies can be powerful. You have to have respect.”

As they got closer to the clear spot, everyone viewed the swirling center and believed Grant was correct.

“I see something that looks too heavy to float.” Ben held out the binos. “Concrete maybe?”

Grant surveyed the area. “Fish farm.”

“Say again?”

“It was a fish farm. Concrete anchors with netted sides and bottoms. A lot of frozen fish came from places like this.”

Claire scowled. “Yeah, so did the sea lice outbreaks.”

“Yeah, but you have to admit, it’s better than cramming them into a tank in a warehouse. At least out here they got some of the same influences.”

“Yeah, like sea lice.” Claire wasn’t going to budge. She hated fish farms, no matter what they were raising.

“How did they get them to stay in place?” Nathan wanted to break the tension.

“The larger, more expensive farms were anchored to the ocean floor by concrete pillars. The cheaper setups and beginners used sinkers made of anything heavy.” Grant pointed, handing the glasses back to Nathan. “There’s a bigger whirlpool at three o’clock. For those of you who don’t know where that is, learn it. Clock Positioning is invaluable for pointing out location as we sail. Just saying to the right isn’t enough. Three o’clock narrows it to where on the right.”

“I see it!” Claire adjusted the glasses, no longer worrying over the debris they were hitting, shoving aside. “It’s sucking garbage from somewhere.”

“Coastal cities are still being wiped out. Hurricane season is busy now. There’s a lot of debris to be washed into the oceans.”

“What happens if we find a field that isn’t moving?” Gus had been worrying over that.

“We have to stop in time and try to locate the best place to go through. We also have to decide if we ease through or ram it with one of the smaller ships first. Let’s hope we don’t find one.”

Gus stared at the swells, stressing. It didn’t help to have his fear confirmed. They could get stuck. It had happened after tsunamis. Fishermen had been discovered alive, in debris fields.

*But we won’t ever be found.* Gus shuddered and tried not to think about it anymore as Grant steered them through the stinking garbage.

Claire was the only one who noticed the lack of birds. She started to ask about that, but it felt wrong to distract Grant with questions right now. *I’ll put it in my book for later,* she decided, resuming her search of the debris. *It’s probably not important.*

**2**

“You’re going away again.” Cody’s lower lip quivered.

“Yes.” Marc knelt by the boy to tie his little shoes. Both were unlaced. “You should be doing this.”

“I like them loose.”

“Why?”

“Noise.” Cody stomped, making the laces smack against the gym floor.

Monica rotated toward them. “Cody! Leave them tied!”

Cody snickered. “Me drives her crazy.”

Marc double knotted them, positive it wouldn’t hold against the boy for long. “Why are you picking on Monica?” He frowned. “And why are you talking like a baby?”

“Missy said it might get you to stay if I act out.”

Marc sniggered. “Good try. What else you got?”

“I don’t feel well.”

“Nope. Next?”

“I really don’t.”

Marc studied the boy. “Are you lying?”

Cody grinned. “Yes.”

Marc tickled him, causing squeals to ring through the gym.

The other kids watched, envious that Cody had two parents. They’d forgotten about Julia’s death.

Marc felt the envy, but he didn’t interfere. His son would become heir to Safe Haven the instant he and Angie got married. If Cody grew into the job, he would probably get it since Charlie didn’t want it. There would always be people who were jealous of what birth had provided. Cody had to learn to deal with it now.

“I am.” Cody delivered a stiff glare to the closest boys, daring them to let the tiger cub out of its cage.

The boys lowered their eyes or dropped their heads, unwilling to meet the challenge. Marc doubted it was because he was here. Cody had bruises on his knuckles. “Been fighting since we set sail?”

Cody shoved his hands into his pockets. “Who, me?”

“Yes, you.” Marc pushed aside the pride to be a good parent. “Come on, fess up.”

Cody glanced at Timmy. “I couldn’t reach his face.”

Marc studied Timmy, picking out details.

Timmy limped to the basketball net and removed one ball. He didn’t look at any of the kids. He started his workout with subdued throws that landed in the hoop again and again.

Marc led Cody to a nearby bench and waited for the boy to get settled.

Cody opened the mental barriers. “I’m ready.”

Marc entered his son’s mind, not straying. He felt bad about not being with Cody while he was born and growing. He didn’t want to know how bad it had been. Thanks to the discovery of a twin, he would have to find out, but it didn’t need to be now.

Cody waited patiently, enjoying the scents of musk and vanilla. *He smells good today, like a real dad.*

Marc caught that thought as the memory began to replay. Timmy had tried to bully the kids into letting him be their leader because he was the oldest. Cody and others had refused. Before Timmy could hit him, Cody and Missy had attacked.

“She climbs better than me. She got a hit on his neck. When he bends to get the ball, you can see it.” Cody stared, waiting for Timmy to look at him.

“Then they voted for Kimmie over you.” Marc pulled it out of Cody’s mind. “Does that bother you?”

Cody frowned. “Why would it? She’s an alpha.”

“You’re Byzan.”

“I will be when Angela unlocks it for the final battle, but Kimmie already has access. She deserves to be in charge.”

Marc was glad the kids weren’t fighting over leadership either. “Anything else like that happen?”

Cody grew sad. “We talked to Leeann. If she makes more trouble for the kids, Kimmie will ask Angela to lock away her gifts so we don’t get blamed.”

“That’s very good.”

“Kimmie wanted to ask for that now. I told her everyone deserves a second chance.”

Marc recognized his own weakness in his son and immediately wanted to set the cute boy straight on it. He chose to handle it when he returned because of the depth of that conversation. He didn’t have enough time right now to be sure Cody didn’t fall into the same traps he had. “Anything else?”

Cody stood up, feeling the moment coming. “Hang on.” The boy let his red orbs come forward just as Timmy stole a glance at him.

Marc hid amusement as Timmy stumbled over the ball and barely kept himself from hitting the floor.

“Why did you do that?”

Cody led Marc toward the jungle gym, away from everyone else. “He was thinking about catching Missy alone. I reminded him that she’s never alone.”

Marc felt a stronger bond forming. Cody was protecting his friend the way he protected Angela.

“She’ll be mine when we grow up.” Cody ducked into the round playground and began climbing the inside bars. “We’ll be best friends by then. We’ll put flowers on the graves of our family together.”

Marc shivered at the chill. “You mean me and Angela.”

“We bury you together. Shawn is there too. Missy doesn’t know. She thinks someone saves him.”

Marc swallowed questions as other kids came over, drawn by the sadness Cody was emitting. Missy was in the lead.

Marc put a hand on Cody’s ankle, all he could reach now. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Hurry home.” Cody pulled his leg free and kept climbing.

Marc left as the other kids surrounded his son, even those who had shown jealousy. He was glad the boy had comfort, but he was also worried about it. Jennifer was right. Cody needed a fulltime guard. *I’ll do that before I leave.* When he returned, they would discuss the visions Cody had seen. They would also talk about his past. Marc needed a clue on where to begin searching. He was convinced Cody knew about his sister. Much like his own heart, Cody’s had a hole that was dark and unfillable. Missing a twin was awful.

**3**

“Is anyone listening to us right now?” Adrian paused in the stairwell. Marc and Ivan had left them after breakfast. Ivan had other chores and Marc was arranging a guard for Cody.

Angela concentrated, nose filled with Marc’s scent and ears ringing with the thoughts and voices of everyone on the ship. She was relearning how to keep that caged. “No. They’re all eating lunch. Brittani did something great with Vienna Sausages apparently.”

“Good. I want to talk to you about what happened when you died.”

Angela froze, thrown back into terror and joy. “What about it?”

“You had a choice to go right then. What happened? Something made you change your mind.”

Angela stared at the display case showing the former employees, not seeing it. “I decided they couldn’t be trusted, no matter what deal was made. I chose to conquer them when it’s all over.”

“What about the great reset?”

“I haven’t figured that all out yet. The angels and Messenger mentioned it, but I didn’t want to give away my idea by asking questions. So far, it’s like erasing a bad game to start a new one now that you have the information. They think wiping the board will bring the Creator back to paint a new picture. They’re searching for a second chance, the same as we all are.” She regarded Adrian. “Did you see me taking over heaven and hell when we first met?”

“If I saw it, I didn’t recognize it for what it was.” He waited for more, hoping she would share.

Angela descended the stairs to the training room. She’d spoken to Kyle about it. Marc and Adrian would find out at some point, but not until she’d finished her plans. The second meeting was more dangerous than the first one had been. The opposite king didn’t need anything she had.

Adrian caught up to her, scanning the halls as they emerged onto the entertainment level. The Eagles had set up a workout area in the rear room. It was a good design that allowed them to keep track of the passengers who wanted to party. There were quite a few of those, making the senior men uneasy. If Safe Haven grew lazy, they were all in trouble.

“Hey!” Ian hurried toward them. “Did you give this order?!”

Adrian slid in front of Angela, frowning. “Calm down.”

“Fuck you.” Ian shoved by him.

Adrian spun and grabbed Ian by the arm and neck. He used their forward motion to slam the man against the wall, then held him there, ignoring the grunts and shouts.

“Let me go! Get off me!”

“Calm down.”

“I’ll kill you!”

Angela placed a hand on Ian’s shoulder.

Ian stilled, unable to fight it.

Adrian let him go, but he didn’t retreat.

Eagles reached them at full runs. They surrounded Ian, hands on knives. Firing weapons on the ship was forbidden except in emergencies.

Angela picked up the folder Ian had dropped and scanned the single sheet of paper. “Yes, it’s my order. What’s the problem?”

Ian’s anger returned, but he knew better than to move or yell. “You’re asking me to do the same thing that got me bumped to a shit job in the first place!”

“No, Ian.” Her tone went cold. “I’m teaching you when to run your mouth and when to listen.”

“I knew it! This is punishment!”

“For breaking Eagle code.” Adrian tugged on Ian’s jacket, straightening it. “She can’t talk around you. If you fail this, you’ll never be a true Eagle. They can be trusted to keep a leader’s secrets and help with plans.”

Adrian retreated, motioning the guards to return to their posts. “If all you care about is clucking, *dude*, there’s space open with the hens.” Adrian rotated to Angela, scowling at her. “I hate it when you put words in my mouth and make me say them. That’s why you do it, right?”

“Of course. You’ve been banished. You can’t tell him anything, but I can make you do it, make you feel it. Knowing you may never get to again is awful, I suspect.” Angela switched her attention to Ian. “Are you taking the job?”

Ian, red-faced and glaring, gave her a curt nod.

“I need to hear it, Ian. There are a lot of Eagles who do want the job.”

“I’ll do it, but not for the secrets. I want my place back.” He gestured. “They all believe I’m a blabbermouth.”

“You are.” Angela pushed harder, ready for this moment to be done. “Your first test is now. Say it. Admit the problem.”

Ian almost shouted at her. He wanted to rant and scream and maybe even swing.

Angela studied him. “That’s disappointing. Shall we go over the list?” She held out a hand.

Ivan quickly dug through the daily logbook and handed it to her, open to the correct page.

“You told a senior Eagle that Adrian helped gather cargo with the crews. You almost repeated that to a camp member, but the same senior Eagle interrupted the conversation. You informed a lower level Eagle about us observing several camp members for violations of the morality code, specifically, the age law.”

“Candy and Conner.” Ian’s anger fled. “I did. I thought it was okay to–”

Angela walked away.

Adrian and Ivan followed, disappointed because Angela was.

“Wait!” Ian considered the moments where he’d teased people with tidbits and hinted about operations Angela had going. “I’m sorry.”

Angela stopped but didn’t turn. “And?”

Ian’s hands clenched into fists. “I’m a gossip. I talk too much.”

She resumed her walk. “Get to work, Ian. I’ll expect your first report at dawn, the morning of the camp meeting.” Angela turned left at the intersection. Ian would take the opposite hallway and join the cleaning crew who was about to begin scouring bathrooms throughout the ship. While there, he would gather information and keep it to himself. If she’d heard about anything he reported, before he gave her that report, Ian would be out of the Eagles.

**4**

“All I have to do is answer these questions?” Candy held up the paper she’d been given upon entering. “That’s my test?”

Neil pointed at the desk next to Samantha. “When you’re done, we’d also like an eye exam and hearing test if you’re feeling well enough for it.” The room they were in had been a small bookstore that hadn’t been used for a while. It had been closed, dusty and didn’t have any books. The Eagles had turned it in to a classroom. It still smelled musty and needed a good dusting from the cleaning crew, but it was perfect in size and location. It was close to all the steps that led to the top and bottom decks.

Candy moved toward the desk. “I’ll be fine.” She took the seat, noting all the students here were female and pregnant. Tonya and Rose were in the rear, not looking at each other.

Samantha winced at a paper cut and stuck her finger in her mouth, sucking. “Get comfy. These are detailed questions.”

Candy shifted to find a spot. The chairs weren’t bad, but a baby was on her bladder today.

Rose, and Sabrina from Ciemus, nodded when she glanced around. Everyone else was working on their test. Candy opened hers and read the first question.

*List three things you dreamed of being as a child.*

Candy frowned, skipping ahead to the next question.

*List five things you think you excel at.*

“What is this?” She regarded Neil.

“Told ya.” Tonya held out her hand. “Not even thirty seconds before she asked.”

“There’s still one more.” Rose moped at possibly losing their bet.

Courtney opened the door and peered in. “Am I in the right place?”

Neil held out a test. “You’re late.”

“I had to pee.” Courtney swept the room and paled, realizing the same as everyone else–this class only held pregnant females.

“Have a seat.” Neil pointed.

Courtney went to the desk by itself, face red. “I haven’t known for long. I wasn’t hiding it from the camp or the father.”

“Have you told him yet?” Tonya was curious who it was.

“No. He’s been busy.”

“Can I ask?”

Courtney shook her head. “It wouldn’t be right.”

Tonya beamed at the rookie. “It’ll be okay. Eagles are stand up guys.”

“I’m not telling him.” Courtney opened her test. She read the first question.

The rest of the women waited, holding in comments.

“Oh, cool. Self-evaluation testing! I used to love doing these in college.” She got to work answering the first question.

Tonya and Rose stared at each other.

“We didn’t account for anyone liking it.”

“No. Does that invalidate our bet?”

“We said all of them.”

Tonya shifted restlessly, sweating. “Fine, you lose. Be at the lab tomorrow to help me put away the rest of the books.”

“I will.”

Neil snickered. They were like any group of male students. Angela would be able to make big plans around these females once they gave birth. He held up a notebook that was locked like a diary. “This is my collection of notes on descendant pregnancies. The answers you put on some of those pages will be added to it. Be generous in your details and opinions about what’s happening to you. No one knows your body better than you do.”

“Is it a medical journal or an everything journal?”

Neil frowned at Tonya. “Why?”

“Because you may not need to know about crazy dreams if it’s just medical.”

“What kind of crazy dreams?”

“Aliens.” Tonya chuckled, hiding how much it had bothered her. “Something came from the sky. Funny, right?”

The women gave weak chuckles, but Neil wrote it down. “Add everything. Angela can decide later if it should be separated.”

“You got it.” Tonya resumed writing, bracing to relive her nightmare.

Neil didn’t tell them Samantha had dreamed something similar last week. He felt Sam staring, but he refused to look at her and confirm there was a reason to worry. He would make sure Angela got his notes on it. He didn’t believe for a minute it was aliens coming to enslave them all, but maybe the Messenger had decided to pay them another visit.

“The boss knows you can’t do physical testing right now. After you’ve recovered from having your babies, you will be given the full test then. When you’re finished here, the boss wants you in the mess for lunch and then down to the medical bay for a checkup.” He scowled at them. “*No* exceptions.”

“I have tests running in the lab. I can only be gone another hour and twenty minutes.” Tonya was prepared to fight over it.

“I have a class of gardeners coming at about the same time.” Samantha was enjoying being in charge of the garden, without other responsibilities. It was peaceful.

“Then you should both get your food to go and attend that medical checkup. The boss said if exams can’t be kept, then your jobs are keeping you too busy.”

Scolded by Angela without her even being here, both women fell silent.

Neil pointed at the chalkboard. “Sign out when you leave. Security is being revamped for the next week and we want to know where you are or where you’ve been.”

“Is there a new problem?” Candy didn’t like the idea of being tracked like a loose dog.

“No. Anyone who doesn’t want a guard can discuss it with the boss.”

The women relaxed. Only a couple of them planned to ask for complete freedom. It was nice to have someone nearby to make sure they stayed alive.

“The last item on my list is mouse control. We have two cats and a half ton of traps. No poisons will be used, but pregnant women are still not allowed to interact with the traps for any reason. If you have problems in your work area, report it, try to cover whatever they’re messing in and encourage the cats to spend time there. If the cats leave a pile of anything behind, do *not* touch it.” Neil looked up. “I assume you all understand why?”

Everyone nodded. It was well known that cat feces was dangerous to the unborn.

“That’s it, then. Finish your survey.” Neil made notes and waited for them to be done, restless. It felt like trouble was coming and not just for the camp. He felt as if he personally was in danger.

The speaker crackled. “It’s nearing lunch time, Safe Haven. I’m told we have Vienna Sausage spaghetti. After lunch, all descendants who have not yet informed the boss of new gifts or been given a time for a personal test will go to the workout center on the third deck. That’s deck C. While it is optional, anyone expecting to join the Eagles or retain Eagle status must attend.”

“Is that any of us?” Tonya glanced around.

“Not me.” Samantha grimaced at a sharp kick. “I’m not even allowed to climb the stairs. If there’s no ramp for my chair, I have to be carried.”

“Same here.” Candy waved the note. “Kenn gave me this a few minutes ago. It’s a list of ‘don’t do or face the wrath of the boss’ warnings.”

Tonya scowled. She dug hers out and held it up. “Kenn left it on my pillow. At first, I thought it was a poem or a note.”

The other women flashed similar papers, laughing.

“I’ll be free after I get the next batch of tests running. We could grab a snack then and go watch the next magic show.” Tonya was finally organized enough that she felt okay being out of the lab between batches.

“Sounds good.” Samantha was also eager for a change. She missed the wind on her skin.

“I wish we could sit on the top deck and enjoy the sun. People are saying it’s warmer and not cloudy today.” Rose also wanted to know if land was still in view, but she didn’t mention that.

Courtney was already mourning the lack of freedom. If not for being given the note and a time to be here, she wouldn’t have shown up. She’d only begun to suspect the pregnancy. Now she knew for sure. *I’m having a baby.* “I know a way we could get up there without breaking the no-stairs rule.”

Neil frowned. “I didn’t hear that.”

Courtney ignored him. “The service elevators don’t have guards. One goes to the top deck for serving the passengers. It’s big enough for a wheelchair.”

Neil groaned. “I told Angela putting guards there couldn’t wait another day.” Neil made a note in his book, but it was too late to stop this minirebellion unless he called and tattled on them.

Samantha glared. “Don’t do that.”

Neil knew she was feeling caged. “I won’t, but only because there’s room for your chair.”

Samantha beamed. “Awesome. This is going to be a good day. You’ll see.”

Neil wished he could concur, but death was heavy on his shoulders. *I’ll be happy if we just get through it alive.*

Chapter Twenty-Three

**Powerful Signs**

**A picture containing green

Description automatically generated**

Day Four

**1**

**“S**how me what you’ve got.” Angela settled into her seat, notebook and pen in hand. There were guards, camp members in the stands to observe, and descendants waiting to be called. Only the kids and pregnant females were missing. They were undergoing medical checks in the infirmary. Everyone was avoiding that area to give privacy. This lesson was being held in the ballroom that had been emptied. Safe Haven wouldn’t be hosting dances here.

There were several clubs downstairs for that. The fragile, expensive furnishings they had found in here would be recycled into something else or stored as trade items for when they returned. They didn’t need gold forks and spoons, but it could be used for something else later.

Trinity drew in a breath and brought up the four-layered shield to prove she’d mastered it.

“Good. What else?” Angela assumed everyone had at least one skill beyond shielding and mind reading.

Trinity released the barriers and picked a target.

Guards stared, not understanding what was happening.

Trinity pointed at Daryl. A wave of energy sailed toward him.

Daryl took a step forward, snared. He fought back, mentally and physically.

Trinity hit him again, yanking her hand inward.

Daryl groaned at the pain of resisting.

Trinity took pity. “Use your shield.”

Daryl brought up two layers, then dropped to his knees, out of energy.

Trinity stopped snaring, loving the claps and respect coming from the observers, but she was also disappointed Angela wasn’t impressed.

“Anything else?”

Trinity had planned to keep her last gift to herself, but she couldn’t stand Angela’s bored tone. She pointed at the farthest entrance, where the guards weren’t paying attention to her.

The door opened and slammed.

Guards shouted, some of them drawing weapons.

Angela wrote it down. “Thank you. Please return to whatever you were doing or scheduled for.” Angela waited for her to stomp off.

Marc motioned Brittani forward, getting attention. The two women were rivals. Did Brittani have gifts to match? Everyone waited to see.

So did Trinity. She lingered behind the bleachers, watching around the side.

With so many descendants in one room and so many minds on alert against people prying into their secrets, it was tenser than Angela had planned on. “Whenever you’re ready.” She flipped the page to Brittani’s name.

Brittani waved her hand and opened *all* the doors to the room. When she slammed them, almost everyone jumped.

“I think I should have called off today.” Ivan was already getting a headache from the noise. He yawned and waited for the next surprise, wishing he’d slept more and read less.

Brittani brought up a shield and wrapped it around the person next in line. Then she repeated the action, six more times.

Descendants stared, wondering how they were going to match that.

Brittani drew in air, struggling to do the last one. *I want this. Help me!*

Her witch woke, whimpering at all the light.

*You’re one of the good guys. Get over it. Help me.*

Energy surged through her body. Brittani lifted a final shield over herself, making it a total of eight.

“How do you do that?” Angela waved her pen. “Specifically, I mean. I use chocolate.”

Brittani let them all go, gasping. “Same.”

“Interesting.” Angela wrote, talking at the same time. “Chocolate helps strengthen energy banks. We’ll add a daily serving of some type as soon as I get settled into ration amounts for the next year. I almost have that worked out now.” She regarded Brittani. “Anything else?”

Brittani shook her head, breathing harsh. “Got food cooking… Go?”

“Yes. Next?”

“That’s me.” Conner stepped forward in the silence. “I need a shield.” He regarded his dad.

“No family allowed during a test.” Angela gestured at Marc.

“Make it big.” Conner waited for Marc to bring up the shield and then walked through it. He stopped chest to chest. “Can we test someone else to see if it works on everyone? I don’t know that yet.”

“Granted. Jennifer?”

Jennifer took Marc’s place, bringing up her strongest shield without being in battle mode.

Conner came right through.

“I didn’t even feel it.” Jennifer returned to her place, not happy about Conner’s evolution. If he could do it, others could too.

Eagles observed, also doing their own evaluations. The rumors of Angela forming a kill team were associated with this demonstration. They all assumed the people with the best skills would be chosen to return with Marc and Adrian to find Cody’s missing sister. Stories still flew fast in Safe Haven.

“My fire also gets through.” Conner’s head tilted. “I think. It was hard to test on my own.”

Jennifer moved back, waving at him. “I’ll absorb it. Hit me.”

Conner sent a weak blast through her shield. It landed in her hands, inches from her face.

Jennifer sucked it down, then belched loudly, drawing snickers from the witnesses. Then she dropped to her knees from the pain.

“Secret weapon. Nice. Practice with anyone brave enough to try.” Angela added a rule. “Fire gear is mandatory.”

Conner strolled to the bleachers and sat down to view the rest of the demonstrations, proud of himself.

Kyle helped Jennifer to her post, glad she would be filled after the power finished merging.

“Next?” Angela was also glad Jennifer was being refilled. Jenny had been busy, but her work wasn’t done yet. The girl had given her a small stack of notes on topics they’d discussed. Angela planned to sort through them tonight, but she’d spotted one to be worried over. Jennifer’s conversation with Neil hadn’t gone well. He was blaming himself for Becky’s condition. Worse, he was stressing over her trial hurting his place in camp. Beneath Neil’s cool demeanor, trouble was brewing.

Morgan moved to the center of the room. He made eye contact with Angela for permission. “A shield maybe?”

Angela gestured toward the guards. “Pinpoint a target.”

“It’ll hurt them.”

“Lower the pitch.”

Morgan smiled. “I didn’t think of that. Hang on.” He concentrated, then sent out a wave of power. It flew through the air and slammed into Tommy, taking him to his knees.

“What was that?!”

“A type of sonic blast, like what Marc did at the mountain. Some of these gifts can’t get a real test here, but we’ll make do.” Angela wrote it in his file. “Next?”

Marc tensed as Charlie came forward. He’d often wondered what gifts his firstborn child had, but he’d never asked. After a while, he had assumed the boy couldn’t do much or he would have shown it. Then the fight at the mountain had come and revealed a power to rival his mother at some point.

Charlie knew they were all expecting something big, but he didn’t feel like showing off. He brought up a copy of his mom’s fire shield and spun it across the room to protect her.

The witnesses liked that, as he’d known they would. Charlie quickly changed it to a wind shield blowing around her like a defensive tornado. When he released it, he wasn’t even winded.

“What else?”

Much like Trinity, Charlie didn’t like the bored tone. He brought up a new shield around himself and made the wind inside it spin so hard that he vanished from sight. He lowered the shield and kept the wind around him as he walked toward his mother. Few descendants could shield themselves while they were moving, but he was also using nature instead of his normal shield. “Better?”

She wrote it down. “Much. Next?”

Charlie frowned at her coldness. He understood she couldn’t show favoritism, but he’d hoped for more.

*You didn’t put in the effort for more.*

Marc sighed when Charlie ignored him and left. The boy still had a lot to learn about growing up. *I hope I get the chance to teach you. A few years doesn’t seem like enough.*

*Tell me about it.* Angela pushed aside personal thoughts and got back to work. “Next?”

**2**

“I’m here to pick up four kits.” Ivan handed the note to Brittani, thinking about what he’d watched her do at the demonstration. She would be valuable in a fight. She could protect an entire team.

Between meals, the galley was quiet and almost deserted. Only part of the cooking crew was here while everyone else took their tests or slept between shifts. Ivan heard the dishwasher running and smelled food cooking. The equipment was getting a work out.

Brittani marked the note and pushed it across the counter. She ducked down and pulled out four kits. “Boss wants these in the armory next. Leave them by the right lockers and you’re all done.”

“No one signs for them?”

“I didn’t ask.” She turned toward the row of ovens. “I’m sorry, but I have a lot going on here right now.”

Ivan wasn’t offended. “Have a good one.” He headed for the armory, located near the new cabin that Marc had arranged for Angela a short time ago. She didn’t know yet and he wasn’t anticipating telling her. He understood what she meant about having things remain constant, but he also believed she needed to be reasonable about some changes. A larger cabin would be beneficial in many ways.

Ivan increased his pace, wanting to be with Angela when she went to the top deck. The captain had sent a note that passengers were gathering up there. Ivan was positive she would go up soon to check it out. Afterwards, there was dinner and entertainment to get through before he would be able to return to his cabin and reread the book he’d finished on a break. Many of the parts were lingering, especially the ones about power and how it corrupts even the best people.

Ivan tapped on the armory window and went in.

The room was empty, but a camera rotated toward him as soon as he entered. Ivan waved, making a face and put the kits below the matching lockers. He wasn’t sure having names on them was a good idea, but he also didn’t know how else they would identify everyone’s gear. None of the bags were standard, though all of them had the basics.

Ivan left. He approached the intersection to take him to the top deck, able to feel Angela heading that way now, and stopped. Unease was flowing, but not from the deck where people were gathering. Ivan followed the feel, dismayed when it led to the stairs at the end of the hall. *The brig’s down there. It’s Becky again.* Ivan slid down the steps and went to the guard station.

Ben and Wade lifted guns at his footfalls.

“Easy.” Ivan joined them, noticing they kept their guns in hand. “What’s up?”

Wade gestured toward the cell. “She’s…upset. Seth’s trying to calm her.”

“She had a bad dream and it rolled from there.” Ben holstered, feeling like they were overreacting to a teenager. “Tell the boss she’s getting worse.”

Ivan wrote it down, then went to the barred window to observe and listen. Ben and Wade couldn’t read her thoughts, so they were missing a part of the picture. He concentrated, straining to read through the red haze in Becky’s mind.

*We have to do it now. The weather’s calm. The boat isn’t rocking at all.*

*Too many guards, and people up and about. We’ll leave during the camp meeting.*

*Now!*

*No. I have to get more ammunition. You need to rest.*

*I have to kill her.*

*Why?!*

*Slavery is wrong.*

*I keep telling you, these people are not slaves.*

*She hooked them in. You too, maybe. None of you can see around that.*

*I’m not brainwashed.*

*You are! She’s evil!*

*Shh. Calm down. It’ll be okay.*

*I’m sorry.*

*So am I. Here, take your medicine.*

Ivan retreated to write it in his book.

Wade cleared his throat and tried not to sound totally freaked out. “What are you going to do about her?”

“Send you more ammunition.” Ivan stored his notebook. “We may need to keep her out of her own trial, or she’ll be hanged.”

Ben frowned. “They’re set to *escape* soon. She won’t face a trial.”

Ivan snorted, heading for the stairs. “Becky isn’t leaving. She’ll come to the trial to reach Angela. Seth will have to drug her to get her off this ship.”

Wade immediately added that to the report for the end of his shift, hoping Ivan repeated it to Angela. Knowing they were in sync would encourage the boss to do something about it. Wade definitely thought an intervention was needed. If Becky walked out of that cell, someone would die.

**3**

“We get the kids, while the camp gets the boss?” James hammered a peg into the rail. “Doesn’t seem like a fair trade.”

Greg chuckled, handing him another peg for the next rail. “Get used to it. Those little monsters will be Eagles, someday, caring for us in our old age.”

“We’re in deep shit.”

“Yep.”

The new training room for the kids had been a daycare center. The Eagles had cleared it out and restocked it, providing a place for their kids to exercise and release some of their pent-up anger. The Disney decorations on the walls and floors had been left to please the younger ones.

The other men in the room listened to the jokes and helped with the massive project. When Safe Haven first began, Adrian had used a training course for the kids, but when things got crazy, they hadn’t been able to keep up with that tradition. Angela had gotten Theo to design a setup they could dismantle or put up in half an hour, allowing them to restart the workouts for the kids. The adults got one too–putting it together and away.

Greg glanced at the guards for a confirmation that things were okay and was glad when he got one. People were all off on their own projects now. Security on the boss and council was light. It was peaceful again and going well. That worried him. Greg held in a shudder at the memory of Becky setting him on fire. He’d never felt pain like that.

James tackled the last rail, back aching. “We’re ready for the connector in thirty seconds.”

Men on break hurried to collect the top portion of the wooden setup. On the bottom, the kids could run a zig-zag course throughout the level, ending in a slide back to the floor. The top level had pullup bars, a tall netted ladder along the wall and several areas for a rotated workout on weights and a treadmill. It wasn’t painted, but it had been sanded and was fine for use.

Near the chairs put out for breaks, Dog was sleeping with his head on his front paws. He’d come in to get scratched and snooze while the cats were getting a flea treatment.

“Ug! Is that a rat?!”

Men grabbed for guns, spinning around to find two long haired creatures with wild yellow orbs glaring at them from the entrance.

People cackled as they realized what it was.

“Must be bath day!” Greg returned to the work of lining up the top and bottom to take the pressure off the men holding it in place.

Both cats stalked into the room, spotting Dog. They paused to shake and lick where needed, twitching at the laughs.

“Look out, Dog.”

The wolf didn’t move.

The cats walked faster, sensing a window closing to sleep on his warm body.

Dog lunged upward, tossing a large toy mouse with his teeth. *Get it, kitties!*

One cat hissed and smacked at the flying object, knocking it back toward Dog.

The male cat yowled, fleeing blindly. It smacked into the open door and skidded out into the hallway.

The female followed the mouse in a fast blur, pouncing on it as it slid under Dog’s side.

Witnesses howled as Dog panicked, fleeing the attack cat with a whimper and his tail tucked.

He went into the hallway, followed by the cat.

She swiped at his back legs, furious about being set up.

The toy mouse was abandoned to the humans who couldn’t stop laughing.

**4**

“Is everything set?” Jennifer joined Kyle in the employee hall across from the row of den mother cabins. Those men and women were on rotating shifts in the living quarters, allowing them a few nights a week here in the quiet area.

Kyle held out her kit. “All covered. Allison has Autumn until we get home?”

“Yes. She’s very sweet. She can’t have kids of her own, you know. She’s one of the Safe Haven females who are sterile. Being a den mother was the next best choice for her.” Jennifer knelt to dig in her kit. She changed quickly so she could blend into the shadows.

“The guards are coming. I hear Daryl’s big mouth.” Kyle liked Daryl, but it was a telltale sign.

“Angela ordered Allison to stay in the cabin with the babies until we return. She has Special Forces on all details outside the entrance.”

“I ordered it, Jenny. Angela signed off on it.”

“What?”

“I don’t know Allison very well.”

“Oh.” Jennifer relaxed, buttoning her shirt. “That actually makes me feel better. If there was a problem coming, Angela would have already had it on her list for this run.”

“I think the same.”

The couple quieted as the voices got closer. The wall between them was thin, allowing Kyle and Jennifer to overhear the conversation.

“I think it’s a bad sign.”

“It’s probably a satellite burning up.”

“Could be a meteor too.”

“Agreed. Now let it go. We’re on duty in three…two…one.”

*Knock-knock.* “This is security team A. Is everything okay in there? Do you need anything?”

“Just quiet so the kids will take their nap.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Jennifer tugged on her jacket, trying to be silent so the guards didn’t find out they were here. She hoped Autumn had a good time while she was gone, but it felt wrong to leave her baby at all. If not for the run they were making being so important, she would have refused it.

Kyle waited for her, then led them through the dim corridors. He’d memorized the routes to half the ship through these dingy, twisting paths, but few of the other Eagles were bothering to learn them yet. Kyle planned to add it to training. Angela had given him free rein to change and tweak the plans she’d delivered yesterday.

Jennifer dwelled on the conversation they’d just overheard. She assumed people had spotted something in the sky, but she and Kyle weren’t stopping to view it. They would be on the open ocean shortly. They could view it from there, along with their teammates.

Kyle increased the pace. They were going to be late by almost a minute.

“This way.” Jennifer grabbed his wrist and ran, using her mental map to drag him through the passages he hadn’t explored yet.

“Here. Squeeze in.” Jennifer shoved him into the elevator and shimmied in with him. She hit the button and flinched as the gate snapped shut.

Kyle held her close, taking the rusty ride with a smile. “I’ll be using this again. Don’t tell my team.”

Jennifer let them out and took off running again.

Kyle chuckled, easily staying on her heels in the narrow hallway meant for employees to traverse unseen, one at a time. The halls were roughly two-foot wide and coated in layers of dust. Kyle didn’t think many of them had been used even while the ship was in operation. The paint here was peeling off the walls and it held a damp smell that implied one of the pipes might be leaking somewhere, though he didn’t spot puddles as they ran.

Jennifer pushed through a wide door and stopped. “We’ve been here a while. Look the part.” She began smoothing her clothes and slowing her breathing as voices echoed outside the opposite entrance to the rear loading chamber.

Kyle did the same, smothering amusement. Neil would have fun keeping up with her on runs.

“There they are.” Jennifer pointed as Marc and Adrian entered.

“You guys ready?” Kyle followed up, deflecting from their appearance.

“We did an extra check on security posts. That thing in the sky is making people nervous.” Marc scanned the couple and shook his head, smirking. He went to the small boat Kenn had gotten ready.

Adrian hadn’t noticed. He was lowering the rear ramp. It was his job to launch the boat and jump in without dying or being dragged across the ridged floor. Neil would be by in a few minutes to close the ramp.

Kyle directed Jennifer into the right place on the boat, showing her where to brace her feet to keep from sliding. He was a bit surprised neither man had protested her being assigned for the run. It was dangerous.

“We want to see what she can do.” Marc settled into place, ready to make the call for Adrian to launch them. “Angela had her tests. Jennifer’s having one now.”

Jennifer laughed, clapping. “Yeah! Tell me who to shoot.”

The men snorted or rolled their eyes.

Marc dropped his hand.

Adrian was watching for it. “Hang on!”

Jennifer clutched the rubber handles and kept her attention on Kyle so she would know what to do next.

The launch and Adrian’s jump happened at the same time, allowing the former leader to land in his seat with perfect grace… Then he hit the floor and slipped, flying onto Marc’s lap as they launched.

The Marine boat shot out of the rear of the cruise ship with two passengers screaming and two of them laughing.

**5**

Ivan climbed the next set of stairs, bad feeling growing. Something was happening on the top deck now and the boss was up there with only half a team for security. Almost everyone was on the top deck now. No one was panicking, but tension had once again joined their ranks. There was even talk about it being a missile, that the war was happening again.

Ivan weaved in and out of groups of camp members, not running so he didn’t spread panic. He didn’t know yet if there was a reason to run.

Ivan emerged on the top deck, shielding his eyes from the sun. He’d spent the last few days organizing below decks for Angela. He’d had one shift up here yesterday while she worked with the children. That was all the fresh air he’d gotten since they set sail.

Ivan spotted Angela across the deck. As he went to her, he noticed everyone was peering upward.

Ivan didn’t let himself glance at it until he reached Angela’s side, putting them hip-to-hip.

She had security from the men who were on duty up here. Those men resumed positions, confident Ivan would protect the boss.

Ivan finally looked up. When he did, he found it hard to glance away.

A blazing ball was streaking through the sky, leaving a crackling and sparkling tail. It appeared as if it were on fire. The front of the glowing ball was pale blue. The sky around it was pristine.

Camp members began calling to each other for information.

“Does anyone know what it is?”

“Maybe it’s a meteor.”

“I believe meteors travel faster.”

“Maybe the space station fell. Or a satellite.”

“I think there would be disturbances in the sky. That looks like it’s still in space.”

“Do we have anybody who might be able to tell?”

Heads twisted, searching for Samantha. Storm tracking was her gift, so people naturally assumed space was included in that.

Huddled in the protective center of the other pregnant females, Samantha shrugged at the questioning glances. “I can track storms. I know squat about the sky.”

“I think it’s a comet.”

People turned to Thelma.

“I’m pretty sure we were supposed to get a comet. I remember talking about it at work with some friends before the war. We were all saying there’s a Russian comet coming next year.”

“We’ll check the books on it. In the meantime, let’s have a closer look.” Angela turned to Ozzie. “Go tell Theo we need the telescopes. Everyone can stay up here until dinner is ready and take turns viewing it.”

Ivan sighed tiredly. “I know where those boxes are. I’ll need some help.”

Angela motioned a few of the bigger camp members along to help carry. To ease Ivan’s discomfort, she moved closer to a guard post.

Ivan descended, thinking he’d never gotten this good of a workout before. There were more stairs on the ship than hallways.

Angela observed the sky with a hand over her eyes to shade them for a better view, like almost everyone else was doing. She used her improved sight to narrow details the others would have to see through the magnifying lenses of the equipment they had brought along. She thought Thelma was right. They were seeing a comet. It was the first one she had viewed in her lifetime, beyond pictures or television. That was probably true of most of the people here.

Because the boss wasn’t showing signs of panic or worry, neither did the camp. They passed the word and accepted it as a normal phenomenon that occasionally happened. Passengers who had planned to go below and wait in the galley for dinner now took seats around the large, dirty pools in the center of the ship and gazed at the sky.

“Aren’t comets harbingers of doom?”

Eagles gave Blake dirty glares, but the rookie didn’t notice. He was on break. He’d come up to hit on the single women, but they weren’t paying attention to anything but the sky.

“I mean, in the past, entire civilizations have fallen over the appearance of a comet because they believed it was God telling them to make war. Won’t that happen again, especially now that society is almost gone?”

No one wanted to answer because he was right. There was little doubt the more primitive people of the world who were viewing it might interpret this as a sign to do something drastic. Those societies hadn’t been big on science in the first place. Many of them wouldn’t understand it was natural and didn’t mean anything.

*Are you sure it doesn’t mean anything?* Angela’s witch slowly returned to her cell, limping and dripping muck. *Just because something is a normal event in your world, that doesn’t mean it can’t be a sign of something else in someone else’s world.*

Angela was forced to acknowledge that. She stewed on it while the witch went to her mental bunk and collapsed. *Have I missed anything? Who isn’t covered?*

Her mind went straight to the team that had just departed, unnoticed. *Please keep them safe.*

Unwilling to dwell on what couldn’t be changed, Angela joined the pregnant women for a light scold and to deliver permission for them to come up using the elevator from now on. As long as they had their medical checks, even Samantha could navigate the stairs, but Angela wasn’t rescinding the no-steps order. Dreams of something coming for their kids had only increased since they set sail. She’d scolded Marc and Adrian this morning for interrupting her thought process, but the nightmare had actually been responsible for it. She was terrified. Once again, death was flying toward them and this time, she had no defenses ready.

**6**

“Wow. That’s amazing.” Angela swallowed and scooped up another bite. “What’s in it?”

“Rehydrated beef, kidney beans, carrots, capsicum and sweet potato. It’s called chili con carne. I added the rice a little heavy to boost health levels. More vitamin A and potassium, plus fiber. I’ve been feeding everyone rich meals. Gotta keep those bowels flowing.”

“Well, it’s really good.” Angela took a bowl for her tray, making the cook smile. “I think we’re stocked on all those items. I’d like you to add this once a week as a standard meal for either lunch or dinner.”

“I can do that.” Brittani wrote it on her sheet of notes and returned to filling bowls from the large steel pot next to her. “I’m making that list now. I should have it done and turned in over the next few days.”

“You’re using recipes with items we have a lot of?”

“Yes. So far, we’ve got three bean meals, two rice meals, four cereal and powdered milk days. Nine of twenty-one slots. I’ll also add snacks and desserts when I finish the main courses.”

Angela swept the kitchen crew, aware of Jayda glowering at her. Jayda had been denied Eagle duty because she talked too much, but she wasn’t saying anything now. “How’s your replacement doing?”

Brittani kept writing, aware of the sparks flying around her head. “She’s smart enough to do all of it. Will she? That remains to be seen.”

“You explained how important the job is?”

“Oh, yeah. She doesn’t care about the level of work involved. She just wanted to do other things.”

“Did she tell you what those other things were?”

“Yeah.” Brittani sighed. “Thank you for telling her no. The interview went fast. I only said about five words. Ivan’s right.”

“I thought so too. Any idea yet what will tip it in her favor?”

“Her first meal for everyone.” Brittani shut the notebook and stretched, spine popping and neck aching. She was beat. “The happiness of a full camp anticipating the next invention sold me. It might her too, but it depends on how strong her desire to be a fighter really is. You know that.”

“Yes. I’m hoping this will give her some of the same feelings.”

“We’ll see.” Brittani picked up a small cup of vitamins and deposited it onto Angela’s tray. “Once a week. Orders from the medics for all females who are or might become pregnant in the future.”

Angela took them without arguing, heart hurting. *I still miss them both. I could have thirty more live births and I’d still miss my two dead children.*

Around her, the camp chatted about the day’s events, the comet, the magic demonstrations and the meal. The clutter of voices and reflections gave Angela a headache. She went to the center table and perched on it instead of taking a bench. No one else was at the table. Angela didn’t expect anyone.

She slid into the center and crossed her legs, drawing attention and tolerance. In a polite society, her actions would have been unacceptable. For addressing Safe Haven, it still felt right. “Bad news first, then the good. Ready?”

People braced. Those in the middle of making plans for the evening scowled, sensing they were about to be upended.

“The top deck is off limits for tonight unless you have guard duty.”

Groans filled the room. More than one couple had been going to sky gaze and make out in the dim lamp light.

“The wind has picked up all day. Those of you who just came down noticed it, I’m sure. The comet is out of sight, but another storm is coming. Please, make me happy and wait until morning or tomorrow night, okay? If you fall overboard, we won’t be able to hear you or see you, let alone try a rescue.”

A somber mood came in. Many people shifted to view Shawn or Missy, who had experienced that.

Shawn glared at Missy and Leeann in turn.

Leeann kept her eyes on her plate and didn’t respond to the sudden attention.

Missy glared back at everyone but Shawn, arms crossing over her chest. She didn’t glance at Shawn at all. Seeing him fall into the water had been the worst moment of her life so far, easily beating out any of her time with Tara. Samantha had warned her she was going to get Shawn killed and it had almost happened. *I’m not having anything to do with him ever again. Then, he’ll stay safe forever.*

Across the galley, Angela and Samantha caught the thought. Neither woman was relieved. Missy had just proven her love was real. By giving up her heart for his life, she’d proven it wasn’t a spell or an obsession that needed to be blocked. They were meant to be together.

“That’s all the bad news. All I have left is to let you know that a few people in leadership have been overloaded. I insisted on them taking a break. Don’t bug them. One of those couples needs the…rest.”

Everyone who got the inuendo tittered or whistled. They’d noticed Kyle and Jennifer were absent.

“To make up for the top decks being closed tonight, we’re opening…” Angela peered at the sheet and cleared her throat. “Okay. We’re opening ‘Spanky’s Dance Disco’ for couples only. A guard will be posted.”

More amusement echoed, breaking the rest of the tension from the appearance of the comet. Theo had verified that suspicion by finding a passage in a science journal about celestial events. The book was floating through the meal, getting dirty.

*We need to laminate the books*. Angela smiled at her people. “You’ve got me for two movies, a late-night snack right here and a tour of all the open shops.”

The cheer from that drew attention from the ship. The walls began to give off a soft green light that warmed chilly skin.

“All kids are to go to the small training room after you eat. The guards there built something special. They’re going to teach you to use it.”

Once again lined up on stools across from each other, the kids and fighters eyed each other in the same wary suspicion.

“The shops and clubs from last night are opening as we speak, along with the beauty shop. Candy has been authorized to open one hair booth and supervise a worker, so sign the sheet I’m passing out now.” Angela let it fly toward a group of healthy camp women who pushed and shoved in fun to reach it.

The women around Candy were from the pregnancy class. They’d stayed together all afternoon and into the evening. They smiled at Candy, glad her place in camp was smoothing out.

Candy searched the crowd for Conner, aware of the good vibes but not enjoying it. They’d been apart all day and she didn’t know the plan for tonight. She could be alone; she just wanted to know if she would be.

*Never*. Conner appeared in the window along the opposite wall. He flashed her a quick leer and disappeared again. *Just busy, baby.*

Candy blushed at the endearment. *Okay*.

“That’s it from me.” Angela held up her mug. “Here’s to six hours of fun!” Angela drank the toast and picked up her bowl of chili as people came by her table and went to others.

Some of those were guards waved into position by Travis. Ivan was off duty and Travis hated it. No one kept track of Angela the way Ivan did.

The camp started gravitating toward the fun, encouraging others to finish faster. It didn’t take long for the galley to empty, leaving only a few passengers who weren’t going to the entertainment floor. Angela swept them, making sure everyone was covered. Most of them were contemplating sore bodies needing a bed. She approved and followed her camp to the fun. She hadn’t had many nights like this where she could relax, and she didn’t expect to have many more. She hated being without Marc, but she was anticipating a little fun without any of her men sniffing and getting jealous. Tonight, for a change, it really would be just her and her people. *I need it as much as they do.*

Chapter Twenty-Four

**Under the Weather**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“P**eople aren’t going to like this.”

Ivan led Jeff toward Angela’s new cabin for third shift duty. “She gave us a list of names for when we need to rotate. You’re on it.”

Jeff liked how that felt. He wanted to be useful to Safe Haven as more than just anger control for their kids.

“Don’t knock that job. She spends a lot of time on plans for them. Your classes have to be related.” Ivan handed him a notebook. “I’m two cabins down on the left. Greg is two cabins down on the right. You’ll have a partner, but not for the first two hours. You have the code book for rookies?”

“Yes. I remember a lot of it.”

“Good. We hate giving out books, but it’s hard to practice on your own without a manual or guide. Don’t forget to sign it. We only let one copy out at a time.”

“You have a waiting list?” Jeff stored the items in his new Eagle jacket. The Scott vests were great.

“It goes to those who show promise or are needed in other places.” Ivan strolled down the hall. “Doug gets it next.”

Jeff liked that too. Doug was a good guy. In his day, he’d no doubt been a loyal badass. Now, he was a dependable Eagle for shifts that needed to be filled. In time, maybe Angela could find a more important job for Doug. He had earned it, in Jeff’s opinion. The big man was doing duty over Cody right now, proving he was trusted by the boy’s father.

Jeff wondered who his partner would be as he took his post and got set to be there a while. In two hours, all the shifts changed. Angela had requested hers early so Ivan would get some extra sleep. He’d stayed up too late reading the last couple nights. Jeff didn’t know what the book was, but the soldier was protecting it as if it were a gold brick. That made Jeff want to know. He loved to read.

Following the rules, he tapped on Angela’s door to make contact and ensure his protectee was fine upon taking over a shift. “Everything good in there?”

“It’ss fine.”

Jeff heard the slur and assumed she’d had too much to drink. “I’m out here if you need me.”

Something fell over, thumping to the floor.

“I’ll get that when I come back.” The sound of gagging came next.

Jeff left her alone. Alcohol was rough, especially for those who didn’t binge often.

Jeff glanced up as Ivan returned. “Problem?”

“She didn’t drink anything.” Ivan dug out his key. “I knew she rushed me out for something.” He went into the cabin as the sound of vomiting echoed.

Jeff stayed in the hall to deflect passengers, wondering if she might be pregnant. When a woman got sick, it was the first condition he suspected.

“See if anyone else is ill. Could have been dinner. It’s been about five hours since mess.”

Jeff went to find the man on point tonight.

Angela recovered slowly and opened the bathroom door, but she stayed near the john as she flushed.

Ivan got a glass of water ready and then dug through her kit for the crackers he’d stashed there. “Seasick?”

“No.”

“Other symptoms?”

“Just tired now.” Angela rinsed her mouth and sat on a stool. “I’ll be fine in a few minutes. I probably mixed something I shouldn’t have.”

Angela’s new cabin was twice the size and held an extra bed that was already covered in her gear. Ivan hadn’t put it away for her because he didn’t know where she wanted everything. If she was like the other Eagles, the weapons duffel bag would go under her side of the bed and not in the closet.

“We’re checking on dinner to be sure.”

Angela groaned. “I didn’t eat lunch or breakfast, other than the wakeup tray the galley sent. Chili on empty guts is hard.”

“Any heartburn?”

“No.”

“We’ll check things out, per your rules.”

“If someone else is sick too, there might be a problem. One is random. Two might be a pattern.”

“We’ll know in a little bit.” Ivan heard steps and went to the hallway. He saw Morgan coming with his medical bag.

Morgan yawned as he entered the cabin. “Jeff said I should stop by. Evening, Boss.”

Angela came from the bathroom, shaky and pale. “Same to you.” She sat in the chair and let him give her a quick exam.

“There are no other illnesses, that we know of.” Morgan soothed her concern as he got to work. “Other than me. I have enough heartburn to fuel a jet.”

Angela chuckled weakly, relaxing. All she wanted was sleep. It was a relief to know there wasn’t a problem with anyone else. “The chili got me. Don’t make a fuss.”

“I won’t.” Morgan wrote the results on his clipboard and went on to the next test. He hummed as he worked, wondering what the waves looked like. The wind was almost howling. It couldn’t be pretty.

“How are all your patients?”

“Fully recovered, except for Zack and Ramer. Both are coming along nicely with Conner’s healing sessions.”

“Sally?”

“Fully healed.” Morgan’s calm faded. “Becky’s the one I’m worried about. Jennifer handled the gunshot and baby damage but mentally, she’s pouring blood.”

“I’ve been thinking about talking to her.”

Everyone scowled.

Angela sighed. “I can’t think of anything else to get through to her.”

“You can’t save everyone.” Morgan put his equipment away and left without giving a diagnosis.

Angela returned to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She felt better now, but she wanted to sleep.

“I’ll stay here tonight.”

Angela didn’t argue. She always felt better having someone she trusted close by in case things went hinky.

Jeff joined them, finally releasing the scowl he’d hid all the way here. “The captain got sick half an hour ago but refused to make a medic call. He’s in his cot on the bridge, sleeping. Ray’s watching for a fever. The boat crew is on duty–all of them, with Claire and Nathan in charge.”

Angela came out of the bathroom and went to her bed. “Wake me in an hour with an update.” She tried not to yawn as she climbed under the blankets, boots on.

Jeff and Ivan shared a worried glance and settled into their posts, leaving the door open so they could communicate by hand gestures.

Angela dropped out right away, tormented by images of death and endless failures at sea.

Down the hall, Jayda pulled the sheet up and lay there. *I’m just a distraction when he isn’t serving the queen. I don’t like this deal. I was supposed to get a good man, a good mate. All I’m getting from this is quick sex and sweaty arms that aren’t even here half the nights. And when the permanent cabins come out, we aren’t being put together unless I’m pregnant and maybe not even then.*

Jayda rubbed her belly, letting her mind drift. She’d wanted a baby for a long time. When the war came, she’d never believed she would have one. Now that there was a chance, she still wanted the kid. She just didn’t want the man. She might if he wasn’t already in love. Competing against Angela was impossible. *It would be easier to kill her.*

**2**

Tracy opened the cabin door, responding to the quiet tap. Charlie had just finished taking care of their animals.

Charlie handed her a small bag and kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll be around if you need me.”

“Are you working?”

He tried not to glance at her long legs in the pink nightgown. “Doing rounds before I crash. It may be a while.”

“Okay.” She came forward for a kiss.

Charlie held her, heart settling into a peaceful rhythm he knew he would always associate with her. No one else made him feel this way.

“Sleep well.” He waited for her to lock the door, then continued down the hall. Many of the pregnant women were in this deck of cabins. He had delivered snacks to all of them. He’d thought of it for Tracy and realized everyone probably wanted one. Tracy had been his last stop.

Wind howled outside the ship, drawing reactions from those sleeping. Dreams shifted; mutters echoed.

Charlie strolled through the hall, nodding to guards who were also feeling the absence of four strong members of their camp. Few people had noticed the team was gone, but everyone still felt it.

Dog came around the corner and fell in on his heels.

Charlie was glad of the company. He wasn’t scared, but he wasn’t calm either.

Dog studied the voices and vibes, not liking the unease of the humans. Even the cats were acting strange. He hadn’t seen them in hours. The rocking swells and loud wind made the felines jumpy.

Charlie went to the brig deck. He’d told Tracy it might be a while because he wanted to spend time down there, listening. Now that he didn’t have to be an Eagle anymore, he had free hours to do with as he pleased. Choosing to spend it on rounds didn’t feel strange to him. His dad was off ship. It fell to him to keep his mom safe and things weren’t right somewhere. He was betting on Becky being involved.

When he finished the brig deck, where everyone was sleeping but the guards, Charlie did the same to all the other decks, Dog at his hip.

When dawn arrived, he fell into a restless slumber in the living quarters with the wolf across his ankles.

People wondered if he and Tracy were fighting, but no one woke him to ask or to alert him to his next shift. He wasn’t an Eagle anymore. His schedule wasn’t important to them.

**3**

“Hi, Panaji. Enjoying breakfast?”

Panaji grinned, showing a mouthful of chewed pancakes. “Is good!”

Daryl sat across from the man, noticing he was alone at this far table. He’d just woken and wanted coffee. “Things okay for you?”

Panaji shrugged. “They no trust me yet.”

“Is anyone bothering you?”

“No. Just no talk.” He pointed. “Except the angels. You all talk to me.”

“Sorry about that. Over time, the camp will understand you’re one of us.” The other new citizens weren’t being given a warm reception either. It had only been a few days; Safe Haven hadn’t forgotten their enemies. Rachel and Leeroy were under heavy scrutiny from nearly all the two hundred people in this galley. Their daughter, Sally, was at the counter with the other kids. She appeared to be having fun chatting with Sean and Caleb. The other children weren’t paying her much attention, telling Daryl they hadn’t found a problem with her or they hadn’t scanned her yet. Unlike the adults in here, the kids weren’t concerned over the rough seas or rocking boat now. The weather topside wasn’t a concern for them.

They were all eager for the classes scheduled today. Conner, sitting at the end of the counter to suck down a quick meal, was slotted to go in the first wave. His test was being done in the gymnasium while the kids were doing their workout with Jeff in the training room.

Daryl spotted Kenn in the corner, working on a CB system that would enable them to have contact with home until they rounded the tip of South America. Once they reached the island, Kenn hoped to set up a high distance repeater tower to carry their transmissions all the way from Pitcairn. Daryl yawned, hoping Kenn succeeded. It would be good to get reports of what was happening there while they were gone. *Eagles always look ahead. Lesson...?* Daryl frowned. *I forget the lesson number. That’s not good.*

“Can we still see the comet from the deck?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Too bad. I’ve never seen a comet.”

“Me either. Hopefully the storm clears before it passes our hemisphere.”

Daryl listened to the conversations and thoughts, but he didn’t dig deep. He was enjoying the peace and the sight of Brittani working behind the counter of the galley. She had flour on her face. It was cute.

Brittani swiped at her cheek, spreading more flour. *Did I get it?*

Daryl nodded, trying not to laugh.

Brittani grabbed a towel and went to the rear of the cooking area to scrub.

Daryl switched his attention to the crew in the center. The fishing team had been scheduled to spend their first day learning the ropes, but the captain had vetoed it because of heavy wind and rough seas. They were now drawing up plans for a system to use during rough weather. Afterwards, they were on downtime. Daryl expected the crew to show up at the testing area. Everyone wanted to watch the demonstrations.

Daryl took two Advil with the last of his coffee, then cleaned up his mess. He was aching in places and it was a bad day for it. He was on duty during the tests. Then he had duty over Autumn again.

Brittani returned to the line, joining Jayda at the serving trays where they were jamming up. She took the farthest tray first and slid it onto the counter, allowing the others to drop. It was an odd loading system but efficient for such a small space.

“Cool.” Jayda switched to that method, following the leader. She was disappointed she hadn’t gotten an Eagle slot, but she did enjoy cooking. Brittani had fun recipes to play with and she was an easygoing teacher. She led by example.

“You okay with this now?”

“I will be.” Jayda dumped the coffee grounds into the recycle jar and placed the used filter on the shelf. It would be wiped off and reused. “I’m not used to the fast pace. That’s the hard part.”

Brittani snickered. “Yeah. These people like to eat.”

“And have sex.” Jayda shrugged at the surprised glance. “What? You hear them too. I know you do because it’s everywhere. Damn ship full of rabbits.”

“Like you aren’t enjoying having a top Eagle at your beck and call.”

Jayda didn’t reveal her inner turmoil. “That does have perks. I just meant it seems like sex is all people care about since we set sail.”

“I don’t believe that’s true. You just haven’t seen everything going on.”

Jayda snorted. “You must be one of the few women not jumping your man at every chance in hopes you’ll get pregnant.”

Brittani stole at look at the table where Daryl was sitting and found it empty. “I’m on the pill.” She refused to say she and Daryl hadn’t had sex yet.

“Then you’re in about the same boat as Trinity. She stopped taking her pills, but she said Gus won’t…” Jayda realized who she was speaking to. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t think.”

“Gus won’t what?”

“Give her a baby yet.”

“What about you?” Brittani neatly flipped the conversation. “Are you trying, like the others?”

Jayda touched the cooking food and determined it needed a bit longer. “I quit taking my pills after the war, but we don’t get a lot of time together.”

“Well, that should change once the camp settles down. We’ve only been at sea a few days.”

“Yeah.” Jayda began chatting at the next person who’d come to get a tray, sensing Brittani didn’t really want to talk.

Brittani finished the meal and slipped away as soon as she could. She’d forgotten something important.

Brittani jogged down the stairs and went to the infirmary, hoping no one else was there.

**4**

Morgan glanced up. He sat the inventory clipboard list on the counter and picked up the one for passengers. “What can I do for you today?”

Brittani cleared her throat. “I’m out of birth control.”

Morgan didn’t blink. “No problem.” He pointed to a glass case. “See if you recognize the kind you normally use. If not, I’ll dig out the book and ask you some questions to narrow it down.”

Brittani scanned the round containers. “That one, on the end.”

Morgan retrieved it and relocked the glass. He wrote her name and the serial numbers on the clipboard, then slid it into a small brown bag.

Brittani smiled at him for the discretion. “Thank you.”

Morgan let some charm come through, practicing for Pam. “It’s my pleasure.”

Brittani shivered, then laughed. “Be careful. A male snare is powerful.”

Morgan frowned. “I wasn’t using a gift.”

“Yes, you were.” She held out her arm, showing goosebumps. “I always keep a shield up and I still felt it. That’s a rare gift.” She tossed advice over her shoulder as she left. “Make sure you tell the boss. Someone else will if you don’t. Not me, of course. I’m just the cook.”

Morgan chuckled with her and added it to his report for the day. He added his respect that Brittani was preventing a pregnancy and his curiosity as to why. The other females wanted to have babies and the men were coming around to the idea now that there were so many females to pick from. Something was different for Brittani. Angela might need to figure out what. Like Adrian, Angela encouraged the races to mix, but it would be hard if all races didn’t breed. As far as Morgan could tell, Brittani was one of only a few black females here who might be able to have children. At some point, Angela might ask her to procreate for the survival of her race. If there was a big reason why she wouldn’t, they needed to know that now.

Daryl appeared in the infirmary doorway, appearing as though he’d been kicked.

“You okay?” Morgan put the sheet from the clipboard into Brittani’s file and got a new one for the next passenger who might come in.

“I didn’t know she’s scared to have kids.” Daryl had caught her thoughts as he came down the steps. She’d been busy sneaking into the storage area to take a shortcut to the elevator and hadn’t noticed him. Daryl hurried after her.

Morgan added the observation to his notes and returned to doing inventory. He enjoyed this work. It was soothing and easier than being put with the kids or fixing meals for the camp. He could have done those jobs, but Angela had rewarded him with the career he’d always wanted and couldn’t afford. Becoming a doctor had been expensive before the war. Now, it was free, but he had to learn hands-on. Morgan was eager for the challenge.

Daryl caught up to Brittani while she was waiting for the elevator. He stopped a few feet away, not sure what to say. He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but her pain was hard to ignore.

“I’m fine. I’ll get over it.”

“We don’t have to have kids.”

Brittani frowned. “I want to. Just not yet.”

“There’s no pressure from me, but Morgan’s right, you know. I’m white. I can’t help keep your race alive. You need a black man to give you children.”

“Stop it. I don’t care about that.”

“You might when we return, and you see how bad it is for them, for everyone. You could be a queen too. You’re good. You should have that honor.”

Brittani put a hand on her hip. “Don’t you think I’ve already considered those options? I don’t want that life. I don’t want a separate black society. I like it here, and….” She took a step toward him. “I want love. I don’t care what color it comes in.”

Daryl’s eyes darkened. “I’ll give you all of that you can handle. But you have to love me back. I won’t settle for anything else, not even for you.”

She held a hand out. “I feel the same way.”

Daryl took her hand and pulled her into his arms. He lowered his head to hers, groaning at the full body contact. “I want you!”

Brittani had been worrying over that a bit. Desire flooded her.

Daryl kissed her cheek and slid to her neck. His grip tightened, pulse racing. “I had you moved to the cabin next to mine.” He reached into his pocket and held out two keys. “The extra is to my cabin. You can have your own or you can move in with me. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

Brittani took both keys, blushing. “How soon do you need an answer?”

“I don’t. When you’re ready to use the second key, use it. If you don’t, keep it to make you smile.” He grinned at her warm reaction. “Just like that.” He kissed her cheek again and retreated as the elevator opened and people emerged. “Have a nice day.” He went to the stairs and quickly vanished from sight.

Brittani got into the elevator, happiness lingering. He was perfect. It was scary.

Daryl strolled the lower halls, checking on guard posts and enjoying the quiet moment to think. He was courting Brittani the way he’d always hoped to do with his future wife. He knew they were a soul match and he wanted her in his bed. Now, they would begin building a future together.

Daryl slowed as a crackling noise caught his attention. A mix of a beep and a grind, it sounded like a wire spewing electricity. He followed it to the messy cargo area and entered the first huge room. The stacks of gear and supplies here were massive. The noise could be coming from any or none of those.

Daryl listened hard but lost the sound as the ship’s engines kicked on. He left, frowning. A watch alarm was driving them all crazy.

Satisfied the lower levels had guards who were alert, Daryl went up the steps, heading for the skills test. He had a busy day ahead, with no time to track down one annoying little sound.

**5**

“She’s crazy. Tell the boss she needs to be sedated.”

“I’ll mention it, but Angela isn’t going to agree.” Ivan wrote notes in his book, listening to Becky’s whisper of blood and death. The girl was falling off the edge faster by the minute. A lot of people had come and tried to talk to her, but she wanted Angela dead. She wasn’t going to change her mind.

Ivan passed Kendle, who was cleaning the bathrooms in the other cells. He nodded to her but didn’t stop. He wanted her locked up too. Maybe listening to Becky’s rants would help the castaway resist her need to try again. Either way, Ivan had two bullets ready–one for each female.

Kendle was listening to Becky and hating it. She recognized her own illness in the teenager, but there was more. Becky had truly snapped, and she wasn’t coming back. Kendle didn’t want to go there. She had another chance to live and she was suddenly grateful for Angela’s choice to spare her life. When the end came for Becky, she wouldn’t even know what was happening or why.

Tonya came down the hall. When she spotted Kendle, she gestured. “Got a minute?”

Kendle wiped her arm across her brow to remove the sweat. “Depends on why.”

“I need blood samples from some passengers. You’re one of them.”

Kendle didn’t mind. She hoped Tonya’s tests resulted in something that helped the cancer patients. “Go ahead.” She rolled up her sleeve.

Tonya used precise movements to take the blood, getting good with practice. She’d already done everyone in Jeff’s western group, including the kids.

Kendle noticed Tonya appeared happy and was able to be glad for her. Kenn was a good mate for the once wild redhead. “I’ll be by later to clean the lab and change the litter boxes.”

“Okay. It’s locked when I’m not there. The guard can let you in.”

Kendle waited for more, but Tonya finished and headed for the brig without saying anything else.

Kendle returned to scrubbing, not offended. Tonya was busy keeping her tests going and her nose clean. Kendle planned to do the same. Listening to Becky was enough. *I’m pulling back from that dark edge. I still hurt, but I no longer enjoy the pain. I have a chance to recover now and I want it as much as I want Marc.*

**6**

“There are seven parts to this test. They will be spread over a few sessions. Fail one, you fail them all.” Greg paused to be sure the rookies were listening. “These results, combined with your skills demonstration, will determine your place in Safe Haven. Give it everything you’ve got if you have hopes of becoming an Eagle.” Greg pointed to the first of three tents in the gymnasium. “This is part one. Go in, sit down, view the images. Come out and speak to one of the Special Forces men who will be waiting. They’ll tell you where to go from there. Line up.”

Conner hurried to the front of the line so he could get rolling and get gone. He had animal and kid duties after this.

Wade wrote his name down, certain the boy would be directed to the tent on the right when he finished here. Conner was sharp on details and light on recklessness. It was a good match for an Eagle. Unlike Charlie, who had been sharp on both. Seth had been like that when he joined too. Wade was glad Charlie had dropped out of training. The boy was only here to complete the skills evaluation.

Rookies went into the tent, emptying the gym. There were only ten of them today. Angela was sending groups of people they needed cleared first and fastest. It would probably take the entire trip to the island to get everyone done.

Wade signaled for Kenn to begin the film they had chosen to use. They’d watched it themselves, then wrote down what they remembered for use in the test. There were easy and hard observations on the sheet, with an underlying theme of loyalty. All Adrian’s training videos encouraged that.

After this, rookies would go to a weapons test or fitness challenge. Weapons meant they were still in the running to be Eagles. Fitness meant to finish the tests so Angela could assign them a job on the ship or island. Eagles who scanned those sheets would see which test had come second and know that person’s future status. Wade believed Angela had done it so Special Forces could begin culling the herd down to the next eighteen men and women who would be rookies.

The ship lurched suddenly, sending items and passengers sliding.

Guards chortled, trying to project calm. The storm was getting worse.

The double doors at the end of the gym opened. Samantha entered, with Amy on her knee. Debra was pushing the chair.

Samantha ignored Neil’s frown, pointing to the row of chairs along a far wall. “I’ll be right there. Go take your test.”

Debra ran. It drew attention but not disapproval. She was one of them. They could tell just by looking at her. Debra’s red tank top accented her muscles and the gunshot scar on her shoulder. It matched many of the female Eagles who had now been in similar situations. That included Jennifer and Angela, who had burns, a gunshot, and a knife scar on one side. Freedom came at a high price and the women were paying it, making the men relive their own injuries. All Eagles had scars–mental and physical.

Wade wrote Debra’s name down and fastened the flap on the first tent. Everyone on his list was here.

Neil relaxed when he realized Samantha was only here to support Debra. He was glad she had a new friend. He narrowed in on the squirming child on her knee, recognizing Seth’s daughter. He didn’t know how that had happened, but they both appeared happy with it. Seth, on the other hand, didn’t seem to care about his daughter at all. He still hadn’t left Becky alone in the brig, even to eat.

For an instant, Neil desperately wanted to know what Samantha was thinking as she played with the girl’s curls and whispered something that made the child giggle.

*May I?* Neil’s demon didn’t rush the bars of the cage. He was shocked the door to the prison was open even a crack.

Neil studied Samantha, heart breaking. *Just this once. Tell me.*

The demon connected them, letting Neil hear it.

*I wish I could keep her. I’ll never have a girl of my own.*

It bothered Neil that Samantha felt that way, but he didn’t doubt the prediction.

The connection was strong. As he listened to Samantha, Neil also caught Amy’s thoughts.

*She’s nice, like my old mommy was. Maybe I can stay with her and start life over.*

Neil broke. He waved Tommy into his place and left the gym. He hadn’t been scheduled; he’d just come to help. He left the hallway and then the deck, lost in his mental voices.

Samantha let out the breath she’d taken when Neil entered her mind. She was too sharp to miss something like that.

So was Amy. She peered up at Sam. “Was enough?”

“Yes. He’ll do it now.” Sam felt bad. Her misery lingered over them both.

Amy hugged her belly. “Better this way.”

“Yes, now be quiet or one of the others will hear us and know what we’re doing.”

“He’ll do it soon?” Amy pushed.

“Yes, but he’ll think it through first. It’s part of why I love him so much. He doesn’t do anything without thinking it through.”

“He be mad when he finds out.”

Samantha sighed. “He’ll understand it’s the only solution that makes sense. After that, he’ll do it quick and I’ll handle the consequences.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

**Spooked**

**A close up of a cats face

Description automatically generated**

Evening Mess

**1**

**“W**hat?”

“I said, I heard Conner did well today.” Pam put a hand on Shawn’s wrist. “Are you okay?”

Shawn nodded, but returned to staring at the kids on the stools. Dinner was in full swing. The room was crowded; nearly every seat was taken. Missy was at the end next to Cody, with her back to them. She hadn’t glanced his way once.

Doug frowned at Shawn, still on duty over Cody. He was aware of Shawn’s gaze lingering on the little girl. He didn’t like it.

Pam would have asked Shawn another question, but Morgan put a hand over hers. “Let him be. He has choices to make.”

Shawn didn’t hear them. He was hurting over Missy’s rejection and examining why.

“Maybe we should arrange some time together for them, supervised.” Pam didn’t like it when Shawn was upset.

Morgan had already gone through this with Kyle and Jennifer. “Let him make his choice first. We’ll help if we need to.”

“She’s blocking him completely. It’s kind of mean.”

“So is she.” Morgan grunted, spearing green beans. He hated them but ate them anyway. “Better than the other one, though.”

Pam scanned Leeann’s red face. “She’s been crying again.”

“This bonding stuff is some serious shit.” Morgan laughed with her, but he meant it.

Thunder cracked, making them all jump. That question had been answered. Thunder on the high seas was common. So were storms apparently, because it was pouring rain once again. The wind beat against the boat, making the engines work harder, louder. People were nervous.

Angela appeared, radiating calm. She waved at the yawning kids as she went to get a tray. They’d been busy today with classes and play time. Angela was both wet and dusty, but also hungry. She’d been tired when she woke, though it had worn off shortly after her shower. She’d spent most of the day in tests. Tomorrow would be about the same after the camp meeting and trial, though that outcome would determine her actual schedule. If Seth didn’t get Becky off this ship tonight, she would probably hang tomorrow.

Angela wiped the rain from her arms and face while she waited for Jayda to load her tray. She’d just come from checking on Grant. Like herself, he’d woken tired and snapped out of it not long after. He had concurred the chili was too rich on stomachs that weren’t used to it.

Thunder cracked again, louder. They were nearing the main part of the storm now. Grant had told her it was ugly even without the radar. Kenn had updated her on that equipment a few minutes ago. They were ready to replace what was fried. They just needed dry weather to do it. In the meantime, there was a lot of work waiting, though the ship was mostly back in order from the storm. It had happened fast, thanks to having done it once already. Within three hours, the ship had been put back to normal and several new precautions had been put in place.

Leaving loose gear around was becoming rarer. No one wanted to keep cleaning up after storms, so they were adapting. The towline had also been pulled up and stored until they were ready to go. That crew was in the infirmary being treated for minor hand injuries. The cargo areas were all that remained to be tackled. None of it had been secured yet. There just hadn’t been time and the last storm had been rough. It was now a jumbled pile of boxes and supplies that had to be sorted and restacked, then secured. *Let’s leave that for workouts and Eagle training.*

Angela addressed the camp. “As you can hear, mother nature is still pissed we’re alive. She hates it that we keep surviving. She wants us to give up and die.”

Angela took a set of the silverware and a mug of ice tea, noticing the freezing cubes with delight. She loved to crunch them, though it was bad for her teeth. Luxuries like ice were still new and welcome. “Lifejackets are being put in the living quarters, at all guard posts and on the bridge. If the power goes off, stay where you are and give us a chance to come around and put up lights like we did last time. Ships like these are meant to survive storms. If they weren’t, the cruise ship business would have gone under a long time ago.”

Angela took her tray to the center table, but she didn’t take her seat. She pulled a small pouch from her belt.

In a nearby corner, Dog lifted his head.

Across the room, begging for scraps, both cats also looked in her direction.

Angela took the small, soft mice from the pouch and began throwing them at Dog.

Dog howled as if he were being shot. *They’re getting me! They’re getting me! Somebody help!*

Angela hurried that way as if to help.

Surprising everyone except Angela and Dog, the two cats flew over, pouncing on the nearest toys.

Angela kept throwing the mice and Dog kept howling, entertaining the camp and teaching the cats that mice were bad.

When Dog finally stopped whining, the camp clapped and cheered his success.

Debra, still pushing Samantha’s wheelchair, paused in the entrance to the galley as all attention shifted to them. The wheelchair had a loud creak that gave notice of their arrival no matter where they went.

Across the galley, Theo gestured with his cane.

Samantha pointed. “I want to sit by him.”

Debra had no choice but to take her there. She refused to look at Theo or speak to him.

Theo wasn’t surprised. After his open challenge of the boss, Debra’s anger had been extended. She might stay upset the entire trip to the island. He was prepared to deal with that.

“Rookie lists will be posted in the next few days. Right now, I have three names that definitely made it through. Do you want to know now or wait for the list to come out?”

People shouted both answers but the loudest demanded that she tell them.

“First place, out of the tests done today, was Conner.” Angela waited for the camp to clap. It wasn’t as hearty as if someone else had come in first, but there was enough of it to make her believe the camp was getting used to having Adrian’s son among them.

“Then Debra.”

Debra beamed and waved as everyone rotated toward her in surprise. She wasn’t as shy anymore. She knew no one here would hurt her because of her disability. She also knew a timid Eagle probably wouldn’t make it very far through the ranks.

“And Brittani.”

The camp clapped and cheered loudly. The woman had a lot of friends here and it wasn’t just because of her cooking. She was dependable in a crisis; she had saved lives. Combine that with a great personality and the interest of a top Eagle, and it made her one of the most popular people in camp.

Brittani waved at them across the counter, sending flour into the air.

Jayda, new hairdo on display, was hit in the ear.

Jayda swiped at the mess, scowling. “What was that for?”

In the opposite corner of the galley, tension flared.

“You got a piece of ass and dropped out of sight! You don’t care about her.” Quinn shoved up from the table, knocking glasses over. “Don’t talk to me!” He stormed from the room.

Tommy was embarrassed at all the attention, but he didn’t speak. Quinn’s opinion didn’t need to be spread around camp. Tommy was already feeling that way himself. He didn’t need to have it confirmed.

The camp slowly swiveled back to Angela for more updates, but they kept an eye on Tommy. Most people assumed the fight had been about Kendle.

Another disturbance broke out at the counter.

“She tried to kill the boss!”

“She’s a stupid kid!”

“Settle down!” Ivan shoved through the crowd, glowering at Doug and Serio. He didn’t know who would have won the fight, but they weren’t going to find out. “That’s enough. We’ll go with what the camp decides.”

Doug crossed his arms over his chest, snorting. “Care to make me?”

“Oh, grow up.” Ivan pointed at Serio. “Find a table with your team.”

Serio went immediately. He wasn’t about to disobey. Ivan was bringing his crew up through the ranks as he leveled. The perks were amazing.

Doug spun around and picked up his spoon, muttering.

Ivan swept the tense camp, angry. “It’s a trial and a storm. Is that all it takes to spook the legendary Safe Haven?”

People dropped their heads, ashamed, or voiced agreement. They’d faced much worse.

Angela hid a victorious wave of emotion. She was right about Ivan. He was going to be a great leader. He was already showing signs of it.

In the quiet, Neil slipped into the galley and went to the table where Samantha was getting settled by Theo. He whispered in her ear.

“Sure.” Samantha let him push her to a table away from the others so they could talk.

“What do you think that’s about?” Kenn joined Angela at the center table, handing her a folder of updates. He ignored the crack of thunder that made nearly everyone else flinch.

“I’m not sure. She has a wall up. She’ll know if I go through it.”

“I wonder if Conner can.”

Angela stared at Kenn. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Kenn wrote it down, glad he could help. He didn’t often feel like he was contributing enough under her leadership.

Angela skimmed the updates and cleared her throat to get attention. “The comet, ISON, appears to be gone, but you might get another chance to view it through the telescopes after the weather clears.” Angela flipped through the other updates Kenn had delivered. She held up a sheet of paper. “These people have a test tomorrow, before the camp meeting. We’ll begin that right after lunch mess. I want everyone else in the ballroom when we start the trial. Life and death should never be decided by people who are yawning.” Angela stifled a yawn herself and sat. “That’s it for now. I’ll be doing rounds of the entire ship after I eat. If you need something, let me know then.”

Several passengers immediately made plans around that.

Kenn added himself to her list. He’d noticed something about the camp and wanted her opinion on it. He hoped he was wrong.

“Oh, yeah. Some of you have injuries from the beach.” She waved a tired hand. “One of the kids will be around to heal those up. Just hold still. They won’t bite.”

Descendant children jumped from the counter stools and marched into the crowd, searching for injuries. They couldn’t use their excess energy on the ocean right now. This would help drain them so they could sleep.

Across the room, Shawn stood up. He’d made his choice.

Pam tensed as he turned to her, expecting him to end their relationship before it had really begun.

“You busy tonight?”

Pam’s happiness broke over her lips. “Nope. What do you have in mind?”

“You, me, Morgan, and some privacy.”

Pam nodded eagerly. “I’ll set it up. Are you sure?”

Shawn kissed her.

Pam chuckled against his lips. “Awesome.”

Missy looked at Angela, tears in her eyes. *You promise?*

*I do. You’ll end up with what you want if you’re strong enough to wait.*

Missy swiveled to Jeff, who was on a stool nearby. *I need a lesson.*

*On what?*

*How to not kill someone.*

Jeff took pity on the girl and left his half-finished tray. *Come on. We’ll do a workout. When that fails, you can kick me around in the cage and then get a cold shower.*

Angela was happy with both of them and not at all surprised when a few other UN kids followed. They were adjusting to being in civilized company, but none of them would ever be normal. They would always need ways to blow off steam. The end of the world hadn’t meant the end of their lives physically, but they’d lost everything else.

“Want company on your rounds?” Kenn wanted to be her first private conversation.

“Is it in this folder?”

Kenn shook his head. He hadn’t wanted to alarm anyone who might read it.

Angela sighed. “You can’t stay with me while I do rounds. I need you to be visible on the entertainment floor. The storm will encourage heavier drinking than we’ve had so far. Your big body, along with Doug’s, will discourage some of that. Just tell me now.”

“I’ll catch you another time. It’s not a rush. Is there anything you want me to get ready for the meeting tomorrow?”

Angela knew he meant an escape route for Becky. “No. This one is a straight shot, Marine. No tricks.”

“Adrian would have tried to sway the camp.”

“Yes.”

“But you’re not going to.”

Angela looked away instead of answering.

Kenn wasn’t sure how to take that. He hoped it meant she had a plan despite calling it an honest vote. He didn’t want to be around Seth every day after they hanged his mate.

The lights flickered above them…

They stayed on, drawing a cheer from the kids.

Thunder cracked out, muting all conversations. The storm was right on top of them now.

Angela opened her mouth to order the guards to start putting up lights.

Power went off across the ship. The engines began to fade.

“Little late on that one.” Angela flipped on her neck light like the other Eagles were doing. “Put the lights around these walls first and then head for the halls outside the galley. Split it up between ten of you. Everyone take different stairs or corridors. All plans and events are on hold.” Thoughts on the edge of panic overwhelmed Angela for a moment, coming from all areas of the ship.

Wade took over, directing Special Forces men first, then the rookies who’d been chosen today.

Debra hurried over to get a bag of lights, leaving Theo alone with Samantha.

Amy climbed from a stool and came to Samantha. She got onto her knees and hugged Sam’s belly. “I hear babies.”

Theo smiled at the girl. “She’s sweet.”

“Yes.” Samantha played with her hair as light slowly returned to the room. She wondered if the ship’s walls would glow for them again, but she didn’t want to bother Angela with the question. She had joined the guards to hand out more instructions.

The cooks finished the meals they had going or covered them until the power returned, refrigerating some of it. Then they started brewing fresh coffee on their old setups. All the travel gear for cooking was in a narrow pantry in the rear of the galley.

Angela led Kenn to the doorway. “So what’s your beef?”

Kenn pouted. “It’s not a beef, just an observation.”

“I’m all ears.”

Kenn waited for Gus and Brittani to go by. Brittani was taking trays to the brig. With Gus escorting her, she didn’t need a guard, but she had one anyway in case the former couple got into a fight.

“Everyone’s scared and pretending not to be.”

Angela slid her pencil behind ear. “Sailing off is a big change, frightening.”

“It’s more than that. The nightmares are back for some of you and insomnia for others. People are snapping, tense. Do you know what’s causing it?”

“No, but it’s bothering me. I’m going to do some careful searching when I get time alone.”

“Are you able to do that?” Kenn had heard about the Demon of Time issue, but he didn’t understand it.

“Not really, but when the cats are away, the queen will play.”

Kenn sniggered as she got started on rounds of the shadowy ship. When her guards fell in behind them, Kenn went another direction, not offended. It would still be a long time before he’d earned full trust. He planned to work on it every day until he died.

**2**

The storm raged around the ship, battering it with violent swells and harsh wind that tried to blow them off course. Grant stayed at the wheel, using his instincts to guide the huge ship.

Grant adjusted the wheel, glad of the reserve generators that were allowing navigation. It wasn’t the same as steering, but it was effective when nothing else worked. Come daylight or storm’s end, he would use the star charts to determine where they were. He’d increased their speed as the storm got bad, hoping it would stay true to the course he’d set, but there was little chance of it. The best he could do was follow his nose.

Lightning flashed in front of the ship, glaring.

Grant flinched and recovered.

The crew, Claire included, abandoned their booths to huddle in the rear of the bridge. Nathan was the only one who kept his post.

Grant concentrated on the storm and the powerful currents under them. Large chunks of debris swirled around the ship, banging into it.

The pitch-black sky lit up in a vicious blast of energy, showing walls of water on all sides.

“Go below. Take the stairs.”

The crew fled into the rain, grateful.

Ray took Grant’s right. He was scared too, but he wasn’t leaving his post.

Nathan waited for instructions, not sure if they would survive this. Cruise ships adjusted course when bad weather came, but without the radar, they didn’t know exactly where the storm was. This might be the edge of a hurricane or it could be the center of one. They had no way to know.

Grant made another adjustment, feeling the ship slowing against the resistance of the wind and water. Soon, his tiny bit of control would be gone.

“Should I get the boss?” Nathan didn’t know what else to try.

“She’s already doing her job. This is mine.”

“Can’t she ask the ocean dude to calm down?”

“Nature controls storms, not the ocean.” Ray didn’t want Grant distracted. He put his fingers over his lips.

Nathan nodded. He hadn’t meant to interrupt. He was just scared.

The walls of water collapsed onto the deck of the ship. It immediately plunged downward, groaning from the pressure.

Ray heard passengers screaming, but there wasn’t time to check on them. He anchored Grant to his belt by a rope, then braced the man with his hip and an arm on the wall to keep their captain from sliding as the ship plunged again.

Water ran up the deck, reaching the bridge…

Everyone held their breath, praying for it to come back up.

Grant hit the anchor switch, dropping the huge chain. The sudden weight release from the rear of the ship evened out the distribution and popped the front upward. Water flew in all directions as the deck broke the surface.

The ship shuddered and groaned from the sudden drag, but the deck stayed above the waves on the next dip.

The anchor kept dropping, making more noise than the storm. Two hundred feet of chain took a while to run out.

“Bring it back up as soon as it finishes.”

Nathan nodded, hand going to the switch. The anchor would weigh them down if they left it that way.

Another swell roiled toward the ship.

Grant tightened his grip on the now useless wheel, hating the feeling of being helpless.

The swell overwhelmed the ship from the front, soaking it and rolling by.

Grant was glad the waves were hitting them straight on. From the side might cause a roll, though the wave would have to be huge to do that to a cruise ship this big. *Please don’t send one that big. Please don’t send one that big...*

Nathan and Ray stayed with Grant for the next three hours as he tried to keep the ship on the course in his head. They did whatever he told them and smothered the urge to flee below with the rest of the crew. It wasn’t safe there either. It only seemed that way.

**3**

“Sounds like it’s finally winding down.” Gus was almost able to breathe again, though he was ashamed he’d left the bridge. He was terrified of the ship being damaged, leaving them adrift with no way back to land.

“What about our tow?”

“Same as last time, drifting right and slowing at the same rate of speed. Nathan is gathering FND volunteers for pulling in the line this time.”

“Yeah, gonna skip that one.” Quinn listened. The rain and wind weren’t beating against them anymore. Thunder was rolling away, according to the counting passengers were doing at each flash of lightning.

“Can I help you?”

Quinn turned from his post on the galley hallway. “What?”

Gus leaned closer. “I’d like to help you.”

Quinn studied the big man, confused. “With what?”

“Matters of the heart.”

Quinn immediately got defensive. “What do you mean by that?!”

“I know heartache when I smell it. You need help.”

Quinn started to shout and then realized Gus might be on his side. “You don’t mind the idea?”

“No. Other people will, though. That’s why you need help.”

“It will make me an outcast.”

“We don’t get to pick who we’re attracted to.”

“No.” Quinn peered through the window to the galley. “How about you?”

“Trinity’s great, but I’m still hurting. We’re taking it slow.”

“Well, you’d better settle with her soon or she may pick someone who can give her what she wants.” Quinn pointed.

Gus peered through the window into the lantern lit room. He found Trinity at the engineering table, where the team was eating and enjoying the flirting. All the camp females had recognized the engineers as valuable. Jonny, a black man with a stellar reputation in Safe Haven, leaned in to chat with Trinity, giving her a generous smile.

Gus was surprised to feel the slight edge of jealousy. *I guess I do have some feelings for her. That’s good, right?*

Quinn let Gus work on his personal problems, but he was encouraged that the man was on his side. Very few people would be when they discovered who he’d fallen for. Quinn couldn’t believe it himself.

Brittani came toward the entrance carrying a basket.

Gus opened and held the door for her.

“Thanks.” She sensed he wanted to say something and lingered despite the weight of the food. This basket was going to the bridge. The storm was fading, but the captain still hadn’t been down to eat.

“I need to know why.”

Brittani had been expecting this conversation earlier, but Gus had only acted as escort. He hadn’t spoken. “Are you able to walk with me?”

“I’ve got this post. Go ahead.” Quinn hoped they could find peace. He didn’t care who they ended up with as long as everyone was happy. Gus’s situation wasn’t complicated. He was allowed to be with either of the women he wanted.

Quinn shut the door as they moved toward the stairs.

Inside the galley, Trinity moped. She’d been studying Gus’s shadow through the window. She was aware of Jonny droning on in her ear about candles and lanterns being romantic, but she wasn’t interested despite him being an upstanding member of Safe Haven. She wanted Gus. She had since she’d first spotted him in Ciemus. *Then you’d better start fighting for him.* *There’s no bond yet because we haven’t gotten physical, but that isn’t always needed and I know it, don’t I? All it takes are good moments and love that he can always count on.*

Trinity returned to the conversation and directed it away from romance. She wouldn’t hassle Gus about conversing with his ex. She would give him a great moment and then another and then another, until all he could see was her. Brittani wouldn’t be a rival when she was finished. The cook would be a distant memory fading behind a fire that couldn’t be put out.

“Thank you for not screaming at me.”

Brittani slowed as they got out of sight. “What did you want to discuss?”

Their guard dropped back to give them privacy. Donald was eager to be off duty, but he also liked the quiet jobs he was being given. The two descendants in front of him were important. Angela had blended them right in under everyone’s nose. It was impressive. He couldn’t wait to view them in full action.

“Are you happy…with him?”

She shrugged. “I’m not *with* him. We’re dating. Like you.”

“That’s what I want to talk about.”

Brittani braced, feeling another blow coming. *I dumped him, cruelly. I deserve whatever he gives.*

“Trinity wants a baby. I’m going to give her one. We’ll be moving in together soon, I’d guess.”

“Oh.” Brittani tried not to feel anything. She shoved away the anger and sadness. “I’m happy for you.”

Gus knew she didn’t mean it, but he hadn’t expected this to be easy. “I’m sorry you’re hurt. It’s best if I move on. You understand.”

“I do, absolutely.” She waited for more, fake smile plastered to her face.

Gus patted her arm. “You can still come to me if you have trouble.”

“Thanks.”

Gus left her alone with her guard, eager to return to the light of Safe Haven.

Brittani stared at the guard who came to her side.

Donald stared back, thinking she wasn’t as hooked on Daryl as that Eagle thought she was.

Brittani lit up. “Actually, it means I’m free now to do anything I want. I just got scared for a minute.”

“Because Daryl isn’t what you considered first, is he?”

“No. I want to lead my own team. Everything else will have to come second.”

“He’ll need to hear that.” Donald tossed approval at her. “Welcome to Angela’s army.”

**4**

Power came on, flickering and stuttering.

Cheers echoed throughout the boat. The storm was over. The lights were back on. Life was looking up.

Kendle enjoyed it too, though she didn’t react. She was in the living quarters, scrubbing toilets again. She’d done every john on this ship now. The power returning didn’t change her job, but it did help her mood. The lack of light and abundance of shadows had been getting to her. She was reminded of her own start to the war. The wave that had rolled her ship had also come with poison clouds that turned the floating shelter into a nightmarish trap she and her sister had barely escaped with their lives. Dawn hadn’t kept hers and Kendle had washed ashore on Pitcairn Island in a dead speedboat. She was the sole survivor. *Sole survivor…*

“You about finished?”

“Yes.” Kendle ignored Ian’s curt tone as she switched off her flashlight. The Eagle was pissed he’d been demoted to the cleaning crew. He was taking it out on everyone.

Ian saw her pale cheeks and eased off. “I can finish this room if you like.” It had to be hard on her. Most of the camp was here, coming in and out, dropping garbage for her to clean up, making jokes and heated threats. He was impressed she’d controlled herself so well.

“This is part of my punishment. You can’t do it for me. She’ll just add something else later.” Kendle stripped off her gloves and shoved them into the garbage bag on the side of the cart. “Besides, it’s done now. They can come on in and start shitting the place up again.”

Ian snickered. He took a closer look at her. “Have you eaten today?”

Ian frowned when she didn’t answer. “You were avoiding the galley, so she made you come here, where you can’t avoid people.”

Kendle gave a curt nod. “She’s not going to let me out of any of it.” Kendle pushed the cart toward the exit, bracing to be the center of attention again. “And she shouldn’t. I deserve this.”

Ian waited until she’d gone to record it in the book he called a spy’s diary. Angela wanted details on everyone, and he was gathering them. It was difficult not to discuss some of the secrets he was learning, however. This was a test and a huge lesson, but he didn’t know if he would come out on the other side. To keep that flood from coming now, Ian slipped from the living quarters so he wouldn’t be tempted to chat with anyone. People hadn’t noticed his quietness yet, as far as he knew, but they would. When they asked what was wrong, he would have to act like a senior Eagle and fool them into believing he’d grown up.

Ian hoped that really happened and soon. He wasn’t sure how much more he could take of keeping these nuggets. The one he’d learned an hour ago about Candy and Conner was juicy but knowing Marc’s son was a byzan was bigger. Overhearing the kill team had been sent, knowing who was on that list and was now missing from camp, was killing him. He felt like his head would explode if he didn’t discuss what was happening on this ship. The camp thought they were in the loop, but they didn’t know half the drama.

*She put me in this position, knowing it would give me all the damn details I’d ever want. Then she punished me by sealing my mouth. That’s incredible and cruel. I don’t know if I love her or hate her, but I’ll never mess with her. I can’t match that type of thinking.*

Ian shored up his determination to win this game and headed for his next check with guards on the galley. Anyone who wasn’t in the living quarters trying to sleep was in the galley. He would learn more secrets while there, he had no doubt. He loved the job and hated it.

**5**

“That looks uncomfortable.” Charlie grinned at Dog.

Dog let out a weary grunt. *They believe the mice are planning an attack.*

Charlie petted the cat on Dog’s back, but left the one on his neck alone. The big cat from the bunker wasn’t friendly. “It’s a bit like my relationship with Kendle.” Charlie wiped the fur from his hand and continued their rounds of the sleeping ship. “She carried me on her back too.”

*Running for your life doesn’t count.*

Charlie chuckled. “Does for you. I saw you save them on the beach.”

Dog huffed. *They keep my fur clean. They serve a purpose.*

“Whatever you say.”

Dog stiffened his shoulder when the biggest cat began to purr-claw his skin. *The island woman serves a purpose too. You can unload your pain to her, and she gives it right back.*

“I don’t need to do that anymore.”

*Pain doesn’t stop coming, child. As soon as you recover from one blow, you are hit by the next. Getting up and continuing your mission is what keeps humans sane.*

Charlie moped. “I don’t have a mission anymore. I’m not an Eagle.”

*You have a mate and a pup on the way.*

“It’s not the same.”

*You knew it wouldn’t be before making the choice. Why did you go through with it?*

“Because I’m not like the rest of them.”

*No. You’ve always been different, even from your own kind.*

“Do you know why?”

*No. I smell the differences and notice behaviors. Beyond that, I am as blind as you to the reasons behind life.*

“I know why.” Charlie looked into the room they were passing and kept going. “I’m the heir to Safe Haven, to my mother’s legacy. And I’m terrified of it.”

*Yes. It’s a hard job. Many tremble before leadership when it’s given to them.*

“It has to be earned.”

*Yes. You do not believe you can earn it.*

“I just don’t want to. I could be a good leader in time. I don’t want to make those choices.”

*It’s a good reason. Just being afraid isn’t enough.*

“It will change me, like my drama almost did.”

*Do not fool yourself. You have changed already. The boy I first met was not obsessed with mates and inheriting at the death of his parent.*

“I’m not obsessed…anymore. I needed to work it out for myself. I could be a leader, but I don’t want it.”

Dog dropped his shoulder as the big cat curled up, tired of clawing. *There are other worthwhile missions you could adopt.*

“Yeah.” Charlie picked up trash someone had dropped. He shoved it into a can at the intersection. “I’m sorting through those, but it feels like I took the easy way out.”

*You shame yourself when no one else does.*

“I don’t want her to think bad of me.”

*Your mother does not think bad of you. She loves you more than the others here.*

“Maybe. That doesn’t matter to me as much as how she sees me. There are good, brave men here. I’m not one of them.” Charlie stopped at the next residence and waited for Dog to do the check. They were alternating.

Dog came right out, cats still on his big back. *They are sleeping in there. Next?*

Charlie consulted his map. He hadn’t had as much time on the ship as the other guards. “Looks like we need to do a round of the bottom floor and then we’re on break for half an hour.”

Dog led them toward the stairs. Like the humans, he was shunning the elevators used for passengers. The smaller service elevators didn’t feel as dangerous. It was an odd paradigm when they considered the camp had used the elevators in Ciemus without a single concern.

Charlie trotted down the steps ahead of Dog, letting him have the room in case the cats wanted to exit their ride. They were known to jump from him to the people nearby. It wasn’t pleasant.

Dog slid as he landed, hitting the edge of a carpet.

The cats flew off, smacking into each other and the stair. They scrambled away, emitting low screeches.

Charlie thought Dog would follow to make sure they were okay, but the wolf did a long stretch and moaned.

*Much better.*

Charlie chuckled as they resumed walking. He opened the bottom door and nodded to Conner, one of a dozen sentries here. The brig was heavily guarded tonight, but Charlie thought anyone with basic skills could get by them. They were all reading or playing handheld video games. *It’s rookie duty*, he realized. *Why would she have all rookies on duty over a dangerous prisoner?*

*Seth is supposed to escape. Becky has refused to go.* Dog remembered Charlie didn’t know most of what had been going on. *You were at the briefing. The alpha told us to let them leave.*

“Oh, yeah! I forgot about that.” Charlie put it from his mind and went down the hall to start on the first row of rooms. They would do the cells last.

*The trees are going up again.* Dog went to the corner and sniffed the Christmas tree.

“Mom has me on that chore tomorrow too, after the meeting. People will like it. There’s about fifty fake trees on this ship. Everyone will get a chance to put on ornaments.”

*Why are the tops different?*

“The tops?”

*No people in white fur with golden ears.*

“Oh, angels. I guess people don’t like that image as much now.”

*The origin has not changed, yet you are angry. I do not understand why it shifts the view.*

“People want to enjoy the holiday, but they’re mad about what happened at the big meeting.”

*Your orders are to only put up the shapes?*

“She wants one angel topper on each floor. If they’re stolen or damaged, I think she plans to yell.”

*Inclusion is good. All are happy and tolerant.*

“As long as it doesn’t break camp rules.”

*Some rules are meant to be broken.*

“Yes, and no.” Charlie went into the first room and cleared it, checking corners and under the empty beds. Charlie noted mouse droppings but didn’t scan for the rodents. He was sure Tonya’s cats would find them eventually. These were storage chambers and extra cells if there was a large problem the normal brig couldn’t handle. They’d been recently cleaned. The room smelled like bleach and lemons.

Kendle didn’t glance up at the voices in the hall outside the bathroom. Only the guards used this one and so far, they weren’t being careless. The female lavatory upstairs had been rough. These were almost a relief.

Dog sniffed Kendle’s butt.

Kendle spun around, swinging.

*Hey!* Dog flinched. *I was just checking your mood!*

Kendle lowered her arm. “I’m sorry. I thought you were…” Kendle frowned at him. “You know we don’t do things that way.”

Dog smirked at her, tongue lolling out.

Kendle kicked at him. “Get out of here! You can’t sniff me!”

Dog retreated, chuckling.

Kendle thought about chasing the wolf and decided the kick had pushed her luck enough. She returned to scrubbing on the mirror. Her thoughts immediately returned to the rumor she’d heard about Quinn and Tommy arguing. Her name hadn’t been mentioned, but everyone assumed she was the topic. She didn’t want to know so she could use it or gloat over causing trouble. She considered Quinn a friend and she would always have a soft spot for Tommy, who she’d used as a substitute for Marc. If they were fighting because of her, she wanted it to stop.

“Go on. You know better.”

Kendle turned again at Charlie’s voice.

Charlie pointed at her, angry. “Do it.”

Dog shuffled forward. *I am sorry for sticking my nose in your rear.*

Kendle laughed. She couldn’t help it. “I forgive you.”

Dog’s tongue lolled out again, head tilting. *I wish I was human. I’d sniff you all the time.*

Kendle blushed.

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Dog’s been out in the wilderness too long.” He clicked his tongue. “Come on, horn-dog.”

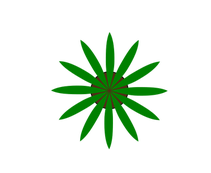
The wolf winked at Kendle and followed Charlie out into the hall.

Kendle stared after them, realizing she was smiling. *How did that happen?*

On a deck above, a descendant was observing Kendle, like she’d done at bedtime every night since they’d set sail. *It won’t happen again. Bad luck, Chick–that’s all the future has in store for you.* Mutters filled the cabin.

Chapter Twenty-Six

**Unwanted Guest**

****

Day Five

**1**

**“T**his is disgusting.” Jennifer stapled the long, sticky strand of kelp to the tarp and picked up the next one.

Kyle chuckled. “Even on the ocean, we have to build our own blind.”

Jennifer made a face. Their small boat was tied to a chunk of debris in the thickest part of the garbage pile. The stiff breeze was keeping the smell down, but the feel of the garbage was nasty.

Kyle examined the work they’d done so far. “A few more on this end and we’ll tie the other garbage to it. You guys ready?”

Marc gave him an ugly glare.

Adrian grinned. He and Marc were fishing out random pieces of garbage to attach to the tarp. It was revolting work that made everyone glad they were almost finished. Working by flashlight was a pain and Jennifer was right about it being gross, but it was also dangerous. The floating garbage contained all sorts of sharp ends and deadly items, including animals. Snakes were slithering through the pile.

“How are we on time?”

Jennifer concentrated. She was full of restless energy. “Half an hour; a little less.”

“Perfect.” Kyle finished tying garbage to his end of the tarp, then began securing it to the boat. They were anchored in two places, but a disturbance in the water might shake them loose. If that happened, they would have to float until it was time to come up.

Jennifer stapled the last piece of garbage and immediately dug in her kit for the Purell. She used it twice, then passed it to Kyle.

Marc and Adrian attached their choices, being careful to make it appear as though the cans and cloth had gotten tangled in the tarp. They would secure their end to the boat once they finished.

“When’s the last time you had a run like this?” Adrian wasn’t sure why Marc was upset, but the man was.

Marc contemplated it, hands busy. “About eight years, I think. Kenn and I led a double team into Ramadi. Intelligence screwed up and sent us into the port. We had to stay under a crab harvest until it got dark so they could extract us.”

“How did it go?”

Marc shrugged. “Fine except for Kenn crop dusting us the whole time. We never let him drink beer the night before a mission again.”

Adrian and the others sniggered.

“Kinda smells like now.” Marc finished and took the Purell. Like Jennifer, he used it twice. This debris had blown apart in the war and washed here in the near year since then. The number of contaminants was probably staggering.

“Anyone want to eat?” Kyle wasn’t surprised at the grimaces. His stomach didn’t feel like it either. “Okay. Let’s go over the plan. We’ll get under cover from there. No crop dusting allowed.”

The men looked at Jennifer.

Still chuckling, Jennifer rattled off, “Be quiet, pay attention, do what you tell me.” She grinned. “This is gonna be fun.”

All three men groaned. Rookie excitement had taken over her nerves. From here, she would either lose control and start babbling or settle into fighter mode and wait for orders.

“Do you hear that?” Marc leaned toward the dark, cold water.

Adrian put a hand on his arm, listening. “You hear differently now. That sounds like frogs to the camp.”

“They’re screaming!” Marc was horrified again. “The fish are screaming.”

“Yes. Their lives have always been violent, but the war filled their homes with garbage. The ocean is very unhappy.”

“We can’t make a dent in that.”

“No. But Angela will try anyway and honestly, something is better than nothing. A few species may survive along our path that may not have otherwise.”

Marc had to be consoled with that. They could empty themselves into the ocean daily and never make a real dent in the damage.

“Block it out again. We have a mission to handle.” Kyle wasn’t hearing it, but he didn’t doubt them.

Marc did, sealing it in a smaller box in his crypt. He’d never imagined animals screaming. It was awful to be able to understand them… “Wait. I speak fish?”

Adrian burst out laughing as he slid into his place in the wet boat.

Marc also got into position, dwelling on the new gift. “Does this mean I can talk to the cats now? If they don’t learn to hunt mice soon, Dog may have a stroke.”

“Damn.” Jennifer stilled. “My timing is off for water. Five minutes, guys. Could be–” Jennifer grunted as Kyle shoved her down and began pulling the tarp over the boat.

Marc and Adrian quickly secured their ends to the hooks, hoping it appeared like any other pile of debris in the darkness.

Tension filled the space. There was a chance the debris would crush them or expose them.

Adrian muttered, magic flowing. “We have a deal. Honor it and keep us hidden.”

Debris pushed in around them, shifting onto the tarp and boat.

Jennifer reached out for Kyle’s hand.

It was there to clasp hers and offer comfort. They lived in a strange world.

Marc put his hand on the first box attached to the boat. He had been given the job of firing. He had two more boxes attached in case he missed. It had been years since he’d done this and even then, only once before. It hadn’t gone well, though not because of his aim or timing. An IED on the dock had exploded, killing the people under surveillance and two of his team.

“I hear an engine.” Adrian strained to pinpoint the location. He and Marc had agreed this location, near a small gap in the debris, was to their advantage but the garbage was constantly shifting. Another gap could have opened. Their target might take a different path.

The water under them sloshed, splattering cold liquid against the debris and their boat. The water rose, pushing garbage together and apart. Their boat shifted, but the ropes on the other side stopped it from going far.

The people inside held their breath.

Engines rumbled louder.

Marc peered through his unblocked corner. “Just like she said–big and moving fast. Hang on for a ride.” Marc studied the boat as it neared, detecting only a few lights and no one on the deck. He assumed there was a captain, though, and waited for the right moment. As dark as it was, their little boat should be hard to see even without the garbage and tarp.

The huge ship shoved through the debris wall. Loud bangs and cracks echoed.

“Ready… Set… Here we go. Cut the anchors.” Marc pushed the button as the ship sailed by, sending a large ripple of debris in their direction.

The metal claw slammed into the hull of the big ship.

Wire spun out of the reel in a blur. It ended abruptly, going taut.

Their small boat leapt forward and upward. Debris flew over them. Part of the tarp flew into the air, lifting them higher. Kyle cut it loose; gravity jerked them back to the water, spraying more cold, nasty garbage.

The line went taut again, jerking them forward. They fishtailed to the right and then to the left as the big boat cleared the debris field.

Marc felt for the button and pushed it.

The small engine made a grinding noise, then began tugging them toward the ship. As long as the little engine held, it would tow them right up to the rear. Marc tried to scan the big boat for anyone watching, but the wake was too rough. He caught blurs of a dark deck and that was it.

Jennifer scanned mentally, white knuckled grip on the boat never loosening. It was too loud for conversation. She sent the images to her teammates instead, letting them glean their own details.

Marc studied the familiar ship, resigned. *I knew she wanted it.*

Adrian chuckled. *The next ship in her armada.*

Kyle was relieved the deck was empty, but not because of the fight that might trigger the rest of the ship’s occupants to come running. Jennifer was boiling with restless anticipation. He’d hoped she would hang in the rear and learn, but that wasn’t going to happen. She would be in the thick of things.

The small winch finally stopped them a few feet from the hull; the little boat bounced on the choppy wake.

Marc spotted the rusty ladder. They needed to swing to the right. He motioned the others to join his side, then directed Adrian to go first. He was in the front seat.

As the small boat swung to the right from the weight adjustment, Adrian leapt onto the ladder and pulled himself up a few feet. He stayed there to be close enough to lend a hand if it was needed.

Jennifer jumped next. Marc gave her a strong foot-to-butt boost, helping her reach the ladder.

Jennifer grasped the wet bars and held on, eyes closed and heart thumping in her chest. *This is that moment. You promised you’d view it honestly.*

Jennifer slowly opened her eyes. She was scared, like she’d worried over being, but it wasn’t so bad that she was in panic mode. This was the hardest part of the run, in her opinion, and she’d done it. *Feels great!* She began to climb, carefully sliding by Adrian.

Marc and Kyle jumped together, leaving the boat to seesaw behind the big ship like a piece of debris. It might draw attention in the morning, but they couldn’t reach the hook to cut it free. They both caught a rung of the ladder and used each other for balance with the other hands.

The team began climbing at Marc’s gesture.

A few minutes later, they reached the top deck and stood in the shadows, preparing for the next stage of Angela’s plan. Kyle had made minor adjustments, but the outline she’d given was solid.

Jennifer shed her wet clothes and tossed them off the side. Her kit had held everyday clothes and a pouch of beautiful knives that she couldn’t wait to play with on the run. The guys wanted her to observe and learn, but that wasn’t why she’d been sent.

Adrian kept his back to them as he also changed, aware that Kyle and Marc weren’t changing.

Marc used his grid, estimating threats. He didn’t mind wet clothes. He found the four dozen heat signatures they’d been told to expect, then a dozen more in the depths of the ship. Marc narrowed in, dismayed to sense power and even more signatures. There were twice as many people on this ship as they’d been told.

Jennifer felt it. “No mental communication.” She switched to hands. *We have to get to that center room first and remove the descendant or we’ll be fighting magic and all hundred people at the same time.*

Marc took the lead, using his mental grid to locate the stairs and avoid refugees wandering the stinking ship. It hadn’t been cleaned, though it appeared the bodies had been dumped. Fresh corpses had taken their place, recreating the same scenes he’d viewed at the beach. All it was missing was young killers snoring in the corners.

Marc led them to the brig, hoping he’d learned enough from Angela to fight one of their kind. The sense of power was strong.

Adrian stayed on Marc’s heels, picking up a new feeling of hope radiating from the cell.

*Knives only.* Marc drew his as they approached the door.

Jennifer had already placed her new blades into her belt. She chose two of the sturdiest and took Marc’s right.

Kyle sighed. *Jennifer’s an Eagle. I need to accept that.*

Marc opened the door.

A dozen sleeping refugees were sprawled around a torture chair. Blood was dried to the floor and walls below a dim bare bulb hanging over the prisoner.

Jennifer lunged forward, knives flashing as a few of the filthy people woke.

The men did the same, but they didn’t grunt in pleasure and enjoy the sounds of death like Jennifer did.

Marc let Jennifer finish the last man, turning to the prisoner. He stared in uneasy recognition.

So did Adrian. They knew him, though only on basic terms. Light flickered around the angel like a missing halo.

Kyle turned, gaping. “What are you doing here?!”

Jennifer pulled it from their thoughts. She strode forward with two bloody knives and gore up to her wrists. “I’ll talk to him this time.”

Kronus struggled against the ropes, talking behind the gag. His red robe had soaked up new layers of the shade. Most of it appeared to be his.

Marc put a hand on Jennifer’s wrist as she came in for a death blow. “We’re taking him to Angela.”

She shrugged, stepping back, but she kept her knives in hand. Jennifer liked playing the bad cop. She didn’t think she’d be good at the flip side.

Kronus breathed a deep sigh, stilling.

Adrian removed the gag and gave Kronus a drink from his canteen while Kyle worked on the bonds. Kronus had been beaten and sliced in multiple places. Whatever he was doing here, it wasn’t going well.

Marc and Jennifer watched the angel and listened for company. They hadn’t made a lot of noise, but they didn’t know if there were guards on this ship who might find them during a patrol.

Kronus took the drink and swallowed, grimacing. “Get me out of this chair.”

No one reached for the latches that controlled the straps.

Kronus studied them through his beaten, swelled face. “She sent you for me. Unlock the chair. Get me out of here.”

Marc regarded Jennifer.

Jennifer slowly shook her head. “She didn’t mention it to me. Why are you here?”

Kronus’s lips clamped shut.

Jennifer’s eyes narrowed as she went back to playing her role. “I guess we have to take you to Angela to get answers.”

Kronus nodded.

Marc gestured. “Slit his throat.”

“Glad to.” Jennifer came forward as Adrian and Kyle retreated.

“Wait! I have news! I have news!”

“Spill it quick or you’ll see your own guts on this floor.” Jennifer tapped her knife against his leg. “Bet you bleed like a pig.”

“We rebelled! We rebelled!”

Jennifer’s eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“We’re no longer weighing the souls. We’re not betting. We refused it all.”

“Why?”

“You humans never follow the rules and the Creator loves you. We’re tired of always being second best.”

Marc grunted. “So you decided to come and raise hell on hell.”

“I’ve come to warn of a danger. I was captured as I descended.”

Marc frowned. “You descended on this ship?”

Kronus delivered a bruised glare. “I wanted to know if I could tread water, like in the stories.” He looked at the latch again. “Please.”

“Did it work?”

“I was captured before I could test it.” Kronus scanned the bodies around his feet. “These humans are primitive. They could not communicate in any way but violence.”

“Even after you told them who you are?”

“They did not believe. They called me a magic user.” The angel let out a frustrated moan. “It hurts me!”

“Welcome to our world.” Marc flipped the latch, releasing the man.

Kronus fell to the filthy floor, groaning and crying in gratitude. “I will reward her for this mercy!”

“Reward me first.” Marc hauled the angel to his shaking feet. “Tell me what these people are doing out here.”

“Chasing the dream.” Kronus sat up and rubbed his bloody wrists. “They desire to be a part of Safe Haven’s light, though they shun your rules. The attraction outweighed the possible outcomes.”

Marc blasted light energy into the angel, healing some of his injuries.

Jennifer would have finished the job, but Kyle denied it with a hand on her tacky wrist. “That’s for the boss to decide. Marc’s just keeping him alive while we finish our mission.”

Kronus sneered. “I am the mission.”

“This boat is our goal, not you.” Marc went to the entrance and swept the dark halls. Their plans had to change now. As soon as the people on this ship discovered the captive gone, they would start searching.

“We can work until they find this room.” Jennifer was still eager to play with her new knives. “When they start searching, we’ll head for the bridge.”

Marc nodded. “We’re already in everyday clothes. When the search begins, blend in and get to the captain. Once we have him, we’re good.”

“Her.”

Kronus explained at their glances. “The captain is a female. She was forced to sail the boat here. I was hiding from them when it happened. I saw them take her. Lila hates descendants. She was going to use the guns on this ship to sink Safe Haven.” Kronus wiped at his clothes and tried to get ready for more ugliness. Getting off this ship wouldn’t be easy. For some reason, he hadn’t expected earth to be so primitive. It was different from those five rooms. Up there, it was a movie. Down here, it was life and death.

Marc gestured at Adrian. “Make our new guest feel welcome.”

Adrian blasted Kronus with his heaviest sleep spell. The angel crumpled on top of the pile of bodies.

“Leave him until we’re done clearing.” Kyle opened the door. “We’ll do this hall first. Two to a side. Adrian drops them, we finish ‘em off.”

Kyle and Jennifer went to the right.

Marc and Adrian took the left.

**2**

“That’s enough. I can’t keep doing this.” Jennifer wiped her knife on her bloody pants and sheathed it. “It’s wrong.”

Kyle had been catching her waves of unease for the last hour they’d spent using Adrian’s sleep spell on rooms of people and then slaughtering them. “We’re only half through the ship, Jenny.”

She walked to the rail and gazed at the waves, refusing to think about anything for a few minutes.

Marc was certain Adrian and Kyle could push her through this, but he suddenly didn’t want it. Angela had been stripped of her morality in a fight. He didn’t want the same for Jennifer. “We could head for the bridge now and take over the ship. We’ll handle them in waves from there. She can make the captain do what we want.”

Jennifer slowly turned, eyes blank. “I can fight. I *came* for the fighting. I don’t butcher sheep. I’m a shepherd.”

Adrian beamed at her.

So did Kyle. She was a true Eagle now.

Marc just wanted to get done and get home. “Okay. We take the bridge and fight from there.”

Jennifer walked to the front.

Kyle followed his wife, proud of her.

Marc walked with Adrian. “Is she okay?”

“She just reached the next level. She has the ice shield now, the one we use to get through a rough job. Most of my army didn’t gain that until Little Rock, other than Kyle and Neil’s teams. The others were still jittery and quick-tempered when we went into the mountain. They got their shield there.”

“I thought Jennifer already had it. I assumed being female is giving her a twitch.”

Adrian snorted. “It’s that thinking that pisses women off, Marc. The difference isn’t hormones. It’s heart. It takes longer to turn their hearts dark enough to do something like this. Killing people gets tiresome after a while, but slitting their throats in their sleep is heavy, dark work. The fights with the troops were easy for her in comparison.”

“Because females give life.”

“Exactly. Not hormones–heart. They have to overcome their basic instincts. It takes longer.”

“So what changes for her now?”

“Jennifer will take her destined place as Safe Haven’s top female fighter. Word will spread about this trip, like the others. More women will see a teenager, underestimate her, and assume they can do it too. Some of them will succeed.”

“And spawn the army of female fighters you’ve dreamed of.”

“That we need.” Adrian decided it was time to let Marc in on a secret he’d been holding for months. “Watch the births we have. I’m predicting 75% female. They have to fight. There won’t be enough males to do it.”

Marc thought about his calls on the camp women, then added in the new ones he’d learned of. “I’m getting 60%.”

“That survive.”

Marc realized Adrian had seen the future and their kids were indeed in danger. “What is it?”

“We don’t know. Even Jennifer doesn’t and she spends all of her free time trying to locate the danger so she can save Autumn and the rest. When we all get to that spot, there’s darkness. Then it skips ahead to the morgue.” Adrian’s eyes were haunted. “The bodies are small. Small!”

Marc put a hand on Adrian’s shoulder, spooked. “Come back.”

Adrian shook off the chills and the hand. “I’m good.” He walked around Marc. “Let’s take the bridge. I’m ready to be banished again.”

Frowning in confusion and concern, Marc followed.

**3**

“There’s another locked door here.” Jennifer eased back as Adrian came forward to kick it open. It was his turn. They were alternating as they finished up the last hall before the bridge. Two hours had passed. No one on the ship had noticed their captive had been freed. She assumed finding his body in the pile hadn’t alarmed them. In the rooms around the team, slaughtered refugees, some of whom had been awake and some who hadn’t, lay as evidence of what they’d been doing.

Jennifer hadn’t changed her feelings about hitting people with sleep spells to kill them without danger, but it wasn’t bothering her as much now either. The things they were finding were horrifying. These people needed to be removed before they reached Safe Haven. It was a hard job, though. The men were opening the door and letting her catch any runners. Then Adrian was hitting them with a sleep spell for the rest of the team to finish off. She realized they were endangering everyone to accommodate her, but she refused to back down on that. Safe Haven didn’t slaughter sleeping people unless there was no other choice. Because there were descendants on this team, they had another choice.

The door cracked under Adrian’s boot and swung open. The sick smell of rotting meat rolled out.

Jennifer forced herself to go inside when neither she nor Marc picked up movement on their mental grids.

“This room is clear.” Kyle shined his light again, narrowing in. “I stand corrected.”

Jennifer fired a single shot at the white-clad man in the rear of the room behind the stove, hitting him in the shoulder. He slipped and fell, landing on the knife he’d been using. It plunged into his chest, sending blood down his stomach and onto the floor where it merged with other puddles.

“Look at that.” Marc pointed, backing out of the room.

Human body parts were stacked on a refrigerator shelf that had been nailed to the wall. Blood was draining into the pans below. Next to them, a reeking stack of bodies waited to be diced.

“There’s gear in the corner. Eagle gear.” Jennifer stared at the jacket. “Did we leave survivors on the beach?” Panic came into her voice and body. She spun to Kyle, small fists punching Kyle’s chest. “Tell me! Did we leave Eagles alive on that beach?!”

Kyle hugged her, not noticing the filth she was coated in now. “I don’t know, Jenny. I’m sorry.”

Jennifer held in sobs, but she shuddered in his arms. “I want to go home now. Let’s get this mission finished.”

Every member of the team sympathized. There wasn’t a single run Angela had sent them on that hadn’t ended in one of them feeling that way about something that had happened or something they’d seen. Life after war was hard.

“How is everyone on power and ammo?” Marc paused, mental grid narrowing the location of the bridge. They were one hallway out.

“Fine on ammo, but low on energy.” Jennifer was getting tired. She didn’t think she’d ever used her arms this much.

“Low on ammo, fine on energy. I’ll get her through.” Kyle had planned on doing this for their missions together. He just hadn’t expected it to be so soon.

“Low on both.” Adrian had used a lot of his energy on sleep spells. “I have one big hit left and then I’m gonna need to recharge–one way or the other.” Implying he was willing to take a lifeforce to be able to keep going.

“She doesn’t want us to do that anymore unless were so low we can’t recharge on our own or we’re in danger.” Jennifer was positive how Angela felt.

“This looks like danger to me.” Kyle had no problem with it. He considered it to be a fair trade. Instead of doing evil, their energy would be used to accomplish good things.

Marc made the call. “We’ll play it straight and save it up. We take the bridge like any other team and Adrian can hit the entire boat from there. Then we’ll bring Kronus up and get set for anyone still brave enough to complain about the change in ownership.”

Adrian frowned. “That’s still going to leave about forty bodies to handle when they wake up.”

“How long will your spell hold?” They were 24-hours from catching up to Safe Haven.

“Six to eight hours. If I sleep, I might be able to hit them with a second spell, but it won’t be as strong, and we’ll be one man down for guard duty during that time.”

“I’ll play that by ear. Let’s go.” Marc led them to the bridge.

On the way, they didn’t surround Jennifer with protection. She walked in the assigned slot as a full member of the team.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

**Matchup**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**C**onner stopped in the doorway. “Oh. I didn’t know anyone would be here yet.”

Eagles stared, pausing in their workouts.

Conner scanned the room, hoping he was welcome. “Is it okay if I stay or should I wait for open camp time?”

Wade gestured toward an empty bike on the end. The new Eagle training room had a ring for match ups, two rows of lockers and showers connected through the bathrooms. It was a great setup and all portable.

Conner went to the bike, not enjoying being the center of attention. He needed a hard workout and then a cold shower. He and Candy were pushing the age law, but he hadn’t broken. It was hard.

Conner flushed at his reflections. He settled carefully onto the bike, adjusting to keep from hurting himself.

Around him, two dozen men returned to their workouts. Eagles were required to put in two hours every day. It was good Conner had come, but he wasn’t going to get an open welcome despite doing so well on yesterday’s tests. He had to prove himself in other ways now.

Conversations also resumed, letting Conner off the hook. He settled into a quick, steady pace and tried not to think about having Candy’s legs wrapped around his neck. He’d gone straight to the shower afterward, but he was still able to smell her scent on his skin and he was still horny. *I’m not going to last much longer.* Conner increased the speed and fell deeper into his thoughts.

“The comet is out of view now.” Donald lifted the weights as he continued their conversation, proud of the body he’d been working on while serving Safe Haven. He’d never been this fit in his life.

“I heard Shawn got pictures of it before the storm.”

“Is it over now, do you think? Hurricane season.”

“No idea.” Daryl was also lifting weights. Sweat ran down his bare chest in tiny rivers. “I hope so. Sitting here like a giant fish lure is weird.”

Ben cackled. “Fish lure. Good one.”

“I got it from Katie, that hot little brunette from Ciemus who’s hooked on Lou. She’s on the fishing crew.”

“She’s a descendant. She doesn’t think we know.” Donald put the weights on the rack and reached for a towel.

“Is she a problem?”

“Doubtful. She’s one of the few still on the fence about joining.”

“Like Trinity.” Whitney joined them at the weights. “She got cooking detail.” He grinned.

Ben paused. “She’ll be working under Brittani.”

“For a while. Should be interesting.”

Daryl put his weights away. “Why would anyone pick mess duty over being an Eagle?”

“She can’t match Brittani there. She hopes she can do it with her cooking.” Greg was listening from the next station over. He was practicing his knife skills on their dummy. He slammed the blade into the wooden man’s eye. “She’s not hooked into the hive yet either.”

All three men chuckled at the wording. The camp was using it too, but it had started as a snide title from the Eagles after they’d discovered Adrian’s betrayal.

Tommy entered the training room, happy with the job that he and the remainder of his old team had done in here. Ramer had read the instructions while the rest of the crew had assembled. Then they’d gotten drunk and he’d been able to forget Quinn’s accusations for a little while.

“What’s the word on the radio and power?” Wade knew Tommy had just come from doing an off-duty check on the captain.

“No radio, but almost full power. The captain said we’ll be moving again about this time tomorrow.”

“Good.” Wade gestured, grinning. “Daryl thinks we may reel in Jaws.”

Tommy chuckled. That joke was floating around all the levels. “Anything new since I went through?”

Wade’s amusement faded. “We had an injury overnight. Actually, we had two of them. One of Tonya’s cats tripped a guard. Ed is in the infirmary. Morgan thinks he has a broken rib. The cat has an identical injury.”

Tommy stared at him. “Identical?”

“Morgan thought it was a little weird too, but Ed said it happened so fast he wasn’t sure if he tripped or the cat tripped him. Other than that, overnight was quiet.”

“Does Tonya know yet?”

“She was a good sport about it, actually. Told Ed she was sorry. We almost choked.”

Tension entered the room. Tommy looked around and found Quinn coming from the shower.

Quinn glared as he went to the pullup bar. He began a punishing pace of chin-ups.

Zack came from the shower next, ribs still yellow but bandage gone. He felt the unease and decided to act like a high-level Eagle–because he was, no matter how the teams were reordered. “This is downtime. Swallow it or hide it in a tissue.”

Tommy and Quinn both nodded at the crude reminder of who they were. Zack was one of their trainers; they respected him. Neither man wanted marks on their record either. Tommy was still Special Forces, but Quinn hadn’t gotten his new placement yet. He didn’t need trouble.

In the far corner on a treadmill, Gus couldn’t hear the conversation for the fans above him. They were automatic and he hadn’t figured out how to turn them off. It worked out, though. He didn’t want to be distracted right now. He had big choices to make. He was going to try to be a true Eagle, but he also wanted a family. He’d believed it would be with Brittani. Now he had to shift the dream a little. Trinity was a nice girl. He could be happy with her if his heart would give it a chance.

Next to Gus, a line of Eagles were also running, sweating and holding in groans. Everyone was feeling out of shape. Aches were the most common complaint. All the steps on the ship were acting like workout equipment.

“Can I come in?” Kendle waited in the entrance. It was all men in here right now, but that wasn’t the problem.

Morgan gestured. “I need a sparring partner. You up for it?”

Kendle came toward the small ring. “Uh… Are you sure? I still get carried away sometimes.”

Morgan laughed.

Kendle shrugged. She needed to beat on someone. If he wanted to be beaten, it was a good match.

“That confident, are you? I like that.”

Kendle snorted. “Save your butter for Pam’s popcorn.”

Morgan burst out laughing. *I gave her that last night.* “Fine. I’m going to pound your ass. You have no chance of winning this match. Better?”

Kendle sniggered. “If you say so.”

Morgan knew he didn’t have to take it easy on her. The few workouts and matches she’d been in since joining this camp had all been victories. That was about to change.

Nearby, the warehouse men followed the video instructions, grateful Kendle was here. They’d been worried over people staring at their scars, but Safe Haven was full of people who had been marred by survival. No one gave them a second glance as they worked out with their teammates and friends. The one they did gawk at was Kendle. She had so many scars it was hard to find a place where her skin was clear. Kendle’s body was a mess. Her tank top and jeans let them see the chunks that had been ripped from her arms and stomach. When she bent to get into the ring, her jeans pulled tight over identical shapes under the leg material. She was covered in bites.

Kendle didn’t care about their pity or revulsion. “Rules?”

Morgan advanced. “Same as usual. You bleed, you’re out.”

Kendle entered the center of the ring. “Stakes?”

Morgan paused. “We don’t usually bet.”

“Chicken?”

He frowned at her. “It’s against our rules. Betting on matches is only allowed with approval from the boss.”

“I have something you want.”

Morgan’s frown grew. “Is this a psych-out?”

“Of course. I overheard great gossip while cleaning the nastiest bathroom ever.”

Morgan tried not to laugh again. The men in camp were thawing toward Kendle, but the females were trying to sink her in every way. “What?”

“That’s my stake. I’ll tell you who said it and then you’ll sign away your firstborn for it.”

Intrigued, Morgan nodded. “Who?”

Kendle answered with a lilt and a grin. “Pamela.”

“What? What did she say?! Was it about last night?” Morgan’s stress flowed out in thick waves. “I knew she was faking it.”

Kendle and the others who heard were laughing and shaking their heads. Morgan was hooked.

“So, you ready to play?”

Morgan’s lips thinned. “First blood calls it.”

“Yes. Now, what’s your stake?”

There was one thing they all wanted from Kendle, but her leaving Marc alone was an impossible demand. “I want your full story. The scars and all.”

Kendle froze for an instant as Ethan’s face flashed in front of her. Yeah, *I’m still with you, baby.*

Morgan held up a hand. “I’m sorry. I’ll pick something else.”

Kendle shook it off. “No, it’s okay. It just means you’ll have more bruises than I’d planned on. When I win, you have to give me private lessons.”

“Deal.”

Eagles gathered around the ring.

Wade and Donald went to the main entrance to keep a lookout for camp members. Fights like this one were not against the rules, but if it got ugly, the camp would have issues, especially if Morgan did beat her up. It was one reason they matched women against other women in training. The camp still didn’t like seeing men beat on women, for any reason.

Gus finished his set and went to his locker to get clean clothes. He wanted to view the match and hit the shower before lunch. Angela had already given him a schedule. He had duty over the camp meeting that was happening as soon as everyone had been fed. He didn’t want to eat or stand guard while wearing dried sweat.

A paper floated from his locker. He picked it up and read it.

*I hope you have an awesome day. -T*

Gus studied the note, touched.

Quinn stomped by Gus, headed for the ring to stop the fight.

Tommy grabbed Quinn by the shoulder and spun him into the row of towel racks out of sight of the ring. “You’ll get in trouble for it. Stop!”

Quinn paused. The surprise punctured his anger. “What?”

“All you can do is bitch and you’ll be voted down. Then you get the rep that you don’t think women are equals, blah blah. Just suck it up or get out of here!”

Quinn didn’t think he could stand to watch the fight. He shoved by Tommy to leave, but he stopped as both participants came from their corners.

“On the right, we have the 110lb. island fighter adorned in mystery scars and glowing red orbs. She specializes in blood and has a fondness for the boss’s main man.” Kenn ignored the shocked gasps and stares as he continued the mock announcement from next to the ring. He’d just come from the shower, but he’d been listening, practicing his mental skills. “In the opposite corner, we have the 210 lb. senior Eagle with huge guns and excellent kai skills. If he can’t beat this little girl, the machoman will be known as a wimp and have to forfeit his next night in the hot tub with Pam and Shawn.” Kenn waited for the amusement and red faces to fade, then kept it going. “Since this betting session isn’t okay, let’s open it up to the audience. Who has chores they’d like to trade or food they won’t be eating? Make your bets. We begin in one minute...” Kenn stiffened. He turned to glare at Kendle and then Morgan, who were laughing at his antics.

“Damn.” Kendle knew that look. “We’re in trouble.”

“Yep. Boss just got off the elevator.” Morgan now regretted being in the ring.

“Coming this way?” Kendle wanted to leave now too. It wasn’t fun anymore.

“Don’t move, either of you.” Kenn leaned over the top rope, pointing. “You wound them up and now you’ll settle them down. Stand by for the boss!”

Kenn’s hissed words knocked the air from both of them. They hadn’t meant to stir people up. They were just having fun.

Silence fell over the training room and rippled into the showers where people were hurrying to finish as they heard about the coming fight.

Angela entered, face expressionless. She advanced into the room, head turning to mark everyone who was there and those who weren’t. She went to Kenn and dropped onto a stool next to him. “As you were.”

Kenn held up an imaginary mike this time. “We have thirty seconds; betting ends in thirty seconds.” Kenn pointed at the clock on the wall.

Angela absorbed it all, catching unguarded thoughts and the desire for their lives to return to what passed as normal in Safe Haven. She didn’t glance at Kendle or Morgan yet.

Kendle stayed away from Angela. Ropes between them weren’t enough. She still wanted the woman dead. She just didn’t have the will to try it now.

Morgan made Kendle switch sides with him. He didn’t want her that close to the boss.

Angela ignored them, studying the crowd. Observing their faces and hearing their words was as important as searching mental doors. Images didn’t always convey mood. She needed to know what, if anything, was bothering her army.

Quinn stayed next to Tommy, torn. “Why isn’t she stopping it?”

“She can’t. Do you feel the anger in the air?”

Quinn hadn’t but he did now. “Who are they mad at?” Quinn had forgotten their rivalry for the moment. This was a senior man educating a lower level Eagle.

“Kendle. She betrayed us. They want payback.”

“So does Angela.”

“I would too, but it can go too far. The boss came to make sure no one gets hurt in the wrong way.”

“To prevent a riot or a lynching?”

“Never a riot, but Kendle could be tossed overboard if she makes another mistake. If these men get wound up tight enough without a release, she could be tossed over without making the mistake.”

“Would that be the same if it was all women in here?”

Tommy snorted. “We’re giving her a chance to regain a little honor. The women will never give her that. They have no forgiveness.”

Quinn forced out his next question. “It would be the same for her next mate, right? Shunned, outcast.”

Tommy shrugged. “That depends on the mate. Is he already an outcast?”

“No.”

“Does he plan on becoming one?”

“No.”

“Is he going to try to get her accepted by the camp?”

Quinn sighed. “He wants to, but he has no idea if she does.”

Tommy moved into the aisle for a better view. “Sounds like that guy might have a chance at all his goals, except one.”

“Just one?”

“Getting her to love him as much as she does Marc. Any man who dates Kendle will never be first in her heart. I couldn’t handle that. Neither could Adrian. If you can, good luck. I mean that.” Tommy went to the ring to view the fight.

Angela delivered an ugly glower to the man at her side.

Kenn paused, about to announce the start. “Uh, hang on folks. Stand by.” He lowered his voice. “What did I forget?”

Angela didn’t censor her angry tone. “I haven’t made a bet yet.”

The room went silent again. Angela didn’t break rules. She wasn’t betting. She was dropping the hammer.

“If Morgan wins and we get her story, she’s blacklisted from the Eagles. If she wins and we get to hear about Morgan’s sex life, she’s blacklisted from the Eagles. She’s taking the punishment for everyone breaking the no-betting rule. Let’s have some fun!”

No one spoke. Angela wasn’t usually outright mean.

Angela regarded Kenn. “Restart the count. Let’s get this fight rolling!”

Kenn, out of fun mode, hesitated.

“What are you waiting for? You and that big mouth jumped right in before I showed up.”

Kenn stepped to the center of the platform around the ring, wishing he and his big mouth had stayed in the shower.

Angela swept the nervous men and women, seeing more people had come from the training rooms in the hall around them. “We have time for two more matches after this one. Pick ‘em and get set. We do have a camp meeting to attend, so all bets will be settled after the matches are over.”

Kenn got excited again, though he knew it would probably make the situation worse. “Who do we have for our second match up? Anyone want to be the center of attention for the boss’s ‘you’re all so fucked’ lesson?”

“Sign me up.” Quinn advanced toward the ring amid oohs and noos. He had a lot of anger to work off.

“I’ll take that match.” Monica was positive she could beat Quinn in a fair fight.

Quinn paused.

The crowd laughed, Angela included.

Kenn got louder to be heard. “Okay, so for match number two, we have the new girl and the twitchy guy. Who wants a piece of match three?!”

People called names and nudged their favorites, creating waves of sound that drew more of the would-be fighters from the other training rooms. Guards on the hall peered inside to verify Angela’s protection was doing their job.

Kids also appeared on the floor, but they stayed in the hall with their guards and personal protectors. The kids knew they weren’t allowed in training rooms without permission, but camp members wandering by had to be dissuaded by the guards.

“I could use a good workout.” Ray came through the crowd, acting timid. “Anyone wanna beat me up?”

People laughed at his game.

“I’ve got two minutes.” Ian didn’t control his cocky attitude as he joined the other fighters near the ring. “Should be over quick.”

Grant stayed in the doorway. He’d let Ray convince him to come along for rounds so he could tell the boss he’d left the bridge for a while. Angela was getting upset with him over it. Now, Grant wished he’d refused. He didn’t want to watch Ray get beat up. Ian’s muscled arms looked like they could pound nails.

Whitney went to stand by Grant before Angela could order it. There were now sixty people in here and another three dozen in the halls. Grant needed a guard.

“It’s not to the death, right?” Grant didn’t know much about Safe Haven’s inner workings yet.

Whitney chuckled. “No. You bleed, you’re out.”

“Bleed?”

“Don’t worry. Ray won’t get in trouble for hurting him.”

Grant heard the tone. “How can you be sure Ray will win?”

“Because my team helped Marc and Kenn make him one of the best fighters in camp. You’ve heard of small but scrappy, right? Well, that’s Ray.”

Grant was soothed a little, but he couldn’t help the concern as he compared bodies on the two men. Ray needed to eat a lot more sandwiches.

“Are you ready?” Kenn noticed Kendle refusing to glance in Angela’s direction and approved.

Kendle nodded, not surprised Angela had trapped them, but she was still eager to fight. She needed to blow off the steam so she could keep walking the line.

Morgan smirked at her as Kenn rang an imaginary bell and people crowded closer. “Come on, scars. Let’s see it.”

Kendle snorted, taking up a stance she knew the man wasn’t familiar with. She’d reverse engineered it from a move Marc had taught her while they were fighting the troops. “You can do better.”

Morgan grinned wider. “Home wrecker?”

“That’ll do it.” She lunged forward, swinging.

Morgan grabbed her arm.

Kendle twisted and used his weight to flip him over her shoulder.

Morgan landed hard but he was up fast. “Don’t stop now.”

Kendle lunged again, coming in low.

Morgan grabbed her again. When she began to attack, he shoved her, hard. She hit the mat, gasping as the air was knocked out of her.

Morgan followed up with a mild kick to her ribs.

Kendle rolled over and got to her feet, expression wild.

Morgan advanced, grin never wavering.

Kendle’s survival mode kicked in without her permission. She punched, rocking Morgan’s head back.

Morgan swung with the same strength, catching her below the eye.

Kendle hit the mat again.

Morgan waved at her. “You need those private lessons. Show me you deserve it.” Her punch had been solid and she was fast. He could do a lot with that.

Kendle stood, swallowing the blood from her split lip instead of letting anyone see it. She lunged without warning, tackling Morgan head-on.

Not expecting it, Morgan staggered at the weight.

Kendle began punching, using more force.

Morgan took four of her hits and then he punched her back, pounding her.

Kendle slid to the mat, dazed. Blood ran from the corner of her mouth.

“We have a winner! Morgan has beaten her ass and leaves the ring with hardly a scratch. Kendle may need a hand. Why did she do it, folks? The world may never know.” Kenn signaled at Quinn to help her out of the ring as people cheered.

Quinn gave Kendle a hand on the arm to help her out and immediately released her.

Kendle sat on the edge of the platform and pretended she wasn’t in a lot of pain. She also didn’t show that she was enjoying it. Physical pain was a distraction from her mental anguish.

Monica leapt over the ropes and landed in the center of the mat.

Quinn also leapt in, not as eager to be facing a woman.

Kenn decided to finish having a good time and pay the price later with everyone else. “In the right corner, we have Quinn, the lovelorn Eagle who can’t seem to hook up with a good woman. In the left corner, we have Monica, the Ciemus fisherwoman who will now lead her own team of hot men. Will she ride them all in her quest for the camp’s best servicer? Will the twitchy guy get one unstuck from his chamber? Let’s find out! Ring that bell!”

Quinn shouted at Kenn, hating the amusement and public knowledge.

Monica laughed with the crowd. She didn’t care about a reputation. She liked men and after a good fight, she wanted one. *What’s so wrong with that?*

Quinn shoved everything else out, not wanting to lose this fight. He’d watched Monica training with Neil. She caught on fast and she’d been practicing.

“Go!”

Monica stepped forward and swept with her leg, hitting a braced knee.

Quinn punched downward, getting a shoulder flinch-off as she spun out of his reach.

Monica dropped and twisted, leg again sweeping.

Quinn jumped. He landed and jumped again, avoiding her second sweep. He lunged backward as she came up swinging but misjudged the step. He staggered, arms flailing.

Monica threw her first punch. She caught Quinn under the chin and knocked his teeth together.

Quinn tried to recover, but his eyes were watering from the blow. He shoved her back in a defensive motion and tried to advance.

Monica punched him in the chest, bringing him to his knees. She wanted to finish him off, but his whimpering gasps were pitiful. She retreated and gave him the chance to recover.

Quinn got to his feet. He understood now that he was going to lose this fight, but he wasn’t going to lay down for her. If she wanted it, she had to take it.

Monica nodded, reading it in his eyes. “I’ll give you a rematch whenever you’re ready.”

Quinn opened his mouth to give a smart remark.

Monica punched him, coming from her hip.

Quinn fell backward onto the mat and stayed there, groaning. Blood dripped from his mouth.

“And we have our winner!” Kenn cleared his throat as Tonya, Candy and Tracy entered the room, let in by friendly guards who would be scolded for it later. “The new girl is making a name for herself in more than just the bedroom…and poor Quinn now needs a medic. Uh, seriously, can we get a medic over here?”

Kendle helped Quinn out of the ring the same as he’d done for her. She heard his slight intake of air at the contact. *Beaten and dizzy and still has a thing for me. Bet he would have gotten back up if the no-bleed rule wasn’t in effect.*

Angela gave a subtle nod. *He would have. Quinn isn’t a great fighter, though he excels at most weapons. He’s a planner, a deadly foe who gives us those plots and schemes.*

*He’s like you.*

*Yes. In time, he might even be like Marc. It depends on the grooming. He was on Marc’s team. He earned XO against stiff competition.*

*I don’t want a substitute from you!* Kendle glared at Angela. *Leave me alone.*

Angela laughed, hard and loud.

Kendle limped from the room, unable to take it. Angela wouldn’t stop until she settled down with someone or left. *You’ll get your wish, you cruel bitch. When we get to Pitcairn, I’m leaving your Safe Haven. Luke’s bunker will be perfect for me.*

Kenn’s voice echoed again. “And now we have our final match, ladies and gentlemen. The captain’s bodyguard against the boss’s former body man. Will Grant get to view his boytoy having a glorious victory or will Ian’s mouth swallow him whole?” Kenn waved his arm. “Let’s roll.”

Ray and Ian got into the ring at the same time, not looking at each other. They weren’t friends, but they’d never had problems. They’d also never matched up in a cage fight or in training because Ray was four levels above Ian.

Grant bit his lip as Kenn rang the imaginary bell.

Ray stood still and let the cocky fighter come to him.

Ian realized at the last minute he was in trouble, but it was too late to avoid the whirlwind Ray became as he threw punch after punch that landed in Ian’s kidneys and gut.

Ray used extra force on the next upswing.

Ian vomited.

“Uh…” Kenn wasn’t sure if he should call it because puke wasn’t blood.

Ian wiped his mouth on his sleeve and stalked forward.

Ray blocked the decoy leg sweep and the fast punch. He wasn’t prepared for the headbutt.

Ian struck him twice, hard.

Ray stumbled and went down on one knee, arms rising in defense.

Ian used both fists together and hit Ray in the forehead.

Ray sprawled backward.

Ian leaned over to deliver a final blow.

Ray struck upward with his knee, cracking into Ian’s jaw. Blood ran into his mouth.

Like Kendle, Ian swallowed it, swinging.

Ray rolled to avoid the leg kick and got trapped by the corner post. He rose to his feet, arms crossed above him to absorb the fast punches Ian threw.

Ray kicked out, getting Ian’s knee. He used the outside of his elbow to batter the man’s ribs and shoulder, causing pain like he’d been taught.

As Ian slid sideways to protect his kidney, Ray repeated Marc’s stomach punch.

Ian dropped, puking again.

Ray hit him in the mouth as he came up for air, splattering blood and debris to end the match.

