

LAST GALL



ANGELA WHITE

DEARLY DEPARTED



ANGELA WHITE

SHATTERED DREAMS



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LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #7

**SHATTERED
DREAMS**

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Life After War Box Set
Books 7-9
by
Angela White

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Book Seven



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Beware The Blades

The gates have all been opened.
The flood is on the way
For both the scavengers and lambs,
Who survived apocalypse day.

Heavy beasts are drifting,
With ravenous evil in mind.
Assassins and traitors lurk,
Waiting in the blind.

Heavy snow surrounds,
Bringing raging wind.
It crashes against tall fences,
Forcing the stone to bend.

The ground occasionally shudders,
Always at the worst time.
Fate cackles wildly from a distance,
Turning lives on a bloody dime.

The future comes too fast, too soon;
The timing isn't exactly right.
The mountain thunders with dismay,
And death lights up the night.

Now, the past has come back;
The safety slowly fades.

The swords of karma slice right through.
Oh, beware the blades!

Chapter One

Madness And Misery

The Georgia Mountains
September 27th

1

“**F**ire in the hole!”

Marc waited for the rumble, sure a few others were doing the same. After three days of Adrian blocking and blowing roads to their den, the notification didn't garner attention from the Eagles. In fact, it was mostly ignored. People in this mountain had more problems than a former leader hanging around.

Marc had told the camp what was coming. He'd also assigned Samantha and a few others to monitor the situation. The result was a twitchy council who needed reassurances from their boss, but none were coming. Angela wasn't in any condition to comfort others. All she did was cry when she was awake, so the doctor was sedating her. Even when Marc was with her, the tears were constant. That man wasn't certain how much more of it he could handle. He wanted *his* Angie back, even if she was a cruel, self-centered bitch.

They'd talked a little more and he understood why she'd made the choices she had, but it didn't

stop the anger or the guilt. If she had told him what she planned, he would have helped, not interfered. She had no right to exclude him that way and then blame him for what went wrong. At the same time, if he had been able to follow her plans in the past, instead of always second-guessing her choices, then maybe she would have confided in him. The gulf between them could now hold entire towns.

The camp also ignored the rumbling from the new explosions. Marc had informed everyone they would be hearing those noises regularly while Adrian sealed up the mountain. Angela had sent him out to handle that chore alone in the dying snowstorm, with dazed, angry refugees and betrayed ants roaming everywhere. Marc wasn't sure if she was trying to kill Adrian, though he was rooting for it. He did hope she let the traitor get the roads and paths blocked first.

There were too many threats in range for Marc's liking, and then there were the three items that Seth and Becky had brought back: iodine, water purification tablets, and military-grade dosimeters. He didn't want to know what horror would cause them to use the personal patches. He had his hands full with the current problems. It was infuriating to Marc that yet another group wouldn't let them have peace. He wanted to challenge them all, but nothing would get him to counter Angela's plans and plots right now. She'd only given a few orders since being carried down the bloody mountain, but Marc was making sure they were followed—against his

own wishes. He didn't want to bunker-in. He wanted to rush out and meet Vlad's populace with his fury. Safe Haven had fought for ten months to keep it together. They had sacrificed and suffered enough. *When do we get a break?*

According to previous words from their seer, no break was coming until they reached true safety. People now assumed that was Pitcairn Island. Kendle had no idea how popular she would be when she returned. Some of the Eagles worried that she might keep going on her own, but Marc didn't. Kendle was terrified of being on the ocean again, alone and helpless. She wanted to go, but the method of transport was going to keep her with them.

Marc wondered how she would react when she found the cruise ship. There was no way she would deal well with that. Marc was glad they would be pulling other boats that would need a skeleton crew. It would allow Kendle a different type of ship for the journey that Theo had calculated would take over a month. Instead of traversing the country again, or worse, dipping into foreign coasts as they tried to slide through on their way to Pitcairn Island, they were going to sail all the way around South America. They planned to stay in the open ocean until it was time to ride the deadly currents around the tip and be spit out near their destination—if they survived. Marc was forever impressed with Angela's courage and ambition. He also thought she was nuts.

Marc leaned under the hot water. After everything the world had gone through, it was a wonder all the survivors weren't lunatics.

The radio on the rocky shower ledge crackled with Billy's excited voice. "Ants are clear from all levels above three."

The ants, angry about being betrayed and needing a new home, were now digging into Safe Haven. They were finding cracks and crevices, but worse, old shafts that had been covered by years of debris. There were a lot more tunnels down here than anyone had realized. As the ants came through and the newest branch-off was discovered, the security risks were being plugged or collapsed. Theo's team was doing that carefully from the inside, while Adrian did the rest from outside. Marc hoped it went well. He would be glad when it was finished. If this cave system started to fall in, there was no way he would be able to get everyone out alive.

"We're clear of ants, all levels!" Morgan called cheerfully.

The Eagles had obviously had another battle with the large insects. That rush of happy adrenaline came from surviving, from being successful in a mission. Marc knew it well. He still craved it some days, but the apocalypse had already given him plenty of action and there would be more. There was no danger of his skills becoming rusty.

Already scrubbed, Marc lingered, enjoying the intense steam of a scalding shower. He still hadn't

gotten used to having the wonderful convenience again. His showers, unless Angie was along, had been quick to save water and let him get on to the next duty or challenge. Now, they were sheltering in place for a month. He could take all the time he wanted.

The bottom floor shower was empty around him, with a set of guards who had snapped to when he came in and still hadn't relaxed. Knowing their attention was on their job allowed Marc to sink down on the seat beneath the ledge that held his guns and radio. He adjusted the water so it was a hot trickle on his shoulders, then leaned against the wall and shut his eyes. Kenn and Zack, with Kyle and Jennifer over them, were policing the top level of their cave.

Neil's team was covering the second floor, with Daryl and Cynthia supervising two rookie teams on level three. Ray and most of Marc's old team were down here on level four. Things were being handled like Angela had instructed. Marc suddenly wished she was here with him so he could hold her in this cloud of peaceful air and promise her things would get better, that the doctor was wrong.

Her injuries were healing quicker than the doctor was comfortable with, but even he was following instructions to document descendant medical facts to share with the other personnel. There were only a few differences, but they were huge. Future generations would need that information. To conceal his nervousness, the doctor

was now traveling in a pack of students, using them to bolster his courage. Marc approved of the coping technique and the training. He'd thought the doctor would have to be run out of Safe Haven because of his attitude, but Angela's injury had revealed the doctor's attachment to her despite their love-hate relationship. He was giving her excellent care, according to Hilda and Peggy, who were always nearby.

The radio echoed again, this time with Tonya's calm tone. "Power has been reestablished in the gaming area. You may resume your free time there."

They were still repairing Jayson's treachery. They were also fixing minor issues that would have come up anyway. Marc was satisfied with their shelter. If not for the other problems Angela had predicted, he would never consent to leave. These mountains had been perfect.

Marc wondered how much time they had before the next crisis hit, but quickly shoved the thought away. This was his downtime to contemplate and restore his faith. Later, there would be runs and guns, and then deals and steals. The snowstorm had finally let up, allowing them to send men out again for food and water, and some basic gear. The lower level Eagles would make that run while Marc took Angela out of the mountain. The storm had slowed the train people, but they were arriving now. He expected to hear from them within the next few

hours. She had to be moved. She wasn't safe in camp.

Marc turned off the water and tugged his towel down. Draping it over his lap, he remained in the steam, enjoying the sensation. He hadn't been in a sauna for a long time. The stone walls and floor in here made this a similar experience. It reminded him of the days he'd stolen for himself over the years. He had liked going to a ski lodge where no one knew him, or an isolated park, if he felt like roughing it.

Life after war was much like how he had existed before the bombs, except that the stress levels were always through the roof and the supplies weren't sent out all neatly packed and ready for his use. He'd held a theory that an apocalypse would make things easier in some ways, but he'd been wrong. The old world of convenience was gone, but it surprised Marc to still be mourning it. He knew some of the camp was also feeling that way. It was hard not to, especially with running water and electricity in the caves, but knowing they were leaving again had brought on this retrospective mindset.

None of these people were eager to go. Even those who believed this place to be cursed were enjoying the TV room, the game cubby, the hot showers, and the activity floor. Despite the chaos that had taken place, Safe Haven was calm and relatively happy right now. Angela had lived, Vlad was gone, and there were no more refugees

screaming at their gate. If not for overcrowding and her predictions, things would be perfect.

Marc winced as the image of her bloody body on the mountain ran through his mind. *Maybe not perfect.*

She'd told him he was in charge. The camp already assumed he was, but she'd known it had to be official. Their witnesses, the doctor and students, had approved. They knew his leadership would be enough to get them through until she recuperated, but it bothered Marc to hear the rest of that thought. *We hope.* Agree with her methods or not, everyone knew Angela was the best person for the job of keeping them alive.

It made Marc need to do better, grow stronger. He had believed things were covered before the chaos wiped away his delusions. This time he wouldn't make that mistake. He was double and triple checking his plans and decisions, trying to glimpse further ahead like she and Adrian were able to do. He didn't know if his shortsightedness could be unlearned, but he was determined to try. He was also determined that he wouldn't be corrupted the way their former leaders had been. He hated to include Angie in with that, but the proof was undeniable. She'd known the avalanche was coming and let it happen to kill hundreds of desperate refugees, and she'd taken lifeforces. It didn't hurt him to be with someone who could do those things, but it was killing him to know that she'd fallen. She'd been full of light, despite awful

childhood events and worse things as an adult, and he knew she was torn apart over it. *His* Angie had always been good. For that to change meant she wasn't at peace with herself anymore. She would need help through this.

"But not from me," he muttered, anger and pain rising. There was no way he could be unbiased. Intentional or not, her choices had cost him a child.

Tears that no one would ever witness slid down Marc's cheeks. His dreams of a happy family with Angie shattered and ran over his cheeks in torrents. He had no idea how they would go on from this.

"Rock is secure. I'm in for the night."

Adrian's message over the radio reminded Marc that he'd been in here long enough to draw attention. He quickly wiped away the evidence and began drying off. It would be a long night, but hopefully also a quiet one. Marc had a tight rein on his emotions now, but it wouldn't take very much to send him into the Marine and no one wanted that while Adrian was locked in the mountain with them. Everything would collapse during the fight, including Safe Haven.

2

"I need to talk to her."

Shawn glared at Jennifer, not caring that the mess was crowded or that Kyle was a few feet away. "I won't let you guys interrogate her again. She's just a little kid."

“Stop saying that!” Missy complained loudly, making Shawn wince.

Jennifer took a minute to evaluate the situation before responding, a bit stung that Shawn would think she was a threat. If anything, she was a defender of the kids here. He should know that, but the coldness he was being treated to was making him defensive. Jennifer was sympathetic, but she also agreed with his punishment. It would keep the other Eagles on their toes about letting relationships distract them from their jobs.

Shawn felt the weight of Jennifer’s study, but he didn’t dig the hole any deeper. A lot of the guys had come by to talk to Missy, not caring that they would scare her or bring up bad memories. Shawn didn’t want to be bonded with the child, but he was. Everyone would just have to accept it.

“They might, in time.” Jennifer joined them at the table. Missy didn’t stop coloring the giant pumpkin on the page.

The child’s skill with the crayons was impressive. Jennifer spent a moment admiring the outlining, the shading and blending the girl had done. All the hues of orange were represented. *Does that mean something?* Jennifer was trying to hone the instincts and skills that made Angela so effective.

Shawn dropped his chin as a group of Special Forces men strode by to their usual table in the rear of the wide area. They didn’t glance at him.

Missy looked at Jennifer, orbs glowing red. “I’m going to make them stop doing that. I don’t like it.”

Sighing, Jennifer whistled to get Greg’s attention. It drew everyone.

Jennifer cleared her throat. “She says it’s enough. He’s being punished by camp rules, but if you don’t stop being mean to...her man,” Jennifer choked out, “she’ll pay you back.”

Missy’s red orbs were a warning and a threat.

Morgan spoke to the child, still ignoring Shawn. “This is what he deserves, what we’d all deserve if we had done what he did. If you protect him from it, he’ll never be one of us again.”

Missy didn’t like that either, but her irises faded into soft brown confusion. “Why?”

“A man admits when he’s wrong and accepts the consequences,” Shawn stated firmly. “Leave them be.”

Missy’s lips thinned into a line of anger. “Fine.”

Jennifer, and others, hid smirks at how much she sounded like an adult female.

Shawn sighed. “Don’t be mad. It’ll fade in time.”

“They’ll let you back in?”

Shawn shrugged. “If I earn it, yes, but I’m not sure that’s what I want any more anyway.”

“You’re letting this drive you out?” Jennifer was surprised. His bond with the little girl was stronger than she’d judged.

Missy snorted. “He’s worried over his strength and intelligence. It has nothing to do with me.”

Shawn couldn’t take any more humiliation right then. “I’ll be back when you’re done.” Shawn marched angrily to the coffee line where the people there fell silent in condemnation.

Missy regarded Jennifer in desperation. “He can’t quit! I lose him if he quits.”

Jennifer was a bit stunned at the emotion in the child’s words, despite knowing descendants were advanced beyond their physical years. She dug into Missy’s mind, scared she was being hurt.

Missy let the woman explore her mind. She had nothing to hide.

Relieved that her first notion about Shawn wasn’t true, Jennifer leaned forward so they wouldn’t be overheard. “I’ll help you. Will you help me?”

Missy grinned. “That’s easy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Helping you is easy. You only need two things, and you already have them both.”

Autumn and Kyle.

Missy beamed. “They feel the same way.”

Warmed, Jennifer placed a hand on the little girl’s thin wrist. “I’d like to view everything that happened, everything you saw and overheard. May I? I’ll stay with you through the pain.”

Missy had paled, peering around nervously. “Here?”

Jennifer nodded. “We all need to know what happened. It will give this camp some of the peace that Tara stole from us.”

Missy slowly put the crayon down. “Okay...” She put her free hand under the table and shut her eyes.

Jennifer relayed the images and conversations that were important, storing the rest to give to Marc or Angela. Few people would ever know the fine details of Missy’s abuse. That privacy, small though it was, would help the girl adapt. “Tara and Donner were sent here by the government. He attacked directly. She was supposed to become one of us and wait for Jack and the descendants on the train to arrive. Missy convinced Jack that he wouldn’t survive unless he split up from his protection. She convinced him that *they* were the targets of death.”

Around them, Shawn and many camp members moved closer. They wanted to hear the details. Shawn wanted Missy to be giving the information willingly.

“She knew if he came to Safe Haven, Angela and the others here would be able to kill him and Tara for what they’ve done...” Jennifer forced herself to continue, heart breaking. “For killing her real mom.”

Murmurs ran through the mess which was now quiet enough to let Jennifer’s voice carry to the sentry on the entrance to the mess—Zack. Pity for the girl hit him in hard waves.

“Jack’s men, some of them, were passive descendants—meaning their gifts are dormant so they aren’t picked up on mental grids. They are called Invisibles.”

Across the tables, Kenn kept his profile blank. *That’s what I am. I’m an Invisible.*

“Safe Haven was always a target, even back as far as the bowling alley. The government has had satellites tracking this camp since January.”

“Was Donner or Tara working with Adrian?” Jennifer demanded before anyone else could. “Did he help Tara get into Safe Haven?”

“Who is Adrian?” Missy asked innocently.

Jennifer frowned, catching the girl’s manipulation. “The man who was boss of Safe Haven then.”

Missy stared blankly.

Jennifer knew the child was lying, but she was about to get to the information they needed the most and let it go. Later she would ponder why the girl felt a lie was best there. “Keep going.”

“Jack and Tara were supposed to wait for the trains.” Missy frowned. “Jack couldn’t. Jayson almost did, but he got scared. Safe Haven’s light was eating at him, trying to sway him to be good. He triggered the trap too soon and Tara had no choice but to get on board right then or be exposed anyway.”

“Tara didn’t want to do it?”

“Oh, she wanted it, just not right then. She wanted to wait for her sister on the train.”

“Go on,” Jennifer encouraged over the muttering.

“Tara used her gift to confuse the few who might have figured things out. She took energy without permission from everyone who guarded her, except for Tracy. She was scared of the Ghost. She wouldn’t mess with him or his family while she waited. She only had one target.”

Charlie, pausing while escorting Tracy to dinner, was glad to hear it even though he was furious that Tara had been able to use others.

Missy showed Jennifer the images. “She tried to kill Angela. A lot. See?”

Jennifer absorbed the mental pictures in horror. “She got the job at the mess so she could poison Angela.”

Li Sing scowled. “Evil woman quit when told her no, only I serve the chain of command. I taste each dish too.”

Li received calls of approval and respect from the crowd.

Jennifer kept going, getting angrier. “Tara tried to give Jack signals when he came, but the code was too similar to what Adrian had taught the Eagles so she couldn’t give him any information that mattered. She...” Jennifer’s head snapped around to Missy. “She tried to sabotage the cave. Theo interrupted her before she could.”

“Did anyone know all of this was going on?” Doug demanded from the next table. “Did she have help?”

Almost everyone immediately thought of or looked at Shawn.

Jennifer was still exploring the girl's memories. "I don't think so. Jayson and Tara had done this before, in Canada. They went in pretending to be refugees, like they did here. Angela knew what was coming and stopped it. Canada wasn't as lucky. They burned alive in their bunker."

"So Angela did know?" Marc was at the entrance. He'd come in a moment before, drawn by the waves of anger and disappointment.

"Yes. She stopped Missy from telling us the truth that first day we picked them up."

"Why?"

Jennifer would have answered, but Missy stopped her. "That's not for us to say."

Jennifer sighed. "As much as I understand, kid, not this time. Tell him. He has the right to know."

Missy focused on Marc with sympathy and sadness. "You were going to die in that fight. She didn't want you there."

"She saved you." Jennifer grunted in anger. "She didn't know Vlad would punch her in the gut."

"No one could have known that." Missy shrugged. "Even my details aren't that fine."

Jennifer understood what the girl was trying to do, but she didn't concur. Marc deserved to know the truth. Angela had gone up that mountain alone to save him. The price had been their child.

"And why do I have to know that?!" Marc spat, furious. "Why does it matter?"

Jennifer glared at him. “Because you can’t help her if you don’t understand how much she loves you. She went up there to die for you if it was needed. She didn’t know the baby was going to be his target. You have to help her. You’re the only one who can.”

Marc knew that to be a lie. He spun from the mess, mind chaotic again. He hated this shit. When did it end?

Jennifer looked at Missy. “Ready to finish it?”

“Yes.” Missy sighed, sounding so old and tired that people moved away from her table. “I’ve had enough of secrets.”

Shawn, pulled by her unhappiness, went to the now empty mess line and began making her a cup of hot chocolate.

“Tell us the rest.” Jennifer allowed her gift to come forward. “Tell the truth and be accepted into this camp in the ways that Tara never could be.”

Missy shuddered. “They’re coming. Tara’s killers are coming.” Allowed to say it now, Missy’s fear bubbled over. “They’ll kill you all! They’re coming! They’re coming!”

Shawn was there to pull the girl into his arms, hoping to forestall her screams. When she got wound up, it got ugly.

Missy curled against Shawn, shaking. Her pitch lowered to an uneasy whisper. “They’re almost here. They want my friend Angie.”

Shawn comforted the child, glaring at those closest. She'd only been out of the medical bay for one full day.

It was clear that he wouldn't let the conversation continue, but it didn't need to. The truth was out.

Before it could cause more chaos, Jennifer looked at Kyle. "The boss has it covered."

"You're sure?" he replied on cue, thinking he was lucky and cursed to have a mate who was so smart. She could outdistance him so easily.

"Yes. I trust her with my life."

Kyle smiled at her. "So do I. What can we do to help?"

Jennifer stood up. "Keep this camp together, follow the rules, help the new arrivals...survive. That's all she wants for us."

Kyle smiled again as Jennifer came to him and slid under his big arm, forcing him to embrace her publicly.

Eased, some of the camp went back to eating, while others went to spread the word about what they'd all learned. None of them were terrified despite Missy's chilling warning. They'd been reminded of Angela's wisdom and her goals—their survival. There was no need to panic as long as she was still looking out for them.

"Is she?" Kyle used a quick hug to disguise the question.

"Yes." Jennifer didn't elaborate. What she'd picked up from their leader's mind was so bad that it was almost unforgivable. It was also perfect and

Jennifer wasn't going to risk anyone interfering, not even Kyle.

3

“Good morning, Safe Haven,” Kenn called over the radio, eager to have the daily address finished so he could prepare for the list of work Marc had assigned. “I have two short announcements for you. The first is we have extra clothing in the shelter rooms now. You can take three full outfits, plus blankets and sheets. Isn't it great to have to make your bed again?” Kenn waited a moment for any chuckles to die out before continuing. “The last notice is a reminder that gardens are mandatory for every family and couple. Stop by the garden area to pick up a small dome with your choice of fruit or vegetable. As you know, the small domes have venting holes and can be opened and closed to retain warmth. Please remember to sit them under the grow lights that are being installed along the shelves. We need to do our share, especially since we all like to eat our share.” Kenn waited again, judging the mood, before adding, “That's it for now, folks. Have a Safe Haven day!”

Listening from the small research room she'd convinced Angela to add before they entered the cave, Tonya rolled her eyes. Some days Kenn was great on the air and then there were days like this, when it was obvious that he didn't want to be doing it.

Tonya smiled politely at the man who appeared in the doorway. Craig Green was shy, but fast with his fists when in the cage. “Was the doctor in?”

“Yeah.” Green gestured, tone bitter. “He said no.”

“He said what?”

“No.” Green waited for the explosion.

“Why?”

Green lowered his voice. “The doctor refuses to turn this camp into a bunch of potheads.”

Tonya’s rage lit up her entire face. “Did he even read the research that I sent?”

“No.”

Tonya snatched the folder from his hand. “Get somebody on my post for a little while, will you?”

She stomped out before Green could answer. He sat down in her chair without resentment. Being a level two was easier than being a level one, and it was definitely better than being a rookie. He didn’t mind running messages and working duty slots. That was easy. Dealing with fiery redheads who didn’t know when to quit? That was hard.

Passing fans and various detectors, Tonya stormed through the damp, chilly cave. She didn’t whine about the lack of warmth. She also didn’t grumble about the dim lights or the bugs slithering along dank walls that never seemed to dry up. She had bigger complaints. The research she’d been doing was conclusive enough to be tested, and someone was going to do it or she was going to raise enough hell to bring these stone walls down.

Everyone who saw her got out of the way. Tonya didn't have descendant powers, but she had a nasty temper and a quick punch. That was usually enough for most people. Add in the fact that the only time she acted this way was if there was a serious problem and the result was instant alertness in every area that she passed through. Guards snapped to attention and began sweeping for trouble.

Tonya shoved her way through the medical tunnel, where half of the doctor's little assistants were busy running back and forth. She jerked the curtain open into the main area, not caring who was in there or what was going on. "I want to talk to you!"

The doctor didn't glance up from the blood pressure dial he was monitoring. "Get out of here."

Furious that the man refused to follow orders, Tonya marched over to the table. She shoved Millie out of the way, using the camp name for the doctor's students. "Move aside, duck!"

She leaned over Angela's unconscious form, trying to ignore how awful the woman looked. "She gave you an order before all of this happened. She told you to follow John's plan for the cancer treatments. How dare you disobey her when she's not able to enforce the rules!"

The doctor unfastened the cuff and recorded the numbers on the chart.

His refusal to even discuss the matter infuriated Tonya further, but unlike in the past, she was able to handle it in a way that got her point across. "She's

hearing everything that's happening, doctor. You may not understand how it works with her, but I do. When she wakes up, the first thing she's gonna ask is how the treatments are going. If you don't have an answer, you might be tossed out."

The doctor snorted. "I'm much too valuable to be pitched out like a common refugee."

All around the room, little ducks pursed their lips in disapproval.

"We'll see what the boss thinks when she wakes up!"

"That may be." The doctor wasn't scared of the bobbed redhead. "But for now, get the hell out of here."

Tonya had little choice but to do as ordered. She exited the cave, muttering under her breath.

Millie came to the doctor. "She's right. Angela will be very upset."

The doctor stared down at Angela's pale, bruised features. "She's not the leader here anymore. She doesn't make the rules."

"We have a fight on level one! I repeat, fight on level one!"

Tonya didn't answer the call, but she did hurry that way. There were too many others doing the same for her to be able to get through on the radio. With Marc out of camp on a food run to get Safe Haven stocked up before the next winter storm hit, things were tense.

As she reached the stairs, Tonya nodded to the Eagle on duty and hurried up to the next level. It would take her a minute to get there, but she had no doubt that her authority would be able to calm things down with the rookies—especially if it was who she suspected. Angela’s order to have the soldiers integrated as Eagles wasn’t going over well.

Tonya rounded the corner and found a small crowd already trying to get to the stairs for level one. A hard hand grabbed her as she stumbled, keeping her from falling.

“Thanks,” Tonya told the ugly-dressed male as she hurried on her way. *Was he wearing a gunnysack?*

Tonya hurried up the stairs and shoved herself in the middle of the struggling Eagles and soldiers.

Behind her, the ugly-dressed man continued on his way. Philip had been a social service worker before the war. He moved down the stairs without drawing attention from the guards. He had been brought into Safe Haven not long after they had reached the mountains. He had been cleared and vetted by the leadership, though not Angela herself. The teenager, Jennifer, had given him his pass with a warning that whatever he was hiding behind his wall would have to eventually come out for him to become an Eagle.

Philip ignored the other bored sentry on duty at the bottom of the stairs and walked toward the medical bay. The walls in his mind had been up for

many reasons. He'd been surprised when Jennifer hadn't dug deeper, but also relieved. It had allowed him to spend the last five weeks blending in and working hard, just to have these two minutes.

Philip slid aside as the doctor and all of his little ducks, as they were being called by the camp, came out of the medical bay and waddled toward the testing lab on the floor below them. The only one in the bay was Hilda and she would be sleeping in the chair next to Angela, the way she had been for the last three afternoons. Philip had made note of the schedule.

Fanatical attention centered on the unconscious woman in the cot at the far end of the room. Next to her, Hilda was dozing in a chair with her cheek against a stone ledge that held medical supplies. Philip moved closer without making any noise. He wasn't here on behalf of the government. He hadn't come for revenge or payment. He wanted power.

Angela didn't stir as Philip placed his hands around her throat. Neither did Hilda.

It worked in Firestarter. It worked in Firestarter.

Angela came awake to that reasoning, struggling against the hazy darkness of drugs and pain. She opened her mouth, gasping for air and realized death had come for her yet again.

Angela stopped fighting.

In a hurry to grab what he had forgotten, the doctor almost didn't understand what was going on

as he entered the medical bay. The sight of the stranger's hands wrapped around his patient's neck was an immediate shock. The doctor had never witnessed violence before the war; he still hadn't adjusted to how much of it happened inside Safe Haven's gates.

Hilda, woken by the sound of the doctor's footsteps, jumped up to shove the man off Angela.

Without pausing, Philip lunged forward and slammed his head into Hilda's chin, knocking her out.

Her big body slid to the floor.

Philip continued to strangle Angela, eyes locked onto hers. *It worked in Firestarter. It worked in Firestarter.*

The doctor rushed forward, grabbing a fire extinguisher from the wall. He slammed it into the man's skull as hard as he could, not thinking, just reacting.

Phillip dropped heavily. He slumped across Angela's legs, blood trickling from his nose.

Angela drew in air sullenly as the doctor came over, staring in horror at what he had done.

The doctor realized Angela had been awake the entire time, that she had been allowing it. "Why?"

"I could have been at peace." She shut her eyes as fresh tears began to roll down.

Drawn against his will, the doctor reached out and brushed one of them away. "Please stop. I can't stand it when you cry. It hurts me."

It made her cry harder.

“What’s going on here?!”

Eagles rushed into the medical bay, forcing the doctor to step back and explain what had happened. Angela pretended she hadn’t woken at all.

Chapter Two

Deals With The Devil

1

Adrian dropped his heavy kit and other gear with a loud grunt that alerted the guard to his presence. They were in a narrow tunnel on the fifth level. Hidden under a rocky ledge, few people knew this area existed. The other four rotating guards on it were being kept the same to limit public knowledge, but after hiking from the bottom of the mountain, Adrian had his doubts about Angela being able to use it for a camp bugout. Not only was it narrow and uneven, it was also extremely dangerous. All those holes in the floor would have to be repaired.

Shawn, doing FND for his involvement with Tara, nodded casually to his former boss and then resumed his post. Eagles here were stationary, but the boss wanted them away from the actual tunnel entrance to provide more concealment. The duty log said Shawn had 5th floor garbage duty, a chore no one wanted because of the smell. They were close to where the camp waste was falling. When the composting heap was going full tilt, the odors down here would be unbearable.

Adrian leaned against the rough wall of the tunnel, taking a minute to get his breath back. His recovery was going well; his body was strengthening with each excursion. He felt like he might die sometimes, but without pain, there honestly was no gain. It often brought memories of his rookie days. Until the heart attack, Adrian hadn't realized how out of shape he'd gotten. Even before the war, he'd been enjoying too many benefits of leadership.

Before the past could drag him into hell, Adrian forced himself to set up camp. The notebook from Angela had been littered with warnings and orders. One of those had been to stay in this tunnel, not outside of Safe Haven's boundary as he'd been doing. Shortly after the avalanche, his men had been taken into Safe Haven's inner Quarantine Zone, but he was banished to the sewer tunnels like a troll. Adrian didn't mind that yet. Technically, he was with his precious herd. It was already more than he could have hoped for when he'd chosen to follow his mother's dangerous schemes all those decades ago. They'd both assumed he would be killed as soon as his secret was discovered.

"Marc wanted it." Adrian thought of how ruthless the Ghost had been after Donner's death. Adrian would always have the experience of being shot to fall back on when he got sympathetic toward Marc.

Adrian used his striker to light the tinder he'd placed under a cup for protection, glad he'd gotten

it ready before he left this morning. He certainly didn't feel like doing it now. While carrying out his instructions, he had also scavenged. The extra labor and weight had worn him out, but it was worth it to have wood for his fire and canned goods to pull a meal from. With all the explosives he had set off today, hunting was out of the question, though he had set up snares anyway. However, he had plenty of water from melting snow to boil. He also had a natural freezer for anything he might catch later. The temperature around the mountain was a single digit. This tunnel was open, but the twists and turns blocked most of the stiff winds to provide him with a comfortable environment.

“Yep. If I ever meet an arctic wolf or a polar bear, I know where to tell them to come for a vacation.” Chuckling at himself, Adrian carefully coaxed the fire into a roaring blaze, enjoying the burning heat on his hands and face. He had begun stripping gear and shoving it into his kit as soon as he hit the bottom of the tunnel, hoping to help his body adapt faster. Completely on his own, the last thing he needed was to get ill. He doubted Marc would bring him into the medical bay, even if Angela wanted it. There was finally room there, though. Debra had been released into Theo's custody for her probationary period as a new camp member. Those from Jayson's cave-in were already out of bed after three days—except for those who'd died. The bodies were being buried on the mountainside now by Zack and a few others, while

Greg and a team worked on getting a new gate up to replace the one that had been destroyed in the avalanche. Adrian was grateful not to have that chore. There were still dozens of bodies mixed in with that snow and wood. The surviving refugees were gathering below in the towns and cities, along with those who were still coming from the west in large groups of lawless desperation. Adrian hoped Marc continued Angela's refusal of new people right now. Safe Haven couldn't handle more mouths to feed yet.

Adrian quickly finished setting up camp, happy that the motions were becoming routine again. Unless his orders changed, he would spend the afternoon making sure the larger livestock, still up top, were fed and cared for. The building they were in had small heaters and lights, but it wouldn't be enough if another storm came. Adrian was working on those plans while warming a pot of Dinty Moore stew over his fire when steps echoed, coming from Safe Haven.

Adrian moved the pot to the smoldering wood to prevent it from burning, then poured himself a cup of the nasty coffee he'd managed to brew by straining grounds through a piece of shirt he'd cut with his knife. Luxuries like coffee filters were for the camp. The molding box he'd found would be delivered to Li Sing.

As steps came, alertness surged through Adrian's aging body. He'd had company down here since the chaos, but Kenn had only been verifying

things for Angela or Marc and hadn't spoken to him beyond camp business. His banishment hadn't been lifted. Kenn wasn't going to break the rules for him. Adrian wasn't bitter over that either. He'd earned this treatment from all of them.

“Yes, you have.”

Marc was unexpected. Adrian quickly stood up, wondering if he was being evicted despite Angela's orders.

“Yeah, like I'd cross her now.”

Adrian didn't respond to the slightly angry words. He poured Marc a cup of coffee instead.

Marc liked being treated as a boss. He smirked, and then barely managed to choke down the first swallow without gagging. He took in Adrian's singed fingers and haphazard tent with a silent gloat. The man wasn't doing well alone.

“You have an army and you still look like shit.” Adrian waved toward the other flat boulder he'd rolled over during his first day here in case anyone did stop by. “Cop a squat.”

Marc sank down without slinging an equal or greater insult. He could demand that Adrian agree to what he wanted or he could use Angela for leverage. He planned to do both, but neither of those were enough. For all the hell Adrian had put him through, Marc needed to know he had the man under such control that escape was impossible.

Adrian knelt down to stir his dinner, smelling gun oil and soap from Marc's arrival. *Two of the*

best odors in the apocalypse. Both smells implied organization and the comforts of society.

Marc lit a cigarette and then held out the pack. He met Adrian's eye as the man took one, locking down on him mentally. "I'm using an old plan. I want you to approve it, *improve* it if you can."

Adrian lit the smoke without glancing away. He wasn't positive that he could. Much as his own had, Marc's alpha power demanded attention. The man's gifts were growing. "Sure."

"You'll leave before the mission team."

Adrian brightened. He'd hoped to be of use for Angela's plans with the train people. He still didn't know what those were, but he doubted there would be survivors after what she'd gone through. She wouldn't have any mercy to give. "You got it. When?"

"I expect a threatening message very soon. We'll leave when it comes." Marc reluctantly released the mental hold he'd taken over Adrian. "You're on the protective detail of a witness. Get it set up."

"A witness?" Adrian repeated, trying to shake off the daze. He'd often tried to do that to Marc, but had never been successful.

"Witness, accused murderer, walking target, the future of mankind. She's earned all those names."

"You're putting me on the detail taking Angela to the enemy?" Adrian demanded incredulously. "Have you flipped?!"

“It’s one of the few orders she’s given since it all happened.” Marc sat the chilling coffee down in favor of the canteen he’d already been working on. “I refused, of course, but she gave arguments I couldn’t find a better answer for, like she always does. Then fate proved her right.”

“What happened? Is she okay?”

“There was an attempt while I did rounds on the top floors. I almost lost her again.”

Adrian dug into Marc’s mind for the details, glad when the man didn’t try to keep him out. “Son of a bitch!”

“Yeah.” Marc hung his head. “I can’t keep her alive here, not if she isn’t even trying to survive.”

Adrian reconsidered the orders and nodded. “We’ll do it your way. What about the train descendants?”

“They still have more fighters, and since she eliminated so many refugees, we won’t get any extra help this time. Plus, the Mexican Army is coming. We can’t fight. We have to negotiate.”

“What happens when they demand her death? They will, you know.”

“We’ll make them a counteroffer they can’t refuse.” Marc passed the canteen after a long drink.

“Like what?” Adrian tilted the canteen up, swallowing the water. *That burns!* It was alcohol... *Wild Turkey!*

Marc snickered at Adrian’s gasps and coughs. “Let’s you and I have a little pow-wow, shall we?”

Adrian sucked air through the fire in his throat, tears spilling. “Asshole.”

Marc chortled happily, taking the canteen when Adrian thrust it at him. “Tell me something, you traitorous sack. What do all descendants secretly crave?”

“Power,” Adrian gasped, empty stomach now burning. “*Control.*”

“So, why come here if they already have both?”

“To check out rivals...or to get more power.”

“What if it’s both? Like the refugees, these new people recognize us as the authority over the land. That’ll be proven for me when they ask for a meeting and a trial, instead of just attacking.”

Hoping Marc was prepared for the fight if he was wrong, Adrian held out a hand for the canteen. His pride was stinging. If Marc thought he could outdrink him, the man had another thing coming.

“If we give them official control over a specific area, we’ll be recognizing their authority; giving them more power and control. They’ll come meet us to see if we can be easily taken. When they understand what a long, bloody battle it will be, they’ll deal.”

“So we negotiate our enemies into control of the north and south? We surround ourselves?”

“For now.” Marc grunted. “It was the best I could come up with once she convinced me of their power and numbers. We don’t have enough Eagles to match the train descendants, let alone the

numbers Cesar's fighters will add. They already know better than to come light against us."

"What did she say the outcome would be?" Adrian was certain Marc had insisted on having the witch search.

Marc's lips tightened into a thin line as the mocking pitch of a female rang out. "*That has not been revealed.*"

Adrian laughed. "Yeah, figures."

"She might be handing herself over," Marc confided in a low mutter. "Suicide by sacrifice."

That wiped away Adrian's amusement. "No signs of her coming up?"

Marc snorted, sending an image of Angela trying to keep it together yesterday long enough to tell him what to expect from the out-of-towners. The sobs under her words were audible.

Adrian winced. She was still falling. "Do you suppose she's lying about not knowing how it turns out?"

"No. I'm just covering all the bases. She's too tired of death to follow through."

"But you have a plan, in case?"

"Yes. She's under watch, even when she believes she's alone."

"And you don't trust anyone else with this crazy plan of yours?"

"She'll overpower or outthink anyone else. You'll make sure she comes back with us—alive."

"Yes." Adrian waited for more, bracing.

“She won’t be at the meeting while I negotiate. She’ll be in a secret location. With you. She didn’t approve it.”

“No, I’ll bet she didn’t.” Adrian glared. “But she’s in no condition to argue, right?”

“No, she’s not.”

“What the hell is this? Are you giving her up?”

Marc snorted again, denying the longing in Adrian’s question. “Not on your life. I’m just done standing in her way. If she wants to be with you, she can.”

“She didn’t say that—any of it.”

“No.”

Adrian stared at Marc, unable to see any drunkenness even though they were quickly going through the canteen. “You do realize she doesn’t want either of us now?”

“She also doesn’t want Charlie, food, news, or leadership!” Marc snapped, finally getting to the open wound that had driven him here to deal with this devil. “Maybe you can bring her back in more ways than the obvious.”

Adrian didn’t know what to say. “Why so soon? It’s only been a few days.”

“She’s gone cold.”

Adrian frowned. It had been a long time since he’d heard that term for a soldier who was methodically getting their affairs in order to prepare for death, usually at their own hand. “You’re positive of that?”

Marc held out the half empty canteen. “Enough to be sitting in this cold, shitty tunnel, drinking and dealing with a man I want dead.”

Silence fell.

Adrian stirred the pot of stew, still burning from the last drink. Marc had to know this wouldn't end well. If Adrian did manage to help Angie, it would bring them closer together, not her and Marc.

Finally drunk, Marc met his eye in open honesty. “I can't lose her too, you know? She's a cold bitch, but the need for her never goes away.”

Adrian wasn't encouraged by that revelation. Marc was drinking, Angela might be suicidal, and Safe Haven could come under attack at any point after dawn. Fate was throwing hits hard and fast now. However, Adrian was encouraged that Marc had come down here, out of sight, to get drunk and spill his misery to someone he knew wouldn't blab. What Angela had asked for almost seemed possible at that moment.

Then Adrian caught a flash of the hatred in Marc's cool eyes and remembered who he was dealing with. Unless Marc was forced to, he wouldn't ever be able to understand why she had changed so drastically over a short nine months. As soon as Angela showed signs of coming back, Marc would thrust everything back onto her shoulders. He didn't like being top dog in a camp like this. There was no time to enjoy it. He also didn't want to be XO anymore. Marc hated the constant demands and the soul-eating stress. Adrian understood. He also

knew Marc wanted Angela out of leadership. He had all along, but there was no one available to handle that heavy chore except a banished rival he could barely tolerate to keep the peace. “You’ll keep her in charge until Kyle’s ready or you pick someone new?”

“Not exactly.”

“Or is it Billy, now that you’ve taken him under your wing?”

Marc stared suspiciously. “How do you know that?”

“He’s sporting a Colt and long, leather coat. Can’t imagine who he’s trying to be.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m training him.”

Adrian waved off the evasion. “He has the walk. He isn’t bluffing.”

“It’ll be a decade.” Marc took the canteen. “Half that, if you and I push him as hard as the job requires.”

“Billy over Kyle?”

“Kyle’s a killer first, and he doesn’t want the job. Never has.”

“But he... Wait. You and I? Am I serving the king now?”

“You do still want to serve, don’t you?” Marc shot back.

“Yes.” Adrian sneered. “Under *either* of you.”

“I’ll put you on lessons. You’ll teach a private class. My goals and students, with your methods. Do you accept this FND labor?”

Marc using those words stunned Adrian. “Tell me why and then I’ll give you the answer you knew you’d get when you came down here.”

Marc belched loudly. He would do his teeth again before his next round of the camp that should be peacefully sleeping. “I can’t wait a decade. I’m bringing you in so you can take back over and I can give Angie another baby. I figure a year of labor on your part, while Angie gets healing sessions from Kendle and Conner. Twelve months from now, compared to sixty months. It’s good math.” Marc held up a warning hand, timbre dropping into frigid. “*If you can be reformed.* If not, I’ll give it to Kenn and Tonya.”

“Kenn can’t lead Safe Haven! Only an alpha can keep these people alive.”

“Then you’d better become *Mr. Perfect* again real fast. Because I’ve had enough of her pain and my hatred. You have one year to prove that you can be trusted and you can have the job back. I know how badly you want it. We all do.”

Adrian was speechless.

Marc understood. He could hardly believe that he was saying these things.

Adrian sensed there was also a lot Marc wasn’t saying, but it didn’t matter. He would take any opportunity to regain leadership and Marc clearly wasn’t above using that. “I’m grateful.”

“I knew you would be. I counted on it. As of this moment, I officially give you permission to be in camp, with a guard.”

Adrian immediately tested his new place. “What are my limits?”

“Same as any other person being considered for admittance.”

“I meant with Angela.”

Marc’s profile tightened. “Do you really need me to point out the line between right and wrong?”

“You’re hard to read.”

“Help her. Bring her back to herself. Get her back in charge.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Your best has built a future where one didn’t exist.” Marc repeated Angela’s words. “I expect it’ll be good enough now.”

Stunned at the admission, the compliment, Adrian stared in suspicion. “What are you up to?”

Marc didn’t see any harm in telling Adrian the catch, now that he had his thumb firmly on the slippery man. “Go on and enjoy your year with her, but at the end of that time, leadership is all you get. The fallout will be gone and we’ll leave you on that island to come home. You and your demanding sheep will be thousands of miles away.”

The cruelty in Marc’s tone wasn’t lost on Adrian, but he centered on a huge stopping point. “You’re bluffing. She’ll never agree.”

Marc stood up, sensing Eagles coming their way on his mental grid. “Angie would do anything for a baby, for even a chance at another baby. A year from now, when the herd is safe and she’s fully recuperated, I’ll give her that—on the condition that

we don't stay, so it doesn't cost us another child. She'll fold in about ten seconds."

Adrian gaped. "You can't do that to her. You wouldn't!"

Marc chuckled. "You keep on believing that, sweetheart."

"And if I tell her everything or offer her the same deal, plus she keeps leadership?" Adrian tried to counter the trap, but he knew it was in vain. Marc had all his ducks in a row.

"Oh, you won't be able to. If you cross a single line, you don't get control and neither does she. I'll sway the camp to have you both banished this time. She'd have to leave Charlie here. She'll never pick you, not when I'm giving her what she wants legally."

Adrian didn't argue further. Angela would never cross that line. Marc was right.

"Checkmate."

"When do you plan to spring this on her?" Adrian needed the information to make new plans and schemes. "Last minute?"

Marc chuckled again, enjoying himself. "I forgot to mention that I already did. She and I came to terms last night. She traded you off, again." Adrian's pain made Marc very happy. He held out a small map. "You're the only one who sees this."

Adrian took it, recognizing the area. He had a hundred theories running through his mind, but the loudest was that Marc wasn't as pure as they'd all believed. For him to threaten Safe Haven's future

for his own gain was a day Adrian hadn't thought would ever arrive.

"It's not my gain, you idiot! Leading is going to get her killed and I believe you already know that!"

Adrian didn't respond as Quinn and Jax came through the protected entrance and went to Marc.

"The train people contacted us. They're demanding Angela be put on trial for murder."

Marc was relieved that he'd predicted their responses correctly, but he was concerned about the negotiations. Until he saw them, read them, he couldn't know if his plan would succeed. Marc kept emotions out of it. "I'll contact them in an hour. Pass the word to Special Forces. It's a duty day." Marc glanced at Adrian. "I want you gone."

Adrian nodded. "In an hour, I'll be out of this sewer and flying west."

"Don't miss anything. This would be a bad time for us to be ambushed."

Adrian watched Marc and the two men leave without revealing his joy or his horror. Marc had him trapped for the moment, but he was about to be in the camp's good graces again. He was also going to have to walk a line he hadn't been capable of when there wasn't as much at stake. The next twelve months would be nothing short of impossible, but he was going to try anyway. The only thing he wanted more than a life with Angela was to be in control of Safe Haven again and Marc had used that to make a horrid deal. Adrian wondered if Marc knew Angela would end up hating him for it. A

woman's heart was nothing to abuse this way. Forcing a female to choose between two things she loved was always a bad idea. Adrian was shocked Marc had taken the risk.

So was Marc. He waved off his escorts and went to the shower again to hopefully sober up. He'd had to be drunk to do this. With Angie, there had been enough pity to control himself and follow his plan. With Adrian, there was only loathing and he'd needed the alcohol to hide some of it. If Adrian knew what Marc really had planned for the end of that year, he would grab his son and flee. That was the only way either of them would survive.

2

“He said what?”

“He'll call you in an hour. He's busy right now.”

The powerful descendant enjoying the softly chugging luxury train stared in shock at the disrespect. Around them, plush red velvet décor offset the apocalyptic landscape passing by in the frosted windows.

“He's busy?!” Sonja's rage flooded the long car, waking the other occupants.

Blankets flew off as hands rose eagerly to defend her.

Sonja settled them impatiently. “Not yet!”

Her two ruthless defenders dropped back down with grumbles about her not controlling her emotions, but they understood. Her twin sister, Tara, had been killed by these Safe Haven people.

Sonja wanted revenge. It's what any of them would want, but this trek south also hadn't been fun, despite the nice ride. The plush couches had been comfortable beds for the trip here and the mini kitchen had allowed them to remain hidden and better protected, but they hadn't forgotten they were at war. The isolated bathroom down the hallway was the single vulnerability on this car. It was second in the convoy. Sonja wasn't foolish enough to take the lead engine, though the first class and employee cabins were even nicer. She had many enemies. The odds of an ambush upon arrival were high.

Sonja glowered toward the radio Ross had rigged up, willing it to come to life, to give her what she wanted.

"It did sound like we caught them by surprise." Bryson didn't want her upset. If Sonja started breathing fire, the entire encampment would be up. Her pull was incredible. It had earned her leadership and more enemies than Bryson had ever known one person to have. The assassination attempts hadn't stopped for six months.

Sonja hoped it was true. That was why she'd chosen to make contact so late at night. "Good."

"Coffee or chocolate?" Bryson was her personal assistant.

Sonja ran a sore hand through short, bottle-given red locks. Yesterday had been spent training in hand-to-hand combat and she was tired. They

rarely fought enemies who could get that close. “A drink.”

Bryson poured the tonic without commenting. Her headaches were ugly, often coming with stress. A shot would calm her nerves. He would have to get some food into her after that so she didn’t get sick.

Sonja downed the shot. She liked that brief second of being on life’s edge as the whiskey made it impossible to breathe. Fascinated by death’s mysteries, Sonja missed Missy more than she missed her sister. The little girl had been a wealth of knowledge that Sonja hadn’t wanted to use in their plans. She also hadn’t wanted her sister to go, but Tara had insisted her man-filled team could handle Safe Haven.

Sonja glanced at her two shields, hating their tougher bodies at the same time that she was glad of them. Ross, with his natural red curls, and Bobby, with his dark dreads, were lethal. They were the only guys on her personal team or on her private patrol. She’d brought them in at first as a decoy for her town, back when she’d had an image to maintain, but their skills had proven invaluable since the war. Finding out they’d once served under those in charge of Safe Haven had made them perfect for this trip.

The sound of an alarm clock in the next car was quickly silenced. Sonja’s chain of command was sleeping off a late evening of relaxation that she hadn’t joined. Her top people were loyal enough, but she’d learned not to bond with subordinates. It

made the battles harder when there were pieces she didn't want to lose. Now, thanks to Safe Haven, Sonja no longer had that weakness. The only person she needed to return from this run was herself, and even she was expendable if it meant the end of Safe Haven's rule. The future was open right now. Anyone could inherit the earth and Sonja couldn't stand the idea of it falling to the weak, greedy humans the descendants had been forced to hide from for their entire existence. Descendants would shape the future now. Equality and justice were myths of weaker species. The apocalypse had freed every magic user to follow their rightful destinies. In time, the few remaining humans would be slaves who knew their place.

Sonja leaned against the soft cushions, heart filled with bitterness and waves of violent fury that she managed to keep locked in this time. Her companions knew how unstable she was, but her gifts were too strong for them to challenge. As long as she continued to reward their skills or dominate them mentally, they would obey. Her worries came from the infiltrators and the assassins. Her life had been in danger countless times since the war, and two governments had caused most of it.

After she'd gone to Canada to collect her people, the government there had recognized her strength and decided she needed to be dead or serving them. They'd almost succeeded. If not for Tara's relationship with Donner, all of their clan would have been killed when he was brought in to

round them up. Then Safe Haven had popped up out of nowhere and destroyed the US government, which had given them unofficial control over the entire country. Sonja still didn't understand exactly how that had happened, but she was going to reverse it as quickly as she could. This upcoming meeting would give her a timeline for the fight. If the shepherds were as weak as those they were trying to protect, the meeting place would become the battlefield. They—

“Do you want—”

“Get out!” Sonja was unable to take Bryson's groveling right now. She had several plans in action. It was a bad time to interrupt her concentration.

Bryson slid from the car with glares from Bobby and Ross as they snapped awake again. It was a normal life for them, but they were surlier than usual because Sonja hadn't gone to the party, which meant they hadn't been able to either. Getting laid was their biggest goal in life, it seemed.

Sonja wished she could have their skills in female fighters. She hated men—all men, any age. In her town, male births required the parents to place a black shawl of mourning over their egresses; they paid double tariffs on their apartment, got less supplies. Having a son was taboo, which, in Sonja's mind, finally made things even. How many female babies had been drowned simply for having a slit instead of a pole when they emerged? It was the dawn of reckoning for men and every age, race, and nationality would fall under her knife in time.

The idea to have women rule the world wasn't a new thing. Many courageous females had tried in the past. A few of them had even been descendants, but they hadn't had the freedom of armageddon to support their ruthlessness. That wasn't the case here. Sonja intended to push her power to the limit to ensure that 500 years from now, men were in chains and women ruled the world. The beginning of it was in her town. The next step was being taken with this run. Safe Haven was the only thing that stood between her and the beautiful, bittersweet dream that had killed Tara.

“It won't be in vain. Send me your strength, sister, and we will still accomplish our goals.”

In the next car, wrist alarms got people up. Just as spacious and nice as the first car, this second area was home to five inhabitants, all of them in leadership. A dozen strong defenders took up car number three, with the middle of the train full of supplies; the caboose held their slaves. The other three trains held fighters and useful subjects. They were seven hundred strong for this run and the mood was confident. They were also bored from being stopped by snow for two days, after already spending four days rolling here from Altoona. They hadn't counted on this extra time and they were going through their supplies too fast. Boredom was dangerous.

Bryson slid into the second car, scanning to be sure the attitudes were safe. He didn't have a strong

gift, but he was able to read moods—something Sonja had once found useful. Now, she could do that herself and he'd been reduced to lackey. Because of his weaknesses, she considered him barely above the humans. Bryson didn't care. He'd loved her before she became their tyrannical boss and he would adore her even after Safe Haven piked her bloody skull on their front gate.

Every descendant in the car turned toward him, easily catching the prediction.

Bryson flushed but didn't offer an excuse. He'd been against challenging Safe Haven before and he still was. They didn't know the folks in that mountain fortress the way he did. When pushed, Mitchel had been merciless in the past. Bryson was certain the man had passed that trait on to any successors. This wouldn't be the quick, easy trip Sonja had promised. It would be a bloodbath and Bryson wanted no part of it.

Chapter Three
All Souls

1

“**T**his is Safe Haven. Go ahead with your message for the boss.”

“Exactly an hour. Interesting. I’m Sonja. You are?”

“The Ghost.”

“Ah. I know who I’m dealing with. Tell me, Marcus Brady. Is the boss listening? Perhaps standing over your shoulder whispering instructions?”

“No and no. She’s still sedated from your ambush. They’re all dead. Hired thugs.”

“That is my sister you’re speaking ill of.”

“Your sister, Donner’s wife, Jack’s lover. She was also a killer and a kidnapper. We sentenced her to death. There is no appeal process for that.”

“Hmm... It’s so hard to read you through that stone. It almost sounds like you’re mocking me to draw a reaction, but I can sense the fear. It is unfortunate that your ruler cannot answer for herself, but an explanation must still be provided.”

“What do you suggest?”

“A peaceful meeting, a hearing, to determine if we want to pursue further action. Perhaps all of this

can be explained. Will Safe Haven stand by their own code?"

Listening while traveling, Adrian grimaced at the cleverly worded trap. Marc couldn't say the code only applied to Safe Haven or they would lose authority over everyone not inside their gate.

"We have nothing to hide, but we won't be drawn into an ambush. We're known for keeping our word. We only know you from people like Tara and Jayson."

"We will bring the same number of soldiers as you to the meeting. You may pick the location. We need those answers. The war has spilled enough blood of descendants. I prefer to collect them whenever possible."

"Safe Haven can agree to those terms, but it'll be a while for us to dig out. The avalanche Vlad caused buried our remaining tunnel. Then we'll have to get through the refugees at the bottom of the hill."

"Very well. We will expect the location soon. Unless you already have a place in mind?"

"No. I couldn't pick it until I knew how much space we'd need."

"Perhaps large tents? I'm told your camp can teach us how to heat them with solar power even now, when the sun hides its warmth."

"Great idea. Maybe you can help us with the station you'll be coming into shortly. We tried to get the outgoing tracks usable, but we have no switch function."

“Yes, we can assist there.”

The conversation continued that way up to the end, with even the parting being cooperative. Adrian didn't buy it for a minute. He thought Marc wouldn't have either. Sonja was in charge of four trains of fighters chugging their way, many of them descendants, and likely just as many people were still in the town that she ran. She sounded dangerously smart. He hadn't been able to spot any mistakes or even a slip of her true emotions, though Marc had pushed that button hard for a first conversation. Adrian admitted Marc had done well, but he still wished Angela had been the one to handle it. Marc's boy scout nature might allow him to overlook a weakness or rule it out for moral or ethical reasons.

Busy exploring that thought, Adrian missed the sound of steps carefully crunching toward the tunnel entrance that he was about to exit.

“Nice. I was hoping I'd run into you without the bosses around.”

Adrian only had time to hit his belt as he ducked the punch. “Jeff's home!”

Kevin gave them space as Jeff dove at their former boss, taking them both to the rocky ground. Furious swings punctuated by nasty comments and accusations filled the drafty tunnel.

The radio crackled. “Are you positive it's him?”

Kevin flipped on his set as if he hadn't been gone at all. He and Jeff had wired up after dropping Sally and the wolves off nearby. “Yeah, we're back,

but the reunion isn't going so well. Hell of a time climbing in through that snow. Be awhile before a group can get out," Kevin added in case the enemy was able to listen to them. He and Jeff had heard the contact from the train people while driving up the road to this tunnel.

Kevin observed the fight nervously. He hadn't expected Jeff to attack Adrian, but he understood the sentiment by now. Jeff hated Adrian for his betrayals and for Crista's death. Kevin didn't know how the two were connected, but he didn't doubt they were.

The sounds of the fight grew louder as Adrian refused to submit to the beating Jeff wanted to deliver. Kevin kept watch over the entrance, worrying about the refugees stacked up half a mile down the snow-packed paths. If the sounds carried, those desperate folks would come up here. After hearing the call, Kevin knew there were enough problems already waiting inside. They didn't need to bring more. Their arrival would already put a kink in whatever schemes were ongoing.

"Stop it! Right now!"

Marc's alpha command came through the air and radio, dowsing the fuse that had been lit.

Adrian shoved Jeff off and climbed to his feet. Spitting blood, heart pounding, skin swelling—it was a bit like past training sessions. *Welcome.*

Jeff also felt it, but he refused to admit that he'd missed it. He swept Adrian angrily, noting the asshole was dressed for a long run.

Adrian wiped at the bloody cuts on his face, not letting his thoughts run as Jeff tried to scan his mind. He'd known the man was special, but he hadn't considered him a descendant. However, Jeff's demon was strong and being used accurately. It would be a big surprise for some people.

Adrian nodded to Kevin and got the same in return. Adrian didn't think Daryl or Cynthia would be glad to see them, but the Eagles would. Two more fighters with morals, ethics, and the ability to follow the chain of command were always welcome in Safe Haven.

Boot steps crunched toward them, from the camp this time.

Adrian retrieved the gear he'd dropped during the fight, then strode toward the opening. No one spoke. Words weren't needed. Jeff blamed him for Crista's death. Adrian also hated himself for it, but not in the same way. If he'd been a better man, he would have been there to lead the fight, with Angela assisting. Between the two of them, they might have caught the mistakes that had cost them lives.

Behind Adrian, a happier reunion began. He absorbed the good waves to carry with him. He had a job to do and an offer to pick over from every angle. Marc wasn't a bad person. He didn't have the callousness for it. Adrian was willing to bet the man had overlooked something. Marc wasn't used to oozing himself out of unpleasant situations the way Adrian was. He excelled at it, clearly. If not, someone would have been able to kill him by now.

Marc wasn't the first man who'd hunted him and come up short. Adrian doubted that he would be the last.

2

Angela listened to the excited voices going by the tunnel that led to the medical bay. Jeff and Kevin would be put in quarantine. Neither she nor Marc had counted those two men in their plans. That would have to happen now. She hoped Marc would take care of it. All she could concentrate on was gathering the strength to make the trip down the mountain. She didn't know what Marc had planned for it, but anything would be unpleasant. Hilda had dressed her in warm, loose layers and these boots were made for walkin', but other than that, there wasn't much she could do gear-wise. She couldn't even carry her kit, though her gun was back on her hip. She welcomed that pain; she felt too vulnerable without it.

"I want to see her!" Jeff's loud demand came through the tunnel.

Angela braced for company. She had to put on a good act here.

Jeff appeared much the same, a bit leaner maybe. Angela was glad the time away had been good for him. She tried to force a welcoming smile that came out as a grimace. The ring of purple fingerprints around her neck glared in the dim lights of the medical bay.

Jeff's mouth vanished into a line of anger. He didn't speak or yell, but Angela wished that he would. The silence didn't tell her who he was condemning.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here."

Angela's heart broke all over again as she realized he was blaming himself. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying. As blood flowed over her tongue, she concentrated on the taste to keep from breaking. "There wasn't anything you could have done to stop it."

"I'm here now. How can I help?"

Angela looked to the tense male who'd just come into the medical bay. "That's up to our leader."

Jeff's face almost collapsed in on itself as he fought not to demand answers as to why that was happening. If it wasn't temporary, then there better have been a vote.

"Did you enjoy your adventures?" Angela made herself stay standing without support as Marc began to evaluate her condition.

"It was interesting." Jeff felt tension he didn't understand. "Met a crazy woman, found Dog's soulmate, fought a panther."

Angela chuckled as if her guts weren't on fire. "Sally, right?"

"Yeah. She's at a warehouse down the hill, with the wolves."

Angela saw Marc was instantly distracted and encouraged it. "How is Dog? We've missed him."

“Not that great. The panther left its marks on all of us. Sally was stitching him up again when we pulled out.”

“Again?”

“Dog’s mate keeps licking them and they come untied.”

Marc wanted more information on the wolf, but he also knew Angela was shaming them. She looked almost normal, but her dilated pupils and nails clenched into her palms under her shirtsleeves were a giveaway to anyone who was searching for the signs. She wasn’t ready for this.

“No.” Angela sighed in weariness and determination. “But I’ll survive it. Tell me how we’re going.”

“No.” Marc motioned Jeff to follow Nathan to the QZ that was in a deep cavity on the first floor. They’d placed it there after deciding unvetted inhabitants wouldn’t be brought in through these lower tunnels. *So much for that rule.* “I’m not telling anyone anything. We still have traitors here.”

Jeff approved. Marc’s diligence allowed him to do as he’d been instructed without arguing. He would get settled in the QZ and then demand answers from the guards there. It seemed like a lot more had happened than just an attack by a new, clever enemy.

Marc lingered on Angela, taking in the flushed cheeks, the walking boots. “You won’t need those. Pick something lighter.”

Hilda hurried off to do that.

Angela sank against the stone. Marc already knew and she didn't want to keep wasting strength that she suspected she would need.

Marc's arms went around her an instant later.

Angela groaned lowly at the heat of his body around her chilly frame.

Marc didn't say anything that might spark a fight or make her upset. He held her loosely and wished they'd never come to Safe Haven. This refugee camp had shattered every dream he'd had for them.

“We have three inner quarantine zones, just like we had topside until the avalanche.” Nathan led Jeff and Kevin into a narrow stone room with a low ceiling. A row of empty cots set into the far corner of the cavity waited for them. There were small shelves anchored to the wall and two large mirrors near the door. Kevin realized that was so the guards in the hall could see into the room without actually coming in. Jeff and Kevin were impressed with the bundled cords and pipework, both feeling guilty they hadn't been there to help with all of it.

“We haven't let anyone down here yet, so it's still clean.” Nathan frowned. “Some of those newer people don't seem to care if the trash piles up.”

Jeff took a rear bunk.

Kevin chose the front, wondering how long it would take the doctor to clear them.

“I'll be right outside. You know the drill, and welcome home.”

“Thanks.” Kevin smiled at the former rookie he’d helped to train.

Jeff didn’t say anything. He wasn’t sure about it yet. Things seemed just as chaotic as when they’d left and that wasn’t good.

“Let me by!” a female voice ordered.

“You know they’re in quarantine right now.”

“It’s really them?”

“Yes.”

Jeff and Kevin listened to Cynthia badger Nathan for details, grinning at each other. She hadn’t changed much.