“There’s your winner! And when he gets off duty, we can all thank Marc Brady for that wonderful new move flying through the Eagles.”

Ray held out a hand to Ian, not bothered by the mess. “Still friends?”

Ian snickered roughly, controlling the next gag as he took the hand up. “If you teach me that move, we can *be* friends.”

“Deal.” Ray retreated and gave the camp a surprise. He wiggled his hand and peered down in a feminine gesture. “You will wash first?”

Ian broke into amusement as the cramp eased off. “I promise. No dirty dick here.”

Ray cackled as he wiped off on a towel Kenn tossed him, finally being himself. Among his kind, he’d been the life of the party during gatherings. “Good. Dirty dicks are so last season.” Ray sauntered away from the ring. Grant was right. He didn’t have to worry over Safe Haven’s reaction. He’d proved, again, that a man could be gay and a badass. That was all he needed.

Grant was laughing so hard he was almost crying. It wrinkled his face and made him appear young, innocent.

Something snapped in Ray. The last barrier to who he wanted to be vanished. He stepped forward and kissed Grant.

Most of the witnesses cheered. Everyone knew Grant wanted Ray, and Ray was a good guy. Their match had already been approved.

Grant clutched Ray’s hips, lost.

Ray pulled back, grinning. “Will you be mine?”

Grant nodded, smiling warmly. “Kiss me again and I’ll be anything you want.”

Ray did.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

**The Other Shoe**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**C**andy joined Angela, aware of the line of Eagles behind them frowning at everyone. All sorts of rules were being broken right now, including non-Eagles being let inside a training room during downtime. “I wanted to thank you for putting me back on the engineering team.” Candy fingered her schedule. She’d just gotten it.

“You belong there.” Angela slid over for the pregnant woman to join her. Candy looked better than Angela had ever seen.

Candy blushed at the boss’s scrutiny. “Thank you for Conner.”

Angela shrugged. “I doubt it will be smooth sailing. You both have baggage.”

Candy laughed. “Yes, we do. I’m glad to know. I’ve been waiting for the next shoe to fall.”

“Well, you may want to brace. It just tumbled off the shelf.” Angela directed her attention to the other side of the room.

Candy’s happiness dulled as she saw Conner. Like the other males who’d already been assigned to a team or cleared as an Eagle, he was surrounded by women wanting his attention. “Golddiggers.”

Angela chuckled. “Not exactly. Monica was given her own team. She doesn’t need him to further her own image or goals.”

Candy stiffened. “I didn’t know she was hunting fresh meat.”

Angela tried not to laugh again and failed. “A lot of Ciemus women flooded in. She wanted top of the pack and she got it. None of the others here are going to match her for a while.”

“You could. Jennifer could.”

“We’ve already earned our places, but we can’t lead teams. She doesn’t have enough experience and I have another job. Monica might be the next one of us to ascend the ranks. Be happy for her.”

“I am.”

“You sound angry.”

“I am. She knows he’s taken. *They all do.*”

Angela shifted so she and Candy were face-to-face. “Really?”

Candy flushed, but anger flowed from her stance. “Yes.” She glared at Monica, willing the woman to look at her.

Monica knew she was being observed by leadership, but she’d achieved a huge personal goal today and she liked younger men. Conner had also proven himself and he was adorable. Now that there was time for it, she wanted a service.

Conner increased the speed on the treadmill, forcing several of the women to retreat. He wasn’t interested in what they were selling.

Monica stood in his downdraft, so he caught her smell. She’d attempted an advantage by picking vanilla soap. She assumed he was his father’s son.

Conner couldn’t stop the instant inhale of the sweet odor. *I am Adrian’s son, but you’re not my Candy.*

Monica, like everyone else, knew where Conner’s heart was. *But that’s not the part I’m after.*

Conner’s head swiveled. “You want me to be your relief source?” The boy bristled. “Do I look like a whore to you?”

Monica laughed. “It’s been a standard for as long as Safe Haven has existed. The difference is that a female Eagle is asking for care.”

Conner chuckled at her clever switch. “You know, most of the Special Forces men specialize in that.”

“I’ve heard. Are you suggesting I hunt elsewhere or asking if I’ve made those rounds?”

Conner’s amusement was magnetic, drawing Monica and the other females closer.

“I don’t know the rules on this. If I refuse, am I demoted or something?”

“Of course not.” Monica leaned in to show the tops of breasts even larger than Candy’s.

Conner was flattered and as a young man, he was enjoying the banter, but he didn’t like how Candy had frozen half way to them as if she was waiting for him to make a choice. “Sorry. Charlie’s the titty-baby, not me.”

Eagles cackled at his quip, proud of him for resisting.

Monica liked his spunk. “Guess that’s a no, huh?”

Conner nodded. “I recommend Greg. Whoever he had in his cabin last night sounded…very happy.”

Monica swept for Greg and found him on duty. She ignored Candy’s glares. “Special Forces…”

Conner leaned in to keep from embarrassing her further. “He’s not my dad, but he’ll get you there.”

Monica paled, secret exposed. *What gave me away, kid?*

*You knew he prefers vanilla. You’ve been watching him to see what he likes. He knows too, by the way. I just wouldn’t let that slip to the boss.*

Conner shrugged as she stomped off, face red. “Some people can’t take a joke.” He looked through the crowd at Candy.

Candy resumed her walk, heart lightening. *This is what you want?*

Conner stepped off the treadmill. *With all my heart. I love you.*

Candy met him in the middle of the room, ignoring the quieting, staring witnesses. She didn’t know how this was supposed to happen, so she did what felt good–she dove on in. “I challenge the age law.”

Silence fell.

Heads rotated toward Angela.

Angela was ready. “For you or the entire camp?”

“The entire camp.”

“No. You don’t have enough status here for that demand.”

“For myself, then. I’ll work up from there.”

Angela gestured. “Make your case.”

Candy swallowed. “It’s unconstitutional. In the beginning, teenagers were able to make these choices and it built the world, including this ship. They had jobs and served in the military. Making them sneak around is wrong and encourages them to go bad to get what they need.” Candy smiled at Conner. “We want to spend time together. We’re tired of trying to hide it.”

Angela was impressed by the choice of defense. “Denied. The age law is fifteen. Stick to it.”

“What if I want to marry her?” Conner took Candy’s hand amid the surprise and mutters. “I planned to do it the right way, after we’d settled into a better place, but it is what I want. What *we* want.”

“Marriage doesn’t preempt the law.”

Conner frowned. “The law is wrong.”

Angela shrugged. “We voted on it when our situation was desperate. Fifteen was chosen. If you insist on another vote now, which *you* can as an Eagle, it will probably be changed to sixteen.”

People scowled at Candy and Conner now. Many of them had potential partners who were about to become legal on their next birthday. They didn’t want more time added.

“You approved other couples.” Candy knew they were going to lose, but she had to keep fighting. She wanted this, a lot.

“I did, one of them was my son. Jennifer was the other.”

Candy held up a hand. “Jenny was pregnant and needed a protector. I understand that.”

“My son was headed down a bad path. Tracy was the only person who could stop him from becoming like Adrian instead of Marc. I made a mother’s choice, against my will.”

“That’s favoritism.”

“It would be if I’d only do it for him. There are always exceptions to rules. Safe Haven recognizes that. We try to save people.”

Candy worked it through. “Conner and I don’t need saving anymore.”

Angela beamed at them. “No. You two are good together. You make each other better.”

“Then why can’t we be together openly?” Conner’s voice carried his frustration.

“Because you’re the example I have to make. The third couple to come through gets the weight of change this time. If you want teenagers to have more status and respect, help them earn it. Follow the laws and be accepted in every way. Break them and be the couple who pays the heaviest price.”

“What if we don’t want any of this?” Conner hadn’t planned on an open challenge. Candy had caught him by surprise.

“Then obey the rules.”

“That’s the challenge.” Candy’s hand went to her hip. “We’re stuck doing it either way.”

“Yes. You joined Safe Haven and promised to uphold our rules, but you’re taking an Eagle’s honor. Stop it. We need them.” Angela glanced around the crowd that was now expecting a punishment. “Report all breaks of rules, even if you agree with the person doing it, even if you are the one doing it. Eagles own up to their mistakes and their choices.” She looked back at the nervous couple. “If you want to be together, four weeks isn’t long to wait.”

“Is that your final word?”

Angela nodded. “It is.”

Candy knew she was beaten, but she didn’t feel as if she’d lost. “We can do it.”

“I believe that too. Now prove it.” Angela waved. “Kendle has cleanup.”

Conversations and workouts slowly resumed. Angela subtly searched for Monica and found her hitting on Greg. Like she had with Conner, Monica was showing cleavage and getting no sparks. Greg was nodding and checking his watch, setting up a service, but he didn’t want it.

*You’re a hard one to match up, Greg, but I will get your DNA spread into this camp*. Angela surveyed the crowd again. Most of the servicing setups were over. Almost all the females were asking for a commitment or friend benefits instead of automatic sex to those who were higher ranked. They were learning to get their own needs covered. She wanted the same for Greg. She looked back at him to scan for what she’d missed.

Greg leered at her in open longing for one second. Then he closed up and sent her an answer mentally. He didn’t need to read minds. He was too good with women to not know what she was doing. *I can’t have who I want. All these bodies can’t compare, but they’ll keep me on the right side of my honor. Please, stop now.*

Angela’s heart broke for him. *How can I reward you?*

*I have my honor intact. That’s enough.*

*As you wish.*

Greg motioned he was going off duty now. He draped an arm around Monica’s shoulders and turned on the charm.

Angela clapped her hands. “All right. Settle those bets and get ready for the camp meeting right after lunch. Today’s fun isn’t over.”

**2**

“There were so many bodies the refrigerators were cleaned out to hold them. When the captain refused to help us, the crew stopped storing bodies at all.” Kendle scrubbed the freshly cleaned mat with a towel, giving it a rough dry. She’d come back as soon as the third match was over. She refused to give Angela any reason to add more chores. “Most of us locked ourselves in the cabins, but you’ve seen the flimsy doors on this ship. Ours were the same. Gangs of passengers kicked them open and ransacked the cabins. After the crew died, the ship stopped filtering fresh water. The taps stopped running and the galley stopped serving. We were on our own.” Kendle tossed the towel into the hamper on the side of the cart. She went to the lavatory to wash her hands, shuddering from reliving her story.

The training room was silent. She’d been talking while she cleaned. No one had left, not even the people who knew her story through gossip. Hearing it from her was eerie and mesmerizing. Even Angela was still here, lingering by the exit with her security.

Kendle came back out, drying her hands on a paper towel. “My sister and I barricaded the door and tried to figure out a plan. We worked on it all night, listening to the ship tear itself apart. Even when the drunks passed out and the kids stopped crying, there were still moans of grief, puking, coughing, dying. It was never quiet.”

Kendle began gathering up the cleaning supplies and storing them on the cart. “We snuck off in a lifeboat with a few other passengers.” Kendle paused. “It bothers me that I didn’t know their names. I was the last one to see them alive, to know for certain what happened to them and I can’t tell their family if I run across them because I don’t know their damn names!” Kendle clenched her fists. “Dawn went during the storm.” Kendle held up her wrist, showing the rope burns and bite marks. “We got the great idea to tie ourselves to the boat. When the rail ripped off…” Kendle sobbed, fighting for control.

“You can stop.” Morgan was sorry he’d insisted. “It’s okay to stop now.”

Kendle wiped away her tears and took a deep breath. “I washed up on an island where the population was infected by the rage illness. As you’ve all stared at, I had an encounter.” Kendle forced herself to finish it. “Ethan liked to bite. When he took me into that cave, I believed I would die there. I should have died there.” Kendle pushed the cart toward the employee hall. “Instead, Luke rescued me and flew me here on a supply plane. He died and I joined Safe Haven’s fight against the government so I’d have a reason to go on living.” She paused at the entrance, ignoring Angela and her scowling security to glance back at Morgan. “Thank you.”

He frowned. “For what?”

“A few hours of dwelling on my sore spots instead of my past. I owe you one.”

Morgan smiled, not understanding but glad she seemed calmer now. “When you’re ready for a rematch, you call it.”

Kendle snorted. “It’ll be a while. I have a lot to learn.”

**3**

“More team lists are up. Come on.” Tonya dragged Kenn to the pegboard in the main lounge even though he was the one who’d posted it an hour ago. “I can’t believe Monica beat Quinn.”

“Same here.”

She skimmed for her name and found it near the top. “Medical team!”

Kenn was thrilled for her. “She thinks you’re happy in there with the chemicals and beakers. Are you?”

“Very. Hey! Did you see where Rose was placed?”

“Yes, dear.”

Tonya snickered. “Never would have believed she’d be helpful to the engineers.”

“Me either, but she has a degree in architectural design. She’ll fit right in there.”

“How did Candy make that crew?”

Kenn shrugged. “No idea. I wasn’t around for that decision. Angela made her choice on Candy weeks ago.”

Tonya kept scanning for familiar names on the listed teams. “Aww. Panaji got the fishing crew with Pam and Katie. He’ll love that. Pam’s a good leader and she’s funny when Katie gets her going.”

Kenn didn’t tell her Katie would be reassigned once she accepted who she was. Angela had insisted they not force the issue for anyone who was still on the fence about using their gifts to protect the camp. She had faith they would come around to it on their own. Kenn had no reason to disbelieve that, but he happened to know Katie was in trouble for not telling anyone she was a descendant. She was hiding it and that was forbidden.

“Wow.” Tonya pointed at the list. “She put her own son on the cleaning crew. That’s harsh.”

“She put him back with his team.”

Tonya frowned as she noted the other names on that new crew. “She wants him around Kendle and Adrian?”

“He did well out there with us. She knows he needs the teachers who were able to get through to him.”

Tonya’s ire rose. “What about you? Not that I want you cleaning my toilet, but shouldn’t you be included in that teaching?”

“I am, actually.” Kenn made sure no one else was close and held out his schedule for her to read.

“Private time with Charlie starting next week.” Tonya gave the paper back to him, impressed. “You really did do a good job out there in hell.”

“I tried. I’m still trying.”

Tonya took his hand and led him into the galley kitchen. It was empty.

Kenn let her take him toward the walk-in pantry. He checked for guards in sight and didn’t find any.

When Tonya entered the darkness and pulled down her pants, Kenn joined her. Right when he started feeling too normal, Tonya reminded him they had a choice. *I love her so much.*

Tonya felt tears coming. “I love you too.”

Kenn shoved between her legs.

The pantry opened. “Very sweet. Now get out of there!” Brittani chased Kenn, swatting his bare ass with the broom. She was careful not to even bump Tonya, who was laughing. Striking one of Safe Haven’s pregnant females was a death sentence.

Kenn fled, calling something over his shoulder as he tried to fasten his pants and run, but no one listened to him through the amusement.

Brittani pointed at a stool. “Have a seat. I need a taster.”

Surprised, Tonya fixed her clothes and sat, studying the pretty black woman. Brittani’s arms were defined, dark pistons that would be shaped into spears during her time in the Eagles. It happened to all of them, but it was quite noticeable in the females because most of those non-fighters had flabby arms. With long legs in black shorts and a flat stomach under her white tank top, Brittani was sexy, confident, and capable. “Have you been placed yet?”

“No.” Brittani sat a small bowl in front of Kenn’s mate. “That’s made with powdered milk, but it’s fresh churned. You’re not allergic to strawberries, are you?”

“No. I don’t like them, though.” Tonya took a small bite of the ice cream. Her lids shut. Tears began to run over her cheeks.

“Are you okay?”

Tonya sniffled, halting the tears like she’d been doing whenever the hormones got the best of her. “Flashes of the past. Some good, some bad.”

Brittani understood. She liked it that the redhead was confident enough to admit it to a near stranger. “I haven’t decided on a flavor for the big meal. Hang around and you can test the other two for me.”

“Sure.” Tonya was waiting on another batch of tests to finish so she could move them and start the next ones. The book said a Karyotyping test took a minimum of seven days, but fourteen was better. Tonya was activating all tests that took a long time. As she got them running, she had small windows of free time.

“What tests can you do down there?”

Tonya looked up at the cautious tone. “You didn’t ask me to stay as a taster. What do you want?”

Brittani leaned in. “Information.”

“About what?”

“Everything, everyone.”

Tonya bristled. “I don’t run the rumor shop anymore. You’ll have to get someone else to break the rules.”

“Excellent.” Brittani took a book from under the counter. “The boss swore I can trust you, but I had to be positive.” She slid the book in front of Tonya. “Can you do this test?”

Tonya scanned it and looked up in surprise. “Are you pregnant?”

Brittani chuckled. “No, but I think your cat is. Are you able to use this test to find out?”

“A version of it, yes.”

“Awesome.”

“Here it comes.” Tonya grinned. “You want a kitten.”

“Please? I’d owe you a huge favor.”

Tonya shrugged. “I’ll put your name at the top of the list. I’ve already had a couple people ask, but they don’t have access to scraps to make sure the sweeties are well fed. We didn’t bring cat food.” Tonya studied her. “In exchange, you can save a tiny bit of compost for my plants.”

“Deal. When will you do the test?”

Tonya stood up, heading for her lab. “I won’t. When she starts getting fat, we’ll know. Until then, keep your fingers crossed the kittens survive.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

Tonya didn’t answer, not sharing her fears.

Brittani stewed on it while she worked, adding another worry to her growing list.

**4**

“The mandatory camp meeting begins in five minutes. If you have duty, keep your radio on and listen. You will still be required to vote.” Grant flipped switches, ending the transmission. Theo’s team had done a wonderful job of replacing blown fuses and changing the settings to account for increased lightning activity. They would have a little more protection from it now. Kenn had also gotten the new lightning rod up this morning. Grant doubted they would lose power again.

Ray yawned, sitting up. He had another hour on his break, but he was escorting Grant to the meeting. He wanted to be awake for it.

Grant glanced over and delivered a warm smile.

Ray chuckled. “You’re in a good mood.” The vibes were thick and welcome.

“Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Ray stood, nodding to the guards. Angela had four men up here now. They were all big, scary looking, and nervous. It could only mean one thing. Grant was in danger. The weapons hidden here supported that theory.

“What do you want for Christmas?” Grant set the autopilot that wasn’t really needed with them anchored, then accompanied Ray to the elevator. He liked to be covered for all contingencies. So did the boss. Angela had ordered him to stay with his guard even while traveling through the ship and he was obeying. He’d also memorized locations of stashed weapons.

Ray swept the empty elevator and let Grant get in first. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Can you get back to me?”

“Sure. Anything your heart desires?”

Grant beamed at him. “I’ve got it. My Christmas came early.”

Ray got them moving, fighting guilt again. He’d dreamed about Dale. Finding the body had hurt him in ways that would never heal.

Grant felt the sadness, but there wasn’t anything he could say to ease that pain. Instead, he chose to distract Ray. “I heard some interesting scuttlebutt about the matchups this morning.”

“We were there. We saw what happened.”

“Apparently we arrived late. Kendle was blacklisted from the Eagles as a punishment for everyone betting.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, and she was added to the permanent cleaning crew.”

Ray hadn’t read the teams lists yet.

“A lot of betting happened in the mad rush. People are paying off while we’re anchored. Angela wrote ‘no trading’ on the bottom of the daily schedules. People are regretting those hasty wagers now.”

“Kendle took all the open punishment. The boss knew people would hurt themselves. She didn’t need to.”

“Affirmative.”

“You sound happy about it.” Ray didn’t know Grant very well yet. That would take time and questions.

“I’m sailing Safe Haven to the promised land. What’s not to be happy about?”

“Agreed.” Ray already knew what place he was getting. Angela had told him that and other details when she’d given him duty over the captain. He was more than satisfied. Ray led the way to the ballroom the Eagles had cleared. It was big enough to allow the entire camp to attend.

Greg, Wade, and Daryl met them at the double exits from this hall. They were clearing and seating everyone.

“Boss wants the captain by the security booth at the far corner.” Greg handed Ray a note and waved them in.

Ray read it as they walked, covering the message from prying eyes.

*Take him to the command center, through the employee tunnels. The stairs are directly behind you.*

Ray wadded the note and stuffed it into his pocket under the various gear he always carried. Angela had given him an escape route to save Grant if there was a problem. Instead of feeling better, it made him twitch harder. *She’s expecting trouble.*

Grant sat in the plexiglass booth. He was now surrounded on three sides. “She’s going overboard.”

“Not a bit. If there’s a riot, this won’t be enough.” Ray took a post, standing, behind Grant’s folding seat. He could sweep the crowd and try to spot anyone staring at their captain.

Other guards were doing the same. Senior men were right here or on the exits, and there were only a few people who would be sitting near his booth. One of them was on her way through the crowd.

Samantha flushed at all the stares as Debra pushed her wheelchair to the empty place by Grant. She studied the big men lined up around them, then the booth, frowning. “Something’s happening.”

Ray put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Not sure she wants us discussing it.”

Samantha understood they were expecting an attack now that targets were out in the open. …*I’m a target.*

Ray removed his hand and returned to scanning. He watched her and Grant too, in case they suspected who might be stalking them but hadn’t mentioned it from fear of being wrong.

Kenn escorted Angela into the ballroom. He cleared a wide path, growling at people to accomplish it.

Angela took a seat at the center table, next to Gus. She removed a folder from her pocket and put it on the table.

People began to take a seat, chatter fading. Safe Haven had never had a meeting like this one. Most trials had been held in private by the moral board, but they didn’t have one of those now. The few former members of it were relieved. They hadn’t enjoyed making those choices alone. Adrian had done it that way to prevent the camp from turning into a lynch mob whenever someone was accused of a crime, but Angela didn’t believe that was necessary anymore.

Kenn opened his notebook and began checking off names on his roster to verify everyone was here.

Angela had ordered them to set the area like a court room, but now that she was here, she realized it was bringing back memories of the justice system before the war. All she could see was criminals going free and judges taking bribes; prosecutors making deals, innocent people being hurt. Angela stood up. “Move this table over there. I’ll sit with the camp.”

Every guard protested, openly.

Angela went to the center of the seats and plopped down on Theo’s lap. “It’s time for secrets to come out. Yours first.” She wiggled.

Theo gasped, getting hard. It had been a long time. He couldn’t help it.

“Stand up.”

“Get off my lap!”

“Stand up.” Angela wrapped her arms around his neck, leaning in as if to kiss him. “Do it right now or stand trial after Becky.”

Theo glared at her, body betraying him as she settled around his hips like the perfect glove. The lack of physical contact was something he often mourned at night, alone. She was using it against him.

“It’s what I do.” Angela arched, sparking with him for an instant. It was common for an alpha to be a fit to anyone, but rare for those people to be a spark for them. Like usual, there was nothing for her.

Theo grit his teeth and stood up with her wrapped around him.

Gasps echoed through the chamber, growing louder as they realized he wasn’t crippled.

Theo walked forward, hands at his sides. He didn’t strain or stumble.

*He’s more than recovered*. Debra stared in hurt shock. To do that, he’d been working out in secret. It would have taken time. *He’s been lying to me, to everyone, since…?*

“I got my legs back in Ciemus. William took me into the water; he carried me. When it receded, I could walk.” Theo, already in trouble, put his hands on Angela’s cheeks and kissed her.

Angela held still, not participating but allowing it.

Theo drew back. “Now get off me!”

Angela laughed as she slid down his hard body, but the sound was cold. She pointed at someone near the Eagle booth. “It’s time for more blood in the water. Come clean.”

Tonya rolled her eyes. “I can read minds through his kid. So what? All the pregnant women can.”

Kenn had known. The camp hadn’t.

“And?” Angela insisted.

Tonya’s chin dropped. “I can move objects and bring up a little fire, on my fingers.”

Kenn gawked at his mate. He hadn’t known that.

People around them shrank back as Angela pointed again.

Leeann’s lip quivered. She started crying.

Angela wanted to take pity but couldn’t. “Get it out.”

“I tried to run away again. The other kids stopped me.” Leeann cried harder. “I want him back so bad!”

Angela shifted, finger coming out again. “Share your poison so we can all move on.”

“I’ve been sleeping on third shift duty since we got on the boat.” James glanced around, hands coming up. “We’re safe now, right?”

“Dude!” Ivan yelled from his post. “That’s the boss’s door! You’re suspended, immediately!”

Angela turned again, narrowing in on someone who planned to remain silent.

Panaji shook his head. “They be mad!”

Angela waited, foot tapping.

The refugee didn’t want to tell on people. “Fine. I hear two things.”

“About people you’ve been working with.”

“Yes. A man on my crew gives candy bars to ex slave girl, so she’ll…”

“Have sex with him?”

Panaji nodded. “Randal.”

“And?”

“And two descendants, on my team.”

“We know Pam’s like us.”

“Not Pam.”

Katie held up a hand. “He means me.” She pointed at Sabrina. “She’s an Invisible, but her power’s starting to unlock.”

Kenn keyed his radio. “All alert, Eagles. Randal is to report to the boss right away. If you run into him, give the man an escort.” Kenn had been checking the lists of the passengers Angela pointed to. Randal wasn’t here.

“As you can tell, this isn’t a normal camp meeting.” Angela drew in a deep breath. “We haven’t really changed, none of us. We’re making the same mistakes that ruined our lives before the war ever came.” Her chin lifted. “I’m no different. The brig’s empty. I told the guards to let Becky and Seth escape.”

Anger came toward her, combined with shouts and mutters.

“You can’t do that!”

“Why?!”

“She’s a troubled kid, that’s why!” Angela let them observe her true feelings. “We can’t execute her like a dog! We’re Safe Haven Refugee Camp! We’re supposed to be the light in the darkness!” Angela waved at Donald as the camp’s anger continued. “Make sure they’re gone. If they were stupid enough to stay, we’re still having the trial.”

Ben hurried off, not wanting to miss whatever came next.

Angela shoved a stray curl out of her face, angry like her camp now was. “I won’t threaten you. I’ll still lead you, but if you kill her over this, you’ll kill a part of me too. We save people; we reform them and give them a second chance. Becky’s mistake was trusting Rick. She’s not all there anymore, mentally. Any of the guards can verify that. We’d just be killing a shell.” Angela motioned at Kenn. “Do the rest of them from the list I gave you this morning.”

Kenn opened the paper and began to read. “Stanley, stealing food from the galley to hoard. Why?”

Stanley flushed. “We might all get sick, like Kendle’s boat did, and people could go crazy.”

Chills went through the room.

Kenn cleared his throat. “Vicky, theft from the garden stock. Why?”

Vicky shifted away from her stunned boyfriend, Whitney. “I might want to leave. I’ll need to grow my own food.”

Whitney dropped his arm from her shoulders, shocked. He hadn’t known she wanted to leave. He’d thought they were a committed couple trying to build a life together.

“Ramer, theft of narcotics from the infirmary. Why?”

Ramer twitched. “I can’t sleep without them. I lay there and hear the sound of Carl dying on that warehouse wall.”

More chills traveled the room.

“Blake, assault on a cat. Why?!” Kenn was personally pissed about this one.

Blake stood up as guards moved his way in case he was a problem. “I wanted to see if it landed on its feet.”

“So you kicked it down the stairwell last night and broke one of its ribs?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt it. I thought it would land on its feet.”

“The rib broke from your boot, dumbass. Also, assault on teammate. Why?”

“Same reason.”

“You son of a bitch!” Ed, wearing a bandage around his own ribs, lunged over the chairs. He tackled Blake, knocking the man’s head against the hard floor. He shrugged off the guards. “Hang on. I want to see if he lands on his feet!”

Kenn waited for the guards to break it up, waving them to take Blake to the brig. “Okay, who’s next?”

Angela pointed. “Last on the list, for today.”

Kenn sighed as the camp muttered. “You sure? They admitted it recently.”

“No, neither of them did.”

Kenn realized she was right. “Candy and Conner, breaking the age rule. Why?”

“You liar!” Conner shouted at Angela. “You said we could be together!”

“You were and you broke the rules. I told you I was going to make you an example. Why are you surprised?”

“You put us together!”

“And you broke my rules. Then you shattered the camp rules! You never intended to follow them. You’re like your dad.”

The crowd gasped. He would never live that status down now.

Conner stared in hurt surprise. “Why did you do this?”

Angela shrugged, tone cold. “I gave you a chance to be one of us and you threw it in my face while breaking the deal we made. That’s why. Don’t make a deal with a devil, kid, not if you don’t mean it. Things get ugly.”

Candy was also angry. “If we’d admitted it earlier, would this be happening?”

“No.” Angela gave the truth. “We were all hoping you would. You disappointed us with that choice. Separate them.”

Kenn motioned at Morgan.

Morgan took Conner’s arm and led him to the other side of the room.

“I’d like to be done now.” Angela moved to the center of the tense, pissed people. “I will do this to begin every day if I have to. We’re not taking all this baggage to the island. I mean that. Stop breaking the rules or be exposed.” Angela went on, glad the worst of it was over. “The kill team has been chosen. No more names are needed.”

“She said chosen, not sent.” Ivan looked at Greg. “If Marc’s wasn’t the kill team, where did they go?”

Greg shrugged. “We don’t ask those questions unless she’s in the mood to talk to us. Since they left, she hasn’t been.”

Angela kept updating them. “Food will be hard to locate. Please bulk up before I send you out.” The chosen people would know each other by their dietary choices. “We’re trying to get the radar fixed to verify if someone is following us. I sent a hard team to check it out. As soon as I hear from them, we’ll make an announcement. I expect it soon.”

People were upset they’d been followed and relieved to know who was handling it. That was indeed a hard team.

“More crews will be posted as other tests are finished.” She looked around, feeling the mood.

*They’re ready.*

Angela smiled mentally. *Welcome back!*

The witch crawled into her cot, once again reeking. *Talk later.*

Angela let the demon rest. “When that team returns, the camp will have a new vote on Adrian’s banishment and Marc’s removal from leadership and the Eagles. Whatever you decide, I will enforce. And obviously, we will hold trials for some of the violations exposed today. Does anyone want to speak before I end…” Angela heard footsteps running and shifted toward the door, feeling trouble coming. “I missed something.” She gathered energy in case it was a mass attack, the only event she wasn’t prepared for.

Daryl appeared in the doorway, shaken. “We need you at the brig.”

Angela read his thoughts. She wanted to puke as she viewed the images. She’d been searching ahead while avoiding the Demon of Time. She’d known something stopped this meeting but not what. She had assumed it was Marc’s team returning, but she’d had to leave that time period repeatedly when the demon sensed her. Most of her information was from looking ahead before she was marked.

Kenn skimmed his list, heart pounding in time with hers. “I don’t have that one on here.”

“That’s because I didn’t see it.” Angela tried to recover from the shock. “Tell them. Then seal off the brig.”

Daryl looked around, voice stunned. “Seth and Becky are both dead. They’ve been murdered.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

**You’d Never Ask**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“S**omething happened.”

Adrian nodded, holding the door against bodies slamming into it. “I felt it too.”

Marc braced his legs, holding the opposite door. Shouts echoed near his head.

“Can I do it now?” Jennifer stood in the center of the bridge, bloody knives in both hands.

Kyle stood in front of her, Glock ready.

“A couple more. There are thirty-one left. We’re missing a dozen.”

Kronus swept the halls, counting bodies crammed into the filthy corridors to reach them. He’d woken to chaos. It hadn’t stopped. “Another group is coming–right side.” The team had come back and retrieved him after they took the bridge, but the refugees had woken from Adrian’s sleep spell at that point. It had been a mad dash to get him to the bridge.

“Shit.” Adrian tried to brace, but there was only so much he could do against so many people.

Refugees pounded on the door, hitting it with fists and knives. The screamed threats were graphic.

“Here they come.” The angel retreated as Jennifer and Kyle advanced, bloody robe leaving smears on the floor.

“Let go on three…two…one… Now!”

Marc and Adrian stood up and spun behind the doors.

A group of furious refugees scrambled in.

Marc and Adrian shoved on the doors to slow the flow.

Jennifer lunged forward, slashing with both knives.

Kyle fired, hitting those attacking Marc or Adrian. He was careful with his aim.

The doors slammed shut.

“We’re using her wolf killing method.”

Marc held the door, kicking a refugee about to hit Kyle’s arm. “So?”

“Just thought it was poetic.” Adrian waited for Kyle to finish the last screaming man and opened the door again.

Marc kept his door closed. He wasn’t sure Jennifer was ready for a full wave.

Jennifer slashed her way over to Marc’s door and yanked it open. She plunged into the swarm of men and women, screaming and slicing.

Marc sighed in resignation. “Okay, then.”

Kyle observed in shocked desire as Jennifer killed them all.

Adrian kept fighting. “A little help here!”

Marc snapped out of it and helped Adrian finish the refugees in that hallway.

Kyle reloaded and reminded himself that he was married to that vicious female. *Life is good*.

“There are a few fleeing for lifeboats.” Kronus stayed back as Jennifer returned, but he gazed at her with wide, adoring eyes. She was covered in blood and glory to him. “I always bet for you, never against.”

“I’ll slit your throat right now!” Jennifer came toward him, furious. “You really think you’re safe because you bet for me?!”

“Jenny.” Kyle hated to stop her. He felt the same way.

Jennifer spun around and took off running through the boat to find more alert targets for her rage.

Adrian wiped his hands and took a seat, breathing hard. He waved at their unwanted guest. “Get these bodies out of here. Then find a change of clothes. You can’t go back to Safe Haven in that robe.”

Kronus did as ordered, but he hated the chore of pulling dead people out by their ankles.

Kyle stared at the smoky hall where Jennifer had disappeared. “Was she like this on the runs against the troops? Is this what the men refused to show me?”

“Not really.” Marc cleared his throat. “She’s actually in a good mood this time.”

“Yeah, I’d agree with that.” Adrian swiveled the seat to study the screens in front of him. “How far out are we?” He regarded the woman who was bound and lying under the console next to his boots. “Speak up, Captain.”

“A day!” Lila spat at him.

Adrian sent a wave of sleep and knocked her out.

Another body fell behind him.

“What the hell, Adrian?!” Marc went to Kyle, who had crumbled. “Watch where you point that thing!”

“Damn. My bad.” Adrian couldn’t lift the spell. They would be a three-man crew until Kyle woke.

Screams echoed from Jennifer’s hunt.

*Okay, a two-man team for a while*. Adrian checked the next screen, spotting the outline of a ship on the radar. It was the Adrianna, but it was a lot closer than a day. Their captive captain had lied.

Adrian now understood why they were here. This ship was a fourfer. They’d collected a lost angel and taken control of the ship. The refugees coming to attack Safe Haven were now dead, and they would have a reserve captain if they could sway her to the light.

“She also got us out of camp for whatever’s going on right now.”

“Oh, yeah.” Adrian contemplated it. “She gave Kyle and Jennifer a honeymoon too.”

“A what?” Marc helped Kronus pull bodies beyond the threshold.

“A few hours to kill together. They’ll be so wound up they probably won’t make it to their cabin when we get back.”

Marc laughed, not bothered by this work. He’d spent his career doing forms of it. “What do you think happened in camp? It doesn’t feel like a drama problem.”

“I’ll try to get a read if you want to watch the exits until she comes back or he wakes up.”

“Deal.” Marc went to the center of the room and reloaded, listening for anyone they’d missed.

Adrian lit up the bond he had with Angela. She didn’t want him to use it because Marc would know they still had a private form of communication, but they did, and he was using it. He refused to hide anything or lie anymore. “She’s at a table with the Eagles. They’re going over papers… Schedules, it’s schedules.”

“Eagles or camp?”

“I’d say both, for third shift.” Adrian paused in reciting, heart speeding up. “Shit.”

Marc almost left his post. “What is it?”

“Two bodies. I can’t tell where. It’s too dark.”

Marc reached down and zapped Kyle. “Wake up! We have to go.”

Adrian picked up the mike for the UN ship. “We need you on the bridge.”

*What’s the problem? I’m busy here!*

Adrian couldn’t find any amusement to force out. *Trouble at home. Let’s go.*

A few seconds later, Jennifer’s footsteps echoed in the hall. Flames danced around her bloody body as she entered. “Hey!” She went to Kyle. “Is he okay?”

“Sleeping. Adrian needs to perfect his aim. How long will it take us to get there?”

“I’m increasing speed now.” Adrian carefully chose buttons and switches, bringing more engine noise. “About eighteen hours, maybe less.”

Jennifer pouted. “Then why did you make me come up now?”

“Because you’re enjoying it too much.” Adrian frowned at her. “Remember who you are.”

Jennifer accepted the scold and took a post over the other hallway. He was right. The freedom to kill was amazing and awful. She didn’t want to enjoy it, but she did, more than almost anything.

Marc gave a comforting nod. Killers recognized each other’s joy. It was the single thing they all had in common, no matter how differently they’d been raised or trained–they enjoyed it.

“I can get us there faster.” Kronus was eager to be with Angela and Safe Haven.

“No.” Adrian was curious about the actual practice, but he knew better than to allow it.

Kronus frowned, pausing in pulling clothes from a blood-splattered bag. “Why?”

“She plans missions based on time. She wouldn’t count on us showing up early.”

“She knew you were picking me up.”

Marc looked at Adrian. “Any chance he’s right?”

“No. Moving through time would attract the demon’s attention.”

“And she wouldn’t risk you that way.” Marc snorted. “Figures.”

“It’s to protect *her*, Marc. The Demon of Time can access this plane if he senses his target.”

“He can’t come forward.” Kronus sat on an overturned bucket between the entrances to change into the clean clothes. “But he can cause evil if he can view his target.”

“Well, we won’t be doing that.” Marc felt his mental doors light up as his spirit returned. *Nice trip?*

*No. They never are*. Marc’s demon curled up on his pallet. *That woman of yours is wild.* The demon crashed.

Marc chortled. “That she is.”

Adrian kept scanning through his link with Angela.

“Did you get them all?”

Jennifer shrugged at Marc’s question. “If not, I’ll hunt them later.”

Marc sprang his trap on the distracted teenager. “Why does Angela want this boat?”

Jennifer shrugged, fighting the urge to go kill the rest of the rats deserting their ship. “I didn’t ask. I get the feeling she wants it for a decoy.”

“A decoy?” Marc kept his tone casual.

Adrian looked up, sensing a secret about to fall.

“For the international de…” Jennifer stopped as she realized they didn’t know. “That was sneaky.”

Marc and Adrian shared a look and similar thoughts.

*When we return, she’s got some explaining to do.*

*Yep. We’ll do that as soon as we find out who died and how.* Adrian sent them an image of the bodies. *That looks like Seth.*

*So the smaller one is probably Becky.*

*I think so. Did the camp riot and hang them?*

*No, Angela is too calm going over those papers. She doesn’t know who did it.* Adrian looked to Jennifer. “Do you know?”

Jennifer refused to answer the question. “I’m going to flush out survivors now that Kyle’s awake.”

She left as Kyle sat up, yawning. The top Eagle stretched and looked around. “What did I miss?”

“A lot.” Marc stared after Jennifer. *Jenny knows what’s going on, but she isn’t allowed to tell. I am so yelling at Angela this time.*

Adrian grunted. *I’m next when you’re done. Sending us in blind just to be out of the way isn’t Eagle rules of operation.*

Kronus studied them in confusion. “Of course not. *You* invented that system. It is inherently flawed. She was forced to create her own way of handling the problems.”

“What do you mean, flawed?”

“You view them as a means to an end. She sees their souls and loves them.”

“He does, though.” Marc didn’t want to defend Adrian, but truth was truth. “He dies with them, hurts when she sends them out. You’re wrong.”

Kronus fell silent, considering that possibility.

Marc finished the lesson, seeing where it needed to go. “She didn’t just use the good ideas, did she?”

“No. A lot of those plans were something I’d considered trying, but I didn’t have all the pieces, or it took too many lives. She adapted them or employed them outright.”

“She’s the one who uses people as a means to an end.”

“Yes. She doesn’t love them the same way I do, but she does love them just as much. She simply stopped letting it hurt her.” Adrian shrugged. “She’s had to do it too many times to keep letting it rip her open.”

“But it is, ripping her open.” Kyle had caught up to the conversation now. “We’re seeing cracks from her holding everything in. The Eagles had hoped you two would help her get it together, but you’ve made it worse with your games and fights. She’s almost done with both of you.” Kyle went to find Jennifer, words coming over his shoulder. “We all are.”

Marc and Adrian shifted uncomfortably. They were aware of the discontent caused by their newest choices and actions.

“Another deal?” Adrian hated to suggest it, but he had been born to solve problems. He had to try again.

“No. I like the one we made.”

Adrian was relieved. “So does she. I caught her thinking about it, the day Becky attacked her. When Angela stormed off, she was happy.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, let’s keep working on it. We have seventeen hours.”

**2**

“I thought you were hunting survivors.”

Jennifer leaned on the dusty couch in a cabin that was clean “They need privacy to talk.”

Kyle groaned. “Making another deal they won’t honor. Great.”

“Maybe.”

Kyle caught the tone. “You don’t think so?”

“No. I believe it’s over now. Everyone knows where everyone stands and what they’ll do to reach their goals.”

“That didn’t matter a few days ago when they went right back to fighting over her.”

“It’s different this time.”

“How?”

“All three of them are satisfied with it.”

Kyle considered that. Neither man would be happy unless they got Angela. “Are they splitting her?”

“Sort of. It’s four and four.”

“I assume Marc gets years and Adrian gets the months?”

“Of course. She would never take it any other way.” Jennifer had already mentioned the deal to Kyle. She told him almost everything. As the top Eagle, he could be trusted with Angela’s plans because he had been all along.

“She’ll still get to see Adrian, right?” Kyle hadn’t asked for details before because he’d been waiting for them to change their minds yet again.

“Yes. Marc understands now. Those three destinies can’t be separated, ever. He’ll let her visit and not ask questions. He never has to be around Adrian, and she’ll be happy.”

“Will she…?”

“Does it matter?”

Kyle nodded. “A little, yeah.”

“Not to me. I didn’t ask, and I didn’t search for it.”

“But you know. I can feel you hiding it from me.”

“I know. I’m trying hard; please stop. It’s her life to live.”

“Okay.” Kyle opened the door next to the couch. “Here’s a shower none of them used. Let’s get cleaned up and sleep for a shift.”

Jennifer followed him. “Does it bother you to see me this way?”

“No. It’s been…educational.”

“Then leave it on a bit longer.”

“Whatever you want, baby.”

Jennifer shivered at the hungry tone. “There are other levels for us to bond on…other ways we can be closer.”

Kyle didn’t let the smile spread over his lips, but he didn’t hide the truth from her the way he did the others. “I’ve waited for you to offer. You already know I want it more than anything.”

“I’ll show you one way. You can decide when you discover the price.”

Kyle already knew he would pay it. He wasn’t scared of this side of her. He’d always wanted it.

Jennifer knew. Kyle’s secret desire to be a descendant was something else they had in common. She didn’t hate her gifts, like Samantha. She never wanted to be without that power, that advantage.

Kyle felt the moment arrive. He turned to her, hands going to her bloody shoulders. “Can you make me a descendant, Jenny?”

Wickedness slowly spread over her expression, ensnaring him. “Yes, I can.”

His heart pounded. “Is it forbidden?”

“Very.”

Kyle drew in a breath, voice breaking. “Will you?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

**3**

“Stand watch.” Marc shoved Kronus into the corpse-ridden hall and slammed the bridge door in his pale face.

Adrian approved. “How are things below?”

“They’re in a bathtub.” Marc had just returned from a check of the ship. Other than their team and the two captives, the boat was now empty of life.

“That’s good. She was a mess.”

“No, I mean they’re still there. It looks like they fucked and fell asleep. No shower.”

Adrian laughed. “You gotta like her. She’s wild and dependable at the same time.”

“Just like the guy she spends time with.”

Adrian knew it probably wasn’t a good moment for it, but he did it anyway. “Can I get you to do me a favor and ease up on Kendle a little? Say something nice?”

Marc snorted. “Even if I wanted to, that won’t happen. If Angela senses we’re bonding in any way, Kendle will die.”

Adrian pouted, jealous. Angela didn’t care who he bonded with as long as she got what she needed from their relationship.

“Yeah, she does at least care about my happiness. She’ll make sure I’m content.” Marc leaned back in the chair, enjoying the breeze that lightened the odor of death. “Plus, she’ll feel bad when she comes home. I’ll get extra care each time to make up for it.”

“You’re a greedy bastard.”

Marc smirked coldly. “Yes, I am.”

“Good.”

“Why is that good?”

“If you don’t punish her, at least a little, she might punish herself and no one wants that.”

“Oh. I’m sure I’ll be able to manage a scowl or two when she comes back…smelling like you.” Marc hated Adrian more than ever at that moment.

“If she does, which I doubt, it’ll be because we were training or working out in the cage I plan to build.”

“I see the sparks with you two, I feel it. At some point, you’ll wear her down.”

Adrian realized Marc had tossed Kronus out so they had the privacy to talk.

“It’s also so he’ll see the results of their bets.”

Adrian was fine with that. He picked up the thread of their conversation. “I won’t have my gifts. I won’t be able to read her mind. Nothing I try will work.”

“You read people, women, better than anyone. You planned all this. Don’t tell me you can’t seduce her because I’ll call you a liar. She has weaknesses to use, just like anyone else.”

“She won’t cave. When she comes back after our visits and you’re half mad and half acting, remember this talk.”

“It’s bullshit, like all the others. They blur together.”

Adrian dug for a solution. “Okay, if she comes home and tells you she had a weak moment and rode me like her favorite horse, what would happen? What would change?”

Marc opened his mouth to say five different things, but nothing came out.

Adrian gestured. “You don’t know. Neither does she and that’s why she never will. She’s put your life ahead of mine from the first minute she took charge of Safe Haven. There’s no way she’d trade physical moments with me, for having you by her side. She wouldn’t ever take that chance. The only way it would happen is if she knew she’d still have you when it was over.”

Marc didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know; therefore, *she* couldn’t know. The price was too high. Angela loved to take risks, but not the ones without a guaranteed win of some sort. “What if I told her she could, then managed to never ask or look. Would she then?”

“In a heartbeat.”

“You’re such an asshole!”

“It’s not for the sex, you jealous idiot. She knows I can give her a baby that will survive. If she had that, it would be another way to guarantee she’d never break.”

“But you still plan to try, don’t you?” Marc glowered in hatred. “After all this talking and these doomed plans, you still want her enough to give up the little bit of honor you’ve earned back.”

Adrian stared, eyes like chips of ice. “Wouldn’t you?”

Marc sighed. “You know I would. I’m no boy scout anymore.”

“You never were, but we’ll keep you as clean as we can–not for you, but because it makes her happy. That’s the goal here: her happiness. We can both have most of what we need and a lot of what we want, as long as she’s happy. If we disappoint her again, she’ll drop us both and switch to Ivan.”

“She’d have to break our engagement.” Marc waited for the reaction, enjoying delivering the blow.

Adrian stood. “I heard about that. Actually, I felt it, you prick!” Adrian spun around and punched Marc in the mouth. “That’s for trapping her into something she doesn’t want yet!”

Marc stayed on the ground, eyes closing. “I should have waited, but these feelings are hard to fight. I was losing her again.”

“No. Your illness was telling you that, but it wasn’t true. She was using you like a bull in a bar. You were getting that extra attention. It wasn’t enough.”

“That’s why I know it was wrong.” Marc sat up but stayed on the floor as Adrian returned to his chair. “I’ll let her out of it.”

“You will not! The camp needs a final decision and she’s got plans around it by now, I’m sure. You’ll follow through and never rub it in to me again because I know you trapped her.” Adrian dug in his kit for a bottle of painkillers. He popped one and tossed the bottle to Marc.

Marc wasn’t looking at him, but he caught the bottle in midair.

They sat in silence for a moment, contemplating what had been said and what needed to come next.

“I got her a gift.”

Marc knew he was being told so he didn’t flip out in public. “What is it?”

“A gift she’ll understand.”

“Something that will make her think of you while you’re apart.”

“I don’t need that, Marc.”

“No, you don’t. Fine. Give her your gift.”

“How are we handling the rest of this trip?”

“How do you want to handle it?”

Adrian met Marc’s eye. “I want to give her what she really wants from us.”

“You mean…?”

“Yes. If it goes badly, she has the memory and won’t ever think about trying it again. If it goes well, she’ll have everything she wants, and her light will shine over the flock.”

“We could do it, but I doubt she would.”

“And you’ll be salty afterwards because you hate me and don’t want to share.”

“I’m afraid she’ll like it and want you more than me.” Marc released another fear, another small box in his crypt. “I’m not good enough in bed.” It was something almost every man feared.

Adrian knew better than to make offers that were impossible to fulfill without Angela’s approval. Instead, he dug into the moment, searching for what Marc needed from this. “Is that all?”

“I don’t match up to most of the Eagles. She has to see how much better they are. She has her pick and always will.”

Adrian was surprised by Marc’s admission. “We can work on your confidence.”

“That’s not my problem. I can be as arrogant as you. I chose not to.”

“You’ve been taught to never flaunt what you have, but you’re surrounded by men who learned the opposite. Of course, you feel the differences, but she sees the tiger inside, and she wants him, not the cool boy scout the camp sees. She hates the idea of you being corrupt, but she likes the image of you as a badass. You should let it go a little in that area and rein in the anger. Then make her laugh, like in the cabin the other morning.” Adrian grinned at the memory. “That was good for her.”

“What if we get her drunk first?”

“Maybe, and Tonya’s got a batch growing that we might be able to snip from, but I don’t want to. If we ever have a moment, I want to remember it all, good or bad.”

“Same here.”

“I know, which brings us to the next confusion. How can you hate me, but be willing to share a bed with me?”

Marc clammed up.

Adrian snickered. “More fears. I never would have suspected.”

“It’s not a fear.” Marc sighed. “It’s embarrassing.”

Adrian concentrated. “Oh, you want to know if you’re doing something wrong.” Adrian chuckled. “Never been that kind of trainer before.”

“But you could, right? You and your nasty past could teach what you know?”

“Yes, but you’d never loosen up that tightly puckered rectum enough to really learn it, so let me say no now and end your pain.”

“Thank you.”

“For saying no?”

Marc nodded. “If you’d agreed, I would have to follow through and I don’t want to.”

“Man, are you conflicted about everything. No wonder you have such far out mood swings.”

“I assumed I was on the rag.”

Adrian cackled. “That’s all we need.”

Marc let the bond grow between him and Adrian. They were connected. He might as well get whatever he could from it.

“So you want to watch. It doesn’t need to be her for that.”

“You won’t be the same with someone else.”

Adrian cleared his throat. “Pretty close. I like to role play even when my partner doesn’t.”

Marc perked up. “Who would you pick?”

“Kendle.”

“She won’t go for that.”

Adrian laughed.

“Okay, maybe she would.” Marc tried to resist, but he needed to know what Angela had in Adrian that she didn’t get from him. He’d compared them in every other way over the months of their rivalry. Sexual technique was the only information he didn’t have. “When?”

“Woah, there. You’re forgetting an important part of that puzzle.”

Marc frowned. “What?”

“You want to watch me love *Kendle*, so you can pick up any magical…techniques I have. Angela won’t be happy.”

Marc’s head tilted. “I’d never get them all in one sitting, would I?”

Adrian decided to be honest. “No. It took me a lifetime. I prefer to use something different on every woman. You’d have to schedule a nightly viewing session. If I ever do settle down, my wife will have a different meal every night for a year, at least.”

Marc chuckled, believing him. “So no, on this one.”

Adrian shrugged. “I can pick someone else, but I still believe your fiancé would disapprove.”

“It has to be her.”

“We could try it alone.”

Marc stared at him. “Excuse me?”

“I’d have to touch your dickie.” Adrian burst out laughing, unable to keep up the farce.

Marc joined him. “Asshole.”

Adrian dug out a canteen and drank, then passed it to Marc. “I can try to direct things. You’d have to block her. Would that give you what you’re asking for?”

“Maybe. How?”

“I’ll pass out before you get to the room.”

“Mmm. That could work.”

“You say the word.”

“You mean give you permission to do what *I* want to do?”

“Yes, if it gives you what you need.”

Marc caved. “Your timing is better than mine. Set it up and I’ll follow through.”

“What about Kendle?”

Marc stiffened. “What about her?”

“Will you ease up on hating her openly? She can’t recover if you do that.”

“She stuck a knife in Angela’s stomach and twisted it.”

“I was there.”

“Angie died.”

“I know. I was there.”

“She still wants Angie dead. Why should I help her recover so she can try again?”

“Because you love her, you want her, and during that four months when we return, you’ll need her to hold you, to love you the way Angie can’t.”

“Kendle killed those feelings. The best she’ll ever get from me now is contempt and pity.”

“Four years is a long time, Marine. You hate her now, but that won’t always be the case. She’ll fade back into the woman you could have loved, and the bond will grow.”

“That would be dangerous–for Kendle.”

“Agreed. Doesn’t change the facts. In four years, we’re going home, and you can have what you secretly want–a woman to worship you and love you above everyone else.”

“I don’t want that.”

“You do. All men do; don’t lie to me.”

“Stop talking.”

“Okay.”

Marc drank, mind spinning. In time, he might not hate Kendle anymore, but the love would never be there.

*You don’t need love to use her for comfort,* his demon reprimanded. *She’ll take whatever you give and be grateful.*

*Why are you encouraging this?*

The demon grunted. *Because I want you to survive when you finally have to honor this stupid deal.*

Marc gave the canteen back and settled in for the trip.

Adrian didn’t push. He’d already done that, with good results. To insist on more now would be suicide.

“Suicide would be letting Angie know about these fantasy talks we have.”

Adrian ignored the stomach cramps that began to hit, hoping it passed. “Some of it would amuse her.”

“Yeah, but the rest would make her shoot fire.”

“…do you think she already knows?”

Marc belched. “Yes, I do. Now shut up. I’m feeling the need to kill you again.”

Silence filled the bridge.

Chapter Thirty

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**1**

**“T**hat can’t be right.” Angela stared at the list of names Kenn had just given her. “That can’t…”

Kenn put the next sheet on the table. “These people were not in the training room with us or any of the other rooms. I have those attendance logs here.” He added that list. “Randal is locked in the brig. No one interrogated him yet, but the guards who caught him did some damage. He needed stitches. Morgan is there now.”

That was a related issue because Morgan wasn’t the top medic. He shouldn’t be handling it.

“And then we have this. A statement from two descendants about thoughts they’ve picked up.”

Angela stood, sweeping the papers into her folder. “I need more than this to accuse someone of murder.”

“I know. I just didn’t want to gather it.”

Angela understood. Neither did she. “Everyone else has an alibi?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve searched every inch of the ship for stowaways?”

“In progress, but nearly finished.”

Angela straightened her shoulders. “Okay, then. We’ll do it together, by the book.”

Kenn snorted. “What book?”

Angela pulled out a half-sized notebook. “Start on page one. If you get to page five, if it’s all there, we’ll make an arrest.”

Kenn let Ivan take the guard position so he could read as he walked. The ship around them creaked and groaned with unease and it wasn’t just from being anchored. The ship was reacting to the bad emotions from the passengers. The waves around them were calm. So was the sky. There wasn’t a reason for the ship to lurch sideways as they followed Angela to the brig, but it still happened.

Angela held onto the rail and made her way down the hall. Guards met them at every intersection and followed until she had more protection than space.

Angela let them do their overprotective thing, but it wasn’t needed. She wasn’t seeing or hearing plans for anything bad and she was digging deep. Everyone had gone silent. That meant the danger was over or would be for a short grace period. They had that long to figure this out. A second attack would trigger panic. She wouldn’t be able to stop it, only slow it.

The cell was open. Angela ripped off the yellow tape as she went in. “Use a different color.” She stuffed it into her pocket and examined the cell. The bodies were in the infirmary, where she’d ordered them stored until Morgan completed an autopsy if she determined it necessary. They also needed to clear a path to the morgue. Men were on that chore now, but it would take the rest of the day and maybe tomorrow as well.

Angela shined her light on the ground. “We got pictures of these prints?”

“Yes. Shawn went to get more film. He did the bodies before they were moved.”

Ivan checked his list. He’d supervised all of it. “We also have pictures of this hallway and inside the door. The key is still in the lock.”

“The sentries who were on duty?”

“Still unconscious. Muttering a lot, tossing blankets off.”

“Sounds like a sleep spell. Has their blood work come back?”

“No. Tonya said around dinner time.”

“She has guards?”

Kenn nodded. “All council members and mates do.”

“Autumn?”

“Checked on her myself. Allison looks tired, but they’re both fine.”

“Mine?”

“The same. Molly said take as long as you need. She’s catching up on her reading, but those books didn’t look like pleasure.”

“I asked her to find a way for us to use fireplaces to make wax molds. She’s determining if we need to adapt the fireplaces or our methods.”

“Good, I can mark her off the suspicious behaviors list.” Kenn did it and then returned to reading her five page plan for murders. He was impressed and eager to get through all the steps so their main suspect could be cleared. Then they would be free to concentrate on locating the real killer.

“Did we remove evidence yet?”

“Yeah, why? Did I miss something?”

Angela shined her light under the cot. “I see a napkin, from the galley–the cloth kind.”

“How did we miss that?”

“It’s stuck on a spring. It’s one of the small ones we give to the kids. Hand me a glove.”

Ivan did, though he doubted they could get evidence from a cloth napkin.

“She’s hoping for a food stain we can narrow down to a meal.”

“Hey, that’s smart.” Ivan wrote it down.

Kenn was reading it in his small book. The words weren’t the same, but the rule was clear–any evidence might narrow a time, and time was the key to everything.

Angela pulled it loose and put the napkin in the bag.

Ivan marked it and put it in his pocket. *Next time, I’ll check it myself.*

*Always,* Angela sent. *A good leader goes over everything their army does–not because you’re searching for mistakes, but because you are the leader and there’s a reason for that. Your skills are better. Use them.*

“Okay, I will. Something’s bothering me.”

“Besides two unconscious sentries and two bodies with no obvious cause of death?”

“Add another one to your list. It’s dim here again, but we just replaced the bulbs with higher wattages yesterday.”

“Check it out.” Angela got on all fours, reaching again.

Kenn memorized the view and turned around so he wasn’t caught eyeing her ass. *I’m still a man.*

Angela pulled out a seed from the garden. Her heart dropped.

Kenn felt it. He didn’t turn around. “Whatever it is, it could just disappear. Two problems are gone, and we need him.”

Angela was having the same conversation with the witch inside. Time slowed as temptation beckoned.

*Kenn owes you. He would never tell.*

“I can be trusted now. I would never tell.”

*Seth and Becky were trouble. Taking them to the island would have been bad for everyone.*

“No one wanted them to go, not even Doug.”

Ivan waited for her choice. He didn’t know if it would change his opinion of her or not, but he refused to try to influence her like Kenn was doing.

“Give me another evidence bag.”

Ivan brought it to her, mirroring Kenn’s tension. “It’s better this way…right?”

“It’s the right way and that is never easy.” Angela put the evidence into the baggie. “It’s a pumpkin seed. Mark it.”

Ivan did and stored it with the other bags.

“Are the bulbs changed?”

“One’s missing halfway down the hall. Cleaning crew could have taken it out when they did the replacements and missed replacing that one.”

“Maybe. Take the pictures and then develop the entire batch. Bring them to the ballroom. I’ll meet you both there.”

The men left, not worried about her. Greg had activated the rotation rule. All guards in an area where she went would assume duty over her until she left. If her standard guard wasn’t with her, all of them would follow her.

Angela went down the hall toward the service elevators, surrounded.

Greg signaled from the elevator where he’d been waiting for her. “I’ve got it.”

The sentries returned to their posts, but only after she was in the elevator with Greg and the doors closed.

Angela reached over and pushed the stop button. “I need a minute to think.”

“We found him.”

“Where?”

“On the rear of the ship, staring off into space.” Greg’s voice deepened. “We took him to a conference room on the bottom deck. No one knows yet.”

“Why didn’t he come to me?”

“We decided you should go to him.”

“Okay.” Angela hit the elevator button. “Who’s we?”

“The sentries who found him, and me.”

“Okay.” She waited for the doors to open and let him step out first, like she was supposed to.

Greg verified no one was in sight and waved.

Angela didn’t like the cloak and dagger stuff. She wanted this handled by the book.

Greg opened the door to the conference room across from them.

Five sentries rose, hands on their guns.

“Stand down.”

Angela swept the tense, shocked guards and then the lone man at the far end of the table. She smiled, glad he wasn’t injured. “How are you?”

“Very confused.” Neil stared at her with wide, scared eyes. “Can you tell me who I am? Your friends refused to.”

“What?” Angela gaped.

“She didn’t do it. She didn’t know.” Greg pointed at Ben. “Mark it and we’ll all sign it before we leave shifts tonight.”

Angela ignored them in favor of studying the man now twisting the hat in his hands like they’d all witnessed Neil do a thousand times…but it was a restless wringing, not a thoughtful turning. “What happened to you?”

Neil sucked in air, coming to the edge of panic. “I’m dead, right? It’s time for my judgement.”

Angela shook her head when the sentries would have spoken, questioned him. “I need a minute to think.”

Even Neil fell silent, staring at her for clues.

Angela spent the time reading through Neil’s mind. All she found was bright confusion. He didn’t know who he was. “Someone wiped his memory. Any answers we hoped to get from him have been erased.”

**2**

“I’m on page four.” Kenn joined Angela in the galley for coffee. Most of the camp was still up even though it was midnight, studying everything they did. Guards glared at him from dark corners.

“It’s all there?”

“Yes. Motive, alibi, skills needed to do the crime. I just finished the strange behavior sheet. It all fits.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. We completed our search of the entire ship. No stowaways or stockpiles of anything. No other dangers.”

“Where is he now?”

“In the infirmary. Morgan and Conner are checking him out, drawing blood. They’ll take his clothes and prints. and get anything from under his nails while they’re at it.” Kenn sipped his coffee. “We told Morgan he could sedate Neil if it was needed, but he seems…cooperative, like he wants to help.”

“He’s confused. He wants to know who he is.”

“We told him a few times, but he doesn’t believe us because it isn’t in his brain.”

“When they’re done, have Samantha collect him. Maybe spending time with her will kick in those memories.”

“Is that possible?”

“It is when the person has a strong emotional connection to pull them out of it. Being around Samantha should trigger things for him. We need to speak to her next anyway.”

Kenn lowered his voice. “The camp knows we have a suspect. They noticed people who weren’t at dinner.”

“You can confirm there’s a suspect so they don’t think we’re holding anything back. Tell them no names are being released because we’re doing an investigation and we don’t want to accuse an innocent person.”

“Good. That might let them sleep sometime soon.”

“How are we on the rest of the list?”

“We’ve cleared all but three. Two of them were in the infirmary shower with their alibi. We’re trying to locate witnesses to verify they were there during the training session. The other one is next on my list. I haven’t gotten to Doug yet.”

“You’re doing a good job.”

Kenn sipped his coffee again. “After we talk to Samantha, I’ll go down and get the morgue entrance cleared so we can store the bodies. Morgan wants to try an autopsy to determine the cause of death if the blood tests don’t turn up anything. He has a few books and Conner thinks he can assist. All that leaves is finishing page five: Interviews and comparisons.” He leaned in though they were alone at the counter. “I found page six.”

“And?”

“Working through it still, but it doesn’t look good. I believe magic *was* involved, possibly in several ways.”

“I agree. Check that one off and get us going on the rest of number five.”

“Starting in the morning?”

Angela looked at him, face hard. “No, *Kenny*. Now. We don’t sleep until we find the murderer in my camp!”

“You got it.” Kenn left, waving hall sentries over.

Angela shut her lids and tried to sort through the chaos. Everyone’s reflections were louder than they’d been this morning. “I’m still missing something. What is it?”

Ivan joined her at the counter. He didn’t sit. “We have a disturbance at the infirmary.”

Angela sighed. “Samantha just found out Neil’s in there.”

“Yes. She’s demanding to see him, loudly.”

Angela put her cup in the dishpan next to her stool and headed for the door.

Around them, the camp observed in eager fear. They wanted to know who’d done it and at the same time, they were terrified it was someone they admired.

Angela used the stairs to get to the infirmary, spotting Samantha at the entrance. She was face-to-chest with the sentries.

Debra, out of breath and holding Amy, was in the hall behind them. The unused wheelchair was there too, folded against the wall next to the deaf woman.

Ivan stepped between them as Samantha heard their steps and turned.

“Tell them to let me in!”

“No.” Angela pointed to a decorative desk along the wall. “Clear that for us.” She dug out her notebook and a pen.

“What do you mean, no?”

“Exactly that.” Angela motioned Debra to leave. “We’ll get her to where she needs to be. Have a snack or see a movie.”

Debra reluctantly departed, casting looks over her shoulder.

“What’s going on?” Samantha felt the tension in the air. *It’s worse than I thought.* “Is he dead? Is that why you won’t let me in?”

“Neil is alive and uninjured. Morgan is taking his blood while Conner scans him for answers.”

“Answers to what?”

Kenn brought the wheelchair over and snapped it open.

Angela waited.

Samantha sat. “Happy now?”

Angela sighed. “Not in the least, Samantha. Not in the least.”

Greg put the table between them while Ivan brought a stool from the nearest room.

Angela sat, nodding at Ivan. “Read it.”

Ivan didn’t need the sheet anymore. They’d done fifteen of these now. He had it memorized. “Do you swear the testimony you’re about to give is the truth and nothing else?”

Samantha stared at him, fear growing. “What is this?”

“Please take the oath.”

Samantha went still, working through the clues. “You think Neil did it.”

“Do you swear the testimony you are about–”

“Yeah, yeah. Tell me what’s going on!”

Angela leaned forward. “Neil has no alibi. Can you give him one?”

Samantha’s heart clenched. “For what time?”

“This morning, during the lessons and before breakfast.”

“Yes! Neil was there.”

“Not the skills test, Sam. The training match afterward.”

“Oh. Let me think.”

“It’s not a hard question.”

“For you!” Samantha glared at Angela. “How can you believe he’d do this?”

“Where were *you* after Debra’s skills test?”

Sam tensed, but didn’t lie. “Walking around against the rules while Debra took Amy for her class with Jeff.”

“You were alone? You didn’t see Neil?”

Samantha had no choice. “No, I didn’t.”

“Was the skills test the last time you saw him?”

“Yes.” Sam felt terror enter her heart and take up a place next to Jeremy’s ghost. “You wouldn’t be doing this unless you have evidence.”

Angela studied the storm tracker. “Are you covering for him, Sam? Did you find out and wipe his memory so he couldn’t be punished?”

“No! What are… He doesn’t remember?”

“No. His mind is blank.”

Samantha sat back suddenly and crossed her arms over her chest. “I have nothing else to say.”

Angela sighed again, deeper this time. “I don’t blame you. I’d do the same for Marc, but Neil is one of the good guys in the camp, one of the known men who can be counted on to do the right thing. What does it say if his mate won’t testify on his behalf?”

Samantha shoved away from the little table. “It says I love him and you’re not going to use me against him.” She flipped the chair around and rolled toward the elevator. “Send him to someone else when you release him. I’ve got shit to do.”

Everyone stared until she was gone.

Angela wasn’t surprised, only disappointed. “Send him to the galley for a meal when they’re done.”

Kenn wasn’t surprised either. Samantha would do anything for Neil, like the team they’d interviewed. That had been ugly. “Guard on him?”

“No, he’s not under arrest. Let me know when Ben and Ozzie wake up. We need those statements.”

Ivan scowled. “Why doesn’t she want to see him now? That was a crazy fast change of attitude.”

Angela finished her notes and stood, storing her book back in her pocket. “She just figured out we’re hoping he’ll regain his memory if he spends time with her. She doesn’t want that.”

“Why not?” Ivan followed her while Kenn put the table back along the wall. “I don’t understand.”

“She’s protecting him. She doesn’t want him to remember.”

“Shouldn’t she, though?”

“Not if she thinks he did it.”

**3**

“We’re getting their statements on camera.” Kenn held the infirmary door for Angela an hour later. “They woke up around the same time.”

Angela stopped inside the entrance, listening. Ivan was handling this one.

“So you signed in for your shift over the brig and you didn’t see anyone until 10am, when someone came to visit Becky.”

“Neil came. He said he wanted to try again.” Ozzie looked over at Ben, in the next bed. “Did you sign him in?”

Ben shrugged, rubbing his head. Hair came off in his fingers. “Is that normal?”

“We’ll check it out.” Morgan took the hair and put it into an evidence bag.

Ivan waved his pen to get their attention back. Both men were foggy. “What happened after you let him in?”

Ozzie grimaced. “I don’t know. I woke up here.”

Ivan lifted a brow. “Can you try to give more details?”

Ozzie concentrated. “I fell. Everything was spinning, like I needed to sleep so bad I couldn’t do anything else.”

“Ben, we found you facing the cell. Did you see anyone?”

“No. I don’t remember anything.” Ben regarded all of them in turn, putting pieces together. “You believe Neil did it.” They’d been told about the murders. They’d also watched Neil leave the infirmary and heard the medics talking afterward.

“He’s being investigated, with several others.”

“But he isn’t presenting gifts. He couldn’t have hit us with a sleep spell.”

“Yeah, plus, why would he have waited until we signed him in?” Ozzie didn’t believe Neil would harm an Eagle for Becky.

“We’re still investigating.” Ivan finished his notes and looked over his shoulder at Angela. He’d known she was here by the sweet smell and the anger. “You want a minute with them?”

Angela had already scanned the men. “There’s nothing else. Neil was the last one down here.”

“What do you want us to do?” Kenn knew what was coming and hoped he didn’t get the duty.

“Page 5 is finished?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“You know what has to come next.”

“I just can’t believe it.”

“Me either, but evidence has to be followed. Do it, now.”

Kenn headed for the stairs, taking longer than he needed to. *Some days, this job sucks.*

Kenn wasn’t happy to find the mess full of people. Everyone was waiting for word on the investigation. The galley was the most logical place to congregate.

Everyone went still and silent as Kenn entered. They knew something was about to happen.

Kenn looked at Greg and nodded, then gestured over more fighters toward the lone man sitting at the counter to choke down a piece of the cake Stanley had baked.

Tommy and Wade also knew what was coming. They’d been expecting it for the last hour. Kenn’s interview had been ominous.

“Todd O’Neil, you are under arrest for the murders of Seth Daniels and Rebecca Kelly.” Kenn strode forward, handcuffs coming out.

Gasps echoed. The camp hadn’t known who the suspect was. Only the top Eagles had, but the reaction was the same–pure shock.

Wade flew toward Kenn as he approached Neil, fury in every step.

Camp members got out of the way, sure a fight was coming.

The cooks also paused to observe, hoping there wasn’t violence. It had been a long day and they didn’t want to clean it up.

Tommy shoved by Kenn, knocking his notebook to the floor. “Get away from him!”

Wade was right behind Kenn now, ready to grab him. “He’s our team leader. We’ll escort him.”

Kenn moved aside to allow it, getting goosebumps. None of Neil’s team believed he was capable. Their loyalty was impressive.

Everyone stared as Neil stood. He walked into the center of the men. “Thank you.”

Tommy scowled at him. “You don’t even sound like yourself. What happened?”

“I wish I knew.”

“Hold your hands out please.” Kenn slapped on the cuffs and took Neil’s guns, glad the man wasn’t resisting. He wanted this over with as soon as possible. He hated that everyone was seeing him doing it. He and Neil had never been friends. Some people would think he was enjoying this.

“Come on, man. You have to remember something!” Tommy was furious.

“I’m sorry, I don’t.” Neil followed them from the room, too confused to be scared about where they were going or embarrassed about who was seeing it.

Wade held the door. “Well, you better remember fast because the penalty for murder in Safe Haven is death.”

Silence hung over the galley as the Eagles exited. Everyone was shocked. Neil was like Marc, one of the good guys. It was stunning to think he may have traded his shining armor for hanging on the deck.

**4**

Ivan locked the cell behind Neil. He turned to find Greg, Wade, and Tommy sitting down along the wall. “What are you doing?”

“The last prisoners in this brig were murdered. We’re making sure that doesn’t happen again. We’ll be here in shifts until he’s found *not* *guilty*.” Wade glared at Ivan, daring him to refuse. If he did, Ivan would be missing a few teeth come morning.

Tommy prepared to fight, as did Greg. They weren’t leaving Neil.

Angela was in the infirmary, talking to the sentries. She came to the door. “Let them stay.” She regarded Greg, who had helped her with the investigation and was feeling guilty. “Keep working through it. We’re all missing something.”

Neil’s team was relieved to hear Angela trying to find a way to prove Neil’s innocence. They immediately began doing the same with the information they had.

“Consider them his defense. Let them have access to all the evidence. They are not to go into his cell, but they can talk to him all they want. Conversations will be recorded in some fashion.” Angela returned to the infirmary before anyone could ask questions. She was following a train of thought that might lead to an answer for this mystery.

Ben frowned at Angela, in the middle of pulling on his pants. He’d hoped she would stay in the hallway for a few more seconds so he could get it done without her watching. It wasn’t that he minded her seeing his ass; it was a respect issue. “What happens next for him?”

Angela rotated to give the privacy he wanted. “A trial and then a vote on his guilt or innocence. If he’s found guilty, sentencing will come next.”

“When do you expect the trial to take place?”

“We’ll hold the trial tomorrow.”

Everyone muttered as Ben scowled. “Why so fast?”

“Because the camp is pissed and hurt. They thought Neil was a good guy. The longer this drags on, the guiltier he’ll appear to the people who get to decide his fate. If we push it through now, fast, while they’re still confused about what’s going on, he’ll have a chance. If we wait a couple of days to finish our investigation, his guilt will already be sealed in their minds before he ever steps in front of them.”

Angela cleared her mind and her throat as she keyed the mike on her tool belt. “I have one announcement and then I want everyone to go to bed because tomorrow is going to be a long day. Starting at 10am, we will have trials for those exposed during today’s meeting. Everyone is required to attend and vote, except for those who have duty or don’t meet the age requirements for criminal proceedings. Good night, Safe Haven. Please try to get some sleep. I need you alert and thinking straight tomorrow.”

Angela let off the mike, positive she wouldn’t be going to bed anytime soon. Just because she wanted the camp to sleep didn’t mean they were going to. Neil had been arrested. Everyone had an opinion and they would feel the need to express that opinion to another person. She trudged the hallway to the stairs by the living quarters. The galley was closing shortly, and everyone would flock to the showers and cots to make it appear as if they were obeying. Once the nightly rituals were finished, those people would wander the bunks. Neil wouldn’t be the only topic of conversation, but he would be the most discussed. In less than ten hours, Safe Haven had gone from calm and peaceful to brimming with excitement, tension, and fear.

Angela straightened her shoulders and put on a calm expression as she opened the door to the living quarters. *It’s almost like we thrive on this shit.*

**5**

“How bad is it?” Ben and Ozzie had finished their statements and were off duty. They’d come to check on Neil.

Wade held up an evidence bag with a picture in it. “Same prints on his shoe.”

Tommy pointed at the logbook for the brig. “He was the last one here.”

Greg reluctantly finished it by gesturing to the sign in sheet for the training rooms. “No alibi.”

Ben and Ozzie were both disheartened.

Daryl and Morgan came down the stairs from the infirmary.

Morgan looked at Ben. “We think you two should hang out here.”

“Why?”

“So no one has a chance to talk to you.”

“Keep them here.” Tommy was certain any conversation the camp had with the sentries from the brig would be damning. Now that he’d had a chance to scan the evidence, Tommy understood why Angela had ordered Neil’s arrest. It looked bad.

“Is there anything we can do?” Daryl made the offer for his entire team, Kyle included. Kyle wasn’t here right now, but if he had been, he would have been the first to step up and defend Neil. None of them believed the trooper was capable of this.

“Why isn’t anyone asking me questions?” Neil’s voice came from the cell.

“You had your memory wiped. You can’t answer them.”

“Oh. That’s right.”

Greg frowned. “Relapse?”

Morgan was also concerned. “No idea. This is all new to me too. I don’t understand the side effects from spells. I’ve never heard about relapses.”

“We’ll talk to the boss later.”

On duty over the brig, Ivan copied the question. He would ask her himself.

“If we had an alibi for him, the rest is circumstantial. It’s obvious somebody wiped his memory; he’s as much a victim as they are. Whoever did it decided not to kill him or the sentries.”

“It’s obvious Seth and Becky were the targets.”

“Okay, let’s generate a list of alternate suspects. I’m sure Angela had Kenn put this together too, but he doesn’t know people as well as we do and there are still ways we don’t let him in. He may not have gotten the full.” Tommy flipped to a new notebook page as Ivan did the same inside the brig office. “Let’s begin with Seth. Other than Neil, does anyone have a grudge against him?”

Wade shrugged. “Maybe his old team, because he left.”

Daryl added an option. “Maybe Doug, even though Marc trusts him on duty over Cody. A lot of times when people are murdered, it’s a friend or family member.”

“If we’re going by that, we have to include everyone who was involved in either of their lives and then clear them.”

“Exactly. You get to work on that. We’ll move on to the next part. Some of the camp members were unhappy Seth and Becky returned. It might not be a friend or family. Who wants to do that list?”

“I’ve got that one.” Wade opened a page.

“Good. Okay, I think between those two, that will cover every adult on the ship. I want a third list made for some of the kids.”

Everyone looked over in horror as they realized Wade was including children as suspects. They’d been so good on the ride that most of the guards had already forgiven them the bloody rampage on the UN ship. They understood the need to kill for defense and more. It was easier for them to forgive. Now that those sentries had been reminded, it was obvious. They had overlooked an entire list of suspects.

Tommy tried to find a bright side. “All we have to do is provide an alibi or disapprove someone else’s alibi. That will give Neil the shadow of a doubt he needs for the jury.”

“What if he makes a plea deal because somebody convinces him he did it while he can’t remember?” Ben shrugged at the looks. “I saw it on a movie once. The guy’s friend framed him.”

“I won’t tell them I’m guilty of anything I didn’t do.”

Neil sounded a little more like the man they all knew with that protest, allowing the teams to dig in.

Wade gestured. “We’re gonna be here for a while. Everyone pull out your kits. We’ll share resources. We’ll use the brig bathroom down the hall so we don’t contaminate these bathrooms and make the cleaning crew have to come in to the crime area yet. We don’t want anyone else here until each one of us has had a chance to go over the cell and verify they didn’t miss anything else. If the boss found two things, there could be more.”

The team got to work on their assignments, not getting permission from anyone and not feeling like they needed to. Despite Safe Haven having a leader, the Eagles ran the refugee camp, the camp members were second, and then the leader. What the Eagles decided, the camp usually went with because they were trusted to make the right choices. Even in situations where it was clear the Eagles weren’t telling the truth or at least weren’t telling all of it, the camp usually sided with them. Morgan sent the thought to all of his team and Neil’s. “If I’m wrong and it all goes bad, we need to plan for that too.”

Everyone nodded, in agreement.

“He’d do the same for us, in a heartbeat.”

Neil was warmed by the loyalty. The men were strangers to him, but he’d clearly earned their support and protection in whatever times they’d had together. It allowed him to have faith in their belief that he wasn’t guilty. He had no other way to know.

“I have that covered. It needs a team touch, though.” Samantha was in the open cell next to Neil. She’d been on the cot the entire time, blending in perfectly with the tan blanket and dark shadows.

“What are you doing in there?!”

“Did you know she was in there?”

“I’m guarding.”

Hearts broke and bonds grew as they realized she’d come here to sleep by Neil, to protect him. None of them considered making her leave.

“Ivan, if you write down that I’m here, I’ll ruin your life. I’ll make it a goal and enjoy every second. Don’t fuck with me.”

Ivan erased the sentence he’d been writing.

“Wise choice.” Samantha lifted the gun in her hand. “I’m staying.”

The Eagles chuckled, loving her for it.

Neil felt a spark, heart giving a single thump. “You’re Samantha, right?”

She sighed. “I can’t talk to you. Please go to sleep so we can save your life.”

Neil paused, then asked, “You…love me, right? You’re my mate.”

“Stop talking now.”

“Answer me! I don’t know anything else! I need something to hold onto!”

Tears ran over her cheeks. “Shut up, you prick!”

Neil did.

Samantha slowly sat up to use hand code. *If I talk to him, he might remember me.*

The teams took a few seconds to figure that out. When they did, they understood part of her plan before she began telling them what it was.

Chapter Thirty-One

**I’m Ready**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

December 2nd

**Day Six**

**1**

**“H**ave you seen the list of trials?”

Lou shook his head, busy stirring a large pot on the stove while Jayda chatted with people at the counter.

Jayda’s voice lowered. “Marc and Adrian are on it.”

“Really? They aren’t here.”

“Easier to do it without them.”

“When are they due?”

Everyone turned to Ivan.

Ivan kept chewing his potted meat sandwich. He’d stopped by for a quick meal and regretted it. Well over half the camp had risen early to discover if there had been new developments. They were congregating here to wait for unsuspecting Eagles.

“Did he do it?” Jayda smiled at Ivan over the counter. “Give us a hint.”

Ivan stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and left, taking his mug.

Jayda watched him leave with glittering eyes as the citizens settled back in to wait for news. She hadn’t thought he would tell. She’d put him on the spot anyway, hoping he got mad. Men often told the complete truth when they were pissed, and she had a big question for him. He’d changed since they set sail. She’d narrowed down the reason why.

Loud voices drew attention.

“He wouldn’t do that!”

“How do you know?”

“He’s a top Eagle here! He wouldn’t do that!”

James tried to stay calm. “I’ve seen the evidence–”

Zack punched him in the mouth to keep the camp from hearing the soldier say Neil was guilty. He hit him again because it felt good.

Nathan and Claire, closest to them, grabbed Zack and dragged him backward. They’d come to collect Grant’s tray and give updates. The radar was functioning again, along with everything else. They were free to set sail whenever Angela called it.

“Get off me!” James struggled to get free of the hands. “When you’ve healed, I’ll return this hospitality!”

Zack flipped him the finger. “Just shut up until the trial. If you bias them against Neil, I’ll be the next one arrested for murder.” Zack stormed from the galley, followed by his sons. They’d all been eating at the same table. That would never happen again.

“He’s high-strung.” Claire stayed by James, handing him the updates. “Boss only.”

James nodded, storing them. He swiped the blood from his mouth. He had helped investigate and move the bodies. He’d been up all night. His own patience amazed him. The old James would have beaten Zack’s ass, hurt or not.

Everyone quieted, staring as Samantha appeared in the far doorway, alone.

Samantha lifted her chin and walked to the center table to wait for the boss.

Jayda made a tray and carried it out. She started to ask if Samantha was okay and decided not to be stupid. *Of course, she’s not okay. I wouldn’t be either.* She patted Samantha’s shoulder and returned to work.

Samantha held still, not responding as other people came her way. She braced for conversation attempts, not sure if she could take it without screaming.

Ozzie put a bullet on the table in front of her and left the galley.

Other people repeated the gesture until there was a stack of slugs on the table and a mostly empty galley. Those who remained observed in confusion, assuming it was a ritual for mates or widows of Eagles.

Samantha picked one up, recognizing the caliber. Neil had three guns, but he only used two of them. His powerful little Glock 26 was a reserve he always left for her. Every bullet here went to that gun, the one she was carrying right now in her bra holster, the one they hadn’t confiscated when they’d taken Neil’s gear because the investigators hadn’t known about it. Only his team had. It was the one that would free Neil if there was no other choice. Word had spread. The mound of bullets was the support she had.

Samantha fingered the slugs as she put them into her pocket, layering her prints on them as she waited for Angela. If this meeting didn’t go well, she now had the backup she needed for a brig break.

**2**

“Here comes another one.” Freddy peered into Angela’s cabin. “Send them in or on?”

“In. I’ll take one more after that and then we’ll get going. I need to stop by the galley before the trials start.” Angela poured a cup of water and drained it, waving Doug to sit when he entered.

“Have you looked?”

Angela didn’t play games. “I can’t. Only Jennifer can right now and she’s off ship. That team will return soon.”

“Before Neil gets hanged for something he didn’t do?”

Angela was forced to remain neutral. She didn’t feel it. “Why do you believe he’s innocent?”

Doug’s bushy brows met in the middle. “Someone wiped his memory. I heard the rumors. Someone else was involved. Holding a trial without catching them is unfair!”

It meant a lot to hear Doug support Neil. Angela chose to be honest. “We’re hoping the questions at the trial will expose an accomplice. Every piece of evidence led to Neil.”

“He’s being framed.”

“We have to prove that.”

“No, we don’t.” Doug stood up and walked out. “It only takes a shadow of a doubt.”

Angela returned to digging for a way to provide that shadow. Samantha was waiting for her in the galley, silently begging her to have a solution but Angela didn’t. If nothing else was discovered, Neil would be found guilty.

“Send in the next one.”

**3**

Angela joined Samantha at the center table. People stared but didn’t speak. They observed her for signs the trouble was almost over.

Angela waited for Stanley to deliver a hot mug of tea to Samantha and a plate of canned fruit.

Stanley wished he could break the tension. He assumed the conversation they were about to have would get ugly. Angela was dutybound to handle it exactly like she was doing. She couldn’t promise to spare Neil’s life.

“It isn’t my choice.” Angela noted the bags under Samantha’s eyes and the angry posture. This wasn’t good for her health. “I don’t have a plan going or a backup to save him. I was blindsided.”

“There’s another storm coming.”

“When?”

Samantha sneered. “I’m being blindsided.”

Angela scowled “That’s not fair, Sam. I can’t see everything.”

“Neither can I.”

“You’d let this ship be in danger–”

“I’d sink it myself!”

Samantha’s icy tone would have frightened anyone who heard it. She didn’t sound like herself.

“You said it would only be one of them when you made me pick. You lied. I’ve lost both my men!”

“You don’t know how the trial will go.”

“Do you?”

Angela slowly shook her head.

Samantha teared up again. “He asked me to marry him. Did you know?”

Angela nodded. “It bothered him that you said no. He mentioned it to Jennifer. He worries Jeremy’s ghost won’t ever give you peace.”

Samantha snorted bitterly. “It was always Becky’s ghost between us, haunting us. And then she came back.” Samantha glowered in cold hatred. “Why did you bring her back?”

“To give her a second chance.”

“She didn’t want it.”

“No.”

“But you had to save her. This is *your* fault.”

Angela shrugged. “Probably. Everything else seems to be. Why should this be different?”

“Don’t get snarky with me! I don’t deserve that!”

Angela waved a finger. “You’re pissed because *you* gave him the idea. *You* told him you wanted Amy because the two of you have bonded and the grief over Jeremy wasn’t enough to stop the voices in *your* head. You’re scared *you* did this to Neil.”

Samantha slapped her.

Angela held still. “Do you feel better now?”

Sam cried harder as sentries came their way. “No!”

“Then do it again.”

*Slap!*

“Again!”

*Slap!*

Angela healed her marks, not breaking eye contact. “Now stop crying. Hold onto that anger.” Angela went around the table, waving off the sentries. She stopped next to Samantha. “I gave you a chance to save one of them, Sam, not to pick between them like hams at an old store. You didn’t cause Jeremy’s death. This isn’t karma for your choice. It’s the damn Dizzyland players, punishing me for not giving in. So you’re right, it is my fault.” Angela walked away, heart like stone. *When I come back up there, I’m going to burn you alive seventeen thousand, five hundred and eight times.*

The Messenger laughed in her head.

Samantha wiped her expression, cold shield of battle dropping into place. She left the galley. *We’re in the middle of a bet and my side is losing. It’s time to gather an army.* She held in a sob. *Neil’s army.*

**4**

“Did you used to cook meth? Is that why you know how to do this?” Tommy glowered at their lab tech.

Greg stared at Tommy in surprise, but he didn’t interrupt. He’d been wondering the same thing as they observed Tonya prepare the tests for Neil’s trial. She was much more comfortable with the beakers and droppers than someone should be who’d only had three weeks of experience after an apocalypse.

“Yes.” Tonya began scanning the results of the test she’d just finished.

Tommy scowled at her casual confirmation. “Does Kenn know?”

Tonya placed the slide under the microscope and peered into it. “Considering you were confident enough in your suspicions to ask me about it out right, I’d say yes.”

“Are you still cooking meth?”

Tonya looked up in surprise. “No. Why would I? There’s no market for that crap here.”

For a moment, neither guard was sure how to take that or what to say in response.

Tommy chose to continue. “People like to smoke pot here, and you’ve got a good excuse with the medical possibilities. We’ve never investigated you because you’ve never been important to the camp before. That has to change. You’re not going to be off limits just because you’re pregnant.”

Tonya frowned. “I don’t expect to be. You didn’t hear me complain when Angela insisted you guys follow along in the same book while I’m doing this test to make sure I’m not skipping anything or doing it wrong. It’s good to have someone making sure I’m not making mistakes. I don’t want Neil to hang either.”

It made Tommy feel a little better to hear her say that. He had been worrying over it because Neil and Kenn had never been friends. Hours had gone by; the team was impatient for results.

“What are you seeing there?”

Tonya had already made a judgment, but she peered into the microscope again to verify. It was late and it was possible her eyes were blurry.

*Nope. You know that for what it is.*

She sighed unhappily. “I’m examining the swabs we took from their arms after Morgan found the needle marks. It looks like they had diamorphine on their skin.” Tonya used her hands to demonstrate a syringe being used. “As you pull the needle out, a tiny bit of the medicine or whatever was injected will come back out with the needle and onto the skin. The murderer didn’t know that.”

She got up and switched slides, bring more tension to the room. They needed to know the cause of death. This test would possibly give them that answer.

Greg took out his copy of the evidence list to compare to narcotics that were signed out of the infirmary.

Tonya looked up at Tommy. “This is Becky’s blood sample. She had a lot of diamorphine in her bloodstream. She overdosed.”

“Who signed it out?” Tommy frowned in concentration. “I know I heard diamorphine listed during the evidence being read out for us to copy.”

Greg held the infirmary logbook open to the right page. “Neil.”

“Damn. When?”

“An hour before Becky died.”

**5**

“Guilty! The recommended sentence is death.”

Randal screamed as Eagles dragged him from the witness box into the hall. He screamed the entire trip to the brig, giving the camp a lot to discuss as they shied from his pleas and curses.

“We have three trials left. They will be held in the order they are listed.” Angela waved at Kenn, mind storing the sound of Randal’s screams for later placement in her crypt. She hated this part of her job.

Kenn cleared his throat. “Call to order, the case of Safe Haven vs Todd O’Neil. Bring in the defendant.”

Three hundred citizens rotated toward the small rear door as it opened.

Neil entered the chamber alone, looking very much like the man they all knew. Only a few people noticed his lack of purpose and attention to detail. He went where the sentries pointed, sitting in the chair in the center of the room.

The camp was in seats around the edges of the ballroom again, but this time there was an unbroken line of Eagles between them and Neil. He was better protected than Angela.

“Because this defendant cannot help with his own case, someone may speak for him. Have you made a choice on that?”

Neil nodded to Samantha. “She’ll do it.”

Samantha stood. There was a big chance the sound of her voice would trigger his memory, but they’d made it clear he had to keep pretending even if that happened.

Angela drew in a breath. “State your name.”

“Samantha Moore.”

“Why are you defending this man?”

“He would do it for me.”

“You have a personal relationship with the defendant?”

“I do.”

“Before we begin, do you have any grudges against the defendant that might prevent him from getting a fair trial?”

“No.” Samantha’s voice was cold. “Do you?”

Angela frowned. “No. This entire camp has been asked the same question. Neil’s only enemy died yesterday.”

“Get on with it then.” Samantha hadn’t slept since Neil’s arrest. It showed.

Angela gestured at Ivan. “You will list the offenses and the evidence. Each piece gets put out on the table. Samantha can stop you at any point to ask questions. She’s seen most of it already, so she’s had time to go over it in her head.” Angela looked at Neil. “Do you understand what’s happening here?”

“I’m on trial. You think I killed someone.”

Neil’s pale face and tight grip on the chair arm made everyone feel bad.

“The evidence suggests it. Do you believe you’ve done something wrong?”

“Objection!” Sam stood. “If he can’t remember, how can he answer that?”

“Sustained.” Angela motioned. “Tell us your name and job in this camp.”

Neil glanced at his team and then Samantha. “They told me, but I don’t know if it’s true.”

“What *do* you know about yourself?”

“I hate the smell of smoke. It makes me think of death.”

Angela shivered. *Me too, friend. Me too.* “Your representative is entering a not guilty plea for you. Do you accept that?”

“Of course. Samantha would never hurt me. I feel that.”

Angela snorted. “We all do. A plea of not guilty has been accepted. Neil, do you want to use your one continuance or your one medical stay now? It might give you time to regain your memory.”

Neil drew in a breath, sitting straighter. “I don’t know for sure who I am, but a man with so many friends, so much support, can’t be a murderer. I don’t need a continuance or a stay. I’m not guilty.”

Samantha wiped away a tear. She would take it from here.

“This is the trial of Todd O’Neil.” Angela smacked the table. “You may begin.” They hadn’t brought a gavel and she didn’t want to ruin the furniture by using a hammer. She hoped they wouldn’t have to do this again for a long, long time.

Ivan, tired and pissed that he’d been given this part of the job, decided to rebel. “I have to resign. I’m good friends with the defendant. I can’t be objective.”

Angela surveyed the Eagles for signs that was a lie and found none. All of them were nodding, even rookies who hadn’t spent time around Neil or Ivan. “Very well. I shall present the evidence since my camp is suddenly full of cowards.”

Ivan took the scold without reacting. He stayed where he was as Angela joined him, assuming guard duty over her.

*Got a twofer with that one, didn’t you?*

Ivan refused to look at her.

“I’m starting with the motive first, but I see no reason to repeat the entire story. We all know Seth blamed Neil for Becky’s state of mind. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” the camp chorused.

“We also know Becky hated Adrian, who trained Neil. Agreed?”

“Agreed!”

“Neil was pissed at Seth for leaving with Becky. Agreed?”

“Agreed!”

“Neil was pissed at Becky for coming back at all. Agreed?”

“Agreed!”

“Disagree!” Samantha’s harsh shout cut through the noise. She didn’t sound like herself. “Neil was worried he’d still want to screw her. He wasn’t pissed at her. He was scared of her. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” Neil’s team and some of the camp echoed, but they were drowned out by the rest of the camp.

“Disagree!”

“I can prove that.” Samantha held up a baggie. “Neil signed out a care package. It was found in Becky’s cell. If he wanted her dead, why would he deliver a care package?”

Angela understood why Ivan had refused. She didn’t want to do this either. “To get her out of here faster. He could have gone down to convince them to escape and there was a fight. So he used his backup plan.”

“Agreed!” the camp shouted.

Samantha was forced to accept their doubt.

“We know Seth and Becky were given a chance to leave. I ordered the sentries to look the other way while they left on a lifeboat. They decided not to go.” Angela pointed at a paper in a baggie. “The morning report from the shift before documented an argument between Seth and Becky. She refused to leave until she’d hurt Adrian or someone he cared about. Neil collected that report and delivered it to Kenn during shift change. He knew she wasn’t going to depart peacefully.”

Near the hall doors, Donald joined the sentries. He was off duty but still doing rounds. “How’s it going in there?”

“Too soon to tell. You going in?” Daryl got ready to write his name down. Almost everyone was here.

“No, just stopping by for an update. We’ve got Randal secured and the rest of the prisoners are in a community cell being fed and given details on what’s going to happen to them now. Randal was the only one to get a death sentence…” Daryl glanced toward Neil but didn’t say *so far*.

Donald peered into the courtroom. He didn’t like how bewildered Neil seemed to be. “Someone framed him.”

“Yep. And we’d better figure out who or he might be gone from Safe Haven. These people are angry.”

“So am I.” Donald went to the next intersection and took the stairs back to the lower levels. “We have an evil genius on the ship, and they aren’t on our side.”

**6**

“In summary, no alibi. He signed out the drugs from the infirmary that were identified as the cause of death. He’s been acting strange. He had motive. He was there; he signed the logbook. He can’t tell us what happened. He was found wandering the rear of the ship, where it would have been simple to throw any other evidence overboard. He had the skills needed to do the crime. Now, you have to decide if that means he’s guilty. The prosecution rests.” Angela picked up her cup and drank it all, throat hurting. Samantha had done a good job of shredding most of the evidence, but some of it couldn’t be discredited because the camp had known too much of their drama. The motive was sticking. So was the timeline. No one had seen Neil after he talked to Samantha at the training session. He’d been found wandering the rear of the ship when he should have been right here, doing his job. It was clear that he was involved. For most people, that was enough to convict him.

Samantha also drank water, getting ready to breathe fire. She drew in a breath and stuck to her plan. “We all know what’s going on. We’re playing court, terrorizing a victim, and pretending magic wasn’t involved.”

The room went quiet, sensing she was about to accuse a descendant.

“Becky controlled people. Eagles witnessed it; the camp heard those stories. She could make people do what she wanted. She wouldn’t leave, and she knew she was going to be found guilty at her trial. She was about to hang. What better way to go than to set someone up to take the fall? She picked Neil because he was the one in the brig when she needed to do it. She could just as easily have framed one of the guards.” Samantha pointed at Angela. “You’ve witnessed what she can do, what a lot of us can do. Is it so hard to believe Becky could force Neil to overdose them and wipe his memory before it kicked in?”

The camp murmured at the almost logical explanation.

Angela studied it like she was required to, searching for holes. She found one. “Seth and Becky didn’t have the sleep gift. Only four citizens in our camp can do that. I’m here; Adrian is off ship. Conner was never out of sight of the Eagles, and Kimmie was surrounded by teachers and trainers all morning. Please explain that and then I can agree.”

“It’s simple.” Samantha glared at Angela. “Someone lied to you about their gifts or you missed it in a scan.”

Angela was impressed that Samantha had chosen this route of defense. “I’m forced to admit that’s possible. I haven’t scanned all our gifts yet, and I don’t see everything. Any of the Invisibles could have evolved with it.”

“Exactly. You can’t prove someone else wasn’t involved.”

“Agreed.” Angela was glad she could.

“And if we believe there was an accomplice, why shouldn’t we consider Becky on that list? She fits those requirements: She had the motive to do this. She had the skills needed. She was in the area. She looks just as guilty to me.”

Some people in the camp nodded, though the reaction was light and scattered. Still, it was encouraging. Samantha didn’t glance at Neil as she continued, keeping her voice shrill. “None of the evidence proves he committed premeditated murder, because that’s what this is: premeditated. You’re saying Neil went to the infirmary and signed out drugs. He then took them to the brig, knocked out everyone there with a sleep spell even though he doesn’t have gifts, overdosed them, then wiped his own memory. It’s not possible. No one can wipe their own memory. It can’t be done and unless you prove it can, you have to find him not guilty.”

Angela would have chuckled at the clever trap if the moment hadn’t been so serious. “Does the camp agree?”

Some did; most didn’t.

“We need more clarification here.” Angela addressed the camp. “Will you accept my word on this matter?”

“Agreed!” the camp and Eagles echoed.

“There’s nothing in the book from Ciemus about it. It doesn’t list that skill, though I suspect if you wipe your own memory, you won’t be able to remember doing it. There wouldn’t be a record. In my judgement, if that skill exists, it would be rare, or we’d have zombied-out descendants wandering everywhere because they didn’t want to remember what happened to them during the war. I have to rule on this, so I will agree we cannot wipe our own memories–with the stipulation that I don’t know everything. Later evidence may prove me wrong.” She wanted to add more but couldn’t. She was already swaying the vote as much as she could get away with. “Agreed?”

“Agreed!”

Samantha felt Neil staring at her in surprise, like he’d remembered something. She used her shrillest voice. “In light of that, I ask that you dismiss the case against him!”

Angela wanted to. *But I can’t or it could cost me my job, and I won’t risk that, even for Neil.* “Denied. If we believe he had an accomplice, they may have betrayed him, but that doesn’t absolve him.”

Sam had expected it. “Then we should postpone this trial until we locate the accomplice.”

“We’ll hear from Neil before we make that decision.”

“He can’t remember anything!”

Angela finally let her anger show. “Listen! We have a bad situation here. One of three things happened. Neil snapped and killed them, Becky set this up and killed herself, or we have a murderer on this boat. I’m not going to stop until we find out what happened and remove that danger!”

Samantha huffed, arms going over her chest, but she returned to her seat. “He has people who want to speak for him.”

“Agreed.” Angela took her seat as Neil’s team rose from their seats and lined up by the witness box to testify.

Chapter Thirty-Two

**The Price**

****

The UN Ship

**1**

**“T**here they are.” Jennifer pointed. “I see them!”

Kyle joined her at the front window, not as pleased as Jennifer. He’d expected Safe Haven to be moving when they caught up, not anchored. It was another sign of a problem, though neither ship appeared to have damage. The cruise ship sat heavily in the calm water, with Adrian’s smaller vessel bobbing behind and to the right.

To Kyle, it was a copy of the bodyguard’s place, a sign of Adrian watching out for them. He suddenly wanted Adrian on that ship, for exactly that reason.

“Stop next to the boat in the front.” Marc was controlling their captain for this shift and hating every second of it. She didn’t want to help them. Kronus was wrong about Angela’s goals on this one. Lila wanted them dead. Marc didn’t believe anyone would be able to reform this one.

“Then we’ll put her down.” Jennifer glowered at Lila. “I’ll ask to do it.”

Lila shuddered.

Adrian pointed. “Keep space between this boat and those. The waves aren’t rough enough to hurt our ships, but you might startle our camp. If that happens, you and Jennifer will have a long talk.” Adrian stared at the captain with cold eyes. “She has a baby on that ship. If I were you, I wouldn’t even give her kid a hiccup.”

Lila had paled with each word. She was terrified of Jennifer.

Fear flooded, making it easier for Marc to control the woman. Adrian’s story of Charlie doing this with three wild females had been amazing. One was hard. He didn’t want to try it with three.

“Yeah, that kid of yours is talented.” Jennifer stole a glance at him. “Both sons, actually.”

Marc tensed.

Jennifer’s tone held a slight edge of contempt. “Of course, we all know he’s special. Their energy matched.”

Marc tightened his mental grip on the captain so she didn’t try to break free while they were talking. “What will he be like in the future?”

“Are you asking me to search for you?”

Marc shook his head. “Just wondering aloud. It scares me that he’s so high level already.”

“Understandable.” Adrian gathered the rest of their gear as the ships neared and their engines kicked down through the gears. “Just teach him to follow the light. He’ll be okay from there.”

Marc scowled. “How do you know?”

“I’ve met his father.” Adrian went out to the deck, waving at the sentries on the cruise ship who were grabbing for radios and weapons. They could read the UN logos now. He waved his Eagle jacket, giving them time to narrow in with their glasses.

He stopped, chills breaking out on his skin.

Jennifer stilled, power rushing out to sweep the boats.

Marc didn’t wait. He ran from the bridge, letting go of the captain.

Jennifer followed him.

Kyle put his gun to the captain’s head, keeping her in place.

Marc leapt over the rail wildly, throwing his body forward. He landed on the deck of the Adrianna and took off running for the bridge.

“Stay with Kyle!” Jennifer jumped behind Marc.

Adrian jumped on her heels, ignoring the order.

The rookies on duty gaped at Marc and Jennifer. They understood a problem had popped up, but they didn’t know what it was. They’d been watching the ship arrive without calling Angela or a senior Eagle. Marc stored that security lapse as he ran by.

“Kyle needs a hand!” Jennifer shouted at a guard. She’d forgotten Adrian didn’t obey anyone’s orders unless he wanted to.

Adrian didn’t care about orders. Like Marc, he’d caught the waves of madness. Someone was about to die.

**2**

“Get in there! Keep your hands up!” Rachel rattled the homemade bomb. “I’ll blow us up. This boat will drift until it hits something and sinks.” She grinned. “Of course, you’ll starve before that happens.”

Grant kept his hands up. “What do you want?”

“I want your boss.”

“I’ll call her.”

“No!” Rachel rattled the wide tape as Ray reached for the radio mike. “I want her to feel it!” The tape had a dozen grenades lovingly taped and rigged for a quick pull.

Ray held up his hands. “Just calm down.”

“If you call her, I’ll detonate it! I’m ready.”

“We won’t.” Ray and the rest of the guards searched for an opportunity to grab her, but Rachel stepped out the door and went down the stairs.

Ray and Grant stared at each other and then swept for sentries, but no one had noticed the problem. There was only a skeleton crew on duty because of the trial. The three rookies here were all scanning the ocean behind them and pointing. They hadn’t noticed what was happening within ten feet of them.

“What do we do?”

Ray considered his rules for hostage negotiations. “Everyone start screaming for the boss, silently. It’ll get through the voices and thoughts down there around her.”

Grant began to do that. “What happens when she gets here?”

“She kills the crazy lady and we return to life as usual.”

Grant liked that answer. He screamed loud, telling himself it was okay to be excited that he was about to observe the Eagles in action.

Angela, in the ballroom and surrounded by the confused camp, pushed her way through the crowd to reach the stairs. She could hear Rachel losing what was left of her mind, but she couldn’t get there in time to help. *Kill her! Do it right now!*

**3**

“Stay back!”

Marc slid to a stop as Rachel held up the tape. He scanned it, seeing she had the pins rigged to come loose with one hard jerk. He had no idea how she’d gotten to the grenades, but he was certain they’d come from Safe Haven’s armory.

“It’s ready. I’m ready.” Rachel put the tape on the support beams for the bridge. “Are you ready?”

Marc swept the crazy woman holding the pull pin. She looked like she’d already died, twice over.

Rachel peered at him. Then she smiled. “You’re her man. It’s perfect.” She yanked the pin and tossed it toward the rail.

A gunshot rang out.

Rachel fell, blood coming from her chest.

Marc ripped the tape from the bridge and flung it toward the water. “Get down!”

The bomb exploded over the rail, blowing a hole in the deck. Wooden slugs slammed into walls, tables, chairs, guards.

Marc looked at Rachel, verifying she was dead, then at the man holding the gun.

Ray lowered the unfamiliar weapon, wishing he’d been able to get a clear shot sooner. “She made us give up our guns and wait in here. We couldn’t tell the boss. We’re not descendants.”

Marc heard steps flying toward them. “You’ll get to tell her now. Good shot.”

“Angela put weapons up here. Only the guards and crew knew. She saved his life.” Ray turned to Grant, a bit dazed. It had happened fast, and he hadn’t gone through this in a few weeks. *Getting rusty.*

Below them, Jennifer stopped and spun around. She slapped Adrian.

Adrian held still, braced to take whatever she needed to deliver.

“You’re already honoring your deal. Admit it!” Jennifer had figured it out when he ignored Marc and Angela to stay on her heels, protecting her.

Adrian tried to calm his breathing. “Yes, Jennifer, I am.”

She stomped closer, finger in his chest. “What do you get out of it? You wouldn’t make that deal for nothing.”

“I can’t answer.”

Jennifer looked at Kyle, who was concentrating on Lila as she pulled the UN ship alongside. “I’ll give you and Marc what you’re whispering about behind Angela’s back. And you won’t even have to ask me carefully.”

“Why? How?” Adrian ignored the warning bells. “Explain that.”

Jennifer sneered at him, furious. “I’ll tell you what will keep her from ascending. In return, you will double cross Kyle and keep *him* alive. Do we have a deal?”

Adrian chose to be selfish. “I was also getting Eagle support back from that deal.”

Jennifer threw her arms up. “You’re a piece of shit!”

Adrian shrugged. “Yeah, but I’m Angie’s. If you survive the final battle and take over, I’ll be yours to use. I can’t go years without Eagle support and then just step back in, Jenny. You know that.”

Right at that moment, Jennifer hated him as much as Marc did. “I want something else out of the deal.”

Adrian had been expecting it. “Name your price.”

“Make an offer.”

Adrian frowned. “I won’t trade a single minute of those four months. You can have anything else you want.”

Jennifer began to smile. “Awesome.”

Adrian tensed. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah.” Jennifer’s amusement spilled from her lips. “When she removes your gifts, you’re done. *You never get them back*.”

Adrian sucked in air at the blow, aware of people coming toward them. “I can’t do that. I have to fight in the final battle.”

“No, you have to train us for it. Your gift is useless in a fight unless you want to put your team to sleep too. You can’t even use it properly. You give up your gifts and I’ll return your army. Do we have a deal?”

“Yes.” Adrian held out a hand. “Angie won’t know. If she unlocks me without asking first, I’ll come to you so you can lock it up again.”

Jennifer shook, using their bodies to hide Kyle’s view. “Don’t betray me, Adrian Mitchel. I’m not Angela. I’ll slit your throat.”

Adrian didn’t doubt it. He moved toward Marc to offer help, attention shifting so no one could read his thoughts on their encounter. As he walked away, the ramp was connected, allowing Kyle, Kronus, and Lila onto the ship.

“Put her in the brig.” Kyle waved at the nearest guard. “Gun in hand. No stops. Take the employee stairs and elevators.”

Kyle’s team came to him before he was mobbed by the huge crowd coming up the stairs behind Angela.

Kyle knew it wasn’t good news by their expressions, but there were already too many people around them to allow conversations.

Marc expected Kyle’s team to tear into the rookies who hadn’t noticed Rachel’s bombing attempt or even told them a ship was coming, but no one spoke. The deck was almost silent despite there now being so many people up here. He glanced at Adrian.

Adrian shrugged. *Whatever happened has them all distracted.*

People stared at Rachel’s body, shocked. The smoking hole in the ship caught attention next, drawing comments and worries over their floating home.

“Someone get Theo up here to check on it.” Daryl waved at a rookie.

Ben scowled. “Yeah, tell him to run. He can obviously do that now.”

The returning team exchanged another uneasy glance and a common thought. *Not distracted. They’re angry.*

Angela swept the situation and found Marc nearby examining the bridge to make sure there were no more threats.

The camp members who had just reached the top deck noticed the UN ship. The start of panic died when they found Eagles onboard.

Marc stared at Angela, heart pounding. *I can’t leave her again. She’ll always be in danger. I need to stay closer.*

Angela smiled, coming to Marc’s side. “Welcome home.” She pulled his ring from her pocket and slid it onto her finger. “Now you can stay close no matter what happens.”

Marc kissed her and rubbed her neck, being easy on her scars. She now had so many it was impossible not to touch one whenever they got close.

Only a few people noticed the moment, but those who did cheered for the couple.

Adrian watched, hurting and happy for Marc at the same time.

Eagles hurried to secure the scene and verify the smoking hole in the deck wasn’t something they had to worry over.

Angela reluctantly pulled away and went toward the stairs. She raised her voice. “The trial resumes in five minutes!”

She’d left Neil with his team and the captain’s security. She didn’t want them alone any longer than necessary.

Marc frowned at Kenn. “What trial? What’s going on?”

Angela pointed at Kronus. “He stays with the enforcer; the enforcer stays with her mission crew.” Angela wasn’t happy to see Kronus, but she also wasn’t surprised.

Kyle’s team immediately came over to surround Jennifer and the wayward angel.

“There’s a large serving area off the ballroom where we’re holding the trial. They can watch and be quarantined until the QZ is prepared. Make sure it’s big enough to hold everyone.” Angela waved at Stanley, who surprisingly, had been the only one able to stay on her heels as she twisted through the hallways and up the stairs. He knew the ship’s passages as well as she did. “Bring them food. Do *not* go inside.”

Stanley hurried off to do as told, leaving Kyle’s team to escort them to the temporary quarantine room. It was slow going while they waited for Kronus. The pain from his injuries was reminding him where he was.

Kenn motioned Marc toward Ivan, seeing his bruises were fading. The black and purple splotches dotted across his face, arms, and neck were now yellowing. “It’s a long story, dude. Get it from him. I need to get this corpse out of here.”

Ivan sucked in air, tired and aching. He didn’t want to tell Marc what had happened. For Ivan, one of his team slacking off was a failure in his job to protect Angela.

Marc took pity. “It’s not an easy job.”

Ivan snorted. “No.” He straightened his shoulders. “Come with me. I’ll give you the full after I check on our prisoners. I want to be sure this wasn’t a decoy to cover an escape.”

Marc fell in, picking up images from the passengers around them. Rachel’s attempted bombing hadn’t even been suspected. They’d had too many other things going on. *I can’t leave to find my daughter. I’ll be sacrificing this family for that one.*

Kyle brought Kronus, helping the angel. Kyle wasn’t sure, but he thought the man was getting weaker despite not having an open injury or expending energy.

Marc slowed to let Kyle catch up.

Ivan waved Travis to go check the brig and detoured toward the courtroom instead. He needed to get this update with Marc out of the way. The team had to be told about Neil. Putting it off wouldn’t make it easier.

Camp members gave the newest arrival a quick scan and dismissed him as a lost soul that Angela had ordered brought back. The camp also began realizing they now had a third boat and approved.

The descendants dug into thoughts and then stared at Kronus in instant dislike. They recognized him.

So did the Eagles. Marc’s team was surrounded by security as they traversed the stairs with Ivan.

Adrian walked next to Marc. *She’s been searching the future. She has a new mark on her wrist. It overlaps, so she’s hoping we won’t notice.*

*We’ll add that to the list. Ivan’s wondering if he should tell me she got sick while we were gone. I want to wait and see if he does.*

“I can remove that for her.”

Marc and Adrian waited for Kyle and the angel, who was limping along.

“How do–”

“What’s the price?” Marc interrupted, flashing a hard glare at Adrian. “’Cause that’s the one we need to know.”

“Later.” Adrian could feel Angela’s attention starting to shift in their direction.

People stood to the sides or simply stopped to let them go by, lips curling at the sight of the team. The smell hit them next. All the mission members were covered in blood and garbage. It was obvious their run had not been fun.

“There’s a ship out there!” Some people were just now heading up the stairs.

“That was our ride home.” Marc spoke up. “There’s no one alive on that ship but Eagles.”

People around them relaxed and began to pass the word they were not under attack from the UN again. Then the realization set in that it was the same ship from the shore. People looked around for bloody kids on the rampage.

Annoyed, Marc delivered a glare. “It was the crazy lady with the grenades you needed to watch out for. Leave the damn kids alone.”

Agreement and shame floated through the hallways, muting further conversations and thoughts.

The mission team was glad. It had been a nasty run and they’d come home to find chaos. They were eager to be filled in on the details that could only come when they were alone with Kyle’s team.

Kyle pointed as they neared the ballroom. “There’s our baby.”

Jennifer and Kyle both waved to little Autumn, who had a surgical mask over her face and was being held by Allison. They both looked fine.

“I knew I liked her.” Kyle approved the extra protections. They were in quarantine even though it wasn’t official yet. Allison was obeying the rules. Kyle’s estimation of her went up a little.

It scared Jennifer. She moved into the quarantine room and got as far away from the door as she could in case she was carrying anything that might travel on the air to her baby.

Daryl got them all inside and shut the door.

“We told her not to come out of the room yet, but she said Autumn wanted to see her mommy.”

“It’s fine.” Kyle wasn’t as concerned with that as he was with the trial they were about to witness.

“No, it’s not.” Jennifer was now pissed. “She wasn’t supposed to come out of that room until I knocked on the door. Allison will never watch her again.”

Kyle frowned, but didn’t argue. He hoped Jennifer changed her mind. When she remembered how easy it was for Autumn to twist adults into doing what she wanted, Jennifer might relent.

Jennifer snorted and took a seat at the end of the table, not wanting to discuss it.

Kyle hid a smirk and joined her.

Marc and Adrian both pointed toward the farthest corner, insisting Kronus go there. It wasn’t so that he was heavily protected. It was so he had to go through all of them to reach the exit.

Kronus took the seat without argument. He had woken with Kyle kicking him, while telling the captain he would blow her brains out if she tried anything. It wasn’t the waking he was used to.

Kyle’s team waited for everyone to sit, all aware of time slipping away.

Marc and Adrian settled closest to the doors, both grunting as they sank into the comfortable seats. It had been a long trip and none of them had slept yet, except for Kyle, who hadn’t exactly been willing.

Jennifer kicked off her boots as soon as she got them unlaced, then leaned against her husband to listen.

Morgan, Ben, Whitney, and Daryl took up places along the wall between the quarantined people and the door, exactly the way they were supposed to by Adrian’s training. Four of the five people in this room were not a threat, but the way Kyle had treated the new arrival was already making them twitchy.

Kyle put an arm around Jennifer’s shoulders and gave Daryl a nod. “Let’s hear it.”

Daryl had tried to memorize what he was going to say to his team leader about the security failures while he’d been gone, but all those felt weak now, as if they were excuses instead of an explanation. He decided to go with a short version that didn’t cast any blame or accept any. “The boss exposed a number of people during the camp meeting. We were in the middle of handling those when Becky and Seth were found dead in the brig. Angela suspended the meeting so we could investigate. We collected evidence. This morning, Neil’s trial began.”

“Neil?!”

“That can’t be right.”

“Did he say Neil?”

Shock floated through the room, bringing adrenaline and alertness to the team.

“What evidence?”

“How did they die?”

“I know Neil better than anyone here. He would never harm Becky. The most he might do is kick Seth’s ass, which he needed.”

“Let’s just show them.” Daryl pointed to the boxes along the far wall as everyone on the mission team asked questions or defended Neil’s honor. “The defense and prosecution have their files stored in here. You can go through the case and see what we’re up against.”

Kyle’s team began grabbing those boxes and bringing them over to the two long tables. As they laid out the evidence, it was obvious why the mood was so rough on the ship. It looked bad for Neil.

“It’s going to take us a while to go through this. I don’t think we’ll get done before the trial is over.” Marc was looking through the baggies.

“We have a plan.” Ben leaned down, lowering his voice as he rested his elbows on the table. “It was Samantha’s idea, but we’ve all contributed.”

Marc didn’t hesitate. “I’m in. Tell me.” There was no doubt in his mind that whatever evidence they had against Neil had either been manufactured or he had a good reason for what he’d done. Neil was one of the few people in this camp that Marc trusted in every way. *Except about Becky...*

The rest of the team added their support and agreement before hearing the details. Like Marc, they had come to know Neil since joining Safe Haven. He wasn’t a murderer.

Kyle’s team filled them in, relieved there wasn’t going to be morality or ethics lectures from Marc or their enforcer. It was wonderful to know that when it came to Neil’s character, they were all in agreement. He was innocent.

**4**

“Would anyone else like to speak on behalf of the defendant?”

“I would.”

“So would I.”

“Same here.”

“I will.” Kyle entered through the rear entrance. He went to stand by Neil’s chair. “None of us have an alibi either.”

Jennifer went to stand in front of Angela, reading her thoughts and needs for this moment. “I left my demon here to watch over Autumn. I think she did it while I was gone.”

The camp gasped. No one had brought up that possibility.

Angela scowled. “Why would *your* demon kill Seth and Becky?”

“This is my home. It would have bothered me to have all the Becky, Seth, Neil drama. It would have distracted me and kept me busy on unimportant stuff. My demon knows that.”

“Actually, I was going to say the same thing, except Neil’s my friend. My demon was supposed to defend Angie and my boys, but he wouldn’t want my best friend hurting that way.” Marc gave a wide eyed, innocent expression as he went to the other side of Neil’s seat. “I can’t be sure.”

Angela grunted. “We’ll add you to the list of people who’ve stood here today and given us a similar testimony.” She waved a tired hand. “Anyone else want to confess before the jury deliberates?”

Silence, finally. Angela pointed. “Take those two defendants into custody. The rest of the crew needs to be quarantined until Tonya can get their bloodwork done.”

Sentries came forward to lead Marc and Adrian from the chamber.

Jennifer went back toward the serving area, flashing the details she’d read from Angela. “A lot happened while we were gone.”

“Apparently.” Adrian didn’t protest as he was cuffed.

Marc wasn’t cuffed, but the looks and body language were hostile. “Safe Haven is settling all its problems.”

“Yes, we are.” Ivan opened the door to the hallway. “Have a seat on that bench. A medic will be by shortly.” He let them go out and fastened the door. He went to stand guard over Jennifer and the new man until an escort came for them. “They’ll be fine. No one wants *them* dead.”

Jennifer placed a hand on his wrist, eager to get the rest of the details. “Do you mind?”

Ivan shook his head, glad the team was home. *Now things can calm down.*

Jennifer cackled without humor. “Since when have we ever calmed things?”

**5**

“This is the testimony of Todd O’Neil, accused of double homicide.” Angela began the final part of the trial with relief and fear. She was glad it was almost over, but the outcome appeared terrifying. “Because the defendant claims to have no memory of the events, I’ve decided to test that. Does anyone object?”

The camp didn’t, but they expected Samantha to.

Samantha sat with her arms over her stomach, waiting. If Angela didn’t test Neil, Jennifer would. It was better this way.

Angela scowled at her. *Better for who?*

Samantha lifted her chin. “We don’t object to your tests. You may proceed.”

The camp snickered at her choice of words.

Angela stored it with the other oddities she’d picked up in the last few hours. “Very well. I’ve asked a few descendants to check Neil’s mind for lies and memories.”

“I’m not lying. I don’t have any memories.” Neil frowned at the people now coming toward him. “I didn’t even know we were on a ship until someone told me!”

Charlie, Conner, Kendle, and Kenn stopped in front of Neil.

“All four will examine your mind at the same time to keep you from blocking. It’ll be easier if you just relax and let them in.”

Neil’s grip tightened on the chair for an instant and then he stilled, body relaxing. “I have nothing to hide.”

Angela nodded.

The descendants shoved into Neil’s mind, searching for anything.

Angela entered Kenn’s mind to view from there. He knew more of what to hunt for than the others. Also, Neil wouldn’t expect her to merge with Kenn.

Kenn held in a groan but not his first thought. *I’ve always wanted this.*

Angela knew. *Get started!*

Kenn strode forward. “I’ve known you since I joined Safe Haven in March. Do you know me?”

Everyone held their breath as descendants dug in to view any flashes Neil might have.

Neil shook his head. “No. I’ve heard stories.”

“We’ve been on missions together. We don’t like each other. Do you know why?”

Again, Neil shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember.”

Angela shoved forward and ripped Neil’s mental wall down. She peered over his landscape with glowing red orbs and found only white, dusty clouds. She stayed, chasing shadows while the others asked their questions or told stories to trigger his memories.

“My dad trained you. Your best friend died in an earthquake, under the mountain.” Charlie had decided to go straight for the throat of Neil emotions.

Conner did too. “You were worried about having a relationship with an underage girl, Becky.”

Kendle could only use the memory she had, digging into him like the others were. “You beat my ass in kai, along with everyone else’s.”

Kenn finished the first round. “You lost your dad in the war. You saw him die.”

Neil stared at them as they spoke, head turning. “Keep going? It might help me remember.”

Angela pulled out of Kenn’s mind as it continued, hair rising on her neck. *This isn’t right. Clouds are not a sign of a sleep spell or a memory wipe.*

“You and Jeremy fought over Samantha at first.”

“You were a state trooper. So was your dad. That’s why you have the hat. You wear it to keep your father’s memory alive.”

“You’re a good man and a top Eagle. We need to know who did this to you.” Conner fought through another layer of the thick clouds.

Angela watched Neil instead of the mental battles. He was staring at Conner with a hopeful expression, but… His fingers under the chair arm curled, tensed. *He’s struggling with something.* Angela knew it could be any number of things, such as embarrassment at the mental violations, but it didn’t match his expression. She looked at Kenn.

Kenn shook his head. *None of us are getting anything.*

“That’s enough! I object!” Samantha had stayed quiet while they all dug into his brain like he was a criminal. She couldn’t take any more. “There’s nothing there!” She swallowed a sob. “He’s gone now. Someone took him from us.”

*Another wise choice of words*, Angela thought as the camp made comforting sounds or muttered. If this was an act, it was winning them over. The part of Angela that adored Neil and trusted him wanted to stop, but her honor wouldn’t allow it. She restlessly fingered her ring, causing it to glint as she contemplated her next option.

The light hit Kendle, drawing her attention. Pain sank in as she realized what it was. *He asked her and she said yes. They’re getting married.*

Angela turned to Neil. “I’m going to try to remove the memory spell now. The book William gave me has a charm for it. Do I have your permission to try?”

Neil’s head bobbed. “Of course. I need to know who I am, what happened to me.”

Again, it was exactly the right thing to say.

Angela muttered the charm, not providing any warning. She saw his fingers brace against the underside of the chair.

Everyone went still and quiet, watching her work.

The charm was only three sentences, but a powerful blast of magic swirled out of the air and settled over Neil like someone sprinkling dust. The descendants in front of him dug in harder, hoping to be able to observe what had been hidden before.

Angela let go and sucked in air. “It didn’t work.”

That was the first for the camp, and for her. Angela hadn’t had failures in magic, only in predictions that were subject to change from a person’s choices. This should have been easy. “I want Conner to try.”

Conner stepped forward. Angela had given him a copy of the charm that he had burned after memorizing it. He slammed Neil with a strong version. He’d been storing energy all day to use for this moment, upon Angela’s request.

Neil stared blankly, waiting for it to be over.

“Are you satisfied now?!”

Angela shook her head at Samantha. “Not in the least, but there doesn’t seem to be anything I can do about that at the moment.” She looked back at Neil. “I need your word you’ll tell us if you have flashes or regain your memory.”

Neil scoffed. “Anyone around me will know. I’ll probably start crying.”

“*Aww.*” The camp was being swayed every time he spoke.

“Would you be willing to reopen this trial if you do regain your memory?”

Neil looked straight at her. “I’ll always follow the law.”

Samantha and Angela both caught the careful wording this time, but there was nothing else Angela could do and nothing else Sam was willing to do. It would be up to the camp.

“Is there anything you would like to say before we retire to deliberate?”

Neil stood, hands still ringing the hat instead of twisting it. “I’ll do whatever it takes to regain my memory. I’m sorry this happened, whatever it is, but I won’t stop trying. I’ll figure out what happened to me and then I’ll tell you, so you can do something about it. I deserve justice even if I don’t know who I am.” He looked at Samantha and the group of men sitting behind her. “Thank you for defending me. I’m sorry I don’t remember you. I know that must hurt. I’m grateful and I’ll try to make this up to you somehow.”

Neil sounded lost. Even Angela was swayed, and she *knew* something wasn’t right. “Go ahead and make your closing statement.” Angela didn’t see any need for it now, but it was the way things had to be handled. Neil was going to be found not guilty because they couldn’t prove it. Magic coming into the mix had changed the rules of investigating. It was possible that Samantha’s explanation was true, that Becky had arranged all of this. Samantha had found Neil his shadow of a doubt.

*I just found a place where my kind can exploit the law and maybe get away with murder.* Angela pushed aside her anger. *But now, I know, don’t I? This won’t work again. Every time someone slides by the law, I’m going to plug that hole or seal that leak until nothing escapes justice. We will never return to the way it was before the war, ever. That includes using Time Keepers for a reset.*

Samantha stepped to the front of the room, taking the time to look around and meet the eye of each and every person who was going to decide Neil’s fate. It took a minute. In the silence, tension grew. Everyone waited to hear her words, most hoping she would be able to save Neil.

Samantha turned to look at Angela as she began. “The prosecution left out a key ingredient in her summary. *Magic* was involved here. We know that a sleep spell was used. Neil didn’t have a sleep gift. In fact, Neil refused to open his gifts at all. He was what we call an Invisible. He couldn’t read minds until I got pregnant. Even then, it was only when we had close contact. We all know what Angela said about power rubbing off, but I don’t have sleep abilities. There’s no way I could have passed that to him, even by accident. The prosecution’s entire case rests on the theory that Neil wiped his own memory. Yet the prosecution has agreed it’s unlikely. There are no known cases of it. He couldn’t possibly have done it, because he did not have the skills needed to commit the crime.”

People nodded, convincing Angela she was right about the outcome. *So why am I not happy about that?*

“Neil has more honor than anybody I’ve ever met. We were all shocked to find out he was attracted to Becky, but no one here can say they haven’t had impure thoughts about someone they shouldn’t have. It might have been your best friend’s girlfriend. Might have been your mom’s new wife; it might have been the boy across the classroom from you, or the guy who worked in the cubicle next to yours, or the girl who delivered the packages. We’ve all had those thoughts. We didn’t act on them and neither did Neil. *Rick* was the one who raped her. Don’t confuse the two men, because they are *nothing* alike. Becky came back here with a vendetta and she carried it out. Now, we all have to deal with this farce of the trial when we know Neil’s not capable of doing this to anyone.” Samantha quickly laid out the rest of the holes in the case. “We’ve heard testimony from the guards and various people throughout the ship who heard Becky swear she was going to try again. We know she was capable of this crime. Becky had the skills. She was there. She had the motive. She wanted to hurt us. The changes in behavior were obvious. She could have evolved with the sleep gift without any of us knowing. Angela admitted she may have missed it on a scan, or someone may have evolved with it and we didn’t know. There are too many ifs, ands, or buts in this case. If you find him guilty, *you* are the ones committing murder.” Samantha sat, hoping it had been enough. “The defense rests.”

Silence held across the courtroom for a long moment as people considered and then agreed with Samantha. Despite small, tantalizing clues, there was no true proof.

Eagles were torn. Cameras were going to be installed in the brig and hallways, and all the other cameras on the ship were going to be activated. The Eagles were looking forward to receiving the order. It wouldn’t be allowed to happen this way again.

“There will now be a one-hour break for a meal and deliberations. Defendants will be returned to their cells or taken to quarantine areas. Everyone is allowed to talk about everything, but I don’t want a single fight or argument. Remember who you are and what we’re doing here.” Angela smacked the table. “Court adjourned.”

**6**

Brittani heard steps coming behind her and recognized them, but she still wasn’t able to make the decision. She was standing between the two cabin doors, both keys in hand.

Daryl stopped behind her, not sure exactly what to say. It was obvious she was having second thoughts.

“It’s not second thoughts. It’s just a big step to live together.”

“You could consider it bunkmates if you like. We can make it clear to everyone that we’re not a committed couple; we’re sharing a room.”

Brittani contemplated that option, not pleased to have a third one to pick from. As she did, she realized it was the most viable option for how she was feeling. “Are you okay with us doing it that way?”

Daryl smiled, relief coming into his heart. “I’d be honored to do it that way. When we get to the island, we can discuss the next step or maybe we can even keep this cabin when the camp moves into the bunkhouse on Pitcairn.”

“Do you think Angela will let us?”

“Of course.” He paused as someone went by, singing about a demon samurai. He snickered and continued. “There’s not going to be room for all these passengers in the bunkhouse in the first year we’re there. Some people will need to stay on the boat to keep the water and power flowing, and some passengers will stay on the boat because they can’t be on land again unless it’s America.” Daryl glanced down the hall toward the leadership cabins. “I’ll bet we have a lot of company if we decide to stay onboard.”

“Good. I like some of these people.”

Daryl stepped by her and unlocked the door to her right but stayed in the hallway. “They like you too.” He stared at her, not wanting the moment to end yet. He didn’t assume being roommates would begin now.

Brittani knew that. It allowed her to step inside and shut the door.

Daryl followed her in surprise. When she shut the door and she latched it, his heart leapt.

Brittani leaned against the door and surveyed his residence. He appeared to be a neat freak, like herself. *That’s good*. She swept for other compatibility issues. She was able to view into the restroom from here. It too appeared clean. In fact, the only clutter she found was a small stack of papers on the table next to the bed and a few items in the garbage can.

She studied the pictures on the wall and then the other decorations, trying to determine if he had made any changes. She was curious as to his personal style. That wouldn’t affect them being bunkmates, but it would tell her more about what type of a person he was.

Daryl got into his dresser and pulled out a change of clothes. He hoped it didn’t bother her that every item was folded in exact squares or triangles. He just liked his stuff that way. She didn’t have to do it too. “I need to take a quick shower and then I’d be happy to escort you to the trial vote.” He moved to the lavatory. “You can ask me anything you want then.”

Brittani sat to wait, in a great mood. It had been a good day for her. She’d been assigned to the captain’s protection crew. She’d been placed on a rookie Eagle team; everyone had loved her food at every meal since they set sail and today had been no exception. She could tell how Neil’s trial was going to go. The mood later would be great too. Now, she got to spend time with her love interest. The only thing that could make it better was something she wasn’t going to allow to happen yet, despite being attracted to Daryl. They were going to take time. They weren’t rushing into anything; they weren’t just in lust. She wanted the real thing this time and she was willing to wait to verify that’s what this was.

“Do you think we did enough for Neil?”

“Yes, I do.” Brittani was sure he would be released. She didn’t think he was guilty and she planned to vote that way.

“I hope so. We need him.”

Brittani hadn’t realized Daryl was worried over it. He hid his emotions well.

“It’s the training. You’ll be able to do it too at some point.”

“Good. I hate it when people see me as weak.”

“Most of us do.” Daryl came from the bathroom, pulling his shirt on. “I’m ready if you are.”

Brittani gawked at his body. He was in incredible shape.

Daryl blushed. “Thank you.” His interest faded as voices echoed down the hall, arguing lightly about the coming vote.

Brittani tried to offer comfort. “If it goes bad, we could always help Neil escape.”

Daryl didn’t laugh. “Yes, we can.”

**7**

“She put me on the meal crew.” Tracy moved her rook forward to flank her knight and tried to ignore the crowded galley around them.

“You don’t seem upset.” Charlie took her front pawn with one of his.

“I’m not. Many of her pet projects are there.”

Charlie went over the list in his head. He was in the middle of memorizing all the teams; the meal crew had been listed first. “Brittani and Jayda, I understand. I don’t know Drew, Corey, or Hailey very well. They’re from Ciemus, so I’m not sure about them, but Stanley?”

Tracy chuckled. “She wanted him to have more than just a reputation as a klutz.”

“That makes sense.” Charlie waited for her to move again. “I got the cleaning crew.”

“You also sound happy about it.”

“I am. It’s great.”

Tracy moved her rook closer, trying to squeeze his bishop. “Why?”

“I’m with people I’ve always wanted to learn from, and Dog. I get to roam the ship at night.” He took her rook with his queen.

Tracy frowned at him. “Will it be that way when we get married?”

Sparks flew between them as Charlie smiled. “I’ll be there as much as you want me to be.” Heat flew again. They were avoiding physical contact until the wedding to throw off more suspicion for when she would reveal her pregnancy. Only a few people knew, and they weren’t going to tell.

“That reminds me. Candy wants to plan our wedding.”

Charlie shrugged. She would find out at the last minute that he’d planned it. Candy was his cover. “I don’t mind if you don’t, but Conner can’t help her this time. They’re not even allowed to be in the same room unless it’s for meals or meetings.”

“That sucks for them. It makes me glad we’re following the rules now.”

“Me too.” Charlie couldn’t help his thought. *But I’m staying hard an awful lot. It can’t be medically safe to walk around like this.*

Tracy giggled. “That’s not right.”

Charlie stared at her. “No, *that’s* not right. You just read my mind.”

Tracy stared in shock for a minute before breaking into a smile. “I guess that means our baby is a descendant.”

“Ten minutes until the vote.” Ivan called the reminder from the doorway. “Go in, mark your choice on the chalkboard, then take a seat while we count. Ten minutes, folks. Be in the courtroom in ten.”  
Tracy sighed as Charlie put her in checkmate. “I’ll be glad when this is over.”

Charlie patted her hand, then stood. “Me too. Let’s go help save Neil and then we’ll come back and you can try again.”

Tracy chuckled, letting him take her arm as she stood. “How about we play Battleship? I might get lucky and win that one.”

“Whatever you want.”

Tracy could tell he meant that. “You’ve changed.”

Charlie held out an arm to her. “Thank my mom. She knew what I needed.”

Tracy curled her hand around his wrist. “I will. But not until she’s in a better mood, you know?”

Charlie frowned instead of laughing like she’d expected. “It might be a long wait.”

“Why do you say that?”

Charlie shrugged. “Just a feeling. I don’t think Neil’s trial is the reason she’s stressing right now.”

“Why?”

“She’s thinking about searching the future, not the past. Something else is wrong, but she doesn’t know what it is. Her mood won’t improve until she figures it out.”

Tracy stayed close to Charlie as they joined the line forming in the ballroom. It took a few minutes to reach the chalkboard where Kenn was supervising the vote.

“Make your mark small to save room, then initial it for the official record.”

Tracy took the chalk and made her mark. She doubted her vote mattered to anyone by itself, but with the other votes on here, it gave Neil’s support another layer. Out of thirty votes, twenty-seven of them were for acquittal. Charlie’s made twenty-eight of thirty-one. *Those are great odds.* Tracy let Charlie lead her to a seat, not saying anything else with so many people around. She also tried not to think about anything that would get them in trouble.

Charlie frowned at her. “We don’t have anything like that… Do we?”

Tracy shook her head, eyes begging him to leave it alone.

Charlie did, but his mood began to sink. “Good. We don’t need more trouble.”

“Where’s Samantha?” Tracy neatly changed the subject.

“She took a tray to Neil. She’ll probably walk up with him for the results.”

The room filled as people voted and sat, all counting the totals. Everyone liked this setup more than Adrian’s locked voting box. It was a bit like watching election results, except this was life or death being decided–Neil’s.

**8**

“Not guilty!” Angela smacked the table.

Almost everyone cheered, but none louder than Neil’s team. They surrounded him and Samantha.

Neil clasped hands and grinned, but he still gazed around in confusion.

The guards and his team wondered if he would be back on duty any time soon.

“Can I help him regain his memory?” Jennifer was next to Angela, still covered in dried blood.

“No, but Samantha can. Put them together tonight, alone.”

“Guards?”

Angela nodded. “In case of retaliation.”

“It’s not needed.”

Angela narrowed in on Neil, who was being hugged by Samantha so hard that his face was turning red. *Oh, yes, it is.*

Jennifer added the clues and flashed Angela a hand gesture to keep anyone from knowing. *What’s wrong?*

Angela frowned. “That’s what I want to know.” She smacked the table again to get attention. “I know it’s dinner time, but I want this done and over with. We’re finishing the last two trials and then everyone can go eat and enjoy their downtime.” She gestured at Kenn. “Bring in Adrian.”

Adrian had been sitting in the hallway, cuffed, for hours. He’d snoozed a bit and read thoughts to get caught up on what he’d missed, but he’d mostly just listened to Angela handling the first murder trial of the new world. He’d recognized some of the changes she’d made and approved. Others, he never would have thought of.

Greg brought Adrian to stand in front of Angela and returned to his place by the door. He didn’t look at Marc, who was also sitting out here, being gawked at by camp members who didn’t want to squeeze inside. The outcome of Adrian’s trial would give them a clue about how things would go for Marc.

Angela pointed at Adrian. “You were banished and returned, repeatedly. You’ve also saved this camp, repeatedly. There’s no need to go over everything–we know what happened. All the camp has to do is decide what we do with you now. Before we get to those choices, you may speak on your own behalf.”

“I’m sorry, for everything.” Adrian glanced around the camp, at the people he’d once been bonded with. “I really am.” He sat down.

“The choices are death, re-banishing, or removing the punishment. Please come up and put an x on the second chalkboard under your choice, like you did for Neil’s trial.”

Kenn held out the chalk to the first person in line. He’d already photographed and flipped the side from Neil’s vote. “Make it small so they’ll all fit, then initial it for the official record.”

Angela studied Adrian as the Eagles came down. What they decided would be followed by citizens.

Camp members moved aside to let them go first.

Kyle made his mark, talking over the surprised murmurs. “Conditional works for me now. If he breaks those rules, I’ll ask for death.”

And with that, Adrian’s future was set.

Tension broke. If Adrian was being given another chance, so would Marc.

Angela waited for her heart to settle into a calmer rhythm. When it didn’t, she allowed the worry to sink in and start festering. *Something’s still wrong. What have I missed?!*

Chapter Thirty-Three

**The Truth**

**A close up of a flower

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“C**ongratulations.” Adrian eased into the lounge seat across from Marc, ready to get right back up if he wasn’t welcome.

“Yeah.” Marc had been returned to Eagle duty and cleared to resume his place on the council if the boss and the other members wanted it. Marc had refused the council spot and taken the offered body man duty over Angela. He’d gotten everything he needed, but it didn’t feel good.

The afterparty was in full swing with dancing, drinking, tables for games, booths for a bit of privacy, and lonely tables for those on the fringe of being welcome. The camp was satisfied, and it showed in the good mood. More bad people had been removed. A good man had been cleared. The ship was once again able to sail, declared safe by their engineers. The hole had been roped off so no one tripped and fell in, but there was little else they could do for it right now. Only the deck and the rail had been damaged. Despite not being able to repair it, the ship didn’t feel angry. Like the camp members, there was a sense that the ship was relieved to still be alive at all.

Around them, the camp and Eagles shared stories and companionship. They were thrilled with the outcomes from the day. Not only had the mad bomber, as she was being called, been stopped, but Neil had been found not guilty. It was okay to still believe in Safe Haven’s goodness.

Neil, also surrounded, was shaking hands and smiling, but he didn’t appear okay to Marc.

Adrian mirrored that thought. *He seems half there.*

*That’s what saved him. He seems like an innocent man and not a killer. It gave him a huge margin.*

Marc brooded. *But we know better.*

Adrian nodded. *Yes. Let’s move on. Too many ears.* “Thank you for not stopping them from clearing me.”

Marc shrugged. “You’re on conditional banishment.”

“Still, thank you.”

“You know why I didn’t. Don’t thank me.”

“Fair enough. The UN captain was sent away with the other criminals.”

“Really?” Marc examined that clue. “So, we didn’t go for another captain.”

“And check this out. I saw explosives crates being carried to that ship. She didn’t want it either.”

“What about Kronus? Are we supposed to reform him or use him, do you think?”

“I don’t know.” Adrian drank from his beer and belched. “One of us needs to get in good with her again and then we’d have these details.”

Marc’s sharp mind flashed to the instant during the power meeting when Angela had whispered into Kronus’s ear. The angel had immediately scoffed, but… *What if he lied? What if that wasn’t really what she said at all?*

Adrian shrugged. “The players directed evil to us so we would remove it. Our journey can now resume.”

The ship radio crackled. “We have full power to all parts of the ship again. As a special treat, I’m switching on the holiday lights for us to enjoy. Don’t be alarmed by things suddenly starting. It’s just me up here playing with the buttons.”

People laughed at Grant’s message, looking around as several lights changed colors and a display cabinet in the hall came to life with Christmas carols as a guard went by.

Marc frowned. “I thought they weren’t helping or hurting us anymore.”

Adrian sighed. “The players are addicts to the games they’ve betted on for so long. Only the Creator can make them stop.”

“So we’re stuck with it.”

“Yes. Speaking of stuck, Kendle saw Angela’s ring.”

“How’d she take it?”

*Ah, a nibble*. Adrian shrugged. “About as well as she could. She went to help clean the top deck.”

“She’s hoping one of the guilty people will try to hurt her. They’re being put off the ship right now.”

“So she can kill them and have a reason to taste blood?”

“So she can die an honorable death.”

“Will any of them try?” The camp had given into Angela about not killing the criminals, but they’d refused to share any supplies. They’d told her the lifeboat was almost too much.

“No, she’s not getting out that easy. She’s been cursed. Happened while we were gone, I assume.”

“Cursed?”

“She won’t feel much happiness unless someone cares enough about her to break the curse.”

“How long does something like that last?”

Adrian scowled at the callous tone. “Could be a long time.”

“Years?”

Adrian slowly nodded, feeling another deal coming. “Why?”

Marc stood up. “If she survives that long without interfering between me and Angie, or breaking a camp rule, she can have my four months on the return trip. I’ll free her.”

Adrian swallowed triumph in place of fear. “Angela heard that.”

“I know.” Marc strolled toward his mate. “She’s getting what she wants. Why shouldn’t I?”

Angela took the hand Marc held out, sliding into his arms as music blared. She snuggled close, resting her head on his shoulder. She didn’t speak or think anything. She just enjoyed being in his arms.

Screams pulled her back to reality.

“Randal just heard the last boat to land is being launched and he’s not on it.”

She sighed. “Will you escort me there when it’s time?”

“No. Kyle’s going now. It’s his job.”

“I didn’t want his first duty upon returning to be killing.”

“It wasn’t. He saved his friend.”

“Neil was going to be found not guilty.”

“I assumed. Do you know who murdered them?”

Angela shook her head. “I prefer to believe the story Samantha presented.”

“So does the camp.”

Angela leaned back in his arms so she could look at him. “What about Marc?”

He kept his face blank. “Marc thinks whatever the queen wants him to.”

Angela curled arms around his neck, leaning in. “*Find out.*”

Marc nodded. “Consider it done.”