It took Nathan almost five minutes to get rid of her. Jeff wondered if Daryl had been standing there with her the entire time.

Kevin never thought of that man at all.

3

A short time later, Angela was in the center of the Special Forces team, cradled by Marc. She hadn’t considered that he would carry her down the mountain. Instead of arguing, she’d chosen to enjoy being warm and in his arms, no matter the reason. There wouldn’t be many more moments like this for them. He hoped taking her to Adrian would help, but that blond bastard didn’t know how deep she’d gone either. All that mattered now was making sure that Safe Haven and Charlie would be protected. In a few weeks, that would be accomplished and then

she could rest in peace. Angela swallowed the tears, crushed beyond repair. She'd gone from everything to nothing, with one cruel punch.

Marc caught each thought as it went through, wincing, stumbling occasionally. She wasn't holding much back. It was hard to keep his mouth shut, but words wouldn't change her mind. Actions sometimes did, except that wasn't going to be enough this time. The hope he'd had for this trip began to fade. Adrian wasn't going to be successful. Angela wanted to die and they couldn't give her another baby in time to keep that desire from setting into this cursed stone. She would have to be watched for a long time once this was all over.

Marc paused as Angela's grip tightened. "Are you okay?"

"No." The visions in her mind were ugly.

"What do you need? Name it and we'll get it."

Angela looked at the security post near them, the last one for this tunnel. "I need him."

The rookie on guard there with the level man raised a brow in confusion. "Me?"

Their rookies were constantly busy learning rules from the level men they'd been assigned to. All they really needed was the physical side and weapons training, but that would have to come later. Two other teams of rookies had been accepted into the Eagles not long after they'd come to this mountain, giving them four teams of amateurs. Kenn and the vet had been pulling shifts with their new teams, but Charlie was still staying with Tracy

and someone else had been given leadership over his team. The boy hadn't protested.

"Why me?" the rookie asked again. "Did I do something wrong?"

Kyle grabbed the man's arm and got them moving again, able to feel Marc's impatience with this unscheduled stop. "Come on. Stay with me."

Soothed, Angela laid her head against Marc's neck and tried not to shudder again. *Please, don't. I'm so sorry for what I've become. Please, don't do it.*

4

The walk down took them an hour. Not a single word was spoken until they reached the bottom.

Kyle led his men out to their transportation, hoping the fresh batteries they'd carried down would be enough to fire up the cold engines. They had chosen not to drain fluids or remove hoses in favor of having a chance at a fast escape if it was needed. Still not sure if it might be, Marc had chosen to come down the bugout tunnel as a test to check for trouble. They'd learned two things right off. The first was that no amount of labor would secure some of the gaps in the ground that had tried to crumble under their boots. They'd been lucky to be able to jump and throw things across, almost losing both gear and lives several times. The other thing they'd learned was to never underestimate the ability of the dark to give grown guys the willies.

All of them had been glad to see daylight at the bottom, no matter how clouded or grudging.

“How far are we going?” Kyle motioned the other Eagles to get their transportation ready.

Marc set Angela on her feet, but he refused to let go of her when she would have stepped away to demonstrate her stability and give him a break.

Marc sighed. “I used to ruck, honey. This is nothing compared to carrying eighty pounds for twenty miles in a 90° desert.” He kept her tight against him so she couldn’t refuse the help. “We’re going a mile, stopping, then going two more miles. The same back, with a possible pit stop along the way.”

“I’ve got it.” Kyle went to the stash of fuel near the laboring Eagles. He tossed bottles of storage additive to the men at the gas tanks, then carried the proper amount of gasoline over. It didn’t make sense to needlessly grab too much or worse, grab too little, if they weren’t rushed. Kyle assumed that was part of why Marc was taking them out early.

Angela knew it was because of her. He was scared to wait even one more day before trying to help her. She was just glad to be out of the cave and away from those who were still determined to kill her. She didn’t know who they were, but their thoughts were always ugly. If they got their way, she would die before Safe Haven was actually safe. If not for Charlie, she wouldn’t have cared.

A few feet away, Jennifer stood with her back to the camouflaged tunnel entrance, scanning for

problems. Now that they'd come up from their hole, the train descendants would be able to reach them. There were also angry refugees still skulking about, along with entire towns of desperate, starving citizens flooding in from the west. She didn't want anyone sneaking up on them.

Able to sense his discontent, Jennifer tried not to be offended by Kyle wishing that she wasn't along for this run. Despite the war with Donner, his mind kept telling him to try playing the role of protector. When he wised up and switched over to what he really wanted, things would get better for him.

What about for you? Angela ducked under Marc's arm to hide her discomfort under the guise of being cold. *Is it what you want or what you owe?*

Jennifer took in a deep breath, impressed by the beauty of the view, but also terrified of the mountain. *Both. It serves two purposes. Later, when we get tired of each other, I won't have this debt hanging over me.*

You do know that's crap, right? Angela was unable to contain her hatred of that mentality. *You don't owe him anything. The rescue was an accident. Adrian just wanted to get rid of the slavers.*

You misunderstand, Jennifer replied without rancor. *I owe him for restoring my faith in humanity, in men. If not for him, I would have the same hatred as Hilda.*

That's not a debt. That's a reward.

Jennifer brightened. *Yeah! That's good, right?*

Yes, Jenny. That's very good. Jennifer continued to heal and strengthen, to prove that a soul could survive some of the darkest shit. Angela was amazed by it. She was also furious. She didn't want to get over it. She didn't want to recuperate. She wanted to be with her dead children.

As she had the thought, snow crunched heavily from the ledge near Jennifer.

"Look out!"

"She's in a blind!"

"Get down!"

Jennifer ducked the blast of gunfire that came over the edge, but she couldn't get out of the crossfire completely as the lone descendant blasted the landing with heat.

Angela met the woman with a scream that sounded through the mountains, knocking her off the cliff with a mental hit, but the gunfire had gotten through.

Marc sank to the snow by the rookie who had shoved him out of the way to take the bullet.

The rookie's eyes fluttered open. "Ugh..."

Marc grinned as he felt the slug in the triple-plated vest. It was one of the few vests like this that they had, and probably the only one that would have stopped the handgun's armor piercing round. Kenn was having fun with new designs, but Marc had refused to wear his for this run. He hadn't wanted to be more protected than his team.

Kyle had Jennifer in his arms, verifying she had no injuries. They both watched Angela cry in relief from the ground, where Marc had shoved her.

“Thank you. Thank you! Thank you.”

Jennifer slowly stood up and went to the crying woman who looked and sounded like a lunatic. As Jennifer realized why Angela was giving thanks, her heart clenched. She was thanking God for not taking Marc. Marc was supposed to be dead now.

Jennifer looked over at the man, only to find the knowledge in his eyes, in his expression.

How long can she keep him alive? Jennifer asked her witch in horror.

The witch didn't answer. It hadn't been revealed.

Angela let them take her to the truck and place her inside. The rookie who had taken the hit for Marc was put behind the wheel.

“I owe you a huge favor. When I'm well enough, I'll honor that debt.”

The rookie grinned, but didn't tell her he was now on his way to having what he wanted most, thanks to her choice to bring him along. He was still smiling as he followed Kyle's vehicle over to the fuel tanks, where Marc would take his place as driver. Until they were ready to leave, the Ghost was standing guard against any other lurking assassins who had dug into the stone to wait for a shot at Safe Haven's leaders.

“Did Willa get her?” Ross was unable to wait any longer. “Is that bitch dead now?”

Sonja’s lack of response wasn’t comforting.

“She didn’t, right?” Ross was supposed to be guarding the train car door, but he hadn’t been able to stay at his post when Sonja began getting Willa’s message about spotting Angela outside her mountain den.

“No.” Sonja showed no sympathy for Ross, who had recently proclaimed love for the fighter they’d just lost. “Get ready to roll out in the morning. Make sure you personally pack the darts. We can use more slaves.”

Ross stomped from the train car, punching walls as he went.

Sonja sighed. Emotions were handy to use to control people, but when death inevitably came, that control snapped. Ross would now have to be watched for betrayals and revenge.

“Should I?” Bryson inquired from her feet, where he was perched to work on her toenails.

She nodded, admiring the golden glints of the blond hair sticking from his pointy ears. “After we get back tonight. Make it a heavy dose. The others will think he committed suicide over his lost love.”

Bryson chuckled at her joke. The others would know he’d been removed; it would make them more careful about demonstrating their own loyalty. Sonja knew how to rule her people.

“What about their leader?” Bryson detailed tiny flames on her nail. “We’ve heard she’s strong.”

The records from Donner had told Bryson that his former co-worker had gathered up the best of the descendant power right after the war. Angela was only a part of it.

“We’ll meet and handle it there. Now that they’ve come from their hole, I’ll be able to scan them when we’re closer. So will Darla. She’ll tell us what gifts they have and then we’ll attack. Like when we were sent to Hawaii to recover the Mitchel girl.”

Bryson frowned. When Adrian discovered where his daughter was, the men in that bunker were dead.

Sonja laughed. “No, they aren’t. They want him to come back, but he won’t. His kind never faces their past.”

Bryson, who had been with Adrian when he rescued that same girl as a child, didn’t correct his mistress. She didn’t like it, but it also didn’t matter. If Adrian did leave Safe Haven to rescue Alexa, it would only make Sonja’s conquest that much easier.

“Should I be worried, my pet?” Sonja drawled, using the language of the fighters because she knew it bothered him. Due to his weaknesses and lack of power, he would never be valued as anything more than a power feed or a butler.

“No, of course not. We’re unstoppable with you leading us.” Bryson capped the polish and stood up. “I’ll be right back with your lunch.”

“Later. Get on the bed. I need energy in case their leader makes a surprise recovery.”

Bryson eagerly climbed on the bed. After she was sated, he would ask to remain here during the fight, as he usually did. Bryson didn’t mind serving the queen, but he hated cleaning up after her. Being Sonja’s matched soul mate, even if she wasn’t willing in that, was amazing. Being her janitor was hard work. She left bodies, or pieces of them, every place she went.

6

Angela didn’t look at anyone as she climbed from the truck and walked toward the small cave where Marc had chosen to stash her. She’d refused to let them get out. Marc needed to go.

Everyone knew who was in the small cave; that man was smart enough to stay out of sight. It was tense, awkward. Most of them scanned the snowbanks and ant cones instead of her stiff shoulders or Marc’s thunderous expression.

Marc waited for her to vanish into the darkness without a wave and for Adrian to give the short whistle that they’d often used as an Eagle signal to mean things were ready to go. He was furious, but Marc didn’t change his mind. He also didn’t wave

Billy over to chaperone them, as Angela had demanded.

“You think this will work?”

Marc returned to the driver’s seat without answering Jennifer’s quiet query. He doubted anything, or anyone, could change Angie’s mind and that included Adrian. She was the most stubborn person he’d ever known, but he didn’t assume she was doing this for attention. Losing the baby hadn’t been planned. He knew that now by her reaction. If she’d planned it, she would have also had something waiting for her pain. Instead, she was eaten up with remorse and anger at herself. Both his demon and hers had warned him that she was obsessing over it, constantly replaying the fight with Vlad that had cost her so much.

Besides the obvious not eating much or sleeping well, and the nasty attitude she was developing, there was the crying every night. It killed him to roll over and detect fresh tears, but the ones dried to her cheek each morning were enough to break him. She started and finished every day the same way now—tearing herself apart for the choices she’d made. Marc was hoping that time alone with Adrian would at least remind her there were still duties to perform. If she went on like this much longer, the camp would demand a leadership vote.

That’s what she wants. Adrian sent it through the private channel he and Marc had worked on before his betrayals had been revealed. *Maybe we should let it happen...*

Hearing Adrian doubt his own plans sent fury through Marc. *Put her back to work!*

Yes, Boss! Adrian retorted snidely. He didn't send his next thought.

Marc was glad. Leaving Angie here, alone with his rival, was a bitter pill to swallow.

We never had to be rivals. That has always been your issue, not mine. Adrian broke the connection.

Marc understood he wouldn't have any contact with Angie while she was in the cave as a bit of payback for how being banished had felt. Marc gritted his teeth and led the convoy toward the meeting place that Kyle's Special Forces team would recon. He had his job to distract him, thankfully, but it wouldn't always be this way. A year from now, he and Angie would be free of that problem—forever.

“He's planning my murder again.”

Angela stopped inside the cave. “Not a first for you, is it?”

Adrian was surprised into a snicker at her sarcasm. “No.” Adrian dropped the black canvas over the doorway that would stop most bullets, then fastened the edges to keep the stiff wind from blowing it around and ruining their concealment. He activated the outer alarms using his wrist console, then switched on the tiny monitor to reveal their den.

It wasn't a great picture, but he had all angles visible with four cameras that were divided into two

screens. He had half a mile view in every direction, a small ledge lined with guns and ammunition, and a handful of grenades he hoped he didn't have to use to blast a hole through the rear wall if things went bad. Feeling like he had security covered as much as he could, Adrian finally turned to scrutinize his soulmate.

The agony was too much for him, as he'd known it would be. She was in more pain than he could stand if he connected with her. Adrian dropped his eyes and waved toward the far wall where two rocking chairs with stacks of blankets and pillows waited.

Angela sank down gratefully, not removing gloves or anything else. She needed to get her breath back first. She was still bleeding and cramping, as was normal after a miscarriage or a delivery, and the truck ride had hurt her. Then Kyle had subtly slipped a thick notebook into her kit as he let her out of the truck. The weight had almost been too much.

Adrian stared at her in open misery and joy. "What can I do for you?"

"Mentally, nothing. Physically, I need to be ready to fight again."

"When?"

Angela sighed deeply. "Hours or a few days, but no more."

Adrian stiffened. "There's only one way I can do that."

"Do it and do it now. All our lives depend on this last step in the plan."

Adrian immediately went to her, heart bursting with love and happiness. *She does need me!*

Angela absorbed it all, allowing the witch to direct the streams to where they were needed the most for the upcoming battle. It was the first time Angela had done that. She didn't know if it would help, but at this point, it couldn't hurt. The descendants coming on the train were strong. Angela wasn't sure she could defeat them at all, let alone while so badly injured. She had to be ready and if Marc wouldn't share his heart with her, Adrian always would, no matter how evil she was. That was why she needed them both. One for each side of her.

Exhaustion swamped Angela as Adrian continued to feed the witch. When the heaviness swarmed over her, she didn't try to fight it. Angela slumped against the wood.

Adrian tugged a blanket up to her chin, but he didn't stop trying to heal her, sending huge streams of energy and love that lit them both in brilliant blue. If she was scared of these train people, they were big trouble. He would give her everything he had.

“When did you give Peggy and Hilda the idea of female leadership?”

Adrian had been waiting for her to ask, so his actions could be explained. It didn't mean as much if he blurted it out when people weren't ready to hear it. “With Tonya. It was their last straw.”

Angela saw it then—the ripples he'd created by punishing Tonya in his own, very male way. She instinctively knew there was more and raised a brow. “What else did you get from that, besides revenge and triggering Hilda and Peggy’s desires to have women rule the world?”

Hearing it spoken so bluntly was something of a power kill for Adrian. Humility came through in his answer. “I had hoped the camp would examine her lack of morals and vote on us having more. It went the opposite way and told our populace that if the boss could do it, they could at least try to.”

“And so we got Samantha caught in that web. She tried to fight the life she'd led in the past, but confirmation of Tonya’s treatment told her you had loose morals and she could too?”

“Is it really loose morals?” Adrian sensed she now meant them and not Samantha’s triangle. “Why must we be bonded to just one person? We’re social creatures. We need others.”

“Beyond all the other arguments? It doesn’t feel right to me.”

“No, it doesn’t to *him* and that bleeds off on you. Take Neil and Jeremy. As soon as they stopped fighting, they found happiness. Neither male would change things now.”

“Only because it would disrupt the peace. They both secretly wish she would pick one, even now that she’s carrying twins. Human nature doesn’t change. We’re made to be in pairs, not triplets, groups, or clans. We’re not animals.”

“Well, I am,” Adrian argued without anger. “I’ve often enjoyed more than one woman at a time. So has your precious Marc, in case you’ve overlooked that fact. We’ve also shared women with our men, at home and in the field.”

“This is different.”

“No, it’s not. His jealousy prevents it. In the Corps, over this situation, all three of us would have been shunned by now, but his treatment would be the worst because the other two are willing. We weren’t meant to own each other, Angie. You know that.”

Angela wanted to protest the assumption that she wanted such a setup; she wanted to scream that Marc was good and they were bad, but both of those options required too much energy, too much caring. Instead, she pulled the blanket over her head, ending the conversation.

“I also got two other things from my brief time with Tonya.” Adrian switched to the TV to check their surroundings.

“What?” came her muffled voice.

“One of the best orgasms of my life. I wasn’t hung up on you yet and when Tonya’s willing, she’s *willing*.”

The muffled choking sound made Adrian snicker. “I also got a glimpse of the person she would be if I could actually reform her. I didn’t see how it could happen until you joined. I’d already made her a pariah and shoved her into Kenn’s arms without knowing it. When you came, and she

showed her jealousy over Kenn, I knew she cared for him. She didn't have that emotion for Joe. I was able to use it to help stir her determination to keep her new man and place. She became a strong, loyal companion for Kenn—something I owed him for all his support.”

Angela didn't answer. She was busy tracing those steps and ripples, and seeing the other small things that had come from it, including her own dislike of the redhead when she should have befriended Tonya and helped her.

Adrian shook his head. “That wouldn't have worked with her. Tonya and Kenn are perfect for each other because they're both so stubborn. When they're right, they're absolutely unshakable.”

“I use that against him whenever I can,” Angela revealed, blanket obviously down by her clear voice.

Adrian didn't turn around. “So did I. He knows. It's part of his reform.”

“I haven't forgiven him. Does he know that?”

“Of course. He knows you can't. Forgiveness is a myth people use to comfort themselves.”

“Yes.” With that sad agreement, Angela covered back up and fell into a restless sleep to avoid more conversation. He'd already given her the answer she came for. Forgiveness didn't exist and life was actually hell. She'd known that all along.

Chapter Four
Let's Go To Market
Near Americus, GA
September 28th

1

Kendle snapped out of her nightmare, staring around. She'd fallen asleep not long after they'd come through a long, dark tunnel that had reminded her of her time with Ethan. She'd been flashed straight to dark caves and hungry teeth instead of the rock climbing book she'd tried to read as boredom set in.

Kendle scanned the black, wet road and then the trees lining the highway. There were no homes in sight, no evidence of people, but the streets were clear on both sides. Abandoned cars and other debris had been pushed into the median for miles. It made the team wonder how many survivors were around here. The war damage was the same as in the rest of the places they'd gone, but there was also a sense of something else they hadn't identified yet. Kendle would be glad when Americus was behind them, even though they hadn't had any trouble. So far, the trip had been boring. They hadn't seen a single person in the eight days they'd been on the road.

Kendle studied the driver, glad she had insisted on giving Conner a chance behind the wheel. She wasn't trying to help him get back into the camp's good graces, but it hadn't escaped her attention that Adrian would be grateful to her if she could.

"Are you okay?" Conner steered around the carcass of a recently deceased cow. Like his father, he was good behind the wheel. "Wanna talk or something?"

Kendle shuddered. Discussing it would bring Ethan's drooling memories back into clarity. It would interfere with the progress she'd been making.

Conner didn't push. He'd picked up enough from her and others to know that Kendle's time before Safe Haven had been intolerable. He would have known that from her scars anyway, but it was also in her reactions to other people. He'd witnessed that same defense in Little Rock among the snake women who'd been locked in the prison.

Adrian had promised that Safe Haven could heal anyone, but unlike most of the people in that refugee camp, Kendle wasn't settling down. She hadn't been with Adrian during his leadership and Angela hadn't had the time or the inclination to welcome another descendant into their midst while fighting for their freedom. Conner was still hoping his dad would be able to help Kendle. He was certain Marc felt the same way, but he had no idea how Angela really felt about Kendle. Conner had assumed this trip was an excuse to get the castaway as far from

Marc as possible. There were signs that said it wasn't necessarily the case, but it felt that way. Conner was reserving judgment. Angela and his father had freed him under impossible circumstances. They would have freed the kids too, if they hadn't been murdered. Safe Haven's leaders were good, strong. Surely, Angela wasn't corrupt enough to send someone to their death just because they were a rival?

Kendle cackling from the next seat was not a comfort to Conner. He had his strongest mental wall up. *Is she still getting my thoughts?*

"Of course, boy. But you have nothing to worry about from me or from Angela. Despite the things she's done, her soul is not as corrupt as everyone believes. Certainly not as corrupt as she and her precious Ghost think."

Conner refused to be drawn into that conversation. He checked the mirror, hoping the five men in the Tahoe with them were sleeping. It was hard to tell with the high level Eagles. They had spent time with Angela and Adrian, learning to block their minds. Conner didn't want to dig in and make enemies now that he had a second chance. It was frustrating.

"Tell me about it, kid." Kendle grunted. "I've walked that line my entire life. At some point, you get tired of it and fall off."

"Is that what happened with you and my dad?" Conner was curious. "Have you fallen off the line with him?"

“Is that what happened with you and Candy?” Kendle shot right back. “Did you fall off the line with her?”

Conner turned red. “I love her. In time she’ll love me back. We were meant to be together. I would never hurt her. They misunderstood.” Conner snapped his mouth shut. *Why am I spilling my guts to someone I barely know and don’t even like?*

Kendle snorted. “Well, at least we have something in common.”

Conner braced for rudeness. “What?”

“We both know where we screwed up and neither one of us is willing to change it.” Kendle tugged her jacket together against the damp wind.

There was silence from both of them as they considered the implication behind those words. It meant they didn’t intend to reform or to resist the temptations that lie ahead of them.

Kendle smiled. “Maybe you and I *can* be friends.”

“Do you suppose she sent you out here hoping you might get killed?” Conner had been trying to resist the question for a week now.

“I seriously doubt it. Like I said, she’s not as bad as everybody believes.”

“Is Marc hoping for it?”

Kendle’s profile tightened in pain.

Conner sighed, easing off the gas as the rain thickened and lightning flashed. “I’m sorry.”

Kendle forced herself to accept it. “Honestly, yeah, he probably does. I’m the unwanted third wheel. You know what that’s like, don’t you?”

Conner was alive with agony at the reminder. “Yes, but it won’t always be that way for me and Candy. At some point she’s gonna realize I love her and she’s gonna want that, because nobody else does.”

“Are you sure? Candice is pretty; she’s smart and strong, and she’s a fighter. She’s also about to give birth to the next generation. I think that makes her special enough to claim a mate.”

“That might be true, but none of those guys will love her for who she really is.” Conner again steered around the carcass of an animal that appeared to be a cow. “No one wants her. They want the babies or the strength she’ll bring to a match. I want her because she’s wonderful.”

Kendle heard the longing and felt another bond form between her and this odd teenager.

Conner also felt the magic, but he refused to be drawn into it. He slammed down on the thoughts in his mind and continued to drive through the rainy darkness.

Pop!

“What was that?”

“I don’t know,” Conner answered distractedly as he fought to control the truck. “The wheel feels funny. I have to pull over.”

Ryan rolled down the window and leaned out, squinting against the rain and wind. “I think it’s a flat tire.”

Conner pulled onto the breakdown lane. He made sure there was nothing blocking an exit before joining the Eagles who were evaluating the problem.

“Front right is flat.”

“So is the rear.” Scott pushed up his jacket sleeves. “Get the equipment. I’ll do the front. Dexter can take the rear.”

Kendle and Conner, along with half of their men, stood watch. All of them were drenched and miserable in less than a minute. This rain didn’t burn, but it was uncomfortable, like a gel sliding down their necks. Keeping them on edge, the wind blew stiffly, moving things through the trees around their stopped convoy as the thunder crashed steadily.

Conner stiffened. “Someone’s coming.”

Kendle alerted Tommy and took a stationary position in front of Conner. Kendle scanned nervously for the trouble. She refused to assume it was anything else.

“There!” Kendle pointed to a small cluster of flooding trees a few hundred feet away, where the person was huddled.

“Doesn’t seem to be a problem.” Conner wiped rain from his face.

Kendle turned from a stiff blast of wind. “I agree.”

Tommy and the other Eagles would have left the vehicles to investigate, but Kendle refused them. “This is why I’m along. Get us ready to roll.”

Kendle motioned Conner to follow her as she tracked through the mud to meet their company. This could be a good training moment for him as long as nothing went crazy. If it did, she was certain he would rely on that Mitchel survival instinct that had apparently kept him alive in Arkansas.

Kendle hurried forward. “Do you need help?”

The shadow was a tall, beaten man with ragged breathing and beady brown eyes. Kendle expected him to run, but he didn’t. “Can we help you?”

Sighing, the man spat blood into the mud. “No, but I’ll be able to help you.”

Kendle frowned. “Excuse me?”

“What happened to you?” Conner wanted to heal the man. He didn’t, though. His dad had said to act normal on this run and not use any magic except for the check ins.

“Just a few more seconds now,” the man muttered.

“What do you want?” Kendle wanted to be patient, but the bad vibes all over this area were growing rapidly.

The beaten male peered at them slyly, ignoring the rain pelting his injuries. “Ten seconds.”

Kendle scanned his bruises and cuts.

“What happened to you?”

“It was my turn.” The man wiped at the blood trickling from his mouth. “They drew our number.”

“Your turn for what?”

“To earn my keep!” The man spat, trying to get his breath back. “Our names go into a bucket. If it’s picked, we bring in supplies.”

“What kind of supplies?” Kendle noted Conner staring at the man with a blank face. The boy was searching mentally.

“The kind you have in those trucks.”

“You’ve been following us?”

The man glanced up at them in bruised satisfaction. “Thank you for stopping. Will you help me up?”

Splashing and fumbling, all of them were mud-splattered by the time they got the stranger to his feet.

“Who are you?”

“Baker.” The man gasped, holding his ribs. “Can you help me home?”

“What did you mean about ten seconds?”

Baker turned away without answering.

The Eagles-in-training automatically put an arm around him when he staggered.

“Where do you live?” Kendle hated it that they were getting out of sight of the team. She was about to order Conner to go tell Tommy what was happening when the man between them gasped out a laugh.

“Are you okay?”

“I will be now. You can go.” He shrugged off their arms, limping toward the woods.

“What’s going on here?” Conner was confused.

Kendle, who had witnessed this technique before but couldn't place it, grabbed his arm as it snapped into place. *Ambush!* "Come on!"

They ran back through the wind and rain to their vehicles, but there was no one in sight around the vehicles.

Kendle panicked. *Our team is gone!*

Both descendants splashed to the vehicles, searching for their fellow teammates.

"Tommy!"

"Tyler!" Kendle glanced back to find the decoy limping away. "Son of a bitch!"

Conner stared in disbelief at how fast things were going wrong. "What do we do?!"

"We get that decoy." Kendle grabbed a few things from their vehicle. "Keep him in your mental grid. If we lose him, we lose our team."

2

Kendle and Conner quickly tracked their mystery male through the rain, thanks to the prints in the thick mud. They followed him into a thicket of trees that had mold growing up the trunks.

"You ready for this?"

"Not really, no. All that time in Safe Haven made me soft."

Kendle understood. She took the lead into the dark woods.

The prints disappeared abruptly, but the man hadn't had time to conceal his exit. Blackness glared at them from the hole in the ground.

"Oh, hell." Kendle's face was pale in the flashlight glare. The top of a sewer tunnel had been broken out to create an exit. Kendle motioned the boy to enter first.

Conner dropped into the slippery darkness with a sense of home that revolted him. He didn't want to be a sewer boy. He didn't want to belong down here, but he had spent so much time this way that it wasn't possible to fight the wave of confidence that let him calmly sweep the darkness. "I found more prints."

It took Kendle a moment to force herself to join him. Her gun was in her hand as she hit the bottom of the tunnel, eyes wide and body ready to react.

Conner noticed her fright and anger, but there was no time for it as voices echoed through the darkness.

"They followed. We're good."

"Shut up."

A light moved toward them.

Kendle and Conner waited side-by-side with their guns aimed at the ground.

"How do you want to handle this?"

Kendle grunted. "We talk."

The five men coming through the dusty tunnel were tall and thin, with modern clothes over filthy skin. They wore once-expensive shoes and their hair was styled in a variety of sophisticated cuts that

Kendle and Conner hadn't seen in ten long months. It was disorienting to confront people who looked like they had stepped from the pre-war past.

The trio didn't stop or speak as they came toward Kendle and Conner.

"Stop there!" Kendle saw their beaten decoy wasn't among this group.

"Or what?" the tall male in the front taunted. "You'll never learn where your friends are if you kill us."

Kendle and Conner rushed forward at the same time.

The group of soft men clearly didn't expect a violent response, despite being thieves who obviously participated in this sort of thing regularly. They cowered from the guns, dropping to the ground.

"Don't!"

"Stop!"

"Where are they?!" Kendle shoved the barrel of her new Glock into an apron-clad chest. "Who are you?"

When none of the men spoke, Conner played the role he thought Kendle would understand. He roughly slammed the nearest man in the shoulder with the butt of his gun. "Someone had better speak right now!"

Kendle didn't interrupt. She wasn't going back to Safe Haven to tell Marc that she lost their team, literally.

“Don’t hurt us!” the short male cried. “Don’t hurt us!”

Kendle retreated, lowering her gun at their terror. “Who are you and where are our men?!”

“I’m Rice,” the leader, a tall male of mixed race, answered sullenly. “Your guys have been taken to the market.”

“The market?” Kendle noted the ugly brand on the man’s wrist. The others didn’t have one.

“This is Market Town.”

Before Kendle could demand more information, the leader sat up. He stared in resentment. “It was our turn to set the trap, so my brother, Baker, took his licks and went out.”

“There’s going to be big trouble for you,” the squattest man warned.

Kendle scowled. That was obvious. “Where is this market?”

Rice pointed toward the surface, south. “The next town you come to. You’ll know it when you see it.”

“So you guys do this willingly? You kidnap your own people and sell them?”

“Better you than us!” the bald man stated angrily.

“You get protection in exchange for doing this?” Conner wanted more information.

Rice sneered. “We volunteer. In exchange, we are allowed to trade in the market and live on the outskirts of the wall. We don’t have trouble here, except for those like you.”

Kendle and Conner were baffled.

“You like being a slave?”

“You out-of-towners don’t know anything!” the tall man accused. “Can’t believe you’ve never heard of Market Town.”

One of the other men who had been silent until now swept Kendle from hair to boots. “Looks like you’re from a hard place.”

“We’re from Safe Haven.” Kendle wondered if the dirt under his nails made his name Farmer.

“Where?” Rice asked.

She shook her head in disgust. “Let me guess. No radios are allowed, right?”

None of the men answered, providing one anyway.

Rice didn’t waste more time. “If you want your men back, you have to buy a ticket into the market. Once you get in, you can trade for them.”

Kendle motioned the other men to stand up. She regarded the male who hadn’t spoken yet. “Who are you?”

“Flour.”

Kendle spotted the white fingernails, confirming her suspicions as to what type of settlement this would turn out to be. “What’s the currency in the market?”

“Same as it is anywhere, I would imagine.” Rice waved. “Beans, bags, bullets, and bodies. Cars are good too.”

Kendle and Conner considered their vehicles with a sinking sensation.

“This is the rest of the trap, right?” Kendle glared. “Keep us busy while they steal our stuff?”

Flour shrugged, straightening his apron. “It’s a hard world out there. We do the best we can to survive.”

Kendle almost understood now. These were city inhabitants who had been caught up in a turf war. They hadn’t had a way to defend themselves, so they had fallen in line with the tyrants. Now, after almost a year of being forced to hurt their fellow man, there was little compassion left in them.

Kendle motioned toward the hole. “We need to go.”

Conner glared at Rice. “Is there anything else we need to know? I would hate to have to come back here.” Conner had sensed something upon entering the tunnels, something he didn’t know if he should tell Kendle about, but he was eager to be away from it.

Rice and Flour exchanged glances before shaking their heads.

Kendle tapped Rice with the barrel of her gun. “You stay with us until we get our men back.” She shoved him toward Conner. “Let’s go. The rest of you, get out of here before I shoot you.”

The others fled without a backward glance.

Rice watched them with lips that disappeared into a thin line.

It took a couple of minutes to get out of the hole and then to where Conner had parked. The rain and wind were still coming in strong waves, but the

thunder and lightning had finally stopped, making for a muddy, windy crime scene.

“Gone.” Kendle went to the almost dry squares where their trucks had been parked. She knelt down as a dull flash caught her light.

“Nails, painted gray.” Kendle tossed it to the ground.

Conner peered around in disbelief, patting his pocket, where metal jangled distinctively. “How did they get the keys? I still have them. How did they move our vehicles?”

Kendle gestured toward their unwilling guide. “They’ve done this before. They’ve gotten good at perfecting the methods.”

“Hotwired?”

Kendle sighed. “Not really. Not that hard to break the steering column off and then loosen the key latch enough to remove it without shutting off the engine. They probably hot wire them with other suckers, but we made it easier than that.”

“Why didn’t they wait and take us too?” Conner wiped drizzle from his skin.

Kendle shoved Rice toward the hole. “Someone has to be left to pay.”

It was a very old strategy. From robbers to pirates, stealing a person’s gear and forcing them to buy it back had been employed successfully since the beginning of time.

Conner and Kendle took Rice to the tunnel, questioning him as they splashed through the darkness and the muck.

“Do you have a town of people like yourself or do you hide underground like trolls?”

“We have a town. The tunnel where you met me leads to it.”

Conner went first again, watching for trouble, but none of the other locals were still there. The tunnel was now dark. “Did they run?”

Rice snorted. “Yes, straight to the market. The masters will know you’re here in a matter of minutes.”

Kendle frowned. “Will these masters hunt for us?”

Rice snorted again. “They know you’ll come for your people. There’s no need to waste manpower.”

Kendle angrily shoved Rice into the hole. Safe Haven wouldn’t like what was going on here.

“You lead the way,” Kendle glowered at Rice after she dropped through. Her anger at the situation overrode her terror of being underground.

The man obediently led, not bothering with his light.

The tunnel widened into a corridor and then stairs that rose from the floor. They went upward toward another dark hole, where wind and rain greeted them. Mostly surrounded by more woods, there were shapes of buildings in the distance.

Rice led them into the town, greeting the patrol on the perimeter.

It was clear they didn’t consider customers a threat here, so it had to be animals keeping these sentries on edge. Everyone knew nature was

trouble. Kendle and Conner made note of the security as they entered the small town. They saw half a dozen houses, five apartment buildings, and no vehicles. The stench of slavery grew stronger.

Rice exchanged short greetings with more of the guards they passed; clearly not worried about being in trouble for the company he was keeping. In fact, the sentries appeared pleased with him for it.

Conner drew her attention to two guards adjacent the area where they had emerged. The two Mexican men, wearing long dusters and rifles, smirked at them. Judging from that, Kendle assumed they knew how easily the team had been captured.

Embarrassed, Conner started to go confront the men. He didn't know what the matching blue helmet tattoos on their cheeks meant, but he was a descendant. He wasn't scared.

Kendle grabbed his wrist, sucking in a breath at the contact. When Conner was mad, he felt like Adrian. "Later."

Conner was also aware of the connection that had lit up between them. There wasn't any time to explore it right now, however. He stayed with Kendle, scanning the foreign soldiers and locals that were still active after dark. Lanterns lit the small town, but the damp darkness fought for every inch. There were more people here than Conner had seen since leaving Little Rock. Safe Haven didn't count. When his father was gathering, souls came. To stumble across a town that had more than fifty

survivors visible, without a descendant bringing them together and controlling problems, was something of a shock.

“What will happen to my men?” Kendle was storing details about clothes, weapons, security posts, and behaviors.

“They’ll be okay.” Rice led them up the stairs to his home. It was a small apartment building with a metal and wood wall all the way around it. He opened the padlock on the door and led them inside. “Slaves are knocked out and taken straight to the market. They’ll be locked up until trading day.”

Kendle fastened the lock without being told, seeing how many people were in the residence, where they were, exits, and other things. “Will they be hurt?”

“No, not until they’re bought. After that, they might be crippled to prevent them from escaping. Some have their tongues removed. The buyer gets to pick.”

Conner and Kendle followed Rice down a grungy tan hallway and up long stairs to a separate apartment. It looked as if the masters packed their slaves on top of each other like sardines.

“When is trading day?”

Rice entered his home, holding up a hand at the men who started to rush toward him. “Tomorrow. You came through at the right time.”

Before they got any further into the small flat, Conner paused. “I need to tell you something.”

Kendle stored his nervous timbre. “Not here.”

Conner switched over to mental communication. *There's power here, descendant power.*

Kendle knew. She was picking it up too now that they were close to the source. She looked over to find Rice and his family observing them with a recognition that was unsettling. Kendle chose not to ask about that yet. Instead, she directed the conversation to the information they still needed. "How do I get a ticket?"

Rice waved toward the table, where a meal was being served. "You'll owe for the food."

Kendle shrugged. She already planned to repay their kindnesses in her own special way. "We'll figure it out. Answer my question."

Rice settled at the head of the table. A woman wearing jeans and a long black sweater that matched her black flats served him a bowl of rice with red sauce on top. Her appearance, classy, was also a surprise.

"You have to do someone a favor. That's how the market runs."

Kendle took the chair directly across from him as the female returned to the kitchen. "What kind of favor?"

Rice scooped up a large bite, waving off a fly. "Some folks need food, some folks need medicine. It all depends on the person selling the tickets."

"Who sells them?" Conner stood next to Kendle's chair. He had chosen to be the lookout, as if he were a full Eagle in his father's army. There

were half a dozen thin men and women in here with them, but they were all happily occupied with tablets and handheld games.

“Our family has that honor this month.”

Realizing they were dealing with the person who was able to get them in, Kendle rested her arms on the table, leaning in. “What is it you need, Mr. Rice?”

The man studied her briefly. “You have nothing I need. I know, because we took it.”

“What usually happens at this point? When the person doesn’t have anything left for you to steal.”

Rice’s sleazy gaze went over her body. “You still have something I can use. Or rather, something I can sell. One week of service should pay me back for this shelter and food every night you two are here.”

Before Kendle could refuse the deal, Conner shoved across the table and grabbed Rice by the shirt. He jerked the local forward until their faces were inches apart. “She is not for sale!”

Kendle pried Conner off the unresisting man, forcing the teenager to sit down in the chair that she had exited. She glowered at Rice, letting a bit of the descendant come forward despite Marc’s orders to stay low-key on this mission. “Do we have to kill you all?”

The icy tension that filled the warm studio told Kendle revealing her descendant status hadn’t been a good idea. She put a hand on her gun.

Rice motioned the others to leave them alone.

Kendle waited nervously to discover why.

“Maybe you do have something I need.” Rice scanned her intently. “Sit down. Let’s deal.”

Kendle did, reaching for the bread and tub of butter. “You have animals here for this?”

Rice nodded, shoveling another large spoonful in.

Kendle and Conner slowly helped themselves to the meal, taking small portions. Their host was keeping a running tab.

Rice studied Kendle as he chewed. He swept her scars and weapons again, then Conner. “They’ll want him. Would bring a great price.”

Kendle stored the information, noting intelligence and suffering in the man. “What do you want us to do for a ticket?”

“Remove something from the market without anyone finding out. Take it far away from here.”

Kendle frowned. “And do what with it?”

“Protect it. It can’t be damaged in any way during the trip.”

“Do we deliver it to someone?”

“Pick someone good to care for it. Just never let it come to harm.”

“What is this precious item?”

Rice shook his head. “I won’t tell you that until after you agree.”

“Can we see it first?”

“No. If the masters or the other locals here were to find it, dozens of lives would end.”

“And if we’re caught with it?”

“You’ll be killed. The item will then be used against your people, and mine, at a later date.”

That was enough to convince Kendle. Rice was in willing slavery, but even he wouldn’t let the masters have control of whatever this weapon was. Kendle assumed that’s what they were stealing. She held out a hand. “We’ll get it out and give it a good home. In return, you will assist us in every way that we require, including giving safe passage out of here. With supplies, please, since you stole our vehicles.”

“If you back out, we’ll kill your men.” Rice shook her frozen hand and then stunned her by shoving into her thoughts. *Get it done and go away. No one wants your kind here.*

Kendle blanched. “It’s not a weapon, is it?”

Rice snorted. “Of a sort. We’ll sleep when we finish here. Let this shift of guards drink for a while. No need to get on their bad side by being out roaming too much.”

Kendle dug into the food, mind racing across several possibilities. She didn’t voice any of them. Instead, she asked about the next thing that mattered. “Tell me about these masters.”

“So you can kill them?” Rice scoffed. “No. We have a deal. Don’t break it.”

“We can’t fight with anyone here?”

“No! You’ll get us all killed.”

“Your family and friends?”

“The entire town. Helping your kind is a death sentence for everyone.”

“Everyone?”

Rice swallowed, peering toward the window. “Most of us came from towns around here, like Butler. You hear about it?”

“No, I’m sorry, but we were going through there later in hopes of fuel.”

“Don’t bother.” Rice grunted bitterly. “It was burned to the ground with people nailed in their homes. A magic user was found.”

Kendle scowled as she realized what was being asked of her. “You’re hiding a descendant!”

Rice flinched, even though she’d said it lowly. “We have a deal.”

“I’ll honor it, but tell me about them, as much as you can. I can’t steal something without at least knowing the basics.”

“I’m not getting everyone killed.” Rice let out a nasty belch.

Kendle switched topics “I need currency to buy my team. What should I use?”

“Food or information.” Rice took a sip of his coffee and grimaced at the cold liquid. “Locations of things they need would be good, but you’ll have to go get it after you make the deal. Then you’ll get your men.”

“What else?”

Rice waved a hand at Conner. “One boy for half of them is a great deal.”

“No. Next?”

“Solve a problem, provide a service. You need to figure something out quickly.”

“I will. Where should we be for the night?”

“You’ll take the rear room.” Rice pointed toward a narrow, dirty hall. “Don’t kill the mice. We sell them.”

“To who?” Kendle stood up.

“There are still experiments to be done and captives to be fed, even now. They also make good pets because they eat the lice and bedbugs.”

Conner frowned. “And carry diseases.” In the sewers, he’d always made the kids kill them.

“Actually, it’s the fleas that carry disease. We dust our mice.” Rice went back to his bowl. “Good night.”

Kendle and Conner went to their assigned room, both scowling and confused.

Kendle swept the filthy bed and cluttered dresser, then the tiny closet that didn’t appear to have been used. Sighing in trepidation, Kendle tossed her jacket there. “I’ll take first watch. Wake you up in a few hours.”

Conner was too tired to try being a gentleman. He’d been driving for hours before they’d had the flat tires.

Kendle noted the lack of windows and the sense of danger, but it wasn’t more than usual. She was always getting herself into a situation where her back was against a wall. Whatever Market Town brought, she was a descendant and so was Conner. Neither of them were defenseless. Kendle was already considering a plan of attack to grab her team and the mysterious descendant, and go. She didn’t

care about Rice, but she couldn't leave one of her own if their life was in danger. It didn't feel right.

"Doesn't feel right to leave these people in slavery either." Conner yawned and lay down on her jacket. "You still smell good. Nice."

Kendle thought of their spark earlier. Her control was almost at its limit, but thankfully, fate had placed an entire town of slavers and thieves at her fingertips. She had to decide which was more important—getting her team back first or killing the masters. Kendle contemplated it long into the night.

She was still working on it when she roused Conner and took his warm spot hours later. "No noises other than Rice's family returning. Didn't hear any conversations. Keep an ear out." Kendle curled into a ball. "Wake me at dawn."

Conner wanted to protest that dawn was only a couple hours away, but remembered that she'd slept in the truck. He settled on the corner of the dresser and tried to listen to the flats around them without using his gifts. Being discovered right now wouldn't be good.

"I need to hear the town coming awake. It tells me things."

"Okay." Conner scanned her ass. She had curled away from him and the view was enticing.

"I'd break you, kid. It would never get hard again."

Conner flushed and sent his curious gaze elsewhere. "Sorry."

Kendle sighed. “Can I give you some advice?”

“Yep.”

“Jealousy is an amazing tool. It has destroyed civilizations and will probably do so again at some point in the future. Jealousy, used carefully, is powerful.”

Conner dwelled on her words. He understood what she meant, but Conner didn’t know anyone in Safe Haven who would help him with something like that. He couldn’t imagine stringing a girl along or lying to them.

“Why lie?” Kendle rolled over to look at him. “Let her see how happy you make someone else. In the meantime, you might be better off with that person. If so, good for you. If not, it gets Candy’s attention. There’s nothing wrong with it. You need experience in this crap if you’re going to please her. I hear Lee was quite the man.”

“Then why did she cheat on him?” Conner asked snidely. He still hated Lee, even though Lee was dead.

“Why did Kyle cheat on Jennifer? People make stupid choices.”

“Like the people here?”

“Yes. If they’d come together, half of them would have died but the rest would have been free, with the threat gone. They were faced with an awful choice and they couldn’t do it. It wasn’t stupid so much as it was weak.”

“You’re not weak that way, are you?”

“No, boy. I’m also not the one for your little scheme. I’ve got my own plans, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Why don’t you stay with my dad?”

“He doesn’t want me.”

“He might, in time.”

“Yeah and pigs will fly. You’ve met her. Would you pick me over her?”

Conner wanted to say yes, but couldn’t. Angela would be at the top of any ladder.

“Nauseating.” Kendle groaned. “Leave me be, kid. I need sleep.”

“One more?”

“Fine.”

“Who did you think of when you said make her jealous?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I do.”

“Millie.”

“What?”

“Millie can’t have children, so none of Safe Haven’s guys want her, but she still needs physical attention that she isn’t getting. She wants to try a service arrangement, but she’s scared of being hurt. You wouldn’t be a threat to her because of your age and size.”

“She’d never go for it.” Millie had been forgiven for not telling them she had medical training. She was now helping the doctor, treating patients and camp kids, making house calls. She was earning her place. She wouldn’t risk it by

having anything to do with him or his father.

“Would she?”

Kendle didn't answer. She was asleep.

Chapter Five
Caged And Pre-staged

1

“**T**ommy’s coming around. Grab him.” Ben squinted through the darkness.

Ryan and Josh forced themselves to scoot through the muck to comfort the groaning, gagging man. The state of the cell they were in was indescribable, causing stomachs to override willpower.

Tommy held his pounding head, stomach twisting. “What happened?”

“We were hit with something.” Ben kept trying to see through the darkness. “We all have neck wounds.”

Tommy felt for his injury, gagging, but he managed not to vomit again. He’d always had a strong stomach. It had been helpful at times. He found the small lump on the back of his neck, but didn’t feel any blood. “Drugs?”

“Something ugly.” Josh spoke over his shoulder. He and Ryan had resumed their guard positions. “I hurt, like Marc taught me a lesson.”

“Can anyone get a message out?” Tommy shivered as his bare feet touched the bars... *Bare?* “I’m naked!”

“Yeah, we all are.” Ben grunted angrily. “I put everyone facing outward to watch for trouble while we recover, not that we can see anything. None of us can send a message. Might be the same stuff Donner used.”

“Soon, we’re gonna kick our way out of here and kill someone.” Scott was eager for it.

“Sounds good.” Tommy puked through the rusty bars in front of him.

Ben and the others controlled their own queasy guts; all of them were shivering, streaked in mud and filth.

“Give me the lay.” Tommy put his cheek against the cool metal, trying not to hurl again.

“We’re in a cage in a long room.” Ben tapped the bars. “We can see light under a door at the far side. No one else has spoken or moved, so we assume we’re alone, but that can’t be verified.”

“We’re in a cell?”

“Of some sort.” Josh shrugged. “I found bars and a stucco wall. Not a jailhouse setup. This cell is raised. I can reach out and under a little. Nothing down there.”

“We’re sitting at an angle.” Tyler clenched his fists as his stomach roiled again. “I’m almost positive of it.”

“Lets the mess drain.” Dexter gagged.

Churning, Tommy gasped. “Sorry!” He emptied his guts again.

“You should be good now.” Ben had been awake first, so he’d been able to count it. “Your sight should be coming around any time too.”

Tommy was startled to realize he hadn’t been able to see, but there were now tiny gleams of light against his lids that said Ben was correct. “Damn. I didn’t notice.”

“Me either, at first.” Ben rubbed his face. “I woke up and cracked my nose on the bars. Probably look like I’ve been beaten.”

Tommy scowled. *I should have asked already. I’m so hazy!* “Has anyone been hurt?”

Ryan remembered not to shake his head. “No. You?”

Tommy studied his body and shook his head. He groaned at the new wave of pain and nausea. “Ugh... No. Is everyone here?”

“The traitor’s son isn’t. No XO either.”

No one voiced theories on that.

Tommy tried to reason it out. “So we were grabbed and stripped, then put into a cell. For what?”

“Revenge for Donner or the big bunker?” Josh was grateful for the voices of his team. He hated the dark.

“Maybe.” Ben swallowed thick saliva, feeling a sore throat. “Could also be any of the refugee families or even the Mexicans.”

“She’s made a lot of enemies.” Ryan meant Angela. In situations like this, they weren’t supposed to use real names.

“Yeah, you’d think people would know better than to challenge us by now.” Dexter kicked the bars. “Don’t they get tired of dying?”

Scott tilted his head. “I can hear talking. In the next room.”

The team stilled, straining to hear as they realized another sense was returning. They’d all judged the muffled sound of their own voices to be a hangover effect from whatever had been shot into them. Sound seemed to snap in place all at once, startling the captives with footsteps, shouts, clangs and bangs, doors slamming, and other noises that echoed into their brains like spikes.

“Ugh! Make it quit.”

“Damn, that hurts.”

The door opened suddenly, flooding them with light. Even the Eagles with their backs to it covered their faces in misery.

“I’m turning on all the lights. Keep your eyes shaded until they adapt or your nose will bleed,” a female instructed.

More light flooded them, bringing fresh groans.

“You will shower and dress. Stand up when you believe you can do that.”

All of the team forced themselves to their feet. Not only did they need to stay together, they also wanted out of the cage to avoid the mess and have an opportunity to escape.

“One at a time. The cell is not locked.”

Not locked! Tommy screamed silently in rage. *We could have already been out!*

“I am Renda. Your owner.”

The men who could view their captor were shocked into silence. The rest of the team shared not-so-subtle glances of preparation as her footsteps neared the cell.

“It is easy to think you can rush me, but I would suggest you inspect the situation before you do it.” Renda came to stand in front of the cell, but not close enough to be grabbed.

Some of the team still gawked at her in dismayed surprise, while the other half stared in frustration at the six hulking men near the door. Each of them glowered menacingly from behind their gear and guns, telling the naked team that any attempt at escape would be met with ugly consequences.

“We’ll shower.” Tommy stared at her, looking for weaknesses. “What then?”

“You’ll be fed and prepared for sale.” Renda swept them for wounds and distinguishing features. “Are you injured or broken in any way? Are you carriers of disease?”

Tommy glared at her in disbelief. “We’re being sold? As what?”

“Slaves,” Renda smiled. “who provide whatever our patrons want. Labor, reproduction, security, any skills you may have...”

Tommy understood she wanted details to base their prices on, but he couldn’t get past the fact that they’d been kidnapped to be sold. “You’re a trafficker?”

“I am a trader! And one of the masters of Market Town. You are property to be sold as soon as the market opens.” She pointed at the showers lining the wall by the cell. “One at a time.”

None of the Eagles moved.

Renda pointed at Tyler. “He’s weak. I will shoot him and trade his body to the health master for experiments.”

Tommy sighed in defeat and went to the shower.

Renda smiled again, showing white teeth and cruelty. “A fast learner. Excellent. Tell me of your skills.”

Tommy tried not to enjoy the warm water in the portable shower, but it was impossible not to be grateful that he was getting clean. The promise of clothes was also something to anticipate. He did the best he could to ignore the way the female studied his body and movements, recording things on her clipboard.

“Skills?” Renda reminded as Tommy dried off with a towel she gave him from the large stack on shelves by the shower. She swept him observantly, from toe to hair, then came to linger on his male parts.

Tommy turned scarlet. “I don’t usually charge a woman for this, but you’ve been rude, so you’ll have to pay.”

Renda laughed, delighted. “Service provider. Are you sterile?”

“Not that I know of.” Tommy happily slid into the jogging pants and paper slippers. His toes were frozen. “You in need?”

Renda wasn't used to captives who accepted their situation so fast. She scanned him suspiciously. “If I were?”

“I'd make a deal.” Tommy motioned Ryan to hit the shower while he followed Renda to a long table adjacent the guards.

“You have nothing to trade. Not even your life. It is mine.”

Tommy tried to send out a sexy vibe. “A willing man is easier to handle.”

Renda gestured toward a double deep sink. “That is where your ankle tendons will be cut after sale, to prevent you from escaping your new owner. I will tell them to do yours deeper than most.”

Tommy sat down where she pointed. “Can't blame a slave for trying.”

Renda didn't know whether to snicker or shout. She settled for going back to the shower to question Ryan.

Tommy spent a moment examining the piles of food on the tray in front of him, and then another long minute studying the row of muscle. The guards were hard, big, and armed, but their blurry features were truly intimidating. They were expressionless. These six men wouldn't show mercy. They would be the ones to cripple the slaves when the woman ordered it, Tommy was certain. He was still contemplating their captors when Ryan joined him.

“Interesting setup they’ve got here.” Ryan was trying to determine if security was supposed to keep them from conversing.

“Effective so far.” Tommy was now studying the windowless red walls and tiny vents.

“Shut up!” the nearest sentry growled. “Eat!”

Tommy nodded at Ryan. They were thinking the same thing. Drag the meal out. When the rest of the team was at the table, they would jump the guards and take their guns, with the woman as their hostage for an escape. As Eagles, they’d practiced scenarios like this.

“Your people are nothing to me!” Renda’s angry words echoed. “Market Town doesn’t answer to this Safe Haven or anyone else. Get over there!”

Scott joined Tommy and Ryan with red cheeks and furious eyes that promised revenge.

“Eat.” Renda waved. “Or we will make you.”

The trio considered attacking right then, but seven of their guys were still in the cell, with one just lathering up. Tommy reluctantly took a bite of what he hoped was a hamburger.

“Beef!” He hadn’t expected other groups to have beef, though he wasn’t sure why he had that preconceived notion.

“We have all the comforts of home.” Renda motioned a sentry to supervise the remaining men as they showered. She directed Josh into a seat by Tommy. “You will not be hurt as long as you do what you are told. The food is not drugged or poisoned. We have a reputation to uphold.”

“Best slaves in the state?” Scott questioned sarcastically. He added a quick rake of her attire—handmade tan pants and tan shirt under a hip-length suede jacket—and rolled his eyes. “Looks like you’re doing well.”

“Yes, my sullen gold mine.” Renda smiled again. “Our slaves are healthy and so are our whores. We give fair prices for all services.”

“Sounds like a big operation.” Tommy fished for information.

“Yes, very big.” Renda pointed. “Hundreds of us. Do not risk your lives for freedom. Owners are protection. Get one and obey them.”

“Eat!” the guard growled again.

Renda shrugged at the angry looks from Tommy and Scott. “They get in trouble if the slaves lose weight or become ill. You were weighed when brought in. We check it daily.”

She reached over and took a cold fry from Ryan’s tray. Chewing, she repeated, “It is not drugged. We will control you through your loyalty to each other, now that you’ve confirmed it exists.”

Tommy bit into the hamburger again to keep from giving the order to attack. *This place is pissing me off.*

“Perhaps you will be one of the lucky few who are bought by their friends or family.” Renda took a drink from the plastic cup on Tommy’s tray to drive in her point. “I have heard there are two new people in town this morning. That bodes well for you.”

The Eagles at the table couldn't hide their relief at hearing the news. Kendle and Conner hadn't abandoned them.

“See?” Renda flashed teeth at them. “Eat, rest on the cots. If fate wants you to be with your friends, it will be so.”

Ben joined them at the table. “What keeps slaves from killing their new owners and coming back here to settle these scores?”

Renda's brows puckered, eyes going dangerously blank. “We keep track. If one of you causes trouble, all of you will be punished. If one of you escapes, one will be killed and sold to the health master.” Clearly sensing the intentions of the men at the table, Renda retreated toward the guards with a hand on her whip. “It would cost me a lot to order all of you put down, but I would recoup my losses eventually. Please don't force that choice. Bullets are expensive, even for me.”

Beside her, the sentries raised their guns in support, destroying any chance of an attack. They stayed that way as the rest of the team showered and came to the table.

When all eleven slaves were seated, picking at their food, Renda slid a paper onto the table. “Those are the rules. Tell buyers anything different and we will cut off a toe each time.” She glided from the room with a cheerful grin.

“She loves her job.” One of their rookies, Carl, glared after her.

Tommy snorted. “Yeah.”

“I’m still having trouble with my eyes.” Ben kept going before the guard could protest against talking. “Someone read me the rules.”

“I’ll do it.” Tyler picked up the paper. In their practice lessons, this was his role—the distraction. “The Masters set prices. Do not make deals for yourself...”

It gave cover for Josh and Scott to talk lowly. Their backs were to the guards.

Tommy joined the conversation with their hand code, but kept his eyes on the tray so their captors wouldn’t know they were communicating.

Try anyway?

No. Unarmed. No location.

Wait to be taken out of here.

The other two men gave curt nods in response.

Tommy understood. He wanted to try attacking the guards too, but he also wanted to get everyone out alive. Their captors weren’t bluffing.

“Eat!”

The team tried to dig into the cold food, knowing they needed to keep up their strength, but cramping stomachs made it hard. The sounds of their cell being hosed out didn’t help. They remained at the table for almost an hour, studying the room, before the bossy sentry ordered them to a row of cots along the opposite wall.

“Sleep!” Bossy ordered.

The eleven men went slowly, casting glares and glowers that were not returned. Other than fear of

their captive's health failing, the sentries didn't seem to have any emotions at all.

"Let's find out how far we can go." Scott flashed quick gestures. *Table goes up, blocks them. Half hold the table and the others grab guns.*

Tommy wanted to agree, but Bossy lifted his AK.

"We do get paid for the bodies if you try to escape. It isn't all about your wellbeing."

Frustrated, Tommy lay down on the first cot. That answer revealed intelligence, something he had been hoping their guards didn't have. From this point on, Tommy would assume they were being held by individuals with routines and schedules like the Eagles. It made the situation much worse.

"This is gonna get ugly." Josh took the cot by their team leader.

"What happens if someone actually buys us?" Dexter was worried about being split up.

"Meet here." Ben tried to get comfortable.

"And our...owners?" Tyler shut his eyes.

"Judge it based on the situation," Tommy was relieved the guards were cleaning up the table and not paying the conversation any attention. "If she wasn't bluffing about that tendon slicing, we'll have to react before that. Be ready for my signal."

Ryan asked a question that had occurred to him upon seeing the woman. "Was she Iranian?"

Tommy nodded. "I think so. Bossy isn't, though. His accent sounds eastern. But not *our* eastern, if you know what I mean."

“I couldn’t place it, either.”

Tommy didn’t tell Ryan that he was almost positive he had identified it. The answer was terrifying. He wanted to confirm it first.

The team continued to gather information instead of going to sleep, all glad when their stomachs settled and their fine motor skills returned. In another hour, they would be in full control of themselves again and then this place was going to learn who they were.

Tommy studied the features and the security, but he also listened to the noises. He could still hear voices in the room next to theirs, but the other side of the door held the most mystery. It sounded as if there was an entire town out there. He’d even heard laughter from children. It almost confirmed his theories. Only someone with organizational skills and brute force could accomplish this and keep it running.

“Think we’re close to where we were?” Ramer was thinking of their trucks and weapons.

“I was in the rear of our Tahoe.” Ryan grimaced. “I keep getting flashes of my kit rolling around against the tailgate. They have it all.”

“We have bigger trouble than missing wheels or rifles. I may have figured out who these people are.” Tommy gestured toward their captors. “That accent was Dutch. Hers was Iranian. The man on the end has a Russian flag tat on his palm. They’re foreign soldiers.”

“People who were visiting family or government workers who got trapped here after the war?” Ben frowned. “You know it’s very unlikely that they would all put aside their differences, even to survive.”

Tommy shook his head, glad when it only hurt a little instead of a lot. “No. See the blue helmet tattoos the guards have? The woman had one on her wrist. I saw it when she handed me a towel. That’s a UN logo.”

“UN!” Ryan made a face. “Does that mean a government made it through the war? I thought the rest of the world was as bad off as we are.”

“I don’t know.” Tommy lowered his voice. “But for right now, we have to assume that America has been invaded.”

“We have to tell the boss.” Josh concentrated. “Can anyone try it yet?”

“Maybe in a few hours.” Tommy was gathering his energy. “I’m the only one here with long range skills. She had me in private lessons.”

Instead of being jealous, the rest of the men were relieved. Angela’s classes had been hard, but useful. This team could use the mental connection over short distances, but they hadn’t had success in the longer tests they’d done on their own.

“I passed them all.” Tommy was reading them through the headache. “I wasn’t allowed to tell you. Now we know why.” That was a reminder not to let their captors know either.

The men all went quiet. They had a simple plan in place, most of them were together, and all of them were uninjured. They already held the advantage. Their captors just didn't know it yet.

2

"It's morning."

Kendle jerked awake, hand going to her knife.

Conner resumed his perch on the dresser while she got herself together. He gave her three full minutes of quiet.

Kendle tried to rush herself awake, but the haze of sleep in small chunks instead of a full night was already pulling on her. Once the adrenaline kicked in, she would be fine today, but tomorrow could get dicey if she didn't get them all out of here.

"The market opened. I heard the bell. And our host is on his way here now."

"Good." Kendle pushed to her feet. "Follow my lead. Don't let them use your emotions to add costs to the total."

"I'll try hard." Conner had already heard cries that forced him to hold himself in place. He was certain they'd been young. Only Kendle's pain-filled whimpers from the closet had kept him from insisting they do something.

Kendle placed a hand on his shoulder in sympathy, but she didn't offer platitudes. She didn't have any. They couldn't attack and risk their men, but more than that, Safe Haven didn't need another

war and they had no idea if these people were a serious threat yet. From all appearances they were, but Kendle couldn't challenge the leadership here without permission from the boss or Marc.

There was a tap on the door. "You ready in there?"

Kendle motioned Conner to follow as she opened it.

Rice smiled happily. "Food first, or the market and then lunch?"

Kendle knew Conner was hungry, but they still had a few supplies from the kit she'd taken out of their truck right before it had been stolen. "The market."

Rice didn't argue. He'd already eaten.

Kendle adjusted her jacket over her guns. "Where do I go when we get in there?"

"She'll come to you." Rice led the way. "This is a large load of slaves. She's very happy with me."

"A woman owns my team?"

"Renda is one of this town's masters. She's the nicest of them."

"When did the masters...collect this town?" Kendle nodded politely to the family members on crusty floors and grungy couches who watched her suspiciously from their plush blankets and thick sleeping bags. The mix of poverty and extravagance was odd.

"Six months or so." Rice took them down the creaking wooden steps. "Feels longer."

“Slavery usually does. Tell me how the market runs.”

Rice held the front door for her, glaring at the other occupants of the building who were craning their necks down the stairs and over banisters. One of them was the beaten decoy from their ambush. Before Conner could be rude, Rice shouted. “Get to your jobs! We have quotas or the others don’t eat!”

Kendle frowned, not shading her view against the dim dawn sky that had finally dried into grudging clouds of ugly gray. “What others?”

“You’ll see.” As they stepped out into stinking, damp air, Rice fastened the home with a padlock.

Kendle stopped Conner from asking why. She looked pointedly upward, where uniformed troops were visible in the cloudy light of dawn. There were large towers on every corner of the tall, thick, wooden wall that surrounded the town, each with four large men or women. In the street, there were small security posts with pairs of heavily armed men, spaced roughly every hundred feet.

“Wow.” Conner was surprised by the size. He couldn’t see the end of the wall for all the apartments crammed around a long, rectangular wall with more towers and guards. It was like the front of a fort, with thugs instead of soldiers. “How many people live here?”

“Hundreds. More will come after the next town is added.” Rice gave a friendly hello and good morning to a large man and woman coming from a bakery that had pastries in the frosted glass window.

The couple, carrying heavy baskets laden with sweets, gave Rice approving glances after scanning his company.

Conner's stomach growled.

"The next town?" Kendle watched other locals come and go through a main gate located not far from the residence where they'd spent the night.

"Rupert, Georgia was approached last month and given thirty days to decide. If they say no, the masters will set the troops loose there, which keeps them happy. If the town agrees, the masters will double their labor force and still gain some new slaves from those few who always refuse to conform."

"Sweet deal."

"It actually is." Rice ignored her sarcasm, leading them past the first security post with his warty chin up. "All these towns are starving. Here, they will work and they will be fed."

"What about those who don't have a skill?"

"And the elderly?"

Rice didn't answer either of them.

The town around them was haunting to both of the descendants, who could sense the misery. The trash fluttering on the wind swept against the bare feet of dozens of hollow-eyed men and women lingering in openings and alleys. They hadn't detected them last night in the dark and rain. Their sallow, bruised skin implied a terrible drug problem here.

There were other problems in view as well. Human and animal waste ran down the street, telling them there wasn't water or power for the slaves. Kendle doubted the masters were exposed to their own excrement.

Rice lowered his voice as they approached the market entrance, where a sign declared the hours as *Dawn to Dusk*. "Don't talk around the soldiers."

Kendle didn't plan to. The hulking thugs were everywhere, watching everything.

She and Conner walked behind Rice as he led them to the gate guards. One black and one white, both sentries appraised them warily.

Rice slowly held up his hand and pulled his sleeve aside to reveal a brand. "This gives me my quota for the month."

The short, white sentry wore crossed ammo belts and overalls that hadn't been washed in a long time. Dirt fell from the creases as he examined Rice's mark and then wrote something in a wrinkled book.

Kendle scanned the other troops in sight, comforted by their boredom and worries of low ammo. Both could work to her advantage.

"How are we playing this?" Conner admired the black sentry's attire. Even his tie was made from leather.

"Like any other trip into hostile territory," Kendle answered as they were waved through the opening gates. "Eagle rules."

Conner didn't know what that meant. He wasn't really an Eagle yet.

"You will be. She has plans for you."

They went quiet as the gates opened fully, revealing another small town.

Rice led them toward the center of the circular encampment, through town members and the guards around these better-built shacks. Kendle assumed the furniture in them would be above Rice's in quality. She also doubted these people would need sleeping bags. They could afford more blankets.

The two women at the open café to the right of the market gates were wearing enough jewelry to be visible from space if the sun ever hit them. The bodyguards hovering made it simple to conclude they were wealthy—not enough to be a trader or a master, but certainly enough to be supervisors or mates of traders and masters.

"Wow."

Kendle nodded at Conner's awe, but not for the same reason. The boy was impressed by the upbeat music and booths, by the flowers and the perfume. Kendle respected the brute force being used in an open display to those who came here to trade. She hadn't been exposed to such a display of guns since they'd fought Donner's men. Many of her plans were now useless. The only way they could fight this was with their power, but even if they won and escaped with their team, the townspeople, who were abundant, would be killed. They couldn't remove

this problem without Angela or Marc's permission. It was a no-win situation.

I feel it again, Conner sent.

Kendle used a subtle gesture to tell Conner not to use that form of communication. They hadn't asked Rice if the masters had any monitoring methods in place for magic users. Mental conversations might be recognized.

"You have to make an easy choice now." Rice turned to Kendle. "Normally, I would take you on a tour to encourage you to come and trade again. Some people demand to be taken straight to their missing items, but they almost never get them. They usually become slaves for their unwillingness to deal."

"We'll tour." Kendle spoke over the chatter of marketplace residents and shoppers. She looked at Conner. "Stay about five feet behind us and watch my back."

Conner did as he was told, trying to appear as intimidating as his dad.

"The item we discussed is in the same area your team will be, if you make a deal. They may be there already if someone made an early bid. That happens sometimes. Be careful not to draw attention. You're on camera in every section and it will drive up the prices."

Kendle wasn't concerned with that yet. She needed to examine the layout and verify her team was okay. As she did that, she was hoping to see something to trade with or at least a weakness to

exploit. If she didn't, she would offer up the next two locations on the map that Angela had given her. One was a stock of bottled water. The other was a DHS office that had been armed, but not used. Kendle hoped those would meet the cost of the trade. Once that was handled, she would need to see where this mystery descendant was being held so she could develop a plan for it. She assumed she would figure that out while going for the supplies. These market thieves were very organized. Kendle didn't expect to find something here to use as currency. Which meant she would be at least a week behind schedule, even if that all went smoothly. She would have to contact Angela soon. Kendle was dreading the call.

“Was this a school?” Conner recognized the basic design.

Rice took them up long, wide stairs toward another gate where doors had obviously been. “Yes. Now, it's our market. You can get anything here.”

The musician with his top hat and keyboard on one side and the busy face painting booth on the other was almost too much for Conner and Kendle to accept. They didn't reply to Rice's comment.

“Ah,” a female drawled from nearby. “I'm glad you have the patrons, Rice.”

They all turned to face the short woman with scars on her cheeks and a long braid. She was sitting at one of the stools that lined the front of an outdoor bar. Her exposed skin, what little there was, boasted almost as many scars as Kendle's.

Rice bowed to the female. “This is our slave master, Renda. After the tour, she is the one you’ll ask to speak with.”

Renda nodded her approval at how Rice was handling things. “Carry on.”

Kendle lingered a moment to give the French-braided woman a hard stare. Trying to convey her evil nature, Kendle was careful not to reveal more.

Renda smirked. “I look forward to your bid.”

Kendle turned away, following Rice. “If they’re injured, you won’t get one. I’ll buy new stock and spread the word your slaves aren’t cared for.”

Renda jumped from the stool, arm rising. “My stock is the best in the state! They eat better than I do!”

Kendle shrugged, not repeating herself. She was only guessing about how to handle the short, muscle-bound woman. This could all blow up with little provocation.

Renda watched the scarred fighter disappear through the market gates, scowling. After a moment, she marched toward her private entrance, muttering under her breath. She wanted to check on her slaves, be certain the guards were obeying their instructions. A bad reputation would get her removed from the market and she didn’t feel like killing for the slot again. The first time had been tiring. Her sister hadn’t wanted to stay under the water.

Rice let out a deep breath as they got out of earshot. “Be careful! The female master has

protections here. If anything happens to her, other masters will take it out on everyone!”

“By burning down the market?” Conner stared at the well-stocked balloon stand and working Pac-Man arcade in wonder. He hadn’t seen those signs of civilization since before the war.

Rice pointed at the signs on one entry wall. “They take pictures. That’s the first stop on the tour.”

Kendle and Conner reluctantly approached the red brick wall, bracing for ugliness.

Conner turned away first, unable to stand the images of children being hurt and burned alive. It was demoralizing. He stared at the dingy white tiles on the floor to avoid Rice’s knowing smirk.

Kendle forced herself to view the entire set of pictures. Looking weak right now wasn’t an option. In fact, there was a chance they would be attacked and enslaved themselves when these so-called masters found out she didn’t have anything to trade. If Rice was wrong about their willingness to make a deal, they were in deep trouble. Magic would be their recourse.

Kendle turned to Rice without a change in her facade.

Rice gestured toward the opposite wall, where more signs waited. “All of them please.”

Rooms with red doors are forbidden.

Deliveries must follow the yellow lines outside to the loading dock. Have paperwork ready!

Tour first. Bother the brokers last.

Management is not responsible for any injuries, thefts, or deaths while you are in the market place or Market Town.

Hours 7am–7pm. Slaves are available every three days. Bidding starts at noon.

“Is the next stop a demonstration?”

“Yeah. Nice guess!” Rice beamed. “Most people don’t get it that quickly.”

Kendle and Conner both braced as they were led into a small section off the main entrance. Between the signs and Rice hurrying, they didn’t have much time to view the hallways.

“These slaves have committed crimes against the masters...”

Kendle got the impression that Rice hated this part of the tour. When he scanned the chained men and women in various stages of abuse, so did she. The urge to act was powerful.

Kendle put a hand on Conner’s arm, falling into a vague plan. “You wanted to come along and learn how to do this. Be still and learn it.”

Rice’s body language was approving as he led them toward the door at their end of the hall

entrance. “The next stop is last. Then we can tour until the time for slaving.”

“When they sell them?” Kendle ignored Conner’s confusion. He would catch on to what she wanted.

“Yes. There will be a crowd.”

“Is it an auction?”

“No.” Rice opened the door and held it. “The bids are private. Masters don’t like their wealth being announced, even to each other.”

Kendle wanted to reply, but the inhabitants crammed into the zone glanced up with so much fear and misery that her stomach clenched. “Collateral?”

“Yes. If you have to collect items to trade with, this is where your boy will stay.”

Kendle swept the cramped, filthy people and the portable setups for waste and washing. “Will he be safe?”

“Each day lessens the odds of it.” Rice shrugged. “He is young enough to train, as you clearly know. He would be worth the lives of at least three adult men.”

Kendle and Conner both frowned, for different reasons.

“What happens if their family doesn’t come or fails to deliver?”

“They become the property of the masters.”

Rice sounded angry for the first time. Kendle caught his fast glance toward the soldiers and then

another swift, longing peek at a small group huddled in a far corner.

Kendle waited until they were back in the hallway. “How many of them are yours?”

“Later.” Rice took them back past the signs and into the first floor. Aware of the need to gawk, Rice put them along a wall so they didn’t block the path between the stalls and security booths. The guards didn’t like it when they couldn’t view the next post down the hall.

After a moment, Kendle turned to Rice. “I want to see it all. Is there time before the bidding?”

Rice peered up at the familiar round clock. “Noon is the opening for slaves and livestock.” His features brightened. “They give out free popcorn on slave days. That’s nice, right?”

“Yep.” Kendle forced a smile instead of the angry tirade that came to mind. “Show me everything. Don’t skip a single area.”

Chapter Six
Toured And Lured

1

“**W**ho has control over this floor?” Kendle scanned the nervous, depressed locals mentally and physically.

“The masters share control. Renda owns the slaves and the weapons wing. Iram owns the food and water, along with the health wing. Iram and Renda share control of everything else on this floor. Yuri is master of the upstairs level and everything there. Xavier owns the basement.” Rice led them down the hall, pointing out shops. “That’s the small café. It’s connected to the music lounge. You can get iPods full of old tunes and coffee with hot rolls. It’s a great place to relax after working all day or traveling.”

Rice sounded like he was giving a sales pitch.

The shops had been remodeled to have glass windows, like a mall. It felt much like that as Rice led them down the tiled halls. Kendle shook her head at Conner when he would have spoken. She didn’t know what he wanted to say, but until she had a firm plan in mind, he needed to be quiet.

“Next is the dance club. The girls take turns entertaining the market customers. In exchange, they get a discount on supplies.”

Kendle didn't glance in the windows or open curtains where music and stench rolled out, but Conner gaped open-mouthed until they were by both shops.

Kendle raised her hand to slap him in the back of the head, but lowered it. Cast iron frying pans had been trying to correct that reaction to breasts in guys for a long time, but it hadn't succeeded. It was biology. Nothing changed that. Determined to get deeper into her role, Kendle sighed. “We could probably find the time, if you make your own deal.”

Conner flushed. “No, thanks.”

Kendle chuckled. “Suit yourself.”

“Our girls are very clean.” Rice ignored the boy's red cheeks. “We mostly cater to women now, but the girls are eager to please.”

Kendle was surprised to hear that. “Those shops are full of men?”

“Yes.”

Kendle swallowed and kept walking.

Rice steered them around groups of troops and townspeople exchanging paper and merchandise at an accounting table. Near it was another table with a tag that said *market broker*. “Normally you would make a deal with the broker, but only Renda deals for the slaves.”

“How does the checkout work?”

“Vendors on any floor will give you a ticket. You bring it to the broker and make a deal, except on slave trade days. The broker and the masters are all in the main section with the cashiers then.”

“Where did the masters come from?”

“They were part of a UN training group that got stranded at Souther Field. Once they unloaded their trucks and crates, they took control.”

“What happened to the airport?”

“Burnt down when they took the first town. The masters don’t want to be stretched too thin.” Rice pointed. “Do you mind if we start downstairs? I have wagers to collect. I need to get to them before they spend their winnings.”

Kendle shrugged. “We’re on your time until noon.”

Rice led them to steep stairs with thick, sturdy rails. “After you.”

Kendle and Conner took the steps down to the basement that had been remodeled to become one huge zone. It seemed endless from the bottom of the stairs.

Conner gaped. “Is this what the real Vegas was like?”

Kendle smiled a bit. “Yeah, but louder.”

“You went?”

“Regularly. My...sister, Dawn, had the bug. She liked roulette.”

Conner heard the deep sorrow and felt yet another connection with Kendle. He also knew loss.

Kendle went cold, eyes fixed on a far wall. Their two matching Tahoe trucks were behind a rope, labeled as prizes for a grand championship fight that hadn't been scheduled yet.

Kendle glowered at Rice. "How can I trade for my trucks if you've given them away?"

"Make a deal with the winner, I guess." Rice smiled cheerfully. "Or you could fight for them. Anyone can enter the championship."

"No, thanks." Kendle had read the fine print. The championship was a bracket matchup that lasted for three days. She wasn't going to be here that long.

"Probably for the best. These matches can be to the death. You act like a hardass, but you can't keep your end of the deal if you die."

Kendle was startled into a snicker at his ruthlessness. "Well, this will be a town to remember."

"Lady, you have no idea how right you are."

Left without a response, she and Conner followed Rice deep into the glittery basement of the Americus City High School.

"Wait here." Rice pointed toward the corner with the row of slot machines. "I won't be long."

Kendle turned to her right and began to walk.

Conner stayed five feet behind and tried not to be distracted by the bells and clangs, the lights and flashy décor.

Kendle strolled by the row of wide oval tables where the middle class sat drinking and playing.

She suspected most of their winnings went to pay off current tabs for the expensive clothes and accessories. These tables reeked of desperation and thievery.

Next to the tables was a small rope partitioning off tournament booths where only half a dozen men remained. Kendle corrected her impression, seeing dusty places on the floor without footprints. *Or only that many had shown up.*

In the center, where bright banners draped the ceiling to floor, there were three divided areas. The first one she walked by held two tired cocks pecking at each other. There was a crowd around that ring, but most of them were guards trying to control a handler who wanted to jump in and beat his bird.

In the middle was a huge ring waiting for a later event. The mat was layered in dust. The far end held a plastic tub with two scrawny females scratching at each other while the referee sprayed them with water. Few people, male or female, were paying attention.

Kendle came to the end of the basement and the stairs that would take her back up to level one, and turned left to finish her circuit. The arcades along that short wall were tempting. She'd loved arcades. She didn't let the set of pool tables draw a reaction either. She'd also been good at that, as well as the variety of throwing games that had been nailed to the walls.

An empty oval counter with ropes was the single attraction along the opposite wall. Kendle

returned to the entrance in disappointment. *This is post-war entertainment?*

She found Rice at the broker table in front of the animal ring, arguing about the amount. She went up the stairs without telling him. She needed a few minutes away.

Conner swept the electronic dartboards in longing as they left, wondering if the empty popcorn machine next to them worked. If he had something to trade and their team was safe, he would come here and spend half a day playing. He missed being able to do things like that without worrying all the time.

Kendle understood, but it was yet another example of the wisdom of age. Youth would take the first flashy thing that came, feeling as though there might never be anything better. Age waited for the quality version because they'd been around enough to know which one was more satisfying over the long run. Conner would learn that lesson in time, if he survived. Kendle was suddenly positive that he would. The kid was smart and tough.

Wanting to avoid the masters as long as she could, Kendle kept going up the empty stairs, skipping the first floor. She didn't want to get in Renda's way again until she had a solid plan.

Signs and warnings were written on, and nailed to, all of the walls in the stairwell, including a large one at the top of the steps that told them not to steal or they would become slaves. Kendle didn't plan on it. Rice had given her a description of what was up

here. If she got lucky, this floor might be productive.

Conner was still reading the signs as Kendle went into the hall, lingering on the fading poster board that advertised happy hour and live entertainment. That spelled party for him.

The pair emerged into a dim hall on the top floor that reeked of sweet smells and soft music.

Conner sniffed the air like a dog. “Is that...pizza?”

Kendle motioned toward an adjacent section. The name of the café wasn’t discernible, but the words *Food, Drinks, Snacks* were flashing in neon lighting.

Kendle turned them away from the café, stomach now growling. She took the opposite hall to make the circuit, noting a plumbing stall and a gardening shop. As she neared the end of the first long side, she found a tool store and a communication stand, where radios and batteries were on display behind a small locked cage. She read signs that informed her those were only for the masters and guards.

The corners of this second floor held stacks of washers and dryers, with pipes and hoses stretched out like snakes. Kendle stepped carefully, as did everyone else who traveled the damp hall.

Along the shortest red wall was an actual tailoring shop and a hairdresser, both with fencing fastened over the entire front of the booths. She

assumed it was too early for those businesses to expect customers. Dawn's break was an hour gone.

Nearby, a security post was shoved into the corner. It was empty, surprising her. The basement and first floor had heavy protection. Why not up here?

Kendle refused to hurry as she hit the other long side and found the upstairs entertainment section. There were girls for rent, men on chains, and a theater with popcorn smells flowing from the open doors. Vague, hard-hitting music beats echoed through the closed spaces.

Conner gaped with longing and curiosity.

At the end of this hall was a red door. Kendle avoided it.

In the center of the upstairs were the living quarters and cubbies for rent. It appeared that all of them had been added or remodeled to provide the spaces without regard for comfort. Most of them were open, revealing emptiness.

"I need to go."

Kendle sighed. So did she.

"Do you suppose those are for the public?" Conner pointed to the restrooms next to the door that was off limits.

Kendle glanced around for someone to ask, but the second floor was deserted. She shrugged. "Let's find out. Stay together."

Bracing, Kendle took him into the men's john to spare him, but there was no one inside for her to embarrass. She hurried, hoping he did too.

After checking the few stalls, Kendle went to the exit. "I'm nearby."

"Okay."

Kendle found a fairly clean place along the wall to wait for him. Getting tissue from the roll, while under real lights, had been nice. The electricity downstairs had drawn the same emotions, just not as strongly. "Funny the things you miss."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?"

Kendle jumped, moving away from the wall. She swept the hall but didn't see anyone. "Where are you?"

A short, squat man wearing pants and a shirt the exact shade of red as the bricks stepped forward with his hand out. "You need a room? I have rooms." His black boots and greasy black beard gleamed in the dimness.

Recognizing him from the description she'd been given, Kendle shook his hand. "You must be Yuri."

The furry male dimpled in happiness. "Yes!" He motioned at the nearest open cubicle for rent. "Come!"

Kendle stayed in the doorway so Conner would see her as soon as he came from the restroom, but it was also as far as she needed to go. It was a small square room with nice furniture and threadbare blankets and pillows.

"You can have this for cheap. You stay, huh?"

Kendle inspected the faded signs and dusty floors of the section around them. “You’ll run a tab.”

Yuri pouted. “People never pay them. No tabs.”
“Okay.”

Conner came over with a deep frown when he saw there was a man with her. “You all right?”

Kendle ignored the question, studying Yuri. His eyes had widened at spotting Conner. She could almost hear his wheels turning.

“The boy.” Yuri pointed. “My best cubby, with food and care for your stay.”

“For the duration?”

Conner glared at her in hurt surprise.

“Yes, yes. He is worth much to the slave master.”

“Will you accept him as collateral on my tab?”

Yuri’s face scrunched into concentration as he considered it. His hand came up to his brow, stroking... “You would pay it off or give me the boy?”

“Yes.”

“Done.”

Kendle put a hand out to shake as Conner spun toward the stairs.

“Grab him!” Yuri ordered.

Foreign soldiers in red clothes sprang from shadowy tables that Kendle and Conner hadn’t noticed without using their descendant powers. The wood had been painted the same shade as the brick. It was perfect camouflage.

The door clicked ahead of him, locking.

Conner stopped.

Instead of the beating he'd expected, the sentries surrounded the boy and gently nudged him toward Yuri.

"Interesting." Kendle ignored Conner's mental threats to let his wrath loose on them all. "He won't be harmed?"

"No, no, no. Our slaves are the best in the state!"

"He'll be with the wretches we saw downstairs?"

Conner perked up, stomach calming. She wasn't trading him.

"Yes. Have him there by the time the market closes. I will have the best cubby ready for you."

Kendle was glad Conner now seemed to understand what she was doing. He would be in with Rice's family. He was also next to the slaves, to their team, and he would be safe. The masters couldn't kidnap him because he was already in their care.

Yuri left them, troops returning to their cleverly hidden posts.

Kendle went into the café before Conner could speak.

The cook, a tall man with a long white apron, smiled at them in delight. "You look hungry. Can I feed you breakfast or lunch?"

"Something beef and filling." Kendle settled onto one of the rotating stools that had been welded to the floor.

Conner took a place by the window to watch for problems. There wouldn't be any from inside, since there were no other patrons.

“Do you run tabs?”

“No credit!” The cook scowled. “Get out.”

“I can help you make more sales every day.” Kendle didn't move. “I can also get rid of your competition downstairs.”

The cook, a tired man from Florida who had been trapped here after the war, studied her for a long moment. When he had made his mental choice, he came from behind the counter to pull down the shade over the front window, signaling that he was on a break. “What do I have to do?”

Kendle gestured toward the grill. “Food and care for the duration of my stay. By the time I leave, your business will have increased one hundred percent.”

“Your collateral? I heard you talking with Yuri. You can't use the boy twice.”

“Feed us now, as a sign of good faith. By the time you close tonight, the shop downstairs will be out of business and that will seal our deal.”

“Who is your host?” The cook wanted to agree. He barely managed enough customers each month to pay the rent for his business. Being out of the main flow of traffic downstairs hurt him.

“Rice.”

“Those are your guys downstairs?”

“Yes.”

The cook stood up and moved toward the grill.

Kendle was glad the man pulled on gloves before preparing their food. She was even happier to see that his small freezer was stocked and labeled with huge strips of tape that all said beef or chicken.

“How do you plan to get your men if you can’t even afford a meal?” He began opening tubs and packages of seasonings.

“I have no idea.” Kendle decided on honesty. For some reason, the cook seemed like a good person. “But I’ve covered your bill and others. I’m making progress.”

The man nodded, slapping a pile of beef onto the grill that he mashed down flat and cut in half. “Somedays, that’s all life is.”

Kendle swept the small café again, seeing he had tried to recreate the experience of an old soda shop. There were even signs advertising milkshakes that could be shared. It was cute, quaint. And very out of place. Kendle found it comforting, exactly like she thought the owner had intended when he’d decorated it.

“I’m Curtis. Cutts to the masters.”

“Widow Maker.” She knew the name would get back to Renda. “He’s my lapdog, Butch.”

Conner and the cook both snickered.

Kendle smiled her thanks for the drinks Curtis put on the counter, motioning Conner to join her.

Following his training, Conner took his to a far end of the small counter so he could still watch the door.

“Were you traveling north or south when they got you?” Curtis dropped generous seasonings and dehydrated onions onto both the grill and the meat.

“South.”

“Something there? Other than what we have here?”

Kendle understood he was looking for hope, for a reason to run. “We were going to check it out. No one has heard from that area in a long time.”

“You on a mission for a group?”

Kendle’s lips clamped shut.

Conner covered for her. “We have a small camp up north. Getting too cold.”

“I thought these latest rainstorms felt like snow might be backing them up.” The cook deposited plastic silverware and cheap paper napkins in front of them, then got plates from a shelf. “Your group good?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Conner and Kendle answering simultaneously drew longing from the man. “Hang on to it for as long as you can. Never bring them through here.”

“No, we won’t,” Kendle lied, thinking about how ugly it would get when Angela found out about this place. The market’s days were numbered.

Kendle and Conner enjoyed the fresh bread and beef patties smothered in onions, but she didn’t linger, sure Rice was panicking at her absence. As

they finished and stood, Kendle held her hand out to the cook. “Good food.”

He beamed, shaking with her. “By close tonight?”

“My word on it.” Kendle heard a clamor on the stairs that announced the arrival of their host. “Tomorrow, I’ll start bringing in the customers. You keep the beef coming.”

Curtis began to clean up their mess. “You get rid of that bitch downstairs and I’ll split the daily profits that you drive in.”

“Deal.”

Kendle shut the door after waving Conner out. She immediately came face-to-face with Rice.

It was clear that they’d been fed, but he didn’t ask how she had paid. After being ignored and abandoned in the basement, it was clear she would make her own choices.

“Have you viewed everything up here?”

Kendle nodded to Yuri as she went by the door that was red. It was his personal apartment. It looked as though it had once been three classrooms. “I’m going to the first floor. You can tag along if you like.”

Pouting, Rice stayed by Conner and let Kendle explore the market at her leisure.

Behind them, Bossy slipped into the café and took a seat on the stool that Kendle had occupied. “Hello, Cutts!”

Curtis plastered his usual benign expression on as he turned from the grill. “She said her name is

Widow Maker. The boy is Butch. They came from the north. Said they're alone. Our deal is for new customers. She promised to increase my sales for a percentage of the profit. I agreed."

"You went for that without collateral?"

Curtis glanced around at the empty stools and full freezer. "Better a bird in the bush than nothing in the hand."

Bossy wrote it down and left without replying.

2

"Something's happening." Tyler didn't rise from his cot on the end. None of them had slept in the hours they'd been waiting. "It's getting louder in the next room."

Josh nodded. "Bossy's getting twitchy. Keeps checking his watch."

"Everyone clear?" Ben looked at the rookies first. They'd gone over it a couple of times, but he wanted to be positive.

"We forgot something." Scott sat up.

The door opened.

"What?" Tommy went to him as Bossy moved their way.

"The traitors."

Tommy realized Scott was right, but there wasn't time to discuss it as Bossy and the other guards herded them to the exit with prods from their rifles.

Tommy led them in, walking slowly to have time to adapt their plan based on where they were being taken. He saw fencing and realized they were being transferred to a different cell. He spotted the long cart with those intimidating metal poles and handcuffs, and balked. “We’re not going in th—”

Bossy slammed his C7 into Tommy’s knee, neatly catching him when he crumbled. He then swung the Eagle over one shoulder as if he weighed nothing.

The Eagles closest tried to help, but the narrow fencing and the troops between them prevented anyone from getting through.

Scott shoved against the Russian soldier, wishing he would swing, but the man stood pat with another sentry, absorbing the anger without reaction.

Scott drew back to brawl, but Ben grabbed his arm. “We’re separated. Get us up there!”

Seeing Ben had him under control, the Russian man moved to let the rest of the team through.

Ben hurried up the three stairs and into the new cell, ignoring the guards and gawkers to help Tommy stand up while he was handcuffed. “I got ya, man.”

Tommy tried to stop the ringing in his ears. “I tried not to hurt him.”

Ben snickered nervously, being pushed over to the set of cuffs next to Tommy. Ben let himself be cuffed with a churning stomach. In their lessons, he

hadn't been able to get out of his. Whatever partner he'd been assigned had always had to help him.

"I've got ya, man." Tommy pulled on his cuffs and was eased a bit to discover they were attached to a chain that allowed him to step out of reach of the dozens of potential buyers now surrounding the cell.

Ben forced his heart rate down. They were Eagles. This wasn't practice. It was time to do what they'd been trained for. *Step one: observe. Step two: compare and plan. Step three: execute.*

Hoping the team around him was doing the same, Ben studied everything he could see. The first observation was the worst. With all the security in sight, only a couple of exits in the gymnasium, and more than four dozen customers crowded around to glimpse the wares, they weren't getting out of here just by fighting. Not even if they grabbed a gun or two. They would be mowed down by uniformed troops carrying everything from AKs to G3s.

Scott was coming to the same conclusion as he examined the walls and found no windows, no weak points, and cameras that stopped and started in ways that suggested a human operator. They were live.

"Two minutes!" Bossy shouted. "Two minutes until the viewing is over."

Guards on the outside of the cage began pulling ropes to bring down what appeared to be red velvet curtains.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Josh glared. “It’s only been ten months. Where is your humanity?!”

The sentry behind him, the Russian he had dubbed Demetri, kicked his left ankle hard enough to bring Josh to his knees.

Josh stayed there while he recovered. “You’ll pay for that and for Tommy. Keep count!”

The soldier leaned down. “Put this on my tab.”

Josh braced for another body hit just as his chin slammed into the bars.

“That’s enough!” Renda shoved the sentry over to kneel by Josh. She grabbed his chin roughly to examine the damage.

Josh tried to pull away, but she used both hands to hold him still. Her strength was surprising.

“You have drawn blood.” Renda glowered at the guard. “What is rule three of your training?”

“Never draw blood.” The Russian backed up. “Use methods that don’t leave visible marks to control slaves.”

“You are relieved of slave duty. Go to a broker for reassignment.”

The man stormed from the cage, casting glares at Josh and Renda.

Renda used her soft jacket sleeve to wipe the thin trickle of blood from Josh’s nose. She wasn’t gentle. “There. Good as new.” She helped him stand, ignoring the way he favored the leg that wasn’t throbbing.

“Drop it.” Renda stepped from the cage. She locked it as the curtains slid into place.

The Eagles immediately tried to use their hand code to communicate, but the clinking chains said it wasn't wise. Tommy shut it down. “Whisper. Do the best you can. Tell me what you saw.” It was the Eagle way of comparing notes to come up with a complete picture of the situation.

“I saw a long row of booths and tables. I could read two of them. One was a rental broker. The other was accounting.” Josh began working on his cuffs. “I had the floor view.”

“All of them were like that.” Dexter also started working on his cuffs. “I think they were taking yellow tickets from people in the lines. I didn't see where they went when they finished.”

“There were a couple of doors and no windows.” Ben scanned Josh's injuries, very angry. “Everyone around us is armed, even the buyers. They're carrying heavy equipment.”

“There's a huge row of shelves on a wall by three big booths that have more security than we do.” Ryan grunted. “The shelves have all sorts of gear and crap. Too much to name. The booths have signs, but I couldn't read any of them.”

“Cameras in all corners.”

“I think we're in an old carnival cage. Might be on wheels. I couldn't tell when we came in. They have lace or something draped over the bottom.”

“These cuffs were welded. Might be a weak place if they did a shoddy job.”

The team continued with their observational meeting, trying to ignore the cruel strangers outside the cage who were now vying for the chance to bid on them.

“I’ll take two!”

“I want one!”

“Three, if the price is good!”

“I want them all!” a familiar voice rang out above the din.

The men in the cage stilled at the offer, straining to hear the response.

“Take a form and fill in your bid,” Renda answered. “Everyone gets a form. Fill them out and give them to me. If you need help, step over to the accounting table.”

The team in the cage waited to hear that powerful pitch again, but there was only the excited chatter of patrons, gawkers, and troops for a long minute.

Tyler frowned. “Maybe it wasn’t her.”

“Wait for it...” The relief in Tommy’s heart was overwhelming. He’d just been thinking that without descendant help, they might not get out of this one.

“If I can’t examine the merchandise, I’m not bidding.” Kendle’s words echoed loudly, bringing all activity in the gym to a halt. “What are you hiding? Are they sick? Hurt?”

“Let her in there,” a man’s hard, clipped timbre ordered. “Unless you *are* hiding something?”

“There was an incident with one of the guards,” Renda confided grudgingly. “There was almost no blood and no mark at all.”

“The rest of my team hasn’t been harmed?”

From her pointed tone, Tommy assumed Kendle knew better.

“Another male hit himself on the bars as he woke in the dark. The troops forgot to stay with them.”

“So there was an entire group of slaves in an unlocked cell, without security?” that first man’s ruthless voice questioned.

“Yes, but I’ve handled it,” Renda stated defensively. “The soldiers responsible have been removed from that duty and now owe all the masters a share of their fight winnings for the next month.”

“That is satisfactory. Proceed with the examination.”

“I’ve got it,” another man spoke up. The Russian accent was thick. “I have rented her a cubby for the duration of her stay.”

“What did she pay you with?” Renda demanded angrily. “We took everything she had!”

Yuri chuckled. “You did not take her boy, who is more valuable than half a load of adults.”

The team strained to hear more as they realized Kendle had bargained using Conner’s freedom.

“What’s the catch?” Renda asked, sounding closer.

“We have a wager.” Yuri grinned widely. “I will not tell you the terms until after it is settled.”

Renda jerked the rope to pull up the curtain over the gate to the cage. “You have one minute.”

Kendle stepped inside, wearing her guns and a smirk the Eagles usually only witnessed under someone’s blood. The team broke into relieved sighs, but didn’t speak.

Kendle swept each of them, easily getting their judgments and fears without having to pry. Tommy’s mind was the most open. Kendle went to him.

“You didn’t say they’d been beaten.” Kendle picked out the various bruises. “That came from a gun butt or a kick. Maybe both.”

Yuri motioned a sentry to write it down. “That lowers the price. Keep going.”

Kendle sniffed deeply. “They’ve been sick. I can smell vomit. Over-drugging or illness?”

Both Yuri and his personal guard turned to Renda in surprise, waiting for her answer.

Renda scowled, reddening in anger. “Do not question how my slaves are handled!”

“Malia never would have allowed this.” Yuri’s eyes misted under thick brows. “Your sister cared for the slaves. You only care for the power. That is why she was loved and you are not.”

Renda chuckled, surprising Kendle and the team.

“But she did not return your sentiments, did she, my sad Yuri?” Renda moved away from the cage. “Pick out flaws if it pleases you. They belong to me;

the other masters are not allowed to interfere. The prices will not change.”

Yuri waited for Renda to be out of earshot before turning to Kendle. “Continue.”

“That was enough.” Kendle gave each of her men a quick look of comfort before leaving the cage. “Don’t forget who you are.”

The curtain fell a moment later, leaving the team in dim privacy.

“Any idea what she has planned?” Ben was hoping Tommy had picked something up from her mentally.

“She only sent one thing.” Tommy’s voice was a gruff whisper. “No magic, at all, in any form.”

“There must be a good reason for it.” Ryan chose to have faith. Kendle hadn’t run. That was enough for him.

Now glad they’d been careful about it, the team fell into silent contemplation of what it could mean.

Outside the cage, Bossy wrote down everything he heard, including Yuri’s words of a private wager and Renda not taking proper care of the slaves. His boss paid well for information like that.

“What happens next?” Kendle asked as they left the crowded gym and all the surprised stares. These people clearly weren’t used to anyone challenging the masters.

“They’re meeting to discuss bids right now.” Rice scanned the hall nervously. “Normally, it would be Renda sorting them, but the offer you

made will involve the entire market, so she'll have to include them in the decision. We should have action soon."

Kendle settled in to wait. If this didn't succeed, she would get mean. *I'm not leaving without my team. They'll have to kill me first.*

Chapter Seven
Baiting And Waiting

1

Kendle leaned against the wall, hoping Conner was settling in without trouble. She hadn't wanted to abandon him to Renda's care, but Yuri was the best shot at having a master sponsor her. The Russian proprietor hadn't agreed to that yet, but he would after the first fight. It had been even harder to walk away and leave her team in that carnival freak show. She would get them back and finish her mission. Then, Angela would make these individuals sorry they'd ever targeted her team.

"No!" Renda shouted from the meeting room near them. "No! No! No!"

Rice moved away from the red door.

Kendle didn't. She wasn't going to show weakness in any way, but Renda was about to reveal hers for everyone to see.

The door was flung open, slamming against the wall. The constant chatter of patrons was replaced with quiet observation and subtle smirks.

Renda saw Kendle; rage swept over her features. She stormed toward the scarred woman, oblivious to their audience.

Kendle smirked a little. "Master Renda."

Renda's profile twisted into insanity...and then snapped into the same blank expression Kendle had witnessed earlier.

"It's been a long time since I actually enjoyed killing someone." Renda motioned toward the adjacent stairs that led to the basement. "We could do it now."

"Well, you're easy." Kendle laughed. "New bid—I kill you and take your place as slave master."

Her worst fear revealed, Renda grabbed for the whip on her belt.

Ready for it, Kendle used a neat move to shove the woman and then trip her with a well-placed boot.

Renda slammed into the tile floor with her ass and back, air knocked out of her.

Kendle put a hand on her gun. "Follow the ways of the market."

Having the rules she'd helped to make used against her was infuriating, but Renda had no choice. The swift move had knocked awareness back into her. There were witnesses all around them. Renda rose, straightening her jacket. She glowered toward Rice, who had stopped to gape, open-mouthed at Kendle's actions. "This trick will not succeed. The slaves are mine!"

Renda stormed down the hall toward the gymnasium, no longer glaring at Kendle. She didn't think she could without attacking.

Kendle didn't push any harder. It wasn't time for that yet.

“That was impressive.” Yuri came from the master meeting room to join her. “Also reckless. She will not forget it.”

Kendle shrugged. “Do the masters know how crazy she is?”

“Yes.” Yuri led her away from the meeting. “It is profitable.”

Around them, locals and visitors to the market stared and pointed at her, already retelling what had happened.

Yuri bowed to Kendle, flashing a charming smile. “Until later.”

Kendle blushed at the timbre. She wasn’t used to being accepted for what she was. It felt odd.

“Yuri is a good man.” Rice smiled pointedly as the second floor master left them.

You wouldn’t know one of those if he spit in your soup. Kendle let Rice guide her toward the basement, where she’d told him she wanted to spend most of her time. She needed to observe the day-to-day operations. Now that she had gotten the ball rolling, she didn’t want to be run over by it.

“Stop!”

Kendle paused at the shout. *Too late.*

“You there! The masters want you, woman. Now!”

Kendle followed the guard. She’d expected this, but not so soon. Hoping she could pull it off, Kendle motioned Rice to get lost when he would have followed. She didn’t want him to know the exact details of her bid. She hadn’t forgotten that he was

the reason she was in this mess in the first place. If he and his family had chosen to do the right thing, the masters would never have been able to build this atrocity.

They cleared the room, was Kendle's first thought as the gymnasium doors slammed shut behind her. When three big troops blocked it with their arms over their chests, her second was, *I wonder if they'll shove me in the same cage or put me somewhere else.*

Kendle felt the basic survival instinct rise, quickly threatening to bubble up and drown her. *Easy. I found an outlet. Now wait for it.*

Yes, I will, her demon promised.

Good. Kendle straightened her shoulders and walked up the short steps to the master's table, which was half a rectangle with the center space facing outward. A sentry with a blue helmet tattoo directed her to stand in the center, in front of the seated rulers who were studying her with varying degrees of interest and hostility.

Kendle studied them right back while waiting for the interrogation to begin. She wasn't worried over Yuri. He now had a lot riding on her being able to do what she'd promised. Renda wouldn't have a choice if she was outvoted. The other two, Kendle hadn't met before. One was a tall, blond man with huge white teeth that gleamed as he smiled at her.

Kendle nodded politely, taking note of his pleasant attitude.

The last master was American. Kendle wasn't surprised, only angry with the white man and his tailor-made suit. She'd been on enough yachts to recognize quality clothing. His colors were the same as the other masters—tan and black—but he was the one making the most profit or spending the most. She watched him lean over to peer at a paper.

The blond master immediately handed him the bid to view.

Leader. The American is the boss. Figures. She swept the room as she had earlier, this time lingering on empty stalls for renting slaves and buying gear and ammo. She and the guards were the only people in here with the masters.

A vague chain clink reminded Kendle that her team was also near, stuffed into a carnival cage like exotic animals. It was unbelievable how fast things had gone bad; Conner was right about that.

“This is very interesting!” The American glanced up at Kendle with eager green eyes.

“It is ridiculous!” Renda gestured angrily. “She cannot make these deals!”

“She can if we authorize it.” Iram was still smiling happily. “If she has collateral, I will.”

Kendle placed his accent in surprise, though she'd been told these were UN people. She'd rarely heard Dutch in person, even before the war.

Renda slammed herself into the chair, arms folding over her chest. “She has nothing! We took it all.”

The American set the paper down and put his gold-plated glasses back into his pocket. He studied Yuri, then Kendle. "Let's discuss each section, shall we?"

"I'm all yours until you're satisfied," Kendle joked carefully, feeling them out for soft spots.

Iram snickered, while Renda and the American frowned. Kendle couldn't remember if Rice had given her the man's name or not, but if so, she couldn't remember it.

"That may well be." Renda flashed sharp teeth. "I will own you and I'm impossible to sate."

The American waved a distracted hand at Renda, causing her to bristle further. "Be quiet now, dear."

Kendle slowly took the copy of the bid she'd written earlier from her pocket. "I believe issue #1 is my collateral."

"Yes. It says information. What type?"

"Financial and security, mostly, but a few profit items as well. I'd like to start with security, if that's okay?"

"I told you she has nothing!" Renda again interjected. "The market is as safe as any compound we've ever been in."

"I'll give you two items now as proof," Kendle countered coldly. "No more until after we have a deal in place."

The American waved. "Go ahead."

"Xavier!"

The American focused on Renda with an anger that Kendle thought she might cower from while begging to be spared. It reminded her of Ethan.

“Shut up or get out.”

Renda glowered in defiant anger.

Xavier let out a weary sound. “Please rest assured that we will not permit you to be taken advantage of, Renda. Your happiness as a master of this market is important to us.”

Kendle heard the note of condescension. So did Renda. Her face glazed over with fresh anger.

“She has nothing!”

“You have holes in the wall.” Kendle took the conversation to where she needed it. “I saw two dogs in town this morning that are in the market right now. The cook in your first floor café is feeding them scraps. Either the guards let them in, daily I would imagine, or you have at least one hole in or under the wall.” She surveyed Iram, the food master, hoping she’d gotten that right. “I’ve been told that scraps are supposed to be given to the locals or market slaves, not wild dogs who don’t work.”

Iram wasn’t smiling now. He was glaring. “Dog soup this week as the regular fare or would everyone prefer actual hot dogs?”

“I don’t eat dog.” Kendle shrugged. “I do train them sometimes.”

“We’ve wanted protection animals.” Xavier gave her a gleam and a beam. “But we have no one

with that skill. Perhaps when this is all over, you will have your own shop here, eh?"

Kendle didn't glance at Renda like she wanted to. "Maybe."

"You said two items!" Renda didn't think information on the dogs was important.

Xavier held up a hand. "I want someone sent to inspect the wall and talk to the gate guards. Replace if guilty, with harsh punishments for not following market profit laws. The only animals allowed in these walls are for food production or clothing. Anything else roaming and squatting will cause diseases." He looked at Renda pointedly.

Renda had no choice but to personally deliver the orders to a sentry. She shoved to her feet.

Xavier waved at Kendle. "Proceed."

"The slaves aren't secure." Kendle watched Renda's shoulders stiffen as she heard the accusation. "The welds are weak."

"That is a lie! I would bet on those welds!" Renda's shout brought all other activity to a halt.

Kendle pointed. "Raise the curtain. I bet one of their lives against all of them being loose in that cage."

Before Renda could argue, Xavier stood up. "I will match that bet. Raise the curtain."

Meaning if Kendle was wrong, Xavier would owe Renda a slave. Kendle had no doubts about who it would be. *Come on, guys. Come through for me.*

The sound of chains clinking echoed from the cage.

Guards hurried over to lift the curtains.

“How did they do that?!”

“That’s incredible.”

“Two of them are not free!” Renda shouted over the mutters and murmurs. “She loses.”

“They were trained to do it in one minute.” Kendle looked at Xavier. “They’ve had about...twenty-five seconds.”

Xavier, who wasn’t positive he could do it at all, motioned the troops back as he strolled over to the cage to observe the two remaining slaves cuffed near the cage gate.

“Like this.” Tommy held up his chain. “Bring your knee into the chain and the chain into your knee, right there at the weld.” Tommy snapped the chains and lifted his hands. The coil fell to the cage floor in loud thumps and clanks.

Ben took a deep breath and repeated the movement, using all of his strength. The weld broke easily, causing him to stumble.

Tommy caught him. “Nice.”

The moment was teamwork, amazing feats, and the sense of something else coming. Tommy turned toward Kendle, who had stayed where the sentry placed her. “We’ve all got it now, Boss.”

“And that’s why I didn’t leave you after you were caught so easily.” Kendle kept playing the role. She raised a brow at Xavier.

Renda was livid, but there was little she could say when Xavier conceded.

“You’ve won the bet. Renda will pick the man.”

“Agreed.” Kendle gestured. “But I don’t want him yet. Please keep him as a part of my collateral.”

The entire team stiffened anxiously.

Xavier brightened. “Yes! What is the next thing your bid promised?”

Kendle didn’t need to skim the paper. “Profit increases. I have no less than ten ways to do that, with one big hit on top of those. I’ll give you three of the small ones now as further evidence of my honesty.”

“Go on.” Xavier was still admiring her team as they finished freeing themselves from the cuffs. With the chains off, the wrist connections were easy to remove.

“None of your sections or shops are full. They weren’t when you opened and they still aren’t, five hours later. You aren’t advertising, but you’ve already sucked all of the profits out of your laborers. You need word of mouth. That comes from special events, big prizes, and happy patrons.”

“You do not think our patrons are happy?” Iram was a bit shocked at the display from her team. Their troops couldn’t do that.

“Everyone is bored. Soon, folks will slip away to other parts of the country that the market doesn’t reach.”

“And what would solve this problem?” As a potential sponsor, Yuri already agreed with her, but

the demonstration from her team had convinced him it was the winning choice. She was going to get her bid demands and then things would get interesting.

“I have to ask you a question to be able to answer that correctly. May I? It’s sensitive.”

Xavier came within a few feet of Kendle, surrounded by soldiers when Renda waved them over. “Yes?”

“Do you allow the patrons the same entertainments that you enjoy?”

“Such as?” he drawled dangerously, not answering the question.

“Executions.” Kendle smiled. “I assume your men do it, but you can charge for that. Also animal control events. Many people do eat wild dog now. You can make a profit from both ends.” She looked at Iram. “Your joke was true. Made it funnier for me.”

Charmed, Iram smiled.

“What else?” Xavier returned to his seat.

“You have no barker to announce the fun going on downstairs or the cubbies for rent upstairs. Advertising solves low traffic problems.”

“That’s not enough.” Renda lingered by the cage. Her attitude was subdued now.

“I concur.” Xavier pointed. “But there are two more items here. To get all of your possessions, you have proposed a series of matches, where a portion of everything will be returned to you.”

“Yes, but I’d like it to be kept each time that I win, as more collateral and proof.”

“You just don’t want to feed and house your men while here!” Yuri exclaimed. “I knew you were sucking me!”

Kendle chuckled at his misuse of American slang. She was sure he’d meant to say suckering. “You’ve seen them. You can imagine the food bills.”

The masters shared laughs of understanding, except for Renda. She glowered at Kendle in growing hatred.

“This series of matches would take place in the evenings, as special events to drive up your profits. Citizens will spend all day or even the week blowing their fortunes in the market until each match. Also, I would not request a share of the market revenue until the balance I owe for my possessions is met.”

Xavier stared thoughtfully, mind spinning with ways they could use such an event to their advantage. “And the last item?”

“When I win it all, I have safe passage to travel these roads without being attacked again.”

“You would have to be branded for that.” Renda would love to be the one holding a branding iron to the woman’s already scarred skin.

Kendle glanced down at her body and back to Renda. “What’s one more?”

Renda slammed herself against the cage, shaking the men inside who were listening intently. Most buyers were too scared to be branded and refused.

“Is there anything else you’d like to add?” Xavier was very aware of the animosity between the new female and his lover.

Kendle slid the paper into her pocket. “Yes. When this is all over, I’m going to kill the slave master for the suffering we’ve gone through during our time here. If you’re sleeping with her, I suggest you start searching for a replacement.” Kendle left the gymnasium before Renda could shove through her guards to meet her challenge.

The other masters stared after her in surprise and greed. If the woman could revitalize their failing market, the secret goals they had might still be possible. They’d chosen to wait until they were established, but when the market had begun to slow down in trade and travelers, they hadn’t been able to move forward. Now, that might change. In a few months, the sign might not say *Market* anymore. It might say *UN Peacekeeping Force* and have glittery signs encouraging inhabitants to do their duty, to help save their country by joining. In a few years they would rule it all, as it should have been all along.

Iram smiled at the thought, ignoring the other masters. Conquering the United States had long been a dream of his. The arrival of this woman was fate telling him it was time to build that future. Satisfied he knew what was happening, Iram turned to Xavier. “I move that we adjourn to the meeting room for a discussion.”

“It’s been hours,” Rice complained again from his seat along the waiting wall with Kendle and the other bidders. “Come on, already.”

Kendle ignored him. She’d listened to the shouts and the sounds of items breaking in the master meeting room, but she was really working on the rest of her plan. If they said no, she would try to break her team out using power. If they said yes, she was about to spill blood in front of a crowd. Both were unnerving, but she couldn’t let them know. She was trying to remain emotionless to everyone watching her for weaknesses in case they got to bet on her later.

“Hours!”

Kendle gave Rice a curt glare, silencing him.

“Attention, slave bidders,” Iram called loudly through the speakers above them. “A bid has been accepted for the entire lot. Thank you for your offers. Slaves are brought in every three days. Please try again.”

“That’s you!” Rice beamed. “No one else could afford them all. You did it!”

Kendle turned away from his excitement. She couldn’t stand him right now; he was in danger. The jump her nerves had just taken was astounding. She was risking all their lives on her fighting skills, and while she’d had various lessons and some prewar training before assignments, she didn’t feel like a killer now. She didn’t feel like the mad woman who

had hunted with the Ghost and his riders. She felt lost.

Kendle left the market, positive Rice would find her later with all the details. Right now, she needed to be somewhere quiet to get her plan straight.

Why? her demon inquired. *What worries you?*

How did they get Renda to consent? What did they give her?

Your life, I would guess.

Yeah, but when? Will she stick me right before the last match or get me after the first? I have to anticipate her attack or we'll be in chains. I didn't like them when Ethan did it. I doubt it would be more fun with Renda.

The demon immediately began working on the problem. Neither of them had thought they would survive Ethan Kraft. They couldn't be caged or chained again, bitten and bled. They would die first.

Kendle ignored the soothing mood of her demon's protective rage. She didn't need to relax. She needed to figure out a way to contact Angela without anyone knowing. That was infinitely harder than winning a few fights. Everywhere she'd gone today, she'd examined threatening signs warning about magic and magic users. This populace was aware that descendants walked among them, even if they didn't know where the power came from, and they recognized the threat. Kendle was grateful it had only gone that far. When they could recognize the magic users on sight, this land would be scoured for them. Safe Haven had to step in, but Kendle

couldn't wait until this was over. If she lost, she and the team would be sold and this market from hell would continue to spread. That couldn't be allowed to happen.

Kendle strode confidently toward Rice's residence, thinking about his brother, Baker, who'd been the decoy for the ambush. *You owe me, Doughboy. Time to pay up.*

Behind her, Bossy made a note in his book and followed.

3

"They made a final choice," Rice informed her as he entered the home. The market sentry outside had told him where to find her. "You'll get details in the morning."

"Good." Kendle stayed sitting in Rice's spot at the table.

His brother, face swelled and painful to look at, rose and exited through another door that connected them to the upstairs hallway.

"What was that?" Rice pouted when she didn't give him his seat.

"He didn't think I should be fed," Kendle lied, using her last chunk of bread to sop up the chili juice and remaining chunks of beef. "Also doesn't want me to sleep here. Didn't care for our deal."

Rice frowned. "I'll talk to him."

Kendle shrugged, swallowing. She let out a loud belch. “You can stand watch over me until an hour before the market gates shut for the night.”

“You could get protection now.” He didn’t want the duty. “The masters will protect their investment.”

“No.” Kendle stood up. “Your presence while I sleep is already too much.” She went toward the closet where she’d slept before. “Don’t wake me late, but don’t come in here at all or you won’t make it out.” She slammed the door before he could form a response.

Kendle collapsed as soon as she hit the thinly carpeted floor, falling into a deep sleep. It was dreamless this time as her body prepared for the challenge she’d set.

4

Knock-knock-knock!

It felt like she had just gotten comfortable, but Kendle forced herself up as the knocking sounded again. “I’ve got it!”

The footsteps faded.

Kendle checked her watch to verify she had an hour. She glanced around and found nothing in the filthy, cluttered bedroom that she could use. Her supplies were almost gone, but she had more deals to make if the merchants were willing. It would depend on how the word was spreading. If citizens were getting excited, she might have good odds that

would increase her value and her dealing power. If folks were still as bored as they'd been on her tour, she might have to steal what she needed. Around here, it was expected and that would make it harder.

Kendle began doing jumping jacks. She would do a warmup here and then run around the main grounds of the market until it closed. The demonstration and exercise would help clear her mind and help her with the matches.

“Ms. Roberts?”

Kendle froze in pain and surprise. *They recognized me. Does that change anything?* “Yes?”

“I have food and some basic supplies for you. Iram sent them as a good faith gesture.”

“To increase the final bill, you mean.” Kendle opened the door and stepped back for Rice to carry the two small totes in.

He set them on the dresser and quickly left, not getting any closer to her than he had to.

“Can I donate things to slaves or individuals in collateral rooms?”

“Yes.” Rice stopped in surprise. “That way the bill doesn't grow larger. My family and I send half our daily rations.”

“Who is it? Friends? In-laws?”

Rice winced, telling her she'd guessed correctly.

“It's good of you to care for them anyway.” She tried to show him she respected people who did the right thing when it was hard.

“It was my wife’s family. They were visiting for the holiday.”

“Your wife?”

“She died. I had to bury her. They’ll do it for free if you burn or donate the body, but I couldn’t do that.”

“Sounds like an expensive burial.” Kendle put aside her plans of a workout in favor of a crazy scheme.

“I could have afforded it, but her father blames me for her death. He made a deal with the masters that I can’t match.”

“Who are they waiting on?” Kendle picked up the totes.

“My wife’s youngest brother. He was a soldier.”

“What was the deal for?”

“The bids are sealed. They aren’t allowed to tell me until the boy returns or their time runs out, but I believe it’s a weapon or a load of them.”

“How much time do they have?”

“Ten days, as of dawn.”

“Will you try to buy them?”

“Of course. It’s why I was happy our family was chosen this month. I almost have enough to make an offer.”

“Will it be enough to save all of them?”

Rice sighed, “I may have to choose some of them. I’m going to take the kids. They can work longer hours than the elderly adults.”

Kendle almost choked on her rage. She paused in the doorway, aware of his remaining family

watching them from the stairs. “Do I owe you anything beyond our deal?”

“No...”

“Then stay away from me unless it’s important or I’ll break your neck.” Kendle left him standing there in humiliation. She gestured cheerfully to the guard who wasn’t trying to hide himself or his amusement. “Let’s go.”

Kendle strolled toward the market, admiring the lanterns hung on old telephone poles and street posts. “Do you protect the slaves too?”

The sentry didn’t answer.

Kendle didn’t try again. She went to the gate.

It opened before she got there; the troops on it appeared relieved.

Kendle assumed the masters were worried she might skip town now that a deal had been made. “Tell them I’m back. Especially Renda.”

“Give ‘em hell, Ms. Roberts,” the black sentry muttered so that only she and his partner heard.

Kendle didn’t respond in case they weren’t allowed to show support. She didn’t know the rules on that yet. In fact, she was making most of this up as she went along. She thought Angela would applaud the effort, if not the plans themselves, and not be pissed enough to fry her on the spot. She was walking a thin line there. Screwing up this easy run might be enough to get her removed.

Do you really feel that way about Safe Haven after being here? the demon asked in surprise.

Kendle sighed. *No. Be quiet.*

The demon settled into a dark corner.

Kendle decided to use every advantage that she had. *What else should I do?*

I can help? The demon perked up eagerly. *I can, you know.*

Kendle said hello to the people passing her who stopped to stare and murmur. *Get it organized and lay it out for me when I settle in for the night. Too much attention right now.*

Pleased, the demon got to work.

Kendle went through the checkpoint in front of the market with the same ease as the first gate. As it clanged behind her, she couldn't help feeling like a prisoner. She was free to roam inside the walls, as far as she knew, but that wasn't freedom.

The market stalls were shutting down and closing shades, blocking windows with boards and thick locks as Kendle entered. Lights were going off and voices were fading. Hoping she didn't run into Renda, Kendle went to the slave wing first.

She stopped at the common section Rice had shown her earlier, holding out the totes. "I brought supplies for my collateral."

An Iranian guard waved her in, flashing thumbs up.

Storing it, Kendle still didn't respond to the unexpected support of the troops.

The table in the center of the common zone held Conner and an older man Kendle instantly knew was the father-in-law who hated Rice. It was in his glare as he spotted Kendle.

“I don’t want any more food from him!”

Kendle slammed the totes onto the rickety table between him and Conner. “Then take it from my boy, ‘cause I brought it for him.” She looked at Conner, seeing he was relaxed enough to be sleepy. “Watch your six.”

The teenager nodded, no longer unhappy about being put in here. He was gathering information, something Kendle needed. “Word spread about you getting the best of Renda. The soldiers are watching my six for you.”

“Why?”

“They hate her, I assume.” Conner yawned.

“Get some sleep.” Kendle ignored the hopeful glances from the bunks. The three women and two children were filthy and thin. “But feed them before you crash.”

“I will.” Conner took the totes to the kids. “Here. Smells like fresh bread.”

Kendle exited the zone, this time giving the sentry a short smile of gratitude.

Fighting the urge to check on her team, Kendle took the stairs at the corner, climbing to the top floor. She wasn’t surprised that Yuri was pacing the hall outside the room he’d given her.

“Thank goodness!” He rushed toward her.

Kendle tolerated his patting and groveling warnings not to be caught around the slaves. She went in, seeing he had replaced the blanket with a thicker quilt that didn’t have holes.

“We can’t have you falling ill, now can we?” He chuckled.

Another addition to the tab, Kendle was still glad of it. She’d left her kit with Conner. It held her spare weapon and some ammo, but not much else. This blanket would allow her a good night’s sleep, providing she blocked the door.

Yuri waved toward the small square. “You have no partner. All yours!”

Kendle noted the book on the table. “Thanks.” She would check out the title once he was gone.

“I have also brought you food and water.” Yuri pointed. “It is in a box under the bed. Do not leave it out or the mice will be into it.”

“Thanks.” Kendle tried not to think about how big the bill would be by the time she left. “Anything else?”

Understanding she wanted to be alone, Yuri went toward the door. “They may ask for a demonstration. Eat, sleep, drink. Be ready.”

Kendle turned a hard stare on the short Russian. “I’ve got it covered.”

Yuri bobbed his head obediently. “Good, good. I will leave you now. Notify a guard if you need me and I will be at your—”

Kendle kicked the door shut in his face. “I almost like him.”

Kendle woke to the sound of a market in full swing. She glanced at her watch to discover it was nearly noon. She had forgotten to set her alarm and no one had woken her.

She leapt from the soft bed, grabbing clothes and boots. It only took a couple of minutes to dress and gather her things, but she felt the time crunch as if it were hours. Why hadn't they sent for her? Was her plan already toast?

Kendle calmed herself before going out, not sure what to expect. It certainly wasn't to see Yuri perched at a new camouflage security post right across from her. The smell of paint was thick.

"What happened?"

Yuri held out a paper, grinning hugely. "We made the choice. There was no need to contact you for further details. The sleep was more beneficial."

"My team and my boy?" She saw there was a place at the bottom of the paper for her signature.

"All being cared for. I believe Renda ordered pizza for lunch."

"The most expensive item on the downstairs menu?"

"Yes."

Remembering that it was standard procedure here, Kendle kept reading. "Series of fights...help with advertising...share of profits once the bill for my team and gear is paid..." Kendle choked on the next line. "A week from now?"

"There must be time for citizens to come and for the market to prepare. It will not be sooner."

Kendle swallowed the bile in her throat. She'd estimated a day or two of bills. Instead, she would have more than a week, counting the time she'd already spent. Then there was the time the fights took. Kendle skimmed for details. "One fight each night equals two slaves if the tickets sell out. If they sell over half, it's worth one man. Under half gains only gear." Kendle went back into her den, once again kicking the door shut. She needed to study this and she needed to do it now.

When Kendle emerged again an hour later, Yuri was still at the table. She slid the paper in front of him, where her signature glared in bold print. "I agree. To all of it, but I don't know if I can wait a full week before I kill her. Tell them to schedule her as my first match."

Yuri chuckled. "The masters set the schedule, my brave new friend. Renda will be the last one you battle. She is the best fighter here."

"Not anymore." Kendle grinned, letting her lust for blood come through. "Bet hard, Yuri. You'll be rich when this is done."

Yuri patted her hand. "I already am, my friend. I already am."

"Then why live here?" Kendle stopped, hoping he would tell her.

"Why not?" He turned toward the stairs to deliver her signed paper to the masters. "It's not like I have better places to be now."

Kendle could have argued, but didn't. She returned to her cubby to contemplate the deal that would either save her team or cost all their lives. She had to figure out how she was going to win every fight without using her gifts, when even the Indians had given up on teaching her proper techniques. She'd been unable to control her rage long enough to learn.

Kendle sighed, sinking down on the squeaky mattress. "I can't fight. Other plans will have to be made."

Chapter Eight
To Bluff Or Not

October 1st

1

Marc watched the convoy of Army jeeps and trucks roll toward them, pretending he still needed the binoculars to keep his guys from knowing how strong his gifts were. He had everyone in his mental grid, detecting with crystal clarity—right down to the power that some of the enemy had. It was amazing. It was also isolating. He now had a better idea of how Angie had spent her life.