Angela swept the room, picking up only good vibes that didn’t sooth her as it should have. The UN ship had been cleared and was bobbing peacefully alongside. The kids who’d spent time on that ship refused to sit by a window where they’d have to look at it. Rachel’s family was here too, though they were at a fringe table. Leeroy hadn’t known his wife was stealing grenades or planning to blow them all up. He’d helped move her body below and then he’d stayed with the crew to help clear the rest of the path to the morgue. There were now three bodies in it.

Leeroy wasn’t saying much, but there was a sense that he was relieved. The same couldn’t be said of his daughter. Sally was leaking continuous tears. Angela motioned Brea toward their table, hoping the tough girl might be able to help Sally adjust. In time, it would get easier for that broken family because they would hear everyone else’s stories. Several of Safe Haven’s members had friends or family who’d tried to kill the dream. That wouldn’t change. Madness had always been present in society. Now, it was loose and growing. There would be more problems in the future. It couldn’t be avoided, only survived.

“Adrian wants some time with you.” Marc dipped her and brought her in close. “I’ll arrange it, or Ivan will.”

“You.” Angela fingered her ring. “And do whatever you two have planned on *tonight*. If you wait until tomorrow, I’ll never agree.”

Marc spun her and paused them apart. “Are you sure? I can get the information in other ways.”

He tugged her in, but Angela stopped, hands coming to his chest. “Let’s get it done and see where we go from here. Everyone else is having a last debauch as we sail. It’s our turn.”

“Is that what you’ll tell yourself while it’s happening?”

She gave a sad smile. “I’ll be thinking how much I love you.”

“And after?”

“How awful I am for enjoying it.”

“And you still want to?”

“Yes.”

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. “I just needed to be sure our reactions would match.”

Angela held him tight. For one night, she could get a taste of Samantha’s life. That could hold her for years. *And then I’ll destroy all their clever plans. No one decides my future but me.* She scanned the celebrating passengers over Marc’s shoulder again, coming to rest on Neil. *And no one gets something over on me without paying the price.*

Marc shivered at the wave of dangerous desire. “Planning death and chaos again, darling?”

Angela shut her lids. “Always.”

Marc rubbed her shoulder and gave Adrian a subtle nod. *Tonight*.

Adrian got up and left the lonely table to make arrangements.

Angela felt the mood shift. “Go have some time to yourself. Cody’s still up.”

Marc kissed her cheek and stepped back.

Ivan was there to offer his arm.

Marc surrendered her without jealousy. Ivan had a long way to go before he could compete. Marc had accepted that now.

Ivan held her away from his body despite wanting to treat her like a lover. “How are you feeling?”

“Horny.”

Ivan cackled. “Well, Marc will handle that soon enough. Anything I can do for you?”

Angela rested her head on his shoulder.

Ivan broke. He had no willpower against her feel. He wrapped her up close and let her put them body to body.

“Change your mind.”

“About what?”

“Not having a family to be hurt by. I was weak that day. I shouldn’t have influenced you.”

Ivan snorted, tingling from the contact. “We have plenty of breeders in Safe Haven now.”

“Do we?” Angela stared into his eyes. “We need leadership to procreate, Ivan. And many of them can’t or won’t. There’s not enough of us who are whole anymore.”

“Why leadership?”

“Would you rather have a world of Stanley’s running around screwing things up by accident or would you prefer a society of people like Marc or Kyle?”

“Wow. Hard choice.” He sniggered.

Angela sent a wave of power, making them both tremble. “Don’t turn her away. We need your bloodline to continue.”

“No.” Ivan kissed Angela on the cheek, no longer dancing. He memorized the feel of her. “I won’t be part of your breeding tree. I certainly won’t make a baby with that loud mouth, always-talking disappointment who could only get kitchen duty.” Ivan retreated, not wanting Angela to feel threatened by his anger. “There’s one woman on this ship who could get that from me and we both know it will never happen, so save that shit for the camp.” He walked away, not looking at Jayda as he passed her. “I’m moving out.”

Silence lingered as Ivan left. Even the music paused as the man running the radio, Gus, gaped in shock with everyone else.

“I’m sorry.” Angela tried to comfort Jayda. “I know you asked me for him, but he’s not available.”

“He never was.” Jayda stiffened her shoulders. “I’ll be fine. I just need to talk less.”

Angela hated the woman’s pain, but it was a common complaint behind her back. If she changed that behavior, she’d have more friends. “Come with me? I have rounds.”

Jayda didn’t want to, but she was eager to escape all the attention. “Sure.”

They left together, moving into the hallway as the music resumed.

As soon as they were out the door, Jayda began crying.

Angela put an arm around her. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Jayda sobbed. “Can you find me someone else? Someone who can accept me for me?”

“Before I try, can I ask something without you crying harder?”

Jayda sniffled. “Maybe.”

“Have you thought about becoming an Eagle and proving him wrong?”

“I want to be one. *You* put me on the kitchen crew.”

“You weren’t going to cut it before. I saved you that pain. I traded it for this one because I thought this would hurt less.”

“Well, it hurts a lot so that future must have been bad.”

“It was, but that’s all changed now. I believe you can do it.”

“Why?”

“You have a big goal now and there’s only one way you can accomplish it.”

“By succeeding.”

“Yes. If you become an Eagle, everyone will have to view you differently.”

“My second chance.”

“Yes.” Angela kept walking as Jayda stopped, thoughts racing. “Let him get his stuff out before you return, or he’ll fall on his knees to apologize and beg you to let him stay. Guilt is hitting him hard now.”

Jayda lifted her chin. “I’m going there to get my shit and he can beg all he wants. I want a baby, not a coward who never told me those things to my face.”

Angela let her go. Ivan deserved that for how he’d handled it, but the relationship had been doomed before she’d set it up. Ivan had no heart left to give. Angela smiled. *That’s mine and no one will ever have a chance at it.*

“Would you like to say hello to the little shitter?”

Angela beamed as Allison came down the hall and placed Autumn in her arms. Jennifer had chewed her out about leaving the room early. Allison had let her vent, then explained it was an order from Angela and even gotten an apology from the hard, teenage mother. “Hi, sweetheart!”

Autumn yawned, almost sleeping despite the noise.

Angela nuzzled the baby. “Having fun?”

“Absolutely.” Allison fingered the Midol bottle in the pocket of her jeans. “She’s a doll.”

“Jennifer and Kyle are on the top deck if you’re searching for them.” The team had been quickly cleared by Tonya, who could now probably get blood from that fabled turnip.

Allison shook her head, scanning the happy people through the open door. “I’ve got another hour on baby duty and I want it.” She felt someone staring at her and rotated to find Zack’s hot gaze on her legs. He was guarding the entrance to the lounge.

Allison enjoyed his flush as she caught him staring. She also liked it when he kept staring, silently asking if she was interested.

Allison grinned. “Your ribs healed up yet?”

Zack chortled. “Enough.”

Allison ignored the hoots from inside the lounge. Everyone could hear them. “We’ll see. Come find me when you’re off duty and we’ll take a walk on the top deck. I hear there’s moonlight and everything.”

Zack’s tension eased. “I’ll be there.”

“Woah, dad. Nice.” Mike was happy for him. The boys weren’t on duty, but they were hanging out at a table by their father.

Timmy shrugged at Zack’s look. “You’re old enough.”

Zack grinned. “So are you. Why not speak to the object of your desires?”

Timmy glanced over his shoulder at a quartet of females by the bar. They were having drinks and swaying to the music. “You think I should?”

“I believe she’ll say no, but if you don’t go all angry, you can find out why and fix it–if you agree it’s a problem.” Zack already knew Timmy’s attitude would be the issue.

Timmy stood up before he lost his nerve. He marched over to the women, arriving right as the song ended.

Timmy cleared his throat and tapped Cathy on the shoulder. “Hey.”

Cathy twisted around and lit up. “Hey yourself, young man!”

Timmy blushed at the heat in her voice. Cathy was a cougar and she didn’t pretend otherwise. He needed to get to her now, before he was too old. “I’m barely sixteen. That’s like riding the line on age. Can we maybe, date or some shit?”

Zack dropped his head. *Oh, my god.*

Cathy had known for a while that Timmy was hot for her. “I can’t, kid. You’re not an Eagle. That’s a deal breaker for me.”

Timmy brooded. “I thought it was age or…how mean I’ve been.”

“Nope. I like to play and all, but you said date. I won’t get serious with anyone who isn’t an Eagle.”

Timmy thought about it instead of getting mad, like his dad had suggested. “So if I were, and I was good at it, then…?”

Cathy chuckled. “Then we might spend some time together, boy.”

“I’m not a boy!”

His growl perked her up, bringing light to her eyes. She gave him a onceover from head to toe. “If you do well in the Eagles, we’ll hang out and get to know each other.”

Timmy grew cocky. “What if I make team leader?”

Heat came into Cathy’s gaze. “If you do that, we’ll take the couples’ class.”

“You mean it?”

She shrugged. “Why not? I need to pick someone to give me kids and I’ll bet you can go all night.”

People burst out laughing as Timmy grinned and returned to his dad.

“That was crazy.” Charlie held up a hand to Timmy. “Excellent!”

Timmy realized he’d gotten the opening Charlie had told him he needed and returned the gesture. “It’s cool.” Timmy sat at the table by the door and rotated the chair to include Charlie, who was at the next table playing Battleship with Tracy. “Maybe we could help throw you guys an engagement party or something.”

“That would be sweet.” Tracy was enjoying the peace.

“Yeah.”

At the counter, Monica and Rose were still teasing Cathy.

Cathy noticed Courtney staring in the mirror at someone behind them instead of joining in. They were usually all in it together. Cathy tried to determine who she was staring at.

Courtney looked at her friend. “Please don’t.”

The other women fell silent to listen.

Cathy smiled. “At least tell me if he’s on this ship.”

Courtney sighed, nodding. “He’s in this room. Now leave it be.”

“Why won’t you tell him? He deserves to know he’s going to be a father.”

“Because his *mate* won’t want to know. He’s taken. I was a relief source in a weak moment.”

“Oh.” Cathy put her arm around Courtney’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Courtney shrugged it off. “I’m not. I wanted a baby and he gave me one. I couldn’t love him more.”

“To love!” Rose held up her wine glass.

The women clinked and drank, but Courtney’s eyes went straight back to the mirror in longing.

People hooted and clapped across the room as Lou led Katie onto the dance floor.

Claire followed the trend and tapped Doug on the shoulder. “Want to dance?”

Doug stared, dumbfounded, as Roy and Romeo laughed and people jeered. “Me?”

Claire nodded. Doug had been assigned to duty over the captain; he was on Ray’s team now. Before that, he’d been trusted to defend Marc’s son while that man was away. Claire was thrilled. She’d been watching Doug since he returned.

“Are you playing a bad joke?” Doug was still certain no woman wanted him. Peggy hadn’t helped that theory.

Claire smiled, sending heat. “You’ll make a good dad and your kids will be healthy, survivors.”

Doug laughed weakly, dazed. “Be a big load for someone to carry.”

Claire patted her hips. “These were made wide. Let’s dance and see if we have anything in common.” She pulled on his arm.

Doug let her drag him to the floor, flushing.

Roy clapped for Doug while Romeo grinned and hooted. They wanted Doug to be happy, but they also wanted a mom.

At the next table, Ozzie nudged Theo. “Debra’s staring at you, man.”

Theo grunted, belching. “Like she wants me dead, right?”

“Kinda sad. Maybe you should go ask her to take a walk.”

“And beg for forgiveness?”

“Of course!” Ozzie laughed. “I bet she’s as miserable as you are.”

Theo stood up, immediately drawing attention. His too-big clothes were gone, replaced by formfitting gear that showed off how much he’d been working on himself physically. Muscles rippled like a cat as he went by, making mouths flood with saliva.

Debra looked up, unable to prevent the hunger that flashed out to greet Theo as he stopped by her table.

“Can we go for a walk and talk?” Theo was encouraged by her warmth and took a chance. “Or maybe we could just dance?”

“Oops.” Samantha dropped her head.

Neil looked around with wide eyes. “What?”

Samantha patted his wrist as Debra stood. “I’ll fill you in later, when you’re ready for it.”

Neil smiled at her. “Sure, Sam.”

“Samantha.” Her voice broke. “Unless we’re…getting close, you always called me Samantha.”

“Oh. Okay!” Neil was distracted by Debra picking up her glass.

Samantha sighed, not sure what to do next with Neil. If his memory returned, he might be in danger. If it didn’t, she’d still lost her mate.

Debra opened her mouth, forcing out air and words. “S-slam you!” She tossed the drink in Theo’s face and dropped the glass. It shattered on the ground.

Debra stepped over the pieces and grabbed Jeff from the next table. “Come!”

Jeff didn’t know what was happening, but he felt like he should go along with it since she was deaf. He didn’t want to be rude.

Debra snuggled into his arms. *Lead!*

Jeff realized she couldn’t hear the music and chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.” He tucked her under his big arm and led them to the center of the floor, where there was more room.

Fresh hoots and chatter echoed.

Theo stood there, humiliated, on the edge of fleeing.

“You can sit with us if you want.”

Theo glanced down, wiping his face with his hand and found three girls staring at him in kinship.

Leeann pointed to Jeff’s chair. “He isn’t using it.”

Missy held out a napkin. “We might be able to help you.”

Theo took it. “Help me how?”

Kimmie shrugged. “We don’t know yet. That’s why we have to talk.”

Theo sat. “Why do you care? Two of you are usually too busy hurting people to help them.”

“That’s why.” Leeann dipped her stale chip in ketchup. “We need something to give us hope.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We all know how it feels. We can’t have what we want yet, but you don’t have to wait like we do. Angela said it will help us hang on.” Missy grabbed Leeann’s chip and ate it.

The girls burst out laughing, all of them.

Theo let their pleasure fill the holes in his heart. “You think she’ll forgive me?” He didn’t question how odd it felt to be discussing his love life with little girls. They were descendants; they’d survived a war. They weren’t just kids.

“She’s thinking about you right now. She doesn’t even feel Jeff.” Kimmie pointed at Theo. “You have to prove you trust her.”

“I don’t know how to do that.” He sighed.

“Tell her something that would get you tossed out of camp,” Missy stated matter-of-factly, dipping her own chip in ketchup. “You have secrets to tell.” She held it out to him. “We all do.”

Theo was shaken by the words. He took the chip and ate it, not tasting anything but coppery fear.

Leeann held up her cup. “We won’t let her tell on you. It’s just a test.”

Theo swallowed, shaking his head. “No. I have to really show trust. No nets or escape plans.” He leaned in, continuing the conversation.

Across the room, the engineering team had been observing in horror. That switched to confusion.

“What do you think that’s about?” Candy sipped her juice, enjoying being here even though Conner wasn’t. He was on duty somewhere, but she wasn’t allowed to know where. He hadn’t been punished for breaking the rules and neither had she, but they had to remain apart until he was of legal age. They weren’t allowed to converse or have contact at all. *So I guess we were punished.* She plastered on a smile.

Jonny shrugged. “I’d be more interested in the table behind them.”

Candy giggled. Pam, Shawn, and Morgan were at a booth in the rear, shadowed and looking very happy.

“I’m heading to the bridge. You guys have fun.” Tommy pushed his chair in. He went by Stanley and Panaji playing UNO at a corner table and vanished through the small employee entrance. He didn’t want to hear the gossip about the trio’s time in the hot tub again.

Morgan didn’t glance up as Tommy went by. “Just tell me.” He tickled Pam. “Tell me what you said. Kendle wouldn’t.”

“She didn’t honor her bet?” Pam started to get mad.

Shawn sniggered. “He forgot to ask her. There was a lot going on in that training room once the boss showed up.”

“Come on, tell me.” Morgan nuzzled her neck.

Pam sucked in air. “Mmm. Keep doing that and I might have to.”

Shawn laughed. “If he keeps doing that, the guards will ask us to leave.”

Pam shrugged, lashes fluttering as Morgan tasted her neck. “I’m ready.”

Shawn snapped his fingers. “Waiter! Check please!”

Morgan lifted her over him so she could go first.

The trio staggered out into the hall and went down the stairs, both men chasing Pam.

Marc slid aside to let them go by, chuckling. He had checked on posts for every level and things were calm. Now he could spend time with his son and not be distracted by security concerns.

Marc tapped on the door to the movie theater and entered, triggering the lights.

Cody was already running to him. “Daddy!”

Marc swung the boy up and did a fast circle before putting him on his shoulders. He bounced them out into the hall so everyone else could enjoy the show.

“I thought you might like to hang out with me for a little bit before bed.”

“Yeah!” Cody wrapped his arms around Marc’s head. “Can Dog come?”

Marc chortled. “Let’s find out.” He whistled twice, using the code to have Dog come quickly.

While they waited, Marc did what he’d avoided before. “You have a sister.”

Cody nodded in relief. He’d been afraid to bring it up. “I miss her.”

“Do you know where she is?”

Cody shrugged. “I don’t remember. I can show you in my head.”

“Yes, but not now. Let’s just have some fun, okay?”

Cody’s hands tightened on Marc’s ears. “Are you going to find her?”

“Yes. We’re sending a team, soon.”

“Good. She needs a daddy too.”

Dog ran around the corner, head swiveling. *What’s the problem? Where is it? Who do I kill?*

Behind him, both cats stopped to watch.

Marc chuckled. “We want company. You busy?”

Dog snorted, peering at them. *Where we headed?*

Marc tickled Cody, making him giggle. “What would you like to do?”

Cody whispered in Marc’s ear.

“Hmm. Let me see what I can do for that one tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay. Let’s play basketball!”

Marc headed for the steps to the gymnasium, storing the boy’s request. Cody wanted to sleep between him and Angela, like they had on the way to the boat. It was sweet.

*It’s telling*, his demon corrected. *He’s still scared.*

Marc was frowning as he went up the steps.

**2**

“We’ll do it together.”

“Okay.”

Neither Ben nor Whitney wanted to go down to the morgue, but it was the only place they hadn’t been during this round of the ship while everyone partied or slept.

Ben jogged down the stairs, seeing no sentries had been posted here. There was no need, he assumed. They had bodies, not people, to guard.

*Beep…crackle…*

“I wish someone would find that damn alarm. It’s driving us all nuts.”

“Yeah. Wasn’t bad when it only went off here and there, but it’s been every hour today.”

The noise got louder as they approached the small storage chamber they’d built for holding the dead. When they had put it in here, they’d stuffed all the cargo around it in hopes a morgue wouldn’t be needed.

*So much for that*, Ben complained silently.

Eagles had been directing rookies down here since the storm. They’d made improvements, but it was still a mess and hard to walk through. It reminded Ben of digging through the mountain rubble after the earthquake. *And look, there are even corpses.* He shuddered.

Ben took a fast glance inside, scanning the three bodies, then shifted toward the exit with careful steps. The book sections were closest to the door and had received the most work. They were almost finished. Angela had ordered most of the books to be taken to the area where they were needed now that shelving and organization had been straightened out. Rookies were getting their workouts carting armloads or carts up the stairs to the elevators.

“Something moved over there.” Whitney shined his light. “Behind that box.”

“Dude, there are five hundred boxes in here.”

“The book row, first stack.”

The men approached the pillars of boxed books with lights in one hand and the other on their guns.

A cat lunged out, grabbing Ben’s ankle.

“Oh, my god!”

She hissed, swiping at his other leg.

Ben retreated as the male cat came from the shadows. “Are they sick?”

“No.” Whitney stomped his foot. “Just being assholes.”

The cats took off, yipping at each other as if they were laughing.

“That did not happen.” Ben kept shining his light. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Do you think Tonya tells them to do that stuff?”

Ben waited for Whitney to reach the landing, then shut and locked the door. “If so, we need to make a deal and give her a list of targets.”

“Where do you think they went?”

“Anywhere but the top deck. Kenn said they won’t go there because of all the water. It freaks them out.”

“But they’ll play pranks near dead bodies. Some sense of humor.”

The guards went to the post at the next intersection and began handing over the reports they’d gathered. After this, they were both off duty.

“Should we go celebrate with Neil and the teams?”

Whitney glanced at his watch. “Boss said to give them alone time to help him regain his memory. I say we make sure the cabin’s ready and then drag him off. Sam will follow.”

Ben laughed, nodding. “Neil’s a lucky man there. Pregnant with twins and she still gave a full-throated defense.”

“I heard she slapped the boss.”

“Wow. What did Angela say?”

“Insisted she do it again. Then she healed it and walked away.”

“Damn. Angela’s punishing herself.”

“I think so too.” Ben tapped on the door of a cabin at the end of that hall while one of the sentries wrote it down.

“Come in.”

Samantha’s voice was a surprise.

“Sorry, we didn’t think you’d be here yet.”

“I snuck off a few minutes ago.” Samantha was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the TV. It was off. “I needed a few minutes of quiet.”

The men started to panic.

“Are you okay?”

“I can call a medic.”

“No, thank you.” Samantha slowly shifted to view them. Her eyes were dazed. “Can I ask you all something?”

“Of course.” Ben shut the door, sensing the question wasn’t one she wanted the guards to hear. Their post wasn’t far away.

“Did he do it?”

Both men frowned. It was a shock after her defense.

“I don’t think so.”

“Your theory made sense to me.”

She nodded, still not sounding right. “Yes, it made good sense. We all want to believe it.”

Whitney sensed them edging into dangerous territory. He suddenly felt like he shouldn’t be here. “Neil was found not guilty. That’s all I need. Goodnight.” He departed, not slamming the door.

Sam sighed. “He’s mad.”

“Not at you.” Ben wasn’t as willing to let it go, but he understood everyone else was. “If you want someone to keep digging into it, you can ask that as Jeremy’s widow–even against Neil.”

“I don’t want that.”

“But…”

Samantha swallowed her answer, coming out of the daze. “But nothing. Whitney’s right. He’s not guilty and we’ll help him regain his memory. It’ll be okay.”

“We’re all going to help. The descendants we’ve talked to say strong emotions do it. We’re planning to discuss you…and Becky.”

“Same here. Nothing is off limits, not even Jeremy.”

Ben’s voice lowered. “And then we’ll all know.”

Samantha’s voice was a bare whisper. “…unless we don’t try as hard as we need to.”

“So he won’t be arrested again if he did it?”

She nodded at Ben.

“I’d say yes, but we won’t need to do that. I happen to know the new constitution we’re voting on has a double jeopardy clause. Once that’s in place, he can’t be charged again, even if he admits it.” Ben went to the door, hoping he’d been able to lend some comfort. “We’re headed to get him now. Should have him down here to you in a few minutes.”

“That’s good.” Samantha rotated back to the dark TV. “I’ll be ready for him.”

Ben shut the door and tried to send his mind to other places so he would be distracted before he hit the top decks and ran into anyone who could read his mind. Even if Neil regained his memory, they had to make him act as if he hadn’t until that document was in place. *Otherwise, he’ll hang. They didn’t call me to the witness box or verify my statement. Next time, they will. They’ll find out I wasn’t knocked out with Ozzie. I came by for a check in and thought Seth and Becky were escaping. I was letting them go. When the killer came from the cell, I kept pretending.*

Ben hurried to catch up to his team, refusing to think about it again.

Chapter Thirty-Four

**Close**

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**1**

**“I** hope they have a good night.” Tommy was thrilled with the verdict. They had just dropped Neil off to Samantha and jogged (raced) back up the stairs to the next level.

“It sucks they have to have guards.” Whitney thought about the conversation waiting for him and grimaced. He and Vicky hadn’t spoken yet about her theft and plans to leave. She was in the brig, serving her sentence. He wasn’t sure if he was going to visit her or not.

Daryl was also considering what waited for him, but he was thrilled. Brittani was moving into his cabin right now. “At least we know they’ll be alive come morning.”

Tommy nodded. “Exactly.”

“Out of all our suspects, did we come up with anyone else who could have done it?” Wade didn’t like the idea of a murderer roaming free. He didn’t believe Neil had done it, and neither had Becky.

Greg shook his head. Kyle’s team had also escorted Neil to Samantha, showing solidarity. “No.”

Silence fell again, all of them mentally vowing to accept that it had been Becky even though parts didn’t add up.

“They’re having a good time.” Wade pointed.

The team snickered as they spotted Kyle. He was against the elevator doors, being assaulted by Jennifer while they waited for it to open. They heard Jennifer giggle, like she knew they were witnessing her attack.

The teams kept walking, happy with the answer as to where Kyle had been while they brought Neil down. Spending time with his new bride now that the danger was over was a good excuse.

The teams went to the brig without speaking about it, wanting to personally check on the prisoners. Stanley and Vicky had both received ten days in the brig for theft. Ramer had been given a month to force a dry out and he’d been removed from the Eagles. Blake had been one of the people banished from the ship. Randal’s body had been tossed overboard. James was out of the Eagles. Everyone from the trials and exposures had been given their sentences, though most of those were removal from teams and shunning from lack of trust. Theo was a good example. His team had accepted him back, and he couldn’t be removed because he was needed, but he would be on the outside for a while and with more than just Debra.

“Everyone ready to pretend to enjoy partying with the camp?” Tommy asked as they finished checking the cells and signing the logbook of the surprised rookies down here. They hadn’t expected to see so many Special Forces men together doing rounds.

Wade frowned. “I don’t mind the camp. I just don’t feel like celebrating anymore.”

“Same.” Ben scratched at his arm. He had a rash coming in. “How about we check out the new arrival?”

Whitney scowled. “You mean the angel the camp doesn’t know is here yet?”

“They know he’s here, just not who he is.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.” Daryl had wanted to go with the team to the Dizzyland meeting. He had questions, but he mostly just wanted to see them with his own eyes. “Do angels drink? We can take a bottle and pry some information loose.”

Tommy shrugged. “Let’s find out.”

Wade led the way. “Adrian did a good job of disguising him.”

Tommy frowned. “Why do you believe it was Adrian and not Marc?”

“Because this is the sneaky shit Adrian’s good at. Marc wouldn’t even have considered it.”

Tommy was forced to admit that was true. If something sneaky or sleazy happened, it made sense to suspect Adrian first.

“I noticed something about the men at that meeting, when Angela replayed it the second time for the camp. When we finish this interview, I’ll tell you about it. I need to confirm the suspicion first.”

No one protested Morgan withholding information. All the senior men preferred to have full data before sharing plans.

There were already several guards outside the room where Kronus was quarantined. As they approached those sentries, Kenn and Tonya came from the nearest stairwell. Like Morgan, she had her medical bag along, though Morgan’s was strapped to his toolbelt and hers was in her hand.

Kenn wasn’t surprised to discover the Special Forces teams here. He’d also recognized their new guest and hated the idea of Tonya being around him at all. Kronus was a powerful angel according to Angela’s recollection and that made him dangerous, even for something as simple as a blood test.

Morgan concurred. He pointed at Tonya. “You wait out here for the vials.”

Tonya shrugged and found a wall to hold up, back hurting a little. She didn’t mind not being the one to take the blood. She just hadn’t wanted to bother anyone when it was time for the quarantined man to be tested. She didn’t know who he was, but apparently the Eagles did.

Kenn pulled a chair from around the corner for her to sit in as everyone else entered the room.

Tonya gave Kenn the care package she’d gathered, and he too went inside, shutting the door.

Kronus glanced up from his book, big smile spreading. It faded as he saw how many men were here. “Is everything okay?”

“You tell us.” Kenn put the care package on the table and slid it down. “Some things you might need. I see you’ve gotten your shower and a meal. Have you slept?”

Kronus grimaced. “No, I’ve had enough of that, thanks.”

Daryl thought Kronus looked healthier than he had earlier and stored it as something to watch later. Taking energy was forbidden without permission.

“Good.” Kenn took the chair next to him as the Special Forces men took chairs and wall spots by the entrance. “We’d like to start with the basics: who, what, when, where, why, and how.”

Everyone waited expectantly for the reply.

Kronus glanced between them. “I don’t understand.”

Kenn drew his attention back. He would ask the questions while the teams observed for lies and details. “This is a debriefing.”

“I thought Angela would do this with me.”

“So do a lot of men, but that isn’t going to happen. You tell us, we tell her. When she’s ready, she’ll come to you.”

The angel scowled. “My name is Kronus. I’ve come to warn her. She isn’t in danger from me.”

“Keep going.”

“I told this to the girl killer.”

“Did Jennifer give you a story for the camp?”

“No.” Kronus looked at Tommy. “When can I speak to your boss?”

Tommy didn’t answer.

Kenn did. “You’ll be here for a while.”

“What happens after I’m cleared?”

“That’s up to the boss. You weren’t exactly invited.”

Kronus realized they knew who he was. He smiled. “We’ve observed you for months and sometimes years. You’re all amazing.”

“Yeah, wish we could say the same.” Kenn gestured. “Start from the beginning. Give us everything you told Jennifer and then everything you held back.”

“Why do you assume I didn’t tell her everything?”

Kenn pointed with his pen. “Because you’re twitching like an addict. Why do you want to see Angela? To kill her?”

“I would never do that! The Messenger is the danger.” Kronus realized he’d said too much, but it was too late to stop now. “The Messenger’s final bet will kill her and everything she loves. That’s why we rebelled and stopped weighing souls. Death is coming for her, for all of you.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t observe the bet. I heard about it.”

“What is the Messenger’s real name?” Morgan wanted to verify his awful suspicion.

“Chaos.”

Morgan went to the door. “I knew it.” He left the room.

Half the teams followed.

“What’s up?” Tommy knew it was bad.

“The names are the same, the personalities are the same.” Morgan opened his notebook and showed it to them. “This is who they were. It’s why they’re in a prison. Angela was right about that.”

The team scanned the mythological family tree that Morgan had drawn and filled in.

Morgan pointed. “This is Chaos, at the top. Down here, you have Kronus, who ate his kids to keep them from challenging him for the throne. They’re evil–all of them, but they’re also immortal so they couldn’t be killed.”

“I know that legend!” Tommy indicated a section of the family tree. “His wife got tired of him eating their kids and sent the sixth baby away.”

“Zeus. He returned and defeated Kronus.”

“What happened to Kronus after that?”

Morgan stared at the door. “He slunk away and was never heard from again.”

The team let their thoughts run wild for a minute, all of them now a lot more concerned with their new arrival than they already had been.

“It’s a myth.” Ben snorted. “Crap we were told to explain what couldn’t be explained. The existence of everything didn’t come from Chaos screwing Gaia.”

“Can you prove that? Because if you can, I need to hear it so I can sleep tonight.” Greg was rattled and he didn’t get rattled very often.

“No, but you can’t believe…” Ben sighed, unable to act like it didn’t bother him. “Fine, we don’t know if it’s true or not, but we’re not saying the man behind that door is him, right?”

No one spoke.

Ben wanted to keep arguing, but the evidence was adding up. *Just like with Neil’s trial*, he realized. *And we know that was a scam, don’t we?* “Fine. We’ll check him out; we’ll check out the possibility that’s him.”

“If he ate his own children, *he* might be the coming danger to our kids.” Daryl hadn’t wanted to say that, but they would all watch for it now that he’d planted the seed.

“Should we…remove him?” Tommy wasn’t sure

Whitney gave a weak smile. “We can discuss that with Neil.”

No one laughed.

**2**

“Have you seen Kendle?”

Donald pointed down the hall, smirking.

Adrian went that way, hoping Kendle wasn’t in trouble. He swept the rooms he passed, smelling bleach. The cabins appeared clean. She was doing a good job.

Adrian entered the last suite. “Hey, Kendle…” Adrian paused at the sight of Kyle and Jennifer on the bed. Fully clothed, enough of it was open to allow access. Neither of them glanced up.

“Oh, come on! You guys have a room.”

Kendle wheeled her cart inside. “You looking for me?”

Kyle and Jennifer ignored them both, bucking and straining as orgasms neared.

Kendle rolled her eyes. “Talk in the hall? I can’t take much of that.”

Adrian followed her.

“What’s up?”

Adrian showed her the conversation with Marc, staying back in case she got mad and attacked. *Gotta have room to cover the balls.*

Kendle read the memory, angry, horrified, and hopeful. “He thinks he can have four months of my life at his beck and call?”

Adrian grinned, liking the spark in her tone. She was recovering. “Yes. But here’s the kicker. This is what he told me an hour ago.”

Kendle sucked in air, heart pounding at the replay. “He’s serious.”

“I think so too. So does Angela or she wouldn’t be listening to this conversation.” Adrian frowned mentally at Angela. *He’s right. You’ll get what you want. Why shouldn’t he?*

Angela vanished.

“Well?”

Kendle let out the breath, heart calming. “When that time comes, *if* it comes, he has to get on his knees and beg me.”

Hard laughter echoed in Kendle’s mind. Marc had been listening too. *Remember you said that.*

**3**

“I wish we had some privacy.” Samantha stretched out on the bed, groaning. “I want to be held.”

Neil locked the door. “They’ll go to sleep on duty.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m going to encourage it.”

“Cool. When?”

“In about ten seconds.” Neil waited for her to ask the next logical question. It was a trigger to the truth.

Samantha eased onto her side so she could look at him, confused. “How?”

He lifted his hand. “Like this.” Power shot from his fingers, slamming though the door and into the guards. Both bodies dropped into sleep.

Neil lowered his hand, watching her to get the full reaction.

Samantha stared, mind putting it together. “You unlocked your gifts. That’s a sleep spell.”

“Sammi.”

She responded to the tone. Then she froze as she realized what it meant. “You have your memory back.”

Neil shook his head, not moving any other part of his body. “I never lost it.” He watched her emotions come and go, the horror, the anger, and then what he’d been counting on–relief. “I love you. I need to know how you feel about me now. What does this change?”

Samantha glanced over at Amy’s small bed in the corner. The little girl liked to nap when she visited. She said it made her feel safe. “I expected you to ask Angela for an adoption ruling.”

“I knew.”

*How do I feel? Do I feel safer or in danger?*

Neil let her make the choice without trying to sway her. He’d known it might end up getting him killed if he’d judged things wrong.

Samantha’s fingers clenched against the warm sheet. *I feel like no one can take her from me now. That feels safer.*

*What about him? Are you scared? Repulsed? Honor bound to turn him in?*

Neil held his breath. *Here it comes…*

*None of those. I love him more than I already did. He’ll do anything to protect his family and that’s me.* Samantha made her choice. “It was a long day. Our sentries fell asleep on duty. We won’t tell on them–*ever*.”

Neil still waited, needing something else.

Sam read it. His mind was full of thoughts now and there wasn’t a cloud anywhere in there. “I said no before because I didn’t feel like you trusted me completely.” She snorted bitterly. “I will now. I can.”

Neil dug in his pocket for the ring box they’d confiscated from him upon his arrest. He knelt at her feet. “Will you marry me, Sammi? Will you love me forever?”

Samantha let the tears come. “It would be my honor.”

In the hall outside, Marc stared at the sleeping guards. He’d just come from dropping Cody off to the den mothers for his shower and snack. *I wish I hadn’t seen that.*

*You didn’t.* His demon knew what had to happen here. *Turn around and walk away.*

Marc wanted to. *But she’ll keep digging. Even if I don’t tell her, someone else will.*

*Not right away. They have a plan.*

Marc went to the elevator and pushed the button, torn and angry. *I’d have to play along when I know the truth. I’m not good at that.* Marc wasn’t sure what to do.

*What if you were distracted?*

Marc glanced up to find Adrian coming down the hall. He studied Adrian’s expression, snapping in the final piece. “You and Neil were alone with Becky. You two shared duty.”

“Please let it go.”

“Why would you do this?!”

“I didn’t.”

“You gave him the idea or told him how. I know you did!”

“No. We never discussed getting rid of Becky, not by mouth, mind, or hand code.”

“Did Angela?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Then what are you hiding?”

Adrian sighed. “I thought about it once, when they first left. Neil was nearby, but I didn’t know he was an Invisible at that point.”

Marc braced. “What was it?”

Adrian sighed. “I wondered if she could be hooked on something and made to OD if she returned.”

“Wow. You are unbelievable.”

“I’m not proud of it, but that was a moment of crazy thoughts that I didn’t write down. And I believed I was alone in my mind. I was violated.”

Marc snorted harshly. “Payback.” He thought about the evidence and returned to the problem at hand. “If he was pretending all along, then he heard your overdose thought and a million others–from all of us.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think he could have?”

“Could have? Sure. Neil’s a smart guy. Did he?” Adrian shrugged as the elevator slid open. “Only he knows. We’d have to accuse him before she makes that document official, then get Jennifer to use the enforcer power on him to find out. He can clearly fake it well enough that none of us can get through his cloud walls.” Adrian met Marc’s eye. “Are you willing to do that? I saw him drop tonight’s guards too, but my testimony won’t help you at all.”

Marc entered the elevator. The doors shut, but he hesitated to push a button.

Adrian waited. If Marc took them upward, he was going to try to let it go. If he took them to the morgue, he was investigating further.

“Is he dangerous? To the camp, to Samantha?”

“No.”

“You’d trust him alone with Angela?”

Adrian patted his notebook. “I’m going to recommend it so the camp will stop staring at him like he’s a psychotic killer.”

“But he is.”

Adrian grunted. “We all are. It’s how we’ve survived. Neil eliminated the only obstacle to his happiness, to his future. In a few months, no one will mention it anymore. In a year, it’ll only come up at gatherings when people are drunk. By the time we go home, the camp will have forgotten it completely.”

Marc shuddered, fighting both sides of his nature.

Adrian shut his eyes as Marc’s hand went out. He didn’t want to know until the doors opened. For this short ride, he wanted to pretend this was a normal, calm evening coming to a close. *Neil fooled me in every way. He’s the one I should have used in place of Kenn.*

The elevator rose, sending chills through their stomachs.

Adrian considered a dozen things to say and chose silence instead. Marc didn’t need explanations or a shoulder to whine on. He knew the stakes as well as anyone.

The door opened, revealing the living quarter deck.

Marc stepped out and headed toward the leadership cabins. “You coming?”

Adrian pushed the button. “No. Have a nice night.”

Marc kept walking. This was Adrian’s reward for him making the choice the former leader thought he should, but Marc didn’t need it. All of them talked big, but Adrian was the only one who would ever go through with it. Even there, Marc doubted he would have stayed for the entire show. Watching someone else love the woman you wanted more than your own life wasn’t a turn-on. It was torture.

*And that’s why she agreed*, Marc realized. *She knows it will hurt him and I’d feel superior for being the one who gets to touch her. Evil. Cruel. I love her.* Marc went to their cabin, nodding at Ivan. “I see the bruises are almost gone.”

Ivan rolled his eyes, not rising to the bait. “She’s been in there about ten minutes, but I don’t hear water going. I think she fell asleep.”

“Good. She needs it.” Marc decided he was no longer in a position to hate Ivan for loving someone he shouldn’t. They were all adjusting to that feeling. “We’ll do rounds together tomorrow. If you have questions, I’ll try to answer them. But I’m in charge of her security now.”

“You got it.”

“I’m also going to let you in…a little. We’ll see how it goes from there. Pick a memory.”

Ivan started with the bottom item on that secret list. “Your time in the service.”

Marc chuckled. “That’s not just one memory.”

“We could have a beer some night and get started on it…”

“I’ll let you know.”

Ivan let him into the cabin and wrote it in the logbook. He liked the idea of learning from Marc, but as long as he got to stay close to the boss, the jobs didn’t really matter and neither did the people.

Marc saw Angela asleep in the bed, surrounded by papers, books, folders. He stacked them all on the desk, then sat in the chair to remove his boots. He noted the travel mug of hot chocolate waiting for him with a small smile. He hadn’t been aware of her slipping him protein cocktails, but Adrian was right. *I need bigger shirts now. That’s cool, I think.*

Angela woke, stretching. She rolled over so she could see him. “You look tired.”

Marc grunted as he pulled off a boot. “I feel old.” He went to work on the other one.

“Secrets will do that.” Angela extended her arms. “Come unburden your soul. I left the leader outside tonight.”

Marc crawled up the bed and joined her. “Ask me again, a while from now.”

Angela knew the answer from his lack of one. “I decided not to pursue it, no matter what you found. That makes me a bad person and a bad leader.”

Marc kissed her cheek, sharing her shame. “It makes you human, Angie. I just made the same choice not two minutes ago.”

“That bothers me too. We needed you a little dirty, not swimming in muck.”

“But you do need me?”

Angela hugged him tight, heart breaking. “More than you’ll ever know.”

“I’ll make you happy.”

“You already do.” She smirked. “Got skin?”

Marc thought about it, then laughed. “Yeah, baby, and it’s all yours. Just let me get a shower first.”

Angela rolled them over and straddled his hips. “I want you like this…dirty.”

Marc hardened, like he always did when she said she wanted him, but his brain didn’t fade out as fast. “Because I made that choice and because you made *that* choice. We’re enjoying…evil.”

Angela leaned down to kiss him, hips grinding.

Marc put his big hand between her legs, stroking her with his thumbs through the flimsy night shorts. He thrust upward, gasps and grunts filling the air.

Angela shuddered, moaning loudly as she exploded against his fingers.

Marc picked her up and dropped her onto the bed. He jerked his belt open and shoved his pants down, watching her skin twitch, listening to her moans. He slid between her legs, starting to mutter the words to the spell.

*Not this time.*

Marc shoved into her, whispering her name instead.

Angela held his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his waist to allow him access. He rocked her up on the bed, moaning and shivering. His grip tightened, breath hot on her neck… He stiffened, crying out.

Angela held him while he rode the waves, not letting anything else enter her mind but the sound and feel of him.

Marc strained, rocking harder. *I’m sorry!*

*So am I.* Angela held him while he calmed and then kept holding him as he cried a little on her shoulder.

In the cabin next door, Adrian pulled out of Angela’s mind and gazed at the ceiling. He tried to hold it in, but he couldn’t stop the tears that leaked from the corner of his eyes either. Marc was right. It was torture.

*I won’t do it again. Marc’s on his own. If she wants a baby through magic, he can do it, or she can bend over in front of me, but I’m never doing that again.*

Angela finally reacted. She smiled.

Adrian believed his evolution had been great enough to allow him mental privacy, but he should have known by now that fate was keeping her a step ahead of everyone else. She had allowed him to believe it, for this moment. *I made Adrian cry. That’s awesome!*

Her smiled widened as Marc shifted them and she drifted off to sleep.

**4**

Buried in a box of gear in the cargo area, the Geiger counter continued to emit steady warnings as it detected high levels of radiation.

No one responded.

**The End of book 11**

## Extras Section Book 11

[Deleted Scenes Book 11](#DeletedBK11)

[Print/Audio](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-11.html)

[Team and crews](#_Teams/Crew_Lists)

[Customized tags and hoodies](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/eagle-gear.html)

[Fun stuff](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/law-fun-files.html)

[Go back to the beginning of this book](#_Book_11)

**Deleted Scenes BK11**

The two guards stepped out into the hall for an update with two Eagles who’d come by on rounds.

Everyone in the infirmary opened their eyes or sat up. The medics here didn’t realize they were being played.

“Let us out, Alpha.”

“Yes, we want to play!”

Kimmie shook her head, glaring at the kids sitting up in their cots. “We’re not going to be like that anymore. I told you, we have to change, or we won’t survive.” Kimmie knew it wouldn’t be long before the guards figured it out. The alpha had a lot going on right now, but it was obvious she was strong enough to control all decks at the same time. Kimmie wasn’t taking a chance on being banished. She wanted to be here. “Go to sleep, for real. Tomorrow, we’ll get out of this room together when they take us somewhere to eat. They already promised.”

“I think you should take over the ship.”

Gasps came, heads turned.

Becky grinned at the little girl. “You’re like her, right? An alpha?”

Kimmie nodded. “I am, but I’ll never do that. You should go back to sleep. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Becky gave a harsh sob. “You can’t possibly hurt me, kid. I’m already dead.”

“Leave the children alone and play with someone your own age.” Kendle sat up as far as her restraints would allow. “You got yourself into this mess. Don’t corrupt them just to get yourself out of it.”

Kimmie could feel the kids rooting for the redhead to keep arguing for it so they could at least watch a fight even if they couldn’t participate. To preempt that, she muttered a sleep spell that dropped the redhead in her tracks.

Kimmie stood up and turned around, hands on her hips. “Who else wants some?”

Very few of the kids considered it. No one stepped up to challenge her.

“Go to sleep. That’s an *order*.”

The kids got back in bed and lay down. Some of them even closed their eyes, but it was obvious that it wasn’t going to happen without a little help.

Kimmie looked at Kendle.

Kendle nodded. “I would.”

Kimmie didn’t wait for another opinion. She blasted a powerful sleep spell through the entire bottom level of the ship, also getting the two guards who were on their way back in the door.

Kendle tried to resist, but she hadn’t gotten her shield up in time. “Leave a note so they know what…”

Kimmie sighed as all the bodies sagged. “That’s not who I was aiming for. I think my winker is out of whack.”

**Deleted Scene #2**

**Explicit**

“Are you sure about this? Someone might come in.”

Morgan and Shawn secured the room while Pam went to the center hot tub.

“The camp is sleeping. The guards are either on duty or downtime in the training room. We should have an hour until someone comes by.”

Both men hurried back to the main chamber, sharing grins. Five hot tubs, each with a divider, a bench and small shelf, lined one wall. The other side held mini showers and a juice bar. Glass windows sent the lust to another level. They could watch themselves making love while sailing the ocean. It was a huge turn-on.

Shawn froze as Pam began to disrobe. His last physical moment had been with Tara. He hoped this one went better.

Morgan also paused, body throbbing. He hadn’t loved a woman since before the quake in the mountain, and that had only been a camp service. While he’d enjoyed it, it hadn’t been for his enjoyment.

Pam’s eyes darkened. “Before the war for me.”

Both men hardened fully.

*She’ll be tight as fuck after a year.*

Morgan nodded at Shawn’s thought. He began removing his boots, glad he’d already untied them because he couldn’t bend down right now. He took off his shirt but hesitated when he got to his pants.

Pam slid her robe off, blushing. She’d dreamed of a moment like this. She’d never thought she would have the courage to do it.

“Me either. I’ve been shy my entire life.”

Shawn chuckled at them, stripping. “I went to a nudist colony for a year. Love it.”

“You’ve done this before?” Morgan wasn’t sure exactly how it worked. “Details would be good.”

Shawn stepped into the filling tub and eased onto the side bench. “It depends on the woman. Some don’t like double stuffing. Some don’t want rear entry.” He smirked at her reddening face. “Tell us what you like, Pam. We’ll go from there.”

Pam eased into the tub and took the center seat, nipples hard under their hot gazes. “I don’t know. I need to try it to make that choice.”

Morgan’s resistance was worn down by lust. He stripped and joined them in the tub, taking the left.

Pam leaned back, shutting her eyes. “This feels nice.” She held a hand out to both men. “Come closer.”

Shawn went smoothly, sliding his hardon against her hip as he slid a hand to the breast on his side.

Pam moaned. “Very nice.”

Morgan felt her hand run over his thigh and groaned as she began to stroke him. Morgan wasn’t sure how long he could last. He’d never been this hot.

Morgan sucked in air when she straddled him, neatly flipping her hips to capture his dick between her legs.

Pam slid onto him, nails digging into his shoulders.

Morgan thrust deep into her willing body, hands going to her hips. He pulled her down, rocking in hard, quick bumps.

Pam looked at Shawn. “Let’s see if I like that rear entry.”

Shawn shook his head, hand working his own flesh. “You won’t, not like this. I like it a lot, but only if the woman is into it. We’ll ease up to that.”

Morgan lifted her off his lap, gasping. “I need a minute!”

Pam curled onto Shawn’s lap, chuckling. “Kiss me?”

Shawn groaned as she slid her hot body over his, taking his thrust with a shudder. Instead of frantic pounding, he eased in and out, and watched her face to discover what she liked.

Pam’s body tightened, nipples hardening.

Morgan slid a hand between her legs. They’d agreed making sure she enjoyed herself was a top priority. They wanted to be able to do this again.

Morgan sucked a hard nipple as he rubbed her. Listening to Shawn’s grunts and moans was also a turn-on.

Pam shivered as Morgan nibbled. “Spank me.”

Morgan immediately smacked her wet cheek.

Shawn sucked in air, thrusting upward. He lifted her off. “Need a minute!”

Morgan slid her back onto his lap, tugging her down for a hot kiss. His hands pushed against her slick flesh, bringing groans and hisses of pleasure.

Shawn smacked her cheek, timing it to Morgan’s strokes. As Pam began to climax, he slid behind her and pushed into her while Morgan was still enjoying her muscle clenches.

Pam groaned, body wracked with shudders.

Morgan lost control at the feel of both of them being inside her. He arched, climaxing hard.

Shawn rocked twice, pushing a little deeper, then he too came, moaning loudly. He slid out of her and dropped into his seat, breath coming in harsh rasps.

Pam let Morgan pull her into his arms, where she rested her head against his chest. Both their hearts were pounding like drums. “Okay… I like that one.”

The males laughed, bodies still spasming.

Behind them, the door opened.

Ivan scanned them and the rest of the room, flushing when he caught the smells and the mood. He left without speaking, wondering if he could get Jayda into the hot tub. The trio with silly smiles and wild hair appeared to be enjoying themselves.

Pam and Morgan laughed at Ivan’s thought.

Shawn refused to ask what it was, not wanting to break the great mood with conversation. He didn’t believe it was about him. He wasn’t feeling threatened by anything right now. All he wanted was a smoke and maybe a nap.

Pam let Morgan hold her, body clenching happily. She dozed, silently thanking Angela for her new life. Under Adrian’s leadership, women would have still been Eagles, but under Angela, women would be anything they wanted and live the lives that pleased them. Female leadership had sped up their independence.

“You think?” When she didn’t answer, Morgan realized she’d fallen asleep and shut his eyes too. He didn’t need an answer. It was evident. There hadn’t been moments like this under Adrian. The women had either been potential Eagles, potential wives, or relief sources. Now, they could be all three of those without being sneered at or overlooked for important positions. They also weren’t getting special treatment. It was perfect as long as those females settled for equal. If they ever tried to take control, Safe Haven would be torn apart.

**Deleted Scene #3**

Samantha looked at Doug. “Do you swear the testimony you are about to give is the full truth?”

“I do.” Doug took the witness stand, flushed from being the center of attention.

“Doug, do you believe Neil committed this crime?”

Doug shook his massive head. “No, I do not.”

“What makes you think he’s innocent?”

“Neil wouldn’t do that. He’s not a bad person. And Becky was deranged.”

“Did you witness her odd behavior?”

“Yes. She was having issues before we came back to Safe Haven.”

“Please elaborate on what those issues were.”

“She was always getting Seth to do crazy things. We never would have infiltrated that camp and rescued the kids if not for her.”

“Did anything happen with Becky once you arrived here, beyond her trying to kill Safe Haven’s leader?”

Doug nodded. “I went down to visit her, after she attacked Angela. She had just been moved to the brig.”

Samantha liked Doug. She didn’t enjoy his pain, but she had to push. “What did you and Becky talk about?”

“She asked me to help her kill Angela. She knew I could get close to the boss.”

Angela cleared her throat. “I’d like it noted here that Doug reported that to the guards and then to me personally.”

The camp relaxed about Doug. They returned to watching Samantha to see where her line of questioning would take them next.

“Was Becky on medication?”

“Yes. I don’t know what it was, but all the medics were giving it to her on their shifts.”

“Did the medicine seemed to help?”

Doug let out a deep rumble. “No. The only thing she talked about was hurting Adrian and Angela. She asked me who it would hurt them the most to lose.”

“Thank you. I’m done with my rebuttal.” Samantha sat down.

Angela stood. This wasn’t going to take long. “Where was Seth while you were having this conversation?”

“He was right there, telling her to be quiet or people would hear.”

“In your opinion, was Seth involved in this murder-suicide plot or did she force him to do it?”

“I’ve asked myself the same thing since we found the bodies. I just don’t know. He wanted to get her off the ship, and I’m sure he was worried about being out there alone with her pregnant. If there was a way for them to stay, I think Seth would have taken it.”

“How much time did Seth spend with his daughter?”

Doug frowned. “A lot, until we got here. Then Becky flipped out and I don’t think he felt like he could leave her alone.”

“She was locked in a cell, being guarded by people who would never hurt her without a trial. Why couldn’t he leave her alone?”

Doug was forced to admit the truth. “Because he knew she was still dangerous, and he was covering for her.”

“I have no further questions. You may step down.” Angela hated to do it, but Seth’s image couldn’t be the shining hero who had been taken advantage of by a scheming female. She wasn’t going to allow history to be rewritten in that way. Seth had picked Becky over Safe Haven. It had happened a long time ago and that was the truth.

**Teams/Crew Lists**

**Special Forces Team #1**

Kyle, Daryl, Morgan, Ben, Whitney

**Special Forces Team #2**

Neil, Jennifer, Greg, Wade, Tommy

(Theo)-**Engineering**: Theo, Ozzie, Candy, Trinity, Johnny, Rose

(Harry)-**Boat Crew**: Gus, Harry, Nathan, Quinn, Brian, Ed, Faith, Zoey, Claire

**Personal Security Teams**

(Ray)-Level 4 -Michael, Ray, ~~Randal~~, Doug, Brittani, Donald-**over the Captain**

(Ivan)-Level 2 -**alpha security**-Ivan, Peter, ~~James~~, Serio, Freddy, Travis,

(Diana)-**Fishing**: Pam, Cathy, Katie, Lydia, Panaji, Elijah, Sabrina, Erika, ~~Blake~~

(Ian)-**Cleaning**: Kendle, Ian, Charlie, Adrian, Mike and Timmy

(Brittani)-**Meal crew**: Brittani, Stanley, Jayda, Drew, Corey, Hailey, Tracy

(Samantha)-**Garden crew**: Samantha, Wessley, Martin, Madison, Natalie, Kayla, Vicky

(Monica)-Kids/Education crew: Jeff, Zack, Shawn, Monica, Marc, Conner, Debra

(Emma)-**Homesteaders**: Emma, Macy, Ramer, Lou

(Morgan)-**Health/Medical**: Morgan, Tonya, Daryl, Neil, Harry, Courtney

(Adrian)-**Strategic planning**: Adrian, Marc, Angela, Jennifer, Kyle, Kenn, Neil, Gus

(Ralph)-**Mining crew**: Ralph Miller family, Debra, Kenn, Molly, Allison,

**Injured Eagles on leave to heal**

Zack, Ramer, Donald, Molly

\*Team leaders will pick their XO after the coming Eagle tryouts.

\*Everyone is back to level 1, except Special Forces.

\*A few people have double duty until replacements are trained.

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A person in a black shirt

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**A LAW Backstory**

**[A close up

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[Marc and Dog](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/marc-and-dog.html)

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# Book 12

Avoiding Fate

A close up of text on a white surface

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

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Life After War 12

**Avoiding Fate**

by

**Angela White**

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**Table of Contents**

[America](#AFCH1)

[The Desolate](#AFCH2)

[Safe Haven](#AFCH3)

[I’ve Had Enough](#AFCH4)

[It’s A Mess](#AFCH5)

[Burn It All](#AFCH6)

[I’m Telling Adrian](#AFCH7)

[Open Waves](#AFCH8)

[Unseasoned](#AFCH9)

[Dim Lights](#AFCH10)

[This Is Hell](#AFCH11)

[Times Two](#AFCH12)

[Burn Box](#AFCH13)

[Strike Where It Hurts](#AFCH14)

[Triple Pickup](#AFCH15)

[How Do I Pick?](#AFCH16)

[Queasy Gizzard](#AFCH17)

[Karma Bites](#AFCH18)

[Let It Roll](#AFCH19)

[Snare Strike](#AFCH20)

[New Puppy](#AFCH21)

[At Least You Know It](#AFCH22)

[Because Of You](#AFCH23)

[Trap Team Troubles](#AFCH24)

[You Will Do It](#AFCH25)

[Cayman Chaos](#AFCH26)

[Time To Go](#AFCH27)

[Every Sacrifice Was Willing](#AFCH28)

[Better Than Sex](#AFCH29)

[I Must Be In Hell](#AFCH30)

[Nightly Notes](#AFCH31)

[There’s No Avoiding Fate](#AFCH32)

[That’s What Men Do](#AFCH33)

[Important Friends](#AFCH34)

[For The Future](#AFCH35)

[Close](#AFCH36)

[-Extras Section](#_Extras_Section_Book_2)

**We Go On**

Our journey has been long.

We’ve lost so many...

It’s hard to bring up their faces,

But I know we loved them all.

Sacrifices are a part of life.

The pain reminds us we’re not gone yet,

That we haven’t been forgotten,

That time hasn’t passed us by.

We go on in their memories.

We go on in love of life,

And hope for a better tomorrow,

Where peace resides and sleep is sweet.

We yearn for happiness,

And cling to our ghosts.

We’re lost and aching;

Pretending we’re whole,

Because it’s expected.

It’s what we do.

We go on.

**Part One**

“The older I get, the more I see there are these crevices in life where things fall in and you just can’t reach them to pull them back out. So you can sit next to them and weep or you can get up and move forward. You have to stop worrying about who’s not here and start worrying about who is.”

― Alex Witchel, The Spare Wife

Chapter One

**A close up of a sign

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**America**

December 3rd

**1**

**“T**his is Ciemus, calling Safe Haven. Come in Safe Haven!”

Everyone in the mayor’s office waited for a reply, but after a full week, none of the trio expected it.

“Come in Safe Haven, this is Ciemus.”

“They’re probably out of range.” Brandon refused to believe the worst so soon without proof that something bad had happened.

“I agree with Brandon.” Standing near the door, Donna didn’t look at either man in her office. “It’s too soon to know anything.”

“Come in Safe Haven!” William slammed his hand on the desk, rattling the radio. “Answer me!”

Brandon wasn’t sure what he could say to make William feel better. He was worried too, but not to the same extent.

Donna frowned at her angry mate. “Did you see something?”

William’s silence was an answer. He shifted to the window to stare at their peaceful town and high walls. The sounds of a normal day echoed outside, but in here, there was no tepid breeze or happy chatting. The musty office stank of fish rot and rage.

Donna shook her head at Brandon when he would have gone over to offer William comfort. It was a bad idea to get close to a byzan when they were upset. William’s instability had grown since Safe Haven, *since Angela*, left America. Donna frowned. “William, what did you see?”

“A funeral service. A lot of people were on the deck.” William turned back to the radio. “They need help.”

Donna and Brandon exchanged a short look, careful not to let it linger. They were spending time together on defensive and offense improvements for the town. They didn’t want William to imagine it was more than that.

“We don’t have a way to reach them. We can’t abandon our town.” Donna wasn’t leaving her home, but she suspected that time was coming soon for William. Her heart continued to break.

“We should have gone with them. They needed us and we refused to go!”

Donna shrugged at William’s accusation. “We have a life here. We chose to make it work. We didn’t abandon our country.”

William growled.

The sound echoed through the office and out into the hall, where people paused to listen.

William tried to control his rage, but it was hard. It wasn’t an infection from the rage children, and it wasn’t his mental cracks, though he was certain Donna and Brandon thought it was a combination of both. His connection to Angela had severed overnight. Even though he couldn’t contact her on the radio, he should still be able to reach her mentally.

“Maybe she blocked you.” Brandon ignored Donna’s quick gesture to leave it alone. “You were a little pushy, you know?”

William snorted. “This isn’t about that. She’s in trouble. They all are.”

“Safe Haven chose to leave. They’re on their own.” Donna waited for another growl, braced to run. When William had returned from escorting Safe Haven to the shore, a new man had come home in his place–one she didn’t like.

William keyed the radio again. “Come in Safe Haven! Answer your damn radio!”

Donna edged closer to the door, able to feel his rage rising.

Brandon was also reading how upset William was, but he chose to keep going. “Are you sure it wasn’t just a nightmare? Even though we’re descendants, we do have dreams that don’t mean anything.”

William sagged in the chair. “I can’t feel her anymore.”

Donna scowled, hand coming to her hip. “You have to let her go. You have a life here!”

William shoved the radio off the desk, shattering it against the cabinet.

Donna slid into the corridor so she had a clear path to run.

Brandon moved in front of William, hoping they were both wrong about the violence in his heart. William’s wrinkled, stained clothing and unwashed hair were just a couple of the signs they’d been watching. He and Donna were clean and neat, as were the rest of the townspeople. William was the outsider now and it had happened fast.

William stared between them, rage twisting his handsome face. “Don’t you understand?! If Safe Haven dies, so do we!”

Donna waved at their town. “We’ve survived on our own. We didn’t have Safe Haven’s help before; we don’t need it now. We’ll be fine right here.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know anything because you refuse to unlock your gifts and help us search for a solution.” He pointed. “You’re a coward!”

Donna’s face iced over, eyes narrowing, lips tightening. “You want *her*. You don’t care about Safe Haven. You don’t care about this town, about me or about the future. You should have gone with them.”

“Yes! I should have!” William spun around and began punching the window.

Brandon didn’t want to interfere, but it wasn’t good for the townspeople to see their leader so upset. It also wasn’t safe. If the window shattered, people below could be hit by glass, as well as William being hurt by punching through it. Brandon placed a hand on William’s shoulder.

“Don’t!” Donna knew what was about to happen, but it was too late.

William punched Brandon.

Trained as an Eagle, Brandon automatically returned fire.

“Stop it!”

William dove into Brandon, ignoring Donna’s shout. The two men rolled across the desk and hit the floor, both swinging wild punches. Contents of Donna’s desk went flying as it collapsed beneath the weight of the brawling men. Her stash of cigarettes was crushed.

Donna’s frustration filled the room, making the men sweat, but it didn’t stop their fight. Nasty punches landed, sending grunts of pain and anger through the office.

“Stop it! Right now!”

Neither man listened.

Donna’s thumb started to slip off the lock she had put on her mental gifts. She struggled to keep the cage from opening.

William put extra heat into his hits, trying to make Brandon bleed. William didn’t know any other way to release his worry.

“I said stop!” Donna was angry and about to be humiliated by this display. Townspeople were coming toward the office now. In a few seconds, they would be able see the fight. *Damn you, William...* Donna let go the mental lock. She lifted her hand.

Power flew out in a gigantic wave that filled the room.

Both men were blasted backward, knocking them against the wall.

Brandon caught the edge of a nearby cabinet and managed to stay on his feet.

William collapsed to the floor at the unexpected blow from his mate. He stared up at her in shock. “For him?!”

Donna didn’t move when William rose and stomped toward her. She’d never been this mad. If he wanted a battle, he would get one.

William realized he’d gone too far, but he couldn’t help the jealous anger spewing in his mind. “You unlocked your gifts to spare him a beating. Not for me, but for him!”

Donna brought up a shield around herself. She’d watched him do it for years. “You scare me now. You’ve changed.”

William kicked a drawer out of the way, making her flinch. “They told me Mitchels were trouble. I should have listened.”

Brandon wiped blood from his lip, sorry he’d fought with William. Donna’s office was trashed.

Donna turned and began walking down the corridor. “I did it for our people. If you can’t see that, it’s time you left–again.”

Brandon stayed where he was, waiting for William’s reaction. The man loved Donna, but Brandon doubted it was enough to keep William here now that she had told him to go.

William stared at the empty doorway for a few seconds, then straightened. He pulled his anger into a thick shield none of them could get through as he stormed from the office.

Brandon followed to make sure William wasn’t going to hurt Donna or anyone else. He was sad things had gone this way, but since William returned, his anger was always in control. Donna was right. William needed to leave.

Security and townspeople retreated to let William stomp by. Like Donna and Brandon, they sensed something different about him and feared it.

William ignored Donna, who was standing outside her office, and strode toward the gate. He didn’t speak to anyone.

Donna made a motion for the guards to let him out.

Worried townspeople stopped to stare at William’s angry exit.

William hated it here now. These people were nothing like Safe Haven, nothing like Angela. They were all weak, especially his mate. She’d fallen for a Mitchel.

Brandon stopped next to Donna. “Do you want me to try to talk to him?”

Donna put a hand on his wrist to keep him from doing that. “Stay.”

William glanced back in time to see the physical contact. His rage surged to a new level. He stalked through the gate and disappeared into the woods around the wall.

“I’m sorry it came to this.”

Donna didn’t answer Brandon. She waited for more trouble. Since Safe Haven reached their area, trouble was all Ciemus had experienced. *It’s like their curse rubbed off.*

When nothing more came, Donna walked away. There was no affair between her and Brandon, but William had been accusing them of it with his sly glances. He was out of control. Unless he regained control of his mind, he was too dangerous to live here. Donna motioned the gate to be shut, holding in tears. “He’s not coming back.”

Brandon wanted to give her hope, but he couldn’t. She was almost certainly right. “Heaven help anyone he runs into right now.”

**2**

“*Come in Safe Haven! Answer your damn radio!*”

The anger coming through her radio caused Nancy to glance over. William was furious that Safe Haven still wasn’t responding.

Nancy resealed the bag of powdered milk and stirred her cup, trying not to clink. She had returned to the apartments, but she regretted that decision now. Another storm had rolled in, preventing travel for her, but not for other people. This area had more activity than she was comfortable with, but she wasn’t fully prepped for a winter journey yet.

“*Safe Haven isn’t coming back!*”

“*Safe Haven deserted us!*”

“*Has anyone seen the boat?*”

“*We need help! We’re out of food.*”

Nancy turned off the radio. The calls from desperate refugees were also more frequent. It was awful to hear, but there was no way she could help them. She was barely able to help herself.

Nancy drank the milk, grimacing at the taste. She hated powdered, but her body needed it. Once the milk was gone, she wiped out the cup with a towel and put it in the rack. While in the kitchen, she peered through all the windows.

“I didn’t think I would feel this way.” She sighed at the sound of her voice rolling through the empty apartment. “But I’ll get over it.”

Engines echoed, filling the tense silence.

Nancy went to the stairs. She didn’t have lights on or appliances running, including the small generator. She’d been waiting for the weather to break. This morning, the ice on the awning had almost been gone. She’d turned everything off while packing. There was nothing here to draw attention from the small line of cars now moving by the apartment. She was the only one in this complex, but it was just a matter of time before...

The engines slowed, drawing Nancy’s hand to the gun on her hip. Thanks to Safe Haven, she knew how to use it, but the noise would attract other predators. Nancy moved upstairs to be near her small stash of supplies. All her weapons, except the two guns she was wearing, were stashed there.

Nancy paused at the upper hall window. She hadn’t boarded the glass up here. The first-floor windows were hidden behind shutters covered in dead vines. It was so pathetic it implied there was nothing to loot or scavenge in these apartments. That was an illusion, of course. This complex still held treasures, like toilet paper on bathroom holders and loose aspirin in forgotten purses.

She was dismayed to see the small convoy stop just three apartments down from hers. The men and women in the group didn’t appear to be a threat, but it was impossible to tell for sure. The apocalypse had replaced civility with desperation. Even the nicest people from before the war had become bloodthirsty. She and her child would survive alone until Safe Haven’s return. If they never came back, that was fine too.

*Until the birth.*

The voice in her mind was ruthless.

Nancy forced herself to be reasonable. The strangers didn’t appear to be trouble. The women were healthy, unbruised, unbound. The men were smiling, chatting, helping kids from the vehicles. She might trade with them, but only after a few days to determine possible outcomes. She knew better than to rely on first impressions, but that voice was right. She would need help with the birth.

Nancy stayed to the side of the window, not letting her breath move the dusty curtain. She had observed Eagle training for a long time. She’d known for a while that she didn’t want to go with Safe Haven, that she would be alone at some point. Learning those survival techniques would keep her and her child alive while almost everyone else in this country was dying. Nancy was confident in her abilities, but she also recognized the pitfalls of being by herself.

Nancy rubbed her flat belly through the blue jean jumper and long sleeve plaid shirt, where the amazing beginnings of life were taking place. She hadn’t had contact with the child yet, but she could feel it growing and it was going to be powerful.

The small convoy of twenty people returned to their idling vehicles, leaving crunchy tracks in the icy slush. The three-inch layer of packed snow under it all wasn’t going to melt yet. The reddening cheeks of the strangers implied the temperature was still rough despite the top layer of sun-thawed slush. The wind was the worst of it. Her fast trip outside to do her business this morning had brought tears and stolen her breath. It was more than cold out there.

Nancy had been taking readings twice a day for the last two weeks. Winter was just getting started. She wasn’t looking forward to huddling in a closet or shed as each storm blew through, but that was exactly what she planned to do. A small space, a lot of blankets, a tiny LED light and an entertaining book was all she needed to make it through any twelve hours of darkness, no matter where she was. She had chosen to read Little Women this month. It was one of the classics she’d never found time for. Now, time was all she had.

Nancy moved away from the window as the convoy rolled out, relieved she didn’t have to flee her den this very minute. She went to her space in the closet, aware of the sun starting to sink. She needed to get things ready for tonight. Once it got dark, she didn’t go out.

“We did a good job, baby.” Nancy rubbed her belly again. Everything she needed was either in her closet or in the small bag fastened around her hips. The pack was rotated around the rear. She wasn’t taking chances on being slapped in the stomach while running. “It can slap my ass all it wants.”

Nancy snickered at her joke, scanning the contents of her stash. Unless she was in the middle of cooking, cleaning, or washing, everything would now stay ready to go in a large backpack. It wouldn’t be easy, but she had gotten stronger since the war. Before society collapsed, Nancy had been in good shape. That would also help.

“Still need more water, but I guess as long as it keeps snowing, I’m covered there.” She shrugged. “That’ll make it easier to carry the pack.”

Nancy closed the closet and did a round on the second floor. There were three bedrooms and a bathroom up here, along with three closets and ten windows. There was also a fire escape that led to the rear yard. Nancy had placed small bags of supplies, covered by debris, on several of the fire escapes. Even if she had to go through a window, one of those bags would be within a few feet of her.

She also had transportation hidden throughout the complex, but she had been scared of making too much noise to start any of the trucks. There was some uncertainty as to whether any of them would fire up when she needed it. She’d done the recommended Eagle repair list, but there was no way to know for sure. She had also replaced the batteries. For some reason, car batteries were easy to find in this area. Few other things were. Stores were either empty or damaged beyond easy entry. If she didn’t mind making noise, Nancy was positive some of the building collapses held a myriad of surprises that would help her survive. She had been forced to pass all those on her scavenging trips. There was only so much one person could do during an apocalypse and she was already doing it.

“Because we have company in the area, I’ll doublecheck the windows.” Nancy eased down the three creaky stairs, then jogged to the bottom floor. She was trying to stay in shape as much as she could, assuming that would also make the birth easier. She already knew it would make an escape easier.

Nancy checked the windows, then the house for anything else that might give her away. Even a small glint of metal through the window could draw attention as someone drove by. It was incredibly dark at night, highlighting anything bright.

Nancy decided the radio sitting openly on the table was a risk and cursed herself for not seeing it sooner. “I put myself in danger with that one.” She scooped up the radio and put it on the floor next to the small generator. Prewar people had commonly died in the winter from not using generators correctly. It made her nervous, but if she used it outside and someone drove by, there wouldn’t be time to hide it. Putting the appliance against the wall, below the window, was the best she could do. With the window open and the shutters cracked, it vented, but she’d still stayed alert.

Nancy carefully stood, trying not to bump the ledge or the table. This apartment was full of furniture. She didn’t know how many people had lived here before the war, but she assumed it had been at least eight. There were that many beds, all of which she avoided. It bothered her to sleep in a bed of any kind now. She wasn’t sure why, but she hadn’t insisted on conquering that issue. *If a bed phobia is my only side effect of the war, I got off lucky.*

The sound of engines finally faded into silence.

Nancy stared at the radio. “William is a byzan. He’s like Angela. If he’s that upset, something *is* wrong.”

Nancy had mixed feelings about it. She didn’t want anything to do with Safe Haven, but she was fond of a few people there and actually liked a couple more. It was painful to know they were in trouble, but she couldn’t help them like she had during the shore escape.

At the same time, it was impossible not to feel smug. She had been against Safe Haven leaving, seeing it as cowardly. The thought resulted in guilt that Nancy pushed away. She didn’t have time for it. “None of us do. The clock has almost stopped.”

Chapter Two

**The Desolate**

**A close up of a motorcycle

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“L**eave the clock.”

Patricia paused on the porch, grandfather clock in her arms. “It belonged to my mother.”

David shrugged in the late afternoon light. “No room.” He had insisted the family bundle up in winter gear for packing, then suffered complaints about sweating. He’d wrapped their thin boots with tape, then listened to them snipe that it was too bulky. It was a wonder they’d survived so long on their own. It usually meant the people were adaptable. This family was just stubborn and lucky.

David scowled when Patricia stared back resentfully. “I mean it. There’s no room.”

The woods around the cabin were covered in thick snow. Another storm had come through overnight, recovering the property. It was a relief. Until they were ready to go, no one would notice them living here. The animals knew, though. They didn’t like it. The herds were going north and passing through this area to get there. It made for easy hunting and surprise encounters. David was an excellent hunter. The family was decent at it, so they had plenty of food and snow melted water. What they lacked was a defendable position and ammunition. David hoped to scavenge their needs while they traveled west.

“I can hold it on my lap.”

David scowled. “Can you also carry it in and out of every campsite? I’m not helping; neither is your family.”

“That’s mean.” Patricia sat the antique down, not wanting to admit how heavy it was. “This clock is all I have left of her.”

“You bring it, you carry it. If we need firewood, that’ll be the first thing I recommend.” David didn’t like being so firm with a female, but there wasn’t a choice.

Patricia glowered, but David refused to budge. “Bring a picture. It’ll last longer.”

Not sure if he was poking fun at her, Patricia brought her hand up, preparing to fight.

The two young boys packing homeschool books into a crate paused, staring at the adults in trepidation.

Lance stepped between them, frowning. “Can’t we compromise?”

“No.”

“No.”

Lance shrugged tiredly and left the line of fire. “Okay.” He went back to the armored car they were packing. He and David had used a semi to pull the vehicle from a muddy ditch. It had taken them weeks to get it ready for the trip north.

Patricia tapped her foot, arms crossing over her chest. “We don’t need you. Stop bossing me around.”

David was dirty, cold, and tired. “Is that what you want? Because I can make it happen, lady.”

Patricia didn’t want to surrender, but she was certain her mate couldn’t handle things alone and neither could she. “No.”

David gestured at the full load they’d already stuffed into the armored car. “No room. We can only take important things.”

Patricia gave a curt nod and struggled to lift the clock.

David didn’t want her to be unhappy, despite her combative attitude. He pointed at the roll of trash bags they were using. “If you wrap it up, I’ll put it in the cellar. Chances are no one will find it.”

Patricia’s face relaxed, smile coming to her lips. “Thank you.”

David turned away from her gratitude. He’d wanted to be gone yesterday, but the family kept finding reasons to delay. This morning, it had been hunting through their stuffed attic for treasures. He was almost ready to leave them behind. If not for his dreams, he would have. The voice insisted this family was important; they needed to be taken to safety. The problem was, he didn’t know where. He’d stewed on it for a week before deciding to take them northwest. Between man and the animals, humans were still the bigger threat, but they were all going south to avoid the cold. North meant less firewood for warmth, but more food since that’s where the animals were gathering. He’d made the choice based on history. Humans had been hunter-gatherers in the beginning. That type of existence was necessary now. If they wanted to live, they had to follow the food, not avoid the weather.

David scanned the armored car, then the mostly empty cellar below it. They weren’t sleeping in the cabin. Too much traffic had come through here, searching for supplies that Safe Haven might have left. Rumors swore there were stashes in the collapsed mountain. David had avoided that area, but the scavengers there were branching out now. He needed to get this family out of here.

“Engines! Under cover!” Lance ran to his mate.

David scooped up the two thin boys and slid them into the cellar. It was a narrow entrance, but roomy inside. The old tornado shelter was perfect for life after war.

Lance dragged Patricia down the porch steps and shoved her to her knees so she could slide under the car.

Lance dove in.

David yanked the white tarp over the car, anchoring it with a fallen limb on the side that was out of sight. He grabbed the branches he’d cut for this purpose and began sweeping away tracks.

Mentally grumbling about doing all the dirty work, David finished, then yanked on the chain he’d hung. He slid into the hole as snowy debris plunged over the car.

The darkness was smothering while they waited, listening to the convoy pass near the driveway. Thick trees helped hide them, as did the debris now over the car, but David didn’t relax even after the sound of engines faded. It was only a matter of time before someone turned down that driveway and found this homestead. “Take a short nap. Let’s make sure they aren’t circling around.”

The worn adults were grateful for his order. Their Safe Haven guide had been pushing them harder than they were used to.

The cellar was one small room with a few bags of supplies. It had a wooden floor and four support beams for the roof. The earthen walls were hard and cold, muffling sound and denying light even a crack. Unless someone uncovered the armored car, then moved it, this shelter was undetectable. It was okay to sleep.

David crashed first. He’d been doing most of the work.

David’s dream solidified until he was standing on top of a government compound. He knew there was a bunker under his feet, though there wasn’t evidence of it. The Hawaiian island was deserted. It looked like people had never come here.

*That’s wrong*. He stared at the ground. *It feels like the world doesn’t exist at all. It’s just me, and whatever lies below this soil.*

“You must stay with them.”

David didn’t turn to scan for the owner of the voice. Alexa wasn’t behind him. She was in his mind. “Why do they matter so much?”

“The boys are special.”

“More descendants.” David wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“Their genes are pure. They can help repopulate the earth. Others will be born, but they will be female. The male children must be protected.”

“Even at the cost of my life?”

“Yes. You are a defender of the future. Such a sacrifice is noble.”

David couldn’t argue that. “I don’t want to die for them... I want to die for you.”

“And maybe you shall. Until we meet, stay with the family as long as they’ll have you. Teach them to survive. Do it for me.”

“I will. My word on it.”

The female voice whispered once more. “Safe Haven’s light is fading. Beware the remnants of society, for they are not mine and never will be.”

David took that to heart. “I won’t trust another living soul until we meet. No one will catch me off guard using kind words to hide evil. I will remove them before I sacrifice my life to a cause that isn’t worthy of it.”

David snapped awake, words ringing in his ears. The price for trust was too high. He couldn’t afford to pay it.

“Are you okay?”

David smiled at the young boy through the darkness. “I’m fine. You?”

David heard a shrug against the earthen wall.

“A bit cold.”

“I’m sweating. Come over and share my heat.”

David swallowed a groan when the boy climbed into his lap, stepping on his thigh. “Easy.”

He wrapped his arms around the shivering boy. Alvin was more than a little cold. David rubbed the child’s arms for a minute, then unsnapped his jacket to pull it around the boy.

Alvin snuggled against his heat. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” David resumed dozing, holding the child.

Alvin stayed awake, wishing the strange Safe Haven man would never leave. Alvin was always scared now. This was the first time he’d felt secure since the war. He never wanted it to end. “Please don’t leave us.”

The pitiful whisper was lost beneath the snores, but David seemed to feel it. He held the child tighter and drifted deeper.

**2**

“You want me?! Come and get me!” William sent a fiery blast over the road, clearing a struggling truck and the rest of the debris in his way. He flew by on his motorcycle, laughing manically as people burned.

The few survivors cowered from his blasts. They’d spotted a lone man on a bike and thought he was an easy target. A few hits of magic had convinced them otherwise.

“Get on the radio!” One of the refugees pointed at the truck.

William kept going despite the urge to swing around and slaughter them all. His mood was darker than it had ever been. He was barely in control.

William sped up, taking the bike to its limit on the cracked pavement. If he hit one of those, he would go flying through the air, but that knowledge didn’t slow him.

*Maybe I want to die.* William tried to go faster, but the bike couldn’t. The shoreline both beckoned and mocked his efforts.

Refugees lingering on the beach rose at the sound of his furious engine, reaching for guns without ammunition. Many of them took off running.

William sped around the final turn and bounced over the walkway. He slowed as he hit the beach. Sand flew in all directions.

“Get him!”

“We can use that bike to leave!”

William fired flames as the refugees surged his way.

People screamed as they caught fire, no longer interested in the bike.

William brought up a powerful shield, not afraid of four dozen people knowing he was a magic user. In fact, he wanted them to attack. It was a good excuse to release more of his rage.

Radios began echoing as the remaining refugees scattered.

William ignored them. If a large group came here to confront him, all the better. In his mood, none of them would live. If they left him alone, he might return the favor.

William leapt from the bike, leaving it to crash into the sand as he stormed toward the water.

The ocean roared as the tide came in, reminding him they were all really powerless. Without a boat, and a deal with the water, they were trapped on land.

Waves rushed to the shore, carrying treasures in the debris that lured refugees to their deaths.

*The ocean is fishing for humans.* William’s mind blanked for a minute, forced into submission. It was too much, even for him. The bloodstained sand felt the same, but it wasn’t. Safe Haven had smothered the gritty surface in light and humanity. Now, the beach was just another earthen sponge soaking up the blood of its conquerors.

“What is he doing?!” Dina gaped.

“Dying if he goes into the water, like us.” Her husband watched the descendant too, but he also paid attention to the terrified and angry refugees around them.

“Is he from Safe Haven?” Dina thought he had been.

Albert shrugged. “I don’t think so or he would have been with them when they left.”

“He was here. He had female fighters as an escort.”

A small group of refugees who hadn’t run or grabbed their radios observed from the far edge of shore. They were hoping Safe Haven would come home.

“Maybe they forgot him…” Dina motioned at her man. “Go talk to him. Offer him our last bottle.”

Albert frowned, but he retrieved the precious liquid as ordered. He trusted his wife’s instincts. It had kept them alive this long. He wasn’t going to quibble over it.

Dina put her arm around her daughter’s thin shoulders, feeling the wind increase. The temperature was dropping. If they were caught out in the open during a storm, her family would fall ill. They were too weak to fight it off.

Dina watched the descendant plop down in the sand, wondering why he was alone. According to rumors, descendants needed normals to give them hope. “And we need the same from them…” She motioned Albert to hurry. A group of refugees were slowly returning. She wanted to make friends before another fight started. When the sun set, that was all these people did. She and her family had been left alone because they still had ammunition, but that was low now. “We need a friend. Go make one.” She gave her daughter a gentle nudge.

Lorna took her father’s rough hand without complaint. Since the war, the eight-year-old had learned to do what she was told, the instant she was told.

William heard them coming. He gathered flames to fire… William lowered his arm when he saw the father and daughter. Their slow steps and cautious smiles implied they weren’t searching for trouble.

“Can we join you for a minute?” Albert was ready to shield his daughter with his body, but he agreed with his wife. They needed a protector. A descendant was at the top of that list.

William grunted, turning toward the ocean.

Albert took that as a yes. He settled a few feet away, nudging the little girl forward. Lorna was good at drawing sympathy from strangers who had a heart left. The problem was, most people didn’t.

Lorna dropped right next to William. His shield touched her arm, drawing a zap and a low moan.

“Damn it!” William scooted over so she wouldn’t be hurt.

Albert nodded to the girl again.

Lorna tried to tap William on the arm. This zap was loud and brought a small cry.

“Stop touching me!” William watched tears form and sighed. “I can’t lower my shield or people will try to kill me.”

The girl ignored the warning, moving closer again.

Forced, William included the child in his shield so she wouldn’t be hurt.

Lorna smiled at him through missing teeth and adorable dimples. She rested her cheek against his arm, sighing in pleasure.

“Ah, that’s not fair. I don’t want the job!”

The child shut her eyes, enjoying the feeling of safety.

Albert couldn’t help feeling useless, though he’d helped keep the child alive. Being normal wasn’t ideal anymore. Everyone needed magic in this new world.

William’s anger rose. “I don’t want the job. Protect yourselves.”

“…just her, then?” Albert knew what his wife wanted. If their daughter survived, they could die at peace. Since Safe Haven left, dying was all anyone talked about.

“No.” William stared at the tide coming in, mind hunting for Safe Haven. *Where are you?!*

“They aren’t coming back.”

William glanced at the thin child, hating the sallow skin beneath a sunburn. She was starving. “I know.”

“Why didn’t you go too?”

“I’m not stable. I would have caused problems.”

The child peered up at him. “Me too. I’m sick.”

William frowned, turning his scan to the girl. “With what?”

“We don’t know.” Albert let out a sound of misery. “She gets fevers and sweats, then she’s fine for a while. Just started after the war, so we don’t know.”

William scanned deeper. “Malaria maybe. You need Chloroquine.”

“We thought of that, but we can’t find any.”

“A hospital out in the country might still have it.” William didn’t resist the urge to heal the girl. He placed a hand on her wrist. He also pushed in extra energy. She needed it more than he did.

“Thank you.” Albert motioned to his wife, who was coming toward them. “We can only pay with my body or hers.”

William scowled at the man. “I’m no rapist!”

“It’s not rape. It’s a fair trade.” Dina hated the way life worked now. “We don’t have anything else to give.”

“Can you give me peace and quiet for a few hours?”

Dina chuckled as she sat by her husband. “No, not really. If Lorna doesn’t start chattering, the other refugees will make noise. The beach is loud at night.”

“Why are you all still here?”

Dina’s sad gaze turned to the water. “We know they aren’t coming home for a long time, but…”

William grunted. “Yeah.” He gestured at a nearby shack. “If I set that on fire, will the others go there for heat?”

“Probably.” Albert didn’t understand. “They’ll just come back when it burns down. They sit on this beach all day or sleep, then drink and fight all night. If you want quiet, you’ll have to...insist.”

William lifted a hand and blasted the remains of the shack. Screams and smoke filled the air.

Once the others realized he wasn’t attacking, they meandered toward the heat, keeping an eye on him.

Radios blared, giving new life to the hunt for magic users, but William didn’t stop them. He was tired of running, of hiding. Humans needed to learn to live with magic. If not, they would die.

The sun sank over the water, bringing a new level of tension to the shore. Women and kids huddled around their small campsites, preparing for the evening’s trouble.

The other starving refugees watched for signs that William had more food in the bag by his feet but none of them wanted to challenge him to find out. The bottle near his hands also appealed, but the refugees had found a stash of whiskey in the warehouse that hadn’t been loaded in time. Safe Haven had left them a final drink.

William sent out a mental warning. *I want peace, or else!*

Everyone stilled, faces filling with fear.

William let out a calming breath. “That’s better.”

Lorna tapped his arm. “Will you stay?”

“No.”

“Can we stay with you?”

“No!”

The little girl began to cry. “Please, mister? We won’t be no trouble for you.”

William lowered his shield. “Get her away from me–now.”

Albert scooped up the crying child and held her on his lap, but the family didn’t return to their campsite. They stayed with William as darkness settled over the land.

William brought up his shield again, sensing danger. He automatically included the small family inside. He didn’t want responsibility for them, but he didn’t want them dead either.

Cars flew onto the walkway and then the beach, throwing sand over people. Tires spun as other cars tried to follow. Sand was hard to navigate. It was thicker, meaner.

William turned to face the oncoming vehicles, fury spilling over.

The family cowered at his feet as he opened fire, blasting flames and madness in every throw.

It only took William a few minutes to eliminate the threats. The peaceful refugees had fled the beach, leaving a dozen who were willing to risk their life to stay close to a magic user. He was the first authority figure they’d had since Safe Haven left. It was hard for them to abandon.

William sank down, sweating and still furious.

“More will come.” Albert helped Dina and Lorna wipe sand from their torn, dirty clothes.

“Let them.” William didn’t speak again as darkness took over and the temperature continued to drop. Some things were too awful to voice. The fact that they were now without Safe Haven’s light was one of those.

More refugees arrived at the beach after the sun sank, but burning, smoldering hulks and bodies made them pause. When they spotted William, protected by his shield, a few of them turned and left. They knew they couldn’t handle him.

Others parked and walked to the beach, not as aggressive as those who’d come before them. That approach obviously hadn’t succeeded and there weren’t enough refugees to rush him. Safe Haven had taken a large toll.

The family around William watched for trouble as a group of ten approached their location.

William let out an ugly sound. “I will kill you all.”

Half of them immediately went in the other direction, picking spots nearby to observe.

The rest joined the family, not speaking. They didn’t know what to say, how to beg or threaten.

William was still angry. “What do you want?!”

A man in the front, a tall, thin redhead wearing three coats and hip boots, tossed a bag at William’s feet. “That’s all the supplies and money we have.”

“Tell me what you want!”

People cringed from his anger. Then they leaned closer for protection.

William sighed, anger fading into deep depression. “I make no promise of safety. I can’t give you what you need.”

“But Safe Haven can.”

“Safe Haven is gone!”

“They’ll return, in four years.” Lorna slid over to be close to William again. “You were thinking it.”

William realized the little girl was catching his thoughts because they were already bonded. He didn’t know how it had happened, but it had. “Leave me alone. If I’m still here come dawn, maybe we’ll talk.” He frowned. “And feed her. The stomach growling is making me angrier.”

The family remained with William as they cooked and ate, sharing their little food and his bottle. When those ran out, William resumed brooding. His dirty clothes and sweaty, gritty body now matched those around him. When the wind blew more sand over him, William let it collect. He didn’t have a ship to follow Safe Haven and there wasn’t time to find one. An ugly storm was coming, one that would blanket the entire country. William had searched for an end to it but hadn’t found one. America was about to get very very cold.

Chapter Three

**Safe Haven**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

December 4th

[21.263244, -85.508671](https://www.google.com/maps/place/21°15'47.7%22N+85°30'31.2%22W/@21.7336212,-86.0710446,7.75z/data=!4m15!1m8!3m7!1s0x0:0x0!2zMTnCsDQ0JzQ5LjEiTiA4NMKwMTQnNTIuMyJX!3b1!7e2!8m2!3d19.746959!4d-84.2478691!3m5!1s0x0:0x0!7e2!8m2!3d21.2632435!4d-85.5086715)

**1**

**“I**’m cold.”

Samantha pulled the blanket up to Amy’s thin shoulders. The child had knocked on the door a few hours after Neil’s bombshell. They’d brought her in without hesitating. Neil had risked his life for this, for them to be together as a family. “Better?”

Amy nodded, lids shutting. “Thanks.”

Samantha waited for more, but the little girl was out again. She’d been sleeping a lot and eating double her share since they set sail. It was good. The child needed to heal.

Samantha glanced over to find Neil watching her. She smiled at him.

Neil didn’t return the gesture. “We have to stay here for a while. It’s not safe topside.”

Samantha frowned. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but my...voice says we have to stay here if we want to survive.”

Samantha wasn’t sure what to do. They had supplies and a functioning bathroom, so staying wasn’t the problem. Letting everyone else fight while they hid, was. “Tell me what you saw.”

“They’re sick.” Neil wiped sleep from his eyes, yawning, but he was already alert. His body would catch up shortly to the bad vibes.

Samantha blanched. “An outbreak?”

“I think so.”

“We have to help!” Samantha moved toward the closet for her clothes.

Neil sat up in the bed. “You can’t help them.” He pointed at her stomach. “You can lose the babies.” Neil glanced at Amy. “And her. If we stay here, we all live. When it’s over, we’ll help in any way we can.”

Samantha’s hand rose to her hip. “You want me to hide here. I can’t do that.”

“Then you’ll bury three kids...and maybe yourself.” Neil laid back down, putting his arms under his neck. “I won’t stop you, but I also won’t be able to save you. I don’t have those gifts. Those who do will use it on their loved ones, not mine.”

Samantha was horrified. She was also suddenly grateful Neil spotted the problem in time for them to have this choice.

“They want us out of sight for a while anyway. We’re doing what’s best for us, like everyone has to do at some point.”

Samantha tugged her silky blue robe over her protruding stomach and curled her feet against the carpet, chilled. “It feels cowardly.”

“It is.”

“Then how can you make this choice?”

Neil sighed. “The same as I have every other choice since I fell in love with you–survival of our family. It’s us or them this time, Sam. Please make your choice.”

Samantha frowned. She hated being put on the spot when she didn’t have enough information. “I don’t know what to do. Maybe it would be okay if we help...” The sound of lapping water mocked her. The boat wasn’t moving, though Grant had received orders to get them underway at dawn. Samantha peered at the clock on the nightstand. *It’s almost eight. Why aren’t we moving?*

The other morning noises she’d adjusted to–chatter, little feet, the murmur of guards and creaking elevators–were also absent. It sounded as if no one was up yet and that was wrong. The guards on their door weren’t here either. They’d staggered off hours ago, but Neil’s sleep spell hadn’t caused it. Samantha had assumed Neil just wasn’t being guarded anymore.

Samantha felt someone coming toward their cabin.

Neil locked eyes with her. “I’ll get us through this. We’ll be alive when it’s over.”

She frowned at him. “Will our camp? Our friends?”

Neil grunted. “That has not been revealed.”

Samantha’s heart broke again.

*Tap-tap!* “You guys okay in there? Need anything?”

Neil waited for Samantha to answer Jonny, to make her choice. The guard had probably been sent to make sure she was still alive after a night with him. His honorable reputation was gone.

“We’re fine.” Samantha cleared her throat. “Leave us alone for a while!”

“Um, okay.” Jonny left, muttering about leaving her alone until she rotted.

Neil wrapped his arms around Samantha as she joined him in the wide bed. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no other way?”

“Not that I saw. This is the safest place you can be.”

Samantha rested against his bare chest, worry settling into her heart. “When are we ever going to get a break?”

Neil didn’t answer. He couldn’t. From what he’d seen while searching time, Safe Haven wasn’t going to get one. The road to recovery was full of sinkholes and black ice. They were slipping toward final doom, with nothing coming to stop it.

**2**

“Help me.” Missy dragged the blanket of supplies toward the stairs. It clanked and thumped, making a lot of noise. “Lift the side.”

Leeann, thrilled that Missy had woken her for anything, took the other end. It was the first time Missy had spoken to her in days. “Where are we going?”

Missy helped Leeann tie a corner of the blanket pouch so their supplies didn’t fall out. There hadn’t been time when they fled the kids’ area. “We have to hide for a while.”

Leeann tightened the knot while Missy pulled on her coat. “I don’t feel anything.”

Missy zipped up. “You’ve been sad. Give it a few minutes.”

“Okay.” Leeann lifted the heavy pouch in both hands. “But we better move faster. It’s almost shift change.”

Missy turned on her flashlight to lead the way. “We have to pick up a few people.”

Leeann assumed she meant other kids, but she was distracted. The bad feeling was hitting her now. She just wasn’t sure if it meant something bad would happen to them if they stayed here or something bad would happen because they were sneaking out.

“Wait here.” Missy opened the employee door. She waved.

Four shadows broke away from the wall and came forward, each carrying a bag.

“This isn’t right. We should stay and help.” Cody shifted his pack onto his shoulders, then took the blanket pouch from Leeann.

Kimmie came around the corner. “We left notes. The alpha will agree.” Kimmie took the blanket pouch from Cody, then slung it over her shoulder.

“She’s also going to be upset about this.” Kyle came from the employee entrance near them. He kissed Autumn on the cheek and handed her to Molly, who was by his side. “Not to mention how pissed my wife will be.”

The dim, deserted corridor added to the bad vibes. There should have been guards all through this deck, but Kyle hadn’t spotted any. He didn’t even hear passengers talking or the echo of equipment from the gymnasium under his feet. *It’s too quiet.*

“We’ll take good care of her.” Molly motioned with her free hand. “Let’s go. Courtney is bringing Mike and Mia. That’s all of us.” The kid’s area was in chaos with children throwing up, running fevers. None of the panicking adults there had noticed them leaving. Kyle had been on duty over the kids. So had Molly, though she wasn’t sure how these panicking children had gotten their agreement so fast.

“Wait.” Kyle scowled, counting. “You said all the kids. We’re missing...a lot!”

The ship swayed gently beneath their feet, anchored in calm seas. Kyle frowned as he realized they weren’t moving. *Something happened topside. I need to find Jennifer.*

Molly gestured at Cody. “Tell him. He needs to let Angela know.” She’d had a few minutes to get details while helping the little boy find his shoes.

Cody put a hand on Kyle’s arm. “They’re sick. A lot of people are.”

“That can’t be. We would see signs...” Kyle scanned for guards at the intersection. “Where’s third shift?”

Molly led the children down the hall as Kyle left to search for the three Eagles who should have been watching this hall. “Come on, kids. We’ll fix up our container like a playhouse. We’ll have smores, sing songs and not do any chores. Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

The scared kids were subdued, convincing Molly the moment the adults had feared was here. The kids were all wearing big coats and boots, with gloves stuffed in their pockets. The cargo areas were very drafty, so they didn’t stay as warm as the upper decks. Molly cursed herself for not grabbing her own warmer setup as they hurried down the hallway toward the stairs.

“What about our families, our friends?” Cody was only going because of Missy. He didn’t want her to be alone. “What about the camp?”

“Angela will cover them. She’ll be happy you kids are safe. You’re special. She knows that.” Pinned up hair and full tool belts around tiny waists would have made her smile any other day. Now, it gave Molly a chill she couldn’t hide.

“Not Caleb.” Leeann frowned at him. “Neither is Roy.”

“Special doesn’t always mean magic.” Molly didn’t explain further because she didn’t know either. She was just glad it wasn’t only descendant children who would be spared. Her wish was for all the kids to live. Missy had refused to answer that question, giving Molly more chills that still hadn’t gone away. She wanted to talk to Angela, but their leader was ill. So was Marc. The best thing she could do was protect their kids until things were back to normal.

“What if they die?” Cody tried not to cry.

Molly put an arm around his shoulders, walking them faster. “Your parents are strong. They’ll survive.”

“I meant the other kids!”

Molly paled but kept walking. “Think good thoughts, okay? It won’t help anyone if we panic.”

**3**

“Don’t panic. I’m sure it’s nothing.” Tonya finished brushing her teeth and spit into the sink. “Pregnant women throw up. It’s part of the process.”

Kenn, leaning against the wall nearby, frowned but didn’t answer. He’d been woken by the sound of vomiting. Their cabin now stank; she was pale, shaky. He didn’t like the process, but that wasn’t the problem right now.

“You have duty soon.” Tonya gave him a weak smile in the mirror. “I’m fine. Go to work.”

Kenn stayed where he was, mind spinning. He was picking up unsettling thoughts from people across the ship. To make matters worse, none of them were receiving responses from the boss.

Tonya scowled as she caught his concern. “Then go check on her!”

Kenn kept the exit blocked with his big body. “I’m listening first.”

Tonya came from the bathroom, toothbrush still in hand. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know yet. Until I do, we’re staying here.”

Tonya tried to connect to anyone on their deck. Her guts immediately began to churn.

“I’ve got it. Shut that down until you’re feeling better.” Kenn strapped on his gun belt, hoping he didn’t need to use it. Angela had scared them all with the mental image of a ship full of holes. Most of them were now afraid to fire a weapon onboard.

Tonya listened for normal noises, but she didn’t hear them. “Where is everyone? We’ve usually been woken three times already.”

“Yeah. No kids, no security.” Kenn could feel the nausea hitting her in thick waves, but he didn’t tell her to stop again. He needed anything she might pick up.

Tonya shut the mental doors. “I caught something.”

Kenn grunted. Some of the thoughts were terrifying. It made them stronger, louder than the others.

“Why are the kids afraid?” Tonya stepped toward him. “Kenny?”

“Someone’s sick.”

“Sick?” Tonya stiffened. “Our kids!”

“Not just our adopted orphans. All the kids are either upset or not transmitting.”

“I don’t understand”

“Whatever it is, their mental connections have been shut or muted. I can’t get any of them.”

“Where’s Angela?”

Kenn’s silence sent terror into Tonya’s heart. “The boss is sick?”

Kenn slowly nodded. “I can’t get Marc or Ivan either.”

“Have we been attacked?” Tonya dropped her toothbrush and went to the closet to get clothes. “Is Grant on the bridge?” Tonya paused at the lack of answers, heart thumping. “Kenny?”

Silence.

Tonya turned to see Kenn grimacing in concentration. “You don’t have him...do you?”

Kenn let go, using too much power for all the searches. “No. Whatever it is, the captain has it too.”

“Are you getting anyone in leadership? What about Jennifer? Or Samantha?”

“Samantha has a shield around their cabin. Nothing from the rest of the council, except Kyle.”

“You have Kyle? That’s great.” She studied him, frown growing. “Isn’t it?”

“He’s in panic mode, baby. He just staggered into the infirmary, carrying a body.”

“Is he sick too?”

“I think so. He feels...odd.”

“So, you’re in charge.”

Kenn hadn’t considered that. “Oh, shit.”

“Exactly. You can’t stay here. You have to go save everyone.”

“Me?”

“There’s no one else who can run the camp, right?”

Kenn felt like he was going to be sick now. “No.” Baby items and medical books covered the available spaces and part of the bed. Kenn didn’t mind. Tonya was happy. That made it worth having to clear off his pillow each night when he crawled into bed. She’d already been asleep, sitting up with a book in her lap, when he arrived last night. When he’d fallen asleep holding her, taking over leadership had been the last thing on his mind.

Tonya dug out her kit and gun from under her other gear, worry growing. She hadn’t planned on using a weapon while pregnant. *I have a man for that.* “You’ll be a hero again.” She went into the bathroom to get changed. “You can lock me in the lab, then go save the world.” She shut the door.

“A hero...” Kenn frowned. “Wait. Did you say something about going to the lab?”

­

**4**

“Get that to the lab.” Kyle dropped into the chair, head falling against the wall. His body went slack as he stole rest. He’d seen descendants exhaust themselves to help someone, but he hadn’t realized how much it hurt to give everything. When he’d found Jennifer in the stairwell, bleeding, he’d done just that. He had nothing left to give her until he recharged, but at least she was stable.

Morgan grabbed the blood sample Kyle had done on Jennifer, under oral supervision, and put it with the others. Morgan and the other medics were too busy to deliver samples or even to handle Jennifer’s blood tests themselves. Ten other people were here ahead of her. When Kyle had come in, carrying Jennifer, all they could do was point to an empty bed.

“Help!” Ray staggered under Grant’s weight as they entered the infirmary.

“Any bed.” Morgan finished drawing blood from Ben, then labeled it with shaky hands.

Ray stared. People were moaning, puking, crying or not moving at all. The four medics were overwhelmed. “Where’s the boss?!”

Morgan didn’t waste time. “Go find her.”

Red skin peeled from Grant’s arm as they got him on the cot. Harry jumped back, groaning. “This is my nightmare.”

“Mine too.” Morgan grabbed the crusty skin and took it to the waste disposal bag. There was already a small pile of skin and hair in the bottom. “I’ve never dealt with a situation like this.”

“None of us have.” Tim, a medic on last team, wanted to offer encouragement, but he didn’t have time for it. The infirmary echoed with groans and whimpering. Vomiting and tears provided a complete symphony. The noises were staggering, as were the smells.

Ray didn’t know how the medics could function in here. He had never witnessed an outbreak, of any kind, and here were half a dozen bodies lying in piss, vomit, blood. It was enough to test his courage. *We need the boss.*

Ray left the infirmary, not seeing anyone in the passages. “Where are the guards?”

Ray took the elevator to the leadership floor, heart pounding in anticipation of what horror he might find there.

The doors opened.

“Oh, my God.”

The guards on this deck were sprawled across the floor, surrounded by vomit puddles tinged in blood. Many were in their doorways, where they’d collapsed while trying to get help.

*While trying to reach the boss*, Ray corrected, seeing they were all pointed toward Angela’s cabin.

Ray ran to her door, keying his radio. “We have an emergency at the boss’s cabin. All able security to the leadership deck!”

No one responded.

The awful odors thickened as he approached Angela’s cabin. Ray braced, stepping over Ivan’s limp hand. The guard had collapsed in front of the door.

Ray’s panic rose, threatening his ability to think. The door creaked ominously as it opened.

Angela lifted a weak hand. “Quarantine...”

A radio lay beside the bed, as if knocked there when she tried to call for help or give a warning. Whatever had happened had hit everyone hard and fast.

Ray backed away, scanning Marc’s bloody body and her open medical bag.

“Quarantine...entire ship. Now.”

Ray shut the door at her weak order and ran, fumbling for his radio. “We have an outbreak. Lock us down now!”

The radio crackled, then faded to silence. Someone had copied the order, but he didn’t know who.

Ray shut himself in the elevator and hit the stop button, breathing harsh. “Think, damn it! Think!”

The radio crackled. Kenn’s voice came, strong and confident. “We are under quarantine, folks. Stay where you are right now. Don’t go try to find your loved one. You might infect them. I know you don’t want that.” There was a pause where those listening heard an elevator ding. “I’m taking Tonya to the lab. We’ll get started figuring out what this is. People will be by to deliver supplies and collect garbage. Try to hang on–we’re here and we’re working on the problem.”

Ray drew in a deep breath, incredibly relieved to hear a calm voice giving easy to follow instructions. He keyed his mike. “Where do you want me?”

“Ray?” Kenn’s voice was relieved. “Good. I need a full account of manpower and status of the ship.”

Ray hit his mike, glad to be able to deliver some good news. “We’re anchored. Grant set the autopilot to get us rolling as soon as we push a couple buttons. The towline is ready to roll out.”

“Excellent. Get that manpower list and meet me at the lab.”

“Copy.” Ray took another minute to calm himself, then hit the elevator button for the bottom deck. He would work his way up and try not to miss any areas. If Kenn needed to know where everyone was, Ray could do that. He just hoped to find people, not bodies, like on the leadership floor. Whatever was hitting them was worse on that deck. At least those in the infirmary had the strength to puke into a bucket or pan. Angela and Marc, along with their guards and hallmates, were covered in vomit and blood.

“That means the others might get that way too.” Grant was having bladder issues. Kendle was currently cleaning up a mess in the bridge. The cot had been ruined. It was now bagged for a trip to the incinerator.

“The incinerator! We’ll burn it all!” Ray hurried from the elevator, notepad in hand. Now that he knew he wasn’t alone, he could almost think again. *If only my stomach would stop rocking and my skin would stop itching!*

**5**

“I don’t think we should stay here.” Gus leaned over the mess counter to whisper. “We should go to the cabin area.”

Brittani didn’t stop kneading the large pile of bread dough. “I can’t leave. Breakfast starts in an hour.”

“We’re locked down.” Gus leaned closer. “Guards might even block the doors. Then we’ll be trapped in here.”

His tone got through. Brittani scanned the mess. Half a dozen mildly alarmed camp people were still here, along with the camp’s newest drunk. Most people had left after Kenn’s announcement. Cathy, at a corner booth with Timmy, hadn’t even glanced up. “Are we in danger?” Brittani concentrated on the boss.

Gus frowned. “We need to go to ground for a while, like we did after the war.”

Brittani thumped the dough onto the floured counter. “Is it that bad?”

“Aren’t you getting the vibes?” Gus was surprised he was having to point it out. Brittani was usually alert to things like this.

Brittani stifled a yawn. “I was up late. I’m tired.”

“Try.”

She concentrated and got worried thoughts from all corners of the ship. She scowled. “How did I miss that?”

“Panic hasn’t spread yet, but it will soon because people know there’s a problem now.” Gus put a hand on her wrist, aware of Trinity glowering at him from their table. “I’ll escort you.”

Brittani pulled away, floury hands coming up. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

People glanced over, drawn by her tone, but not Cathy or Timmy.

Gus glared. “It’s not safe here.”

Brittani kept working the dough ball. “We’re locked down. If there is a problem, we’ll be safe in here.”

“What if someone in here is sick?”

Brittani let out a sound of annoyance. “Then they’ll still need to eat, Gus. Who’s going to feed everyone if I hide?”

He shrugged. “Not our problem.”

“Yes, it is. If you were a real Eagle, you’d be on guard, not asking me to hide from my duty.” Brittani pointed. “Return to your skank. Hide with her. I’ll be right here, cooking and praying for everyone to recover.”

“Me too.” Jayda stepped to Brittani’s side. She’d been following the conversation. “And we’ll be sure to tell everyone who did their jobs while the camp was sick.”

Now Cathy peered over, trying to decide if she should interfere. “Can you guys pipe down? The kid and I are getting to know each other.”

“You just mind your bassinet!” Jayda didn’t take shit from anyone, let alone a cradle robber like Cathy.

Cathy busted out laughing. “Okay, I will.” She smiled at Timmy. “Let’s go sit in a different booth so we’re out of the crossfire when their fight starts.”

Timmy stood and offered her his arm.

Cathy melted. It was sweet–something many of the older men had forgotten how to be, or now refused to do for fear of being called sexist. “Very nice.”

Timmy blushed, eyes sparkling. “So are you.”

Jayda faked a gag. “Table in the rear for mommy and her little boy?”

Cathy stopped, mood dropping a level. She scanned Jayda from braids to boots. “That’s two. Hit me with number three and I’ll fire back.” Cathy pointed when Jayda opened her mouth. “Your biscuits are burning. Mind your job first, and your bitterness second.”

Jayda flipped around. Smoke was coming from the oven. “Damn it!” She hurried to open the oven door and turn on the fan.

Across the kitchen, Gus leaned over the counter to get Brittani’s attention again. “You always told me we have to go to ground when there’s an illness. I learned it from you.”

“That was when we were alone, Gus. Now, there’s a ship of people who need us. We’re not ill. We can help.”

Gus stared at her for a few seconds, then stomped back to his table.

Brittani patted Jayda’s arm, seeing the biscuits were indeed burnt. “A few of the Eagles like them that way. I’ll give this batch to the right people. And hey, thank you for the support.”

Jayda sighed, trying not to cry. “Gus is the easy one. He’ll do what you want because he still loves you. The others here don’t have any allegiance to two black cooks.”

Brittani frowned. “Does it always have to come to race?”

Jayda was still learning to trust other people again. “I hope it won’t, but I’m braced for it. People do crazy stuff when they’re afraid.”

“Yeah.” Brittani returned to kneading dough for the first batch of bread. “Let’s get them all fed. A full stomach helps.”

“I have an idea how we can deliver it to areas without breaking the quarantine.” Jayda pointed at the dumbwaiter. “We can load that up, then tell them over the radio to come get it. No contact.”

Brittani smiled. “Good idea. We’ll get it ready as soon as the next batch is in the oven.”

Gus had paused by Trinity. He peered over his shoulder to find the two cooks already back to work. It made him feel ashamed.

Trinity, soothed because Gus had returned unhappy, patted his thick arm. “Do whatever you want, not what she wants. You’re free of that hold now.”

*You’re free of that hold now...*

*No, I’m not. I still have to live with myself.* Gus went to the main door and shut it. He turned the lock, causing heads to snap in his direction.

Gus locked the other doors, not responding to glares or questions. *If she won’t leave this area, I can lock us in and keep her alive that way. I’m not giving her up.*

“What are you doing? You can’t keep us in here.”

Gus scowled at Timmy. “I’m keeping them out, get it? No one in here is sick so far and we have food.”

Timmy thought about it. “Let me go get my dad and brother first.”

“No. We’re on lockdown.”

Everyone tensed for his whining.

Cathy shut it down. “You’re an Eagle, boy. They come before you do.”

Timmy blushed to the roots of his hair.

Cathy burst out laughing, edge of fear shoved aside by amusement. She could feel the disapproval radiating from the adults in the mess, but she didn’t care. *What good is it to be alive if I never have fun?*

**6**

“This is wrong.” Walking next to Candy, Tracy felt incredibly small, but not in a sexy way. She was terrified of being responsible for the pregnant woman. Tracy forced bravado into her voice. “You know this is wrong.”

“Yes. Come on.” Charlie led Tracy and Candy to the elevator. Not hearing normal activities was frightening. So were empty halls and checkpoints, but the absence of thoughts was terrifying. It was as if almost all the descendants were gone.

Tracy pulled her coat tighter, already cold.

Candy unzipped hers, starting to sweat. She was looking forward to the drafty passages below, but not being alone while they waited. When Charlie had come for them, she’d been thrilled to be included at all. Now, she was just worried. If Conner thought she should hide, it meant things were about to get bad. Again.

Charlie and Conner had felt trouble hit while caring for the animals and made the choice to protect their mates first and then help everyone else. It was wrong to sneak their women away, but the boys had agreed the unborn babies were more important than Eagle rules.

Both females entered the elevator with a dozen questions they were afraid to ask.

When they were inside, Charlie handed a bag of supplies to Tracy, then kissed her cheek. “Stay down until one of us come for you.”

The doors shut before Tracy could protest again. Conner had insisted they be quarantined because they were pregnant. Charlie hadn’t gotten an answer from either parent, or Adrian. His own mental gifts weren’t functioning right, but he still felt the mental panic and heard the same on the radio. Conner was checking on the camp kids now, while Charlie got their women to safety.

“I need help in the infirmary!”

Morgan’s scared voice over the radio got Charlie moving. He planned to wear himself out helping now, so his mom would forgive him for not calling the alarm when he’d first sensed trouble. He’d made another selfish choice. Now, he had to atone for it.

“What can I do?” Charlie brought up his personal shield as he entered the infirmary.

“Over there!” Morgan pointed with his syringe. “Help him!”

Charlie hurried to the convulsing little boy. “Wallace! Can you hear me?” Charlie sent a thin blast of healing orbs. “He’s burning up!”

“They all are!” Morgan injected Brea’s arm, then rotated to Darren, switching needles with practiced actions. He filled the syringe and injected the shivering boy. “I don’t know what else to do for them!”

They had to shout to be heard over puking and moaning.

*No coughs*, Charlie noted. *High fevers, no rash... Grant’s skin is red. He has blisters. It looks like a burn...* Charlie went to Grant and examined him through his shield. “He looks different.”

Harry, hurrying by with a bag of waste for the growing pile by the door, nodded toward the rear of the infirmary. “The fishing crew are red too, with blisters. I think they were exposed first.”

Kyle glanced up from Jennifer’s cot. “That means it’s airborne... Right?”

“Unknown, but if we’re lucky, it’s in the air up there, not down here.” Harry got another empty bag.

“We have to get this boat moving.” Charlie gathered his energy to work on Grant. “We need our captain.”

“I’ve tried.” Morgan dumped a case of dirty needles into the compartment for disposal and went to the cabinet for a fresh box. “All we can do is bring down the fever so they don’t fry. Everything else is up to them until Tonya figures out what it is. She and Kenn are in the lab now.”

Charlie tried anyway, but he didn’t give Grant as big a blast as he’d intended. If Morgan was right, he needed to save his strength to help those who became critical.

Grant moaned as the heat subsided. “Away... Get away...”

Charlie stared, fear growing. “He’s delirious. He can’t sail.”

Tim pointed at the rear of the infirmary. “The entire boat crew is here, other than Claire and Gus.”

Charlie tried to think. “Gus is in the mess. He was off duty last night. I haven’t seen Claire.”

“She’s in Doug’s cabin. They spent the night together.” Ray entered the infirmary, stomach churning. “I just came from that deck. Doug’s sick. So is she; she said it’s a cold. She’s caring for him.” Ray began recording names in his book, working on accounting for everyone. “The boss and Marc are ill too. They need someone to care for them.”

Conner stuck his head in. “Guards and den mothers are bringing a bunch of camp kids! All of them are sick. Clear room.”

Morgan glanced around, then began issuing orders to the three stunned men under his command. “Double them up if they’re small. Start moving people and get bags ready. Try to catch the messes. We don’t have time to clean.”

“Medic!”

Kyle’s scream chilled them all.

Charlie ran toward the top Eagle, gathering energy to stop Jennifer’s convulsions.

“Help!”

Nearby, Wallace’s body jumped out of Harry’s hands.

Morgan sucked in air, begging his brain to wake him from this nightmare. He hit the radio button. “All hands in the infirmary!”

There was no answer.

“Medic!” Ray pointed at Nathan. “He just stopped breathing!”

“Oh, lord.”

There was no answer.

Chapter Four

**I’ve Had Enough**

**A picture containing object, first-aid kit

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“H**ang on. I heard something.” Tracy put a hand on Candy’s wrist. She’d taken the lead since the other woman was largely pregnant. They’d been down here an hour now, looking for a good place to make their den.

A giggle echoed through the crowded cargo area around them.

Tracy frowned. “That was Cody.”

“Is he hiding too?”

Both women winced at Candy’s question. They were hiding to save themselves. Neither of them had given a single thought to the camp kids.

“Let’s make sure they’re covered.”

Candy nodded, following with the flashlight they hadn’t needed yet. Tracy was carrying the rest of their gear.

Molly broke away from the shadows, gun lowering. She’d been watching them for the last few minutes, not sure if she should make contact. “We’re over here.”

Tracy and Candy joined Molly at a storage container. Happy voices echoed from inside.

“Just you two?” Molly didn’t scold the women for hiding, but she couldn’t help the scorn in her tone. *At least I’m trying to help the kids. These two are only concerned with their own survival*.

Tracy didn’t say Charlie and Conner had insisted. She didn’t want them to get in trouble too.

Molly grunted. “Are you sick? Feeling bad at all?”

“No.” Tracy stepped forward. “We’re not joining you. We were looking for a place for ourselves when we heard noises.”

Molly relaxed. “Good. Go on about your business then. I’m sure we’ll be fine.” She ducked into the cargo pod with the kids. Courtney was sleeping while she took the first watch.

Candy and Tracy exchanged a guilty glance.

Candy sighed. “We just got trapped. That was fast.”

Tracy sniggered. “Eagle mentality–she’s got it.”

Candy smiled. She waved at a small stack of lawn chairs and carpeting nearby. “We could make a blind and keep watch, but not have to deal with the kids directly.”

“Deal.” Tracy put her kit down and went to gather the materials. She felt better already. *Now, if I could just wake up from this nightmare.*

**2**

“She stopped breathing again!” Jeff knelt to perform CPR.

Adrian put a hand on the man’s arm. “Let her go. Three times is enough.”

Jeff didn’t want to, but he was exhausted. He’d been trying to keep Sabrina alive for an hour, but her body couldn’t handle it. He closed her eyelids, shuddering. Jeff hated death up close. He didn’t mind if it was a killer or a traitor, but Sabrina had been a sweet girl from Ciemus who hadn’t even graduated high school yet. It wasn’t fair.

Adrian, Jonny, and Michael shared glances of concern, but they didn’t speak. They’d all been quarantined in the lounge for three hours now. Watching Sabrina collapse and not rise had been awful. Their calls for a medic had gone unanswered, but Adrian and Jeff had insisted none of them leave due to possibly contaminating the rest of the ship with whatever Sabrina had.

“Why didn’t the medic come?” Martin banged on the door. “Is anyone out there?!”

Jeff joined Adrian in the corner as Martin vented his frustration. They had stopped him from leaving right after Sabrina collapsed by using calm words and rule reminders, but he was reaching a new level of panic now that she’d died. Some rookies didn’t do well under stress.

Adrian leaned in. “We need to get rid of the body.”

Jeff winced at Adrian’s whisper, though he’d been thinking the same thing. “I should stay away from everyone too. I touched her a lot.”

Adrian sighed. “If she had something contagious, everyone in this room is infected. When a crew comes by, we’ll get her down to the morgue.” *She can keep Seth and Becky company.* Adrian shoved that thought away, hating himself.

Jeff made sure no one else could hear him. “I might know what it is.”

“Me too.” Adrian scanned the room, the people. “Save it for after they sleep, okay? We don’t need more panic.”

Jeff grunted. He certainly didn’t want to restrain anyone right now. He needed a nap. Battling death was exhausting.

Adrian considered it. “That’s a good idea. It might help the others stay calm.” Adrian hadn’t covered outbreaks in any of his notebooks. There hadn’t been time, but he also hadn’t known how to handle most of them except by government standards and that wasn’t used in Safe Haven. Now, he wished he’d spent more time on it. Unless Angela had filled in that gap, they were about to be wiped out and there was little that magic could do to stop it.

Jeff sank on one of the couches and stretched out. He began to doze almost immediately.

“How can you sleep right now?!” Martin glowered.

“He’s tired.” Adrian took the couch in the far corner, watching for trouble. He didn’t feel ill, but Sabrina hadn’t seemed ill before she collapsed either. The only sign had been a nasty sunburn. By the time he’d figured it out, they were under lockdown. He’d sent several radio messages in code to move the ship, but no one was responding, and the boat hadn’t moved*. I’m giving it another hour and then I’ll go do it*. If not for the lockdown, he would have gone already.

*Wake me when you’re ready. It might take two of us to sail this ship.*

*I will.* Adrian was glad Jeff was here. He could be counted on in an emergency and this definitely qualified.

**3**

“I’m not qualified.” Tonya was shocked by the huge pile of vials and bags that Kenn was putting in the cooler or laying by the machine they’d just gotten started. “I’ll never be able to identify it. I don’t know what I’m searching for!”

“Just sort and organize; keep the samples from spoiling. I’ll get you something to test for.” Kenn exited, flipping the latch. *Please, don’t be dumb enough to open it for anyone while I’m away.* Kenn keyed his radio. “All able-bodied people roaming the ship need to come to the lab right now. You have information I need. For everyone else, please give me another hour. The medics are narrowing things down. Please hang on.”

“Help!” His radio crackled with Panaji’s panicking voice. “Need medic in shower!”

Kenn braced for a garble of responses and was disappointed to hear only a few worried, exhausted replies. He got his notebook out and waited, hoping at least a few unaccounted-for people were healthy enough to help.

The elevator dinged.

Steps echoed on the stairs.

Relief entered Kenn’s heart, crushing the darkness as ten people came toward him. Half of them were still in their work clothes from the night before. The rest had dressed hastily, judging from untucked shirts, tilted holsters, and wild hair. The Eagles were clad in full gear, but it felt like that wasn’t enough for this situation.

Kenn motioned Ralph back toward the steps. “Go help in the shower.” Kenn waved the others closer. “Welcome to hell, ladies and gentlemen. Here’s what I need and why...”

“Why are you in charge?” Monica had come with the others, unwilling to hide.

“Everyone else is out of commission.” Kenn kept his tone even. “Also, *we’re* in charge, not *me*. Ray found the boss’s notebook on outbreaks. It has notes from both leaders and was taped to two medical books. I just gave those to Tonya. She’ll use it as a guide for testing the samples. We follow Angela’s notebook. Agreed?”

Everyone nodded, relieved she had left instructions. None of them knew what to do.

Noises echoed as the infirmary doors opened; grief and fear followed the camp members who were going back to the cabins for more ill kids. Kendle’s ghost ship story came to several minds, bringing more fear.

“Why are you avoiding the leadership floor?” Monica would never trust Kenn. “Shouldn’t we go there first?”

Kenn grunted. “I want to, more than anything, but that’s a hot spot. Until we have gear and a plan for what we find, we’re staying away.”

“What if they need help?” Monica didn’t want to let it go. She hated Kenn.

Kenn gestured. “Look around! The herd needs us first. Angela wants it this way. You know that.” Kenn sat in the chair he’d placed by the lab and opened the red notebook. “First, stop. Stay still for a minute. Your brain and body are pumping adrenaline. You need that, but the rush can cause you to make hasty choices. Sit down; breathe. You can do this. You *will* do this.”

Kenn inhaled, following the advice. He planned to follow every step. “Do it.”

*Ding!*

Everyone glanced at the elevator, drawn by the noise.

Debra marched toward them, relief breaking over her face. She gestured. *Was on the top deck. Took time to get here.*

Kenn motioned to an empty couch on his right. She was a descendant. They needed that skill. “Did you catch it so far?”

Debra scanned the book*. Been listening to you since you made the call to shut us down.*

“Good.” Kenn took another minute to let the others finish their breathing break. He had flipped through the suggestions and knew this would be the last peaceful moment they all got for a while. Dropping from exhaustion wouldn’t count.

“Okay, let’s do this.” Kenn cleared his throat. “Step one is to identify the method of transmission. Start with your command group.” Kenn paused to glance around. “Is anyone here feeling sick?”

“No, but I’ve had contact with two bodies.” Kendle came around the corner. “Sorry for being late. I waited until the elevator was empty in case it’s contagious.” She stopped ten feet away, clearly still doing that.

Kenn resumed reading. “If three people or more fall ill at the same time, it is an outbreak. Those people were likely exposed at roughly the same time. If more people fall ill after contact with the first, assume it is a contagion. If they do not, still assume it is a contagion. Now is not the time to take chances. Lock down my camp.”

People gave Kenn approving glances for doing that already.

Kenn opened his personal notebook in his free hand and read from it. “We have sixteen people sick now, with six dead. We’ll watch those numbers. Right now, the symptoms are a high fever, throwing up, explosive diarrhea and exhaustion. A few have nasty sunburns. There are no cou–”

“Wait.” Kendle took a step closer. “What do you mean by nasty sunburn?” She held out her arm. “Is it like this, just brighter?”

Kenn stared, throat going dry. “Identical.”

“Radiation sickness.” Travis leaned away even though Kendle wasn’t ill.

“Radiation poisoning.” Kendle knew the names now. “Acute.”

Travis scowled. “From where? We didn’t see a blast.”

Kenn ran through their route for the last week. “It would have to be concentrated...”

Kendle pointed toward a porthole. “The debris fields we’ve been pushing through.”

Monica paled. “We’re between two of those now.”

Kendle didn’t want to panic anyone, but she was certain what they were dealing with now. “We have to move this ship.”

“Stop. Wait.” Kenn pointed at the notebook. “There’s a note here not to skip anything, even if we know what it is. It also lists outbreaks below with more detailed instructions for each type.”

Everyone waited for Kenn to read the next part, except Kendle. She sank down on the floor. “Before you get rolling, you should know there’s no one on the top deck at all now that Debra and I are here.”

Kenn’s stomach tightened. “Not even the bridge?”

“No. The entire boat team is down, except for Gus. He’s in the mess, guarding against people who want to loot. He wasn’t up there last night either; he was off duty.”

Kenn sighed. “We’ll fast-track this. We have sick people of all ages and both genders. There’s no commonality yet, but the book says to find one, that it always exists. What do all our victims have in common? Locations?”

Kendle shuddered as ugly memories flashed. *I still miss you, Dawn.* “Were they all on the top deck during a storm?”

Her horror story returned to everyone’s thoughts and increased the production of adrenaline.

Kenn read the list of victims. “Almost all our wild kids are sick.”

Kendle frowned. “Boss made them go topside to let go of their anger.”

“We know the boat crew and fishing team were up there.” Monica skimmed her notes from the last shift. “What about Jennifer?”

“She went with Kyle on that last run.” Kendle was a bit jealous of that action. She’d missed out on the fun to scrub pudding while the camp pointed and laughed. “Maybe they were exposed there.”

“And longer or stronger, because all of that team is on the edge of death, including Marc and the boss. Don’t spread that around.” Kenn added the warning mostly for Debra, who was a rookie.

“Not Adrian.” James frowned. “He isn’t sick at all. I heard him in the lounge a little while ago.”

Monica pointed. “Kendle has been up there for hours. She should be sick too.”

“Kyle isn’t sick either. We have three anomalies.” Kenn wrote it down. “What about the Eagles? There are at least five.”

“We have rotating shifts.” Greg had been point man overnight. He’d helped carry those first ten ill people to the infirmary when it started. “Not all of us have pulled top deck duty yet.”

“Okay, so that leaves camp people for the demographics. Few of them are sick. I count...four.” Kenn scowled. “The camp has been avoiding the top deck for the last two days because of stormy seas. They couldn’t take the rocking without throwing up.”

“What’s the next part say?” Kendle was hoping Angela had it covered.

Kenn continued to read. “Once you identify the source, get away from it, remove it or seal it off.”

“We know we’re going to move the ship. We’ll find the Geiger counters, so we’ll know when we reach a clear area. Then we’ll drop anchor until the boat team can take back over. Agreed?” Greg felt like they should hurry.

So did Monica. “Agreed.”

“What’s next?” Kendle also tried to move them along.

“It says to identify the contagion. While running tests, eliminate contaminates–garbage, vomit, blood, clothes, gear, bedding. It all has to be burned to ash. Pipes have to be flushed and a bleach-based cleaning has to cover every inch of the camp. Items that cannot be sanitized must be burned.”

“What about the people?” Monica thought about the infirmary. “We’ve had deaths. More are coming.”

Kenn skimmed and flipped the page. “...once we identify the contagion, go to rear of notebook for treatment by disease and complications list.” Kenn flipped to the rear, not sure if he was hoping to find it or not.

**Radiation Poisoning!**

The red letters gave Kenn a chill. It was underlined. Kenn held the book up and open so everyone could view it.

**Explosive bloody diarrhea is a sign of coming death if the symptoms start in the first hour.**

**If symptoms appear in 2-3 hours, the dose of gys was high.**

**If the symptoms appear 6-12 hours, and stop within 24 hours, the dose was sublethal-probably 1-2gys.**

**(1 gy = 100 rads)**

**0-1gy-extreme flu symptoms**

**1-2gy-blood cells die, bleeding from orifices**

**2-3gy-turns the skin red with peeling and blisters**

**3+gy-Infections and hemorrhaging**

**Treatments-used in combination, for 30-60 days at least, and as much as 2 years after the exposure.**

**1. Potassium iodide-radioactive particles come out in the urine**

**2. Prussian blue-particles come out in the feces**

**3. Give diethylenetriamine pentaacetic acid-it binds to plutonium, americium and curium.**

**4. Draw blood every three hours to check for lymphocyte white blood count**

**5. Preemptive Antibiotics**

**6. Treat fever and vomiting as needed**

**7. Watch for low blood pressure, seizures, anemia.**

**8. Provide huge amounts of Fluids, electrolytes, and plasma.**

**\*Amount of exposure is more dangerous than length; if levels are above 10gy, death results in minutes.**

Kenn began copying it onto a blank page in his notebook. “Everyone needs to make a copy and give one to the medics. We still don’t have a copy machine that works.”

Pens flew across pages.

Kenn kept reading while he finished the bottom row of the chart. “Radiation sickness can be passed in tiny particles that come out in sweat, feces, vomit, saliva. We can also spread particles through face-to-face sneezes or coughs. *Treat this outbreak as it if were a contagion.*”

Kenn flipped to the cleaning page, now understanding why there was more on aftercare than treatment. The chart was ugly. “Pipes have to be flushed to get rid of particles in the sludge or they will become radioactive. We need protection gear from the cargo hold and a crew to take bodies to the incinerator. Arguments with that choice?” Kenn assumed an ethical discourse would come next, slowing them up even more.

No one spoke.

Kenn cleared his throat, caught off guard. “Um, okay. I am sorry for it. It says not to dump close to camp, but burying it creates a hot spot anyway. ...and I can’t just toss them overboard. I won’t.”

People shifted impatiently, wanting him to move on.

“Next, we make copies... Damn it! We need copies of the rules on the next page given to every group in quarantine and to the cleaning crew. Basically, it all has to be bagged, then burned. After that, pipes get flushed and treated, and we watch for new illnesses. If any happen, we clean those areas again, then compare details to figure out where the second outbreak came from or if it means we didn’t identify the contagion correctly.” Kenn put the notebook on the end table so the others could flip back to finish copying the treatment chart. “We need a boat team, a delivery crew, a cleaning crew, a body crew. We’ll split it evenly. I’m on the body crew.”

Debra pointed at the next page.

Monica read it aloud. “Move all infected to one area and allow their loved ones to stay with them. They were contaminated while bringing that person to the medic anyway. Now you can study them for signs of contagion without having to lock them away from their friend or family. It also provides an extra set of hands for nursing the sick. Please note this only applies to illnesses that are not airborne.” Kenn paused. “Okay, so we’re going to send everyone to the infirmary.” Kenn scanned the dozen faces. “Is there enough room?”

Greg shrugged. “I doubt it, but the lounge down the hall can be used too. There’s a paneled wall we can remove to enlarge it. It will also give the medics access to another set of bathrooms and sinks.”

“I’ll make an announcement on these things in a few minutes to keep people calm.” Kenn made another note. “Pick your team. Write it on this page so we can keep track of each other. You should add it to your books too.”

“Books! Thank god!” Tonya’s voice inside the office told them she’d found the two testing books.

Kenn stifled a yawn, feeling fresh panic coming from the infirmary. “Someone just died.”

“It was Nathan.” Kendle punched the floor. “Damn it! He was a good guy!”

Kenn went to Kendle and pulled her to her feet. “Stay mad. I don’t have time for your tears.”

Kendle jerked away from him. “Bastard.”

“That’s better.” He moved toward the corridor as the others resumed discussing teams and plans. Kenn keyed his radio. “I’ll be making an announcement in a few minutes. Let your neighbor know we have a couple answers while we’re gathering the medications we need. Hang in there while we go to the cargo area for the supplies we don’t have up here yet. We’re working on it.”

There were no radio answers.

Kenn gestured toward the stairs, now talking to his new team. “We’ll go to the cargo hold together for the gear we need. We can stop by the showers on that floor and clean, then change. After, we’ll split up for the jobs we chose.” Kenn led the way, hating to leave the lab unguarded. There just wasn’t a choice. Tonya was armed with his rowdy kid and a loaded 9mm, plus five mags. Her cats were also in the corner, sleeping. She would be fine. Everyone else was in grave danger.

**4**

“Unlock my cell!”

“I don’t have that authority.” Lou watched for an opening to grab the hostage back. Katie had gotten too close to the cell, allowing Kronus to take her prisoner. “I’m delivery only.”

Kronus banged Katie’s gun on the bars. “Then go get your boss!”

Lou staggered toward the stairs, still stunned at not finding any guards at their posts. “Help!”

He ran to the next deck and burst through the door to the lounge, the first room he thought would be occupied. “He took Katie captive!”

Everyone in the lounge was startled onto their feet, hands reaching for a defense.

“Calm down. Tell me what happened.” Adrian put a hand on Lou’s shaking, sweaty shoulder as he tucked his gun back into the holster.

“Kronus!” Lou blinked, trying to focus. “We took food to the brig. He took her gun! He’s holding her hostage!”

Adrian frowned. “Who’s on duty there?”

“No one!”

“What does he want?” Jeff began checking the gear he had with him.

“The boss, but she’s sick!” Lou groaned. “Ray said she can’t even get out of bed to puke.”

Adrian’s heart thumped. *I should be taking care of her.*

Jeff spun Adrian around. “You should be taking care of her people, you jackass! Get to the brig and handle that situation like Angela would. That’s an order, from an Eagle.”

Adrian grinned. “Cool.” He ran into the hall and down the stairs, followed by Lou.

Martin fled while the door wasn’t guarded.

Jeff shut the door behind them. “I’d rather be quarantined with a body than those two.”

The others in the lounge tried to chuckle, but it was hard. Sabrina’s jacket covered corpse was behind the couch. They couldn’t see it, but they knew she was there.

“Does Adrian need help?” Michael felt bad for hiding while people were dying, and bad guys were attacking.

Jeff snorted. “No. He’s gifted that way. We’ll wait for the next announcement.”

Jonny was relieved. The run with Kendle to Market Town had convinced him he didn’t want to be in the front for the action. He didn’t mind helping, but he didn’t need to be first into the line of fire anymore. He’d grown up.

Jeff locked the door, hoping Adrian wouldn’t come back here after he resolved the brig situation. “Maybe he’ll trip and fall overboard.”

**5**

“Don’t trip and fall overboard.” Ozzie warned the team for a third time as they reached the top landing in stiff wind. “It’s slick from the spray.” They’d just finished changing into protective suits and come up to move the ship.

Salty spray soaked their suits and blew debris over the deck. The dark clouds offered little encouragement as the sound of water added to the bad vibes. The slapping noises echoed like death knocking.

Whitney scanned and found familiar faces that no one would get to say goodbye to now. “Men down!”

The bodies on the deck were guards who hadn’t been transferred below yet. Their skin glowed bright red; blood was dried to their eyes and cheeks. None of them moved.

“Come on. We have to get the ship moving.” Ozzie went up the stairs first.

The empty bridge gave them all goosebumps. This area was never allowed to be without a captain.

Salty rot floated through... Debra realized her visor wasn’t shut all the way. She snapped it into place.

“Once we establish control, we’ll work on moving guards below and putting up plastic.” Ozzie went to the wheel, waddling in the bulky suit. “Do not remove your gear, for any reason.”

“Hey.” Whitney pointed. “We forgot about the other boat.”

Debra, Whitney, and Ozzie stared at the UN ship through the bulky visors, not sure what to do. They didn’t have a crew to spare to sail that one, but they couldn’t hook it up by themselves either.

“Angie can send a team back for it.” Ozzie made the choice, pointing. “Take a station and we’ll go over the notes the team left.”

“Pam was able to talk to Ray for a minute. It’s on autopilot as soon as we hit the button.” Whitney scanned. “There.”

The three people took their stations, none of them enjoying the sight of the ocean around them. The foggy steam on the water implied something bad. They didn’t know if it was natural, but it reinforced the theory that they were in a contaminated area.

Debra turned on the Geiger counter. It beeped and crackled rapidly and didn’t stop.

“Here we go.” Whitney pushed the button.

The computer activated, screen coming to life. More monitors flashed on, illuminating the team. Noises sounded from the ship, loud and rough.

All the team could do was hope that was normal.

The sound of the anchor lifting was their first clue it was.

“That’s good, right?”

Ozzie shrugged at Whitney. “No idea.”

The boat shuddered as the engines came to life, immense paddles slowly turning through the debris littered water in choppy clunks and clanks.

“Come in Safe Haven!” The scratchy ship radio blared, making them all jump.

“*Does anyone see the boat?*”

“*Safe Haven, come in!*”

“*The ship sank! They’re all dead.*”

“*Come in, Safe Haven, please!*”

Ozzie flipped the radio off, unable to take listening to it. “Don’t answer any calls from land.”

The lights dimmed as the engines strained, then burned brighter. The ship started to inch forward, drawing subdued cheers from below.

Debris smacked into the hull.

Ozzie studied the path in front of them, heart pounding. If they came across something big, he would have to disengage the autopilot to steer around it. Ray had given him instructions, but Ozzie hoped he didn’t have to try. All they needed was a clear area to anchor in until the captain healed. *Please don’t take long. My heart can’t stand this terror.*

Chapter Five

**It’s A Mess**

**A picture containing weapon

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“H**e had a weak heart. There was nothing else I could do.” Morgan wiped his bleary eyes on a clean towel, blinking to stop the burning. They were using harsh chemicals to clean the cots between uses.

Harry grunted comfort, covering the little body. The boy hadn’t lasted long once the fever hit. He’d gone into cardiac arrest and nothing had brought him back, not even Morgan’s magic.

Harry went to change and wash his hands, emotions in chaos. The medics were wearing the fronts of scrubs, trying to change them between deaths to prevent transferring the contagion. The bin was now overflowing. Body fluids and hair littered the floors and cots, the victims. Harry was glad the smell had faded for his nose. When he’d first walked in, he’d spit up bile. His throat was still burning from it.

Morgan swept the infirmary, counting covered bodies. “We’re losing the fight.”

“Kenn said medications are coming soon.” Harry didn’t have more hope to give. He was almost out.

Morgan went to the next bed to check on Wallace.

Eerie groans and dry gags ripped through the medics and volunteers like stings.

A fresh wail from the rear drew flinches.

“Code blue!” Morgan began CPR on Wallace with robotic motions. None of them had returned. He was losing hope.

Charlie ran in, holding up a bag. “Medication and dosage instructions!” Bleach and vomit battled to be the stronger odor in his nose through the surgical mask.

The medics ignored him, trying to save Wallace’s life. Next to him, Darren went into convulsions.

Charlie hurried to help, taking the bag along. He shot cooling energy into the boy, horrified by the number of bodies.

Darren relaxed, muttering about a shadow only he could see.

Charlie emptied the bag on the next cot, one of the few still open.

Harry sidestepped a puddle of vomit on the way to the waste bin. There was no time to clean the room or people, only their hands.

The infirmary held fifty cots, nearly all of them occupied or filthy. They needed a cleaning crew in here, but people were scared to enter. Morgan didn’t expect real help for a while. That terrified him.

The doors opened again to admit Greg and Kendle. They were carrying Claire.

Charlie sorted the medications into piles and got three clipboards while the new arrivals found a place to put their patient. “Each pile goes with a clipboard. Read the notes before you grab a bottle.” Charlie copied it. The medics didn’t have time.

“He’s gone.” Harry walked away from Wallace, too emotionally worn to shed a tear.

Morgan covered the body this time. “Read the instructions to us as you copy it, rookie. We’ll decide who needs it first.”

Charlie read, sorted, and copied while the body team left to bring in another patient. They were handling live bodies first, corpses second. Charlie didn’t see Kenn. He assumed the man was removing bodies from each place the team cleared. Kenn was also sending healthy people to uncontaminated areas for supply deliveries. “Okay, if they have red skin, like a sunburn, they get a double dose. I’m loading those syringes now. Put their names on the clipboard so we know who got their meds. I’ll add the times.”

The medics were grateful to have a calm voice calling out instructions, but they also resented it. Where had that calm voice been three hours ago when their kids started dying? Morgan wiped his hand down blood-splattered scrubs, fury giving him a second burst of energy.

Charlie felt it, but there wasn’t a satisfactory answer. Any outbreak had casualties. The fact that it was mostly children hurt even more.

Charlie was glad his mate and child were hidden below. It gave him the strength to keep loading syringes even when Darren started convulsing again. *It’s not me or one of mine.* He refused to think about his mom and dad. He knew he couldn’t handle that.

In the corner, Kyle used the tiny bit of energy he’d regained from resting with his head on Jennifer’s hand. Dim blue light glowed around her feverish body.

No one noticed.

**2**

“You can’t handle me.” Kronus bared his teeth. “Go get your boss.”

Adrian settled onto a stool across from the cell. “She’s too sick to come down here. You’ll have to wait until she’s better.” Adrian tugged his plain brown coat together and zipped up. He missed his Eagle jacket, but it didn’t feel right to wear it.

Kronus smacked the bars again. “You liar! A byzan cannot be infected.”

“Don’t know where you got your information, but she’s been sick before. Byzan are not immune. Neither are you.” Adrian pointed at Katie. “She’s sick.”

Katie nodded, lids drooping. “I told him. He doesn’t believe we have an outbreak.” The food she’d been carrying decorated the floor in front of the cell where she was standing against the bars. Kronus kept a tight arm around her neck.

“Yes, he does. He wants to use it to his advantage.” Ramer was furious. Locked in the next cell over, there was nothing he could do to remove the arm from Katie’s throat. Kronus’s face was red, eyes growing wild. He was late for something. Ramer didn’t know what it was yet, but Kronus had been getting twitchier every time he glanced at the clock on the faded white wall. He was in the cell where two murders had happened. No one had told him that.

“Let her go!” Lou was furious. “She needs to go to the infirmary for medication!”

“If she dies, that’s a murder charge. Angela will let us hang you.” Adrian settled against the wall, brow up. “If you need something from her, and we both know you do or you would have waited for her to be ready to talk, I doubt killing one of her favorite people will help.”

Kronus let go of Katie, blowing out a frustrated sigh. “I want to talk to your boss!”

“Pray she heals up so you can.” Adrian kicked the cell shut. “Guess you’d have to pray to your friends at this point.”

Kronus dropped the gun onto the floor. “I’m part of the game now. They won’t help me.”

“Maybe you should try to convince them.” Adrian waved Lou to take Katie to the infirmary. “If Angela dies here, she can’t ascend and take her place.”

“She is not sick!”

Adrian tired of the game. He used his reserve energy to shove into Kronus’s mind. He flashed images from Ray’s visit to the leadership floor. “She is more than sick. She’s dying, but we have to medicate everyone else first, per her orders.”

Kronus paled. “But we are immune...”

“Not here.” Adrian locked the cell. “Keep the gun and shoot yourself if you start feeling sick. We don’t have enough supplies for you.”

Adrian took the guard post on the jail, not looking at Ramer, Vicky, or Stanley. He could feel how relieved they were that someone was out here keeping things under control. The other prisoners had changed into warmer jumpsuits and made their cots with the thicker blankets. Kronus had left his items in the bag. He didn’t plan on cooperating. “I’ll let you all out when Kenn makes his announcement. We need all the hands we can get.”

“Not me.” Ramer dropped back onto the cot and laid down. “If you open my door, I’m going straight to the infirmary for drugs. Nothing will stop me, short of a gunshot.”

Adrian sighed. “Okay. You can watch our guest and radio me if there’s trouble.”

“That, I can do.” Ramer heard the radio fall into the cell, but he didn’t rush to pick it up. He didn’t want to take a chance on grabbing Adrian, on forcing him to open the door. Ramer wanted a fix more than he wanted to live. That meant he needed to stay right where he was.

“I’m proud of you.”

Ramer grimaced at Adrian’s words. “I’m not. I’ve got a monkey on my back and even an outbreak isn’t enough to override it. I need help.”