Marc narrowed in on the three jeeps in the lead, noting the cold postures of the riders and drivers. They hadn't come dressed for the hard, packed snowbanks that their jeeps were crunching through to reach the isolated road that would bring them to the meeting place. Winter was in full force. Shouldn't people from the north be better prepared for the cold?

What about weapons? Marc narrowed his grid further, spotting rifles and machine guns, along with two grenade launchers. It was much the same firepower that he had brought. Physically, they were about evenly matched with guns and men. They'd both brought three dozen of their best fighters, but

their gifts were bright bulbs on his grid as they rolled closer. It seemed as if they planned to rely on that magic, because the rest of their gear was light. If they had brought more, it was still on the train.

We did not think it was needed.

The woman's cultured voice in Marc's mind was a violation that freed his rage for an instant. Barriers slammed down with his fury, forcing the leader out. *How dare you!*

Marc angrily motioned his team to fall in and led them down the hill to meet the strangers. As he walked, Marc brought up his strongest mental wall. So far, only Angie and Jennifer had been able to get—

May I apologize?

Marc swallowed annoyed concern as the woman broke through with no effort. *No.*

He stepped into view, not expecting the movie star type who stood in front of her vehicle. The female was tall, red, and beautiful, dressed in a white gown that proclaimed she was attending a party. Under the elegance, evil flowed from her as strong as power. *She's too much for me. She'll figure out where I've hidden—*

“I felt her already.” Sonja scanned the powerless humans on Marc's team first. “It would be a small matter to sniff out her hiding place.”

“Why haven't you?” He wondered if the woman had sent out another group to grab Angela during this meeting.

“I have no reason to betray or use deceit.” Sonja turned hard eyes on him. “I have more power than you. I can force you to bring her in or hold you until she comes in on her own.”

Eagles stepped closer to Marc as the cloudy sky darkened further.

Needing to regain control, Marc grunted. “Let’s start with introductions.”

“I am Sonja. You are Marcus Brady.”

The female was quickly surrounded by her powerful defenders as Marc and the Eagles stopped in front of her, causing more concern. Marc had been right to put Angie with Adrian. Big Jack hadn’t been able to locate Adrian at first, either. It would buy them time.

“He was nothing compared to me,” the coiffed woman explained smugly.

Marc was positive that was true. He locked down on his thoughts as if he were going into battle. In a way, he was. This would be a fight for Angie’s life.

“Yes.” Sonja stared intently, digging into him. “But not just *her* future. We will consume Safe Haven if she is found guilty. An evil ruler begets evil peasants.”

Directly threatened, Marc’s team drew weapons.

“Stop!” Marc gestured when Kyle went forward to try disarming the strangers.

“It’ll take more than you, killer,” Sonja taunted.

That brought Jennifer forward. The teenager moved between them, orbs glowing a crimson warning. “Will I do?”

Much as Adrian often had, Marc waited to see where it would go. He was glad of the choice when doubt crossed Sonja’s painted features.

“Chauncey failed to mention that you have an Enforcer.”

Jennifer didn’t reply. She was instinctively burrowing through the woman’s darkness for a way to kill her.

Sonja fought to keep those secrets, suddenly scared. It had been a long time since she’d felt that upon a mental battle. What would this child be like if she were told to dive all the way to the bottom? *I’m not sure I can keep her out.*

You can’t. Jennifer smiled cheerfully. *There’s no way to stop me.*

Desperate now, Sonja drew her gun and pointed it at Kyle.

Jennifer reluctantly stopped as Marc and the Eagles lifted their guns in response. She’d detected enough to know these people were worse than bad news. “He won’t always be in the crossfire!”

Sonja revealed her frustration at Jennifer’s strength, glowering resentfully. “But you will.”

Jennifer was fine with having that target on her shoulders. She flashed a challenging sneer. “Just remember to ambush me, lady. You slow down with age.”

Marc laughed as Sonja flushed an ugly red that made her seem like an overdressed clown.

“You little bitch!”

Jennifer leaned against Kyle’s tense body, letting the Donner adventures be read by Sonja’s shields. “I’m much more than that. Welcome to the end of your leadership. This is where you lost control, when you have that moment later of wondering how it happened.”

Sonja recovered, chuckling as she holstered. “You are all alone, Enforcer. The only one who may have helped you has two gunshot wounds and no will to fight. Be careful of the threats.”

Jennifer didn’t reply.

When Jennifer shut her mind off with an impenetrable barrier, Sonja began to suspect there might be others like her, other power they hadn’t been warned about and could be surprised by in battle. She would have to find out. There hadn’t been an Enforcer in generations. It had to mean something.

Marc motioned to the small strip mall they had cleared and secured. He and the Eagles had spent the last three days in the upstairs levels when they weren’t working outside, getting it ready. Marc prayed they didn’t have to use it. The few traps there would never be enough. “We have tables set up in the library. After you.”

Sonja and half her group went toward the small library in front of the mall while the rest remained around their vehicles. Those closest to Sonja were

females who continuously scanned everyone, including their own, for trouble. Marc could feel their mental sweeps as the group went in.

Jennifer stayed on Marc's heels without being given orders. He might need her.

Marc didn't protest, despite assigning her to vehicle duty earlier. She was right, he might.

Kyle also didn't argue, though it was hard. He was clearly a weakness in this situation. The feeling sucked.

2

"Get up!" Angela slapped at Adrian's arm. "We have to go."

Adrian snapped awake, automatically glancing at his alarms and then the monitor. "What happened?" He realized the threat wasn't here. "Is it Safe Haven?"

Angela limped by him, tossing her kit over her arm. There was no way she could sling it over a shoulder and not fall down.

Adrian felt her waves of pain as he hurried to place himself between her and the door.

Angela allowed it because she needed a minute to breathe through the agony. Adrian's energy had helped her a great deal, but the witch had only used some of it to heal her. The rest had been stored for this moment.

"Tell me what happened."

Angela linked their minds, letting Adrian share the vision she'd had.

"Damn." Adrian gently brushed by her. "You're right. We have to go."

Angela waited for him to bring the bike around, inwardly wincing at the doctor's reaction when he discovered her adventures.

Adrian was aware of the problem. He used the plan he'd developed for a quick escape. He shot a bolt of blue light at her, enjoying her gasp of pleasure. It was all the energy he had left.

"I detest you."

"Yeah, yeah." Adrian sighed. "Get on."

Already shivering from the wind and cold, Angela centered herself carefully behind Adrian, both loving and hating the feel of his comforting body against hers.

"Deal with it! If she bluffs him, none of our plans will succeed."

Angela molded herself to his big body, arms coming up to hold his chest instead of his waist. It allowed her to get closer, to give him more balance on the bike, and to put his heart under her hands.

Adrian kicked the bike to life and took off toward the meeting place. As he rolled them along at ugly speeds, he gave terse instructions. *I'm your protection. Do not get out of my reach.*

Then stay on my heels, like a dog.

I will, so be prepared for it. Adrian was aware of her attempts to push him away with hostility, but it wouldn't work.

Angela let Adrian ramble, only occasionally responding. It amazed her to be underestimated. Adrian thought this was a surprise, that she didn't know how to handle someone threatening Marc or the herd by now. They should all know better. When either of those cherished things were in danger, she had no limits, something these new people were about to discover. Mercy was for the weak and the dead.

The witch, a bit intimidated, subtly retreated into her cell and got comfortable, eager for the show. It was a sign of life—a rarity in her host's mind now. Adrian and Marc would both be horrified if they knew how deep Angela had gone, but the witch was pleased. She and her host were now bonded in ways that she and the males running through her life would never be. The witch was irreplaceable and content in that knowledge.

3

“Where do you wish to begin?” Sonja settled into the chair across the wide desk from Marc. “Shall we discuss Tara or Donner?”

Marc motioned Jennifer forward. “She was there with Donner.”

Sonja frowned. “I can't scan her. Convenient.”

“You can if she lets you in.” Marc's words drew scowls from Jennifer and the new people. “What?”

“That requires trust, as it allows too much free roaming.” Sonja motioned to a female near her. “Evie will view the scene and pass it to me.”

Marc and everyone else understood that Sonja had secrets to keep. The seats around the square that Marc had put the tables in were filled with descendants from the train. Marc had placed the Eagles in the rear of the library, near the exits as a precaution. He wanted them to be able to get out since they were defenseless against this threat. To counter it, Sonja had placed her remaining defenders along the doors and walls also, daring Marc to deny them that right. Marc hadn't bothered. He wasn't trying to trap them.

Jennifer and Evie stared at each other for long moments where the rest of the strange group held perfectly still, as if listening. Marc was aware of fidgeting Eagles, but he didn't scold them for it. He was assuming the strangers were probing their minds for details and evidence, but they would discover what he'd been saying all along. Safe Haven had defended itself and others. They were in the right.

“That remains to be seen,” Sonja argued without malice.

Evie turned to her mistress and the waiting began again.

Jennifer flashed Marc a hand gesture. *Unstable.*

Marc wasn't sure exactly what she meant, but if it was this situation, he agreed. All these mind readers being here would stop plots from being a

surprise, however. Marc was almost grateful for it. No one could trigger an ambush or attack without everyone knowing. It might make this talk easier.

“I had hoped so.” Sonja was now finished viewing the moment of Donner’s death and then Tara’s. Jennifer had sent the images she’d picked from Angela’s mind after she had been brought down the mountain.

“However, the question remains. Why were they killed? Because of our plans to enslave humans? Who is Safe Haven to command and expect us to obey?”

“Then you agree that humans should be slaves?” Marc clarified coldly, bringing down his shield again in preparation. They would lose, but Sonja would die in the fight.

“Of course.” Sonja didn’t react to Marc’s sudden withdrawal. He’d been allowing her brief sweeps since they sat down, trying to show her Jayson’s betrayal. “The natural order puts us above them. Human populations must be regulated, much like we did before the war with the animals.”

Marc leaned forward. “This is America. Slavery will never be allowed here! I suggest you pick another country if you want your settlement to be that way.”

Marc’s menacing behavior was met with calm consideration, another bad sign. He’d been hoping for rash behavior.

“Perhaps Safe Haven should stop trying to police the world. Beating the government was

indeed a feat, but you've met your match in us, my young friend. Don't spill all that blood for a myth. It isn't worth it."

"You don't belong here." Marc was getting angry. "America meant freedom at one time and it will again, when people like you are gone. We won't have to remove your town, just you. The rest of them will be glad you're dead. No one wants slavery."

"My subjects are adapting to all the changes, the same as yours are," Sonja corrected. "They don't like these fights, but when we settle in for the winter with help, they'll be grateful that I insisted." She smiled at Marc, sending a wave of obedience toward him. "Besides, if they didn't like it, I wouldn't be their ruler and we wouldn't have slaves."

"With every word, you mock what we stand for." Marc needed time to regroup and form another plan. He hadn't expected a confession. "You have three days to get on your trains and get gone. If you don't, the council will meet to determine if action is to be taken against you."

Sonja laughed, to everyone's surprise. "Good! Now you are where I am over my sister. You know just enough to be certain that you don't like these strange new people, with their strange, obscene ways, but justice must be served."

"You have three days." Marc stood up and moved toward the exit.

"I demand to know what happened!"

“She tried to kill me.” Angela limped into the meeting. Adrian’s hand on her arm brought frowns from the Eagles and delight into the faces of Sonja’s subjects.

Before Sonja could say anything, Angela lifted a bandaged arm; every door and window in the library slammed shut. Flames shot up to block the exits, making descendants scream in panic. Descendants hated fire more than anything else. Angela knew that for a fact as she let the flames walk along both palms.

Pillars caught the flames, sending the heat upward to a ceiling that immediately absorbed the warmth and spread it across the room like a plague. Wreaths on the wall burst, popping. Hot plastic shrapnel pelted the descendants and humans.

Supporting her now with both arms, Adrian was impressed and proud, knowing he’d helped her conquer her fear of fire. The flames were a shield that she could now use to deflect almost anything.

“*Stand and be judged,*” Angela’s witch intoned, glowing red orbs pinning Evie in place. “*Tell the truth and set Safe Haven free.*”

Evie turned to her boss, cheeks devoid of color. She wet her lips, knowing if she didn’t say it, Angela would. “I gave Tara the idea. I’m able to hide it from you and everyone...almost everyone, because I take drugs to keep my mind foggy.”

“You appear stupid and I take you at face value.” Sonja wasn’t scared of the flames in the same way that her fighters were.

Angela clapped her hands, grinning, but it was the centuries old witch who glared out insanely through her eyes. *“You have traitors and thieves among you. Malicious betrayals have been planned. You are warned.”*

Sonja waved at her subjects to settle down. Now that she was getting a glimpse of Angela’s powers, Sonja wouldn’t be fighting today. She couldn’t hope to win.

Soothed, Angela slowly brought the fire back in.

As the flames vanished, Marc was able to see how pale she was and how much Adrian was supporting her. How could she do that just days after losing their baby? *What is she?*

“I have the same query,” Sonja confided in a low murmur as Angela moved toward them.

Everyone fled her path, including a few of her own men. Marc marked the rookie men not to be brought along again for moments that involved descendants or magic.

“Why do you hide these things from your...herd?” Sonja tried not to show her nervousness as Angela neared the table.

“Because we’re the abominations, not them.” Angela took the seat by Marc. She leaned against his shoulder in search of comfort. She was exhausted again, but there was enough healthy energy in here to resupply her a few times over if things went sour.

“You’re corrupt!” Sonja’s eyes widened. “You’ve taken lifeforces!”

“I also have a list of those who need to be consumed next.” Angela glared. “If you insist on keeping slaves in America, you’ll rise to the top for me and frankly, Sonja, I’d rather do it now if it’s going to happen.”

Weapons came out; shields flashed into view as Sonja tensed.

Marc’s hand dropped to the table to lift it up as a shield for Angela.

“Easy...” Angela straightened as Adrian came to place a hand on her shoulder to drag her down when Marc lifted the table. “You were given three days to leave our area. Not only will I honor that, I’ll agree to a bartering meeting twice a year if you like. In return, all slaves will be freed and no new slaves will be taken.”

Marc sneered at Sonja’s sullen expression. *Not so disrespectful now, are you?*

Sonja nearly growled at him, but she didn’t with Angela just waiting for a reason to engulf the place in flames. Sonja wanted to believe Angela wouldn’t fry her own people that way, but she wasn’t positive. The open corruption flashing in Angela’s mind said she had little conscience left. It was a lot like peering into Tara, who had also been fearless and merciless. Combine it with powers that Sonja couldn’t identify behind their oddly marked doors and it meant she had no choice but to consent.

“It’s the follow through that I’m concerned with.” Angela sighed tiredly. “It’s easy to say you will or won’t do it, but how will I know?”

“We’ll leave!” Sonja blurted angrily. “We’ll go north again.”

Angela nodded, shoulders relaxing, a polite smile coming over her pale face. “Exactly what I wanted to hear. Take a month; move slowly and carefully so you don’t endanger those slaves. Rumors of mistreatment will earn you a hunting party.”

Sonja tried to shrug it off, but the threat had been felt. Angela didn’t like her at all. The feeling was mutual.

“Good.” Angela gestured. “I’m hungry. Someone feed me.”

Angela acting like a dictator was perfect for the train populace, but Marc realized her power demonstration had caused fear among almost all of their new men. It was in their strained expressions and jerky movements.

“I’m sorry for that.” Angela let Marc gently help her to her feet as Adrian cleared a path to the door and vanished. “I’ll try to make it up to them on the way home. I found a chocolate factory. Candy bars mean sex now. We all know that.”

Marc led her outside, where Eagles were already setting up the grill. “What about them?”

Angela sighed tiredly. “Feed ‘em, send ‘em on. I don’t care.”

“Do we have enough?” Marc didn’t want to waste their supplies on bad people.

“Their slaves are starving, Marc. I can sense it from here. Give them food so I don’t have to send the witch out. She already hates these people.”

Marc knew she wasn’t bluffing. He quickly got her settled in the front of his truck with a drink and a plate. Billy and Kyle took up guard places around the vehicle.

Sonja watched all of this in jealous concern as she and her group now waited nervously by their vehicles for permission to leave. It was a huge change from the arrogance they’d rolled in wearing. The jealousy wasn’t over Angela’s powers and her threats, or the promise she’d extracted with so little effort. It was in how Angela’s subjects cared for her, even when scared. They didn’t fear for their lives. They feared for *hers*. It was humbling and infuriating to witness the treatment Sonja had always longed for.

Marc steeled himself, trying to act like a leader and not gloat. “We have herds and gardens. We give to the refugees. We drop supplies in old campsites for those who come after us. We share. We compromise. And we get along.”

“Or your mate kills everyone?”

“Yes.”

Sonja waited for the offer, certain she had to accept it. The risk of offending Angela was too great.

“She actually prefers that you leave.” Jennifer was still hovering near Marc. She wasn’t above gloating. “So do I.”

Sonja bristled, but she did want the food. Angela’s soldiers were firing up grills and taking chunks of meat from coolers. Her own people were always on rations. A full hamburger or steak hadn’t happened since the war.

Marc motioned toward the small picnic site by the library. “We’re taking over that area to get our people fed. I’d like you to keep your people in line, but they can mingle without worry. We have nothing to hide.”

Sonja already knew that. “No need with a ruler that powerful.”

“Exactly.” Marc swallowed his anger at their odd ways, settling into the leader his old fire team would have recognized. “Two rules. You stop any fights. You don’t plot. Those two things will draw Angie’s wrath.” Marc leaned forward a bit. “She won’t stop this time. We’ll all die.”

Not sure if Marc was bluffing, Sonja said nothing.

Marc shrugged. “Just a friendly warning. She’s ill. She’s hurting. She lost something very precious to both of us. Don’t screw up here. She won’t give you another warning.”

“We will eat with you and discuss things.” Sonja had realized her mistake as soon as Angela touched the Ghost. She had threatened Angela’s mate. Sonja wouldn’t risk offending the male again

by refusing the meal, even if she weren't secretly drooling over the smell of cooking meat.

Marc motioned toward the picnic area. "Consider yourselves our honored guests."

Sonja went that way, not digging into Angela's thoughts. She also wasn't scanning anyone else around here, but the other new descendants were doing both.

Angela wasn't concerned. None of these here were strong enough to pry into her crypt, and even if they were, they wouldn't detect much beyond rancid meat. That's all she was now, deep inside—a wild dog that needed to be put down.

4

A short time later, Adrian settled into his chair in the cave, annoyed with the distance. He couldn't stay with Angela and risk her plan being revealed through his weak mental shield. They had to hope no one would notice that he had disappeared. If someone commented on it, the instant hostile responses from the Eagles over his banishment should cover things.

Adrian switched on the monitor and adjusted the channel to pick up the new camera he'd just placed. Angela hadn't told him to, but he couldn't be away and wait patiently like a good dog. If things went crazy, he would return for her. Two miles on his bike went by fast.

Adrian was relieved to find both groups enjoying a meal together without obvious trouble when the static cleared, though Billy and Jax did seem to be exchanging glares. Everyone was still tense, but there were conversations taking place, so that was encouraging. Adrian peered at the background, where Eagles were helping Sonja's men load coolers of meat and boxes of supplies. They were almost finished.

Adrian searched for Jennifer and found the teenager still haunting Sonja's every move. Adrian grinned. When Jennifer took over Safe Haven, peace would rule with her. Citizens would be as scared to act up under her as they were under Angela. Grief would drive Jennifer into being a strong leader.

On the screen, Marc stood up, causing people to turn his way. Adrian could almost imagine the silence, the expectation and suspicion in equal amounts. Marc had to be nervous.

Whatever he said was met with laughter and cheers, judging from reactions. Adrian moved toward the fire he'd left burning, not needing to witness Marc's good moment. The man would have a lot of those, hopefully. His time leading Safe Haven would only be short because Marc didn't want the job. To be good in that position, the person had to be slightly obsessed with it, but the only thing Marc felt that way over was currently snoozing in his truck under a heavy guard. The let down from using that much energy was like the crash of a drug.

She would need food and sleep when Marc brought her in.

Adrian spent a few minutes considering what he wanted to do, then he got up and got busy. Watching the screen without being able to hear the conversations was maddening anyway. The next run like this would include a microphone.

5

“Angie?” Marc tapped lightly on the window. “We’re ready to roll.”

Angela groggily fumbled for the lock button to let him in. She’d followed his instructions.

Marc tried to smile at her. She looked rough. “You did well.”

Angela leaned against the seat, not feeling much physically or emotionally. Everything was blurry.

Marc climbed into the driver’s seat as her guards went to their vehicles. After Angela’s show of force, the meal had been peaceful. The new descendants had eaten three times as much as the Eagles.

“Good,” Angela murmured.

There’s a flash of soul, Marc judged. She’s glad they’re getting a great meal, and that their people won’t starve this week.

Angela turned away. She had a few more miles before they would be out of Sonja’s range. Not that the train boss was scanning them. Sonja and her

convoy were hightailing it back to their train as fast as they could. Sonja was scared for her life.

She should be, Jennifer sent. *I want to go after her.*

Angela pretended to consider it, aware of Sonja's stronger defenders still trying to listen. *We made a deal. How would you justify that?*

She is a dangerous threat. She needs to be removed.

I agree, but we cannot kill them all. Let her be. If she sticks to her word, so will I. Unable to take more of this farce, Angela dropped her shields and let the grayness claim her again. In here, her mind was protected by the fog.

Marc approved the choice. Sonja might not be scanning Angela, but he was. Sonja didn't know her the way that he did.

Let her be! Jennifer snapped, causing Marc to flinch at the accompanying sting. *She needs peace. Another argument about your lost child will NOT help.*

Marc locked down on a nasty reply. Jennifer was right. It was done. There was no going back, and accusations would make things worse.

Angela sighed in relief, glad for the comfort of the fog, but even more grateful for Jennifer's loyalty. She didn't know if the teen was playing a perfect role or if her timing was just great, but it allowed Angela to sink the rest of the way into the darkness to sleep.

Marc slowly shifted so that her head lolled against his shoulder and stayed there, supported. “I’ve got you. I always will, even when I don’t agree with you.”

Marc turned on the heat and drove toward the cave. A few hours with Adrian had already healed more of her physical injuries and brought part of her back mentally. A day or two more should do a lot and then he could hand this heavy burden back over to the one who was meant to carry it.

6

“You can’t go to Safe Haven yet.”

Marc put the truck in park, frowning at Angie’s words. He’d thought she was still asleep as they approached the town at the bottom of Safe Haven Mountain.

Angela didn’t move. “I had these plans running before everything happened, Marc. Please keep that in mind.”

Before he could question, Adrian came out of the cave, gesturing.

Seeing Angela wasn’t paying attention, Marc translated. “They went straight to the train. The coolers are being unloaded. It won’t be long.”

Marc turned to Angie, angry. “What did you do?”

“I handled the problem.” She opened the door of the truck herself instead of waiting for someone to do it for her.

Adrian was there to catch her when she stumbled in pain. “Sorry.” Adrian scooped her up and took her inside under angry mutters and glowers. Some of those men would never forgive him. His disapproval rating would always be double digits.

Adrian settled her on the sleeping bag he’d placed on a stack of cushions and pillows from nearby homes. It would hold her for a day or two. He quickly retreated to the ledge with his mess kit as Marc and three Eagles came into the cave.

Angela pushed herself into a sitting position, unable to conceal the pain as she moved. Her body would take a long time to finish healing.

Adrian dipped out a bowl of hot stew, shoving a spoon into it. He completed the meal with a tumbler of powdered milk and hurried to serve her.

Marc watched without comment. He assumed the urgency was due to the energy Angela had used to produce and control the fire.

“Some of it.” Adrian was careful not to touch her again. “The crash hasn’t really come yet. She’ll sleep for most of a day after this. We have to get a meal into her first.”

Angela forced herself to pick at the stew. She had one more secret to get rid of, one more horror to reveal, and then she could sleep all she wanted.

Jennifer entered the cave, going straight to Angela in support. She sent a clear glower around the cave, implying she wouldn’t tolerate Angela getting upset.

Adrian was grateful. When Marc found out this last mission, he would want to scream, but Angie didn't need that right now.

"Tell me." Marc sank down in the chair that still held a blanket with Angela's loose hair on it.

Angela sighed. "Are we clear?"

Jennifer nodded. "Yes. I can barely reach them from here. They aren't on us now."

"I lied to Sonja." Angela gestured. "Show him."

Adrian switched the channel on the monitor.

Marc stared at the trains in surprise. "We have a camera up?"

"She had me do it first." Adrian adjusted again, trying for a slightly less fuzzy image. On the screen, dozens of people were cooking, eating, cleaning themselves, and walking around. It seemed like a grateful group of survivors enjoying a moment without chaos.

Angela set her bowl down. She couldn't eat while they watched this or she would toss it right back up. Bracing, she waited for the ugliness with another part of her soul dying.

Marc studied the images. "How do you know she's going to attack?"

"She didn't ask for those tradeoff lessons, did she?"

"What?"

"The camping and solar knowledge she schmoozed you with upon first contact." Angela sighed tiredly. "She never brought it up."

Marc frowned. “We didn’t ask for the rail information either.”

Adrian nodded. Both sides had known that the other was lying. The ending could have been much worse.

“What are we waiting for?” Marc asked a bit later. Most of the people on the screen had finished eating and walking, and were now in the train, out of view.

“Five more minutes,” Angela predicted gravely.

Marc heard the awful pain in her words and tried to get ready for it. Whatever this was, Adrian and Jennifer were both refusing to even think about it to give him a clue. Apparently, Angela wanted him blindsided.

“If you had known, you would have talked me out of it.” Angela started crying again. “But it had no good endings for Safe Haven. I hope you’ll believe that.”

“I already know that’s true...” Marc suddenly guessed what she’d done as the clues came together. When he got over the surprise and then the revulsion, Marc asked the biggest question on his list. “Will it get them all?”

Adrian answered for her, tone grim “Three full trains have now eaten. It cuts them by more than two thirds.”

Marc couldn’t find an error with those numbers, or the secrecy. After witnessing Sonja’s amazing ability to read him over so much distance, Marc

understood the need to keep this from him. What he hated was the deaths. Again, not all of those people were bad.

“No.” Angela wiped away fresh tears. “And many of the slaves will clean up the scraps from their owners and also perish.”

“Wow.” Marc had been through this too many times to get enraged. “I thought you were wishing them well.”

“I was.” Angela met his sarcasm with ugly bitterness. “I fed them a last meal, didn’t I?”

Everyone winced, including Adrian.

Marc turned to shout at the former leader, but he was drawn to the screen, where the poisoned meat was finally taking effect. The scene was gruesome. *She’s never coming back. No one could come back after doing this.*

Behind him, Angela’s last hope went out.

Chapter Nine

Keep It Down

1

“**W**hat happens now?” Marc was still watching bodies fall. “If they attack, will we win?”

“We aren’t going to give them time,” Jennifer answered, proving to Angela that the teen had known the full plan.

“They’ll dump the train of bodies for those jeeps and trucks.” Adrian drew his attention when Marc glowered at the girl. “Sonja’s town will fall without her using her ability to hold them there. No more threat of descendants, no chances of American slavery.”

“Sounds easy,” Marc stated with only a little rancor. He hated the choice, but Angela had made this plan before he had been passed leadership. She was following through.

“Yes.” She shuddered. “I’m in no shape to do anything more.”

“We’ll take care of it.” Marc heard the exhaustion, the unbearable guilt that she was adding to her shoulders for this. As much as Marc wanted to say she was right to feel that way, he couldn’t. Sonja had been dangerous.

“Thank you for understanding.” Angela’s energy was fading fast. “Need to sleep. Make the call.”

“I’ve got it covered, Baby.” Ignoring the anger at his endearment, Adrian motioned toward the bedroll. “Get her to eat. If she doesn’t, she’ll wake up throwing up.”

Marc glared. “She ate at the library.”

“She ditched it as soon as you turned your back.” Adrian tuned in the radio. “She was afraid it would make her think about what was in the coolers.”

“Asshole,” Angela muttered.

“Get her to eat,” Adrian repeated.

Jennifer and Marc both went that way.

Adrian hit the mike. “I have a message for Sonja. Did she survive?”

The cave of Eagles waited for a reply, all watching the monitors except for Marc, who was determinedly spooning small bites of the stew into Angie’s mouth. Jennifer was alternating drinks of milk and encouraging words when Angela’s hands went to her stomach in pain.

“This is Adrian Mitchel, contacting whatever snake is now leading those trains of dead. Someone had better answer!” Adrian was following Angela’s mental script. She was using the last of her energy for this.

“We are here, you evil bastards!” the radio spat. “We will make you pay for this treachery!”

Angela clasped Marc's wrist and sent out a final wave of angry heat that flared over everyone in burning waves of warning.

“Stop! Don't send the fire! We will go!”

Angela only let up when that surrender came, much to the discomfort of her own populace. Unfortunately, to capture all of the survivors, she'd had to send out a huge net that couldn't exclude her group. That heat had also been felt in Safe Haven.

“You have two hours to be gone. One day to be out of this state. One week to be out of this country. We're watching. Go now and go fast.”

Silence came for a moment, and then, “Should we leave our slaves?”

“Only if you want to get out alive.” Adrian let his own hatred bleed through in his tones. “Don't be late. Two hours, one day, and one week.”

“Copy.”

Adrian cut the radio to conserve the battery, glancing toward Angela for approval. Adrian's brows came together. She was already out, with the bowl still half full. He stood up. “Switch with me.”

Jennifer started to get up.

Marc waved her off. He took Adrian's seat at the monitor with a glower that spoke volumes. He hated all of this.

Adrian settled down next to Angela and took her hand.

The instant he touched her, Angela's eyes snapped open. “I told you to never touch me!”

Adrian grinned, scooping up a large bite. “Just have to motivate her.”

Marc snickered against his will, soothed by her response. The jealousy was a part of him, a part of their upbringing where he’d been the only one looking out for her, but he was trying to crush it. Where they were all going from here, the drama couldn’t tag along. Pitcairn Island didn’t have room for it.

“Coming in,” a familiar voice notified them from outside the cave. The veterinarian ducked through the blind. Surprise rolled over the Eagles.

Kyle moved forward. “How did you know we were here?!”

“Who do you think added the special coolers?” Chris went to Angela. He gazed at her with a clear adoration that drew notice from every male in the cave.

Finally! Jennifer had always known the vet was hinky. It was about time the others felt it too.

“You did well,” Angela praised between bites. Angela ignored the others to finish her last part in this mess. “We’re all set?”

The vet handed her a photo. It was of a minefield.

“Channel fifteen.” Chris gestured at Marc, a bit surprised the boy scout was here for this.

Marc switched to the new angle in pleasant surprise as he realized it was atop a tree that gave them a clear view of the road the surviving train people would have to take to travel north. His

elation faded as he realized the photo the vet handed around at Angela's direction wasn't far into the distance from the trains. "How did you get close enough to do this without them knowing?"

Chris beamed proudly. "I did it before they got here. It's been in place for two weeks. I took this picture right before I shoveled dirt over it."

"It's now had fourteen days to sit and re-blend with the rest of the road." Angela pushed away the last bite. "I'm done. Get off me."

Adrian ignored her request and adeptly shoved the last bite into her mouth. He scowled as she gagged. "Keep it down!"

Angela struggled to obey. It was hard.

Marc watched the tears stream down her cheeks, watched her recover herself and actually swallow the food. *I wouldn't have been able to do that to her*, he thought, remembering his weak gut moments. It had gotten better over the years, but not that much. He also wouldn't have been able to treat her that way.

"Good girl," Adrian praised as Jennifer handed her the milk to finish. "You can sleep now. We'll handle things."

Angela held up a very sore arm. "I want to be awake for it. I did it. I have to watch."

"I don't think you need to carry this one." Adrian refused to touch her for the energy blast she needed. "If you want it, you'll have to take it."

Angela inhaled with a brutal tug and then used some of the energy to blast Adrian against a wall of the cave. He crumbled at her feet, barely conscious.

“He won’t say that again.” Marc chuckled. He went back to studying the monitor.

Angela used the stolen energy to push herself up and join her mate at the radio. The food was trying to settle, but the stomach cramps were making it hard.

Feeling her discomfort, Marc reached out for her hand. As angry as he could be with her, as angry as he was right now, he still cared. That would never change.

“Same here.” Angela clasped his hand. They waited together to witness her latest atrocity.

Adrian slowly stood up, glad Marc was ready to offer comfort. She didn’t need to witness this.

I agree. Marc hoped to surprise Angela with their open line. *But I don’t want to be knocked out. You want to try again?*

Adrian smirked. “No.”

Angela ignored them. The fleeing train survivors weren’t staying together as she’d hoped they would. If too many of them reached the trap ahead of the others, there might still be survivors.

“Shh. It’s okay.” Chris was still gazing at Angela. He hadn’t glanced away from her once. “I placed a second area in case that happened.”

Right on time, Angela tracked as the vet’s mental walls collapsed under Marc’s scrutiny.

“You’re a descendant!”

“Not now.” Angela pulled his attention away from the vet. “Be ready.”

Marc saw the box next to the radio and realized he would be the one to spring the trap.

“Let the traitor do it.”

Marc stood up, wrapping an arm around Angela’s shoulders.

Shaking off the daze, Adrian ignored the lump on his skull to take over the controls. He fought not to smile.

Spotting his eagerness, Marc glared. “You’re loving this!”

The former leader picked up the box. “Eliminating our enemies? Yes. Why aren’t you?”

“Because I have a soul! Why don’t you?!”

“Because I wasn’t put here to be a saint or a boy scout,” Adrian stated calmly. “I’m here to ensure the survival of our people. There isn’t anything I won’t do for that goal. Let us know when you finally understand how that feels.”

Before Marc could send a scathing retort, Adrian hit the button and blew up the road.

Watching the carnage on the monitor was hard on all of them, even Adrian. Despite his bravado, he didn’t like doing this. Killing wasn’t the goal of a descendant; every time he did it or helped do it, he felt more alien to this world.

A small group from the train made it through the first explosions, only to be hit with the second barrage Adrian triggered as they watched the monitors. Nothing moved after that.

Angela slowly turned toward the warm cocoon of her chair and blanket. As she pulled the quilt up to hide the sobs, Adrian turned off the screen. “As far as I’ve seen, we never have to do that again. This is the one and only time that Safe Haven will ever have to condone mass murder.”

Unable to take that lie, Marc suddenly wanted to be back with the camp. “What else do we need to do?”

“Jeff’s new friend needs to be handled.” Jennifer reminded them of other issues that were waiting. “He said Sally can’t come in our gates, and I believe him.”

“What does she want?”

Jennifer shrugged. “To be alone with her animals. Jeff wants to hook her up with gear and supplies and send her on her way.”

Marc caught the tone. “What about you?”

“She should be eliminated.” The teenager sighed. “But Jeff said she saved their lives and they have to return the favor.”

“Angie will make the decision,” Marc passed the choice automatically. “Tell him she’ll—”

“No.”

Marc quickly rotated to confront Adrian. “You don’t get a say!”

Adrian glared back. “Angie is not in charge anymore. These are *your* choices. Handle them and let her heal.”

Feeling the scold, Marc scowled. “Who the hell do you think you are?!”

Adrian didn't answer. She needed a break and he was going to make sure that she got one. Without a respite, she wouldn't be able to get them across the ocean.

Marc relented, reading the thought. "Fine! When Dog's ready to be brought in, we'll swap out the gear and supplies, and send her on her way," Marc chose, talking to Jennifer. "But if you get a real sign of a problem, tell me and I'll handle it then."

"You got it."

Marc realized he was fully in Angela's place now. "What else?"

"The bodies. Poison meat isn't good for nature."

Marc sighed. Cleanup had to happen. "Okay... We'll burn it on our way to camp. What else?"

Adrian gave Kyle a pointed look.

Kyle, still furious with the man, flipped him the finger, but did as directed. "What we tell the camp, what loot we take, level of discussion among the ranks, and then notifying their town that Sonja and her army are gone."

Marc hadn't realized there were so many issues still waiting, but it was embarrassing that he'd forgotten about the town. "Do that one now. Does she have something scripted?"

Adrian held up a finger. "I've got it covered when you say the word."

"Word."

Amused, Adrian found the right channel on the radio that Kenn had made as powerful as anything

in camp. “This is Safe Haven refugee camp. Come in, Altoona, Pennsylvania.”

The response came quickly.

“This is Altoona. Where is Sonja?”

“Sonja is dead. I repeat: your tyrannical ruler is dead. Safe Haven has handled her and liberated your town. You are all free to go.”

“Is this some kind of bad joke?” the man on the other end asked suspiciously.

“I repeat, Sonja is dead. Everyone on the train is dead. We consider all the subjects of Pennsylvania to be innocent victims of her tyranny, including those in her hometown. Safe Haven is open to trade and regular communications if you so desire.”

“We’re going to confirm this before we do anything,” the voice replied stiffly. “Altoona, out.”

Adrian turned off the radio. “Have a wonderful evening, asshole.”

Marc sniggered. “Nice. She write that little freedom speech and warning combined?”

“I did,” Jennifer grunted. “She approved it, of course.”

“So did I.” Adrian avoided Marc’s quick glare. “She wasn’t sure it conveyed enough of a threat. Judging from the response, I’d say it was perfect.”

Jennifer didn’t want to feel good about receiving praise from Adrian. To hide what she couldn’t avoid, Jennifer stomped over and sank down by Angela. “I’m staying here.”

Adrian shrugged. He had nothing to hide now. The feeling was amazing.

Loathing that, Marc motioned the Eagles toward the exit. "I'll figure out the rest of it as we go. Let's roll."

Jennifer didn't stand up until Marc gave her the specific glower that said he would pick her up and carry her out if he had to. Aware that he was on the edge of his patience, the teen reluctantly stood, but she couldn't keep from protesting. "It's not right."

"Get in the truck." Kyle took Jennifer's arm. "He knows what he's doing."

"Giving her up? Because Adrian will use this to bond with her! You know that."

"Yes, I do," Kyle conceded angrily. "Now, come on."

Marc waited to be alone with Adrian and Angela. He had to let go of something.

Angela struggled to stay awake; her energy was gone. "I'm listening."

"I've always known that you belong with someone else. Even when we were kids."

Angela would have denied that, but Marc didn't let her. "I'm not giving you up or giving you permission to love him. I don't have that kind of control over you." Marc sighed. "I wouldn't want that kind of control over anyone, but I mean it. I always knew we weren't supposed to end up together."

That old wound began to bleed in her heart. "That's why you made the choice?"

"Yes. I wanted the Marines. You were meant for better than me. That's why I let you go. Every

moment since then was spent in regret, but it was honest regret.”

“Because you still believe it was right?”

“Yes.”

Adrian stayed silent as they tried to remove one of the walls that had always stood between them.

“I was scared of you.”

“Why?” Marc couldn’t stop his annoyance at the revelation. “I never put a hand on you that you didn’t beg me for.”

Angela couldn’t say it, forcing Adrian to supply the answer. “She’s terrified of males. Always has been, I would guess.”

Marc was floored by that. “I never knew.”

“I hid so many things as a kid.” Angela refused to cry again. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you.”

“I wouldn’t have known how to handle it then.” Marc came over to her. “I guess the past never lets go, does it?”

Angela held up a hand to him. “I love you.”

Adrian winced even as he silently applauded the start of their reconciliation. He needed her to be happy. After all that she’d sacrificed for the dream, she deserved peace.

“Without change, there can be no peace,” Angela muttered chillingly. “Only survivors.”

Marc stiffened. “And we haven’t changed, have we?”

“Not enough and it’s cost me everything that I needed.”

Adrian tried to comfort her. “You couldn’t have pushed them any faster.”

Marc flashed an ugly glare. “Stop lying to her. That’s an order.”

Adrian winced again.

Marc knelt down, finally ready to say what he’d been holding onto for a while now. “I can’t be with you like this. I love you too, but as long as you lead Safe Haven, I can’t be your mate. You’re too...”

“Evil?” she supplied tiredly.

“Yes.”

Adrian clamped down on a violent response.

“What about while *you’re* in charge?” she questioned, lids closing.

Adrian abruptly got up and left the lukewarm cave.

Marc gloated, missing Angela’s relieved flinch. “I’m making all those choices, with you doing nothing that I don’t approve?”

“Yes, please.” Angela instantly claimed the freedom. “I’m tired, Marc. I... I can’t do it.”

Marc stewed over it as if that didn’t fall right into his own plans. “I need to think on it.”

Angela didn’t speak as he kissed her cheek and left. She let the blackness come forward to remove the pain.

Marc didn’t acknowledge Adrian as he came from the cave to get into the waiting truck. He still didn’t as they drove off. He was afraid to talk to the former leader and reveal his plans before things were in place.

Adrian knew the sentiment. He was currently doing the same.

2

Jennifer began as soon as Marc was out of sight of the cave. “You shouldn’t leave her alone with him.”

“Yeah, about that. You and I need to talk.”

Jennifer felt the unhappiness, but didn’t back down even though it was a man. She didn’t have very much of that old fear anymore. It was liberating, but also scary. “She isn’t safe.”

“Is there something you’ve seen that she missed?”

“No,” Jennifer responded sullenly. “If I’ve caught it, I know she has.”

“Then butt out.”

“But she—”

“I said, butt out.” Marc drove on, glowering a bit. “Angie stayed out of your personal shit, right?”

Jennifer grunted.

Marc motioned toward their home. “I need you keeping the peace without the camp sensing your sting. Work on that now.”

Jennifer hadn’t realized she would have to continue enforcement duties in their camp.

“Of course, you will. We have hundreds of new members and some are descendants who haven’t had our rules to follow. You and the other scanners will form a group to control the magic users in Safe

Haven. Monitor and enforce—by Eagle rules, not descendant.”

“Openly?”

Marc nodded, timbre settling into stone. “We will not restart Adrian’s lies to the camp. If they ask, tell them.”

Before she could protest, Marc held up a hand. “That’s not all. As of this moment forward, all open use of magic or gifts without permission is expressly forbidden.”

“What?” Jennifer was shocked. “That’s not what Adrian and Angela wanted. They said we need the camp to accept us for what we are.”

Marc glanced over at Kyle. “You understand why.”

Kyle nodded. “Yes, and I agree. People are jealous.”

Jennifer thought of the ugly bruises on Angela’s neck and swallowed her instinct to refuse. Maybe it would be better if they weren’t so open for a while.

“What about the train?” Kyle was glad Marc had redirected Jenny’s focus away from Adrian.

“The same. We don’t hide it anymore.” Marc steered the truck toward that carnage. “We also don’t take photos. Set up a patrol when we get there. I don’t want a lot of witnesses.”

“Too late for that.” Kyle sighed, using his binoculars to explore their surroundings. “Big group of refugees ahead.”

“Heard the radio, probably.” Marc started to message Angela to ask how she wanted this

handled, but the thought of facing Adrian's scorn slapped him. *He* was in charge now. *He* had to make these choices.

"We'll go around." Marc steered them toward a different road, quickly getting their convoy out of sight. He was doing what Angela would do to clean up the loose ends, but after this, things would be done *his* way.

She's right to get rid of the threats, his demon argued hesitantly. *We've detected ugliness in their futures.*

Marc wasn't comforted. He, more than most, understood they had to remove some individuals, but not like this.

Do you believe that group would treat you better? Perhaps you should go lead them! His demon left, not wanting to trigger an argument.

Marc knew it to be the truth. Scanning, he was able to read their lawlessness, the contempt for authority that kept shrinking their members.

She knew I would have to do this. Angie knew this would happen. That's why she didn't have instructions for the cleanup.

I think so too, Jennifer admitted, *but I wasn't a part of this plan at all. I was a tag-a-long.*

Marc almost smirked, contemplating an old joke about loose women and a truck stop tag-a-long. Marc snickered. *We called them lot lizards in my day.*

Bite me, Jennifer retorted easily, glad Marc wasn't mad. She cared too much to ignore their problems.

"I appreciate that, I do." Marc waited for any last chance that Angie would contact him. When it was clear no reprieve was coming, Marc turned the truck toward home. "Come out tomorrow and verify the totals. Then burn it."

"Yes, sir." Kyle wasn't ready to clear that site yet. He was still occasionally haunted by the rest area. That ghost didn't need company.

Jennifer saw the Indians emerge from a long line of trees to their left. "Our escort just fell in."

Marc didn't respond. Natoli and his warriors were still running under Angela's orders. Since they were following him everywhere he went, Marc assumed they were there to keep him alive. He was just grateful Sonja hadn't sensed them and thought it was a betrayal of their deal. Not that it mattered now.

"There's Seth." Kyle pointed.

Marc pulled alongside a truck that looked like it had gone the distance, rolling the window down. "All done?"

Seth hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "We removed all street signs within two miles of the base. No easy markers to get in."

"Excellent. We're going up now. Everyone goes in the QZ."

“You got it.” Seth took his vehicle to the rear of Marc’s convoy. Natoli’s warriors, still looking regal despite being in trucks, took drag.

Marc led them to the alternate loading location, not looking forward to the climb after the meal and the drama. Much like Angie, he just wanted to sleep.

Jennifer subtly placed a finger on Marc’s shoulder and sent a bolt of pale light into him.

Marc, not realizing what had happened, felt his spirits lift. He would be better once he was back inside Safe Haven’s light. “The sooner the better.”

Jennifer rested while he parked. Now *she* wasn’t looking forward to the climb.

Kyle secured the area while the other Eagles loaded up the empty boxes and coolers, none of them talking. It had been an incredibly successful mission, but they didn’t feel like bragging.

Marc took his team into the tunnels Adrian had come through, refusing to think about being without Angie. They both needed this break.

Jennifer trudged behind Marc, wanting to be close enough to protect him if they were ambushed. Being Angela’s XO was hard. Tired, she quickly allowed a gap to come between them.

Kyle scooped her up. They both tensed at the contact, guiltily enjoying it.

“You did real good.” Kyle patted her shoulder. “I’ve got it from here.”

“You sure? ‘Cause I could—”

Kyle quickly kissed her. It was a fast peck followed by a confident grin. “I’ve got this shit.”

Jennifer giggled, sending warmth through the entire group. “Okay.” She snuggled into his thick arms, resting her cheek against his neck. “You smell good.”

Kyle retained his grin for the rest of the trek.

3

“You left her where?!”

Marc sank down in the chair the doctor waved him to, eager to have his blood work done. “With Adrian.”

“Why would you do that? He is the devil!”

Marc chuckled at the shouts, trying not to let the remaining bruise on Hilda’s head sway him. “Yeah.”

Peggy scowled. “What’s funny about this?”

“You two.” Marc blasted them with cool contempt. “Do you think the guys here don’t understand what’s going on?”

Hilda and Peggy both shut up, going still and watchful.

Confirmed, Marc chuckled again. “Don’t pick a fight you can’t win, ladies. Angie won’t ever support you on that.”

“She already has.” Peggy regained her balance as she realized Marc knew of their plans. “Ask her.”

“She gave me a message.” Marc wasn’t above using that tactic. “She said if there’s trouble while I’m in charge, she’ll hunt down every one of your plants—including Marsha.”

“Trouble with who?” Hilda knew she needed to be worried about Marc having that information.

“She didn’t say. I’d be careful.” Marc’s eyes narrowed. “She isn’t in a forgiving mood.”

Hilda turned and walked out, furious at the perceived betrayal.

Peggy wasn’t fooled as easily. She stared at Marc in intense concentration, trying to figure out where she’d been tricked. “She didn’t say that.”

“Would you like to ask her?” Marc countered. “She has a son here, one of those men that you hate. If Charlie was threatened, after the loss we’ve suffered, I won’t even try to hold her back. You’ll burn in front of the entire camp. Should I plan for that?”

Peggy knew that to be true and also a lie. She slowly gave in. “Okay for now, Mr. Ruler. But you be careful too, huh? You’re *not* her.”

“No, I’m not,” Marc concurred icily. “I’ll charge you and have a trial, then *hang* you in front of the camp. Same result, though.”

Enraged, Peggy marched from the medical bay.

Drawing blood, the doctor smothered a smirk. Peggy and Hilda were getting too open about their desires. Now they would stop for a little while at least.

“I hope so. I understand and all, but enough is enough.”

The doctor patted him once on the shoulder and went to draw blood from Jennifer.

Marc scanned the medical bay, estimating there was room for all of them unless real patients came in. “We’ll crash right here until we’re cleared.”

Happy to not have to lug themselves up or down any more mountainsides or tunnels at the moment, the Eagles began to get comfortable, claiming cots and corners.

“Make a short list of anything you’d like to have and I’ll send for a gopher,” Marc took out his notebook. He pushed the button on the radio. “We’re home, base. All accounted for. Doing our time in the QZ like everyone else has to.” It was a good reminder for their new inhabitants that even the boss of this refugee camp went through these procedures.

“Copy that. Welcome home,” Kenn replied. “I’ll send someone by.”

“Copy.” Marc assumed Kenn had anticipated the need for a gopher. He was pleased the Marine remembered it from their days of fighting together. Grunts always wanted access to comforts after a fight. It just hadn’t always been possible then.

“Medical showers are open for us.” Marc waved toward the rear of the bay that was usually only for the medical staff. “Ladies first.”

Kyle gently tugged Jennifer that way, not letting her protest. “Yes. You’re getting a shower, a hot meal, and eight to ten hours of sleep.”

Jennifer sighed. “After you check on Autumn.”

“I’ll do it while you shower.”

Marc waited for Jennifer to get out of sight and then stripped off his dirty clothes for the clean set in his kit. He did it quickly, not looking at anyone, and wasn't surprised when a few of the men followed suit while they had privacy. Marc thought of the M.A.S.H. line and grinned. Nudity still made some folks breathe funny. That was life.

The doctor and two nurses drew blood, and then went about their routines as if it were normal to have three dozen Eagles camping with them for the night. Marc was pleased. People were adapting to life after war better than he'd judged they would back before the shit had hit the fan. It was a comfort to know humans could still adapt.

Kyle looked around. "Hey, where did the vet go?"

Billy frowned. "He didn't come in our trucks. Probably didn't leave that way, either."

"I want him quarantined when he shows up." Marc wrote it down.

"Maybe she had other work for him." Barry had been silent the entire trip, watching and learning, as Angela had instructed. He had many things to replay when this run was over, but he wasn't going to go blabbing about being taken along or saving Marc's life. It would anger people like Cynthia, who Angela had vetoed from the trip despite Marc saying the reporter could come; but it also didn't fit in with his plans. Barry knew he had to be more cautious if he wanted to achieve his goals.

Marc glared at him. “And what would those be?”

“To make it onto your personal team.”

“To kill me?”

Barry smiled a bit. “Angela’s already got that covered with you and Adrian.”

Marc was surprised into a harsh laugh of respect for the honesty and courage to say that so openly. “What’s your name?”

“Barry, sir. From New York.”

“What did you do there?”

“Stockbroker.”

“No shit? Never met one.”

Barry held out a hand. “Now you have.”

Marc chuckled, shaking. He didn’t pick up anything hinky about the man and that was good. “Get some sleep, rookie. Your patrol starts at midnight.”

Barry snapped a salute, grinning. “Yes, sir.”

Marc rolled his eyes, trying not to enjoy it too much. He’d witnessed Adrian and Angela brought down through pride and obsession. He wasn’t about to make those mistakes.

You’ll make all new ones, his demon predicted bluntly. Try to account for that while you’re busy congratulating yourself.

Marc hadn’t felt the demon return, but he didn’t respond. He understood going against his descendant power wasn’t recommended, but he’d already witnessed firsthand what happened when a person let that side of them have control. No, he

wasn't going to repeat the mistakes of previous leaders and if he did make all new ones, then so be it. At least they would be his and not some inhuman form of life that had to have a host.

Feeling the insult deeply, the demon finally spoke his full thought on the matter. *I believe you're searching for an excuse to ditch that decades old commitment because you're scared of not being man enough for her now that you've witnessed what she's capable of in every way. Coward.*

The demon slammed mental doors on his way out, leaving Marc angry and without a target. It was hours before the fury faded.

Chapter Ten
Lying In Wait

1

Adrian secured the outside of the cave, then quickly stoked up the fire he had going in the far corner. The vent hole he'd made was sucking the smoke out nicely, but it was a giveaway on their location. He was going to burn it hard and hot for about half an hour, and then they would resume a cold camp. The chill in the air felt like they might wake to a fresh layer of snow.

Adrian added two more thick rocks as weight to seal the bottom edges of the flap. There hadn't been time to construct a real door or gather gear.

After shifting the monitor to where he could see it from the bedroll, Adrian went to Angela's sleeping form. He didn't want to wake her, but there wasn't a choice since she was still sitting up.

"Lay down, Angie." Adrian rubbed her arm. "It's okay to sleep now. Lay down."

To his surprise, she did, burrowing deep into the thick sleeping bag.

Adrian hurriedly joined her and zipped them up. It took a minute to find a comfortable position on the cushions that were under the bedroll, but it was

still wonderful to be enclosed with her warmth, her smell.

Adrian concentrated, using his dimming gift to hide them in layers of darkness that very few descendants would be able to penetrate. Satisfied of their safety, Adrian's lids shut. It had been a long day.

Outside the cave, the vet felt the couple behind him go dim. Glad that he'd been overlooked, Chris peddled toward Safe Haven on the ten-speed he'd chosen, fighting light jealousy. One day, he would hold her while she slept. Until then, Adrian would keep her warm.

Upon reaching camp a short time later, Chris began patrolling the cold, snowy sector around Safe Haven's open entrance, not minding the miserable labor. Angela had known that he wouldn't. He was honored to shield her son and clean up loose ends. In time, he would do more.

2

“Angie didn't come back with you?”

“No.” Marc motioned Morgan into the cubby so their voices wouldn't carry as far. “She's not safe here.”

“We have more assassins?!” Morgan was angry there had been another attempt on Angela's life, but it scared him that the person had been trying to steal her power. He hadn't even considered that motive.

“We don’t know. It could be something Tara set up or someone else is still pulling strings.”

“Other than the train gang?”

Marc sighed. “Yes.”

“What about the possible meltdown somewhere upstate?”

“Ongoing, so far as we know. We have a lot to do before we even lift a finger. You know what I mean?”

“Yes. Who do you want in on it?”

“All team leaders and XOs, plus Kenn and a few others I’ll bring in.”

Morgan sat down at the narrow cafeteria table they’d drafted for the security chamber. “Which crisis will hit us first?”

“According to the notebook, all of it in the next two weeks. We have two choices, like before. We tough it out or we run. Last time, we all had hopes that we’d be safe here and the vote was easy. Now, they might actually vote to run. We’ll need to be prepared for either outcome.”

Morgan retrieved his notebook from his jacket and began to make notes.

Marc let him go for a minute, reading the neat script upside down across the table. Morgan was handy.

“Do you want this done openly?”

“As much as you can, yes. I’ll note the things that are to be kept quiet.”

“Do you anticipate many of those?” It was his way of asking if Marc would be hiding things from

the camp and running behind-the-scenes plots like his predecessors had.

Marc grunted. “Not if I can help it. I will be open, but we have to have their reactions covered.”

“Sounds like secrets to me.”

Marc frowned. He hadn’t looked at it that way. “I can’t be open with them?”

“Not on some things,” Morgan revealed the teaching moment for what it was. “We’ll help you through it. The senior guys have done this a couple of times now.”

Marc was surprised into a smile. “Smell that green, do I?”

Morgan chuckled. “So did your woman. Adrian whispered in her ear. I’d be honored to do that for you.”

Marc held out a hand, grateful he didn’t have to make a choice on that. “Thanks.”

Outside, Jax smothered his desire for that position as he tapped and pushed the door open. “You wanted me?”

Marc waved him in, giving Morgan a nod of dismissal.

Jax took Morgan’s seat with a reserved look at the Special Forces man. Jax hadn’t been able to bond with Neil’s men at all.

“I have a job for you.”

“Cool.” Jax brightened, leaning forward eagerly. “Sure!”

Outside, Morgan cracked a grin. That had sounded exactly like Adrian. Marc was about to

learn that their former administrator's methods had been necessary in many ways. *It should be fun to watch.*

3

“Things good in here? Boss wants a check in.”

Kenn frowned, but didn't say what he thought. “No trouble and no contacts for a few hours.”

Tonya closed the thin door and leaned against the radio counter to write down the details. She was trying to be careful in her new duties of information officer.

Kenn rattled off the few things their newest boss needed to know, saving the unimportant items for later. From the sound of Marc's short radio message, the train run had been rough. He wouldn't have the patience to wade through stupidity for a few hours.

Tonya copied it all down and then stuffed the notebook into her pocket. She still had fifteen minutes before she had to report in. She wanted to spend it here.

Kenn felt her leg slide against his and grinned at the heat, but he didn't encourage it. Tonya's medical checkup was coming soon. He wanted to wait until she had been cleared to get physical. It was another big change for him—wanting the baby.

Tonya wanted sex. She wasn't sure she'd ever felt so horny. She tried to be casual as she stretched, shoving out her chest.

Kenn's eyes snapped to her. He swallowed. "No."

Tonya stared, hands going to her hips. "Excuse me?"

Kenn snorted, forcing his concentration to the new monitors that had been put up. "No."

Tonya took it as a personal challenge. "Okay." Shrugging, she unbuttoned the top button on her jeans and slid a hand inside her pants.

Kenn struggled not to respond, to hold firm to his resolve. It lasted all of two minutes before he caved. "Come here."

Tonya grinned, eagerly moving into his embrace. "We'll be careful."

Kenn grunted, replacing her hand with his own. "I just have to get you sloppy wet. Hold onto my shoulders."

Tonya groaned as his big fingers rubbed her slick skin. "Thank you."

Kenn hardened the rest of the way. "I aim to please."

4

"You doing okay in here?"

Samantha kept her attention on the security monitors. "No big problems so far. The Eagles are supervising things."

"Marc wants a—"

Samantha handed Neil a clipboard with a dozen papers. "Those are copies of the two arrests we

made, the report on the missing rookie gun that we're all positive was set down somewhere and forgotten, and a few other small issues. Pretty quiet while they were gone."

Neil dropped a kiss to the top of her head, positive she was tired. "I'll be by to get you as soon as your shift is over."

Samantha was still studying the screens. "Looking forward to your back, sir."

Neil laughed. "And I, yours."

Neil quietly shut the door to the security compartment that had been shoved into a deep impression near the brig. He liked Samantha being down here, away from the chaos of new citizens. In a few weeks, when Safe Haven had infected them with light, he would relax about it. Until then, having Samantha stashed out of the way was perfect.

Neil walked to the next location on rounds, enjoying running security on the cave. He and the other senior men were supervising all the floors. Since the mountain blew up, there hadn't been big trouble inside their stone walls. Neil understood most people were scared to cross Angela. Her power was intimidating. However, Neil found himself comforted instead of concerned. Angela wouldn't let anything happen to their future. Bad people would be exposed for years and dealt with, but in the end, they would have peace. "Can't have one without the other." If being scared of Angie kept people under control, Neil was all for it.

He stopped at the radio room. “Coming in.”

“Shit!” Tonya scrambled for clothes.

Kenn leaned back to button his jeans. “Nice timing, Numbnuts.”

Neil knew he should be mad, and he would tell Marc, but all he could do was laugh at this moment.

Kenn flushed, realizing who he was talking to. He’d thought it was a rookie. Neil would rat them out. “We would have heard the radio if someone called.”

Neil shrugged. “Tell it to whoever he sends to reprimand you over it. I’m just here for your sheet.”

Kenn tossed it, making the former state trooper grab for it awkwardly.

Neil, now frowning, nodded politely to Tonya, noting her small smirk. Feeling the need to set them both straight, Neil left instead.

Tonya’s giggles floated out, followed by Kenn’s groan. “That’s why I said no. We can’t do this shit on duty.”

“Don’t be mad. I’m sorry.”

Kenn sighed. “Come here. I like holding you afterwards.”

Melting, Neil chose not to rat them out. That was more caring about a female and the camp rules than Kenn had ever shown unless there was a crisis. It was clear progress.

Neil went to the final stop on this floor, enjoying the beautiful heat rushing through the passages. Theo’s crew was still working on the cave, those who could anyway. Most of the damage from the

blast had been removed so they could do repairs. Topside wasn't as good. Thanks to the cold, the avalanche and bodies were still there. The remaining ants were using them as a food source, but Neil assumed orders would come down soon for a cleanup crew.

He'd heard the rumors that leaving the mess was an intimidation technique, but he didn't believe it was needed. Samantha was saying they would have two weeks of clear weather before the next blizzard. In that time, the current mounds of snow would melt and the bodies would begin to stink. Angela wouldn't leave that to nature; the Eagles who expected to get the duty were mentally preparing for it.

Neil tapped on the pulled down shade to the medical bay and stepped into the dimness. He liked Angela in charge. Marc would do fine while she recovered, but then she would have to be put back in place, where she belonged. It wasn't a haven anymore if their seer wasn't guiding them.

5

“You okay over there?”

Jeff grunted.

Kevin joined him on the wide sofa, glad the doctor had been able to get them cleared so quickly. Now that Safe Haven had nurses and assistants, the quarantine waiting time had been cut by half. Kevin

wondered why Jeff had chosen to stay in the reading room that was closed for the night.

“I don’t have memories of *her* here,” Jeff’s voice broke a little. “I loved that stubborn bitch, you know?”

Kevin was shocked by Jeff’s tears. He put a hand on the man’s shoulder, not sure what to say that would help.

Jeff recovered quickly, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

Kevin shrugged, settling onto the sofa. “Don’t be.”

Jeff glanced over, noting the bottle in Kevin’s hand and the haunted expression. “What about you?”

Kevin sighed deeply. “About the same, I guess, just without the other half of your pain.”

Jeff understood. “Yeah.”

The two rebels stayed quiet for a long time. When the lights went out on the automatic timer, neither of them rose to reactivate it. The darkness was a comfort.

Seth headed for the general sleeping space, doing a last check of all the rooms that were off limits during the evening on his way. He shined his light around the reading chamber... *Faces! People!* Seth let out a cry, hand sliding toward his weapon.

Recognition came as the laughter spilled out. “Damn!”

Kevin chuckled while Jeff snickered.

“What the hell, guys?”

Kevin yawned. “Just closing our night like we did while on the road.”

And they were, Jeff realized. The only thing missing was his cigar.

Kevin handed him one. “I hit the supply area.”

Jeff’s mood brightened a little. He had missed hanging out with his team. He, Tommy, and Seth were all that remained now. “Come join us?”

Seth started to kick them out and then shrugged. “Yeah, if the boss clears it. Give me an hour.”

“We’ll be here.”

Seth disappeared, suddenly eager to hear their tales of living without Safe Haven. Many citizens were comparing Pitcairn to being here on their own. Jeff and Kevin had details they would all want to hear.

Seth made a short pause by the security booth, getting approval for the few hours they would be in the reading room. After promising Marc it would be cleaned and ready for the camp in the morning, Seth went to check on Becky. She had first shift and should be sleeping.

Seth quietly eased around cots and blanket forts, trying hard not to disturb anyone. This open set up and bunkbed maze fit many people into one area, but there was no privacy. Everyone heard everything.

Becky didn’t wake up as he pulled the blanket to her shoulders and placed a soft kiss on her cheek. Neither of them had mentioned their conversation

in the truck after coming home. He still hoped to make her happier so those desires would go away.

Seth finished his rounds and made a last stop by the eating carts. He wrote a note for what he took, then returned to the reading room to enjoy some male bonding. He didn't realize other dwellers had discovered the location until he walked back into the darkness and half a dozen lights shined in his direction.

"Down, boys!" He shielded himself from the glare. "I brought snacks."

Low cheers came as Seth passed the small bags around. He'd also managed to quietly juggle a few beers. "We'll have to share. Everything's closed."

"I've got a bottle for you if it stays quiet here," Marc offered from the doorway. He set it on the nearest end table. "I'll be listening."

The seven Eagles shared chuckles as Marc left them alone.

Glad the guys would have a good time, Marc told Billy to increase the heat a little more and handle a few other items that they would need overnight. He would also have Kenn put some soft music on to keep the camp happy. Other than that, all he had to do was keep from dwelling on too many plans and plots at one time. He was too tired to keep it all straight right now. Tomorrow, he'd be plotting and planning all day, and doing anything to make him tired enough to sleep without his mate. The last week had sucked, but there wasn't an end to his empty bed in sight.

“I want my friend, Angie!”

Coming down the corridor, Marc followed the sullen demands to Missy and Shawn, who were staying in the small family area that hadn't been opened until yesterday. Children who were having trouble adjusting could now be brought here at night to finish settling down. Missy was the first one who had refused to sleep in the common space.

“I want Angie!”

Shawn sighed. “She can't come back yet. I told you that. She isn't safe.”

“I want to help catch the bad guy.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Hello.”

They both twisted to find Marc in the doorway.

“How can you help? Searching for us?”

Missy nodded, becoming shy around Marc. He scared her a little.

“No need to be scared.” Marc smiled. “If you can help, then do it.”

Missy immediately shut her eyes, sending waves of descendant power through the cave. It woke people from dozes and dreams, causing them to shift and glance around in confusion.

“Damn. Stop.” Marc's grid was lighting up. “My mistake.”

Missy regarded him resentfully. “You’re new here, right?”

Marc chortled. “Yeah, and so are you.” Marc motioned toward the handheld video games. “Introduce her to the muted version of Mario. We’ll do this in the morning.”

Unhappy, Shawn nodded. He felt like her father since Tara’s death and it was confusing. He didn’t even like this kid.

Missy began to cry.

Shawn felt his own heart break and relented. *Yet, Baby, but we’ve got years if you’re right.*

Missy sniffed, looking up. *You mean that?*

Sure, why not? Shawn conceded. “And to be fair, you don’t like me yet, either right?”

“No.” Missy made a face. “Boys are gross.”

“Perfect. Let’s be good friends. I can help you, be there when you need someone.”

“You won’t use me like the others all have?”

“Never. If you agree to be my ward, I’ll protect you like a daughter or a...wife,” he forced out, unable to feel that way with her childish profile and body in front of him. “But I ask that you spend time with guys your own age you actually like. I don’t think the whole descendant thing is foolproof.”

“But it is.” Missy yawned as the anger faded. “You’ll be so in love with me that you give me up.”

Shawn winced. He gently wiped away her tears. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Yeah.” Missy shrugged. “But after that, we get to live happily ever after, so I’m okay with it.”

Shawn smiled at her phrasing. He didn't know what to make of this little girl, but he would protect her until he knew who she was supposed to be matched with. He didn't believe for a moment that she was right about it being him. She deserved better. Like with Angela and Adrian. Their former leader was too evil to be matched with Angie, too selfish. Shawn had faith that Marc's love would pull her through. All they had to do was make it safe for her to come home.

7

During the night, Angela began to shiver.

Adrian had them swaddled in layers of blankets, but without a heat source, the cave was cold. Wishing he'd had more time to gather items, Adrian left the warmth of the blankets to dig through the kit Angela had struggled to bring in without letting the Eagles see how weak she was. It hadn't succeeded.

Adrian pulled out the bags and pouches happily, glad Marc had covered it. "Nice."

"What's wrong?" Angela asked groggily.

"Nothing. I'll have us warmed up in a few minutes. Sleep if you can."

Angela did as she was instructed. Exhaustion was heavy.

Adrian set up the spirit burner and the pot, dumping his canteen into it. The small stove wouldn't put off enough smoke to be noticed, but it would work quickly. The hot water bottles would

keep her warm until daylight, when he would build up the fire for their breakfast.

As soon as the bottles were filled, Adrian placed them under the sleeping bag, wrapping the ends of the blankets around them to hold in the warmth.

Adrian settled into the cold chair by the radio, tugging his jacket closer. He needed to scavenge more gear. The waves of refugees had cleaned out almost everything on a straight line from Yellowstone. It was occurring to him that Safe Haven was also low on those items too, since Marc had sent the small stove. Adrian had been expecting something larger. He would have to branch out for real equipment, but it would have to happen later. He wouldn't trade his current duty for anything.

Adrian opened the notebook, sure Marc had recognized it. He began to read, immediately enrapt. Angela's predictions were complex, in-depth monsters that required full concentration and even then, he still felt like he was missing things. When his mother had told him there would be an alpha descendant whose powers eclipsed all others, Adrian had honestly believed it was him. He'd been young then and still growing mentally. Now that the real alpha was before him, Adrian could see how blinded he'd been in his youth, how devoted to his mother's every word he'd become over the years. Had that been intentional? How had his mother known so much? Adrian's subconscious began to nag that loose thread as he consumed Angela's visions of the next wave of effects from the war.

In the bed, Angela gradually quit shivering, but she didn't fall into a restful sleep. The witch was trying to show her something through the fog. Having trouble keeping up, Angela tried to force herself into alertness so she could receive the warning. Weariness was a constant shadow since she'd taken over leadership... Wait. She was with Adrian. Marc was in charge of the camp. *I don't have to do this anymore!*

Angela lurched into a sitting position, gasping in pain and shocked alertness.

Wait! The witch tried to pull her back.

Tell Marc. Leave me be.

Adrian came to her, but didn't touch. He waited to see if it was her or the witch.

"It's me."

Adrian sank down next to her. "Even better." He was happy to feel a steady stream of warmth coming from between the cushions now. It was warming nicely.

"Thank you."

Adrian handed her a pack of stale, generic smokes and a lighter. "All I've got."

"Marc sent my brand, but this is fine." Angela enjoyed the harsh draw. Safe Haven's doctors had loudly complained each time she'd tried to have a smoke and locate her center.

Adrian studied her as he always had before. She needed something and he wanted to give it to her. That need to please her had always been between them.

“Along with this attraction.” She glared coldly.
“I didn’t ask for either.”

“We change, we adapt. And many times, we fall short. Makes it easy to screw up an entire world.”

Angela sighed, misery bleeding through again.
“I don’t know how to go on from this. As soon as he...” Her voice broke, but tears didn’t come.

“How much have you planned out?”

“All of it. The same as you did, I would imagine.”

Telling him she knew it could pass with time, that she didn’t have to be suicidal.

“Why didn’t you fight back with Tara at the end?” He and Marc desperately needed to know that.

Angela forced it out through the rage and regret.
“When he hit me, I realized what I had just lost. I decided my life no longer mattered.”

“That’s what we were afraid of,” Adrian’s breath steamed out in front of him. “That’s why they had you under watch.”

“They still do,” she grumbled, meaning him.

“Do you blame us?”

Angela didn’t reply.

“What about Charlie?”

“Better off with Marc.”

“Because he’s a boy scout and you’re corrupt?”

“Because Charlie will follow me. He’ll end up hurting people too.”

“Have you seen that?”

“I don’t need to. I’ve watched generations repeat the mistakes of the past, even after a nuclear war. Some things cannot be changed.”

It’s too soon for this discussion. Adrian switched topics. “What about Marc, after you’ve gone? Kendle gets him?”

“Please!” Angela barked a laugh. “He won’t touch another woman for the rest of his life after me. Marc is more loyal than I’ve ever deserved.”

Adrian switched again, searching for a target. “What about my camp?”

“Stop. You’re getting it through the deal with Marc. You don’t need me in any way except as a prize box to catch what you squirt.” Angela laid down, tired of the conversation. She couldn’t explain her bitterness, her agony. He mistakenly believed he knew how she felt. He was positive he could bring her back to herself before she took her life, but he didn’t understand she was already more than halfdead. She’d lost two children now. She was bleeding out.

Adrian knew more than she believed, but until he found a way to breathe life back into her, it wouldn’t succeed. There was no way he could push and be bluffing. When he unearthed something else that might succeed, he would test the waters again. At some point, he would strike a nerve and she would snap back into the Angie they all needed so much.

Adrian waited until she had fallen asleep, then rejoined her under the blankets. He placed his spine

to hers, but slid up against her to keep the body heat going. There was nothing sexual or bonding in the moment. It was survival.

As she drifted off, Angela felt the witch return to glower at the man next to them. Angela faded into the darkness knowing her magic would protect her. That ancient spirit inside was really the only one she could trust with her life. *Or what remains of it. If I can be saved, if I'm worth saving, then the witch will do it. I'll never again trust a human to react the way I need them to, not even Marc.*

Adrian caught that last thought and added up the clues. She felt betrayed. Not by Marc or the camp, or even by himself. She'd been betrayed by her visions, by her shortsightedness and arrogance. She'd relied on the logical part when she'd needed to embrace the demon within.

Adrian tried to send good vibes. He'd made that mistake so many times over his life that he couldn't remember all of the situations. It's not as if life came with instructions, and his beginnings had been odder than most anyway. It was a wonder that he'd survived at all, let alone to have gathered so much power in one place. It was only a little short of amazing.

"Fate." The good and the bad were meant to happen. He assumed it was so they would all come together to knock out a final evil at the end, but he was afraid to look that far on his own. With that disturbing reflection, Adrian fell asleep.

On the ledge by the radio, the open notebook page glared in bright warning.

I have become the sum of all descendants. My gifts were mostly dormant for that decade with Kenny, growing in ways I never imagined possible. All I have to do is scan a descendant now and I can copy their power. I can do all that they can and then more. I've never felt so odd and there is unrest because of it. The camp is scared of me. How I hate that! I would never hurt my people. I have this power because they're too weak to defend themselves yet. How dare they blame me for their own failings! But I know how to fix it. When Adrian returns, the camp will understand I'm their defender, but he's their leader. All I have to do is handle this threat from Tara and then I can work on getting him forgiven. I've already started. Many in camp want him dead or at least gone forever, but they don't understand.

Without Adrian's light, we are doomed. It's the one gift I haven't been able to replicate. Only he can bring us together, keep us together. All of our personal drama means nothing compared to the survival of our country and I can't tell you how much that hurts me. I barely recognize myself anymore, but when the next enemy comes, I will kill them all without a second thought. I crossed the line in Little Rock. I can only go forward from that because Safe Haven is a place of safety and of light, of duty and honor. It is a refuge for survivors. It is

also a place of death and darkness, where murder and madness walk hand-in-hand.

8

“We’re gonna get caught.”

“Shut up!”

The four brothers hurried through the tunnel, trying not to make noises that would echo. They were supposed to be on duty in the bottom levels as fresh rookies who needed to work their way up. With so many new people in Safe Haven, it was easy for them to go unnoticed for hours at a time.

“This way.” Joshua entered the passage that would take them out the same way Marc had reentered. They’d followed his group to discover where Angela was being stashed, then returned to gear up. When she’d told everyone that she wasn’t safe in camp, she’d been right, but she also wasn’t safe in a dinky cave with one disgraced old Marine either.

All four men had been among the first refugees Safe Haven had taken in upon reaching Georgia. Joshua and his brothers had already been waiting almost two months for their shot before Vlad’s attack. They’d assumed it would be easy to finish Angela off while she was in the medical bay, but the doctor and nurses hadn’t left her alone. They had been resigned to waiting it out another month when they’d heard Marc was taking Angie out of the mountain. Their chance had finally come. The

bunker was gone, but the brothers had been paid for this and they intended to follow through. You couldn't be the best mercenary family in the country until you captured one of the descendants on a government list. After this, all refugee camps would want to hire them to kidnap or kill a descendant.

Bran, bringing up the rear, wasn't as eager as his older brothers were. He had respect for the people who had taken them in. They hadn't been the desperate family trying to survive that they'd portrayed, but the Eagles hadn't known it. They had been welcomed, fed, and clothed, and now they were being trained. If they made it through the rookie level, they would get more benefits. Bran didn't want to throw that away for a reputation they wouldn't need if they stayed here. He'd brought it up, but he'd been outvoted by brothers who had always liked living on the edge. Reluctant, Bran followed them through the cold, drafty tunnel to the bottom of the mountain, shivering at the chill of fate sweeping down the cliffs. They were about to betray an entire camp of descendants. They would be lucky to get through this alive.

“You're not going to.”

The traitors shined lights around to find the vet in the icy entrance of the cave.

“I know what you are.”

Panicking, the would-be killers grabbed for weapons, but it was too late to avoid the justice of the veterinarian who was spending most of his time off the radar of Safe Haven's people. Angela had

told him to eliminate threats first and ask for permission second. He was doing it with gusto.

Chris kept firing his suppressed Glock even after the killers were down, not leaving loose ends to unravel later. When the mag was empty, he calmly stowed the hot weapon and exited the tunnel to resume his patrolling. Wanting everyone to be clear on why they were eliminated, the vet left the scene untouched. When Eagles came across the bodies and checked their gear, they would find duct tape, knockout darts, and pictures of Angela from before the war. These four had been sent out to kill her months ago, lying in wait for the opportune moment. It was a wonder they hadn't tried sooner.

Not minding the cold, the vet strode confidently through the darkness, easily avoiding the holes and crags others were always stressing over when sent out. Chris had an instinct for places to tread lightly or step over. It was how he'd lived his entire life, from orphanage to now. His true self had to be controlled, hidden. He'd existed in a myriad of costumes over the years, but that was all over now. As Angela's killer, he had free rein to do what he loved the most. Chris began to whistle a merry tune as he walked. *Life is good.*

Chapter Eleven
Swinging Sack

1

“**T**hey got caught. That’s why we haven’t heard anything since last night. It keeps the camp calm and doesn’t spook other suspected plants.”

Robert nodded at his partner’s comments, but didn’t add anything. Joshua and his brothers had gone about things the wrong way. Dozens of assassins had been sent, all with orders to blend in and get close to leadership in Safe Haven. Some of them had already been here when Marc and Angela came, like Alex. Others, like Joshua and Bran, had come in once they realized how many of their rivals for the target were living with them, eating next to them. Joshua had gotten in, learned the routines and thought he had it covered. He and his brothers had gone off to take down the boss while she only had Adrian to protect her, like that would be a piece of cake.

Howard rolled his eyes. “Idiots.”

Robert bobbed again. He and his small group had chosen to go all the way to top level Eagles on the protection detail of the council before revealing themselves. They’d had small chances to grab members already, but Bobby wanted the entire

prize. The government had five of these dwellers on the list, and just because the big US bunker was gone, that didn't mean other big buyers weren't still around. These descendants could also be sold to any number of people, not the least of which would be slave traders. Life now depended on supplies. Who better to sniff them out than your very own magic user? Bobby planned to keep the least destructive one and sell the others.

With the gear and supplies they were given, and the new rep of being the badasses of the new world, they could go anywhere and do anything without rules. Compared to that, being level three on Marc's former team was nothing. Hell, to get here, they'd already killed several of their own during the fight with Donner. That hadn't been in their orders, but Bobby wasn't going to lose this payday—not to rules or rivals. If Joshua hadn't been caught soon, Bobby had planned to reveal overhearing an incriminating conversation. Marc would shoot first and demand details later.

Used to using their positions to arrange things, this group of traitors was patient and calculating. Right now, it made no sense to attempt multiple abductions. Once the Mexicans came, it might be possible in the chaos, but Bobby didn't believe that would succeed either. What they needed was for Angela to come home and say it was time to bugout. That would be a good moment for familiar faces to go missing. It would be expected, and lies could be told to cover in places where it wasn't. Bobby and

his team, all five of them, would each grab their chosen target and flee in different directions. Snatch and run, while keeping their victims drugged, was only part of the scheme. They also needed to keep from being followed. That would mean enlisting help or finding a way to kill every man, woman, and child in Safe Haven.

Bobby preferred the latter. Time as an Eagle and on Marc's team had taught him that leaving threats alive was a mistake. If things went badly during the kidnappings, each of his men had instructions to kill their target to at least secure that noteworthy goal. He wasn't taking any chances on losing the game he'd been playing. It was all or nothing.

2

"Here they come."

"Who?"

"The new men," Donald sneered. He and Rusty were in the shower stalls on the other side of Jeremy.

Jeremy slid further down into the stall, trying to be quiet. He didn't want to be a part of another fight between the old and new Eagles. Angela's insistence upon adding in Tonya's soldiers, Samantha's soldiers and Adrian's soldiers had caused a lot of friction. The new citizens were rookies in the Eagles, but the level six men who hadn't been quite good enough to make one of the Special Forces teams were bitter about it. Jeremy

was just happy to have 20 new hard bodies in the Eagles. He especially liked the fact that these guys were already trained to follow orders and live by a different set of rules than civilians did. That was pretty much Eagle life. The herd still didn't know some of the things the Eagles were responsible for. The camp had one life, and the Eagles had a different version that allowed the first to exist.

Peter stopped a few feet into the room. "Is it okay to take showers now or do we have to wait until you senior men are done?"

Jeremy thought the rookie sounded very respectful considering how nasty some of the senior members were being to the new guys.

Rusty puffed out his bare chest. "Wait your turn!"

Jeremy contemplated standing up and setting them straight, but the shaking fingers clutched around the bottle in his hand said he wasn't in any condition to use his authority right now. He sat down on the bench and waited for it to be over.

Everyone paused as the lights flickered. Safe Haven had been experiencing small blips in the power since they moved into the cave, but this one continued for so long that camp members in the rear of the showers began flipping off water and looking at the Eagles in concern.

The guards had activated their lamps and lanterns by the time the power came back on in full.

"Everyone okay?" Ray was glad no one had panicked, unlike other areas in camp where he was

certain that wasn't the case. Ray swept the showers and benches. Many of the camp's females and older inhabitants weren't comfortable with the coed shower set up yet. They preferred to take their morning showers at the same time as the Eagles who always stood with their backs to them. Ray didn't imagine that was going to change much over time, mostly because people like the level Eagles glaring his way, daring him to overrule their choice, were always ogling the women walking by.

Rusty and Donald were respectful of the camp members, but let an Eagle female come in with a towel over her shoulder and heads swiveled. The female Eagles hadn't noticed yet, but Ray was positive they would. When they did, it would cause a completely new level of trouble between the sexes that Safe Haven didn't have time for. Ray had added it to his notes for leadership, hoping Angela would eventually be made aware of it, but he didn't expect her to change the decision. People would get used to viewing each other half clothed and be able to control their behavior.

It was something the old world couldn't have conquered because there had been too many citizens to monitor in the beginning of such a risky experiment. Here, there were enough guards to be able to protect the girls while they showered and still give the guys time to adjust to seeing so much bare skin without being allowed to touch it. Ray was curious as to whether or not this was happening in

other showers where it was mostly women and the occasional male hunk came through.

As if drawn by his reflections, the object of Ray's affection appeared in the entrance. He went cold when he saw that Dale once again had one of the new men, Dennis, standing next to him with a silly grin. Dale liked Dennis. So did the vet and the other people in their circle. Ray wasn't sure why, but he didn't.

"I'm going to have lunch with Dennis, so I won't be able to go with you to the dog training class later." Dale smiled at his partner. "Is that okay?"

Ray shrugged. "You're free to do whatever you want, Dale. We both are." Without waiting for a response, Ray marched to the rear of the showers, motioning his Eagle duty mate, Green, to take his place in front. Unless showering, citizens weren't allowed in here. Ray was hoping Dale would take the hint and leave. This was the wrong time and the wrong place for their personal issues.

Dale stared at Ray in hurt surprise. "He must be having a bad day." Dale turned toward the corridor, missing Dennis's smirk.

Ray slid into the rear security booth and did a fast scan of the people around him. He scanned the rear of the chamber and swung around to sweep the closest stalls. "Damn!"

Kenn was standing there, hair full of soap.

"So what's up with Dale and Hotrod?" Kenn didn't care for the way Ray's eyes had just lit up.

Nor did he care for the way his own ego had risen to the attention. Tonya wasn't in the mood to talk or plot as much as they used to. Kenn was lonely.

Ray frowned at the insensitive wording, but he didn't scold Kenn for it. Not only had the man saved his life, he was right. Dennis was a hot ride. He flirted with both men and women and didn't care whether those people already had a partner. Ray was almost positive the story Dennis had told to be allowed into Safe Haven was a complete lie. "You get anything on him yet?"

Kenn increased the hot water. "No. People aren't really concerned about camp members right now, you know?"

"Yes." Because of all of the fights between the soldiers and senior men, most citizens and rookies were being overlooked.

Ray turned his back to Kenn, studying the front where he was able to observe his replacement, Craig Green, arguing with Rusty, who was still insisting he wouldn't shower with the soldiers. The words were echoing across the room.

"We don't want you here!" Rusty now had jeans on, but there was still soap in his hair. He was ready to fight.

Peter held up a hand. "We didn't come for trouble. We just need to shower before we go to our next lesson. We'll wait."

"No, you won't!" Green glared at Rusty. "Don't make me call Marc."

Instead of calming things down, as it might have if it had been Adrian or Angela's name invoked, Rusty became infuriated.

“Fuck you! Cry to the boss like a bitch! These guys are the enemy! You should know the difference!”

No one was surprised to hear the sound of flesh meeting flesh after that.

Kenn kept washing. “Are you going to help your partner?”

“Craig Green, light weight boxing champion, can handle it.” Ray was still watching the massive fight. Eagles were coming out of their stalls and soldiers coming from down the hall, drawn by Peter's shouts. Craig was in the middle, doing damage to both sides.

Kenn chuckled. “Yeah, I guess so. He almost beat Neil in the last kai class. He picks up shit fast.”

Kenn finished showering as Ray kept track of the fight, both aware that camp members were observing nervously from behind them. It was a protection issue. Some of these fights had spilled into living and dining spaces, injuring citizens when things were knocked over or broken. With Kenn and Ray both between the camp members and the fight, everyone felt safer.

“Don't they know Marc's in a bad mood?”

“I don't think it would matter.” Kenn began drying off. “Some of these guys are very unhappy about having to eat and sleep with the enemy. Asking us to shower together is a little too much.”

Ray nodded, but didn't answer. He knew what it was like to be on both sides of that coin, where you were colored as bad while you were trying to do good. He didn't blame the soldiers for following orders. Safe Haven gave people a second chance. The soldiers deserved one too.

"That's a load of shit and you know it." Kenn wrapped the towel around his waist and came over to the booth. "They could have chosen us at any point during that fight."

"How did..."

Both men stared in shock as they realized Kenn had read his mind.

"She was right." Kenn was a bit stunned to have what he'd always wanted, now, when it didn't even matter.

"She always is. This is good, right? You'll be more helpful."

Remembering they weren't alone, Kenn frowned. "Later."

Ray didn't push the issue, but he didn't think there was a reason for Kenn to be so cautious. There were many descendants here. Some, like Kenn, didn't have a power that had manifested yet. Others had enjoyed gifts their entire lives. It wasn't up to the individual person as to what gift appeared, if any, ever. Ray didn't understand much of how it worked, but that part was clear. Any of the descendants may or may not have gifts at any given point. It was part of why the government had always hunted them. Even innate descendants might

become active in time and in the proper environment.

Kenn slid his jeans on. “How do you know that?”

Ray swallowed, attention snared by the sound of Kenn dressing. “Angela isn’t afraid to talk around me. She knows I can be trusted.”

“She say more?”

“A lot. She was gathering information for a book about us. She wanted to make copies for the descendants to carry so they’d know how to educate people so they wouldn’t be so scared.”

Kenn doubted that would happen now. Angela wasn’t the same person she’d been a few weeks ago. Not even all his years with her had added up to this much pain and abuse. He was stunned that she had survived.

How do you feel about that? the new voice inside asked slyly. Does it make you happy to see her pay for betraying you with Marc?

Kenn sighed unhappily. A small part of it was gratifying, but he was trying not to enjoy it. He’d changed enough to recognize that as wrong. He was also able to guess that most of it was still his shame hoping for an excuse so he didn’t have to carry this guilt, but life didn’t happen that way. Even Adrian had to take his lumps.

“So, is he trying to take your man or what?” Kenn brought the conversation back to where it had been, trying to decide how much he now had to ask

Ray to hide for him. Angela and Marc couldn't find out about his gift yet.

Ray thought on it again. "That's sure what it looks like."

Kenn stared. "And you're gonna put up with that?"

Ray didn't answer.

Kenn knew what the silence meant. Just because Ray was gay, that didn't mean he didn't have the exact same reactions as any other man to a romantic relationship. "Are you ready for it to end?"

Ray shrugged again, telling Kenn it was on his mind. The only time a man didn't answer another man on that question was when he was evaluating his options.

Kenn let it go, understanding that was a sensitive topic, but also aware that they weren't alone, so Ray was unable to speak freely. Many of the camp members behind them, with an ear now turned toward this conversation, would be more than happy to run to Dale and let him know that Ray was discussing their personal life. In Kenn's experience, the woman was never happy about that. He didn't believe a gay relationship was any different. People didn't like it when you talked about them behind their back, no matter the intent.

"Beer after duty?" They were both scheduled in the entertainment areas until dinner.

"Sure." Kenn would have anyway because Ray had dangerous information, but Kenn was also eager to spend a couple hours hanging out and

enjoying being alive. There hadn't been much of that during Adrian or Angela's rule.

3

"What do you mean they don't care?"

Neil closed the thin door to Marc's security cavity. Most of the camp was in the showers or the mess to start their morning, but he didn't want to take a chance on being overheard.

"They don't care if she slaughtered the train people. They want her to come home right now. About half of them asked if she left because she thinks they won't understand."

Marc stared, unable to believe that reaction from a camp founded on strict morals. *How did this happen?*

Not sure if Marc wanted anything from him, Neil waited restlessly. The news should be a relief for the new boss. If the camp wanted her here and Marc wanted her here, which Neil knew he did, then there was nothing preventing her from resuming leadership.

"Except her pain," Marc reminded tonelessly. "Don't forget that we lost a baby."

Neil grimaced at his own thoughtlessness. "I'm sorry."

"I shouldn't be in your head anyway." Marc sighed tiredly. He hadn't slept long before the camp had risen. "I know you're loyal to her."

Neil joined Marc at the small wooden table. Angela had insisted all their furniture be flammable. When questioned about the danger, she'd said freezing to death was much slower than a fast fire. No one had argued with her logic. If all of their power sources failed, they could still burn the furniture as a last ditch effort to survive. The lengths she'd gone to and the details she'd covered during each stage were amazing.

"Yeah. But she can't come home until we find the other threat."

"Is it just one?" Neil asked hopefully.

Marc scowled. "We don't know. She can't see it. There's a blind spot. That means someone is having second thoughts, but I don't want to count on it going our way. All traitors have to be dug up." He slid his notebook around. "I'm working on a rotation where the descendants can scan all members of the camp and clear them."

Neil both hated and loved the idea. Before the war, it would have been an unforgivable invasion of privacy. Now, this was necessary to ferret out their weasels.

"It's still an invasion. It was a hard choice."

"I can imagine." Neil sympathized. Marc's moral line was thick. Crossing it would cause him pain—much like Safe Haven's other leaders. Each of them had been tormented. Marc would be no different. Neil saw Jennifer was the sole person assigned to scan so far. "How long will this take?"

“Weeks, at best.” Marc grunted. “I may call a camp meeting to knock out a big batch. We can work the rest in after that.”

Neil considered what the camp might need or want that would entertain a large gathering. “Do we have a telescope?”

Marc smiled a bit at the images in Neil’s mind. “I’d spend time there. Sounds nice.”

Neil began to make notes; already falling into the zone where doing his job came naturally.

Marc let him work, glad to have that solved for the moment. Neil would set up a viewing area and Jennifer would be the steady guard on it, giving her an excuse to observe that crowd and converse with them. Small holes in the roof could be opened for viewing times.

“The camp will like this. It’ll earn you points.”

“Good.” Marc was determined to leave with the same stellar reputation he’d brought in.

Now bunkered in a small alcove nearby, Chauncey laughed, letting it carry.

“You don’t know the future, Marcus Brady.” Chauncey stared at the pictures of islands he’d pasted over the hard stone with spit and floor dirt. “But you will. Angela and Adrian have learned it. *Your* turn has arrived.”

Chauncey nervously stood up as steps approached.

So did the sentry, though he was hoping it was Marc coming to smack the traitor around a bit.

“Come with me.” Kyle unlocked the gate, not certain he approved of the man being allowed to shower and eat with them. After helping the government, Chauncey deserved to die. However, that standard would remove many of the new people Kyle did approve of getting a second chance. He was able to recognize his own bias. This man had endangered Jennifer. That was why he didn’t like him.

“I am sorry, you know.” Chauncey limped slowly out. After a month in the cell, his body had stiffened and weakened.

“I don’t believe that.” Kyle pointed toward the correct tunnel for the cafeteria.

“I like to wash before breakfast.”

Kyle lifted a brow, but grudgingly took the man to the nearest wash area. As they entered the steamy stone impression, Chauncey’s delight overflowed.

“Hot water! Can I have a shower? Please, oh, please?!”

Kyle couldn’t stop the reluctant grin. He’d felt the same way when Adrian had first hooked up showers for the camp, months after the war. More of Kyle’s bitterness over Adrian faded at that thought. The man really had done a lot for them. He’d given everyone moments of joy like this repeatedly during his time as leader. Now experiencing guilt, Kyle pointed Chauncey toward a shelf with towels and hygiene products. “You have ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes with the water running?” Chauncey gawked incredulously. “Are you crazy? You can’t waste that much water.”

The two Eagles on duty chuckled, as did the few men who were using the showers.

“We have plenty of water,” Kyle explained, thinking about the row of gigantic water heaters Theo’s team had assembled in place. “We recycle about 85% of what the camp uses. You can have ten minutes, like everyone else.”

Overjoyed, Chauncey immediately began to strip the grimy clothes from his crusty body.

Kyle and the others didn’t avoid looking at him even though they wanted to. Security took precedence over nudity; the guards scanned continuously for problems. Most dwellers waited until they got behind a stall to take off their clothes, but Chauncey pranced across the damp, warm floor with his man parts dangling. It was embarrassing and heartwarming at the same time. In that moment, he was an innocent child discovering the joys of a bath with toys.

“You have toys?!” Chauncey squealed in delight.

Kyle pointed him toward the box of scrubbers, ducks, and balls. It was usually the kids who played with them, but the Eagles occasionally came in after lessons and tossed the balls around while cleaning. Angela had foreseen the harmless entertainment going over well. She’d been right.

“What can you tell us about the history of the descendants?” Barry had sentry duty until Kyle’s crew was ready to leave for the train station, but this chance alone with Chauncey wasn’t likely to come again.

Also interested in that answer, Kyle took up a position near the exit, where he would be able to hear this conversation and any problems coming from the camp.

“Lots.” Chauncey shifted around with an armful of colored plastic balls and his own swinging sack. “What do you want to know?”

Kyle was laughing, unlike the guards who were still fighting the urge. He now understood how someone could force this man to do whatever they wanted. Chauncey wasn’t stable, in several ways.

“Have they always been around?” Barry forced out through the amusement.

“Are they really descendants of God?” Zack didn’t care about the man’s giant, snake-like, curled up... *How can it stay curled when hanging? My dick doesn’t defy gravity.*

The questions flew hard and fast for a few minutes where Chauncey stood in front of them and answered patiently. Barry finally waved him into the shower, even though he still had queries. He couldn’t look at the man’s balls anymore. As it was, all the toys in here would now have to be replaced or he would never get the image out of his mind. That was the longest schlong he’d ever seen. The thought of it hardening was enough to make Barry

ashamed. He couldn't match that even with a generous extension.

As Chauncey vanished under the water, filling the steamy stall with squeals of delight and squeaking balls, Barry and Zack exchanged raised brows of intimidated awe.

“Can you imagine the wife?”

Barry burst into laughter that he tried to smother. “Not after he had it. You can't Kegel that back into shape!”

Kyle held onto the wall through his mirth. He still wasn't sure why Angela had insisted that Barry be bumped up after so short a training period. Despite saving Marc, the new man hadn't actually earned his slot on Special Forces yet, but he was definitely a good duty partner.

“This is so nice!” Chauncey blew water against the stall.

Kyle deliberated on how Chauncey could be so cruel as to betray his own kind, while being a child the rest of the time. It was how Jennifer could be a killer, but also still be afraid of some men, he assumed. Humans were complex creatures with deep layers of filters that protected their every thought, cushioned their every moment of reality, but even the war hadn't been able to strip their passions. Light would fill the world again. The apocalypse wouldn't be the end of humanity. Safe Haven was proof of that, but Kyle was positive people across the world were the same. With or without magic, humans were special.

Kyle thought of the baby waiting for him, able to feel her looking forward to their bedtime routine even though the day had just begun. When his shift ended at night, he'd been going to Autumn's crib for an hour of father time. They both loved it, though sometimes it was hard on him. The baby had begun to sense things about her birth that neither he nor her mother were ready to handle yet.

Kyle frowned as a cold chill floated through the tunnel. Following his instincts, he hit his radio. "Time for a check in."

Chapter Twelve

Move Away From The Pen

1

Samantha fought to concentrate. She'd had duty over the air quality cubby for the last week, sleeping when someone could be spared to watch the dials. They were keeping the sensor numbers quiet for now, hoping they didn't need to reveal the charts at all. To do that, they had to limit who had access to this small compartment. As a result, only she, Neil, Jeremy, and Jennifer were taking shifts.

Samantha jumped as the small timer went off, sending loud buzzing through her foggy brain. She hurriedly slapped her hand on it, sighing. "Time to check on the donuts."

Samantha got her pen and notebook out, scanning her neat script. She checked the gauges and found the numbers the same. Samantha dutifully recorded them and then leaned back in the chair. She would give someone another hour to relieve her.

The monitor behind Samantha showed the proof of the second snowstorm she'd predicted; thick clouds were roiling toward them from the west. It would carry cold and precipitation, but also the contamination from Yellowstone and any fallout

from meltdowns near there or along the way. Angela had been right to bury them in this mountain.

The thin door opened a few minutes later, letting Jeremy in. His shift was finished, but he wasn't pulling the hours that Samantha and Neil were. He wanted her to go to the couples' area and sleep.

His heart settled into a contented rhythm as he spotted her sleeping features. *I love you. You'll never know how much.*

Samantha didn't wake up, busy fighting the pull of the dreams that wanted her to fly away in them again. She'd been having those more and more often, dreaming of the island and the boat ride to get there. Terrible storms were already preparing for their passage.

Jeremy knelt down next to the chair, placing a gentle hand over her slight stomach bulge.

Sam slowly woke. She slid her hand over his. "They're sleeping."

Jeremy laid his ear against her belly, fascinated. *I'm having a son!*

Samantha stroked his clean hair. *I'm sorry I can't pick one of them. They both deserve a full life with a real wife.*

Pain lanced through her heart, but Samantha controlled it, not letting the babies feel it and respond. She'd tricked the cancer, but the clock hadn't stopped ticking. It had taken her a month to figure out why she wasn't happy, despite being

spared. Because she hadn't been. Death was still over her shoulder, over all their shoulders. The dreams were warnings that time was getting short. Angela had to call the bugout soon.

Jeremy slowly helped her to her feet. "Get some sleep."

Enjoying the fresh scent of his cologne, Sam kissed his cheek and staggered toward their bed. Once Jeremy had chosen to fight his fear of being in the mountain, he'd easily conquered it. She was proud of him.

Jeremy settled into the chair, doing a quick sweep of all the gauges and monitors. The levels outside were the same as they had been the entire time that Safe Haven had been watching them—roughly three months—but the numbers down here in the mountain were lower. The personal badges stuck to the stone above the monitors and below the air vent were well under former safety levels for employees in power plants. If the numbers began to climb down here, then Safe Haven would have a completely new set of problems.

Enjoying the swimming head he'd brought with him from the shower, Jeremy switched his radio on. He wanted to be aware of anything that might happen in their caves. It had been quiet so far, other than the train people. Jeremy wasn't sure how he felt about Angela's methods to rid them of that issue, but there was no denying that he felt safer for it. None of those people would return to hurt them later. The camp was almost proud of it, as if they'd

sent out an army to fight and won. Jeremy didn't find any honor in poisoning, but that was the least of his worries where survival was concerned. Except...he didn't want to serve a boss who was capable of that. *I want Adrian back. I really do. What the hell is wrong with me?*

Passing the room, Marc felt his good mood vanish. More than a few members were wishing the same thing. They'd had time to weigh all that had happened. Adrian had refused to give Safe Haven to the government, at great risk to his own life. He'd left them in great hands with Angela. Time was passing and anger was fading.

"Not mine." Marc didn't want to revive their open rivalry, but it rankled to know Adrian was being forgiven when he deserved to be hanged. Marc envisioned the hands-on method he'd chosen for the Jody's final moment. A dry grin stretched his lips, good mood returning. Three hundred days from now, he would wrap his eager, strengthened arms around Adrian's neck from behind and snap it. Not even a descendant would be able to resurrect him from that.

"Three hundred and counting!" Marc strolled toward the cafeteria for a mug of Li Sing's hair-growing coffee. "Three hundred and counting."

On his way, Marc slowed for the footsteps coming from the lower passages. They sounded urgent.

He twisted around in time to be hit with the butt of a rifle, flashing him to the mistakes of his youth.

Glad the hit hadn't been hard enough to knock him unconscious, Marc kicked out harshly as he fell. Screams echoed through the cave as the man's knee shattered.

Marc hit his button, sweeping for more trouble through blurry vision. "Minor accident, no worries. Anyone need a hand?"

No reports of attacks came, telling Marc he was the only target.

Shane, the guard on the area, skidded to a halt in surprise as he rounded the corner. "Not another one!"

"Yeah." Marc grunted his frustration. "Get the doctor to knock him out, then pick a cell."

Three more Eagles joined him with guns drawn.

"He fell off the ladder and broke his leg. Tell people to be careful."

Morgan motioned the others to carry the screaming man to the medical bay, not challenging Marc on the lie. The nearest ladder was ten yards away.

Marc followed, recognizing the injured assassin as one of their newest arrivals. This one, and a few others, had come in together right before the avalanche, seeming like decent folks who just needed a little help. It added a fresh layer of danger for Marc, who had cleared the man himself. It already felt like they were being betrayed daily and they had no way of knowing how many more assassins were in here with them. He had to find a way to scan everyone in Safe Haven, but they

desperately needed a foolproof method for the descendants, who knew how to shield their thoughts under multiple layers. He and Jennifer had been in a hurry, but they also weren't as strong as Angela was, so they'd skipped layers and made mistakes. Marc assumed Angie had done that as well as her gifts grew or they wouldn't still have long-time assassins in here with them. Until he had a way to bust through all the layers at once, it would continue under his watch.

Shane had the medical bay cleared and the doctor filled in by the time the Eagles arrived. They dumped the crying man on the waiting cot, but didn't leave in case the assassin tried to get to Marc again.

"Did you have to shatter it?" The doctor examined the bones with no regard for the man's renewed screaming. He spotted Marc's new bruises, lips disappearing into his puffy profile.

The Eagles holding him looked to Marc in surprise.

"He fell from a ladder." Marc cursed his oversight and the ache in his jaw. He should have told Shane what to say. "Can you shut him up?"

The doctor quickly shot a sedative into the struggling man's hip. He didn't care about Marc covering with the camp. He didn't want to hear any more screaming either. "He'll need surgery. I don't know how to do it."

"No need." Marc watched the assassin slumped over. "How long will he be out?"

“Two or three hours. Why?”

“Just scheduling a conversation about the dangers of ladders.” Marc smiled cheerfully. “Take him to the brig.”

The Eagles took the unconscious man to the cells down the corridor from the medical bay, casting curious glances at Marc.

The doctor glared at Marc as soon as they were alone. “Angie can’t come back yet. You tell her we all agree on that.”

Marc was tired of hearing it. He also felt she was safer where she was. When it came to keeping people alive, Adrian was a pro. Marc started to go to the brig, but the radio on his belt crackled, making the doctor jump. Everyone was twitchy.

“Marc, you got a minute?” Jeremy’s voice was perfectly controlled. “No hurry.”

Marc caught the code and the secret that Jeremy didn’t want anyone to know. *Great. That’s just what we need.* “Sure. Are those new screens going fuzzy again?”

“Yes. Do you have time to take a look?”

“Yep. Things are 5-by here.” Marc swung toward the monitoring cubby, donning a calm facade to hide his frustration. The next wave of chaos was about to hit, early, and Angie wasn’t here to handle it. He was on his own.

Jeremy shoved the mouth spray into his pocket as the door opened, getting straight to business. “Kyle’s crew contacted me through the cameras. They don’t want to leave the site until they’re done. It might take all day.”

Marc waved his approval, settling into the other chair. He scanned the monitors while Jeremy filled him in.

“They sent two messages. The first is there was no body for Sonja. The second is elevated levels on the personal patches. They put those dosimeters on their jackets this morning, new. Four hours outside now results in measurable radiation exposure.”

Marc studied the view of the train station, unable to see any space that the men had failed to search. There were small fires scattered all over the tracks and ground, with hundreds of bodies burning. The Eagles appeared to be roughly half through cleaning up the mess. “How elevated?”

“Still under the old limits. It’s the first jump. Angela told us to make certain you knew the moment it happened, that it would matter in your calculations.”

“It will. They’re positive on her body?”

“Yes, but Kyle saw drag marks all around the area. The crew agrees that Sonja was probably among those picked off by wildlife or scavengers who wanted her clothes or gear. We also can’t identify everyone from the two sites that were mined. She could have been there.”

“It’ll be good enough.” Marc wasn’t going to waste men on the hunt. Sonja had eaten lightly at the picnic tables, which implied she would have gorged herself upon returning to the privacy of her train car. He had assumed she didn’t like the way they were preparing the meal. He still thought that and her being dragged off after death to be eaten by a wolf was fitting. He almost hoped it was Dog. “Tell them to hurry and get home.”

Jeremy activated the mike on the camera as Kyle walked by it on the screen. “Finish up. No hunting.”

Kyle snapped a salute to the camera, then continued pouring gasoline over the bodies. Marc had assigned twenty gallons for this chore. It wouldn’t burn everything down to ashes, but it would get most of the poison and send a powerful message to anyone who found it. Especially when they read the message Kyle had been instructed to paint on the walls of the station. *Slavery is illegal. – Safe Haven.*

Marc headed for the tunnel, picking up the impatience of his next appointment. “Jeremy?”

The Eagle tensed, instantly nervous at Marc’s tone. “Yes?”

“Don’t ever do it again. I like you and we all need you, but I’ll bust your ass down to a rookie and then run you out if you ever do a shift while drunk again.”

Jeremy didn’t have a chance to respond as Marc slammed the thin door on his way out. Alone with

his shame, Jeremy lowered his cheek to his arm and tried not to puke. That last drink had been the one too many he was supposed to avoid. Hiding his problem hadn't been easy in this hellhole. He hoped Marc didn't tell Samantha he wasn't adjusting as well as she'd thought.

"I hate it down here. Please, God. Get me topside before I ruin everything."

3

"Where have you been?"

Marc tried not to laugh at the little girl with her hand on her hip. "Working. You ready?"

Missy moved over so he could sit next to her. "I already have been. Shawn helped."

Marc didn't look at the man lurking in the corner with his arms over his chest. "Good. Show me what you've got."

Missy slid the wide paper over. "It's good, right?"

Marc frowned at the bright colors. "Crayon?"

Missy shrugged. "I'm not allowed to have a pen."

Marc glanced at Shawn. "Why?"

"She makes a mess." Shawn shrugged. "I got tired of cleaning it up."

"That's not her fault." Marc handed her his Bic. "You have to teach her."

"No, you don't understand. She knows how to use it. She can't control it."

“Sure.” Marc rolled his eyes. “Missy, honey, circle the ones that are the most dangerous.”

“I already did.” She uncapped the pen.

Marc peered at the orange and yellow lines. It was a dozen stick figures in seven different areas. He had hoped there wasn’t that many.

“Oh, there’s more.” Missy shook the pen to get the ink flowing. “That’s the ones I membered. I haven’t been to all the rooms yet. Shawn won’t take me into some of them and I’m not allowed to go on my own.”

“That’s about to change.” Marc tried to figure out how he would determine who each of the stick figures were. “What’s this?”

“A red scarf.” Missy frowned when the ink wouldn’t come down the tube. “She had red hair.”

Marc knew who it was from that. He made a note on the paper, adding the name. “Where is this?”

“The kitchen. That boy helps bring stock to Li Sing.”

Shawn reluctantly interrupted. “Uh, Marc?”

“Hang on.” Marc pointed to the drawing. “Is that a training room?”

“Yeah. The one by the reading chamber. I can hear the bad thoughts, but I never get to see the people, so I don’t know which one it is.”

Marc leaned in. “Is that...”

“Marc, listen, I think you—”

“She’s not upset at all! Let us work.”

Shawn pulled a face. “You got it, *Boss.*”

Missy, aggravated with the pen, jerked it up and down furiously. “Come on!”

Realizing his mistake too late, Marc grimaced as the ink splattered across his chest, face, shirt, arms, and jacket. “Let me guess. I should move away from the pen?”

“Yeah.” Shawn laughed as he took the leaking pen from Missy’s hand and began to wipe her off. “Ink, paint, Kool Aid. If it stains, she can’t be near it or the closest person wears it.”

Marc tried not to rub his skin, knowing the ink would spread and stain worse. “I’ve never seen a Bic do that.”

“I’m special,” Missy declared promptly.

“Yes, you are,” the two men answered in unison, causing more chuckles.

Marc stood up. “Keep going over it with her like I was. I need a shower.”

Shawn, still laughing, gestured his acceptance of the order.

Missy was happy to have made her future mate happy instead of annoyed or depressed. She beamed at him.

Shawn’s smile slowly faded as the glow of bonding settled onto his shoulders. It had only been a week of caring for the little girl, but it already felt longer. He’d been trudging through so far, determined to reclaim his honor, but this moment was different. He liked her.

Missy’s joy was obvious. Her friend Angie was right. If she didn’t ever push him, Shawn would end

up being hers. She just had to teach him to love her along the way. *I'm cute. Who wouldn't love me?*

Marc snickered. He'd paused to wipe his hands so he didn't streak ink all through his clean gear while he dug out clothes. He was still smiling when Morgan came from the lower level ladder to join him.

"He's secured. What are you going to do with him after your discussion on the dangers of ladders?" Morgan didn't comment on the ink stains. He'd observed Missy and Shawn entering the room a while ago to wait. He could guess what had happened.

"First, you and Kenn will check out his friends."

"Why Kenn?" Morgan still didn't like the loudmouth Marine.

"Because he'll know what to say to set them up." Marc liked being honest. "These guys are rookies. So is Kenn. He bunks with them."

"They'll know he's too loyal to the chain of command to tell him anything."

"Agreed. But he'll know who they do trust. Get a man inside to find the proof."

"Why not have a des..." Morgan stopped at the instant anger that came over Marc's ink-dotted face.

"We can't solve all the problems here using magic! We don't have enough descendants or the time to sort through every person. We're going to have to rely on standard police methods."

"A narc?"

“Yes. You and Kenn have to pick a narc to roam among the rookies. Good luck.”

Morgan drifted toward the radio cubby, not pleased with the job he'd been given. Marc was going to hide magic from the camp, which was against what Adrian and Angela had been doing. It would cause problems. Morgan hoped Marc would be the only one to learn the lesson from it this time, not Angela or the Eagles. They'd all suffered enough.

4

Adrian tapped the spoon against the small pot. “Time for a lesson.” He was making a meal and trying not to look at her at all until she'd had a chance to fully wake up.

Angela glanced at the target on the pegboard; pain lanced through her heart. She'd only been awake for half an hour, despite it being late afternoon.

“Was it restful?”

Angela didn't answer his distracted question, refusing to admit even mentally that she'd been delighted to wake up next to him.

Adrian knew. He gestured at the dartboard. “Go on. The doctor said to get you using those arms as much as you can stand. Do underhand until you can do over.”

When she didn't, Adrian came over to take the darts from the board and hold them out to her. He

noted the hollow cheeks and sunken eyes lined with purple skin. *How could Marc have ever believed you would make the trade willingly?*

“Don’t.”

“Time for a lesson.” Adrian backed up as she took the darts and grudgingly staggered to the line of yellow tape he’d placed for her to stand on.

Angela tossed the first one underhand. It immediately felt like she was taking the coward’s way out. She began throwing normally with her left hand, reading his goals and his hopes to distract her from the pain. There was a chance her aim would improve. Her heart, he couldn’t fix.

“I love you.”

Angela winced. “I don’t deserve that from either of you. Stick with Kendle.”

“Marc will share your time now. It’ll be better.”

“It will never be better.”

Adrian worried even more. Her tone was emotionless. Where was the fire? He thought of repeating all of the things Marc and the others had obviously tried, and chose to skip them. If Marc hadn’t broken her this way, then only one thing might succeed.

“It won’t. I wish you wouldn’t even try.”

“Because it hurts?”

“I can’t accept it now.”

“Without empathy and love, you can’t lead.”

“I expected them to call the vote right after I killed all the train descendants and their innocent slaves.”

Her calm words confirmed one of his suspicions. *She's abdicating my throne.* "To Marc?"

Angela nodded, but didn't say more. She sank down in the chair and drew the blanket tight around her shoulders. The remaining darts fell to the ground. The doctors wanted her to use the arms, but they didn't have to experience the pain and be constantly reminded of why it was there.

Adrian studied the old plan again. In the past, he'd thought about gifting the ugly job of permanent leadership to Marc once the man toughened up enough to do whatever it took to keep their people alive, but it hadn't ever felt right. It still didn't. Angela was meant to lead them south. If anyone else tried, it would get them killed.

"It's already getting us killed. You've seen what we're about to face?"

"Yes."

Angela dropped her head. "I can't take anymore death—theirs or mine, it doesn't matter. It kills me with every one of them."

Adrian now understood exactly what she was suffering. It wasn't just the baby. How many times had he sat in his tent with a blanket and a drink, mourning alone for one of his beloved herd? She had instinctively copied his coping mechanisms.

"They don't work."

Adrian chuckled in bitter agreement. "No."

"Making sure it wasn't in vain isn't enough now," she confided in horror that was still too dazed and faraway for his liking.

“That’s when I knew I’d had enough.” Adrian took the chair across from her. He had the screen in his view from here. Nothing was moving out there except the wind.

“Were you already training me then?”

Adrian got a flash of Joe. “You hadn’t arrived yet.”

“And you went on for months this way?”

Adrian locked their eyes. “When you came, it got easier.”

Angela wanted to feel something for him at that moment just to replace the cold chill she couldn’t shake, but there was nothing. She stared back impassively. Then she began to cry.

Adrian watched the tears glisten in the dim glow of the lowly lit lantern in the corner, frustration growing. If he was her match, he would know how to help her, but he was as clueless as Marc was...

Adrian stilled as a new idea occurred. It was ugly, awful to do to her, and yet, it felt like it might break through a layer or two of the ice around her heart. The problem was, he didn’t want it all to melt. The flood of tears she was already shedding didn’t need to be increased with full awareness of her pain. She needed to be in the middle for a while and deal with as much as she could at one time. When she conquered each brick, she could continue to the next one without being drowned.

He suspected she was trying to do that herself, but her walls were too thick to allow a connection. He had no link into her mind at all, something that

had never happened with them unless the bubble was interfering. “Are you mad that I chose you?”

“I’m still honored.” She shuddered tiredly, not bothering to wipe away the tears that would only be replaced. Each time she sank back into her mental hell, Adrian pulled her into the real one. “And ashamed that I haven’t done better.”

“You’ve done great through the chaos you’ve had to supervise since taking my place.”

“No one can take your place,” she stated automatically.

If only more people felt that way! Adrian gushed silently, unable to help it. He missed being in control, being the one everyone went to for help and answers.

“Well, whose fault is that?!” Angela thumped her head against the chair. “Quit whining. We’ve all suffered losses.”

Pleased at her anger, Adrian was disappointed when fresh tears began flooding down her cheeks. The anger wasn’t real. It was the pain taking any available vent.

He watched as she sank down into her quilt of silence. *Back to the drawing board. For the first time in my life, I may not be able to reach a hurting female with my light. The fact that I love this one just makes it cruel.*

“At least you’re getting some of what you deserve.” Angela pulled the blanket up to her chin, shivering. “I want you out of the bed before I wake up from now on. It puts me in a bad mood.”

Adrian bowed lowly in sarcasm, but the demand hurt him. He'd never been happier than watching her eyes light up when she saw he'd taken her into his arms for more warmth during the night. She'd hidden it as soon as she realized what was happening, but Adrian would never forget it. She liked being with him. She still felt something for him. It was great for his ego, but it was even better for her recovery. Other than sadness or anger, it was the first emotion she'd shown since Marc had brought her here. If not for two brief seconds, he wouldn't have any hope at all for her recovery.

Chapter Thirteen

Lessons

1

Marc settled onto the stool outside the cell, observing the would-be assassin's waking thoughts.

What happened? Oh... My leg!

The groaning started before the man's eyes opened. Marc realized he'd done too much damage for coherent thinking. He quickly shoved through the man's layers to gain access to any plans he and his friends had made, but there was only the bright glows of pain and addiction.

Marc narrowed in on the sallow skin and twitchy muscles as he became aware of not being alone in the brig anymore. Without prisoners, there hadn't been any need to waste workers to patrol it. Chauncey's little cubby was right next to a guard post now.

Marc glanced over at Morgan.

Morgan held up a small syringe of clear liquid.

Both men braced as the prisoner's eyes flew open.

"My leg!"

Morgan shut the door as the shouting resumed. Then he joined Marc in front of the cell. "I'll do it."

That snagged Marc's attention. "You have Kyle's old job?"

Morgan shrugged. "It's *your* old job too."

Marc understood he wasn't allowed to pretend he was above this after doing it for most of his life. "Yeah. Stand down."

Morgan's respect for Marc went up. Adrian had preferred to let his flunkies handle the wet work and the cleanup. Morgan didn't mind the latter, but a leader had to be willing to do the former alongside their men. It came with the job.

Marc rushed into the cell and slapped the syringe into the easiest place to reach—the killer's neck.

The assassin groaned loudly, still holding his shattered knee. "Please..."

Marc pushed the plunger without guilt or sympathy. He stood over the man as the drugs began to take effect. The shouts and moans fell to muttering; a thick stream of drool presented within a minute. Marc didn't know what drug it was, but it worked quickly. Two minutes after injecting his assassin, the man had quit moving. His breathing stopped next. Marc left the cell.

Morgan wondered at Marc's thoughts as he filled out a death report from the cabinet. Adrian had always shown signs of unhappiness and guilt after moments like this.

"I'm not him."

Morgan was glad that Marc didn't sound angry. He shrugged. "Still, if you ever need to talk about the things we do, that's also part of my job."

"Thanks."

Morgan watched him, assuming Marc was going to get a small crew for body disposal. Morgan clicked his mic. This was their first death in Safe Haven. He wasn't sure what would be done with the body. Burning it would produce a harsh smell many of their members would recognize. Kyle would handle it if Marc didn't know how.

Kyle met Marc as he came from the brig. "We had some trouble in the bottom passage." Kyle handed him the images he'd snapped with the new camera all Eagles were now required to carry.

"Do we have someone patrolling entrances that I don't know about?"

Marc studied the Polaroid images, then handed them back. He strode toward the supply compartment. "I don't, but we both know I'm still not in the loop on a lot of things."

"Yeah, about that. The Eagles want to call a meeting about Angie. I put them off a bit with the usual story of her not being safe, but it isn't going to hold them."

"What's the biggest beef?" Marc knelt down to grab duct tape and a garbage bag from the supply shelf. "Her being alone with the traitor or her not being here to protect them if something happens?"

“Neither of those.” Kyle following, curious now. There had obviously been trouble while he and the crew were burning the mess at the train station. “No one likes how it’s affecting you.”

Marc paused. “Me?”

Kyle took the bag and tape from Marc’s hand. “Yes, and that reminds me. Leaders don’t do cleanup, even if they made the mess. I told Adrian that. Kevin told it to Angela. That’s how this setup rolls best. Now get back to business. We want her home.”

Kyle went into the brig, assuming the problem had occurred there since that’s where Marc had been coming from. The guard would tell him.

Marc stared in surprise. He’d always assumed Adrian hadn’t handled things himself because he was a giant douche. With Angela, Marc had witnessed her guilt and her exhaustion while trying to keep up and he’d been forgiving. He had never once considered that the Eagles insisted on the leader’s hands looking clean.

Why would they do that? He went toward the bottom tunnel to examine the scene. He had a suspicion about who was responsible for it. *Why are they hiding our danger moments?*

Marc’s demon was still angry and didn’t answer.

Quit acting like a bitch! Marc spewed it furiously. *Help me or go away!*

That negative presence resentfully vanished.

Marc took a deep breath as a small group of camp members came through the level to get to the ladder for the top floor. He plastered boredom on his profile and slowed his steps. There was no need to panic everyone with his possible schizophrenia.

Marc zipped up his jacket as he reached the lower level, suddenly hoping Angela was warm enough. He hadn't sent much gear with her to keep the kit light, but also so that Adrian wouldn't have much afterwards. He hadn't wanted to outfit his enemy, but now he was feeling guilty because Angie might be suffering.

Fighting the urge to call out to them when he reached the very bottom, Marc flipped on his belt light and jogged through the darkness for his daily workout while on the way to play detective. Later, he could think about what he wanted from his time as a boss of this refugee camp and make some changes.

He wasn't like Angela and Adrian, who felt they needed to save each and every life. Marc still disliked many of the inhabitants here. The thought of taking all of them on a boat to a deserted island had never set well with him. Now that he was in charge, he could do something about that. A lot of the camp wouldn't like it. They preferred Angela making those choices, but the way things felt, she wasn't coming back any time soon. They would all have to adjust to his methods and values, or stay here and rot. There wasn't a choice beyond those

two. *The crimes of our previous leaders won't be mine. Not now, not ever.*

2

“I want to be an Eagle.”

Joseph stiffened at the adamant tone. “I told you the Eagles were closed to new members over a month ago, when all the refugees flooded our gate. When Marc’s ready, it will be reopened and then you’ll get your chance.”

Gus stared back suspiciously. “You sure it ain’t cause we’re...”

Joseph punched the man in his giant throat, doing absolutely no damage. It didn’t stop his warning. “We don’t do things like that! We’re the good guys.” Joseph stomped from the training room, subtly rubbing his hand. “Someone else will be by to guide you on your tour. With that attitude, it won’t be me.”

Marc, listening from the shadows, stepped in front of Joseph as he came through the beaded curtains of the small training compartment. “Problem?”

Joseph jumped, nearly shouting in surprise.

Marc grinned, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Joseph immediately felt the need to defend his actions. “I handled it like you would have.”

“You handled it like Adrian would have. I do wonder if violence is the right solution to get your point across.” Marc left the confused man standing

in the drafty corridor, now unsure if he'd done things right.

Is there a better way than Adrian's?

Marc was glad the man was weighing that and tossed a bit of advice over his shoulder. "Missa would probably like to help you with your goals. Ask her to join."

Joseph stared after Marc, stomach a ball of fire. He and Missa were getting close, but it wasn't romantic. They had too many obstacles in the way. Missa was terrified of most men and her white skin next to his black shade already drew snide comments when they went on walks together or ate at the same table. Safe Haven boasted being equal to the masses, but Joseph knew better. As soon as he started to date Missa openly, there would be trouble for both of them. Equality was for whites, as usual.

"I wish you wouldn't think that way."

Joseph spun around to find Jennifer coming up the hall. She was obviously trailing Marc, providing protection while Angela couldn't.

Jennifer halted in front of the black man, admiring his neat appearance. Few of the males here cared about things like that when there was so much work to be done.

Joseph stayed silent, certain he was about to be scolded. He didn't think this would get him banished, but he was nervous as he waited.

Jennifer realized normal conversation wasn't going to break through his layers of icy denial and

past prejudices. She sighed, trying anyway. “We’re all adapting as best we can. Surviving the apocalypse was hard—for every race. Isn’t it time to put those awful tragedies aside so that we can have a future now?” Before he could answer, Jennifer grabbed his wrist and connected their minds. “This is what I see for *our* citizens.”

Joseph controlled his fear and churning guts to watch the vision. It was amazingly detailed, allowing no disbelief as he saw the people he’d just yelled at, punched. They were full Eagles in the future, with heavy jobs and all the respect they could carry.

“Now see what happens without you leading this moment in our new history,” she intoned eerily.

The vision changed to not a single dark profile in the camp. It appeared as though *all* other races had been removed. Even the cook was different.

“Segregation now is possible if that is what people truly want. But this time, it will never revert.” She stepped around the shocked man. “You are a leader, Joseph. It’s time to act like one. Do your duty.”

Jennifer believed Joseph was a good man. He would come around and help ease the occasional racial issue that came up. Once those people had been here a while, they would understand race meant nothing to Safe Haven’s administrators. Hard work and loyalty, on the other hand, were omnipotent and could lead to anywhere, even the main council seats. All Joseph had to do was work

and sweat harder than he ever had. Jennifer was positive he would. She was also furious with the few assholes they had here.

They want everyone to be the same, her demon volunteered. Differences are shunned in society.

After a while, Safe Haven will fix that ugliness in the population. The atrocities of the past will not be repeated anymore. We're the new future and it is made up of all races.

Her demon didn't answer.

Marc and Jennifer found Cynthia waiting at the security cubby. Jennifer immediately turned in the opposite direction.

Marc dropped the papers on the desk and faced the reporter. "What can I do for you on this fine—"

"Why didn't she take me as her XO?" Cynthia closed the door to Marc's security cubby. "Is it because she wants my child?"

Marc tried to scoff, but he was aware of being mentally probed by the baby. "No." He slammed his walls down, glaring a bit. "What's your problem?"

Cynthia felt the anger of her child as Marc's threatening vibes surrounded her, but she had to know the truth. "Why are you lying to me?"