**3**

“I need help!”

Greg and Kendle hurried over to Kenn. He was bringing Doug to the infirmary, but the big man was dwarfed by Doug’s heavy body.

Doug, barely conscious, tried to propel himself forward.

Kenn steered while the others supported Doug’s weight. Together, the trio got him onto the elevator.

Kenn struggled for breath as it went down. He didn’t try to talk yet, but he used his hands in code. *Update?*

Greg frowned. “Two more deaths in the infirmary; one death in the camp cabins. Gloria was on the top deck two days in a row, sunbathing. She stayed up there to watch the storm come in. She had red skin. According to Angela’s notebook, that means she got a higher dose.”

Kenn added it to his mental list. *Okay. Next?*

“Adrian got Kronus to stand down for now, but we’re monitoring for more tricks. He wants to talk to Angela.” Greg lowered his voice. “He doesn’t believe she’s sick.”

“He’s back burner for now.” Kenn sucked in more air. “I feel us moving. Boat crew report any trouble?”

“Not that we know of. Our gophers should be here soon for another load of supplies. They’re hitting all cabins right now. That’s how we found Gloria.” Greg braced against the elevator ride. “She lives alone.”

The elevator opened, letting them out. The corridor outside the infirmary now held patients in cots, as well as in the opposite corridor.

“They’re rearranging while James removes the wall panel. It’ll be cluttered for another hour.” Kenn put Doug on the only empty cot, then went into the infirmary to let Morgan know he had more patients.

The quiet gave him chills, as did the dozen covered bodies. The only noise was the medics harsh breathing as they worked on Grant. All the other patients were unconscious.

Kenn scanned again. “Is the medicine working on any of them?”

“Too soon to tell.” Morgan filled another syringe. “We got the sunburnt people dosed with both medications. We’re dosing the milder patients now.”

Kenn frowned deeper. “Why are they all out?”

“The fever reducer makes them drowsy. Sleep is good, for most of them.” Morgan rubbed his aching wrist.

“Make a hole!”

Kenn moved aside so Charlie and Conner could enter, bringing Panaji between them.

Charlie panted. “He was in the stairwell. Think he was trying to make it here.”

They didn’t have an empty cot.

Kenn went to a covered body and lifted it, spine screaming. “Use this one.”

Harry hurried over to change the soiled sheets so Panaji could be laid down.

“Where do you want me?” Jeff, just making it here, joined Kenn. He hoped the man understood he was worth more than a messenger or body mule.

“We’re all better than that.” Kenn grunted. “But I get your point. Take duty over the lab. We need those results.”

“We need the boss.” Jeff meant it.

“Yeah, well, unless you can heal her, we’ll have to stick to the book she left.” Kenn hated his sharp tone. He couldn’t help it. He was scared and covering.

Greg understood. “Any chance she’ll return soon?”

“Until we clear the leadership deck, we won’t know. She might even be dead.” Kenn headed for the incinerator again, wishing the nightmare would end. *Someone please wake me up now. I’ve had enough.*

**4**

“I feel fine. We’re all fine. We should go help.” Zack stood between the cabins, frowning. The Eagle floor was empty except for the four of them. “I’m going to the infirmary.”

The passages were normal. The power was on, but it still felt dangerous. The Eagles had stayed in their cabins because they’d been told to do so. They were good at following orders, but it was obvious they were needed elsewhere.

“To make sure your boys aren’t there?” Allison smiled in comfort to let him know she wasn’t being snarky. Allison wondered if wearing the heavy black Eagle outfit was painful for Zack. His ribs were still healing.

Zack gave a curt nod. “Also the boss. We should have heard from her by now.”

All of them had been thinking it.

Moans echoed over the radio, again, drawing attention. Things were getting worse.

Ian turned toward his closet. “Let me get my gear.”

“I have surgical masks in my kit.” Shawn tossed it to Zack.

Zack frowned as Shawn shut the door to his cabin. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

Shawn stared at the letter in his hand, trying to make a choice. Missy had left this note on his chest.

*Terrible things are coming. I’m safe. Please don’t tell anyone where we are. We can’t be without protection.*

On the bottom was a list of kids and where they were hiding. Shawn put the letter in his pocket.

The ship creaked, walls dimming. Their ride wasn’t happy.

“Come on! Let’s go!”

Zack’s anxious voice drew Shawn’s attention this time. *I know where my girl is. Zack needs the same relief.* Shawn smacked the door. “Two minutes. Stop yelling or you’ll add to the panic.”

“Yeah. My bad.” Zack swallowed the fear as best he could. He went to the main hall to stand watch.

Ian joined him first, geared up for a firefight.

Zack didn’t tell him to change. Before it was all over, they might need that setup for everyone still healthy enough to enforce laws. Outbreaks did crazy things to people after just a few days. If it went longer, deaths unrelated to the illness were likely to happen.

“Hey.”

Zack spun around, gun coming out.

Quinn fled back into Kendle’s cabin. “I’m sorry! I didn’t know you had a thing for her!”

Ian put a hand on Zack’s wrist, pushing the gun down. He deftly took the weapon while Zack stared in shock.

“I almost shot him.” Zack tried to think and came up blank.

“I know.” Ian kept the weapon, but he was sure Zack had a standby. “Eagle rule three G?”

Zack struggled to think through the sense of doom. “Uh… See it before you fire.”

“Concentrate on that for two minutes. Then I’ll return your weapon.”

Zack frowned as he realized Ian had taken his gun and he hadn’t known. “See it before I fire…”

Ian turned from Zack’s mutters, not surprised by the reaction from a senior man. His sons were in direct danger this time. It had to be an awful feeling.

Quinn peered around the doorframe. “Can I come out now?”

Ian grunted. “Get dressed first. It’s the wrong mood for nipples.”

Quinn gawked, openmouthed. “What?”

Ian came to the door. “We’ve lost communication with most of the descendants. People are sick, dying. Get dressed and do it fast.” Ian scanned the room, determined how the pair had spent the night, then turned his back so he could keep an eye on Zack.

“Where’s Kendle?” Quinn hurried to find his clothes. He yanked a sock from the curtain.

“Body crew.” Ian wanted him to understand how serious it was. “She and Greg went by half an hour ago with someone wrapped in a bloody sheet.”

Quinn winced. “Thanks for the details.”

Ian shrugged. “I didn’t know you two were close.”

Quinn dug his boot out of the bathtub laundry pile. “Neither did I.”

Ian didn’t know what to say. “Shit happens.”

“Exactly!” Quinn paused as a flash of last night hit.

*“If you can reach it without using furniture or your hands, I’ll…”*

Quinn blushed. He used a chair this time and grabbed his gun from the nail protruding from the vent. “Now where’s my jacket?”

“Hanging from the intercom.” Ian kept an even tone. He had noted what all the cabins were like and other than Kendle’s mess, it was good. The Eagles were neat and organized. “Your belt is under her scrubs.”

“Thanks! …never gonna live this down.”

Ian stored a chuckle for later when he could enjoy it.

Quinn emerged from the room, pulling the door closed. He stuffed his belt into his pocket and worked on buttoning his shirt as Shawn and Allison came from their cabins.

Zack took his gun from Ian’s secondary holster without explaining.

Shawn didn’t ask. He was still stewing on the note from Missy.

Allison stayed in the rear of the group. She wanted to be out front, but now wasn’t the time for an argument on gender roles. She felt safe being in the company of four males in full gear. She also resented it. She kept an eye on the rear as they walked to the stairs.

“Coming through. Hold your fire.” Charlie struggled up the stairs. “We’re bringing food and orders.”

The Eagles retreated as Charlie and Conner, in full quarantine gear, hauled dollies up the steps. The teens looked like two giant blue and white bugs. It would have been funny in another situation. Here, it was a reminder that lightning had once again struck Safe Haven.

“Why didn’t you use the elevator?” Zack took the dolly from Charlie, surprised the boy had made it up here.

“It needs to be sanitized first. Only use elevators to transport the sick or bodies.” Conner nodded to the senior men, then opened his notebook in slow movements that tortured the waiting people. The bulky gear was hard to work in. “The infirmary needs hands. Kenn said be sure you want that duty. Once you accept it, you can’t leave that area.”

“What is it?” Zack felt panic threatening his sanity again. “How does it spread?”

Quinn paused, only catching one part. “Kenn’s in charge?”

Conner scowled at them. “Tired here, all right? Shut up and listen!”

Everyone retreated at the bark from the normally mild-mannered teen.

Conner waved toward the supplies Charlie was unloading from the two dollies. “Make these last, but share. We haven’t cleared all the cabins yet, so some people have nothing. Full quarantine is in effect. You should stay where you are and follow radio instructions as they come.” Conner turned the page.

The Eagles waited, frowning at this delay.

“For those who refuse to stay where they are, there are four crews working. One is body removal. Two is cleaning and sanitizing. Three is supply and information delivery. Four is the boat crew. Pick a team, let the delivery crew know, then get to work.” Conner looked up expectantly. “You can talk now.”

Adults frowned at him. Shawn spoke up. “Infirmary, for all of us.”

“Kenn said Eagles would pick that.” Conner flipped to the last page. “The leadership guards are in the infirmary, along with a dozen others from all levels. Kenn thinks they have radiation poisoning. Tests are being run to find out for sure. All gear must be worn to prevent spreading the tiny particles. Your bottom box has two temporary outfits. People without gear will not be let into the infirmary.” Conner looked up again. “Who’s going to be where?”

Allison retreated, gut churning in anticipation of being put on a cleaning crew. “I’ll see if the boat team needs a hand...unless you want me somewhere else.”

Conner thought Allison looked out of place in her jeans and t-shirt, but he didn’t linger on it. “Females should avoid topside due to possible sterile effects.”

Allison shrugged, face going cold. “I already am sterile. I also have cancer. What else could it do to me that the war didn’t?”

The men winced.

Conner wrote it down. “Two more for another crew. Who is it?”

“Me.” Shawn cleared his throat. “I’ll help with delivering, too. I need to stay busy.”

Conner and Charlie smiled. The stairs only rule was wearing them out and Shawn had muscles bigger than theirs combined.

“Body crew.” Quinn had just remembered where Kendle was working. He wanted a minute alone with her to see where they now stood. Waking up alone had caught him off guard. He’d mistakenly left the after-sex conversation for morning.

Conner wrote and talked, getting better at it with all the practice. “Take part of these rations so you don’t drain the resources of where you’re going. Eat something on the way. Everyone is exhausted. They need a break as soon as you can arrange it. Those going to the infirmary need to get suits on now. Everyone else will get gear at the base location by the lab. Go there first.” Conner put his book away. “Sorry. Kenn was specific about us getting the information delivered first. I can answer a couple questions while you change into the gear.”

“Why is Kenn in charge?” Quinn didn’t like it.

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Charlie refused to help create drama right now. “Leadership is down–all of them.”

“Even Jennifer?”

Conner’s expression became grim as he answered Allison. “She’s bad off. She may not survive.”

“Keep going.” Zack wanted to be on the move. He tore into the boxes to get the suits, more worried about his sons than he already had been. He was too scared to ask where they were yet.

Ian went over to make sure Zack didn’t damage the supplies or gear.

“How many dead?” Shawn had to know.

Conner lowered his voice. “Eight, with three more on the edge. We have missing people and there are areas and cabins we haven’t checked yet. It’s a mess.”

“The boss?” Allison pushed, hoping a female was still in charge somewhere.

“Alone and sick, so far as we know.” Charlie shrugged, guilty eyes on the floor. “You know the rules. The sheep come first.”

“Perfect time for assassination attempts.” Quinn didn’t trust Kenn to keep anyone safe.

“Yeah, but we don’t have manpower for guards. Kenn’s asking the Eagles to do what they do best and prevent attacks in any manner necessary.” Conner glanced around, sounding like his father in that moment. “No gunfire to spook the herd, for any reason.”

All the Eagles nodded at the order.

Shawn stepped forward. “I’m a senior Eagle. Where does he want me?”

Conner checked the instructions sheet. “We need our missing people found, but those four crews are important. Can you do both?”

“Absolutely.” Shawn paused, facing the fear Zack was hiding from. “Do you know where Pam is?”

Conner shook his head. He looked at Charlie.

Charlie sighed. He hated being the one to tell them. “She’s sick, Shawn. Morgan has her in the infirmary, along with everyone else from the fishing crew. It’s not good for any of them.”

Shawn froze, heart speeding up. *Pam’s sick. Pam needs me!* “Ian! Hold on.” Shawn went to the boxes and took the suit from Ian. “I have a special duty for you. Ever play hide-n-seek?”

“Of course.” Ian kept helping Zack sort the gear.

Shawn leaned down. “Were you good at it?”

Ian scowled. “What’s the damn job?”

Shawn whispered in his ear.

Ian calmed. “I can do that. It will please the boss to know.”

Shawn began donning the bulky suit. “Ian is helping with deliveries; I’m going to the infirmary. We leave in two minutes. The rest of you get going.”

It was almost a relief to have a bossy tone to follow. Not having leadership running things was terrifying for everyone. Without leaders, what would they do?

*We’ll save ourselves*. Shawn hurried up, determined to do his part before he had to vanish for his next run. The date had been set last night. In a few days, he was leaving Safe Haven’s light. *Until then, I’ll stay with Pam*.

Chapter Six

**Burn It All**

****

**1**

**“I**’m going. You can’t stop me.” Trinity’s hand went to her hip, lids narrowing. “Move this shit or I’ll get mean.”

Gus glanced up from the mess counter. “You want out, you move it.” He’d blocked the entrances with heavy booths and was now enjoying a sandwich.

The other diners stayed in their seats or at the long counter, avoiding both parties.

The cooks kept working. Brittani had just finished the meals for breakfast and was cleaning up to start prepping for lunch. Having to serve individual meals was tiresome and inefficient, but at least people were getting fed. All the cooks were sweaty, wrinkled, and ready for a break. The diners hadn’t helped yet, but Brittani planned to insist on that when this shift got too tired to keep going. The pile of dishes waiting to be cleaned was daunting, but they had successfully fed the entire ship. It was encouraging. The news the delivery boys had shared a bit ago was the opposite.

Awful screeching noises echoed as Trinity began to drag a booth. It moved a few inches and then stopped, wedged on the booth beside it, as Gus had planned.

The only people clamoring to leave were female, so Gus had designed a block that only females might have a challenge getting through. It wouldn’t work on Brittani of course, or any of the female Eagles, but Trinity and Emma weren’t Eagles yet. They just wanted out.

“Damn it!” Trinity glared at Gus. “If you don’t help me, I’ll–”

Trinity stopped as Brittani turned around. The warm room spiked with heat as the women glared at each other.

“We are in a crisis situation. That means there’s no guards to protect the food.” Brittani pointed. “If we open the kitchen, and you go running out there, people will try to come in. We may all starve.”

Trinity pointed. “Mind your own business!”

Brittani crossed arms over her chest. “I’m an Eagle. Everything is my business.”

“I’m on the engineering crew!” Trinity tried to make them understand. “I need to get to the bridge. There’s no one sailing the boat!”

Brittani glanced at Gus. “Is she right? We could sneak her out as a delivery person.”

Gus shrugged, fighting his own urge to run. “Wait until we get the next supply delivery. Kenn said instructions would be provided. He’ll ask for posts to be covered then too.”

“You’re sure?” Trinity and Brittani asked at the same time.

Gus sighed. “No, but it’s in the Eagle training book. I finished it yesterday and passed it on. *The chain of information will be established to all areas central to survival within four hours of the crisis beginning*.”

Brittani glared at Trinity while she spoke to Gus. “It’s been seven hours.”

“I know, but the manual didn’t account for a lot of people dying.” Gus tried not to sound bitter. “I know you guys tuned it out so you don’t have to hurt, but I’m keeping track of Kenn when I can. It’s bad. The dead and dying have to come before the rest of us.”

The explanation made sense to all of them, even Trinity, but she couldn’t help the feeling that time was running out and it wasn’t just because of the illness. “One more hour; then I’m going.”

“Me too.” Emma wanted out of the mess. She hated to be closed in anywhere, especially with Brian. The camp drunk made her nervous.

Gus caved. “If we don’t get instructions in an hour, I’ll be your escort.”

**2**

“I’ve closed in on the cause, but I can’t prove it yet. The second test is running. It’ll be about four hours.” Tonya put her cheek on her arm to steal a minute of rest.

Kenn let her. They were talking through the open lab door that he had lined with sterile curtains. She now had a surgical mask on, as did he. Kenn doubted they needed it at this point, but until the cleanup was done and everything was burned, there was still a risk of spreading or catching a mild case of poisoning from the particles.

Kenn saw two camp members in full gear come down the stairs and take the elevator to the infirmary. The medics needed more hands in there, but Kenn couldn’t force anyone to do it. He had to let them volunteer.

*Beep!*

Tonya rose to check on a different batch of tests. “I’ll need some help in here soon.”

“I’ll try.” Kenn didn’t know anyone else who could handle the equipment except people in the infirmary and they were busy. He shut the glass door, seeing Tonya’s cats were now scanning the exit. “I’ll be here for a while, organizing.”

Tonya nodded.

Dog glanced up at Kenn. *Thank you.*

Kenn frowned. It felt weird to be guarded by Dog. “For what?”

*Locking them up. Now I don’t have to worry over them.* Dog flashed a mocking smile at the two cats approaching the glass door. He moved off at Kenn’s heel, ears and tail up.

“Did Angela send you?”

Dog snorted. *I protect the leader.* Dog sneezed on Kenn’s ankle.

Kenn jumped back, grimacing. “Nice.”

Dog licked his paw and rubbed it over his face. *Not my fault you stink.*

“Go away.”

*Only if you die.*

Kenn rolled his eyes at the eager tone. “Fine. I’m staying here. Can you watch the lab corridor too?”

*Of course.* Dog went to do a round of his new perimeter, hoping Marc was doing better. Cody had asked him to stay overnight. When the kids had risen, Dog had listened for a minute, then gone roaming to verify the coming danger. Not long after, Adrian had called for his help to guard their leader. Dog had foolishly thought he meant Angela. Upon discovering the situation, Dog had agreed, but reluctantly. He wanted to be with Marc.

Kenn dropped into the plush office chair and leaned against the wall. It had only been seven hours, but he was feeling it. The bugout time where Becky and Samantha had been kidnapped had felt a lot like this. He could feel things slipping through the cracks.

“Is this where we’re supposed to be?”

Kenn sat up as Allison, Ian and Quinn came down the hall. “In here.” Kenn pointed to a stack of gear on the table nearby. The plush conference room held luxuries that were absolutely no help. Only the table and chairs were useful. “Suit up according to what team you picked.”

Instead of bothering him with a lot of questions, the three volunteers did as they were told.

Kenn was impressed that Charlie and Conner were getting the point across about business first. It made things go a lot smoother.

The instruction sheets on top of each pile took a few minutes to read. As they did it, the trio began to get changed.

Allison ducked behind the projection board at the end of the room to give the men privacy. She was eager to get topside and make sure everything was okay with the ship.

Ian edged closer to Kenn. “I’m search and delivery. Do you have a priority?”

Kenn like the idea of Ian being the one to sniff out the missing people. *Every juicy nugget of gossip always finds its way into Ian’s path, so this should be easy for him.* “They all have equal value to the boss.” Kenn extended a sheet from his book that he had hastily copied with the other hand. “Make sure you can read all that.”

Ian scanned, comfortable with Angela’s messy scrawl. “I’ll cover it. They’re probably all together.”

Kenn stretched to work out the sore spots. “I think so too, but I haven’t had the manpower to verify it. Ray was on the chore, but he’s in the infirmary now. If you go, don’t forget to deliver the supplies.”

“Am I in the right place?” Vicky came up nearby stairs, peering through the dim passages with trepidation.

“In here.” Kenn pointed at the tables as Vicky came in. “Gear up based on the crew you chose.”

Vicky came to Kenn instead. “Adrian sent me from the brig. He said he can hold things for ten hours at the max, but it might go as soon as seven unless he gets help.”

Kenn was relieved to have that much time before things went crazy with Kronus. “What does he have you doing next?”

Vicky went over to the gear for the boat crew. “He wants me delivering messages. He said I should get in full gear.”

Kenn didn’t override the order. The chain of information was just as important as the chain of supplies or the chain of command.

“We saw Ralph and his group on the way here.” Ian pulled on the suit carefully so he didn’t rip it, then refastened his gun belt around the outside. “Ralph said to tell you he’ll try to keep the camp calm, but it would be good to send Eagles there.”

“I’ll send them when I get them.” Kenn held up his radio. “Two clicks is our code for a body pickup. Separate them by pauses for each deck. One second is top deck. Two seconds is top level cabins and so on. Leave a towel on the handle of the exact location.”

Dog came into the room from patrolling the hall. *The garbage and bodies are stacking up. I can smell it.*

Kenn frowned. If Dog could smell the bodies two decks up, he had to do something about it now. Kenn didn’t need to consult the notebook for what had to happen next. He motioned toward Vicky. “When you get suited up, I have your first message to deliver. I want all roamers to meet me at the incinerator. No exceptions.”

**3**

“We do not answer that radio. No exceptions.”

Allison frowned at Ozzie’s curt warning, though the sounds coming from the radio made her skin crawl. She’d come to deliver Kenn’s message and join the boat crew. Refugees from land were screaming for Safe Haven to answer. She was positive she recognized one of those voices. William was irate. “Can’t we just click or something? Maybe a fast chat?”

“What would you say?” Ozzie understood her desire to respond. “We’re sick, sitting here like ducks in open water. We’ll be attacked. No long-distance radios are allowed to be on, as of this minute. Make a note of it. Kenn will confirm that order.”

Allison didn’t doubt it. She also agreed it was the best way to handle things, but it was still hard.

Ozzie sighed. “It bothers me too, but I need to leave it on. If the radio signal fades, we’re getting too far away from a shoreline.”

Whitney and Allison exchanged a worried glance.

Behind them, Debra observed the debris field in waves that held no signs of life. Claire had been raving about birds in her delirium, but Debra didn’t see any on the debris or in the sky. That wasn’t good.

Allison tapped Debra on the shoulder. “He’s talking to you.”

Ozzie pointed at the fuel gauge. “Tell Kenn I think we have a week before we’ll have to refuel.”

Debra made a hand gesture. *Anything else?*

“Yes.” Ozzie used a firm tone, hoping it worked. “Stay where he puts you. Allison too. We only need two people up here.”

Debra moved off. She had no problem following orders.

Allison scowled. “I want to help.”

Ozzie glared right back. “You’re on the mining crew, from what I remember, and helping with engineering if you have needed information. You don’t know anything about boats, but Kenn needs you below.”

Allison didn’t want to accept that explanation, but it made sense. “Can I be on your relief shift?”

Ozzie nodded. “You can help then.”

Mollified, Allison moved toward the stairs, eager to get out of the radiation suit.

Ozzie and Whitney didn’t speak until they were positive the women were out of listening distance.

Whitney turned on the Geiger counter. Loud beeps and crackles immediately filled the bridge.

“Are we able to go any faster?”

Ozzie shrugged, not feeling well. “I’ll try.” He and Whitney had agreed to keep the ship moving no matter how bad it got up here. The fallout cloud had to end somewhere.

**4**

“That’s enough. If we stuff it too full, it won’t burn evenly, or it may cause a fire.” James closed the heavy metal door. “Stand back.” He’d had a shift on garbage duty last week, but not many people had been rotated through it yet. No one else in this group had, which made him the teacher.

The group watched how James activated the incinerator. The machine was louder than the rest of the ship, giving them a break from the noises of death, though not the smells or sights.

The incinerator room was a long corridor lined in green walls that ended in a wide area with a concrete floor, a giant trash machine, huge vents and a variety of shelving that held tools only a few of them were familiar with.

“Tonya has the first results ready. She confirmed everyone has abnormally low white blood cell counts. We’re handling it right.” Kenn had ordered everyone here for an update during the lesson. It was the same people who’d answered his call earlier, minus the two men sailing the ship. None of them had gotten ill despite carrying bodies. It proved their theory about the contagion.

“Then why do we have so many bodies?!” Monica didn’t think she could take what came next.

Conner gave her an emotional sedative, a new evolution of his sleep gift. He could calm someone or hype them up, but he’d never thought to be using it so soon.

Monica gave him a weak smile. It stank here, like death. She’d been avoiding the infirmary for this reason.

James retreated another step from the heat as the incinerator began to do its job. “When the timer goes off, the next load can be added. Theo’s notes reminded me the ashes have to be scraped after a few loads. It usually goes into bags for the garden. We’re going to burn those ashes again and again. When it gets too thick, scoop out a layer and put it in these stainless-steel cans. With each load, add a few scoops of the ash back in. Let me know if that keeps it down. If not, I’ll search the book for another way to dispose of it.”

Kenn squinted at his watch. All of them were wearing surgical masks, but he wasn’t sure it was enough. “Everyone is hungry, scared. We have cabins that haven’t been cleared yet. We still don’t have everyone accounted for, but we have to be done before it gets dark. We all need to sleep then too, and craziness may happen. As we visit these floors, watch for anyone you think we need to sedate. Morgan gave me powder to add to the food. Brittani made a nice stew with chunks of everything, so it will blend right in.” Kenn didn’t like the idea of drugging people, but he refused to live through Kendle’s nightmare. If people acted crazy, they would be locked in their cabins or the jail. If that failed, they would be knocked out. “Last part before we suit up.” Kenn motioned Greg to help.

They carried a covered body to the second incinerator, straining and grunting.

“We’ll run both machines at the same time until we’re caught up.” Kenn sucked in air as they hefted the body up. “It’s the same procedure.”

James opened the door so Kenn and Greg could stuff the body in, head first. It was gruesome and brought tears to almost every eye at the disrespect.

“We’ve put all the names on the clipboard hanging by the incinerator. If you bring a body down, add the name to the list.” James relayed the rest of Kenn’s orders, hearing it in his head. “Waste people will take pictures and record the contents of pockets. Once it’s gone through the fire, mark off the name, then initial it.”

Kenn went to do that, mood dark. “The first one is about to beep... I want the two smallest people to load it this time, then we’ll go.”

Debra straightened her shoulders and went to the body pile, trying to show she could do her part, no matter how ugly the chore was.

James helped her, needing to assuage his guilt. If not for being suspended from duty during the trial, he would be dying in a drafty hallway near the boss’s cabin too. He also couldn’t help being grateful, which brought shame. It was a nasty mix.

*Beep!*

Debra and James lifted the next body.

**5**

“Is that low?” Kenn paused on his way through the soft rumble of machinery in the water room a short time later.

“Might be.” Greg shrugged. “Theo would know.”

Kenn consulted Ray’s notes on locations of all the Eagles. “He’s locked down in the garden. Send someone for him. The last thing we need is to run out of water.”

Greg added it to the list, marking that a priority. “Who’s our com man?”

“Ian. He’s gathering channels and locations now while he searches for our MIA list.”

Greg was glad to hear it. He peered at the water tanks again, hesitantly confirming it was lower than this morning. Theo and his team had been running the inner workings of the ship since they set sail. They were doing a wonderful job, but no one else knew how to do it.

Footsteps echoed.

Greg didn’t draw his gun, but he thought about it as he turned to face the possible threat.

“Just us.” Allison and Debra came around the corner. “She has updates for you.” Allison wanted to make sure Kenn listened to the deaf woman.

Debra clapped her hands at Allison. *Stop talking for me!*

Allison flushed.

Kenn frowned. “Spit it out.”

Debra faced Kenn*. Ozzie says we’re good on fuel for now.*

Kenn wrote it down. He felt the tension between the women; he just didn’t have time for it. “I’d like you to check on the camp next. I need to know the mood, who’s keeping control, reports of problems.”

*You got it*. Debra moved toward the steps.

Allison followed, slower. She didn’t like how Kenn was ordering them all around.

“Allison can help Zack at the incinerator.” Kenn didn’t want Debra distracted by Allison’s thoughts of rebellion.

Debra vanished into the stairwell, grinning.

Allison marched to the next set of stairs, muttering about bossy men.

“I don’t think she likes us very much.” Greg held the door for Kenn as they entered the corridor. They were headed to the more isolated areas of the ship now, passing orders and information.

“I got the same impression.” Kenn stored his book in his pocket. “Bet she’d call us sexist.”

Greg wanted to snicker but couldn’t. “This is all so wrong.”

Kenn knew what he meant. “I agree, but it’s Angela’s rules.”

“Yeah.”

Neither man was happy about leaving Angela to her fate, but if they didn’t save her people, it would kill her anyway. The choice they’d made was the only one she might be able to live with.

**6**

“Theo!” Ian jogged to the garden, not surprised to find the doorway taped in thick plastic. All the areas with people were doing the same, except the camp. They were huddled in groups, muttering and studying each other for sign of contagion. “Boss wants Theo for water duty!”

Theo rose from the rear table. “Thank god!” He joined Ian, ignoring glares from those he’d been quarantined with. Hannah and Natalie were still angry about his lie.

Theo took the radio Ian held out. “Eagle emergency channel?”

Ian gave him an extra battery. “Is only for an emergency. Kenn is on channel four. Stay tuned there.”

Theo strapped it on. “What about the boss?”

Ian walked toward the stairs to the cargo area. “Kenn *is* the boss. Get moving. Everyone else in here needs to go to the camp area or the lab base for a job.” Ian kept walking, ignoring the rest of Theo’s questions. He still had a number of people to account for, but he’d narrowed down where they could be. Now, he needed to verify it to get that final line of communication open.

Ian jogged down the stairs. He heard voices as soon as he entered the main room of the cargo hold. The lights had been turned off to provide an advantage.

“Who’s there?”

“Stop where you are!”

Tracy and Candy came forward with guns out.

Ian froze. “Don’t shoot!”

“What do you want?!”

“Why are you here?!”

The women had planned their attack to confuse anyone who found them.

Ian recognized the tactic. “Kenn sent me. He needs everyone accounted for.”

Tracy held up a hand to stop Candy from repeating the next line. “What’s the password?”

Ian frowned. “There isn’t one. We have an outbreak. Lines of communication are being established right now, by me.” Ian scowled at them. “Holster those weapons!”

Tracy did it immediately. “What do you need from us?”

Candy didn’t budge. “How do you know we can trust him?”

Tracy frowned. “He’s an Eagle. I trust them.” She put a hand on Candy’s barrel. “Stand down.”

Ian slowly took a radio from his tool belt. “Here. Stay on four for general announcements and instructions.”

Tracy took the radio and the battery he dug from his pocket. “Emergency channel is only for emergencies?”

Ian smiled at Tracy. “Very good. We’re on four, steady. Five is problems.” He glanced at Candy. “I’m reaching into my kit now. Do not fire.”

Candy lowered the gun, eyes narrowed against the light from his toolbelt.

“This is all the food and water I have on me, along with my medical kit.” Ian put them on the ground at his feet. “All I need now is for you to open that container, then I’ll be on my way.”

Candy’s gun barrel lifted again. “For what?”

“I’m required to get visual confirmation of all people aboard this ship.” Ian dropped the Eagle speak. “I just need to see they’re okay. As long as things are fine, I doubt you’ll hear from anyone but a delivery crew until this all blows over.”

Tracy went to the correct container and knocked twice. “Check in time.”

A latch flipped, making Ian frown. *I didn’t know any of our containers lock from the inside.*

The door swung open to reveal napping kids and two uncomfortable adults. There were art projects on the wall above both lanterns. Ian realized they were written in a language he’d only seen on television. “Is that Egyptian?”

Courtney yawned from the spot by the door. “The kids wanted to do a spell. I suggested they put it on paper first so we can ask the boss.”

Ian studied it, trying to remember his classes. He’d loved ancient languages. “Uh, I think posting it activates the spell, but good try.”

All women scowled at the kids.

The children were either asleep or pretended to be.

Ian hid a grin. “Get those up to the boss after this all blows over.” Ian motioned Tracy to close them up. “I’ll be around. Remember to see it before you fire.”

“We’ll be careful.” Candy finally holstered. She was glad to have news, but she wasn’t sure it was a good idea for anyone to know where they were. It felt like the worst of the danger was just beginning.

Ian continued on his way, happy with the progress he’d made. All he had left was to verify that Samantha and Neil had Amy in their cabin.

The shower door opened as Ian reached that deck. Shawn came out. Guilt flashed across his tired face. “Hey, Ian. Find everyone?” Shawn had helped in the infirmary until he’d been told to leave for a decontamination shower. Pam was hanging on by a thread. Shawn wanted to get back there.

Ian frowned. “You should have told me.”

“Damn.” Shawn sighed. “How did you know?”

“I just saw Missy. She didn’t ask about you. Then I remembered how calm you’ve been; you didn’t ask if I’d seen Missy.” Ian stalked by him. “At least tell Kenn before he reads my notes. You can be removed for shit like this.” Ian trotted up the stairs, good mood soured.

“Is he right?” Jeff exited the shower behind Shawn, paper in his hand. Shawn had dropped his letter while changing clothes. When Jeff found it, he’d shown the one Kimmie left for him. It was almost identical.

Shawn shrugged, moving toward the lab to report to Kenn. “If so, it won’t be until things are normal again.” Shawn slapped the wall as he went by. “I knew I should have told someone!”

Jeff didn’t feel bad for keeping the secret, but he understood why Shawn did. He was a senior Eagle; more was expected of him.

Jeff sighed, listening to his inside voice. *Damn it! I don’t want to step up and give more.*

His demon snorted. *Liar.*

Chapter Seven

**I’m Telling Adrian**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“W**here are you going?”

“The boss needs help. Kenn is avoiding that deck because it’s a hotspot. He’s also handling the camp first. It will still be hours before he gets a team up there.”

Samantha sat up in the bed. She studied Neil’s handsome profile in his trooper hat and Eagle gear, enjoying the sight. She hadn’t thought he would wear it again for a long time, if ever. “You said we should stay here.”

Amy was still sleeping. Samantha was glad. She didn’t want to explain what was happening when she wasn’t sure herself.

“I still believe that.” Neil grunted. “But Angela needs my help now.”

Samantha had taken a nap and woken grouchy. “Don’t know why you’re willing to help her after she didn’t help at your trial.”

Neil frowned. “Samantha.”

Her hand went to her plump hip. “What?!”

“I’m a killer, but I’m not dead or locked up. I’m still an Eagle, still respected by the camp and guards. Who do you imagine allowed that?”

Samantha jerked a thumb at her chest. “Me. *I* made sure you were found not guilty.”

“Sam.”

Samantha crossed her arms. “I did it, Neil. Me.”

Neil blocked the images flashing in his head. He didn’t want Samantha to see how he’d set it all up and followed through. She’d accepted his choices this time, but he knew better than to reveal just how devious he really was. “Angela steered things the entire time. If not for her setups, I would have been convicted.”

Her lip quivered. “How can you say that after everything I did for you?!”

Neil smiled. “You did everything right, baby, but without her setups, it wouldn’t have worked.”

“What setups?”

“The biggest was holding a trial right away. The smallest was letting you defend me.”

Her eyes watered. “I did a good job!”

“Yes, you did.”

She frowned. “But?”

Neil sighed, forced to be honest. “You made it emotional, so we were able to skip the harder questions.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Neil sat on the edge of the bed to pull on his boots. “What if she’d waited until the UN team returned for the trial? Jennifer would have been used against me and I would have lost. My cloud walls were effective because it was new. Our enforcer would have broken through in about five minutes.”

“But she didn’t have time…”

Neil nodded. “Exactly. Angela rushed it through before the team returned, so they could arrive in time to feel like they were saving me and the camp.”

Samantha paled. “And if Jennifer could have gotten through…” Samantha started to panic, cheeks flushing. “Angela knows!”

Neil nodded again, voice grim. “I owe her a debt I can never repay.”

Samantha didn’t know what to say. She was complicit in the murders. Angela would never trust her again.

“I’ll handle that when the time comes.” Neil stood to strap on his gun. He checked it automatically, then holstered. “When it all comes out–and it will, don’t doubt it–she’ll see you really didn’t know. It will all be on me, where it should be.”

Samantha thought about that. “But not until the new constitution is ratified, right?”

“I don’t know if it’ll hold that long since I’m breaking quarantine.” Neil caught a whiff of Samantha’s peach body soap and stored it for later. He wouldn’t have any good odors after he left their cabin.

Samantha’s stomach churned. “But that’s to help the boss.”

“She’s sick. So is Marc, who she’s caring for.” Neil added his toolbelt to his lean hips. “I doubt she’ll be in the mood to keep pretending.”

“She won’t do anything to you.” Samantha was suddenly confident. “If she knows and let it slide, it must fit into her future plans for the camp.”

Neil shrugged, stilling as he caught panicking thoughts near their location “Or she’s made plans for me now.”

The sound of someone running drifted down the hall. “Help!”

No one answered.

The cry came again, fading as the person moved away from their cabin.

Neil met her eyes. “Stay here. *Please*.”

Samantha shivered. “I will. We will.”

Neil opened the door and glanced back as he turned the latch so it would lock behind him. “I love you.”

Samantha melted, anger fleeing in place of fear. “Be careful. I need you more than she does.”

Neil shut the door. *And the herd needs me more than either of you. I’m still an Eagle. Duty to the camp comes first. When the boss is okay, I’ll help the people. Maybe then my guilt will ease.*

Neil took the elevator to the leadership floor, then traversed the body littered hall in determined steps. The stench of burning flesh was thick in this lower deck. “Time to start paying on what I owe.”

Neil’s demon applauded his choice. *Get right back in there! Good boy!*

Neil grunted. *Shut up or be locked back up.*

Silence was the response.

“Good boy.” Neil stepped over Ivan, seeing the ragged rise and fall of his bloody chest. Neil opened the door and entered hell.

Ivan struggled to reach his radio button, weaker than he’d ever been. He keyed it, shaking with the effort it took to press and hold. “Boss has a visitor.” Warning delivered, Ivan surrendered to the grayness where there was no pain.

**2**

“Let’s go.” Kenn waved off people trying to get into the remaining suits. “No time. We need to help the boss.” Ivan’s words were code for an intruder.

Ian joined Kenn’s group in the stairwell as they went down. He’d just confirmed Amy and Samantha were in their cabin. He’d been there when Ivan’s call came.

Kenn checked his weapon as he led the way. “Be quiet as we go. Don’t give us away.”

“They already know we’re coming.” Travis had his gun in hand, wishing Ivan was leading this run. “That was an open radio call.”

Footsteps sounded through the ship, along with voices raised in anger.

“Oh, shit. Come on!” Kenn ran toward the dim stairwell.

“Stop right there!” Ralph took aim from the opposite hallway as Kenn’s group approached.

“Identify yourselves!” Corey gave support, standing next to the older camp man.

Kenn stopped, holding out an arm to stop those behind him. “Identify your own people, Ralph.”

“Kenn?” Ralph stepped closer, hand on his gun butt. “Is that you?”

“No, it’s Santa and his trigger-happy elves.” Kenn waved at his group to holster their weapons. “Why are you out of your quarantine zone?”

Ralph and Corey had shunned the required gear in favor of long coats over cargo pants and brown boots. Woolen caps completed the outfit, giving them the appearance of fishermen. Everyone else behind them was wearing the suits, but the sleeves had been ripped and taped so they could reach their guns. Besides the surgical masks, there wasn’t anything else they could do. It gave the group an odd look that Kenn found comforting. They felt like rookie Eagles who had pieced together outfits from loose gear. “Should I ask again?”

Ralph dropped his hand, chin lifting. “The boss has company.”

Kenn was glad it wasn’t a problem in the camp area. “Come up behind us but keep those weapons right where they are.”

Rushing water and debris being crushed blared through the porthole at the top of the stairs, making them all jump.

Corey retreated to let the Eagles go first, lips thinning. “We’re not trigger-happy or you’d already be dead.”

“Yeah.” Kenn led the way up the steps. “Good job on not letting the rest of the camp come too. I assume you all voted?”

“Actually, Daisey insisted she was going to come help. It rolled from there.” Ralph sucked on his teeth. “She gets the credit for keeping us in line with our values.”

“I’ll make sure she gets a good word.” Kenn drew his gun as they hit the top floor. “Masks up.”

The Eagles lifted surgical masks over their faces and waited for his next order. It didn’t feel wrong to have Kenn leading them. If there was gunfire, he would be the first one shot.

“Hello in the hall.” Neil raised his voice. “Boss said to send the herd back but gather the names of those who had the balls to come check on her and Marc.”

Corey shook his head. “We’re coming up there, Neil.”

“All of us!” Ralph ignored glares from the Eagles. “We want to see that she’s alive!”

There was a pause, then Neil sighed. “Kenn only in the room.”

Neil waited for the group to approach. “She wants her men taken to the infirmary as you leave.”

Everyone stared in horror at the bodies.

“Are they alive?” Ralph suddenly wished he’d let Daisey come in his place. He would never forget this combination of vomit, blood and burning bodies coming through the drafty passages.

“We’ll get to them in a minute.” Kenn stepped into the doorway. “I want to see...”

Angela gave him the finger.

“Holy shit.” Kenn gawked. Her oily, dirty hair hung in a limp belt across her shoulder. It was solid white now. Clumps of dark hair littered the pillows and sheets around two shriveled forms covered in gore.

Angela forced herself to speak. “It’s not that bad.”

Kenn snorted, trying to recover. “You look like a lobster I caught as a kid.”

Angela sniffled, groaning. “Don’t make me laugh. My stomach isn’t ready.”

Kenn stared. He couldn’t help it. He’d seen ugly things in his lifetime. He’d done ugly things, but this was worse than all of it combined.

Angela tried to smile through cracked lips and peeling skin. “This should help your fantasies.”

Kenn winced. “If you don’t, he will.” Marc was worse than Angela. His cloudy orbs were almost lost behind deep bags and red skin that was coming off in places. They were both bundled in blankets, with nasty sheets around their shoulders. Shudders racked them both, making them twitch and tug the covers closer in futile comfort.

Kenn scanned the filthy room. “What do you need up here?”

Angela saw Kenn was tired but not at his limit and breathed a sigh of relief. There was no way she could take over yet. “You’re doing it.”

Reminded that he was the boss, Kenn spun a finger. “Get these guards up to the infirmary.” Kenn pointed at Corey. “Get there first and help Morgan prep for them. He’ll find places to put cots. You stack ‘em.”

Corey snapped off a neat salute, then marched for the stairs as the rest of the camp people began moving the sick and dead guards.

Kenn sighed as he shut the door. “Glad that’s over.”

“Don’t get comfortable.” Marc opened bleary eyes. “You’re not stayin’.”

Kenn snorted, relieved the power couple wasn’t dead. Ray hadn’t been sure about Marc in his report.

Angela leaned against the headboard, breath coming out in a groan. “Get on with it. I don’t have much left.”

Kenn frowned. “Get on with what?”

Angela cracked another smile. “Asshole.”

“There’s my girl.” Kenn avoided a tacky stain on the carpet as he settled into the chair and opened his notebook. He waited for Neil to go by with a garbage bag. *Neil? Cleaning?* Kenn shook it off. “We’ve had ten deaths.”

“Damn you!” Marc struggled to sit up, bony fist clenching. “Why did you start there?!”

“So he can end on a high note. Hush.” Neil began to remove garbage from Marc’s end table.

Kenn went on. “Half of them were kids.”

“Son of a bitch!”

Neil took Marc’s arm as he rose, pulling the man onto his feet. “Come on. You need to hit the head.”

“Yeah, Kenn’s!”

Neil shrugged. “We’ll talk to the boss about that. Maybe you can schedule an appointment.”

“Very funny.” Marc glowered at Kenn as Neil helped him walk. Tiny steps were all he could manage as his head spun.

“I thought so.” Neil got them to the bathroom, ignoring the approval coming from Kenn. “Get in here and show me why she picked you over Adrian.”

Marc tried to jerk out of Neil’s grip, staggering. “You’re a hell of a comedian today.”

“No, really.” Neil pushed his way into the bathroom, positive Marc needed help. “I know your mouth’s bigger. Let’s see that wee wee.”

Angela and Kenn grinned despite the situation. It felt good. They listened as the door shut.

“Get off me, Neil. I’m warning you!”

“I’m holding your arm. If you fall, your old lady might get angry.”

“Well... Look away!”

“Why? *Are* you bigger? That’ll crush Adrian’s ego.”

“How would you know?”

“Stop stalling. This was supposed to give her a minute to collect updates, not give her an asthma attack from laughing.”

“She can hear us? This sucks.”

Angela was almost in tears. For this moment, misery was drowned by amusement.

Kenn cleared his throat and wiped his eyes. “I have your book.”

Angela held up a finger.

Kenn waited, assuming Neil wasn’t done.

“Wow! She *is* a lucky lady.”

“God, Neil. How am I supposed to piss now?”

“I am telling Adrian.”

Marc groaned. “Let me guess. He isn’t sick.”

“Healthy as a horse.”

“Then you should definitely tell him.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Ma’am? I thought you peeked?”

Angela’s rough laugher flowed through the room, hitting Kenn in thick waves. It made him feel like everything would be okay even though he knew better.

The sound of water running echoed, drowning out anything else the men said. The sound of the ocean and ship engines was louder here, explaining why no one had heard the guards collapse. It hadn’t helped that it had happened while everyone was sleeping off Neil’s acquittal party. Kenn didn’t want the moment to end. The hell they were suffering wasn’t something he wanted to return to.

Angela held in her pain. “You’re doing good. I’m sorry I can’t help.”

Kenn shrugged. “None of the sick descendants can. It’s like the demons shut down.”

Angela tried not to gag as her guts heaved again. “To protect themselves. If we die, they have to find a new host. They can’t if they’re too weak. Something about making the transfer.”

“So they abandon us when they think we’ll die?” Kenn didn’t like that.

“Yes.”

Kenn tried to find a solution. “Is there some way to bind them so they try harder to help?”

“Even if there was, it wouldn’t matter. Most demons are completely loyal.” Angela fought the nausea, swallowing a moan at her aching joints. “They only leave if they can’t help. Magic cannot cure illnesses–any of them. It can only strengthen the host body to help it endure.”

Kenn made mental notes, letting her direct the update. She had the worst news now. Everything else was better.

“Marc almost died.” A tiny tear crawled down Angela’s gaunt cheek. “My witch drained herself to save him for me. I had to give him lifeforces, against his will. His demon had already shut down. Mine keeps checking in with me as I get better, but there’s no power to use.”

“I’ll–”

“Save it for the herd.”

Kenn nodded at her set tone, looking around again. The cabin smelled as bad as it looked. Neil had one corner cleared of trash, but it had barely made a dent. Angela’s medical supplies were scattered through the cabin, telling Kenn panic had ruled her for a while. She never treated supplies that way. “I’ve recommended only using our power for the critical patients. The medics are doing as they see fit, which I approved. I’ve got no experience at this.”

Angela shivered. Chills were attacking again. “You’ve been managing a crisis since December 22nd of last year.”

“Not like this.” Kenn spotted a stack of blankets on the corner table and retrieved one.

“Same steps in the book.” Angela groaned as he covered her with the heavy blanket.

Kenn moved back, wishing he could do more for her. “I noticed almost all of them do have the same steps.”

“Ironic, isn’t it? We used to spend billions of dollars on different cleanup and recovery methods, but we only needed a few and almost the same equipment.” Angela slumped against the pillows. “The medications change, not the rest.”

“Tonya updated me on the first batch of tests.” Kenn steered them back to camp business, hating the panicked feeling that wanted to return as soon as his mind changed subjects. “She used a lot of terms from the book I didn’t write down. She thinks everyone was exposed at roughly the same time.”

“Do your preliminary findings support that conclusion?”

“Yes, except for three anomalies.” Kenn frowned. “Why do you sound like a lawyer?”

Angela’s good humor faded. “Trial aftertaste.”

“Makes sense. The anomalies are Adrian, Kendle, Kyle.”

Angela tried to sound firm through her misery. “Your ears only.”

“Okay.” Kenn was surprised she was going to trust him with anything important. He assumed he only had this job because there was no one else who could handle it right now.

“Kendle built up an immunity from her first exposure after the war.” Angela didn’t want to respect Kendle’s strength, but she did. The castaway had gone through this too and survived. “She’s not immune, but she can take more than most of us.”

“Okay.” Kenn wrote it in his book. “Kyle?”

Angela fought a cough and her burning throat to keep talking. “Jennifer gave Kyle a protection no one else can unless they’re an enforcer’s blood or mate.”

Kenn wasn’t sure what that meant. “So he’s...immune to illnesses?”

“Something like that.”

“What about Adrian?”

Angela gave him another pathetic stare. Kenn held up a hand. “Until you say otherwise, my ears only.”

She sighed. “Adrian has protection from a higher level.”

Kenn added it up. “The Gamblers?”

Angela snickered. “Great name.”

“Tonya started it.” Kenn scanned his notes. “She’ll have the second batch of tests ready in about eight hours.”

“Does she have a guess?”

Kenn nodded. “We believe it’s radiation poisoning, but we’re waiting on the tests to confirm it before we tell the camp.”

“Good job moving the ship.” Angela’s head spun; her nose began to drip again. “Who has the bridge?”

“Ozzie, with Whitney.” Kenn gave her an apologetic shrug. “It’s all the help we have right now.”

“How many ill?” Angela braced as she wiped.

Kenn sighed. “About twenty, counting this floor. We’re still clearing the cabins.”

“How many unaccounted for?”

“Same–almost twenty. Like I said, we’re clearing the ship. We’ll find them.”

“Damn it!” Angela concentrated. Now that Neil was here to aid Marc, she might be able to help her people in some way.

Kenn willed her to find the strength. He didn’t want this job.

The bathroom door opened. Marc exited, hand on the wall for balance. “Make her stop. She went to the edge to bring me back. She’s not ready.”

Angela didn’t argue. “Get him in bed. He’s cold.”

Neil helped Marc back to his place. “I’m changing the sheets after this nap. Try to store up some energy for it and we’ll get you both a shower.” Neil grinned. “Together, if you’re nice to the help. I know how we can all fit in there.”

Marc groaned as he sank down. “And the bad jokes just keep rolling.”

“Affirmative.” Neil turned to Kenn and held his hands a foot apart.

Kenn sniggered at Neil’s antics. It was rare for Neil to act this way, telling Kenn the trooper felt the situation was grave.

Neil nodded. “I do. I’ll be out to help as soon as these two don’t need me.”

“Now.” Marc rolled toward Angie. “Kick him out now, mommy.”

Neil returned to collecting garbage as Angela tugged Marc’s sweaty sheet up. The sweat was a good thing. Now that the fevers had broken, they could start recovering. “Have Morgan send meds up here, along with some food, if you can. No hurry and don’t bring the last of anything.”

Kenn wrote it down, certain that order had come from the boss. “Brittani has the kitchen under control. We were by there to pick up baskets for the camp. She’ll have the next load ready in an hour. We’ll make sure deliveries come here too. *Tip big*.”

Neil knew what to do. “I’ll let them peek at the boss. It will keep people calm since they haven’t heard from her.” Neil wanted to open the window to air out the smells, but the ship was still moving, which meant it wasn’t safe yet.

Kenn scanned Neil, but he didn’t waste time going deep. He needed to know if it was safe to leave the wrinkled, stained trooper alone with Angela. All he found in Neil’s cloudy head was concern and determination to help.

Angela spoke up. “I’ll make a radio call when you’re ready. What do you need me to say?”

Kenn was shocked by the question, the trust. “Uh... Let me check my notes.” Kenn skimmed. “We’re pretty calm for the moment. When you call, let them hear how sick you really are. That’ll buy us time.” Kenn frowned. “I forgot. Kronus is demanding to see you.”

Angela stiffened. “Who do you have on him?”

“Adrian.”

“I’ll get ready for it.”

Kenn snorted. “Yeah, like I’m going to let that happen. We’re stalling until Adrian takes him out. He needs some time to set it up.”

“Kronus is immortal.” Neil repeated a common rumor. “He can’t be taken out.”

“That’s up there.” Angela groaned. “Damn it.” Stingy tears rolled over her cheeks.

Neil and Kenn concentrated. Sadness and pain rolled through the passages.

“Another death?” Marc wasn’t getting anything.

Angela nodded, wiping at her red face. Skin flaked off; it drifted to the sheet.

Neil hurried over to scoop it up. He deposited it into the garbage can that he’d assigned for contaminated debris. It would be burnt as soon as he finished cleaning.

Marc held her hand while she cried. “Who was it?”

“That doesn’t matter to the boss.” Kenn hoped Marc understood he didn’t want to announce it. Angela was connected to her people. When they suffered, she felt it, but without her witch, she couldn’t zoom in to identify the problem. She’d judged this one on the level of grief hitting her. She didn’t need to hear a name too.

Marc took her hand, trying to lend his emotional strength. He couldn’t do anything else. “I’m sorry.”

Angela sniffled. “Me too. I was so worried about law and order that I forgot to guard against nature.”

Neil winced.

Guilt flooded the room.

Angela’s eyes snapped to him. “Seal that shit up right now. I won’t warn you twice.”

Neil brought up his clouds.

Kenn stared between them, mind clicking clues into place in loud snaps that echoed through the cabin.

Marc gestured at Kenn. “Finish up.”

Kenn scanned the paper to find his place, shelving the thread he’d caught. “I’m moving healthy people into new places as soon as we’ve had 48-hours with no new cases, per the book. Then we’ll start cleaning. We have alarms on the weapons room. I did those myself. Not even Kyle could get around those without setting them off.”

Angela approved. They didn’t have manpower for guard duty.

“That’s it for the bad.” Kenn waited.

Angela met his eyes. “And the good?”

Kenn smiled. “Only five camp members are sick.”

Angela felt a small measure of relief. She refused to read the illness list yet. She knew where her kids were. Charlie had come by to tell her they had a problem and found the guards knocked out. She’d felt him, but she hadn’t had the strength or time to answer. Marc’s life had been in the balance at that moment. Afterward, she’d wondered if she should be angry Charlie didn’t warn the camp. She still hadn’t made that choice. “Do you have a connection in the patients yet?”

“Topside seems likely.” Kenn pointed at her. “Almost every one of you were either on the top deck when Rachel died or right after it. The kids went up to release anger. The rest were fishing, piloting, or recreating.”

“Anomalies?” Angela remembered most of the steps in the book, but not the order.

“None, now.”

Marc tried not to choke. “You’ve done well, Marine.”

Coming from Marc, Kenn felt it. “My honor. Now finish healing and take this shitty job back. I never want to do this again.”

Angela leaned against Marc’s shoulder, lending heat. He was shivering again. “I’d trade you right now. I can’t tell you how rough this feels.”

“Worse than your daytrip with the flu?” Neil had wondered about that run. She still hadn’t talked to any of them about it.

She nodded. “There, I only thought I was going to die. I didn’t actually want it to happen for the relief.”

“Damn.” Kenn shot a blast of energy at the bed, hitting them both.

Neil smirked at their disapproval. “Suck it up.”

The radio crackled with Tonya’s annoyed voice. “Kenn! Where the hell are you?!”

Kenn sighed, storing his book as he stood. “Time for me to fly.”

“Break’s over.” Angela gave him a knowing look. “Feel a little better?”

Kenn realized he did. “Thank you for the downtime. I didn’t know I needed it.”

“My honor. Now get out of here and be our hero.”

Kenn left with lighter steps.

Neil locked the door behind him, glad the guards had all been taken to the infirmary. He would have called it in at some point, but he’d almost forgotten them when he entered the cabin. He hadn’t been sure Marc was alive. Neil had no doubt the battle to save his life had been hard.

“I need something from you.”

Neil turned, slowly, at Angela’s demand. “Name it.” Neil braced for ugliness now that the boss was recovering.

“Get Jayda ready for Eagle tryouts.”

Neil frowned a bit. The loudmouth wouldn’t be able to cut it. “Okay.”

Angela sent what little energy she’d recovered, forcing Marc to take it when he tried to pull his hand out of her grip. “Questions?”

Neil tried to act like it was any other day of getting orders for the camp. “Level goal?”

“Ten, by the time we reach the island.”

Neil snorted. “In kai? Not possible.”

“Eight?”

Neil considered. “Five, if she works hard.”

“Five, it is. By the time we reach the island. No one finds out.”

He tensed again. “Or?”

“Or she fails. This isn’t a punishment.” Angela tugged the blanket from her shoulders and weakly tossed it over Marc, who was shivering hard from the exertion of going to the bathroom. “It’s a favor.”

“To you?”

“To Ivan, though he doesn’t know it yet. He’s earned a reward. It almost killed him too.” Angela’s voice dropped. “I heard him, but I had to help Marc...”

Neil wanted to offer comfort, but there was too much darkness between them now. “I’ll do it as soon as things settle down. Anything you recommend I try or avoid?”

“The public. If you run into Jennifer, she may still dig through your clouds.”

Neil realized Angela didn’t know. “Jennifer’s sick, Boss. Morgan isn’t sure if she’ll survive.”

Angela pulled her hand from Marc’s weak grip as he dozed off, too tired to stay alert. “Get me dressed–right now.”

Chapter Eight

**Open Waves**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

December 5th

**6pm**

**1**

**“G**ood evening, Safe Haven. I’m on my way to the infirmary.” Angela braced on the elevator wall as it started to move. Kenn had insisted it was okay for her to use it. “Kenn is in charge. He’ll pick an XO in the next few hours; you’ll have an official chain of command. He’s the only one in leadership who isn’t sick or distracted by personal problems. I expect you to treat him as if he is me.”

Kenn made ugly gestures.

Angela frowned at him, fighting pain and twisting guts. “I know what I’m doing. Be quiet.”

People listening to the radio understood someone had protested her decision.

“The ship is under lockdown. Deliveries and information are coming as we get them. We need volunteers for cleaning and taping up plastic. All windows need to be closed; no air conditioning, as of this minute. Ozzie, shut it off.”

Loud noises came at Angela’s order as the team on the bridge turned off those utilities.

Slight panic began to hit her from all corners of the ship.

Angela keyed her mike again. “All the sick people are at the infirmary now, as far as I know. I have us in lockdown so no one else is infected. They can’t run the AC until we finish cleaning, otherwise we’re just blowing the particles right into where you are. Volunteers need to put a note on the outside of their door so crews can record it, then get you working.” There was a pause as she looked at Kenn, eyeing his two-day beard and grim features. Angela was mildly surprised by his harsh smell and unkept appearance. It still hit her at odd moments that he’d changed so much. “I don’t need a guard right now. Put Ian to work.”

Dirt in the carpet crunched beneath their feet as they stepped out. *I bet he still hates a dirty floor. This is all a huge adjustment for Kenn. I shouldn’t forget it.*

“Ian will have duty over you until you’re done at the infirmary.” Kenn tried to appease her. “I’ll have other work for him then.”

Those listening approved Kenn’s choice. It made them feel better to know the boss at least had one guard during the chaos.

“Fine. All of this is coming from Kenn. I support it. As you can hear, I’m not well. Neither is Marc.” Angela stumbled in the dingy employee hall Kenn had insisted on taking for her safety. She drew in a breath and kept going.

Kenn wanted to offer her his arm, but he knew she would rather fall than take help. *She may get her wish. Some of the bodies are more alive than she is.*

Kenn signaled to Ian, wondering why she didn’t just keep the gray hair. It almost looked good on her. “Take her to the lab, then relieve Jeff on duty there so he can sleep for third shift.”

Ian nodded, glad he was able to be useful. He wouldn’t be able to do much for their patients. He also wasn’t above enjoying people being wrong about him never guarding the boss again. Sure, it had taken a crisis, but it still counted.

“I’m almost at the infirmary...” Angela squinted at the list of talking points from Kenn. “What’s the last one?”

Kenn read it. “Looting. It’ll be dark in a few hours, but I don’t have the manpower for guards.”

Angela keyed the mike, fingers aching. “I’ve been informed we’ve already had a case of looting.” She paused for effect, using precious energy to sound angry about the lie. “I’m giving the Eagles permission to use lethal force on anyone caught breaking rules. If you see a problem, call them on channel…”

Kenn held up his notebook with the number.

“Channel 5.”

Kenn waited until she let off the mike. “Great cover.”

Angela drew in a breath, winded. “I mean every word.” She pushed through to the corridor outside the infirmary.

Dog was waiting. He padded to Kenn, like he’d been told, and shook dust onto the man’s boots. He’d just come from the leadership deck. He’d taken his nap in a hall near there, protecting Marc on his break.

Kenn grunted. “Thanks.”

Dog peered up. *Marc says hello.*

“Figures.”

Angela waved them off. “I’ll be fine.”

Kenn left her there, not liking it but there was no other choice. Everything she would broadcast now was horror propaganda to keep people grateful for the lockdown. He had other things to handle.

Kenn shut off his radio as he neared the brig and peered in. Empty mess bowls were stacked on the desk; the trashcan was overflowing. The cleaning crew hadn’t been by here yet.

Those inside didn’t notice Kenn in the passage outside.

“She is not sick!” Kronus tightened his grip on the bars. He coughed, and spit onto the cell floor.

Adrian noticed the angel looked worse but didn’t comment on it. “You heard her. You felt it, the same as I did. She’s not faking.” Adrian was glad Angela was going to the infirmary. Everything she saw there would piss her off and help her fight harder to survive.

Kronus glared, hating this mortal body for its weaknesses, the pain he hadn’t felt before coming to earth. “You’re buying time to strengthen her gifts with souls of the dead. But it won’t work. Those souls are useless.”

Adrian glowered at the dirty man. “Have some respect for the lives being lost!”

Kronus laughed. “I do, since I bet on it.”

“What are you talking about?!” Adrian came over and kicked the cell door. “Answer me!”

Kronus smiled.

Adrian realized the man wasn’t going to tell. He fell back into a teaching tone. “At least give her an hour to experience all the misery. Maybe she’ll negotiate.”

Kronus’s eyes narrowed. “Do you really think so?”

Adrian sighed. “No. I think she’s going to kill you and trigger a new war.”

Kronus smiled again. “You should thank me. Instead of sitting there, getting sleepy in clean clothes, you could be dying with the rest of that mission team.”

Adrian understood Kronus had known they were going to get sick. He stored the information and refused to rise to the bait again.

Kenn continued down the hall. He wasn’t letting Angela anywhere near Kronus in her condition. Adrian would handle the man when the time came. Kenn didn’t know if he should give that order, though. It felt like something Angela needed to insist on, not a temporary boss.

Kenn saw the lunch delivery crew trudging the hall toward the stairs. They were wrinkled and sweaty, not chatting. Their shift had just ended. Kenn hadn’t eaten yet, but he hoped they had delivered food to Tonya.

Kenn opened a closet and sank into the chair he’d placed there a couple hours ago. It was time for a quick snooze. It was going to be a long evening. The camp had to be moved so they could clean. He was going to supervise it himself if he could get free time, but he also needed energy.

He switched his radio on and leaned back in the chair. He had to grab a nap while he could, as if they were at war. He would be up all night. This nap would help get him through it.

Dog sat down in the hall to keep watch over the man. He didn’t like the duty he’d been given, but he was doing it.

**2**

“Why did Neil kill my daddy?”

Samantha turned around with the basket of food in her hand, startled. The delivery crew had just left; their sparse information hadn’t been comforting, though her stomach had responded to the wonderful scent of Brittani’s stew. Now, it flipped over.

Amy stared at her from the little bed, surrounded by coloring books and crayons.

“We can’t talk about that.” It had been a peaceful eight hours for her and the child. All they’d heard, other than the radio she’d shut off, was footsteps going by a few times. She’d found a cute set of dresses and socks for the girl a couple days ago, but Amy hadn’t agreed to try any of them yet. She was clinging to her threadbare jumper. They’d cleaned the small cabin and taken a nap together on the big bed instead. Samantha had loved every second of it.

Amy frowned. “Why?”

Samantha sat the basket on the dresser. “Because the alpha would have to execute Neil.”

Amy colored harder. “Was it wrong?”

“Murder is always wrong.” Samantha waited for more from the cute little girl. When they’d risen from their nap, she’d spent an hour brushing Amy’s hair and putting little barrettes in while they chatted. She hadn’t known the child changed her name after being captured by the UN. Amy refused to say what her old name had been. Samantha hadn’t pushed. She understood wanting to start over.

“I’ve murdered too.” Amy snapped the crayon in her grip.

Samantha sat on the edge of her bed. “You were forced. That’s different.”

“Not always.” Amy snapped another crayon. “In my mind, I’m dark. I enjoyed it.”

Samantha began to realize she’d been fooled by the child too. “Amy, are you glad this happened?”

Amy shrugged, picking another crayon. “I wanted to be a little kid, not a weapon. Becky would have made me hate all adults.”

Samantha frowned deeper. “What about your dad?”

Amy went cold, tensing. “You won’t let the strangers take me. You’ll get me back, no matter what.”

“Your dad came–”

“No! He took too long!” Amy threw the crayon against the wall. “He left me for Safe Haven!”

Samantha understood what the little girl needed. “I already chose you over the camp. I always will.”

Amy dug another coloring stick from the torn box. “That’s why I won’t ever tell anyone. In time, we’ll be a real family.”

“What if you get mad at us for something, or you get jealous of the babies?” Samantha felt like she had to ask. The little girl now had dangerous leverage.

Amy shrugged. “What if you don’t want me when you have your babies?”

Samantha frowned. “That’s never going to happen.”

Amy shrugged again. “Same answer. I got to pick *this* life. I want it.” She peered over at Samantha, letting her true self be seen. “I’ll kill for it.”

Samantha reached over and hugged the girl. “Me too, sweetheart. Me too.”

Amy buried her head in Samantha’s jumper, calming. She’d longed for parents who loved her enough to do anything to protect her. *Now, I have that.* Bella’s parents were always drunk or never home. Seth hadn’t been there to stop her mom from slapping her or to stop her mom from selling her to the UN men. Samantha and Neil would die to prevent that from happening to her again. *I finally feel safe.*

**3**

“She’s been in the infirmary for an hour.”

Adrian shrugged at Kronus, taking another bite of stew that had been delivered. Adrian was in higher spirits, despite the open waves transmitting awful noises. Adrian was sick of it, though he was grateful for the update. He’d heard a lot of names while Angela helped their sick people. Daryl. Tommy. Ben. Wade. Many of his favorite students were sick.

The radio crackled again, drowning out sounds of vomiting, gagging and beeping machines. “Peter is on the way to help care for his team.”

Adrian heard a distinctive rustle and assumed Charlie was still suited up.

“Good. We need all the hands in here we can get.”

Adrian identified Morgan’s weary voice that time.

The sound of footsteps and a cabinet being slammed shut echoed; both were overwhelmed by Harry shouting.

“Her fever is going up again! I can’t stop it!”

The sounds from the infirmary were haunting.

Adrian stared at the radio, waiting for the next noises that would tell him who was at death’s door. While he waited, whimpers and clinks of medical gear were the loudest.

“Give her a double dose.”

“We don’t know what that will do.”

“Megan will die anyway. Give her a double dose of the medication.”

“Okay.”

Adrian was glad Morgan was listening to Angela. Those who were unconscious had little hope. Doubling medication was a desperate attempt to save their lives. Adrian applauded it.

Kronus smacked the bars. “At least feed me!”

Adrian glanced at the generous bowls Brittani had packed. He hadn’t fed anyone in the brig yet. They were all watching him; Safe Haven members understood there was a reason the food hadn’t been distributed.

“I want to eat!”

Adrian sighed, sitting his bowl down. He picked up the smallest bag and took it over to the window in the cell.

“About time!” Kronus snatched it and went to his cot to eat.

The smell of stew thickened in the brig, making stomachs growl.

Adrian resumed eating. Brittani had sent food. Charlie had added a bottle of sedatives. All Adrian had had to do was combine them, then make sure Kronus got hungry. The hard part was eating while listening to his people die.

“Why aren’t you feeding them too?” Kronus stuffed in a spoonful and talked through it. “It’s good for earth food.”

Adrian snorted. “They eat together. The cooks didn’t send enough for everybody.”

“*You’re* eating.”

“I’m banished.”

Kronus shrugged, swallowing. “I’m their better. So are you. It makes sense we’d eat before them.”

Mutters came from the other cells.

Fresh groans echoed from the radio, followed by crying.

“We lost her. Megan’s gone.”

New footsteps echoed. “We have a lunch delivery for those who can eat. A bland broth and green tea.”

Fresh vomiting echoed, followed by the sounds of trash bags.

Adrian doubted anybody in the infirmary would enjoy the meal, even if they could keep it down. Adrian resumed eating. It was great cover to get Kronus to finish every drop in his bowl, but Adrian wished Angela would turn her radio off now. He’d heard enough.

“She must have taped her mike.” Ramer couldn’t help wondering if that was a good idea. *What if someone needs to get through?*

Adrian nodded, but didn’t speak. Angela needed Kronus and the camp to hear it, but like himself, Adrian was sure everyone else also wished she would let them have silence back now.

Adrian glanced toward the corridor window, frowning. The sun was starting to set. Things might get uglier now. He considered the note that had been sent with the medication. *Do not kill him.*

Adrian didn’t know what plans Angela had for the fallen angel, but he doubted it was pretty.

The radio crackled again. “Code blue! Ben just stopped breathing!”

The radio went dead.

Everyone was relieved, except for the people in the infirmary. They hardly noticed.

**4**

“Where have you been?!” Tonya jerked the glass door open, shoving aside the curtains.

Kenn frowned. “Trying to snooze while listening to creaking cots, moans, crying, puking and Ben ranting about keeping a secret.” Kenn took the book she held out, aware of a cat sneaking around her leg. He gently shut the door.

Sitting at Kenn’s heel, Dog gave the cats a condescending glance. *Stay in there and don’t make trouble for me.*

The two felines looked at each other, then back at Dog with deceptive innocence.

Dog leered. *Good kitties.*

“So you verified it?” Kenn handed the book back to her. “We are using the right medications?”

Tonya wiped curls from her sweaty face. Without air conditioning, the lab was stifling. “Yes, it’s working. We just need to increase the doses. I’ve written it all down.”

Kenn put the paper in his notebook. “People are going to come here to give you samples. Wait until they leave before you get them and put them in the cooler. Do not open the door otherwise.”

Tonya had cleared every bit of counter space, then covered it in tests, prep areas, and books. Kenn was careful not to move anything, though he scanned much of it. The smell of chemicals was strong, though he couldn’t name what they were. It was still better than the odors in the infirmary.

Tonya frowned, pointing to the guard on the couch.

Kenn shrugged. “He can’t protect you if you keep opening the door.”

Getting tired, Tonya flipped him the finger.

Kenn sniggered. Tonya had her hair pinned up high and glasses on a chain around her neck. She only used them when her eyes were bothering her from reading small print. *Wish I could give her a break.* Kenn hit his mike. “We have a confirmation of the illness. It is acute radiation poisoning. We’re medicating people in the infirmary. If you don’t feel well, call us so we can get you medicated too.” Kenn paused, hoping for responses.

The radio was silent. Listening to Angela’s time in the infirmary had been stressful for everyone. Kenn hoped Angela was about done there. Tonya needed help here, where she could sit and hopefully not wear herself out.

Tonya didn’t ask if he’d been given a meal yet. She could hear his stomach. She waved at her bowl. “Finish that while it’s warm.”

Kenn did, pleased she’d been given a huge portion.

“You’ll have relief coming shortly.” Kenn looked toward Jeff.

Jeff shrugged, not opening his eyes. “It’s pretty quiet here. She’s right, though. You have to pick an XO. When you go to sleep, somebody has to be in charge.”

Kenn ran through the list of people he had been stewing on since Angela mentioned it. “Too bad Ozzie has to run the ship. I think he would be…” Kenn’s stomach dropped. “The boat crew. Damn it!” Kenn opened the door.

“What’s wrong?” Jeff wasn’t sure if he should follow. He shut the lab door and stayed in front of it.

“They’ve been topside too long! Stay here.” Kenn hurried toward the stairs to the top deck, cursing himself. He keyed the secondary radio he was keeping on the emergency channel. “I need Theo and three volunteers to report to the top deck in full gear–immediately!”

**5**

“Theo!” Kenn was glad to see him coming up the ramp to the top deck ten minutes later. “You’re in charge of the ship.”

Theo didn’t protest. He’d expected it and come prepared, but he didn’t want the job.

“None of us do.” Kenn understood. “You’re the most experienced man here after Grant.”

“That’s scary.” Theo donned the bulky helmet. “Let’s get it done.”

The three volunteers behind Theo weren’t eager either, but they didn’t argue. Everyone else was busy, sick, or dead.

Kenn led the way, wondering if this small exposure would be too much for him to fight off. They only had a few suits. He didn’t want to waste one on himself.

Kenn went up the stairs into light wind and good temperatures that didn’t give a clue to the danger. The deserted deck was the same as before, as was the bridge, but it didn’t feel good. Air was suddenly the enemy.

There was debris in the water on both sides of the ship. The smell of rot slapped at their noses, burning through the masks. The damp deck shined in the light of sunset, mocking them with glints that promised fun in the sun was waiting.

“I don’t see fish.” Travis noted details, nervous. “The skycrap seems thicker. We shouldn’t be up here yet.”

Kenn agreed. He trotted up the slick steps to the bridge.

“Men down!” Kenn grabbed Ozzie’s arm as the man staggered.

“We held the ship.” Ozzie tried to smile. A drop of blood rolled from the corner of his eye, tracing a path of crimson over his burnt skin. “We held it.”

“Yes, you did.” Kenn walked him toward the elevator, not sure Ozzie would live. He also wasn’t sure Whitney was even alive.

Ozzie staggered again, forcing Kenn to lift the man over his shoulder.

“When it stops beeping...” Ozzie slumped.

“When it stops, stop the boat.” Whitney tried to help the men get him to his feet. “We voted to stay.”

“You did good.” Theo patted Whitney on the shoulder.

Whitney stumbled to the steps and puked.

“Get him below. Keep a bag ready.” Kenn fished one out while trying to balance Ozzie’s weight. “Theo, it’s your ship now.”

Theo took a place in front of the main console. “We’ll call if we start feeling bad.”

Whitney scowled through a pounding throat and cramps deep in his gut. “You stay until the beep stops. Be a man this time!” Whitney shoved Travis’s hand away. “Get me below.”

Kenn got the two men into the elevator and pushed the buttons without overruling the order. If they didn’t get this ship into a clear area, there wouldn’t be any reason to change shifts. They would all be dead.

Kenn took a last glance at the setting sun, mourning the switch from daylight. *Things will get rough now.*

**6**

“Lift the body.” Greg unfolded a large tarp. “We’ll get this under it.”

Jonny and Michael both frowned at the words, but they stepped by Greg to do as instructed. They’d stayed in the lounge until the body crew arrived. Now, they were supposed to get this room sanitized, then stay on that crew. It wasn’t the glamorous Eagle job they were used to.

Jonny handed the box of gloves to Michael, then rolled the body over by himself. Sabrina was stiff. He had to use real muscle to move her.

“Good.” Greg closed the tarp over the body.

Ian folded it over the top and the bottom, then pointed at the bag he’d brought. Angela had sent him away as soon as Kenn left her sight. “Tape.”

Jonny got the almost-used roll of duct tape, hoping it was the first one. Unfortunately, he doubted it.

This dim lounge had been enjoyed for a week. Now, Ian suspected it would sit empty. Any place someone had died would be shunned until the bad memories faded. “Wrap it all the way around while we hold it.”

Michael and Jonny each took an end, grimacing at the disrespectful method of handling the dead.

Greg was worn out, but he still had time for compassion. “It’s to keep the radioactive particles from spreading while we take her to the incinerator.”

Jonny paused. “The what?”

Michael stood, dropping the empty tape roll. “We’re burning them.” He wasn’t asking. It made sense; he just couldn’t believe it was happening. *We’re protected. We’re God’s chosen people.* *Why is this happening to us?*

Greg felt their bewilderment, but there wasn’t anything he could say to make it better. Even if he had thought of something, he no longer had the energy for conversation. Caring for the dead was taking everything he had.

“There’s a note.” Jonny nudged Michael, passing the plastic wrapped gear. “*These are the last two suits. Don’t rip them. Love, Kenn*.”

Ian sniggered. He wasn’t as tired as Greg yet, but he was close.

“*Ps. You two are the relief. Tell the current crew to get a shower in the sanitizing area going up in the big gymnasium. Instructions are posted there*.” Jonny put the note back in the bag and began donning a suit over his clothes.

Greg opened a large yard bag, then began putting the body in it.

“I can’t do that...this!” Michael dropped the suit. “Switch me out. I won’t do *that*. I can’t stand to see it.” Michael’s fists clenched. “Stop it right now!”

Greg kept working. “Report to the base by the lab. Follow the signs.”

“This isn’t right.” Michael spun out of the lounge, furious.

Ian glanced at Jonny while Greg lifted the body so it would go into the bag. “What about you?”

Jonny knelt by the supplies to read the instructions someone had hastily scrawled on the back of an Eagle schedule. “Elevators?”

Ian gave him a relieved nod. “Yes. Always wear your gear in the elevators. We’re using them for faster body transport.”

Jonny braced. “How many have you taken down? Not counting this one.”

“Twelve.”

*Unlucky thirteen*. Jonny pulled on the visor and shut it, firmly. “One of you can go to break now. We don’t have to wait to start rotating.”

Ian gestured. “Take Greg’s spot. You’ll hold lights, push buttons. If we have to use stairs, you’ll carry. My back’s about done.”

Greg staggered from the lounge, grateful for a break from this nightmare.

“After we take it down, we’ll return and do the first layer of cleaning here.” Ian pointed. “Put that kit over your shoulder and let’s go.”

Jonny stayed ahead as Ian walked to the elevator, horrified by the job.

The boat groaned at them as they moved by.

Jonny staggered, mind struggling to accept it.

Ian shrugged. “Why should humans have all the pain?”

Jonny didn’t know what to say. He chose to remain silent.

That choice was a relief for Ian. He didn’t think he was capable of having a normal conversation about any topic without screaming. It would be best if he didn’t have to talk at all for a while.

Zack glanced up as the elevator dinged and opened.

Allison stepped into the corridor, hand on her gun.

“One coming in.” Ian nodded at Jonny. “Watch what we do, so you’ll know for the next one.”

“Maybe there won’t be any more deaths.”

Jonny ignored Allison’s hopeful comment. “Your radio is clicking.”

Ian sighed, stepping forward with the heavy, hard body over his aching shoulder. “That’s the infirmary. Everywhere else has a pause to indicate which deck.”

The radio kept clicking.

“What does that mean?”

“Multiple deaths.” Ian staggered as he lowered the body onto a pile.

Jonny stared, bile rising. *That’s a stack of bodies*. Garbage bags lined one wall, waiting to be burned. A second stack of bloody corpses lined the other wall, waiting for the same. He’d never seen that in real life, until Safe Haven. Once he’d joined this camp, it was all he’d seen.

Ian wiped his hands with alcohol pads. “You okay?”

Jonny shook his head. “Yes.” Jonny saw three bodies that had been in the morgue and swallowed a protest. Seth and Becky, along with Rachel, were here to be burned. It made sense, but it also made him uncomfortable.

Zack grunted. “Yeah, that about sums it up for all of us right now.” He pointed at the glowing incinerators. “One’s for trash. We’re almost caught up on that now, so you can spread the word to start bringing it again. The cleaning crew is on the top inside deck and working down. Angela’s notebook said we should clean now to avoid more illnesses.”

Jonny tried to concentrate and store the words, but the smell here was already getting to him.

“Hang on for about thirty seconds. The vent will open at the peak of the burn.” Zack knew the sounds and reactions by heart. He would never forget this duty. It dwarfed anything he’d been forced to do so far and that included getting nailed to a warehouse wall after his ribs were broken. Those were still aching, making this even more uncomfortable. “Tell Kenn we’re stopping soon to let the machines cool. Don’t let anyone restart them until we come back.”

Allison waited until they were done talking, pausing while Ian labeled the tag on the body. “What’s going on up there?”

Ian grunted. “Nothing good.”

“More details, huh?!”

Jonny frowned at her snap. “Why are you here?”

She tensed. “Kenn told me to help.”

“Then leave, right? We have camp rules about females being out of harm’s way during a crisis, to protect future generations. This isn’t safe.”

“She doesn’t count in that.” Zack didn’t look at Allison. “I settled it already. Get up to the infirmary and bring down the next body. They need empty cots.”

“I already have a chore list.” Jonny left, scowling.

Allison hadn’t known Zack was aware of her infertility. “How did you know?”

Zack didn’t look at her. “I was at the meeting. You didn’t move to the breeder tables.”

She stiffened. “I could have been lying.”

“You weren’t.” Zack met her eye. “I saw your red cheeks, like the ones you have now. You were embarrassed.”

“You’re smart.” Allison didn’t have a mental filter on right now. She was too tired. “Wish I liked you more.”

Zack smiled without meaning to. “I’m trying to like you too, despite our awful date. Keep saying things like that.”

Allison flushed darker. “It really was awful.”

Zack shrugged, aware of Ian staring at them in mild disapproval. “My ribs were hurting. I didn’t lie.”

“Well, you didn’t have to call me easy. I’m not.”

“I’ve heard different. I’ve also heard you bat for my team. I assumed neither of those were true. I judged on behavior.”

Allison’s cheeks flamed brighter. “It’s been months. The guy who used to handle it went and fell in love. I was horny. Sue me.”

Zack laughed. “That’s better.”

“What?” Allison was sorry she’d blurted it out that way, but Zack’s opinion meant something to her. She just wasn’t sure why.

“Full honesty.” Zack kept going, hoping she could accept the words. “And I didn’t call you easy. I implied it, to see your reaction.”

Allison understood he’d been testing her to determine if they were compatible. She lifted a brow. “Well?”

He grinned. “You passed the first level.”

“What is wrong with you two?!” Ian stomped toward the elevator before Allison could respond to Zack’s flirting. “Have some respect for the dead!”

Allison and Zack watched until he was gone, ashamed.

The doors shut, dinging.

Zack went back to recording information.

Allison returned to hauling ash.

Chapter Nine

**Unseasoned**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“G**ood evening, Safe Haven. We are under curfew until dawn, for all decks. That includes the entertainment areas.” Kenn let off the mike. He was in the infirmary, cleaning up garbage and loading syringes so the medical team could take a break. That hadn’t happened yet. They were too busy. Mutters and whimpers echoed behind him, followed by cots creaking as people with fevers tossed, turned and mumbled.

“Our first test results are identical in all the victims. We believe the debris fields we’ve been pushing through are contaminated. As you already know, we are moving the ship out of danger. When the ship stops, it’s okay to open the windows. We’ll give the all clear on the PA system.” Kenn left the mike keyed this time, like Angela had earlier. She was still here, organizing. He was hoping it would help the camp to hear her voice in the background.

“Just a few sips?” Angela held up the bottle.

Ben barely moved his head, fighting to survive. “Don’t think I can.”

Angela sat the bottle next to his cot. She knew Kenn was broadcasting. She tried to think of something to say, but there wasn’t enough alertness left in her brain. She was functioning purely on Morgan’s orders. “Where do you need me?”

Morgan pointed to the basin. “Bathe the next one.”

“You got it.” Angela shifted to the basin.

Kenn cleared his throat, talking to the listening camp. “Post a list of what you need on the inside of a window or slide it under the door. Crews will be by overnight to pick them up. Do not break quarantine.”

“Code blue on Ben! Code bl–”

The radio cut off abruptly on Angela’s shout.

**2**

“We’re breaking quarantine right now.” Natalie pointed at the long line of camp members making the move to the plush cabins of the deck below. Twitchy people slunk toward the stairs with possessions clutched tight.

Those in the middle of the line wore expressions of tolerance. They remembered when they’d been easily spooked. The few members who’d been along for a thousand miles of fighting stayed back from the rest of the line. They’d learned to avoid the crossfire in moments like this.

“Oh, shit!” Martin pointed.

Everyone turned.

Three people in radiation gear went by, carrying a body to the elevator.

Panic ensued from the newer members of Safe Haven. They pushed toward the employee living quarters, anxious to avoid contact.

Ralph and his sons were at the rear of the lengthy line, along with Quinn and a few others Kenn had sent. He’d wanted to do it himself, but Ian had talked him out of it and earned point duty for the move.

“Get out of the way!” Martin puffed up his chest.

Ralph snorted. “You new people aren’t seasoned yet. Calm down.”

Wessley and Martin, ex-Eagles carrying a grudge about losing rank, stepped forward.

The feeling of a fight about to happen swept through the crowd, bringing people closer.

Halfway through the mob, Sally peered up at her dad. “You could steal a gun right now. They wouldn’t even notice.”

Leeroy stared at his daughter in horror. “We don’t do that! We’re not like *her*.”

Sally pouted but didn’t try again. Her grudge against Safe Haven wasn’t the same as her father’s grief over missing her mother. Even at her young age, Sally recognized the difference. Her dad was not on her side.

Hailey and Natalie, girlfriends of Wessley and Martin, stepped forward to flank their men. Dressed like 80s rockers, the two females snapped bubbles and pointed, tossing teased hair.

Ian was tired of the drama. He gave Quinn a motion.

A gun cocked; it was a very distinctive noise to every Eagle in the area.

Michael aimed at Travis. “Stop the boat. We want off.” Michael was at his limit. He’d been telling anyone who would listen what the body crew was doing, but they didn’t care enough to stop it.

Time seemed to slow for Ian he stared down the barrel of the gun. “This is a contaminated area. We have to keep moving.”

Michael’s eyes were wild. “Let me off!”

“Okay. If you want off the boat, I’m not going to stop you.” Ian slowly pointed. “You go straight down that corridor to access the lifeboats from the top deck.”

Michael stared in suspicion. “What’s the trick?”

Ian shrugged. “No trick. Would you like me to escort you?”

Michael gave a curt nod. “You’re not my hostage or anything. I just want off the boat.”

Ian moved toward the corridor. “I understand. I won’t take it personally if you don’t.”

Michael followed, frowning as he lowered the weapon. “Why would I hold a grudge?”

Ian spun around and slapped the gun out of his hand. He punched the man again and again until Michael collapsed at his feet.

Eagles hurried over to help but were beaten there by several camp members who’d also had enough. The camp members punched or kicked the troublemaker into submission.

Wesley and Martin tried to get by Ralph and his sons in the din.

Quinn stumbled toward the shoving, yelling crowd. “I don’t feel well.” He coughed, dropping to his knees.

“He’s got it!”

“He’s infected!”

“Get to the next deck! Get to the next deck!” Ian directed the stampeding herd.

The twitchier camp members rushed down the stairs toward the luxury cabins, where the Eagles had been trying to get them to go in the first place.

The rest of the camp members moved slower. They were used to Eagle mind games.

Ian pointed toward the stairs. “Get him to the brig.”

A group of Eagles hauled Michael to his feet and shoved him down the hall.

Ian glanced around to see what else needed to be taken care of. Senior members walked by them with snickers of approval as Quinn stood, brushed himself off.

“Do you know where my dad and brother are?”

Ian nodded at Mike, impressed that the teen wasn’t overreacting like some of their so-called adults. “Your brother is in the mess. Your father is...eliminating contaminates from the ship.” Ian didn’t want to say Zack was burning bodies. They didn’t need the extra stress right now.

Relief settled into Mike’s face. “Thank you. I know I’m kinda young for it, but is there anything I can do? I don’t mind helping.”

Ian scanned the stocky teenager. “We need hands on the delivery crew and the cleaning crew. Go to the conference rooms near the lab for an assignment.”

Mike was thrilled to be trusted with any responsibility. “Awesome.” He trotted off toward the stairs, grinning from ear to ear.

“I wish they were all that easy to please.”

“Me too.” Leeroy stopped next to Ian. “After this is all over, I need to talk to someone about my daughter. She’s holding onto a lot of hatred.”

Ian felt the little girl’s glare from across the room. She was sitting on one of the couches, waiting for the rest of the line to go by. “I’ll put it in my notes to the boss.”

“Thanks.” Leeroy waved Sally over.

The little girl joined him, sneering. They descended together, not talking to anyone.

Ralph brought up the rear, with his sons. “What’s next?”

Ian checked his book. “We need those supply notes taped to the windows or put under the doors. Can you supervise it?”

Ralph was also happy to be able to help. “You bet.” He descended the stairs, watching out for Hailey and Natalie, who had gotten separated from their boyfriends in the rush. *Some Eagles.*

Ian did a fast scan of the living quarters to make sure it was really empty, then keyed his mike in code to alert the cleaning crew. They needed the camp moved for multiple reasons, but cleaning was the biggest. A lot of the people in the infirmary had fallen sick in the living quarters. It all had to be gutted.

Ian decided to follow the guards to the brig to make sure Michael was safely locked up and their other guests were still contained. They didn’t need any loose cannons right now.

**3**

“Somebody just tried to turn the handle.” Jayda was positive she’d seen it.

Everyone left in the mess turned to stare.

The handle slowly turned both ways, testing.

Cathy started to ask who was out there, but Gus held up a hand. He motioned everyone to be quiet as he snuck to the door.

The handle turned again, harder this time. Everyone heard something being inserted into the lock.

Gus motioned the others forward as he advanced. He banged on the door. “You better get to your quarantine area!”

The others did the same, but it didn’t drown out the sound of footsteps running away.

Gus checked the lock to make sure it hadn’t been breached. “Who wants first shift?”

Timmy held up a hand, eager to impress Cathy.

Gus waved, glad to see the kid was willing to do something other than flirt. “Good. Get on it.”

Timmy beamed, straightening his black jean jacket proudly. He paused, smile fading. “Don’t I get a gun?”

Cathy and Gus both snorted. “No.”

Timmy wasn’t as eager for the post now, but he had no choice.

“We need to get food ready for the escorts. We’ll make sure they know somebody tried to break in while we give them a couple minutes to sit and eat.” Brittani was packaging the first batch of dinners to be sent out. The counters around them were stacked with food in various stages of preparation. Wonderful smells were thick here.

Trinity scowled. “You’re staying?”

Brittani shrugged. “It’s as safe here as anywhere else.”

“I don’t think we should open the door at all.” Jayda put a hand on her hip when people turned her way. “I may be a big mouth, but I still have the right to an opinion. If we open those doors, even to go to our cabins, we’re risking being exposed to anything in the air. We should stay here.”

Gus hadn’t expected that reaction from the others too. He looked back to Brittani. “We should get your parents to the living quarters so they can rest. They’ve been working all day.”

Thelma pointed at Gus. “You can go. We are staying.”

Gus flushed at the shaming tone from Brittani’s mother.

Brian approached the supplies Brittani had just packed. “I can drop this off on my way.”

Brittani stepped in front of the sober drunk. “You’re not on the delivery team.”

Brian pointed at her, finger in her face. “And you’re not the boss of me!”

Brittani laughed at him. “What are you, like ten?”

Brian stepped forward, rigid with anger and fear. “You shut your mouth!”

Brittani punched him in the throat.

Everyone gawked as Brian dropped to his knees, suffocating.

Gus hit the button on his belt. “We need a medic in the mess!”

Trinity huffed. “Medics are not leaving the infirmary. You heard what the last delivery crew told us.”

Gus realized she was right. He sent a small blast of healing energy into Brian. “Feel special. You don’t deserve that.” Gus dragged the coughing man as far from the cooks as he could. “Stay down or I’ll break your legs.”

Gus hoped Kenn got things straightened out soon. It wasn’t good to have people who didn’t like each other locked in the same room. He was still expecting a catfight too, but these women didn’t understand who they were messing with. Brittani was ruthless when challenged, as Brian had just learned. Her signature was a one hit delivery that disabled her opponent. She was incredibly good at it.

Trinity caught and stored the information without letting anyone know.

**4**

“Where’s Angie?” Marc struggled to get out of bed.

“Helping the medics, who are making sure she gets her medication on time.” Neil pulled the clean sheet back up to Marc’s neck. “She wants you to eat; then you can help too.”

Marc settled back against the pillow. “Stubborn woman!”

Neil wanted to go scrub the bathroom, but he needed to get Marc sleeping first. “I put broth on the end table. Do you want help?”

“No!”

Neil listened to Marc’s clumsy attempts to secure the bowl, but he didn’t interfere. “Eat it all. She said you need your strength if you want to pull a shift.”

“I’m bringing her right back here.” Marc kept muttering as he opened the lid on the bowl, spilling some down the sheet. He couldn’t help it. His hands weren’t steady. If he had to defend himself right now, he would die.

“Eat up.” Neil watched Marc sip the warm broth. “You can take bigger bites than that.”

Marc took a big mouthful and swallowed, frowning at Neil’s sudden smile. “What made you so happy?” Marc sucked in another large mouthful of the savory stew.

“Seeing you eat.”

Marc swallowed. “Worried about me?”

Neil ignored the sarcastic tone, motioning for him to keep going. “Of course.”

Marc took another healthy swallow, stomach protesting.

“Besides, if you’re sleeping it’s easier for me to get shit done.”

Marc scowled, lowering the bowl. “It’s drugged.” Grayness swarmed him.

Neil got there in time to grab the bowl and lift it out of the way as Marc began to pass out. “That’s better. Now isn’t it better?”

Neil put the lid on the bowl and slid it into the mini refrigerator. Then he got Marc arranged so he would be comfortable. “I’m sorry. The boss wants you to stay here and whatever she wants, she’ll get from me.”

**5**

“I want to stay.”

Kenn gently tugged Angela toward the door by her elbow. “Go to your cabin and check on Marc. You pulled a full shift here. That’s enough.”

Kenn refused to listen to any more of her protests. Her crying and hacking was just as bad as listening to the other patients in the room. There was no reason for her to be here. Most of these people didn’t even know there was a medic in the room, let alone that one of them was the boss. They were too far gone.

Angela caved. She had limited gifts back now, but not enough to help anyone beyond offering mental or physical comfort. It was killing her to be here and not be able to help them. Kenn knew that.

Angela let the door close behind her, heart in shreds. *I’ve lost so many!*

Angela glanced up at footsteps coming around the corner. She nodded to Debra. “Updates go to Kenn.”

Debra patted her on the shoulder as she went by, glad to see the boss lady up and about. It was obvious she shouldn’t be, though. *Angela looks like shit.*

Debra went straight to Kenn, for once glad to lack hearing. She didn’t want to know exactly how miserable the people in here were. She had a mental bubble around herself that only Kenn could get through for them to stay in contact. She didn’t want to experience everyone else’s pain. She had enough of her own.

Kenn ran the Geiger counter over Ben and then Wade, finishing another step in the directions to confirm the outbreak. Loud beeps and crackles overwhelmed the other noises for a minute.

Kenn turned it off and recorded his findings. He’d scanned everyone in the infirmary now to determine where the radiation was in their body. No one was going to be happy to learn it was all through them. They were in the middle of a hematopoietic event that would destroy their bone marrow and ruin their immune systems. Even those who survived would suffer effects, maybe for the rest of their lives. “Give it to me.”

Debra shoved into his mind, not liking the dark, cobwebby corridors of Kenn’s thoughts. *We had a situation in the camp area, but Ian got them settled. Quinn pretended to be infected. Everyone is hiding in their cabins again.*

Kenn didn’t have the energy left to chuckle. “Excellent. Next?”

*Michael is locked in the brig. He was part of that problem. Cleaning crews are in the living quarters. And the mess just called for a medic. Ian plans to check on that after he verifies the brig is secure.*

Kenn paused for a minute to go over his mental list. “Can you do a round for me? I need updates on the water crew, delivery crew…”

*I know what you need. I’ll check on Zack too.* Debra left before Kenn could respond. She didn’t want his gratitude or admiration. She just wanted this nightmare to be over.

The ship’s radio crackled with Theo’s tired voice. “Our measurements say we’ve been in the clear for almost an hour. Permission to drop anchor?”

“Granted. Relieve the boat crew now. Full gear is still required.” Kenn didn’t want to take any chances on something blowing through overnight. Anyone laboring on the top deck would have to suffer through the bulky gear that made walking slow and climbing dangerous.

A few seconds later, the boat shuddered around them. It was obvious Theo’s heavy-handed touch didn’t mix well with the cruise ship. Kenn tried not to worry about it. Once the boat was anchored, Grant could take back over when he recovered.

Kenn scanned the room. Grant was still unconscious, but his fever had broken an hour ago. The fact that he was still alive was a good sign. Ray, on the other hand, was in the cot next to Grant, unresponsive. Ray had lasted longer than Grant due to his anxiety about the captain getting sick, but in the end, the illness had caught up to him too. Anyone who had been exposed on the top deck only had a slim chance of survival.

“I didn’t tell… I’ll never tell.”

Kenn glanced over at Ben; his fever was raging again. The Eagle kept saying he hadn’t told, he wasn’t going to tell, but Kenn was suddenly sure Ben would give away details in his delirium. Kenn hoped it wasn’t another bomb. They were already shellshocked.

“Coming through!” Corey rushed into the infirmary, in full gear, and went to the sink. “We’re doing water testing, like the book recommended. We gathered water from the big tanks. Samples are on their way to Tonya now.”

Kenn finished the syringe, then began working on the next. “Did you find instructions for testing?”

Corey capped the water vial. “We sent it with the samples.”

Kenn was relieved, but a new layer of stress had just been added. Tonya only had two batches of patient tests done. Twenty-three more now waited behind them. The water samples would triple that load. Kenn knew she could be counted on in a crisis, but this was too much for anyone. *She needs help.*

**6**

“I need help.” Tonya opened the door, not caring that Angela might be contagious. “I only have two hands.”

Angela came in, then shut and locked the door. “For the moment, occupy those two hands with your vest and gun.”

Tonya gawked at her for a minute, then knelt to pull her kit from beneath the metal counter.

Angela slid into the shadows, not sure if she would be able to fight. She hoped it wouldn’t be needed.

Tonya donned the vest, wincing at the tightness around her growing stomach. She placed her gun on the counter, then slid a file over it. “What’s going on?”

Angela leaned against the wall, stomach heaving. “I don’t know yet. Debra picked up something hinky. She told Kenn to send you another guard.”

Tonya picked the gun back up. If someone came in who wasn’t supposed to, she would kill them.

Angela shut her eyes, listening. “Just make sure you see it before you shoot.”

Tonya began to run through what she remembered of the gun lesson, calming her nerves.

“You’re supposed to let me know when there’s a problem.” Still on the couch outside the lab, Jeff sat up, then stood.

Tonya flushed. “I didn’t even know he was still out there.”

Footsteps ran through the ship.

The radio crackled. “Help in the mess! Help in the mess!”

Jeff looked to Angela, brow up.

Angela shook her head. “Debra has a direct line to Kenn. It’s his order for you to stay here.”

“Just to protect his woman.” Jeff would never trust Kenn.

Angela shrugged. “It’s a double. We need her results.”

Tonya snorted. “You’re both missing the obvious reason.” She turned the page in the huge book, squinting at the small text. “The boss is here. The *real* boss.”

Jeff recognized the truth. He turned to face the corridor, hand on his gun. Adrenaline began to wake him. “They’ll have to get through me and I’m no pushover.”

**7**

“Get off me!”

“Let go!”

“I’ll rip your hair out!”

The three males stood in the doorway of the mess, watching the three women roll around on the floor, slapping, punching, pulling hair, screaming insults, growling, kicking.

James waved. “Get in there! Break them up.”

Peter retreated. “Do it yourself.”

Both men looked at the teenager between them.

Charlie snorted, hands coming up. “That’s not in my job description.” The main dining area was destroyed; food and utensils were scattered all over the floor. Charlie assumed they’d been throwing things at each other before they switched to fists.

Jayda, Trinity, and Brittani didn’t know the door was open, though that was what had triggered their fight.

“Skank!”

“Whore!”

“Bad cook!”

Brittani snarled. “Why you little…!” She punched again, trying to hit Jayda. She knocked her into Trinity, who was recovering from being slammed into the side of a dining booth.

Brian had fled the instant the guards opened the door. Almost everyone else had gone as well, except for the cooks. Cathy and Timmy were still in a far corner, enjoying the entertainment. Brittani’s parents were behind the counter, still cooking. It was as if they didn’t know there was a fight. Gus envied their calm. He had no idea what to do.

“Break it up, ladies!” James clapped his hands a few times.

Peter and Charlie snickered at his attempts.

Angry footsteps echoed. They turned to find Debra marching down the corridor, fury on her face and hands clenched into fists. *I sent a false alarm to the boss over this. I hope they resist arrest.*

James retreated. “This should be good.”

Debra shoved by Peter and Charlie to stomp into the mess. She took a few seconds to evaluate the situation, then went to the water cooler. She hefted it up and tossed it at the three women like a small water bomb.

Water and shards of plastic flew into the air, drenching all three women and half the dining area.

James, Peter, and Charlie rushed in during the shocked shouts, each grabbing a struggling female.

Debra pointed toward the door, mentally shoving into every mind in the mess. *Take them to the brig!*

“You can’t do that!”

“She hit me first! It was self-defense!”

“Why are we being arrested? Eagles do this all the time!”

The guards in the doorway didn’t speak. Debra was on her own here.

Debra glowered, pushing up her sleeves. *You wanna do this?*

The three women stopped arguing, even Brittani. Debra’s gifts were strong; she was sure to use them in a fight.

James smiled at Debra as he herded Jayda out.

Peter followed with Brittani, leaving Charlie to escort Trinity.

Trinity glared at Gus, still winded. “Why didn’t you help me?”

Gus walked behind the counter. “I need a mop.”

Furious all over again, Trinity jerked out of Charlie’s grasp and marched toward the door. “I’ll be in my cabin.”

Debra grabbed Trinity as she went by, slamming the woman into the wall of the mess. She shoved the rebel down and grabbed the handcuffs off her belt. Trinity squealed the entire time.

Charlie and Debra got Trinity to her feet, ignoring her threats.

Gus also ignored it. When this was over, they would be too. He was sick of drama and no longer willing to be a part of it in any way. He just wanted Brittani protected. She was the only one who mattered to him.

Timmy got up and closed the door. Then he dragged a booth back in front of it. He glanced around to make sure that was okay with everyone and found approving nods. He came to the counter. “Is there something I should be doing?”

Gus pointed at the floor. “We need to get cleaned up, then prep for breakfast. After, maybe we’ll go get a shower and some sleep.”

Timmy was now willing to help. Seeing Charlie acting like an Eagle again had reminded him of his own goals. *It’s time I stepped up.*

Chapter Ten

**Dim Lights**

**A close up of a logo

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**1**

**“P**risoners coming in. Step back.” Charlie hoped Adrian was ready for the sulking, muttering trio. “Charges are fighting and destruction of property.”

Peter held the brig door, waving at Brittani. “Go to the last empty cell.”

Brittani stomped forward, sporting scratches and bruises, but not a black eye like Trinity and she wasn’t missing hair like Jayda.

Kronus eased from his cot, coming to the window. “What stinks?”

Brittani jerked away from Peter to confront Kronus. “You should be glad you’re eating at all.”

Kronus laughed at her. “I’m not eating anything that smells like shit.”

Brittani leaned in to sniff. “Lot of room to talk. You smell like a goat.”

“Mmm.” Kronus half shut his lids, body tensing. “I love goat.”

Brittani made a face. “Wow.” She turned her back to him.

Charlie picked up a bad vibe. “You shouldn–”

Kronus grabbed Brittani’s arm.

“Hey!”

Peter drew his gun as he stalked forward. “Let her go!”

Trinity and Jayda cringed against the cells, hoping to avoid the crossfire.

Brittani prepared to kill Kronus. “Let go of my arm.”

Charlie was stuck by the door without a clear shot. He concentrated on Adrian.

The other prisoners came to the windows to see what was happening.

“I mean it.” Brittani picked a nasty spell. “Let me go.”

“Okay.” Kronus jerked Brittani against the cell, banging her into the bars before she could blast herself free. She slumped in his grip, hanging by her hair. Kronus quickly pulled her up and wrapped both hands around her neck; blood ran down his wrist from her wound as he held her there.

“Let her go!” James wanted to shoot, but he still didn’t have a clear shot.

“Go on.” Kronus grinned cruelly. “Except you can’t, can you? This one has been marked. She’s *special*.”

Adrian studied Kronus’s grip on Brittani’s neck. It was tight. “I’ll get the boss.”

“You can give her my displeasure for having to wait so long.” Kronus stiffened to snap Brittani’s neck.

*Use your sleep spell.* Charlie didn’t have a harmless weapon to fire.

*Not strong enough, kid.* Adrian was gathering what little energy he had, but it wasn’t going to be enough.

*I’ll boost you.*

Kronus shifted...

Adrian and Charlie fired together, hitting the entire brig with the spell. It bounced off the walls and hit some of them twice.

“No!” Kronus tried to kill her anyway, but blackness took him first. He slumped against the bars, letting go of his hostage.

Peter rushed in to grab the bleeding woman, fighting a yawn attack. He dragged her out of reach.

Adrian shriveled, skin tightening, body losing mass. He crumbled to the floor like a sundried paper towel.

Charlie tried to stop Adrian’s fall into emaciation, but he didn’t have the energy. He’d given all he could spare to subdue Kronus.

Peter and James didn’t know what to do. They had little experience with evil like Kronus had just shown.

Adrian lifted a bony finger. “Infirmary.”

Peter lifted Brittani, wincing at the bleeding wound on her head. He hurried out of the brig, followed by James, who held the door. Blood dripped over his arm, creating a faint trail for the cleaning crew.

Adrian tried not to cry like a child. He’d forgotten how much this hurt.

Charlie stood, legs shaking. He pointed at the empty cells across from Ramer.

Trinity and Jayda didn’t protest. Despite fighting with her, they were horrified by Brittani’s injury.

Jayda took in Adrian’s withered form, then Charlie’s shaking body. She yawned. *Man, I’m glad I’m not one of them.*

“Pick someone to stand watch.” Ramer had come to the bars. “Neither of you can stay awake for the rest of the shift.”

Charlie turned to evaluate Adrian.

Adrian slid down the dim wall, unconscious.

Charlie sighed. “Who threw the first punch?”

Jayda glared, stopping outside her cell. “I did. No one calls me useless.”

Trinity wisely went on into her cell, not rubbing it in. She’d been thrilled to get Jayda to swing first, but now, she wished she’d waited for a better time. Brittani had only been trying to break them up, but all of them would pay for this.

Charlie slowly picked up Adrian’s keys and extended them to Jayda. *I wonder why no one else was knocked out by Adrian’s spell. Maybe we’ve built up a tolerance?* “You’re on duty. Uncuff her and take the post.”

“What?!” Trinity came back to the cell door. “You’re kidding, right?”

Jayda kicked the door shut in the woman’s face, letting the keys hit her arm.

Charlie nodded. “Keep it like that.” Jayda had bruises and scratches, along with a chunk of missing hair that Charlie was sure would be found on the mess floor.

Jayda frowned. “Like what?”

“Take a hit to ensure prisoners don’t escape.” Charlie went into an empty cell and brought out a blanket to cover Adrian. He didn’t have the strength to move the man, but he remembered how cold he’d been during his own power drain. It burned on the inside, but he couldn’t ease that. Adrian would have to recover on his own. None of the healers could spare it from those who were dying.

Charlie dropped onto the cot he’d taken the blanket from and shut his eyes. He was out a few seconds later.

Jayda did her new job. “Hold your hands out.”

Trinity shoved her hands through the bars, glowering.

Jayda unlocked the cuffs and stored them in her pocket with the keys. She went to the Eagle post, shunning the chair in favor of scanning each prisoner to decide what she should do if they tried to escape.

When she got to Ramer, the man didn’t smile.

“You wanted to be an Eagle, right?”

“Don’t talk to me.” Jayda wasn’t going to fall for tricks. “I’m not your friend.”

Ramer glanced at the shadow of Kronus slumped against the bars of the next cell. “If you let me out, I’ll slit his throat before he wakes up. It’ll save lives.”

Jayda scowled. “Don’t talk to me!”

“Come here and make me stop.” Ramer leered.

Jayda retrieved Adrian’s gun. She didn’t have one of her own.

Ramer’s mood dropped into fear. “Uh, never mind.”

Jayda aimed at him.

Ramer retreated, hand rising. “I’m sorry. I won’t talk to you.”

Jayda lifted a brow. “You said come here. I’m here.”

Ramer laid down on his cot.

Jayda lowered the gun. “You’re a fast learner. That’s good.” Jayda returned to her post, mind moving on to the other prisoner. Kronus wouldn’t be bluffed by a gun. She needed something ugly ready when he woke.

**2**

“What are you doing about Kronus?” Tonya put the next slide under the microscope, then stole a glance at Angela. She’d found the woman beautiful at several points through Safe Haven’s history, but all of them had been before she’d taken over leadership. *It’s slowly draining her, killing her. Would Adrian have been like this by now?*

“He’s like it this very minute.” Several people were feeding Angela major events as they occurred, but she was only getting about half of it through her spinning mind and aching body.

Their guard was in full Eagle gear, presenting a figure of authority both females appreciated as he scanned the empty halls around them.

Tonya’s mind stayed on *what if*. “We wouldn’t make it with just one leader, would we?”

Angela grunted, getting another slide ready for Tonya to view through the microscope. “We may not survive with three.”

“Three?”

“Marc’s stepping up.” Angela was glad. They needed him more than ever. “He finally gets it now–all of it. When he recovers, he’ll be able to give us a break.”

“Three-way rotation. Eagle standard.”

Angela gave the redhead a smile. It was funny, but she was comfortable around Tonya. She didn’t know when that had happened. The redhead was healthy and happy in a dirty lab coat and smudged reading glasses. She didn’t have any secrets or anything bad to hide... Angela switched to safer topics. “I have a dangerous plan. Would you like to help me?”

Tonya frowned. “How?”

Angela sighed. “Check the tests and tell me who I can’t save.”

Tonya stared in disapproving surprise as Ian eased closer to listen while standing guard. Kenn had sent Jeff to get a shower and food.

Tonya glared at Angela. “That’s why you’re here, not to help me. You need to help yourself.”

Angela winced. “It is the safest place I can be. It allows Kenn to relax on one front. He needs to rest.”

“So do you.” Tonya had also thought Angela looked rough a few times before, but it was nothing compared to sitting next to her while she died. Each bit of energy Angela expended drained her further. It was more than unsettling to watch the last tips of black arm hair turn gray while they spoke. “Why do you need to know who you can’t save?”

“That’s part of the dangerous plan.” Angela couldn’t say much more without risking someone hearing them or catching their thoughts later.

“Let’s hear it.” Right at the door now, Ian wasn’t letting them plan anything that didn’t involve him too. Ian kept one hand on his gun and used the other to scratch his itchy beard. He studied the traffic moving in and out of the infirmary, and then their base of operations as Angela decided if he could be trusted. He was prepared to handle whatever came; he just had to be in the loop. Ian enjoyed protection duty.

“When Kronus comes for me, let him. Don’t call the guards.”

Both of them scowled at Angela.

“You can’t fight like you are right now.”

Angela nodded at Tonya’s concern. “I’ll be defenseless.”

“Then why do you want to let him reach you?”

“I have a hole card.”

More frowns met her words.

Angela didn’t say anything else, now thinking about how many people they’d lost. “Let’s get this test finished and put in the fourth batch. Then, you and Kenn can sleep.” Angela turned toward the hall, redirecting their focus. Two guards were carrying someone down the corridor, presumably to the infirmary.

“Who is it?” Tonya couldn’t see from where she was.

Ian blocked their view. “Another unfortunate soul. Keep working, ladies. We need those results.” Ian went to the end of the hall, watching. The mood of the ship was dangerous. *I hope we get some good news soon.*

“So do I.” Tonya shrugged at the surprised look from Angela. “Kenn didn’t say I couldn’t listen.” She gestured at the timer. “We can check our results now. Maybe we can adjust the medication again after this.”

Angela joined Tonya at the counter.

The ship groaned, low and full of misery.

Tonya patted the wall absently. “I know, baby. We’re working on it.”

The ship stopped moaning at them.

Angela stared.

Tonya shifted uncomfortably, scratching her stomach through the vest. “Can I take this off now?”

Tension filled the area... A gunshot echoed down the hall.

“Guess not.” Bitter, Tonya resumed work as Ian came back to stand right in front of the lab door.

**3**

“Move aside!” Corey ran through the hall by the infirmary with a bloody woman over his shoulder, bumping into people.

Peter and James almost dropped Brittani, but they didn’t yell. Blood was pouring from the unconscious woman Corey was carrying. He had a priority patient.

“Where do I put her?!” Corey couldn’t help his panicked tone. “Gunshot!” Blood dripped unnoticed onto the filthy floor that would require multiple washings to see its original color again.

“Oh, Lord.” Morgan sucked in a breath. “Over here!” He shoved everything off the cart they’d been using for filling the syringes. The bottles were empty now. They rolled unnoticed across the floor.

Terry, a new medic from Ciemus, hurried over with the kit they hadn’t needed yet, pulling the guidebook from the top. “Gunshot. Step one. Stop the bleeding if possible...”

Morgan and Harry followed his instructions in silent, stunned determination, aware of death circling the room again.

Ed, recovering from his beach injuries, waved to James and Peter. “Put her over here. I’ll see what I can do.”

They placed Brittani on the cot by Ed, who appeared tired but not ill.

“You’re not a medic.” Peter tried not to stare at Rose’s blood pattering onto the floor nearby while the medics worked on her. Her legs were also covered. She was losing the baby.

“That is something I have become painfully aware of.” Ed examined Brittani’s injury.

Peter frowned. “I just meant you’re not trained.”

Ed scanned the awesome medics. “Neither are they.”

Standing next to them, James’s stomach churned as he studied the infirmary. The smell of death was thick.

Ed shoved his hands into the alcohol bowl, then wiped them on a used rag. He saw Peter’s frown. “Sorry. We can’t use ship water and there’s no time to go to the prep area to wash every time someone comes in. It’s been too busy.”

Peter had to accept that. “What about gloves?”

Ed shook his head, returning to Brittani. “We ran out a few hours ago. Delivery people promised to search the cargo area as soon as they have a chance.”

Near them, Claire vomited down her chest, coating the dirty sheet with another layer of mess.

Peter waited for someone to help, but everyone was busy.

Claire threw up again, then sank back on the cot, gasping for air.

Noises rang loud and clear to Peter. Claire wasn’t the only one puking and lying in it. Half a dozen people were doing the same. *I have to get out of here.*

Ed wiped away drying blood. “I think Brittani needs stitches, but it’s not bleeding anymore. I’m going to cover it and let one of the medics verify that later.” He began opening bandages.

James watched Morgan and Harry work on Rose. Blood was all over the floor and cot in thick puddles. He joined Corey, who was also staring in horror. “What happened?”

Corey scowled. “A camp member panicked in a dim corridor and shot a zombie.”

“Damn idiots.”

“She took it pointblank. She won’t make it.”

James swept the long, grim room. “Will any of them?”

“No idea.” Corey approached the exit, wiping blood from his arms. “Might be a good time to be grateful we’re not sick or crazy.”

“I already am.” James followed Corey from the infirmary. He didn’t want to stick around for Rose’s death. He didn’t think she would survive either. Blood had left a solid trail all the way here. “I’ll get the cleaning crew.”

Corey grunted, going toward the cabins. He had someone to arrest or kill. He hadn’t decided which.

Kenn met Corey in the hall outside the cabins. “They’re settling down again. Rose being shot brought calm.”

“I’m arresting Sheldon.” Corey gestured. “I don’t care if he was a teacher or that he’s been well behaved in camp.”

Kenn nodded. “We already did. Greg is taking him to the brig and getting an update there.”

“Good.” Corey pulled off his bloody shirt and grabbed a clean one from the pile the delivery crews were placing in all areas. “Where do you need me?”

Kenn swept the cabins, nodding to calm people and frowning at those showing signs of panic. “Point for a while. I need a break.”

Corey was eager to be busy. “You got it.”

Kenn took off his kit to dig in it. “Take over now. I’ll still be around for an hour if you need something.”

Corey also scanned the messy hallway. “I’ll get the cleaners up here. What’s the code?”

Kenn handed him the notebook from his pocket. “It’s all in there.” Kenn returned to the infirmary. He had been there when the gunshot echoed.

Kenn put on a calm face as he entered; he went to hand Morgan instruments while waiting for orders. He had no idea what to do for any of the groaning, bleeding, dying people.

“Put your hand here!” Morgan slapped Kenn’s hand over the exit wound.

Kenn pushed down hard, hating the feel of Rose’s blood. He was glad she was unconscious. He wished all of their patients were. Those capable of it were staring at him, pleading with him to end their misery. “This totally sucks.”

Morgan grunted, sewing through pouring blood. “Tell me about it.”

**4**

*Knock-knock!* “This is the delivery crew. You guys okay in there?”

Timmy knocked back on the mess door. “We’re fine. What’s the word?”

“No change, so far. Are you guys staying put for the night? Boss wants to know where everyone is.”

Timmy glanced around the mess. Gus was doing dishes. Cathy was mopping the floor. Brittani’s parents were prepping things for the morning meal. Everyone nodded at him. “Yeah, we’re staying.”

“Good night.” Conner left, arms and back aching. His team had delivered all three meals to everyone on the ship, along with water bottles, minor medications, and a few nonessentials to keep people occupied. It had been a long day.

The mess crew was glad the three fighting females had been arrested. Even Brittani’s parents were enjoying the tension break. Gus thought about asking if Brittani was okay in the brig. He chose not to. He was furious at the women for fighting during a crisis. *Maybe a night in a cell will cool them off. Plus, that’s the safest place she can be.* Gus kept working, glad he wasn’t part of the problem.

Cathy smiled at Timmy as he gazed at her. *I like ‘em when they’re trainable. What’s wrong with that?*

Gus snickered.

Cathy flushed, remembering Gus was a descendant. *I miss the old days when no one invaded my thoughts.*

Gus shrugged, sending his response into her mind. *We were always there. You just didn’t notice it before, and we didn’t let on. Descendants have always existed. We’ll never be gone, so you’d best get used to us.*

Cathy shrugged, mopping. *That may be true, but people like yourself should be careful pushing for that too fast. I suspect the Salem Trials weren’t all lies or mistaken identity now.* She smiled at him, flashing cold, hard teeth. *Those people are gone, but the mentality isn’t. if you push the normals, they will push back and even now, after an apocalypse, we still outnumber you.*

Gus took the warning to heart as he eased out of her mind. She was right. It was still dangerous to be different. That hadn’t changed.

**5**

“Here comes Kendle and the cleaning crew.” Zack stopped to get an update from them.

Allison kept walking, taking the small, wrapped corpse to the incinerator. The pile there was large, but it wasn’t growing as fast now. Everyone else was too busy to collect bodies, but the medics still needed them removed. She’d volunteered to bring a few down before starting the incinerator back up. The break they’d taken had been short.

Kendle slid aside for the body crew, personal shield visible. She didn’t feel safe. The camp had watched her try to kill Angela, so she was viewed with suspicion no matter where she went. The Eagles disliked her for that, and for getting them all in trouble by betting on a training session. No one liked her except Quinn, and she wasn’t sure why he wanted to be with her either.

*I’m also living my nightmares*. Kendle swallowed a shiver and kept going, but she couldn’t get rid of the chill. Walking the empty passages of this ship, listening to people dying, was getting to her. It sounded almost the same; it felt almost the same. If not for the fragile hold leadership was keeping, it would be the same.

Kendle opened the door to the bottom stairwell, braced for anything. The dim corridors were covered in a layer of dirt that crunched under her boots. The sound was loud in the empty areas of the ship. Kendle’s mind lashed out, showing her the ugly escape she and her twin had made from the last death ship.

Kendle shoved it away, shuddering as she walked.

“Stop right there!”

Kendle flinched from the glare. “Who is that?”

“Travis.” He lowered the light. “We’re all clear of bodies now, except the top deck. A few of us are trying to wash suits so we can go up for a check.”

“Don’t bother. I’ve got it.”

Travis let her go up the stairs, glad she felt okay but uneasy about why. She’d gone through this before, but she didn’t have an immunity to radiation. It wasn’t possible. No one could do that, not even a descendant. *Maybe her shield keeps it out.* Travis pondered that as he descended to update the man on point. With almost everyone sleeping, the ship was quiet, but not in a good way. It sounded like death had struck every door.

*We’ve been marked.* Travis trotted down the steps, now trying to cause noise. *Go away, death. Go away, death. You weren’t invited.* Travis didn’t imagine his chants would work. He had no skill in spells, but he figured it couldn’t hurt to try. *Get lost, death. You’ve worn out your welcome... Or maybe I’ve worn out mine.*

**6**

“You’ve worn out your welcome, Neil. Get lost.” Marc stood on shaky legs, scanning for his clothes. He was tired of these walls. *They mute too much noise. I feel like I’m trapped in a gynecologist’s office.*

Neil stayed where he was, confident he could wrestle the weak man back into the bed if he had to. “Angela will be here soon. Make her eat. She hasn’t yet.” Neil was glad to see color in Marc’s cheeks. He was still having an occasional spat of dry heaving, but Neil thought it sounded almost normal for someone recovering from a nasty cold. Whatever Angela had done for him had sped up Marc’s recovery.

Marc’s frown grew. “Where is she?” He knelt to grab his kit and caught his balance on the bed before he fell over. Dizziness was hard to conquer.

“In the lab, helping with tests.” Neil motioned at the clock. “Almost everyone else is sleeping peacefully.”

“Liar.”

Neil flushed. He hated that fact.

Marc began pulling on his pants, tired of cold legs from being in his boxers. He felt ill. Not being dressed made it worse.

Neil realized it was going to come to physical restraint this time and tried to brace for it. He didn’t want to hurt Marc. “She said you have to stay here. Follow orders!”

Marc drew in a steadying breath, taking out the heavy flashlight he’d recently added to his kit. He turned to Neil. “Are the lights dim?”

Neil frowned, considering. “Uh, yeah, they–”

Marc threw the Maglite, striking Neil in the forehead.

Neil staggered to his knees. “Dim, yes. My lights have dimmed.”

Marc felt for his boots with one hand and his nightstick with the other.

Neil slowly stood, hand checking for blood.

The nightstick slammed into his shoulder, knocking him back against the door. “Hey!” He slid down it this time, grunting.

Marc yanked on both boots and dug in the kit again.

Neil shoved himself off the floor, hand up to shield his face. “Can’t we talk abu– Umph!”

Neil flailed backward, deflecting the box of ammunition. He hit the door again. A second box smacked into his hip.

“You should move.” Marc stood with both of Angela’s drying boots in hand.

Neil turned in time to take the hits to his kidney and ass instead of his face. “You fight like a girl!”

Marc threw the alarm clock, shattering it against Neil’s arm.

“Ow! All right, an angry girl.”

Marc snickered. “Angie taught me.”

Neil glanced down to take stock of the damage, proud of himself for still being in front of the door.

Marc lunged over the bed and dove into Neil, shoving the former trooper into the corner between the wall and the door. He grabbed Neil by the ears and banged him into the wall, repeatedly. Weak, it wasn’t as brutal as he wanted, but Neil still dropped at his feet, moaning.

“Fuck your kai, and fuck you too, *murderer*.” Marc stomped on Neil’s thigh, hoping he got the edge of nut. “You owe me, you piece of shit. Get up and help me dress!”

Neil struggled to recover. His shoulder, thigh, forehead, hip, back and one testicle were throbbing or burning. It was a nasty mix.

Marc stumbled toward his kit. “I can’t find my guts, but I always have my balls.”

Neil groaned, amused, angry and ashamed. “Glad you’re feeling better.”

Marc growled. “I’m not! I want my fiancé with me. I guess I have to go beat her ass too.”

Neil slowly stood. “My money’s on her.”

“Yeah. Mine too.” Marc sat on the bed, brain spinning. “Come tie my boots. I don’t need any help falling. I’ve got that covered.”

Neil forced himself to move. “Even a sick tiger is lethal.”

“That wasn’t lethal.” Marc shut his eyes, weary. “Did you drug me again?”

“No. She said to let you wear yourself out...”

Marc snorted. “So you used your body. Good choice.”

Neil rubbed his hip as he knelt at Marc’s feet. “I had already dosed your food and bored you. There wasn’t much left.”

Marc yawned, adrenaline crashing.

Neil smirked. He was sore, but nowhere near out for the count.

Marc stretched, yawning again.

Neil glanced up, fingers slowing on the laces.

Marc twisted to the side and brought his hands together as he leaned into the blow.

Neil tried to duck it.

Marc kicked him in the balls.

Neil’s body lunged forward as Marc’s clasped fist struck him in the face. He fell into the end table, scattering the contents.

The lamp bounced against the wall, then smacked him in the other cheek.

Marc watched, enjoying the show. He followed Neil’s hands-up stagger, blood starting to well from the lamp hit. *I miss popcorn.*

Neil scrambled against the wall, groaning as he pushed upward. He gained his feet and tried to see Marc through watery eyes.

Marc pointed at his half-tied laces.

Neil realized Marc wanted him to keep going. “Hell no.”

Marc smiled, cold. “If I fall, my old lady might hurt you.”

Neil wiped blood from his cheek, wincing at porcelain splinters. “Not worried about her anymore.”

Marc frowned. “Get over here.”

“Why? You save enough energy for one more attack?”

“Yes.”

Neil sighed, afraid to walk yet. “There’s a spot on my left leg that doesn’t hurt and only one ass cheek is throbbing.”

“Good to know.” Marc let his frown become a glare. “I’m done now. Get over here.”

Neil eased forward, grimacing.

“Oh, stop it. I’ve seen females in training tag you without a reaction.”

Neil started to lower his battered body to the carpet. “They don’t know where to hit it like another guy does.”

Marc laughed. His stomach protested, cramping. He wrapped his arms around his middle.

Neil flinched, leaning backward to avoid another attack.

Marc reached out to grab Neil’s shirt and keep him from falling again.

Neil lunged away, whimpering. He overbalanced and fell, landing hard on his butt.

Marc held his guts, almost crying. “I was trying to help that time!”

“And yet, I now have *four* throbbing cheeks.” Neil stayed where he was, not wiping away the blood or rubbing his aches and injuries. *There are too many. I don’t know where to start.*

The cabin had been trashed. Pieces of furniture littered the main area, with a few shards even making it into the bathroom.

“I’m not cleaning this up.”

Marc shrugged. “I may not be finished anyway.”

Neil groaned. Only the smell of chemicals remained of the neat cabin he’d cleaned. Even the last bag of trash he‘d gathered was knocked over, spilling tissues and other debris.

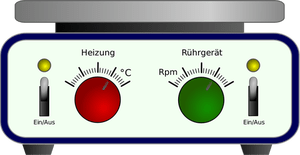
Marc eased down on the bed, heart thumping. “You have twenty minutes to get my boots tied. If I wake up and my laces are not done, you’re in deep shit, Todd O’Neil.”

Neil winced. The use of his full name was like a parent delivering a warning of impending brutal punishment. “I’ll handle it.”

Neil refused to think about anything else, concentrating on his pain. He’d forgotten Marc could hear his thoughts. *I won’t do this again*. Neil took stock of his injuries, finding two that were almost serious. *He did this to me while deathly ill. If we ever go at it for real, I won’t survive.*

Chapter Eleven

**This Is Hell**

****

December 7th

**3am**

**1**

**“N**ot gonna survive.” Jennifer sucked in a ragged breath. “Keep her safe!”

Kyle wiped the blood from Jennifer’s cracked lips, numb with fear. He had expected to be torn in a moment like this, but he wasn’t. Nothing could get him to leave Jennifer right now. “You know I will. Fight harder!”

“Nothing left.” Jennifer’s eyes shut. She couldn’t seem to find enough air.

Her pale face was stained in specks of blood; her already slender body was shrinking. Kyle had never felt so helpless. He concentrated, trying to connect to her like she had him while they were on the UN ship. “Take it back.”

“Never.” Jennifer’s breathing slowed...and stopped.

“Move!” Morgan shoved Kyle aside so he and Harry could start CPR.

Kyle strained... He managed a weak stream of orbs that floated toward Jennifer and vanished.

“Clear!” Morgan shocked her.

Harry listened for a heartbeat.

Kyle sent another rough stream of healing energy. “Come on!”

Kenn hurried over to put a hand on Kyle’s arm. “Try again.” Kenn didn’t have a healing gift, but he was able to add strength.

Kyle blasted orbs into Jennifer’s chest.

Sick people on the cots around them stared in desperate hope, praying it worked and that Kyle could help them next.

Jennifer arched, gasping in air.

Kyle stopped, breathing rapidly. It hurt to share energy.

“You can handle more. I’ll help.”

Kyle let Kenn direct him to the most critical patients. Jennifer’s lifeforce was strengthening. His was exhausted.

Jennifer’s lashes fluttered. She opened her eyes.

Morgan and Harry observed her for signs of a relapse… She stared at them in dawning alertness signaling a recovery starting.

Morgan breathed a sigh of relief.

Harry went to get a shot of b-12 for Kyle so they could use him to keep everyone else alive. The mobster was going to have a busy night, but it would be temporary. Tomorrow, he would be empty, and they would return to desperation. There were too many ill people for one healing descendant to handle. Haggard medics in filthy scrubs scurried among the dying people, trying to give comfort they didn’t have.

“Is Serio dead?” Claire already knew the answer.

Working at a counter nearby, Terry nodded. “Yes. I’m sorry.”

Weak sobs echoed through the infirmary. Claire was sick of crying. Her gut hurt from it, but there was nothing else she could do as friends died all around her. “What about Doug? And Freddy?”

Terry shrugged tiredly. “I don’t know. I thought Serio was getting better. We’re upping the dosage on the next round. The lab sent suggestions.”

Claire forced out her next question, terrified of going back to sleep. She knew she might not wake up. “Is any of it working?”

Terry scanned the loud, crowded infirmary. “Lou and Katie are worse. Wade and Ben are improving. The rest show no signs of change.”

The room was disgusting in both sight and smells. Garbage and bodies were stacked; there were wads of napkins on or around every cot. Waste cans were overflowing with items she refused to name. *I was just in here yesterday. It didn’t look anything like this.* Claire shut her swollen eyes. She felt like hell. “And me?”

Terry tried to find some comfort. “Recovery stage.”

“You think.”

“I hope.”

Claire realized she was at the same stage as Serio had been. *I may die soon*. Claire opened her lids, voice weak. “I want to make a will.”

Terry stared at her for a few seconds, comfort draining from his face. There was no reason to lie to someone who knew the truth. “I’ll try to arrange it.”

“Thank you.” Claire held in a cough, not wanting to spray blood again. She swallowed a few times, hoping the tickle would ease. Her throat felt like sandpaper from vomiting, gagging, crying. All of that had made her cough and snot. It was like the worst cold she’d ever had, combined with the terror of blood coming from places it shouldn’t.

All the cots were dotted in bodily fluids. It was germ heaven, despite the medics trying to clean between emergencies. Claire didn’t envy them, though she would have traded places in a heartbeat. She’d never been so close to her own mortality. It was scary in ways she didn’t want to face.

Morgan went to the main entrance to write on the window. It was easier on the delivery crew and safer than having workers in a dangerous area.

“Add towels.” Harry dropped a bag of used linens into the corner garbage pile that was growing into a problem. “And schedule a time for trash removal.”

Morgan added them, then spent ten seconds thinking about absolutely nothing. He was almost at his limit.

Harry resumed roaming the cots, already mentally shut down. He was caring, cleaning, shocking, and declaring them dead. He had the awful routine down well enough to avoid true thought. He was grateful for it right now. Later, he expected to cry himself to sleep while very, very drunk.

Heavy, urgent footsteps echoed through the hall outside.

“Damn.” Morgan braced for more unwelcome news.

Harry covered Serio’s body and awkwardly slid it onto the floor. His shoulders couldn’t take lifting anymore. Harry dragged the corpse to the side, then got a clean sheet to cover the cot.

Molly hurried into the infirmary, carrying a child’s limp body over her shoulder. “She’s sick.” Leeann’s flushed face told them she had a high fever.

Harry waved Molly over. “Put her on the cot. Start wiping her down with alcohol. It’s in the bowl on the desk. Rags are next to it.”

Molly put Leeann on the cot, then went to get a rag. Hiding wasn’t her style. She wanted to help.

“What about the other kids?!” Shawn had come from Pam’s side. “What about the others?!”

Molly frowned at him. “Being relocated to a clean location. Quit freaking out.”

Shawn sneered at her and returned to his vigil over Pam, who hadn’t woken yet.

“We assume Missy used a spell on Shawn. Nothing else explains his attitude about her.” Ed was also getting an alcohol rag. Morgan had talked him through giving Brittani stitches a few hours ago. After, he’d been too hyped to just sit on his cot and let his ribs heal.

Molly dipped a clean rag and squeezed. “Why didn’t you go up to the living quarters?” Molly was sure they’d tried to get minor injuries out of here.

“I was going to, but they brought Brittani in and Morgan was busy.” Ed shrugged. “After that, it seemed wrong to leave.”

“Got it.” Molly went to Leeann, aware of life and death struggles playing out all around her. Jennifer was in a far corner, next to a cot with a covered body on it. Kyle was helping little Amber, who was in the other cot by Jennifer. Ray and Grant were shivering next to each other nearby, sharing a nasty garbage pail. Ivan was by Freddy and close to where Leeann now lay. Molly assumed the covered body on the floor was Serio. A line of senior Eagles were in the cots along the far corner. Daryl, Wade, Ben and Donald had fought together for almost a year. Now, they might die together.

Molly spotted three members of the fishing crew, but not the rest. *Did they all die except Zoey, Elijah and Panaji?* *Oh, my god. I didn’t know it was this...* Molly stopped scanning when she reached little Sean, heart breaking. His breathing was labored. He didn’t have long.

Molly shuddered as his chest stopped moving. Death flew over her shoulder and latched onto the child. “Help!”

Morgan felt it too. He hurried over to start CPR while Harry grabbed the defibrillator.

Molly turned away, praying for the boy to survive. Sound faded as she scanned the rest of the infirmary. People were on the edge of death in every cot, or worse. Ozzie was dead. His sheet had slipped enough for her to recognize his watch. Tommy and Whitney were unconscious, both speckled in blood over their necks, chests, arms, legs. Molly’s stomach churned as she realized the radiation sickness was making them bleed from every orifice. *Is this a payback for the refugees outside the mountain? For knowing it was happening and not warning them?* Molly shuddered again, on the edge of flight.

Morgan slowly walked away from Sean’s cot, clicking the radio on his belt.

Molly watched Harry cover the little body with a sheet, frowning as her mind worked on a connection.

Harry felt her stare. “He’s calling for a body pick up.”

Molly shut her eyes, trying not to scream. “I’ve been hearing that all day. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve heard that!”

Harry patted her shoulder as he went by, leaving a bloody print. “This is hell. We all live there now.”

**2**

“I need updates. Then most of you can go try to sleep.” Kenn studied the workers leaning against the two passages that connected in front of the lab. “I’m going to start with results first.” Kenn pointed to Tonya through the glass, aware of how tired she was. Tonya hadn’t put in this much work the entire time she’d been a member of Safe Haven, but she’d refused the breaks, vowing to find the solution. Kenn was extremely proud of her. When this was over, he planned to express it, openly.

Right now, he wasn’t sure there would be an end to this crisis. Fear lurked in every expression. Kenn also saw rebellion in a few. They were dirty, hungry, thirsty, tired, and scared. It made for a somber mood where no one felt like talking or cleaning. The stacks of supplies in here were no longer neat or large. They were running out of almost everything already. Kits and packages had been ripped open for spare parts. It looked like the area had suffered a riot.

Awful noises and smells floated to them from the infirmary, turning hunger to queasy guts that only wanted fresh air and peace from constant rushes of adrenaline.

Tonya picked up her notes, trying to focus. She was barely awake. “We have confirmed it is acute radiation poisoning. The medications we prescribed are right, but we need to double the dosage again. We should use IVs for everyone who comes in because they’re dehydrated and have issues with digestion. If we can avoid feeding them solids, it might cut down on some of the mess. Tell the cooks to keep broth flowing to all the patients.” Tonya stopped, voice lowering into personal pain. “There doesn’t seem to be anything else we can do for them. It’s up to their immune systems.”

Tonya wondered if Angela was awake. Their tired leader had stumbled to the lab couch an hour ago and dropped into a silent, still slumber that was creepy.

Angela gave Tonya a thumbs up, but she didn’t rise. She wasn’t sure where to find the energy to keep functioning.

Tonya went on. “I’m running another batch of tests to verify the results we’ve come up with. I’m sorry. That’s all I have.”

Debra handed Kenn a paper.

Kenn was impressed with how organized the notes were. “So far, the boat crew is fine. Kendle has been visiting the bridge so Theo can rest between shifts. We’re anchored and haven’t had a positive radiation reading in eight hours. The towline is in and coiled for us to set sail when ready.” Kenn added that to his own book, then scanned her list again. “No new illnesses since Leeann. The girl woke up and reported she had felt bad for hours but hid it because she didn’t want to be a problem anymore.” Kenn also wrote that in his book, along with the time she had been brought in. “It means she’s not a secondary wave starting. That’s great news.”

Everyone listening was relieved.

“We don’t have an update on the water yet. We have gathered the samples for the testing.” Kenn gestured toward the lab. “She’s overloaded. We’ll get to the water as soon as we can. Until then, keep using the reserves.”

The delivery crew wasn’t happy to hear that, but they understood the choice. Charlie and Conner were lying on the couches in the corridor, barely awake enough to listen. James, Vicky, and Ian were all standing near those couches, also not very alert.

Kenn tried to hurry. “After Leeann was brought up, the kids in the cargo area were showered and switched to a clean spot. They don’t need anything except normal deliveries. Our body crew has now cleared the entire ship. We have those areas marked with tape and ready to be cleaned. The camp is relatively calm, ironically, because of a shooting. Our new camp militia, led by Ralph, is keeping things under control.” Kenn glanced at Ian. “I’d like you to stay with the camp for a bit. It would be a good idea if you took Travis along.”

Ian frowned. He had expected a better position during the crisis. “Who did you pick for your right?”

Kenn’s lip curled. “Not you, so why interrupt this meeting for a petty question like that?”

Ian flushed.

Everyone assumed that was only one of the reasons Kenn hadn’t chosen the blabbermouth. Ian hadn’t been forgiven yet for sharing secrets, though he was no longer exhibiting that behavior. It was too soon to believe it was an honest change.

Kenn handed the paper back to Debra. He spoke to her directly. “You’re point man for the next shift. Take notes. I need these things covered over the next four hours.”

Debra hurried to get her notebook out, not realizing what was happening.

Some people in the hall around them groaned or scowled in jealous confusion. Allison beamed at Kenn, glad a woman had been given the job. The rest of the tired workers didn’t care as long as they got to sleep soon.

“All three meals and supply deliveries have to be covered. The current delivery crew is exhausted, so make sure they get a break. Our waste removal team also needs a break. The next person to go to the incinerator should tell Zack to take a shower, get a meal and sleep.”

Debra held up her finger.

Sighs echoed from the group, expecting to have to wait while she wrote it down.

Debra forced words out. “Allishin.”

Kenn understood her. “Good. Maybe she can stay there and keep the waste burning while Zack takes his next break. I’ll need an update on that too.”

Debra scribbled notes in her book while Allison stared between them, not sure if she now hated the idea of Debra being XO. She’d thought a female, any female, would assign her a better job.

Kenn checked his paper. “The cleaning crews also need a break. Make sure they get showered and have a dose of medication before they go to bed. Same with the body crew and anyone else who had contact with an infected person, area, or body. I realize we don’t need to do that,” Kenn quickly interrupted the coming protests. “But better safe than sorry in this situation, you know?”

People nodded, too tired to put up a fight.

Kenn tapped on the window. “Any chance you’re returning today?”

Angela rolled over and vomited into the waste can Tonya had put by the couch.

“Okay, then.” Kenn skimmed his notes again. “The medics need more help. I want you to pass the word to the camp, Ian, when you get there. Some of them are friends and family of people in the infirmary. We haven’t released names of the victims yet, but I want you to do that now. Let people start having a chance to grieve; let the loved ones go to the infirmary and help.” Kenn pointed at Debra. “As soon as you get enough people, give all the medics a break. They’ve more than earned it.”

Debra wrote it down, agreeing. *Our medics are awesome.*

“I’m going to need to sleep soon, but I already know Tonya isn’t going to leave the lab yet.” Kenn again preempted a protest. “I’ll be on the couch right here if you need something. Questions?”

“I have one. Are you saying you want us to go tell three hundred people about everyone who is sick or has died?” Travis didn’t think that was a good idea.

Debra snapped her fingers, then she pointed to Conner.

Conner stared at her for a minute. Then realization dawned. “Oh, okay. She said that’s why Kenn sent two badasses to take care of it.”

Travis was instantly mollified.

Ian rolled his eyes at the ploy.

Other people in the hall began to feel better about Debra being put in charge.

Debra made another gesture.

Conner came to her side. “She wants me to travel with her for translation.”

Kenn could only find one problem. “Make sure you don’t put words in her mouth.”

Debra made another series of gestures.

Conner flushed. “She said she’ll rip my balls off and give them to Candy as a gift.”

Everyone laughed. Some of the tension broke.

Kenn was sorry to bring it right back. “Here’s our list of jailed, ill and dead. You need to make a copy for yourself because I still can’t get the damn machine in the central office to spit out what I want. I’m only going to give you numbers the first time. After that, we’ll go through specific names. When we’re done, this meeting is over.”

Everyone settled in with pens, notebooks and fragile emotions braced for awful news.

“In the brig, we have our previous convicts, minus Vicky, who we let out to help with deliveries.” Kenn gave her a hard glare. “This is a temporary release, on probation. If you break a rule while on probation, a harsher sentence will be enforced.”

Vicky nodded. She hated being the center of attention. *I like to work in the dark.*

“We have Kronus in the brig until the boss is able to deal with him. He’s tried to escape twice now; he’s attacked people. When you go to the brig, don’t get anywhere near his cell so he can’t use you in his next attempt. Adrian had to drain himself to stop the last one. As you can see, Charlie is pretty rough too. He helped Adrian subdue Kronus. Jayda is now the brig guard, and as you know, she isn’t an Eagle, so we need somebody to take over that position as soon as possible. They’re knocking Kronus out every five hours. He’ll get his next dose at 5am. Make sure someone stops by there regularly even after we get a new warden.”

Everyone made a note of that.

“Ramer is not to be let out. He told the guards if we let him go, he’d just steal drugs. Do not open his cell or get near it. Stanley has already had the pep talk I just gave to Vicky. Jayda sent him out to help us.” Kenn gave the camp klutz a firm stare.

Stanley nodded, cheeks red. He was helping the delivery crew and surprisingly, hadn’t dropped anything yet.

Kenn gestured tiredly. “I want Trinity let out of the brig too. She can pick a work crew but keep her away from Brittani and the mess. We don’t have time for personal dramas. Since Brittani’s in the infirmary from being attacked by Kronus, it shouldn’t be hard to keep her out of there.”

Anger filled the corridor, as Kenn had expected. Brittani was well-liked on the ship.

“Michael has also been let out of the brig. He swears fear got the best of him, but he’s under control now. He’s back with the camp.” Kenn gave Ian a glance.

Ian nodded, understanding. If Michael acted out again, he would be quietly removed.

Kenn grunted. “Our last guest is Sheldon. He thought Rose was a zombie and shot her. She lost the baby and died a few hours ago.”

Grief and fresh anger swirled this time. Rose had also been well-liked. She had been on her way to becoming a top female Eagle. She’d made a lot of friends since joining. Her loss was heavy.

“I don’t have a list of new deaths for you, but I think it’s safe to assume if they’re not on my infirmary list here, and they’re not in one of our quarantine areas, they didn’t survive. For the camp members who this may pertain to, have a guard check the waste area for confirmation. Zack is keeping detailed records of each body we burn.”

The few people who hadn’t known about it scowled. Those who did know also frowned at the reminder.

Kenn didn’t offer another apology this time for burning the bodies. He was doing what was necessary. “My infirmary list is Ivan, Freddy, Zoey, Ben, Wade, Donald, Katie, Doug, Claire, Panaji, Brea, Grant, Ray, Jennifer, Megan, Erika, Daryl, Tommy, Whitney.” Kenn gave them time to copy it, aware of Dog roaming the halls around the meeting. He really liked having the wolf on duty. “The known dead are Sabrina, Gloria, Sean, Wallace, Ozzie, Darren, Lydia, Faith, Lou, Serio, Cassie, Gina, Amber, Nathan, Rose.”