Marc perched on the edge of the table, sighing. "I don't know why she vetoed you from the trip. I haven't asked her. I'm certain you can understand that your friendship with her wasn't top on my list."

Cynthia didn't even blink at the sarcasm. "She's punishing me and I don't know why. I've done my duty and then some."

“Yes, you have. But you’re blowing it now with wild accusations and a bad attitude.” Marc studied her, tone softening. “I haven’t forgotten that you saved her life. I have work for you. Just give me time to get my feet set in this job, okay?”

Soothed a bit, she sighed. “Can I interview the teams for the next edition of the Quest Chronicles? I’ve heard about fights between the old Eagles and the rookie soldiers.”

Marc felt a flicker of concern, but he couldn’t detect a reason for it. “Yes. Leave Jennifer alone.”

“Why? Protecting Angie’s pet?”

“Nope.” Marc slid by her to reach the exit. “Protecting you. Attack Jennifer the way you are me and one of you will end up in the medical bay. We both know who it will be.” Marc continued down the hall to do rounds, snickering mentally at the image.

“But the other will be dead.” Cynthia went in the opposite direction Marc had taken. She rubbed her upset stomach, breathing deeply. She didn’t doubt the warnings the baby was sending. She also didn’t think she and Daryl had been placed on duty in the bottom levels by accident. Daryl got to escape with his Special Forces team, granting him a reprieve, but Cynthia was only on the top levels now when she went for a walk. She had no interest in the reading or television rooms.

“Something’s going on.” She shoved by a group of new people who were being given a tour of this

level by Joseph. “When I find out what it is, I’ll blow this place wide open with the truth.”

Standing by the security booth, Kevin and Jeff both frowned. They’d been put on duty down here by Marc, both happy to feel like Eagles again, but it had been boring. Until now.

Kevin sighed. “Put it in the book.”

Jeff did it without commenting, respect for Kevin increasing. The reporter hadn’t even glanced at Kevin, despite the various meals and moments that had already put the pair in the same area together. She didn’t look well, and now she sounded like there was a problem. Fresh from the wastelands, Jeff and Kevin knew danger when they spotted it. Cynthia was trouble again and they had no idea how it had happened. When they’d left, she had been a hero.

Kevin considered sorting through people to locate someone he could trust to fill him in, and chose not to. He honestly didn’t want to be a part of the drama anymore. He still wanted to be with Cynthia, and maybe he could have adjusted to being a stepfather if he hadn’t been gone for a month. Now that he’d returned, it was clear that he didn’t belong here now. He wanted more from his future than to help raise a descendant’s offspring or to become a top Eagle. “I’m not staying.”

Jeff wasn’t surprised. He and Kevin had gravitated together out of pain and boredom.

Neither of those emotions was tolerable inside Safe Haven's harsh walls. The reminders were constant.

"You?"

"No." Jeff grunted. "Even the crazy lady is better than this."

Kevin chuckled, but he concurred. Sally was nuts. The people here were fanatics.

"You think so?" Jeff questioned in surprise. He hadn't ever felt that way.

"I don't know." Kevin shrugged. "Just feels wrong somehow. I'm still trying to figure out why."

"Same here. Beer after duty? We'll talk."

"You know it."

3

I wonder if Conner misses me.

Candy looked around guiltily to see if there was anyone nearby who might have caught the thought. When she spotted no one, she relaxed and continued to contemplate it as she shucked corn with the other camp members. This was the final harvest of warm weather food from the gardens. There was a small group of men and women here, but none of them were descendants.

Candy pictured Conner out questing with Kendle for a boat. He was too busy to miss her, like Theo was too busy with the deaf chick to have time for her now. Lee was gone, Angela wasn't here, and Candy had never felt close to Marc. Despite being surrounded by people, she was alone.

Spine aching, Candy leaned against the stone wall and shut her eyes for a short break. She had volunteered for this evening shift and she could leave when she wanted, but she had nowhere else to go, nowhere to be. Eagle training hadn't resumed, but Candy wasn't sure if that would satisfy her either. She wanted to talk to Conner. When she asked herself why, the answer wasn't comforting.

Because he needs me, and I need that.

Candy resumed working, not joining in with the jokes or conversation. She didn't have much in common with these happy camp members. And Safe Haven was happy right now. Angela's sacrifice had removed the threats and returned the calm they had all come to expect from this refugee camp. It was great.

Jennifer walked by. She'd just been joined by her infant and her man; all of them were smiling and chattering happily. Candy's heart clenched. It was also lonely. *I don't know how much more peace and joy I can stand.*

4

“How are you holding up?”

“I'm cool.” Jeremy forced a sickly grin. “Frosty, like a cone.”

He'd spent the night here, sobering up and doing his duty. He could only hope Marc hadn't told anyone. Samantha wasn't acting like she knew.

Samantha scanned the gauges and monitors. “Some people are being sedated. You’re doing great.” She hoped it helped Jeremy and the others to know they weren’t alone in their fears about the mountain. Everyone knew they could all be buried and crushed at any time, but most of them also knew these tunnels had been here for thousands of years and were actually very safe. The mind liked to play tricks. For Jeremy, his past was an added weight, an extra demon to be battled.

“You need anything before I crash?” He was jumpy without the alcohol buzz to drown his concerns. He had to actively fight the urge to claw his way up the nearest corridor.

Samantha scanned the numbers and screens, and then nodded. “Yes. Come here for a minute, will you?”

Jeremy was distracted the minute she kissed him. Samantha in his arms was enough to block out all of the old terrors and then some.

When the security compartment door opened and closed, the couple barely noticed.

Neil stayed back, letting them have this moment. It was impossible not to harden with desire though, despite the 20-hour shift he’d just pulled. He’d never have believed he would be the type to share a woman. Their relationship had awkward moments where he wasn’t sure how to react, but in this area, he had no complaints at all. In fact, it was better than good. There was no more rushing

through his own pleasure because he didn't want his partner to lose interest, or guessing what was right and wrong to the detriment of his own arousal. Between the two of them, he and Jeremy could now bring Samantha to a shuddering climax in mere minutes, leaving them both time to fully enjoy the slick, welcoming heat of her body. It was perfect.

The door started to open again, but Neil neatly kicked it shut with the heel of his boot, snickering at the thud of contact. "All full here."

Samantha and Jeremy snickered against each other's lips, bodies now connected.

Tired, Neil allowed his mind to wander as he watched, hand occasionally stroking. He wasn't waiting for his turn. He was absorbing the good moment to combat the next wave of bad. That's all life really was anyway—a few vivid, amazing seconds, surrounded by dull, sometimes intolerable minutes. It made the precious seconds more valuable. Without them, no one would continue to fight for survival. There wouldn't be any point.

5

Do I have your permission to try anything?

Yes.

Marc's quick, curt answer implied he knew Adrian hadn't had any luck and he didn't expect the man to succeed, no matter what he tried. Adrian wanted to be cocky and say he would accomplish it where Marc couldn't, but he was too worried. He

didn't have much faith in his remaining ideas.
"Angie?"

"What?"

"You'll get Charlie tossed out. They'll banish him."

Angela's head slowly swiveled to find him by the small monitor. "Don't you think Marc tried that?"

"I assumed the boy scout wouldn't stoop to lying."

Angela snorted bitterly. "Thanks to me, he's being corrupted. He'll lie now. He'll also kill you. He's at a limit with this drama."

"You have a plan for that?"

Angela shrugged, still not touching the food or water he'd put near her chair. "I have plans; I haven't started them yet."

"Why not?" He knew her avoiding that was probably a bad sign. It meant the plans were ugly.

"I'm staying here." Angela had expected the same immediate denial she'd gotten from Marc, but Adrian only stared at her in concern.

"I've had enough. I can't do the job now and I don't want to. Let them all survive on their own. I don't care anymore."

The fresh tears proved her a liar, but Adrian was busy exploring the new options that had popped up in his mind. "If there's someplace you need to go, I'd take you."

"Yes, you will." Angela's voice grew cold.
"You owe me."

Adrian nodded without argument. He did. If not for her, he would be dead several times over, but more importantly, without her, there wouldn't be a Safe Haven.

“And they mean more to you than anything else, right?” She dug into him as deeply as he'd ever scanned her. “Even over Conner and me.”

Adrian didn't glance away. “Safe Haven is the reason I insist on breathing. I've carried this goal for so long that it consumes my every thought, even when I'm alone. I want you and I need you. I love you as much as I can love, but I'd give everything up for my country. I already have.”

“They're realizing that. You've done everything right since being banished.”

“Except for predicting your moves and being there to help,” Adrian muttered in half regret, half anger. “I'm sorry I wasn't faster.”

“I'd be dead if you hadn't come. Thank you.”

“Do you mean that?” He demanded an honest answer with his forceful tone. “Are you grateful to be alive?”

“No.” Fresh tears coursed over her raw, pale cheeks. “There was no reason to let me live, except fate is punishing me.”

“They were bad people, Angie.”

“That wasn't for me to decide. I'm not God!”

Adrian was encouraged by the small shout and responded in kind. “Well, God wasn't doing his job, was he? Someone had to!”

Angela shuddered at the blasphemy. “I don’t feel that way.”

Adrian heard the doubt and pressed the issue. “Don’t you? Haven’t you asked why the baby was taken after all the good you’ve done? She was innocent. Why did God take your baby?”

Angela felt the rage building, but she was helpless to control it. “He didn’t. I did, with my actions.”

“You know better. The Creator could have protected you while you battled the monsters, but he didn’t. You were betrayed by God.”

“That isn’t true! I was betrayed by my arrogance!”

“Bullshit. You felt forsaken the second Chauncey showed up and put thoughts of damnation in your mind.”

Her anger fled. “They were already there...” Angela recalled the many times she’d questioned herself on the choices to kill. “I was willing to do anything to keep the herd safe and then to keep my baby. I did this.”

Her voice had fallen into misery. Adrian found a needle in the haystack at that moment. “You hate the Creator!”

Angela’s chin snapped up to pin him with crimson orbs. “Yes. Don’t you?”

“Yes.” Adrian shrugged it off. “But it took me forty years to get there and I’m not positive it’s Just. You are.”

“Of course the hatred is Just!” Saliva flew from her mouth. “He abandoned all of us! We’ve been on our own since we were set in the garden, guided with whispers we were never sure were real or in our minds. He created us and then left!”

Adrian didn’t refute the accusation. He couldn’t.

“How could he do that?! I care more for my herd than he ever did his!”

That was where Adrian had been since Joe’s death. He’d never felt closer to her or anyone else, including his mother. “Welcome back.”

Angela felt the full weight then of what she’d done, but the anger over the situation was stronger at this second. She stared at Adrian as heat surged through her limbs. “How do you keep faith that it’s our duty with this kind of hatred always coloring it?”

Adrian stood up. “Sometimes I don’t. That’s when I hide and one of my loyal minions comes to pull my head out of my ass.”

Angela snorted at the joke, surprised at the amusement or any other good emotion. She deserved to feel empty and useless. The cell was still wide open; she could dive through it at any point. That helped.

“Does it?” Adrian came to where she sat near the cave wall. “Or is it a weakness you have to conquer?”

“Both.” Angela sensed his intent, his need to be certain she was here to stay. “Don’t touch me.”

Adrian stopped, struck by her coldness. He'd only wanted a hug and to shove some more light into her dark soul.

"I don't want your light. I want your loyalty."

Adrian winced. "I couldn't kill Darian. He went dim and blended in with a group of refugees. He used a spell I haven't seen in decades and then he was gone."

"He tried to do the same thing on the mountain." Angela's rage was growing. "But he forgot there has to be innocent souls nearby for that to succeed. I got him right as he realized he'd evaded a quick death with you. He screamed louder than the other one while he burned."

Her expression spoke volumes that Adrian quickly added together. What he came up with was horrifying. And perfect.

"You'll have to stay with me now, to keep them from reading your thoughts until it's too late. Like with Sonja."

Her calm tone implied that was what she'd wanted all along. "All you had to do was ask."

Angela flashed a scornful glance his way and spared them both the reminder that he couldn't be trusted. Just because she understood the choices he'd made, that didn't mean she agreed.

"Would you have done it differently?"

Angela shrugged, shifting toward the target and forgotten darts. "Maybe in places."

She sent him the image of his attempts to be physical while Marc was gone.

“I’m sorry.”

He didn’t offer any excuses this time and that helped. She understood that like his son, he had an obsession he had to fight daily. Now, however, she also knew where that obsession ranked and it was a relief to find out that it was under the camp. Adrian was indeed what she’d needed to believe—a patriot who loved his country enough to give up everything.

“Thank you for seeing that.”

Angela sighed, anger fading to leave a stain of bitterness and weary peace. “Am I wrong for the newest abomination to come?”

“No. It’s also not right, but you know there is no clear black and white anymore...if there ever was. There are always exceptions to the rules.”

“Is there another way to handle it?”

“Yes. There are many.”

“Is there a *better* way to handle it?”

“Based on the goals we’ve put to paper, no. This ends it faster than any of the others, with a minimum loss of our lives.”

Angela was quiet for a moment, pushing the agony away this time instead of wallowing in it.

“You’ll stay with me afterwards?”

“I won’t ruin your leadership.”

“Only I get to do that.”

“You haven’t, you know. They’re worried about you, but nothing else. The refugee threat is gone for the moment, you’re handling the loose ends from our battle with Donner and the government, and

they're safe. They have food, and no illnesses like the others who've come here, and they aren't being abused. You got them to see enough of the differences." Adrian hesitated. "I'd bet that 17% is lower now."

Angela's eyes closed. She hadn't wanted him to discover her margin of camp dissatisfaction. She'd been worried he would put his faith in someone else. Even in her misery, she hadn't wanted to give it up.

Adrian chuckled, relieved to find that out. It meant she could continue. "Did 83% of Safe Haven approve of my leadership?"

Angela nodded quickly. "Yes, but higher. When I joined, everyone loved you."

"Because I hid things from them. Do you do that?"

Angela sighed. "I try not to. It makes it harder."

"Exactly. If the herd had witnessed the things I did, do you think 17% would have disagreed?"

Angela's mind went to his treatment of Tonya, and how he'd known that Becky might be hurt by Rick. "No. It would be higher, maybe."

"Definitely. You have their respect, something I was afraid to earn openly."

She automatically defended him. "You couldn't then."

"We both know that's not true. I hid my actions because I wanted complete control without their interference at first."

"To build the Eagles."

“Yes. Our army has made all the difference, in every situation we’ve been in.” His eyes glowed in the dimness of the chilly cave. “Them, and you. I’m sorry that I came between you and Marc.”

Angela held in a sob. “So am I. It ruined so many things.”

“It also made some things better.” He smiled softly. “I told you once that I could walk away if you told me to. I knew it for a lie when I spoke it, but things have changed now.” He drew in a tight breath. “Do you want me to go? There’s nothing to conquer that you can’t already handle.”

Hearing that took a huge weight from Angela’s shoulders. She was assuming she would have to keep killing to keep her people safe and she couldn’t do it. “You mean that? It’s the ocean and the island?”

“Once you clear that island, they’re safe for years, Angie. I can’t promise what’ll happen to any of her chain of command, but Safe Haven’s citizens will flourish on Pitcairn.”

Tears of relief threatened. Angela wiped at them as he waited for her choice. “If I say yes, what happens?”

Adrian swallowed the crushing pain. He did owe her. “I’ll ask how soon. You’ll give me a date, and by then, I’ll vanish.”

“Will you stay here?”

“I won’t ever come to the island.” He gave her what she was fishing for. “I’d also shut down the

links so I can't get messages or details. Those things would tempt me to go."

"Have you looked at that future?"

"No."

"I have. It's not bad. For either of us."

"But it's not good enough, is it?"

"No." She sighed. "After all I've given up, I have to be more than content."

Adrian waited, sure he shouldn't speak. Anything he might say now would influence her choice and he couldn't have that this time. If they had any sort of future together, it had to come from her.

"Do you know how to sail the boat?"

Her quick topic change without an answer threw Adrian off. He grunted. "No."

"We don't have a captain yet. Find me one."

Adrian beamed at the order, the choice. "Yes, ma'am."

Angela began throwing the darts. Neither of them were encouraged by the bad aim.

"You hadn't been practicing before."

"No." She didn't tell him she'd been too busy trying to keep it all together alone. He knew what that was like.

"Maybe you should teach that lesson to Marc."

He retrieved the darts. Most of them had bounced to the ground.

"I've been trying not to corrupt him like we are, but there's no choice, right?"

“Not really.” Adrian dropped the darts into her open palm without touching her. “Time will do it anyway. Right now, he doesn’t understand what it’s like to have two awful choices and both of them could cost thousands of lives, maybe even our future. If he knew what that felt like, you two might be able to bridge the gap and have a real conversation.”

Angela didn’t ask if he’d gotten that from her. It had come from Marc, who was desperate to have her recovered and back in charge so he could revert to his sullen attitude of accusations and scolding.

“I haven’t told him anything.” Adrian retreated from her line of fire so she could throw again. “He’ll ask for an update on you soon.”

Angela’s mind was already overcrowded with the thoughts and plans she’d refused to allow in until now. She shoved it all out in one mental scream. Her shoulders drooped. “I’m not ready yet.”

“No. Let him cover things for a while.”

“What will I be doing?”

“Healing, I assume. Doing things that don’t remind you of your pain, like practicing that aim. You could also spend some time with me. I could resume your private lessons. With a chaperone, of course.”

“You could teach a class...” It would be nice to go back to being just a rookie in training. The pressure then hadn’t been staggering.

“Be happy to.” He was unable to keep the smile hidden this time. He also liked the idea of just being

a trainer for a class. Let someone else handle the stress and harsh choices, the constant fear of not being good enough, of missing something. Marc would be in charge of it all, and then they would see if he was still smug and superior afterwards.

“It hurts me to be around you.” Angela was suddenly exhausted again. “Don’t talk for a little while, okay?”

Adrian watched her curl into the chair and blanket as if she wasn’t ever coming back out, burrowing in until he couldn’t see any skin. Her recovery would truly take a while. It wouldn’t be an act for Marc or the camp. She needed a real break, but not a long one. He hadn’t exactly told her the truth about the final issues coming for Safe Haven. Crossing that ocean wouldn’t be quite as easy as he’d implied, but her final layer of thick skin would come in the next six weeks. By the time they hit the ocean, nothing would rattle her.

Chapter Fourteen
The Black Widow
October 7th

1

“**T**his can’t be legal!” Rice’s protest echoed loudly in the crowded gymnasium.

Kendle pinned him with a nasty glare. “Perhaps you’d like to explain to them how I earned my ticket into the market?”

Rice quickly shook his head, reminded of their deal. If the masters discovered he’d been hiding magic, he would be killed.

Kendle held her hand out to Yuri, who had been observing without comment. “My weapon?”

Yuri placed the modified sheath into her hand. The knife was already inside.

Kendle was certain he knew what would happen next, but their deal included his support for the fights. He had no choice but to provide what she asked for.

Kendle strapped the weapon around her hips, aware of the noise in the gymnasium as the spectators shopped, chatted, and watched her prepare for the first fight. It had been a long week of waiting, but she’d made plans and figured out a strategy. Now, she just had to follow through.

“Five minutes until the bell!” The speakers blared with a bored, almost angry voice. “The betting boxes are closing soon.”

Kendle scanned the slave cart, where her team was also observing without comment. She didn’t try to communicate with them. There were too many people around. The gymnasium was almost too packed for movement as the gamblers came to get a peek at her before going to the booths to make a bet. Now that the call had come, the crowd was slowly exiting, but the warmth from all the bodies was stifling.

“We can go now, as well.” Yuri leaned against the wall. “You may also wait until they call you.”

Kendle placed her kit by Yuri’s boots. “I do like to make an entrance.”

The Russian grinned, clearly looking forward to having her kit to himself while she battled. Kendle didn’t tell him she’d scrubbed it for anything she didn’t want the masters to know. Yuri was supporting her, but he wasn’t loyal to anyone except himself. She wouldn’t make the mistake of thinking otherwise.

Kendle strolled toward the small kiosks that were getting more shoppers than they usually did. She could tell by the eager delight on the faces of the shopkeepers. The glances they kept tossing to her were filled with gratitude. Kendle walked among them, feeling a bit safer.

Yuri stayed by the stairs, waiting to guide her into the fight, leaving Rice to hover like an annoying insect.

“Get lost.”

Rice didn't wait for her to get mean. He vanished through the main exit, presumably on his way to visit with his captive family or maybe even to tell on her for the poison on her blade. Either way, Kendle wasn't more worried than she already had been upon waking this morning to Yuri's cheerful knock and call. Full alert was as high as her emotions went. If things progressed beyond that, blood would spill. She expected to hit that point somewhere in these matches, but not for the first one. She needed to do this cool and calm, like Marc would have.

Kendle lingered at the medical booth until the other customers had left. The owner, a thin man with a kind profile and weathered brown skin, gestured toward a box on the lowest shelf. “Discount bin.”

She knelt down. “Will you offer suggestions?”

Stan joined her, tugging the box onto the floor. He held out a package of bandages that was half used. “What can I do for you?”

“I need something absorbent.”

He dug deeper into the box. “Purpose?”

“Death.”

“How soon?” He kept digging, not showing a reaction to the words.

“Before the final match.”

Stan handed her a bottle of alcohol with a few inches of murky liquid remaining. “Take that. If you survive until the final match, come collect it.”

Kendle pretended to read the label and smell the used alcohol. “How much?”

“Same deal you made with my friend who runs the café upstairs.”

“Deal.” Kendle stood up. “I can’t believe you have this!” She strode toward the exit with a huge grin and big mouth. “Bet heavy.”

The few customers who remained in the gym immediately went toward the booth to discover what she had purchased. While there, they would peruse his stock and Stan would make a profit.

Happy that she now had a medical supplier other than the masters or Rice, Kendle moved with the heavier flow of traffic in the halls. Not positive if an attack was allowed out of the ring, Kendle kept her attention on the crowd and not the speaker who was profiling her and the first sucker the masters had found to die for their audience—while bleeding them dry of every dime and metal they had.

Kendle wasn’t bothered as she walked to the basement. Most of the citizens around her didn’t know who she was yet. It might be the last time that happened. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Kendle listened to the thoughts of those around her, as well as their words. By the time she hit the bottom floor, she had confirmed her impression of this being something big for them. The horrified boredom from this type of slavery, after surviving

an apocalypse, had made them vulnerable to the same weaknesses that had allowed the world to be blown up. They were still passive sheep, waiting to be fed or slaughtered. Her visit would wake them a bit, give them a reprieve from what was coming; they would be grateful to her for the distraction if she won. If she lost, the locals might also kill her for the disappointment.

Yuri waved from the other side of the basement. “Over here.”

Kendle followed him to the center ring, now drawing attention. A small cheer echoed.

Tan and black uniforms were dotted through the crowd, blue tattoos flashing as they growled at people, but there wasn't trouble here despite all the drinking and betting. Kendle assumed they were still scared enough to keep their wits about them. This place was dangerous. That was clear.

Yuri held up one creaking rope so she could climb into the ring.

Kendle hadn't seen her opponent, wanting to be sure she had herself under control first. The masters had picked knives for the battle, but they hadn't said if it was to the death. She'd chosen not to take the chance.

Kendle lifted her chin to see who she had to kill...and struggled not to show the shock as she stared at the huge man. He was easily a foot taller, with arms flexed into big boulders that waited to pound her senseless.

Kendle stayed still as the referee, dressed in the old style of black and white stripes, stepped between them.

The crowd pushed closer, almost tipping over the betting booth at the corner.

“Betting is done!” the speaker announced loudly. “Betting is finished. The fight starts in one minute.”

Kendle couldn't help a shudder of apprehension that made some of the crowd groan. They'd bet on her.

The man now doing arm crunches for the audience that Kendle estimated to be around fifty, grinned at her with missing teeth and no sympathy.

Instead of replying in kind, Kendle scanned the organized chaos of the basement. The games and kiosks were all empty except for this one. She had the full crowd, but it wasn't nearly enough to meet her expenses.

“This fight is not to the death.” The referee waved them forward. “Shake hands and come out fighting at the bell.”

Kendle braced for pain, but the giant barely touched her hand before recoiling.

The crowd quieted, instantly suspicious.

Kendle tried not to react, but it was impossible not to feel the fear. Fifty was enough to overwhelm her. She'd forgotten how defensive her demon was.

Ding! The bell rang before the giant recovered.

Kendle snatched her knife from her belt and threw it as hard as she could.

She nearly missed. The blade sliced through the man's arm at an inch depth, and flew into the crowd. Someone there screamed.

The giant laughed, taking a step forward as the crowd chanted.

“Kill her! Kill her!”

Kendle didn't move. She waited for him to pause, to peer down...

“What is this?” The giant groaned in painful fear. “What is it?”

Kendle knew not to gloat yet. The pause where he'd sensed her magic was still too fresh and the poison needed time to work. Paralyzing muscles and organs came first, then death. She'd chosen wisely.

The giant slid to his knees, strangling noises echoing across the room that had gone quiet.

Sticking to her plan, Kendle pointed toward the stairs. “The medical booth sells some great things. One of them was Batrachotoxin.”

“What is that?” The giant could barely breathe. His chest felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, making it impossible to take in enough oxygen.

“Poison.”

The audience cheered as the giant fell over, no longer able to use his muscles to control his big body. The thought of magic was banished for the obvious as the bell rang to declare it a win.

Now Kendle grinned, ignoring the guilt to reclaim her blade from the grinning, twitchy

spectator who'd recovered it. Another body lay on the ground outside the ring.

Kendle sheathed it carefully, taking advantage of the shock. "The medical booth is probably out of this now, but it's got other things. Get them before I do."

The crowd chuckled, finally moving toward the betting kiosks.

The speaker blared. "The Widow won! Collection booths are open."

Kendle climbed out of the ring, but she stayed close in case the masters decided poisoning wasn't allowed. When no call came, she chanced a glance toward the huge table and plush chairs that had been placed along a wall for their comfort.

Yuri raised his glass to her, as did Iram. Renda and Xavier glowered.

"Let's celebrate!" Rice appeared at her elbow. "On me!"

Kendle allowed Rice to lead her from the gym, but she refused to visit the first floor café that was now being run by one of the angry relatives of the first café owner that she had ratted on to make her deal. "Upstairs is better. Real beef. No rat filler."

Kendle hid a smirk as nearly half the crowd followed her and Rice upstairs. These market sheep were easy to herd.

“Come in.” Kendle had ditched Rice and the other happy gamblers at the crowded café for the quiet of her cubicle after only a short time.

Yuri opened the door, eyes roaming her bare skin. “Your winnings have been seen to.”

Kendle rolled onto her stomach and gestured at the bottle of oil on the end table. “I need to be rubbed. Tell me while you work.”

Yuri swallowed a lump and entered the room. He began to pull the door shut.

“Leave it open,” Kendle pushed off her new slippers. The café owner had insisted on giving her his. She left her socks on.

Yuri climbed onto the narrow bed with her, breathing already increasing to shallow rasps as her mostly naked skin waited for his fingertips.

No, he definitely doesn't mind my scars. She didn't react to the cool baby oil on her skin. She was in her bra and underwear, but not scared or even worried. She had figured out what drove Yuri, what he wanted from all of this. “I'm going to kill her.”

Yuri rubbed her harder, spreading the slippery oil over her bare thighs and the edges of her ass cheeks. He didn't speak.

Kendle felt his hardness rub against her thigh and allowed it. “Will you tell me about Xavier and about the UN being here?”

Yuri thrust forward, clenching her hip. “For the right price, I might tell you anything!”

Kendle wiggled her hips, sliding his hand from her slick skin. “Now you can close the door.”

3

Kendle woke to the same sounds that had greeted her for the last week—people. She didn't like it anymore today than usual, but the hot breath on her neck didn't help.

“I will bring you breakfast.”

Kendle grunted, eager for him to be gone. Yuri was surprisingly gentle, but she didn't want to waste the time. She had a lot to do today.

Yuri sensed what she wanted and quickly dressed. He left with only a quick brush of his hand down her arm, but Kendle was warmed. Yuri wasn't a good man, but he also wasn't evil. She'd certainly made worse alliances, namely Adrian.

Kendle took her time getting ready, going over plans as she prepared to face the public. She expected a busy afternoon.

Kendle stepped from her cubby to a low cheer from the small crowd that had clearly been waiting for her to make an appearance. She grinned as she read the sign of a local in the front. *Black Widow*.

“I like that.” Kendle pointed to the raggedy woman, laughing. “Have them change my name.”

Kendle was still chuckling as she entered the café, where a seat quickly cleared for her among the dozen customers.

“Good day.” Cutts was brimming with cheer. “The usual?”

Kendle took the cup of coffee he held out to her. “Surprise me.”

“Can do.” He shifted toward the grill where other orders were already cooking. The smells were wonderful.

Kendle tried not to look at any of the other patrons, not wanting to suffer through their fumbling attempts at small talk. She didn’t have a headache or gut ache yet, but she could feel her woman’s time coming and it was already making her grouchy.

Cutts set a plate of fruit by her hand and went to the grill to flip the sizzling meats and vegetables.

Kendle munched on fruit and sipped the coffee, wondering how well this booth was doing compared to the medical shops she’d helped last night. Was she clear on food yet?

Unlikely, Kendle decided. Despite the crowd right now, there hadn’t been one yesterday morning. This would have to happen regularly for it to make a real dent in her tab. “I was thinking I should treat myself to something special today. Suggestions?”

The cook studied her in surprise, considering his answer. “Nails or hair? Women used to like that stuff. Some of ours still do.”

“Maybe. Are those owners as good at their jobs as you are?”

Cutts snorted. “No, but they’ll get it done if you’ve got anything they want.” He glanced at her, saw the subtly lifted brow that most of the other

patrons didn't. "I've heard they're fans of music and science books."

"Odd combo."

"Yep. The hair and makeups booths don't make enough to splurge on things like reading or CDs. Makes them valuable."

Kendle mentally sighed in relief. She had a thumb drive in her kit that held over a thousand books, many of them educational. She'd been gathering the files whenever she could find them. She enjoyed reading. "Good to know. What can a girl do around here for fun?"

Cutts slid a portion of steaming chicken onto the buttered biscuits and smothered them in thick country gravy. "Yuri."

Kendle choked, spitting coffee across the counter.

The cook hurried over to wipe it up as everyone laughed.

Kendle gloated over the victory. Word would now spread to Renda that they were lovers. It would anger her rival and cause tension. For Kendle, it was a double win. When she slept alone, she had nightmares. Waking up screaming right now would make her seem weak.

Cutts slid the plate in front of her after adding a generous helping of fried potatoes with peppers and onions.

Suddenly ravenous, Kendle dug in, aware of the fresh snickers. The patrons were assuming that Yuri had given her a workout, resulting in a good

appetite. It wasn't far from the truth, but in the end, he'd agreed that killing Renda was enough to pay for the UN information that she wanted. Once it was done, he was supposed to tell her everything. Until then, he'd promised to tell her parts of it each night that she let him sleep next to her. Kendle had agreed. Yuri was handy, harmless. The same couldn't be said of Xavier, who Yuri had spilled his guts over with little provocation. Kendle had already guessed that they were enemies, assuming it was over Renda's dead sister. Yuri had refused to speak of that woman at all.

Kendle assumed Malia hadn't died a natural death, but she hadn't needed to confirm it once she'd figured out that Yuri hated Xavier. All she had to do was kill Renda, get the information and the hidden descendant, and then get back to Safe Haven. Everything else was added chaos that she didn't have time to sort out.

4

"They've chosen hand-to-hand," Yuri stated from the door of the tiny nail salon where Kendle was being given a custom job. He scanned her oiled body in familiarity and affection.

Kendle blushed on cue, adding fire to the gossip.

"What time?" She twisted her hand in the stirrup in search of a comfortable position. The nails gleamed bright red in the dim lighting.

“Same as last night.” He didn’t enter the small shop. It was already a tight fit with Kendle and the technician, but the smells were also thick, smothering. “Roughly the same size fighter, as well.”

Kendle heard his warning. “The bigger they are...”

Yuri grinned, leaving her to her manicure. He had no idea how she would win the fight, but for some reason, he was now positive that she would beat them all except Renda. Yuri had to hope on that one. Renda would use her whip. He’d already told Kendle, but she hadn’t seemed worried. Yuri didn’t have as much faith, but a small chance was better than no chance. He’d learned that well during his lifetime. Coming to America had changed nothing.

“Tell me about him.” Kendle smiled encouragement as the technician leaned over her other hand to repeat the labor.

The short, shrewd woman studied Kendle through decades of worry lines and wrinkles. “Included or extra?”

Kendle understood there might be something worth paying for. “Either or neither. It depends on the information.”

Rita made a nasty sound in her throat. “You talk like them.”

“Them, who?” Kendle assumed she meant the masters.

“Magic users.”

Kendle tensed involuntarily, immediately twisting it into fear. “Here? Magic users?”

Rita peered up at her suspiciously. “Like you don’t know.”

Kendle was forced to settle for a thick glower.

Rita paled a bit, but didn’t back down. “I know what you are. Be careful.”

Glad no one had been close enough to hear that, Kendle didn’t respond as the squat woman finished her nails. Kendle studied the gleaming red, running through possible outcomes. She needed to handle this before leaving the shop. “Did you know Renda’s sister?”

Rita’s face morphed into grief and deep rage. “Malia was my friend.”

Kendle felt the hint that there was a closer bond, but she knew better than to ask. “How did she die?”

“Renda!” Rita shoved Kendle’s hand from the stirrup. “You’re done. Get lost.”

Kendle stood up, not sure what to say. She chose to be silent and let the woman grieve. If Rita hated Renda that much, she wouldn’t tell the masters what she knew until after the final match.

As Kendle neared the exit, Rita slapped her fist against the counter.

Kendle pushed lightly into her thoughts, needing to be positive that she was safe until the final match.

Beyond that even, if you kill her. Make her suffer. Malia deserves justice.

Kendle gave the angry woman a comforting nod, eased. Rita was also a magic user. She couldn't reveal Kendle without expecting the same treatment in return. Both their secrets were safe for now.

Encouraged, Kendle headed for the collateral area to discover which team members Renda had released. She expected it to be the two weakest men, which meant Tyler and Carl would be with Conner right now, spilling their guts. She wanted to stop by and remind them to keep their mouths shut about Safe Haven and the descendants. Market Town already knew too much.

5

“Where is she now?”

Renda gestured toward the screens lining the wall of Xavier's lavish apartment. The entire market was on camera. “Visiting her men.”

Xavier leaned back in his padded rocking chair, contemplating Renda's accusation. “If you're wrong, you'll owe for it.”

“I can afford the fine. I'm telling you; she's hiding something.”

“You have permission to determine what it is.” Xavier waved off the protests of the other two masters in the room. He glanced at Yuri and Iram. “You will not tell her that we are investigating. If she discovers it, that will prove the accusation and she will be arrested.”

Yuri's lips disappeared into his pudgy face as he fought not to argue.

Iram shrugged, returning to his charming smiles and tones. "I have no deals with her."

"But you do have bets." Xavier saw Yuri tense. The Russian had multiple deals with Kendle.

Iram spread his hands out in a gesture of acceptance. "I will not tell the woman. My word."

Satisfied, Xavier glared at Yuri. "And you?"

Yuri pouted. "I will not tell her."

Renda marched from the meeting area in high spirits, content that Kendle wouldn't know she was being investigated for magic use. Renda had observed her fighter's flinch from the handshake, like the others, but she hadn't forgotten it. The scarred woman was hiding her power, but Renda wasn't afraid. In fact, she now hated Kendle more than she already had. The only thing worse than a do-gooder, was a descendant.

Renda had warned her sister about using her gifts, but Malia hadn't listened. In the end, her power hadn't even tried to save her. Renda had been glad, but it wouldn't have mattered at that point. She'd hated her sibling for most of their lives. When the market citizens and the masters had fallen for Malia's charms, Renda snapped. She'd been the little sister, the unwanted third wheel, for too long. Once she'd become a master here, Renda's needs and orders had been satisfied first. She'd enjoyed it for six months, until Kendle's arrival. Now, it was starting to feel like it had before she'd caught her

sister alone in the bathtub, back when Renda had been so tightly wound that only death satisfied her.

Renda snarled at the men she passed, hands in her pockets to keep from reaching out with swiping claws.

Realizing the old rage was getting the best of her again, Renda detoured from the upstairs shops to a rear training cubby that was for their fighters and guards. If she didn't work off some of this heat, she would explode. Sniffing out clues would have to wait.

Rita breathed a sigh of relief as Renda abruptly spun toward the stairs. The nail technician quickly closed the gates and secured them with her thickest lock. There was no evidence of what Rita was, but all she owned in the world was inside these walls. If Renda got in, nothing would survive. Rita had witnessed Renda at her worst, back when the market was first beginning and Yuri was on track to be named leader instead of Xavier. Renda wasn't stable and Rita wanted no part of that din. Rita was an Invisible. She was also weak and lazy. She would flee into the night before challenging Renda directly, but supporting someone who might be able to kill the slave master was an easy choice. If Kendle could take care of Renda and give Malia justice, the ghosts in this place might settle down enough for Rita to sleep at night. She was tired of hearing the dead cry out for blood. It was exhausting.

6

“This fight is not to the death. Battle begins in one minute.”

Kendle rolled her eyes at the same lackluster introduction, but didn't protest. She had to stay focused. Her opponent was a huge female that would have been right at home on a WWE program. Even her flaming hair and painted cheeks matched the image. Kendle wanted to laugh, but the voice inside said to end this as fast as she could.

Dangerous, the witch warned.

Kendle nodded at the female and got nothing in return, not even the flicker of a lash. *Great. Only match two of six and I already have the Ice Queen, Ivanna. Godzilla must come next.*

Kendle stepped forward to shake, controlling the shield over her skin this time. When they shook without a problem, not squeezing or playing games, the crowd was disappointed.

So was Renda, who was sure of what she had witnessed before the first fight. The Iranian moved closer to the ring to observe.

Ding!

Kendle lunged forward, but Ivanna beat her to the move. She hefted Kendle off her feet, arms like a vise around her ribs.

The crowd roared in approval as the females grunted and struggled.

Quickly! the demon ordered.

Kendle squirmed loose, sliding through the bottom of Ivanna's grip to land in a heap at her feet.

Ivanna frowned, peering down.

Kendle grinned, glad she'd thought of the oil. Before her opponent could figure out how she'd lost, Kendle slammed her new fingernails into the woman's exposed ankle, ripping upward.

Kendle rolled away as the fighter lunged down for her, driving a knee into the female's big nose.

Blood ran down Ivanna's cheek to pool with the puddles from her ankle; her tan and black uniform was dotted in crimson.

Kendle stood up in the tense silence of the crowd, attention staying on her opponent.

"Why isn't she screaming?" someone called from the crowd.

"She can't." Kendle didn't glance away as Ivanna struggled to talk, to move. "She's paralyzed." Kendle flashed her nails, wiggling her fingers. "I added the chemical, but the chick who does these is awesome. Best set I've ever had."

Hoping that small bill would now be paid, Kendle glanced down at her opponent. "I don't have the antidote. I couldn't take the chance."

The Dutch woman began to convulse.

"The Black Widow has struck again!" the speaker informed the spectators. "Come collect your winnings."

Kendle left the ring as the crowd cheered wildly. They cleared a path for her, being sure her claws didn't brush them even in passing.

Enjoying the feeling, Kendle breathed a mental sigh of relief and headed for the showers without glancing toward those plush master couches. She could feel Renda's rage from across the cool basement. It wouldn't take much to set that off and there were still three more matches to go before they could fight.

Mind now on the next challenge, Kendle guided attention to the shops where she needed fans to spend their winnings. She waved and called greetings, talking happily about the stock and the service. It was up to the shopkeepers to convert the sale.

When she walked by the empty pharmacy, Kendle nodded to the owner to indicate she would be by later. Hopefully the owner would wait up for her. If not, she would stop by in the morning. Kendle knew the next fight would be harder. She needed to get the proper supplies.

7

Kendle slid into the collateral room as the market closed for the night, bell ringing to signal the guards to lock it all up.

Kendle glanced to the sentry on the room, noting his bored attitude. She joined Conner and her four men at the center table.

“Good timing.” Conner pointed angrily. “Tyler was planning how we escape from this place and kill all the troops on our way out.”

Tyler paled at being rattled out.

Carl grinned at her. “Conner and I keep telling him that you have things under control, but he’s a rookie.”

Kendle didn’t show amusement at the joke. Carl was also a rookie. Kendle took the bottle of water Conner handed her, but she didn’t open it. She was busy reconsidering an option. She’d been in the market enough to pick out the weakest and sympathetic guards. An escape might be possible. A good leader considered all avenues. “Would you leave your team? Go get help and leave them to Renda’s anger?”

Tyler shrugged. “It’s what we’re taught, I think. We didn’t get to these lessons yet.”

“You stay with your team.” Conner had heard his father repeat it too many times to be confused. “She has it covered.”

“Do you?” Tyler demanded suddenly. “We’ll all be crippled if you don’t.”

Kendle placed a hand on Tyler’s hairy wrist. “You’re an Eagle. Act like it.”

Tyler’s face flooded with anger and embarrassment, but he held silent.

“Fear is a hard thing. I understand.”

Tyler let out his anger in a thick snort of resignation. He’d been reminded of who he was now, of what Safe Haven taught them.

“We’re not the underdogs.” Kendle smirked. “They have no idea who we are. It’s a huge advantage.”

She left them with that thought, glad only one of them was upset with the delay to their freedom. She was also encouraged that none of the men had been harmed so far. If their care had been bad, she wouldn't have handled things this way. If their care changed, she would adjust her plans. Their safety was a priority—right behind Renda. That evil had to be snuffed out. *I'm not leaving Market Town until it's done.*

Chapter Fifteen
Big Orders

1

“**W**hat are you doing?”

Tommy had dropped his dirty shirt onto his cot and knelt in the center of the room. They only got clean clothes weekly here.

“My morning workout. All this time lying around is making me fat and tired.”

The six other Eagles quickly joined their team leader, eager for the activity.

The guards watched them suspiciously, but didn't protest. They weren't certain if this behavior was allowed. None of their other captives had tried to exercise.

Renda found them all a while later, sweating and laughing as they put their bodies through a much-needed workout.

She slammed the door. “What's going on?”

Tommy finished his last pushup, grunting. “We needed exercise.”

Renda kept her distance as the travelers continued to stretch and kick, to spin and spar. It looked as though they'd practiced it regularly.

Renda crossed her arms over her chest as she noticed the team leader giving her hot glances. She knew what he wanted, what he was, but she had no time for mating. She wanted information on Kendle. “Where do you come from?”

“North.” Tommy stuck to the small bits that Kendle had been able to pass to them during her walks and tours. “It got cold.” He looked toward the wall, where a window would have been if not for being cemented over. “Is it cold here? It wasn’t when we came in.”

“It is warm and sunny.” Renda lifted a brow. “Would you like to see the sunlight?”

Tommy snorted. “Yeah, that’d be nice.”

“I will trade a walk, bound, for information on your owner.”

“Kendle doesn’t own us.” Tommy stood up. “And I don’t need bonds. I’m not leaving my men.”

The other team members didn’t know what Tommy was up to, but they all suspected it had something to do with the new slaves that had been brought in. They would be waking up soon, with their guts rolling.

Renda had noted their loyalty over the days she’d held them and didn’t doubt his words. She wondered what their scarred owner might think of Tommy roaming without bonds. “Let’s go.”

Tommy slid his shirt over his head, aware of Renda’s hot gaze on his sweaty skin. He’d been a camp provider long enough to know what she needed, but he doubted she would make a deal for

company until the night before the final fight. He was hoping for a few hours alone with her at that point. Tommy slowly approached her and held out an arm like a gentleman. “Shall we?”

Renda hesitantly took his arm, transported to her father and his friends doing the same thing for her sister when Malia reached puberty. They’d both been trained to dance in all styles, even those of the hated west, but Renda had never felt special doing it until now.

Tommy tucked her hand around his arm and patted her wrist. “Sunlight, you say?”

Renda was startled into a smile at the charm. “Yes.”

He led them toward the exit, ignoring his surprised team and gawking guards. “Good. I’ll bet you’re beautiful in the sunlight.”

Renda blushed down to her roots, speechless at the flattery even though she was well versed in sex and the foreplays that led up to it. Something about Tommy drew her like a moth to a flame.

Pretending to be distracted, Renda studied him intently, searching for the lies she could feel. Maybe a walk in the sun and a few drinks would give her the secrets she knew existed. If not, she would threaten to cut off his penis. That tactic usually got her whatever she wanted, especially once the blade was against skin. She didn’t bluff.

Tommy knew he was playing with fire, but he also knew Kendle needed every advantage she could get in the upcoming fight with Renda.

Tommy wasn't positive that Kendle knew what she'd gotten herself into. He wasn't certain of his own chances against the Iranian, let alone Kendle's, considering that she was a rookie who had only received a couple months of training from Marc and the Indians. He didn't think it would be nearly enough.

2

Kendle enjoyed the hot water, taking advantage of Yuri's hospitality to use the shower in his apartment. Yuri's accommodations were lavish. The three rooms were layered in rich, exotic furnishings that would have set well in her former home in California.

While she let the water beat on her, Kendle carefully scratched the poison out of the acrylic nails, but left the talons. It would make her next opponent think her hands were still lethal. If they were distracted by it, she could use a different method to end the fight quicker.

Yuri knocked. "We have chosen battle axes!"

Kendle snorted at his cheerful call. He wasn't the one who had to use them. "Be right out."

"Take your time! New supplies and slaves have come in. I must go collect my share."

Kendle heard the door slam, but not lock, and shut off the water. She had to stay alert.

She dressed quickly, donning her weapons and setup for the next fight over wet skin. The door opened again as she came from the bathroom.

The guard set a tote on the ground. “Gifts.”

“From who?” Kendle dropped onto the bed to tug on her socks and boots.

“A mix.” The sentry scanned the area to be sure things were calm in here. “Lot of newcomers arriving to see your next fight.”

“Will you be there?”

“No. I have duty over Renda’s apartment.”

“Are you on that post alone?” Kendle went to the window. Another group of people was entering the town. Most of the locals had chosen trousers and loose-fitting shirts, but the newcomers were clad in heavier, more durable gear that suggested some of them had traveled a long distance.

“Why do you ask?”

Kendle spotted a large group of troops coming through the closest gate with another load of supplies. She could tell they’d made several trips because of how tired and sweaty they were. “I’d like to get in there.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Can *you* get in there?”

“Of course.”

Kendle looked at him, encouraged by the tone. “Will you?”

The guard, part of the rotation that had originally landed with the UN convoy, nodded. “For the—”

“Yeah, I know. For the right price. Can’t anyone here just do the right thing?”

Ori stared at her as if she had grown two more noses. “That sounds like something an old-worlder would say. I thought you’d been around.”

Kendle pulled a face. “That is an understatement.”

The guard studied her, amusement dropping from his profile. “You can’t give me what I want. No deal.”

The Iranian man spun to leave.

Kendle threw her knife, hoping the aim was good. Marc had praised her progress with it.

The blade wobbled painfully as it stuck in the wooden frame by Ori’s arm. “Tell me what you want.”

The man’s hand tightened on the knob. “To go home, Ms. Roberts. Give me that and I’ll strangle her in her sleep.”

“Wow. Big order. I don’t suppose you have a second choice?”

The door shut softly as Ori left without answering, closing out the noise of the crowd gathering to witness this evening’s fight.

“No, I didn’t think so.” Kendle hadn’t wanted to let anyone know about Safe Haven because she hadn’t believed these people were good enough. After that, she’d realized she needed to let Angela make the choice. Now, she might have to take a UN guard back with her in order to win the final fight.

“Man, the boss isn’t gonna like this.” Kendle headed for her daily workout and tour of the shops. She would explore the gifts in the totes when she returned. “Angie isn’t gonna like this one bit. Maybe I can get Conner to explain it.”

3

“Are you ill?”

Kendle shook her head, placing the packaged syringe near the cash register. “I’m good as gold. I also have no money, as I’m sure you’ve heard.”

Sylvia waved her off. “Just coming in here will help me. That pays for a syringe.”

“Thanks.” Kendle spent another minute admiring the stock in the woman’s kiosk so the people watching her would also shop here. There were only about ten people following so far, but it reminded her strongly of the old world when fighters and singers had groupies. She didn’t know what to do with them.

Kendle moved out into the warm hall, where the audience was steadily growing despite it not being noon yet. Kendle was glad, but the lackluster radio voice didn’t seem to understand how valuable new arrivals were. There was no excitement, no draw to the festivities, which meant no eager spenders. Her tab wasn’t going to be paid unless she got people shopping.

Kendle detoured toward the master apartment on the first floor, assuming the radio booth would

be there. She discovered the cords leading into a small kiosk next to Renda's apartment.

Kendle tapped on the glass, motioning to the tired-looking man inside. "Trade a break for an hour."

The dusky-skinned man, Kazan, stared at her. "What?"

"I'm supposed to eat and take a walk now. Trade me."

"On whose orders?"

"Mine."

"You aren't a master." He started to pull the door shut.

Kendle slid a hand in, where her remaining nails gleamed in warning. "I will be."

Kazan studied her for a long moment, understanding the threat. If he refused now, when Kendle took Renda's place, she would make him pay for it. "An hour?"

"Maybe less." Kendle joined him in the small, dusty booth. "She'll get mad when she finds me here."

"What'll keep her from taking that anger out on me?"

"You can say that I kicked you out." Kendle gently took his arm.

"Without marks?" Kazan snorted. "She won't believe that."

"Yeah." Kendle smiled. "Sorry about this. It isn't personal." She slammed the man's face into the glass.

Kendle jerked the door open wide as he fell, shouting. She dragged him out by his arm. “I won’t forget this. Keep your mouth shut.” Kendle dumped him outside and went back in, flipping the latch.

The radioman slowly got up and limped off, glaring through the bloody hand cupping his face.

Kendle sank down into the folding chair, reaching for the mike. “Let’s breathe some life into this place.”

4

“Good morning, Market Town! This is the Black Widow, coming to you from the first floor, where you’ll find shops full of products that I know you need. Like what? How about medical supplies from that kiosk in the gym! Why not stop by and browse?”

Renda pushed Tommy away from the kiss she’d been about to allow. “That woman!”

Tommy hid a snicker, knowing it wasn’t smart to poke the bear. “Should I go to my cell?”

Renda shoved him toward the door. “Like I’d let you go alone!”

Tommy frowned. “It’s two rooms down. Where could I go?”

Renda growled her anger, but the tirade was cut off by Kendle’s cheerful voice on the radio again.

“I wanted to let everyone know about my fight tonight. If you haven’t seen me in action, you don’t want to miss this. I believe we’re using battle-axes!”

Tommy paused at those words, concerned. “Battle-axes?”

Renda grabbed his arm, furious. “Get back to your cell.”

For one instant, Tommy’s arms stiffened to grab her, but Renda was too alert. Her eyes flashed death for his men. Tommy backed down.

“Go right now.”

Tommy went quickly, not detouring. He was certain Renda was watching to be positive he went into the correct room. As Tommy closed the door, the rest of the team still here glanced up with snickers and smirks.

Tommy shook his head, telling his team it hadn’t happened. They’d agreed to try to get Renda alone to kill her. He’d only had her in her apartment for a full minute before Kendle had come on the radio.

Tommy scanned the room. The new slaves hadn’t volunteered any information or asked for any help getting through their captivity so far. Ben obviously hadn’t offered any from the cold silence. Tommy also didn’t think it wise, considering that each night their numbers were now dropping by two. The new people might be just as dangerous as they were.

“Here are some morning announcements!” Kendle’s voice over the radio blared through the market. “The café upstairs got a fresh load of fish yesterday! Better get it while it’s there.”

Tommy laid down on his cot, placing his big arms above his head. “Been quiet?”

Ben rolled his eyes. “You were only gone for fifteen minutes, dude.”

Tommy chuckled. “Felt like longer. She’s wild.”

“As in sex?” Josh leered.

“As in death.” Tommy frowned at the rookie. “You should see her apartment. Very morbid.”

“Can Kendle handle her?” Ryan couldn’t help his concern.

Tommy didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure. The few minutes he’d had with Renda said no.

“I’ve been informed that there are also new slaves!” Kendle’s tone became challenging. “Master Renda, who is in a lovely mood this morning, says she needs the money really bad, so stop by now for a quick examination of the stock!”

Ben burst out laughing as they listened to someone beating on something. Presumably, Renda was outside the booth. “Yeah, I think she’s got us covered.”

5

“Get out of there!” Renda slammed her hand against the glass. “I will break it!”

“No, you won’t!” Xavier’s harsh denial rang through the crowded hall, causing Renda to spin around.

“What?!”

Xavier gestured to the line of people gathering at her apartment. “She has increased your profit.” He nodded to Kendle, but didn’t smile. “All first floor shops are full.”

Cutts slid between them to flash a paper at Kendle.

She announced it quickly. “The upstairs café is out of fish now, folks, but he still has beef! Get two-for-one on hamburgers for the next hour!”

Xavier watched another shopkeeper come forward to give the scarred woman a message to read. “See to your patrons, Renda.”

Renda slammed her hand against the glass again, but did as she was told.

Kendle didn’t look at Xavier, afraid that he would see too much. She wasn’t certain about his motives. When he left the hall, she was relieved. That one was dangerous. Renda only thought she was. Kendle was almost looking forward to that battle, but Xavier scared her. He had the same type of eyes that haunted her dreams—hungry.

Kendle spent the next two hours in the booth, reading messages and reminding customers that deals were expiring or over. The pain in her bruised ribs kept her slightly out of breath, adding to the impression of eagerness.

Renda was pacing the hall outside the booth again. She’d handled her line of patrons, too fast in Kendle’s opinion, but Kendle hadn’t liked sending strangers in to bid on captive humans anyway, so

she wasn't going to mention it. While her team was safe for the moment, she felt deep empathy for the rest of the chattel here.

When there hadn't been any messages for half an hour, Kendle keyed the mike. "Well, this part of the fun is about over for the day, folks. I'll be here for another ten minutes if anyone has any last deals to offer. See ya tonight at my fight. You won't want to miss it. Will the Black Widow survive? Come find out!"

Renda was reminded that she couldn't fight with Kendle yet. Xavier wasn't going to side with her on this either. She stomped out of the market, leaving relief in her wake as two more shopkeepers delivered deals for Kendle to read.

6

"The betting booths are about to close. Five minutes left to bet."

Tired of the careless introductions to her fights, Kendle strode to the announcer and held out her hand. "Take a break or I'll give you one."

Kazan, not yet recovered from his earlier abuse, shoved the mike at her and vanished into the crowd.

Kendle climbed up onto the nearest chair. "Good evening, folks! Welcome to the Market Matches!"

People in the basement began shifting her way, but it was hard to hear over the games and chattering. Kendle got louder, pretending she was

the announcer for someone else's coming death or survival. "Tonight, we have a feature match between the Black Widow and some poor sucker chosen to die by her claws. Or will it be by her blade? Gather around and try to pick a winner."

Kendle twisted to include all areas of the wide room in the short time that she had to pull in more profit for the house. "We've got a lot of cubbies upstairs and a café that has promised to stay open and serve beer until the masters shut it down, so don't go away after the match. Celebrate the life or death of the Black Widow!"

The locals were mostly on one side of the ring, gathered together for protection from the rowdy, drinking spectators who had just arrived. Their manicured nails and shiny new haircuts marked them different, dangerous in their own sad way. They watched her with sly smiles and ticket stubs held tight. They'd already placed their bets.

People moved toward the ring; Kendle skimmed them, hoping to spot her opponent. She saw only hungry profiles waiting for death to hit anyone except them.

I will free you. Angela will let me. She'll send a force and we'll destroy this place with liberty and justice.

Kendle saw the man in the betting kiosk waving. "The booths are closing soon. We're gonna hold this match for exactly three minutes more so you can have a chance to bet. Better hurry!"

Now, there was a rush to the booth.

Kendle set the mike on the chair and took her place in the empty ring. Under a sleeve, her fingers went over the tape and stiff plastic, hoping she'd chosen the right chemical. The janitorial closet had been full of colorful liquids in cloudy jugs that she hadn't had time to decipher.

"The fight starts in one minute!" Kazan shouted, sporting a split lip. Someone had obviously clipped him for letting her take the mike and change the rules.

Not sure what to do, the clerk in the betting kiosk slammed the window shut.

Kendle leaned against the ropes, trying to appear unconcerned as her opponent finally made an appearance.

He had to duck to get through the door! Kendle kept her calm posture, controlling the terror that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Take your weapon," the announcer ordered.

Kendle quickly grabbed the smaller battle axe, still finding it heavy and awkward.

Maybe it will be for him as well, that voice guided. *Stick to the plan. Show no fear. Throw him off.*

Kendle obliged, blowing a kiss. "Well, aren't you a cutie!"

The big man, Griff, paused. Most people ran from him without a single word needed. He didn't know how to respond to the scarred woman.

Kendle waved at the other axe. "Come get it, Sweetheart. You're gonna need it."

Griff paused again, eyes going to Renda.

Kendle laughed. “She sent you in here to die. Don’t expect her to save you.”

The bell dinged before Griff was fully in the ring. Kendle wanted to take advantage of it, but she held sympathy for the mind-fuck she’d just given him. She waited until his hand was on the handle of the axe before rushing forward.

The tall man was fast. He snatched his weapon and rolled, catching her swing with the thick handle, but he had to grip it with two hands to do so. Kendle used her strategically free hand to slam the syringe into his chest and push the plunger.

She lunged back as he swung, shouting, but it wasn’t far enough to avoid the blade that swiped down her thigh, taking a wide swatch of jeans and skin. Blood began to spread down her leg.

Kendle waited for the next swing, but the syringe contents took effect, bringing a wave of vomiting and bleeding from the nose that sent the crowd into fearful watchfulness. It looked like a disease.

Kendle waited until Griff fell to the mat before moving. She slowly held up her arm to show where she’d hid the syringe. “Drain-O still clears those clogs!”

“We have a winner,” Kazan announced sullenly over the radio. “Booths are open.”

Kendle ignored the painful heat in her leg to scan the crowd and masters, hoping things were

calming down. Instead, she saw Renda gesturing wildly at the other three rulers.

Kendle sighed. "I'm starting to believe fate brought me here to kill her."

"So am I." Stan had appeared at her elbow. "Let me tend your injury at my shop. The people who come will pay for your service. Sylvia can bring you a new syringe."

Kendle allowed it gratefully. The pain was quickly becoming intolerable.

7

"He's coming here?" Xavier stared worriedly at the rider who'd just come in through the rear entrance to warn him. "Here? When?"

"Two days. He'll be here for the final fight."

Xavier waved a curt hand, dismissing the drenched man. "Get cleaned up and back to your normal duties."

"He said to tell you she'd better still be here when he arrives. He also wants to talk to Renda before you execute her."

Xavier blanched, turning so the rider didn't witness it. When the door shut, he dropped down at his plush table to consider the proper course of action. If Dirce Resi was coming here to talk to Renda, that implied she was the one who'd been telling market secrets. None of the masters wanted the UN boss around, except for Renda. She had been Dirce's private bodyguard before Malia's murder.

“We’ll have something waiting for you...” Xavier thought of the way tonight’s match had ended. A syringe of poison was simple and quick, and in a thick, shoving crowd, might not even be noticed until it was too late.

Xavier stayed at the table, brooding over his options. When someone knocked, he ignored it. If he wasn’t careful, he would end up being a UN lackey, but that wasn’t what the former tycoon had planned out for his future. *This is my town.*

8

“I need to be oiled again.”

Yuri paused in the doorway of his room, not asking how she’d gotten the guard to let her in. “Open or closed?”

“Open.” Kendle rolled onto her stomach. “I need them to pick a weapon for tomorrow instead of hand-to-hand. If they think I’m ready to slip out of their grasp, they’ll go for something easier to deal with.”

“Aren’t you worried that I will tell Xavier?”

“Won’t matter.” She smiled as he approached the bed. “The people you send to fight won’t take the chance. They’re scared of me. Did you see how my groupies have already disappeared?”

“Yes, along with customers as you walk by. It is odd that they will follow you, but not too closely.”

“They know a killer when she’s in the same hall with them.”

Yuri took the top position, rubbing, but he didn't enjoy it as much this time.

Kendle sensed his tension. "Are you okay?"

"My boss is coming."

Kendle frowned. "Xavier?"

Yuri snorted bitterly. "No, our leader is the one we all came here with as his protection. Dirce Resi is coming to observe your final fight."

Kendle tried not to tense further. She'd thought this was all of the UN people. "Are there a lot of troops around?"

Yuri didn't answer orally. His hardness along her thigh begged for him.

Mentally, Kendle didn't want to make the trade, but her body responded immediately. Kendle sighed. "If you've got your red wings, I'll meet your price."

9

"Tasers?!" Kendle repeated the next morning. "They chose tasers?"

Yuri brought the tray to the bed where she was lounging. "Fun, right? The odds are on you now."

Kendle sat up, not bothering to cover herself. He'd seen more than that last night.

Yuri patted her shoulder lovingly. "I must handle business. Sleep in, rest up. I have much money on you."

Kendle waited until he left and flipped the tray across the room, splattering oatmeal and eggs across

the wall and chair. The familiar cramping came. “Not good timing.”

She spent an hour in the bathroom, cleaning, dressing, preparing, but the rear of her mind kept repeating the word *taser*.

“The market is now open! Come browse our fully stocked shops and watch the feature match. You can even stay overnight!”

Kendle snickered at the flustered radioman. Apparently, the masters had decreed that her way was more profitable.

Kendle pulled her boots on, hearing the crowds outside the building and outside the door. The noises gave her hope that her profit totals from today would start clearing some of her debts. No one had provided a statement after closing each night, so she had no idea where she was on it.

Kendle braced as she exited the apartment. It might be a rough day. After her workout and a visit with her team, she didn’t have anything to do. That was dangerous when PMS was here. Those hormones would need an outlet that might not wait until a scheduled time. Even now, Kendle could feel the pressure building behind her sockets, the uncontrollable rage barely being held in check by polite society.

“Except, society doesn’t exist anymore,” she growled, causing citizens to retreat to a safer distance. “and I’ve never been polite.”

Kendle ignored the confusion around her. If she were lucky, no one would spark the rage.

Using threatening body language, Kendle began her workout of running around the building until she was too tired to keep going.

No one interrupted her.

Chapter Sixteen

The Human Condition

1

“She has to be eliminated.” Yuri clucked his tongue regretfully. “She knows too much.”

“Dirce will make that choice if she survives tonight. Did you tell her it is to the death?”

“No.”

“Good. The crowd will get a lot drunker and shop more after watching an electrocution. That type of death is not so fast.”

“Why?” Yuri wondered if he could use it to his advantage somehow.

“Because it reminds them they too must die someday, maybe as horribly. The need to celebrate after that has ruined many a poor man.”

Yuri shrugged, not completely understanding.

“Why are you betraying her?” Xavier stared in suspicion. “If she kills Renda, you have your revenge.”

Yuri nodded, eyes glinting in the dim morning sunlight coming through the window where they were viewing the courtyard around the building. “True. But she is an American, like you. I am Russian. We will never be friends.”

Yuri left Xavier to his arrogant assumptions that he was beyond harm from the other masters here. Xavier didn't know the big boss the way the rest of them did. Xavier had only met him once and been intimidated. The rest of them had served with Dirce for a decade. When the big man arrived, everything they'd built would end. Yuri knew which side to be on when that happened.

2

“This is the fourth of six matches that the Black Widow must win to regain her men and gear! Betting booths are closing soon. Come enjoy the blood and gore!”

Nearby, Kendle rolled her eyes. “No blood with a taser, you idiot!”

Kazan flushed.

Kendle moved away from him to keep from interfering. He had obviously been ordered to emulate her and that would have to be good enough. She had other things to worry about.

Kendle swept the basement, glad to find the games and kiosks all filled with eager players and shoppers. At the same time, she was horrified so many people had come to witness a death. The human condition wouldn't change until people didn't respond this way. She had no idea how that would ever be possible.

“The betting booths are now closed! The fight will start in one minute!”

Kendle climbed into the ring, picking up the taser lying in her corner. She checked it for a safety button and flipped the power on. The light came, a vivid green that flashed her to the island, to her paradise that had been ruined. “What am I doing here?”

“Dying,” a voice responded from the other side of the ring. “The same thing we’re all doing.”

Kendle recognized the bossy guard who had been following her around and caring for her men. “Well, this sucks.”

“Yeah.” Bossy grunted. “I thought so too.”

Kendle waited for him to get his weapon and for the bell to ring, but she didn’t hesitate to shoot.

She missed.

The electric darts flew by the ducking fighter and slammed into the cheek and chest of a spectator. Screams and cheers sounded.

Kendle braced for the impact as Bossy fired, dropping her empty taser, but she wasn’t prepared for the pain. It took all of her will power to remain standing and not piss herself. Ethan’s evil leer flashed in front of her mind... Kendle felt the demon within burst forward to rip the darts from her stomach.

Growling, she advanced, demon in the lead.

Bossy lifted an arm for protection.

Kendle slammed her wrist into his, injecting him with the syringe from her sleeve. As he tried to jerk away, Kendle used the nose breaker she’d been taught by Marc.

Blood sprayed as the man's nose shattered under her descendant strength, but he was already debilitated by the poison; there was no scream.

Guess Kazan was right about the blood. We'll get to the gore next time. Kendle shifted around to scan the masters and found a guard, April, climbing into the ring with her.

"I'll kill you!" April charged at Kendle with her knife.

Bang!

The woman fell heavily into Kendle, glaring up in shock as she died.

Kendle looked over with the rest of the crowd to find Xavier holding a gun.

He lowered it slowly, flashing a thin smile. "The Black Widow wins again! Booths are open."

The crowd cheered at getting two for their money. Kendle just tried not to puke. Her stomach had already been hurting. Now, it was on fire.

Kendle staggered from the ring amid congratulations that stopped short of touching her. She left the basement without revealing more of her misery, but the instant the barrier to her cubby shut, she slid to her knees in agony. Only her nightmare with Ethan had been worse than this.

3

"It's time to show me."

Rice paled, looking around.

Kendle waited for him to confirm that they were alone in the small greenhouse where he was tending his namesake.

“Now?”

“Today. I need to have time to make a plan for it.”

“If you survive.”

Kendle crossed her arms over her chest, tapping chipped red nails on her arm.

Rice’s shoulders drooped. “I’ll go to the collateral area after my shift ends. Be there.”

Kendle left him to his work, noting the bakery nearby where his brother and family were laboring. From outward appearances, the people in this town were happy, but it only took a little time among them to be coated in their misery and desperation.

Kendle winced at a strong cramp. She had two huge bruises on her stomach, along with puncture marks, and there were still two fights to go.

Kendle forced herself into a run, not changing her training pattern. It would make her look weak, but she also needed to pass the time until Rice could leave work.

Curious about the rest of the town she hadn’t observed yet, Kendle veered away from incoming trucks that presumably held more stolen gear or people. She wasn’t allowed to run around the rear of the market during unloading anyway.

She jogged through the gate with the normal nod to the troops, picking the opposite rocky road from the one she’d chosen last time. It had taken her

a full hour to reach the end of town when she'd chosen to explore this prison. As far as she knew, there was one street left she hadn't explored. She had skipped the dark alley yesterday when she'd discovered it, not wanting to be gone too long and raise suspicion. Kendle jogged there now without stopping, hoping it would give her a few extra minutes for investigation. The empty alley had drawn her for some reason she hoped to identify. She didn't believe there was anything to find, but there were hours to kill before her meeting and match.

The alley, blocked at one end by part of the wall around the town, was as empty as she'd assumed, but Kendle felt the menace as she stood in the dark corridor. It didn't surprise her to observe three market sentries waiting for her with cruel expressions as she emerged.

Kendle didn't wait to find out if there were more of them. She let the demon loose as she ran forward, protected by her bubble and her rage. They'd come alone. *Mistake.*

Renda watched in shock from a short distance. She'd sent the men out to kill Kendle so she didn't have to fight. She hadn't expected the widow woman to use magic openly.

Renda ignored their screams for help as she walked back to the market to tell the other masters. "This changes everything. I've got you now."

4

Kendle reveled in the blood. By the time she finished, she was coated in it. The locals who'd been there the entire time gaped in shock and fear. Those who came upon the scene paused with the same emotions.

Kendle slowly became aware of what she'd done. She wanted to be concerned, but the satisfaction from spilling blood was too great. She staggered to her feet, leaving the body she'd been chewing on to sweep the horrified witnesses with glowing red orbs.

The locals didn't run or call for help. They stunned Kendle by revealing their own descendant statuses and sending sympathetic support to her silently. Kendle shuddered at the urges and longings they tossed, unwilling but unable to fight the bonds they were forcing upon her. "I will free you."

Her speaking seemed to be the cue for them to disappear. All except for Baker, who handed her his coat to hide the clothes that were coated in blood. "There's a pond. You saw it on the way here?"

Kendle nodded, running an arm across her mouth.

He grimaced. "It makes a good place to go swimming. Drains out into the river."

Kendle understood the blood would be washed away. "Thank you." Her eyes faded to normal.

Baker breathed a sigh of urgent need. “Don’t lose or we’ll kill your men before she can sell them.”

Kendle ignored the threat. “Take me to the pond.”

5

“Here they come.”

Kendle didn’t glance around at Baker’s warning. “I wasn’t there. You heard screaming but didn’t witness anything.”

“You don’t tell me.” Baker glowered at her in scorn. “I’ll tell you.”

Kendle laughed happily. “Don’t push your luck, coward.”

Baker kicked water at her and stormed off in embarrassment.

Kendle smothered further mirthless amusement to stand up and meet the squad of guards that had been sent to collect her. The pond, surprisingly clear, was only a short distance from the gate, where the more sympathetic sentries watched in concern.

Behind them, Renda lurked.

“Come with us. Do it now.”

Kendle came from the water with a confused tone. “What’s wrong?”

The guard closest, who had been tight with two of the dead men, slammed his rifle into her ribs.

Kendle fell to the ground, groaning.

The sentries dragged her to the market under Renda's blissful supervision. As they took her by the gate troops and crowds of patrons who had come to view her match, boos and shouts of rigging the fight echoed through the air. The mood quickly became ugly.

Renda ducked from a hurled stone, unable to tell who had thrown it. "Get her inside!"

Kendle was aware of the demon gathering energy to fight, but the pain in her ribs and gut prevented her from holding it in. The men roughly grasping her arms let go of her as an electric current ran through her skin, shocking them.

"More proof!" Renda shoved her men back toward their jobs. "Knock her out!"

Kendle tried to bring up an arm, but she couldn't avoid the gun that smacked into her neck or the concrete that caught her temple. The lights went out all at once.

6

"She is waking. Bring in the witnesses."

Kendle groaned at the pain in her body, blinking against the glare of afternoon light. She couldn't find a place that didn't hurt.

"You are accused of magic use." Xavier came over to stand in front of the barber chair they'd brought in to use for this. "Do you have anything to say?"

“I’m Kendle Roberts, from TV. It may seem like magic—”

“Ugh!” Kendle grunted in fresh pain as Xavier punched her in the leg over her bandage. The material was still wet, so she hadn’t been unconscious that long. Kendle tried to count the people in the room and breathe as she scanned her surroundings. The meeting room held a long desk with two benches behind it and a single chair across from it. There was a window, with bars, and only a single door. *Not much to work with.*

“You will answer to these charges!” Xavier’s profile morphed into an obsessed fanatic. “Your kind is not welcome here!”

“I’m not a magic user!”

“We shall see.” He waved the locals over as Renda herded them in.

The sight of Kendle, bound and beaten, brought fear and more tension into the room.

“Did you witness this woman using magic?”

No one spoke.

Renda slammed the door. “Answer him!”

“We saw her visit Mr. Rice at the greenhouse,” one of them stated with a shaking arm around his wife.

“She was at the bathing pool for a while, swimming.” Baker stepping forward. “Is this about the dead guards?”

“Yes.” Xavier approached Baker with a menacing glare. “What do you know of it?”

“I reported it.” Baker shuddered. “I couldn’t get the dogs off them.”

“Dogs?” Xavier repeated. “Dogs got to the bodies?”

“Dogs killed them.” Baker gestured. “The pack came from that old alley that leads through the wall—the one your riders use when they leave.”

“You lie!” Renda flew forward, but Yuri grabbed her arm.

“Keep going.” Xavier listened for lies as Yuri shoved Renda toward the exit.

“The guards were walking by, maybe following that woman, and the dogs came from the alley and attacked.”

“Why only them?”

“Got me too, sir.” Baker raised his sleeve to show a taped bandage. He revealed the gory wound under the gauze. “After I reported it, I went home to get cleaned up and back to work.”

“You did well.” Xavier turned to Kendle. “Did you observe any of this?”

“I heard the screams...” She fought the groggy sensation, in a lot of pain from the injuries and the position. “I would have helped them if I’d seen it.”

“You are all lying!” Renda punched the wall. “Why do you lie for her?!”

Xavier motioned Yuri to open the door. “Remove the witnesses.”

Kendle’s stomach fell further at that tone. She knew it well. *Do not come out of your cell*, Kendle ordered mentally as Xavier came toward her with

his knife in hand. *Unless you want me dead, do not come out of your cell.*

Kendle's hoarse screams echoed down the hall to her team and beyond, but nothing could stop it. Thanks to the support of the UN troops, the masters had full control.

7

"Nothing! You have wasted our time!" Xavier flung the knife toward Renda's boots. "Get her down from there and take care of her—on your tab."

Renda had seen Kendle attack the guards with so much strength that they couldn't escape or fight back, only try to defend themselves. She marched forward to do more damage than Xavier had.

The leader grabbed her wrist in an iron grip. "I think you are afraid."

Renda couldn't stand to be called a coward. With her free hand, she slapped Xavier hard enough to rock his chin.

Yuri and Iram both gasped.

Kendle tried to stay conscious.

Xavier let go of her, profile darkening.

Renda stumbled back in fear. "I got carried away."

"Yes, you did." Xavier gestured toward Kendle. "Do what you were told."

Now without an option, Renda hurried toward the chair.

“You will ask if she can fight tonight. If she says no, you will take her place in the ring.” Xavier left, ignoring the crowd that booed and pushed against him to view into the meeting room.

The locals had been won over, many of them now decorating their bodies with odd makeup that resembled her scars. Kendle wasn’t flattered by the emulation. It repulsed her.

Renda unsnapped the cuff on Kendle’s wrist. “I saw you. It happened.”

Kendle lifted her head with the last of her energy, shoving into Renda’s mind. *I’m going to kill you. Make your peace with God.*

Renda flinched in terror and anger, pointing. “She threatened me! I heard her in my mind!”

Iram, the last to leave, lifted his nose in disdain. “That is desperate and pathetic, even for you.”

Renda screamed in frustration.

Kendle passed out with a smirk on her bloody lips.

8

Tommy and everyone else in the holding area jumped as the door swung open and slammed against the wall.

The guards hurried forward to help Renda as she struggled to get Kendle’s weight inside.

“Take that!”

The troops hefted the unconscious fighter up and took her to an empty cot.

Renda leaned against the frame, getting her breath back. “If she can’t fight tonight, you all die!”

The door slammed and locked behind her.

The Eagles shoved by the sentries to surround Kendle with their protection.

Ryan looked at the nearest guard. “We need medical items.”

The Iranian man snorted. “Not my problem.”

“Are you certain?” Scott glared. “Renda didn’t say only slaves would die.”

Realizing he was right; the guard reluctantly went out to get instructions from the boss.

The Eagles knelt or stood around Kendle as Josh used his shirt to wipe away some of the blood from her face and arms.

“Thanks,” Kendle croaked. She’d woken when the guards in here touched her with their harsh grips. Those men weren’t like the others who had bonded with her. The guards in here were pure evil, like their mistress.

“What happened?” Ryan helped her get a drink from the cup that another guard brought over.

“I pissed her off.”

The team tried to laugh, but the way Kendle cramped up and groaned made that impossible. “Who’s the medic on this team?”

“Me.” Josh frowned a little. “You want me to check you out?”

“I want you to bandage my broken rib and give me something for the pain if they’ll allow it. I’ve got shit to do.”

Tommy snickered.

Josh scanned her visible injuries and shook his head. “You can’t fight like this, not without recovery time.”

Ben gestured. “You heard our host. Do what you can for Kendle.”

Tommy knelt down and held Kendle’s hand. *Take what you need.*

Kendle gave him a grateful, pain-filled smile. Then she drew so hard that Tommy felt his guts churn. He braced as the tug increased. “This is some ride we’re on.”

Kendle grunted, half in agreement, half in pleasure. Energy flowing in was better than sex. It didn’t hurt to take energy from Tommy.

Tommy chuckled as the kneeling members of the team stood up to help hide what was happening.

Kendle let go when Tommy yawned, wary of hurting him. “I’ll be good now. Let me sleep.”

Tommy rose, waving Ben to take his place. “All we’ve been doing is lying around after eating and resting. Let us help.”

Kendle didn’t have the strength to resist. When Josh placed his hand over hers, she drew what she needed.

Renda’s sentries didn’t know what was happening. They didn’t see anything odd, but they were distracted by their concern over what had been said. Had Renda meant they would die if the Black Widow did? Worried that was the case, the troops began preparing a meal and gathering supplies.

Renda wasn't stable. Everyone knew that. It was best not to take chances.

9

“This is the fifth match for the Black Widow! How has she lasted this long? Come find out tonight! Betting booths are closing soon.”

Kendle leaned against the ropes, eyeing her opponent. The energy from her team had done a lot for her internal injuries, including helping with the broken rib, but she'd stopped before the external wounds could be repaired.

Yuri came to stand by her with a wide grin, sliding a hand around her waist. “Your room has been broken into. You will stay with me tonight if you survive.”

Kendle didn't argue. She wasn't surprised by the cubby being damaged. Renda was still searching for proof. She would only have 24-hours after this to find it and Kendle expected the Iranian woman to be in rare form as fear crept up on her.

Kendle scanned the four thick rocks piled on each side of the ring, then the woman waiting to grab her share. “Rocks are so archaic.”

“It was that or machetes.” The older woman stared at Kendle. “My aim is better than my arm.”

Kendle was surprised into a grin. “I'm the opposite. Gives you the advantage.”

“Yeah,” Ellen muttered sarcastically. “Gonna kill me with a rock and she makes a joke.”

Kendle realized Ellen didn't want to be here, but it was too late to change her plans now.

"This fight is not to the death," the announcer called. The bell rang.

"Yeah..." Ellen streaked for the rocks.

Distracted, Kendle was just reaching her pile when the first stone struck the back of her skull. The second caught her in the cheek, tearing into her skin.

Dazed, Kendle brought the demon forward to make sure her aim was good as she rose and turned. To do it, she took a third hit that split her lip open and sent blood splashing down her shirt.

Kendle threw the rock as hard as she could, as she had in the first match with the knife, but this time, her demon guided the aim.

The stone smashed against the woman's windpipe, producing a loud crunch that brought silence to the basement.

Smothering, Ellen dropped heavily to her knees, both hands coming up in futility.

Kendle waited for the call, holding the rest of her rocks. She'd only thrown one.

"The Black Widow will face our slave master Renda tomorrow night!" the speaker blared. "Place your bets! Place your bets!"

Kendle drew in another deep breath, and then struggled out of the ring. Her ears were ringing, vision blurry.

Renda, hovering nearby, watched in happy fear as she spotted Kendle's weakness.

Feeling the stare, Kendle couldn't resist leering over her shoulder.

Renda screeched at her, drawing attention and condemnation from the other masters.

Kendle got out of sight as quickly as she could, staggering up to Yuri's apartment. She needed to lie down. *I'm not feeling well.*

10

Kendle smiled as her turn came at the front of the crowded kiosk. "I came for something absorbent."

The afternoon crowd around them quieted to listen.

Stan didn't look at her. "It will be delivered shortly. I'll find you."

Kendle nodded her thanks and went to the collateral room, eager to meet with Rice. They hadn't been able to find time yesterday between her torture and fight.

Pain being controlled with pills Yuri had sold her, Kendle noted the happier moods of the guards and the prisoners. All of them were healthier after a week of steady meals. She'd sent all gifts and donations here.

Kendle settled wearily at the table, joined by Conner and Ben. The rest of the team that had been released took seats nearby to listen.

She surprised them all by waving over the guard instead of whispering as they'd expected. She

handed the man a slip of paper that he read with excitement and horror.

“For real?”

“It’s a better life than this.”

Ori ripped up the paper. “Tell me when.”

“In the next couple hours, a package will be delivered to me. I need you to coat the handle of her whip with it.”

Ori understood what would happen. “You won’t betray me?”

“We don’t do that. Safe Haven provides a second chance for almost anyone, including you.”

Understanding she’d chosen this man to go to camp with them, the team studied him intently, examining him for whatever she’d seen.

“You won’t betray me?” Kendle was honestly concerned over it.

“I never go back on my word,” Ori stated stiffly. “Not for her or anyone else.”

“Good. Do your part and you’ll be with us when we go.”

The door opened to admit Rice.

The guard went back to his place. “No more noise!”

Rice came to Kendle, glaring. “My brother said no reply. What does that mean?”

“He can’t answer what I asked. What about the other half of why I’m still here?”

The rest of the team hadn’t heard why Kendle had agreed to fight for them instead of just blowing

this place up. They listened eagerly as Rice explained.

“In the crib.”

“A baby.” She was revolted. “You’re giving up your own baby.”

Rice didn’t respond to the contempt.

“Far corner or near the shelves?”

“Corner.”

Kendle couldn’t remember if she’d seen the child or not. “I’ll need to judge the size and weight. We’ll carry it out in a bag or kit.”

“Them.” Rice dropped his chin. “Twins.”

Kendle’s mind flashed to the signs about magic users mostly being twins. “How did you hide that for so long?”

“There’s a panel under the mattress. We switch them out for feedings and sleep.”

“How long can that last?”

As if to answer her, a baby’s cry echoed, forcing the guard to yell at the person tending it.

Kendle sighed. “Okay. We’ll need two large bags and they’ll have to be drugged or they’ll cry during transport.” She glowered at him. “Can you do that without killing them?”

“We’ve had to a few times when Renda was in here.”

“Be careful. After going through all of this, I’d better not be given two corpses. I would have to come back and express my displeasure.”

Rice paled. “I have to go.”

Conner wasn't sure the man could be trusted.
"Don't forget who your real enemy is."

Kendle waited for Rice to be gone before scanning the crib. "So, who knows how to change a diaper?"

Chapter Seventeen
Not The Favorite

1

Kendle woke to a heavy weight on her chest.

Her lids flew open in the darkness to find Renda sitting on top of her, eyes glittering with insanity. Renda's braid tickled Kendle's nose as she leaned down. "You die now!"

Kendle, caught in hazy sleep, sent a powerful blast of need out, calling for help.

Yuri jerked up next to her, hand clutching the blade he slept with. "What?"

Caught, Renda slashed with her knife.

Yuri jerked her by the long braid, throwing Renda from the bed. "Get out!"

Renda scrambled away from his fury, aware of how dangerous Yuri was with his knife.

"She will die tonight!"

Yuri manhandled her out of his room, growling at the troops for the interruption to his sleep.

Kendle breathed a thin sigh of relief, wondering how badly she'd been injured this time. The pain was minor and she was breathing okay, but that didn't mean much in the end. She gingerly felt her throat, coming away with wet fingertips.

"Are you okay?" Yuri flipped on the light.

“Yes.”

Yuri got his medical kit out to wipe away the blood and place a small bandage on her neck. “Good as new.”

Kendle laughed under his light touch. “Yeah.”

Yuri kissed her cheek and lay down next to her. Of all the women he’d spent time with since the war, this one was his favorite.

Kendle caught the thought, but didn’t respond. She knew Yuri was only loyal to Yuri. After she killed Renda, Yuri would probably betray her descendant status. Kendle wasn’t certain how she knew that he had figured it out, but there was no doubt. Yuri knew she was a magic user.

Yuri placed them back to back, enjoying the warmth. He quickly drifted off, not fazed by the dangers of this life. *Russia! Now that was a harsh existence.*

Kendle took a while longer to fall back asleep, mind worrying over the coming fight. Renda had been sitting on her arms, hitting pressure points that paralyzed people. Kendle hadn’t been able to move. That didn’t bode well for the coming match. Renda was obviously a good fighter who understood how to disable an opponent. If Ori didn’t get the poison onto Renda’s whip handle, Kendle would be flayed alive. That image wasn’t conducive to rest.

Outside, Renda prowled the market, frustration and fear boiling. She’d felt Kendle’s mental blast, heard the voice in her mind, watched the woman

tear three huge sentries apart with her hands and teeth. Not being taken at her word was more than the Iranian could stand. “Dirce will believe me. Dirce won’t let her kill me.”

2

“He’s here. Get up!”

Kendle rolled from the bed in a daze, grabbing her gun from under the edge of the pillow. “Who? What?”

Yuri tossed clothes at her. “Dirce. He wants to meet you.”

Kendle dressed in a blurry fog. She hadn’t dropped off again until daylight. She judged it to be noon now.

“You must hurry. Dirce does not like to be kept waiting.”

Kendle heard the fear and devotion, but she also caught the bitterness. She pulled on her boots. “What should I know about him?”

“There is no time for that. Come.”

Kendle let him lead her into the hall, running over previous conversations, but she couldn’t remember anything helpful.

The market was crowded, so much that Yuri had to elbow people aside for them to get down the stairs. The difference in the market was huge. Instead of the boredom and depression she’d been greeted with two weeks ago, there was now cheer

and hope. *Because they got to be a part of death and it wasn't theirs?*

Your light has fed them, the demon told her. That is why descendants were gifted to humanity. If you need these people to defend you, they will.

I've...infected them?

They were already infected, the demon corrected. The rage disease has spread around the world. You gave them hope for the future, even a short one while you are here. When you go, a little of that magic will remain.

Kendle was comforted by that.

The first floor was even thicker with people. Kendle was glad of it, but that relief didn't overshadow the concern about meeting Dirce. From everything she'd picked up, he was worse than Xavier.

Yuri pushed the door open, taking her arm again. "This is the Black Widow."

Kendle stopped, catching sight of the big boss. "Do I know you?"

Dirce chuckled, motioning for Yuri to leave. "Yes, Ms. Roberts. I believe we have a mutual friend."

Kendle took the seat he offered, noticing that they were alone in Renda's grimly decorated apartment. Renda's den had skeletons and animal dissections in glass frames with bloody fingerprints on the sides and tops. The floor was carpeted in animal skin and the curtains were dusty red

bedsheets. *What an odd mix.* “Who’s the mutual friend?”

“Chauncey.”

Kendle thought of the Keeper residing in a Safe Haven cell and tried to clear her mind as the full sense of danger settled onto her shoulders. This man knew about descendants.

The Greek studied her openly, standing near the window where defiant sunlight was trying to penetrate the gloom. It was obvious that Renda didn’t open the sheets very often. Dust was swirling around the room. Kendle concentrated on the beams instead of letting her mind run wild.

“You killed my spy.”

Bossy, Kendle realized. “Well, it was him or me, and I need me more than I did him, so...”

Dirce joined her in the chair across the small table that had been set with a meal for two. He didn’t smile at her quip.

Kendle didn’t touch anything as the wide man began to make a plate. Dirce didn’t wear the standard uniform or the colors of his troops and masters. He favored jeans and a long button-down with deep blue stripes along the tapered sleeves. His tan work boots were a common style found at any K-Mart, but his weapons were first class. Kendle tried not to gape as she continued to store observations about the boss that was twice her size, but not fat. Muscles bulged under his shirt. *Talk about fit.*

“Thank you!” Dirce gushed proudly. “Most people don’t notice!”

Kendle blanched. “What do you want?”

All pretenses fell like a broken mask. Dirce leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table. “Why are you here?”

Kendle didn’t resist as he scoured her mind for everything that had happened with the guards and her fights. When he was finished, Kendle felt her demon powering up to fight.

“Eat now.” Dirce handed her the plate.

Kendle took it with a shaking hand.

“Easy, Healer. I mean you no harm.”

Kendle knew better than to believe that, especially since Ethan had once said that to her and then bit off her nipple.

Dirce blanched this time. “I’m sorry that happened to you. Please, eat. You’ll need your strength.”

“For what?” She picked up a strawberry. She hadn’t had one since being on the island.

“Your match, of course.” He began making a second plate. “We can’t disappoint the masses.”

Kendle pushed cautiously. “What about after?”

“You’ll be given your team and the gear, and sent on your way.”

“Why?”

Dirce gazed at her with glowing orbs that held the promise of the type of abuse Ethan had dealt out. “Because you’re not a threat to me. If I kill you, Safe

Haven will come here...and they are a threat.” He gestured at the plate. “Eat.”

Kendle did as he instructed, enjoying the fruit and pastries. Dirce also ate, but he never looked away from Kendle. She could feel him tinkering in her mind, trying to convince her to stay and help him with his goals.

Kendle shoved him out with a quick motion that surprised them both.

“Interesting.” Dirce’s blue helmet tattoo winked at her as he peeled off part of an orange. “Are all of your citizens as strong?”

Kendle thought of Angela and then brought down her mental wall. “Yes. Leave us be. We’re tired of fighting.”

“Who could give you a challenge?” Dirce stared at her. “The Mexican army will not return from that conflict. Who else threatens an entire camp of descendants?”

Realizing she’d said too much, Kendle tried to switch topics, but Dirce ripped into her mind brutally, going deeper this time.

Kendle forced herself to think of her nightmare with Ethan, the horror and the humiliation she’d survived. Dirce wasn’t able to get through that type of barrier. Even she couldn’t.

Dirce drew back in frustration, eyes settling into inoffensive chocolate. “You will leave and not return. If you betray this deal, I will hunt you.”

Kendle didn’t need the threat. “All I’ve ever wanted from this hellhole was to be out of it. I’ll go

right now, without the gear, if you'll give me my last two men."

"There are bets placed and bets to be paid."

Kendle now studied him the way he had her, seeing his smirk, feeling his eagerness. "Why do you want Renda dead?"

Dirce frowned at her accurate guess. He shook his head, but didn't answer, leaving Kendle to puzzle it. When she couldn't come up with anything, she moved onto the next item on her list. "I'd like to buy the freedom of the other people in the collateral area."

"Everything is for sale in our market. As long as you never return, you may shop."

"Thank you." She gestured toward the window, to the alley. "I'm sorry about your three troops."

Dirce waved off the concern. "They were hers. Mine would never betray a deal to protect a coward."

Ah. Renda trying to kill her to avoid the match had revealed a yellow streak.

"Yes. I don't need a coward protecting me."

"I can understand. Is that the job you'd give?"

Dirce nodded, scanning her from black hair to black boots. "You're not a coward."

"No. There are very few things that hit me that way."

"Renda isn't one of them?" He smirked a bit. "She can kill flies with that whip. I've seen it."

Kendle stood up, sensing he was ready for her to go. "Just as long as she uses it tonight."

Dirce caught her hint, chuckling. The creepy sound followed her out into the hall, where Yuri and Rice were lurking.

“What happened?”

Kendle realized she hadn't settled the babies with Dirce. She shrugged at Rice. “Too soon to tell yet.”

Yuri grinned. “You're alive. He must like you.”

Kendle spotted Renda coming down the hall and raised her voice. “Yeah, I think he's gonna bet on me tonight.”

Renda slammed her fist into the wall.

Kendle hurried down the corridor, laughing.

3

“I'm not the favorite?!”

Renda's shout was barely audible over the dings of games and chatter of a happy crowd. Spectators from across the state had come to witness this final match.

“I have been fighting here for six months! How can I not be the favorite anymore?! She has only been here two weeks!”

Kendle kept her chin down, trying to hide the laughter. Around her, the audience didn't bother. They knew who was going to win.

Renda scanned the crowd, observing the satisfaction of the other leaders, watching the betting odds in the boxes go down on her survival.

“How many of you are in on this?! How many of you want me dead?”

Those around her didn't reply. Those furthest away hadn't even heard the shout.

Once again full of frustration and fear, Renda stomped to the ring, hand resting on the handle of her whip.

Kendle looked across the basement.

The UN guard over Renda's apartment was lingering near the dartboard as he waited with everyone else to see who would survive.

Kendle lifted a brow, to which Ori replied with a small nod. Hoping that meant it was taken care of, Kendle shifted her attention to her opponent. Now that the big boss was here from the UN, there was no way she could use magic. Kendle expected to be hit several times, but she thought she could stand it. She'd been hurt by Ethan and during the battles with the government, not to mention while surviving the apocalypse. These people had no idea who she was, despite recognizing her name.

“This fight is to the death!” the radio blared.

Renda glanced at the other masters in shock, unable to believe that she was being betrayed.

“Booths are now closed. The match will start in one minute!”

Kendle bent down to pick up her weapon. In the last sixty seconds before the match started, she scanned the basement and found no trace of humanity in the humans who filled the basement. In

that instant, she hated them all for forcing her to do this.

Ding!

Renda was fast. She flipped her whip with gusto. The first lash across Kendle's arm was a reminder that pain was also infuriating.

Be calm, Kendle ordered her demon. *Stay back.*

Renda snapped the whip again; a small chunk of skin flew off Kendle's wrist. Kendle screamed.

Renda lunged forward, snapping the whip again.

Kendle tried to defend herself from the blows, raising her arm to fight, but she had no skill with the weapon. She'd never even held one before. She tried to snap it like her opponent was currently doing.

The lashes met in midair, tangling. Kendle took advantage of her descendant strength to pull Renda toward her.

Aware of Kendle's poisoning tactics, Renda scrambled away, keeping her grip on her weapon.

Kendle jerked her whip, unprepared for the harsh snap. The whip cut into her chin as it flew backwards. Blood sprayed.

Renda wanted to gloat, but there wasn't time as Kendle snapped her weapon again. The razor sharp edges of her lash flew across Renda's arm, but didn't break the skin. "You don't know how to use that! Let me show you how!"

Kendle ducked, but not quickly enough. Renda's whip tore into the side of her neck, barely missing the artery.

If it doesn't work soon, you're done, the demon warned. *Let me come forward.*

No!

Renda snapped her whip again. Blood splashed down Kendle's leg.

Spectators groaned and muttered as the two women battled. Compared to their boring existence of slavery and scratching out a meager living, this was excitement. Bloodlust flew through the crowd.

Renda snapped harder, going for the kill this time...

How did I miss? Renda stared at Kendle's undamaged eye. Dizzy, she staggered, balance gone. She looked down, realizing she'd been injured. *Is my arm turning blue?*

Kendle stayed back as the poison on the handle finally began to take effect. As she had in the other matches, she waited to determine if Renda would die on her own. Some of the others, she might have spared at the end, but not this one. If Renda didn't die here, Kendle would kill her.

Renda tried to snap the weapon again, but it fell from her grip. "How did you get to me?!" Her knees caved, taking her to the ground.

"Anything can be had from Market Town for the right price." Kendle gestured. "Even someone putting something on your favorite toy."

“Who?” Renda struggled to breathe and form the last sentence before death claimed her. “Who did this?”

Kendle gestured toward the audience that had gone quiet so they could hear the conversation. “About half of them. You’ve made a lot of enemies.”

Renda glared up in final defiance. “Dirce?”

Kendle nodded, finally letting her true emotions show as a sneer of victory spread across her face. “It sucks to hear that something you love was taken, doesn’t it?”

Renda stared at her with horror, realizing her obsession with the weapon had killed her. Blood began to roll from the corner of Renda’s mouth, her eyes dilated... Then it was over. Renda slumped to the mat. Blood ran toward Kendle’s boots. *That’s the sight I’ll always remember you by now.*

“The Black Widow has won it all! The Black Widow has won it all! Booths are open! Don’t forget to shop!”

She climbed out of the ring amid deafening cheers from the audience, half of which were off duty guards and troops who had come with the big boss. Everyone had enjoyed her matches, except for the dead woman lying in the bloody ring.

Kendle moved toward the master couches, not certain of the protocol, but wanting to be positive that her men were released even though Renda wasn’t around to handle it.

Yuri motioned a guard toward the first floor. “See to her men.” He pointed to two others. “Take care of her gear. Have her ready to go by morning.”

As the two sentries disappeared, Kendle gave Yuri a grateful nod that revealed more of their intimacy than she’d intended.

Sitting on Yuri’s left, Dirce glanced at the Russian in aggravation. “Must you tag everything that walks?”

Kendle burst out laughing.

Yuri flushed. “You know me, Boss.”

Dirce sighed resignedly. “Yes, I do. You always get the best ass. I just don’t know how you do it.”

Dirce waved Kendle off to tend her injuries as the rest of the crowd gravitated toward the kiosks, games, and shops that were open for entertainment. “Someone clean up that mess. The market will stay open until midnight to celebrate the Black Widow’s victory! Start telling people that we will do this again next month. We need fighters for the matches.”

Kendle left the basement. She wasn’t certain she could contain her anger or her relief much longer. She needed a few minutes alone.

Instead, Kendle found all of her team waiting nervously outside Yuri’s apartment. Kendle sighed. *No time for emotions right now. I still have business to handle.*

Kendle’s team surrounded her with support and protection as Josh knelt to tend her injuries. He and all the others were surprised to have been given their

gear. They'd thought for sure it had been sold. Most of them had doubted at one point or another that Kendle would be able to secure their freedom. Standing in the hallway, with no guards or bonds, was a great relief to the ten males.

"We'll be ready to go in the morning. You can sleep for the ride." Tommy had been grabbed, along with Josh, and shoved into the hallway to find the other team members being marched upstairs. When they hit the top of the steps, the sentries had pointed them toward Yuri's apartment and then left.

"We can't go yet." Kendle knew Tommy and Josh still didn't know about her deal with Rice. Kendle let the others quietly fill them in, scanning the hall. Both people she expected were already in the crowd, moving toward her.

Kendle motioned to Rice. "You guys are gonna spend the night at his place." Before anyone could argue, Kendle smiled. "I'm spending the night here. Meet up with me in the morning."

Kendle went inside, holding the door for Yuri. When she gently shut it, the team was forced to accept that she had made other plans.

Tommy grinned. "Guess that means we have the rest of our evening free."

As the team scanned the shops, all eyes came to rest on the small café that had a line out into the hall and beautiful smells wafting through the air.

"Anyone mind waiting?" Tommy asked.

None of them did. It would allow them to stay close to where Kendle was for as long as the market

was open, and let them hear some of the stories, meet the locals that had apparently been won over. It was obvious she'd also been won over by them. Why else would she stay and help these cowards after everything they'd done?

Tommy led the way toward the café.

All of the men were surprised when the crowd parted to let them through. As they reached the front of the line, Cutts glanced up in happiness.

“You guys eat on the house! Come sit in the front.”

Surprised at the difference in their treatment, the team did as they were bid, each accepting congratulations on having the Black Widow as a member of their team.

“What the hell did she do here?”

Tommy shrugged at Ryan's whisper. “I don't know, but it saved our asses. We'll have to make sure we show our appreciation somehow.”

Ben grunted his thanks to the cook as the happy man set a large drink on the counter in front of him. “Yeah, now we have to figure out what you get for the girl who already has everything, including her own whip scars.”

The team snickered a little, each feeling guilty for her new injuries. It was impossible not to, considering that they were now free and being fed, while she was alone with a Russian man that they didn't trust.

“I think maybe we’ll hang around in the market.” Tommy scanned his team. “We can sleep in the hall if we have to. We’ve got our gear.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Cutts gestured. “Every shop here has gained profit since the Black Widow showed up. Anyone will give their cubby to you. All you have to do is ask.”

Tommy shoved a straw into his cold drink. “What deal did she make with you?”

Cutts glanced around the happily filled café and then over to the cash register that had real money sticking out of it for the first time in months. He hadn’t known that greenbacks were still a currency in the United States. “She saved my life. You know how that feels.”

The team did. They ate their meal in silence, contemplating how lucky they were to have been sent on this mission with Kendle. Nearly anyone else would have gotten them killed.

Rice, seduced by Kendle’s choice to stay the night with Yuri, joined the men in the café for a meal. He wasn’t a part of the festivities, but because he had brought them into this, he was a part of the situation. There was also the fact that his needs hadn’t been met yet and he didn’t want to spend time away from the information and news. Too many lives depended on Kendle coming through with the rest of their agreement. For him, the fighting wasn’t over.

“This will all be over in a few days.” Yuri handed her the bottle of oil. “I don’t have the right to do this with you anymore unless we make a new agreement.”

Kendle set the bottle on the table, then dropped down onto the bed. “Do you really think I would be here if I were doing this for money?”

Happy to discover his company had been enjoyable, Yuri joined her on the bed. “Would you like to clean up? Can I get you a meal?”

“No.” Kendle laid down. “I need to rest. Just keep me alive until morning and then my team will take over.”

Yuri made sure the apartment was secure. When her snores began to sound a few minutes later, he pulled the blanket up over her.

Yuri studied her scarred face for a long time, remembering when he’d done the same with Renda’s sister. Now they were both dead, but this warrior was here. “I don’t want to let you go. I’m going to ask Dirce to let me keep you.” He flipped off the light. “My new Kendle baby.”

Chapter Eighteen

Blindsided

October 12th

1

Angela woke suddenly, stomach cramping as she shot up. “I have to go.”

She’d spent her days with Adrian sleeping, eating, and crying. It hadn’t been any different from being in camp.

Adrian didn’t waste time questioning. He rose from the bedroll next to her, pulling on his boots.

Angela stood up slowly, fighting the urge to run. “Tell them to get everyone in. Dosimeters should be up.”

Adrian hurried to the radio, dragging one boot by a lace. “We’ll go in through the bottom tunnel?”

“Ask Marc.”

Adrian quickly keyed the mike. “Bastard to base.”

“This is Safe Haven,” Kenn responded tonelessly.

“We’re coming in.”

The radio was quiet for a few seconds. “Copy. Instructions will follow.”

“Roger that.”

Adrian began to gather his main gear, aware of Angela already limping toward the entrance.

Still not used to acting like an Eagle instead of leading them, Adrian swallowed instructions and followed her out into the cold darkness.

Angela went to the snow-covered bike, but Adrian put a hand on her arm when she would have helped him. He glanced at the dark, icy landscape.

Angela reluctantly drew her gun and stood watch. She was barely awake. Physical labor, though painful, would have woken her a little quicker.

Adrian found the edge of the frozen tarp and braced for a huge pull that jerked it from the bike. He let the tarp fall to kick away the snow, and then slid onto the cold seat to twist the key that was already in the ignition. “Home?”

Angela had to holster, unable to hold her weapon while climbing or moving her lower body. The pain in her abdomen was still too bad. She slid onto the bike behind Adrian. “Yes.”

Adrian wanted to go slow, to be careful, but he knew better. He drove as if he were alone, on his way to her.

Angela was forced to mold herself to his warm body, but it didn't help the misery of pain and cold. She also didn't ask Adrian to dim them as they neared a camp of refugees that were a short distance from the cave. They blew by tents and bodies.

Angela sucked in the horror, the guilt. If she'd tried harder, she might have been able to save more

of her fellowmen. The small group they'd just passed wasn't bad, only desperate.

"You aren't meant to save them all." Adrian repeated her words to him upon first joining Safe Haven. "Fate makes that choice."

Angela sobbed against him, not caring when the tears froze to her face. She was crying for her country now and that was okay.

Adrian felt her pain as if it was his own, but that soul-crushing weight of leadership was absent. He gunned the throttle in relief.

2

How long?! Marc was ecstatic that she wanted to return, but furious that she was being transported by one person in the middle of the slick night where it would be difficult for him to reach her quickly.

Ten minutes until the intersection at the bottom of the hill, Adrian answered, sounding distracted.

Marc didn't make it worse with instructions or complaints. He broke the connection and headed for the bottom tunnel. He didn't take anyone willingly, but Kyle refused to let him go without an escort. He and Jennifer walked behind their new boss, glad Angela was coming home. Once she was back, things would calm down. The last week had been full of fights and doubts.

Marc caught the thought. He hoped it was true, but the demon said trouble was coming with her, not

peace. Marc didn't care. If Angela was coming back, she was awake. She could resume command.

Jennifer's snort made Marc tense. "What do you know?"

Jennifer didn't answer. The visions she'd had were foggy at best. She just knew Angela better than her mate did.

"Whatever." Marc didn't have time for teenage drama. Angie was coming home. Angry or not, hurt or not, he'd missed her.

Thanks to Marc's quick pace, the trio made it to the bottom of the tunnel in record time. Marc led them into the darkened shadows of the final twisting cavern, where a cleverly placed gray tarp hid a Gator.

Kyle drove, familiar with the vehicle since he and Neil had alternated driving it to various locations to keep it hidden from everyone. It had been an emergency transportation for the council if needed. It wouldn't have held everyone comfortably, but it would have held them. Due to the slower speeds, it wasn't ideal. Under these rugged conditions however, it was perfect. It took them down the iced-over mountain path and by the small refugee camp that was now dwindling instead of growing. Fighting and starvation had thinned that herd since they'd handled the train people.

Adrian wasn't in sight as they arrived at the snowy intersection. Wind blew drifts and ice across the road as they tried to spot the former leader.

“There.” Kyle pointed to a taller drift near a telephone pole.

They watched the drift become a white tarp that was jerked aside by a man on a bike, holding a woman in his arms.

Marc was out of the gator in a flash, crunching toward them.

Kyle and Jennifer took positions nearby, neither of them caring for how open it was here. Anything could happen.

Jennifer shared a concerned look with Kyle, but he didn't have time to agree as lights flashed their way from a narrow street that should have still been blocked by the avalanche.

Marc had started to take Angela from Adrian, but now he spun around, drawing a Colt.

The truck skidded to a halt at the corner, door flying open.

Marc prepared to fire, like Kyle and Jennifer were doing.

“Don't shoot! Oh, God! Marc don't you shoot me!”

Hearing the name froze all of them. It was someone Marc knew.

The woman slipping toward them in a hurry had left her headlights on, engine running, and was clutching a form that could only be a thin child.

“Oh, God!” The brunette ran toward them as fast as she could on the ice. “We have to go!”

Marc glared at Adrian, who flashed Angela's words about the dosimeters. Understanding the

threat that was coming, Marc's gut tightened into a ball of lava. *Safe Haven!*

Marc waved toward the Gator. "Get her up the hill. I'll follow you."

Marc grabbed the panicking woman by the arm and swung her around, ignoring everything except his need to get to the cave. The herd was in danger.

"No! Stop, Marc!" Julia tried to resist, but there was little she could do as Marc pushed her toward her truck. "We have to get under cover."

Marc took her to the passenger side, causing Julia to fall silent. She watched fearfully as he slammed her door and slipped around the front of the old Chevy to take the driver's seat.

"Hang on." Marc followed Kyle, who was already rolling. "Rough road."

Julia clutched her son, bracing with her legs. She also kept her mouth shut, stunned that she'd found Marc standing in the middle of the street right when she needed him most.

Marc concentrated on the drive. The woman's truck wasn't equipped for the climb that it now had to make.

The demon however, disappeared to dig for information on the woman and child huddled in the passenger seat. He remembered this serpent in their garden all too well.

Angela moaned as the Gator slid on a patch of ice that had melted a bit from the first ride down. It was icing over in a slick sheet that refused to give them enough traction. Kyle shifted gears, rocking, and they shot forward. Jennifer warned Marc mentally, but wasn't certain that she had needed to. Marc was hell behind the wheel, like Kenn and Billy.

Even though she'd expected it, Jennifer was still impressed with the way Marc walked the battered truck up the hill sideways. It was a delicate balance to hold a vehicle on the edge like that, and it implied the person doing it was a master.

Marc was just glad when they finally reached the tunnel. The silence from the woman and her child was a bit unnerving. He'd been braced for crying or constant chatter while he was trying to concentrate. It had been a relief not to have either, but it had also been a concern. He hadn't had the spare focus to scan her yet, but he was already positive the woman or her child was a descendant. There wasn't a hum of power or anyone in his thoughts to give it away, but he knew what he knew. His radar was much sharper now. He needed to get them under cover so he could at least see her face. She and the kid were wearing more layers than the Eagles did whenever he sent them out.

Marc went to the passenger door, holding it for her and then led her into the bottom corridor, where Kyle and Jennifer were following Adrian toward the camp.

Marc waited until the others were out of sight before turning to his unexpected company. He flipped on his belt light and crossed his arms over his chest. “Who are you?”

Julia set the boy onto his feet, keeping an arm around him. “An old...friend.”

Marc scowled as flashes from an ugly past slapped him like the recent rifle butt to the skull. “Julia?”

She pushed her hood off to reveal a gaunt profile under a desperate expression. “Hello, Marc.”

Marc hadn’t thought about Julia in ten years. “How did you find me?”

“I heard the Ghost defy and then defeat the government.” Julia swallowed nervously. “After that, Cody tracked you down.”

Marc stared in dawning horror and shock as Julia slid the boy’s hood off. It was like looking into a mirror.

Julia cringed as Marc’s facade morphed into every nightmare she’d ever had of this moment. She’d always hoped it wouldn’t have to happen. “Please, let me expl—”

“What have you done?!” Marc was unable to process more than the obvious yet. Julia was here. Julia had a son that looked like him. This was his son. Julia had...stolen a child from him! “You liar! You whore! You awful, awful human being!”

Julia held the boy when he would have lunged forward to attack Marc. She deserved everything he

gave her, even if he tossed her out. Cody was all that mattered now.

“How could you do that! You...you...liar! Thief!” Marc spun toward the tunnel, staggering in his pain.

“Wait!” Julia scooped up the struggling boy, running after Marc. “Wait!”

Marc didn't.

“You, *Boot!*” Julia screamed, using the only way she knew to get his attention.

Marc's fury passed the level of violence. He twisted around to hit her.

“He'll die without you!” Julia screamed, not scared after the life she'd led since betraying him. “Hate me, throw me out, shoot me, but do right by your son, Grunt!”

Marc froze, glad she'd called him a grunt. He wouldn't have been able to stop himself if she had hurled another insult. He stared at her defiant face, seeing the terror of a mother who had nowhere else to turn. He didn't care about her, but the little boy on her hip, now suckling his thumb in fear, was hard to ignore. “What's wrong with him?”

Julia sighed in relief. “He's in shock from things we saw. He's getting better.”

Marc scanned them, digging deeper than he'd ever gone into someone other than Angie. When he was satisfied that Julia didn't have a hidden agenda, Marc motioned toward the corridor where Eagles could be heard coming toward them. “Get moving.”

Julia tried to hurry, heart pounding. She'd been sure that he would kill her. It was worth it for her son to be with someone who wouldn't let his gifts be used in ways that would harm him further. Cody had been through enough.

Julia tried to keep up with Marc's stride, but it was impossible. She tripped repeatedly in her worn boots and weak condition. They had always been on rations, but the last weeks had been harder than usual. There hadn't been much food. Julia tried to be grateful her son didn't weigh as much as normal as she struggled up the mountain tunnel. She'd found Marc. When his anger eased, he would do right by their son. That was all that mattered.

Marc wasn't immune to her suffering. He didn't care. It was the child's cry of pain when she tripped and fell that got him to relent.

Nearly snarling, Marc stomped to them and snatched the boy up.

Julia waited at his feet for the beating she deserved. He had his son. He could cast her out right now.

Marc wanted to. Her thoughts were easy to read, but her remorse had no effect on him. Nothing she could ever say or do would allow him to forgive her.

The boy in his arms was light and still, curled around his arm and shaking. Marc tried to give him back to his mother as she stood up, but the boy wouldn't let go. Marc glowered at Julia in confused anger. "What's his deal?"

Julia rushed forward to take her son, but the boy still wouldn't let go.

Marc caught a detail he'd missed in all his rage. "Why doesn't he talk?"

Julia paled a bit, retreating. "He's fine."

Marc shoved into her mind, immediately wincing at her memories of the boy being born. She was in what appeared to be a shed.

Julia slammed down the wall she used with her son.

Marc waved a hand; she was knocked against the tunnel wall. She stayed on the ground, gasping.

"Please, don't."

Marc pulled in the physical form of his anger. It was the first time he'd used it in Safe Haven. The little boy hadn't budged from his curled position around Marc's arm, but his voice was like hearing Charlie speak.

Marc turned toward Safe Haven, catching Adrian's need for him to be there to enforce Angela's wishes on the newest crisis. He tucked the child onto his hip, glad when the boy automatically wrapped his legs and arms around for a better grip. "Keep up!"

Julia hurried to her feet, dizzy. She'd known he would be mad, but deep down, she'd still believed Marc wouldn't hurt her.

"You were wrong."

Julia stared in shock as she realized Marc was an alpha. "He got it from you!"

Marc understood then, more than he wanted to. Julia had believed it was a curse, that the boy was ill. She hadn't been able to accept that her son had gifts. She'd chosen to hide them. Marc instinctively held the child closer. "That won't happen here. You can be who you really are."

Cody didn't answer, but he was listening. His mother had always spoken of his father in terms of a hero. Cody needed that to be true. Nothing else his mother had told him was.

Marc quickly ran through the chaos this would bring, trying to spot big problems that had to be handled right away. Based on what Safe Haven had already gone through, Marc only asked a few important questions. "You running from anyone? Being hunted? Sick? Planning revenge on someone here?"

Julia snorted, out of breath. "No, to all."

"What do you want from us?"

"Us?"

"Safe Haven."

"I came for you, Marc. I don't care about your camp."

Marc didn't tell her that she would in time. He already wanted her gone. He had enough on his plate. "What do you want?"

"For Cody to be safe."

"You've been doing that until now, I assume. What changed?"

"Supplies are getting scarce." Julia felt like she might faint. This was more exertion than she was

used to. “And raiders are getting bolder. Our group was attacked. I barely made it out.”

“So you want to dump him here with me or do you want to be invited in too?” Marc faced her as they reached the guard booth at the summit of the corridor.

Julia didn’t answer. She didn’t have the right to ask for anything except her son’s life. If Marc gave her that, it was enough.

Disgusted, Marc waved a hand at the guard. “Get someone on her. She doesn’t even visit the latrine without company.”

Barry nodded, not showing his surprise at Marc’s hostility. He hadn’t spoken when Adrian had gone by with Angela in his arms and he didn’t now either. It was obviously a bad time to bother anyone.

4

Angela couldn’t stop the tears as Adrian carried her into Safe Haven. The guards around them assumed she was in pain. Angela let them. She couldn’t explain how it felt to be back here without the baby growing safely inside her.

Adrian cradled her, understanding as much as he could. Her misery was hitting him in harsh waves that threatened to bring tears to his eyes, but he didn’t know what to do to help her, other than what he was already trying. Losing a child wasn’t something you got over in a month or even a year.

It was something you carried your entire life. He knew.

“You didn’t tell me that.” Angela sniffed against his shoulder, ignoring their audience as he took her to the medical bay. “Why not?”

Adrian shrugged, glad his chest wasn’t hurting as they neared the lower levels of the camp. “Just didn’t come up. I would have.”

“Son?”

Adrian nodded stiffly. “My eldest.”

“I’m sorry.” She shuddered, trying to restrain the flood.

“So am I.” He shifted her gently into Doug’s waiting arms. “So am I.”

Angela buried her cheek against Doug’s chest as tears broke over her face.

Adrian immediately went down the ladder. He didn’t want to push his luck, but he was also curious about Marc’s visitors. Was that really a bastard child from Marc’s past? Adrian hadn’t thought Marc capable of walking away from a woman carrying his child.

“He wouldn’t!” Jennifer glared. “Quit enjoying his pain. It isn’t right.”

Adrian didn’t reply. They should all be back in their previous lives, worrying over bills. None of this was right.

Jennifer agreed, but with the revelations of the last months, she had come to understand what her role was. Peace wouldn’t come until past behaviors changed, and past behaviors wouldn’t change until

they were pointed out. Half of these people didn't know the line between right and wrong anymore.

Adrian was instantly furious at the teenager for what he saw as an attempt to wrest control from the council he'd put in place. "Who are you to be the moral judge of *my* refugee camp?"

Jennifer paled a bit at the accusation. "I wouldn't do that. The council choices are final."

"Didn't sound like it." Adrian didn't care that Kyle was coming toward them with a shitty expression warning of violence. "Don't get ahead of yourself as an Enforcer, Jennifer. You haven't lived enough yet to understand what drives people to make the choices they do. You have gifts, but you won't deserve them until you gain the wisdom to know when to interfere and when to stay out of it."

Jennifer wanted to argue that, but couldn't. He was right. She didn't understand humans at all.

Kyle fell in behind them, forcing himself to listen before reacting. He hadn't cared for Adrian's body language. He was certain he wouldn't care for the words either.

Falling back into leader was easy for Adrian as the couple stayed close, appearing to escort him out. "It isn't about understanding. You have to search deeper. And then you have to dig. People hide who they are, what they want. When you can determine a future reaction, based on a past event, you're close. When you can accurately predict the reactions of an entire group that you've never met before, whose past you don't know, then you're

there. Past Enforcers didn't take official roles until well into their thirties, and many of them didn't qualify until they were half a century old."

"Qualify?" Jennifer's anger was fading with the new distraction.

"There are tests for all descendants, tests to pass to take your rightful place. Like school. No one is born knowing everything."

"Interesting..."

Adrian was impressed. Kyle knew how to pick them. Jennifer would be a full partner in any relationship. It was nice. "We can't do it here. Boss lady will shut it down."

"Because of the sheep?"

"No. She doesn't want us competing and destroying the peace."

"You've already discussed it?"

"It's in my notebooks. I gave her both angles on it. Because we haven't heard anything, I'm assuming she chose not to and that's why."

"Makes sense." Kyle respected Angela a lot, but it went up now. The descendants could have taken over the camp, like Sonja. Kyle was grateful that Angela was good.

Adrian began to laugh.

Jennifer and Kyle believed they knew why he was amused. The mobster flushed angrily, but Jennifer knew he was right. Angela had wells of darkness. "But she's also our light."

Adrian nodded. "Yes, she is."

The tunnel narrowed as they reached a checkpoint, where the guards approved of Adrian having a high-level escort.

“Is there something we can do for her? I’ve been scanning, but I don’t know.”

“Leave her be for a while? Maybe send her off with you...”

Adrian was happily surprised, but he knew better than to mention how big of a concession that had to be for both of them. “She has to face the pain, but she’ll need breaks from it. When she’s ready for one, Marc will let me know and I’ll take her out for a while. Over time, she’ll come back to most of the Angie we all know.”

“But we have a lot of trouble coming.” Jennifer shook her head. “We need her in charge now.”

“I understand. But you’ve got Marc and the council. They’re good at what they do. Have faith.”

Jennifer and Kyle were now the ones surprised. They’d never thought to hear Adrian supporting Marc.

More conversation had to wait as Marc and his guest reached them.

Marc’s face was red, but his hold on the boy was gentle. The woman behind him didn’t get a glance as Marc stomped by. Both of the descendants he passed immediately began scanning him and the kid for details.

Marc was in no mood for it. He spun around to glower.

Adrian coughed. “I’ll be around.”

Jennifer flushed as Adrian scooted off. “Sorry.”
Marc grunted, ignoring Julia’s surprise. “Keep track of him.”

Kyle and Jennifer followed Adrian.

“Come on.” Marc shifted his son to his other arm.

Julia stayed on his heels, unable to place this hard, angry man with the young Marine from whom she’d stolen a child. He’d clearly changed.

“Are you the boss here?”

“For now.”

Julia was both relieved and worried over the answer. It gave Marc the power to let them stay and the power to remove them.

“You’ll be allowed to stay while I figure out what I’m doing with you,” Marc informed her gruffly as the boy clung to his jacket. “After that, you’ll abide by the choice I make.”

“I will.”

“Your gratitude will earn you no sympathy when people find out what you’ve done. Keep your mouth shut as much as possible and you may get out alive.”

Always near Marc now when he wasn’t scheduled for anything, Billy fell in step. He’d overheard enough to be concerned. Marc wasn’t the type to hide things unless there was a great reason. The woman must be trouble.

“She is.” Marc waved. “I want a guard on her. Now.”

Billy vanished to locate the right volunteer for private FND. He didn't need to be told to keep his mouth shut. He hadn't been chosen because he was stupid.

Marc took the boy to the medical bay, furious. Angela was going to flip out.

"Who is Angela?" Cody was scanning everyone they saw, but he'd kept the link into Marc's mind open.

"You're strong. That's dangerous here. Can you control it?"

"Of course." Cody halted his explorations to bring down a barrier over his mind.

"Good, boy. Try not to let anyone in, okay?"

Cody nodded, glad to have a game to play. The trip here hadn't been any fun at all.

There was a kind of awed silence as Marc entered the medical bay and sat the child onto the nearest cot.

Cody immediately climbed right back into his arms, much like a monkey.

From the corner, Angela chuckled harshly.

Marc winced. He knew what that tone meant.

"No time for it now." Adrian gave Angela a sharp look. "We have to shut down the rest of this tomb. The fallout is coming."

Marc motioned Neil and Jeremy to get the equipment. They'd been doing monthly testing of the levels while out in the open and when they'd first explored these caves. It hadn't been done since, except for the dosimeters in the air quality chamber.

“The numbers aren’t bad down here yet or Sam would have called you.” Angela leaned against the cold stone next to her cot. She’d insisted on remaining standing.

“We need to test things now.”

“Just tell Theo’s crew to get on it. They know what to do.” Angela led him through it, grimacing from the cramps in her gut. The traveling hadn’t been good for her, but it had been necessary.

Kenn came through the tunnel, face unreadable. “There’s a call for the boss.”

Marc sighed. He knew who that was.

“This is my moment still.” Angela pushed resignedly away from the wall. “You close us down. I’ll buy time from Sebastian’s people.” Angela limped toward the tunnel, brushing by Julia without even a glance. She did spare a small smile for Marc’s son, however. It certainly wasn’t the kid’s fault.

“I like her.” Cody stared with wide eyes. “She’s beautiful—even on the inside.”

Angela felt Julia’s pain and was satisfied for the moment. She had other demons to fry right now, but that snake would be handled.

“The transmission is from the Indians.” Kenn led her through the corridor toward the radio cubby. Behind them, Marc began calling out orders.

“They’re escorting the Mexicans. They couldn’t stop the army from coming through, but they did manage to negotiate themselves into escorts so they could be here for the fight.”

“There isn’t going to be one.” Angela grunted, fighting cramps. “Start selling that. No fight, no more massive death if we stay in here. They can’t reach us.”

Relieved, Kenn left her alone at the radio cubby to get the word spreading.

Angela slid into the warm chair with a sigh and a grunt that combined to produce a whimper. She needed to rest. “This is Safe Haven. Go ahead with your message.”

5

Camped in the charred lobby of the train station Safe Haven had destroyed, Bryson rubbed his hands over the weak fire, stewing. Sonja was buried not far from here. He’d dug her grave with his bare hands, enjoying the pain as each fingernail had snapped and ripped off. It was no less than what he deserved for letting his master die. He didn’t eat meat and had been spared, but his minor gifts hadn’t been enough to save his mate.

“We will be at Safe Haven in hours,” the radio crackled lowly. “Our guests are many, and upset.”

“Copy that. Please tell Mikel to kiss my ass.”

Bryson stared at the radio in disbelief.

The pause on the other end of the radio implied that person was reacting much the same.

“Did you hear me? Tell him to kiss my American ass.”

“Are you sure that’s the message we should deliver to a very large army searching for vengeance?”

“Yes. You are not to interfere. In fact, it is my wish that you and your people depart these lands before the truce between white and Indian is broken once again.”

Now the pause was longer. Bryson was certain the voices were trying to read each other, as well as between the lines, but he couldn’t figure out a hidden order if there was one.

“Very well. We will leave Safe Haven lands. If you survive this foolishness, we look forward to trading with you.”

“Go in peace, my friends, but do go. Lingering could be detrimental to your health.” Angela’s words left no room for doubt about her wishes. She wanted the Indians gone and the Mexicans pissed.

Bryson huddled over his fire and tried to figure out why. When he knew Angela’s goals, her motivation, he would be able to destroy her and all she held dear. Unlike those who’d tried before him, Bryson held a strong advantage. He didn’t have anything left to lose and his patience was endless.

6

Kenn was waiting when Angela emerged. “Are you crazy?!”

“I gave you a job to do.”

“I did it. I told Tonya to tell Hilda.”

Angela smirked. “Yeah, that’ll work. The grapevine seed came from her ancient ass.”

“You riled them up. How will we avoid a battle now?” Kenn stayed with her as she slowly walked toward the stairs to the next level.

“Do you trust me yet, Kenn? Would you tell me your deepest secrets in full confidence that they would be protected?”

Kenn considered it and slowly shook his head. “It’s better between us now, but no.”

“Then why do you imagine that I would give you such a pass, when it was your crimes that came between us in the first place?”

Effectively silenced, Kenn still stayed with her as she roamed without Marc’s protection. Their newest boss wouldn’t like it if Angela was found wandering alone. Kenn didn’t intend to get back on Marc’s shit list.

Angela smirked, hidden by her hair and lead position. *Like you were ever off of it.*

The witch snickered with her at the private thought. Kenn assumed he’d been forgiven, replaced by the hatred for Adrian, but he couldn’t be more wrong. Marc wasn’t the forgiving type. Kenn’s final reckoning with him, like Adrian’s, would come.

“What can I do to help?”