“Oh, my god.” Corey hadn’t known it was that bad.

Kenn kept going. “Does anyone have anything else?”

The room went silent for a moment except for the ruffling of papers as people scoured their notes to make sure they had everything.

Kenn tensed at the sound of the lab door opening. “Wait!”

The two cats rushed through the opening.

*Yip!*

*Yip!*

Greg and Ian hurried forward to grab them.

The male from the bunker jumped through Greg’s arms and climbed his leg.

“Ow! Stop!”

The cat growled as Greg tried to pry it from his body. “That hurts!”

The female hissed as Ian lifted her, then lunged forward. She bit him on the nose.

“Get it off! Get it off!” He staggered through the chaos, trying to pry the feline’s tooth from his nostril.

“My babies!” Tonya started to come through the door.

Angela put a hand on the redhead’s arm. She’d staggered to her feet upon hearing the door open.

Kenn slid in front of the exit to keep either of them from coming out. Or anyone from getting in. He still didn’t trust a few of the people in this hall.

The cats jumped from Greg and Ian onto walls, couches, and other people as they fought to reach the door guards, Travis and Monica. It was as if they knew not to hit the floor for more than a second if they wanted freedom.

People cringed from the flying felines, ducking and shouting.

The big male jumped with claws out; it landed on Quinn’s thigh, digging in.

“Stop it!” Quinn ripped the cat free and tossed it away from his body.

In the path, Monica shrieked, fleeing.

The big male landed on its feet against the now jarred open hall door.

Kenn pointed. “Grab him!”

Vicky lunged forward just as the female hit the ground next to her. The cat hissed, swiping. A claw dug into Vicky’s cheek.

Vicky screamed, recoiling. “Help!” She bumped into the group coming to block the door, knocking half of them over.

Both cats ran through the opening.

*Yip!*

*Yip-yip!*

Kenn surveyed the corridor of knocked over, bleeding, whimpering people. “The next time we get in a fight, I’m firing your cats at the enemy. They’ll clear the path. We’ll call it Feline Forces.”

Tonya laughed.

The ship around them responded, walls brightening.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

Tonya frowned at her. “For what?”

Kenn didn’t turn. “Not now.”

Angela slipped by Tonya. She stopped short of touching Kenn. “Stand aside.”

Kenn immediately moved.

As soon as Angela was out of the lab, he turned around and shut the door, then resumed guard in front of it. Tonya wasn’t coming out of the lab until this was all over.

Angela strode to the infirmary. Adrenaline had woken her again. She planned to use it while she had it. “You’ll get a call about Marc soon. I’ll let someone know where to send him first.”

No one doubted her. They were thrilled to know Marc was feeling well enough to be allowed to assist in anything. It meant Safe Haven still had their leaders. Hopefully, that would be enough to see them through.

Kenn gestured at Debra. “You have point, as of this minute.” Kenn dragged the couch in front of the lab door. He lay down, groaning.

Tonya scanned her quarters. The lab had a bathroom, a mini refrigerator, and a fairly comfortable couch. She could stay here indefinitely. It was obvious that was what Kenn wanted. *But what is he not telling me?*

Tonya stewed on it as she went to get disinfectant wipes for the couch where Angela had been sleeping.

Kenn was glad Tonya wasn’t using her energy to protest because he wasn’t ready to tell her the truth yet. When she found out, she was likely to shoot him and then storm off. *This is a bad time for people to be running loose.*

Chapter Twelve

**Times Two**

****

December 7th

**Dawn**

**1**

**“*T****he tiger has escaped his cage. I repeat, our tiger is on the loose.*”

“*Send him to the infirmary.*”Conner’s voice echoed in response to the radio call from Neil*.* “*We need all hands there.*”

The sound of Marc cursing in the background was clear as Neil replied.“*Thank you!*”

Tonya and Kenn both got up from their couches. The two-hour rest had helped, but neither of them had been able to fully relax enough for true sleep. Couches weren’t beds and things didn’t feel good.

Tonya checked on the current test, then headed for the bathroom.

Kenn motioned Jeff toward his spot on the couch and walked to the infirmary. He was positive there were new bodies waiting to be transferred. He would be able to work for a couple more hours, thanks to the nap. Then he would need real downtime. He had been hoping Marc would be able to take his place, but it was clear that wasn’t going to happen. Marc had been sent to the infirmary so he would wear himself out and be unable to interfere with leadership while they tried to keep things together. That implied Angela thought he would be more of a hindrance than help. Kenn had to find someone to leave the camp with, someone besides Debra, who would still support her. Right now, the deaf woman wasn’t close to anyone except Samantha and that chick was persona non grata for her blind defense of her mate against Safe Haven laws. Slapping Angela hadn’t helped.

Debra would have a rough night considering she’d chosen Adrian’s son as her translator. Kenn needed to add one strong presence to that group before he could sleep. He just hadn’t decided where to pull the person from yet. In fact, the next strong person who came available still needed to be sent to relieve Jayda at the brig. She wouldn’t be able to control their unearthly guest when he woke three hours from now.

Kenn spotted Kendle coming down the stairs from the top deck, carrying one of the industrial garbage bags they were using for dangerous waste.

Kendle kept the bag away from Kenn. She paused by him in case he had any instructions to deliver.

Kenn kept walking, but he gave her a nod. He wasn’t sure what to say to Kendle, beyond keep working. He didn’t think it was a coincidence that she was suddenly coming below now that Marc was out of his cabin. The castaway seemed to have forgotten the boss was also out and about. No good would come of that, but Kenn didn’t feel he had a right to tell her to stay away from Marc after everything they’d been through together during Charlie’s manhood quest.

Kendle continued down the stairs to the waste disposal area. The stench was thick enough to make her gag. Kendle had a strong stomach in her opinion, but the smell of burning flesh was worse than being in the infirmary. She didn’t know how Zack and Allison were standing back-to-back shifts here. “More garbage.”

Allison didn’t move from her spot in front of the incinerator. She was watching the timer. Zack was on a stool near a clipboard covered desk, but his head was against the wall and his eyes were shut.

“Just drop it somewhere. Then do me a favor and take him up to the infirmary. He needs to be tested for exposure…from what we’ve been doing down here.” Allison was glad someone had come in without adding another body. “He insisted on staying until the medics were caught up. I didn’t want to put the call over an open radio. It might make people think we have a new illness.”

“You handled it right.” Kendle put the bag on top of the small pile of garbage, noting the bodies were also almost taken care of. She didn’t tell Allison there was another stack waiting in the infirmary for Kenn’s big shoulders to bring them down. She had caught his thoughts as they passed in the hall.

“Come on, Zack.” Kendle got an arm around the man’s waist, trying to be careful of his ribs. After sitting on the stool for so long, he had to be hurting even if he wasn’t ill.

Zack was barely awake. He tried to get his legs to cooperate, but it was hard when all he wanted to do was curl up and sleep.

Kendle got Zack to the corridor where the stairs and elevator met under a beautiful blue canopy that was becoming covered in dust. She chose to take the elevator since this was a trip to determine a possible illness. It was a relief to not have to climb the stairs again.

The elevator dinged, caused everyone in the infirmary who wasn’t sick or sleeping to stop what they were doing and look up. That ding sound would haunt some of them forever now.

The sight of Kendle helping Zack toward the sickbay sent a fresh wave of panic laced tension through the medics.

Kendle took Zack to one of two empty cots, trying not to wonder who was under the sheet next to it. It was obvious the cot had only been cleared for a brief time. “Allison said to bring him up and have him tested. She’s not sure if burning the...garbage might have exposed him.” Kendle gave Morgan a pointed stare.

Morgan understood better than Kendle. He didn’t want any of the people on death’s door to know they were just minutes or hours away from being burned.

Kenn came over to drag a body out of the way. Once there was room for her and Zack to get through, Kenn knelt and tucked the sheet under the body before hefting it up onto his big shoulder. He disappeared into the elevator.

Morgan began to examine Zack.

Kendle retreated. She did a quick scan to determine if there was garbage to be transferred while she was already here. She found Marc coming down the corridor; a battered Neil was on his heels.

Kendle could feel Angela watching her now, but it didn’t matter. *I have to see that he’s okay*. Kendle waited as chaos raged from every direction of the infirmary, only caring about one man.

Marc entered the infirmary and stopped, shocked. Neil had tried to tell him what was going on while they were in the elevator, but Marc had been concentrating on not falling. He’d only heard one of every five words. *It wouldn’t have mattered. This is worse than he could have described.*

Marc went to Morgan, mentally scanning to see who was here. His grid failed to appear, frustrating him. He had forgotten his demon hadn’t returned. He didn’t have access to any of his gifts.

Kendle stiffened when Marc walked by. Her heart broke when he didn’t even make eye contact. She slunk out of the infirmary, trying not to cry.

Angela returned to bathing Tommy with alcohol, trying not to feel happy about such a petty thing.

“What can I do?”

Morgan studied Marc, identifying the lack of power, then pointed to the desk. “Notebooks and pens are in the drawer. People want to write wills. Angie refused to do it.”

Marc glanced at Angela, not sure if that was personal or if she was afraid people wouldn’t fight as hard if they thought their affairs were in order.

Angela shuddered. “If I cry, I’ll collapse. I don’t have anything left to give.”

Everyone caring for a loved one understood. The adrenaline rush was wearing on them. They were mentally and physically exhausted, and still terrified with little hope in sight despite Angela and Marc both being here.

Radios crackled on the Eagle channel. “We have five missing camp members and a report of lights in some of the shops on the fun deck.”

Kenn answered, out of breath. “Anybody got a free minute to swing by for some lost sheep?”

“I’ll take care of it.” Kendle’s voice wasn’t exhausted yet like the rest of them.

Kenn decided he might as well push his luck all the way. “Good. After that, you’re with Debra and Conner, on point duty.”

There was silence across the radio and through most of the alert Eagles on the ship. Kenn now had three of the most disliked or unknown people on the ship in charge.

They didn’t understand he was basing it on sleep, as well as ability. Kendle had slept on the bridge. Conner had his youth. He was still going strong. Debra had napped in the prep area by the lab after breaking up the fight in the mess. That trio was organized, determined and dependable, if not likable. *Right now, ability and availability win out over personality.*

“Copy.” Kendle’s voice was as shocked as she felt. She hurried down the stairs toward the entertainment deck, not sure how she should feel about being on point. She didn’t mind working with Debra or Conner, but she was positive the rest of the camp would. She quickly decided the only way to handle that was to do a great job. As long as she did everything right, no one would be able to complain when it was over.

With that thought in mind, Kendle made a quick detour by the weapons room to make sure the alarm was active. She found a slender shadow standing in front of the door. “What are you doing there?!”

Vicky spun around; guilt crossed her face. “Making sure the alarm’s up.” She paled when she realized who had caught her. “Congrats on getting point duty.”

Kendle wondered if Vicky knew she had crumbs on her red shirt and a ketchup stain on her sleeve.

*Might not be ketchup*.

Kendle shied away from that voice in her mind. She motioned Vicky away from the door. “Don’t let me catch you here again or I’ll put it in my report.”

Vicky sneered at Kendle’s scars and arrogant attitude. “When this is all over, you’ll go back to outcast. I’ll be an Eagle.”

“You? An Eagle?” Kendle laughed, hard.

“Slam you.” Vicky trotted upstairs, casting a nasty glower accented by a swinging ponytail and rigid shoulders.

Kendle snickered. “You’re not limber enough.”

She checked the alarm, then added it to her report. She’d been around for enough Eagle training to remember that. No matter what you told camp members, or fellow Eagles, you always put the truth in your report. Nothing was hidden from the boss.

Kendle took the far stairs, aware of the ship groaning at her. The walls were alternating between very dim and slightly dim. And it was making noises. It unnerved most of them, but the sounds were strangely comforting to Kendle. Her ordeal on the cruise liner hadn’t been supernatural in any way, so anything connected to magic or descendants–like having a self-aware boat–was a difference she could hold onto.

Kendle trotted down the stairs and took the employee corridor to the next set that led her to the entertainment deck. She had learned how to navigate the ship quickly, unlike many people who were still carrying a gift shop map.

Kendle heard voices before she reached the fun strip, but it wasn’t camp members.

“I don’t care if you were sent. This area is off limits. Get back to your floor.”

“You going to make me, *slacker*?”

“I’ll put it in my report. Save that stupid shit for somebody who gives a damn.”

It sounded like two Eagles who had a grudge. Kendle paused in the corridor for a quick sweep. Five camp members were moving up the opposite stairs, going toward the cabins. Kendle guessed they’d been spending time in the shops against rules. They’d been caught by James and Travis, who were now in the middle of a drama moment. All the camp members watching over their shoulders, hoping for a fight, were trouble as far as Kendle was concerned. *And that’s saying something, considering who I am.*

“You shouldn’t even be on duty.” Travis pointed at James. “You should be with the camp!”

“It happened once. I was punished for it. Get off my back!”

Both men were flushed and tensed.

*And here, we have two alpha men learning how to assert their dominance. See how they preen and snort for the two chittering females enjoying the display?* Kendle snickered at herself. Travis and James were okay, though she’d wondered how stable Travis was at times. Kendle stepped out of the shadows. “How about you both get back to work?”

James immediately turned around and left. He had no problem with Kendle. Everyone had been assured that she was no longer a danger to the boss and that was the only thing she’d done wrong in his opinion. Trying to get Marc to love her wasn’t a crime. It was just an exercise in futility. Anyone could see that.

Travis stood straighter, not quite intimidating, though he was aiming for it. “I haven’t forgotten what you did.”

Kendle sighed. “We can do this one of two ways, Travis. Either you go back to work or I go to the infirmary and bug the boss.”

Travis hadn’t been prepared for those options. He shoved his hands into his pockets, delivering a nasty glare. He left, using an off-limits elevator.

Kendle took a moment to put it all in her report. Then she went by all the businesses, closing doors and partitions. “That’s just the beginning of the fun, folks.”

Kendle couldn’t help the bitterness, but she didn’t have to let everyone know how she was feeling. This was the first break she had gotten from prying descendants since boarding the ship. She wasn’t happy about the crisis, but she was happy to have time to herself again without being viewed as a potential mass murderer. *I can’t make up for what I did. All I can do is keep trying to prove I’ll never do it again.*

Kendle concentrated, positive her target was listening. *Where do you want me?*

Kendle waited for an answer, hating the sound of water smacking against the hull of the ship. Anchored or moving, the sound was the same to her–unnerving and nauseating.

*Supervise food deliveries. People are starting to hoard things.*

*You got it.* Kendle took the corridor toward the mess, content with the chore Debra had given her. It meant she would see areas of the ship that hadn’t been visited by leadership in a while. When Kenn called for an update upon waking, Debra would be able to give him information on the rest of them.

It also meant she would have to face camp members. She was positive Kenn had ordered the camp to be first on the delivery schedule. Kendle wondered if he’d considered drugging them after last night’s shooting. She doubted that would happen, but it was likely the choice had been considered. Kenn wouldn’t be as careful of people’s personal liberties as Angela and Adrian had.

Kendle winced at a mild leg cramp as she went up yet another flight of stairs. She wouldn’t need the workout part of Eagle training if she was ever allowed back in it. All the steps on the ship would keep her in shape.

Kendle caught her breath as she walked down the hall, not wanting to sound excited when she knocked. As she walked, she listened to the voices. She couldn’t make out the words, but the tones were calm. Then she began to smell the food. *That’s French toast. I love French toast!*

Kendle knocked. “I’m here to supervise deliveries. And eat!”

Chuckles came as the door opened. Kendle nodded to Cathy as she stepped inside.

Cathy relocked the door and returned to the counter. The cougar was wearing a long, checkered apron and covered in powdered sugar. Kendle could smell it, as well as see it. “Is there time for me to grab a plate?”

Gus waved at the counter. “We started prepping it as soon as Debra put you on duty here.”

Kendle realized Gus was listening to everyone on his descendant line. She wasn’t sure if she was okay with that or not, but it was too late to protest eavesdropping. She’d certainly been doing it.

Kendle settled at the counter where a glass of cold powdered milk and a plate of steaming French toast waited. Her mood lifted. She dug in, moaning between bites. “This is awesome.”

Thelma smiled at her. “Did you get to see Marc?”

The delicious toast turned to dust in Kendle’s mouth. “Yes.” She forced herself to keep chewing.

Timmy sat on the stool next to her. “What about Angie? And my dad? And my brothers?”

Kendle swallowed. “Your dad’s on duty burning trash. Mike was in the living quarters last I saw him, helping Eagles keep things calm. Angela is in the infirmary, doing everything she can for people. Eric’s still there too. He’s not sick, but he hasn’t woken.”

“Will you let Debra know I can do something else?” Timmy leaned in. “They put me on sweeping duty because I kept dropping things. I also tried behind the counter, but I’m not a good cook.”

Kendle shoveled in another bite and took out her notebook. She didn’t see any reason why Timmy couldn’t be on the delivery crew with Conner and Charlie, especially since he seemed to be maturing to match the situation. She had little doubt he might return to the petulant brat they all hated when this was over, but he seemed willing to cooperate right now. They needed that. “Okay.”

“Thanks.” Timmy went back to sweeping.

“We have lunch in these baskets too.” Thelma pointed at the small stack on the table. “Each one is labeled for where or who it goes to. Sorry we don’t have them ready yet, but Brittani didn’t think about how much we needed her here.”

Brittani’s mom was obviously angry. Kendle frowned, swallowing another mouthful. “She didn’t mean to get hurt. It wasn’t her fault Kronus attacked her.”

Silence fell.

Gus turned around with fear on his face. “What are you talking about? She was arrested for fighting. She’s locked in a cell right now!”

Kendle shook her head. “Kronus tried to escape when she and Trinity were brought in. He banged her against the bars, from what I understand. She has five stitches and a concussion.” The minute it was out of her mouth, Kendle wished she could pull it back. She realized the guards hadn’t told Gus because they didn’t want him flying to the infirmary. “You have to stay here, Gus. You have to keep working. We need the food and you’re doing a fantastic job.”

Gus tried to do the right thing. “She would come to me if I was hurt.”

Kendle was out of patience. “Then I guess you have to decide between actually doing the right thing or doing what you feel is right.”

Gus winced at the reminder. It was an exact line from Eagle training. He forced himself to turn back to the hot griddle, no longer in the mood to cook.

Kendle made a note in her book to get an update on Brittani’s condition. Then she went back to eating, no longer enjoying the great meal. It felt like someone had sucker punched her.

**2**

“Is she okay to be on point?” Vicky paused, making the rest of the delivery crew stop behind her.

James and Stanley peered through the shadows to see Kendle leave the mess and go up the far stairwell.

“She’s okay. I like her.” Stanley didn’t hold a grudge against anyone.

James shrugged, still angry at Travis. “We have more important things to worry about than a lovesick castaway.”

Vicky scowled. “She almost killed the boss.”

“The boss said she was safe.” James moved around Vicky, arms full. “Come on. We still have to deliver to the brig, then the lower cabins. After that, we have to get the next batch of supplies from the cargo area for the camp.”

Vicky and Stanley followed James. One of them was angry and embarrassed. The other was relieved to be free. The brief time locked up had reminded Stanley that he hated to be caged. His grandmother had locked him in a small shed for so long that his body refused to grow correctly. He’d never mastered balance because of it. Being in prison had reminded him of his childhood in captivity.

Vicky dwelled on Kendle. *I’ll bet she put it in her report anyway. Weird bitch.*

James was also stuck in his thoughts. *Travis shouldn’t have a place on the boss’s crew. He’s the laziest Eagle I’ve ever met.*

Kendle wasn’t so far up the stairs that she was out of range. She paused as their thoughts slapped her. After a minute, she decided to add it all to her report. Angela didn’t have time to cover these issues right now, but when things were back to normal, she needed to know who might still ruin the peace and serenity everyone was longing for. Kendle put Vicky at the top of that list. She wasn’t sure why the auburn-haired girl rubbed her the wrong way, but there was no denying that she did.

Kendle felt the same way about James, but not as strongly. She considered him to be slacker. Stanley was okay, though. He was just recovering from the traumas of childhood, as were many of the people on this ship. The effects of youth lasted long into adulthood. Some people never escaped that damage. She hoped Stanley wasn’t one of those. So far, the only thing against him was his proclivity to panic or drop things. Both of those could be overcome.

Kendle made another note in her book about Stanley, recommending he become an Eagle. She then continued on her way, hoping the trio didn’t cause any problems as they made supply deliveries below.

**3**

James led the crew to the brig, tapping on the door to let the guards know someone was coming. He stayed away from the cells as he entered.

Adrian stepped out of Kronus’s cell, empty syringe in hand. “I hope there’s toilet paper in one of those bags.”

Stanley laughed. “I told you they needed it down here.” He smiled at Adrian. “I put in three rolls.”

Adrian stored the key on the wall hook. He glanced in the next cell to make sure Jayda was okay. He had insisted she take a nap since he felt like he was ninety and was moving at about the same rate. It was an improvement.

Vicky sat the bag next to the guard station and turned for the exit. She didn’t like being around descendants anymore, even Adrian, who had given her safe harbor in his camp. She no longer trusted magic users.

James frowned at the quick exit. “What’s her problem?”

Adrian was too weak to read thoughts. He hadn’t been trying. “Doesn’t seem like she likes the job.”

James snorted harshly. “No one likes the job during a crisis.”

Stanley moved around the cells, depositing bags in front of doors for the guards to give to the prisoners when they were ready. He wasn’t about to step into any of the cells, especially the one with Kronus. The angel scared him.

James did a fast scan of the prisoners. Everyone was sleeping or going back to sleep after having been woken by their arrival.

“Tell Kenn he’s got five more hours.” Adrian dropped the syringe into the bucket and went to the stool. He dropped down with a tired grunt and joints that popped.

“Kenn said to let Trinity out and put her to work. She’s to go to the prep area by the lab. She can pick any chore except the infirmary. If she goes there at all, unless she’s ill or injured, she’s to be locked up.”

Adrian nodded, taking the keys from the hook.

In the cell, Trinity stood up. “I’m not the one who injured Brittani so bad she had to see a medic.”

“We need all the hands we can get. The situation is bad.” James took the keys from Adrian and opened her cell so the man could rest.

Trinity hurried out, not saying anything else. She was ashamed. The night in jail had reminded her that getting locked up was contrary to every plan she’d made.

Adrian yawned. “Anything else for me?”

“No.” James left the brig before he could offer comfort. He didn’t hate Adrian, like most people here did. He hadn’t been a part of Safe Haven for Adrian’s betrayal. He’d only been around to watch the man help in any way he could. He had seen the former leader interfering in Angela and Marc’s relationship, but the couple wasn’t married. James considered all fair in love and war. If he had his way, he would have chatted with Adrian for a few minutes about some of the security issues they had. He was positive the former leader would have good ideas. He was worth more than a guard on the brig.

“We have one cabin on the next deck and then the cargo area. We’ll check on the kids there and get our next load of supplies for the camp.” James led the way.

Vicky was waiting in the hall. She let James go by, not caring about leadership of a three-man team. *I have bigger goals.*

The trio descended the dirty stairs into the bottom of the ship, each of them concentrating on their own problems.

James knocked on Samantha’s cabin. “Supply delivery. You okay in there?”

“Leave it!”

“Do you need anything?”

There was a long pause.

“I need medication... Amy’s sick.”

All of them had been secretly dreading that answer each time they knocked.

Radios suddenly crackled with open panic on the Eagle channel. “I need help in the cargo area! Courtney’s sick!”

In the infirmary, medics and leadership froze. The secondary wave was here.

Chapter Thirteen

**Burn Box**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“D**id you hear that?!” Brian rose from the chair he’d placed outside his cabin. “More people are sick! They don’t have it contained!”

People came from the humid cabins around him, filling the corridor. Some of them had suitcases Greg assumed were stuffed with loot. They were also wrapped in thick coats, telling him they’d gotten into the cargo areas. Everyone else was wearing summer clothes.

“The entire ship is contaminated!”

“We have to get off this boat!”

Ian, Travis, and Greg came into the area from their guard positions on the doors as the raised voices caught their attention.

“Calm down.”

“There’s no reason to panic.”

The three-dozen people in the corridor ignored the guards. A few rushed for the unguarded doors.

Ian and Travis tried to stop the mad dash.

Ian grabbed Brian by the arm as the man tried to flee by him with two bags in one hand and a gun in the other. “Hang on.”

“I want to file assault charges.” Brian tilted his head up. “See the bruise on my throat? It came from your cook!”

“Later.” Travis waved him away, trying not to laugh at the guy. He’d been throat smacked by a woman and couldn’t handle it.

Brian stomped on Ian’s foot, then pistol whipped him in the jaw.

Ian slid to the ground while Brian jumped over him and ran for the door. He disappeared into the dim corridor.

More people followed, some stepping on Ian or kicking him as they went through.

At the other end of the hall, Travis had the same problem. A group of Ciemus women kicked him repeatedly.

Greg stayed at his post, but he didn’t try to stop anyone from leaving. The mob mentality had peaked. Nothing he could say would matter. He keyed his mike. “We have twelve camp members heading for the lifeboats. We also have two injuries being taken to the infirmary.”

Ian hit his mike. “One. I’ll live.”

Travis wanted to add his support to that mini rebellion, but he was still being walked on and kicked.

Greg waited for the rush to be over. Then he went to help Travis, who had taken the worst of it. Ian had been smart enough to stay down after the first blow. Travis had tried to get back up and assert his authority over the Ciemus women.

Most of the remaining camp was in the hall now or in the small lounge area, scared but willing to wait and see what leadership was going to do about the newest problem.

Greg waved a few of them over. “Take Travis to the infirmary. Stay there and help if you’re not scared.” He gestured toward other people. “The infirmary needs help. The medics still haven’t had a break. Go in the same group. We’ll come by to collect your names later. Don’t forget the rule about looting.”

Greg returned to his post, content to let the camp people make their own decisions. Only the new sheep were panicking. Eventually they would learn to trust leadership. As far as the deaths they’d had, it bothered Greg too, but he understood this was the apocalypse. There hadn’t been a way to prevent death before the war. It was unreasonable to expect that now.

Blood ran down Ian’s cheek from the gun hit he’d taken. He wiped it away, scanning. Furniture and a garbage can had been displaced, making the corridor messy. *It’s impossible to keep this place clean!*

Camp members slowly drifted back into their cabins to wait for the next update. A few more scared souls gathered their things and left.

Greg hoped they were going to the infirmary and not the top deck. *I’m glad I’m not on duty up there right now. That’s going to be ugly.*

**2**

“Get out of my way!” Brian glared up at Debra. “If you think I won’t hit you because you’re female, you’re wrong.”

Debra had placed herself on the top deck ramp where all three staircases from the bottom levels merged. Two of those stairwells had groups of people trying to get by her to the top deck.

Debra began gesturing.

Conner translated quickly, hoping he didn’t need to use his gifts or his gun. “She said the lifeboats on the far end are yours. There are instructions on the wall by each boat for lowering them.”

Brian paused. “Is this some kind of trick?”

Debra was still gesturing.

“No one is in Safe Haven against their will. You can leave. Just do it safely, so none of you get hurt and you don’t damage our ship.”

Debra retreated, motioning Conner and Kendle to do the same. They were the only guards on the top deck; Theo, alone, was watching worriedly from the bridge. Physical restraint was out of the question.

People climbed the steps, not dissuaded. Furious shouts and raised fists had met anyone who got in their way, but they hadn’t attacked. They just wanted to leave.

Debra signed again.

“She said to remind you not to swim in the ocean. That’s where the mission team was contaminated.”

A few people paused at Conner’s warning. Clearly, they hadn’t considered the source of the illness.

Debra kept gesturing and Conner kept translating, both staying out of the way of the scared, angry people.

“There are sharks. You should pick set bathroom times for everyone, then move your boat away from that area, so you don’t attract as many of them. If you go north, you should reach land in about ten days.”

More people hesitated now. They had considered sharks, but they hadn’t thought about how long a trip it would be in the lifeboats.

Conner kept translating. “You also need to pick teams to row the boat. They don’t have engines.”

Debra stopped, not wanting to push the people so far that they considered taking over this boat. She just wanted them too scared to go out on their own.

“Are supplies still in the lifeboats?” Brian wasn’t deterred. He wanted off the death ship.

Kendle nodded. “There’s a few days’ worth in each. I see everybody brought something from below, so you should have no problem surviving the ten days without more supplies.”

A few people in the crowd gathered around the lifeboat launch pad began to consider exactly what Debra had feared.

Behind them, Eagles came up all three sets of stairs and blocked access to the lower decks.

A few of the rebels shifted toward the Eagles, seeking the Safe Haven comfort that had gotten them this far alive.

Brian sneered at Debra. “I know what you’re doing. It won’t work with me. I’m leaving.”

Debra pointed to the instructions below the lever.

Conner translated her thoughts, omitting the worst of the insults. “Have some of your friends help you. You don’t want to throw your back out right as you make your escape, coward.”

Debra turned and walked through the shocked people with her chin up.

Conner followed, swallowing a smirk.

The Eagles parted for her, showing approval. There weren’t many of them, but it was enough to handle the group of camp people if they tried to rush back downstairs.

A few of the camp members followed Debra and Conner, offering apologies.

The Eagles allowed them to go by, but all of them noted the people who were quick to flee when things got bad. Those people would never be Eagles now.

Kendle remained on the top deck. She was going to give Theo a break shortly, but she also wanted to make sure Brian wasn’t going to be a problem. They couldn’t afford to lose the lifeboat or the supplies, but Brian was a future danger. It was better that he left.

Radios crackled to life all over the ship with Tonya’s exhausted voice. “I have the first results on our water. It’s contaminated. That’s where the secondary illnesses came from. It’s not spreading. We just didn’t eliminate all the sources.”

Relief went through everyone who heard.

People sneered at Brian’s dawning realization that he had overreacted.

Jeff eased over by Kendle as the top deck slowly cleared. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“About what?”

Jeff locked eyes with her. “What’s waiting for us on the island?”

Kendle’s face melted into terror before she locked it all up. “Shouldn’t you be more worried about what’s happening now? You have friends dying in the infirmary with no one to care for them.”

Jeff tensed at her mental image of Doug. He immediately turned toward the ramp and vanished.

Kendle went up to the bridge to give Theo that break now, almost certain Brian was going to change his mind and stay since they knew the illness wasn’t spreading. She was disappointed. It would have saved on drama later.

A tiny part of her also wished Jeff was leaving. *The next time he asks that question, I might have to answer it.*

**3**

In the infirmary, Angela and the medics were thrilled by Tonya’s announcement and proud of the redhead for refusing to leave the lab until the water tests were done. Kenn had finally gone to their cabin, but Tonya had kept working, with Dog guarding the door while watching for the escaped cats.

The infirmary doors opened to admit Kenn. It was obvious he hadn’t slept long enough by the bloodshot eyes and drooping shoulders.

“What are you doing here?”

Kenn grunted. “Heard about the deserters. Update?”

Angela was the only one free to do it. The medics were occupied with people going into the final stages of death.

“No change here.” Angela didn’t tell him they’d lost two more. He would find out when he got the report.

“I stopped by the lab on the way here. Tonya said the level is highest in the fountain water. We need to find out if patients were consuming ship water even after we shut it down. If they all were, we’re good. If not, I’m sending people through the ship with Geiger counters to check each water source.”

“I’ll send someone to wake you soon as we know if we have to search the ship.” Angela took his arm.

Kenn let her push him back toward the door. He was asleep on his feet.

Angela stepped out of the infirmary to point at Tonya through the lab glass. “You go too. Now.”

Tonya didn’t argue with the order from the boss. She came out of the lab, locking the door. She helped Kenn toward the stairs, mind shutting down.

Angela went back into the infirmary. As she slowly recovered, she was sharing her energy with the critical patients. So far, it wasn’t working. She didn’t have enough to give. All the descendants had worn themselves out trying to save loved ones or camp children. The only one having any success at making people feel better was Marc. He was writing wills for those who were certain they were going to die. At this point, Morgan wasn’t able to rule out any of them.

Angela dug towels from under the counter, seeing the stack was almost gone. She refilled the alcohol bowl, then went to check on the IV bags for every cot. Angela wasn’t able to talk to the newest patients yet because the medics were taking blood samples for the lab. As soon as they finished, she would handle that.

While she worked, Angela listened to Marc. He was speaking to Jennifer. Kyle was on her other side, sitting on the floor with his cheek against her hand. Kyle hadn’t showered or changed his clothes in days. He was barely eating when the delivery crews brought food. His vigil at Jennifer’s side was constant.

“That’s Autumn. Next is Kyle.” Marc wrote his name on the paper, already sick of the duty he’d been given. He’d handled three other wills so far. It was awful. Marc was aware of the human misery around him as he covered people’s last wishes and affairs, but he was weak and miserable himself. It barely registered unless it was someone he cared about. The same was true of the mess and the harsh smells. After the first few gags, he’d forgotten to notice. It was this mental anguish he couldn’t take much more of.

“Make the camp leave him alone. They’ll know when he’s ready... He’ll pick one of the whores.”

Sweat rolled over Jennifer’s cheeks and neck. Marc took that as a good sign. The critical patients weren’t sweating. They were barely breathing.

“Put my daughter first, with whoever they try for a match. Kyle will always love her more, so they need to make sure she can handle that.”

Kyle groaned against her hand, but he didn’t interrupt. He was surprised Jennifer had found the breath to do this. With every second, he could feel her energy ebbing. The healing he’d done with Kenn’s help had lasted for half a day, but the radiation was stronger. It had snatched her back under and sent her fever through the roof.

“All my belongings...to Kyle. Tell the camp I gave them something...more valuable than property. I’m dying for the dream. Going to the island is the only way America survives. I’ve done my part...to ensure that. I have no regrets.” Red tears slipped from Jennifer’s lashes.

Marc wiped them away, then finished writing her wishes on the page. When he was finished, he held the book over so she could sign it.

Kyle listened to the weak scratch of the pen on the paper. *I’ll never make it without her.*

Marc gave Jennifer’s hand a light squeeze and tried to send energy. His attempt wasn’t successful. Just like Kyle, there was nothing he could do but watch her fade.

Marc switched to the next cot before he broke into tears. He took the stool between Wade and Whitney. Both men were critical. “Together or one at a time?”

“Together,” the men responded.

Whitney had bright cheeks and the doomed eyes of someone who knew the end was coming for him. Marc wiped blood from the corner of his mouth and dropped the rag onto the floor. It didn’t have a clean spot left. “Repeat after me, if you can: I, your name, being of sound mind and failing body…”

Angela listened to them repeat the same lines she’d heard a thousand times in her life and never thought anything about. *I don’t have a will either.*

Nearby, Morgan finished with Courtney. He stood up to write things on the clipboard hanging from her cot.

Angela joined him. “How is she?”

“Not good, but none of them are.” Morgan held out the clipboard so Angela could read it.

*Pregnant* was underlined twice.

Angela moaned. The kids were taking an awful cut.

Marc didn’t glance over at Angela’s sound of misery, but he registered it. “Ready when you are.”

“All I have is a burn box.” Whitney tried to focus on Marc through bloody vision. “Take care of that for me?”

“Of course. Where is it?” Marc leaned down so the man didn’t have to expose his hiding place.

Whitney whispered.

Marc wrote it, again patting a hand while hoping to send healing energy. It was like trying to start a car without gas.

Marc held the book for his signature. Whitney was the worst of the patients he was writing wills for.

“I guess it’s my turn.” Wade wasn’t much better than Whitney, though his voice was stronger. “I have souvenirs from affairs... With women in relationships.”

“I’ll burn them.” Marc didn’t mind making the promise, but he was surprised at how many burn boxes he now needed take care of if these people died.

“No, you don’t understand.” Wade tried to smile. “I want the souvenirs delivered.”

Marc snorted laughter, unable to help it.

A few people in the infirmary found it disrespectful, but most of them were happy to hear anything as positive as laughter.

“Okay, who do they go to?” Marc frowned. “Or do you want me to do this quietly?”

“Open. And soon.”

“What if you don’t...?”

Wade couldn’t shrug, but he wanted to. “Then I get to watch them open it.”

Marc got ready to write. “Let me have it.”

“I carry a box in my duffel bag. I like looking at them.” Wade waited for Marc to write. “The first one goes to Adrian. He thinks he’s the father of Nancy’s baby, but he might not be.”

Marc laughed again as he wrote it down. “I can’t wait to deliver that one.” Marc groaned. “Oh, my God! I did not mean that!”

Wade was laughing and wheezing. “I understand. It’s panties.”

Chuckles went through some of the cots around them from the people who were alert enough to hear.

“The next one goes to Theo. Tell him he doesn’t deserve Debra. She’s an amazing friend and lover.”

Marc wrote it down. That one would probably cause problems, but it was still hilarious. Theo thought he was the only one with a claim on the deaf woman, but that wasn’t true.

“I also have one for Doug.”

“Doug?” Marc thought about it. “Peggy!”

Wade blushed a little under his red skin. “I wanted to see if she knew things.”

Marc couldn’t help himself. “Did she?”

Wade smiled through cracked lips. “A few.”

Marc snickered. “Got it. We’re done with that part now, right?”

Wade’s fingers clenched against the filthy sheet. “I have one for Ivan.”

Disapproval came as witnesses realized Jayda had cheated on Ivan. He hadn’t had a relationship other than her.

Wade felt bad for that one, but it didn’t outweigh the fear of death. He needed to come clean about these things. “I also owe little Timmy an apology.”

Marc snorted, making his throat hurt more. “Where the hell did you find the time for all this?”

“Excellent scheduling skills.”

“Fair enough. Okay, *why* did you do all this? Can’t get enough sex or you like living on the edge?”

“Both.” Wade tried to smile. “I’m an Eagle.”

Marc snickered, writing. “Is that it?”

“Uh...no.”

Marc grinned. “I’m impressed. And a little scared.”

“It’s the last one.” Wade’s amusement faded. “Not sure you should deliver it. Could cause real problems.”

Marc waited, letting the man make his decision.

Pain lanced through Wade’s neck and stomach at the same time, reminding him the situation was dire. “Tell Kenn I’m sorry. Not trying to ruin his recovery. I just need closure before I die.”

Marc was stunned. “I didn’t think Tonya was like that anymore.”

Wade frowned. “Not the fiancée. His mistress. I almost caught them together once. Apparently, he’s a wham bam. I offered to take up the slack.”

Marc didn’t know what to say. He wrote it down, not sure if that secret would leave the infirmary. Marc glanced around the people who had heard, hoping they wouldn’t go blabbing until he figured out the best way to handle it.

The glances that came back told Marc it was up to him. All these people had had enough drama. They weren’t willing to tackle Kenn’s infidelity with so many lives in jeopardy.

Marc was relieved. He was also horrified. “How could he do that?”

“Courtney said he was scared of settling down. It happened in the mountain when Tonya was nagging him to propose.”

Marc hadn’t realized Kenn was afraid of getting married. It was almost excusable considering that Tonya was a cheater too, but she hadn’t been for a long time now... It gave him a duty to at least confront Kenn about it when this was all over, to make sure he wasn’t still cheating. If he was, Tonya had a right to know.

Wade shut his eyes. “I should sleep now.”

Marc once again tried to send healing energy, but there was nothing, not even the click of an empty chamber. He stood, swallowing groans that would have matched everyone else in the room as they shifted in vain to find a comfortable position on the narrow cots.

He traveled the line to Ray, who was the best of these four, but still in critical condition. “Repeat after me, if you can…”

Brittani slowly opened her eyes, waking to disorienting noises and smells. There were coughs, grunts, groans, gags and even crying. It smelled like puke, blood, shit. *Am I dead?* She carefully turned her head.

Sharp pain tore through one temple. *Nope; can’t be dead if I feel pain.*

Her vision focused. *I’m in the infirmary. Wow. That’s a lot of sick people.*

Adrenaline helped bring alertness. She struggled to sit up.

“Take it easy. You have a concussion.” Ed was glad Brittani had finally woken. After being the one to handle her injury, he had been terrified he’d done something wrong.

Brittani stayed sitting on the cot, staring at the misery throughout the room. She spotted people she knew, people she loved and people she hated. The illness was having no mercy on anyone. Her next thought was of family. “Have you seen my brother?”

“I need a hand over here!” Harry shouted for help with Whitney.

Ed hurried over.

Brittani scanned again, spotting bodies piled along one side of the wall, wrapped in bloody, vomit splattered sheets. Her fear fled, replaced by panic. She staggered to her feet and began walking through the cots, searching for her brother. “Lou?”

As she went by Daryl, he reached out for her.

“Daryl?” Brittani took his hand, kneeling. “I can’t find my brother.”

Daryl tried to talk to her, but there was too much blood in his mouth. He pushed it out the side, letting it roll down his cheek.

Brittani watched the bloody spit form a pool on the pillow. *That’s blood. He’s bleeding inside.* “Oh, God.”

Daryl tried to nod, but he didn’t have the strength. He shut his eyes, hoping she didn’t leave.

Brittani sank to her knees by his cot, not sure what to do. Around her, the medics were working on people who were clearly about to die. She wasn’t sure if she should call someone over because everyone had soiled bedding. *They need help here.* Brittani pushed aside her pounding headache to stand. “Where do you want me?”

Morgan was glad to have someone on that side of the room. “Right where you are. Bathe the hot ones in alcohol. Yell if they go into convulsions or stop breathing.”

Brittani stared. *I don’t know if I can do this. I do know I have to try.* She approached the desk, following her nose to the alcohol.

Brittani was the only one to react to the infirmary doors opening and the sound of footsteps. She turned around. “What do you want?”

“They came to help.” Ralph indicated the people behind him. “They needed an escort. Put them to work. I’m going back to the camp.” The elderly miner left the room.

It was obvious he was exhausted.

The camp members came to Brittani, looking to her for leadership. Some of them wore masks and gloves.

Brittani started to call a medic, then remembered they were busy. She spotted Marc and Angela in the far corner, speaking to Grant. They didn’t need to be disturbed either. She squared her shoulders. “Bathe the hot ones in alcohol. Shout for a medic if they go into convulsions or stop breathing.” She was proud of herself for remembering Morgan’s words. “As soon as he says everything’s under control, or at least stable, we need to clear cots for the medics to sleep and sanitize this room. It’s not safe to be in here without a mask. Someone find a box and pass them out.”

Camp members did as they were instructed, all of them scanning for friends and family while gaping at the bodies. It was shocking.

Brittani forced herself not to think about the dead. *We need to concentrate on the living while we still have living to concentrate on.*

The elevator dinged.

Anyone with the energy left turned to see who it was.

Samantha staggered off the elevator, carrying little Amy. “I don’t know what to do!”

Samantha was wild-eyed, with crazy blonde curls hanging over wrinkled clothes and a terrified face.

Brittani took the child from the pregnant woman. “Go get a shower. Get out of here.”

Samantha wanted to stay.

“No pregnant women in the infirmary.” Brittani didn’t need to ask to know that answer.

“You heard her.” Morgan offered support, glad to have another voice of reason. He was also anticipating the break she had just spoken of. If he didn’t lie down soon, he would fall.

Brittani scanned for a cot. There were two of them. Both had bodies.

She pointed to Trent, a man from Ciemus who appeared strong and calm. “Move one of those bodies.” She pointed at another camp member. “Find a sheet to put over the cot. Dig through the cabinets.”

Trent didn’t hesitate to go over. He also didn’t check to see who it was. He lifted the body and moved it to the pile along the wall.

Gabe hurried over with a sheet and spread it out. “One of your stitches is bleeding.”

“That must be what I feel running down the side of my face.” Brittani put the child on the cot and motioned toward the alcohol. “Start bringing her fever down while I throw on a Band-Aid.”

Still in the doorway, Samantha hesitated, torn. She could see Neil over in the corner by Marc and Angela. *I want to be with Amy.*

Neil glanced across the infirmary. *Get out of here right now.*

Samantha turned and left.

“He stopped breathing again!” Angela began compressions on Whitney.

Morgan brought over the needle of adrenaline he’d already had ready.

Harry charged the paddles.

Marc stepped out of the way, then stumbled to the next cot. He’d only been here for a few hours, but it felt like days.

Electricity ran through the room, drawing fresh attention to the newest crisis.

“Clear!”

Angela listened with the stethoscope. “I have a pulse.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, hoping when their turn came, she also found one.

“Help!” Marc was on his knees next to Ellie, one of the youngest camp orphans. “She’s not breathing!”

The despondent medics hurried to the child as Marc tried to force energy he didn’t have.

Angela swayed on her feet, focused on Marc. The adult deaths had taken a toll on him, but this was the first child. He wasn’t going to be able to handle it. As she watched, the tips of his hair began to turn gray.

Marc jerked away from Angela’s touch when she came to him. “Help me!”

“Clear!”

More of Marc’s hair turned white.

Angela tugged on his arm, dragging him to the door when he resisted.

Marc was forced to let her. He’d never been this weak, but he kept trying to send energy, causing more of his hair to turn white.

“Stop it! What if Charlie needs it? Or Cody?! Stop wasting what little you have.” Angela staggered down the hall, heartbroken. *I should have seen this coming. This is all my fault.*

“TOD is 6:43am, December 7th.” Morgan’s horrified voice echoed behind them.

Marc slowly trudged after Angela, weeping.

**Part Two:**

“So it’s true, when all is said and done, grief is the price we pay for love.”

― E.A. Bucchianeri, Brushstrokes of a Gadfly.

Chapter Fourteen

**Strike Where It Hurts**

**A close up of a logo

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**6pm**

**1**

**K**enn woke in a quick burst, sitting upright the instant his alarm went off. *They let me sleep for a full shift. That can’t be good.*

Kenn hit the off button as Tonya stirred next to him.

*Nothing. I hear nothing.* The neat tan walls of their cabin weren’t thick enough to mute noise from the rest of the ship, but it was silent.Kenn reached for his radio on the end table.

“Let me shut the bathroom door.” Tonya hurried in and turned on the water. Their radios picked up details. She didn’t want everyone listening to her pee.

For a change, Kenn didn’t stare at her bare ass as she ran for the bathroom. She refused to sleep any other way, even now. Kenn had stayed dressed and ready to roll. He keyed the mike, adrenaline making his heart pound. “Who has an update for me?”

The radio crackled right back. “Outside your door.”

Kenn blew out a breath, mind crashing. *Thank you.* He’d dreamed of waking to an empty ship full of dead bodies. It would be a while before he forgot that one. “Copy.”

*Conner sounds tired. That means Debra kept him working. Good. Maybe I’ll find out she’s covered everything, and I can just go straight to rounds.* Kenn swung his stiff legs over the bed. He hadn’t even removed his boots, worried about not being able to get them back on fast enough. He stood, stretching. Body odor wafted up his nose.

Kenn smoothed his neck length black hair and slapped on some deodorant. There was still an hour before the next batch of lab tests would be ready. Tonya had time for a hot shower. He didn’t. He’d adapted to functioning when not in a pristine state, but he still hated it.

Kenn opened the door. He frowned. *No one’s...* Kenn glanced down to find Dog lying along the baseboard, blending in. “What gives?”

*Shh... They’re close.*

The corridor was empty; the walls no longer glowed in contented green.

Kenn motioned. “Get in here.”

Dog scurried inside, snout curling.

The beautiful timber wolf was bigger up close than Kenn remembered. He didn’t usually get near Dog at all. They didn’t like each other, though Kenn had let most of that go a while back. He just wasn’t sure if Dog had.

Kenn shut the door, aware of the irony of a terrified wolf being sent to update him. “Must be bad news.”

Dog scratched a layer of dust from his fur. *More deaths.*

“New illnesses?”

*No.*

“Good. What else?”

*We’re going through the reserve water too fast. Someone is stealing or the delivery numbers are wrong.*

Kenn pulled on his jacket, then took his notebook from the pocket. “Go on.”

*Debra wants me to sniff them out. We need a master list of who isn’t accounted for.*

Kenn frowned. “I thought they all were.”

Dog licked his paw*. Ian’s numbers are short half a dozen.*

“I’ll cover it on rounds.” Kenn tried to smile at the animal. “You can go with me.”

Dog stopped licking and started scratching.

Kenn grunted. “Is that it?”

Dog’s ears tilted. *Yes. The cats have gone by. Let me out.*

Kenn opened the door. “I’ll be ready in two minutes.”

Dog sat in the shadows. *It won’t take you that long.*

Kenn shrugged, shutting the door. He had no idea what the wolf... Kenn’s nose curled at the new, awful odor in the cabin. His stomach clenched. “Dog!”

Tonya came out of the bathroom. “What’s going on?”

Kenn grabbed his kit and fled. “Dog farted. Take cover!” He slammed the cabin door and hurried down the hall.

“You both suck!”

Dog huffed as Tonya’s shouts continued.

Kenn swung his kit on. “You’ll pay for that. Those cats listen to her.”

*I know. I chose to strike where it hurts.*

“I don’t understand.”

*I gassed their leader.*

Kenn groaned. “That means I’m a target too. Damn it!”

Dog chuffed, leading the way. *If they attack, I’ll use you as a decoy. Expect it.*

“Thanks for the warning.”

Dog pushed the door open, holding it for Kenn with his leg. *I have to keep you alive. I don’t have to save you from your mate’s spastic assassins. That’s all on you.*

Kenn took them to the top deck of the ship. He had a list of stops to make. He’d chosen to start here and work his way through the huge cruise liner. It wouldn’t be a straight shot because of the way the ship was designed, but it would finish him up in the infirmary where he would help their sick patients if he had any energy left. He planned to end the evening in the mess with a hot cup of coffee at a quiet booth, so he could go over his notes to make sure he wasn’t forgetting anything. So far, he hadn’t, other than a few unaccounted-for people.

Dog stayed by Kenn, falling into alert mode as warm ocean air rushed over his fur, blowing off more of the dust. It was hard to smell the cats up here. The only thing he was picking up was salt and fish–two things he enjoyed when he wasn’t watching for an ambush.

Kenn trotted up the metal stairs to the bridge. “Coming for updates.”

Theo turned around in the captain chair, orbs bloodshot. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

Kenn got his book out. The bridge smelled like fresh chemicals, telling him the cleaning crew had been by again. Outside, it smelled like rot. A stiff wind was pushing it their way, warning of more weather problems coming. “Shoot.”

“The first thing on my list is important. You may not think so, but it’s understandable. You’re overloaded.” Finished recording numbers for this hour, Theo shoved his notebook into the bulky pockets of his jumper. Many of the volunteers had chosen them from the list of approved clothing.

Kenn frowned. “Whatever you tell me will be taken under consideration. Now spit it out.”

“Kendle’s state of mind is dangerous.”

Kenn snorted at Theo’s declaration. “No shit.”

Theo gestured. “That’s what I’m talking about. I don’t mean she’s a danger to the boss. I mean she’s jumpy. We’ve already had one shooting by a twitchy person. We could have another if she doesn’t calm down. I recommend giving her a job that keeps her mind busy too.”

Kenn wrote it in this book. “Anything else?”

Theo frowned at the curtness. “Is this payback?”

Kenn grunted, pen hovering over the paper. “This is because I’m busy. Your team will pay you back. I don’t need to be involved.”

Theo was relieved. “Okay, good.” He pointed at the clipboard. “Fuel is going to be a problem, but we’re okay for a week, according to Grant’s calculations. I’ll go over them today. I’m also shutting down things we don’t need. There will be areas where lights are off, or service is not functioning. Most of that is me, but if you make a list, I can confirm it.”

Dog sat down nearby, staying to the shadows. He listened to the update, storing the information while scanning for intruders.

“Debra has a water crew about to try to filter a batch. I assume that’s going to make a lot of noise. You may want to warn people.”

Kenn keyed his radio. “I’ll have updates for everyone over the next hour. You’re going to be hearing noises. That’s us, taking care of essential services.” Kenn looked at Theo. “Next?”

Theo patted his personal dosimeter. “Air quality is good. It’s my opinion we can stay here while people recover, but we should continue 24-hour monitoring.”

Kenn nodded. “Agreed.”

Theo consulted his list. “Last thing. Debra said to tell you my relief will be here around 4am.”

Kenn scanned his notes, then looked at Dog.

Dog licked his tail. *I have nothing on that.*

“Did she say who?” Kenn prepared to write it down.

“No.” Theo didn’t like giving that answer. “I forgot to ask.”

“Do you know where Debra is right now?”

Dog pawed the floor. *She’s doing a mission in the brig.*

Kenn didn’t ask for details. The brig was third on his list. He would find out soon enough. “Anything else while I’m up here?”

Theo shook his head, sighing.

Kenn took in how tired the man appeared. “Are you going to be okay until your relief arrives?”

“Sure. The mess sent up extra strong coffee and Kendle comes up every couple hours to check on me. All I have to do is watch the numbers on the monitors, drink my coffee, and mourn my friends.”

Kenn didn’t have anything to say to that. He took the stairs that would lead him to the camp area. While he did need an update on all of the places he was about to go, he was saving the infirmary for last for exactly the opposite reason. He wasn’t ready to mourn yet. He was still fighting for life.

Raised voices greeted Kenn as soon as he reached the bottom of the stairwell.

Dog moved in front of Kenn to provide guard protection, hoping he wasn’t forced to be violent with a camp member.

Kenn braced, then entered the corridor where most of the camp was now gathered.

“There’s Kenn. Ask him.” Ian pointed. Like Travis, the man was covered in scrapes, scratches, bruises. So was Greg, though his had come from the great cat escape.

Half a dozen camp members rushed to Kenn, with Perry in the lead. Behind him were half a dozen others Kenn wished they hadn’t brought along, but Perry was especially troubling. Kenn hadn’t nailed down why yet, but he was certain if he spent enough time with the man, he’d find something awful. Perry had that vibe of a possible serial killer but at the least, a child molester.

Kenn pointed at the full garbage can and trash on the floor. “You’ve only been here a little while. Clean that shit up!”

Those closest did, casting glares at the people who’d actually made the mess.

The smell hit Kenn next. People were still in the same clothes, with dirty hair and smudges from where they’d been digging through areas that they shouldn’t have been in. “And why isn’t everyone showered?”

The camp members who had already cleaned up hid smirks. They’d been told to mind their own business when they complained about it.

“You can’t keep us here.” Perry’s wife, Ellen, pointed at Kenn. Her saggy breasts heaved in indignation. “It’s against the law.”

Perry stepped up to Kenn, lean frame stiff with aggression. “You’re going to let us go or–”

“Or what?” Kenn stepped forward, bumping his bigger chest against Perry. “Or you’ll riot? You’ll shoot somebody?” Kenn shoved him, knocking him into Ellen. The couple bounced off each other, grunting.

Kenn glowered at all of them. “Make a normal request like a civilized person or I’ll lock you up.”

Dog padded back in front of Kenn, growling his support.

Perry’s hand went to the gun on his belt. “Get out of my way.”

Kenn gestured toward the open door. “You go straight down those stairs to the brig. Go on.”

Perry didn’t back down, but everyone behind him realized Kenn was serious. They waited to see if Perry was getting locked up or if he had secured freedom for them. Cowards in the mob always worked the same way. Kenn kept that in mind as he slowly took out his notebook. “I’m writing it down as an update for the boss. She’s the one who decides how much supplies you get. She’ll organize a crew to lower those lifeboats, so you don’t damage our ship. You are not being kept here against your will. You just have to wait a little longer for us to be able to help you leave.”

Most of the rebels were okay with that.

The people behind them were members of the camp who were either okay with what was going on in leadership, or they supported the decisions being made. They were in chairs and doorways, observing.

*But you still aren’t willing to risk your own asses, are you?* Kenn couldn’t help the bitterness. The camp was making a lot of progress. There were only a dozen people he considered to be a problem anymore. That was amazing considering they had over three hundred people on this ship, but the troublemakers were still taking up his time when others needed it more. Kenn gestured at Perry. “Brig until the lifeboats are launched or stay here where you can access books, games and a bathroom with no one watching you shit?”

Perry retreated. “I’m leaving at dawn. I’ll shoot my way out if I have to.” He shoved around Ellen and disappeared into their cabin.

Kenn gave the rest of the group a small glare, memorizing names–*Ellen, Linda, Gail, Terry, Bobby Jean, Clifford.*

The three troublemakers who had caused problems yesterday were added to his list, despite the fact that they were all sitting on the couch together and not joining their fellow rebels this time. Kenn didn’t trust it, mostly because they were sitting together. They had no history of doing that. The men were friends; the women were friends. They’d never spent time together as couples. “Anyone else have questions or messages for the boss?”

A few people came forward.

“Do you have a list of the dead?” Ralph’s oldest son, Randy, joined Kenn, keeping his hands in view. “An updated list?”

“I haven’t been to the infirmary yet. I’ll try to have that for you with the next delivery.” Kenn made another note in his book, recommending the mess include careful use of sedatives in the next meal for the camp. He doubted Angela would approve it, but it was almost a necessity at this point. “The infirmary needs help. Does anyone want to go?” Kenn waited, not expecting much.

Half a dozen hands went up.

Kenn gestured. “Stop by the prep area near the lab for information and protective gear.” Kenn stepped aside so the freshly washed people could leave.

He could feel the near panic still lingering, but there wasn’t anything he could do or say that would make it better. “I’ll be doing rounds for the next few hours if you need me.”

People muttered as he left, disappointed by the lack of comfort.

*Where to now?* Dog was still on the lookout for the cats, but not twitching as much as earlier. He was hoping the angry felines would leave him and the human alone because of the duty they had right now.

“I need to check on our guest.” Kenn wondered why everything suddenly appeared so dusty. Even Dog’s fur was speckled. It hadn’t been that long since the ship had received a cleaning.

Dog stayed outside as Kenn entered the brig. He didn’t want to be around Adrian or Kronus. Both males made his heart hurt and he was already stressed.

Kenn scanned as he entered. He spotted Adrian on the stool, appearing rough but calm. Kenn had been worried Kronus would make another attempt while he was asleep. It was a relief to find a normal smelling room that was neat and clean, and running according to schedule.

Ramer appeared to be asleep. Kronus was muttering, on the edge of waking.

“He’s been drugged a lot over the last two days. We need to let him regain consciousness and really feed him...or kill him. Tell your boss the time has come for that decision.”

Kenn frowned at Adrian’s wording. It grew as he took in Adrian’s appearance. He hadn’t cleaned up yet either. “She’s your boss too.”

“Only until she kicks me off the ship. Then I’m my own boss again.” Adrian glanced up with bloodshot eyes as more footsteps echoed.

“Hey, Dog!” Charlie kept going by the wolf. “I’ll scratch your ears after I put this stuff down.”

The evening meal was being delivered. Kenn checked his watch, frowning that they still weren’t on a regular schedule. Then he remembered Brittani wasn’t running the mess now and Jayda was sleeping in any empty cell while Adrian took a shift.

Adrian envied Charlie the youth and good mood. Wearing his old Eagle gear to let people know who he was, Charlie was the center of attention everywhere he went, except the infirmary. Adrian had been stuck in the brig so far. It was tiresome.

Conner came in behind Charlie, also carrying bags. He smiled at his dad. “This is dinner and breakfast. Gus has them serving two meals at a time for efficiency. He said it might cut down on how fast we’re going through food. Brittani usually covers that.”

Adrian scanned the boy and didn’t find any signs of illness in Conner’s lean body or tired movements. Adrian let himself breathe. He had been worried.

The sweaty boys sat the bags near Adrian’s post. They knew not to get close to the cells.

Stanley came in last, carrying the smallest load. He eyed the cells nervously as he put the delivery on the desk. Stanley didn’t like being in the brig. He shoved his hands into his jean pockets so he couldn’t have an accident in here.

More footsteps echoed as Debra came down the stairs to join them, clothes wrinkled, hair wild. She made a quick gesture.

Conner gave Charlie an apologetic shrug. “She needs me again.”

Charlie didn’t want to be on delivery duty with Stanley, but it was far from being the worst chore on the ship. “Have fun.” He tried not to be bitter that Debra hadn’t chosen him for the job. He knew sign language, just not well.

“Can I get a meal here?!” Kronus banged on the cell.

Everyone jumped. They hadn’t heard him rise from the cot and come to the window.

Adrian begin digging through the bags to distribute the food to the prisoners.

“Not that drugged garbage! Give me yours.”

Adrian frowned. “There’s nothing wrong with this food.”

Kronus pointed. “Then you eat it.”

Adrian hesitated.

Debra snickered. *He’s got you there.*

Adrian reluctantly removed the food pouch he’d just attached to his belt. He extended it through the cell window.

Kronus grabbed the pouch. He immediately tore it open and began to eat.

Adrian turned toward Kenn, refusing assistance when he stumbled. “Jayda will be taking over my shift soon.”

“I’ll get another man in here soon as I can.”

Adrian nodded at Kenn’s promise. He was on the edge of collapsing again already.

Kenn waited in case Adrian had more, willing to listen to the man in this situation. He regretted having to use him as a guard when he was more valuable in a leadership position, but there was no way Safe Haven would accept that. They were scared about the illness, uneasy about the lack of information, and angry about Kendle and Conner being put on point with Debra. If he added Adrian to the mix, it might be the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“The boss would like an update on her kids.” Adrian didn’t look at any of them. “I can feel her worrying about it and feeling too guilty to go find out. She thinks every minute of energy she can spare should be spent in the lab or the infirmary.”

Kenn made a note of it. “Cargo areas are next on my list. I’ll make sure she gets an update.”

Adrian began distributing the food to the rest of the prisoners.

Kronus kept munching on the tuna sandwich, watching them all. He didn’t care that he’d been wrong about the food. He didn’t trust Adrian.

Adrian finished, aware of Kenn leaving and Debra lingering. Adrian also knew sign language, but unlike Charlie, he excelled at it. He’d been the one to teach Conner. He gestured at her.

Debra enjoyed having another adult to speak to. She smiled as she answered his question.

They conversed in silence, aggravating Kronus. “What are you talking about? Do you know how rude that is?”

Debra snickered again.

Adrian made another gesture.

Debra shrugged.

Kronus swallowed the last piece of fresh bread. “What’s going on?”

Adrian grinned. “She wants to see you fall down.”

Kronus snorted. “It’ll take more than you to beat on me.”

“Actually, all it took was one fish.”

Kronus realized he had been tricked again. The acidic taste of medication brushed the back of his throat. He stumbled against the side of the cot and sat, jarring it. “You dirty little bitch!”

Adrian laughed at him, not holding back.

Kenn tried to keep track of what was going on in the brig as he trotted down the next set of stairs. He was impressed by the trick that had either come from Adrian or Debra. When Adrian had said Angela was consumed between the lab and the infirmary, he hadn’t been exaggerating. All plans going on right now were coming from other people. “Where are the kids?”

Dog took the lead. *They moved to the cabins on the same floor where Samantha and Neil live.*

Kenn scanned his book as he walked, realizing Samantha’s cabin hadn’t been put on the cleaning list yet. Amy had been sick there, so it needed to be quarantined until a cleaning crew could get to it.

Tracy stepped out of the shadows at the end of the corridor. “Who is it? What do you want?!”

Candy appeared at the far end of the corridor, weapon in hand. “State your business.”

Both women were wearing heavy winter gear and aggressive expressions. They weren’t waiting for an attacker to get near the kids. He approved. “It’s Kenn, plus an escort. I want an update.”

Tracy breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s what we want too. We don’t have illnesses here so far, but we’re checking all the kids every hour for fevers.”

Kenn swept Candy’s rounded form. “What about yourselves? Any symptoms?”

Tracy shook her head. “Other than being tired and worried, we’re fine. We’re letting Molly have a nap with the babies right now. She said she could only take so much of the infirmary. When they wake up, the older kids and Candy will take a rest. After that, it’s my turn. We broke it up into shifts a few hours ago.”

“You remembered your Eagle training. Good girl.”

Tracy tried not to feel condescended to. Kenn was only trying to help. “That’s my update. What’s yours?”

“I haven’t been by the infirmary yet, so I don’t have current information.” Kenn looked at the wolf again.

Dog snorted, pawing at the ground. *Bodies are waiting to be transferred. Some are big. Some are small.*

Kenn shrugged at the anxious kids. “I’ll try to get you an update with the next meal delivery. As far as I know, Leeann is alive. We would have all felt Angela’s grief if not.”

That made sense to them.

The kids and den mothers were stashed in three cabins down the hall from Samantha’s quarters. The doors were open; tiny faces peered at him. All the kids were sporting surgical masks. It would have been cute if they had been playing dress up.

Kenn scanned the walls of cabins he could see into and found the spells Ian had mentioned in his report. Kenn recognized them too. However, he didn’t understand the intent.

Missy came to Kenn, bundled in a jean jumper and winter coat. “Someone’s coming.”

Kenn spun around, hand going to his gun.

Candy lifted her weapon.

Tracy waited to see if she needed hers, hoping she didn’t. She was too tired to be sure of her aim.

A shadow appeared in the corridor, stumbling toward them.

“Hold your fire.” Kenn recognized the castaway by her scarred arms. “It’s Kendle.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Candy holstered, wincing at a cramp in her stomach. *It’s too soon, baby. Go to sleep.*

Kenn scowled, pointing at Candy. “Get her off her feet, right now. We can’t deliver a baby in the middle of a radiation crisis.” Kenn keyed the radio. “I need one person for private guard duty. Meet me in the lab in half an hour.” Kenn gestured to Tracy. “Be ready for someone to relieve you.”

Missy tugged on his arm.

Kenn leaned down, expecting more advice about Kendle.

“Watch out for Tonya. She’s not safe.”

Chills broke out on his skin. “I will. Thank you.”

Kenn put a hand on Kendle’s arm as she started to walk by. “Go to bed. Six hours minimum. That’s an order from the boss.”

Kendle switched directions. She hadn’t eaten or showered yet. She couldn’t. She was dead on her feet.

Kenn hated to leave Tracy on duty alone, but there were a lot of stops waiting and a lot of other issues that had to be handled.

Tracy knew what he was about to do. “I’ll be fine until relief gets here. I don’t need Dog to stay. You handle the camp. I’ve got the brats.”

Kenn snorted, walking away. He hoped she really was able to handle it because he didn’t have any free hands at the moment. If he had, he would have sent them to the lab after Missy’s warning. As it was, that was still a few stops away. He was now very anxious to get there.

Chapter Fifteen

**Triple Pickup**

**A close up of a logo

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**1**

**“I** need to check the waste area now. I understand those smells are hard on you. Wait for me on the entertainment deck if you like.”

*Maybe.* Dog wanted to take Kenn up on the offer, but it felt like shirking his duty. He stayed next to the man as they went to the opposite side of the ship. The temperature dropped noticeably as they descended the dirty stairs.

“Who’s there?!”

*I’m really tired of that question.* “It’s Kenn. I’m here for an update.” He entered the incinerating room, nose curling at the odor. It horrified him to find piles of personal items laying on baggies, with cardboard boxes of shoes slid under the workbench. *Those belonged to people I was assigned to care for. This can’t get any worse.*

Allison was writing down details about the body they were burning. Allison’s perfect makeup was missing; her glowing curls hung in an efficient braid. *So she’s adaptable and bossy. Good to know.*

Zack was nearby, trying to strip the next stiff body of personal effects.

Monica came to Kenn, wiping sweat off her neck. She’d been helping wherever she landed, then heading back to the original job for the next round. “We’re doing this one, and one more. Then we’re shutting down to let everyone rest while the machinery cools off. It isn’t meant to run this way.”

They all waited for Kenn’s decision as he scanned the clipboard.

“That’s fine.” Kenn read the list, wincing at the names. He knew all of them, though he hadn’t been close to the kids.

“Have you seen my sons?” Zack was barely able to stand on his feet, but he hadn’t been able to stay in the infirmary. He knew his boys weren’t in there, other than Eric, and that was enough.

Morgan had determined that Zack did have a low level of radiation poisoning, but he was also exhausted and still healing from previous injuries. He’d been ordered to take meds, wear a mask, and get bedrest. Zack had come here instead.

Kenn checked his notes. “Timmy is in the mess. Mike is in the camp area, though I believe he volunteered for open duty on the last round. You’ll probably see him down here at some point.”

Zack scowled, voice sharpening. “No, I won’t. No kids are allowed down here. Don’t let them carry bodies!”

Kenn agreed now that he’d heard it. “Okay.”

Allison finished recording the personal effects. About an hour into this job, she had started crying. A full shift into the chore, her body had been aching and heart breaking. After days on the job, now she was numb. *Nothing I go through during the rest of my life will ever match this horror.*

“Help Zack to the shower, then take him to the infirmary for another dose of meds. While you’re there, get one yourself. I want you to sleep, then report to the lab prep area for duty at the beginning of the next shift. Keep your radios on in case there’s an emergency in your area.”

Monica and Zack left, grateful for Kenn’s order. No one here had the energy for drama or even shallow conversations. It was information only flowing through the waste area.

Kenn joined Allison at the table. He scanned the neatly labeled baggies, wincing. She was handling Nathan and Whitney now.

“Coming in!” Vicky entered the waste area carrying two large bags of garbage. She tossed them onto the pile and flounced over to the table. “Where do you want me next?” She was happy Allison was too tired to be bossy.

Kenn motioned. “You can take a break.”

Vicky broke into a grin. “Awesome. Now that the fun floor is open, I can borrow a book or maybe find batteries for my videogame.” She twirled her ponytail. “I wonder if they had any porn on board.”

Kenn scowled at her.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Allison snapped before Kenn could scold the flaky girl. “People are dying all over the ship, people we know and love.”

Vicky shrugged, twirl pausing. “I don’t love any of them.”

Allison shoved Kenn out of the way, slapping her clipboard into Vicky’s hands. “What about Whitney? Do you have any feelings for him? Because he’s dead.”

Kenn eased out of the area, not caring if they came to blows. If it wasn’t for needing more hands, Vicky would still be locked in a cell. Kenn kept walking as loud voices echoed behind him.

Dog peered up. *Where to?* He’d waited in the hall.

“The fun floor. We have the weapons stashed there. Angela thought it was a good place to hide it; right in front of their eyes.”

*She put it there so you could protect her people. She believed that is where they would be the most.*

Kenn felt shame as he realized Dog was right. Everything Angela did was for the herd. She hadn’t tried to hide weapons. She wanted them available to her people too, not just her army.

Dog stayed with Kenn, but not so far ahead that he was an easy target for prowling cats. No one had spotted them in hours.

Kenn took yet another stairwell, proud of himself for not getting lost yet. He took them to the entertainment floor, noticing what Theo had told him about services not being active. The beautiful fountain in the center of the open deck was no longer gushing and the only light was from small lamps at each intersection.

Kenn walked through quietly, scanning for intruders, but he didn’t feel anyone down here. He had read the report earlier of camp members trying to have fun, but he didn’t think anyone would be here overnight. With the main utilities turned off, it was creepy.

Kenn paused in front of the bookstore. After a few seconds of deliberation, he went in.

The bookstore was small but cleverly packed into the walls to create a generous selection. It was also cramped. Kenn worried he would break something as he went through.

Dog caught a smell that terrified him. *I’m going to check on the kids. You’ll be okay by yourself, right?*

Kenn snorted. “Go on, you coward. Get out of here.”

Kenn listened to the sound of Dog’s nails on the tile floors as he took off running.

Kenn scanned and found a few shadowy areas where almost anything could be hiding. “I want you to understand I’m not part of your war.”

Kenn moved to the informational side of the store, getting his flashlight out so he could identify the correct shelf. “I carry you around on my shoulders; I let you sleep on my bed. I make sure you get fed and I scoop your little turds. *All* those services are in danger if you involve me in your war.”

Kenn shined his light on the parenting section, skipping the popular titles from the month before the war.

Kenn chose a book that had three copies, not bothering to scan the blurb. He had bought this for Angela during her pregnancy, though he’d done it for a different reason. He’d wanted Angela to feel alone and turn to him. He needed Courtney to feel like she could do it on her own, because he wasn’t going to be there for her like he had been with Angela. During Charlie’s gestation, he’d still been convincing Angela that he was a good guy. He’d eventually worn her down through awful tactics. She never would have succumbed to him on her own. He had been thrilled with the success of his manipulations then. Now, all he felt was crushing shame he didn’t know how to get rid of.

Kenn chose a red gift bag from the stack on the counter. He put the book inside, then folded the bag so he could stuff it into his pocket. *Damn Wade.* Kenn had heard about the wills, about Wade’s indiscriminate womanizing. He had been relieved at first, but now, he was simply scared. Even if Wade was the father, Tonya was still going to find out about his affair with Courtney.

Kenn stepped out of the bookstore, hoping he wasn’t about to add to his shame. He’d chosen to do it this way so his secret would only be revealed to the few people who needed to know until he could figure out how to tell his mate.

*Click. Click.*

The radio on his belt lit up in the now familiar, hated code for a body pick up.

He sighed, keying his mike. “I’m on the way.” Kenn checked the weapons alarm, then headed to the infirmary to see who had just died.

Kenn disappeared around the corner.

The bookstore’s lower swinging door opened from the inside. Two cats eased out and padded down the corridor, following the scent of a scared Dog.

**2**

Kenn stopped at the lab before he went into the misery of the infirmary. He needed to see for himself that Tonya was okay. Missy’s warning had creeped him out.

Jeff had been getting bad vibes for the last half hour. He had moved from a spot in the corridor to right in front of the glass entrance a few minutes ago. He slid aside to let Kenn enter.

Kenn noticed the vest beneath Jeff’s Eagle gear and approved. The mood was dangerous.

Kenn paused as Cathy and Timmy came down the hall. Cathy was dressed in slacks and a sweater, while Timmy had followed the Eagles with jeans and a black shirt. They made an interesting couple, but Kenn hadn’t decided if he was okay with it. *Older men chase younger women. It’s not supposed to be the other way around. ...right?*

Timmy smiled. “We volunteered to be your private duty person.”

*He doesn’t seem to mind the gender flip.* Kenn scanned them. He assumed they had hated mess duty; it was closed for the night anyway. Gus and Brittani’s parents were showering. Then the hardworking couple would join the camp. Kenn expected Gus to go to the infirmary after that. There was no reason Cathy and Timmy couldn’t be put to work if they had spare energy. They couldn’t handle the sick people or the brig, but the kids would be easy duty for them. *I hope*. “Go to the bottom deck cabins for guard duty over a quarantined group. Take your own supplies.”

Cathy and Timmy disappeared down the hall as Kenn went into the lab and kissed Tonya on her pale cheek while scanning for trouble. Angela was on the couch again, wrinkled and curled into a ball. Kenn assumed Marc was in their cabin. The little he’d seen of Marc had verified he wasn’t ready to return to action.

Kenn dropped a small pack of Oreos into Tonya’s lab coat pocket, aware that Jeff had noticed but Tonya hadn’t. She was deep into her work. He liked that.

Kenn kept up a steady run of positive, calm thoughts to keep both women out of his head.

Tonya felt Kenn’s closed mind but didn’t probe. *I have bigger things to worry about right now than whatever you’re hiding from the boss.*

Kenn flushed.

Tonya pointed to the book in front of her. “We’ve narrowed it down as much as we can. There are multiple areas of exposure: unfiltered water, actual dunkings, and then people who were on the top deck when the last blast came in with the wind. The crews are working on a second batch of water filtering now. The first batch levels were too high. We’ve increased the amount of bleach. That’s all the updates I have.”

Angela understood Tonya was tired, but she knew Kenn needed more details. “The last mission team was in the water for a long time. We held descendant lessons on the top deck. The water in the tanks when we boarded was cleaned and ready for the chartered passengers. We cycled it through. We didn’t know to test the refills. I also spoke to Courtney and Leeann. Both of them filled canteens at the fountain by the cargo area. They didn’t know not to use ship water.”

Kenn made a few notes in his book, thrilled they had been able to narrow it. “If that holds, then we do have it contained. All sick people are in the infirmary. A third of all areas have been cleaned. It’ll take another 48 hours, but the entire ship will be sanitized except for the infirmary.”

Angela slowly sat up, not looking at her withered body. “Brittani felt well enough to help in the infirmary while you were sleeping. She’s got half of it cleaned. It was hard to move some people.”

Kenn could imagine how awful it felt to wait for people to die so she could clean their cot.

“The people who died first had a higher exposure or were exposed longer. Everyone else had a lower dose or was exposed for less time. It means we might have some hope for recovery now that we’re giving them the right amount of medication.” Tonya wanted to give Kenn some good news. She’d heard the call for a body pick up and assumed he would be the one to do it.

“A group of people want to leave the ship. I told them they could go.” Kenn wasn’t sure if he should have locked them in the brig.

“You did the right thing.” Angela stretched, locking down on her emotions. “We can’t keep them here.”

Kenn rotated toward the door, squaring his shoulders. It was time to step into the infirmary and pretend it didn’t hurt to see Safe Haven’s strongest people brought to their knees. Even the people he didn’t like, he preferred up and fighting with him, rather than lying on their backs and puking. He hoped that when all was said and done, they felt the same about him. Watching this camp die of radiation poisoning was the worst thing he had ever experienced in his life.

Angela pushed the button on her belt. “We have the situation contained now. We tracked the sources and eliminated or shut them off. There should be no more deaths in any area...except the infirmary for people who are already ill. I can’t promise you any of them will recover. I can only promise you that no one else will fall ill.” Angela took a breath. “Anyone who wants to leave the ship may do so. Be on the top deck at noon if you feel you need to leave us. There are already supplies in those boats. I’m sorry we can’t spare anything else. Thank you for all the time you spent in Safe Haven. We wish you luck.”

Kenn hoped her announcement kept the peace. He stepped inside the infirmary and did a quick scan to find the first target on his list. He approached the cots along the far wall, pulling the gift bag from his pocket. His hearing registered misery on every level, as did his other senses.

Kenn locked eyes with Courtney. *How are you?*

*Uh...okay, I think.*

*Good.* He sat the bag on Courtney’s lap as he went to Morgan. “Where do you need me?”

Courtney had frozen at the sight of Kenn coming toward her. She’d had two doses of medication now and felt better, but her heart had stopped for a brief second. She peered into the bag, not sure what to expect.

*He knows!* Terror flew through her. She stuffed How to be a Single Mother back into the gift bag and hid it beneath the blanket. *He knows.*

Morgan waved at a row of bleeding, dying people. “They want to make wills. They weren’t conscious when Marc was here doing it.”

Kenn assumed the duty, walling up his emotions. They didn’t need to see him depressed.

Kenn memorized their faces, their gestures, the unspoken dreams. He didn’t think he would get the chance to do it in the future. Most of these people weren’t going to live. Kenn tried to brace himself for that fact. *If this is what it’s like to be in charge of Safe Haven, to be a leader at all, I don’t want it. I can’t ever do this again.*

Four hours later, Kenn sat on a stool at the counter of the mess, sipping hot, strong coffee. It had taken him a few minutes to figure out how to work the machine, then fill it with water from his canteen, but he now had what he’d been craving since he woke.

Papers were spread across the counter in front of him as he compared the reports people had collected. The mess was empty; the cooks weren’t expected for half an hour. Most of the lights were off, casting weird shadows over the neat area. The mess crew had done an excellent job. It was ready for the next day of cooking. Even the tiled floor was pristine.

*I need you in the camp area!*

Kenn spilled coffee across the papers at Debra’s jarring shout. He left everything, running.

**3**

“They’re leaving!”

“They’re cooks! They have to go get the mess ready so you can eat today!” Greg and Ian were at one end of the corridor, trying to stop the same dozen camp members from leaving again. Others who’d been drawn by the noise observed through nightcaps and sleepy eyes that protested focusing in the dim light.

Debra stayed at the other door, by Gus and the bleary cooks who were waiting for her to unlock it. She couldn’t do that until Greg gave her the key.

“Stop it. We need to get to work.” Gus had woken in a bad mood.

“We need to get to the lifeboats!” Michael wasn’t taking no for an answer. He was dressed to leave.

“You heard the boss. She said noon on the top deck. Back off!” Greg had also woken grumpy.

Debra gestured wildly but no one paid attention to her. There was no one here who could translate her words and she was too tired to use a mental zap. The situation was escalating out of control.

More people came from their cabins to create a crowd of fifty pajama-clad members who pushed and shoved against each other.

“Stop it!”

“Go back to your cabins!”

Greg and Ian refused to budge as the crowd shifted toward them.

Travis, just waking, lingered in the middle of the corridor, not sure which position to take. *I want off this ship too.*

Kenn appeared in the window behind Debra, pounding on the glass. “When I get in there, I’m cracking heads!” Kenn dug out a set of master keys.

The crowd pushed toward Ian.

Debra saw the metal flash of a gun. *Get down!*

A gunshot echoed, incredibly loud in close quarters.

People screamed, running for cabins or dropping to the floor as the smell of gunpowder floated through the hall.

Michael fell into the crowd, clutching his chest; blood ran over his hands and splattered his legs.

Greg and Ian hurried into the mix to subdue whoever was shooting.

Debra did the same from the other direction.

Kenn also ran in as half a dozen troublemakers pushed by him. They fled down the dim hall.

Ellen’s stringy hair slapped against her fat cheeks as she waved the gun. “Stay back!”

Now next to her in the chaos, Travis grabbed the hot gun. He shoved Ellen to the ground.

Greg and Ian handcuffed her while Kenn and Debra checked on Michael, who was on the ground at her feet.

“I didn’t aim for him! I wanted that deaf bitch for getting in my head!” Ellen began to cry.

Bodies shifted around them as they assumed the danger was over.

Mandy, Michael’s girlfriend from Ciemus, ran toward Ellen. She reached the sobbing woman, drawing a knife from her hoodie. She stabbed the cuffed woman repeatedly in the chest.

Fresh screams filled the hall.

“Get her!” Kenn tried to shove through the stampede.

Travis stared in shock at the scene as people bumped into him from all sides. *That’s blood!*

Mandy grunted, stabbing Ellen again. “I’ll kill you!”

*You’re good enough. Do it.*

Kenn drew his gun at Angela’s mental order, aiming carefully. He shot Mandy in the back.

Camp members who had stayed to see the chaos dove into their cabins again or hit the floor with almost everyone else.

“Clear!” Greg knelt to examine both women, checking for a pulse.

There was no mental praise for the careful shot from Angela. Kenn understood. This was awful, in every way. Kenn holstered his weapon. He did a fast scan, then keyed his radio for a triple body pick up. Michael was also dead. “We need a cleaning crew in the camp cabins.” There was no reason to hide it. The people they’d been hiding it from had just caused three deaths. “Well, that went bad fast.”

The other guards tried to calm people, insisting the danger was over even though they weren’t positive that was true. People on the edge did crazy things and there was now a dozen of them loose on the ship.

“A group of camp members are going to the lifeboats. Do not stop them.” Kenn didn’t want angry, gunslinging Eagles running around the ship any more than he wanted camp members doing it. Someone with the experience to handle it would answer that call. Hopefully, they would understand he was busy here trying to prevent more panic.

Kenn joined Gus, who was still staring in shock. “There’s a package on the counter of the mess for you. The orders came from the boss.”

Gus was able to guess what it was. Two hours ago, he would have protested vehemently. Now, he was in complete agreement. “Is it okay if we go?”

Kenn waved off other Eagles coming to the doors. “Yes. This area will be your first delivery?”

Gus shrugged. “We give it to the delivery crew. I don’t know the pecking order on that.”

“When they pick it up, tell them that also came from the boss. Feed this zone first. They’ll cooperate.”

Gus motioned to Brittani’s parents, then the others who had volunteered to help. They traveled the dim, groaning passages in a small, twitchy cluster, but they were all glad to be out of the main camp area.

“Are we arresting anyone?” Ian was eager. He still wanted payback for the beating he had taken.

Travis gravitated toward them, not anticipating the physical scuffles that might come next. He was still sore from the last one.

Kenn cast glares at the people who hadn’t joined the others but might still be part of the problem. “I think seeing three people die in front of them will calm things down. As long as they don’t do anything else, we’ll just put it in a report and move on.”

Fresh tension went through the corridor at his announcement. It reminded them all there would be hell to pay for the bad behavior.

More people went back to their cabins, chattering and muttering while avoiding the mess on the floor, chairs and one wall.

“Do we have other injuries or damages we need to be concerned with right now?” Kenn scanned for Greg, the most levelheaded of the group. He didn’t see the man now.

“I don’t think so. People are just shaken up.” Ian began checking each cabin to make sure that was true.

“Good.” Kenn considered for a moment, relying on his training with Adrian for how to handle a twitchy camp. “They need something to do.”

Travis made a face. “I don’t think reading or coloring pictures is going to cut it this time.”

“I agree. How about giving me a recommendation instead of giving me shit?”

Travis flushed, mind going blank again.

Kenn shook his head, disgusted. “I don’t understand why my ol’ lady likes you guys so much. You’re really not all that.” Kenn waved Ian back over. “Ideas for occupying the sheep?”

Ian considered their options. “At this point, I might be hungry. I’d be scared too, and since the adrenaline wore off, I’d get sleepy. After, I might start getting angry again…”

Kenn waited patiently, listening to the camp lock doors around them. They liked having someone from leadership here. *I’ll have to stay for a while.*

“But I wouldn’t be upset if I was entertained.” Ian’s brows came together. “Maybe we should open the second entertainment floor; let them spend eight hours exploring the shops. Well over half the camp hasn’t enjoyed any of the amenities on the ship yet.”

Kenn spent a minute considering how they would keep order in that situation, then nodded. “I’m going to be here for the next hour. I’ll draw up notes on it. In the meantime, you have duty on the bridge.”

Ian checked to make sure his gun was loaded. “While I’m up there, I’ll make sure we still have a Captain.”

Kenn was reasonably confident the person now manning the helm would be able to handle it, but he couldn’t help the nervousness. He wanted another reliable set of hands up there.

“Do you want me to go help...?”

Kenn grunted at Travis’s hesitant tone. “No. I want you to assist the body crew; then stay with them. You’re not good with live people. We’ll see how you do handling the dead.”

Chapter Sixteen

**How Do I Pick?**

**A close up of a sign

Description automatically generated**

December 7th

**4am**

**1**

**“W**hat’s that sound?” Marc paused at the bottom of the steps, enjoying the salty breeze blowing through. Neither man had a radio on. They had been told by a delivery crew that they were part of the next shift change. Marc had been eager. He didn’t care they had been ordered to go incognito through the employee halls.

Neil had also been relieved by the order. He didn’t want to take another beating to keep Marc in the cabin.

The sound swelled, clearing into panicking footsteps in the predawn stillness.

Marc tried to bring up a shield, but he didn’t have the energy.

Neil brought up a shield around both of them as he slid in front of Marc.

Marc scowled at the back of Neil’s head. “You are such a liar!”

Watching from the bridge above them, Theo was stunned by the revelation. The light on the deck had given him a clear view. *Neil’s a descendant!*

Neil winced, bracing as the steps peaked.

Angry faces appeared in the shadowy stairwell. A group of people carrying bags and weapons made it to the top landing; they spotted Neil and stopped. They looked at Marc next and saw he had a shield up.

Anger flashed again at the magic use. They rushed toward the lifeboats, casting both men warning glares.

Plastic sheets flapped in the breeze. The bridge was covered in it to block the captain from a sudden radioactive storm. Cool air rushed over the group, but it didn’t clear the hot heads.

Marc didn’t see any guards following the small mob. He stepped around Neil, wishing sunrise would hurry. The darkness made it impossible to distinguish hands or intent. Anyone could draw a weapon right now and try to kill him. He wouldn’t be able to see it coming.

Neil followed him, keeping his shield in place. It was luck that everyone was assuming Marc was the one doing it. Neil shrank the shield around the wolfman, then stayed on his heels, trying to reclaim his appearance of being a bad ass. He would need that later when people found out.

Marc joined the angry crowd, not yelling or ordering them around. These people weren’t going to do anything they didn’t want to. All he could do was get them off the ship faster.

Perry and Bobbyjean knelt to read the instructions for lowering the lifeboat. They both wore bulging backpacks.

Marc shined his flashlight on the winch. “I can tell you what to do while you do it. I would do it for you, but I’m a little sick right now.”

A small wave of panic went through the mob.

Perry knew Marc wasn’t contagious “No tricks.”

Marc gave him an ugly glare. “*You’re* the problem, not me. Do what I tell you and you’ll be gone in five minutes.”

Perry wanted to argue, but he wanted to be off this boat more than he wanted to make a point. He didn’t check out the view or enjoy the air. He wanted to be gone.

“Where do you think you’re going to go?” Neil gestured. “It’s all open ocean.”

“We’re going back to the UN ship.” Bobbyjean sneered. “We can sail that, without magic users.”

More footsteps sounded as a few Eagles finally reached the top deck. Debra was in the lead. They slowed as they realized Marc almost had the crowd under control by giving them what they wanted.

Theo resumed his place in the bridge, storing the nasty secret he’d learned about Neil. *I guess I wasn’t the only one hiding things.*

Debra gestured at the Eagles.

Next to her, Conner translated, whispering. “Marc is supposed to sail the ship now. Get him to his post.”

Eagles advanced as Neil took over supervising the two men lowering the lifeboat. The calm ocean lapped against the ship as the crowd observed the procedure. Multiple flashlights provided a view and eerie shadows.

Neil let go of the shield and pushed Marc toward the rear, where Eagles tugged on him until he was in the back of the crowd.

Debra took his arm, pointing at the bridge.

Her long-sleeved shirt and jeans were covered in stains, telling Marc she’d been working hard. Conner was the same, though he was sporting a fresh bruise on his cheek that implied someone had hit him or he’d walked into something. Marc was betting on the latter. It was dim in the halls and they didn’t have a new body or prisoner. Marc doubted Debra would put up with anyone hitting Conner on her watch.

Marc went up to the bridge, hoping nothing else went wrong. Everyone on this ship was an amateur.

Debra and Conner lingered in the rear of the group for a minute. When the lifeboat finally began to lower, Debra tugged on his arm. The situation was under control. *We have other things to cover.*

Conner checked his book as they went back down into the ship. “We have reports of looting from the mess to check, or we can…”

Marc watched them leave, feeling the tension still in the air. He rotated to Theo, aware of the new physique, but he wasn’t sure those cut pecs were worth the hell that Theo was getting from Debra. “What is it?”

Theo pointed at the fuel gauge, keeping his voice down. “The last crew miscalculated. We’re going to need to refuel soon or we’ll be adrift.”

Marc’s heart thumped at Theo’s tone. “How soon?”

Theo grimaced. “Two days, tops.”

Debra and Conner paused as they hit the bottom of the stairwell. They’d caught Theo’s revelation, then Marc’s edge of mental panic.

Debra went on, signing.

Conner shrugged. “You’re right. I know. They’ll handle it.”

Debra led the way, glad Conner was reasonable. It was great to have someone to converse with who wasn’t panicking at every tough situation. Right now, it seemed like that was all they had.

They both slid aside so the cleaning crew could access the corridor to exit the living area.

“It’s all done in there. It needs to sit for another two hours. Then the camp can be moved back in.” Trent continued on his way to the waste area.

Debra put it in her book, then went toward the infirmary. She also wanted to stop by the lab to see if Tonya had any new test results.

Conner stayed on her heels, trying not to be creeped out by the environment. He had lived in much worse.

They moved aside again as the body crew stepped out of the elevator at the intersection. Travis and Jonny lugged a corpse between them, grunting and dripping sweat.

Conner couldn’t see who was under the sheet, but it was a good guess that a camp member had gotten out of hand.

Debra and Conner took the stairs while the body crew disappeared into the elevator. Debra was glad shift change would be coming soon. She was exhausted. So was everyone else. Many people laboring right now were at the end of a 24-hour shift. The delivery crew was finally sleeping, but they were set to return at dawn so they could pass out supplies to the camp while Gus got the morning meal ready. The delivery and body crews were working almost nonstop, as were the medics.

Debra scanned her notes and saw the incinerator team had returned to duty, including Zack. Vicky was also down there, but Debra wasn’t certain how much help the weeping woman would be. Whitney’s death had brought emotions from Vicky that none of them had expected. Debra was suspicious of it. She hadn’t thought Vicky cared about Whitney. She believed the woman was using it to gain sympathy.

Conner sighed. “So do I.”

Debra tried to find another burst of strength as she came down the stairs to the lab.

She hadn’t reached the glass before Tonya pointed. *I don’t have anything new yet. Don’t nag me, woman.*

Debra snickered, moving toward the infirmary instead.

A group of people came from that door, carrying waste bags. They followed another body team to the elevator.

Debra and Conner paused as more people exited the infirmary.

A group of camp members came from the prep area by the lab and went toward the infirmary.

Caught in the middle, Debra began directing traffic.

“What’s going on in there?” Conner asked before Debra could signal it.

“Brittani’s almost got the place cleaned.” Morgan helped Courtney sit in the chair outside the door. He patted the woman’s shoulder, hoping this was an honest recovery for her. He didn’t get his hopes up. All the patients had a good stretch...before they died. “We’ll have you back in bed in a few minutes.”

Courtney grimaced, wishing she was well enough for a shower. Her clothes were filthy; she stank. “It feels good to be sitting up.”

More non-critical patients were brought out of the infirmary. Debra spotted Tonya’s guard, Peter, who had replaced Jeff for shift change. Debra frowned at him for being away from the lab door.

Peter hurried back to his post, hitching up his loose pants. With all the movement in the passages, he hadn’t been sure who he was supposed to guard.

*Rookies!* Debra snorted frustration. She returned to directing traffic around the infirmary while Brittani did her whirlwind cleanup.

In the chaos, a shadow in the crowd knelt to pick something up and slipped under the couch outside the lab. He stayed there, waiting.

**2**

Kenn held the door for Gus as the big man came down the dingy hall carrying a huge, steaming pot. “Breakfast is served. Line up.”

Kenn waited for someone to mention they’d already put breakfast into the baskets from last night’s dinner, but the camp hurried out to get a serving of something fresh.

Brittani’s father, Dwight, placed a bag of plastic utensils and paper bowls next to the pot, then followed Gus out. Dwight scanned the cabins for his son as they left but he was terrified to ask.

“Form a line on each side of this desk.” Kenn pointed. “Food on one side; drinks on the other.” While he’d been talking to people, calming them, Kenn had activated both coffee pots. “Who wants cream?”

The camp gathered around, eager for a warm meal and a cup of soothing coffee. More people had finally started to get their showers. A few were even reading books in chairs nearby, but Kenn didn’t ignore the lingering edge of fear.

“Have you seen Jonny or Drew?” Ian was still trying to verify locations of a few people. He scratched at a spot on his back that he couldn’t fully reach.

“No.” Kenn opened the lid on the pot. Butter and cinnamon smacked him in the face.

“I don’t have them yet.” Ian sniffed, stomach growling. “I’ll add them to the mia list.”

“Okay.” Kenn assumed those guards were in a different area or even in the infirmary. It was also possible they were both dead. Right now, he wasn’t able to keep track of everyone. It felt a lot like his failure during Safe Haven’s first bugout.

*The oatmeal smells good.* Kenn scooped out a small bowl for himself, wishing he could actually eat it.

Chills broke out on Kenn’s arms.

The ship’s PA system hummed to life with Marc’s voice. “It’s time for the rest of shift change, Safe Haven. Good morning. Let’s try to have a calm, peaceful day of recovery.”

All over the ship, people who had been pre-notified by Debra moved toward their job location.

Kenn tensed as he felt a descendant mind trying to connect through the excited mental chaos of bored people getting to do something different.

*The sniper is in his blind! Sniper!*

Kenn dropped the oatmeal ladle, running. He shoved confused people out of his way. After Missy’s warning, he didn’t need more information from Debra. Tonya was in danger.

**3**

“We’re ready to start moving people back in now.” Brittani spoke through the infirmary window. She shoved dirty curls out of her face as she wiped away sweat.

*There she is!* Brian slipped from under the couch, gun in hand. He’d been waiting for the sound of that voice outside the protection of the infirmary.

“Stop right there!” James pulled his gun as he ran forward.

Brian spun around, squeezing the trigger. He hit James.

James slid down the wall next to the lab, leaving a blood smear.

Brian spun around as people screamed and fled into the infirmary or down the dim corridors. A couple of the braver people hurried toward him, but the patients in chairs were helpless as Brian pulled the trigger again.

“Where are you?!” He fired at a glimpse of dark skin in the cowering crowd, hoping it was Brittani. “You’ll never punch me again!” He fired.

Bodies dropped; people screamed.

Trapped inside the infirmary, Angela shoved against the incoming crowd, trying to reach the door. Her weak body was no match for their fear.

Tonya opened the lab door, gun ready. She did it quietly, hoping Brian didn’t hear her.

Flying down the stairs, Kenn saw it all unfolding. “No!”

Brian rotated back toward the lab, lifting his gun, finger tightening on the trigger.

Tonya fired.

Brian squeezed off a single round before Tonya’s bullet slammed into his chest.

Tonya gasped as a hand jerked her down. She landed in a warm, bloody lap.

The slug pierced the glass above her, shattering it and several pieces of equipment.

Brian slumped to the ground, gun falling from his hand.

People hurried forward to grab the gun, but they didn’t try to save his life. Instead, the medics hurried to help people who had been hit by his gunfire.

Face to face, Tonya stared at James, feeling like the breath had been knocked out of her.

James gave her a little shake, rattling shards of glass from her hair. “What were you thinking?!”

Tonya tried to give him a smile, hands coming up to stem the flow of blood from his shoulder. “I have a vest on.”

James snorted in painful anger. “Our vests will not stop penetration, god damn it! I’m so sick of hearing that. All it does is lessen the damage when the bullet hits these cheap plates and shoots upward. You have less than a 10% chance of *any* armor actually stopping a bullet at such close range. My blood is proof of that!”

Tonya frowned. “I could have been killed.”

James slid her hand off his bloody wound. “You *should* be dead right now. He wasn’t aiming for your vest. He was aiming for your head.”

People surrounded them, trying to give aid. Glass crunched under their boots.

James pushed more hands away. “It’s my fault. I didn’t know he was under the couch.”

“You saved my life.” Tonya glared up at Kenn, who had just reached them. “And that’s all that matters. You’re not going to be punished for something you couldn’t control.”

Kenn nodded, heart cramping. “In fact, you’re going to get a thank you.” Kenn helped the bloody soldier to his feet. “First, we’ll get that bullet out.”

James pulled free of Kenn’s grip. He helped Tonya stand, scanning her for injuries. He swayed on his feet. “She needs a new guard.”

Tonya hadn’t realized how dangerous camp technician would be. She controlled a shudder as she scanned all the blood around the new bodies.

“She can stick with me for a minute.” Kenn tucked her under his arm as Morgan helped James toward the infirmary. Kenn wanted to keep her close until his heart settled back into a normal rhythm.

Tonya also pulled away from Kenn. She put James’s other arm around her neck and helped him into the infirmary, not noticing the blood pouring over her arm. “I can’t believe you saved my life. I thought you’d forgotten all about our adventures together.”

They went inside, leaving Kenn frowning. *I should have been the one to save her. I’ll pay for that at some point.*

Kenn scanned the scene, hoping not to find any bodies. His hopes were dashed as he picked out Katie and Zoey lying near the couch.

Kenn clicked his radio in the code for another triple body pick up, then went into the infirmary to check for other serious injuries. Not finding any, he scanned for Brittani, hoping she had survived unharmed. She might be able to tell them what made Brian hate her so much that he’d tried to kill her and taken two innocent lives instead.

**4**

“I think I can save one of them.”

Angela turned to Conner, who had leaned down to whisper in her ear. It had been half an hour since the shooting. “What?”

“I’ve been saving up my energy. I’m ready to try.” He scanned the cots of bleeding, crying people, filthy hands coming up. “How do I pick?”

Angela understood his misery. She was sharing every little bit that returned with whoever was most critical at that moment. Conner was being smarter with his energy, though he would only be able to help one person at a time. “Ben, Pam, and Jennifer are the worst.”

Conner scanned those cots; they had all been placed along the rear wall together. *That must be the critical zone.* “Can you pick one?”

Angela shook her head. “I really can’t. I need all of them. I can’t imagine our future without them.” She stepped around him to help Morgan extract the bullet lodged in James’s shoulder. They’d stopped the bleeding and started replacing the blood he was missing. Tonya was helping, though that consisted more of keeping James’s attention occupied than actually doing anything.

Conner didn’t want to make the choice. He stalled by scanning the infirmary. He saw camp members assisting friends and acquaintances that needed to be bathed in alcohol to keep their fevers down. The reducers weren’t strong enough by themselves. IV bags were being changed, under the supervision of Ed and Jeff. Conner hadn’t known either of them had medical skills. He assumed someone had shown the tired men how to do it, which also proved how desperate the situation was. Normally, the medics would never allow IVs to be handled by someone else.

Over near the infirmary doors, two bodies were wrapped in bloody sheets. The mess on the floor had been cleaned up to keep them from tracking it all through the infirmary, but the window and hall wall were still coated in crimson splatters. Conner hoped the cleaning crew came through soon. It was the only place that still looked bad.

Thanks to Brittani, the infirmary had been cleaned, though at least half a dozen patients were dirtying it back up with bodily functions they couldn’t control. Conner had nothing but sympathy for them, especially the row of children along the wall by the medical desk. There were only ten kids left in the infirmary now. It hurt Conner as he tried to remember who had been here earlier, who had died, but couldn’t.

Debra came to Conner’s elbow, signing.

Conner nodded, removing blood from his hands with an alcohol wipe. “About five minutes.”

Debra left the boy alone, not asking who he had decided to save. It was an awful choice. If she had healing gifts, she would have only chosen children, but that was a personal decision she was glad she didn’t have to make. She liked everyone on the ship. She didn’t want any of them to die.

Several patients were watching Conner, aware of his moral dilemma. As his eyes swung around, resting on them, every adult head shook, denying him. Weak hands pointed at the shrinking row of kids.

Conner was horrified and impressed by their choice to save the children above themselves. *That’s what I would want too.* Conner went to the children and sank down between two cots, wondering if he could find enough energy for a double.

The descendants in the infirmary kept an eye and a mind on Conner’s progress as he began to heal two children. The sick people were hopeful it would be successful, that Conner would come around to save them when it was their turn in the critical row.

“Put it right there.”

Brittani’s voice echoed outside the infirmary. She was directing the cleanup out there, enlisting the help of roamers. Eagles had shown up to assist with the chaos and been put to work. Three lifeboats of people had left Safe Haven now, but it didn’t feel as though their population had taken a hit yet. None of those people had been important to the day-to-day running of the camp, unlike the ill people they were losing. If the camp knew how bad it was in here, they might have been more like those who’d abandoned ship. As it was, their brig guest and the camp members in the cabins had been knocked out with breakfast. Other than the infirmary, it should be a peaceful shift.

Kenn’s voice also echoed as he tried to determine why Brian had wanted to kill Brittani.

Brittani’s raised voice echoed back the confusion that everyone else was feeling. Many of them assumed Brian had snapped under the stress of not knowing who might die next.

Debra went out in the hall. She was relieved to find out the attack had been personal, but it also worried her. Safe Haven’s mental state wasn’t good.

Debra held the door for Kenn as he collected a body. Brian’s aim had been good for someone who was having a mental breakdown. They had two new deaths and five injuries. Other than James, the others were trims.

Gus came down the hall, body covered in flour, face coated in guilt.

Debra also held the door so he could enter the infirmary. Brittani had just ducked into the bathroom area to wash up yet again. Debra hoped she and Conner were gone before Brittani came out to find Gus there. She hadn’t read the woman’s thoughts, but she was positive Brittani was angry that Gus hadn’t come to check on her before now. *I would be if I were ill.* Debra made a mental note to check on Theo even though she was angry with him.

The ship PA system crackled, making people jump on every deck.

“Hello again, Safe Haven.” Marc’s voice was weak but calm, sending relief through people who were awake to hear it. “We’re going to refuel the ship in the next 36-hours. I wanted to prepare everyone for the noise and get permission from the boss to move us into position.”

Angela was busy. Morgan wasn’t having any luck sewing up James’s small, slippery artery because her hands were too shaky to keep it still.

Kenn keyed his mike. “You’re the boss up there. Do what you think is best.”

Everyone liked hearing that. They trusted Marc to be their captain.

“Copy. That means you’re going to be hearing noises from the ship. That will be me. Captain, out.”

Courtney glanced up as the infirmary door opened again. She watched Kenn take a body out, forgetting she wasn’t alone in the room.

Nauseated, Tonya glanced away from James’s surgery in time to see Courtney staring at Kenn. Fury went through the redhead.

“Save it for later.” Angela couldn’t handle one more moment of drama right now without snapping.

Tonya patted James’s bloody hand as she turned back. “And there will be a later. You can bet on it.”

James took that as her saying he would survive. He forced a smile through the pain. He’d refused a numbing shot, insisting they get him done and out of the way so the medics could concentrate on real patients.

Angela made a mental note to assign Courtney a guard. She looked over to see Brittani glaring at Gus. *Damn. There’s another pot about to boil over.*

*You can take that to the bank.* Brittani was standing outside the bathroom. Her raw hands were clenched into fists and her lips were thin lines across her face, but she didn’t respond other than to point at the door.

Gus left. He had been expecting her anger. He’d just needed to know she was okay. Later, he hoped she would let him explain that he hadn’t known she was injured until a short time ago.

Angela caught it all. *Gus may need a guard too. She’s pissed*

*Did it work?* Debra lifted a brow at Conner as he joined her in the hall.

Conner followed her toward the mess, where they still needed to investigate the report of the looting. *I think so. We’ll know in a few hours.*

Debra wanted it to help, but she was also worried Conner would be forced to heal everyone until he was a withered husk like Angela was becoming. It was hard to view her idol that way. Angela had been a pillar of strength to Debra, even during her recovery from losing the baby. Seeing her like this was horrible. It might have shaken her confidence in becoming more powerful. Debra wasn’t sure how far up that ladder she wanted to climb now. It didn’t seem like there were many perks at the top.

Conner rapped on the door of the mess. “Coming in for updates.”

Screeching noises echoed as booths were dragged away. Dwight opened the door and retreated to allow them inside.

The pungent aroma of fresh bread slapped Conner’s nose, making his mouth water.

As soon as they were in, he and Dwight dragged the booths back over.

Conner and Debra picked up the bad vibes next. They joined Brittani’s parents at the counter. The older couple was covered in flour, like Gus had been, telling them he’d stopped everything and ran when he’d found out someone tried to kill Brittani.

Dwight pointed. “We sprinkled baking soda on the floor. There are footprints.”

Debra knelt to examine the tracks, noticing open cabinets, while Conner translated.

“Is anything missing?”

“Food, water. Small amounts.” Brittani’s dad didn’t normally say much, but he was furious this time. “How dare someone break in here right now! Don’t they understand what’s going on?!”

Thelma patted her husband’s arm. “The boss will handle it.” Thelma was eager for it to be over too, but she also understood her daughter’s status in Safe Haven had changed again. She wanted Brittani to be happy, even if it hurt Gus.

Debra nodded, signing.

Conner translated. “She said the boss is going to be harsh on anyone we arrest. Whoever did this will probably be kicked off the ship.”

That was satisfying to the people who were working hard to keep everyone fed.

“Have you seen Lou?” Thelma looked at Debra, certain the deaf woman would tell her the truth.

Debra frowned, nodding.

The ship groaned loudly, drawing attention. Pipes cringed and clanked all through the cruise liner, causing ugly echoes and alarmed shouts.

Dwight went to the sink and rotated the knob. Horrible spitting noises came out, but that was it. “We just lost our water.”

*Damn it!* Debra rotated toward the door to check on the latest crisis.

Conner followed, praying it was something simple. Safe Haven couldn’t take much more.

Chapter Seventeen

**Queasy Gizzard**

****

8am

**1**

**R**adios crackled. “That’s the water crew trying to get a fresh batch running through. We have delivery teams bringing up reserve water. There’s no reason to panic over this. It’s a good sign.”

Kenn’s sarcastic, tired update over the radio brought the hyper mood down a notch. He was on rounds now that the bodies had been delivered to the incinerator, where the waste disposal team was once again in full burn. Kenn hoped things stayed quiet this time so he could finish rounds.

Kenn tapped on the brig door and entered. He saw Kronus sitting on the floor in the rear of his cell. Jayda was sitting on a stool at the guard desk, enjoying a bowl of oatmeal.

Kenn smirked at the dirty angel. “Not hungry?”

Kronus shot Kenn a nasty glare but didn’t respond.

Kenn joined Jayda at the post, setting a bag on the small desk. “I brought you some supplies since I don’t have another man free for guard duty yet.”

Jayda glanced into the bag, eyes widening.

Kenn kept his body between her and Kronus’s cell so the angel couldn’t see. He had little doubt the man was trying to read their minds, but he wouldn’t understand, and the drugs would make it hard.

Kenn turned around. “If you can be reasonable, I can get you a shower. Hell, I may be able to find you a beer.”

Kronus stood, gesturing wildly. “I’ll make you pay for this! No one keeps me waiting!”

Jayda stepped around Kenn and aimed the dart gun. She pulled the trigger while Kronus was still trying to figure out what she was holding.

The dart smacked him in the arm, sinking in deep.

Kenn chuckled. “Wow. She pulled the trigger on you faster than I would have.”

Kronus sank to the ground as the drugs began to take effect. His filthy clothes began to soak up a puddle from the floor of his cell.

Jayda returned to the stool, putting the gun on the desk for the next time. She gathered her short, dark hair into a bun and clipped it, sweating. There wasn’t a breeze down here with the windows closed.

Kenn took a minute to glance into the other cells. The rest of their prisoners were either sleeping or resting on their cots, even Ramer, though his hands were twitching. Kenn wished there was something he could do to help Ramer through the withdrawals, but there wasn’t. Some bad habits had to be broken alone.

“I didn’t mean to shoot her.” Sheldon glanced up from his cot. His eyes were swelled from where he’d been crying. Rose’s blood had dried to his shirt and hands. “I was scared.”

Kenn didn’t offer comfort. Sheldon had killed someone. There was going to be a price to pay for that. He couldn’t just say sorry and walk.

“You’re gonna hang me, aren’t you?”

“Stop crying.” Jayda was out of patience. “You did something stupid; it cost someone their life. All you care about is how it affects you. What about her friends, her family? What about her future in this camp? Maybe you should worry more about other people and less about yourself. Then you wouldn’t be so scared you’re shooting zombies in the dark.”

Sheldon fell silent, more tears slipping from under his lashes.

Kenn peered into the cell across from Kronus and found Adrian watching the angel pass out. Adrian had headphones on. He looked like he’d been sleeping until Kronus started yelling.

Adrian slipped off the earbuds. “Did he make fun of her singing again? I told him not to do that.”

Kenn gave a weak chuckle. He glanced down to see Dog appear at his heels. “There you are, coward.”

Dog huffed*. I always run from angry pussy. Don’t you?*

Nearly everyone in the brig laughed.

Dog pawed at Adrian. *Marc wants you, after you shower.* Dog’s nose wrinkled. *You stink.*

Adrian flushed. “What does he want me for?”

Kenn frowned. “It doesn’t matter. Get a shower and get up there.”

Adrian left, proud of Kenn for how well he was handling this crisis. It was a far cry from the selfish, self-righteous Marine who had joined his camp ten months ago.

Jayda motioned Kenn over as Adrian left, not wanting the prisoners to hear her question.

Kenn knew what was coming, but he let her ask anyway. This was one of those moments all future Eagles had to decide for themselves before they could fully commit. He was only surprised it was coming from Jayda.

“Is it right? What we’re doing with the drugs?”

Kenn shook his head. “No, it’s not. In an ideal world, we would never need to use these methods. If the camp finds out we drugged their oatmeal, we may lose another group of them. We’ve already had three lifeboats of people leave.”

Jayda realized Kenn was trusting her with an important secret. “I can understand about the camp, but the prisoner is locked in.”

Kenn glanced at Kronus, who was now sitting in the corner of his cell, drooling. “He’s not a normal prisoner. When Adrian comes back from his break, have him tell you how things went in the higher power meeting and how they found Kronus. I think that’ll help you understand why we’ve chosen to handle him this way.”

Jayda realized Kenn had misunderstood. “No, I mean why are we using drugs instead of just killing him? He’s obviously dangerous, to all of us.”

Kenn stared.

Jayda shrugged. “I once heard on a ship, there shouldn’t be any fat on the bone. If they don’t serve a purpose, they should be eliminated.”

The words sent chills through the prisoners who heard.

It gave Kenn a new measure of respect for the woman he had viewed as a useless loudmouth until now. “I personally agree, but there are some lines Safe Haven can’t cross or we’ll revert into the old ways that destroyed the world. Killing unarmed people for minor crimes is one of those lines we can’t cross.” Kenn held up a finger. “I need to make a quick announcement. Hang on.” Radios crackled on the Eagle channel. “I’m holding an update meeting in the prep area by the lab in thirty minutes. Be there if you can.”

Kenn took the stool next to Jayda, spending a few of his precious minutes to guide the next Eagle into Angela’s army.

**2**

“Go get a shower and return.” Kenn pointed at the open door half an hour later. Quinn smelled worse than any of them. He couldn’t stay in this cramped office for the meeting. No one’s stomach was that strong.

Quinn left without argument. Kenn would be able to guard Tonya while he was holding his meeting. Quinn was looking forward to the hot shower, but he planned to hurry back to verify Kendle had attended the meeting. He hadn’t seen her in a full shift now. He was starting to get worried.

Kenn paused to prepare for the meeting. This was another part of leadership he hadn’t considered. Adrian and Angela had managed to stay a step ahead of the camp in most situations because they had taken a few minutes to think. The few minutes with Jayda in the brig had reminded him how important those personal moments were.

Behind him, Tonya kept working. She almost had the final batch of water tests done. She was hoping to give them good news during the meeting.

People began to come down the passages and stairs. Few of them were talking. Most were too tired to expend the energy. The rest were afraid of getting more sad news from anyone they conversed with. It was easier to just remain silent and hope the meeting gave them good news.

Kenn did a mental count as couches and chairs in the corridor began to fill. Ed, Brittani, Vicky, Stanley, and Charlie were here. They were all carrying travel mugs. Ralph was coming down the stairs, leading a group of camp members he had chosen as helpers. Gus was behind them, clean and appearing restless.

Kenn rotated toward the other hall and caught a glimpse of Trinity, Timmy, Jeff, and Greg rounding the far corner. He assumed Cathy had sent Timmy up so the kid’s area could have an update.

Kenn waited, not speaking to anyone yet. Anything he said would just be repeated in the meeting. He turned toward the last corridor as a final group of people came toward them. Peter, Molly, Monica, Allison, Zack, and Ian were walking together. Freshly showered, they all had red eyes and sagging shoulders.

Behind them, Theo and Harry were having a quiet discussion while they came down the hall.

Kenn rotated again as footsteps echoed from the stairs that led to the bridge. He frowned, bracing to scold Marc for leaving his post.

Neil appeared, smiling through bruises and a black eye.

Kenn realized Marc had done the same as Cathy; he’d sent an emissary to retrieve an update.

Dog sat next to Kenn, shaking off dust. *I will guard while you have your meeting.*

Kenn was relieved. He didn’t trust Marc to protect Tonya, but he did trust Marc’s pet. Dog was loyal to any duty he was given. Kenn knew that now. He’d also figured out his previous pettiness against the wolf would still have to be paid for. He didn’t assume them working together was giving him a pass. “Are we all here?”

Charlie shook his head. “Conner and Jonny aren’t.”

“Pretty sure they’re catching a nap.” Kenn didn’t mention the fact that Shawn, Greg, and Drew were also missing. He waited for those names to be mentioned. When no one spoke up, he got the meeting rolling. “Let’s start with missing people.”

“Only a few left.” Ian got his book out, curling his sore toes inside his boots. He hadn’t had them off, except to shower, in days now. “I’ve managed to account for everyone, except this list.” He handed the paper to Ken.

“I’ll compare it to mine.” Kenn stored the paper in his full book. “The water is about to come back on. The last test was okay. Tonya is waiting for a confirmation.”

Tonya tapped on the glass, more red curls slipping loose of the ponytail. “It’s good.” She gave a thumbs up. “Turn it back on.”

Kenn gestured at Zack. “See to that as soon as this meeting is over.”

Zack was glad to have been given duty that wasn’t around the dead. “I will.”

“We’re running low on fuel. I don’t know if Marc needs a refueling team up there or not. I assume he’ll call for it. Be ready to assist when he does.” Kenn scanned his notes. “We had a break-in in the mess a few hours ago. Food and water were taken. I need someone to put a camera up.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Jeff was almost as good with electronics as Kenn.

“The shooting we experienced was a personal matter. Apparently, Brittani and Brian had gotten into an altercation in the mess. Brian was carrying a grudge. Everyone else he shot was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

It was a relief to hear, but it was also frustrating to know people were letting personal drama interfere with survival.

Ian fingered the narrow wound on his temple and then the matching part on his ear, hatred for Brian welling in his throat. *Good thing you’re already dead, dude.*

“What’s the progress on the ship cleaning?” Kenn scanned for Kendle.

“She’s on duty over the kids.” Timmy stood. “She wanted me to tell you it’s two thirds of the way done. Stanley has her notes.”

Stanley came over and handed the papers to Kenn. As he went back, he tripped over the edge of the rug. He landed in a cramped seat on the small couch already holding Ian and Jeff.

“Hey!”

“Get off me!”

Kenn sighed, moving on. “The camp will be awake in four hours. I want shift people to sleep now, so we’re ready to handle whatever comes then.”

All of them paused as someone exited the infirmary, allowing awful noises to escape. The grieving father didn’t even notice the meeting.

“That’s all I have.” Kenn yawned. “Unless anyone has anything else...”

“I think we should start holding memorial services. There are so many, some people are going to feel cheated out of their grief.” Molly’s time in the infirmary had softened her heart toward a lot of people she hadn’t liked before.

“We don’t have the manpower to contain the camp or police such an event.”

Everyone understood Kenn’s choice, though few agreed with it. Many of the people in this room had already lost friends. That grieving process could only be put on hold for so long and then it would take over on its own.

“Anyone else?”

Jeff stood, lowering his hood. “I heard something today in the shower. I wasn’t going to say anything because it doesn’t feel like it should be my business. I decided against that after Brian’s shooting rampage. You have a right to know what’s going on...with the Eagles.”

Frowns came over nearly every tired face.

“What are you talking about?” Kenn controlled his queasy gizzard.

Jeff ignored the few people here shaking heads at him. “There’s a meeting being held about leadership, about going home...without Angela.”

“That won’t happen!”

“Who is it? We’ll take care of it!”

“They have a right to leave. The only prisoners on this ship are in the brig.” Adrian ignored all the nasty comments as he stepped into the hall with wet hair and clean skin. “I’m on my way up to Marc. The boss wanted me to drop this off to you.” Adrian handed Kenn a small slip of paper and left the room.

Kenn frowned as he read it. He flipped the paper over so everyone else could see it.

*Let them go.*

“That’s straight from the boss, folks. I recognize her handwriting. So does everyone else who got an envelope during our civil war. Anyone is free to attend that meeting. Anyone is free to leave. If someone wants to update me on the choice afterward, that would be lovely.” Kenn snapped his book shut. “Dismissed.”

Kenn was furious about the betrayal by some of the Eagles. He was also disappointed Angela was allowing it to happen. *Maybe Adrian can talk to her.* Adrian hadn’t seemed upset at all… Kenn’s eyes narrowed. *There is something going on.*

**3**

“You have something for me?” Marc copied the numbers from his dosimeter onto the clipboard. Around him, bright sun sparkled off everything metal, making it hard to view through the windows.

“Kenn’s getting them going on preparations. He said he’s sending a team up later to finish taping the bridge.” Adrian held out a package. “They had one more suit for Grant to switch out. Both bosses insisted you get suited up as soon as the numbers start going up.”

Marc sat it on the small desk he’d had Neil bring up for books. He would put the suit on if he needed to, without argument. He was still suffering the effects of his first radiation poisoning. He wasn’t anticipating a second blast.

Adrian moved around the bridge, checking numbers against what he remembered was accurate for a ship this size. He’d only done a small amount of research before they left America. He had assumed they would always have a captain who could handle these issues. *That was a big mistake.*

Marc nodded at the thought. “One we all made. Angela counted on that, the same as you.”

“Assuming is dangerous.” Adrian shifted to the front window, admiring the beautiful ocean view. The water they were sailing through appeared clean. He didn’t detect any debris, but he also didn’t spot any life. He would feel a lot better if there were fish or dolphins in the water that weren’t dead or in distress, like some people had reported seeing in the last debris field.

“I have the refueling center on this map.” Marc stepped away from it so Adrian could have access. He didn’t ask for Adrian’s thoughts on the matter. The blonde man knew that was why he had been called up here.

Adrian examined the map of the surrounding area, calculating not only what they would have to do to access the fuel, but also possible dangers. It was unlikely a refueling center would still have the gas they needed. A year was a long time for such a valuable resource to have gone untouched.

Marc kept track of Adrian’s thoughts, wishing he had the strength to pry deeper. Angela had a plan going. What he didn’t know was if Adrian was aware of it. In the past, Angela had used Adrian’s plans, combined with her own. This time, Marc wanted to know if Adrian had been let in.

Adrian didn’t rise to the bait, though he wanted to say several things in response to Marc’s thoughts. He was hoping that conversation didn’t take place. “I assume you considered using the reserves?”

“Yes. I also considered refueling directly from the ship we’re towing.” Marc stretched his arms, still sore. He wasn’t sure if it was from the illness or beating on Neil. “Both those actions require two full teams of healthy people to manage the stations. We should have smooth seas for the operation, but I’m not sure about manpower.”

Adrian studied Marc. “You have a bad feeling.”

Marc sighed. “I don’t think we should go to the refueling station unless we’re prepared for problems.”

“I agree, but I also agree we don’t have the manpower to refuel from the ship we’re towing or to launch our refueling craft.” Adrian shielded his eyes as the sun brightened. After days below, he couldn’t take the glare. “Do we have other options?”

Marc shrugged. “We always have another choice, but it is not a good one. We have enough fuel, I think, to make it back to the UN ship and drain those tanks. However, it’s basically the same setup as refueling from the ship we’re towing. We’d also return to a contaminated area. Out of the four options, the most realistic is to just pull into the refueling center.”

Adrian nodded, leaning on the console. “We would need about five hands and a couple of guards for that run, depending upon current occupation of the station, damage from the ocean, and lack of repairs for a year.” Adrian sighed. “I assume you want to know what I would do if I were in charge?”

Marc grunted. “You are still in charge in a lot of ways; we both know that.”

Adrian didn’t deny it, though he could feel that era quickly coming to an end. Angela no longer needed his lessons. Only specific situations, like this one, required his expertise. “Give me two minutes.”

Marc turned to check the numbers again, occupying himself with a scan of the fuel, water, and air. It was helping him stay awake, since the only thing he could see through the windows was water and hazy sunlight.

“Once this big bitch is stopped, it’ll take us a little bit to get her going again. We’ll need to make sure the station is clear before you bring it in.”

Marc left Adrian alone while he mumbled out details, remembering a recent situation where he had wished Angela would let him do the same instead of interrupting him with her well laid plans. He was looking forward to a time when she would trust him the way she did Adrian, and obviously Kenn, since he was in charge of the ship. So far, it didn’t feel like Angela had faith in his ability to lead.

“That’s all in your mind. She’s waiting for you to step up. When you do, you won’t be able to give it back to her because she doesn’t want to lead anymore.” Adrian quickly changed the topic before Marc could reply. “I’d do a four-man team under the fog that’s coming. Oh, yeah. Samantha said there’s fog coming soon.”

“Noted. Plan?”

“Myself, Greg...and Shawn, if we can pry him away from Pam.”

“I had a different crew in mind.”

“Let’s hear it.”

Marc said three names that immediately made Adrian agree. “I can work with that.”

“Good. I’d like some other updates. Did you catch the meeting?”

Adrian knew better than to lie. “Almost all of it.”

“I didn’t. I have my grid back now, but nothing else yet, and Neil is still gathering information.”

Adrian brought up his mental notes from the meeting, while scanning for Marc’s guard. He didn’t see anyone, but he could feel eyes on them. He just wasn’t sure if they were human. “We’re still trying to narrow down a few missing people. Should I add anyone to that list?”

Marc shrugged, wondering if Adrian had noticed Conner’s absence. “If Kenn is as good as Angela thinks he is, those people are already on it.”

Adrian hoped Kenn had it covered so her faith would be justified. In moments like this, the Marine had always served him well, but that still hadn’t been enough to prevent tragedies. “Water will be back on shortly. Kenn told them to be ready for your call at the refueling station. We had a break-in at the mess. Brian shot and killed Katie and Zoey because Brittani punched him a couple days ago. Bad aim. He also wounded six people.”

Marc brought up Brian in his mind; he didn’t know much about the man. He wasn’t positive when Brian had joined them, though he thought it was sometime around their mountain adventures. “What else?”

“The ship is almost clean; shift people are sleeping, and the camp will be up in about four hours.”

“What about the brig?” Marc expected a real update from that area.

“Do you want it personal or general?” Adrian had never worked directly for Marc in this manner.

“I’ve got time to kill up here. Make it personal.”

Adrian put Marc’s placeholder back on the map and settled onto the rickety stool next to the desk. “We’re drugging Kronus regularly. When he finally sleeps it all off and gets his gifts back, there’s going to be blood spilled. We’re using the cocktail from Little Rock. Each time he gets it, his gifts are locked.”

Marc wondered if the angel, like Angela, would be able to fight through the drugs and access his gifts anyway. He decided not to invite more trouble by asking.

Adrian continued. “Sheldon will need to be under suicide watch if we ever let him out of the brig. He’s torn up over killing Rose and terrified he’s going to be hanged for it.”

“He might be.”

“Thus, the terror. We should encourage him to go with the Eagles who are about to leave Safe Haven.”

Marc was stunned. In all his time here, he’d never once considered Eagles might desert them. “What is she doing about that?”

Adrian sighed miserably. “She said to let them go and forbade me to interfere in any way.”

Marc could feel how much that choice hurt Adrian. “What about Ramer? Any chance he might recover enough to help out?”

Adrian reluctantly shook his head. “He might even be a danger. Withdrawals hit in a series of waves. The last one can be nasty if the person has gone cold turkey. People can even go into cardiac arrest from it. When he reaches that stage, I’m going to recommend the medics give him something to knock him out.”

Marc was sorry Ramer had been sucked into an addiction. Ramer was normally trustworthy. “What about the kids?”

“I told Kenn he should get Angela an update on her twins at least, but that was before the shooting. He’s been busy. As for the condition of people in the infirmary, I blocked out that part of the meeting.”

Marc wasn’t mad at him for it. His shift in the infirmary had been excruciating. “How do I become Byzan?”

Adrian’s mouth dropped open.

Marc grunted. “I’ll count to ten.”

Adrian’s face darkened. “You already have that answer.”

“I want to hear it again.”

“Why?”

Marc stared at him in cool hatred.

Adrian’s shoulders slumped. If Marc became byzan, he’d never be able to beat the man. “You have to give your demon control and trust it to still share the soul with you. Most of us won’t take that risk. We understand it’s part *demon*.”

Marc waited for anything else Adrian wanted to add.

Adrian clamped his lips together.

“You can leave.”

Adrian did, relieved there wasn’t going to be more personal drama between them. He was too vulnerable right now. Any of his secrets could be accessed behind his weak walls, and as usual, he had more than one.

*Marc is considering flipping to that level. Can I do that too? Am I that brave?*

Adrian’s demon waited for his answer, begging to be trusted, to be fully accepted as they were meant to be.

Adrian wanted to. If he became a byzan, it would take all of this ship’s descendants to lock him down and that still wouldn’t be strong. If he waited, the choice would be taken from him.

*Adrian?*

He tensed at Angela’s cold voice in his mind. *Yes?*

*Never consider it again.*

*Why? I’m not bad anymore. I never really was. You know that.*

*No.*

*You know I can be trusted.*

*No.*

*But I built this camp you’re so fucking fond of! I built this!*

*And then you crushed it. Something inside you is broken. If you become byzan, you’ll force me to put you down. I won’t allow it to spread.*

*You won’t kill me. You love me.* Adrian tensed in case he was wrong about how much she cared.

So did others who were listening, hoping Adrian had just pushed her too far.

Angela’s icy amusement floated through the drafty ship and slammed into Adrian. *My plans for you are bigger than a heart attack in a dim hall to avoid your fate. You’re going to serve me, Adrian Mitchel. As will all of your descendants, throughout every branch. They will be cleansed of your stain and allowed to flourish...unless you become byzan. If you do that, I will leave Safe Haven and hunt down every last Mitchel until your line is but a memory.*

“It’s not fair!” Adrian punched the wall.

The ship groaned back at him.

*It’s delayed justice. Fair would have been letting you hang. This way, you face the people you betrayed, daily, until you die for their freedom.*

“That’s not my dream.”

*No, it’s mine. You hurt me in ways even Kenn couldn’t. I believed in you. There’s no walking away from a debt like that with me unless you die.*

People who had betrayed Angela winced as her contempt wafted through the ship in brimstone scents. *You made your choices, all of you. Now live with them or get out of my camp. The next lifeboat launches at noon.*

Chapter Eighteen

**Karma Bites**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

Noon

**1**

**“D**o you have updates for me?” Angela looked to Kenn through the door of the office they were using for preparations. Nearby, Tonya was finishing a set of tests in the lab before she and Kenn went to bed. He wanted to be wide awake when they reached the refueling station.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.” Kenn paused as he realized Angela was changing her filthy clothes. She’d been puked on and pissed on in the last hour of helping in the infirmary. He turned his back. “Are you sure you’re up to point duty?”

Angela grunted, trying to get the dirty jacket off. Her entire body was sore; she felt like someone had been beating on her for days. “Debra will be up at six. It’s not that long.” Angela wasn’t looking forward to having point either, but they both needed sleep.

Kenn observed her from the corner of his eye, not sure if he should help or mind his own business as she struggled with the bra strap. The office around her was cluttered with piles of items he’d requested, or the delivery crews thought they needed. It was messy but usable.

“Where’s Dog?”

Kenn motioned toward the dirty floor under his feet. “Down there again somewhere, hiding in the shadows. He’s still afraid the cats are out to get him.”

“They might be.” Angela grunted as the little metal hook missed again. “Damn it!”

Kenn drew in a breath as he approached her. “Don’t freak out.” He took the two ends from her trembling fingers, adeptly clipped them together, then retreated back to his position in the doorway.

“Thanks.” Angela was too tired to be scared of him or anyone else. She pulled on her last clean sweater, wishing she had one that smelled like Marc. No one was doing laundry at the moment. When this was all over, that room would be another nightmare to sort out.

Kenn scanned her long, white hair and wrinkled, starving body with guilt. He wasn’t draining himself in the infirmary. His body was still healthy.

“You’re doing your job. Stop whining.” Angela pushed off her filthy shoes, then pried the socks off her feet. “I’ll take those updates now.”

Kenn got his book out, still frowning. “Cameras are going up in the mess as we speak. We’ll have full coverage through the computer on the counter by your arm in the next half hour.”

Angela picked a pair of shoes from the pile, verified the size, and set them aside. She hoped these weren’t from their dead, but she didn’t ask. She couldn’t keep wearing her old ones. They were squishing and leaving small puddles of horror as she walked. “Keep going.”

“I don’t have much for you. Tonya is getting the next batch of tests running. It won’t be ready until we get up, so no one needs to go into the lab. I’m not putting a guard on the door, but I will put an alarm.”

Angela nodded, sifting through the pants. “Make it small. There’s a lot of traffic going through here. We’ll see anyone who tries to break in.”

“I will.” Kenn had the setup in his pocket, but he didn’t say so. It was strong enough to kill a grown man. “Some of the camp didn’t eat the oatmeal or sleep. I have a team of Eagles helping them leave now. There’s seven.”

Angela didn’t ask who it was. She would find out later when she was better equipped to handle the feeling. “How long to reach the fuel station?”

“Roughly fifteen hours. We’ll all be back on duty then.”

Angela slid off the filthy scrubs and underwear. She quickly shoved her leg into clean pants. *There’s the uneasy feeling*.

Kenn snickered but didn’t comment. He had a line into everyone’s mind right now, but he was only snooping for important things. When it came to Angela, he wasn’t snooping at all. Losing these people couldn’t be easy on her. She was holding up remarkably well considering he was positive she wanted to break down.

“How’s Marc?”

“Fine, as far as I know. Adrian was just up there. You can ask him.” Kenn stepped aside so Adrian could access the doorway.

Adrian’s heart thumped at the sight of her bare cheek disappearing into pants. He gave Kenn a quick glare. *Nice timing, dick.*

Kenn shrugged. *You can pretend you didn’t like it. I understand.*

Angela slammed the shoes on the floor and sat on the edge of the chair. “I’m going to make both of you pay for this moment.”

Kenn scowled. “I didn’t do anything! He’s the one who looked.”

“You waved me in!”

Angela slipped the shoes on. “Finish your updates, then get the fuck out of here–both of you.”

The men frowned as they realized they had pushed her over another line while trying to get her to fight back.

“I just needed to know you’re up for point duty.” Kenn hoped she didn’t hold a grudge. His list was big enough already. “Update her on Marc’s fuel plan.”

Adrian scanned Angela through their bond. He ignored Kenn’s displeasure, horrified by her condition. “Can I give you energy?”

“Save it for your next job.” Angela didn’t look at him. “Update me.”

Adrian sighed. “He has a solid plan for the refueling station. I went over it. I don’t see any problems.”

“But?” Kenn looked at Adrian expectantly.

“What makes you think there’s a but?” Adrian winced as a flash of Angela’s ass went through his mind.

Angela’s face turned redder. “We both heard your tone. Spit it out.”

Adrian felt alone in that moment. *She doesn’t want me in on this one.* “Nothing.” He headed for the hall.

“Is the water back on?” Angela pulled up her sock.

Kenn glowered at Adrian’s stiff back as he left. “Yes. So far, so good. When we get up, Tonya will run another test to verify it. Until we get a second positive test, we’re still using reserves.”

“Good.” Angela’s stomach twisted. “How’s your gizzard?”

Kenn didn’t want to admit that his was also churning. “I’m not sure what else we can do. We have to have fuel.”

Angela turned around, adjusting the clothing. She put her hair into a wild white ponytail that Kenn wanted to stroke and cut off at the same time. He hated seeing her weak now.

“What?”

“I’d feel better if I looked ahead.” Kenn joined her in the room, not wanting anyone to overhear them. He sank down on the couch, groaning at the relief. “I don’t have any *adult* descendants who can do it...”

Angela sat next to him, switching things from her dirty pockets as she spoke. “Would I do it?”

Kenn wasn’t sure if it was a trick, so he answered honestly. “Yes.”

“Do you think it’s wrong?”

He nodded. “Absolutely. We shouldn’t use minors in moments like this, then tell them it’s wrong to use that power when they want to. We don’t have to use it here.”

“Last question. Would Adrian do it?”

Kenn was surprised she’d gone there. “I’m not sure.” He looked over at her, aware that she wasn’t protesting him being so close on the couch. “Would he?”

“Never. Adrian refused to involve the children in camp security. He’s afraid if they have to kill, that it might corrupt them.”

“I worried about that too when I thought of it.”

Angela realized Kenn had a child in mind. “I can’t scan you, so you have to spill your guts. I used the last of my energy to threaten everyone.”

Kenn wanted to snicker but couldn’t. He was too worried. “Missy warned me Tonya was in danger. She’s full of restless energy. It would kill two birds with one stone, but I’m not sure it’s right.”

Adrian appeared back in the doorway. “That’s the one place where you’ve misjudged me. With children so restless they’ll endanger themselves or someone else, I did put them to work. I did it with Charlie and Conner, and a few others I believed needed it. In this situation, if you have an *in* with Missy, I would use it.”

Angela saw a shadow coming down the hall behind Adrian. She kept the knowledge to herself as she finished gathering everything from the pockets of her dirty jeans.

“I don’t know what else we can do.” Kenn sighed as the bad feeling grew stronger.

Samantha tapped Adrian on the shoulder.

He screamed, banging into the wall.

“It’s just me.” Samantha snickered. “I heard some of that. You guys have another option.”

“You are not doing it.”

“We are not taking a chance on you losing those twins.”

Angela and Kenn both denied it.

Samantha gestured at Adrian, hoping he would be on her side. “It’s not like I’m taking energy. They wouldn’t be able to evolve. There’s actually little danger.”

“What if we try it this way?” Adrian sent an image, aware that Angela didn’t have the energy to search for it on her own. He wanted to gift her until she was full and he was drained.

Kenn frowned at Adrian, standing. “No. Learn what that word means.”

“I want you back in the garden.” Angela motioned at Samantha. “I’m not going to change my mind.”

Samantha left, not surprised. She’d volunteered because she felt useless. If not for being pregnant, nothing would have kept her from the infirmary. As it was, she was doing once an hour checks through the doors while tolerating hostility from harried medics. She understood where they were coming from. They would also have to understand where she was coming from.

Angela stood, strapping on her gun belt. It felt like it weighed fifty pounds.

Kenn went into the hall to scan for trouble. She didn’t have a guard right now.

Adrian lingered, hoping for a moment alone with her to talk.

Kenn grabbed him by the arm and spun him out into the hall. “You don’t get to do that while I’m in charge.” He shoved Adrian toward the stairs, aware of his own shock as well as Angela’s surprised pleasure. He gave Adrian a threatening glare. “You can be drugged next.”

Adrian’s brows came together. “That’s not a bad idea.” He moved off down the corridor.

Kenn waited, watching the traffic in the hall. He found two small shadows at the intersection Adrian was approaching.

Chilled, Angela leaned against Kenn’s warm body. “Wait for it...”

Kenn automatically dropped an arm around her shoulders and tugged her against his heat. He could feel how cold she was.

*Wait up!* Dog trotted after Adrian.

Adrian slowed to let the dusty wolf catch up, assuming he had another message from Marc.

Kenn continued to observe, wondering if Angela gave him moments like this to rub in how wrong he’d been to treat her cruelly. This felt amazing, with her willing. She had to know that.

Dog walked in front of Adrian, leading the way. *How’s your day going?*

Adrian shrugged as they reached the intersection. “Why do you ask?”

*It’s not going to get better, so I hope it’s been good.*

“What are you talking about?” Adrian stopped in the middle of the intersection.

Dog jumped out of the way as two wild shadows lunged through the air, hissing and yipping.

“Oh! Get it off!” Adrian staggered backward as one of the cats dug into his stomach with all its claws. “Help!”

The other cat wrapped tight around Adrian’s ankle, biting and scratching.

“Bad kitty!” Adrian stumbled forward, arms flailing. “Let go! That’s *my* ear!”

Dog took off running down the corridor. *That was from the Captain.*

The big cat on Adrian’s stomach climbed his body in fast yanks up to his shoulder.

The ankle monster dug in deeper to hang on. “Son of a bitch!”

The cat jumped off his shoulder and landed on the cabinet by the infirmary.

Adrian kicked his leg out, hoping to dislodge the other feline.

The cat on the cabinet jumped again, landing on Adrian’s head. It slid, digging in.

“Ah! Call it off!” Adrian’s hands came up to protect his face as he staggered down the corridor. “Marc! Stop laughing and help me!”

Kenn and Angela were in tears. They shook against each other, trying not to be so loud that it carried into the infirmary. A few people were already coming, drawn by Adrian’s screams. Those were fading, but still continuing as he fought to extract the claws and teeth.

“That was the best shot I’ve ever seen.” Kenn was impressed at how quick karma had bitten Adrian.

Angela stilled against him. “You avoided yours when you defended me.” Angela retreated, not feeling fear or anger. She only felt pity. “Tonya knows.”

Kenn sucked in a breath. “How long?”

Angela gestured toward the bullet-chipped corridor. “Right after that.”

Kenn sighed. “Thank you for the warning. I don’t deserve it.”

“As leader of this camp, I need your personal drama to wait until we’re in the clear. I told her the same thing when she started to confront Courtney.”

Hearing the other woman’s name spoken brought it home for Kenn. “I don’t know what to do.”

Angela was surprised. “I would think you’d deny it, let her raise the baby alone and pretend it never happened.”

Kenn blew out a tired sigh. “I’m not sure I can. Blood means more to me since I joined Safe Haven.”

Angela stepped into the drafty corridor, shivering at the breeze. “That’s a choice you have to make, but it has to be later. Right now, you need to collect your angry woman and sleep.”

Kenn grunted. “If she knows, there won’t be sleep.”

“I think you’ll be surprised.” Angela knew Tonya planned to sleep hard and not speak to Kenn. That was the only concession Tonya had agreed to make when Angela gestured to her a little while ago. There was no doubt that bomb was going to explode. It might take the ship with them, but it wasn’t going to happen until this crisis was over. Angela respected Tonya for having the strength to do that. She had little doubt that the woman would follow through. Tonya honestly had changed. Kenn was the one who was still embracing parts of his old self. Until he conquered the last bit of nastiness inside, he wasn’t going to be trustworthy as a mate. Tonya had just learned that the hard way.

**2**

“The lifeboat is leaving in thirty minutes. Everyone needs to decide if they’re going.” In charge of the Eagle meeting, Travis gestured at the twenty people who had shown up. “I vote we go. They don’t need us here. All we can do is die for them.”

Jeff leaned against the wall of the empty swimming pool, glowering. “What do you mean by *them*?”

Travis retreated, hand coming up. “I didn’t mean descendants!” Salty air rifled his hair.

“I think you did.” Jeff crossed his arms over his wide chest, enjoying the breeze but not the mood.

“So do I.” Zack was next to Jeff, barely awake.

“I meant leadership! None of us are high on Angela’s list for anything except pawns in her next plan. Any of us could be the next sacrifice.” Travis wanted to say more about Angela, but he didn’t push.

Jeff did a fast scan of the people who had shown up to the center deck meeting. They were all assuming Marc, still on the bridge, couldn’t see behind him because of the sun’s glare. Jeff was a little surprised to find Brittani and Ian at this meeting, but he was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they were spies, like himself. He wasn’t leaving Safe Haven, and certainly not in the middle of a crisis like a rat deserting a sinking ship.

“This isn’t what I signed up for.” Peter had had enough brushes with death during his time in Safe Haven to be leery of pushing his luck any longer. His packed kit was on his back; he was wearing winter clothes despite the warm temperature. He was ready to go.

“It’s exactly what you signed up for.” Molly was horrified that Eagles were talking about fleeing right when they were needed most. She had just come from helping burn bodies. Her mood was ugly. “You swore to keep the peace, the same as the rest of us. Eagles don’t run.”

“I don’t want to be an Eagle anymore. I just want to survive. It’s a basic right.” The meeting was over as far as Travis was concerned. He rotated toward the ramp that led to the front deck. “I already packed my shit. I’m gonna go figure out how to lower that lifeboat.”

A few people followed him, but most didn’t, including all ten low level people the senior Eagles had expected to. Travis’s defection was something of a surprise. They’d thought he was happy as a member of Ivan’s team.

“I have a quick question.”

Travis paused, bracing. “What is it?”

Jeff moved by him, not surprised when the taller man stepped out of the way. “When did you become a coward?”

Jeff walked down the ramp before Travis could form a reply.

The rest of the Eagles who had been on the fence also left the meeting, but they didn’t go toward the front deck. All of them went below to assume the next duty they were assigned for or to finally get some sleep. Some of them had been on another 24-hour shift.

The last two people at the meeting stared at each other in dismay. Zack and Allison understood how bad it was that Eagles were deserting. When the camp found out, it might mean there would be another lifeboat of people leaving tomorrow at noon. The Eagles kept the camp stable, not leadership.

“Help me to bed?”

Allison nodded, coming over to take his thin, bruised arm. The medications were taking a toll on Zack now. He had confided the diarrhea was explosive, though not bloody. It was still better than what the patients in the infirmary were dealing with, but it was a scary reminder of what he’d gone through. Everyone had forgotten that Zack had spent time on the top deck too. His exposure hadn’t just come from burning.

As they descended the ramp, Allison looked back to count the Eagles now gathered around Travis at the lifeboat. There were five of them, barely enough to man the boat in shifts.

Brittani had lingered on the ramp to observe. It surprised her none of the panicky camp members were up here.

Jeff grinned as he passed her. “Drugged oatmeal.”

Brittani processed that. Gus had been willing to do it. She was surprised.

She followed Jeff, Zack and Allison down into the ship, confident the five people fighting with the lifeboat would never be seen again. Once you left Safe Haven’s light, that little bit of protection ended.

“Where does she want me now?” Brittani wasn’t sure if she should go disrupt the new routine of the mess or try to help in the infirmary, where she felt useless now that things had been cleaned up as much as they could be.

“When was the last time you slept?” Jeff held the door for all of them, eyeing the dirty bandage on her head.

Brittani shrugged. “Yesterday.”

“I’ll escort you to the showers, then your cabin if you like. We’re all going the same direction.”

Brittani was glad for the company. The damp, groaning ship held endless shadows to trigger terrible thoughts. The four people traversed the corridor together, chatting lightly.

Brittani tensed as they headed for the coed showers on the ship. She hadn’t fully adjusted to that yet, though she’d done it a few times now. There hadn’t been problems. She hadn’t even felt anyone staring at her, but it was different than how she’d spent most of her life.

Deciding this was another of those moments where she could conquer something that made her uneasy and stole power from her, Brittani chose to go ahead. She did want a hot shower and she would feel safer while other people were in here with her. This would be her first shower since the illness struck.

Brittani and Allison chose the full stalls in the rear of the room, while Jeff and Zack joined Trent and Corey in the open stalls in the front of the large bathroom. There were also toilets and sinks in an adjoining corridor. This was where the cruise staff had come to shower between shifts. It was built for bulk use.

Conversation started as clothes came off, driving back some of the awkwardness.

“I saw a supply delivery crew going to the cargo area.” Zack adjusted the water to as hot as he thought he could stand it, relishing the feel of having his socks and shoes off. “I’ll bet we’re starting to run low on things.”

“I heard Kenn talking to Debra and Conner yesterday about toilet paper.” Jeff stepped under the water, closing his eyes. “That feels good.”

For the next few minutes, there was only the sound of water running, and pleased grunts and groans as hardworking people tried to soothe sore muscles.

“Who has point now?” Allison wasn’t sure she could sleep if it was still Kenn.

“Angela until six, when Debra gets up.” Jeff was scheduled to guard the lab then.

“I don’t know how she’s still functioning. She looks like hell.” Brittani began to scrub, refusing to let her mind think about any of the horrible things she’d seen and heard over the last few days. All she wanted right now was a bit of mental comfort from sleep.

“She should take energy from the camp.” Zack was also eager to sleep. “It’s not like they won’t give it willingly.”

“I did think about that.” Angela entered the room, Dog on her heel. “If we don’t get a break soon, I’ll be forced to do that.”

Everyone tensed as Angela walked toward an empty shower. It was obvious that coincidence had brought her here at the same time they were discussing her; it still made them uncomfortable.

Angela wanted to offer the mental comfort they were hoping for, but she refused to lie. She got into the shower and stripped.

After she was gone, the conversation didn’t resume. Everyone hurried to eat and sleep as soon as they were finished, all dwelling on how rough Angela looked. She was a white-haired hag being escorted by a grouchy timberwolf. They all needed to rest so they could get back on duty and send her to bed. She clearly needed more recovery time.

Angela caught the thoughts, thanks to her link with Brittani. She didn’t think the beautiful woman was even aware that she was broadcasting directly to the boss. It was good to have another connection in the camp that she could depend on, but it was also disquieting. Brittani was stronger than she realized.

Dog didn’t like Angela’s reflections. It bothered him when she was feeling bad. He didn’t know how to lend her the strength physically, so he decided a distraction would be a good idea. He waited until she finished clearing the storage areas they weren’t using, then paused as she came out. *I’d like to have a mate.*

Angela was completely distracted. “Say that again.”

Dog huffed. *I want to be part of your breeding tree.*

Angela smiled wryly. “That’s a great idea. There’s just one problem. We’re on the ocean. I don’t think we’re going to find many wolves out here.”

Dog flashed her a memory of his conversation with Adrian.

*You need a mate. It would be amazing to have all the camp’s workers come from your bloodline.*

*Dog sniffed the air curiously, but his tone in Adrian’s mind wasn’t interested.*

*With those common mutts? I’d have my breed die out before polluting it that way.*

Angela frowned. “Well, that certainly makes things harder. If you want a mate like you, I’m going to have to figure out how to track them down. As far as I know, there’s not a way to do that.”

*I think I can. I’ve caught flashes before.*

Angela shrugged. “Okay. Let me know the next time you catch the scent. I’ll see what I can do.” Angela paused as Kendle came down the corridor.

Kendle stopped dead in her tracks, goosebumps breaking out across her rough skin. She had no problem defending herself against anyone else, but she would never again raise a hand or spell to Angela. It made her feel weak.

Angela didn’t glower or threaten. She motioned Kendle over, aware of Dog moving between them. In normal times, Eagles would have also come closer, hoping to stop blood from spilling on clean floors. Here and now, it was just them, a filthy carpet, and an unhappy ship waiting for the end of its usefulness. If she wanted to kill Kendle, now was the perfect time. *And I do!*

Kendle approached with slow steps, ready to take flight. She’d decided that was her only option if Angela attacked her.

“I have a job for you.”

Kendle’s heart thumped. “I’ll do it, whatever it is.” She felt it was easier to cave now. It might save her a little pain later.

“You have duty over the captain during the fuel run.”

Kendle’s heart skipped another beat. She shoved her hands into her pockets. “I didn’t hear that right.”

Angela stepped closer, voice lowering. “If I have to repeat it, you may need to use your fallback option.”

Kendle shuddered. “Why would you do that?! That’s cruel! To him!”

“The only man I trust with Marc’s life is going on the fuel run. The only female I trust with Marc’s life is a scarred, scared islander I may end up killing some day.” Angela walked away, proud of herself. Kendle loved Marc enough to kill for him, no matter who the threat was. The same couldn’t be said of anyone else on the ship except for herself. She had given Marc the best protection love could buy. “Get some sleep. You may have a ten-hour shift, depending on how long it takes to clear the station before we can start offloading the fuel.”

Kendle’s wave of happiness flew through the corridor, slapping Angela and everyone else in its path.

Angela paused. *Wait for it…*

“I hope that scarred bitch isn’t put on point duty again.”

“I know, right? She gives me the creeps.”

Vicky and Hailey came around the corner and stopped, realizing they’d been heard.

Kendle’s good mood crashed. She headed toward the kid cabins, hating everyone on the ship again.

Vicky paled. She flipped up the hood on her jacket and turned toward the opposite stairs.

Hailey waited to be yelled at. When nothing came, she flushed and followed Vicky.

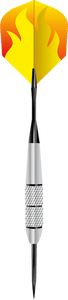
Dog stayed on Angela’s heels. *They’ve been in the cargo area. I can smell it.*

“Kenn knows.” Angela kept walking, stewing on Kendle and the curse. Until the caster recovered, it would be weak. If she died, the curse would be broken. Either way, it was definitely still in effect. Angela was impressed with how fast it was happening. Every time Kendle’s mood improved, something happened to slap her back into misery. The caster was powerful.

Angela had recognized the spell floating through the ship when it happened. She had been furious until she realized the intended target was Kendle. The caster was trying to make sure Kendle paid for trying to kill the boss. Since Angela was also carrying a grudge about that, she’d allowed the curse to land, but she’d felt a little bad. *Now, I can’t imagine telling Pam to lift it.*

Chapter Nineteen

**Let It Roll**

****

5pm

**1**

**“I** want to see the boss!” Ramer banged on the bars, jarring the door. “Let me out of here!”

Jayda was seated across from his cell. “That’s not going to happen, and you know it.” She was out of patience. Sitting here in this hot room, guarding criminals while sweating and scratching at a new rash on her arm, was torture. She wanted to do more, be more.

“You don’t understand! I need to talk to the boss!” He banged on the cell again. Sweat and anger dripped from his lean body. His legs shook. It was sad and a little scary.

On the stool nearby, Adrian took in Ramer’s condition with sympathy. “I recommended we give you something to help you through these final stages.”

“And?!”

“I’m sorry. She said no.”

Ramer punched the cell and kicked it, screaming.

Adrian picked up the dart gun, sad it had come to this. “I really am sorry.” He fired through the bars, hitting Ramer in the shoulder as he tried to duck it.

The narcotics dropped the non-descendant in two seconds, worrying Adrian, but there was little else he could do. Ramer had entered the final violent stage where his body was hunting for any trace of the drugs. His mind was going crazy demanding more of it. This part was so stressful on the human body that it could sometimes lead to a heart attack. Adrian hoped the sedative would get Ramer through the final stages.

He placed the gun on the desk, wishing he had more darts.

“Coming in!”

Charlie, Brittani, and Debra entered the brig. All three of them were wearing white shirts, though the logos were different. Adrian wondered if that had been their idea or Kenn’s. It made the crews more visible to the guards and camp members.

“We brought food.” Brittani had been on her way to bed and spotted them carrying a large load. Helping even though she was exhausted was the right thing to do.

Standing at the bars to enjoy the Ramer show, Kronus retreated, hand coming up. “I’m not eating or drinking any of that.”

Charlie shrugged, rubbing his creased fingers. “I’m not sure we brought enough anyway. The mess is low on supplies now that someone has broken in twice. We may have to ration.”

Adrian frowned. “I thought we had a camera?”

“It’s back up now. Someone cut the wires on it during the last shift change.” Charlie handed Adrian a small, heavy bag. “Have you seen Conner?”

Adrian slowly shook his head, stomach curling into a hard knot. “Not today. You?”

“No. He wasn’t at any of the meetings.”

“Pass the word to keep an eye out for him?”

“I will.” Charlie turned to Debra to see if she had anything for him to translate.

Debra had already scanned her notes. She shook her head. She just needed to check on the bridge. They had volunteered to bring the food here to save the delivery crew a stop and allow her a fast update.

Adrian began eating. He grinned. “This is good. Who cooked it?”

“Gus. He remembered my chili recipe.” Brittani had recognized the smell.

Adrian didn’t reply, busy shoveling another bite into his mouth. It was honestly the best chili he had ever tasted.

“Give me yours!” Kronus came to the bars, glaring at Brittani. He was aware that she was the woman he had hurt earlier, but he revealed no remorse as he scanned her from bandage to boots. “Are you busy later?”

Brittani’s orbs turned red. “Nope. I’d like to spend a few minutes with you.”

Adrian chuckled, coming over to shove his bowl into Kronus’s hand. “Shut up for a while. She’s more than you can handle.”

Adrian walked Brittani to the door. “I’m sorry about your brother.”

Brittani froze. “What?”

Adrian realized she didn’t know. Being his usual self, he decided to determine if she was able to stand the next level of being an Eagle. “They took his body to the disposal area last night.”

“Lou…?” Brittani ducked out of his comforting hand and ran down the hall.

Adrian made a note in his report so leadership would check on her later.

Debra gestured angrily.

Charlie translated. “That was awful. Why did you do that, you prick?!” Charlie scowled. “I have the same question, worse words.”

Adrian went to his stool and dug in the bag for another bowl. “Angela is evaluating her for a leadership position. Someone has to stay on the island when we return. It has to be someone who can function while in personal pain. This was a perfect moment for her test, which she failed.”

Charlie reacted before Debra could. “You are a giant piece of shit! Stinky, fly covered shit!”

Debra flipped Adrian the finger, then tugged Charlie out of the room before it could come to blows. They marched down the hall, comparing how much they disliked the blonde man.

Kronus let out a loud belch and dropped the bowl to the filthy floor. “Come work with me. I’ll never let anyone treat you that way.”

“Why would I?” Adrian pointed. “You can’t even get yourself out of a cell on a cruise ship.”

Kronus staggered. His sunken eyes widened as he realized he’d been tricked once again.

Adrian grinned, also getting hazy. “We’re going to nap together now. Don’t talk. I want to count your farts.” Adrian fell sleep to the sound of Jayda chuckling and Kronus falling.

**2**

*Beep! Beep!*

Kenn reached over to silence the alarm on his side of the bed. He didn’t get up yet. Tonya’s fully clad, tense body next to him said she was also awake, stewing. He wondered if she’d come up with a satisfying solution. He hadn’t.

Kenn waited for her to speak. He wasn’t sure how to start this conversation or what the outcome might be.

“I need to know why.” Tonya didn’t move yet. “And when.”

Kenn forced himself to be honest. “You were pushing for marriage. I started twitching. It’s not a good excuse, but it’s the truth.”

“In the mountain?” Tonya hadn’t been able to come up with any other time he had seemed distracted. She’d assumed it was the stress they had all been living under then.

“Yes.” Kenn waited for her to start ranting or threatening. He wasn’t sure which one the passionate redhead would opt for, but he was positive he wasn’t getting out of this cabin without bruises.

“Do you love her?”

“No.”

“You fucked her.”

Kenn snorted. “The two are not mutually exclusive.”

Tonya’s fingers clenched in the silky yellow sheet. “This isn’t funny.”

Kenn realized his attempt at lightening the mood had crashed. He hurried to put out the new flames. “I’m sorry.”

Tonya had a hundred things she wanted to scream. She’d spent the last hours resting while trying to decide how much it mattered. In the past, cheating hadn’t been a big deal because she’d never loved someone other than herself. That had changed.

Kenn sat up in the bed, stomach in a tight ball. She didn’t know the worst of it yet.

“After the crisis is over, I need her switched to the other ship. You can’t have any contact with her now, or afterward.” Tonya thought that was more than reasonable. If the situation were reversed, Kenn would be beating on someone right now.

Kenn stood. “I’m not sure I can do that.”

Tonya finally looked at him, fury growing. “Which part?”

“All of it.” Kenn picked up his kit, tensed to flee. “Courtney’s pregnant.”

**3**

Kenn slammed the door behind him. Something hard smacked against it.

“What’s all the noise?” Charlie translated for Debra as Kenn came out of his cabin.

“*You son of a bitch!*” Something else banged into the door. “*I’ll kill that little skank!*”

Kenn left, wincing at the double bruise on his shoulder from a pair of old high heeled boots. She’d thrown them at the same time and landed both hits. “She’s cranky today. Everyone should probably leave her alone.”

Charlie actually wrote it down. “What about a guard?”

“*How dare you do this to me! I don’t deserve this! You bastard!*”Something shattered inside the cabin.

“No guard needed right now.” Charlie underlined the note in his book, frowning. “I guess that secret isn’t a secret anymore.”

Kenn grunted, pulling on his jacket and then his kit. “It’s not like I meant for this to happen.”

Charlie nodded at Debra’s quick gestures. “Exactly. Thinking it through before you do it makes a difference in the outcome.”

Kenn didn’t let the ribbing get under his skin. He was already in as much trouble as he could be. He didn’t care that the camp was going to make fun of him, though it did bother him that he was going to lose some respect when they found out. What he was concerned with, surprisingly, was if Tonya would leave him over it. He had decided he wanted to be part of his child’s life, but he had no feelings for Courtney. Tonya, on the other hand, was his soulmate. He believed that now. *Losing her will crush me where nothing else can.*

“I’m ready for updates.” Kenn led the way toward the stairs. “You can walk with me.”

“Hang on. We have a message for you.” Charlie pulled the paper from his book. “Missy made us swear we would deliver this as soon as you got up.”

Kenn scanned the odd message and was surprised to discover he understood it. “That’s where I’m going now.”

The message said Missy was ready to try. Kenn wasn’t surprised the little girl already knew. He just didn’t deal well with children. He was hoping the time it took his to grow up would also teach him how to be a father. He didn’t know what to say to the little girl who had intimidated most of the camp with her brash, blunt behavior.

“My dad said to tell you she’s sweet inside.” Charlie finished the update before Kenn could ask how Marc had known what he was doing without gifts. “The last water test is good. Angela oversaw that. She went to bed half an hour ago, after Debra insisted. Dad said we’re ten hours from our destination and that’s all I have, other than the infirmary.”

All of them stepped aside so the food crew could go by. More drugged items were going to the camp.

“We had two more deaths, but no new illnesses. We do have Courtney and Amy showing signs of recovery, but we know from the pattern that can mean it’s the last good moment they have before they slip into the third stage.” Charlie handed the paper to Kenn with the other details on it, not enjoying the man’s pain at the news that Courtney could still die. “All the wounded from Brian’s shooting are improving, except for James. His wound is infected. The medics are treating it and keeping an eye on him when they can.”

Kenn put the papers in his book. “What about the kids Conner helped?” Like many of the others, Kenn was hoping they might be able to stuff the boy full of protein and use him as a healer for everyone.

“Both of them are unconscious, but they’ve lasted longer than the other people who were in stage three, so we’re hoping he gave them the strength to make it through. We won’t know for another day.”

Kenn realized what Charlie was telling him. “You’re saying we have a pattern, with stages?”

“Yes. Mom wrote it all out on a wall of the infirmary a few hours ago, along with how to treat each stage below it. It sucks that the patients are seeing it, but the medics know what to do for each person now, based on their symptoms. It should help a lot.”

“Great. What about the camp?”

“The camp started waking a couple hours ago.” Charlie waited for Debra to finish signaling. He hadn’t been along at that point to take notes. “When we told them this evening’s entertainment, the reaction was good. Their mood is okay now that most of the troublemakers are gone.”

“And the brig?”

Charlie snickered. “Jayda has a fresh box of darts and an extra gun. She starts with singing. When Kronus doesn’t obey, she picks up the gun. She said they’ll work on his dirty cell when he wakes up next time.” Charlie didn’t tell him the rest. Kenn would read it in the report. They were all impressed by how resourceful Jayda had been.

“Seems like things are under control. Good job. Go to bed now, both of you.”

Debra moved off, eager to do as instructed. She hadn’t worked this hard since joining Safe Haven.

“Have you seen Conner?” Charlie was worried.

Kenn shook his head as he watched Debra walk away. She was limping on sore feet. “No, and if I find him down there visiting Candy, there’s gonna be hell to pay.”

Charlie let it go, also eager to sleep, but he couldn’t help worrying about his friend. If Conner didn’t show up soon, Charlie had decided he was going to use his mental gifts to do a scan. He had recovered enough of his energy after helping in the infirmary that he was almost certain he could do one blast. It was another evolution he had received. He was thrilled to discover it matched his father’s. Marc had even promised to teach him how to use it.

Kenn stored that as he went down the stairs. “Hello in the hall!” He announced his presence before he arrived. “It’s Kenn. Stand down.”

Cathy came out to meet him, assuming he was here for an update. “What’s up?”

At the other end of the hall, Timmy holstered his new weapon.

Kenn peered into the cabins as he walked by, spotting Candy in one and Kendle in another. The cabins were neat and clean, with kits by the door in case they needed to relocate quickly. Kenn approved.

Both females gestured to him but didn’t rise. They knew he wasn’t here for them.

Tracy was at a small table in the center corridor between the cabins, tired, wrinkled, and covered in small bits of glitter. She saw his amused look but didn’t chuckle. “How could you do that to her?”

Kenn blanched. “How the hell does everyone know already?!”

Tracy glared at him. “Stop thinking about her or everybody on the ship will know before morning.”

Kenn had forgotten non-descendants who were pregnant with descendant babies could access their gifts. He secured his thoughts as he approached Missy, who had just come from one of the cabins. Kenn scanned all the children as he went by. Autumn, Mike, and Mia were sleeping in the cabin near where Tracy was sitting. Roy and Caleb were in another cabin, playing checkers and slurping juice boxes. Cody, Missy and Kimmie met him in the hall.

Kenn still didn’t know how this worked or what he was supposed to do. He looked at Missy, hoping the little girl did.

Missy sat in one of the small chairs she had dragged into the corridor. “Kimmie and Cody are going to help me. It’s been a long time since I’ve done this.”

Kenn instantly felt guilty. *I should have taken better care of our kids. Then they would be stronger.*

Missy patted his wrist. “Angela is sorry about it too, but we understand.”

Kenn felt tears try to come. He gruffly brushed away her touch. “Let’s get this over with.”

Everyone frowned at Kenn, except Missy. She often used the same tactics to cover her emotions.

Cody and Kimmy stood behind Missy and placed hands on her shoulders.

“Do you want to ask questions, or do you want me to let it roll?”

Kenn didn’t have many questions. “I need to know if the fuel is there and if we can get to it.”

Missy opened the doors to a vast field of power that Kenn never would have suspected in the child. He immediately linked their minds so he didn’t miss anything.

Missy tensed. “I’m opening the door...”

Power flew through the passages, blowing papers from the walls.

Timmy gathered them, assuming the kids would want to put them back up when this was done.

Kenn watched in amazement. Missy’s gift was different than the other descendants who could do this. She didn’t get brief, out of order flashes. This was minute-by-minute of what the future held for all of them; every moment was happening at the same time.

The images increased speed, making Kenn frown. “Wait.” He saw Trinity using magic in the brig and then the speed increased until he couldn’t pick out people or rooms.

“I can’t show you all of it. I’m not strong enough.” Missy concentrated, slowing the images as the cruise ship sailed into the mouth of an island.

She sped it back up, showing Kenn what he needed to see.

“There’s fuel. Thank god.” Kenn scanned for other people and found nothing.

Missy groaned, trying to hold the images in place.

Kenn pulled out of her mind. “Let it go now.” He’d seen them offloading the fuel without being attacked. That was good enough.

Missy began to come out of the daze, breathing harsh. The two children behind her let go. They sank to the floor, yawning.

Kenn smiled at them. “Thank you. That was helpful.”

Missy leaned on her knees, recovering. “Yeah. Now let’s talk about what you did to Tonya.”

He stiffened. “I don’t have time for–”

“Make time! Or lose everything you have. Including your place in this camp.”

He had no power to resist. He hadn’t known Missy was an alpha. Even though he was older and stronger, Kenn was a beta. Her gift overwhelmed him, bringing stinging pain along his nerves.

“Don’t make me do that again. I don’t like being mean anymore.”

Kenn gave her an angry nod, controlling himself. *It’s a good thing I’m not the same man anymore, little girl.*

Missy patted his big wrist again. “That’s exactly why we’re having this talk. You’ve made progress. You’re not a bad man, but I don’t want you to ruin all the progress Tonya has made either.”

Kenn considered her words. “When did you and Tonya become friends?”

“Since we set sail. Tonya spends time with us now.”

Kenn looked to Tracy, then the other adults for confirmation. “Since when?”

“She’s been spending time with the kids to decide if she’s going to be a good mother for your child.” Kendle had been listening while resting before her shift. “She’s not sure she’s good enough for you. She was thinking about giving up the baby to someone who would be a better mom.”

“That’s ridiculous! She’ll be great.”

“Of course, it’s ridiculous.” Missy glared. “*You* are the problem, not her.”

Kenn dropped all pretense. “I don’t want to be. I don’t know what to do.”

“That’s why we’re having this meeting.” Kendle came out and leaned against the dim hall wall. “Kenn, this is an intervention. We, your sort-of friends, have decided to help you through this rough time in your life. If you do what we tell you to, you might be able to come out on the other side better than you went in.”

People added agreement, waiting for Kenn’s reaction.

“We aren’t friends. Why are you doing this for me?”

Kendle frowned. “It’s not for you.”

Kenn was humbled by the show of support and once again proud of Tonya for the friendships she was forging with people he had assumed would never accept her. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Kendle’s eyes narrowed. “Now, let’s talk about that skank who’s having your baby.”

**4**

“Straight ahead of you.”

Jonny carried the body as Monica held the door. The waste area was shut down again so the machines could cool off and people could rest, but the bodies were still coming.

Monica noticed the light was already on. “Is there anything else I can do?” She needed to spend time out of the infirmary, but she hadn’t realized what being on the body crew meant.

“No. I’ll handle it. You can go get cleaned up for your next shift.”

Monica turned to leave. She spotted movement in the corner.

One of the bodies moaned.

“Help!” Monica ran over as Jonny lowered the body. “That’s Brittani! She’s been missing for hours.”

Jonny helped get Brittani to her feet, taking in her filthy state, wild hair, and dazed, swelled eyes. She had a bloody tennis shoe clutched in one hand.

Brittani looked between them, voice like that of a child. “He wouldn’t bugout without these shoes.”

“Let’s get you a shower.” Monica wrapped her arm around Brittani and led the devastated woman out of the area, ignoring the unpleasant feel of touching the gore on her skin and clothes. Monica was horrified. Brittani had dug through the pile of bodies, searching for her dead brother.

Jonny waited until the women were out of view, then restacked the bodies. It hurt him to recognize people as he rewrapped sheets and placed the newest body, Megan, on top of the stack. He left room for more, aware that more were coming.

Jonny returned to the infirmary for the next corpse, wiping his hands down with the alcohol wipes the medics had given him for this duty. The gloves had run out a few hours ago.

As he neared the lab, Quinn fell in from a nearby hallway. They both spotted Tonya coming down the corridor. When she bypassed the lab and went to the infirmary, he and Jonny quickened their steps. They’d heard about Kenn and Courtney. Both men assumed there was about to be more trouble when they didn’t need it.

“She shouldn’t be up here.” Quinn pointed.

Samantha came up the stairs in a complete radiation suit, carrying three more. “I found these in the cargo bay.” She shoved them into Jonny’s hands and stepped around them.

Neither man could think of a reason to stop her now that she was in the proper gear.

“Do you hear that?”

Quinn wasn’t sure what Jonny was talking about. “No.”

“Exactly. What happened to all the ranting?”

The men eased into the infirmary, upset at the lack of noise.

“It’s gone quiet.” Jonny felt goosebumps break out across his skin. Patients who had been in the second stage were unconscious. There were still blood stains on sheets, skin and clothes, and little murmurs of conversations between a couple of conscious people who were dying and their loved ones, but the rest of the noise was gone.

“Not breathing!”

Jonny jumped at a shout for help from the corner of the packed infirmary.

Harry rushed over. “Who is it?”

Filling a syringe, Morgan gestured violently. “All three. Ben, Donald, Wade. Help me!”

*So that’s why it’s so quiet.* Jonny slowly walked to the body pile, not sure if he was about to pass out.

Quinn stood still a moment longer, spotting Grant and Ray having a conversation next to Pam and Shawn. Pam appeared to be unconscious; Shawn didn’t look much better even though he wasn’t sick. It didn’t appear any of their people were going to survive.

Quinn went to help Jonny carry the next body out. *Please let this end soon. We can’t take much more.*

Samantha eased down next to Amy’s cot, relieved the little girl was still breathing. Her skin glowed bright red as she coughed up blood.

Samantha wiped it away, trying to smile at the girl through the plastic shield. “It’s gonna be okay now.”

Amy closed her eyes.

Samantha cried.

“I have to go.” Shawn kissed Pam’s hand, then leaned forward to do the same to her red cheek. “I love you.”

She didn’t respond.

Shawn went to the door, where Daisey was waiting to take over caring for Pam.

Daisey entered, bracing for misery. This wouldn’t be easy duty.

Heavy steps stomped to the door. Morgan swung it open and ran after Shawn. He grabbed him by the arm, jerking him around. “You can’t go now! She needs you here!”

Shawn had been hoping to avoid this. “I have a run.”

Morgan let go of him, bitterness spreading. “You get to go play war while I watch Pam die.”

Shawn sighed. “They need you here and me on a run, man. Come on. This is the job.”

“The job sucks!”

Shawn nodded. “Sometimes.” He didn’t want to leave. He held out a hand. “She might be all yours if I don’t make it back.”

Morgan rotated toward the infirmary. “She might be dead when you get home. I can’t stay with her. *You* should.”

Shawn let him go, moving to the stairs. His team was gathering already packed gear now, then meeting at the cargo area for a briefing. From there, they would leave the ship and confront destiny once again. Shawn was torn in two directions. He’d gotten to see Pam, but not Missy.

*Do the right thing. Do the right thing.*

Shawn waited by the landing, letting his mind make the choice.

When his feet finally chose a direction, Shawn was proud of himself. He trotted down to the cluttered, shadowy cargo area and joined his team.

Chapter Twenty

**Snare Strike**

**A picture containing indoor, sitting, table, wall

Description automatically generated**

Midnight

**1**

**“W**e have fog moving in. Preparation lists were delivered to each area earlier. They should be taped near an entry. It’s time to finish any preparations that aren’t done or finished. That includes closing doors and windows, sealing rooms the rest of the way. We also need to go quiet, except for designated areas. Turn off all unused lights or equipment. I repeat, this is a fog warning. All quarantines are in place until the fog lifts. Captain, out.” Marc hung up the ship mike.

“I hate the fog. I always have.” Neil waited for a reply from Marc as they watched midnight fog roll across the top deck of the ship. They were the only people up here right now. Thick white clouds taller than the steps were coming up to the bridge. It surrounded the glass in an endless layer of concealment.

Neil tried again. “It’s not as bad as a hurricane, of course, but I still don’t like it.”

Marc sighed. “I don’t want to talk about it.” He did like having Neil on duty here, however.

Neil knew this wasn’t the kind of thing they were going to be able to let go of and still hide from the camp. They would see his bruises and feel Marc’s coldness. “I’m sorry.”

Marc wrote down the numbers on the screen. “For lying, for hiding, or for the murders of two camp members?”

Neil stiffened. “I’ll never be sorry for the last part.”

Marc shrugged coldly. “I didn’t think you were. If you regretted it, you wouldn’t be about to talk me into hiding it for you.”

Neil didn’t like using their friendship, but it was all he had. “I’ll do anything you want.”

Marc snorted. “You would have anyway.”

Neil didn’t argue that. “How did you know?” He’d been running it through his mind for days now, but he still hadn’t found the answer, despite what he’d told Samantha. He was hoping Marc had told the boss, and not the other way around.

“*I* didn’t.”

Neil shoulders drooped. “I should have known she would pick up on it. How did she tell you?”

Marc swiveled the chair around, face hard. “She said two words. You know what they were?”

Neil shook his head, bracing.

“*Find out.*” Marc leaned to the right, searching for a comfortable spot. “Do you understand what that means?”

Neil’s heart sank. “She wasn’t sure.”

Marc pointed. “Exactly! That means every moment for her was real. If you don’t think she’s going to make you pay for that, you’re out of your mind. I’m the least of your worries, *liar*.” Marc turned the chair around, unable to look at his former best friend.

Neil let out a sound of exasperation. “It wasn’t like I could tell her what I was going to do!”

Marc’s tone sharpened. “Why not? Angela trusted you with all her nasty plans.”

Neil hadn’t even considered that she might go along. Therefore, he’d never thought to get permission. “Son of a bitch.”

Marc was unable to keep smugness out of his tone. “You underestimated her, and me. I suspected it as soon as I found out who the targets were. As soon as I found out *you* were being charged, I assumed you were guilty, that it was one of Angela’s plans to rid the camp of two troublemakers. I was horribly betrayed, Neil, when I found out the truth. There’s nothing you can ever do that will make up for this. Not to me, and certainly not to her.”

“So what does that leave?” Neil gestured. “Should I have been on the lifeboat that slunk out of here today?”

Marc shrugged. “My best friend would have stuck around to face the consequences of his actions, like the man we all believed he was. I don’t know what this new Neil will do. It’s the first time I’ve ever met him, and frankly, he’s kind of an asshole. I don’t think he’s going to get support from anybody.”

“If there’s anybody left to deny support, that is.”

Both men jerked around to find Ian standing just outside the plastic covered doorway. Wearing full Eagles gear, like they were, he had blended in perfect with the shadows, but he’d also avoided that fourth squeaky stair.

Ian shrugged at their surprise. “I’m taking advantage of descendants not paying attention or not having their gifts right now.”

Marc waved him in, eager for an update.

Neil stared in surprise, expecting a rant or at least accusations from the tall, thin blabbermouth.

Ian handed Marc a sheet of paper, wondering if the split lip hurt Neil more than the huge bruise on his forehead. “I wasn’t sure if the boss wants Neil in on it or not, so I wrote it down.”

Neil winced. *I’m officially on the outs now.*

Ian saw Neil’s expression. He sneered. “I knew before Marc. I didn’t tell anyone except the boss.”

“What, are you storing them up for a big delivery?” Marc gave a smile to let the man know he was joking. He had already noticed Ian’s new quietness.

Ian returned the grin. “I’m her secret keeper. Once I adjusted to not being able to tell anyone, I discovered I like it more.”

Marc chuckled. “I guess that means if I asked you what was going on with Kenn, you wouldn’t tell me.”

Ian leaned against the counter that didn’t have any dials for him to hit accidentally. “Actually, that one is common knowledge now. So are a few others.” Ian checked his watch. “And I happen to be on a ten-minute break.”

Marc gestured the man to go ahead. Sailing the ship was boring unless something went wrong, and he refused to wish for that. During the day, it was beautiful ocean in all directions, with skycrap above. Right now, it was darkness or fog. *Boring.*

“Kenn cheated on Tonya.”

“I know that.” Marc’s mood dipped at the reminder of the wills he had written for some of the people in the infirmary. Whitney’s burn box had been delivered to his cabin.

Neil listened, wondering when he would get blown out of the water now that so many people knew his secret.

Ian grinned. “Do you know who it is?”

Marc didn’t. “No.”

“Courtney.”

Drawn against his will, Neil took a step closer. “You’re kidding, right?”

Ian ignored Neil. “Courtney had to tell them about her condition.” He waited to see if Marc would guess.

Marc’s mood dropped another level. “I hope she doesn’t lose the baby.”

Ian shrugged. “Morgan said there’s no way to know if any of the pregnancies will go to term now.”

Neil was stunned. “I thought I had the only secret in camp.”

Ian snorted harshly. “Yours is a doozy, but it’s nowhere near the only one.”

Marc was impressed. “You really haven’t blabbed.”

“No.” Ian shrugged. “She gave me a job I hated, but I’m good at it.”

Marc gestured. “What else do you know that you’re allowed to tell?”

Ian chose not to ruin the progress he’d made. “Just one. The boss has an ugly plan for Kronus.”

Ian ducked through the plastic before he could say more. It was hard to be around Marc and not talk about the things he knew. Like the other alphas, Marc’s pull made people want to be in his company, but Ian didn’t want to lose his new job. Hopefully, there would be other times to spend with Marc when they weren’t in the middle of a crisis and he didn’t have half a dozen secrets that could disrupt every part of camp life.

**2**

“Let me out. I can help them.” Kronus smacked the cell bars when Jayda didn’t answer. “Did you hear me? I can help them.”

Jayda frowned at the angel. “You’re sick too. You can’t even help yourself.”

Kronus wiped snot on his sleeve. “I’m immortal.”

“Up there, maybe. Down here, you’re as mortal as the rest of the descendants. Go on, try to heal yourself.”

Kronus scowled at her, big bushy brows coming together. “The drugs you’ve been giving me block my gifts.”

Jayda smirked. “I’ll bet you guys spent a lot of time making bets when Safe Haven went into Little Rock. Now, you know what it feels like to be hit by the shit.”

Kronus ignored her. He was trying to find the energy to heal himself. She was right; he was ill. He felt like he needed to sneeze, defecate, vomit, belch and cough, all at the same time. “I hate this body!”

Jayda didn’t have sympathy for him. She also didn’t want conversation. Corey was her relief. He was in the next cell, sleeping. For another hour, Kronus was her problem and then she was on a break. That was all she wanted at the moment. She needed to pee and sleep, in that order.

“I’m telling you; I can help them!”

Jayda’s anger rose. “You’re not getting out until the boss comes for you!”

“Hello in the brig.” Vicky and Trinity came down the hall, bringing a delivery.

“I just can’t believe he’s gone!” Vicky sniffed.

Trinity rolled her eyes. “I’ve heard that about fifty times now. I still don’t believe it. Shut up already.” Trinity dropped the box onto Jayda’s desk. “Kenn said you needed this stuff.”

Jayda signed the paper to prove she had received the delivery–a new rule–then glared at the women, hoping they would leave quickly.

Vicky came over and leaned against the desk, face puffy. “He’s gone. My Whitney is gone!”

Jayda pushed the girl’s hip away from the box she was about to knock onto the floor. “I’m aware.”

“I don’t know how I’ll make it without him.”

Jayda copied Trinity’s annoyed tone. “Probably the same way you did before he died–ignoring him until you want something.”

“That’s not true!” Vicky waved grieving hands toward the cells. “Why couldn’t it have been one of them?!”

Kronus smiled at the crying female. “I can save all the people in the infirmary if you let me out.”

“I told you no!” Jayda picked up the dart gun.

Vicky moved closer to the cell, eyes swimming with fresh tears. “You can help them?”

Kronus nodded, reaching through the cell window.

“Get back!” Jayda lifted her gun, but she didn’t have a clear shot.

Kronus brushed tears from Vicky’s pale cheeks, pretending he didn’t mind the feel. “I’m sorry you’re in pain. If they let me out, I can help you too.” He retreated, hands up as Jayda shoved the gun through the cell window. “I didn’t do anything!”

Vicky pushed the gun down. “He was being nice to me. He didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You should tell your boss what’s going on here.” Kronus stared at Vicky again. “My word. I will help them.”

Vicky stormed out of the brig. “I’m gonna do that!”

Jayda went to her stool, wishing she’d been quicker. Then she could have gotten away with shooting him again.

Kronus wiped his hands on his filthy clothes, stomach curling at the smell coming off his human body. He wished he’d taken the shower offer.

Trinity’s meek expression melted into the thunder that had started the fight in the mess. “He’s one of them? The Gamblers?”

Jayda nodded. “Yep.”

Trinity spun around and targeted Kronus with her snare gift.

Kronus stiffened. “Wait...”

Trinity locked on; she jerked him forward.

Kronus pinged off the bars and staggered back, blood dripping from his nose. “You human bitch!”

Trinity nodded. “In every way. If you speak to me again, I’ll knock you out and slice off the part that makes you a guy while you’re down here. Get me?”

“Useless whore!”

Jayda didn’t even try to stop Trinity from firing.

Kronus had no defense to the mental hand that slammed him against the floor and knocked him out.

Trinity shifted toward Jayda, but she stayed where she could still see Kronus. She enjoyed watching blood roll from his nose onto the dirty carpet. “You need anything?”

Jayda yawned, rubbing bleary eyes. “I’m good now. Thanks.”

Trinity started to leave, then paused. “I’m sorry.”

Jayda shrugged. “For the fight?”

“No. You asked for that. I meant for calling you useless.” Trinity’s demeanor slid into misery. “You can’t be. He’s dangerous. If you were useless, you would be on the delivery crew...with me.”

Radios crackled. “We need hands in the infirmary! The medics are down!”

Trinity immediately left.

She traversed the long corridor in fast steps, hating the sound of plastic flapping. Almost all doorways and windows had been covered, reminding her of growing up poor. They’d often had plastic over missing car or house windows when they couldn’t afford to replace them. She didn’t like it. In fact, she loathed it. Trinity had spent her entire life working to escape that environment and now here she was, right back in it.

“Don’t you go up there!”

Trinity spotted little Sally flying up the stairs. *Is she still wearing the same dress from a week ago?*

“Come back here!” Leeroy ran after his daughter. He looked like he’d just come from the showers.

Trinity shook her head and kept walking. *Kids.*

She bumped into Trent as she rounded the corner by the infirmary.

Trent steadied her, then removed his hands. He was dirty. “Did you just deliver to the brig?”

“Yes.” Trinity couldn’t find a smile to give him for keeping her from falling. “Thanks.”

“How are things there?”

“Calm.”

“Even Kronus?”

She nodded, stepping around him. “He got his bell rung. It was a knockout by snare strike.”

Trent frowned, but wrote it down as he continued toward the stairs.

Trinity entered the infirmary. It was almost impossible to believe the amount of chaos.

Exhausted Medics were on bedrolls while camp members worked. A body was waiting for removal; an untouched food delivery sat in the corner near dozens of empty water jugs and empty paper towel rolls. There were three dozen people moving around three dozen cots. The air was thick with feces and vomit.

“Oh, my God.” Her ears filled with an insane amount of coughing, groaning, and gagging. It was worse than she had thought the few times she’d glanced through the window. Open, empty cabinets and boxes said the infirmary was running out of everything.

Trinity keyed her mike. “I need all delivery crews to get to work immediately. I’ll read a list of items in a minute. I want these things brought to the infirmary in the next half an hour. If you’re sleeping or on a break, get up and do this, then go back to it. We need these things here right now; you’re the only ones left to help.”

Trinity didn’t wait for approval from anyone in the infirmary. This was one of those moments where approval didn’t matter and the energy to serve did. Trinity waved at people. “Let’s get all this garbage bagged up; somebody take the body to wherever we’re taking them. I want all the empty cots cleared so we can put down fresh sheets and towels. Then we’re going to help get all the patients into clean clothes and get some water in them.”

Trinity read the list taped to the infirmary window, stomach dropping as she realized none of the delivery people had been by here yet. She keyed her mike. “We need sheets, towels, alcohol, all stomach and fever medications, rags, and any clean cots we have stored. Also, IV packages and bags, needles, syringes.” She let off the mike, a bit stunned by the number of things they’d run out of. She was sorry she hadn’t skimmed this list before.

She turned to the waiting, shocked people who hadn’t begun to move yet. She frowned at their confused stares. “I gave you a job. Get to it.”

People slowly began to work on the garbage piles or cots, but no one approached the body.

Trinity assumed there was a code for it. She made a mental note to ask someone. Right now, everyone was occupied. Trinity was afraid to go closer to those people. It was hard to look at the messes, but it was even harder to view the pain. *Please let this end soon. We don’t need any more death*. *And while you’re at it, can you take care of Kronus? Safe Haven doesn’t need him either.*

“Coming in.” Tonya entered the infirmary. An unhappy guard trailed her. They were both wearing masks over their faces.

Tonya went to Angela in the far corner, trying not to look at the patients. “I have updates for you.”

“Go ahead.” Angela didn’t take her hands away from little Cindy, who was about to die.

“The levels in the blood samples are dropping. It may not seem like it, but I think almost everyone is getting better. The two kids Conner helped are in the official stages of recovery and Leeann may soon join them.”

“That’s good.” Angela put a hand on Tonya’s wrist and pulled a tiny amount of energy that she sent into Cindy’s small body. Tonya could spare it, but only a little at a time.

Tonya walked away, wishing she could help more. It looked like everyone had someone to care for them… Tonya spotted Courtney by herself. Blood was dripping from her nose.

Tonya hated her new self at that moment. In the past, she could have walked away. Now, she found herself going to kneel by Courtney’s cot so she could reach the pack of tissues on the floor. She wiped the blood from Courtney’s thinning face, waking the ill woman.

Courtney was shocked to see Tonya looking at her with anything but hatred. She waited for something ugly, wrapped in misery.

It was a perfect opportunity for Tonya to strike, but she couldn’t do it. “Where is that damn delivery?!”

Trinity realized Angela was getting updates from everyone and joined their leader. “Something happened in the brig.”

Angela understood it should be mental. She placed a hand on Trinity’s wrist this time and pulled the energy to connect their minds. “What is it?”

*Kronus is sick from using the fountain in his cell. Vicky wants to let him out.*

Angela braced as Cindy’s body stiffened*. She came here, but Morgan wouldn’t let her in.*

*Kronus says he can help everyone.*

*How, if he’s sick?*

*No idea. I think he’s lying. He’s knocked out again.*

*Good. The drugs should keep him under control a little bit longer.*

*No, he got knocked out. He might even have a concussion to match* *Brittani’s.*

“Thank you.” Angela’s tears rolled as Harry came over to declare Cindy’s time of death. “Please go back to work.”

Trinity did. It was obvious Angela didn’t have anything left to give, but she was still trying.

*I can do the same. I might be new, but I’m still a descendant and if giving these people my energy keeps them alive, then that’s what I’ll do.* She’d finally caught the Safe Haven infection.

**3**

“Turn your radio on.” Marc wanted to hear the open infirmary channel. He was trying to get updates on some of his favorite people. Waiting to reach the location was hard on his nerves. He’d cleaned the bridge, mapped their course multiple times, cleaned the windows, reread Grant and Ray’s sailing notes, cleaned his fingernails, his gun, and his boots, but it hadn’t covered even half the hours.

Neil checked the time. “You don’t need to hear that misery. Things are peaking. It’s awful there.”

Marc was bored, though the view now consisted of the refueling team on deck with Theo, practicing as the sun sank. He’d lost interest after the first practice run. *I memorized the routine and moved on.*

“I’ll be leaving you in a few minutes. Is there anything you need from me?”

“Hardly.” Marc frowned. “Who’s your relief?”

Footsteps echoed.

Kendle appeared.

“Absolutely not!”

Neil ignored Marc’s protest as he went over to open the plastic so Kendle could come in. He ducked out at the same time, not speaking to her. Neil caught the scent of fresh washed hair and stored the image of Kendle in clean jeans and a tank top. Despite all the scars covering her exposed skin, she was alluring.

“Get out of here!” Marc’s loud voice echoed.

Neil escaped before the grenade exploded. He didn’t imagine the plastic would be enough to hold it in, but he would be off ship soon and it would be someone else’s problem. When Marc had told him that he was part of the clearing team, Neil had been thrilled. He was eager to start re-earning the respect he’d thrown away.

“You need to get out of here.”

Kendle took Neil’s corner spot for guard duty. “Your fiancé sent me up here. I’m not leaving until the end of my shift.” Kendle didn’t hide the fear of what would happen if she disobeyed Angela’s order. The rest of her thoughts and emotions, she kept locked.

Marc threw himself into the comfy captain chair. “Fine. Just don’t talk to me. Or look at me. And I don’t want to hear you breathing.”

Kendle understood what Marc was doing. It hurt to have him say these things, but she could feel his secret happiness as well. They were about to have a full shift alone together, to say anything they wanted. It was exciting in ways Marc didn’t want to admit.

Kendle let herself stare, picking out places where he was wrinkling, withering. His skin was sunken, and his hair wasn’t shining. He’d been extremely ill.

“Angie saved me.”

“With a lifeforce?”

Marc refused to say more. He hated and loved the chills traveling his body as Kendle continued to undress him mentally. He could actually see her taking his shirt off. “It’s not going to work if you do that.”

“I haven’t been allowed around you for weeks. You do your job; I’ll do mine.”

Marc snorted at the common response from an Eagle who didn’t like being called on something they were doing wrong. He didn’t tell her to stop again. She was examining him and coming up with the same thoughts Angela had. *I look like hell. I smell like hell. I’m grouchy. I’m sick and tired of people staring at me like I’m sick and tired. What more is there to know?*

Kendle now believed Angela had given Marc this duty so he felt like he was doing something without being in the infirmary where he would drain himself, like she was doing. Kendle had been shocked by how rough Angela looked.

“I knew it!” Marc slapped the arm of the chair. “She doesn’t need me up here! Dog could have done this.”

Kendle laughed. “He might have trouble holding the pencil.”

Marc felt Kendle’s curse about to kick in. He wasn’t sure how he knew, but he was certain her good mood was about to be crushed by something.

Kendle’s radio crackled in the code for a body pick up.

Both of their moods plummeted.

“That was one of the camp kids.” Kendle refused to cry. “I think her name was Cindy.”

Like with Angela, Marc felt Kendle’s pain. It wasn’t as strong, but it was there. He fought the urge to comfort her, sending a prayer for the child instead. Safe Haven was losing people at a rate of five a day. If that trend didn’t lighten, they might lose them all.

Marc wondered if Kendle’s curse had cost a child’s life or if the child’s death had been a coincidence. He didn’t understand how the curse worked. He hadn’t thought to ask Adrian for details when they discussed it.

“From what I understand, curses are subject to the laws of chaos. It’s almost impossible to predict what will trigger them. This is a perfect example.” Kendle motioned to the radio on her belt. “It’s not on. I shouldn’t have heard the click.”

“But I heard it too.”

“That’s what I mean. It’s selective, random. It could have skipped me here and slapped me by seeing the body being carried out later, but the curse chose to hit me now to interfere with the good moment we were having.” Kendle stared at the ocean and the darkening sky. “I deserve this.”

Marc didn’t argue with her. The tender feelings he had left for Kendle came from the time they had spent together battling the troops, but he wasn’t sure how strong it was anymore. He might have gone to bat for her before she tried to kill Angela. “So every time you have a good moment, you get slapped.”

“Yes. I’ve made an enemy somewhere.”

Marc snorted. “Obviously.”

“Do you know who it is? I might be able to get them to lift it if I can make amends.”

Marc spun the chair around to stare at her. “Who do you think?”

Kendle refused to allow him to see how much she was enjoying being this close. His sarcastic tone didn’t matter to her. “Angie didn’t curse me.”

“How can you be sure?”

“She would have told me.”

Marc ran through a mental list of names, but he was unable to narrow who else might have done it. “Jennifer, maybe?”

Kendle shrugged. “I’ve narrowed it to someone who’s sick because the curse weakened. For the last two days, it’s hurt my feelings instead of sending me into the past and making me cry myself to sleep.”

Marc didn’t want to feel anything for her. “Who do *you* think it is?”

She shrugged. “I’m still narrowing it down. Considering how nasty this is, and how little sympathy the person must have for me, I believe it has to be female. I don’t think a man would know how cruel this is.”

Marc considered that for a moment and had to agree. Much like poison was a female’s weapon of choice, being mentally cruel was also something that gender excelled at. “What happens if they die?”

“I’ve heard the curse will be broken, but it’s hard for me to wish for that.” Kendle’s heart was breaking. “I don’t hate kids, and I don’t dislike anyone else in the infirmary to the extent that it would warrant treatment like this. I want all of them to recover.”

Marc smirked at her. “You’re trapped. Whoever did it knows you well.”

Kendle had to ask. “...did you?”

Marc’s amusement faded. “No. I don’t play the mind games in this camp. We already have a champion who handles that remarkably well. Nobody can take her place.”

Kendle understood the double meaning. It didn’t matter. “What can I do?”

Marc stared at her, not seeing the scars or the bags beneath hopeful eyes. All he saw was her plunging the knife into Angela’s guts, then smiling about it. “Nothing. You could save my life. You could save *her* life; it wouldn’t matter.” Marc swiveled the chair back around, not wanting to see her tears as they started to fall. “Let’s stick to the plan. You do your job; I’ll do mine.”

Kendle wiped her face.

*If there’s nothing you can do to make it better, then there’s nothing you can do to make it worse.*

Kendle didn’t want to listen to that inside voice.

*I’ve saved your life, more than once. We’ll talk later, when you’re alone.*

Kendle shushed her demon. *Be quiet*. She could listen. There was nothing wrong with that.

She twitched around as the plastic rustled.

Dog eased under the bottom of the plastic and joined them, coming to sit at Marc’s feet. He gave a loud groan as Marc rubbed his ears.

“I thought you were with Angie.”

Dog’s leg thumped as Marc hit the spot he could never reach on his own. *She sent me out. I was jumping at noises.*

Kendle tried not to feel enjoyment so she didn’t trigger the curse again.

Dog curled up at Marc’s feet*. She wants me to stay with you.*

Marc waved a hand. “Turn your radio on. I want the live updates.” Angela was once again broadcasting from the infirmary to keep people informed.

There wasn’t anything Marc could ask that Kendle would refuse so long as it didn’t endanger his life. She switched on her radio.

Horror lashed their frayed emotions.

“*Time of death is 12:32, December 9th, 2013.*”

“*You have to keep trying!*”

“*I’m sorry. Cindy is gone.*”

Wails sounded through the radio.

Kendle winced. She started to turn it off, realizing the code a few minutes ago had been for a different death.

“Leave it.” Marc felt guilty he couldn’t be there to help.

Kendle turned it down instead. It didn’t help much.

“*Call the body crew. We have three waiting for pick up.*”

“*I thought the little girl was getting better.*”

“*So did I.*”

Marc listened to the awful noises. Almost everyone who was ill now had a friend or family member in the infirmary to help care for them, but it wasn’t enough. The radiation was merciless.

“The fog is getting thicker.” Kendle pointed.

Marc used binoculars to scan in that direction.

Thick clouds of white rolled over the water toward the ship.

Kendle observed through the window as the kill team practicing on the deck below stopped and slipped into the shadows. She memorized their proud shoulders and walks, hoping all of them returned.

A fresh team came up the stairs and took their place. Kendle recognized the refueling crew who had been practicing up here earlier.

The radio echoed with shouts and crying.

Kendle turned it off. She couldn’t take anymore.

Marc didn’t overrule her. He was watching the fog roll toward the ship in thick waves that reminded him of laundry soap bubbling out of a washing machine.

“What good is it to have the ship go quiet if we still have areas in the entertainment zone going full blast?”

“Step out there and listen.”

Kendle did, frowning. As she hit the stairs, resealing the plastic, she couldn’t hear the partying anymore. There was no thump of music or laughter of happy people. There was only the water and the chugging of an engine slowing down. Kendle moved back into the doorway, but she didn’t seal the plastic yet. Standing between, one ear could hear the ship noises, but the other ear only heard the water. It was spooky.

Kendle froze as Marc’s hands settled onto her shoulders. His warm body slid behind hers, pressing up tight. She shuddered as his hands slid down her arms.

Marc leaned in, warm breath on her neck. “I figured out why Angie sent you up here.”

Kendle tried to step out of his embrace. “Why?”

Marc snatched a huge chunk of her energy.

Kendle arched in pleasure and pain at the unexpected attack.

Marc drew again, enjoying her gasps and her moans, but mostly, the restless energy thrumming across her skin. There was only a bit of pain. She was close to his level.

Kendle struggled to remain standing and let him have what he needed. She wouldn’t have refused him but having him take it like this was almost worth everything she’d done. The feel of him was indescribable.

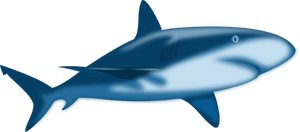
Marc retreated, not wanting to drain her so far that she couldn’t perform guard duty. He sank down in the chair, lids shutting as energy swelled over his weakened body, strengthening him.

Kendle slid to her knees. “Dog. You have duty until I can think straight.”

Dog got up and began pacing. *Humans!*

Chapter Twenty-One

**New Puppy**

****

Nearing the Cayman Islands

**2am**

**1**

**“I**t’s almost time to cut the engine.” Molly was keeping track on her watch. It was the only light allowed and even it had to be covered for each check.

Adrian was also timing. He finished his mental count and hit the kill switch.

The small craft began to slow in the calm water. The feel of ocean fog was ugly as they sailed through it, but there was no avoiding the white clouds that smothered their small inflatable speedboat.

In the rear, Neil waited for them to arrive at their destination. After meeting in the cargo area and slipping off the Adrianna, they’d performed their duties in silence. None of the chatter Neil had expected from Molly had come, not even questions about his bruises and scrapes, or the ugly scratches that ran over both of Adrian’s cheeks and his brow. Molly had been quiet and efficient so far. That was a good sign. Most rookies were already babbling at this point on a run from nervous tension. She was enjoying the ride with her eyes shut, leaned back to enjoy the breeze. The only thing marring the picture she’d made was the lack of sun. It was 3am and dark on the open ocean. If not for the occasional flashes of light from her watch, Neil wouldn’t have been able to see her.

Molly and Adrian slowly put the paddles into the water. It wasn’t quiet, but it wasn’t loud either. The sound of the ocean mostly muted it.

The pair paddled the boat, listening to creaking groans that told them other ships were nearby. It sounded as though there were several. Adrian hoped so. He was counting on a floating fuel station instead of having to go to land. Floaties had been popular before the war. This area around the Cayman Islands had been full of them.

“I see something.” Molly pointed.

The two men strained to detect what she had.

A shark fin rose a few feet from them and ran along the water line toward the front of the boat. It disappeared under them, leaving large ripples on the water.

“Well, that was unsettling.” Molly was thrilled she had been chosen for this run, but now, she was also nervous. Of all her dives, the single bad trip had been with sharks.

Neil echoed Molly’s silent plea to let this go well. It would be hard enough to keep himself alive, let alone his shipmates. He had no experience on large bodies of water and visibility was low. The fog was an unending wall that mocked him. It said no clouds in his mind could ever match the real thing.

Adrian grunted as the shark fin reappeared in front of the boat. He didn’t speak, hoping the predator would go away after it satisfied its curiosity.

The shark stayed near them, swimming in large circles that shrank to close passes. The shark wasn’t huge, but it was still big enough to sink them if it attacked.

*Missy didn’t tell Kenn about sharks.* Neil pushed away the surreal feeling. It was hard to believe that a year ago he had been putting up a Christmas tree in the sheriff’s office with his father in Arizona. Everything he’d seen and done since then felt different. It was almost as if someone else was now living his life, someone who didn’t fear danger in any shape or form. Not even a shark.

Adrian glanced back at him. “You really feel that way?”

Neil nodded. “Mostly, because of you. There isn’t any hell you won’t go into. In some weird, sick way, that gives me strength.”

“All the Eagles feel that way.” Molly had been in Safe Haven for a long time before she decided she did have enough sand to compete with the best. “We all rely on him. It’s why he’s still in camp. No one else could have taught us to be this strong.”

Neil didn’t want to think bad about Angela, but he was forced to agree. He didn’t add his thoughts to the conversation, however. He had enough strikes.

Adrian pointed. “I see a floatie.”

Neil and Molly had never viewed a floating fuel station. Both of them were disappointed by the tiny ships that had been reoutfitted for duty they weren’t designed for.

Neil’s frown grew. “It looks like it was pieced together with leftover awning from a trailer park.”

Molly was equally dubious. “There’s no way that thing is holding enough fuel for the Adrianna.”

“Be quiet. I’ll explain in a minute.” Adrian was using the tiny amount of energy he’d regathered to scan the area for trouble. All he was picking up were a few terrified hearts and one powerful heartbeat hunting them. Adrian identified them as the shark and its prey. *I hope we’re not on that list.*

“Sorry. I wanted to make sure we’re alone.” Adrian guided the little boat alongside the refueling barge. He pointed at the hull they couldn’t view below the water. “This is a floatie. It has a pipe from land that comes up to feed the fuel. Consider it like a socket for power in a house. This was a way to refuel larger ships without them having to come into the crowded, shallower areas.” Adrian tied off the rope, hands protesting the wet, hard job.

Molly frowned deeper. “You mean that tiny thing really can refuel a cruise ship?”

“Yes.” Adrian tied off the rope to anchor the two ships together. He stood, carefully. “All floaties were required to be outfitted for every ocean vessel, including aircraft carriers. Our problem is whether or not the land office shut off the flow to the pipes. All floaties have an inside cap that seals. When the cap is raised, pressure lifts fuel into the pipes. If the land station closed the pipes on their end, all it will do is suck air and maybe collapse a weak pipe system that hasn’t had maintenance in the last year.”

Molly tensed. “Everybody freeze.”

A dark fin slid through the fog. The shark bumped the boat, shifting them in the water.

Adrian and Neil both reached for their guns but stopped, realizing they couldn’t afford the noise so close to land.

Molly retrieved the dart gun she had been thinking about since they saw the fin the first time. She quickly loaded a dart.

The shark circled the front of the boat, trying to get between the two ships. The rope tightened, pulling the front of their boat down toward the water. Salty spray splashed them all.

Molly shot the dart into the thick part of the fin where it met the body, marveling at her own calmness with a reef shark within touching distance.

The shark emitted a groan as it dove under the water.

Molly loaded a second dart, ready to double tap if it came back.

“Over there.” Neil pointed.

Near the front of the floatie, a large wave of bubbles appeared, followed by the foggy shape of the shark, belly up. As they watched, it slowly sank below the waves and kept going.

“Did you kill it?” Neil wasn’t sure what the load was for this run. He hadn’t packed it. Kenn had. Kenn was the only one with access to the weapons room.

Molly shrugged. “I knocked it out, but sharks have to keep moving or they’ll drown.”

Neil was happy to hear that. It meant one less problem.

Adrian used the paddle to pull them back alongside the boat, then secured the rear of it, so they had two anchor points. It would keep their boat from being slapped against the other one if the waves picked up. Right now, it was calm and quiet except for the occasional sound of things moving in the water. Adrian hoped it was fish and not another shark.

Neil and Molly held the small boat still by the ropes while Adrian climbed onto the floatie. He shined his flashlight, getting a quick look before he shut it off.

Adrian moved back onto their ship. “It’s burnt inside. I have no idea how it’s still floating.” He slid into his place and began untying the rope. “The hatch melted. There’s no way we can lift it.”

Neil finished untying them and pushed away from the burnt hulk.

Adrian steered them in a wide circle around the floatie, hoping this was a farm. Competing fuel companies launched multiple floaties in popular tourist areas to draw in captains who didn’t want to be stuck in the cramped port waiting for the smaller ships around them to move so they could leave.

“There’s another one.” Neil pointed.

So did Molly. “I see a shadow over here too.”

Adrian chose the one farthest from land, watching the dark, foggy shadow of the main island for signs of life. Adrian was disappointed. He didn’t want a confrontation, but it would have been nice to know the apocalypse had more survivors. It was horrible to imagine the souls aboard their cruise ship were the only people left on this side of the planet.

Molly tied the ropes this time while Adrian climbed onto the second floatie. He stayed in the doorway to shine his light, and again, rejoined them after a brief scan. He helped untie them, then quickly pushed away.

“What was it?” Molly couldn’t help asking.

“There was a fight. No bodies, but there’s blood everywhere. Some of it is still wet. I’m not sure if the damp air might be preserving it, but it’s possible people are still here, hiding. The pipes have been welded shut, like someone was trying to prevent theft.”

The third floatie was taking on water. They didn’t need to tie up to determine it wasn’t usable. Windows were broken; bodies on the deck were in various stages of decomposition.

“Shouldn’t we be seeing fuel leaks in the water?”

Adrian nodded at Molly’s question. “It’s a bad sign. The land office may have had time to shut it all down.”

Adrian chose to go further from land, where the less expensive fuel companies had been forced to operate. It wasn’t prime area before the war, but now, it was perfect because it was the farthest from port.

Molly slid the dart gun onto her tool belt and got ready to tie off their little boat as another floatie came into view through the fog.

“This one looks good so far.” Adrian tied the front of the boat to the slippery rail as Molly secured the rear. The floatie creaked as they nudged it with their movements, sending chills through all of them. It was worse than any haunted house recording they’d ever heard.

Neil kept the boat steady while Adrian climbed aboard the dirty, weather-beaten floatie and shined his light. The control panel he’d spotted from the water was shut, protecting the delicate equipment. “Bring the Porta-gen.”

Neil boarded the floatie next, carrying the gear. He stepped off the little boat just as it rose beneath his boots.

“Watch out!”

The shark slammed into the bottom of the small boat, knocking Neil and Adrian onto the deck of the floatie.

Molly was ejected into the water.

The shark attacked their little inflatable, tangling in the ropes. It ripped free from the floatie, also taking the rail.

The angry animal lunged, big jaws lined with jagged teeth. It splashed wildly, head shaking, jaws ripping. The boat deflated in seconds, becoming crunchy rubber in the shark’s mouth. It went under the water, taking the boat carcass.

“Molly!” Adrian stomped on the deck of the floatie, hoping to keep the shark’s attention on them. “Molly? Where are you?!”

Water smacked debris against the floatie.

“Molly?!” Neil tried to use this gift, but the fog was too thick. “I feel her, but not which direction!”

“She went back.” Adrian was also concentrating on a connection. “Smart girl.”

“The last floatie?”

“No. She found one close to it.” Adrian connected their minds.

Neil watched Molly scurry up the ladder of the floatie that appeared heavily damaged. There was no sign of the shark.

Adrian let go, unable to hold the connection. He didn’t have extra energy, and fog was a natural barrier to a descendant*. I didn’t know that before. I wonder how Neil knew to use it*. Adrian gestured. “Use your nervous energy; tell her to sit tight. We’ll pick her up when Safe Haven gets here.”

Adrian glared when Neil only stared. “Do it now, before she starts firing her gun.”

Neil realized Adrian knew he was a descendant. He shoved that aside to concentrate, relaying the message. Now, Molly would know his secret too.

Molly sucked in huge gasps of air, lying on the filthy deck of the floatie. She felt Neil’s fear under the message, but she didn’t have time for it. She was busy being grateful to have survived. The last thirty seconds of that swim had been terrifying. It was as if she’d been able to feel the shark tracking her.

A dark fin rose from the water, running alongside her floatie.

Molly stayed still, letting her heart calm. *I never thought I’d be in a Jaws situation.*

A whimper echoed from inside the floaty. Then a thud.

*Shit! Always clear first, relax second*. Molly got up, slippery hands grabbing the first weapon on her belt. She eased toward the doorway, trying to control her ragged breathing. She shined her light.

“Snogg!” A small seal with a nasty stomach injury screamed at her.

Molly automatically fired.

The dart landed, quickly silencing the defensive noise. The monk seal cowered on the bloody floor, breathing hard as it watched her.

Molly ignored Neil’s repeated calls, aware of the shark still cruising by. She grunted. “I hope PETA doesn’t find out about this.”

Molly shot the trapped seal a second time, then began to clear the floatie.

The reef shark kept pace, circling until she made it all the way back around. It nudged the front when it stopped, causing wood to creak.

“Easy, boy. It’s almost dinnertime.” Molly chose a rotting cabinet and opened it. She kicked the door off the hinges, wincing at her sore leg. It had been a while since she swam. Her body was reminding her of that. The bite she’d suffered during the beach fight had come from a small alligator. It had died, but she’d lost a chunk of her thigh. It was a scar now, but very fresh.

Molly took the cabinet door back to the main room, where the seal was now unconscious. “This better bump me up a level.”

Molly wore herself out getting the seal onto the rotting wood. The unresisting animal was small but still too heavy for her to lift. She was forced to roll it in a series of back straining shoves and tugs.

Once she got the seal onto the wood, she dragged it to the edge of the floatie, dripping sweat and guilt. “Let’s do this quick. I’m sorry.” She shoved the seal over the side with her boot.

“Ah!” Molly shouted as the shark lunged up near the floatie. It grabbed the seal.

Molly stumbled back inside as blood filled the water, hoping a full stomach would encourage the predator to go away.

*Are you okay?!*

Molly grunted at Neil’s mental shout. *Just feeding the new puppy. I’m gonna take a nap now. Seal dragging is hard work.*

“What does that mean?”

Neil shrugged at Adrian’s question. “No idea, but she sounds okay.” Neil scanned the floatie. “Do we need a new plan?”

Adrian considered their options. “I think we’re good. All we need to do is verify we have fuel in the pipes before we contact Marc to bring in the Adrianna.”

Neil pointed. “Is that good?”

Adrian shined his light on the pipe cap, relieved to detect traces of wet fuel. “I guess the shark rattled it.” Adrian took a radio from the waterproof bag in his kit and prepared to make contact with Safe Haven.

Neil kept watch and waited. He was positive Marc had put them together for more than just the fuel run. When Adrian was finished, Neil planned to dig in and find out.

Adrian gave the bruised man a sharp glare. “Are you that eager to hear your doom?”

Suspicion confirmed, Neil fell silent and brought up his mental clouds.

**2**

**The Adrianna**

“Are you ever going to tell me why?”

Kendle jumped at the sound of Marc’s voice. Neither of them had spoken in hours. “Tell you what?”

“Why you tried to kill her.”

Kendle hid clenched hands in her pockets. “No.”

“Why?”

“Ask something else.”

Marc was bored. Her energy had woken him up, but there was nothing to do while they sailed. “How did you get into acting?”

“My mother was in the field.” Kendle didn’t want to talk about her old life either. “Can I blast you?” She was trying to stay ahead of him, so he didn’t touch her again. She didn’t think she could take it a second time without responding and that might get them both killed.

“Nope. Still topped off.” Marc enjoyed having a full energy level again, but he hadn’t wasted any of it with useless scans of the water around them.

“Okay.” Kendle searched for another distraction. “You check the numbers recently?”

“Once an hour.”

She frowned. “You’ve checked it more than that in the last ten minutes.”

“Why’d you ask if you knew?”

His slightly annoyed tone made her smile. “I’m trying to distract you from being mean, personal, or stressed. It’s a rough job.”

Marc snickered. After a minute, he rotated to look at her. He still saw his friend, but the desire to be around her was gone. “You hurt me. I thought I could trust you with any life.”

Kendle blinked back tears. “I’m sorry. I was so mad... I’d have to let you see it and feel it. It’s all complicated, wrapped around my past.”

Marc stiffened. “Not right now.”

“I know; I’m on duty.”

“Yes, but fate has a sense of humor too.” Marc felt a wave of energy coming toward them. He didn’t track it, sure Adrian was about to make contact. “We’d get rolling and the clearing team would call.”

“Later?”

Marc’s eyes narrowed at the pleading tone. “It won’t make me forgive you.”

“I know.” Kendle didn’t have a plan for that because she didn’t think anything would work. “I just need you to understand. My words will screw it up. You have to view it, feel it. After, I hope you won’t hate me as much.”

Marc let his hatred show. “Why? We don’t have a chance, ever.”

“I’m sorry you feel guilty about me. I’d like you to be free of that.”

Marc grunted. *So would I*. He mentally scheduled time to follow through, then turned his attention back to the numbers that hadn’t changed in hours, except for the temperature. It had gone down upon arrival of the fog. “You know she’s going to keep torturing you, right? You’d be better off leaving with some of the cowards. They need a leader to keep them alive.”

Kendle was already shaking her head. “Kill me if you have to, but don’t ever believe I’ll go on my own.” She smiled a little. “I’m the female Adrian–always in the shadows or stuck to the bottom of your shoe.”

It bothered Marc to know that he now trusted Adrian more than he did Kendle. Adrian would never endanger the camp or hurt Angela. Kendle had done both in one brutal stab. “Why did she let you live? All her other assassins are dead.”

Kendle’s lips clamped together. *I’m not answering that.*

Marc glowered. “You weren’t scared when you tried to kill her. If you don’t fear Angela, I know you don’t fear me. Why did she spare you?”

Kendle tried to redirect. “How about an infirmary update?”

Marc used his gift this time. “Answer me.”

Kendle shuddered at the feel of his alpha pull, skin tingling. “Please don’t make me say it.”

Marc had no sympathy. “You’re assuming I know the answer. Maybe I don’t.”

Kendle’s fists clenched as her nipples hardened into rocks. “Then you should ask her, not me.”

“Kendle...”

Kendle’s lids shut. “Please.”

“Is she keeping you around for me?” Marc thought he knew the answer. He just wanted it confirmed.

“I’ll be helpful on the island. I know the–”

“Kendle.”

“Damn.” Her body twitched as he pulled harder, making her heart pound. “Stop it!”

Marc increased the strength. “Why did she spare your life?”

Kendle slid to her knees. “Because it doesn’t belong to her! It’s yours! I’m yours!”

Marc smiled coldly. He changed the alpha pull to an anger connection, zapping her tender nerves with his rage. “And if I sentence you to death for your crimes?”

Kendle began to cry. “No one will interfere. They’ve been waiting for you to do it.”

Marc frowned, closing the connection. “Angie didn’t tell me. That means she either didn’t want me to know or she doesn’t want you dead yet.”

Kendle breathed in deep as the awful, wonderful feeling faded. “She wants you to know everything. She just doesn’t think you’re ready to handle it the way she needs you to.” She couldn’t stop babbling now. “Adrian’s been helping you through those moments as part of his penance. She wants your crypt emptied.”

Marc was now interested in a conversation. “Tell me everything Angela hid from me or the camp.”

“I don’t know of anything she’s keeping from you.” Kendle wiped away the tears. “She’s still making quiet plans, but you’ve been included in them–like picking the teams that left earlier.”

“What about Adrian?”

Kendle frowned. “What do you want to know?”

“What is he planning to win my *fiancé’s* heart?”

Kendle’s brows came together, hurting again at his term. “He accomplished that months ago. He has to find a way to get her to admit she wants you both at the same time, then follow through.”

“She has admitted it.” Marc had made peace with that. He also wanted someone other than her at the same time. It just wasn’t going to happen–ever. *That lifestyle is for other people, not us.*

“Why?” Kendle’s voice was a whisper as she stood.

Marc’s laughter was cold. “You’ve seen how jealous we both are. The other people wouldn’t live long. We’ve talked about this.”

Kendle hadn’t expected different. She gave him a small blast of warmth, not caring if he blocked it. “I hope you’ll be happy. I won’t ever be a problem again. Time will prove it.”

“I hope so.” Marc knew when to use the fist and when to use the open hand. “I missed our friendship. Maybe we can have it back, if you prove that.”

“I will.” She smiled, tearing up again. “You’ll see.”

“Hey! Is the mushy shit over yet? I need a minute.”

Marc frowned as Tonya entered the bridge in jeans, a sweater, and her lab coat, but no mask or protective suit. “You shouldn’t be up here.” He was impressed that she hadn’t made any noise to alert him she was coming, but he didn’t say so.

“Neither should you, but here we are.” Tonya glared at Kendle. “Get out.”

Kendle went, but only to the metal steps where she could hear if Marc needed help.

Marc waited for Tonya to come closer. He had no idea why she was here. Her mental walls were thick enough to give him concern, but he filed it for later. Angela would show him how to get through blocks whenever training restarted.

Tonya perched on the stool that had been brought up for the guards. “What happens to my baby if I leave Kenn?”

Marc was shocked by the question. “What do you mean?” He had assumed Tonya would stay with Kenn anyway, because of his prominent level in camp.

“Thanks.”

Marc flushed at her scorn. He’d forgotten about the baby connection. *She can read through those walls. She’s been practicing to be able to do that. It’s hard. I know.*

Tonya didn’t care. Marc’s opinion didn’t mean much to her. She just needed information. “Yeah, yeah. Answer my question. I have to get back to the lab.”

“What question?”

Tonya frowned at his evasion. She didn’t stop him getting into her thoughts, but she studied his methods to copy later. “It’s a descendant. Does the father have some stupid claim I don’t know about or does this go by old world rules?”

Marc considered, then shrugged. “Old world, as far as I know. I think you need to talk to Angela about it to be sure.”

“I will.” Tonya covered her next concern. “What about the Eagles?”

Marc scowled. “Why ask me?”

She delivered a nasty look of her own. “Angela is busy. Kyle is too, and Neil has clouds in his brain. You’re the top of the chain right now, even though you don’t have a patch.”

Marc sighed, trying to remember. “As far as I know, we like the baby staying with the mother and she lets the father have access. Unless the mom is abusive or a harm to the child. Again, ask Angela to be sure.”

“Again, I will. What about you?”

Marc stiffened. “What about me?”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Why ask me?” Marc tossed her thoughts back at her. “My opinion doesn’t mean much to you.”

Tonya flushed this time. “It might matter, a little.”

Marc chuckled. “Fine. It’s over him cheating, right? No abuse or anything else?”

Tonya gestured angrily. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Certainly, if he promised fidelity.”

“We’re engaged.”

“I know.”

“The fidelity is implied.”

“Is it?” Marc shrugged. “Even so, I believe the event happened in the mountain. You weren’t engaged then.”

Tonya hadn’t thought of it in those terms. She scowled. “Why are you on his side?”

Marc smiled at her. “Because you are. You want to fight for him, but you’re not sure if he’s worth it. You came up here hoping I would tell you that he isn’t. But I won’t. If you two hadn’t discussed fidelity, I’m not sure he’s as guilty as you’d like him to be.”

Tonya’s anger was replaced with confusion. “Why would I want him to be guilty?”

“So you don’t have to feel like you failed.”

Pain lanced into her heart. “I did. He went to another woman.”

“No.” Marc wasn’t going to let her carry that weight. “That’s Kenn’s failure. I’d bet he knows it. Just be clear on the terms during the time of the event. If you still feel he’s not worth it, that’s your right. Most of the camp will side with you.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re on his side. You hate Kenn.”

Marc nodded. “I do. I also see how much he’s changed. Even in this, he isn’t denying or trying to cover it up. He’s facing it. I respect that. So do you.”

“Yeah. That makes it harder.” Tonya stood. “Thanks. You and Scars can return to bonding now. I’m sure that will please the boss.” Tonya left, casting a warning glare at Kendle as they passed on the steps. “Charlie won’t be allowed to heal you next time. Neither will Angela. The camp will overrule it and you’ll finally die like you should have on that island.”

Kendle was crushed at the open hatred after having a good shift with Marc. She returned to her duty, lips clenched together. *No more talking. It just leads to trouble.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

**At Least You Know It**

**A close up of a gun

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“W**hy did you send Neil on this run?” Kendle needed to fill the silence after Tonya’s exit.

Marc shrugged. “It had several benefits, but he was the best man for the job.”

“The old Neil, right?” Kendle didn’t like the new Neil. “Not the one with a brain full of cotton candy.”

Marc snorted. “That man never existed. He was a figment of Samantha’s imagination, temporarily brought to life.”

“Temporarily?” Kendle realized what that meant. “He lied. He’s one of us!”

Marc nodded. “While they’re out there, Adrian will be making a decision about Neil. On this one, I plan to support his choice. It wouldn’t be right for me or Angela to make it since we’re not Neil’s mentors and we’re both definitely biased.”

Kendle frowned, going to the taped doorway to do another scan. “I don’t get it. Why not tell everyone? Let him serve the punishment.”

Marc decided to let her in as a test. “Until we have a new constitution, we can’t execute, or even jail, for crimes that are not on the Safe Haven camp list.”

“He killed two people.”

“We don’t have laws against murder.”

Her stomach churned. “...you mean for the descendants.”

Marc nodded. “It’s not something we want pointed out, but yes. The descendants don’t have any laws. They just don’t know yet.”

Kendle considered that while Marc recorded numbers from the screens. The temperature had dropped a little more, but the Geiger counter hadn’t beeped at all.

Marc paused, feeling something coming now.

The radio on the counter lit up in a series of clicks and taps that Marc deciphered. “There’s fuel. We can come in.” Marc keyed the radio in response.

Kendle waited for Marc to make a call on the ship’s system to let everyone know refueling was a go. His mind was going over the next phase of the plan. He wouldn’t be doing that if it wasn’t good news.

Marc picked up the ship mike. “Welcome to 3:15am, Safe Haven. This is your captain speaking. We are approaching the refueling station. All entertainments are to be shut down by 3:45 and everyone in their cabins by 4am. Someone will be by to verify your location and collect supply lists. I believe updates are also being delivered, along with a light snack. Try to get some sleep, and please consider volunteering for infirmary duty in the morning. We need people who have strong backs and strong stomachs.”

Marc felt Angela wake at his announcement. He reached down and gave the wolf a quick rub. “I’d like you to stay with her now.”

Dog left, nosing beneath the plastic. He slid down one side of the stairs as Theo came up, still scanning for small, furry shadows.

Theo stepped inside the tape, arms bulging under his tight shirt. “I’m sorry, but I need the refueling papers now.”

More steps came up right behind him. “We need an update for the boss.” Charlie and Debra entered the bridge. They’d also felt Angela wake. She would want an update as soon as she was ready to leave her cabin.

Theo gave Debra a smile in the awkward silence. “You’re doing a good job.”

Debra made a rude gesture.

Theo sighed, picking up the folder he needed. He left without saying anything else.

Marc didn’t understand how he had been cast as the role of relationship fixer, but he found himself frowning at Debra. “You should give that man a break. He stayed up here when we didn’t know if it was safe. He’s a hero to the camp, or at least he will be after we recover.”

Debra’s furious gestures told Marc he wasn’t going to like what Charlie was about to translate.

“She says the heroes are Ozzie and Whitney, who died to get us to safety. All Theo did was stand on their backs.”

Marc didn’t argue. Theo had come up after most of the danger was over. She was right. Ozzie and Whitney were the heroes. Theo was going to end up getting credit for it whether he tried to claim it or not, simply because he was the last surviving member of the boat crew.

Debra gestured toward Marc.

Charlie translated. “You look tired.”

Marc again found himself responding with compassion instead of annoyance. There were two hours to go before they reached their destination. He didn’t want Debra to spend it upset. “So do you. Do you need a minute alone with me or Angie?”

Debra shrugged, but didn’t try to communicate mentally. She was about to go nap and get right back up at dawn when they were slated to reach the refueling center. This was her last stop before going to the boss, then bed. She wanted it over.

Marc understood. “We’re on time. Keep people in their cabins and everything locked down as much as you can, but if people insist on leaving, this is the right time since we’ll be near land. Maybe see if we can find them some literature on the Cayman Islands in a gift shop or bookstore.”

Charlie wrote it down as Debra lifted her brow.

Marc shook his head. “I don’t have anything else. There’s been no change in numbers or estimates.”

Debra was relieved to hear it. She left, sorry for her rudeness, but she didn’t have energy to spare on someone other than herself. Almost everyone on the ship was the same. The illness was peaking and so were the levels of exhaustion. If they didn’t get a break soon, the caregivers would simply stop giving care. There was nothing else they could do.

Marc sighed as Charlie lingered. “I guess you want advice too.”

The teenager flushed. “Is that okay?”

Marc smiled at his son, pushing aside his mental concerns. “Of course. Is your shift over?”

“Yep.”

“Then what’s your beef?”

Charlie leaned against the dirty plastic. “I feel bad that Conner and Candy were punished, but I wasn’t. I want to tell everyone Tracy’s pregnant.”

Marc was surprised. “That’s...very mature.”

“And dangerous.”

“A bit, but not as much now that you’ve dropped out of the Eagles.” Marc studied the boy. “How are you feeling about that?”

“It was the right choice.” Charlie settled onto the stool by his dad. “I don’t mind helping, especially during times like this, but it’s not what I want. At least, not yet.”

“I can respect that.” Marc took a shot in the dark. “Do you know what you do want from the future?”

Charlie shrugged. “I know what I end up doing, but it doesn’t appeal to me yet either.”

“What is it?”

Charlie leaned in to whisper, hoping Kendle didn’t hear. “*Heir.*”

Marc shrugged at the tired teen. He’d already known Charlie’s future in Safe Haven, according to the visions, but that wasn’t carved in stone. “When it does appeal, let your mom know.”

“She’ll be disappointed if I don’t go that way.”

“Not if you’re happy. That’s all she really wants for you.”

“I know.” Charlie whispered again. “*Why does she have Kendle up here with you?*”

Marc shrugged, refusing to think about the truth. “Tired of the drama and wants us to make peace is what I assume.”

Charlie scowled. “Will that happen? It better not happen.”

“Already did, now relax.” Marc understood the boy’s warning. He wasn’t allowed to treat Angela that way. “Your mom and I are fine.”

“Are you?” Charlie didn’t like the way things had happened with Adrian. He certainly didn’t want it repeated with Kendle. “And what about the sickness? You both look awful.”

“We’re in it together, now.” Marc let his mental walls down so the teenager could verify that. “We were on the edge for a while, in both ways, but we’re recovering.”

Charlie caught his dad’s concern for the others who were ill. “Is there anything we can do for them?”

“We already are. Your mom organized a rotation of healing from those who can give it, but only the two children Conner helped are showing real signs of recovery. Our gifts don’t do well with illnesses or certain injuries.”

The teenager thought about it. “Like Zack’s crushed ribs.”

“Exactly. We all have limits.” Marc sensed Charlie was leading up to something. He waited, letting the boy direct it.

“Mom looks bad. How long will it take her to recover from this?”

Marc had asked that too, just silently. He gave Charlie the answer he’d been forced to accept. “She’ll survive, but she’ll never recover. We’ve lost too many people on her watch. She’ll never forgive herself for it.”

Charlie didn’t know what to do. “I want her to be happy.”

“Me too.” Marc sighed.

Charlie finally asked the question he’d been stewing on for days. “Are you thinking about evolving?”

Marc slowly nodded, impressed with his son’s intelligence. “Would that bother you?”

“I don’t think so.” Charlie shrugged. “Mom didn’t change much. She was spitting fire before she became byzan.”

Marc chuckled. “True.”

“Why haven’t you, before now?”

“It’s complicated.” Marc didn’t want Kendle to have those details. “Ian is coming up for shift change. Why don’t you escort Kendle to the kid’s area so she can sleep? We’ll find time to hang out and talk more.”

Kendle scowled, coming to the doorway as footsteps echoed from the ramp into the ship. “I don’t need an escort.”

“You need a muzzle for your mouth.” Ian came up the ramp. “A boss told you what to do. I’m on duty now. Go do it.”

Kendle flashed a glare at Ian, a last warm glance at Marc, then went to the ramp. But she waited for her escort.

Charlie joined her with a smile, glad the fighting was over. “So, how was your day?”

They tensed at the echo of footsteps running toward them.

Leeroy appeared on the deck right below the bridge. “Anyone seen my Sally?”

They both shook their heads; Charlie wrote it in his book.

Ian stayed near the bridge doorway, watching the man.

Leeroy hurried across the foggy deck. “Sally? Where are you hiding?”

Charlie and Kendle continued down into the ship in silence, both tired, with a lot on their minds.

A few people moved around them, more than it had been as the camp finally came out of their shells to help. Ralph now had them rotating fifteen-man crews, every six hours.

Charlie paused as a wave of nausea hit. “I need to eat.”

Kendle’s stomach also flipped. Unlike the younger descendant, Kendle knew what was causing it. “Someone’s trying to make contact, through dreams.”

“How do you know?”

“Never you mind. Just listen. It’s hard to do this.”

*Go back!*

They exchanged a confused glance.

“Go back?” Charlie had no idea what it meant. “Where?”

“The bridge?” Kendle’s eyes widened. “Marc!”

They took off running, shoving the few people out of their way. Kenn was warning them Marc was in danger.

**2**

“Someone’s coming up the steps.” Ian ducked back through the plastic to see who it was.

He saw the small face and relaxed, smiling. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. You can’t be up here right now. It’s not safe.”

Ian’s smiled faded as he realized the thin little girl was holding a gun. “Where did you get that?”

Sally lifted the weapon. “I stole it.” She pulled the trigger.

Ian was knocked backward by the chest shot.

Sally was also knocked backward into the rail of the bridge next to the steps, but she recovered quicker than Ian. She ran up the steps as shouts echoed from below.

Ian felt himself for blood. There was none, telling him wearing a double vest today had been a good idea. He was relieved the girl had only been able to find a .22. Anything more powerful and he might be lying in a pool of blood right now.

Sally ripped the plastic down and pointed the hot gun at Marc. “You killed my mommy.”

Like Ian, Marc was horrified, not sure if he could shoot her. He began searching for a way to handle it without hurting her as he lifted his hands. “Your mom tried to kill me. I was defending myself.”

Sally’s insanity glared at him. “You should have stopped for us! She would have been a part of you by now!”

*It always comes back to that*. Marc sighed, able to feel the little girl’s madness. The angels had cured the rage sickness on the ship, but they hadn’t been able to take away the anger. “I’m sorry we didn’t stop.”

Sally’s finger tightened on the trigger. “My dad’s wrong about you. I hope this ship sinks.”

Ian threw his flashlight.

The Maglite slammed into the back of Sally’s head. She dropped the gun, falling forward. Her foot tangled in the stairs, pulling her down. She fell all the way to the bottom, landing with an awful crunch.

“No!” Leeroy ran to the body, screaming. “What have you done?! My baby!”

Marc came to the doorway, gun now in hand. He studied Leeroy to determine if the father was also a threat.

Ian walked toward Leeroy to comfort the man, though he wasn’t sure what to say. The evil in the child had stunned him.

Leeroy spotted the gun next to his daughter’s leg and grabbed it. Before anyone could stop him, he put the gun under his jaw. “This is Safe Haven’s fault. I’ve lost everything.” He pulled the trigger.

Ian turned away, wincing.

Marc hit the button on his radio for a double body pick up and slowly resumed his post. *It’s days like these that make me wish I’d died in the war.*

The ship radio lit up in Eagle code.

Marc went to the console to write it down so he could translate it. When he first came up here, he’d been able to keep it straight, but that had been a lot of hours ago and he hadn’t fully recovered from the radiation poisoning. If he didn’t write it down, he would forget it.

Ian explained what had happened to the Eagles who rushed up the stairs, the few who arrived. A week ago, three dozen hardbodies would have shown up to offer assistance. Now, there were four moody males and two weary women. Debra was definitely getting a taste of leadership. She and Charlie prowled the scene, adrenaline waking them, while Kendle and the others stood guard.

On the bridge, Marc finished translating the message. He keyed his mike again. “We have the all clear on visibility. Permission to take us in?”

“Permission granted.”

Angela’s weary voice wasn’t a comfort to Marc. She sounded like she was at her limit.

*We all are.* Marc watched the body crew come to the deck. It was a long trip down to the waste disposal area. There was no way to avoid people seeing two new corpses. Unless someone explained what happened, camp members would assume it was another wave of the illness. Marc made a quick note, then stuck his head through the plastic. He held the paper out to Ian. “Make sure the boss gets this. I’m good with all these people up here.” Marc was certain Kendle would now sleep in the folded corner cot behind him.

Kendle nodded at Marc through the window of the bridge, heart pounding. She was glad Ian had handled it. She was also glad Kenn was looking out for them, even in his sleep. *He might make a good leader yet.*

Ian ran so he wouldn’t be gone long. He was eager to escape the sight of the little body. He had hoped being hit by the flashlight would knock the gun from Sally’s hand or get her to turn around so Marc could grab her. *I didn’t mean for her to die. Is that murder?*

Marc observed in concern as Ian disappeared below, but he wasn’t able to send the man an answer. He didn’t have one.

Marc went back to the radio to give Adrian and Neil his answer. He was glad their mission had gone well. *May the refueling go just as easy.*

**3**

“This is from Marc.” Ian came to Angela and extended the slip of paper.

Angela skimmed it quickly, holding Ben’s hand. He didn’t have much longer. The man was gasping and crying; it tortured her to be so helpless.

Ian didn’t know which deck was worse. He was eager for everything to be over, more so than he had been before.

Angela felt him reaching his limit and took time she didn’t have to look up at him. “Is Marc wearing a vest?”

Ian stared, trying to process the question. “Oh, I don’t think so.”

“Then it wasn’t murder. You saved his life. She would have killed him.” Angela clasped Ben’s hands tighter as he sucked in air. His terror was smothering. *Please forgive Ben sins committed in the name of Safe Haven. Those acts allowed us a future.*

Ian frowned as he realized Angela had either known what was going to happen or she had watched it happen without warning Marc. “What the hell?”

Angela nodded toward Tonya, who was with Courtney. “She’s been relaying things as they happen. We won’t let her do anything else because we don’t want her to lose the baby.”

Ian was able to accept that answer, but he was surprised to find Tonya in here helping. “Does Kenn know she slipped out of the lab?”

Angela shook her head, tears rising. Ben was on his last minute of life. “He’s sleeping until we reach the refueling station. She’s taking advantage of him and I love her for it.”

Ian understood not to scold the redhead. He gave her a nod of approval instead, moving away as Angela motioned Morgan and Terry over to Ben’s raspy body.

Tonya didn’t have the mental capacity to be happy about a good moment from the Eagle. She didn’t view Ian as a blabbermouth. She saw him as future team leader, but right now, she would trade all of her good moments with him or any other Eagle in exchange for Courtney’s life. The toxic levels in her blood were going down, but she had fallen unconscious again. This was the final stage.

Tonya sighed, looking up at Ian. “Let Kenn know as soon as he wakes. He might want to say goodbye to her and the baby.”

**4**

“*We had a rough moment, but it’s over,*” Adrian translated the answer as Marc sent it. He and Neil had caught the bad vibes a few minutes ago and made contact.

Neil gestured. “I want to know if Samantha was involved.”

Adrian turned the radio down instead. “She wasn’t.”

“Ask him!” Neil hated being away from Samantha. Anything could happen while he wasn’t there to help her.

“No.” Adrian tried to recharge while they waited, already sick of the ocean that mocked him with odd slaps of debris against the floaties, keeping his nerves on edge. “He’s busy.”

Neil scowled. “Doing what? Pushing buttons on a computer?”

Adrian frowned “Slowing the ship so the Adrianna doesn’t plow through this little floatie like it’s not even here. I’m not going to bug him by asking about your girlfriend!” It was hard to believe he was having this conversation with Neil. Adrian had thought Neil was long over this stage.

“Fiancé.” Neil sat on a rotting stool in the far corner of the floatie and began digging through his kit. “She said yes.”

Adrian shrugged. “Fiancé, then. I get it, but I’m not going to do it.”

Neil glowered across the broken furniture. “You’re just Marc’s bitch now. You won’t fight him on anything.”

Adrian snorted. “ I don’t see you telling Angela no.”

Neil kept digging in the kit. “Whatever. You don’t owe him, anyway. All is fair in love and war if she wants you.”

Adrian scowled, dropping into one of the galley chairs. “I’m not having this conversation with you.”

Neil gestured again, tone sarcastic. “No, you’re not henpecked. You won’t even talk about it.”

“Actually, I have a job to do. Distracting me won’t work.” Adrian decided to get started on that since Neil wasn’t going to let him rest.

Neil tensed. He’d always heard that tone directed at someone else. “Now? Wonderful.”

“At least it’s not Marc passing sentence, right?” Adrian scanned Neil’s various injuries. Marc clearly hadn’t liked Neil following Angela’s orders to keep him in the cabin.

“I’ve always been one of your favorites. That should help a little.” Neil tossed the sarcasm right back. “I’ll face Angela on this. Your threats don’t mean anything to me.”

Adrian tried to find a comfortable spot on the rotting seat. “You misunderstand. I’m not making the choice for Angela. I’m also not making the choice for Marc. This will be a camp decision. I’ll replay our conversations. When they see you’re not sorry, you’ll be in trouble. I won’t have much to do with it. Consider me a tape recorder.”

Neil wasn’t intimidated. “That’s only if she tells you to release your tapes to the public. We’re in the middle of an outbreak that’s already cost two dozen lives. Do you think she gives a shit about me right now?”

Adrian knew that was true. “Fair enough, but at some point, the crisis will be over. The boss we all love, and hate, will return. Do you want her to review this conversation and see you acting like a rookie who refuses to admit he was wrong?”

Neil sighed. “I don’t believe it was wrong.”

“You murdered two unarmed people! You lied to everyone in camp, for almost a year. How is that not wrong?”

Neil didn’t meet his eyes. “Seth and Becky were not important. I made the decision to eliminate a possible problem from the future.”

Adrian pointed. “Ah, but *possible* is the key word here. You don’t know for sure either of them would have been a problem. You let your emotions get control because Samantha wanted Amy; you wanted Becky. To keep yourself from betraying your relationship, you removed temptation–permanently. That’s as wrong as it gets, Neil. I’m surprised you can’t see it.”

Neil blocked out his guilt. “Becky was going to be hanged for attempted murder. Seth was going to be dumped off at the first port we came to. All I did was cut out the middleman–the camp. The end result was going to be the same.”

It hurt Adrian to hear Neil talk like this. “How did you get it by me for so long?”

Neil shrugged. “I believe everything I’m saying.”

“I mean lying to me about being a descendant.”

“I was never going to tell anyone, not even Samantha.” Neil glowered. “But you helped Angela bring them back. You’re not my friend.”

Adrian shook his head. “No, I’m the prosecutor. Later, because it’ll hurt me, I’ll probably be chosen as your executioner.” Adrian was tired of the conversation. It was clear Neil had his own way of thinking about what had happened and a quick conversation in a foreign floatie wasn’t going to change his mind.

Neil tensed. “I feel people… Descendants!”

Adrian nodded. “On land. Hopefully, they won’t notice us. The fog seems to be lightening.”

“What should we do?”

“We don’t respond to contact attempts. If they come out here, we’ll explain we have our radios off and our ship is quarantined for a contagious illness. All the plastic over everything will provide proof. Hopefully, they’ll be scared of catching it.”

Neil swallowed. “What if they attack?”

Adrian glared pointedly over the tiny, leaning table. “Then *all* of us will use *all* resources at our disposal and face the consequences later.”

Neil understood he would be expected to use his gifts, even if it was in front of the camp. He didn’t argue. That was what the descendants were here for and if the camp saw him protecting their ship, maybe they wouldn’t be as harsh in their reaction to his lies. He knew murder was wrong. He also knew the camp would give him a free pass if Angela did.

Adrian huffed. *Liar!*

Neil didn’t show a reaction, but it hurt him to be called that by Marc or Adrian. He was used to being the favorite. Now he was on the bottom with the rest of the people who couldn’t cut it. The feeling was awful.

Adrian began flipping through the channels on the radio. They might be able to pick up a transmission to let them know whether or not the land people were trying to make contact. There was only a small chance they didn’t know someone was out here. There had been a lot of noise when they arrived. “Check on Molly.”

Neil went to the doorway; he flashed a light toward the floatie where Molly had taken shelter.

Light flashed right back, telling him she was fine and alert.

The water around them seemed rougher than when they arrived. Neil realized Adrian was right. The fog was lifting. It was completely possible Safe Haven would arrive in time for the land people to have a perfect view of them refueling. According to the instructions that had been delivered to Marc, the engine had to cool before the ship could be refueled and the process itself would take hours. That left a lot of time for anyone on land to see a cruise ship a few miles from shore and wonder if they could reach it. It was almost certain they were about to have their first foreign contact.

Adrian agreed with Neil’s assumption. He was anxious for Safe Haven to arrive so they could refuel and go. The feeling of bad things about to happen had been hitting him since the shark knocked Molly into the water. Adrian grunted. “So this is how you plan to handle it with the camp and my Eagles?”

“*Angela’s* Eagles.”

“Whatever. You know it won’t work. Why are you going through with it?”

“I don’t have a choice.” Neil sighed. “If I tell the truth, other people will pay too. If it was all my idea, only *I* pay for it.”

Adrian had known Neil was trying to protect Samantha. He’d just assumed she had been in on the plan. So had Marc, thus this interrogation. “It won’t work. When Samantha sees you going through pain, she’ll interfere. Then the truth will come out anyway.”

“I know.”

“And?”

Neil sneered. “I went to a higher authority, traitor!”

“You made a deal with Angela.”

Neil’s anger fled. “It’s not official.”

“Or even discussed, until she sees how you plan to play it?”

“I think so.” Neil leaned against the dirty, damp doorframe, body aching in all the places Marc had hit. “I’m in deep shit.”

Adrian felt great sympathy for him at that moment. “Well, at least you know it.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

**Because Of You**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

December 9th

**5am**

**1**

**“S**o what’s the plan for Marc?” Neil was sick of listening to the water and waiting for the sun to rise.

Adrian frowned, barely awake. He’d been snoozing for the last hour. “How would I know?”

Neil opened his eyes. “Because you’re helping with a plan now. I assumed it wasn’t the only one.”

Adrian tensed, bringing up walls against Neil’s prying.

Neil laughed, retreating. Watching Adrian’s thoughts and dreams had been enlightening. Adrian had forgotten he was a descendant and left his doors open.

Adrian hated it that the trooper had now gotten over on him twice. He lashed out brutally. “You’ve lost all your friends and your place in camp. Keep laughing. Your family will be next.”

Neil stopped. “That was uncalled for.”

Adrian shrugged. “Right now, I like Marc more than you. Welcome to the future you’ve made for yourself.”

Neil returned to his earlier accusations. “Anything to avoid an honest answer.”

“This side of you is ugly, Neil.” Adrian yawned, starting to wake.

“Thus, the reason none of you ever saw it.”

“Why are we seeing it now?” Adrian was curious. “You didn’t have to kill them.”

Neil didn’t respond. Only one person would get that answer from him and she was busy saving lives in the infirmary. He owed Angela everything now. If she asked, he would answer.

*He’s scared*. Adrian caught that, stored it. “What do you think happens to Samantha?”

Neil frowned, shifting against the damp wood. “Nothing changes for her. She didn’t do anything wrong.”

Adrian wanted to be home. “It doesn’t work that way, Neil. You know it. When an Eagle falls, their mate usually goes down with them.”

“She didn’t do anything wrong!”

Adrian confirmed his thought that Neil was actually terrified beneath his bravado. He pushed harder. “No one will trust you. That means we won’t trust her either, because now we all know Samantha will stand by you, through anything.”

Neil groaned in frustration. “How many times do I have to tell you?! She didn’t know anything about it!”

“Okay, let’s try this a different way. How do you plan to hide it? I noticed it was hard for you to keep up your cloud wall earlier.”

Neil didn’t answer. After everything he and Adrian had been through, it was no longer certain he could trust the man with something like this.

Adrian sensed Neil’s reluctance was related to his own betrayals. “I can lock it up for you or take your memory if that would help.”

Neil stared in suspicion. “Why would you do that for me?”

Adrian met his eyes. “Loyalty, Neil. You and Kyle can come to me, for anything. I just need to understand why.”

Adrian sounded so much like the leader he had trained with that Neil allowed the truth to come out. “Because of you.”

Adrian stiffened. “Me?”

Neil shrugged. “I watched you go from hero to criminal. There had to be a payback.”

“You killed them to hurt me?”

“To snap you out of being Angie’s lapdog! Look at what’s been going on! How could you give us up so easy?!”

Neil’s actions were a protest, but it was also murder. Adrian hated himself again in that moment. “I’m sorry. I tried to do the right thing. Because I couldn’t, I’m not fit to lead. I’ll never be in charge of anyone again. It’s for the best.”

Neil snorted roughly. “Whose best? Marc’s?!”

Adrian wasn’t sure what to say in response to Neil’s open animosity.

Neil wasn’t done. He’d felt this way for a while. “It certainly wasn’t best for the camp. No one gave us what you did.”

Adrian was shocked. “Where was this support when I needed it at my trial?”

Neil pushed to his feet. “I was still gasping for air from the blow that you were a traitor! I only recently started breathing again.”

Adrian was silent for a minute, considering what Neil was telling him. Removing Seth and Becky without orders was Neil’s way of trying to get Adrian to come back and lead the camp. “You tried to tank Angela?”

Neil didn’t answer.

Adrian didn’t know the right thing to say, so he went with the first thing that came to mind. “Can you forgive me?”

Neil sighed. “I’d ask the same question.”

There was no hesitation for Adrian. “I do forgive you. I hope you can hide it, so you can keep your place.”

“Thank you… Boss.”

Adrian blinked away the tears that formed at the corner of his eyes. *I have one of my Eagles back.* The feeling was indescribable.

“What about Angie?”

Adrian cracked a small grin. “Thought you weren’t worried about the punishment.”

Neil glared, anger never far away now. “I’m worried about Samantha getting hit in my place.”

Adrian yawned, stretched. “I can tell you what will work, but you’re going to call me her lapdog again.”

Neil pierced Adrian with a hard stare. “You *are* her lapdog, and Marc’s bitch. I can’t stand that.”

“You want the old Adrian back, even if he’s evil?”

Neil immediately nodded. “You scratch mine; I’ll scratch yours.”

Adrian chuckled, rueful. “If I had known you were really like this, Neil, you would have gotten a different position in my army.”

Neil sighed, anger leaving for a moment. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Adrian felt Neil’s mind go straight to Jeremy. Neil’s walls were down, allowing Adrian full access into the man’s emotions. It was easy to see how conflicted the trooper had been about his decision. It was something of a surprise to discover Neil had also been jealous of Kyle because of the killing duty Adrian had always assigned to him. “Damn, Neil.”

Neil shrugged, embarrassed. “That isn’t something you can say to someone who thinks you’re an uptight prick who wouldn’t even break the speed limit before the war.”

Adrian flushed. He’d had that thought about the trooper more than once.

“I wanted a different life.” Neil removed his hat and ran his hands through sweaty hair that was slowly drying in the salty breeze. “I thought if I played the part long enough, I would become that person.”

Adrian sympathized. Almost everyone in his camp went through moments like this; it just usually happened in the first few weeks, not a year later. Adrian replaced Kenn in the hierarchy in his mind. “You would have been my XO. I wish you had trusted me. Our foundation would have been completely different.”

Neil felt those words in his heart, but he didn’t reply as he picked up something hinky from the floaty where Molly was sheltered. He went to the door, scanning the coming dawn.

Adrian joined him.

Neil pointed.

Adrian followed it to the top of Molly’s floatie. She was on the roof, lying down. The dart gun was in her hand and her eye was on the scope.

Neil and Adrian swept for trouble in the dawn light. They found a familiar fin gliding through the debris. Several darts were sticking from it.

Molly pulled the trigger.

A new dart plunged into the shark’s fin, causing it to flinch. That was the only reaction.

Molly grumbled as she loaded another dart. A small red letter caught her attention. She narrowed in and grimaced. “Expiration date, 2012. Figures.” She loaded the dart anyway and got set to fire.

Molly’s second shot almost hit the shark in the eye.

It let out an eerie cry and disappeared under the water.

Molly stored the gun on her belt, but she didn’t sit up. The fog was lifting, fading. She was afraid the people on land might be able to see her if they had binoculars.

Neil and Adrian gave her gestures of approval when she looked in their direction.

Molly used Eagle code to let them know the darts were expired.

“That means her little friend will return at some point.”

Adrian shrugged, mind already falling back into their conversation. “So, what can you do?”

Neil settled onto a rickety stool, brows coming together. “I don’t get you.”

Adrian leaned against the doorframe. “What’s to get?”

“You’re acting like this isn’t a big deal.”

“It might not be. That’s up to Angela.”

Neil glowered. “That’s what I’m talking about. You decided you deserved to die. Then you set out to accomplish that sentence, no matter who you had to piss off or hurt.”

Adrian couldn’t deny dying had been preferable to not being in leadership back then. Some days, it still was.

“Then why don’t you fight for it?!”

“Haven’t you been paying attention?” Adrian pointed toward land. “We’re trying to build a better society. Someone like me cannot lead it.”

“Neither can Angela. You corrupted her.” More regret crossed Adrian’s expression. Neil tried not to have sympathy, but it was hard considering his own transgressions. “Where was I?”

Adrian began fishing through his pockets for smoke fixings. “I set out to die and I was willing to do anything to achieve that sentence.”

Neil picked back up there. “You got lucky Angela cared enough to make sure you were spared at the trial. Then you spent that time birddogging her, which allowed our camp to be attacked over and over and over. We lost a lot of people because you weren’t paying attention to your duty!”

Adrian had given himself the same speech a hundred times. He had heard it openly at least that many since they’d left the mountain but getting it from Neil hurt more than any of those. “I’m sorry.”

“But you don’t regret your decision.”

Adrian slowly shook his head. He wasn’t allowed to lie anymore. He also didn’t need to. “If I had still been in charge, we never would have been able to reach the next level of the afterlife. We would still be in the dark on what happens when we die. I consider that to be my magnum opus, even above the creation of Safe Haven. My choice has allowed mankind to evolve to a new level of awareness about their origins. I’m happy with what I’ve done, in that manner.”

Neil hadn’t considered it that way. A little of his anger deflated. “I can understand. I just can’t justify the means.”

“I would give you the same answer.”

Neil winced this time, finally showing regret.

Adrian understood more of what had forced Neil into the decision now. He just needed to make sure Neil wasn’t so corrupt that he was a danger to the dream.

“What do you care about the dream anymore?”

Neil’s bitterness shocked Adrian. “I can’t believe this is the same guy I trained in Eagle ethics. I watched him beat men for having a thicker line than what he crossed.”

Neil’s cheeks turned red, but he didn’t respond this time. He didn’t have a defense for it other than he been trying to go straight. *It didn’t work.*

“She’s going to replay this conversation, but I don’t think it will be for a while. Even before everyone got sick, Angela was heartbroken over this. She didn’t want to dig into it; she didn’t want Marc to dig into it either after he already had. As far as leadership is concerned, it happened exactly the way the trial turned out. However...”

Adrian couldn’t stop the nervous tone. “I picked up thoughts from her. It doesn’t look good for you. She knows you scammed her; she’s pissed about it. I don’t know how many people may be caught in the crossfire of whatever plan she devises as your punishment, but I do know there’s one thing you can do to make sure you’re the only one who gets hit by it.”

“Tell me.” Despite his bravado, Neil was scared of Angie. He also respected her and was still as loyal as he could be, considering the things they had all gone through since she took control. He didn’t blame her for Jeremy’s death, or any of the deaths they’d had. He blamed her for continuing to play with Adrian’s emotions to prevent the man from resuming leadership.

Adrian scoffed. “I can’t believe you really think that. She doesn’t want leadership. If I got the camp and Eagles to agree to it, she would hand that burden back over to me faster than you could shake a stick.”

“I don’t believe you.” Neil told the truth as he saw it. “She gets off on the control, the same as you do. She doesn’t want to go back.”

“You’re wrong. She’s tired. She keeps leading the camp through hell because no one else can. Did you see how fast she picked another descendant to carry the burden as soon as she was in leadership?” Adrian blew out a frustrated sigh. “Angela knows she won’t be able to handle it much longer the way things are.”

“You mean Jennifer.”

“No. I mean Marc. Marc thinks the same as you, but neither of you understand what it’s like to be in charge of our camp. It doesn’t take long before you’re so worn down that you’ll pass it to anyone the instant they show skills you need. It is a constant process of evaluation and disappointment.”

Neil wasn’t sure he could believe that. “I need proof.”

Adrian spent a minute trying to find something to satisfy the trooper. A recent observation he’d made came to mind. “Our ship is in the middle of a crisis, but she’s still thinking about leadership positions. Your proof will be when she announces a fighter list, even though none of us have gone through the evaluations.”

“There’s no way she can do that yet.”

Adrian shrugged. “I’d be willing to bet as soon as our medical crisis is over, that list gets posted–before the funeral.”

“I’ll watch for it.” Neil wondered if there was anything else they needed to discuss. It felt like he was forgetting something important.

“Do you want my advice?”

Neil realized he was getting tired. He had meant to bring them back to that. “I’m willing to listen to your idea.”

Adrian grinned at Neil’s stubbornness. *I wish I had seen this side of him sooner.* “Tell her everything. Be prepared for pain while she grills you, but she’s still the battered female rookie you took under your wing. Without you, she wouldn’t be where she is. I promise you; she has not forgotten that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. There’s also the fact that she needs you and your little family. We have a war to win when we come back. Your trio will probably be on the front lines.”

Neil’s guts churned harder. “No! Samantha and Amy are staying on the island.”

Adrian sighed, tired, sore and nervous without being exactly sure why. “We can’t hide anymore, Neil. Survival depends on sacrifices. You knew that when you signed up.”

**2**

**The Adrianna**

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Brittani stared back at him from her bed, face puffy. She’d been lying here, remembering her brother. Kenn was the first person to stop and check on her.

Kenn had been drawn by her endless pain lashing over his open connections. “They just don’t know what to say.”

Brittani sniffled, heart breaking all over again. “Do you?”

Kenn sighed. “Yes, but it’s cruel. I’m finding it hard to do that to you. You’re nice. Almost too nice to be an Eagle.”

Anger came into her red face. “I’m not.”

Kenn snorted. “We know you have a temper, but who doesn’t these days? Beyond that, you’re nice. We all know it.”

“And use it!” Brittani hated how she’d let these people manipulate her.

Kenn shrugged. “It’s what we do.”

“It’s wrong.”

“It lets us survive.”

“My brother didn’t!” Brittani sat up, rage flowing freely now. “My brother is dead!”

Kenn nodded, hardening his mind to get through this with her. “He was a sacrifice that let the others survive, like his mother, his father, and his very needed older sister who all loved him.”

Tears flooded from her eyes. “I hate you.”

Kenn opened his arms.

Brittani flew into them, body racked with huge, shuddering sobs. “I want my baby brother back!”

Kenn rubbed her shoulder and cried with her. Her pain was intolerable. “I can’t give him back to you. All I can offer is the chance to honor his memory.”

Brittani cried harder. “I hate you all!”

Kenn patted her and rubbed, repeating what he’d watched Adrian do so many times for hurting camp members. “It’s not fair, not to any of us. He didn’t deserve to die. None of our lost people deserved it.”

Brittani shuddered. “I don’t think I can go on!”

Kenn hugged her close and let her cry, hating the next part. He understood why Adrian handled it this way and he agreed, but it still hurt. “Here comes the cruel part.”

Brittani tightened her grip on his big body, bracing.

Kenn drew in a deep breath. “I need you. Lock it up, now. When it’s time, we’ll all suffer through that part together too. Don’t shut down when we need you the most. You’re dishonoring his sacrifice.” Kenn set her stiff body away from his. “Daryl needs you. So does everyone else who hasn’t died.”

Kenn headed for the infirmary before she could target him with her anger. Adrian had always stayed and let them take it out on him to deal with his guilt. Kenn didn’t have that part of the burden because he wasn’t the leader of the camp. When Angela recovered this time, she might need the same treatment to snap her out of their losses. That would be his job, providing he still had one when this was all over.

Kenn paused outside the infirmary. He hated death scenes.

“She isn’t going to die.” Tonya opened her folder so he could view the last test results. She’d just come from the lab.

She let him have the folder and went into the infirmary. Courtney, and many others, still needed care.

Kenn read Tonya’s note and felt his heart lighten. So far, the baby was okay.

Kenn entered and went to the cot, not looking at either woman. He dropped the folder onto Courtney’s ankles and went to Angela for a check in he didn’t really need yet. He just felt bad that he wasn’t spending time here suffering with everyone else.

Courtney hadn’t expected Kenn to offer comfort. She was too miserable to expect things from anyone. She was just grateful someone was caring for her. She tried to focus on red curls, throat burning. “Water?”

Tonya helped her get a drink, hurting. *This is not fair.*

Courtney sagged against the cot, exhausted.

Tonya replaced the empty bag of fluids, marveling at how much she’d changed. She kept telling herself she was doing a good thing as Courtney coughed up blood again.

“It is good.” Ivan fought not to cough too, unsure if he had his eyes open. His mind was spinning too hard to tell. He had been told he was recovering. Being able to hear Tonya’s thoughts confirmed that, but he didn’t feel like it.

“It’s true.” Tonya jumped at the chance to have a good moment. “I did the tests. In a few days, you’ll be able to tell too.”

Ivan tried to smile at her, but he passed out in the middle, turning it into a grimace.

Tonya ignored Kenn’s comforting shoulder rub as he left, but she didn’t pull away. She didn’t have time to decide how she felt. Until she did, it could wait. *Safe Haven needs me. And I need Safe Haven. Kenn, I’m not so sure about anymore.*

**3**

“Kill the engine.”

Marc pushed the buttons. He immediately felt the ship respond. Noise levels dropped in half. Within a minute, there was quiet from the ship.

Ian stayed by the door, providing guard duty for Marc and Theo as they brought the ship in to the floatie for refueling. They’d been able to see the faint outline of the Cayman Islands for the last half hour of sunrise, causing unrest among their healthy members and sadness among the leaders. It was a tropical island paradise they would never get to enjoy. It was obvious by the stillness that the Cayman Islands hadn’t survived. A few people had been harboring secret hopes that the United States had been the only country destroyed; they were still yearning for rescue, even after eleven months.

“What happens from here?”

Theo finished adjusting the dials, watching their speed and the radar. “We get in as close as we can. When she stops, we use the tugs to get in place, then drop the anchor.”

Marc was certain it wasn’t going to be as easy as that sounded, but he was willing to let Theo handle it. The buff man had spent a lot of time going over the design of the ship in the books, but he’d also spent time with Grant on the bridge before they set sail and after. If anyone could do this, it was Theo.

Theo was almost certain they were going to overshoot by half a mile. That meant wasting fuel they didn’t have to get the big ship into the correct position. He also didn’t like how many floaties were popping up on the radar. In that half a mile, it was possible they might run into one–literally.

“What would be the effect?” Marc was monitoring Theo’s thoughts, as well as Kendle’s and the fuel crew on the deck below.

“Not much, I think. There would be a fuel spill, of course, but that’s minor compared to everything that’s happened since the war.” Theo watched the numbers count down. “However, a spark could cause a fire or even an explosion.”

“What can we do?”

Theo pointed toward the refueling crew on the deck. “They’ll have instructions. Keep an eye out for floaties or big debris in front of us. I’ll try to steer around if we happen to be that unlucky.”

“Have you noticed all the movement in the water?” Ian was horrified. Dozens of sharks were circling the cruise ship.

Theo hadn’t noticed, but he didn’t want to look away from the screens.

“I told our guys to use heavy gear.” Marc had picked the animals up on his radar as they neared the location. He stared into the distance, wondering what kept the sharks here. *Maybe there’s a nursery.*

“I see our floatie.” Ian used his glasses. “Our clearing crew is on top. There’s a lot of debris in the water. They had problems.”

Marc joined Theo at the radar screen. There were multiple signatures; one was directly in their path. He wasn’t sure if they were going to hit it.

Neither was Theo. He rubbed the console, murmuring encouragement to the giant ship. “Come on, baby. Slow down for me right where I need you.”

The ship shuddered under them; resistance increased as the water thickened. The ship slowed, numbers on the speedometer ticking down three times as fast.

Marc gaped in disbelief as the ship stopped exactly where it needed to be. “Now, I’ve seen everything.”

Theo wanted to echo Marc’s shock, but there wasn’t time. He hurried out of the bridge and onto the deck to join the fuel team. It would take a while for the engine to cool off, but there was still a lot to get done before then.

Marc took a minute to confirm his sanity. He pinched himself until his arm turned blue under his fingers. “Nope, still awake. Damn it!”

“Here comes trouble.” Ian stood on the stairs to block anyone from reaching Marc.

Marc came to the plastic and pulled it open as a small group of Eagles and camp members made it to the top deck. They spotted him and came over.

“We want to talk to you!”

Ian went to the bottom of the stairs so he would have room to fight if it was needed.

Martin stepped up to him without fear. “We want Marc’s permission to leave.”

Ian scowled at him, then everyone else. “What if he says no?”

Martin gave a hard glare that said he wasn’t going to back down. “Then we’ll have to go ask the boss and she’s a little busy right now.”

“Let them go.” Marc pointed to the lifeboats. “You have to pick one and liberate yourself. I don’t have the manpower right now.”

Everyone in the group sighed in relief.

Martin stepped around Ian, ignoring the man’s immediate fighting stance reaction. He held out a hand to Marc. “I’m sorry it has to be this way. Thank you for letting us leave.”

Marc respected Martin for the way he was handling things. He shook with the deserter. “I wish you luck.”

Martin turned away. “Right back at you, Marc. I hope we see each other again someday.”

“Me too.” Marc went back into the bridge. He was almost certain that wouldn’t happen. The nine people moving guiltily toward the lifeboats were their weakest Eagles and several restless camp members. That group wouldn’t have an easy time of it no matter where they landed, but from the look of the shoreline, they definitely weren’t going to find safe harbor here.

The faint sound of an engine brought Marc back to the plastic sheeting of the doorway. He and Kendle observed as Quinn and Allison took a small inflatable to pick up the clearing crew.

Marc scanned the floaties. He didn’t respond to the wave he got from Neil or Adrian, but he did give Molly a friendly gesture. He didn’t care that it appeared sexist. Molly was the only one of that crew he wasn’t pissed at.

Chapter Twenty-Four

**Trap Team Troubles**

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The Cayman Islands

**1**

**“T**hat’s a lot of sharks!”

Allison scowled at Quinn’s shout over the noise of their engine. They weren’t supposed to do anything to provoke an attack.

The inflatable speedboat was surrounded by choppy waves and sharks of so many varieties that Allison couldn’t identify them all. Dozens of rare, normally unaggressive sharks were fighting each other everywhere she looked. The natural enemies were gathered here, for whatever reason. These disturbances could trigger a larger event if they were unlucky. Quinn’s shouting could have also been a final straw. She had no idea why he’d been sent along for this run.

Per Marc’s orders, Quinn steered them toward Molly first.

Two dozen Lemon sharks around Molly’s floatie flinched as the boat neared, vanishing below the waves. Reef sharks took their place, circling the boat in restless anger.

The rest of the sharks swam through the debris being shifted by the wake, dark eyes watching every move the humans made.

Quinn stopped by the side of Molly’s rotting floatie, grinning up at her. “Miss, did you call a taxi?”

Molly frowned, gesturing for him to be quiet.

Quinn scowled, but he didn’t argue when she pointed at the sharks, then lifted her brow to ask if he was crazy. A dozen more reef sharks were gliding their way with fins barely rising from the murky water.

On the other side of the huge cruise ship, a lifeboat dropped heavily into the water.

Nearly every shark dove out of sight to go investigate the new vibrations.

On the bridge, Marc was torn as he watched it unfold on his mental grid. He chose to do what he felt was right, not what they deserved. He keyed the mike on his belt, sure those Eagles were still listening. “You have a lot of company coming. Watch the water.”

“Same to you!” The radio screamed at him. “Flank!”

Marc and his guard hurried to check their rear, bad feeling growing as they registered movement from land. “Company! Incoming!”

Gunshots rang out, bringing attention from all over the big ship. Terrified faces appeared in portholes; boots sounded on the stairs. Snipers took aim, waiting for Marc’s call.

Screams came from the people fleeing in the lifeboat. Marc didn’t use his energy to help them, following Angela’s order to save it for their ill people. He observed in guilty misery as two people were shoved out of the boat during the panic. Everyone was trying to get in the center, away from the sharks. Bloody screams hit the waves.

On the other side of the ship, engines and more gunfire echoed. A speedboat of scavengers bounced toward their floatie. The three men were firing AKs–badly.

“I know that aim! That’s Blake!” Neil hit the front of the advancing boat.

It gave a weak pop.

Molly and Adrian fired at the same time. They both hit the man in the front.

Blake jerked the wheel as he fell out of the boat.

Quinn held the pickup boat steady as Allison took aim on the now retreating survivor. He resisted the urge to rush her. *I hate it when they do that to me. Some parts of Eagle rules are stupid.*

Allison pulled the trigger and immediately rotated to Quinn without watching it land. She knew it was good. “It’s not stupid! They do it for moments like this! If I kept waiting, the target would have gotten out of range.”

Quinn realized she was mad. His brows came together. “What’s your problem?”

“You! You shouldn’t be along for this run!”

He frowned. “You’re a very unpleasant person.”

Allison stared… She chuckled quietly. “Yeah, I guess I am.” She slid over to allow Molly a seat. “Get us rolling, *please*.”

Quinn smiled and did as instructed.

Molly took the rear position, standing, with her weapon ready. She was the guard for the next pick up. Allison was too new to know that’s where she should have been.

Neil and Adrian were ready to go. They landed in the front of the small boat simultaneously, like they’d drilled months ago. After so many flooded areas, Safe Haven had learned to use small watercraft, though they’d never gotten good at it.

“Are they leaving!?” Allison pointed at the lifeboat of crying, scared people coming around the front of the cruise ship. “That’s Martin …and Corey!”

Only Allison was surprised. She hadn’t been invited to that Eagle meeting.

Allison realized her crew already knew. She fell silent as Quinn took them back to the Adrianna, trying to figure out how. *What did I miss?*

Molly scanned for problems, not looking at any of her shipmates. She replayed swimming away from the shark over and over in her mind, refusing to think about anything else.

Neil gestured at Adrian. *Is she okay?*

Adrian yawned. *She’s covering something. She hopes we’ll think she’s traumatized, so we won’t look for what she’s hiding.*

Neil’s gut tightened. *Any idea what it is*?

*She knows your secret.*

Neil’s stomach churned now. *It might be one of yours.*

*Can’t be. I don’t have any. You’re the only one still lying.*

Neil brought up his mental clouds, positive it was already too late.

The two Eagle boats passed within twenty feet of each other. Five hard stares followed the ducked profiles of the deserters. No words or gestures were exchanged.

Sharks began returning from the other side of the cruise ship, watching both boats of humans for another treat. Adrian’s people were glad they only had to get back on their ship. It was close. Land was a mile away for those in the lifeboat; the sharks haunted them the entire way.

**2**

Molly took Theo’s strong hand as she reached the top of the ladder and let go the instant her boots touched the deck. She immediately turned toward the ramp.

Theo shrugged and held out his hand to the next team member trying to get onboard. Lemon sharks lined the water under the ladder.

Quinn had sailed the boat into the loading chute and was now securing it to the rail. Theo admired the handiwork as he pulled Neil onto the deck. The chute held five small boats of sturdy nature for emergency situations. This was the first time it had been used and it had gone flawless. *Ozzie would have been proud of what we built.*

Molly went down the ramp into the ship without responding to any of the questions or Ian’s order to get a decontamination shower. She jogged through the hall, headed for the stairs by the elevator. She could feel someone trying to keep up with her in the hall. Molly knew who it was by the feel of their panic.

*Ding!*

Molly jumped as the elevator slid open.

Peter gave her a weak smile through the visor of his radiation gear. “This elevator is back open.” He put a sticker on the wall above the buttons and waddled off. Wearing a full suit, Peter was both funny and scary to view.

Molly stepped into the gleaming elevator, barely aware of the strong chemical smell. *I have to get to Angela.* She breathed a sigh of relief as the doors started to close.

“Hold up!” A hand shot through the gap.

The doors slid open.

Neil entered the elevator, aware of how she’d paled. He hit the shut button, blocking an escape with his body.

Molly drew her gun.

**3**

*Ding!*

Kenn moved toward the elevator. He could feel the bad vibes it was about to release into this hall. He came face-to-face with Neil, who was wet, red-eyed, and nervous.

“Holster, rookie.” Neil said it without moving from the elevator, even when Kenn retreated.

Molly put her gun away, cheeks red. She let out a ragged breath as Neil went to a chair by the infirmary and sat.

Neil had kept his back to her for the ride, trying to think of something to say. He still hadn’t come up with anything that would work. Molly was furious at his betrayal.

Kenn lifted a brow at Molly, noting she was also wet and tired, but a furious rage was burning in her eyes. *Neil did something bad*. “You need me?”

Molly walked toward the infirmary, leaving salty footprints. “The boss.”

Kenn motioned Neil to block her. “Angela is busy.”

Neil reluctantly stood in front of the door.

Molly rounded on Kenn, not intimidated. She’d never been frightened of anyone, except Neil during that elevator ride. “Let me in there!”

“Why?”

“None of your business!”

Kenn sighed. “I’m man on point, Eagle.”

Molly considered her options, then realized all she had to do was yell. That allowed her to calm down and think. *I’m safe here. I made it to the boss.*

“Yes, you did.” Kenn frowned. “What rattled you?” Molly was usually as steady as they came. Adrian had been eager for her to join the Eagles. So had Angela.

Molly glanced at Neil. Her lips clamped shut. Without talking to the boss, she didn’t know what to do.

Kenn shrugged. “She’ll be out in a few minutes. It’s almost shift change. Have a seat and wait–unless it’s an emergency. If it is, tell me right now.”

Kenn scowled when her eyes went to Neil again. “Fuzzy-brain isn’t a descendant. I am. Tell me.”

Molly’s hands clenched as she spun around. She shoved Neil out of her way, knocking him into the door. As it swung open, she went in.

Neil tripped as he tried to catch himself, falling onto a chair and then the floor.

Kenn skipped helping Neil up to observe through the window as Molly stomped to Angela and whispered in her ear.

Kenn caught the words. He replayed them in growing fury. *Neil’s a descendant. He’s been lying this whole time. And Adrian knows.*

Neil sighed, shoulders slumping. “The boss does too. And Marc.”

Kenn stopped himself from attacking Neil, but it was close. Angela’s quiet response to Molly, and Molly’s shocked expression in return, proved Neil’s words. That meant Angela already had plans. Kenn glanced at Neil, seeing the lie now that Neil’s mental clouds were down. “Wow. She’s gonna fuck you up, dude.”

Neil winced.

Kenn’s anger grew at the response. It was more proof. “Why are you here?!”

Neil gestured at the clock. “Shift change. I’m on duty over the boss.”

“Who gave you those orders?!”

Neil ignored him, tired. He waited as Molly came toward the exit, mentally begging for a chance to explain.

Molly grabbed both doors as she went out. She swung the left side as hard as she could, cracking Neil in the face.

“Oh, my gosh! I am, like, so sorry!” Molly kept walking as Neil crumpled to the tile.

Kenn laughed. He met Molly’s eyes, amusement fading. “I didn’t know.”

Molly was too stunned to talk about it calmly. She glanced at Neil, who was bleeding and moaning. “I want him dead.”

Kenn wasn’t surprised. “For what he did to Seth, or for fooling us all this time?”

Molly’s lips thinned into a hard line. She left without answering.

Kenn understood. It was both, and then so much more that he couldn’t find the words to express it either. Neil had been a pillar of good they’d all depended on. Now, they would have to watch him fall. It was awful.

“I see you’re helping again.” Brittani strode down the hall.

Wearing clean clothes and shoes, with her hair in a tight braid, she looked ready to try again. Only the horror in her eyes gave her away. Kenn held the door open. “I’m proud of you.”

Brittani entered with her chin up and her heart locked. *Lou would want me to keep helping, to keep living and I will, but this pain might kill me when it’s all over.*

Kenn finished the chore with a mental thought. *I’ll be there for you then. We all will.*

Angela gestured toward the door. “Get in here.”

Neil went into the infirmary.

Kenn came to the door in case she meant him too.

Angela pointed at the corner, not looking up from Dion as death claimed another of her lost children. Tears ran over her cheeks in thick waves, soaking the boy’s face.

Neil, nose bleeding, walked to the body pile.

Kenn went in to help. This shift had taken five more lives. Terribly, the cots were finally emptying.

**4**

“I want you to verify the sniper watch is rotated, then check on our other ship.”

“You got it.” Adrian headed back down the bridge steps he’d just come up. Marc wasn’t in the mood to chat. Neither was Adrian. He was too full of his conversation with Neil to hide anything.

Marc watched Adrian’s shadow as he made contact with Zack, who had taken over sniper watch. *Time is running out for you, Adrian. I’m counting hours now.*

Marc saw the towline crew heading to the rear of the ship. He’d also wanted to make Adrian do that, but he’d taken pity on how bad Adrian looked after no sleep and being drained. He wouldn’t have been much help.

Marc turned back to Theo, who was giving him instructions.

“If the flow is too fast or doesn’t overspill each tank correctly, it can cause stability problems. There’s even a small chance of rolling the boat onto its side due to uneven weight distribution. I want you to watch these gauges. You see how they show the stability of the ship and the horizontal line of the hull on the horizon?”

“Yes.” Marc memorized the correct position for the dials, wishing the skycrap would thicken or the fog would return. They were in plain view, with morning light illuminating every person on the top deck. None of them were safe.

“It can fluctuate 5% to either side. After that, we have to stop filling until the tanks level out.” Theo rocked his hand. “Sometimes the fuel goes in too quick and causes rocking, which, as you know, we don’t need.”

Marc nodded. “Got it.”

“Watch this gauge here.” Theo pointed. “When the fuel level gets to this point, you need to call down to shut it off.”

Marc frowned. “Every tank can still hold another quarter after that.”

Theo shook his head. “Never fill a boat gas tank all the way. You have to give the fuel room to expand.”

Marc shrugged. He was willing to take Theo’s word on it. “Is there anything else you need me to do?”

Theo moved toward the fading, buggy plastic over the doorway. “Just make sure we remain stable and you yell when we’re at three-quarters.” Theo ducked out, waving at Quinn, who was waiting for orders now that he’d changed clothes. “I have you positioned here at the shut off valve between the deck and the tank. Make sure you open it or close it as soon as we tell you to.”

Theo waved Allison toward the fuel fill. “You watch that line. Make sure it doesn’t twist, jump, or leak. You see any of those problems, you let me know.”

Theo kept moving, running over the mental list while speaking it out aloud to be sure it was all covered. “We’re properly vented. The vent hose is high on the vessel and away from the engine or any other heat source. The gauge flow arrester is functioning. The grounding cables are in place to provide a discharge for any static electricity that builds up.” Theo joined the small crew near the hoses that had been brought up from the cargo area. “Anyone who smokes, I want you to have your last cigarette for the next five hours.” Theo made a gesture. “I’m not kidding. Light it up now, because once we get rolling, anyone who lights a cigarette will be shoved overboard.”

A few people pulled out smokes and lit them, but everyone wore an uneasy expression at the threat. There were sharks in every direction around the boat and the fuel floatie.

“The most dangerous part of refueling is static electricity. Unfortunately, we carry it. We have to avoid discharging it once the fuel starts, so there are a few things I’m going to have you do while the engine cools. The first is that all of you need to switch to a pair of leather boots, not rubber. Anyone wearing wool or anything that makes you itchy needs to change. We’re going to have a metal object up here, probably a milk pail, for everyone to touch before we get started and after, so it naturally discharges the spark. While we work, there will be no rubbing, itching, sliding, scuffing, or scratching. Don’t run your hands through your hair; don’t reach into your pockets for anything. If you have to walk somewhere, raise your feet all the way. Do not scuff across the deck. We have fire extinguishers ready in case something goes wrong. Should you catch fire, I recommend jumping overboard. It’s quicker than waiting on us to figure out how to use the extinguishers.”

Debra made a short gesture, then pointed at the water.

Theo flushed. “Oh, yeah. On second thought, wait for us to figure it out. Getting burned is better than being eaten.” He pointed at the nozzles while people muttered. “A positively charged nozzle can react with a negatively charged pipe. Everything is grounded, but you need to be careful not to lift the nozzle from the pipe during refueling. Breaking contact can cause a spark as quickly as making contact. All you need to do is clamp these hoses into place and watch for spills. Don’t try to adjust anything. If there’s a problem, wave me over and I’ll handle it.”

Theo ran through his mental list one more time, then looked at the small team. “Does anyone have any questions I can answer before we get started?”

Heads shook and feet shuffled restlessly before remembering they weren’t supposed to do that.

“Anyone who needs to get out of their clothing, do it now.” Theo indicated a large crate by the ramp. “I had a variety of boots brought up. Please remember what I said about smoking. That rule will go into place in a few minutes, so if you’ve got them, smoke them now or do without.”

Theo joined Allison and Quinn with a hand out for the pack they were sharing. “I think I’d like to try that.”

Allison held the lighter for Theo, wondering if the man had ever smoked before.

Theo inhaled deeply, braced for the coughing.

Quinn put the pack away, scanning the wooden boat behind them. Nothing moved on Adrian’s ship. *Why does that bother me?*

Quinn shook it off and enjoyed a few minutes of chatting before the next shift of labor began.

**5**

Adrian tied the small boat to the side of his smaller ship and carefully climbed the ladder. The ship they were towing hadn’t been boarded since they left America. He agreed with Marc that it was a good time to check on things while they were stationary.

Adrian went to the towline first; it appeared okay from this end. He would recommend they switch it out next time they stopped.

Adrian moved toward the wheelhouse. He didn’t like being out of sight of the Adrianna, but with the towline still attached, he wouldn’t be left behind. The smaller vessel swayed gently under his boots, giving the impression he was on a pleasure trip. While smaller than the Adrianna, this ship was still big. It was carrying a few bulky items and a variety of crates and bags they hadn’t had time to sort through on the beach.

Adrian’s first clue something was wrong was the sound of footsteps coming from below.

As he turned around, his ears registered two more sets of boots coming up behind him.

Adrian drew his gun.

A dense shield slammed around him, locking him in place.

Five shadows dressed in black outfits with UN emblems on their chest surrounded him.

“I did it! I got him!” Sadie pressed against the shield, making faces at Adrian. “I caught a Mitchel!”

Adrian observed his new captors. This lone female among them sported a tall, blue mohawk and dark, sun-kissed skin that Adrian would have been glad to rub in another situation. Even without her words, he would have pinpointed her as a new descendant from her twitching fingers. She was ready to throw another spell if he resisted. She was also bragging. *A rookie. That might be useful*.

Adrian didn’t have the energy to get through the shield. His mind began laboring on a spell she wouldn’t expect as he turned his attention to the two bruised, scarred fighters holding guns on him. Both men were bald with American and British features, and the same black clothes with the same UN emblem.

Adrian wasn’t impressed despite the muscle. He scanned the man standing by himself at the corner of the wheelhouse. This one had a long black braid. As the man shifted, Adrian caught his profile and identified him as Native American.

Dag stepped forward and slapped the shield around Adrian, making it ripple. “What about me, hotshot? You haven’t evaluated me yet.”

Adrian frowned at the man with the shorter braided blonde ponytail. “I always seem to run into a German or a Mexican on trips like these. Do they produce you guys in factories just for moments like this or were you the only ones willing to take a run for me?”

Dag, the XO of the group, wasn’t sure how to take that. He stared, mind spinning.

Jamie, the team leader, snickered. “You think highly of yourself. So does the UN. You wouldn’t believe the reward they offered.”

Adrian shrugged. “Probably not. Are you here just for me? That sure would make me feel special.”

Dag motioned their two fighters into position. “The UN doesn’t tell us what they want.”

“We know, though. Once Safe Haven is under control, the American government can come back out of the ground.” Jamie huffed in disapproval. “It’s terrible you helped peasants conquer your own government.”

Adrian didn’t get pulled into that blackhole. “Were the decoy scavengers yours or ours?”

Dag lifted his chin. “That was all you. Banishing people is a bad idea. You should just kill them.”

Adrian couldn’t argue. “How do you expect to take our ship?”

Sadie leered at Adrian, orbs glowing red. “With you, of course. Everyone wants you, especially your own people.”

Adrian snorted bitterly. “You obviously don’t have the latest information.”

Jamie frowned at that.

Dag was positive it was a bluff. He gestured to Sadie. “When I count to three, I want you to drop the shield. We’ll get him darted and back to land in time for lunch.”

Sadie stepped forward eagerly. “I hope he fights. I’ve never been this hungry.”

Dag scowled at her. “The UN will only pay us if he is intact. Do *not* take his lifeforce.”

Sadie’s happiness fell. Her lip pushed out in disappointment.

Jamie didn’t like their descendant being unhappy, especially since he was sleeping with her. “Don’t worry, sweet-ums. You’ll get a chance at the shark killer.”

Sadie’s mood improved. “I really do want her. She’s a great shot. I’ll bet Molly tastes like sugar.”

Adrian realized these killers had been observing since the clearing team arrived. “Cameras?”

Jamie nodded. “We installed them on all floaties two weeks ago. We’ve been waiting for you, Mr. Mitchel.”

That explained the sunburns they were all carrying. Adrian frowned as he realized this was one of the brainwashed groups they had learned about during Charlie’s manhood quest. “You’re a trap team.”

Dag and the others scowled; Jamie chuckled. “Excellent. A little more proof you are who we came for.” The boss gestured.

Sadie lowered the shield.

Adrian fired a spell at her as the two fighters, Roy and Wendell, both shot him with darts.

Adrian slid to his knees, fighting the powerful sedatives as he tried to gather more energy. *Angie!* A weak call spun into the tropical air.

“Dart him again!” Dag grabbed the gun from Roy when that man didn’t respond quick enough. He slammed the dart into the chamber and popped Adrian in the back.

Adrian slumped at their feet.

Sadie hurried forward. “Lunch time!”

Wendell grabbed her by the arm. “The boss said–”

Sadie lunged around and latched onto his lifeforce. She snapped it loose in a matter of seconds and swallowed, moaning.

Wendell’s corpse fell to the deck, shriveled.

Sadie realized what she had done and backed away, hands coming up in defense as pain hit her gut.

Jamie and Dag stepped toward her, both wearing angry expressions.

“I’m sorry! I was so hungry!”

Dag lifted his gun.

Sadie tried to bring up her shield.

Nothing happened.

Dag and Jamie waited, one confused and the other surprised Mitchel had been smart enough to do it.

“Why won’t it work?!” Sadie began slamming through doors in her mind, firing random spells that brought no response from her magic. “What happened to it?! Where is it?!”

Jamie motioned toward Adrian’s body. “He locked you up. You’re no longer a descendant.”

Sadie screamed. Her hands came up to yank on her blue hair in brutal rips.

“This is making too much noise.” Jamie had seen descendants flip out, but never for this reason. “Shoot her.”

Angry about Wendell’s murder, Roy lifted his gun.

Sadie ran. She made it to the side of the ship before the surprised men reacted, diving overboard.

There was a large splash and then silence.

Dag holstered his weapon. “The sharks will take care of it. We need to get Adrian back to Grand Island and send a support team for Kronus. He’s the most important package we’re collecting today.”

**6**

“I heard something...” Kendle was the last one on the rear of the Adrianna. They’d finished pulling in the towline to making sure there were no tangles to prevent it from stretching out when they set sail again. The rest of the workers had already switched to other areas of the ship for their next duty. Kenn was keeping every able-bodied person busy every minute that he could between breaks and sleep.

Old magic wafted by on the warm breeze and vanished into the sunny sky.

Kendle stared at the tow ship. *I hate that spell.*

*Angie!*

Kendle tried to pinpoint the call. When she did, she took a minute to decide what to do. Adrian was calling out to Angela for help again. Because no one was responding, Kendle assumed the call was too weak. *I’m the only one who heard it.*

Kendle rotated toward the main landing, but she avoided the steps that would take her into the bowels, where Angela was supposed to be on a break. She took the long way to the bridge, going to Marc instead.

Kendle didn’t hate Adrian, but she loved Marc and she needed all the points she could score. *Marc will get to make this decision.*

Chapter Twenty-Five

**You Will Do It**

**A close up of a device

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“D**o you want me to do something about her?” Neil held the door open for Angela to enter the corridor that would take them to the coed showers.

“No.” Angela fought her sore throat, eager to have this conversation over with. “Kendle is doing exactly what I thought she would.”

Neil wasn’t surprised to hear it, though he was a bit dismayed. “You knew there was going to be a problem during this stop, but you didn’t tell anyone.”

Angela snorted. “I told the people who matter.”

Neil felt the blow, like she’d intended. He was on the outs with everyone. It didn’t leave room for the fame or glory he had enjoyed as the most honorable man in camp.

Angela wanted to let him stew, but she was running out of time. She hoped pushing him now was the right way to go. “If I had told you yes about Kendle, would you have done it?”

Neil nodded.

“I don’t sense any guilt about it.” She looked at him. “Is that a problem?”

Neil grunted. “As long as my family is protected, no.”

“I wish I’d known all of this before we set sail, Neil. You would’ve gotten a different place in my army.”

Neil opened the shower door for her. “Adrian told me the same thing, but I wouldn’t have won Samantha with the truth.”

He fell silent at the sight of Allison and Quinn using the showers.

Allison and Quinn both gaped at the couple. Neil was covered in yellowing bruises and didn’t seem capable of standing up straight. Angela was a shriveled hag with sunken eyes that neither of them could look at for long.

“Everything okay?”

Allison grunted at Angela’s query, soap dripping from her hair. “Theo said our skin is too dry; our hair needs conditioner so we don’t create sparks.”

Angela stepped into one of the stalls to disrobe, vaguely aware that she no longer felt uncomfortable doing this around other people. Only Kenn and Adrian made her feel that way now. “I’m sure Theo knows what he’s doing.”

That was the end of the complaining. Angela’s white hair and bony body was enough to stop anyone from whining about how unhappy they were. It was obvious the boss was giving everything she had.

Angela quickly washed, already feeling guilty for the amount of time she would be away from the infirmary. Morgan and Harry needed this break more than she did, but those men had insisted she leave. Angela knew it was because she couldn’t stop crying, but she really couldn’t. This culling of the herd was killing her.

“I think I saw one of your socks.”

Silence fell as everyone looked at Neil.

Neil grinned at Quinn, hoping this effort gave Angela a few minutes of peace instead of the mental misery threatening to swallow her.

Quinn flushed. “Uh, thanks.” He hoped Neil would let it go.

Neil wasn’t about to. They all needed to laugh so they didn’t scream. “It was hanging from a light fixture in one of the cabins they cleaned yesterday.”

People snickered or shook their heads as Quinn flushed darker and refused to meet anyone’s eye.

Neil grinned wider. “Do you want to know where they found your shorts?”

“Please don’t.”

“In the mess, under a booth. How on earth did your shorts get under a mess booth?”

Quinn covered his face with his hands. “She said she had them.”

Neil laughed. “Are you missing more than one pair of underwear?”

Quinn groaned.

“The cleaning crew is trying to find the entire outfit. Be nice and lose a pair of pants somewhere. Ian almost has the set. He found your spare boots on a balcony.” Neil grinned. “Well, two different balconies, but still.”

Laughter broke through the room as Quinn slid under the water. “Never gonna live this down.”

There was soothing quiet for a few minutes as the group showered. Steam floated through the room, easing tension and congestion.

“Charlie’s coming.”

Angela hurried at Neil’s warning. “It’s a message from Marc. They’re about to start fueling.”

Everyone in the shower was either assigned to that dangerous event or planned to be there in case they were needed, including Angela. Morgan had insisted she get some fresh air after her shower, instead of coming straight back to the infirmary.

Charlie stuck his head in, refusing to acknowledge Neil. “Mom?”

Angela wrapped a towel around her hair, then another around her body as she stepped out. “The people in here are okay. Let’s hear it.”

Quinn and Allison liked that.

Neil doubted she meant him. He tried not to draw attention any more than he already was by being next to Charlie in the doorway.

“Refueling will start in ten minutes. We need all hands. Theo said we’re ready to go. He’s just waiting for the engines to finish cooling off.” Charlie sent a mental message. *Dad said there’s trouble on the other boat with Adrian. He wants to know how you want him to handle it.*

*No change in the plan.*

*He’s having doubts that she can handle it.*

Angela sighed, standing behind a locker to dress. “Tell him to get her ready–by any means necessary.”

Charlie frowned as he wrote it down. Like others in the room, he’d just figured out Angela had known there was going to be a problem here and hadn’t warned anyone.

Neil glared at her. “That’s twice on the same stop.”

Angela shut her locker and began pulling on socks. “Keep counting. It’s not over yet.”

Angela strapped on her gun, then pulled on her jacket and boots, wet hair dripping all over her and the floor. There wasn’t time to dry it. The wind on the top deck would take care of that when she got up there.

Realizing Angela was almost done, people shut off showers; squeaking footsteps echoed across the floor as they tried to get dressed as quick as she had.

“How are Tracy and the kids?”

Charlie flushed. “Fine, as of a few hours ago.”

Angela didn’t scold him. “Get some sleep when you can. I don’t want to see white hair on you.”

“Okay.” Charlie headed back up to the bridge.

Neil studied the boy until he was out of sight, aware of Dog coming out of the shadows to fall in on the teenager’s heels. *I wonder if the wolf will talk to me now...*

Neil pushed the thought away, turning to scan the other hall. He was on duty over the boss. No one was going to get near her without him being aware of it and making them pay. He wasn’t looking forward to the fallout when the camp discovered his secrets, but he was grateful to be a descendant. There was a lot he could do, and Safe Haven needed it.

Angela stepped by, slinging wet hair as she finished braiding it, then began to wrap it in a loose bun. “Maybe if you do enough, they’ll forgive you.”

Neil followed her, aware of the others rushing around behind them. “Yes.” He hesitated, then went on. “Will that work?”

Angela was thoughtful as she walked toward the intersection while clipping her bun into place. “There’s a great chance it will work on the camp. There’s absolutely no chance it will work on me.”

Neil was already pushing the line. “What *will* work on you? How do I earn your forgiveness?”

“That depends on what you’re asking forgiveness for.” Angela tugged on black gloves next, then moved toward the freshly scrubbed elevator, tired and sick of stairs.

“For murder.”

“I can’t offer you forgiveness for that. I’m not positive it was murder. I still haven’t decided how I feel about that part of it.” She shrugged. “That decision goes to a higher level than me anyway.”

Neil pushed the button to the top deck. The doors slid closed. “Then for breaking your trust.”

Angela’s face darkened into a thick cloud. A wave of heat filled the elevator. His damp Eagle clothes and boots began to dry.

Neil retreated, hand coming up. “I’m sorry.”

Angela forced the rage down. “You betrayed me. You lied to my face; you put this camp through days of stress that helped weaken our immune systems. We were all so busy with your bullshit that we missed the real threat.” Angela forced the rage down. It had been a long time since she’d been this angry with one of Safe Haven’s members. “With every person we lose, your hands get a little bloodier. As the leader, I can’t condone that; nor can I forgive you for it. Your actions cost more than the two lives that were taken. You can’t earn my forgiveness because you can’t bring those people back.”

“Even though you’re glad to have some of them gone and you knew this was coming?” Neil didn’t have anything left to lose. The truth was the only thing he could cling to.

“Yes. You’re the only person who has ever tricked me into planning for something that you never intended to follow through with. Like the people you’re going to face at some point, I’m shocked that you were never what you pretended to be. That’s a long time of lying, Neil. Even if you hadn’t distracted us, there would still have to be payment for that.”

“So what happens now?”

“Because the camp needs you so much, I’ve chosen not to make a final decision until they get their say. Forgiveness doesn’t matter to anyone right now.”

“It matters to me.” Neil hit stop on the elevator. He leaned against the wall away from her, so she didn’t feel threatened like Molly had earlier. “I wasn’t a good man before the war. I wasn’t evil, but I wasn’t good. When my father was killed, that eliminated the last living person who knew me. I saw it as an opportunity to change who I was.” Neil let out a sigh that revealed the disappointment in himself. “I tried to live by it. For eleven months, I *was* a good man.”

Angela hated her time being spent this way, but it was part of the job too. When one of her men was having an epiphany, it had to be handled right then if she wanted the outcome to go her way. “Are you willing to tell me what flipped you now? I would have asked sooner, but I thought I already knew the answer.”

Neil lifted a brow. “Will it matter?”

Angela shrugged, also leaning against the elevator wall. She lifted her leg and tugged on the clean sock that still refused to stay up on her ankle. “I won’t know until I hear it.”

Neil let out a sound of misery. “I still wanted Becky.…”

Angela understood how hard it was for him to admit that to her. She helped him along by filling in the next part. “And because you had an open relationship with Samantha, your brain started whispering you could have Becky on the side, that Samantha would have to agree because you agreed with Jeremy.”

Neil was horrified. “I could feel it coming. I was going to get drunk one of these nights and say something stupid. I was about to throw away the first happiness I’d had in my life, for a piece of ass with a damaged child.” Tears rolled down Neil’s cheeks. “I’m not a good man.”

Angela knew the right response to give according to Safe Haven’s rules. She also knew the response she wanted to give as a female. She chose to be a leader. “What about Seth?”

Neil scrubbed away the tears. “Seth took advantage of her just weeks after Rick’s assault. Then he got her pregnant right after her abortion. He wasn’t punished for any of that, but he should have been. *You* know he should have been.”

“I do. However, I wasn’t in charge then. If I had been, that would have gone differently, but long before it, you would have been banished for your relationship with her. My camp would have been so strict that not enough people would have joined to allow us to reach this moment in time. Adrian had to lead us first. Now, I can tighten the laws to prevent those situations. You’re a crumb that slipped through the cracks. So is Kyle, though that situation had a better resolution.”

Neil’s anger returned. “You sound like it was an experiment.”

Angela shrugged. “Adrian and I studied the relationships, but I don’t consider it an experiment as much as something that was going to happen one way or another. We didn’t put Seth or Kyle with younger women who had been abused. They both did that on their own. We just studied the results so we could figure out how to prevent it from ever happening again.”

Neil was relieved to hear something good might come from the whole mess, but he was still confused. “How does that work?”

Angela pushed the button to open the doors. “I’m going to make examples. Then I’m going to make us so strict on morals that it becomes a comfortable way of life and people won’t even consider making the same bad decisions that you’ve allowed to ruin your life.”

The elevator opened. Angela touched Neil’s shoulder. “Thank you for being honest with me. I know that wasn’t easy. I’m sorry your attempt to change failed, but as I’m sure you know, Safe Haven is a place of second chances. If you can get the camp to forgive you, it doesn’t matter how leadership feels. You’ll still have your place here and you can try again to be the man I was once so proud of.”

Angela stepped out of the elevator, glad she had been able to end things that way with Neil. If the camp didn’t forgive him, she would be expected to banish him at the very least. Angela almost hoped they didn’t, despite how badly they needed the former state trooper. Her wrath at being fooled for so long needed an outlet.

Angela’s mind went to Adrian’s situation. *Wait. That’s right, I have a bullet in the chamber. Time to fire it.* Heat came off her body as she walked.

Neil put more distance between them as they went up the final stairs to the top deck.

**2**

“*This is the Cayman King. I’m speaking to the Captain who is stealing our fuel.*”

“Oh, shit.” In the bridge for an update, Theo panicked. “We just started to refuel!”

“I’m aware.” Marc considered the options and made a hard choice. “Don’t answer it. Spread the word.”

Theo clicked his radio on the Eagle channel, ordering no contact.

“Dear cruise ship captain, this is a friendly port. There is no need to hide in the fog and pretend you do not hear me. Send a team to land so we can trade. It has been a long time without contact. We have many questions for you, but no hatred.”

*He’s trouble*. Marc was picking clues from the words and tones and becoming concerned. The Caymans didn’t have a king. They had a Premier, with a two-party system, which meant the government here had fallen. *That’s dangerous if pirates came for the fuel and here we are, stealing it.* Marc winced. *Well, that settles that question. Kendle was right. It is stealing.*

“Can we pay for it?” Ian was coming to the same conclusions as Marc, just slower.

“I doubt it. Anything we offer will be accepted and then more demanded. We might be able to leave if we gave up half our food and water, and of course, our women.”

Ian didn’t think they were in shape for another fight. “Maybe they’d just take the food.”

Marc gestured. “Use my glasses. Tell me what you see.”

Ian did, frowning as he spotted ripe mango orchards that hadn’t been harvested. Heirloom tomatoes were rotting on the vine. “They aren’t starving.”

“No. Winter came through and finished off any farms the government or looters missed in America. Down here, the weather is temperate. It allows for growing year-round.” Marc considered. “They might be out of ammunition, like home. The only other thing we have is a cargo full of supplies.”

“We have another ship.” Ian pointed toward the rear.

Marc snorted. “So you see my point?”

Ian ran through the leadership secrets he’d collected. They had to keep that ship and everything else they’d brought. There was already barely enough for everyone. They weren’t trading for their needs on this trip. They were taking it. “Agreed. No contact.”

“I need you to pass the word again when you go below. Make sure everyone knows they’re risking all our lives if they answer.”

“I will.” Ian opened the plastic. “Coffee from the mess?”

“No, thanks.”

Ian nodded to Kendle, who was resting in the cot behind the booth where Marc was sitting. She’d refused to go to a cabin until her shift began.

Kendle didn’t get up. The deck below the bridge was dotted with groups of working people. Most were Eagles, but a sizable number were camp members who wanted to help and couldn’t handle the stress of the infirmary. She was scanning anyone who got near the steps to the bridge.

“*My patience runs thin!*” *The radio blared.* “*Answer me, thieves!*”

Marc shut off the radio.

“There are descendants here.” Kendle sat up. “I didn’t feel it before.”

“The fog is lifting, and we made a lot of noise.” Marc tensed. “We’re being scanned.”

“This is bad.”

“Yep.”

“What will Angela do?” Kendle hoped Marc wasn’t sent. He was hiding his pain well, but she could still feel it.

Marc swiveled around to meet her eye. “She’ll send someone healthy we can afford to lose.”

Kendle laid back down. “She’s the boss.”

The plastic rustled. Neil came in and took his guard post over Marc.

Kendle frowned. “I thought I had duty next.” She frowned at Neil as he took a place in the shadows, no longer certain he was one of the good guys.

Marc sighed. “I have a job for you.”

Kendle brightened, standing. “You name it, I’ll get it done.”

Marc finished writing down the fuel numbers and turned to her, expression hard. “I’m glad to hear you say that.”

Her happiness fled. It was replaced with tension. “What do you want me to do?”

Marc gestured toward the foggy island. “We’re missing a dog. I want it returned.”

Kendle snorted as she realized who he meant. “No, you don’t.” As far as she was concerned, trading Adrian for the fuel was a good idea.

“Actually, I do.” Marc’s tone settled into the rough rock she’d gotten used to during their fight against the troops. “You will go meet the people, rescue Adrian, and make sure those who survive your meeting are not going to be a future threat.”

Kendle stared at him as if he had grown two heads, hand coming to her hip. “How do you expect me to do all that?”

Marc smiled. “You’re going to pretend you’re my Angie.”

The refueling team paused, glancing up as female shouts echoed from the bridge.

Theo gave a sharp whistle. “Pay attention!”

The team resumed work, being careful not to create a spark. This was all new to them, but so far, it wasn’t a hard job, just a tense one.

“You’re out of your mind!” Shouts flew down to the deck. “I won’t do it!”

A wave of tension came after it.

Theo assumed Marc was getting Kendle under control by using his displeasure at her refusal. It wasn’t necessary to use the alpha command. He already owned her, even if he didn’t want her.

Guards monitored their foggy surroundings, uncomfortable being in sight of land. Though the fog bank was still hovering over the water, they had a clear view above it, which meant anyone on land also had a clear view of them.

Neil left the bridge to stand on the stairs, unable to take the ugly battle going on between Marc and Kendle. It was mental now. He was finding it hard to resist either of them. *I guess that means I’m not an alpha.* Neil wasn’t disappointed. In fact, it was a relief to know that from now on someone would be able to stop him from making bad decisions. He still wasn’t certain that it had been bad, but he loathed how it felt now; that implied it was.

“You can’t make me do it!”

Marc stared at Kendle for a long moment, deciding how far he needed to push her.

Kendle kept her shield up, hurting at resisting anything Marc wanted, but this was too much.

Marc attacked from a different direction. He smiled at her.

Kendle groaned, trying to strengthen her shield. “That’s not fair.”

Marc stepped closer, turning on the charm. “Please?”

“Okay, okay!” Kendle crumbled, as he’d known she would. “Just turn it off.”

Marc stopped using the charm, but he couldn’t help another smile. It was a nice boost to his ego to know he had the power to make people respond to him. As long as he didn’t abuse it, it was awesome.

“For you, maybe.” Kendle couldn’t resist smiling when he laughed*. He’s adorable. Why can’t he be ugly?*

The tension eased, but Neil didn’t go back in. Like they’d done with Angela and Adrian, the Eagles would give Marc the same respect. Leadership definitely had perks.

Marc picked up the bag he’d had Charlie pack and held it out. “You’ll find some things in here that don’t make sense. Just do it.”

Kendle took the bag without touching his hand and moved toward the door.

“Don’t go out there.”

Kendle stopped, spinning around. “I have to get changed in here?!”

Marc pointed at the elevator. “Hit stop when you get in. It’s yours until you hit the button again.”

Kendle stomped to the elevator, grumbling.

Marc laughed again. He missed spending time with her when she wasn’t burning through his clothes with her eyes. *I’m more than a chunk of skilled man meat.*

He also wanted to punish her for trying to kill Angie. If it had been anyone else, they would have been executed. Because of his relationship with Kendle, she had been given a pass on attempted murder. The affection he carried for the castaway, while still fading, had saved her life. Marc wasn’t okay with that.

“You have got to be kidding me!”

Marc snickered. *She found the push-up bra.*

“This is humiliating!”

Marc nodded, though she couldn’t see him. He had noticed differences between the two women and tried to account for them, but some of it, nature was pretty strict about. Angela was bigger in the chest, and because she’d had children, her body was rounded. It was easy to change the way Kendle walked and put makeup on the scars, but when it came to more boob, only a push-up bra could do that. “Tuck in your shirt; put your cuffs inside your boots.”

“Slam you!”

Marc did a scan on the fuel gauges. They were a little over halfway full. In another quarter tank, they would start the disconnecting process. A short while after, they would be underway. Marc was looking forward to it. Like everyone else, he hated being in view of land while hostiles were watching.

*Ding!* Kendle stepped out.

Marc rotated to do an evaluation and sucked in a tight breath at the similarity. Even though he had planned on this effect, it was still eerie.

Kendle smiled, using soft eyes and a lot of teeth, the way Angela did.

Marc nodded, voice rough. “Just like that.”

Kendle tensed as he stepped toward her with a makeup kit. “No.”

Marc ignored her. He flipped open the case and picked up a likely applicator. He smeared it into the one foundation and began to rub it over her face.

Kendle held her breath, fists clenched against her hips as Marc applied way too much. Small clouds of powder danced around both of them, causing coughs and the urge to sneeze.

Neil stepped inside the plastic, drawn by the noises. He laughed at the scene. “Wait until the Eagles hear about this.”

Marc chuckled.

Kendle tried to glare at Neil.

Marc swiped her nose, filling it with makeup.

Kendle pushed him away and used her sleeve to take off a few layers. “You’re not filling in a ten-mile trench!”

Marc held the mirror so Kendle could apply the makeup.

Neil leaned against the wall so he could view the stairs and the gauges. He also scanned Kendle occasionally, impressed by the job Marc had done turning her into Angela. *He was absolutely right. She needed the push-up bra.*

Kendle grimaced. “This sucks.”

Both men ignored her but inside, they agreed. They were using it to keep from thinking about any of the awful things happening on the ship or the tragedies yet to come.

Kendle slid the gloves on when Marc held them out, refusing to admit how much she was enjoying being in front of him while looking this way. She was trying not to have thoughts like that in public. She preferred to enjoy those while she was alone and couldn’t get in trouble for it.

“That won’t work if you have to go out together.” Neil shrugged at the dirty glares they both tossed in his direction. “I’m just saying. Angie looks at you with heat. If Kendle is standoffish, that might give it away.”

Marc suspected Neil was trying to matchmake, but he wasn’t sure if the trooper was doing it in hopes of repairing their friendship or if he was trying to help Adrian win.

Neil glared. “One big mistake is all I’ve made. Can you say the same?”

Marc shook his head. “No, but my mistakes are a lot different than yours.”

Neil shrugged, unwilling to discuss it in front of Kendle.

Kendle scanned the Eagle jacket Marc moved from the bag to the counter so he could dig under it, wishing it was really hers. “Doesn’t have the patch.”

“We’ll get those from the horse’s mouth when it’s time.” Marc picked up a bottle of perfume.

Kendle’s mouth dropped open. “You mean Angie’s going to see me like this?!”

Marc spritzed her.

Neil chuckled as Kendle began coughing. “That was mean.”

“It stopped the noise.” Marc began gathering her hair into a loose ponytail, hoping it was long enough to braid.

Kendle froze. Heat ran through her body, giving her goosebumps. She tried to be afraid of him, as she had been for a moment in Ciemus, but she wasn’t feeling that now. She thought of the other men she’d had contact with since the war, especially Ethan, but not even terror could cut through the need. She wanted Marc, in every way.

Neil gestured. “That’s enough heat to convince people.”

Marc was aware of it, but he was busy. He deftly wrapped the ponytail holder in place, then began working on the braid like Angela had shown him. When he was satisfied, he wrapped the second ponytail holder around it, then twined the braid around to make a small bun. Once he clipped it in place, he mussed the entire setup so it would appear she’d been windblown.

Marc retreated, enjoying the heat and her discomfort. “What do you think?”

Neil studied Kendle. With the lighter layer of makeup covering her scars and dressed like Angela, the hairdo made her look so much like the boss up close that distance wasn’t going to be a problem. “It’s good.”

*Good for you, maybe*. Kendle was on fire. She was also furious at Marc for using her against herself.

Marc gave a nod, able to feel Angela coming up the steps. “There’s one little thing I need you to do on this run.” He stepped closer, sending an alpha wave. “If there’s a way to kill Adrian by accident on this mission, you *will* do it.”

Kendle gave Marc a gaze of deep need and haunting devotion. “All you ever had to do was ask.”

Neither of them paid attention to Neil, but they were aware of him. This was a test of his loyalty, as well as hers. If anyone found out, or if she skipped an opportunity to get rid of Adrian, it would prove to Marc that neither of them was on his side. *Sometimes a man just needs to know who his true friends are.*

**Part Three:**

“You’ve got sadness in you, I’ve got sadness in me – and my works of art are places where the two sadnesses can meet, and therefore both of us need to feel less sad.”

― Marc Rothko

Chapter Twenty-Six

**Cayman Chaos**

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**1**

**“H**ow much longer?”

Theo didn’t turn away from the refueling taking place. Their hoses were stretched out across this side of the deck like giant, bulging snakes. “You can check with Marc on the numbers, but I’m pretty sure we need another hour.”

Angela finished scanning the deck, then moved toward the bridge. She’d taken a moment to be sure anyone on land got a chance to recognize her. Guards were in the shadows up here now. She had assigned great shooters with all the mags they could hold, though those men and women were no match for the ill Eagles. Marc was as safe as she could make him.

“Boss is coming up.” Neil moved aside, holding the plastic so Angela could join them. He and Marc both breathed a sigh of relief as she entered the protection of the bridge

“Angie, meet Angie.” Marc watched for her reaction.

Angela stared at Kendle. Except for the scars on the skin she had showing, and her black hair, they could have been twins. Kendle was wearing the identical boots, jeans, Marine shirt, and Eagle jacket. Even her hair was pinned up in a wild bun that spoke of hard labor with no time to worry about something as frivolous as a hairdo.

Angela couldn’t help the jealousy as she imagined Marc helping Kendle get ready, but satisfaction in the job overrode the rebellion in her heart. “That is excellent.”

Angela tore off the Velcro patch from her jacket and handed it to Marc so he could put it in on Kendle’s arm. The castaway had lost weight; her body wasn’t recovered from everything that had happened on the beach. It was eerie how similar their skin was at the moment, including the bags under their eyes and the leathery patches around hardened calluses.

“What do we do about the hair color?” Kendle was uncomfortable standing in front of Angela after Marc had put his hands on her, had drawn energy from her. The fact that she looked like their leader didn’t even come into the picture.

Angela pulled a rattling spray bottle from her pocket. She tossed it to Marc.

Marc began squirting Kendle’s hair.

“Stop!” Kendle covered her face as he layered the silver spray in.

Angela gestured. “Set it like I explained on the way up here.”

Neil scanned the bridge one more time for threats, then left her alone with Marc and Kendle.

“Good?”

Angela nodded. *Do I really look that bad?*

Kendle’s fun at playing Angela faded. *I wanted to be the pretty you.*

Angela grunted. “That makes two of you.”

Kendle wisely backed out of the bridge and stood on the stairs. She kept her attention on land or the refueling crew, refusing to think anything that would get her in trouble.

Marc checked the fuel numbers again. He looked up and caught Angela’s expression. His stomach tightened into a hard knot he knew would be there for at least the next ten days. “It’s time?”

“Yes.” Angela joined him in front of the long console. She slid under his arm and rested against his chest.

Marc held her, trying to calm both of them. “This was the best plan we could come up with.”

Angela didn’t argue. Almost everything about to happen had been a combination of her and Marc, but in the end, she had made the final decision on all of it. She wasn’t certain it was going to be enough, but she couldn’t help feeling proud once again for getting them to this point. After they cleared a last ocean hurdle, the island had to be claimed. Then, they would have years of peace from everything except personal drama. With a couple of minor exceptions, Angela felt confident she could handle that part of leadership. It was the constant battles and death that made it intolerable.

“Are you sure about this?” Despite helping her create the plan, Marc couldn’t help worrying.

Angela nodded even though she didn’t feel as confident about that answer as she would have liked. “They need me too much to kill me. That will give me an advantage.”

“I know you’re keeping something from me again.” Marc kissed the top of her head. “I assume you have a good reason.”

Angela sighed, small smile coming to her cracked lips. “I love you.”

Marc chuckled. “Nice evasion there.” He assumed she didn’t want to speak where anyone could hear them because it would interfere with whatever finishing touches she had put on the plan. Marc had expected her to add things. He let it go, begging fate to give them a happy ending. *No one should have to go through the things we’ve been through. Anyone who does deserves a pass.*

“I feel exactly the same way.” Angela tilted her head up.

Marc kissed her and smiled against her lips when his battered body still responded. *That’s my Angie.*

Angela retreated a step. It had been a while since she was this scared. “It should be coming any minute.”

Marc made a curt gesture toward Kendle. “Get in here.”

Kendle stepped in. “I can’t do this with her watching.”

Angela smirked. “Afraid to imitate the real thing to my face?”

Kendle nodded immediately. “Yes!”

Marc moved between them but made sure he could still see the fuel gauge.

Energy came through the bridge. It was a tiny difference, but all the descendants noticed it.

Marc held up a hand. “Remember the five count. It drives the other side crazy and gives you a few seconds to think about each response. The five count is your friend.” Marc turned the radio on.

Adrian had been a hostage for two hours. Angela had hoped the call would come sooner. Because it hadn’t, that meant what she’d seen at her first meeting with Adrian was about to take place. It appeared little had changed. One hole in the vision, however, was a gaping black pit that made her heart pound and the palms of her hands grow sweaty. She didn’t know the ending. It hadn’t been revealed.

Marc finished instructing Kendle. “Remember, the refueling team already knows, so you’re not going to get any reactions out of them that would give things away to someone watching from land. If people come up from anywhere else on the ship, they’ll think you’re Angela at first. If you can’t keep them from reaching you before they give it away, you have to shut them down. The Eagles have instructions not to let anyone come to the top deck until refueling is finished because it’s dangerous. That will buy us a little time for people on land to see you leave the ship. We still need at least forty minutes to finish refueling and half an hour after that for the fumes to dissipate.”

Angela noted the numbers as she checked her watch. “It’s time. Go play me.”

Kendle didn’t move.

Marc pointed toward the deck, brows coming together. “If you want people to respect you again, then you have to be willing to do things for the camp in public. It doesn’t get any more public than this.”

Kendle shoved herself toward the door. She stopped before she stepped out, taking a minute to calm her nerves and get in the mood that Marc had suggested earlier. She opened the plastic and glared at Neil. “Let’s go help the refueling team so we can get the hell out of here.”

Neil gawked for a brief second at the close imitation of Angela’s tone...then he fell in on Kendle’s heels with a blank façade and a thumping heart. It was eerie the way the two women had just switched places.

Kendle had played the boss in her mind many times, like many other females in this camp, but with Angela watching, it felt dangerous.

“Duck!”

Kendle brought up her shield as a big bird went over their ship, cawing in angry tones.

The Eagles laughed at her and themselves. A couple of them had even drawn weapons.

Kendle released her shield, frowning at Marc. He was in the doorway, chuckling. Angela was behind him, a dark shadow with a satisfied face. Kendle realized it had been intentional so she would use her gift. Anyone who was watching from land now knew she was a descendant and she looked like Angela. All that remained was to have her issue a few orders.

Neil whispered the first item from the list Angela had given him.

Kendle found Trent in the small refueling crowd. “Be ready to go early. Make sure everyone on the floatie gets back onboard. That’s your job now.”

“You got it.” Trent approached the rail so he could communicate with the three men on the floatie. The fuel was making the ship sink slightly beneath their feet as it filled the tanks, causing groans and unease in the passengers. It gave the Eagles relief. Every inch it sank was more miles they could travel without having to do this again.

Kendle scanned for the next item on Neil’s list.

The ship radio crackled. “Raven to the bridge.”

Kendle frowned. *That was too fast.* She turned on her radio and keyed the mike. “Copy.”

Kendle turned back toward the steps, fighting the urge to bring up her shield again. She now felt like a bug about to go under glass. This was the moment where the person holding the glass chose to drop it or just stomp their prey and move on.

Kendle slid inside. “I didn’t hear it.”

Marc gestured toward the radio on her belt. “You forgot to turn it back on. The call came as soon as you lifted your shield. It looks like you’ve been making them wait.”

Kendle wasn’t sure that was the right way to go. The vibe she was picking up from land was more than hinky. It was downright cold.

Kendle lifted a brow as Angela picked up the radio. “Mercy? Survivors?”

Angela shrugged. “I’ll let you know.” She keyed the mike. “Your transmission was garbled. Please repeat.”

The radio crackled with a man’s thick voice. “This must be the boss. You are stealing our fuel.”

Angela counted to five. “We didn’t know there was anyone here.”

The radio crackled back. “We are a British nation, as we have always been. That fuel comes from our land. You owe a large bill.”

Angela counted to five.

Kendle could feel the frustration of the person on the other end when they didn’t get an immediate response.

Angela keyed the mike. “If I had known there were people here, I would have offered to trade for the fuel. Please allow me to do so now and accept my apologies.”

“That is more like it! You owe us slaves and food supplies.”

Angela counted to five.

By the time she got to three, the frustration had reached a high enough level to cause the man to interrupt.

“It is a good deal. You will not get another!”

Angela hit the mike. “I don’t have slaves on this ship and we’re not carrying food. We fish every day for our needs. That’s how we got sick. Our ship is under quarantine.”

Now there was a five count of silence from the other end as the voice tried to determine if she was lying and if not, how much danger they were in.

Despite the animosity between them, Kendle studied the moment. There was a lot Angela could teach her and she did want to learn it during the times she wasn’t too bitter for it to stick.

The ship radio lit up again. “We have observed many people on your boat. All of them are well fed. That did not come from fishing. We know. We will board your ship and take our payment for the fuel.”

Eagle radios suddenly crackled with a series of clicks on the emergency channel that made Kendle tense. She noticed Marc and Angela weren’t surprised and assumed they had it covered.

Angela keyed the mike. “This ship is in the middle of an outbreak. If you board, you have to stay. I suggest a neutral location to negotiate terms. Perhaps this could become a major trade port of the post-apocalyptic world. We’d be happy to spread the news to other areas.”

Marc made several gestures.

Angela nodded at him and continued waiting for a reply.

Kendle stayed away from the door so those watching didn’t know she wasn’t the one on the radio.

“I hear no lie in your voice and I have no wish to inflict more misery upon my people. You may come to land to negotiate trade terms.”

Angela softened her tone. “I will meet you at the main dock warehouse in half an hour, if that is acceptable.”

The radio crackled with the voice of a man who was satisfied he was getting what he wanted. “That is definitely acceptable. You may bring one guard.”

Angela keyed the mike and laughed at him. “I don’t need guards.” Angela hung up. Everyone on the bridge waited to see if that would fly. In the past, Angela hadn’t gone anywhere without protection. They were counting on these people to not know that.

“Agreed; out.”

Angela looked at Marc.

Marc shrugged. “It was hard to tell if he bought it. I think he has an emotional shield. I didn’t pick up much static from him.”

Angela turned to Kendle next.

Kendle stuttered, hand coming up. “Sorry, but I was watching you.” Kendle grinned. “That was badass.”

“No, what you’re about to do will be badass.” Angela stepped toward the castaway, making both her and Marc tense. “I want the people who took my dog to understand how much it upsets me when someone other than me abuses my pet.”

Kendle had no problem with that. “What about descendants or refugees?”

“You need a meal and some practice not hitting the wrong people in the crossfire. Sounds like a perfect setup.” Marc wanted Kendle to be clear; they didn’t need descendant survivors left to chase them.

Kendle was a bit surprised. “Anything else?”

Angela nodded. “You’re allowed to make one exception to the plan, if you decide it should happen.”

Kendle assumed she would know that moment when it happened. She moved toward the plastic, able to feel Marc now worrying over her leaving the safety of their ship. “I’ll catch up.”

It was her way of telling him she wasn’t going to be gotten rid of that easy.

Marc’s lips twitched.

Angela’s fists clenched.

Kendle hurried out of the bridge and down the stairs.

**2**

Angela got into the elevator from the bridge and descended into the ship. As she went, she clicked her mike on the Eagle channel to gather a crew for what she needed. The emergency code that had come in the middle of the call had been for intruders. They didn’t know where it had come from, however. It was time to search the ship and she couldn’t do that alone.

Marc picked up the ship mike as the two women left. “Lock us down, Eagles. I repeat, I want the entire ship secured and everyone accounted for.”

Kendle listened to Marc’s voice as she went to get geared up. She passed the refueling team, who gave her quick glances and wishes for a successful trip. Kendle kept pretending she was Angela and responded warmly. “Be safe while I’m gone.”

People stared at the rarity.

She quickly trotted down the stairs toward the mess. As she reached it, the cooking team came out, clearly headed for the living quarters. A few of them carried supplies, but most of them were empty handed and hollow eyed. Lou’s parents knew their son was gone. They were staying busy to keep from thinking about their loss, but it obviously wasn’t working.

Kendle continued down the stairs, passing the main living area. Doors were closing on cabins, and windows were being locked even though it was unlikely someone would climb up the side of the ship and fit through a porthole. Guns were being checked for ammunition. Kendle kept going, hoping Ralph and the drafted camp crew were able to keep control there.

Kendle traversed the entertainment floor to the weapons room, aware of stares and mutters from people who knew she wasn’t Angela. The camp members didn’t know what was going on. Few, if any, of them down here had been listening to the radio. They were too drunk. The descendants with the camp members thought she was pulling something.

Kendle passed the corridor to the waste area, nose wrinkling at the burn. It seemed worse today. *Burning bodies. I’ll never forget that smell.*

Kendle strode down the corridor by the shops and businesses, aware of more camp members lingering in the shadows of these rooms. She assumed the search crew would be through here shortly and get people back to their assigned areas.

Kendle saw another shadow by the weapons room and scowled, anger rising. She made her steps quiet as she snuck up on Vicky.

Vicky felt it coming; she started turning to face the danger.

Kendle grabbed the woman by her ponytail and smacked her face into the wall.

Vicky slid to the floor, bleeding and knocked out.

“Lay there and think about what you’ve done. The search crew will catch up to you.” Kendle opened the door and went in, closing it behind her.

Gearing up only took a few minutes. Kendle didn’t take anything she didn’t need.

Quinn was standing there as she emerged.

“Son of a bitch!” Kendle kept from reaching for her gun, but barely.

Quinn couldn’t force a smile. “You’re leaving.”

“For a bit.” Kendle stepped around him, headed for the ramp that would take her to the cargo area.

Quinn followed, not sure what to say. He was intimidated by her appearance even though he knew she wasn’t Angela.

Kendle didn’t have time for it right now, but she also didn’t want him to get in trouble. She made a rude gesture. “You’re supposed to join the boss for a search of the ship. Get on it!”

Kendle kept going as Quinn stopped, hurt. After a few seconds of contemplation, he did as she’d ordered.

Kendle saw Charlie heading for the cabins housing the kids. He was hurrying and didn’t notice her.

Eagle radios went off across the ship again in emergency code.

Kendle kept walking.

**3**

“We think she’s in labor.” Timmy pushed the unconscious woman toward Charlie as he came down the dim hall. “We found this wheelchair in a closet.”

Charlie took over the chair while Timmy tucked the blanket back around Candy’s shoulders. “I’ll get her to the infirmary. Everyone is supposed to be locked down now.”

“What’s the problem?” Cathy was standing in the nearby shadows, hand on her gun. In full Eagle gear, she’d blended in perfectly.

“We don’t know yet. Hopefully, it’s a false alarm.” Charlie turned the squeaky chair toward the cleaned elevator. “What happened to her?”

“She was stretching and saying her side hurt; then she dropped.” Kimmie went back into the cabin as little Mia started crying. “I didn’t go anywhere. Stop it.”

The crying halted. A soft giggle came.

“I love you too. Go to sleep.”

Charlie chuckled as he left, being careful not to stop suddenly and send Candy flying from the chair.

Cathy and Timmy returned to standing guard as Charlie vanished into the elevator. They waited for the tense feeling to fade, but it didn’t. They searched the other shadows and listened for footsteps, but the kids were loud. It was hard to distinguish much between the shouts and laughter of happy children.

The other end of the corridor was dark, with shadows that didn’t match the cheery antique furniture. Two of the shadows eased closer to the kids while more men came in from the employee hall. Chatter from the children covered their steps as a fifth man joined the UN team.

Kimmie felt them arrive. She came to the doorway, orbs glowing red. “Go away!”

Cathy and Timmy rotated, drawing their guns.

Two suppressed shots echoed.

Both guards fell to the plush carpet, but there wasn’t any blood. They’d been hit by knockout rounds.

Kids screamed, cringing away as the team advanced. They’d watched the pregnant woman get picked up, revealing where the guards were.

“Get those twins. I’ll get the Brady boy.” André lifted his gun toward Kimmie. “Keep your power to yourself and no one will be hurt.”

Kimmie crossed her arms over her little chest and stepped aside so the man could enter the cabin. “I wouldn’t count on that.”

“Don’t go in!” Chuck tried to reach André’s arm. “It’s a trap!”

André stepped across the threshold... He screamed, hands coming up. Blood dripped from his nose. He dropped to the carpet, blood gushing from his mouth like a fountain.

The rest of his team stared in shock. Then they looked at Kimmie.

Kimmie smiled, easily falling back into the UN camp mentality. She waved. “Next?”

The descendant on the team lifted a hand. “I’ve got ya.”

“No, you don’t.” Cody slapped him with a heat spell and then ran up and kicked his shin.

Kimmie sent a wave of rage that leapt eagerly onto the two bald fighters and began devouring their skin. Screams became shrieks.

Dirk was the last man standing, with no idea how things had gone so bad so fast. “Surrender and no one else has to get...”

Kimmie and Cody advanced, smiling with huge teeth and hungry souls.

Dirk took off running down the corridor.

“I’ve got it.” Tracy tossed her knife like she’d been practicing.

The blade slipped into the man’s spine, bringing him to his knees as a cry of agony spilled from his lips.

Angela appeared in the opposite corridor, flanked by half a dozen Eagles.

The kids ran to her, eager for praise.

Angela hugged those who mobbed her, giving them approval even as she mourned not reaching them in time to keep them from killing again.

Eagles dragged the bodies from the area, piling them all into one of the elevators for later disposal.

Peter slapped the button, leaving a bloody smear. Whoever opened this elevator next was going to get a shock. They didn’t have time to notify anyone that it was coming.

Angela waved Peter to stay. He would get Timmy and Cathy off the floor, then supervise a new guard shift.

“Come on.” Angela and the others went toward the infirmary stairs. Kenn’s coded emergency hadn’t come again. They didn’t know what had happened, only that he’d called for help–something few of them expected. Kenn liked to handle things himself so he could take full credit.

Angela felt time slow as they approached the infirmary. What happened in the next thirty minutes would determine the fate of their country yet again. All dimensions were shifting this way to observe.

Angela stopped around the corner, then stole a fast look.

She ducked back. “One target so far. Multiple people in the crossfire.”

She waved Quinn to the right hall, where Tonya and her guard were locked inside and standing away from the glass. Angela took in a deep breath and walked to the infirmary.

“Give it to me!”

Angela winced at the sound of Ramer’s furious shout. She peeked through the window, memorized his location, and ducked to the side.

*Target is in the middle. Two hostages. Go on two.* “One...two!” Angela pushed the door open, holding it so the Eagles could enter unimpeded.

“Drop it!”

“Get down!”

The Eagles rushed in, scanning for threats.

“Get down!”

“I’ll kill him!” Ramer jerked Stanley tighter against his chest as he stood overtop Kenn, who was on the floor, face down. “Stay back!”

His entire body was shaking, even his finger on the trigger. Madness glared out of his sockets, demanding surrender.

“Help her!” Morgan directed Kyle to Candy’s unconscious form. She was still in the wheelchair. There was no other place to put her yet.

Kyle went to work on Candy, trying to find the energy to stop her labor.

“Ramer!” Angela switched to the front of the hostage situation, begging her weak body to get her through this. “I will count to three and then someone will shoot you. Let him go.”

Stanley didn’t struggle as Ramer’s grip tightened. He was terrified.

“I want drugs! Give them to me! *Now*!” Each word was louder than the last.

People edged closer or shifted to block a cot holding their dying loved one.

“Okay.” Angela went to the medical cabinet and ripped the flimsy door off the hinges. It clattered onto the floor as she grabbed a bottle. “Let’s trade. *This* for him.”

Ramer shoved Stanley toward her and held up his hands to catch it.

Angela threw the bottle as hard as she could.

The glass shattered against his elbow as he cringed from the blow. “No!”

“Go!” Angela made the call.

Kenn, on the ground at Ramer’s feet, punched the man in the back of the knee and then kept hitting him as he fell.

Angela let it go for a minute, then whistled.

Kenn reluctantly got up, leaving Ramer’s bruised, bloody body where he’d curled up.

Stanley hurried to get the broom. “I’ll have this cleaned up in minutes.” He began sweeping the glass shards, smiling at Angela and Kenn for saving him.

Morgan and Harry checked those closest for injuries, then went to tend Ramer.

Patients and caregivers relaxed. Then the tension of their situation sank back in, bringing fresh pain and a wave of desperation.

Kenn collected his gun, furious he’d let Ramer sneak up on him and take it. “Sedate him and send him back to the brig?”

Angela was already heading for the door. “The brig is compromised. Handcuff him to a cot; knock him out as needed.”

Kenn followed Angela and the Eagles, taking a quick glance through the lab door to verify Tonya’s safety and her guard. He spotted the blood on the clothes of some of the Eagles who fell in behind them and realized there had been trouble elsewhere as well. *It comes in threes. Three must be the brig.*

Quinn gave Kenn an order, in hand code.

Kenn realized the man was right. He gently took Angela’s arm, stopping them all. “You’re on duty here.” Kenn guided Angela back to the infirmary and held the swinging door open. “We’ll clear the ship. You help our sick people.” Kenn knew she wouldn’t refuse that chore.

Angela sighed, deep and miserable. Then she went back into the sickbay.

Kenn and the Eagles strode toward the brig, hoping things were already under control when they got there.

That hope was dashed as another shrill voice echoed through the halls, screaming for Angela to come and face her destiny.

Kenn drew his gun and flipped off the safety as he followed the noise that was taking them away from the brig. *Those who scream the loudest have to be handled first.* Kenn followed his training even though his instincts didn’t agree.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

**Time To Go**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“S**he’s not coming!” Kronus stumbled out of his cell to join the five-man UN team that had taken over the brig during the land call. “She let him turn her back!”

Oliver, the team leader, checked his watch. “It doesn’t matter. We’re on schedule.”

“It does! She invited me! She said she had a job!” Kronus hated liars.

“This job is the one that matters. We’ve decided to take over the ship while everyone is ill. It’s the perfect time to conquer Safe Haven.” Oliver stepped over the female guard they’d darted. He shut the other cell, hoping the drug-craver kept the Eagles busy. Ramer had been begging for freedom, so Oliver had obliged. “Take Kronus to the offload spot. Contact our ride in five minutes.”

Kronus scowled as one of the fighters stalked toward him. “You came for me. You can’t send me away now.”

“Of course, I can. You have no gift available for hours, and I’m in charge.” Oliver delivered a cruel leer. “You now belong to the UN.”

Kronus didn’t argue. It wasn’t wise with two hard men pointing guns at him. Down here, he could be killed.

Blair, a simple fighter, waved Kronus toward the exit. “Let’s go.”

Kronus obeyed, casting an ugly glare of retribution toward Oliver.

Oliver waited for them to be gone, then flashed a grin at the other three men. “We’ll be heroes.”

Javier, the XO, nodded, but didn’t speak. He was listening for footsteps.

Oliver gathered the weapons and ammunition from the guard and the desk station, then joined their fighter and descendant in the hallway.

Maliki increased the strength of his shield, widening it to include their XO. He was supposed to keep Safe Haven’s guards from sensing the team, but Javier hated to be in the bubble. He said it muted too much noise.

“Any sign of Lila?” Oliver paused, mind going over the new plan.

Maliki shrugged. “Not yet. We’re a few minutes early.”

“All the teams probably are. We’ve grown bored over the last weeks.” Javier shrugged, leading them down the salty smelling corridor. “We’ll adjust. Let’s get out of sight. Remember to stay in range of Maliki’s bubble and use your darts. Do not kill unless there isn’t another choice. Every capture is worth double credits.”

Maliki frowned. “Are we offering support to Lila?”

“Negative. Finding that group out here was pure luck. We came for Kronus.” Oliver reloaded on the move, glad the darts were working on these stronger people. Refugees were always easier to bring down than descendants. “Safe Haven isn’t allowed to have an advantage like him.”

Javier smiled proudly. “We’ll be honored for bringing in this ship.”

“Yes, but do not have contact with anyone who is sick.” Maliki scanned for visible loot. “If we bring back this illness, we will be shot, along with our families.”

Gunshots echoed from a hall behind them.

The trap team hurried into the shadows as steps came their way, then veered off toward the noise.

“There’s our decoy.” Javier kept them still, letting this area empty of people. He’d memorized the map of the Adrianna upon getting the assignment. He knew how to reach the bridge. He’d even accounted for the small elevator space and brought men who would fit at the same time. Now that Blair and Kronus were gone, it should be a smooth takeover with a 4-man crew.

From here, they would sail the ship straight to the international detention center. If they didn’t change speed, and they made subtle direction changes, the passengers wouldn’t notice for hours. By then, it would be too late, but they had to time it to the boat’s departure. Javier had expected Angela to make that call before she left the ship, but it hadn’t come. Once they reached the top deck, they would need to blend in until fueling was finished and the extra guards went below. Whoever was manning the bridge at that point would surrender the helm or die. There would be no negotiations.

**2**

“Drop your weapons! Come out with your hands up!” Kenn mentally winced. “I mean it, lady!”

Lila fired at Kenn.

Kenn dropped below the rim of the empty fountain. The once beautiful decoration was now chipped with the woman’s bad aim.

*Thud! Thud!*

“She’s almost got the door open.”

Their intruder was holding two guns while kicking down the barrier to their weapons.

Kenn opened a connection into her mind. His eyes narrowed into angry slits. “It’s the UN captain we allowed to leave. I should have sunk that lifeboat!”

Quinn finished reloading. “Eagle plan C1. I’m on point. Pick a decoy.”

Kenn chose a small statue on the fountain. He snapped it off with his boot heel.

*Thud! Thud! Crack!*

The door couldn’t take many more hits like that without giving. Kenn tossed the heavy figurine.

It clanked to the ground on the opposite walkway between the stores.

Lila spun out of the cover of the doorway, firing at it, missing.

Quinn pulled the trigger, once.

Lila froze. A bloom of deep red popped out on her cheek. It widened. Blood gushed down her face as she fell over.

*There’s another one I’ll dream about.* Quinn reloaded and advanced on Kenn’s heels to clear the area. Neither of them wasted time checking on Lila or kicking her gun out of her reach.

“Clear!”

Camp members who hadn’t heeded the lockdown call now flooded from the stores and entertainment venues. They pushed and shoved up the stairs toward the cabins.

Kenn keyed his mike. “Situation is over. Body crew needed for one dead traitor.” Kenn hoped his calls over an open radio would convince other intruders to surrender when they were found. Knowing there wouldn’t be mercy was a big deterrent.

Kenn studied the barrier. It was hanging on one hinge and had several large cracks in the lower boards. Anyone could get through it in just a few more kicks.

“I can’t stay. Angela’s getting ready to make the call. I’m on the pickup team.” Quinn frowned toward Vicky’s unconscious body. The bruise on her face was turning colors. “Lila didn’t do that. Someone had found her here earlier, probably trying to break in, and knocked her out.”

Footsteps echoed as a group of camp members joined them to help with the rest of the search. Charlie was leading and appeared alert.

Kenn motioned to Charlie. “Take this post. I’ll get someone down here to relieve you as soon as I can.”

Charlie took a spot in the shadows near the battered door. “Good time to eliminate any other thieves or possible assassins...”

Kenn grunted. “I don’t know how the boss feels about that.”

Quinn snorted as he walked toward the cargo area to get their inflatable ready. “Yes, you do.”

Kenn sighed, sure Quinn was right. “Just make sure it stays with the three of us. I don’t want to deal with your mom on it.”

“No problem.” Charlie doubted anyone else would be dumb enough to cause trouble. He got comfortable and listened to the groaning ship around them as Kenn joined the search group that had already moved on.

They strode through the ship, breaking off in small groups to clear halls and meet back at each landing. There were two dozen of them.

The camp watched through windows with worried faces pressed against the glass to see who would win this latest invasion.

**3**

“Time to go, Safe Haven. Disconnect us.”

Angela’s order over the radio brought an immediate response.

The fuel team began the dangerous process of removing the hoses without creating a spark. Theo stayed on top of the team, directing valves to be shut in the right order. He followed the directions on the book page he’d ripped out and brought along to be sure they didn’t make a mistake.

The floatie team was relieved the call had come. The sharks were still lingering. Over the last half hour, the huge animals had started to get aggressive with each other. They were fighting all around the floatie now, where the team was barely breathing for fear of triggering a bigger problem.

Molly cursed herself for volunteering to come back out here. After Neil’s bombshell, she’d needed to stay busy.

“We could use a distraction.” Ian whispered instead of shouting or using his radio. They had no way to know what might anger the sharks; now was a bad time to find out, but their ride was coming shortly. It probably wouldn’t go well.

“Do you hear that?” Molly listened toward land. “It sounds like a...bell.”

Ian frowned at her. “So?”

Molly ignored his tone. “If they’re ringing a bell, I assume it’s an alarm.”

Ian shrugged.

Molly’s concern grew. “It’s muffled. Like it’s underwater.”

Quinn didn’t understand. “Why would someone be ringing a bell underwater?”

Molly pointed at the sharks nudging the rear of the floatie next to them.

Lim had been listening to them. He didn’t feel right offering an opinion to the Eagles yet. He was only a possible rookie waiting for his test. His biggest asset was his descendant gifts, which were considerable when he wasn’t exhausted. He used them now to scan the area. *Someone has weaponized the sharks. We need help here or we’ll never make it back on board.*

A few seconds later, Lim breathed a sigh of relief. “We have a distraction coming. Get ready to roll.”

Molly and Ian finished shutting the fuel cap, then gathered their gear. The boat they’d come in was on top of the floatie, protected. They removed the ties now but left it where it was. The number of sharks around the floatie was still increasing. The trio didn’t want to leave it despite the way the wood creaked and groaned beneath their boots. It still offered more protection than their small boat would.

Theo motioned to them from the deck of the ship.

Lim translated. “He said they’re finished. We can leave these hoses connected. We have a spare set in the cargo area.”

Molly shook her head. “Tell him to pull it up when the distraction comes. It’s ready.”

Lim relayed the order, not sure if Theo would do it.

To his surprise, Theo beamed at him and resumed supervising the action up there.

Molly didn’t rub it in to the rookie. Theo knew they couldn’t afford to use those replacements unless there was no other choice. Molly studied the foggy landscape, not hearing the bell anymore.

A familiar fin rose from the cloudy water near the floatie. Several darts were sticking out of its body.

Molly laughed bitterly. “You’re like a fucking disease I can’t get rid of.” Tears welled. “Isn’t the cancer enough?”

The shark vanished beneath the waves.

Ian and Lim stared at her. They hadn’t known.

“Don’t go running your yaps!” Molly scrubbed away the tears. “I don’t need your pity. I have enough of my own.”

*Bump!*

The floatie slid sideways at the forceful nudge.

“They hit from the bottom.” She grabbed her end of the escape boat, getting the handle. “Hang on!”

The floatie cracked in the center as it was hit from underneath. A gaping hole appeared... It began filling with water.

Shouts and screams drew attention toward the cruise ship. Something was thrown into the water. It splashed down, trailing blood.

The closest sharks rushed at the corpse, tearing into it and each other. Their feeding drew more of the predators. Those investigating the boring sinking of yet more wood now thrashed toward the new smells and vibrations.

Molly slid into the inflatable as the floatie fell out under her feet. She grabbed Lim’s arm to keep him from going under. He’d forgotten to keep ahold of the little boat.

Ian swung his wet legs in, then helped Molly drag Lim in with them.

Most of the sharks were being drawn to the feeding frenzy near the Adrianna now. Another heavy splash came. Then another. Molly watched Eagles heave bodies over the rail, praying it wasn’t any of theirs. Good people deserved better.

A familiar fin rose near Molly’s arm.

Fury went through the trio.

Molly punched the shark’s back.

Lim stabbed it.

Ian emptied his gun into it as it groaned and darted away.

The noises didn’t deter the other sharks from the free meal at the rear of the cruise ship. Blood and body parts littered that side of the water.

Molly and Ian directed their little boat toward the front chute, where Theo and the refueling team were waiting to help them onboard. They tried not to make sudden moves that might bring the sharks back.

The floatie finished sinking behind them, sending up a cloud of bubbles. A wave of ripples caught up to their small boat and gave them a ride on weak rapids. It slammed them into the side of the cruise ship.

Ian grabbed Molly’s arm and heaved her toward the ladder as Lim tossed the rope to Trent, who’d come down the long ladder to help.

Molly went up the ladder as quick as she could without falling, sorry she’d let her secret slip. *I’m never leaving the ship again.*

Lim tied the inflatable to the rail, then climbed the ladder, proud of how he’d handled himself. *I can’t wait for the next run.*

Ian was too tired to care either way. He was just grateful to be back on the Adrianna so he could sleep soon.

The refueling team went below deck together at Theo’s direction, ready to shower and pick their next job from what was needed.

The top deck cleared.

The anchor began to lift.

It was time to go.

**4**

“Everyone ready?” Oliver scanned the UN team for problems.

The ship shuddered under them, finally moving almost ten minutes after the call. Oliver stewed on that. *A woman gave the order, but the leader of Safe Haven is falling into our land trap right now...*

The elevator dinged.

Oliver and Javier stayed back while their fighter and descendant cleared the bridge.

Maliki stared in dismay. “It’s empty.”

Oliver came out, scowling. “Something went wrong. It’s supposed to be Brady up here. We have orders to collect him, Mitchel and both their kids.” Oliver hated the thought of failure. He strode to the console and entered coordinates into the keyboard.

The ship began shifting slightly east.

Oliver gestured. “Make the call. Set up defensive positions. The ship belongs to us.”

Maliki and McClery went to opposite doorways.

Javier took over the radio and dialed in the correct channel. “We have the Adrianna. We are on the way.”

Oliver’s personal radio clicked. “Boss, how long should I wait for this pickup?”

Oliver frowned. He keyed his radio. “Blair should have been there with my package half an hour ago.”

“No sign of him.”

The radio clicked again with another voice. “Same here. André has not made contact.”

Oliver realized theirs was the only full team still operating. “No one gets up here.” He keyed the mike. “Provide escort in whatever way you can.”

“Copy that.”

“Copy.”

Javier waited for a response from the detention center, hair rising on his arms. He could almost swear he was hearing a voice in his mind and it wasn’t from their descendant.

*You are. When shit happens, don’t move. If you move, you die where you stand.*

Javier froze.

The main radio crackled with a weak signal from the detention center. “Good work. Bring them straight here. Instructions will be relayed.”

“Copy, out.” Oliver went to the front window, mind racing. *This feels wrong.*

“That’s because it is.” Marc lowered his shield, revealing Neil and Dog in one corner. He was in the other.

Marc grinned at the shock of the mohawked descendant. “Our boss taught us some amazing tricks.” Marc fired a weak blast of his rage at the leader, while Neil shot the descendant first, as he’d been told to do.

Dog attacked the fighter, driving him through the plastic. He fell down the stairs and the angry wolf followed.

Trent and Theo rushed forward, kicking and punching the fighter. They’d been lurking under the bridge stairs, as per orders.

In the bridge, Oliver dropped to his knees, blood ran from his eyes. His screams were intolerable.

Neil shot him in the head.

Marc nodded, guns still in their holsters. “Thank you.” He turned to the survivor who had frozen in place and still hadn’t moved. “Next, or do you surrender?”

Javier knew he was beaten. “Surrender.” Without their descendant, he didn’t stand a chance.

Marc approached the man with a calm smile. “Wise choice. Let’s take a walk, huh?” Marc put an arm around the man’s thin shoulder, feeling him tremble. “Did you see all the sharks?”

“Uh, yes.”

Marc led Javier down the stairs to the deck. “Are you armed?”

Javier slowly gave Marc his guns and knife.

Marc gestured toward a group of kids waiting on the landing. “The kids or the sharks?”

Javier stopped cold. “Wait.”

Marc let his eyes glow red. “My son is on your list, isn’t he?”

Javier took off running toward the rail.

The kids gave chase.

Marc observed with a tolerant smile.

Javier almost made it. Little fingers yanked him back at the last minute.

“Oh! So close!” Marc turned toward the bridge, where their captive was watching Javier’s violent death with a glaze of terror. “What’s your name?”

“McClery. Allan McClery.” He stood when Marc gestured, glad the kids didn’t let Javier suffer. “I’m sorry.”

“Not yet, but you will be.” Neil pushed McClery toward the empty chair they’d brought up for this reason. “You’re going to be our...guest for a bit. The Ghost wants information. You’re going to tell him whatever he wants to know.”

McClery tried not to shake. “I wasn’t even supposed to be along for this run. Someone got sick. I was called up a month early.”

“Bad luck for you.” Marc rubbed Dog’s ears. “So, why do you want my son?”

Terrified of both kids and sharks, the fighter started babbling.

**5**

“Please don’t let her die!” Samantha grabbed Angela’s arm as she staggered to her feet. Desperate tears rolled down her cheeks. “I’m sorry. Please.”

Angela pulled away, heart breaking. She knelt by the cot to replace the oxygen mask over Amy’s face. The little girl had been brought back, but her pulse was ragged and her skin was waxy. “As soon as I recharge, I’ll try again.”

Samantha sank to her knees, sobbing.

“Ray!” Grant pushed to his feet, gamey clothes hanging from his emaciated frame. “Someone help Ray!”

Angela hurried toward the couple, trying to gather energy she didn’t have.

“Jenny! Help! Medic!”

Harry responded to Kyle’s hoarse shout, limping from his aches and bruises. It was impossible not to bang into things when you were this tired.

“He’s dead! Joey is dead!” His father collapsed on the filthy floor, hands covering his face. “My boy!”

*Stage three’s here.* Angela injected Ray.

Grant did compressions, shoulders screaming, spine burning.

Ray’s body arched as he gasped, heart stuttering, then resuming a weak, rapid thump.

Grant hugged him, bawling like a baby.

Angela immediately went toward Joey, positive his father was right. They’d brought him back twice, but his weak body just couldn’t keep fighting. *Once more...* Angela filled a syringe.

The infirmary door opened. Steps came.

Angela injected the boy, then started compressions.

“I can help you–all of you.”

Angela ignored Kronus, concentrating on Joey. *He’s mine until I’m done with him. Let go!*

Joey arched, gasping in air.

Angela reached for the oxygen mask, heart skipping a beat. Another of those lethal moments had arrived, but she was so weak she could barely slip the oxygen mask back over the little boy’s blood-crusted face.

“I know you don’t trust me, but I swear, I know how to help you.”

People began turning, listening to Kronus.

Angela finally faced him, furious, but also relieved. Waiting was torture. “How?”

“Orin has a strong bloodline. A transfusion will give your people the strength to fight this off like it’s just a cold.” Kronus hated the sights and smells in here; they reminded him that he could die down here on earth.

Harry scowled at the blood-speckled angel. “One person can’t give that much.”

“Not all at once.” Kronus waved at Angela. “Why are you even hesitating?”

“Because you can’t be trusted.”

“It’s just one of us. You know we can’t come down here without your permission or approval from higher powers.” Kronus glanced around, including everyone. “Frankly, you have nothing to lose.”

People responded like he’d expected.

“Do what he wants!”

“Let him help us!”

Angela turned, scanning the cots, the bodies now waiting for removal. “What if they take the ship?”

“We’re dying!”

“Help us!”

Angela’s head dropped. “Give me the details.”  
Kronus straightened his shoulders, missing his wings. “I go get Orin. We return; you use his blood. When you’re ready, you tell us to leave and we do.”

Angela sighed. “It’s a camp choice.”

“Let him do it!”

“Let’s hold a vote!”

Angela keyed the radio on her belt. “Kronus is here. He says he can go get a...friend who will help our sick people. It’s a camp vote because of who his friends are. I vote no. All those in favor, say aye or click your radio now.”

Clicks and garbles came through for almost a full minute.

“All these opposed?”

“Me.” Only Marc’s angry voice.

Angela nodded, blowing out a tired sigh. “Go get him.”

Something exploded outside the ship.

The intercom crackled. “That’s our clearing team. No worries.” Marc was observing as Theo’s team used grenade launchers on the two inflatables waiting to pick up the stolen people from the rear of their ship.

Kronus walked toward the doors but vanished before he reached them.

People gasped and stared after him or avoided Angela’s eyes. They had betrayed her after swearing it would never happen, no matter how terrible things got.

Angela noticed Joey had stopped breathing again. His father was staring at the doorway, watching for Kronus to return. Angela knelt to resume compressions.

Guilt flooded the infirmary, but they didn’t offer apologies for trying to save their loved ones.

Angela didn’t expect them to. In their place, she most certainly would have done the same.

**6**

“She’s halfway to shore.” Neil was standing on the stairs, relaying information to Marc as he and Theo got the ship up to speed. Their guest was bound and sitting in the shadows of the bridge until Marc was ready to move him.

“Sharks are all around her boat. She has her shield up or they would have attacked her.”

The cruise ship bumped into sharks and debris from their activities as the fueling station began to fall out of sight.

“Someone has a grenade launcher on the dock, but it’s at his feet. I think they fell for it so far.”

Marc came to the plastic, tired of listening to Neil’s voice. Their audience needed to think that was his mate out there all alone while her people left. *It’s not Angie. It’s Kendle, so I don’t care...right?*

Marc had assigned people to this plan with two goals in mind. The first was to complete it successfully. The other was to determine his feelings. He knew how he felt about Angela. With Kendle, it was harder. He hated her, but he also cared for her and hoped she found happiness. In a few years, that might be with him, if Adrian got his way. Marc had plans for that man, but when he put everything else aside, his own feelings were the wildcard because he didn’t know how deep they went.

Marc watched Kendle approach the dock. For show, he sent a weak wave of protection that surrounded her in his blue light.

Kendle blasted her own protection spell back, swarming the entire top deck with heat.

Marc went back into the bridge. *It will bother me if she dies. This test of my emotions might not have been a good idea.*

Neil snorted. “I told myself the same thing, afterward. Why are we wired that way?”

Theo had caught enough of the words and vibe to understand what they were discussing. “Because the Creator has a terrible sense of humor.” Theo scowled. “Didn’t you know? We’re all liars here in Safe Haven.”

Neil and Marc stilled, defensive in their guilt.

Theo finished setting the dials and moved toward the exit. “If people knew what we were all really like, they’d never want to join us.”

Neil hung his head.

Marc let out a miserable sigh.

Neither man denied it.

**7**

“Can I hit her now?” Zorie studied the small, protected inflatable speedboat coming through the sharks, fingers twitching. He was certain he could take out Angela’s shield. Her reputation was legend. Zorie wanted to know who was better. His shield pulsed around his trap team with hungry energy.

“Talk first, hit later.” Kurt waved toward the woman in the small boat, soaking up details. He plunged into her mind as she waved back, trying to find out if she’d believed his act as the Cayman King.

*Stop that!* Kendle sent a light zap. *Never without permission.* She lunged from the boat and landed on the rotting dock.

The sharks attacked her now unprotected boat, sinking it in seconds.

Water splashed over Kendle as the animals fought each other over the missing meal.

Kendle smirked at the expressions of distaste from the trap team. *You guys don’t like sharks either, huh? Bet you’ve never killed one with a hammer.* “Where’s my dog?”

Kurt stepped aside to reveal Adrian.

The blonde man was either unconscious or dead. Bound and hanging over a wide gap in the center of the warehouse floor, Kendle understood they were going to feed him to the sharks. Based on the amount of chains they’d used, they didn’t intend to let him go even if a deal was struck. *Lying cheaters too, huh?* Kendle smirked again. *So am I. This should be fun.* “I assume he’s been knocked out?”

Kurt stepped forward to meet her. “Darted, yes. He’s quick with his spells. Are you?”

Kendle assumed Angela’s air of arrogance. “You’re probably going to find out. What do you want?”

“You, of course.” Kurt waved at the leaving cruise ship. “All of you. My men are taking over your ship as we speak.”

Kendle glanced toward the Adrianna, glad it was moving away. “I doubt it, but I’ll handle that when I get back. One more time, what do you want?”

Kurt smiled. “Your full surrender or we’ll kill your lover.”

“Former lover.” Kendle noticed Zorie licking his lips and took a step toward the ugly, mohawked French man. She’d found her loose end to unravel. “You and me, right now. Kurt can do a three-count.”

Zorie lowered his shield to show he wasn’t afraid of her. “Agreed. Kurt, start counting.”

Kurt scowled, stepping forward. “No, surrender and we’ll–”

“Shut up!” Kendle smiled at Zorie. “Safe Haven always needs good men.”

Zorie chuckled at her attempt to get him to turn against his team. “I’d be honored, but for one problem. I like my job, Boss Lady.”

Kendle’s lips tightened at the title.

It was an easy mistake to make.

Zorie spotted it. “Wait.” He flashed to her arrival, to watching gray hair go floating in the ocean spray. *That wasn’t her hair*. He reached out to verify his suspicion...

Kendle bit into his finger and ripped it off.

“Ahh! Ahh!” Zorie lunged backward. He fell off the dock, still screaming.

The sharks gave fast assistance; they put him out of his misery.

Kendle sucked blood from the finger and spat it out at Kurt’s boots. Then she smiled.

Zyron, the team XO, ran. “Black widow! Black widow!”

Boris stared at the feasting sharks. *We just lost a descendant. The UN will kill us all.*

Kendle slid in front of Boris and took his arm. She spun him around as Kurt fired at her, using his body instead of her shield. She needed to gather energy.

Bullets slammed into his chest, driving them both backward.

Kurt was horrified. *I just killed my best friend.* “Boris!”

Boris fell to the dock, gurgling out a last breath.

Kendle dropped to her knees as she drew her gun. She rolled across the bloody dock like she’d been taught and stopped against the beam. She took aim as sharks lunged up, biting at her.

Kendle fired.

Zyron slumped against the corner of the warehouse. Three more steps would have put him out of sight.

Pain sank into Kendle’s arm, ripping, tearing.

Kendle curled up and kicked the other fighter in the ankle as hard as she could manage from that position.

The bone snapped.

Boutros screamed, dropping on top of her.

Kendle rolled, taking him into the water.

Sharks swarmed, turning the area into butting predators and deadly snaps. Blood rippled over the surface and sank.

Kurt stared at the carnage. *When did I lose control?* He swept the churning waves by the dock, seeing only body parts. “Damn it!”

“Aww. Did you lose your promotion?”

Kurt spun, gun coming up. He fired at the soaked shadow in front of him as she brought up her shield.

The slug bounced off Kendle’s bubble; it slammed back into his chest.

Kurt dropped the gun, sliding to his knees. Blood ran from his mouth.

Kendle lowered her shield. She’d brought it up as soon as she let go of Boutros under the water. It had taken a lot of energy to keep it up against the crush of sharks, though. She gasped in air, blood thumping in her veins. Going into the water had brought back her time with Ethan. If not for that fear, she might not have had the strength to keep the shield up underwater.

Kendle looked toward Adrian... She froze.

A dozen faces stared back at her from a line in front of him.

Kendle grunted. *What would my fearless alpha do? Use any method available to kill them all?*

Kendle advanced toward the line of men and women, mentally calling for Adrian. *There’s going to be another slaughter. I can’t protect you while it’s happening. Wake up or die.*

**8**

“She’s waking up!” Kyle stood, head swiveling for a medic. “She’s waking!” Kyle had finally changed clothes, but he hadn’t spared time for a shower. He had been terrified the entire time he was gone that Jennifer would slip away.

Morgan didn’t budge from Pam’s side. *I saw her lashes flutter. I know I did.*

Samantha didn’t rise from Amy’s bedside. *It’s not my baby. I don’t care.*

Brittani looked over, but she didn’t let go of Daryl’s hand. He was on the edge. She could feel his soul trying to leave.

Doug patted Romeo’s hand, blood dripping from his nose. “It’s almost over now.”

The boy didn’t respond.

Jeff wiped away blood from both of them, mourning his friends.

One cot over, Candy cradled her stomach and cried for Conner.

Next to Candy, Ivan opened his eyes. Angela was the first person he saw.

She tried to smile. “Welcome back.”

Ivan grimaced. “You look like I feel.” Ivan forced his lids to stay open. *She needs me.*

“Yes, I do.” Angela leaned down to whisper in his ear.

When she straightened, his eyes were shut. He’d fallen back out. There was no way to know if he’d heard her plea for him to protect Marc if she didn’t come back. Angela didn’t have the energy to make other plans. *So be it.*

She straightened as Kronus and Orin appeared outside the infirmary. She gave the few awake, hopeful people a forgiving tone. “It’s not your fault. I would have made the same choice. Any hope is better than none.”

Orin shoved by Kronus to enter the infirmary, gleefully spinning around to observe everything firsthand. “This is amazing! I can’t believe you got her to agree!”

Angela waited, gathering her courage. This was by far the stupidest risk she’d ever taken.

Orin came to her, opening his arms. “Thank you for the invitation.”

Angela held still as he hugged her.

“It will be your downfall.” Orin grabbed her around the neck and spun her into his grip. His arm tightened.

Angela was supposed to go meekly, but the witch inside refused to take this lying down. She sent heat through Angela’s skin until steam baked off her.

Orin shouted, letting go.

Angela still didn’t fight. Her witch was out of energy now. Angela just wanted this over with. *I’ve never been this tired. I thought I was before, but I didn’t know what tired was then.*

Orin grabbed the gun from her belt. He aimed it at her, eyes cruel, face hard.

Kronus finally recovered from the surprise of Orin’s actions. He held up a hand. “Stop! Don’t kill her here!”

The exhausted people around them realized it had been a lie. Fury came from them. Several rose to do their duty as defenders of the light.

Orin flinched at the movement. New to guns, he pulled the trigger.

The bullet went wild and plunged into Brittani’s leg.

Brittani fell, whimpering.

People shouted as fresh blood dripped to the floor. Medics hurried toward her.

Angela’s rage became an icy shield that froze her breath and spread through the room. Cracking echoed from the walls as ice poured through the vents to envelope them all in a frigid haze. *I’m speaking directly to you, your Majesty. It’s time we met.*

“Yes!” Orin swung around to share a glance of triumph with Kronus. “She’s calling the Creator!”

Angela dug deeper, trying to find a door she’d never viewed in her mental warehouse; she knew it existed. *I demand an audience through my birthright. I am a descendant of your master.*

“Wait.” Orin’s finger tightened on the trigger. “It’s a trick.”

Angela felt death approach. She’d wagered it all on this moment.

“Not until we ascend!” Kronus staggered toward Orin, blood dripping from his nose.

Orin laughed. “I’m never going back. She’s the only one who can make me.” His finger tightened the trigger another notch.

Angela panicked. *Please!*

Kronus echoed her fear. He slowed time to find a solution.

Angela’s brain kicked into gear. *I have to ask*. “I invite you for council.”

***Say my name, child.***

“Death.”

Orin pulled the trigger.

Time stopped.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

**Every Sacrifice Was Willing**

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**1**

**“Y**ou rang?” Hard laughter flowed over the frozen room.

Angela shuddered at the feel of the presence surrounding the ship, entering the infirmary. It dwarfed the Messenger’s aura, terrifying her. *I can’t fight that!*

“Easy. You called me, remember?”

Angela sucked in air... *I can’t feel myself breathing!*

“You aren’t. Your life belongs to me.”

Angela recovered quickly, like she always had, but the fear didn’t leave. “Only in your dimension. Here, we’re equals.” She looked around but couldn’t find him. The voice was in her ears, not her mind. He was here, on earth.

“You may think that if it eases your fear. I cannot be tricked by childish methods.”

She was certain he was close. “You already have been. I don’t see you, but you’re here...aren’t you?” Angela couldn’t help the elation from being right.

The icy air solidified. Angela choked, falling to the frozen floor as it rushed into her lungs.

With nothing left to lose and only one thing to give, Angela quit fighting. *Take it, then. My life isn’t worth anything to you. My energy belongs to the ocean!*

The ice receded. “I cannot break deals already made. When you die, that promise will be honored.”

Angela swallowed repeatedly, trying to soothe the sting. *Thank you.* Angela bowed her head to wait for the end. *I’ve lived more in a year than most people do all their lives. Safe Haven will survive and with them, Marc and my children. It’s enough. I have NO regrets.*

More ice receded. “I rarely hear that.” The pain withdrew. “Rise; speak.”

Angela got to her feet, trying to stop shaking. She’d made a big mistake assuming this king would be her match on earth, like Kronus and Orin.

“Yes, you did, but it is too late now. I grow angry again with this delay.”

Angela heeded the warning. “How can I shatter my enemies?”

The King appeared in front of her, radiant and handsome in his arrogant confusion. The red beard, brown eyes and yellow skin were a perfect combination. He looked like all of humanity in one beautiful form. “Why ask me? Your clever mind can produce an answer.”

Angela had thought to have more wonder, or to ask enlightened questions at this point, but misery was heaviest in her heart. It emerged first. “What could I do that I haven’t already?” Angela’s tone fell into deep depression. “I’ve killed thousands...”

The powerful being showered her with contempt. “You hunt for evil methods to remove evil souls, then wonder why it doesn’t bring peace.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re corrupt. The answer is beyond you.” The King didn’t move, but his image softened into a tolerant expression on a mystical face. “Replace them with good souls–with children, perhaps, since you will lose the rest of them.”

Angela’s heart broke. Tears welled. “Can I trade you for the kids?”

The King came closer, stepping between her and the bullet. “You have nothing I need. Even if you did, I do not judge souls. I do not cause evil. I expose mankind’s secret selves to the light. You and yours would commit the atrocities anyway. It’s your nature.”

Angela couldn’t argue. “The Creator gave us both sides, but we use one too much.”

The King scowled at her with rage that dwarfed the disease effects. “My realm is full of it. I would *wager* heaven wasn’t as occupied.”

“No.”

The King studied her, evaluating. “When did you learn how to contact me? I’ve been watching.”

“It’s in William’s book, though he didn’t see the connection. I didn’t either until I got to the known rules section. I’d been following them all my life, without ever knowing why.” Angela smiled sadly. “Never without permission. I had to invite you to offer a gruesome suggestion.”

The King let out a frustrated rumble that echoed like thunder. “It did not have to be gruesome. I am not the monster. I only open those cages.”

She shrugged, trying to remember her plan and stick to it instead of begging for answers. She wasn’t convinced this being had the other information she needed. There was too much confusion in his beautiful eyes. “Still not good for our souls.”

“In the beginning, exposing evil *was* good. It allowed humanity to find the monsters and defeat them.” The King’s huge hands clenched against his red robe. “The Creator will be angry when he discovers the betting included my kingdom. I am now forced to punish those who do not deserve such an eternity.”

Angela unthinkingly repeated a line she’d heard all her life. “Only bad people go to hell.”

“What about the sick kids who died on the UN ship, or in the western fighting?!”

Angela tensed at his terrible anger. It was cold. She shivered at his mental image of children screaming through eternal flames.

“They cannot be washed clean by anyone but the Creator, so they must serve an unjust sentence.”

Angela tried again. “Until He returns...”

The King snorted bitterly. “*He* is not coming back.”

“How do you know?”

“He said so as he left. I believe the exact words were... *Not a chance in hell*.”

Angela couldn’t find any amusement. “You’ve heard our talks. Will my plan work?” She couldn’t help trusting the powerful being. He had no reason to lie. She’d already offered her life.

“Maybe.” The King was surprised to feel hope. “Can you stop the reset?”

Now Angela felt hope. She’d expected to be laughed at, or denied. “I thought it through from every angle, but I don’t know.”

The King held out a hand, palm up. “May I?”

Angela didn’t have any walls around her mind right now. It was another sign of his trustworthiness that he hadn’t looked. “Absolutely.”

The King chuckled. “Doesn’t it worry you that I may really be the monster, that I’ve lied to you?”

“No. I did get that vibe from my trip to the weigh station, though.” She slid her hand over his but didn’t touch him. “I should have listened to my instincts.”

“And killed Kronus the instant he appeared on earth?” The King began sifting through her thoughts, copying everything for later examination.

“Yes.”

“I think so too, but again, the time for that has passed.” He withdrew, lowering his arm. “Speak the rest of your offer so I may release time. It is not good for your world to stop spinning. It may not restart.”

Angela let her desperation show. “Can I go find him, beg him to come back?”

The King studied her, robe trembling. “Maybe. You would have to die.”

Angela sighed. “That will happen as soon as you release time.”

He smiled, stunning her. “Perhaps. I have not flipped a card in Safe Haven since you came together.”

Angela struggled to think. “Mother Nature has had that honor?”

The King grew serious as he studied her plans, and her mental construction project. It was nearly finished and very impressive. “Yes, but even that creature can be controlled.”

“By the Creator.”

The King leaned forward, enjoying having someone to mentor again. “By an invasion. Instead of taking, force her to accept.”

Angela felt her energy draining as time waited. “I never would have considered...”

“It is my honor to assist you.” The King scowled at her. “And also my hatred. I loathe your kind. Putting descendants in charge of the weigh station broke the entire system.”

“Who did it?”

“That has not been revealed.”

It wasn’t a surprise to discover this being also had limits. She’d suspected that as soon as he obeyed the ocean deal for her energy. “It has to be a mix. Too many of one side or the other will sink us.”

The King felt her depression. “Humanity will sink anyway. Those differences prevent bonds and encourage hatred.”

Angela confirmed another corner of her project. “Even if we were all the same, we would still have these issues.”

“Yes...”

“Lies are not allowed with me.”

“You are no one.” He glared at her in disappointment.

Angela’s anger flew out of her mouth. “I am everything! I am the heir, gifted with the keys to the kingdom by the Creator.”

The King bowed to her as he retreated. “Prove your claim; receive my support. Fail to do so and the bullet will strike your heart.”

Angela pulled up the words from William’s book. “There’s a legend of a female descendant child. Within her heart was the seed of creation. If she had been allowed to grow, she would have populated the earth with a new kind of human–one who has absolute power over evil.”

The King kept retreating, tone sullen. “That proves nothing.”

“The murder of that child drove God away. He swore not to return until his daughter was reborn.”

“I know the story! I was there!” The King retreated another step, clearing the bullet’s trajectory. “When Sarah came here, she was full of hatred for the very souls she’d been sent to save. Even now, she sings to me of her happiness that humanity is on the brink of extinction. He cannot return to that. We will all be destroyed by his grief!”

“She needs to be brought into the light.” Angela gave her first command. “Send her soul back out to try again.”

The King stopped fading. “She has been sent back five times, over five thousand of your years. Atrocities always follow. No one is strong enough to keep her demon in line once she is earthly.”

Angela drew in a breath, now following her plan word by word. “My child might be, if she were blessed by someone as powerful as you.”

Laughter flowed from the King. “Your gall is amazing. Have you decided on last words?”

“Yes.” Angela had tried all her weapons in this mental battle. It was time to just swing. “*Your* child would also be strong enough. Then the Creator would have to forgive you for whatever it was you did to get put in this awful job.”

The King flinched.

Angela kept going, trying to find the right button. “You could just send out the call and lie; tell him that she’s here. I’ll deal with the fallout since you’re obviously a coward.” Angela stood, slipping free of the fear spell he’d put on her when he first arrived. “I’m not weak. Neither is humanity. Stand aside while I fix your mess.”

“It’s not my mess! I tried to stop her death!” The King drew in a breath, preparing to restart time. “You do not know!”

Angela gave her second command. “Then show me, so I can. This has become tiresome.”

Rage and love surrounded her as he dug all the way into her mind, her plans, her fears. He began to laugh. “You know who is responsible. You just need my permission.”

She didn’t rub it in that she’d tricked him again. “Actually, I *want* your permission. I can conquer the weigh station without your support now that you’ve told me how.”

The King gazed at her in loathing and respect. “You are a magnificent player and a total liar. You do humanity proud and doom them in the same stroke.” He bowed to her again, contempt spreading across his eternally young face. “If you make it back, I will send Sarah out to try again.”

“And the father?”

“On the night of your wedding.”

Angela didn’t ask how that would happen. She didn’t want to know those details.

“I’m not a sperm bank.” The King raked her with fresh contempt. “Immaculate conceptions are immaculate.”

Angela let herself breathe again. “I’m sorry for my rudeness.”

“We haven’t had an enforcer in these realms in centuries.” He’d just realized how she’d managed to slip free and trick him.

“That’s going to change as well.” Angela drew in a breath. “I now need a favor.”

The King lifted both hands, palms up. “If I can, I may.”

Angela snorted at the word play. “Can you do anything for my dog? He’s lonely.”

The King’s mood changed to dangerous. “You enjoy the attention. If he has a mate, that will change.”

“Exactly.”

“You’ve made a final choice between them.”

Angela shook her head. “There was never a choice to be made. Please send my dog someone he can love and who will love him in return.”

“It will never replace the bond you share.”

“I don’t need it to be a replacement, just a happy period in reward for all he’s done right.”

Anger rushed toward her.

“And what of all he’s done wrong?!”

Angela sent her own rage right back. “That’s why the happiness is only temporary!”

The King waited, now scanning her in every way.

Angela let him. *I have nothing left to hide.*

“Lies are not allowed here.”

Angela grunted. “I’m working on it. The cracks are small so far.”

The King stared at her with sympathy and smugness. “You know.”

“I do. So do others. They’re watching. If I get out of control, they’ll put me down.” Angela wasn’t sure that was true of most people on their ship, but she knew it was from one of them.

“How?”

“It’s part of what my dog trained them for. Deep down, Adrian worried that he would be the one to go crazy. He put precautions in place.” Angela lifted her chin. “So have I. Ivan has orders. He’ll find them as soon as he returns to his cabin.”

“That one walks the line.”

Angela sighed at his warning tone. “All Safe Haven’s people walk the line. So do their leaders.” Weakness swarmed her. She drew in a breath and did something she never would have considered before this meeting. “Will you look ahead for me?”

The King’s eyes narrowed. “The reason?”

“I need to know if dying fixes things, if I’m really the reason death follows my camp. When Orin kills me, he and Kronus will never make it off this ship alive. They can’t go back to the weigh station without my permission. The instant you unlock time, I’ll ban them from heaven, then die. I need to know what comes after.”

The King pulled up a globe much like the one the Messenger had used during the end of their meeting. Angela stared hard, but she couldn’t see much from where she stood.

The King studied her over the globe. “Ask and receive.”

She swallowed. “May I watch with you?”

“Yes.”

Angela took his right. She immediately loved how it felt. Peace and strength flowed from the King. Desire was also there, but it was covered in layers of disinterest. He didn’t want anything as mundane as sex. He wanted a friend. “Are we allowed to do that?”

The King shook his head, sadness rippling down his cloak. “This very moment is forbidden.”

Angela smiled at him. “Then I’d be honored to be your friend. We’ll talk over brandy and cigars, late at night when the rest of the world is sleeping or guarding from nightmares.”

The King hesitated. “Our bonds will go deeper. I recommend you avoid this decision.”

“Why?”

“You’re a descendant! You cannot be trusted.”

She smiled again. “So, are you in?”

The King chortled. “Of course.”

A loud click echoed. A copper chain snapped around her wrist.

Angela accepted it willingly. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” The King lowered the globe, extending it to her.

Angela took her future in one hand and placed the other on his wrist. “Will you be my good friend?”

The King nodded. “No matter the cost.” A matching chain snapped around his wrist.

Angela studied the images as they began moving, hoping the bond would hold when it mattered. She was new to descendant negotiating. William’s book wasn’t detailed enough.

The King studied the future, without the dazed eyes and rough breathing she was used to. “It would seem you were right. That is an ugly death they receive for killing you.”

“Yes, but too many of mine die in the fight.” Angela concentrated, waving her hand over the orb.

The images sped up.

The King stared at her in surprise. It was more proof of her claim. The orbs weren’t supposed to work for anyone without a birth claim.

Angela studied the future, heart clenching when Marc and Kendle became a couple. Her anger rose when Adrian left; half the camp went with him.

Angela’s lids drooped. *So tired.*

The King touched her chain.

Energy shot into Angela’s wrist and traveled up her arm. The pain was excruciating.

*He’s definitely above my level.* She ignored it to watch Adrian’s group land in America.

They were slaughtered by nature. It took weeks, but the surrounded camp fell.

Angela waved her hand again. “Show me the island.”

It was empty. Graves littered the landing area. One of them belonged to Marc.

Cody and Charlie were next to him.

Angela shoved the globe back at the King.

He closed it with a tolerant motion, waiting for her decision.

“What card are you going to flip?” Angela didn’t know if he could, or would, tell her but she needed the information.

“A debt has been called in.”

Angela nodded as soon as she figured it out. There was only one person in the infirmary right now who owed her a life. “If possible, I’d like him to survive.”

The King glared. “So you can have revenge whenever you feel like it?”

“So I can keep studying his behavior and duplicate it. He’s honestly changed. I need that formula.” She let her anger show. “Then I’ll send him down so you can give my children justice.”

“Agreed. When I count to three, time will resume. Is our business finished? One.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“You are the heir, with the keys to the kingdom.”

“No lies here, remember?”

The King sighed, letting his misery show. It matched hers. “I miss the Creator. I am loyal to him, *always*. Two.”

“Is there anything you need?” She put a hand on his wrist chain. “Something I can do for you or help you with?”

The King stared at her again, eyes blazing with a million thoughts. When he finally spoke, heat radiated through the infirmary, thawing the icy walls. “Teach them to love me.”

Angela stared in dismayed surprise. “Humans fear death more than anything else.”

“Yes. If it cannot be changed, I wish to be released from servitude and placed somewhere there is no fear of me. I have served my duty faithfully since it was assigned.” He pleaded with her. “I want to be forgiven, like you humans are.”

Angela memorized those exact words. “Agreed, if you help pick your replacement. I don’t know the rules.”

“Agreed.” The King hesitated to call the final number.

Angela surprised them both by touching his wrist this time. It felt like any other arm to her.

Peace flowed through the King, bringing a relieved smile. “May I visit you?”

“Never without permission.”

The King snickered. “Perfect.”

Angela understood he wanted the contact more than she did. *Wow. I never thought of Satan being lonely.*

“That name is not mine.” The King bowed to her a final time. “I am Michael Mitchel.”

Angela gasped.

The King retreated, fading. “Three.”

Time snapped into reality.

Kenn stepped in front of Angela, shield coming up.

Kyle fired, hitting Kronus in the stomach.

Shawn threw his knife as Orin fired again. The blade went deep into Orin’s chest. Blood bloomed on his blue robe as people shouted.

Kenn’s shield dropped at the first bullet. He realized the second slug was headed for his heart and felt his demon preparing to flee. Kenn stayed in front of Angela, peace settling into his heart. *This is for my sins. I’m sorry. Please forgive me.*

The slug hit Kenn in the chest. Blood bloomed on his black shirt.

Angela caught him as he fell, heart breaking. She’d known, but it still hurt. “Don’t you die, Grunt!”

Kenn dropped to his knees, covering his pouring wound.

A poisoned red hand appeared, grabbing Kenn’s arm.

Courtney held tight as Kenn slid to the floor, stomach clenched as her mind directed the power his child had sent upon her plea.

Angela added what little she had left as Eagles who were able to secured the scene and more flooded in from various corridors.

Dying, Kronus sent the last of his power at the group.

Angela stepped in front of the hit. She stiffened, breath rushing out as she absorbed it. “Time to go.”

Angela collapsed.

Around her, sick and healthy bodies did the same.

Panic took over the infirmary.

**2**

*Angie!* Adrian’s eyes snapped open.The first thing he saw was a shark.

Hungry teeth snapped at him; black orbs glared in reproach at the delay of a meal.

The second thing he saw was Angie behind a line of locals, throwing ice... *Ice?* Adrian tried to stand and felt the chains around his hurting body. *I’m hanging in the air. How did that happen?*

His memory flashed an image of his capture. *Watch out! There’s more of them!*

Kendle already knew. Kurt and his team had been a decoy while a second trap team got behind her. She was now stuck between them and the locals who had rocks and a few knives but no guns. Jamie was firing whenever she dropped her shield, forcing her to stand here and drain her own energy. She was almost out. In another minute, it would be over.

Adrian felt her panic. He responded the only way he could, using the only magic he had left. *I need help. If you want to join Safe Haven or just get off this island, come to the docks.* The alpha wave traveled through the warehouse and rippled over the horseshoe-shaped land.

“Dart him!” Dag pointed at Adrian.

Roy went to do it, stepping behind the locals.

Kendle took advantage of his absence to lower her shield and blast the team with ice. She grabbed a terrified local and drained him as they recoiled.

Kendle’s shield went back up as Roy and Dag opened fire again. Bullets bounced off it, hitting the walls, floor, people. Several locals fell, screaming or dead.

“Stop shooting!” Jamie stepped in front of Kendle, noting her renewed strength. “Lower the dog into the water.”

Kendle glowered at Jamie, stomach tightening at the pain of absorbing the lifeforce. “I’m going to cut your throat out.”

Jamie laughed. “How? You’re trapped.”

“So are you.” Kendle gestured toward the road to the dock.

A large group of new locals were coming toward the dock in a hurry. They bounced down the grass and the street, forming a line of defenders coming to the rescue. Bullets flew as they got closer.

Kendle kept her shield up as the locals in the warehouse fled, leaving the trap team to fend for themselves. They were unprepared for the betrayal.

*Wow, are you guys rookies. Safe Haven always expects that*. Kendle dropped her shield and grabbed another local who had turned his back as he eased away from the fighting. She inhaled as hard as she could.

She tossed his withered corpse at Jamie

Jamie screamed as the body shattered against him, spraying dust and organs.

Kendle lunged forward and stabbed Jamie in the side as she inhaled again. “I warned you.” She hammered the blade into his throat a dozen times as she drained him.

Her shield came back up, thrumming with energy. *More*!

Kendle fought the pain, and the temptation to take another life. The addiction to killing was still a battle she always had to fight.

Kendle scanned the new group of locals as they tore Dag apart with their bare hands. *They’re bloodthirsty. I should thin them...*

*Angela.*

Kendle spun at Adrian’s voice. “Where?”

Adrian held still as the people he’d called lowered him enough to swing the pulley over the floor. He kept eye contact with her, communicating silently. *Let them go.*

Kendle wanted to fight his order, but it was impossible to refuse the light. She waved at the bloody locals. “We need to get going. Do you have a boat?”

Adrian joined her, shaking hands and chatting with their rescuers, but his anger made the meeting tense.

Kendle flashed smiles, but it had no effect as Adrian’s anger grew. Kendle finally spun to face him. “What is your problem?!”

His eyes widened*. You’re not Angela!*

Kendle snorted. “No shit. You helping here or what?”

Adrian snapped out of his shock to grin at her. “I’m glad you came.”

Kendle snickered. “Save the charm. We have work to do.”

Adrian had been furious that Angela was off ship alone. Realizing it was Kendle was a relief.

Kendle laughed. *You really thought I was her. That’s rich. Marc will be thrilled.*

Adrian smelled vanilla as he scanned her, heart twisting. *Yeah, he knows her from head to toe.* Adrian scanned Kendle’s chest. *And where you needed padding.*

Kendle laughed harder instead of getting angry. *The makeup was fun. I can still taste it.*

Adrian came to her side. Then he turned around to watch behind them. It’s what he would have done with Angie or any teammate.

Kendle slid over so their shoulders were touching. She remembered that from her brief Eagle lessons.

Around them, the locals were standing in groups, talking and watching them. Kendle knew they should have a conversation, but she wasn’t sure how to start it.

*Wait for them to come to us*. Adrian shifted so he had a view of their guests and the road behind the warehouse. “I called them, but they just realized you aren’t Angela.”

*Which means they’ll have to be evaluated on our ship, where they can’t escape*. Kendle cleared her throat. “We’ll send you back here if you want. Safe Haven doesn’t murder people.”

Adrian was glad they couldn’t view his expression. That lie was dangerous.

Two men broke off from the groups to join Kendle and Adrian in the warehouse. Both tall and dark, they had a sense of strength Kendle admired. They reminded her of Safe Haven men, the strong silent ones who always ended up saving the day.

Adrian rubbed her shoulder with his. “Not the men this time. *You’re* the hero.”

Kendle smiled. It sent peace over the strangers and brought them closer.

“I am Raheem.”

“Selito.”

Kendle held out a hand to shake.

Both men retreated, expressions fearful.

Kendle lowered her hand. “I’m not sick. This happened to me a year ago.”

Selito waved at the leaving cruise ship. “Your boat has plastic up. Your people are ill.”

Kendle didn’t see a need to lie. “Radiation poisoning. It’s not contagious.”

The men looked to Adrian for confirmation.

Adrian didn’t want to take over the meeting. He nodded and waited. Kendle was getting job training right now. She just hadn’t realized it yet.

Raheem’s voice was hesitant. “Your...boss will talk to us when we reach your ship?”

Again, Kendle didn’t lie. “Yes, but not right away. She’s working.”

Relief entered their expressions.

Kendle’s anger blasted out, trapping the two men inside her shield. She leaned forward as they panicked and tried to fight their way free. “What evil are you hiding?”

Adrian drew the gun from Kendle’s holster and turned, keeping the other locals at bay. *She’s got good instincts, but bad timing.*

Selito stopped resisting. Tears rolled over his sun-burnt cheeks.

Raheem kept punching the shield that gave no reaction to his fierce blows.

*I don’t like this part of the job. Where’s the fun?*

Adrian grunted at her. *Few and far between most days. Finish this so we can go.*

Kendle released her shield. “Tell us now so we don’t have to go through it on the ship. If it’s bad, you can stay here. We won’t tell the boss.”

“She lies!” Raheem was an inch away from attacking Kendle. “They won’t care we were starving. We’ll be slaughtered!”

Many of the small crowd voiced agreement.

Selito kept crying. “The UN told us Safe Haven has no forgiveness for our kind! We shouldn’t have come.”

Kendle and Adrian realized the trap teams had filled the locals with lies. Kendle sheathed her bloody knife. “Cannibalism?”

Selito nodded, wiping at his tears. “When your kids scream for food, when they die from needing it, you do whatever you have to.”

Kendle pointed at the crops ready to be harvested, then the water. “Why didn’t you eat the crops or the sharks?”

“The crops are poison. We cannot grow food anymore.” Raheem, calming a little, shrugged bitterly. “Before we used the bell, the sharks didn’t come here.”

“What bell?” Adrian and Kendle asked at the same time.

Raheem pointed at the chains still hanging over the water. “We lower a bell there and slap it against the chains. The sharks come to be fed.”

Adrian frowned. “How is that possible?”

“We used to have tourists who liked to swim with them. The guides called the sharks using bells.” Raheem pushed his big hands into the pockets of his baggy shorts, waiting for their decision.

“A dinner bell.” Kendle sighed. “It’s not up to me, honestly, but my boss won’t like it if you murdered people coming through here...or worse. Maybe you should stay. I can’t promise she’ll clear you.”

Selito shook his head wildly. “Our population chose a lottery draw. No one was murdered! Every sacrifice was willing.”

Kendle shifted to look at Adrian.

Adrian shrugged. “I made exceptions in areas like this, but Angela has a unique way of passing judgement. I can’t promise it either.”

“Safe Haven is a place of second chances...” Selito didn’t want to give up the only hope he’d had since his family died. “Has that changed?”

Adrian smiled at him. “No. We’ll always be that. She’ll give you a fair evaluation. Just follow the rules and be helpful.”

Selito smiled back, aware of who Adrian was. “I will go.”

“Good.” Adrian holstered Kendle’s gun and waved toward the water. “We need a ride to our ship. Can you help with that?”

The rest of the group calmed.

Raheem stared at Kendle’s scars. *Anyone who went through that shouldn’t have survived.*

Kendle caught the thought. “If not for Safe Haven, I wouldn’t. They helped me stay sane.”

Raheem’s face melted into surprise. His body relaxed, anger fading. “You have the rage sickness.”

She nodded. “I did. Safe Haven cured me.”

Raheem dropped to his knees. “Please!”

Kendle felt an unwilling link forming, but she didn’t fight it. Descendant bonds were supposed to be strong for both people, but other than Marc, Kendle hadn’t experienced that part of it. She didn’t expect this to be different. “I will if I can.” She took his arm and helped him up. “Do a lot of you have the rage disease?”

Raheem shook his head. “Just me. My father was a pirate. I escaped the green fog and washed up here... My father tried to eat me. My mother shoved him into an oil tank. Then she caught the disease. She sent me away.”

Kendle placed a hand on his shaking shoulder. “Have you infected anyone?”

Raheem shook his head, more tears slipping out. “Not yet...”

Kendle awkwardly patted his shoulder. “We can give you outlets that will help, but only you can control it. If you don’t, you’ll be put down.”

Adrian was proud of Kendle for coming out of her misery long enough to help someone else through theirs. He waved Selito to get their ride, then scanned their surroundings. Satisfied they were safe for the moment, he turned toward the Adrianna.

And didn’t find Angie.

*She’s not on the ship!* Adrian reeled, stunned. *She ascended without me.*

Adrian immediately flashed to the moment with Kronus, where Angela had whispered to him. Both their thoughts had been blocked. Not even Marc knew what she’d said.

“I do.”

Adrian glared at Kendle. “You weren’t even there!”

“I watched your memory.” Kendle shrugged. “I read lips. It’s part of why Theo wants me to teach sign language to the camp. He knows I can help Debra, so it’s a win-win.”

Adrian grabbed Kendle’s arm and spun her around. “What did she say?”

*“Come visit me in a few days. I have a job for you.”*

“What was the job?”

“I have no idea.” Kendle pointed toward their cruise ship. “I’d bet he knows.”

Adrian narrowed in on Neil, who was standing on the bridge steps, watching them in concern. A piece snapped into place. *The clouds in the weigh station. That’s how he knew to use it!*

“Son of a bitch.” Adrian hurried toward the men and the boat coming around the corner of the dock. “Let’s roll!”

Kendle followed, letting out a jealous sigh.

Selito and Raheem got everyone into the long boat and waited for Adrian and Kendle to join them.

Kendle scanned the land behind the warehouse, stomach full of butterflies. She glanced toward the ocean, to their ship.

Adrian waited impatiently for Kendle to make her decision. He could only guess how hard it was for her, but he had no doubt about her final choice. Marc was on the Adrianna.

Kendle walked to the boat and climbed in.

Adrian waved for them to go. “Catch up to the rear. Someone will open the cargo doors.”

“Are you sure?”

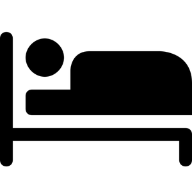
Adrian sighed at Kendle’s mutter. “We’re still needed. Until that changes, we won’t be pushed overboard.”

Kendle snorted. “That’s with Angela in charge. If she’s gone, *Marc* now leads Safe Haven and he hates you more than I hate the man who tried to kill me. At least Ethan was sick; you don’t have that excuse.”

Adrian’s balls drew up. His stomach twisted. But he didn’t change his mind. Even if Angela was gone, Safe Haven wasn’t. “Take me home.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

**Better Than Sex**

****

**1**

**N**eil greeted them as the boat was hauled into the small cargo bay. A line of tired Eagles pulled the ropes and daydreamed of sleep.

Adrian lunged from the boat and landed in front of Neil. “Take me to Marc, right now!”

Neil led the way without protesting the tone. Marc had told him this would happen.

“You knew!”

Neil took them through the employee hall toward the infirmary. “She’s alive. They all are. Marc is on his way from the bridge. Theo has that post now.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?!”

Neil snorted. “I might have, but you nailed my ass to the wall and let me hang there. Then you forced me to betray my best friend.”

Adrian scowled. “Marc flipped you.”

Neil shrugged. “It wasn’t hard. I don’t like you anymore.”

Adrian read Neil’s thoughts of a short conversation where Marc had offered friendship in return for loyalty. “You told him everything. You betrayed me!”

Neil refused to feel guilty. “Eagles are taught to lie to the enemy when necessary.”

“I know! I created that rule!”

“Ironic, isn’t it?” Neil opened the door to the small office across from the lab hallway. “Please wait here; your executioner will be along shortly.”

Adrian shoved by Neil and went toward the infirmary.

Just coming from there, Kenn slid in front of him. “She’s getting a checkup.”

Adrian scanned the infirmary through the windows. Cots of unconscious people greeted him. Their loved ones glowered.

“Let’s chat.” Marc came down the steps from the bridge, smiling at people, sending alpha waves that eased people’s troubled souls.

Adrian observed in jealousy. *That’s my job!*

*It was. You betrayed them.*

*I saved them!*

“One does not negate the other.” Marc waited for Adrian to go first.

Adrian stomped into the office. He dropped into the closest chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

Marc shut the door. He sat at the other end of the long table, mind full of the plans that had led to this moment.

Adrian read them, anger growing. “You let her do this?”

“It was my plan.”

“What was?”

“Sacrificing herself for her people.” Marc brought up his shield.

“You bastard!” Adrian fired a powerful blast of acid pain. It settled over Marc’s shield and melted it.

Marc brought up another one, enjoying Adrian’s agony more than he could express.

“You made sure we didn’t even get a goodbye!” Adrian tossed a thicker blast, eating through the shield in seconds.

Marc brought up a third bubble, frowning a bit. “I like that spell.”

Adrian tossed a double blast this time, removing the shield first.

Marc caught the second blast and absorbed it like Angie had been teaching them to do.

“Damn you!” Adrian fired one more hit, using his alpha power.

Marc couldn’t absorb the blow in time. He took it in full. Golden light swarmed his body and sank in.

Marc laughed through the pain.

Adrian’s mouth dropped open. “You should be on your knees!”

“It only works on new people.”

“New...” Adrian groaned. “You’re already one of mine. I can’t grab you twice.”

“Exactly.”

Adrian realized Marc hadn’t fired back. “What are you waiting for?!”

“I’m enjoying the foreplay.”

“Slam you.”

Marc chuckled. “We’ve been here before. Your tits aren’t big enough and you won’t swallow.”

Adrian groaned, adrenaline starting to fade. “She’s gone, Marc! How can you joke?”

Marc sighed, hiding his own concern. “It was the best path to her goals.”

“To *your* goals, maybe.”

“Meaning?”

“You’re now the leader of my camp!”

“No. The Eagles are in charge. I’m in recovery.”

“It’s the same thing!”

“Angela wanted it this way.”

Adrian was hurt that she hadn’t said goodbye, that she’d known she was leaving, but mostly, that she’d had a scheme going and hadn’t included him. *I was blindsided!*

“God, it feels good to be on this side of things.” Marc leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. “She said it could be a while. We’re putting them all on IV lines so their bodies don’t shut down. We’re telling the camp they’re in a coma.”

Adrian tensed again, still waiting for Marc to fire.

Marc’s smile widened into the grin of a hungry wolf. “Angie doesn’t want to be around you anymore. She told me to tell you it’s time to move on.”

*Blow one.* Adrian’s heart thumped. “What?”

“She also said Mitchel DNA has to be passed carefully. She’s forbidden you to breed with anyone the council doesn’t approve because of how dangerous it is. Conner’s going to have the same rules.”

“That’s... That’s... Against the constitution of the old world, and of Safe Haven!”

“This is part of the new descendant laws. It only applies in special cases.” Marc smirked. “Be proud. Your name will be the first.”

Adrian felt his tiny world crumbling all over again. “What else?”

“Your previous deals with everyone are void. They all came clean while Angie was draining herself hourly to save their lives.”

Adrian tried not to think about any of those forbidden alliances, but it was impossible. Faces and deals flashed.

Marc caught it all. *I don’t want to miss anyone when I compare notes.*

Fury filled Adrian’s face. “What about *our* deal?”

Marc blew out a tired sigh, getting to the part he hated. “We’ve agreed it might be best in the end.”

Adrian grabbed that slippery rope, desperate. “Because you have feelings for Kendle!”

“Because I love her.” Marc wasn’t afraid to admit it now. “She’s the subservient worshiper I need.”

“That’s what I am to Angela.”

“We both know it’s more.” Marc smiled again.

Adrian braced. *Here comes number two*.

“I no longer need your help with the baby spell. I pulled it from your memory. I’ve been working on it and now that I’ve found the procreation scrolls...” Marc paused to enjoy Adrian’s gasp. “we don’t need help from anyone.”

Adrian tried to bring down a wall over his thoughts, but he was weak from being drugged and wasting his energy on opening blows. Sweat beaded on his neck.

Marc had been waiting for this moment since Angie asked him to handle things, savoring it like sex. He was truly her XO now. “I’m locking your gifts. Today.”

Adrian strengthened his shield as much as he could. “Only an enforcer can do that.”

“Not true. Anyone can copy that skill, if...” Marc’s grin covered his face. *This might be better than sex.*

Adrian’s stomach dropped as Marc revealed a mind full of doors that glowed green. *Those are new! How did he get so many so fast...* “You’re Byzan now. You reached her level.”

“I asked for it and received.”

“You took a big risk.” Adrian assumed Marc had fooled the time guardian somehow while embracing his demon.

“Scroll diving avoids the Demon of Time. I trust my power. It pulls me up. Your power knows you can’t be trusted, so you aren’t.”

“Why are you telling me?” Adrian was almost in tears. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll use it against you?”

Marc nodded. “I’m counting on it, but not for four years. You won’t be able to dive, shield, read or draw.”

“It won’t change how she feels about me.”

Marc grunted. “No. And if you become a good person, it might even increase her feelings.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“Because I trust her. There’s nothing you can do to win Angie away from me.” Marc was thrilled that he now meant every word. “You might get her when I die, but until then, she’ll always put me first. I don’t have to be threatened by you. So I’m not.”

Adrian was proud of Marc for the progress. He also hated him for winning this round. “This isn’t over.”

“Yeah, it is.” Marc’s lids narrowed. “She left a message for you. Once I deliver it, you will have an hour to set things in order, but don’t go looking for Conner. He’s not here.”

Adrian frowned. “Where is he?”

“On a run. You’ll see him when he gets back.”

“Who’s with him?”

“Eagles.”

Adrian thought about it. “Can I call him?”

“You’ll blow the run and screw his chances of getting over your mistakes. It’s up to you. Personally, I’d rather he was gone too.”

Adrian locked down on his need to contact Conner. “I won’t do that. He’s a good kid.”

Marc shrugged. “We’ll see. In the meantime, be back here in one hour. I’m doing a group thing then to conserve energy.”

Adrian stared at Marc. “All this from scroll diving?”

“Yes.” Marc hoped it ate Adrian up for the next four years. “I stored the spells, the details. When we got sick, I had time to study them. It kept my mind off the misery.”

Adrian realized he’d been wrong. “I didn’t think you could reach it without mass murder.”

Marc’s face darkened at Adrian’s mutter. “I helped with enough plans to qualify. There’s still no conclusive proof otherwise on that.”

Adrian’s hatred glowed, but his bitter curiosity came first. “Why are you really telling me all this?”

“I found a special set of scrolls. Did you know a byzan can assign a job...a gift...to any alpha?”

“Please.” Adrian groaned. “Just tell me and stop playing with my life!”

Marc sighed, delighted to hear Adrian beg. “Effective immediately, you are the Keeper of the Descendants, a History by Adrian Mitchel.” Marc muttered, hand lifting.

Adrian’s shield melted.

Marc lunged over the table and punched him in the mouth. Then he hit the dazed man with the spell.

Adrian stayed down. He’d learned not to get up.

Old magic sank into his chest. Voices entered his mind.

“You’ll be able to hear it so you can record it, but you won’t be able to use any of it for four years.” Marc stood. Adrian was already falling into the daze of a new gift. “Hey!”

Adrian’s teary eyes snapped up to his. “Yes, Boss?”

Marc sucked in air. *That made me hard!* “One hour from this moment.”

Adrian dropped his chin. “Can I see her?”

“Yes. You can also try any last-ditch effort to escape this fate. It won’t matter. This part was her idea. We need a Keeper.”

Adrian felt love grow for Marc. “I’ll be useful now. Thank you!”

“You’re welcome.” Marc meant it. He owed Adrian a few good moments. He’d helped keep Angie alive. That was powerful to the man who loved her enough to share if she had demanded it. In the end, the charms and spells had finally worn off or been broken. She was his again.

“She always was.” Adrian had known that from their first meeting. “I had to try.”

Marc shrugged. “I understand that. I really do, but it’s all over now. You have a place–on the fringes, keeping track of it all. It’s what you’ve been best at all along.”

“Yes.” Adrian braced. “What’s the message?”

Marc opened his thoughts so Adrian could get the memory message directly from the source.

Angela glanced up from her notebook, looking into Adrian’s tortured eyes. “This is the way it has to be. Spend the years regaining your honor. If you do that, I’ll find a place for you in the rebuilding. If you fail, Marc will take your lifeforce and Conner will be banished. The name Mitchel shall become a forbidden bloodline that I will wipe from the Earth. Do not fail. Your descendants depend on it.”

Adrian was crushed. “Can’t I just go away?”

The vision rippled as Angela sighed. “I’m guessing you’re considering running away now. You have that choice. Conner won’t suffer for it, but you will be hunted. We can’t trust you roaming loose.”

“I’d never hurt the dream!”

Angela sighed again. “If there’s a rabid dog on your farm, you can track him. You have an idea where he’ll attack. If you put him outside the fence, he’s hurting others, and sooner or later he’ll find a way to slip back in and rip your throat out.”

It was the exact words he’d said to Samantha about Rick, back when they’d first joined.Adrian’s heart squeezed. “I can’t do this.”

“Do you love me, Adrian?”

“You know I do!”

The vision rippled violently as Angela stood. “Four years will pass in the blink of an eye. A single betrayal will curse that future. Make your choice and do it now.”

Adrian surrendered, body sagging. “I’ll try. You know I will.”

Angela smiled at him. “Happiness may be beyond us, but contentment can be enough. Emotions mean little compared to what you’ll be responsible for starting, for helping to build.”

Marc was impressed with how well she knew him. They’d recorded this in a dream walking session, but all her responses were accurate so far.

“I don’t know how to do this.” Adrian forced the truth out. “I’m a lazy, weak coward.”

“You’re also a hero. Remember that and hold tight to those ethics. I believe in you. And that’s enough of this. I hate the mushy crap. Spend your hour how you want, then embrace the next stage in your destiny.” For an instant, horrible sadness crossed Angela’s face. Then she brightened. “I’ll contact you occasionally, for my sanity. Marc insisted. He’s an amazing man. Try to emulate him and the four years might not be as bad as you’re expecting.”

The vision ended.

Marc pushed Adrian out of his mind and waited for the man’s reaction.

Adrian stood. “I’d like to spend my hour with her.”

“I assumed you would.” Marc went to the door. “I’m sorry it came to this. If you’d been a better man, I would have followed you.”

Shame flooded Adrian. “She made the right choice. I knew she would. You’re the perfect man.”

“Not even close.” Marc leered. “She’ll train me to be that and you’ll get to keep track of it. Think of the fun!”

Adrian knew Marc was enjoying rubbing it in, and he was sure the man was right that it would suck when those moments happened, but all he could feel was grateful to have been given any sentence that let him live and still have some contact with Angela.

Marc left, motioning at Neil. “Don’t let him out of your sight.”

“You know it.”

Adrian staggered into the infirmary, Neil on his heels. He had too much to process. The hardest was that Angela had planned all this without warning him. He hadn’t seen it coming. He’d thought she was too sick to carry out plans.

“She didn’t have to do anything but let you sink yourself.” Ivan was on duty in the bed next to Angela’s partitioned cot. He’d insisted. He didn’t care that the medics had only agreed so there would be another set of eyes on the boss while they were busy.

Adrian flinched at the fresh blow. “You knew too.”

“I guessed some of it, overheard some it, read a little.” Ivan shrugged, ignoring his sore body. “I am her understudy.”

Adrian’s chuckle was harsh. “She’s training you exactly like I did her.”

Ivan brightened. “You think?”

Adrian spotted an opportunity to pay Marc back for the loss. “I hope she doesn’t betray you the way I did her.”

Ivan shrugged. “If she does, I’ll learn from it.” Ivan was thrilled with his new job. Marc had promised to put him in classes with Angela, with Eagle training between. Nothing Adrian could do or say could compare.

Adrian scanned the partition. “Are you allowed to update me?”

Ivan glanced toward Marc, who was talking to Kenn at the door.

Marc nodded. He was monitoring the conversation.

Ivan reached over and pulled the curtain back. “She ascended, with a lot of the sick people. We’re all waiting now.”

Adrian went to her cot and dropped into the chair. He took her hand, eyes roaming her face and weak body. He sent his energy, his love, to help her recover while she battled for all of them. He understood what she’d chosen to do, just not who she’d chosen to do it with. “I would have gone with you.”

“Same here.”

Adrian frowned at Ivan’s mutter. “What did they decide about Kendle?”

Ivan looked at him over Angela’s body. “We won’t know until Marc’s next meeting is finished.”

“He’s meeting with her today?”

“Yes. After her, Kenn, Tonya and Charlie will have a turn.”

“And Conner, when he gets back?”

“Yes.”

Adrian’s stomach tightened further. “Marc’s cleaning house now, while she’s gone and can’t interfere.”

“No.” Ivan didn’t let Marc take the blame. “She told him to do it now, so she doesn’t get hurt anymore. She’s ready to be protected, the way you were supposed to do with someone like her.”

Adrian flushed. “Her destiny wasn’t to be peaceful. Coddle her all you want, but when it comes time to fight for our future, let her roll. You hear me?”

Ivan wrote it in his notebook. “Anything else, since you won’t be handling her training?”

Adrian sighed, rubbing her chilly fingers. “She has to have freedom to be a little wild or she’ll smother. If you guys really love her, let her breathe.”

“I’ll make sure Marc knows.”

Adrian waved. “Shut the curtain. She wouldn’t want the camp to see her this way.”

Ivan tugged the curtain half closed, making sure he could still see Adrian.

Adrian opened a dusty door in his mind and sent his demon into the time field. *Show me.*

The future swam closer, fading into a blur of years.

Adrian slowed it, scanning for details. He saw the camp, glorious in its relaxed sprawl, and a tiny graveyard that didn’t get much use from its appearance. The people looked healthy and happy, and so did the Eagles.

*Where’s Angie?* He zoomed in, hoping he had enough time before the time guardian became aware of his presence. *Show me!*

The image morphed into a cluttered tent with a laughing toddler and a chuckling woman spinning her around. In the corner of the wide tent, Marc was sitting in a rocking chair, reading to a small boy from a book. Cody and Dog were playing tug-of-war by the open flap.

*Is she the same? Can she still do the job?*

As if she heard, Angela in the vision looked right at him. “Get the fuck out of here before the demon of time senses you.”

“Angie!”

She smiled at him. “It’ll all work out. Just remember my number one rule.”

“You never gave me any rules! I gave them to you!”

“I taught you to love someone more than yourself, Adrian Mitchel. Keep my lesson in your heart and fight for the light.” She resumed spinning the little girl. “Or just die and get it over with. Safe Haven has no room for quitters or cowards.”

Adrian snapped up, vision ending. He looked at Angela first, then Ivan. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed.

Ivan yawned. “Your time’s about up. Marc just sent Kendle to the office across the hall. She was...okay. I think you two are going to be good friends again.”

Adrian stood, spine popping. “We already are.” He bent to place a kiss on Angela’s head. “Be happy, baby. You’ve earned it.”

Adrian left the infirmary without talking to anyone who was watching him with expectations of it. Until he sorted himself out, he didn’t want to have those conversations.

Adrian entered the office to find Kendle sitting cross-legged in a plush chair near the small TV. She was still wearing her disguise, though the hair color had run out hours ago and most of the makeup covering her scars had washed away. “You okay?”

Kendle shrugged. “She told Marc not to lock me down this time, that I’ll learn to trust myself and then I’ll be trustworthy.” She frowned up at him. “Does that make sense to you?”

“Sort of.” Adrian dropped into the chair next to her and placed a hand on her wrist. “Will you be my woman?”

“Can you share me?”

“Like Samantha?”

“No.”

“Then yes.”

“Do we need to set limits?”

“I doubt it.”

“You were the only thing I asked for when he told me he’d never be able to love me and that I should consider moving to the other ship so it wouldn’t tempt me to be bad when I see them together. He was very nice about it.”

Adrian studied her, assuming she’d been hit by many of the same blows he had. “What can I do for you?”

Kendle grunted. “You already did it.”

“Because I remind you of Marc.”

“A little. More because you’ll keep me from making another big mistake, and I’ll do the same for you, so it doesn’t ruin Conner’s chances.” Kendle’s lashes fluttered as she tried to hold back tears. “I knew there wasn’t a chance, but it still hurts.”

Adrian put an arm around her. “I know.” He leaned against her. “I’ll do the best I can to ease that when it gets bad.”

Kendle turned against his arm, cheek pressed to his. “You have to make the choice for us both. I’m not strong enough.” She shuddered. “He kissed me goodbye!”

Adrian knew what choice she meant, but he shook his head. “I’m not ready to make a final call on that. She’ll be happy with her family for four years and she deserves that, but when we return...”

“Yeah.” Kendle kissed his cheek. “If you wait too long to make the choice, you know which way I’ll go.”

“I do.” Adrian felt Marc coming their way and controlled his need to run. “Stay?”

“You know it.”

Marc tapped on the door. “It’s time.”

Kendle squeezed Adrian’s hand in comfort. “Come in. He’s ready for you now.”

**2**

“He’s ready for you–both of you.” Kendle pointed as she and Adrian left the office.

Kenn and Debra stood while everyone else frowned or breathed a sigh of relief. Marc was handling all the problems in camp right now. The eleven people had been waiting in silence, not sure what their future held.

All of them had taken turns going to the infirmary window to check on their friends or family, and to scan Angela’s partition. They craned now, scanning the room, Marc, and the faces of the people leaving.

Adrian paused by the hall chairs, torn. He wanted to be with Angela. That hadn’t changed because his gifts were now locked.

Adrian glanced at the waiting people.

Even Kenn stopped to watch, to see what choice he made.

Adrian didn’t need his gifts to know what they were thinking. His shoulders drooped. “I’m sorry.” He rotated toward the stairs. “Stay away from me so you don’t get in trouble too.”

Everyone was shocked, except Kenn. He was proud of Adrian for the first time in months.

“Should I reschedule this?”

Kenn grunted at Marc’s tone, motioning Debra in first as Kendle and Adrian vanished down the dim corridor. “Yes!”

Marc chuckled. “No worries. Leave the door open. This is a good meeting.”

“Awesome.” Kenn beamed at Debra. “I told you we did good.”

Debra grinned back, gesturing. *You were right.*

Marc pointed at two papers on the desk. “No need to sit. I know you’re tired. As of this moment, you are both Safe Haven XOs. You’ll share the job.”

Kenn blinked, breath gone. “What?”

Marc grinned as Debra clapped Kenn on the back and people in the hall cheered lowly for him. “You earned it. Congratulations, Marine.”

Kenn shook Marc’s hand automatically when it came toward him, mind blinking. *He gave me XO... Marc did what?*

Debra shook with Marc, beaming. She grabbed him for a fast shoulder hug that made him laugh and pat her arm. “You’re welcome. Congratulations.”

Debra turned to Kenn, waiting for him to breathe again so they could find out what came next.

Marc gestured to the papers. “Details are on there.”

Debra grabbed them both and shoved Kenn’s into his hand.

Kenn read it, smile slowly appearing.

Marc enjoyed the moment. “Attention, please?”

Debra’s head snapped up to him. She was monitoring Marc’s thoughts so she didn’t miss anything.

Kenn kept reading.

Debra nudged him.

Kenn looked up. “Where’s the protection for the boss? Bosses? You?”

Marc chuckled. “I’m giving that to you now. Ready?”

Kenn got out his notebook.

So did Debra.

“My personal guards are Neil, Kendle, and Charlie with Dog. They’ll rotate on eight-hour shifts, seven days a week until you send me a list of personal protection candidates. Then you’ll train them. They’ll be separate from the Eagles, but attend the same classes and training, plus whatever you else you decide they need.”

Kenn began to frown. “You can’t buy me.”

Marc snorted. “Yes, I can, but I don’t need to. You’ve proven your loyalty to the camp and to Angela. This isn’t a bribe.”

“It’s a...reward?”

Marc smiled at the confused, changed man. “It’s the best person for the job. We call that being fair.”

Kenn considered it. “Huh. Okay. We can do things that way.”

“Good. Moving on: Ivan, Jeff and Molly have duty over the boss. They’ll use the same rotation as the personal protection on me, but not the same shift or person every time. Keep it flowing so all those people become a complete protection team in time.”

“You got it.” Kenn made notes, heart lightening. He’d been worried that Marc would remove him from camp because of his past.

“It was considered, but of all Safe Haven’s members, yours has been the biggest change. Don’t stop working on it.”

Kenn nodded, proud.

“I want a full round from you now, together, then you’re both off duty for two days to get set and sleep. Everyone I just mentioned for duty who is waiting in the hall will go with you on those rounds until you get their schedules set for the first three days. Pick a team leader and get rolling.”

Kenn shook Marc’s hand again when it came out, then left. *I can’t believe he gave me XO.*

*He also gave you a team. Adrian never got around to that. Neither did Angela*. Neil fell in on Kenn’s right. “I’ll volunteer for this shift so Marc isn’t alone right now.” Ivan was already with Angela, but Marc didn’t have a guard.

Kenn wrote it down. “Agreed. We’ll update you on who gets team leader.”

“Cool. Do not give it to me. I’m busy; orders from the boss.” Neil went to wait by the door. Marc wasn’t finished here yet.

“Understood.” Kenn wrote that down too, glad. After his lies, Neil didn’t deserve to be a team leader.

Marc waited for them all to be gone, then he knocked on the table. “Kyle.”

Kyle appeared, alone and frowning.

Marc waved him in. “Close the door. This is *not* a good meeting.”

Kyle’s heart dropped. “You know.”

“Not as much as I will after this is done.” Marc waited for Kyle to shut the door and pick a seat.

He took the one closest.

Marc liked that. Everyone else had kept at least one chair between them.

“It was my idea. I brought it up and I nagged her until she agreed.” Kyle crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s my side of it.”

Marc snickered. “Angie was right. You’re like the Terminator of our group.”

Kyle snorted. “My lines aren’t that good.”

Marc grew serious. He scanned Kyle openly, noting his gifts and his limits. “You’re not a true descendant.”

“No. I wasn’t born with a demon.” Kyle knew not to lie about that part of it. “I’m sharing space with a stranger.”

“How does it work?” Marc was hoping for details on the process.

“Only an enforcer can do it.”

Marc didn’t tell Kyle it could probably be copied. “Side effects, so far?”

“None.”

“Communication with the demon?”

“Direct, no. Dreams are starting.”

“Good. You’ll get a lot of the rules from that because you’re smart. When you have something you can’t figure out, I’m sure Jennifer will help.”

“She will.” Kyle waited, certain a punishment was coming.

Marc’s face hardened. “Did you know she was going to do it?”

Kyle frowned. “Do you mean was it thought out and planned?”

“I want to know if you had a chance to refuse.”

Kyle scowled. “I told you. I asked her.”

“So *she* had a chance to refuse.”

Kyle’s lips clamped shut.

Marc sighed. “Listen, I don’t care. It will make you better at your job and a better provider for your family.”

“But?” Kyle knew there was one.

“But it isn’t up to me. The boss didn’t give permission. From what I’ve read in the old scrolls, that’s not allowed.”

“I didn’t ask about the rules...”

“Jennifer knew it was wrong.” Marc ripped into Kyle’s mind to replay the moment.

Kyle held still, suddenly terrified Marc would lock up his new gifts the way he’d just done to Adrian.

Marc withdrew. “She knew it was forbidden. So did you. Angela will handle you both when she recovers.”

“When she returns, you mean.”

Marc shrugged at Kyle’s curt correction, refusing to show how worried he was. It had already been hours, but there were days to go. “I want you to spend time with our new Keeper. Record the event in our official history, but all deals you’ve made are void. Adrian is now an Invisible. It is forbidden for you to involve him in camp business or descendant related material, other than the histories he will record for me.”

Kyle nodded stiffly. He hadn’t known Marc was aware of his deals with their former leader.

“Tell Jennifer the same thing.”

Kyle’s eyes swung to his. “What?”

Marc laughed at him. “That’s it for now. You can go.”

Kyle scowled. “That’s it? I can go?” Kyle stood, chair scraping the floor. “Who do you think you are?!”

Marc’s mood went cold. “What have you done to deserve a reward? You helped our kids hide, which strained manpower to search for them. They were then attacked and forced to kill. When Jennifer fell ill, you went to her side and didn’t come back out. Helping a few sick people for a day doesn’t erase your selfish behavior. There isn’t a penalty for that in this camp, but everyone saw it. Your punishment won’t end with whatever Angie decides.”

Kyle groaned in frustration. “I just got everything I wanted!”

“I know, right?” Marc’s face changed into the sly leader Angie had always known was there. “Unless you’d like a get out of jail free card.”

Kyle tensed. “What about Jennifer?”

“She’ll get the same offer when she recovers.”

“What is it?”

Marc took out his book. “I want you to give up the Eagles for a while–both of you–and go on a run.”

Kyle caught the tone. “Back or forward?”

“Back.” Marc slid over a single sheet of paper. “That’s all I have on your target. The bottom has a list of names to talk to before you go. Jennifer might be able to get more information from them.” Marc studied Kyle, noting the baggier clothes and the sunken sockets. “You need to take extra rations along so you can all beef up on the trip.”

“Wait.” Kyle glowered at Marc. “You want her to go too.”

“Yes. The mission needs an enforcer. She’s the most experienced one we have.”

“No.”

Marc shrugged. “Okay. Like I said, you can go now. I have another meeting.”

“I’ll do it. She doesn’t need to go.”

“Yes, she does. You both need a job so Angie can’t punish you. You have a grid and a green door?”

Kyle nodded. “I don’t know how to use them.”

“I’m going to give you lessons on the grid before you leave. The tracking, you get to learn on your own. Safe Haven doesn’t have one.”

Kyle frowned deeper. “You’re giving me a descendant job?”

“Yes. But both of you, not one.”

Kyle struggled to find a reason to keep Jennifer here. “She won’t leave Autumn for that long. She loves her baby.”

“It’s love that will make her agree. My daughter needs a mother too, but I can’t go myself, at least not until we’re settled on the island. I can’t wait that long.” Marc sighed. “Cody’s nightmares are getting worse. His sister is in danger. She needs a team of killers to bring her home. I chose you to lead them.”

Kyle shoved the paper into his pocket. “I’ll talk to Jenny when she wakes up.”

“No need. Ivan’s filling her in right now.”

“Ivan?!” Kyle stormed from the room.

Marc laughed, smothering his pain. *She was right. Some of this is fun.* “Come on in, Mike.”

Mike entered, not shutting the door. He knew he had nothing to be worried about.

Marc smiled at the boy. Mike had been sent to the garden on a quiet mission to listen to radio channels and record what he heard. Between, he had stayed in the garden (his radio booth was in a grow closet labeled *never open*) and helped Emma with the plants.

Mike handed Marc a notebook. “There’s a key on the first page.”

Marc skimmed it. “This is good. How’s the garden?”

“Better now that we’re watering again, but it gave us time to finish the planting Samantha mapped out. It’s all in the ground. Emma’s sure it’ll all sprout.”

Those two had stayed when everyone else went other places. Mike wasn’t as bad as Timmy, but with the other brother, Eric, now awake from the coma he’d been knocked into during the beach fight, Mike would be drawn back into trouble. Marc wanted to avoid that. “Eric is doing well. He’ll be able to have visitors soon.”

“Awesome.”

Marc knew the boys would miss each other, but things were going to change for Zack’s family. It had already started. Cathy would help keep Timmy occupied and Eric would be put with Zack full time to improve their relationship and help shape the oldest son, who should be eager to resume Eagle training. Safe Haven’s future generations might not be rough, but this first crew was. All these weeds had to be carefully tended so they didn’t smother the flowers.

Marc didn’t like using females and breeding in these plans, but he’d agreed little else would do it. The need to be loved could overcome a lot of flaws. It was their second chance. Being young didn’t absolve them of mistakes. Those still had to be fixed and atoned for. Mike had a short list, so he had been separated from his family in hopes that his better side would win. He would still get visits and bonding time, but not a lot of it until the brothers showed signs of moral improvement. “Did you like your quiet job?”

Mike nodded. “Can I keep doing it?”

“Absolutely. Take a two-day break; visit with your brothers and your dad. After that, you won’t see much of them for a while.”

Mike surprised Marc. “Good. I want a different future.”

“Excellent. I’ll give that to you, in time.”

“I want it.” Mike stood, sensing Marc was done. “I’m going to find Emma a tray. You want a meal?”

Marc grunted. “That would be great. Thanks.”

Mike smiled. His mouth opened...

“Get off me!”

Jennifer’s shout brought Marc from the chair. He jumped over the wolf in the doorway and plowed into the infirmary, ready to kill whoever was bothering one of his herd.

Jennifer glared at Morgan. “Touch me again. I dare you.”

Marc relaxed, figuring it out. Jennifer wanted to get up. Morgan and Kyle had told her no. *We see who won that one. She’s the enforcer. No one will force her, on anything, ever again.* Marc smiled as she noticed him. “Welcome back.”

Jennifer pushed onto wobbly legs, glowering. “What’s this shit about you giving my XO position to Debra and Kenn?”

Marc chuckled. “She’s definitely recovering.”

Jennifer gave Kyle a baleful glare. “And why were there no good moments? I’ve been on my back in a bed for weeks and not one orgasm! Would it have killed you to hook me up?”

Marc held his stomach while he chuckled. Many of the others in the sickbay were in the same condition.

Jennifer stilled suddenly, halting the amusement.

Kyle dropped to his knees by her, ready to catch her if she fell.

Everyone watched, terrified of what she would say.

Lightning flashed over the ship. A dark sky rolled toward them with ominous clouds.

Jennifer’s eyes turned red. Her voice blended into the double timbre of her witch. “The battle for the weigh station has begun.”

Marc was certain she was right. “God, help us.”

There was still no answer.

Chapter Thirty

**I Must Be In Hell**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“S**he went up without me!” William stood, rage surging. “She said we would ascend together!”

Only a few of the people on the beach around him glanced up. They’d adjusted to his mood swings. The refugees were sprawled at campsites and fires in a wide, smelly, trash circle around William. They were waiting for him to tell them what to do.

Nearby, a grungy man in sandals strummed his guitar.

*A light in the darkness*

*Safe Haven once stood*

*Sheltering survivors*

*And serving the good*

*A place of safety*

*In a harsh new life*

*Honor and duty*

*Among the despair and the strife*

*Blazing a path of hope*

*Safe Haven Refugee camp came this way*

*Arriving for many*

*In time to be the saving ray*

*And then they were gone, vanished*

*Leaving only traces...*

Dina enjoyed the guitar player’s new composition, scanning the refugees around them. She counted roughly a hundred. *I wonder if William knows he has an army here.*

William knew. He hated them for it. His one link to them, the kids on the beach, was fading as their parents sat and waited for rescue. They weren’t willing to help themselves. The beach was suffering from nature and the ocean, as well as the wind and the refugees. It looked and felt nothing like it had when Safe Haven was here. William hadn’t understood how Angela could be okay with leaving people behind, but he did now.

William staggered toward the shore, filthy and unshaven. “She went without me...”

The musician stopped playing, picking up a more dangerous vibe than what they’d been living under for the last weeks. He slowly stored his guitar in the bag that never left his waist. The need to run grew, but he was in clear view.

The musician knelt by his small fire and began burying himself in the sand while praying William didn’t turn around until he was covered.

“She said we would rule together!” William tossed his bottle into the ocean. “She lied!”

His roar finally caught attention. People began grabbing their things or walking away. They all knew not to run.

William’s attention was still caught by the movement. His lids narrowed. “She did it for you. She knew I’d never protect you the way she will.”

Families moved behind their children, certain William wouldn’t hurt them.

“You’re using them against me?!” William’s rage took over the rest of his brain.

Albert dove into his family, knocking them to the ground. He covered them as much as he could, hoping they were spared.

Insane anger flew out of William’s chest, striking the nearest people.

Lorna and her parents burned in the first blast.

The refugees panicked, fleeing.

William opened fire on them all.

The guitar player, now buried in the bloody sand, cried silent tears and waited for it to be over.

**2**

“Come on!” Donna dragged Brandon toward the rotten mill creek. “Get in the water.”

Brandon didn’t resist. He was still tracking the screams and magic use on his grid. They’d been overseeing the new garbage dump as the first loads were brought in. The familiar magic signature had slammed into the walls around Ciemus and interrupted everything. William was now the biggest threat on American soil.

Donna shoved Brandon into the water and blasted the nasty liquid in desperation. “Please! We need a new deal!”

Brandon held his breath as the water came up even though he knew it wouldn’t drown them.

The water rose quickly. Brandon realized the ground was lower here, that Donna had brought them to the place where it would rise fastest. *If she’s this scared, we need more than a deal with water.*

Donna’s people observed in fear, hoping she got the spell done before William’s rage turned in their direction.

William’s mental eye swiveled toward home, to the place he’d been told to leave while another man took over his duties and his life.

“My honor.” Donna cut her hand, letting the blood merge with the water as it rose over her chest.

Brandon did the same when she gestured, amazed and afraid. William had killed almost everyone on the beach. His next target was being chosen.

The water enveloped them.

Donna ignored her hat as it was stolen by the water and the curls fading into wet strands against her pale cheeks. *I can’t believe he’s gone that far. I should have tried harder to help him.*

The Ocean King rippled through the waves. “What do you seek?”

Brandon gaped. He knew not to speak, but he stored every second for later examination.

“A new name must be added to the list.”

“Speak it.”

“As Mayor, I banish William Sinclair from our haven.”

“It is done.” The water began to recede.

Magic flashed out, surrounding the town. William would never be allowed to enter Ciemus again. Donna’s heart ached.

Brandon wasn’t sure this was enough. “What happens if he comes here?”

“Old magic will consume him. We’re safe.”

Brandon didn’t ask for how long. He already knew. Ciemus would be destroyed as soon as William managed to make a deal with the ocean.

“He can’t.” Donna let Brandon help her toward her office so she could get changed. “Angela told me that was going to be part of her deal. The ocean only gets her lifeforce if William is blacklisted from making deals.”

“Will it work?”

Donna shivered as the wind picked up. “Until Safe Haven returns. After, there’s only darkness.”

“I loathe that answer.”

“Me too.” She let go of his arm and left him standing at the bottom entrance.

Brandon watched her, heart thumping. He wanted Donna. He just hadn’t decided if he was going to do anything about it.

Donna stopped. She turned on the stairs, heart hurting. “Drink with me?”

Brandon lifted a brow. “Drink or...?”

Donna shrugged.

Brandon went up the stairs.

In the distance, William’s rage roared unchecked.

**3**

“There she goes!”

“Get her!”

Slavers chased the fleeing SUV, bouncing between trees and over the rough Georgia terrain. Animals flew from their dens, leaving their young to fend for themselves. The slavers had been watching the apartment complex for days, waiting on the lone woman to make her move. Blondes were valuable.

Nancy spun into a gravel lot and aimed for the rear field, hoping her smaller vehicle would be able to get through where their bigger trucks couldn’t. She’d left the complex at exactly the wrong time and drawn the attention of a small scout team rolling by. She had ducked back in and hidden, but they waited her out.

She rammed the weak fence, sending pieces of metal flying. Gear flew loose from her tied down tarp and smacked into the ground, shattering the contents. *Should have done a better job there*. Nancy spotted two paths ahead. One led to the crammed highway. The other was unknown.

She took the rougher mystery road, praying for a miracle as one of the trucks neared her bumper.

Nancy gunned the gas. “Come on!”

The bigger truck slammed into her rear panel. The pit sent her spinning into a slushy drift. Snow flew up from the tires as she fought for control.

The bigger truck pitted her again, harder.

The wheel spun out of her grip. Her truck smacked into a guardrail and came to an abrupt stop.

Lightning flashed. Thunder cracked. The sky opened up, drenching the land.

Nancy fired at the boots coming to her door. Upside down, it was a beautiful shot.

The man screamed, falling.

The other door was ripped open.

Nancy fired into the man’s face.

Hands grabbed her other arm and dragged her from the truck.

*Adrian!*

There was no answer.

**4**

“Faster!”

David tried to coax more speed from the armored car, but it was built for endurance.

“It’s falling!” Patricia held onto her kids in the rear as the ground behind them rumbled and split. The earthquake was still shaking, but they couldn’t stop or the crack would swallow them.

Lance watched the road. “Left!”

David veered around another opening crack, heart pounding. He hit the gas again to take the next curve in the winding road. The armored car slid on a layer of fresh ash, moving toward the new crack.

Another tremor rattled the ground.

The armored car hit a chunk of debris and regained traction.

David took the first clear turn and got them away from the rifts opening in the ground. He took them west, hoping the voice in his mind was right about it being the safest place for this family now that Angela was dead.

“She ascended.” Lance ignored his wife’s glare. “There’s a difference.”

“He doesn’t need to know.” Patricia sniffed, nose rising. “He’s Invisible, by choice.”

David was eager for a distraction to keep his mind from dwelling on their near miss with death. “Why do you hate your own kind?”

Patricia glared. “You’re not our kind.”

“I meant Angela and Adrian.”

Patricia’s lips clamped together.

Lance was grateful for all David was doing for them. “We don’t know the female leader. The male leader is a Mitchel.”

David frowned. “I know.”

Lance kept an eye on the rough ground. “Pat’s family knew them too. They grew up together.”

David slowed to keep from wasting fuel. “That doesn’t explain the animosity.”

“Her sister–”

“Stop!”

Lance patted his wife’s tense wrist. “He needs to know.”

“Why?!”

“So he can keep them away from us.”

Patricia accepted that answer. She gave a curt nod.

Lance turned back to David. “Her sister was killed by a Mitchel. The same man raped Patricia and gave us two beautiful children to love.”

David was stunned. “Was it Adrian?”

Neither of them answered.

**5**

“She’s dead! Safe Haven’s leader is dead!” Sally danced around the counter of the general store in middle Kansas, uncaring that the locals were eying her in fear or annoyance.

Her weekly trip in provided the dying town with fresh revenue. It was the reason they tolerated her odd behavior. The rest of the town was quiet and helpful. Sally didn’t fit in here.

“I knew they wouldn’t make it! They dropped me off here, but I’m safe when she’s dead!”

One of her wolf pups grabbed the end of a tablecloth and tugged, spilling a stack of blankets.

“Get those animals out of here!” The shop owner didn’t like dogs or wolves, and the woman was traveling with both.

Sally thought of protesting, but she reconsidered when she saw the man’s big hand go toward the shotgun on the counter. She whistled. “Let’s go.”

Sally trotted to the exit, basket in hand. Her dogs and wolf pups followed.

The locals watched her go. The oldest among them, Tia, walked to the window to keep observing. Despite the crazy behavior, Tia knew a sly character when she met one.

“Do you want us to follow her?”

Tia grunted at her granddaughter’s question. “Make sure we know where she’s staying.” Tia saw lightning flashing in the distance; the sky roiled with black and yellow clouds. “Storm’s coming–a big one. Don’t get caught in it. Strange things come out of the water now.”

“Do you think she’s right?” The store owner shook out the blankets one by one and refolded them. “Is Safe Haven really gone?”

Tia sighed. “No. We’re not that lucky.”

The owner grunted. “Luck is for magic users.”

Tia patted her guns. “So are these.”

**6**

A mile from the tiny town where Sally had chosen to homestead in a church, a hole in the ground began to widen. The dirt fell in as a rusty, squealing hatch opened. A helmet appeared, then a wary face and lean body in full armor.

The man scanned in every direction before holding up a small box. He checked the reading when it beeped, then waved. “We’re clear. Bring them up.” He stepped out to make room and stand guard.

Soldiers began emerging from the bunker, some of them seeing daylight for the first time in a year.

Four dozen soldiers lined up and waited for orders as the hatch closed and locked from the inside. This tunnel system was one of hundreds crossing under the country. Few people not in government work knew they existed. Much like rogue waves had to be filmed to be believed, underground tunnels in America had existed for decades without proof of them.

“Our orders are simple for this first scavenging run. We’re going to take over the nearest town, strip it of resources and any able-bodied males. We’re using knockout darts. Do not kill the locals. We need them.”

“What about me?” Paul didn’t know what Rankin expected.

“Do your tests and try to stay out of the way.” Regan knew not to interfere with orders. That didn’t mean he had to be nice to the boss’s weak son. Regan motioned toward the distant shadows of buildings through moldy trees. “Let’s get this town cleared and get back. Boss said we have twelve hours. We’re going to do it in half that.”

“Why?” Paul hated it belowground. “There’s a lot out here to study.”

Rankin shoved Paul out of the way. “Shut up, Rabbit. Corbin might be your father, but you’re useless. Follow my orders or you won’t make it back.”

Paul dropped his head. He had read the signs too well. Now that Safe Haven was gone, the government was free to come back up. *If they’re really gone... Mitchels are hard to kill. Everyone knows that. Why doesn’t my father?*

**7**

*I’m a Mitchel. We’re hard to kill.*

“I’ll come for you now.” Billy tossed in his sleeping bag, mutters filling the elevator of the parking garage in Nucla, Colorado.

*Stay on your mission.*

Billy’s dream changed to a field of corn around an evil house.

*“In here!” Billy slammed the door shut behind Edward and fired through the filthy screen, hitting the wolf about to come straight through the flimsy mesh. He fired again, wounding the second snarling wolf.*

*The other animals turned tail toward the cover of the corn.*

*“I think we’re okay for a minute,” Billy gasped, trying to control his breath as he reloaded.*

*“Um, Bill?”*

*Edward’s tone increased the speed of Billy’s fingers.*

*Edward grimaced as the wolf snarled, tensing for the leap. He was too close for a straight aim. He dropped to his knees and he fired.*

*Billy’s shot went through the wolf’s eye.*

*Edward’s tore its throat open.*

*Blood rained onto the wooden slats like a flood.*

*Edward shoved the gory carcass off his legs and joined Billy at the door. “I’m starting to get the feeling we’re not wanted here,” Billy cracked.*

*“You too, huh?” Edward grinned, preparing to kick the door open while Billy covered him. “I thought it was just me they didn’t like.”*

*Billy nodded once, indicating he was set.*

*Edward used his strength to kick with, shattering the lock on the door. It banged against the frame with a thick crack, then slowly swung back in a haunted screech that echoed to all corners of the huge house.*

*Edward sighed. “So much for not knowing exactly where we are.”*

*Billy shrugged, stepping into the old kitchen. “Won’t matter in the end.”*

*“No.” Edward covered Billy as he moved farther into the wide room. “No, it won’t.”*

Thunder rolled; the wind howled.

Billy snapped awake from the dream, shivering. *So vivid! I can’t wait to be living that life.*

The storm raged around his shelter, but he wasn’t concerned. If it fell and he died, that was fate. If it held, he would continue on. That was also fate.

Billy listened, drawing his knife. Something slithered.

*Thud*! His blade sank into the snake that had escaped its bucket prison while he slept.

Debris hit the garage, rattling the walls. Billy ignored it in favor of securing his dinner. The beans had been soaking for half a day now. He flipped on his lantern and scanned his 10’ x 10’ den. The snake had been in here when he arrived–a free meal.

Billy cleaned the snake and put the meat into the pot on top of his dead fire. He cleaned up the mess and lit the tinder, then uncovered the dented corner he’d kicked out to allow smoke an escape. During the storm was a perfect time to cook a big meal that he could eat off of for days. His survival skills had sharpened to a fine point while he’d been on his own.

“Alexa?”

No answer.

Billy hated it that she only came to him in his dreams. He also loved it. In that realm, he could tell her anything and he did. They had few secrets left and they hadn’t even met.

“She’s in trouble.” Billy wanted to go straight to her. He was reasonably sure he’d pinpointed her location by details in the background and words she used. It would take months to reach Hawaii, but he could do it. She’d told him no every time he begged her. Billy didn’t understand why his job was more important than her freedom, but he didn’t argue, only begged. She’d refused to relent, so he was still in middle America, hunting soldiers.

Billy scanned the feel of the land around him. He didn’t need to see it to read it.

When he was satisfied that he was still alone, Billy turned on his small radio.

Haunting tones came out of the box.

Billy sang, cooked, sewed, and longed to be with his own kind.

**8**

**The Weigh Station**

“What have you done?!” The Messenger sank to his knees inside the layered shields over him and the group of kids. He was in the center, being held captive by bloody, angry children slobbering for more justice.

Angela absorbed a final blast from Azeez, then sent it right back, with her hatred.

He screamed, burning alive.

Teus, the only surviving level one angel, fled through the cloud wall.

“Mark that spot!” Angela kept an eye on it herself until Doug limped over and smeared his bloody hand down the cloudy surface.

The chess room of the weigh station had been completely destroyed. Smoldering boards and tables littered the ground. Even Earth’s board had been erased. Angela had done that one herself, and with gladness. Even if her replacements returned to betting, their planet wouldn’t be a target.

“What now?” Pam joined Angela. She was glad to be here, despite the ugly chore. They’d arrived together and instantly started fighting. Some of it had been with magic, but most of it had been Eagle training and pure adrenaline at being brought into the middle of a vicious battle. The level ones up here had been prepared to defend the weigh station, but not against enforcers. They’d been helpless to avoid the locks on their magic.

Daryl helped Erika to her feet, then went to check on Donald, who had taken several hits. Without power, he’d been an energy source during the fight and protected by the kids.

Donald took the bloody hand up, dazed but willing. This enemy hadn’t been easy to kill. He grabbed his knife, gun empty. “Next?”

“You’re the supervisor.” Angela pointed at the kids, then the Messenger. “Kill him. Seventeen thousand, five hundred times. Save his last six lives for my interrogation.”

The Messenger screamed as it began.

Donald went to supervise, not feeling guilt. He’d seen the replay of Angela’s first meeting up here and felt the lack of empathy for those they’d destroyed through their bets. To get answers, this had to happen.

Angela walked through the carnage, counting her survivors. She’d come with a group big enough to overwhelm each area, but she’d also brought two young enforcers who’d been eager to use their gifts. Angela motioned them over from their places on duty at the entrance.

Heather and Robbie ran to her side, each taking her hand.

Angela sent warmth to them both. “You’ve done well. I know it was hard for you. Are you sure you want to keep going?”

Both children nodded.

They were splattered in blood, but they’d never felt more innocent to Angela. “Take a few of his lives to strengthen yourselves. Remember to never let the layer over him go below ten shields.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

The children ran to join the circle around the Messenger.

“Let us in!”

“One at a time.”

The enforcers slid between the layers.

Fresh shrieks pierced the smoky air.

Near the entrance, Doug put an arm around Claire and the other around Romeo, refusing to think about anything until it was all over.

Claire huddled under his big arm and stewed on what it all meant.

Romeo watched the descendant children and wished he was like them.

So did Ginny. She edged over to Romeo, the only other child who wasn’t attacking the horned man in the center of the circle.

Romeo smiled at her. “You’re like me?”

Ginny nodded. “I think so.” She frowned. “Were you sick?”

Romeo nodded, smile fading. “I was supposed to die.”

Doug groaned.

“Me too.” Ginny rotated to stare at Angela in adoration. “She saved me.”

“She saved all of us.” Pam was copying Angela, who was now walking the small battlefield to check on the survivors and verify the dead. “We were all dying.”

Doug sucked in air. “We can’t return...can we?”

Pam slowly shook her head. “I don’t think so, but we’ll be together up here, right?”

Doug nodded, tears welling. “I didn’t want to die yet.”

Pam laughed so she didn’t cry too. “We can’t ever die now, Doug. Think about it. You get to be with your adopted son and some of your friends, forever.” Her eyes shined. “That’s heaven, right?”

Doug’s mind began working it through.

Pam moved on, needing to be useful. Her heart was broken that neither of her mates were here and at the same time, she was elated. *They get to live. That’s all I wanted.*

Angela finished her circle of the trashed room, ending with Brittani. She knelt in front of the bloody, shocked woman. “Are you okay?”

Brittani looked up, tears in her eyes. “I’m not worthy of this. I shouldn’t be here.”

Angela brushed Brittani’s bloody curls back from her face. “None of us are.” She held out a hand.

Brittani took it, letting Angela pull her to her feet.

Angela gave the woman a short, hard hug. “Stay with me now.”

Brittani zeroed in on Angela’s hip and stuck herself there.

Louder screams echoed.

Voices muttered from the other areas.

Angela waved to those not handling the Messenger. “I can’t give the other angels time to regroup. We have to go now.” Angela scanned the dazed, bloody faces of her army as they surrounded her.

Pam, Daryl, Brittani, Donald, Doug, Erika, and Elijah came over right away.

Claire and Ray were slower. Neither of them wanted to repeat their behavior, but they didn’t feel they could refuse either.

“I need two killers.”

A dozen young, eager faces whipped toward her.

Angela pointed at Ray, then Claire. “Take their place and take your turn with the Messenger or die like you were meant to. This is the only choice I can offer.” She pointed at the trapped Messenger, who had just reappeared. “It’s his fault it has to be this way. He won’t tell us the truth. When we get to his last lives, we get answers.”

Ray hardened his heart. “How long will this take?”

Angela sighed. “Ten days of 24-hour work if he continues to reappear at the same rate.”

Ray spun toward the Messenger as Brea took his place.

Claire began to sob. “I don’t want to be here! Send me back to die. This is wrong.”

Angela looked at Doug, who was staring at Claire in pain but not trying to talk her out of it. *She wasn’t his match either. Damn it!*

“Please?” Claire was starting to go crazy. “I’m dead. No, I’m in heaven, killing angels. I’m dead! There is no heaven. I must be in hell.”

Angela waved a hand.

Claire’s body fell through the cloud floor. There was no noise.

“Anyone else?” Angela waited, hoping the rest of her choices were good.

“Maybe.” Wade approached Angela, hands on empty guns. “Is there a reward at the end of this? Like a wish where we get to go back and live?”

“That has not been revealed. I fight because it’s right. I chose you because you were going to die anyway and it will hurt me to lose you, any of you. This was the only way I could help.” Angela tried not to cry. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do better.”

“Will we get to see our loved ones again. When they die?” Ray had to know he’d get a chance to say goodbye to Grant at some point.

The kids paused in killing to hear her answer.

Angela nodded. “When their time comes, I’ll evaluate them first for these rooms–my word on it.”

“You’re not staying.” Wade shrugged. “I guess I knew that. You recovered from the sickness.”

Angela frowned distractedly. “How do you know that?”

“I heard you, while I was under, helping people, begging fate to leave us alone. I know you tried.” Wade patted his gun. “So how do we get more ammo?”

“Ask for it.” Angela waited, not certain about this part.

Wade cleared his throat. “Can I have more ammo?”

Nothing happened.

He frowned. “Okay... More specific. Can I have three mags of ammunition...for my .45? Please?”

Weight sank into his pockets. Wade grinned, pulling out a mag. “Awesome!”

Around him, others began doing the same.

Angela considered what they’d just learned and pushed it. “Can I have a gun that never runs out of bullets?”

Nothing happened.

Angela looked at Wade.

Wade grinned. “More specific, maybe?”

Angela thought about it. “Okay. Can I have a 9mm that never needs to be reloaded?”

Weight sank into her backpack.

Angela hurried to retrieve it, excited by the possibilities. She pulled out an exact copy of the weapon she had now. Angela switched them and put the backpack over her shoulder. She also listened for people to make unreasonable requests and was pleased when they didn’t.

“It won’t refill me.” Ray held up his empty gun. “None of it works for me.”

Angela looked around. “Does anyone have something they didn’t ask for?”

Doug sighed. “I do.” The weight of the fresh mags had settled into his pocket and his heart.

“Switch out.” Angela had a horrible idea of what that meant. Doug really couldn’t go back. He’d been chosen to stay, like everyone else about to march back into the fire upon her command. Angela hated that feeling. She straightened her shoulders. *It’s my army. When I leave, I’ll take who I want, and the rules be damned.*

Doug had to ask. “What happens to Safe Haven if we lose?”

“It will cease to exist.” Angela walked to the blood-marked path in the cloud wall. “Surrender now and receive my mercy!”

Panic came from the other side of the wall, but there was no call of surrender.

Angela put a hand on the bloody print. “These rooms are mine by birthright. Let me pass.”

The clouds parted, revealing the first dim tunnel. Angela marched into the dirty space.

Her shocked army followed.

Chapter Thirty-One

**Nightly Notes**

**A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated**

**Day 1**

**T**hese are my nightly notes. Am I doing this right? Who the hell knows? It looks like the ones in your books, so hopefully it will get you caught up when you return. And while I’m on that, thank you for this job, Angie. It truly sucks.

Illness

1 death–Claire.

Camp

Are going nuts. They know you’re gone and it’s getting ugly. As soon as I finish this red tape, I’ll spend the night with them instead of you. That also sucks. I hope you can feed from my aggravation.

Location

We’re making ten miles a day. I told Theo to slow it to eight. I know you said ten days at the most, but it feels like we should cover a few extra.

Supplies

We’re on the third batch of water now. Tests are good since we upped the bleach dosage like Tonya suggested. The fountains are okay now, but we’re all avoiding them anyway.

Food is holding steady. Gus has the kitchen running like a well-oiled machine and the meals are rather good. Brittani hasn’t been back there yet.

Medicines are low, I’m sure. I’m doing inventory tomorrow on that.

Security

Prisoners are fine. I assigned Stanley to help there. He and Ramer are friends. Hope it helps. I recommend banishment if he backslides. Our new guest, McClery, hasn’t been trouble so far. He also isn’t saying much now, which is good. None of the guards are in the mood for tricks.

Mike picked up a lot of calls from home when you ascended. Several were for help. A descendant is killing refugees, just because they survived. The rest of the calls were celebrations of your death. Sick bastards.

This was indeed a clever plan, Angie. McClery confirmed what we assumed. The UN had a time set from the moment we dropped anchor. While we were attacked by the first scavengers, boats came through the fog behind us and boarded both ships. They knew it would take at least two hours for our engines to cool down before we could refuel. Once they saw the fuel being loaded, that was their cue to act. They had that first two hours to get into place. At the two-hour mark, the people on land were supposed to make contact and distract us so their waiting teams could engage.

I’ve been watching the radar. So far, no followers or contact. Kendle did her job.

DOC

I added our confirmation to the book. The time is limited to just days for a visit unless the host invites them to stay. Then they lose their wings, which means they are mortal. Kronus stayed down here too long. I hope that isn’t a yin and yang thing because you’ll be up there longer than he was down here. Be safe, love.

Other

Adrian isn’t handling this well. His thoughts are sliding into revenge, like you predicted. I’m sticking to our plan, but I don’t think it will hold until you return.

**Day 2**

Illness

2 deaths–Leo, Cris

We’re low on all medications related to this illness. Morgan put together a list of needs. We’re searching for substitutes.

Camp

We told the camp everything. I made Adrian come in and support it. There was a little talk of going back to America, but people with sick family shut it down fast. They decided to wait for your return to make that choice. You were right–they’re still too gullible. We’ll work on it. In the future, no one will be able to do this to them again.

Location

We’ve come another ten miles instead of eight. Theo and his new crew are working on it. The tide was faster in places and dragged us along. I had no idea that would happen. I’m definitely not a Navy man.

Supplies

Water is good for now. We’re cleaning batches around the clock. Almost everything we had in reserve is gone.

Food is still holding steady on your predicted numbers. We had problems with ants, though. We sanitized the kitchen and put down bait in the corners. Some people think they came in on the wind, others think they were already here. Either way, the tiny monsters have to go. They don’t have mutations and they’re not the wrong size, but they still annoy everyone and invade food stocks. Tonya threatened to kill me over it if anything happens to her cats. I told her as long as they’re not stupid enough to lick ant bait, they’re fine. She then called the two critters to her and escorted them to the kitchen. She gave them a lesson on avoiding the poison. I wanted to laugh, but... Anyway, we placed vent covers over them so the felines will leave it alone.

Security

Adrian is being shunned. The Eagles revoked his conditional banishment. I had nothing to do with it. Neil led that charge. I also didn’t ask why. I’m leaving that for you.

DOC

Angie, Kenn’s baby has animal gifts. According to William’s book, gifts come from the mother or the higher level parent. In this case, that’s Kenn. Which means he has an unlocked animal ability. That might be handy when we go home.

Other

So far, the only way I feel different is my hair going gray and my joints aching. How the hell have you stood the constant drain this long? Are you even human? I’ve never heard you complain about the physical part. I now suspect you are a robot with an amazing ass.

**Day 3**

Illness

2 more deaths–Joyce, Vanessa

Camp

The camp is tired of being stressed. I suggested they use the entertainment floors again and enjoy the amenities. It was shocking how fast they went for it. On a side note, Angie, I don’t like scheming and plotting any more now than I did before. That’s a good sign, right? Something kicked in this morning, but I can’t explain it yet. I’ll try later.

Location

Seven miles. The water was full of bodies in a debris field moving toward the ship today. We went around.

Supplies

The last batch of water we filtered tested high for radioactive particles again. We increased the bleach and put everyone back on water rations, so they won’t be absorbing so much chlorine. As soon as the levels lower, we’ll be back on full water. I made exceptions for entertainment areas to keep the camp happy. They know the risks. I made sure of it.

Security

Jayda went back to guarding the brig last night, by choice. I found her and Stanley singing this morning, while Ramer cried and the other prisoners covered their ears. I didn’t ask.

We drugged Adrian today. His constant pacing outside the infirmary was bad, but the muttering started disturbing the patients. He’s sleeping for the next four to six hours. I know you wanted him to stay away, but I’ll probably let him sit with you tomorrow. I can’t take the pacing either.

**Day 4**

Illness

0 deaths today!

1 improvement–Grant sat up and had broth this evening. It lifted the mood of camp to know not all coma patients will die. To be honest, it did the same for me. I never realized how a leader in this camp feels the emotions of everyone–good and bad. It’s a rollercoaster that only stops when I sleep.

Camp

The camp spent the night partying and remembering why they’re here. They had a good time. The noise covered the sound of the storm. What are you doing up there? Nature is furious. We’re being hit by all types of wind. Topside is forbidden.

Location

We anchored during the storm. We’re right where you and I estimated for this point.

Supplies

No change in water or food situation. We found two crates of medication. There wasn’t any Prussian Blue, but we found boxes of Potassium iodide. I sent one to the infirmary and locked up the other three.

Security

Adrian told the camp that Neil is a descendant. He wasn’t aiming at me, though it could have caused a lot of trouble. It was all against Neil. To my surprise, the camp already knew. Ralph said they’d decided Neil’s lies didn’t matter and then he floored me. He said Neil is on your council. If he thought Seth and Becky were a threat to you, he had a duty to remove them.

After that, I got drunk and passed out by your cot. I’m writing this with a hangover while Morgan tries to shove coffee into me. I don’t feel any different, but I am. Is this how isolating it was for you...?

I’m sorry.

**Day 5**

Illness

3 deaths today. Zane, Doris, Toby.

It’s one step forward and three steps back with this radiation sickness!

All the people you took had a sponge bath today and were given what little energy I had. Others helped–Kendle, Morgan, Kenn, Kyle. I didn’t tell them, but they know I’m worried.

Camp

The camp is enjoying the entertainments. No fights so far, but a lot of messes. The cleaning crew doesn’t mind. It’s better than shit and puke.

Location

We’re moving again. Two miles today. The wind settled down, but the sky is ugly, like right after the war. We’re not seeing birds or fish, but we’re not directly monitoring for them yet. I don’t have enough manpower. Even those who weren’t sick are busy in the infirmary or volunteering in shifts to patrol the ship. The camp loved that suggestion. It keeps them in the loop.

Supplies

We’re sorting through the cargo area now. I hope we’ll find more medical supplies. We’re still going through it faster than I can keep up.

Other

Burn boxes have started coming to our new cabin. I haven’t touched them yet. Not sure I can.

I miss you.

**Day 6**

Illness

0 deaths. I’m not getting my hopes up. Neither are the medics. Spencer and Maxine are in their final hours. There’s nothing I can do to stop it. Endless power and I’m still useless!

Camp

The camp is hungover every morning now. I put a limit on how many drinks and bottles can go out per hour, but I doubt it will help. We’ll have to do something about the effect of this, maybe. I thought letting them have a drink or two would help ease the tension. I didn’t think it would become a habit.

Location

Ten miles today. Back on course, but still too fast. We’re talking to Grant tomorrow on that. He’s better now, but he refuses to leave Ray.

Supplies

No change. We’re still sorting.

Security

James punched Zack, for no reason I was told. Then they shook hands. I got the feeling it was connected to Neil, so I didn’t push for details.

DOC

Adrian stopped pacing today. He’s on the rear of the ship now, drinking and talking to himself. We’re leaving him alone. The voices in his mind have kicked in fully, but his bond with you is driving him crazy.

Other

Tonya is still caring for Courtney. She’s not speaking to Kenn at all and he’s avoiding both females. Same with Gus and his women. Brittani’s parents visited her today. It was so sad that I cried with them while I was on the bridge, getting updates from Theo. That’s a powerful family. I guess you knew that when you took Brittani up there with you.

**Day 7**

Illness

2 deaths–Spencer, Maxine

Courtney didn’t lose the baby. We don’t know about effects yet, but the heartbeat is strong. We’re keeping her in the infirmary until she’s eating and doing things on her own. Tonya is still helping her. You can imagine how awkward that is, for both of them.

Camp

I cut off the drinking. We had two fights and a theft, along with property damage. I used my alpha wave. I scared them into doing what’s right. And the Eagles rewarded me with a nightcap. I don’t understand anything anymore.

Location

Eight miles. We finally nailed the speed! Okay, Grant was able to tell us how to calculate it, but still, it was a great moment.

Supplies

Tonya figured out we can make Prussian Blue, but I didn’t get the exact details on it. She said they brought bottles of unmixed ferric hexacyanoferrate from the cargo hold, so we’re back to being okay on those meds for a bit. Unless we have another outbreak. Man, I hope we don’t have to do this again. I’ll carry the pain of not being able to help them until I’m a dirty old man who can only think bad thoughts because he’s so used up. You’ll sit on my lap, right?

Security

Mike isn’t getting any radio calls now. We don’t know if it’s because home went quiet, or if we’re just out of range. I want to believe in the simplest answer, but the power signatures from the byzan are still coming through clear. He’s calling our kind now, calling them and killing them.

Other

Tonya asked permission to test camp people for radiation sickness whenever they come to her for something. I agreed and signed the paper in the folder to make it an official order. Tonya may have spotted something in Kendle’s blood that identifies the rage illness. She’s working on a way to test for it. There was also a form in the folder allowing her to test for other illnesses without permission. I signed it. ...was that right?

**Day 8**

Illness

0 deaths.

3 improvements:

James. His infection is finally responding.

Brittani. Her gunshot wound is also improving now, though she’s still unconscious, as you know. We switched meds for her, and the stronger antibiotic was effective, so we’re using it on all of them.

Ivan is walking and showering on his own. He’s the only one from our deck, other than us, who has recovered so far.

Camp

The camp cleaned their cabins and hallways today. I’m still in shock. I asked Ralph whose idea it was. He swears it was spontaneous after Candy was brought to the camp area. Her labor stopped. Adrian volunteered to look after her. I refused because he would have been in the living quarters too much. I gave Tracy the job. Those two seem to get along pretty well now.

The kids were also brought up to the camp cabins, except for ours. They’re in our cabin with Molly and Daisey. Those twins are funny. They don’t like any man but me. Even Kyle got peed on when he came to give me updates.

Location

We’re anchored again for another storm. We did see a bird in the mix, but Theo isn’t sure if it was alive.

Supplies

The cargo area is half sorted. Camp members have volunteered. So have Eagles who can’t stand to be in the infirmary anymore. I’ll have better numbers in a couple more days.

Security

McClery hanged himself overnight. I changed the rules on what prisoners go through when they’re brought in. From now on, it will be just like before the war, where we take everything, including their belts. I guess you know how bad that makes me feel. It also hurt Jayda. She was blaming herself. Kenn talked to her a little while ago. She seemed better after he left.

DOC

I had the nightly meeting with the kids and camp together. It went okay. I’ll be glad when you’re back to help me with the topics. I chose a short story about being a good Samaritan, but I wish I’d picked the longer one about having faith when the lights go out. It would have helped me.

Other

A few people have asked about training classes for descendants and Eagles. They already assume it has to be separate. A few have also requested we not use magic in front of them. You were right. It’s coming, and soon.

**Day 9**

Illness

Kayla and Cecilia died overnight. Every time we get hope, it’s crushed. Do your own damn report!

**Day 9**

I’m doing this on day 10, at 5am. I couldn’t sleep. I’m sorry, baby. I now understand what you were going through. Every death kills a part of me, and I don’t even like some of these people! Please come home tomorrow. I can’t do this.

Camp

Ralph is so much more than what Adrian had him doing. He’s able to get people to work together and that is a gift. The living area has been refitted to give more space and comforts. It now has a small medical wing so patients in the recovery stage can still be with their friends and family. Ivan wants to go. So does Tommy. I told them tomorrow will tell, but Ivan’s going to leave on his own even if Morgan says no. As soon as he woke and found you there, he started getting better at a rapid rate. I think he’s willing himself well so he can have an official shift over you. I admire that type of strength.

I also want him gone, Angie. I guess you know that.

Location

We did twenty miles today to avoid another debris field. The tide caught us and saved fuel, but we’re ahead of schedule. Tomorrow, we’ll probably drop anchor for half a day to get back on time.

Supplies

No change. The sorting slowed a little yesterday. We found a box of photos and got lost in grieving.

Security

Kenn and Debra are good together. They cover the days, and I have the nights with the camp and the kids. I chose a cabin in their area as a temporary spot while you recover, but I might want to stay there. When they’re all sleeping, it feels good. I assume that’s a side effect of being this new man... It’s odd. I need them so much! I hope they never find out how easily I can be killed now. All it would take is their rejection.

DOC

You were right about Tonya’s connection to the ship. I’m studying it. So is Kenn and a few others. We don’t understand much yet, but I assume you’ll fill us in after you get back. That should have been today...

**Day 10**

Illness

No deaths.

All radiation patients are showing improvement except for the names you left, the people you took. The death rate was so high! We have them on IVs, but they’re wasting away. Please don’t be gone much longer. We all need you, even if death does ride us because you survive.

Camp

People are leaving things at the door to the burning room. I’m sorry they know, but I’m also glad we don’t have to keep trying to hide it. I’ve instructed Theo to start on something for a memorial. He said he has ideas.

Location

We’re anchored, waiting. Day ten is over as I write this...

Supplies

Cargo area has been sorted. Organization will come next.

Security

It looks like the UN didn’t know exactly where we’d go, so they tried to cover it all. We’re staying out of sight of land, and out of range of descendant scans. Unless they’ve got a byzan, they don’t know we’re not captives.

DOC

I copied a gift. I feel so...inhuman. You have to come back. You hear me?! I can’t be this, alone. I need you.

Other

We refueled today, using the cargo reserve. We can do that twice more and then we won’t have enough fuel to get home in this ship. I’m searching for another fuel station we can use. So far, there are too many traps waiting for us.

While we were stopped, we changed out the towline. That was ugly. If you want to laugh, have Theo replay it for you. I’ve never seen one man fall that many times in the oil we spilled trying to get it loose.

**Day 11**

Illness

No change.

Camp

No change.

Location

No change.

Supplies

Blah blah.

Other

Where are you, baby?

Marc looked up as the office door opened.

Cathy came in with Leeann over her shoulder. The recovering little girl appeared to be asleep.

“What’s going on?”

Cathy wasn’t sure what to do. “She tried to leave again. I had Morgan sedate her.”

Marc sighed, standing. *I already hate this part of the job.* He waved a hand, casting two spells at once.

Leeann didn’t respond.

Marc hadn’t expected her to. “That’s it.”

Cathy was surprised it was that simple. She’d expected it to take longer at least. Cathy shifted the girl higher onto her shoulder. “What do we do now?”

Marc shrugged. “We go back to forgetting Billy was ever a part of Safe Haven. He’s the only one who can trigger her memory.”

“What about talk?” Cathy marveled at being able to stand and chat while holding the girl. She was in great shape, thanks to this camp and the constant struggle to survive. “Someone is bound to mention it eventually.”

“Not for a while. No one feels like chatting about past traitors when death is hovering over their shoulder.”

“What about after?” It was her way of asking if they were going to survive this, if they had an after.

“We’ll put her with Conner and the animals.”

Cathy frowned. “Why?”

“Because Zack’s son, Mike, is going to be there.”

“Matchmaking?”

Marc sighed. “More like a desperate attempt to change the future. Adrian warned me it can’t normally be done, but I’d give a lot to be able to change this one.”

“Is it so bad?” Cathy wondered if Marc had noticed her strength. Some of their Eagles couldn’t even do this. “If he waits until she’s older, they could be happy together. She loves him.”

“If she goes to him, it will end all chance of us winning the final battle.”

Cathy’s concern grew. “She’s that important?”

Marc shook his head. “Billy is. We can’t let her interfere with the job he’s doing in the west.”

“Even if it means removing her?”

“Yes.” Marc opened the notebook as Cathy left to take the girl back to the infirmary.

Other

I blocked Leeann’s memory tonight and locked her gifts. I hope it works. If not, you’ll have to remove that one. I just can’t. She’s too much like you.

Marc dropped the pen and put his head down on the desk. *Where are you? Are you coming back to us, to me? I’m sorry for all the times I wasn’t fair, the times I hurt you. Please come home and give me a chance to make it all better.*

Silence met his pleas.

Chapter Thirty-Two

**There’s No Avoiding Fate**

**A star in the middle of the night sky

Description automatically generated**

December 21st

**1**

**“C**ode blue!”

“Help!”

“Code blue!”

Shouts circled the infirmary as unconscious patients stopped breathing, at the same time.

In the office across the hall, Marc winced. *It’s over.*

He joined Adrian in the corridor, watching through the small window. “I’m afraid to go in.”

“Me too.” Adrian squared his shoulders. “If she didn’t come back, kill me.”

“Same.”

“Together?”

Marc hated himself for it, but he needed the support and only Adrian really understood how he felt at this moment. “Yes. One more time.”

Adrian and Marc stepped into hell together.

“Boss?” Morgan hurried to Angela as she blinked. Tears rolled over her cheeks in waves.

Morgan held her while she bawled, fighting the guilt as he and the other medics offered comfort instead of trying to revive people. Marc had made it clear that wouldn’t be possible this time.

“Help me!”

“Get over here!”

The other medics looked to Angela as people begged for assistance.

Angela kept crying. “I’m sorry. They’re gone. I’m sorry.”

Morgan rocked her, heart breaking.

Marc and Adrian stayed back, scanning for other survivors. Neither man moved yet or spoke, not sure if they could. Finding out she was alive was overwhelming. The last eleven days had been rough as the illness finished ravaging their sick people. They’d convinced themselves she wasn’t coming back; she would stay up there where no one would ever hound her again for sex, for love, for loyalty or anything else.

“A second chance.”

Marc nodded, bitter. “And we’ll screw it up again. Right?”

Adrian shrugged. “We are human. I’m not sure we can do anything else.”

Ray opened his eyes. The ceiling came into focus. He narrowed in on the tiny holes in the tile. *I’m back. How am I back?*

“...Ray?”

Ray turned his head, wincing at weak, sore neck muscles. “Yes?”

Grant collapsed by the cot, weeping.

Hope swept through the infirmary as people realized those who were still unconscious might have survived.

“Sammi?” Amy blinked. “Thirsty.”

Samantha stared at the little girl, shock taking over.

Neil eased by Marc and Adrian to help Samantha into a chair. Then he got the little girl a drink of water, smiling at her while ignoring those grieving for their dead. He felt bad for them, but right now, he was thrilled for Samantha.

Across the room, Daryl groped out for Brittani’s cold hand. “She wanted to stay up there.” His pain washed over the room.

Brittani gasped, chest arching. She sucked in air, unaware of people jumping and shouting in surprise.

Daryl clutched her, feeling warmth start running through her fingers. “How?”

Brittani groaned, pain sinking into her body as she woke the rest of the way. “Too many. She changed the required number per room.”

Daryl crawled from his cot and hugged her. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” She clutched him close, gasping in another lungful of beautiful air. “Love.”

“Same.”

“Nooo!” Panaji hugged Erika’s lifeless body.

Next to him, Tommy stared at Erika’s blue face. Blood trickled from her mouth onto Panaji’s arm. *I could have loved her.*

“Damn.” Tim gestured toward Donald. His arm hung from the cot; blood dripped from his nose. “We lost another one.”

Debra knelt by Doug and Romeo, feeling for a pulse.

She shook her head at Harry, who was now writing names on his clipboard.

*Damn it!* Adrian scanned the room. Five cots still needed to be checked. *Be alive. Be alive. All of you, be alive!*

Debra shook her head again. All four kids from the UN encounters were dead.

That only left Pam.

Over Angela’s shoulder, Morgan watched for signs of life in Pam’s blue skin. A blood drop rolled from her nose and slid down her cheek. *Please, God. Please.*

Debra slowly went to Pam’s cot, not getting a life vibe.

Morgan kept begging. *Please, God. Please. I’ll do anything you want.*

Debra knelt to feel for a pulse.

Silence fell between the cries and tears.

Debra drew in a breath.

So did Pam.

Debra lunged back, fighting the need to grab her gun.

Morgan flew to Pam, bumping into the cot. He grabbed her up. “Baby!”

Pam hugged him back, mostly to stop the squeezing. She gasped in air.

Morgan lowered her. “Sorry! Sorry! You’re back!”

Those who’d lost a loved one or friend glared bitterly at the couple. There wasn’t going to be a happy ending for them.

Marc sent energy into Angela, sliding into Morgan’s spot.

Angela accepted it, lids shutting. “No pain.”

Marc kissed the top of her gray head. “Fill up and sleep, baby. We are 5-by.”

Angela lost consciousness.

Adrian felt Marc’s need and scanned the room. *The boss wants an update on what happened. Is anyone able to give him a sitrep?*

“We won.” Ray struggled to sit up. “She replaced them all. Everyone not waking up is settling into those rooms. They’re not really gone.”

Greif paused as people listened.

“She didn’t want to do it, but they were going to die.” Ray paused, tears rolling down his cheeks. “After, she gave us the choice to come back or stay up there and be angels. We all asked to stay.”

“Why?” Grant didn’t understand.

Ray lifted a hand to touch Grant’s burnt cheek. “So we could protect you.” Ray stilled, head swimming.

Grant helped him lay back down.

Adrian relayed Marc’s orders. “We’ll get the rest of it later. Sleep, eat, have a shower if you think you can stand up. You’ve earned it.” Adrian turned toward Angela. *Now that the real boss is back, I can get my gifts unlocked. She’ll do it for me right now because she’s vulnerable from these new deaths.*

Jennifer lifted a hand and snatched Adrian’s demon. It ripped away from his soul with a scream of anguish.

The demon burst into the air above them, held only by a thin tether in Jennifer’s hand.

Adrian fell to his knees, hands outstretched. “Please!”

Jennifer looked at Marc.

Marc shook his head.

“He’s never going to change.”

Marc got Angela comfortable, aware of Adrian starting to cry. “I know.”

“Then why?”

“Safe Haven is a place of darkness and light, of honor and duty. It’s a refuge for survivors. It’s also a place of darkness and danger, where murder and magic go hand-in-hand. And it’s his creation. We owe him a debt. We also deserve justice. Neither of those balances can be settled if you do that now.”

Jennifer could have overruled him. As official camp enforcer, it was her final call, but Jennifer didn’t consider it. She trusted Marc. Jennifer let go, instead of burning Adrian’s demon.

Adrian sucked it in, eyes rolling back in his head. The instant he gained control of himself, Adrian fled the infirmary.

A few of the Eagles and survivors clapped. Marc had just put them first. Adrian could never match him now that Marc had accepted his destiny.

Marc straightened, sorry for his next order but eager for it to be over with. “Bodies will be transferred in half an hour.” Marc lifted his voice over the immediate protests. “In half an hour, the body crew will come. I’m sorry. We talked about this. I know you don’t want to hear it again.”

Marc waited as all of them glared or nodded in his direction. He understood the hostility. People would be sedated where needed and those who’d also lost someone to the sickness would try to help them. Marc didn’t think other people would understand enough to be a true shoulder to lean on. The same was true of those in this room. He expected these survivors to grow close. “We’re having a wake tomorrow, starting at noon, for everyone. We’ll gather on the deck after that to hold a funeral service.”

Marc felt bad about doing this now, but he pushed on with sympathy and regret in his tones. “None of us wanted things to work out this way. As soon as she’s ready, Angie plans to call a meeting. She wants a vote about going back to America.” Marc hoped that would distract them a little.

“Tell her no!” Ray shoved away Grant’s hand. “We lost a lot of people. It all means shit if we go back!”

“He’s right!”

“Erika wanted to see the island. We have to go, for her.”

Marc controlled his tears at the denials. “The boss loves you all. So do I.”

Bonding waves flew out, easing a little of the pain.

Marc frowned at Ivan as the man hurried into the infirmary. “Let her sleep.”

Ivan sank into the chair by Angela’s cot and took her hand.

Marc left them there, mind already racing ahead to the next items on his list. *This is how it was for Angie.* *No wonder she seemed like a cold bitch.* *These voices won’t leave me alone.* Marc saw Dog curled up in the corner across from the lab. He and Jeff were on duty, along with Neil, though Neil was still with Samantha and Amy. He hadn’t noticed that Marc was gone.

“Yes, I did.”

Marc spun around to find Neil a foot behind him. He snorted. “Nice trick.”

Neil shrugged, face impassive. “She gave me a job, and a promise. I won’t slack off, even for Samantha.”

Marc looked down as a hacking noise echoed.

The cats were cleaning Dog, and each other. Long licks cleared winter fur in large balls. One of the cats kept hacking, and finally regurgitated a hairball the size of a turd.

“Okay. Now that’s disgusting.” Neil gagged.

Dog snorted. *You have no idea*. He glanced at the cats. *You missed a spot.*

The cats went back to licking.

**2**

Marc held up a hand as anxious camp members rose and rushed toward him. They’d been playing cards and reading books, but that had all come to an end at his arrival.

“Is she back? Did Angie come back to us?” Ralph had been praying she would every morning.

Marc smiled. “Yes. She’ll need some recovery time, but she’s back. She said to tell you evening mess had better have chocolate of some kind.” Marc chuckled with the cooks, noticing Gus and Brittani’s parents seemed closer. They’d taken cabins next to each other.

Just moved from the infirmary, Brittani was in Daryl’s cabin now, but Gus hadn’t been in to visit her yet, that Marc knew of. The big shock was Trinity sitting by Brittani’s bedside, playing cards with her.

“I have a list of names. These people need to go to the corridor by the infirmary. Do not go in until they call you. Everyone is getting a shower and fed. You’ll need to be patient.” Marc moved aside so people could reach the doors, taking the paper from his pocket. As he called the names, Marc refused to think about the status of their friend or loved one. Not all those who left had returned. “You can also be topside today. Ralph will organize groups of fifty, for two hours at a time.”

The camp cheered. They’d been cooped inside the ship for weeks now.

“That’s all I have for you. I’ll be around if you need anything.”

People nodded at Marc or smiled at him. They liked his leadership. There was no doubt about his intentions.

A group of women came from the showers. They split up as they entered the cabin area. Jayda walked by Ivan’s cabin to reach her new quarters next to Gus and the other cooks.

“Hey!”

Jayda turned at Trinity’s call. “What?”

“We’ve got beer and poker chips. Get in here.”

Jayda slowly smiled, feet turning her around.

Marc enjoyed the moment, marveling at how their emotions were so vivid to him.

Gus was also glad the females were getting along, but it didn’t matter as much to him now. Gus eased through the main door and walked to the cargo area for his first private lesson with Kenn.

Marc noticed Allison entering the hall. Before he could return her stiff nod, Zack came from his cabin and went toward her. Marc waited with everyone else, expecting a nice scene between a new couple who had worked hard during the crisis.

“I can’t date you anymore. I’m sorry.”

Allison stiffened, lids narrowing. “What?”

Zack softened his tone. “We’re not good for each other right now. You know that.”

Allison hadn’t known this was coming, but she’d been dumped enough to guess why. “Too bossy or too feminist?”

“Neither, actually. I could have lived with those and given you time to adjust to this new life.”

“Then why?”

Zack tried to be kind. “My sons need me more than you do. When I get them settled, I might like to try again, if you’re single.”

Allison stared, realizing it wasn’t something she’d done. In fact, the reason made her like him more. “Oh. Well, we’ll see.”

“Are you mad? Hurt? I don’t want you to be.”

“No, I’m good. We’re good.” She gave him a quick hug and moved down the hall. *So, I’m a single again. There’s a shock.*

Zack spotted Timmy coming down the hall.

Cathy was on his heels and eyeing his ass. *I really didn’t think they do that too.*

“We’re helping Eric to the mess for chow. You want to join us?” Timmy had missed his father and brothers.

Zack shook his head, wishing he could. “Actually, I’d like a minute with Cathy. You can go on.”

Cathy looked up. “Me? Why me?”

Zack scowled at her.

Cathy paled. *He’s about to nail me for flirting with his boy. Shit.*

Zack motioned toward an empty office. “Let’s talk, shall we?”

Timmy slowly went on down the hall, silently begging his father not to screw up his relationship.

Zack shut the door and leaned against it, arms crossing over his chest. “So. What are your intentions toward my son?”

Marc slipped out of the cabin hall without waiting for Cathy’s stuttered answer. He needed to do a final meeting with the group Kendle had brought back. He’d spent hours helping them adjust over the last ten days. None of the locals were a problem. All that remained was for him to tell them they’d been cleared, then make sure their escorts were there to take them up to the camp area. Ralph had also organized that.

Marc spotted Adrian in the shadows and waved him over. “Stick around. I have something for you to do in a bit.”

“You got it.”

Marc went to the quarantine zone they’d set up in the empty gymnasium, glad Adrian had cleaned up and was functioning better today. He doubted it was a coincidence that it had happened just an hour after Angela returned. *Was he faking for the last eleven days?* Marc wasn’t sure, but it didn’t matter. “I’ve got you...under my thumb...” Marc kept humming as he greeted the Cayman refugees. “Welcome to Safe Haven. May it become your home.”

Marc was glad all the new people had checked out. They would be watched for a while, of course, but this group wasn’t a problem. They’d been waiting almost a year for rescue. They understood how lucky they were.

Marc watched as they began gathering their things, already comfortable with the guards and making friends. It was a moment of incredible pride that gave Marc a new understanding of how Angela and Adrian had felt each time they gave shelter to people worthy of it.

Adrian lingered at his side. “Does it feel good?”

Marc nodded. “I need a guard while Neil and I talk.”

Adrian brightened.

Neil dropped his head and fell in on Marc’s right instead of the bodyguard position he’d been enjoying.

Marc led the way to the top deck without speaking. He liked letting the tension build for moments like these, but this time, he really didn’t have the extra breath. He was still recovering from radiation poisoning and so was everyone else who’d been exposed. It would be a long time before they were back to where they’d been before. Some of them would never reach those levels again. The illness had been merciless. Tonya’s tests were revealing concerns all over the spectrum for future effects.

Marc moved aside for Ray and Grant to go up the last steps ahead of them. “I need the break. Take it slow.”

Ray smiled at him. “Congratulations.”

Marc frowned a bit. “For what?”

“Putting us first. We needed that. Now you two can rule together, like it should have been all along.” Ray went up the stairs with Grant’s hand on his hip, daring anyone to complain about the public display of affection.

Marc frowned. “Ray? Grant?”

The couple stopped. Grant’s shoulders were tense as he turned. “Yes?”

“If it’s what you both want, pick a cabin together. Get some gophers to help you pack and move.”

Tears filled Grant’s eyes.

Ray scanned Neil and Adrian to determine how the camp would react.

Neil shrugged. “Couldn’t care less.”

Adrian gave a nod. He didn’t feel right doing more with Neil and Marc here, but he didn’t like the decision. *I wouldn’t have done that.*

Marc glanced over his shoulder. *Do you have a good reason?*

Adrian sighed, shoulders drooping. *Not anymore. I was wrong.*

“Excellent. Keep saying that. I love hearing it.” Marc waved the couple on. “Go. Leave the lid up; belch and scratch. Talk too much. It’s all waiting for you.”

Grant immediately dug at the rear of his jeans, making crazy faces.

Ray swatted his arm.

Everyone laughed, sending out good vibes as the group reached the top deck.

Marc inhaled of it, scanning the surrounding area with his grid. He could use it on the entire ship and be fine, but going beyond was hard on his energy level. The same was true of topside. He had miles around the ship on his grid now, but nothing from inside the ship. *I’ll work on it, along with getting my physical health back.*

Marc jogged up the stairs of the bridge for a check in. He was out of breath before he got to the top.

Neil and Adrian hung back.

“Advice?” Neil didn’t want to ask, but he felt he had to. Marc’s thoughts were too bright to read now. He had a glare.

Adrian shrugged. “Not really. If you have any credits, now is the time to cash them in.”

Neil frowned. “That’s how I survived my trial.”

“Ah.”

“What if it were you?” Neil pushed. “What would it take for you to forgive me?”

Adrian grunted. “Marc’s not me. Wouldn’t work.”

“I don’t mean him.”

“Oh.” Adrian considered, brows coming together. “Not much. If you saved the camp, my kids, the future.”

Neil scowled. “Anything a level down? It’s hard to do those alone.”

“Tell me about it.” Adrian dug deeper and came up with a tiny light. “You could go find Marc’s daughter. She would like that.”

Neil sighed. “That team has already been chosen. Next?”

Adrian studied the guard shift and the calm water, hating Marc for how good he was doing. “Everything else I have is shady. That won’t help you.”

“No, it won’t.” Neil joined Marc on the bridge steps, nodding to Theo through the plastic. “I’m sorry. What can I do?”

Marc kept an even tone even though he was still furious with Neil. “Depends on what you’re asking for.”

Neil replayed Angela’s order.

*Sleep with him. Shower with him. Pretend he’s Samantha. And make friends again. Marc needs you too.*

Marc grunted. “Just me? I can give you that today. Angie or the Eagles? That’s harder.”

Neil gestured. “You first. If she sees I followed orders, she might not fry me.”

“So just to save your own ass.” Contempt laced Marc’s voice. “Should have known.”

“That’s not fair.” Neil pointed at the guards. “Eagles are trained to find double benefits for their choices. It doesn’t mean one is more important than the other.”

Marc sighed. “Why do you even care? You’re obviously not sorry; you’ll do whatever you want now that you think you can get away with it.”

The former trooper’s shoulders stiffened in renewed anger. “You’ll help me stay good. You’ve done it for everyone else. Why not your best friend?”

*Ouch*. Adrian gave the men more space and kept a sharp eye out for trouble.

Marc snorted. “My best friend murdered two people, forced us through a trial, and got off scot-free after lying to everyone for almost a year. How am I supposed to support him?”

“I don’t know.” Neil had to try. “We could have a beer later and try to figure it out...”

Marc took a bottle of water from the cooler that had been brought up for Theo, picking the red cap. He popped the top and extended it. “I can’t take beer yet.”

Neil grinned. He drank half the bottle and held it back out. “Thank you.”

“My honor.” Marc put the cap on it. “Neil, do me a favor and start counting to a hundred.”

“You didn’t drink.” Neil frowned. “Is there a problem?”

“No. Just count.”

Adrian recognized Marc’s tone and retreated a few more steps to avoid the crossfire.

Neil shrugged. “One, two, three, four, five, six...” Neil paused to lick his lips, mouth suddenly dry. “Seven, eight, nine, ten...” Neil felt his blood change; chill bumps broke out. “Eleven, twelve...”

Marc waved over his hidden security man.

“Thirteen, fourteen...” Neil swayed on his feet. His crashing brain gave him the answer. “Son of a bitch.”

Trent caught Neil as he fell, sweeping him up and over his big shoulder.

“Thanks.” Marc stored the drugged water bottle in his pocket as Trent headed for the stairs. “Don’t forget to take the lightbulb.”

Adrian watched as Neil was carried below. *Do I need to plan a rescue?*

Marc chuckled. “He’ll be fine. I’m still salty about him drugging me to keep me in the cabin.”

Adrian relaxed at Marc’s good vibes. He followed as Marc did a visual inspection of their remaining lifeboats. They’d had a lot of wind since setting sail. “Is there anything I can do?”

Marc nodded. “I have a job for you, but it’s hard. No one else has been able to do it.”

“Anything.” Adrian moved closer, face lighting up. “You name it.”

“Die.” Marc lunged forward and shoved Adrian upward by his chest.

Adrian flew over the rail and out into open air. He dropped like a rock, slamming into the waves below.

Marc turned around, swiping his hands as if to remove dust. “Next?”

The top deck cleared of everyone but guards in seconds.

Marc grinned in response to the laughter of the Eagles. They were quickly adjusting to his style of leadership. In time, they would be bonded to him in ways that Adrian hadn’t been able to because he was unethical.

*I’m the first byzan who wasn’t corrupt before reaching this evolution. I might be the key that saves all of us.*

**3**

“I asked you a question.”

Cathy frowned. She sat in the chair he’d slid out and crossed her arms over her chest.

Zack joined her at the table, but he took a chair next to her and scooted it over so their knees were touching. “There’s a way out of this.”

Cathy ignored the heat from his touch. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“What are your intentions toward my son?”

“What’s the way out?”

Zack grinned, laying on the charm. “You could date me instead; leave him alone.”

Cathy gaped, cheeks flaming. “Excuse me?”

Zack’s smile faded into a leer. “You’ll be bored with him a week after you pop his cherry. He can’t satisfy you. He’s not a descendant.”

Cathy’s chin went up. “Maybe that’s why I want him.”

Zack increased the vibes. “Use me instead. I’ll even roleplay. In the dark, we sound alike.”

Cathy felt her cheeks flame up hotter. She tried to sound angry instead of flustered. “This is a bad conversation. You’re a pig.”

Zack shrugged. “I’m a father protecting his son. You’re going to hurt him. I can handle you. He can’t.”

Cathy snorted. “You think that, but teenagers have energy.”

Zack wasn’t offended. “I understand how that could appeal, but I don’t think you’ve considered the other half.”

“What would that be?” Cathy was sure she’d covered it all.

“They do it five minutes at a time.” Zack leaned in. He sniffed her, letting her feel his genuine interest. “Can you cum in five minutes, Cathy?”

Cathy shivered.

Zack almost let his cheek touch hers, using a method he’d watched the service Eagles use with remarkable success. “You need a man who knows how to get you there.” He kissed her cheek with a bare touch, sighing. “And I do. I will. As much as you want, any time or place. You’ll stagger through this ship with a smile on your face and my name on your lips.” Zack leaned back, voice chilling. “If you dump my son. If you don’t, I’m going to ask Angela to banish you and every other predator picking out a child to mate with.”

Cathy was trying to breathe, to recover from his cruel assault. She’d never been so horny.

Zack knew. “I asked Adrian to help me with that. While he did, I asked him how he felt about cougars.”

Cathy swallowed. “And?”

“He said he never would have given it a thought except for Angela. She convinced him the boys needed protection too. I love her for that. When she gives the order to remove you from the ship, it will be followed.” Zack kept a hard tone. “Don’t make me toss you overboard for breaking our laws.”

“He’s legal. It isn’t against our laws.”

“It is, and you know it. America had age laws. When our new constitution is voted in, you’d better believe that age line will go back up.” Zack was prepared for any defense she tried to use.

“Angela and Adrian said we need babies, for the future.”

“We do, from adults who can raise those children. Timmy isn’t ready to be a father. Let him be a child, while he still can. You’re robbing him of his future; I won’t stand for it.”

Cathy hadn’t thought of it from those sides. *Am I serious about this kid?* She’d been having fun playing with him, but Zack had just shoved seriousness into her body and mind. It was an unpleasant mix. And... *And I want to take him up on his offer.*

Zack wasn’t immune to the plan he’d used. “I mean it. You have needs; I have skills that are getting rusty. But I want it done openly.”

She hesitated. “He’ll be hurt, mad.”

“Yes, but he’ll make peace with it when he joins the Eagles and starts building a future.” Zack tried logic next. “And if he still wants you when he’s eighteen, I’ll step aside.”

Cathy snorted. “If I’m still with you then, it’ll mean I’m happy. I’ve never had a relationship that lasted more than a few months and I don’t expect one now.”

Zack dug in. “Because deep down, you really hate men. You pick them young to train them to serve you.”

Tears welled in Cathy’s eyes. “I can see where you’d have that impression.”

“I’m wrong?”

“Yes. I don’t hate you guys at all.” Her eyes dropped. “I’m scared. I know a teenage boy can’t hurt me physically. A grown man, however...”

Zack understood a lot more now. He forced the sympathy back but stored it for a later moment. “I’ve had my say. Now, I need your choice so I know what to tell Marc tonight when he asks for an update.”

Cathy wiped away the tears, shrugging. “I don’t love him. I’ll back off, do the right thing.”

Zack smiled. “Excellent choice. If you want to set me up for that and tell him I’ve forbidden it, that’s fine. It’s the truth.”

“I might.” Cathy stared at him, wanting to take a chance on a different life.

Zack reached out. He put a hand on her cheek. “How about if I teach you how to beat my ass physically? Afterwards, you can decide where we go.”

Cathy smiled. “Really?”

Zack nodded, thinking of Marc and Angela. Marc had trained her, and Angela now loved him more than anyone. “It would be my honor.”

**4**

Angela’s eyes opened.

Ivan stood, motioning to Morgan, who was at the desk. The infirmary was still full, but this time, it was patients recovering through sleep and their exhausted, relieved caregivers in the cots next to them.

Morgan knelt by Angela, wincing at sore knees. *I want kneepads for Christmas*.

Angela drew in a deep lungful of air. Pain came. Smells were next. Sound popped in. Angela sucked in more air. *Are you close?*

Footsteps came. Marc sat on her cot. “Close enough?” He waved the others away, sure she needed a minute of privacy.

Angela struggled to sound casual. “Are my eyes open?”

Marc closed her lids and sent energy into her eyes. “You were gone for a long time. Your vision will be different now.”

Angela was comforted by his words and his presence. “How long until it happens?”

Marc moved his hands. “Now.”

Angela opened her eyes, blinking at the bright light.

“You can adjust it, but you can’t remove it.” Marc held her hand, relishing the feel of her strength coming back. “The scrolls call it a glare.”

Angela shut her eyes. “Later, okay?”

Marc felt her mood shift. He wiped away the tears now coming from under her lashes. “Get it over with. You’ve come too far to be a coward now.”

Angela grunted. “Fair enough.” She looked up at him.

Marc stayed connected, curious about how it worked.

“I usually hide and do this alone.” Angela was self-conscious as she blinked and hit mental buttons. “They all think I know what I’m doing.”

“I won’t tell them different.” Marc had also thought that until his evolution. His compassion had grown. His jealousy and anger had shrunk until they were almost gone. It was amazing.

Angela didn’t tell him that side of the emotions would show up later. There was no need to ruin his good mood. She blinked faster. “Multiple modes!”

Marc thought of their first trip to the weigh station. “Now we know what they meant by not needing to go to the viewing room.”

“Yes.” Angela stopped as the rotation came back to the beginning. This was the first slot and the closest to normal. She concentrated, dimming the glare. Everything was brighter, but there were more shadows.

Marc leaned in to whisper. “Those aren’t shadows. It’s the darkness in them.”

Angela was dismayed to see how much evil remained in the people here. Even those who were grieving had madness lurking.

Marc was also able to see it on his stronger grid. “Zoom out, get the big picture.”

Angela did, including him too. Marc’s aura was blue.

“So is yours, I’d bet.” Marc put an arm around her shoulders, able to feel the chill on her skin.

The bond lit up, providing a connection they’d never had.

Angela moaned lowly. “Nice.”

“Yes.” Marc was suddenly eager for her full recovery. *If she moans now at just my arm on her shoulder...* He hid a snicker.

Angela chuckled tiredly.

“A constant two-way connection?”

“Yes, made possible only by a perfect match.” Angela leaned up, puckering.

Marc didn’t want to stop the kiss. Sparks flew, heating his healthier body.

Angela grinned against his lips, loving his response.

Pain sank into Marc. He drew back, frowning. “Where?”

Angela held up her wrist. It was blue and purple, and arched at a bad angle.

“Aww, baby.” Marc put a hand on it. “Anywhere else?”

Angela gave him a mental list, lashes shutting in relief as his energy eased her pain. “I’m one big bruise. That’s the only real injury.”

“I’ll work on it in stages.” Marc kissed her again. “I can also call help.”

Angela slowly wrapped her healing wrist around his neck. “I’ve got all the help I need right here.” She put her cheek on his shoulder. “Stay?”

“I can’t. It’s my shift.”

“Okay.” Angela instantly hated that.

Marc smiled at her. He didn’t say anything snarky. He didn’t feel it. Neither side was tolerable when they were alone. “I’ll send you a gopher if you like.”

“Just by volunteer.” Angela didn’t tell him she needed to get up, fighting it so she could have this time with him.

“You’ll have to narrow it down.” Marc patted a paper in his pocket. “Thirty people want that slot.”

Angela smiled. “Who deserves it?”

“Kimmie. The spells protected the children. She taught them to do it.”

“Agreed. Send all the kids up as gophers, huh?”

“Glad to.” Marc waited to see if she wanted to do any work tonight.

“I might, in a bit.”

“Are you keeping me here on purpose?”

“Yes.”

Marc chuckled. “My shift is up at dawn. Kenn will be on duty then.”

“He’ll need a buddy to keep him alert.”

Marc read her thought and sighed. “I didn’t talk to Tonya yet. I wasn’t sure if I should.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered, but get Kenn a duty buddy, even if he hates them.” Angela didn’t want him distracted while everyone slept.

“I will.” Marc worried what other bad choices he’d made while she was gone.

Angela didn’t like his fast need to take the blame. “If it felt right at the time, it wasn’t a bad choice.”

“How do you know?”

She snorted.

Marc scanned her. “Now?”

“Yes, please.”

Marc disconnected the IV, under her direction. Then he lifted her and headed for the bathroom.

Pacing outside the infirmary, Kendle peered through in time to see Marc carrying Angela to the restroom. *Maybe someday he’ll care for me that way.*

Angela glared over Marc’s shoulder. *He can carry your body right now...*

Kendle’s face vanished from the window.

Marc hid his amusement, starting to feel guilty for all the shit he’d given her over Adrian. He hadn’t realized it sucked to be stalked.

Angela smiled as he put her on her feet. “If I’m not out in five, I’m in the shower.”

Marc let her make the choice. If she felt she could, that was good enough for him.

Angela shut the door and staggered over to the small mirror and sink. She leaned on the freshly bleached porcelain and drew in a breath. Then she looked at herself.

Power shuffled beneath her skin. It moved and stretched, exploring the limits of this body. “I’m one of them now. Son of a bitch.”

*I did tell you not to stay long.*

Angela sighed at Michael’s amused voice in her mind. “It was worth it.”

*You believe that?*

Angela smiled into the mirror, controlling the shift. “Yes. I was born for this. There’s no avoiding fate. It always catches up.”

*Will you tell me what happened?*

Angela sighed. “The Messenger was Cain, being punished for killing his brother. He lied about having contact outside those rooms. When he disappeared, it was to search the tunnels for a way out without the others knowing. He was one of the first souls to ever be punished. His lifeforce went straight to the Creator when I took his last spark. ...like yours would if I banished you from hell.”

*Yes.*

Angela felt she had to offer, even if it was forbidden. “Do you want that now? I’ll do it for you.”

*No.*

“Even death fears that final judgement.”

*So now we wait again.*

She nodded, but she wasn’t sad or angry about it. “This time, the angels running the weigh station love humanity, even with all its flaws. The betting is over. It’s all on us now.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

**That’s What Men Do**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

6pm

**1**

**K**enn knocked on the lab door and entered. “Marc said to give you this.”

Tonya glanced up from the patient files she was updating, frowning. “What is...?” Tonya almost cried. “That’s for me?”

Kenn smiled, handing her the new lab coat. It was signed by about everyone in camp, in indelible ink. “You earned it. They all love you now.”

“Do you love Courtney?” Tonya dropped the lab coat on her desk and glowered at him.

Kenn paused at the abrupt topic change. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Kenn sighed, realizing their truce was over now that the boss had come back. “No, but I want the baby even if she doesn’t. I had to let her know before she decided without me. Now, she can’t until we talk.”

Tonya hadn’t considered that. “She doesn’t want the baby?”

“I have no idea. Other than the moment of conception, we’ve never spoken.” Kenn scanned and found a neat lab ready for whatever came. Things had been cleaned and restocked. It looked as if there hadn’t been a crisis.

Tonya shrugged, holding in her anger. “I guess you’d better handle that.”

Kenn tried a warm tone. “You come first.”

She snorted. “Clearly, not true.”

He tried to give more details, hoping that would help. “I got scared about marriage. You were pushing and I was trying to change. I broke. She was there.”

Tonya’s lips pursed. “That’s not an excuse.”

“I agree, but that’s the way it happened. You deserve the truth.”

Her tone sharpened. “I deserve a man who’s loyal and mine.”

“Yes... James wants you.”

Tonya rolled her eyes. “Until we have sex and he wants to drive.”

Kenn’s lips twitched. “So you’re with me for the sex?”

Tonya refused to laugh. “It’s been a constant that I’ve grown used to.”

Kenn waited, letting her control the moment. She hadn’t spoken to him in days unless it was camp business. He’d been sleeping here on the lab couch or in the infirmary.

Tonya sat the beaker down. “You hurt me. I don’t know if I can get over this.”

Kenn’s shoulders sagged. “I understand. I am sorry. I guess that doesn’t help.”

Tonya shook her fiery curls. “Not much, no.”

*Tap-Tap!* Courtney was standing on the other side of the glass door.

Tonya’s anger blazed. “What?!”

Courtney ignored Kenn’s motion to go away. “Can I talk to you for a minute? Both of you?”

Tonya gestured curtly at the pretty brunette. “At your own risk.” *She gets sick and still looks great. Wonderful. I hate her guts.*

Kenn stepped closer to Tonya, and away from Courtney.

“Thank you, for everything you did for me. I didn’t deserve it.”

Tonya lifted her nose. “No, you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry.” Courtney cleared her throat. “I need a paternity test.”

Kenn locked down on his thoughts.

Tonya glared at the woman. “Not until it’s born. We all get to live with that question for the next...?”

Courtney flushed. “Eight months, I think.”

Tonya wrote it in her notes. She would add it to Courtney’s file later. “Anything else?”

“Yes.” Courtney met Kenn’s eye, voice hard. “I won’t abort it. You can’t make me just because she found out. It might not be yours.”

Kenn seized the opportunity. “I’m prolife now. Down, girl.”

Courtney let out the breath she’d taken. “Okay. I, uh... I don’t want to talk about anything else until we get the results of the test. I’m telling the camp it’s none of their business.”

Tonya lifted a brow. “And the boss?”

Courtney flushed. “I’ll tell her myself if she wants to know. Otherwise, it stays between us.”

“What about the other guy?”

Courtney stiffened, tears welling. “He didn’t make it.”

Kenn almost believed her. If not for her fingers being clenched together, he would have.

Tonya did. “We’ll do the test right there at the birth if you want it.” Tonya pointed at Kenn. “Until we know, you sleep with the Eagles. If she’s carrying your baby, you’ll bunk there permanently.” Tonya left, not slamming the door behind her. She didn’t need to. Her emotions were obvious. *I haven’t let a man hurt me this way in a decade. There’s no way I can let it slide.*

Kenn watched her go. She would spend an hour helping James now, like she’d been doing since he saved her life, then go back to their cabin and pack his things. The bags would be sitting in the hall by the time he got there this evening.

“You know I lied, right?”

Kenn wasn’t surprised by Courtney’s words. Like himself, she had two faces. “Thank you.”

She eased toward the exit, sore and grateful to be alive and still pregnant. “No, *thank you*. It’s what I want.”

“A baby?”

Courtney revealed her true feelings. “*Your* baby. I love you. If she doesn’t change her mind...”

There wasn’t a choice for Kenn. “Then I’ll spend the rest of my life wearing her down until she does. I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Courtney left, but she wasn’t crying or even sadder. She’d always known who Kenn’s heart belonged to. She couldn’t compete with his ties to Tonya, but she would have a bond too, through the baby. It would be enough.

Tonya observed through the infirmary window, proud of Kenn and also furious with him. She was already lonely. Tonya straightened her shoulders. *But I can live with it to do the right thing. Let’s see if he can.*

Tonya went to James, who was being released today. She flashed a bright smile. “Let’s get you ready to move. Then I’ll find you a hot meal.”

James beamed at her. “Will you stay for a while? We can play cards again.”

Tonya’s voice hardened. “No, James. We won’t ever be alone again. I don’t share–in either direction.”

His eyes softened with emotions she’d suspected for weeks. “You don’t have to. I only want you.”

Tonya sighed, aware of their approving audience but not caring. “I wish I could, but there’s only one man I’ve ever really loved in my entire life and he’s currently crying on my new lab coat. I won’t ever do this again.”

**2**

The camp cheered and clapped when Angela entered the mess for dinner. Flanked by Ivan and Debra, she paused in the doorway to absorb the good vibes. They’d spent too much time dealing with death. *That will change now.*

The mess wasn’t full, though. Angela felt the cut as she swept the wide room and the people who could now begin to recover. *I lost too many. I’m not fit to lead.*

Angela went to the center table that was empty and waiting for her. She sat, not sure where to begin. Everyone wanted details, assurances. *I want a meal, an orgasm and sleep.*

Sitting at a nearby stool to get the mood of the camp, Marc’s head lifted from his coffee. *I’ve got duty soon, but I can find us a closet on my break.*

Angela snickered.

The good vibes increased.

“You don’t have to do this now.” Kenn knew what she would want and how to handle it. He’d gotten plenty of practice working under Adrian. “We’ve waited almost two weeks. Breakfast isn’t far considering what you’ve all gone through.” Like Marc, Kenn had come to judge the mood of camp while Angela joined them. They were both worried over retaliations for lost loved ones.

Angela gave a hesitant smile. “Are you sure? I can do it.”

Kenn denied her, as did other people. “We have the important answer–you came back. The rest can wait.”

Most people nodded agreement. Those who didn’t were longing for their loved ones.

“Thank you. We really are beat.” Angela yawned, then chuckled. “If we could have until morning, that would be amazing.”

“Consider it done.” Kenn began casting glares at those thinking of protesting or catching her alone.

Thelma brought over a tray.

Angela put a hand on the sad woman’s wrist. “I’m sorry about Lou.”

“Thank you.” Thelma sniffed. She went back to the kitchen to stay busy.

The camp clapped again as another group of people entered the mess.

Harry and the other medics, now off duty, grinned and waved away the cheers, but it was obvious they were happy to get the recognition. They strode to the food lines, surrounded by friends–new and old.

The clapping and cheers swelled to a painful level as Morgan appeared, pushing Pam in a wheelchair.

Pam put a hand on the wheel, forcing him to stop and accept what he deserved. No one had worked harder than Morgan.

Morgan was thrilled and a bit embarrassed. *I wish Shawn was here to share this with me.*

Pam rubbed his wrist. “We all have jobs, baby. Take me over to the boss. She’s lonely by herself.”

Morgan wasn’t willing to let it go. “He should have stayed here! You almost died.”

Pam was grateful to have been brought back, but it was also soothing to know she’d been good enough to stay up there and help. It gave her a feeling of peace that she shared through a touch to his wrist with her palm. “I love you. Please?”

Morgan’s anger faded. “Okay.”

Pam let him wrap the blanket back around her shoulders, holding onto his upper arm. “We all win if he’s successful. He had to go.”

Morgan was able to breathe now, and to think. “Can you tell me?”

Angela nodded when Pam glanced her way for approval.

Pam whispered. “He’s on the kill team. They’re collecting the UN ship so we can use it to surprise the detention center.”

Morgan thought about what that meant. “We’re going there, instead of letting them come to the island.”

“Very good.” Angela motioned at one of the empty seats. “Stay?”

Morgan blushed a bit. “We’re all sitting together.” Morgan indicated a table nearby where the medics were settling down to enjoy a hot meal and the warmth of the camp.

Pam waved him off. “Go have fun.”

Morgan kissed the top of her head and joined his crew.

Pam let the tears go as soon as his back was turned. She didn’t make noise, but her misery had to have an outlet.

Angela hugged her, not speaking. There was nothing she could say. All they’d been through, here and above, was traumatizing. Now they had to wait and see what side effects might come from the radiation, including infertility. Pam loved kids. Thanks to the illness, she might never have them.

“Please.” Pam’s rough voice broke. “Can you search for me, later, when you’re better?”

“I’ll look for everyone. You can pass the word. If they want to know, I’ll share what I see.” Angela handed Pam a napkin. “What can I do for you right now?”

“That’s my only problem.” Pam sniffed and wiped. “I’m happy, honest. I liked my job.” Pam shivered. “I thought my...lifestyle would send me to hell.”

Angela shrugged. “So did I, honestly, but that was your choice to make. It’s great to know we were both wrong.”

Pam wiped away more tears, suspecting she would be puffy eyed for weeks. “I wonder how it’s decided, judgement, I mean.”

Angela had many of the same lingering questions, but they were distracted by more clapping from the camp. Theo and Trent entered, Charlie and Dog in the shadows behind them, on duty over their new co-captain.

Marc looked at Angela across the crowd as the camp welcomed Theo. He replayed Debra’s opinion.

Angela shrugged. *Kill it if you agree.*

Marc held up a hand. “To our heroes, Ozzie and Whitney!”

The cheer was deafening.

Theo flushed.

Marc moved by him and joined Angela at the table.

Debra, now in the line for a cold beer, saw Theo’s embarrassment. She couldn’t help feeling bad for him.

Theo felt her eyes on him, but he avoided her like Kimmie had suggested. He got into the food line, accepting handshakes from those around him.

Debra frowned. *Hey!*

Theo flinched at her shout in his mind. He swung around. “What?”

People paused in their conversations to watch.

Debra gestured.

Theo shook his head.

Debra scowled and signed again.

Theo held up a hand, cheeks darkening.

Angela chuckled. “I love this channel, but I have no idea what they’re saying.”

Marc laughed. “He’s begging forgiveness and swearing to never lie again. She says that’s a lie.”

Angela leaned against his heat. “Is it done?”

The good mood faded a bit for Marc. “Yes. Adrian made it onto the other ship.”

“You knew he would.”

“Yes.” Marc leaned closer to keep their conversation semiprivate. “Are you sure? I can handle it now if you want him brought back.”

“No.” Angela kissed Marc with heat, making sure he felt how much she wanted him.

People around them smiled and clapped again, delighted to have these good moments to share. The past weeks had been hard on all of them.

Angela took his ring from her pocket, where it had stayed since she’d accepted it; she placed it on the table. Then she held her hand out.

Marc felt like a nervous groom as he slid the ring onto her finger. “I’ll love you forever.”

“Yes, you will.”

Marc chuckled at the word play. He leaned over to kiss her cheek...

She sealed their lips again, eagerly, drawing hoots and laughter from their audience. Even those who’d lost someone enjoyed watching the couple reveal their commitment.

Kendle left the room, guts churning.

More cheers echoed as Theo and Debra met for a kiss. Their makeup moment was another good moment to absorb.

Tension filled the dining area as wheelchair-bound patients were brought in. Courtney was first in line, being pushed by James. Whispers floated through the area. Almost everyone knew she was pregnant and refusing to name the father.

James chuckled at all the attention, not feeling awkward at all. He’d worked hard through the crisis and he’d saved a life. His place in camp had been returned. Kenn had already asked if he wanted one of the slots for personal security teams. James was thrilled. *And lonely; I’ll survive. She doesn’t want me, but others do. I’ll never sleep alone again if that’s what it takes to get over Kenn’s woman.* He pushed Courtney to the long table that had been put together for the few patients who felt strong enough to attend this meal. He rolled her in next to Samantha and Amy, then vanished. He wasn’t ready to celebrate yet.

“Has anyone seen Neil?” Samantha liked it that the long tables were close enough to allow communication without yelling.

Angela swallowed a chuckle.

Marc cleared his throat. “I believe he’s finishing loose ends below.”

“Okay.” Samantha patted Courtney’s wrist and drew her into a conversation. Cody and Missy were across from them, while the other cargo kids ran errands for those who hadn’t been cleared to leave the infirmary yet.

Tonya studied Kenn and Courtney from the doorway, watching for signs they were still having the affair. She couldn’t help it. The shock had passed. Now, she was pissed.

“They’re not.” Marc waved Tonya over. “Sit for a minute? I’d like to speak on Kenn’s behalf.”

Kenn immediately got up and left the mess, humbled and certain his presence wouldn’t help.

The camp cheered for a long time as Tonya was noticed. It was a huge leap from where she’d been just six months ago. Tonya smiled at them, trying to hold in tears. *I have a home now.*

Tonya joined Marc and Angela at the leadership table in the center of the wide room, wishing she could stay here after they talked.

“You can.” Marc pushed a chair out with his foot. “You’re always welcome at the boss’s table.”

Tonya sat, wiping away tears. “I didn’t even know I wanted this.”

“That’s what makes it perfect.” Marc nudged the plate of cookies toward her. “Have a few of those.”

Tonya took a cookie.

Marc got started, able to feel confusion and curiosity from the people around them. They were all noticing her coldness toward Kenn. “He needs you.”

Tonya refused to let it go. “And what about the next time I nag him on something he doesn’t want? Or when the baby keeps him up all night? Will he run to his other woman for comfort?”

Marc couldn’t answer her quick, angry points. “Do you think he will?”

Tonya’s fire faded. She was too tired to hold onto it for long. “I don’t know. Until I do, I’m not letting him con me.”

“Good for you.” Marc could feel Tonya trying to make a plan to find out how deep Kenn’s feelings went. “I’ll help with that, if you like.”

Tonya knew she could trust Marc, but the offer was still surprising. “Maybe. I’ll let you know.”

Marc motioned toward one of their gophers. “We need milk over here. Cookies have to have milk.”

Stanley hurried to get Tonya a glass of cold powdered milk.

“I hate that shit. Can’t I dunk in my coffee?”

Marc grinned. “Of course. After you drink your milk.”

Tonya stuck out her tongue.

Angela laughed with them, thrilled by how the camp was reacting to Marc. They’d already accepted his leadership. *Do I feel jealous? Am I worried they’ll like him more than me?* Angela examined her feelings and was happy to say no. *He’s meant to share this burden. I don’t resent him for that. It makes me love him even more.*

Angela yawned. She leaned against Marc’s big arm, almost comfortable for the first time in weeks.

Marc kept his arm in place as he felt her drift off. He was surprised she’d lasted this long after walking all the way here. She’d refused the wheelchair on the grounds she was more of a medic than a patient. He wanted to carry her to bed now, but he wasn’t recovered enough for it. He settled for waving at Ian, who hadn’t been ill.

Ian carefully lifted Angela and followed Marc to the camp cabins. Angela had insisted she was ready to be with her people and Marc hadn’t argued. Having the boss there would keep them out of trouble.

Angela mumbled a thank you to Ian as he put her on the bed.

Ian switched to the doorway to stand guard. It was his shift over Angela now. Ivan would take over later.

Marc covered her up. “Thank you for coming back.”

“Always.” Angela forced her lids to open. She smiled at him. “See you after my nap.”

“Yes, you will.” Marc walked toward the stairs, smiling at Charlie as he and Dog kept pace. They were on duty over him right now. “I bet your mom would love a game of chess when she wakes up.”

“We haven’t played in years.”

“I know. Kenn was thinking about it earlier. He used to be jealous of the time you spent together.” Marc noted guards on duty in the hall, able to feel the difference it made in everyone’s mood. “Your mom misses some of those moments from your childhood.”

“Is she still mad at me?”

“She was never mad at you, boy. She was disappointed. That happened again this time, but by the end, you proved you could be counted on. Many people would have stashed their family if they could have.”

“It was wrong. You’re punishing Kyle for it.” Charlie had been feeling guiltier since hearing that.

“Yeah, but he needs to be brought down a level. So did you, so I let it ride. Now that you understand how selfish the choice was, you can hear the rest of that speech.” Marc waited for camp people to go by, nodding and smiling in return to their encouraging words and well wishes on the engagement. “Ready?”

Charlie nodded, sensing he was about to reach a new level of manhood.

Marc’s face darkened. “Those hidden people would have been with the camp for every bad moment they went through, including the triple shooting. When the trap team came for the kids, a lot of camp people would have gotten hurt trying to protect those children. Your selfish choices probably saved lives.”

Charlie scowled. “So it was the right thing to do. And also wrong.”

“Yes. Next time, warn the ship. That’s the only thing you were punished for.”

Charlie was relieved, but still upset. “I don’t think I like adulting.”

Marc snickered. “You’re becoming a man. Your mom will be so proud.”

“She’s not speaking to me.”

Marc patted his shoulder. “Just show up with a chess board. That’ll be enough.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Marc wanted his family united and happy. It was the only way they would withstand the future still waiting for all of them. “It’s my honor.”

“Speaking of honor...”

Marc grunted. “We discussed it. The right choice is complex. If you tell the camp, your baby will carry the pain of your choices. Everyone will know it’s the child of a predator.”

“Tracy is not a predator!”

Marc sighed. “Yes, son, she is. You like the relationship, but that doesn’t make it right.”

“Age shouldn’t matter.”

Marc stopped and looked at him. “You’ve been told wrong and right don’t matter now, that only survival does, but that’s an excuse to do whatever you want, and I won’t stand for it anymore. If you survive, but lose your honor doing it, you might as well have died. It eats away at your soul for the rest of your cursed life.”

Charlie wasn’t sure what to do. “So you don’t want me to tell everyone?”

Marc needed the boy to figure it out for himself. He gave another hint. “I don’t want my grandchild to pay for your mistakes or Tracy’s crime.”

The pointed tone finally got through. “I want to get married–as soon as possible.” Charlie really did, though Tracy still wasn’t keen on the idea. She was going along with it so the camp didn’t demand a trial as soon as they found out she was pregnant.

Marc nodded, relieved. “We both think that’s best. How does Tracy feel?”

“Embarrassed. The other women are still treating her odd. She knows our marriage will help.”

Marc frowned, catching the concerns that Charlie wasn’t speaking. “But does she love you and want to marry you?”

“Will mom leave her alone if we’re married?”

Marc snorted at the evasion and the question.

Charlie sighed. “I’ll go back into the Eagles. Tell her to leave Tracy alone and I’ll do whatever she wants.”

Marc didn’t know if Angela had already made plans for her unwilling daughter-in-law. “Tracy won’t be punished until after the baby is born.”

“But we’ll have to live with the tension until then!” Charlie gestured. “We want it to be over now.”

“And what is Tracy willing to give up? You’re the victim.” Marc was angry about it. He hadn’t been letting it show because it forced him to deal with his own guilt for thinking it was okay just because Charlie was getting laid. He now believed Angela was right. The boys deserved protection too. “You shouldn’t be sacrificing. *She* should.”

“No. I chased her, dad. I used a spell on her. She’s the victim.” Charlie brought up a mental wall as Marc’s eyes narrowed.

“She offered to do something...” Marc was reading Charlie’s chaotic thoughts through the wall. “What was it?”

“No.”

Marc sighed, not wanting to use his stronger gifts against his son. “Tell me.”

“I told her no.” Charlie pointed. “I’m telling you the same!”

Marc pried open the boy’s mental door in two seconds. “She agrees. She thinks she should be in the brig!”

Charlie groaned, stopping. “Don’t. Please, don’t. I did this!”

“So did she.” Marc kept walking. “You broke the rules. You may not be able to buy your way out of this one...but she won’t go to jail.”

“How can you know?” Charlie hurried to catch up.

“Because then we’d be stuck raising your child and frankly, I can’t handle any more diapers. Mike and Mia are little shit factories. It’s all they do, all day long. You and Tracy can wipe your own kid’s ass. Both my hands are full.”

Ralph rounded the corner, in alert mode.

Marc waved him over. “What’s up?”

“People are reporting a banging noise in the bathrooms by the cargo area. Tonya thinks one of her cats might be stuck in there.”

Marc nodded. “Ah.” He kept walking, ignoring Charlie’s smirk as they both envisioned Neil waking up in the dark bathroom with the door blocked. “Be careful. It might be a big rat.”

Ralph patted his leg. “I know how to stomp them.”

Marc snickered. “So do I.”

**4**

“No running!” Allison followed the laughing kids, out of breath as they wound down to the cabin area. People sidestepped the evening chaos, not minding the noise. It was a welcome change from the tears and groans of the ship. Everyone was still mourning, but many of them also wanted to move on. It was too painful to think of all they’d lost.

Kyle glared at the kids, bringing them to a halt. He kept walking, carrying Autumn. She was in half a radiation suit so she could visit her mother. Jennifer was better, but Morgan had refused to discharge her yet.

“Hey!” Missy ran alongside Kyle. “Have you seen my Shawn?”

Kyle pointed toward Kenn, who was coming down the steps. He had a duffle bag over his shoulder and a grim expression. “He has the complete list of missing people.”

Missy ran to Kenn.

Kenn surprised everyone by lifting the girl in his free arm. “Hey, squirt.”

She wrapped her arms and legs around his big body, hanging on tight. “Where’s my Shawn?”

“On a run.”

Missy stared at the honest answer.

Kenn scanned for an empty cabin. “He wasn’t allowed to see you before he left.”

Missy rested her cheek on Kenn’s shoulder, arms around his neck. “When he comes back, I need you to help me be good.”

Kenn held her closer, finally understanding why Adrian had spent so much time with their kids. “You’re already good, sweetheart. I will help you, though. Sometimes we make mistakes and we need a good friend to get us through it.”

Missy hugged his thick neck tightly. “I’ll be your good friend.”

Kenn wasn’t ashamed to let the tears roll. He dropped his bag in front of an empty cabin and used the free hand to scrub at his face. “Marc was right. You are sweet inside. Who knew?”

Missy giggled. Soft blue light flowed through the cabin, bringing peace.

*And an alpha*. Kenn added up the new clue as Missy’s little feet began to swing, kicking him in the hip and stomach. *All the kids from the cargo area were alphas, except for two. Even Leeann was, though Marc locked her gifts. Angela’s twins are alphas. What are the odds of that? I thought alphas were rare.*

“We are.” Missy slapped her hand down his cheek to remove his tears. Then she kicked him in the balls.

Missy landed on her feet and ran into the next cabin with Cody and Kimmie, laughing.

“My eggs.” Kenn wheezed, reaching out for the wall so he didn’t collapse. “She cracked my eggs.”

In the cabin across the hall, Candy locked eyes with Kenn. *Where’s my Conner?*

Kenn concentrated on breathing and nothing else. Missy had still been wearing her shoes.

Candy slowly sat up, hands cradling her swollen stomach. *Please*.

“Give him a minute. He’s in pain.” Neil pushed Samantha’s wheelchair by the cabins. “He may not be allowed to answer. If not, don’t nag him. That won’t help your condition.”

Candy flushed at Neil’s sharp tone, but she laid down. *Back to thinking about rainbows and unicorn farts, I guess.*

Kenn snickered at her thought, getting his breath back. *Neil?* *Beer later?*

Neil smiled, happy it had worked out his way. He was grateful to Marc. *You know it.*

Samantha scanned for Amy. “She’s not here.”

Neil pushed the chair to the empty cabin next to Kenn. “I told the infirmary to give me half an hour to get a room ready. Daisey is with her until then.”

Samantha relaxed, thrilled to still have her family. “As soon as she’s up here, you should go have that beer.”

Neil kissed the top of her head. “I plan to. You want a snack sent up?”

Samantha frowned. “There’s no time to coddle me. We’re still in a crisis.”

Neil helped her into the soft bed. “It’s over, mostly. We’ll need to recover, of course, but there won’t be any more deaths from radiation.”

“That’s great. I still don’t want to bug the mess. It must be a mess.”

Neil folded the wheelchair and put it in the closet. “Nope. All primary areas are clean and stocked for normal use. Marc’s done an amazing job.”

“Marc!” Samantha’s anger rose. “He beat you, drugged you and locked you in a bathroom without a light!”

“I earned that and then some.” Neil smiled at her through his healing split lip. “Be good to Marc. It was his way of saying we can be friends again.”

Samantha rolled her eyes. “You’re kidding.”

“No. At some point, he’ll come through here and we’ll chat like none of it happened. That’s what men do.”

“Why?”

Neil sighed. “I have no idea, but it works.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

**Important Friends**

**A clock on the front

Description automatically generated**

1am

**1**

**“I** need a cabin change.” Tommy waited for Ivan’s response without offering chitchat. He couldn’t. Erika’s death had stunned him.

Ivan understood. Sharing a cabin with Daryl and Brittani, watching them become a couple, would hurt. “I’ve got room since Jayda moved out.”

They were in the camp area now. Ivan was sitting in a chair between the doors, on duty.

Tommy gave him a nod and staggered off to collect his things. He’d only been out of the infirmary for an hour. *Why did I survive? Was I too corrupt to stay at the weigh station?*

Ivan wrote that down and continued his mental evaluation of what came next. Angela was sleeping, as were the others who’d returned. When she recovered, she could help Tommy. *Or maybe I can...* Ivan’s thoughts switched to matchmaking. *Who would be a good partner for him? Kendle isn’t available.*

Peter came down the hall. “I need a decontamination shower. I’ll be a few minutes late for duty.”

Ivan frowned. “What happened?”

“We found a withered body in the cargo area. We think it happened at the same time as Vicky’s death.”

Ivan shrugged. “Vicky couldn’t handle the new strength Kenn put on the alarms. Kendle said she found her there several times and even knocked her out once.”

Peter nodded. “She must have tried again when she woke.”

“That’s what I think too. The other body probably came from Kronus. We never did find his UN escort.” Ivan added it to his notes.

“Makes sense.” Peter headed for the shower.

Ivan studied the quiet halls, still stewing. *She did all of this on purpose...*

“Keep that locked up, will you?” Marc frowned at Ivan as he came through on rounds.

Ivan snapped his mouth and mind shut, realizing Marc knew whatever was going on this time. *That makes me feel better. Weird. I never liked Marc before.*

Marc caught it. He stopped and looked back.

Ivan met his eye, shrugging. “Should I lie and suck up like everyone else?”

Marc smiled.

Ivan braced for a correction. Marc had been giving them out left and right, and oddly, earning respect because of it. *Even mine.*

“What are you doing right now?”

Ivan frowned. “I’m watching over the boss.”

“Her door’s closed.” Marc resumed his rounds. “That’s a rookie mistake with someone like her. Add that to your notes.”

Ivan got up and went to Angela’s door, stomach in a hard ball. He opened it quietly, telling himself she was still asleep.

“Son of a bitch!”

Chuckling, Marc went up to the top deck, able to feel a shadow trailing him. She might have gotten by with it because he was still tired, but people were chuckling and thinking about her slinky actions in the dim corridors. The camp liked seeing Angela try to sneak up on him, even if her movements were weak and timid. It meant most of the horror was over for this moment. It was okay to joke and laugh. Marc knew she didn’t feel that way. She was trying to force them all into moving on as fast as possible, but she was also restless.

Marc liked doing rounds. He’d had small tastes of it, but this time, he was the one making choices, improving situations. It was addictive. The only thing more potent was the smell of Angela’s vanilla scent as she caught up and touched his shoulder.

Marc tugged her against his lean frame, not pretending she’d gotten him.

Angela chuckled. She wasn’t thinking yet, just living.

“That’s all you have to do, baby. I’ve got it covered.”

“In the morning...”

“Not if you don’t want to. I can ask a few questions and then fill them in during breakfast. They want answers, but it doesn’t have to come from you.”

Angela sighed, torn.

Marc rubbed her arms, stopping as they reached the top, dark deck landing. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Angela shuddered. “I don’t want them to hear me say I killed the angels at the weigh station. They’ll never forgive it.”

Marc didn’t agree, but she had a great history of being right. “Tell me, baby. I’ll handle the camp.”

Angela opened her mouth, not sure where to begin. It was a relief when it came spilling out. “Kronus wanted to kill me too, but it had to be up there, so I’d become one of them. Orin wanted me to die down here so I would go to judgement. If I were an angel, I could order him to return and never let him back out. Orin wanted freedom more than anything else. I knew they were the only two I might not be able to defeat in my condition. I needed them to both die, down here, but I needed at least one of them weakened so you could all handle him. I chose Kronus, as you know. He was delayed long enough to get sick. Because of the drugs in the food, the darts, and the contaminated water from his cell fountain, he wasn’t able to recover enough to get out until the UN opened his cell.”

“Why Kronus?” This was the part Marc hadn’t been allowed to know so no one could read it in his thoughts and give them away.

“He’s a time master. Because Orin went against their deal to kill me in the higher level, Kronus slowed time right as Orin fired. It allowed me to accomplish something no one else has ever done.” Angela yawned, energy already drained again. “I have to save the rest for later. We have an audience.”

Marc turned to see a group of kids coming up the steps. It was the same group he’d brought up to help handle the final UN trap team.

Angela wasn’t upset over his choice. The kids were angry fighters. When she and Kenn had discussed it, neither of them had asked what Marc would do. They’d assumed he wouldn’t do it at all. “We were wrong.”

Marc shrugged, seeing how happy Cody was with Missy next to him. “I needed the help and they were the only ones left with the need to kill.”

“They’ll remember it.”

“Good. I may need them again.”

Angela frowned at his words, his tone.

So did the kids who surrounded them in a circle of protection.

He tensed and immediately felt guilty for it.

Angela rubbed his arm. “It’s okay.”

Marc stopped, locking down on his fear. “It is. Whatever you decide is fine. I’ll adjust.”

Angela hated it that he was tortured. “Never worry about a decision like this. You’re probably the purest soul in this camp. Of course, I want you to keep it.”

Marc hugged her.

The kids clapped and smiled.

Kimmie took Marc’s hand. “The alpha has approved your evolution. Do you wish to keep this great gift and awful duty?”

“Yes.” Marc finally had everything he wanted now. “Please.”

Kimmie smiled up at him. “Assume your new level with honor. You are the first male byzan.”

Marc frowned. “William is byzan.”

“His evolution was not approved by our traditions.” Kimmie’s scowl caused frowns in the other kids. “He’s a bastard.”

Marc didn’t like how that sounded. “Don’t use that word.”

She stared at him, trying to do what he wanted. “In this...situation?”

“In this context, and both. I don’t want you cursing, and the word bastard is negative. It’s not the child’s fault the parents weren’t married.”

Kimmie prepared to use another spell. “So you approve William’s evolution? You have that power now.”

“Never.” Marc hadn’t put William’s name in his nightly notes, but he knew the man had snapped. So would Angela when her gifts allowed her to scan deeper.

“Then I stand by my decision and my word.” Kimmie’s tone switched to teacher. “Just because you don’t like it, that doesn’t change the definition or the expected behavior.”

Marc sighed, hating it that she was right. “We’ll have talks about that. I’m not Adrian, who’s lenient or Angela, who’s strict. I believe in meeting in the middle for the good of both people.”

Kimmie pointed toward the sleeping camp. “This is for the entire world. Some of our laws should never be changed. If byzan are not approved, they develop cracks that no light can heal.”

Marc and Angela both took a step forward.

“Say that again.” Marc knelt in front of Kimmie.

She nodded at his sudden flood of thoughts and questions. “Yes, to all of it.”

“Now?”

Kimmie scanned Angela. “She’s too weak to try it.”

Angela let them make plans, happy to get the information, but she was barely staying on her feet. She wasn’t sure she could walk down the stairs at this point, but she’d had to come up here. *I made it back. I needed to stare at the sky, the real sky, before I sleep again.*

Marc found Angela gazing at the darkness over the ship. He joined her as the kids went below with Allison, who had guard over them. “Are you okay?”

“Not hardly.”

Marc held her, prepared for tears and self-recriminations.

Angela’s cold voice whispered in his ear, “You’ll wait for that a long time.”

Marc held her back. “Angie?”

Angela let him see the shifting power beneath her skin. “This was my very first plan, Marc. I cry for them because I love them, but I’ve killed them for the greater good. I won’t scold me for making the only choice available. I also won’t expect it of you when it’s your turn to make these choices.”

“I won’t.” Marc was certain nothing on earth could make him cross his ethics, except her.

“I won’t.” Angela smiled at him. “And I know you’ll try hard. Our new angels will also try to make sure you’re never put into that position.”

Marc heard the tone and tensed. “But?”

“If the time comes, you will continue Safe Haven’s brutal legacy, or I’ll bring the kids back up here right now and remove it.”

Marc chuckled. “There’s my baby.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “Joking, now?”

Marc grew serious. “I want this. I know it means everything. We’re on the same page.”

“Are we?” She leered at him. “I can just lay there.”

Marc laughed. “How can I refuse such a gracious offer?”

“So we’re all alone now?”

Marc kissed her, then steered them toward the employee steps. “Yes. Except for the ten kids in our cabin waiting for a bedtime story.”

Angela chuckled and let him guide her to their new double stateroom.

She laughed when he opened the door. “That’s more than ten.”

Marc met her eye. “Do you mind? I can clear it out.”

Angela entered the cabin of wary children who had killed without her permission. Most of the cargo kids stayed in the rear, waiting for her punishment now that they’d approved Marc’s evolution.

Angela opened her arms to them. “There’s no place I’d rather be.”

The kids cheered, mobbing her.

“Same here, baby. We’re really on the same page now.” Marc shut and locked the door as she began tickling the children, causing squeals that brightened the ship walls. “And I’m never going back.”

Angela concentrated on the kids, letting the grief slip from her heart. She always felt this way at the culmination of her plans. They were traumatic to everyone involved, but once again, Safe Haven had survived. She hadn’t known about the UN trap teams waiting for them until she and Marc had gotten sick. The delirious flashes of that future had given her enough warning to create a winning solution, but the plan to take down the weigh station had been in the works the instant the angels had revealed their betting addiction and lack of empathy. Both plans had gone better than expected.

*You paid a heavy price for this*. Angela’s witch was tired. *Your mate will lead you into the future.*

Angela smiled over the kids. *That’s exactly how it should be. Together, we’ll be unbeatable.*

*But it’s not together! He’ll be the true leader. You’ll return to decoy and figurehead.*

Angela didn’t feel the same jealousy. *That’s perfect too. Let him carry the weight. Without this break, my cracks will widen. Leave me in peace, demon. Rest. You’ve earned it.*

*I leave you in love.* The witch faded. *You can always find me in the flames.*

Angela felt empty and old as her demon vanished. She smiled brighter at the kids and blocked her mind from thinking about anything but having fun.

The descendant children in the room smothered her in love and good vibes, lifting her mood.

Marc listened, relieved it had worked out like they needed it to. Her cracks could never be allowed to grow. She was more powerful than William. She wouldn’t stop with slaughtering a beach of innocent refugees when she snapped. Angela might doom the entire world. She had important friends now.

**2**

Ivan lingered in the open doorway to Angela’s cabin four hours later. Anyone might have thought he was staring in love or longing, but Ivan was stewing. Angela had been sleeping for an hour. Dog was curled up on her feet. Tonya’s cats were curled up on Dog. Charlie was in the chair in the corner, snoozing, though he was coming more alert the longer Ivan lingered. Charlie and Angela had played chess after the kids left and talked silently. Ivan hadn’t snooped. He’d been stewing.

He was supposed to be sleeping now, while Dog and Charlie had guard duty, but too many things were bothering him. *I’m alive. No one else survived from my past. She saved me somehow.*

Ivan leaned against the doorframe, weak and fighting the need to crash. His brain was locked onto a thread.

*...will accomplish chunks of progress at once with brutal strokes no one else would dare.*

Angela had knocked out a list with this one. He ran through them. *The betting is over, Kronus is gone, the UN center is setup... Adrian’s off ship now. William and the rest of her enemies believe she’s dead. Kenn has some respect back, our troublemakers are gone. The camp voted to block all land contact...and she made a new friend. I think she also has a new leadership Eagle in Debra.*

Ivan drew in a breath. “Angie? Could we have gone around?”

Angela’s witch rushed out to meet Ivan, furious and lethal.

Ivan smiled at her. *I’m not sure we’ve met.*

The witch stopped, drawn despite her anger.

Ivan held out a hand. *Let’s chat.*

*About?* The witch slowly touched him, scenting, marking.

*About her cracks. I think you’re causing them.*

The witch stiffened. *The choices you force her to make cause that, not me.*

*How do you know?*

The witch paused. *I don’t, for sure. No one knows.*

Ivan smiled again. *Do you love her?*

*Of course! We are bonded to our hosts. You know.*

*Yes. And if she cracks up, you die, right? There’s no one else strong enough to host you now.*

The witch hated her secret being known, but she couldn’t lie. *Yes. Marc would try to share with me, for her, but there isn’t room.*

*Then I’d say a lot depends on those cracks being healed.*

*Yes.* The witch studied him through sullen orbs. *What do you want?*

*Go away. Let us watch her and see if they heal. Then we’ll know if it’s you.*

*When I return, her gifts will grow again. You may also watch for the cracks to change at that point.*

Ivan was surprised the witch was being reasonable. His eyes narrowed. *What’s the catch?*

*There isn’t one. She’s in the evolution stage right now. It drains her when I’m here.*

*Then why are you still here?*

*Because she’s mine!* The witch hissed at him, showing fangs and rage. Worlds rose and fell in her anger.

Ivan’s lips pursed. *You are the problem, aren’t you? And you know it.*

The witch vanished.

Ivan settled in the chair by the door to reread the descendant history book.

Marc appeared in the hall.

Ivan let Marc view the entire conversation without speaking, hoping he’d handled it right.

Marc was satisfied. He resumed his rounds. He was too close to Angela to be able to do that to her witch. Ivan had been believed because he and the witch had never met face to face. If she’d known it was Marc’s idea, she never would have agreed. *I’m going to save you, baby. Even if I have to make you an Invisible to do it.*

**3**

Kendle paused in rinsing out the rest of the hair color and makeup, feeling hot eyes roaming her body. She knew who it was by the tight breaths he was taking. “What?”

Quinn swallowed. “I want you.”

Kendle sighed. “Let me tell you what I want, then you can make a choice.”

“You can’t have Marc.” Quinn couldn’t help his jealousy. He was expecting a brushoff here.

“But I can have Adrian, and I want him.”

Quinn’s face fell. “What’s my choice?”

“Can you handle friends with benefits?”

Quinn forced himself to consider it. “For a while, maybe.” He stared at her. “Adrian will hurt you.”

“Adrian understands me in a way even Marc can’t.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know. It’s not something you can improve or compete for. It’s what I have to offer you.” Kendle’s body deflated. “And you deserve better. Several camp women are waiting for you to show an interest.”

Quinn understood she was giving him a way out that would let him save face. *I only want you! That sex was amazing!*

Kendle chuckled. “I was impressed with your aim.”

Quinn grinned, chest puffing out. “I am one of Adrian’s Eagles.”

Kendle opened the shower door.

Quinn hesitated for a second, then joined her. Adrian could always be counted on to screw up and Marc was taken. *I can wait. Someday, she’ll love me back.*

Outside the bathroom, Marc pushed the door shut the rest of the way and kept walking. “Good luck, dude. She likes trick shots, from what I’ve seen in Adrian’s mind. If you can’t keep up, she’ll move on.” Marc wasn’t jealous over Kendle having male friends. *If I ever snap my fingers, she’ll come running.* It was a powerful feeling that no longer gave him guilt unless he was around Angie when he had the thoughts. Over time, that would ease. Their vow to be honest, no matter what, would make things better for their relationship and prevent anyone from ever coming between them again. “Now, I’m happy.”

Marc prowled the passages of the ship, working off the restless energy that came from it being almost over. When Angela woke next time, she would be stronger and able to start resuming some of her duties. *I don’t want to give this up*. Marc hated that, but it was another part of his bond with Angie. He now understood why she hadn’t been able to turn it back over to Adrian or anyone else. *When you know you’re good at it, it feels wrong to give it up to someone who can’t do it as well.*

Marc frowned. *Do I feel like I can do it better than Angie?*

*No. Not yet*. Marc was relieved. *I have a lot to learn and she can’t wait to teach me. By the time she’s done, I’ll be eager to lead, and she’ll be eager for the break. That way, we’ll both be happy.*

Marc staggered, stopping as he understood what that meant. “When we return for the fight, I’ll be leading.”

He accepted that with pride and little smugness. “At least the UN won’t be involved. They’ll be gone before we reach the island.”

**4**

**200 miles North**

“It’s gone.” Travis stared at the faded map he’d liberated. “We’re on course. It should be here.”

The few people still in the lifeboat barely looked up at his announcement. They’d been out of water for two days. The fight between him and Corey had taken half their lives from wild shooting and sent a lot of their supplies overboard or ruined them. Twelve days at sea in the lifeboat had been too much for their sanity.

Travis stood on shaky legs, skin cracked, body too dehydrated to sweat under the piercing sun. He stared in every direction, searching for the missing UN ship.

Five miles away, Drew spotted them on the radar. He motioned to Shawn, who was sailing the big ship.

Shawn shrugged. “We have a job. They made their choices.” They’d been aware of several lifeboats passing. One had spotted them and tried to make contact on the radio, but Shawn wasn’t abandoning the mission for people who had abandoned their camp. Deserters had left the light. They were on their own.

Drew joined Jonny and Greg at the table in the corner of the bridge. They’d agreed to stay up here and sleep in the same room to avoid getting lost or hurt while alone. It was a big ship, with the feel of ghost passengers who were happy their ride had resumed.

Greg dealt a fresh hand of five-card stud, yawning. Once the sun went down, they would start practicing for the next part of their run. This bridge was closed-in enough to provide protection from the air and water contaminants, but their drills would be done in bulky gear in case the mission ended in a bad area. The boss had insisted they needed to function both ways.

“Is it okay to talk about what we’re doing?” Conner, sitting on a stool by the door, wasn’t sure about the rules.

Greg nodded. “We cleared this ship. Say anything you want.”

“A five-man kill team seems light. What am I missing?”

The men liked it that Conner assumed he’d missed something and not the other way around. Greg motioned to Shawn.

Shawn swallowed his cold coffee. “We’re infiltrating the enemy.”

Conner frowned. “How?”

“Four kings, jack high.” Jonny put his cards down for the others to see and groan about. “We’re negotiating for a job.”

“What makes you think they’ll even talk to us?”

Greg stared. “We have you.”

Conner caught their thoughts; he paled. “I’m your prisoner!”

“And we’re out here away from your daddy, so be a good boy or we’ll just use your body to get in. We’re all fine with either one.”

Conner’s heart pounded. “I don’t understand.”

Shawn looked over from the wheel. “What’s not to understand? You have no friends on this *four*-man kill team. If you manage to survive, thank your dad for all the fun you’re about to have.”

**5**

**Tow Ship**

Adrian turned on the lantern, shivering at the cool breeze on his sweaty skin. He’d barely grabbed ahold of a rope hanging from this ship as it sailed by. He’d hurt his arm a little, slowing down the climb up the side of a vessel doing twenty knots. Now that they were away from the floaties, Marc had increased to cruising speed.

Adrian opened the ration kit he’d found and dug in. he sat at the crate he’d chosen to use as a table. Getting it up to the wheelhouse hadn’t been fun. Neither had moving the tied-down pallets of wood. He’d only needed to clear three inches of room to get the generator up here, but he hadn’t been able to do it. He planned to try again tomorrow.

Wood creaked

Adrian tore open the baggie. “Come eat. I have enough.”

A female gasp echoed.

Adrian didn’t turn around. He’d spotted the shadow following him. “You need more training if you’re going to kill descendants.”

Sadie eased around the wheelhouse, knife in hand. She stayed on the other side of the crate, glowering at the man who’d locked her gifts.

Adrian poured the package into one of the two coffee cups he’d found in a cabinet. “It’s cold, but it’ll–”

Sadie dropped the knife to snatch up the cup. She drained it in seconds, swallowing chunks whole.

Adrian opened the second package and poured it into the other cup. He nudged it toward the oddly sexy woman wiping her mouth across her arm. “I snacked while digging through the cargo area. Go ahead.”

Sadie repeated her actions, stopping to belch. She dropped the second cup, splattering her legs in the dregs.

Adrian stirred powdered milk into his open top canteen, then capped it and shook it.

When he sat it down, Sadie grabbed it without suspicion.

Adrian settled back against the wall as he lit a cheroot he’d found with the cups. He believed these items had belonged to the staff of this boat. He hadn’t cleared all the lockers before Angela had taken over this ship at the beach for loading. He puffed, eyes shutting. The crash was coming soon. He could feel it.

Sadie crouched, arms going around her gut as milk spilled onto the deck.

Adrian didn’t move, letting the sedative take effect.

Sadie slumped over, moaning.

“You’ll be okay. And I won’t hurt you. Just take a nap with me and we’ll talk in the morning.”

Sadie’s eyes closed. Her weakened system shut down quickly from the drugs, leaving her breathing even. Her cramped face finally eased into peace.

“That’s much better.” Adrian stared at the lit cruise ship, mourning his new status and location. Neil had flipped on him; Angela had said goodbye. Marc had removed him from the ship. Adrian had foolishly thought having his gifts locked was going to be the only punishment until they reached the island. He’d forgotten about the threats and deals to move to this ship. Marc hadn’t.

“Bastard never forgets anything.” Adrian puffed, dwelling on Marc. In two weeks, he had calmed the camp, supplied their needs and won them over. There wasn’t a person on the Adrianna who would take his side over Marc’s now. “I lost.”

Adrian felt the evil Mitchel side rise. He tried to ignore it, but he was alone. There was no one else to listen to. Marc’s mistake had been in assuming the evil side was the descendant half. Adrian’s human soul had always been the problem and Marc had sent the good half away.

“So now, we’ll see what happens when we hit land. If I’ve gone totally bad by then, they can bury me there. If they don’t, I will get my camp back...and that includes my favorite student.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

**For The Future**

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December 22nd

**8am**

**1**

**K**enn walked to the top deck in the last group of fifty camp members going up for their time in the fresh air. He was off duty and finishing loose ends. Marc had most of it covered, but Kenn couldn’t find any reason to put off the work now and he hadn’t been able to sleep in. *It’s not like I have a warm woman next to me.*

Kenn saw Brittani and Daryl inching up the stairs ahead of the jammed crowd and approved the mood. No one was complaining or pushing by the weak, bruised couple. Both of them had earned respect, but it was also wonderful to see their sick people finally out and about. It gave everyone hope.

Jayda paused next to Kenn. “They’re engaged.”

Kenn hadn’t known. He added it to his mental list while taking out his notebook. He handed her a sheet of paper with several signatures on the bottom. “If you don’t hand it in during the first Eagle meeting, the offer disappears.”

Jayda read it, smile spreading across her face. “Really? I get to pick?”

“You did an amazing job. Leadership is proud of you.”

“What about you?”

Kenn frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“Do you agree?” Jayda held up the paper, drawing attention. “I refuse to be a quota fill.”

Kenn’s lips twitched. “And you think the boss would do that?”

“If it served the future, yes.”

“And Marc?”

Jayda shrugged. “Don’t know him well, but probably. He is engaged to the boss.”

“But you trust my opinion?”

Jayda chuckled. “Yeah, I don’t know how it happened either.”

Kenn tapped the paper. “It was my idea. I printed it off and got it signed an hour ago.” Kenn moved into the crowd, leaving her smiling.

“Hey, I need a verification on something.” Charlie held out a small note so no one else could read it or pick it from their minds.

Kenn scanned and nodded. “So when’s the wedding? It’s a little odd that you two haven’t set the date yet.”

Charlie flushed. “I... We...”

Kenn laughed with those around them. “It’s okay, kid.”

Charlie found a timid tone. “I’ve been waiting. It felt disrespectful.”

Kenn shrugged. “It actually sounds like fun. The camp could use that right now, but I assumed it would put pressure on you.”

Charlie flushed again. “We’d love to do it soon. We want to be allowed to be... We want the rights of... We want to be married!”

Everyone laughed at his babbling, remembering their days of wanting to be alone with the person they were in love with.

Kenn wrote it in his book too, refusing to think about how well they’d just played a small crowd on their own. “I’ll let the boss know.”

“Mom doesn’t want me to. She’ll try to delay it, I think.”

“Maybe she’s right.” Kenn had no problem with what Charlie was now trying to do. He just didn’t think it would work.

“Maybe. I know we’re young, but it’s not like we have our whole lives in front of us, you know? We’re always in danger.” Charlie’s tone and eyes lowered. “I want to be allowed to love her now, while I can.”

Those who had lost someone immediately switched to his side. Those whose loved one had been spared, switched even faster.

“We’ll talk to your mom.”

“Angela likes us happy.”

“She’ll agree if we want it.”

Charlie scowled. “Don’t use me against my mom! If I can’t do it, neither can any of you.”

Kenn was proud of Charlie in that moment, able to feel the genuine heat behind the demand. The teenager didn’t want negative side effects from their decision.

Kenn snorted. “No one uses anyone against your mom, boy. She can look after herself.”

The tension broke, drawing chuckles as Charlie’s cheeks turned darker.

“We’ll talk to her, but we didn’t mean we’d threaten the boss.”

“We’re not crazy.”

More explanations and chuckles floated through the ship. The walls brightened, noticeably.

Kenn watched the non-magic users in the small crowd, evaluating reactions for problems and found one. *They’re scared of us.*

They couldn’t help it. Endangered people froze for a brief instant at the gravest of dangers, scenting in hopes they were wrong. For that second, all emotions and terrors were exposed. Other than sex, the moment before life was extinguished or allowed to continue was the most vulnerable a living thing could ever be. Kenn saw everything on the faces and in the hearts of those around him. Confronted with yet another form of magic, their first instinct was to scent for the danger they felt coming. Humanity was already sure descendants would be their doom.

Kenn did his job–he calmed the humans in his herd with a distraction. “Did you get to see Marc shove Adrian overboard?”

The crowd switched to hard laughter and funny comments. A few of them even imitated Marc’s movements, but their eyes didn’t lose that terrified glint of knowing their saviors would also be their killers in the end.

Kenn told a few jokes, then faded to the rear of the crowd as Charlie continued. The teenager kept them laughing as the crowd began to climb the stairs now that Daryl and Brittani had finally reached the top deck.

Kenn went back to the infirmary, mind and heart battling over his newest revelation.

**2**

“Have a seat.” Angela cut Kenn off as he entered the swinging doors. She was in the middle of leaving.

Kenn winced as she pulled out her IV and hung it up. Blood rolled over her arm, but Ivan was there to wipe it and slap on a thick bandage.

“You’re set as soon as we button your shirt.” Ivan yanked the last piece of tape from her arm. “Even though I found you on your bathroom floor this morning and Morgan says you should stay here a few more days.”

Kenn opened his mouth to protest.

Ivan jerked her shirt up.

Angela punched him.

Ivan hit the floor while Angela walked toward Kenn.

Chuckling, Kenn dropped into the chair by James, just noticing the quiet man. Around them, only a few people were still in the infirmary. Ramer and Sheldon were here now, both sedated. Ramer had been screaming and Sheldon had been crying. The medics hadn’t been able to take either for long.

Angela waved at them. “Come on. You two have the same problem as a few others. I have thirty minutes of alertness in me; I’m not spending it in a cot getting a sponge bath from anyone but Marc!”

Kenn chuckled.

James frowned. “What do you mean, the same problem?”

Angela held the swinging door for both men, pointing to the largest office across the hall.

Angela turned her head to glower at Morgan, who was coming toward her with a hand extended. “Kendle showed me a very primitive way to make sure someone doesn’t touch her. Shall I demonstrate?”

Morgan recoiled. He’d heard about Kendle’s adventure on the dock. He went back to the medical desk where he’d fallen asleep.

Angela entered the office and went to the tiny window that allowed her to watch the opposite corridor. “A few others are coming.”

Kenn was willing to let her try to ease his mind. If she said they had the same trouble with multiple people, that was a problem they needed to discuss and figure out how to handle.

Angela didn’t turn. “Yes. We’re going to have more meetings like this. They’ll grow larger as more people become aware of the danger of merging magic into humanity.”

“Is there no hope of having three societies, where magic, human and the offspring of both can coexist?”

Angela didn’t answer Ralph’s question. She didn’t need to. Humanity hadn’t been able to coexist with themselves. Descendants had been repressed and caged since they appeared. Neither of those things boded well for the future.

“I don’t want them to die out.” Kenn lowered his voice. “Or us.”

“None of us do.” Jeff held the door for Kimmie and Missy to enter. Zack came in behind them, nodding at Kenn. He held the door for Gus.

Kenn was dismayed as people kept coming in. It was a mix of both sides. *If that many people know, it’s not a secret.*

“It never was a secret.” Kendle held the door for Ray. She closed and locked it as Angela pulled the shades. “It’s just that in moments like this, they can’t hide it.” Kendle sank down next to Kenn on the long couch. She leaned against his arm. Next to Kenn, Angela would barely be able to see her.

Kenn shifted to provide more cover, trying not to snicker.

Angela rested against the shade covered window, looking at them.

Twenty tired, worried people stared back, waiting for her to make it better.

“Let’s hear options in one sentence. We’ll explore those we think we can swallow.” She gestured at Kendle. “Go first.”

Kendle sat up, clearing her throat. “I don’t support this option, but we could breed them all until we’re one species.”

Angela held up a hand when people started to protest. “We’re just listing options now. Go on, Ray.”

Ray sighed. “We could do nothing and hope it solves itself, but I do support Kendle’s choice. If we’re all alike, we can’t fight.”

Angela waved. “What else do you have?”

Ray shrugged. “We can separate the two groups. It might mean new breeding laws.”

“We could get strict.” James was next in line. “We’re remaking the constitution. We can add things.”

“No. It’s perfect like it is.” Jeff hated the idea of changing the constitution.

“Then you can’t be allowed to exist because magic users are not covered.” Kenn challenged Jeff’s human side to explain it.

Jeff hadn’t considered that humanity’s constitution didn’t apply to them. “So we’re above the law?”

“We don’t have them in writing, except for Safe Haven’s rules, which includes all members, not just humanity.” Angela came to the desk and sat in the one empty chair. “Keep going with options. We need to know them all.” Angela took a stack of papers from her book. “Each of you will take one of the options, preferably one you refuse to vote for, and tear it down. Find a way you could live with it, so the other side can too.”

“Why are we even doing this?” Ivan was already confused after hearing just a few of the options. “We survived again. Why do we have to start stirring them up already?”

Angela waved at Tommy.

Tommy pulled the string, making the shades fly up next to him.

A dozen guilty faces peered through the glass, but they didn’t leave.

Ivan nodded, sighing. “I get your point.”

Tommy started to shut the shades.

Angela shook her head. “Leave them. Let people see all races are represented, as are both genders and both branches of humanity. At some point, Dog will probably join us too. All species have a stake here. If we can’t find a way to make it work and save ourselves, then no one can.”

She took a seat and opened her notebook. “We’ll go up for the wake in a few minutes. Marc’s getting ready to start calling us to the top deck. Until he makes the call, hit me with all the options we haven’t covered. In a few days, we’ll meet again to discuss them.”

“It’s been a year.” Jeff stared at Angela, but his thoughts were on the past. “We’ve survived for 365 days.”

People stared. They had been too busy to keep track of the date.

Jeff frowned. “Do you think that’ll come up at the wake?”

Angela shrugged. “If not, you should mention it. People need to know so they can mark it, even if we are a day late.”

“That also means it’s almost Christmas, right?” Ray wanted something hopeful to think about after the wake and funeral.

Some people smiled. Everyone else frowned. It felt wrong to think about Christmas after losing so much.

Angela forced herself to give them what they needed. “Our losses are the reason we should celebrate Christmas, New Years and every other holiday. We’ve survived for a year after the end of the world. That’s a miracle. It deserves to be celebrated.”

The ship speakers crackled with Marc’s solemn voice. “Good morning, Safe Haven. We will begin services on the top deck in twenty minutes. Please gather on the top deck in twenty minutes.”

Angela smiled a bit. “My timing’s off. I’ll work on it.”

People rose, understanding the meeting was over.

Angela let them clear out, dwelling on the war. She’d forgotten the anniversary was coming and it had passed without exact minute prayers or tears. That felt wrong somehow, like they’d disrespected the horror of the event by not recognizing it.

Angela slowly stood, blinking rapidly to clear the darkness scope on her vision back to the dimmer glare. She’d scanned everyone at the meeting. She was making lists of the darkness she found. Safe Haven’s members couldn’t be allowed to pass that into the next generation. “I’m going to change them or remove them, for the future.”

Waiting for her near the door, Ivan nodded. “I’ll help in any way you want me to.”

Angela lifted a brow.

Ivan sighed. “Fine. I’ll be a part of your breeding tree.”

Angela snickered as she moved toward the top deck. *A dozen down, three hundred and twenty-two to go.*

**3**

“Our journey has been long. We’ve lost so many...” Marc’s emotional tenor carried through the ship over the PA system. “It’s hard to bring up some of their faces, but we loved them all.”

Marc met their teary eyes as he gave the first service to honor their losses. “Sacrifices are a part of life. The pain reminds us that we’re not gone yet, that we haven’t been forgotten, that time hasn’t passed us by. We go on in their memories. We go on in love of life, and hope for a better tomorrow, where peace resides for everyone.”

Angela took her place next to Marc, repeating the words as he gave them to her mentally. “We yearn for happiness and cling to our ghosts. We’re lost and aching, pretending that we’re whole because it’s expected of us. It’s what we do. We go on.” She wiped away tears, as many people in the crowd were doing. Marc was getting all of them with his emotions, as well as his words. “We are not the chosen people. We are not better than those who fell or were left behind. We are human first, and we hurt for all of humanity, not just those we had bonds to. The war almost brought us to extinction. We’re no longer a mix of refugees or separate races struggling to make a mark on history. We are simply survivors of the apocalypse. And we’ll go on. Because that’s what survivors do. It’s our job.”

Marc hugged her as she cried, finishing the words everyone in their camp needed to hear before the healing process could begin. “Hatred, bitterness and sorrow will always haunt us because we’re alive. Life has always been this way. Nothing has changed. We’re human. We make mistakes and we carry regret. None of that makes us better or worse than the person next to us, or even those in other countries who are fighting this same battle. We’re all part of the human herd. We need each other. The future needs us to put aside the past. All those we’ve lost will be dishonored if we can’t come together. Please remember their sacrifices when you get angry, bitter. Life isn’t fair. It never has been. It wasn’t set up to be fair. It was designed for the strongest of the species to survive. Wrong or not, it doesn’t change the facts: Those here now are among the strongest of our species. The war took things we’ll never get back, but in the end, even an apocalypse couldn’t eliminate us. We’re here to stay. Fate will just have to accept it.”

People cheered at the words, and at the feel of coming together. They were tired of fighting, tired of hating and killing. They wanted peace.

Marc vowed to give that to them. “I’m sorry for your losses, and for mine. But I’m not sorry we survived when others didn’t. Don’t you dare be sorry for it either.”

More cheers and tears flowed over the deck, bringing healing to those who could accept it now. The others cried for their loved ones and friends, but they were also ready for peace.

Marc nudged Angela forward, aware that she didn’t want to do this. Marc was certain now was the time. He insisted.

Angela faced her crying people, tears dripping down her shirt. “We’re going to the international detention center to wipe them out. We’ll be there in two weeks.”

No one spoke.

Angela waited for protests.

Marc smiled at the people, proud of them. The anger coming into their faces now was honest. They knew there was still one big enemy to face.

Angela realized Marc was right. None of the hundreds of souls here on deck were against it. In fact, even those in deep mourning were in favor.

Marc put an arm around her shoulders. “We’re not afraid to die for what’s right. We don’t want to fight anymore, but we will. For the future.”

“For the future!” Neil shouted, hoping it was the right time.

The camp echoed it back, repeating the chant.

Marc held Angela as she took in the newest change in their people.

Angela cried harder. *I didn’t think they would ever get to this point!*

Marc kissed her forehead. *Neither did they. Be proud. We’ve all come a long way.*

“I am proud.” Angela smiled through the tears as the chants stopped and people began to drift back down into the ship or to the rear deck, where white balloons with names were being filled and released. “Of every one of them.” She turned in his arms. “But mostly, of you.”

Marc grinned. “Anything for you, baby.”

Angela sniffed. “It’s not just for me, though.”

“No. It’s for our future.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

**Close**

**A close up of a device

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**1**

***T****he Descendants, A History by Adrian Mitchel*

Adrian swallowed a chill as he stared at the title. Once this was done, he would live forever in the hearts and minds of all their kind. It was an immense honor and a mountain he’d never thought to climb. “How the hell do I do this?”

The voices clamored for his attention, screaming and shouting to be heard.

Adrian clenched his fists, fighting to narrow down just one.

“You have to call them forward.”

Adrian looked over at Sadie, who was handcuffed to a handle on the wall. Other than that, she hadn’t been restricted, harmed, or even searched.

Sadie had watched him start the coffee and listened to him piss off the side of the boat without speaking. When he’d sat to write, she’d been curious enough to wait for her own relief. His words reminded her that she needed a bathroom break. “Got a minute, Mr. Mitchel?”

Adrian grunted as he rose, very sore. He unlocked the cuff and waited for her to take off running.

Sadie stared into his eyes, preparing to kick and dart.

“There’s no need to disable me first. Just go.” Adrian winced at the shrill voices clamoring for his attention. “Come back in an hour and I’ll make something to eat.”

Sadie kicked him in the shin instead of the balls and took off running.

“Damn.” Adrian hobbled back to the notebook, grumbling, but he was pleased to have a sailing partner. He just needed to tame her a little and it might even be a pleasant trip.

A gun cocked.

Adrian sighed. “I saw the mess you made in the cargo area. If you kill me, you’ll starve to death. Don’t they teach you guys to cook before sending you out to battle us monsters?”

Sadie lowered the gun, unable to think of a response. She walked out of the wheelhouse, now the one muttering under her breath.

Adrian chuckled. He sat down, pondering her words. “Call them forward... But how do I organize it? Should I start as far back as the dates go or begin with today’s history and work my way back?”

Adrian sighed as he picked up the pencil. “Oldest first, please. Name and place of birth to start.”

Nothing happened.

Adrian cleared his throat. “I’m the Keeper. Come forward to have your history recorded, oldest first.”

Adrian sucked in air as a vivid impression filled his mind. A woman’s soft voice began to speak.

Adrian recorded it word for word, not letting himself dwell on anything he was told.

Sadie finished her bathroom break and came right back, Adrian’s gun tucked into her waistband. She watched him labor over the paper and mumble to himself, wondering what he was doing. She wanted to talk. She also didn’t. She already knew Adrian was dangerous. Provoking him wasn’t a good idea.

Sadie settled nearby to wait for breakfast, beautiful violet eyes studying her unwanted companion. She wished for her gifts so she could get into his head. Young and restless, Sadie had joined for the adventure and free food. Neither had been given until now and they’d both come from this man. She watched every move he made, clever mind working on his puzzle.

**2**

Adrian stretched, groaning.

Sadie flinched awake at the noise. She sat up, unhappy with herself for dozing off.

Adrian looked at the sun and realized three hours had gone by. He secured his book in his kit and dug out a ration bar. “Munch on this while I get something going.” He tossed it over his shoulder, certain she would catch it.

Adrian listened to her rip into the bar, sorry he’d made her wait. *I didn’t expect it to be so consuming. I didn’t know that much time had passed.*

Adrian lit the small stove and got water boiling, amazed to feel so at peace when he’d been split from his gifts and his love. Three hours of recording had given him a feeling of satisfaction. The first fifteen pages in the notebook were done. It was amazing.

“What are you working on?”

“A history of our kind.” Adrian opened one of the food kits he’d gathered as he went through the ship. He added a few freeze-dried items to the pot and snapped down the lid. “It’ll be a while, but we’ll be able to eat off this all day.”

Her head snapped up. “More than one meal in a day? You’re lying.”

Adrian felt deep sympathy, but he didn’t let it show in his tone. “When it’s done, we’ll have a full bowl, with milk. After that, you can eat a bowl an hour until it’s gone. Just give it that hour between or you’ll get sick.” Adrian already knew she wouldn’t be able to eat so much. After the second bowl, her guts would refuse to hold any more.

Sadie glowered, stomach rumbling as she swallowed. “Why are you feeding me? What do you want?”

“Why do I have to want anything?” Adrian dug out clean clothes, missing his jacket. Everything he was using now had been scrounged from below or he’d put it here before they set sail, not knowing he would need it.

“Nothing is free. Wasn’t before; ain’t now.” She took another large bite, spraying crumbs through an open mouth.

“True.”

She eyed his kit. “You want my history?”

Adrian shrugged. “What have you done?”

She paused; more crumbs fell to the floor. “Not much... Oh! I’m a traitor to my country and to my own kind. Is that enough?”

Adrian sighed, misery returning. “Not by itself.”

Sadie considered how she’d joined. “I fought in the UN matches and won a lot. I’m also the only female to win a death match against a descendant, without my gifts.”

“That’ll do it.” Adrian was curious. If it could be duplicated, he would pass the message to Marc whenever someone checked on him. “We can do that during dinner if you like.”

She scowled. “You gonna drug me again?”

Adrian chuckled. “Probably. You’re an admitted traitor. I’m a patriot. Natural enemies shouldn’t mix too close.”

“How about you lock me in a cabin below?”

He heard her nervous tone. “Why?”

“So I know you’re not touching me while I’m out!” She blushed.

Adrian untied his boots. “Okay.”

Sadie stared. “What’s the deal?”

Adrian kept removing his boots, then took off his shirt. “I’m changing. You don’t have to turn around, but please don’t touch me without permission.”

Sadie snickered at the reverse psychology. “You’re funny.”

Adrian removed all his clothes and washed off the layer of gritty salt that was making his skin raw. He ignored her roaming eyes, just seeking relief.

“I’ve been a service girl.” She shivered. “I hated it.”

Adrian wiped salt from the crack of his ass, cursing Marc. “Being forced can do that.”

“I liked some of it.”

“The credits afterward?”

Sadie chuckled. “Yes. And the cuddling.”

Adrian tossed the dirty clothes into the corner. “Cuddling after sex is nice. Doing it after making love is amazing.”

“And I guess you can do that, right?” Sadie didn’t want to trade her body for food and water, but she’d done worse since the war.

“Not with you.” Adrian used his dirty shirt, turned inside out, to wipe salt from his hair.

She frowned, starting to get self-conscious while he cleaned up. Her first bath in months had come from jumping overboard. “What’s wrong with me?”

Adrian kept using his basic line with twitchy females who didn’t know where they stood in the world. If she gave him time, Sadie would become stronger than she’d ever been, and no one would ever be able to manipulate her this way again. The only hindrance was brain power. He wasn’t sure if she was smart enough yet. Some people just weren’t. “You’re not willing and we’re enemies. Both of those would have to change for me to be your service girl.”

Sadie laughed this time. “You’re funny.”

Adrian stayed with his back to her as he pulled on his pants, not wanting her to see that he wasn’t as immune as he sounded. *I’m a guy. We mention sex and it gets hard, even when it knows it isn’t getting used.*

“I’ll think about it.”

“Me too, I’m sure.” Adrian zipped up and sat to pull on the winter socks. They were all he’d been able to find, but they were infinitely better than none at all. “So why become a traitor? Gold or food?”

“Conscious choice. I was an activist before. I supported the UN. When they came calling, I wasn’t busy.”

Adrian met her eye. “Do you think I’ll ever return your gifts if you lie to me?”

Sadie threw herself onto the pallet, sulking. “Asshole.”

“Lying traitor.”

“Mitchel.”

“That’s a low blow.”

Sadie snickered again.

“How old are you, Sadie Jones?” Adrian had picked out her name and a few details when he’d locked her gifts, but it hadn’t been much. She would figure out that he was also powerless, but it might not be for a while if he was careful.

“Seventeen.”

“Family, alive?”

“Probably. I ran away a few years ago.” She stopped being fearless, unable to fight the old horrors. “I was in California when the war came.”

“So was I. Bakersfield.”

“Fresno.”

“Where’d they catch you?”

“On a beach, with a group of college kids who thought I was one of them.” Sadie shuddered. “They hurt us when they came. We were waving and crying, hugging.” Her voice dropped into betrayed pain. “We thought we were being rescued.”

“Stop.” Adrian buttoned his shirt. “I don’t want to feel bad for you yet.”

Sadie’s lip stuck out as she struggled not to cry.

Adrian finished dressing, then went to check on his drying weapons. He took time to wipe them again. “That weapon won’t work like it is. Bring it over here so I can take care of it.”

Sadie placed it on the warm rail and moved back, worried about being attacked.

“This will be a long trip.” Adrian kept working her, pretending she was a young Mitchel just pulled out of the labs. “I’d rather not spend it with an enemy.”

Sadie tensed, preparing to fight when he tried to throw her overboard.

“We’ll call a truce until we reach land.” Adrian leaned against the rail, studying her. “We won’t be friends, but we won’t have to watch out for a knife while we sleep.”

Sadie nodded. “Magic?”

“Do I need to bind you?!” Adrian advanced, hating her flinch. “Can’t you just keep your word?”

“I will! I will!” She cringed from his anger, backing away.

Adrian went by her and back to the wheelhouse.

Sadie slowly followed. “Why, really?”

Adrian sighed. “I get lonely.”

Sadie believed him. He held all the cards here. There was no reason to lie. “You have any games? I like games.”

Adrian motioned toward the front cabinet. “I think there’s a deck of cards.”

Sadie got the deck, handling it as if it were food. “Awesome!”

*She’s just a kid.* Adrian relaxed a little, suddenly grateful he’d spared the girl and she’d climbed back on board. *Thank you for not making me go through this completely alone. I know I don’t deserve it but thank you anyway.*

“Why did they toss you overboard?”

Adrian winced. He’d been hoping Sadie hadn’t seen that humiliation. “It’s a long story.”

Sadie shrugged. “How long until they get wherever they’re going?”

Adrian looked at her. “The UN doesn’t know where we’re headed?”

“Not that I heard, and rumors were everywhere, about everyone.”

Adrian stored that information. “A month, I think. It depends on Angela’s next choice.”

“The UN thinks Safe Haven is on the way to eliminate them. They’re gathering people, calling them back to base.”

“Good to know.” Adrian got out his pen as the voices in his mind began weeping at the lack of attention. “Give me an hour and we’ll talk some more if you want.”

“And eat?”

“Yes.” Adrian fell back into the work, forgetting where he was.

Sadie considered killing him, but she didn’t want to be alone either. “Does it bother you if people read over your shoulder?”

Adrian didn’t hear her. He was already into the history of a woman who had lived a very long time ago.

Sadie edged closer to look, curious and reckless. She knew the man was dangerous, but she couldn’t help being drawn to him. He’d been nice to her. She couldn’t handle that.

Sadie began to read as Adrian wrote, moving into touching range to see the small, neat text.

**My father dumped my body into the river. I was consumed by the animals and trapped with my demon in this wasteland of lost souls. My mother never knew. She went on to have seven more children, all daughters. My father mated each of them and produced deformed offspring with power and no will to control it. All of those damaged children ended up in the same river, year after year. Our justice was denied!**

**I have searched for an escape from this place for centuries. My demon faded into nothingness before the new world was discovered. I have been alone here since.**

Sadie backed up, heart hurting. She didn’t want to know more about the story he was recording. She now wanted justice for the lost souls.

“So do I.” Adrian put the pen down as the angry voice in his mind faded. “This one was used as an experiment. In the beginning, no one knew what would happen if they crossed descendants and humans. Her father tried to create superbeings who could go back up and challenge God’s decision to create humanity.”

“Did it work?”

Adrian’s brows came together.

Sadie flushed. “Well, I don’t know this stuff. I only have the basics on our kind.”

“Same, until now. With these recordings, I’ll be able to trace it back and maybe figure out what causes the cracks in a...” Adrian stopped, not wanting her to have current information about Angela.

Sadie already knew. “The UN says mental cracks come from disobeying an alpha’s order.”

Adrian snorted.

Sadie flushed darker. “That’s not true?”

“A byzan is above an alpha. We don’t tell them what to do; they tell us.”

“Byzan are a myth.”

Adrian stared at her. “You meant alphas or all descendants?”

“All. Any of us can go crazy.” She shrugged. “According to the UN videos and booklets. They passed out a lot of stuff like that, but it all says the same thing: Obey orders.”

“Makes sense, for them. For us, it’s all lies.”

“So we don’t get cracks if we disobey an alpha?”

“We get punished.”

“With cracks.”

“No.” Adrian sighed, trying to be patient. “Only byzan get mental cracks. Alphas just punish you.”

“Like enforcers.” Sadie shivered.

Adrian nodded. “Yes, but an enforcer is stronger than an alpha in a way, though they report to them. Enforcers are special.”

Sadie stared toward the big cruise ship. “Safe Haven has more than one.”

“Yes.” Adrian didn’t tell her they were all young. Even Jennifer was just a teenager.

Sadie shivered. “Are you guys going to attack the IDC? Because I want off before you get there.”

Adrian studied her, seeing strength and a reckless gleam in her violet eyes. In that moment, she reminded him of Angela.

Sadie blushed under his attention. It was the first time he’d shown heat.

Adrian turned back to his notebook. The next voice was already calling to him.

Sadie stayed back, questioning her physical response. “Did you use the alpha pull on me?”

“No.”

“How can I trust you?”

Adrian knew he shouldn’t, but he suddenly wanted a bond with her. “My gifts were locked. I’m an Invisible now, like you.”

Sadie gaped at him. Anger flooded the wheelhouse.

Adrian ducked her lunge and followed her fall, hard body pinning her to the deck.

Sadie didn’t struggle. She’d been taught to submit in this situation. Tears began sliding from under her lashes.

Adrian watched her, mind working on a new plan that would most certainly get him killed when they reached the island.

Sadie waited for his attack, body shaking, tears rolling.

Adrian moved to the floor next to her and sat, but he braced for another assault.

Sadie slowly opened her eyes in relieved confusion. “You don’t want me?”

Adrian shook his head, disgusted with how she’d been trained, how she was reacting. “Let’s make a deal.”

Sadie stayed still, afraid he was testing her. “Okay.”

“Don’t you even want to know what it is?”

“No.”

“Because you won’t stick to it.”

“I will! I always do what I’m told!”

Adrian sighed. “That’s the deal, little girl. Never again submit to anyone, over anything, unless it’s what you want.”

Sadie stared at him in suspicious confusion. “I can’t do that. I’m well trained.”

“You were brainwashed. I can help you, but only if you agree to the deal.”

Sadie slowly sat up. “You want me to fight you, on everything?”

Adrian chuckled. “I keep forgetting you kids take everything literal.” Adrian stood, ignoring her flinch. “I want you to free yourself of the UN chains. You’re a human being, not a slave or a weapon to control.”

Sadie shuddered. “I can’t do that.”

“Then get off this ship.” Adrian walked out of the wheelhouse. “I can’t stand to watch you act that way. You’re a survivor. You deserve better.”

“I don’t, though.” Her voice lowered into a mutter. “I’m a bad girl.”

Adrian kept walking, attention caught by balloons. As they came closer on the wind, he could read some of the names written on them. Tears came to his eyes.

Sadie approached him on the right, where he could see her. She stayed by his side and watched the balloons float by until they were all gone and the rear deck of the cruise ship emptied of all but a striking couple and a few guards. “Who are they?”

“Your former targets.”

Sadie gasped. “That’s Angela?”

“And Marc.”

Sadie waved a hand. “He’s just her lover. His kids are the strong ones.”

Adrian stared at his rival. “Marc is the most powerful descendant on the planet.”

“You can’t know that.”

Adrian held up a hand. “Watch.”

Sadie studied the couple, realizing they were hearing this conversation. She decided it was a good time to be still and hope they didn’t order Adrian to kill her.

“They won’t.” Adrian sighed as Marc lit up a shield around the entire cruise ship in response to his request. “And I wouldn’t do it anyway.”

Sadie gawked at the open display of power. “You’d defy that? *Him?*”

Adrian met Marc’s eye across the ships. “In a heartbeat. They banished me. I’m free to do what I want and face the consequences.”

“He hates you.” Sadie could see it in Marc’s expression. “What did you do?”

Adrian stared coldly. “I almost stole his life, with her. And in the end, if he isn’t very, very careful, I’ll still get it.”

Marc had caught everything happening on Adrian’s ship. He sent a mental response, staring back just as ruthlessly. *Your grandson, Brian, was taken captive by the soldiers right after we set sail. Nancy now belongs to a group of slavers who might eat the baby when it’s born. Your daughter is in a lab, miles under the ground. And Conner is being handed over to the UN by our kill team. Be very, very careful yourself, Mr. Mitchel. You’re about to be the last of your line.*

Marc led Angela toward the ramp while enjoying Adrian’s screams.

Angela couldn’t take it. “Please? Do it now.”

Marc waved a hand.

Angela’s mind went silent as Marc locked her gifts. She was now an Invisible.

Angela smiled at the instant relief. “Thank you!”

Marc guided her down the ramp. “It’s my honor.”

**End of Book 12**

**What would you like to do now?**

**[A picture containing person, water, riding

Description automatically generated](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-13.html)**

[The next book in this series](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-13.html)

Link goes to my website.

## Extras Section Book 12

[Deleted Scenes Book 12](#DeletedBK12)

[Box Set Page](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/law-box-sets-page.html)

[Print/Audio](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-12.html)

[Customized tags and hoodies](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/eagle-gear.html)

[Radiation chart](#RadChart)

[Note from author](#_From_the_Author)

[Book 13](#_Book_13_Sample)

[Backstory](#_Backstory)

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[Go back to the beginning of this book](#_TOC)

**Deleted Scenes BK12**

“Everyone okay up here?” Kendle climbed the steps to the bridge, fighting harsh memories. It had been easier last night when everyone was up here with her.

“Surviving.”

Kendle stepped into the bridge, forcing herself to smile. “Boss wants an update.”

Theo frowned. “You shouldn’t be up here without a suit yet. We haven’t called it.”

“You have the no-scratch cone off.”

Theo laughed at her description of the helmet for his radiation suit. “We’re clear now. I’ll give the word when Kenn calls for it.”

Kendle swept the bridge, seeing it was still neat and clean.

“You did good work up here. Smell’s almost gone.”

Kendle nodded. Vomit and shit odors were hard to get rid of even after the mess was cleaned up. Blood dried and smothered itself. She still preferred the first two. Vomit and feces meant life. Blood meant it was ending.

The ocean mocked Kendle with its beauty. *Nothing so dangerous should look so wonderful.*

Theo checked the screen against the notebook on the counter and wrote it down. “How are things below?”

“The same.”

Theo glanced over. “Has to be hard for you.”

Kendle held in an honest reply. She had no idea how she was doing it.

“When was the last time you slept?”

“I snooze.”

“So, since we left?”

Kendle’s voice went cold. “No. I had the first few days in the infirmary, counting ceiling tiles between sedations.”

Theo didn’t bat an eyelash. “There’s a cot in the corner behind you. Take a snooze now if you like.”

Kendle wasn’t sure if she looked that bad or if he just wanted company. “Do you need me up here for something?”

“A conversation, security.”

Kendle snorted. “What do you want?”

“A sign language class, with you teaching it.”

Kendle frowned. “Why me?”

“Debra likes you. She told me she wants to talk to you.”

“She’s a descendant. She can talk to me anytime I want.”

“Exactly. You never have your guard down and she’s not pushy.”

“She needs to be if she wants to become an Eagle.”

“I think that’s what she wants to chat about.”

“And if we use sign language, the other descendants won’t hear it.”

“Yes, but I want her to be able to talk to anyone at any time. She speaks their language. Now, they need to learn hers.”

**Deleted Scene #2**

Adrian knew he was dreaming, but he didn’t resist. He approached her without fear of rejection. *I need to hold you.*

Angela wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. “Mmm...”

Adrian kissed her cheek. “Thank you.”

“For not leaving you behind?”

“For returning to us. I’m going to kiss you now.” Adrian pressed his lips to hers, heart skipping a beat. Bright blue light shot out, surrounding them.

Adrian deepened the kiss, taking advantage.

Angela compared it to Marc and pulled away.

Adrian retreated, bitter. “Not even close, was it?”

“No. It hasn’t been in any of our lifetimes. I always went back to Marc. I always will.”

Adrian finally accepted it. “I still love you. Can we get rid of that now?”

“You tell me.”

“It’s possible, but you’d have to do it. I can’t. I want you too much.”

Angela tried to do the right thing, but her heart had two doors and one of them belonged to Adrian. “You’ll always be second. Little could change that.”

“What about Ivan?”

“Third.”

“But why?”

“I’m greedy.”

Adrian chuckled. “Liar.”

She sighed. “I saw something that scared me. So I took precautions.”

Adrian could only think of one thing she could have seen to produce that reaction. “Marc and I both die.”

“No. I had to leave.”

“And you’d never take me or Marc away from Safe Haven...” Adrian gazed at her, heart in his tone and expression.

Angela stroked his scruffy cheek. “You taught me a lot. Covering my own needs and wants was in there too deep. I’m corrupt.”

“We all are, Angie. Stop blaming yourself for all of it.”

“I made the choices. I directed fate.” She dropped her chin. “I played god. I still am.”

“Well, the people doing those jobs couldn’t handle it. A closer had to be sent in.”

“Do you really feel that way?”

“No. It scares me that betting addicts had the future of all life in their hands. I understand the choices you’ve made; I agree with almost all of them.”

“Which ones would you have done differently?”

“The mountain. I wouldn’t have let it happen. We would have fought them honestly.”

“And lost half our army. What else?”

“Me. I would have killed me a long time ago.”

“Many have tried.”

“You could do it.”

“No, I can’t.”

Adrian frowned. “Why?”

Angela stepped forward and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “Because I love you.”

Adrian swept her up against his chest, locking their mouths as he opened the connection. Bonds swirled around them, old and unbreakable by anyone but them.

“I release you.”

Every remaining bond between them snapped.

Adrian jerked awake. *She just said goodbye!*

**Deleted Scene #3**

“She’s out and about. Ditched me.”

“Copy.” Marc had been expecting it. Angela had napped for four hours. Her mind wasn’t letting her have a longer break. He’d picked up the pattern already.

Sure of where he’d find her, Marc kept moving up the stairs, accepting the ship’s groan like it was a camp member. “You’re welcome. Thank you for holding us up through this.”

Marc found Angela on the rear deck, staring toward the ship they were towing. He didn’t scold her. He put an arm around her waist to lend his heat against the almost chilly breeze.

“Congratulations on reaching my level.” She kissed him. “And damn you for it.”

Marc held her tight, the way she liked it. “Permission to use it for three seconds?”

“Granted.”

Marc clapped his hands over her head, hoping Adrian was watching.

Angela was delighted as a shower of flowers fell over them. He’d copied William’s gift, just from watching her memory. “You’re going to be amazing at this.”

Marc was suddenly sure she was right. He already felt more in control, calmer, wiser.

Angela snorted. “That didn’t come with it. You brought those skills to the level.”

“Really?”

“You finally have what you need to be happy.”

Marc wanted to ask if she did too, but he wasn’t crazy enough to hurt them both that way. He kissed her instead.

Angela held him close, thrilled and dismayed. Marc would be a great leader during peace, but he was going to be their fighting general for the trip home instead. Then, just when he was enjoying the role, he would have to give it up to Adrian, who would lead the ultimate battle against nature. No one knew what would happen from there.

Marc hugged her closer. “I’ll be fine. I never wanted it, so it’ll be easy to give it up.”

Angela sighed, not telling him he didn’t understand, that it got under your skin and refused to stop itching. “I don’t want you to be hurt.”

Marc held her back, making eye contact. “The only way I’ll be hurt, is if I don’t have you.”

Angela didn’t answer.

Marc gave her a weak growl. “Tell me!”

“I can’t. I don’t know. I’ve managed to get every descendant on this ship to search too and the answer is always the same.”

Marc braced. “Do you die?”

“It feels more like I’m gone.” She leaned back to view him. “I’ll tell you now. There’s no way I would leave Safe Haven unless I became too dangerous to stay. I think you have to lock me down or send me away.”

Marc, with others, had already spent time worrying over that possibility.

“Me too.” Angela rotated in his arms. “I love you. Always.”

Marc rested his chin on her head, arms crossed over chest. “I found a few scrolls that might have information on why byzan become unstable. I couldn’t reach them. I’ll try again when we’ve all recovered.”

Angela fought tears. “Someone else just died. I feel so useless!”

Marc slammed her with the little energy he had, lifting her mood against her will.

Angela gasped, fighting the urge to giggle like a schoolgirl. “Where did you learn that? One of your little floozies?”

Marc burst out laughing. “From you.” Marc swept her up and took her back to the empty cabin. He understood her need to roam to avoid the grief, but she had to rest. *How about that orgasm now?*

**Radiation Chart**

Explosive bloody diarrhea is a sign of coming death if the symptoms start in the first hour.

If symptoms appear in 2-3 hours, the dose of gys was high.

If the symptoms appear 6-12 hours, and stop within 24 hours, the dose was sublethal-probably 1-2gys.

**(1 gy = 100 rads)**

0-1gy-extreme flu symptoms

1-2gy-blood cells die, bleeding from orifices

2-3gy-turns the skin red with peeling and blisters

3+gy-Infections and hemorrhaging

Treatments-used in combination, for 30-60 days at least, and as much as 2 years after the exposure.

1. Potassium iodide-radioactive particles come out in the urine

2. Prussian blue-particles come out in the feces

3. Give diethylenetriamine pentaacetic acid–it binds to plutonium, americium and curium.

4. Draw blood every three hours to check for lymphocyte white blood count

5. Preemptive Antibiotics

6. Treat fever and vomiting as needed

7. Watch for low blood pressure, seizures, anemia.

8. Provide huge amounts of Fluids, electrolytes, and plasma.

\*Amount of exposure is more dangerous than length; if levels are above 10gy, death results in minutes.

**Life After War 12 Shirts**

A person with collar shirt

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2020 edition t-shirts for book 12 of the LAW series. Multiple colors and sizes to pick from! Official Life After War merchandise.

[**See details**](https://teespring.com/life-after-war-shirts11_copy_1?pid=2&cid=2397)**.**

**From the Author**

Hello! I hope you enjoyed this edition of life After War. I did, and at the same time, I didn’t. It hurt me to lose so many characters that I love. I cried while writing several parts of this book. If I could, I would never kill off a good one, only the bad. But life doesn’t work that way and neither does fiction. Still, I’m sorry for your pain.

On the bright side, Adrian is off ship and Marc is a byzan! About time, right? If it were up to me... It really isn’t, though. The voices scream and I copy it down, a bit like being a Keeper. Once it’s rolling, the characters have a life of their own.

...was anyone else surprised about Kenn and Courtney? I was. I can’t wait to see what Tonya comes up with to test his loyalty. I’m also eager to watch Debra and Ralph become more important to Safe Haven. Those two are special.

How?

We’ll find out together.

Until next time, watch your six.

Angie, out.

# Book 13

**[A picture containing person, water, riding

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[For the Future](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-13.html)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marc waved. “The Boss.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Roy grinned around his sucker.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most people nodded and exchanged comments with those closest.

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

“Are we able to visit?”

“Can they come down here and visit us?”

“Can we trade places?”

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

Grieving loved ones began to cry again.

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

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

*You got it.* Adrian scribbled faster.

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

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

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

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

Marc shoved Adrian out of his mind.

Adrian finished writing out the scene.

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

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

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

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

Adrian’s face went blank.

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

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

**2**

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

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

The slowly clearing crowd in the mess laughed with them.

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

Marc nodded, drawn.

Angela tugged him down for a soft kiss.

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

Brittani cleared her throat. Her foot tapped.

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

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

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

Marc immediately began to do that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wade grinned, sunken eyes twinkling. “Awesome!”

Neil swallowed a laugh to enjoy later.

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

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

Marc filed that under the man’s profile.

Wade rotated the chair to stare at Angela.

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

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

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

Wade dropped his chin. “Yeah.”

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

Wade pouted. “Tim would have waited.”

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

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

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

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

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

Angela shrugged. “Okay.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Angela tensed.

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

The crowd instantly began scanning for a threat.

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

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

Candy’s mouth opened.

Kyle scowled at her. “Follow the rules!”

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

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

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

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

The delivery crew came around the corner.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Angela snorted. “Try the Eagles and Rammstein.”

Now Ivan wore a quizzical expression.

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

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

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

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

*And her cracks?*

*No change.*

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

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

Marc smiled at her. “Always.”

Angela tugged him down for another short kiss.

“Yuck!”

“Ew!”

Kids barreled toward them from their cabins.

Marc rotated as he dropped, arms opening.

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

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

Angela smiled innocently, pointing at Marc.

Brittani’s glare switched targets.

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

Debra tapped Brittani’s shoulder and gestured.

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

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

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

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

Marc nodded to Courtney.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marc sniggered. “Do you need anything?”

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

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

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

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

Angela stomped on his foot.

Neil flinched. “Hey!”

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

He hobbled backwards. “Stop that!”

People were staring, laughing.

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

“What’s your problem?!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stanley juggled his stack of trays.

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

They landed in Neil’s arms.

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

The witnesses burst out laughing.

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

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

Descendants snickered at his thought.

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

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

Angela dropped out immediately.

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

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

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

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

“That’s spooky.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Allison gaped in shock as Neil killed it.

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

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

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

Dog jumped up and ran his tongue across her face.

Allison recoiled. “Gross!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# Backstory

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