Angela sighed. “Just stay close. Marc won’t let me out for long.”

Kenn knew that to be true.

Angela entered the cafeteria-style room, where a few dozen people were enjoying the evening coffee and cookies Li Sing had made. The little man was a genius when it came to cooking with the wrong ingredients. His Chow Mein with tuna had been a lot better than it sounded.

The mess fell silent as Angela was noticed, but she didn't wait for their thoughts. She gave them what they needed.

“We don't have to run yet. We *are* safe here right now. I'll handle it like I have the other threats that have come. Have faith in me.”

It was enough for most of them. Despite the dangers of the apocalypse, their administrators were doing a great job of keeping people alive and together. This mountain was proof of that. So were her injuries, most of which were not bandaged so the air could reach them now that the danger of infection had passed. The black stitches in her arms glared harshly in the lantern light as she carefully chose a kid's mug for a cup of strong coffee. It hurt her to lift more than that.

Kenn would have served her, but he knew she wanted the camp to see that she was healing. He clamped down on a protest when she went to a table instead of going back to the medical bay. The camp needed to be calmed and Marc was busy closing up the shop. She had to be here.

Other Eagles in the cafeteria felt the same way. They'd been worried over camp reaction, not how Angela had handled the transmission. The

Mexicans would learn that Safe Haven was the power in this country.

Angela slid carefully onto the bench next to Shawn, who was helping Missy with math papers. She'd had her first school day and wasn't happy.

"I know this stuff already." Missy pushed the paper toward Shawn. "I should be in a higher grade."

"We don't let kids skip." Angela wrapped her hands around the warm cup of coffee. "You may be smarter in those subjects than the kids we've placed you with, but they also have things to teach you. Socialization is important. You need friends."

"Why?" Missy resisted Shawn's attempts to get ketchup out from under her fingernails. "Sonja always says they're a weakness."

"They are." Angela forced a smile. "They're also a source of joy and strength. One balances the other, as with anything else in life."

Missy's face scrunched up in concentration. "So it's worth the risk?"

"The pain. It's worth the pain."

Shawn wanted to pad that, but with Angela sitting next to him, he couldn't.

Angela sighed, resting against Shawn's big shoulder. "If you don't want me to tell her the truth, I won't."

"Someone else will?" He shifted a bit so she would be more comfortable.

“Or she’ll be crushed by it because she didn’t know it could happen.” Angela drew lightly from the strong man.

Shawn didn’t notice, too busy examining the choice before him. When he leaned toward Missy, ready to ask what she wanted, Angela was able to move to her next chore. She slowly stood up, waving him off when Shawn would have helped her. “She’s waiting to hear your next words. Don’t change them.”

Shawn still helped her up, giving Kenn a hard glance as he appeared at her hip.

Kenn ignored the Eagle and everyone else, fingers hovering over his radio. He knew it was coming.

“Where is she?!” The radio blared with Marc’s angry tones.

“Eating,” Kenn answered evenly.

Angela gave a small grin and continued to the next table with her coffee.

Kenn hurried to the buffet line to make her a tray. He wanted to be able to prove his words. Marc was in charge now; Kenn remembered his time with that grunt as their fire team leader. There had been no room for errors.

Instead of anger, Kenn was pleased to be excited. He’d become a better person while laboring under Corporal Marcus Brady. He was actually looking forward to that happening again.

“Damn weird place we came to. It can turn a punching bag into a queen and a king into a servant. That’s some magic.”

Chapter Nineteen
Reluctant Bonds

1

More people came to the cafeteria, upset over the attack. When they saw Angela and then the wide room of calmly eating and conversing dwellers, they got in line for food or drinks, knowing those already here would fill them in. There clearly wasn't as much reason to worry as they'd believed upon hearing the radio exchanges.

“May I join you?”

The two Eagles jumped apart, caught conspiring.

Angela limped toward the bench across from them, not hiding her discomfort. The pregnancy jeans and loose blue top didn't disguise her injuries or her disabilities. Stitches and scars gleamed under the florescent lights of the mess, declaring that she would never be a full Eagle again. Her body wasn't capable of it, despite being helped by powerful descendants. She was lucky to have survived at all.

Both males immediately got up to assist her, drawn from their fantasies of getting Billy banished.

Angela let them help. She'd used a lot of her strength getting rid of the train people. She hadn't replenished it all yet.

“I’m sorry.”

Quinn’s lips thinned into a line, but he didn’t apologize like Jax just had. They hadn’t wronged Angela.

“It is my camp that you were about to upset with your petty jealousy.” Angela groaned under the noise of chattering inhabitants. “I’m not happy about it.”

Quinn would have forced out the required apology, but Angela stopped him. “It’s worthless if you don’t mean it.” She hated these moments almost as much as the killing. She liked both of these men. She didn’t enjoy punishing them.

Why are you doing it at all? Adrian asked in her mind. Where is Marc?

Kenn slapped Angela’s tray down in front of her and retreated. It appeared that he’d taken two small bites of her hamburger and a drink of her milk.

“Mustache.”

Kenn wiped it on his sleeve and then turned to monitor the mess.

The cafeteria went cold as Marc and his guards stormed into the area a few seconds later.

Kenn nodded to Marc and vanished, glad to be relieved of the duty and the drama.

“It occurs to me that you’re right,” Angela motioned to the pair waiting for her punishment. “You can tell your new boss what you were planning for his student. Do it now.”

Quinn and Jax angrily did as they were told.

With Marc distracted again, Angela hurriedly stuffed in a few bites and rearranged the remaining food to appear as though she'd eaten more. She would pick on it while she was here, but everything tasted like sawdust.

“These seats taken?”

Angela swallowed. “Nope.” She was glad of the welcome she was receiving mentally and physically. She hated disciplining her people. She found it impossible to be as hard on them as they needed. Marc had no such qualms, however. He was now shouting silently at Jax and Quinn while the camp went on with their meal, unaware.

The Special Forces team members who didn't have duty sat down, sandwiching Angela with their approval and protection.

“We weren't sure how to handle that since Jax and Quinn are both on our teams.” Daryl smiled at her. “We haven't dealt with jealousy in their lessons yet, you know?”

Angela nodded, pleasure flowing through her from all the heat. Guys with strong bodies put off a lot of that. It was wonderful when you couldn't seem to get warm. “When did it start?” She tore off a small part of the fresh bread on her tray. It was flat and grainy, made from what baking supplies that remained, but bread was welcome in any edible form.

“When Marc began mentoring Billy openly.” Wade was thrilled to see her. “Other than Billy, the lower ranks still haven't mastered as much as they

need to. After running sets with the rookies for a few weeks under the new teams, we understand why Marc chose him. Senior men pick up on things like that.”

“Yes, you do.” The mental links she’d encouraged in the Eagles were still being strengthened. Angela was delighted. She’d had too many things on her plate to continue guiding them. “Do you like the new setup?”

The males all snorted or teased her.

“Uh, let’s see.” Wade beamed at her. “You made us the top two teams for all time. What’s not to like about that?”

Angela absorbed their goodwill. She had adored her time with the teams before. She could have that again, with a few limits.

Angela caught sight of Samantha and the soldiers the storm tracker had made friends with during the Donner fight. The doctor had sent down word that they and Adrian were clear because no one else in their group had tested positive for problems. The leader of those soldiers, David, limped straight to the table full of tensing Special Forces men.

“Are you going back to him?”

Angela swallowed the bite of chilling rice and beans that Kenn had chosen to accompany her burger. It was a healthy choice for a survival situation. She was surprised by it. “Is there a reason why I should?”

David scowled, leaning on the table in front of her. He ignored the two men who bumped back with their shoulders, staying put. “He doesn’t deserve to be down there alone.”

“No.” Angela let her words carry. “But the camp voted and I will honor that, always, no matter how much I may not agree. I won’t interfere with the will of the people.”

Furious, David spun around and stomped from the cafeteria.

His soldiers wanted to follow, but Samantha waved them toward the table nearest to Angela and the Eagles. “Have a seat. Let’s talk about my hunting team.”

Torn, the rookies followed Samantha. The light of Safe Haven was obviously wearing them down. Sam had been given the duty of helping them adapt to the rules since they’d been cleared to join the general population. She was trying to fit it in between shifts over the air quality station.

Jeremy waved at her as he went by; drawing a blush from her and chuckles from witnesses, further dissipating the previous tension.

People continued to come to the mess as word spread. Some of them had been slaves in Cesar’s camp, while others had been with Safe Haven while they were being hunted by the ruthless Mexicans. Very few people had been bothered by Angela removing Sebastian and his group before they could become a problem.

Samantha took the soldiers to the double table that already held Cynthia, who was scribbling intently on the next edition of her paper, and Charlie, who was laboring over plans for Kenn and their rookie team. Everyone had been surprised when Kenn had picked Charlie as his XO and Charlie had refused.

Angela sighed. “How is Tracy doing? And Candy?”

“Good on Tracy.” Morgan dipped his burger in mustard. “She spends a lot of her time training alone with Charlie or helping with the animals. She’s down there now, feeding them.”

“Give her some more time before you put her on anything stressful, but she needs to get to work in the other ways. When she feels like an Eagle again, she’ll feel safe.”

You think so? Charlie asked without his usual bitterness. He hadn’t believed his mom cared about Tracy. He was glad she was getting an update.

Yes. It helped me.

Charlie knew that to be true. He smiled at her, getting one in return, and then continued working on his papers.

Angela shut her eyes as chills swarmed her. She didn’t have much energy. She needed to finish this. “What about Candy?”

All the men frowned. They’d discussed it only yesterday.

Greg answered her when the others didn’t. “Not great. It’s almost like...”

“She misses Conner?” Angela supplied tonelessly.

“Yeah. She stays to herself. No more haircuts or training.”

“She refuses to discuss Lee at all. It sucks.”

Angela understood. She also understood not wanting to talk about the things that hurt. “Marc needs to make the choice on her, not me. I’m biased. I liked Lee. I don’t like Conner.”

“Exactly.”

“Yes.”

“That.”

The Eagles agreed Conner was trouble. He had bonded with Candy against her will, much like with herself and Adrian. It wouldn’t end well if she or Candy succumbed to the darkness.

Greg heard footsteps coming. He looked up, which drew the rest of the Special Forces men to scan the mess.

Angela stored the cause and effect, pleased. Greg was coming along nicely.

Neil, top guard on this floor, came through the tunnel. After quick glances around at the short food lines and full, content tables, he returned to his rounds. Other levels weren’t as calm, but most of their population was gravitating toward the mess as word spread. Neil was glad Angela and Marc were both on his floor.

Lost in her reflections, Angela was happy with how Marc was doing. Most of the cave had been battened down. The air vents to the top had been

closed, while the vents that went miles in two other directions had been opened. Depending on the shift of the wind, Safe Haven would be pulling clean air at all times. As the cloud of fallout centered over them, they would lock down completely and then the waiting would begin.

“Room for two more?” Seth hoped so. Becky was sleeping again. The morning sickness was keeping her off her feet.

Jeff was behind Seth, expression saying he didn’t belong here and he knew it.

Kevin had volunteered to gather the supplies they were taking to Sally. He wasn’t ready to face the camp.

Jeff knew exactly how he felt as Angela and everyone else at the table centered on him.

Angela hid her upset stomach. “Always.”

Jeff gave her a quick sweep, reading the discomfort. “You haven’t changed.”

Angela snorted as the guys at the table slid down for Jeff and Seth. “No. You?”

“Maybe a little.” Jeff took a place next to her. “I’ll be more careful of animals from now on.”

Angela grimaced. “Same here.”

“I’ll be leaving to take some supplies to Dog.” Jeff met her eye. *I’m probably not coming back. I expect Kevin to go with me, but I’ll leave him here if it will help you.*

Angela sighed. *No, as much as we need Kevin, it will just bring trouble. He’s more useful to you at this point.*

Jeff placed a hand on hers, sending a bolt of good health into her. *I don't want more people to know.*

Angela didn't tell him that Kevin had already mentioned it to too many guards for it to remain a secret. "We have a few sets of heavy gear. It would be safer if you used it. The levels out there are going to get *very* high."

Those quiet words explained a lot for the people who were able to make the connection. The men around her went silent, studying the implications as they tried to guess what would happen next.

Satisfied she'd given them enough to use to keep the camp calm, Angela finished with Jeff. "I need something you won't want to do, but Adrian has to give Sally a message. She's important to the future. Tell Marc to take him along for the food run in the morning."

Jeff carefully patted her cold fingers, unable to believe how badly she'd been hurt. "I'll talk to him."

"Thank you." Angela slowly stood up as Marc approached the table. She held out a hand, letting their blue spark of connection be viewed.

Marc felt his rage fade another notch as their fingers and force connected. It was impossible to stay mad with her weariness dragging him down. "You okay?"

She curled against his chest weakly. "Yeah. I could use a nap."

Marc caught her as she stumbled, steadying her. “Let’s go.”

People smiled as the couple left, tension gone except in their concern over her health. They had been told it would take time, that Marc would protect them, but knowing Angela was helping was a large comfort. Their seer had returned. It was okay to breathe and live again.

Marc took Angela to the shallow impression on the same floor as the brig and medical bay, wondering why she hadn’t said anything about Julia yet. That viper was currently occupying a cell in the brig while the doctor ran her blood test and the Eagle on duty collected her story. The boy, Cody, had free run of the brig while his mother was being interrogated.

Marc directed her in as Morgan caught up to them.

“Who do you want in charge while you sleep?”

Marc sighed, flashing a hand signal that was opposite of his answer. “I’ll get my notebook for you. It has my wishes on that topic.”

Angela let Marc remove her boots and tuck her in, already dozing.

Marc flipped off the light and began pulling the door shut.

“Marc?” Angela called sleepily.

He paused, tensing. “Yeah, Baby-cakes?”

“There’s no need to do that with me. I won’t ever interfere with your choices.”

Marc smiled wryly. “Fine. I took a pep pill right after the Mexicans called last time. I’m good to be up for a while.”

“Thank you.” Angela yawned and spoke at the same time. “Good night.”

Marc shut the door, grunting. He’d much rather climb in and hold her, but there was work to be done and his body was able. He and Morgan went to the brig to sort out plans for their morning run out of the mountain.

Angela burrowed deeper into the blankets, ignoring the heart crying out in pain and loneliness. The same misery would still be waiting for her when she woke. There was no need to rush through it all at once.

Outside, Shawn took up his post. He chose a shadowy spot along the narrow curve in the tunnel and blended in. After everything he’d done, having this second chance to guard Angela was a gift from Marc that he wasn’t going to waste. Anyone who came by would be in his crosshairs the entire time and he didn’t care who they were.

2

“I don’t care who she is! I’m not doing it.”

Tonya immediately flipped the doctor the middle finger.

Marc sighed in annoyance. “Listen, children. She’s here. She’s asleep. Do either of you want her up?”

Tonya and Doctor Brooke both denied that, faces contorting into ugly stretches of concern and fear.

“Neither do I. She needs to rest, but if she senses all this anger, she’ll be up and there will be hell to pay.” Marc realized Angela being home would give him another weapon to use against those who disturbed his peace. “Unless you two want her to make this choice?”

“I do.” Tonya pouted. “But in the morning.”

“You’re the boss here.” The doctor sneered. “Tell this one to stay out of the lab.”

Marc picked up the paper Tonya had flung at him upon storming into the security impression without knocking. The numbers caught him, held him.

Tonya sat down in the chair across from the desk before the doctor could, confident Marc would support what Angela wanted.

“I wouldn’t if it wasn’t important.”

The doctor tensed as he realized they were communicating in the way that he couldn’t.

Marc frowned. “She was making an assumption that I would agree with Angela. It’s not true.”

Eased, the doctor crossed his arms over his chest. “Well?”

Marc dropped the paper on the desk, pointing at Tonya. “You’re in charge of this project. The lab is yours. The doctor will stay out of there unless he has work to do for a patient.”

“I’ll stay out of there period!” Doctor Brooke pointed angrily. “She can do it all.”

Marc regarded the man in contempt. “If she can, then fine. If she can’t, you’ll do it or you’ll be put on half rations for only doing half of your job.”

The doctor gaped, open-mouthed.

Tonya buried her chin in her chest to keep from laughing in delight.

“Get to work. Both of you.” Marc glared. “And if she gets up from either emotion you’re both spewing now, there will be a price to pay and it won’t come from her.”

Marc waited for the pair to be gone before chuckling lightly. He didn’t understand why the doctor had refused to continue the research on the cannabis oil, except for old world prejudices. There was nothing wrong with using the last of Tonya’s stash to discover if the drug would help their cancer patients.

Marc doubted that it would do that, but it would serve the purpose of eliminating the last of the smokable material from the camp. They’d already eliminated all narcotic use over the last six months between people being too scared to leave camp on their own and all drugs being locked up. Cigarettes were also almost gone, with only a few dwellers still having any packs hidden. Those were being used as trade items and the price was high.

Marc was pleased. The harsh withdrawals were over for their population, except for the potheads, and their turn had now arrived. *It’s great.* He lit a

very stale generic cigarette. It was his last one. Marc planned to suffer through the forced quitting with his people. They would find strength together, as they'd been doing with all the things that challenged them. For what they'd gone through, Marc thought they were all handling it pretty well. It certainly could have turned out worse for all of them.

Am I forgiving her? He exhaled and coughed.

Maybe, but it didn't matter. He still wanted her. He'd made that choice. Angela could be Satan himself and he would still crave her touch, her light.

Marc finished the smoke in silent contemplation, not as stressed as he'd been while Angela was gone. He assumed that most of their camp felt the same. The next few hours would provide the best sleep any of them had gotten since Vlad brought the mountain down.

Wide awake thanks to the pharmaceuticals, Marc opened his notebook and made plans for the morning run. The camp needed food. He would retrieve it.

3

“This will be one of our last trips out of the mountain for a while.” Marc swept the eager group of men around him. They had just passed the last guarded checkpoint before the bottom exit of the mountain. Marc had waited to give instructions until they were out of the range of both camp members and guards. “We’re checking the Det-Cord down

here on our way, to make sure it's still rigged to blow. Other than the topside, where Greg has been working on the gate and cleanup, this is the last entry or exit from our den."

Marc held out small black bags that contained replacement parts and tools. "If you have to work on anything, remember to be careful. We pieced this together with what little remained from our fights with the bunker. It's fragile."

The Eagles stowed their new items with care, exchanging uneasy glances in the gloom of flashlights.

Marc understood their fears, but he didn't try to soothe them. There was nothing comforting that he could say. *If it blows while we're in here, we'll die or dig our way out.*

He didn't think these guys would find it funny the way a team of soldiers might have.

The walk to the trucks was slow, tense, and cold. By the time they reached the exit, after reattaching the Det-Cord in two places, they were frozen and grumpy. These tunnels were frigid for humans even though they were in their thickest gear.

Spotting dim dawn light, Marc led them out quickly, using his mental grid to scan for waiting problems among the boulders. This was only supposed to be a short trip out. They would drop off supplies to Sally and then hit some adjacent locations in hopes of finding food.

The waiting trucks, freshly refilled from their last run by level six men who were now sleeping happily in the caverns above them, were a happy sight for the team.

Marc gestured to Jeff. "You're with me." He went to the lead vehicle, glowering at Adrian. "So are you."

Adrian and Jeff hurried into the cold vehicle that would at least provide shelter from the wind that was blowing sheets of thin snow and ice over them.

Marc got the engine running and adjusted the seat, still scanning as the rest of the team split themselves between this truck and the one other he'd chosen to take. Marc noted the quarter tank of gas, holding his hands over the heat vent as beautiful warmth started to emerge. Kyle had carefully measured the fuel for this run. He had to watch it or they would be trapped below and have to cart everything up on foot. "Any of our alarms disturbed?"

Kyle slid into the seat behind Jeff.

Morgan took the other seat, intentionally sandwiching Adrian uncomfortably between them.

"No, we're good." Kyle elbowed Adrian over. "They haven't gotten to this section of the mountain yet."

"How long?"

"Kenn said to tell you not to let the sun get too high, so I assume a few hours." Morgan shouldered Adrian back against Kyle.

“Good enough.” Marc shifted into drive. “Let’s roll.”

The ride down the slick hill wasn’t fun, but it wasn’t terrifying for the men on this run, despite the drop-offs waiting if their drivers steered them wrong. The relief and excitement of being out of the tomb for a little while had smothered those fears.

“Where is she stashed?” Marc came to a halt at the level ground near the bottom of their road. He didn’t see anyone around them yet.

Jeff pointed toward the small business district in the distance, where industrial buildings rose in stunted growth from the snow-covered landscape. “There’s a warehouse.”

“Warehouse? With all of the places available now, why did you choose a warehouse?”

“You’ll understand when you meet her.” Jeff didn’t want to fill Marc in with Adrian listening. He knew about the man’s weak stomach; he was hoping Adrian might puke upon entering the warehouse. Jeff had absolutely no faith in Sally’s willingness to clean up after herself or her animals.

Marc steered them in that direction. Whatever it was, it could wait.

“What about any survivors we run across?”

“I’m only out here to pick up food.” Marc studied the map, missing frowns from the Eagles.

Kyle didn’t push, but he wanted to.

Adrian saw the reaction, but he couldn’t comment on it. Whenever he’d gone out on a mission, it was with the understanding that if they

found survivors, the people would be evaluated for being brought into their haven. The new boss apparently wasn't going to give everybody the same gift he'd been given.

A block later, they rolled by a small camp of refugees without a word spoken. Disappointment returned, stronger.

Not scanning, Adrian assumed Marc was wondering why his guys weren't happy with him, but again, he didn't speak up. The Eagles were expecting their boss to care about everyone, even those they didn't trust. They were quickly learning that Marc didn't think like Adrian and Angela. Marc didn't care if everyone survived. He had his picks in the people he thought were worthy. In some ways, it would make him a great leader. Safe Haven's population would be smart, productive. Adrian actually respected him for the choice. It was a hard line that he himself had not been able to follow, nor had Angela. They both had sympathy for all life.

Marc didn't correct Adrian. He knew why the men were disappointed, but he was making the only choice he could. In less than one day, the radioactive cloud would be over them. They had to get business done and get back inside. As for the people they were leaving out here, Angela had already scanned them. If they were supposed to be a part of the camp, they already would be.

As the Safe Haven vehicles rolled by, few of the refugees paid attention. Adrian's sweeps of the refugees didn't reveal much good in these groups.

The desperation they had already been through, combined with the evil in their hearts, allowed for no peace. The smartest refugees had already left. They were off to locate shelters that would protect them during the winter. The takers and the beggars were the ones who were still here, so Adrian understood Marc's indifference. He just wasn't that hard.

Adrian forced himself to open one of the newest notebooks Angela had sent to him through an Eagle, needing the distraction to keep from bringing it up. Marc already wasn't happy to have him along for the trip. He didn't want to make it worse.

Picking it all up, Jeff directed Marc to the warehouse. Despite being in the middle of what used to be a busy town, the location was good. Most of the refugees were camped at the bottom of Safe Haven Hill. There was almost no one in the small town next door. "Over there, by the black billboard."

All but two of the Eagles hurried to the warehouse—not because they perceived a threat, but because the icy winds overwhelmed them as soon as they stepped out of their vehicles. After the warmth of their vehicles, the nasty difference brought tears to their eyes and snot to their noses.

Kevin hurriedly unlocked the warehouse, waiting for everyone to get in.

As Adrian passed, the former leader kept his chin down and his thoughts to himself.

Wise, Jeff thought, coming in last.

Kevin slid the door shut; Jeff quickly locked it as the men around them flipped on belt lights. The dim sun coming through the filthy windows still revealed too many shadows for their liking.

The first thing the Eagles noticed about the warehouse was the smell.

Jeff and Kevin had been in Safe Haven for a week, but neither of them were surprised by the state of the warehouse. The smell of garbage, urine, and feces was enough to make all of them wish for the icy cold fresh air outside.

Marc gestured for the Eagles to put masks on.

Jeff led the way to the rear storage chamber, where he and Kevin had barricaded entrances and exits so only the front needed to be guarded. It didn't look as if there had been problems. It also didn't appear that Sally or the wolves had been outside at all.

Jeff opened the door to find a gun in his face. He quickly smacked it to the ground and then shoved Sally away. "Damn!"

Jeff didn't bother to introduce anyone. He went over to Dog to make sure the wolf was still alive.

Marc did the same.

That left Adrian and the Eagles to deal with Sally, who was furious to have her den full of descendants. She backed into the dusty corner, retrieving her weapon. "Get out!"

Before the Eagles could make things worse, Adrian hurried over the garbage piles to place himself between her and them. He held out a hand,

wishing he'd kept his gloves on while reading the notebook. "Maybe you'd better let me hold that until we're ready to go."

Sally wanted to argue, but it was clear they could take it by force. She surrendered the 9mm reluctantly.

Adrian tucked it into his pocket, feeling the light weight. He wasn't positive that it was loaded. It was something of a relief that Jeff and Kevin hadn't given her a loaded weapon. Sally was obviously deranged.

Marc knelt next to the wolf that was obviously sedated. A quick examination of the wounds explained why. The battle had to have been awful. The wolf was lucky to have survived. Marc looked at Sally. "Thank you."

Sally didn't reply. Her face was still squished in that place between murder and terror. It made her appear quite dangerous.

Marc placed a hand on the wolf's head, noting Dog's new mate sleeping nearby. He shot a blast of healing energy into his friend.

Dog didn't wake up.

Marc hadn't expected him to, but it would have been nice to be able to say goodbye to his old friend. Marc had come to understand that keeping the wolf and humans in the same environment was wrong. Dog had never truly been given the chance to return to freedom since they'd come together. After so many years, the animal was probably ready to live

a normal lifestyle, not to be someone's pet that was always in danger.

Marc observed the sleeping female. Even in slumber, her nose was against Dog.

“Where will you go?”

Sally didn't want to tell Marc, but she needed an escort. “Northwest.” She glanced reluctantly at Jeff. “Will you both take me?”

He agreed curtly. “Yes.” Jeff and Kevin had already discussed it. There was nothing keeping them in Safe Haven.

“The wolves should be ready for travel in about three days.”

Marc gestured the Eagles to unload the bags they'd brought. “We donated a few things we thought you might need, but there is no radio. After this, there will be no contact with Safe Haven for you.”

Sally understood that meant she wasn't being invited in. She didn't mind.

The only thing left was to leave Dog. After more than a decade together, it was hard to do. Suddenly very angry at the world, Marc spun toward Adrian. “So what's the deal? Are you done?”

Adrian shrugged, still standing by Sally. “I'm not sure. Neither of us would have let her in either.” He meant Angela and himself.

“Well, get done. I want to be gone. It stinks here.”

Kyle was eager to get back outside. “Do you want a litter brought in for Dog?”

Marc shook his head. "He's staying."

Adrian was surprised the wolfman was leaving his pet behind.

"If he wanted to be with me, he would. Eagles brought him back in a truck. He didn't come on his own."

Adrian pushed out the personal drama to try to figure out what he was supposed to do with Sally. He wished Angela had given him more information and then mentally grimaced at the irony. How many times had he done this to others, making them figure it out for themselves so they learned something from it?

Sally stared at Adrian, aware that he was a descendant. Not only did she hate him, she was scared of him. He was strong, vivid to her.

Adrian was nervous. It was hard for him to perform on demand. He wasn't the boss anymore and his confidence in himself and his abilities had been shaken. He couldn't concentrate with two of the men he hated and respected the most watching, hoping for him to fail.

Sally reluctantly put her hand in Adrian's when he held his out. It wasn't as if she had another choice.

Adrian anticipated a revelation as their fingers touched, but there was nothing. He wasn't sure what to do, beyond wait with her grimy skin against his. He hoped this wasn't a crazy attempt by Angela to try getting him and Marc to bond or even

communicate. They had already said enough to each other.

Everyone waited in tense silence for something to happen. In the quiet, came the rustling sound of an animal.

Marc glanced down to find Dog slowly waking. Not positive what type of reception he would get from the animal that had been living away from him for more than a month, Marc waited.

Dog came to in a good mood as he realized the pain of his injuries was a little less and Marc was here. He sniffed Marc's boot, tail wagging.

A thick sense of homecoming swept over the room.

Relieved, Marc carefully scratched the wolf's chin. "Hey, boy."

Now distracted between two scenes, the Eagles waited for something interesting.

Surprised to discover the strange leader knew the wolf, Sally pulled her hand out of Adrian's, not sure what he had been doing. "Will you go now?"

"That's not up to me, but if it were, I would say no." Adrian shrugged at her glare. "Whatever I was sent here to talk to you about has to be settled first."

Marc was happy to spend a few moments with Dog now that he was awake. "Go on."

Adrian motioned Sally toward the front of the warehouse. "Let's try it out here."

Eager to be out of the Eagle-filled building, Sally followed.

Dog's injuries were healing faster now that Marc had helped. He looked over to be certain his mate was okay, not whimpering from the stitches. Seeing that she was still asleep, Dog nudged his former owner.

Marc knew without being told that Dog didn't want to return with him. "I'm glad you woke up. We get to say goodbye."

Dog was relieved that Marc understood, but there was also sadness. *Perhaps we shall meet again in the future.*

Understanding Dog had left to avoid a scene like this, Marc didn't drag things out. He gave his friend one last scratch across the top of his head, sending another beautiful bolt of healing light into the wolf. "You've always got a home with me if you want it."

Tired of the constant pain brought to them by the apocalypse, Marc and the Eagles exited the smelly compartment. As they passed Adrian, who was conversing with Sally in low murmurs, Marc noticed a knife drawing on the concrete wall. It was very detailed for being gouged out with a blade tip.

"Did you do this?" Marc could feel the importance.

Sally scowled. "Why?"

"Did you see it?" Marc gloated a bit that he'd caught it and the former leader hadn't.

Shamed, Adrian studied what Sally had carved... Magic filled the room.

The warehouse around them disappeared as the picture enlarged, allowing the cold snow to blow over him as if he was being buried in an avalanche. It quickly became hard to breathe.

Adrian saw seven shadowy forms walking toward him in the distance. “Alexa!”

Marc and the Eagles held silent as they waited for Adrian to finish whatever it was that he was going through. They held more sympathy for Angela and her moments like this than they did for him, but it also hadn’t escaped anyone’s attention that Adrian had now taken Angela’s place in this department. It pissed them off.

A moment later, Adrian snapped out of the vision, breathing in big gasps. “I’m going to need...about twenty minutes...with her. I’ll catch...up.”

Marc motioned the Eagles toward the exit. “If you’re not there, I’ll blow it anyway. No one gets in or out after us.”

Adrian returned to Sally as the Eagles left, not doubting it. He didn’t know how he would get back, but this was too important to rush. His daughter’s life depended on it.

4

“Don’t take your time getting here.” Marc pointed to a place on the map. While they gathered food, Adrian could finish his business with the crazy woman.

Kyle flipped the heater to high against the icy conditions and rolled them four blocks to the first location on the map. He didn't comment on leaving Dog or Adrian behind. He wanted to offer Marc comfort on both of those headaches and solicit some much-needed advice, but he also needed to stay aware of their surroundings. There would be time for talking when they got back to camp, he hoped. For the guidance he required, Marc was the perfect person to ask.

It was clear from first glance that the local sheriff's office had been cleaned out because there was nothing left of it. It had burnt to the ground. Around it, were the usual signs of doomsday—bones and clothes mildewed to the ground from ten months of apocalyptic weather.

“We'll keep going.” Marc showed Kyle the next place on the map. He had three to try.

Kyle and his team didn't speak or do anything except keep watch for trouble as they traveled through the city. Helen, Georgia was a ghost town. If not for Sally and the refugee tents on the outskirts, it might have been completely deserted.

The ritzy country club a mile away had also been damaged, but the broken doors and windows were associated with the draft. Marc gestured the team in, leaving two Eagles with the vehicles.

The men cleared the building fast, lights flashing over signs of struggles for life and signs of struggles for death. Plush furniture and swanky

decor were offset by the heavy scent of recent decomposition.

Marc ordered the Eagles to put their masks back on as they walked down a cold, trophy-filled hall to emerge in a small kitchen that fed them into a large dining space. The eating area was where the bodies were, but the kitchen was still stocked with enough food for the Eagles around Marc to clap him on the shoulders.

Marc and the others loaded everything they could carry. They would sort through what was still edible later.

While Marc and the Eagles cleaned out the country club, the two guys on duty at their vehicles stayed alert, trying to stay warm as they smothered the uneasy sensation that always came any time they were out in the open now. Their break from the stone was welcome, but the short hour they'd been out here had already been enough to remind them that outside was the most dangerous place a person could be now.

As if to prove the thought, engines rumbled in the distance.

Billy got on the radio. "Boss, company! We're coming in."

Unable to move the vehicles without being noticed, Billy and Jeff hurried into the country club.

The convoy of vehicles in the distance didn't come directly toward them, but it was close enough for the Eagles to hold their breath as they tried to

estimate the enemy numbers. It sounded like the Mexicans had come in force this time.

Marc and the other men joined Billy and Jeff in the entrance, each taking peeks that were quick and careful.

“Where do you think they’re going?”

“I’d say they’re trying to make sure they have the bottom of the mountain surrounded,” Marc answered Kyle’s question. “Once they have that, they’ll climb up to explore passages and entrances. If that doesn’t succeed, they’ll try to burn us out.”

The convoy was still rolling past, over fifty trucks now. Kyle frowned. “I hope she has a plan for this. Adrian didn’t.”

Marc grimaced. “She does. That’s the last of them. Let’s roll. We have to get to our road before they do.”

The Eagles hurried into their vehicles, where Kyle and Daryl drove them out of sight. When no one chased them and bullets didn’t slam into their windows, everyone relaxed a little. Kyle knew how to get them back into the mountain. They would be there before the Mexicans. No one knew if they would have enough time to exit the vehicles and get into the tunnel before being spotted, but it wouldn’t matter at that point. The wired explosives would be enough to ensure the Mexicans wouldn’t follow, while providing protection for the team—if it didn’t trigger a collapse of the entire corridor. Either way, the enemy wouldn’t get in. Neither would Adrian, unless he rolled out right now.

Marc refused to send him the warning.

Chapter Twenty

Walking A Tightrope

1

Adrian stepped out of the warehouse to find David sitting there with the passenger door of his beater open. “Thought you might need a lift.”

Adrian climbed in, grateful. His business with Sally hadn’t taken long, but it had been illuminating. It had also been directly connected to the man now steering the car down the alley. David showing up now was another sign.

“There’s trouble.” David informed him of the Mexican army’s arrival. He had tried to estimate their numbers but failed to get an accurate count. “There are a lot. High hundreds.”

Adrian grunted, but didn’t respond otherwise. After all the bad dealings between Safe Haven and the Mexicans, Adrian would have been surprised if the enemy had come light. The guerillas were prepared for war, but they weren’t prepared for Angela.

“There’s Marc.” David pointed.

Adrian motioned him to follow. “Keep up.”

The Eagle vehicles were traveling at a rate of speed that made Adrian think their entrance into the mountain was going to be quick. He didn’t know if

they had been spotted or if Marc was just being careful, but Adrian felt the tension in the air. However, he was relieved the man wasn't going to stay out here and try to forage while the enemy surrounded their base. Adrian knew he was underestimating Marc's ability to lead, but it was hard not to, considering how bitter he was.

Adrian and David fell in behind Marc and his team, exchanging waves as they were recognized. The three vehicles flew toward the only road to the mountain that was still open to traffic on wheels.

"How did you know where I was?"

"I saw them leave without you." David didn't want Adrian to know he was following to absorb lessons in secret. "I figured he had left your body."

Adrian chuckled. "Thanks."

"No problem." David motioned toward the glove compartment. "I found smokes."

Adrian broke into the name brand carton, lighting one for himself and the driver. As the nicotine glazed their minds, the rumbling engines grew louder.

"Wow. That's a problem." David hit the gas to stay on the bumper of the truck in front of them as the enemy came into view, Winston hanging comfortably from his lips.

"Here we go." Adrian exhaled. "We couldn't get three hours of peace."

David sped up again. The Mexicans had spotted them; they were turning in this direction. It would be a mad dash to the tunnels. There was no chance

that Adrian hadn't planned for this problem, as far as David was concerned. His mentor might not be liked by many people, but when it came to predicting the moves of an enemy, Adrian was boss. David was confident the man had something planned.

"It's going to get bumpy up here!" Kyle drove the truck by their hiding place and up onto the larger rocks that lined the exit. He had to get them close enough that their vehicles would provide cover while they ran for the entrance. If they left their trucks at the flat hiding place, they would be easy targets.

Kyle tried to get all the way up to the entrance, but twenty yards away was the best he could do due to the huge boulders and steep drop-offs hidden by stone and slushy ice. As he steered away from the edge, the truck's engine stalled, running out of fuel. He'd cut this one too short with his gas estimate.

Kyle slammed it into park and leapt from the protesting truck to get to Marc.

"Let's go! Let's go!" Out and running toward the tunnel, Marc made sure everyone went ahead of him, including Adrian. He wanted to blow the entrance now. If the Mexicans got into Safe Haven, they would slaughter almost everyone. "Run! Run!"

The team made it to the entrance before they heard the first gunshot. As bullets began to ricochet off the cliffs and crags around them, Marc brought up his shield. He was in the rear of the line. As long

as none of the slugs got by him, everyone in front would be fine.

Aware that Marc was being shot at, Kyle and Adrian gestured the others to keep moving. They all wanted to be close to the man in case Marc tried to rescue someone or do something else stupid like that. New leaders were notorious for trying to keep all of their people alive, but sometimes it wasn't possible.

The Mexicans came up the hill in an orderly formation that was terrifying. The tank leading the procession was flanked by a big semi with a grinning lunatic behind the windshield that immediately reminded the senior Eagles of the rest stop and Cesar.

Eagles shoved into the tunnels to avoid the continuous shots, all hoping the tank didn't fire.

"Fuckin' ghost won't quit haunting us!" Kyle unconsciously rubbed the scar on his hand from Angela's teeth.

Marc joined them, shield glowing brilliantly. Out of time, he motioned to Kyle. "Do it."

Everyone else hurried up the corridor as the mobster knelt down to recover the control box hidden in a crevice in the stone. Thanks to Theo's setup, everything was ready, but they would all need to be running as the bottom portion of the corridor collapsed.

Kyle set the pack down, finger hovering over the switch. He wanted to do damage with this first

blow. Like Angela, he needed the enemy to know how dangerous they were.

The first group of guerillas reached the top of the rocky entrance hill and started into the tunnel.

Kyle flipped the switch. He took off running, but was lifted off his feet in the concussion from the blast. He flew forward with the debris.

The explosion wasn't large. Most of Safe Haven had no idea that there was yet another life or death struggle happening on their doorstep, but for the team in the passage, the noise was deafening and tiresome. They were sick of explosions and rocks falling.

As the lower part of the cavern collapsed, Kyle managed to crawl forward through the shock. It was just enough to be in the camp as the tunnel sealed behind him.

The explosion triggered a small avalanche from the cliffs above the tunnel, burying the guerillas that had rushed in. It rained down on the tank, doing no harm, but the semi was sprayed with heavy rocks and then slammed sideways by a washing machine-sized boulder that flew through the windshield. The semi shuddered; the cabin rocked toward the edge of the cliff.

A few vehicles back, the leader of the Mexicans stood up to lean on his jeep frame, staring in disbelief. He'd just lost two dozen men and a semi, plus the driver. *How did that happen?*

“I told you we should have let them go,” a snippy voice quipped from the vehicle next to him.

Mikel’s throw was so fast that Marietta didn’t know there was a blade protruding from her throat at first. It was more of a straight razor with a handle than a knife.

Marietta sucked in air around the blade, panicking as she realized what was happening. Tears rolled down her bronzed cheeks.

Mikel reached out and snatched his knife free, not bothering to wipe it clean as he stowed it in the special sheath on his belt.

The woman, his latest, fell off the foot rail where she’d been standing. Marietta had been a good shot, but she’d run off at the mouth one too many times. He was glad to be rid of her.

Mikel slid into the seat and began turning the jeep around. He didn’t order his guys to dig out any fighters who might have survived. He’d brought enough men to spare on moments like this. He’d simply been surprised to view two of his main targets out in the open. Mikel was certain it wouldn’t happen again. The rats would dig in now, hoping their hunters would get bored and depart.

“You don’t know me!” His madness echoed off the cold cliffs. “I’m not my cousins. When you finally emerge, I’ll be waiting... If I don’t dig in to you first!”

Disoriented, Kyle didn't struggle when Adrian hefted him up and over a shoulder. He just wanted the ringing in his ears to stop.

The trip up the tunnel seemed longer than it actually took. All of the men were tired. That was the way things were now. No one put in a full eight hours of labor anymore, so when real labor came, their bodies weren't used to it. Adrian had known that was a possible risk, but there had been little choice. People were now undependable in most situations. They needed breaks from the way the world had become *eat or be eaten* so abruptly. Hiding from reality that way made them all a bit unsteady when they came out, but it was a small price to pay for sanity.

There was no way the people who had survived the apocalypse could be shoved right back into 9-to-5 lives. They would have to be nursed into that lifestyle, if they were ever able to do it again at all. The children of this generation might be able to pick up where their parents had left off, but the inhabitants who made up Safe Haven's everyday life right now were broken souls.

When they reached the top of the corridor, Zack met them. Marc motioned Adrian and David toward their usual spot. "You guys are in quarantine down here."

Adrian nodded as he put Kyle on his feet, winded. He didn't want to be in the medical bay around Angela. It would already be hard enough to stay away from her knowing how close they were.

Marc gestured to the duty booth where Allan and Howard were on watch. “Drop the food here. They’ll see that it gets to the stock rooms.”

The rest of the team went up to the medical bay to be tested. On the way, Marc sent runners to the senior guards on duty to let them know things were fine. It wasn’t necessarily true, but they were a little safer than they had been before the trip out of the mountain. Other than that top entrance, now there were only two tunnels open and one of them had Adrian camped at the entrance. The other was hidden so well that not even Safe Haven’s citizens had found it until a few days ago. The enemy wasn’t getting in.

Safe Haven also wasn’t getting out. According to Angela, that was the only way they would survive. Marc wasn’t looking forward to viewing the proof of her words. As far as he was concerned, if they survived the radiation, they should stay down here until winter was over and deal with everything else come spring.

Adrian shook his head, picking up the thought. Marc still didn’t understand how important it was for the camp to be off American soil as soon as possible. *But Angela does. She’ll make sure it happens. That’s why I gave her leadership. She won’t let me down.*

Neil was perched on the edge of the security post as the dusty team emerged from the bottom levels. He was no longer on duty over Angela, but he had stayed with her anyway when she'd wandered down here to wait for the team to return. Her official guard, Brandon, was in the shadows, trying to blend in and impress everyone. "Anything I can do?"

"Not that I can think of." Marc slid the kit off his shoulders and began stripping gear. He waved the others to continue. "We already had the top levels mostly closed off. All we have to do now is stay in and keep things tight."

"Sounds like easy duty."

Angela tensed.

Marc and Neil exchanged concerned glances as a chill swept through the tunnels.

"The kids!" The cry echoed down the cavern.

Heavy steps rushed their way.

"You'll be in the medical bay?" Marc spotted Hilda and Ray coming toward them.

"I will. Be careful." Angela stepped aside so he could go by. Life as Safe Haven's boss was never easy.

Neil still stayed with Angela, but they'd barely gotten out of sight when more steps sounded from the opposite direction.

Millie hurried to them with a horrified expression. "Becky's gone! She left a note."

"Becky ran away?" Neil went into angry shock. "Why? When?"

Millie grabbed his arm, dragging him toward the living quarters. “Come on. Peggy found the note. She wants Doug to chase after the idiot girl.”

Breaking the rule without even thinking about it, Neil went with her, gesturing to Brandon. “Tell Marc.”

Brandon took off down the tunnel at a fast jog. He would relay the message to the first guard he found and then resume his post.

Angela was left alone.

Glad of it, she carefully climbed the level ladder that emerged near the brig. She was never happy about chaos in camp, but one thing always led to another. These two events would bring about more of the changes Safe Haven needed. All they had to do was the same thing they’d been doing—survive it long enough to learn from it.

The detention center, which was one bare step above the brig in comfort, was shoved into a rear cave and had wider cells with the same steel bars. Theo and Kenn had worked together on that one to keep it quiet. They had a more modern system than the camp would care for. Thanks to water hoses and drain cracks, prisoners didn’t even have to be let out for baths. It wasn’t pleasant, but it was the safest way.

Chauncey was in the farthest cell, where he would be trapped or crushed in a collapse. His cell dipped down sharply in the rear, preventing room for exercise.

“I’d like to switch you to a better place.” Angela slowly sat on the stool by his barred gate.

The guards, Barry and Whitney, came closer to protect her, but they didn’t alert anyone. Both of those men considered Angela their leader and as such, she had every right to be here alone.

Chauncey stood up and came over to the bars. He looked rough, but Angela suspected much of it was an act for sympathy. “Extra food portions?”

Caught, Chauncey grinned. “Good grub here.”

“I’ll give the cook your compliments.” Angela observed him coolly. “You’ll miss our food when we go.”

“To the island?”

“Yes. You’ll be *here*. I’ve seen it.”

“But I gave that girl the information! You’ve read it!”

“So?”

Chauncey regarded her in horror. “You don’t want them to know about my gift.”

“I don’t think I can keep them from killing you.” Angela leaned against the wall. “When the others like me find out you were the reason the government was able to keep track of us, someone will shove you down the stairs and claim it was an accident or gut you in the shower. I can’t protect you.”

Flipping into sullen, the man tossed himself down onto the cot. “I want to go with you.” He crossed his arms over his chest and glared.

“Convince me it’s worth the trouble of extra guards and drama.” Angela pointed. “Give me at

least two great reasons why you should be forgiven and embraced as one of us.”

Chauncey studied the options and came up with one—telling the truth. “I came here for Safe Haven’s light. In any way that I could.”

“I knew that and still let you torment me.”

“Because it was also the truth. I was told to come here.”

“By Donner.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been screwing with me because you can or because there’s more to the plan that hasn’t happened yet?”

“Because I hate you!” Chauncey’s rage turned his face purple. “I hate you and all our kind. We’re evil!”

The guards came to stand next to Angela. Whitney’s cast glinted with signatures in the lantern light.

“You can only track and record. You have no true value to anyone.”

Broken, Chauncey dropped his chin. “Yes.”

“Now that we have the truth, the leader of Safe Haven, Marc, will decide your fate.”

“I want to touch the ocean,” Chauncey whispered sadly. “I never have.”

Angela refused his plea, returning to the medical bay after ordering the guards to tell Marc everything. Another loose end would be cleaned up once people knew. Chauncey was a traitor, sent in

by Donner to mess with descendant minds. Absolution could never come from one such as him.

Angela entered the medical bay in time to observe Doug awkwardly placing Peggy's large form onto one of the cots. She'd obviously fainted at Doug refusing to go after the wild girl. The doctor and his students were gathered around the pair, quacking in concern.

Not wanting the stress, Angela left. She would pick a quiet place to curl up for a while. Being in these passages was a constant reminder of her missing child.

Hoots and cackles from children in the game area floated down, taunting her.

Angela found an empty storage compartment and curled up on the floor, tears flooding.

4

“The kids have to be in that hidden tunnel.” Billy joined Marc in the living quarters an hour later. The camp had needed to be calmed down again after hearing that some of their kids ran away. “We also have two women missing who were slaves in Cesar's camp.”

It was understandable that the former slaves and children who had been held by the Mexicans would be scared, and fear caused people to do crazy things. Once Marc explained it that way, people would settle down and then he would be free to investigate how it had happened. He'd already discovered that

the night post on the kids' quarters had been empty for fifteen minutes while the duo snuck off for a few minutes alone in a stock room.

Both of those Eagles were now in the brig for dereliction of duty, but the damage had been done. They had eleven missing people, counting Becky. Marc didn't have her on his grid. He also didn't have the kids, implying they were being shielded. As far as he knew, Becky didn't have that type of gift and neither did any of the children. He had told Kyle to assume they'd been taken. He hadn't told Jennifer anything. He didn't need to. She was currently digging through the people who had access to anything the kids needed or wanted in case they'd been lured out. When she got out of range of the main cave, Jennifer would redirect her focus to breaking through whatever shield was over them. No one kept her out. Marc refused to contemplate the other implication of neither of them having the people on their mental grids.

“Is there anything you'd like me to do?”

“Yes, I need...” Marc paused as Kenn appeared to flash a subtle hand signal.

Marc sighed. “I need you to stay here and keep working with people the way we talked about in our first lesson. Be careful, but don't lie.”

Billy swallowed nervously as he took Marc's seat next to the security post. “I'll cover it.”

Marc went to the radio, mind racing. “This shit always comes in three or more. Put Tonya on the radio and find Samantha. I need to know what the

weather is doing, and I'd like Jeremy on the laptop. I also want a current fallout level."

Kenn vanished, eager to be in the mix now that chaos was visiting them again.

Marc closed the door to the radio cubby and sat down in the warm chair. *This should be fun. Nothing like walking a tightrope with weights on one ankle.*

"Safe Haven, here." Marc hoped he was wrong about what this was. He hadn't known Angela planned to piss off the Mexicans, but after the narrow escape that had killed people, he should have expected a kidnapping. He just didn't know how they'd gotten in. *That's what I get for treating her differently. From now on, Angela will have the same rules as everyone else.*

"Where is the woman who spoke so rudely earlier?" a Mexican voice demanded.

"Resting. I'm in charge of this camp." Marc used a firm tone. "You were told to leave our country. Why are you still here?"

"We are at the base of your mountain. We have surrounded it. Until we get what we came for, we will not leave."

"What did you come for?" Marc assumed it was revenge for Sebastian and Cesar since there hadn't been an immediate ransom demand.

"My family. I believe their names are Royan and Romero."

Marc leaned back, stunned. He'd never imagined the Mexicans would want Cesar's sons or

that Cesar still had relatives left to haunt them. This added a new layer of trouble to the situation.

Marc keyed the mike. "Roy and Romeo are members of this camp." He used the version of the names the boy's had chosen. "They will not be handed over to anyone. Leave now before things get uglier."

Chilly amusement came through the radio. "My men were right about you and the woman being dangerous, but it will not matter. We defeated the patrols of soldiers who came south during your war. We do not fear the cold or the flames. We will not leave until our family has been released. Would you not do the same, if we held relatives of yours?"

"Yes, because they would be slaves if they were with you. These boys were rescued by Safe Haven. They have become full members, with all of our protections. We will not hand them over."

"We will not leave. After a month, when your bellies are hungry, we will be here. After three months, when your people are dead and dying, we will still be here. Perhaps you wish to consult with the woman who makes the decisions?"

Marc didn't reply. He'd already given his answer.

"Couldn't give them to you even if I wanted to." At least he knew why the kids had run away. They'd assumed they would be handed over and fled to avoid recapture. Marc suddenly didn't blame them one bit.

Marc went to the brig to get a fresh vest and gear. After that, he and the Special Forces teams would hunt for their missing people. Their morning was just getting started.

5

“The numbers haven’t changed down here in the cave yet.” Jeremy had arrived at the brig to deliver the update, catching Marc as he donned his gear. “Nothing is moving on the satellite, except refugees still coming in from the west.”

“What about the weather?” Marc laced his sturdiest boots. He didn’t know how long this hunt might take or where it would lead them. He wanted to be prepared.

“Cold as hell, but no storms other than the one that went northeast of us yesterday.”

“Good. Help keep things under control here while we’re gone.”

“You know it.” Jeremy wasn’t glad they had more trouble, but he was glad to be needed after his screw up. He was also grateful that Samantha hadn’t been told.

“Keep track of Angie?” Marc asked suddenly.

“I’ll go to her as soon as you give the word.”

“Now.”

Jeremy exited the brig, eager to do the quiet labor.

Marc shoved a thicker coat into his kit and went to the bottom tunnels.

6

“Is she with them?” Seth demanded it as he joined the guys in the top floor training room, wearing a copy of their uniform and gear despite not being Special Forces yet.

“We don’t know.” Neil was sporting more equipment than he knew what to do with. Marc had insisted.

Becky’s note had been short. Seth replayed it repeatedly in his mind, falling in line behind the two teams when they exited the training chamber that held their lockers.

I’m a danger to this camp, to every person here, because I can’t control my nightmares. When I can, you’ll see me again.

Seth could feel the yearning for death in her words, the impossible goal of erasing the past in the scribbled letters. She wasn’t coming back.

The mission team stopped at the medical bay to collect Doug and Jennifer, then went down to the tunnel the kids had taken.

Marc advanced into the darkness as soon as the team came in sight. He’d already been here, updating the fresh Eagles at this checkpoint. There was no other way the kids or Becky could have gone.

Most of the team believed they would locate the entire group huddled together for warmth before

they reached the end. The children hadn't taken their coats.

"How long have they been gone?" Doug was ashamed for not taking time to tell the boys they wouldn't be handed over to the Mexicans. He hadn't imagined that was an issue.

"Marc narrowed it down to two hours." Daryl and the big man were bringing up the rear as the quicker men hurried forward to protect Marc.

"Let's move!" Marc called from the icy darkness ahead of them.

The team shifted into a faster pace, breath steaming out around them like small clouds of moist, ominous fog.

7

"Coming in." David spotted the light from Adrian's fire, but not the man himself.

Adrian emerged from the wall as if he was a part of it. His new clothing was a perfect match to the stone. "You need something?!" Adrian didn't want David getting in trouble for visiting him.

"A place to crash. You got room?"

Understanding the choice the healing man had made, Adrian lifted a brow. "You sure? It's cold down here."

David slung his gear to the ground near the flames and knelt by the coffee tin that was boiling over on the fire, causing it to spit in protest. "Not

very warm up there without your woman in charge. That Ghost is some hard piece of work.”

Adrian nodded. It was a fair assessment. Marc had a moral line that was absolute. He wouldn't break it, but the apocalypse, combined with leadership of Safe Haven, would give the man new insights into survival.

“You eat yet?” David handed Adrian a cup of the burnt coffee.

“I have a wonderful meal of ramen noodles planned. I found a case of chicken flavor last week.”

David grimaced. “You know those things are poison, right?”

Adrian laughed. Unable to help it, amusement bubbled out into the tunnels, spreading light that he no longer had the right to share with his camp. Horrible sadness stopped the mirth, replacing it with sullen depression.

David dug through his bags and pouches. Very happy with the minor pain instead of flaring agony in his ankle as he bent and knelt, he labored silently for his mentor. He already felt better. *This is where I belong.*

Adrian sat down on the flat rock and opened his notebook. He had put it down when he'd heard the steps. With the Mexicans on their doorstep, he was twitchy, and not inclined to take chances.

After adding a bit of tinder and a few logs to the fire, David poured his canteen into his cooking pot and placed it over the fire, with the lid. While he waited for it to boil, the soldier gathered a few

items, mixing them together in the tiny frying pan that had come with the camping cook set. He still didn't speak.

Adrian watched the man assemble a meal, stomach growling. He'd missed real food since his banishment, along with toilet paper and coffee that didn't taste like ass.

David covered the pan and used two bottles of water to fill his small kettle. He added two tea bags and the rest of his personal stash of sugar to the kettle, then replaced the lid. As the first pot came to a boil, David deftly slid it onto the stone floor and placed the frying pan over the flames.

The large baggie of jasmine rice captured Adrian's attention as David dumped it into the first pot of boiling water and used the lid from the frying pan to trap the heat.

Adrian realized he was being given a gift. "Who sent it?"

"Li Sing said to hurry up. He needs someone to play chess with."

"Tell him I'm working on it."

"I will." David pushed the kettle onto the flames before swirling the frying pan around. A wonderful smell began to fill the tunnel.

David set out one bowl and a large mug with a lid.

"You're not eating?"

David snorted. "I couldn't swallow another bite. Li forced me to make it while he watched. Would have been rude not to eat it when he told me to."

Adrian was impressed with Li again. He'd wanted to be positive Adrian got enough food to hold him through a full day. He couldn't do that if his company needed to be fed too.

David rotated the frying pan and the kettle every couple of minutes, slowly warming both until they were fully heated. The tuna stir-fry over rice had been amazing. David wanted to witness Adrian's expression when he tasted it.

"Coming in," a familiar and not entirely welcome voice called from the Safe Haven direction.

David noticed Adrian's tension and shifted so he had a clear shot at the new guys if it was needed. Everyone here referenced Jeff and Kevin as if they were saints, but David wasn't taking the chance with Adrian's life. The new bruises the blond had were glaring in the firelight as if to support the choice.

Jeff and Kevin appeared through the gloomy passage, both cold and concerned.

"Have you seen Angela?"

Adrian was on his feet in an instant. "What?"

"He hasn't. I told you she wouldn't do that." Kevin flashed Adrian an uncomfortable glance. "Jeremy is looking for her. We don't want to bother Marc and we don't want to piss her off if she just wants some free time. We stopped by the medical bay to talk to her about Sally, but she isn't there."

Adrian hit his radio. "Who has the Raven?"

Silence came for a moment and then Angela's voice echoed. "I'm fine. Visiting with an old friend."

Adrian frowned. "Chauncey."

"Yeah, what's up with him?" Kevin was curious. "We've never had a prisoner before, at least, not for so long."

Adrian didn't mention Kevin's use of the word *we*, but Jeff noticed it and scowled.

Adrian didn't know what to say as he sat down, eager again for the food since Angela was all right. "Don't let the boss lady spend too much time with Chauncey. He's bad news. He plays with her mind worse than *I* ever did."

Jeff took the warning to heart. Now that he was here, his feelings of duty and loyalty to Angela and Safe Haven were returning by the minute. He couldn't wait to be gone again before this place sank the claws back in too deep for him to escape.

"How did you guys get hooked up with Sally?"

Jeff sent Adrian the mental story of all they'd gone through, tolerating the slime ball because Angela had said it was important. He hadn't snooped on Adrian's moment with Sally, but he was now wondering if he should have.

"Wow. She's nuts. You're lucky to have gotten out." Adrian was impressed. "Are you sure you want to leave Safe Haven for that?"

"Yes," they answered in unison, tones clearly implying he was the reason.

“Sorry to have bothered you about Angela.” Jeff exited the tunnel, unable to stand being around his former boss. He’d been gone long enough to understand that his anger was from the disappointment and the betrayal. Crista’s death had been an awful accident on the part of Safe Haven’s leadership, as had Tracy’s assault and the other injuries and deaths they’d suffered. Fights for freedom required that type of sacrifice. Jeff had accepted it years ago. What he couldn’t accept was the betrayal that had come from someone he might have once considered a brother.

Adrian tensed as a wave of pain he wasn’t allowed to feel slapped at him. “Oh, you little liar!”

Kevin lifted a brow.

Adrian wasn’t going to pass the job to someone else. “She isn’t with Chauncey anymore. I’ll be back.” Adrian headed for the next level. “Will you be my escort?”

Kevin nodded, though he wasn’t positive a former Eagle was enough for the camp or for Marc. He would claim he didn’t know the rules so Adrian would get the blame if there was trouble.

“There won’t be.” Adrian increased to a jog. “Marc’s busy or she wouldn’t be alone.”

Kevin heard the tone and frowned. *Why can’t Angela be alone?*

“She’s not herself, from losing the baby.” Adrian increased his pace again, forcing Kevin to concentrate on his footsteps around the gaps and piles of rocky debris instead of asking questions.

Kevin wasn't as familiar with these lower caves as Adrian was. He hadn't spent the last month alone in them.

“Where is she?”

“We'll have to search.” Adrian lit up the bond he and Angela had created through the forbidden call, swarmed with hatred for the slobbering voice on the other side of the barrier that had refused his pleas for help. If the day ever came that the situation was reversed, his reply would be the same.

A golden wisp lit up before them and then faded.

Kevin was instantly fascinated. “What was that?”

“My tracker.” Adrian didn't give Kevin any more details than he might already have.

Ignoring the sentries on the stairs, Adrian stopped at the top and waited. The small golden ball lit up for a brief second and took off up the damp wall.

Adrian went to the next level, not answering the questions of anyone he passed. Because he had an escort, the Eagles let him go by.

Adrian tracked Angela to the rear of Safe Haven's storage space, wedged between dusty bags of wheat and flour. Tears were dried to her cheeks. “Angie.”

Adrian kept his distance as Kevin went to her, blocking the view of anyone who might have followed them. A minute later, Kevin had her on her feet.

Adrian reluctantly backed out of the compartment. Marc wouldn't like it when he found out who had helped her. He didn't need to be there to feel it.

Kevin took Angela to the medical bay, glowering at her guard as he came running toward them in panic.

Brandon opened his mouth...

"Shut up!" Kevin hissed, catching Angela's need for this to remain between them. "Get her arm."

Certain he had just lost his next rank, Brandon gently took Angela's arm and helped get her settled with the doctor and students, who scolded her the entire time.

Angela didn't respond. She stared at Peggy's unconscious form in misery, refusing to glance away until the doctor finally sedated her to get away from the creepy tension. She wasn't doing well.

Chapter Twenty-One

Would You Believe?

1

“**D**o you hear that?”

Kyle shook his head. He didn't hear anything except for their funny echoes rebounding off the stones, but he didn't doubt Jennifer.

Jennifer wasn't sure why the kids weren't on her mental grid. It bothered her that Marc couldn't detect them either. She was positive they were alive. She was bonded with some of the missing children. She would feel it if they'd died.

The tunnel was icy. The temperatures in these surface caverns were below freezing. They wound along the earth like a large snake trying to dig a way into the mountain. She shivered, straining... “Listen.”

The team stopped, waiting to hear anything.

A soft whimper of relief broke the silence.

“It's them! They're here!”

“I told you they'd come for us.”

Jennifer and Kyle led the men forward, eager to comfort and then scold the children.

Marc was busy scanning to find out what had happened with Becky and the two missing women. He scowled at the images of the two females

running straight out of the corridor into the cold and waiting arms of the Mexicans. He didn't want to imagine their fate.

Ahead of the team, the tunnel curved, making a small pocket protected from the wind. They found the eight missing kids there, huddled behind a small fire. They were all grateful to see the Safe Haven adults.

Roy and Romeo stayed back as the other kids ran forward to hug their rescuers. The Eagles drew coats from their kits and tried to warm tiny hands.

Doug went to his boys, kneeling down. "Why?"

When they wouldn't answer, Doug took their cold hands and led them to the others. "Come on. Get your coats on and we'll talk on the way."

The boys went willingly, exchanging glances of relief. They both expected to be punished for running away, no matter how scared they were. Safe Haven's adults were brave. They wouldn't understand being afraid.

"Not true." Jennifer ran a caring hand over Roy's short, stiff hair. "We were scared when we found you gone. It would hurt us to lose you."

"Yes!" Doug zipped the smaller boy's coat and lifted the child into his arms.

Jennifer took Romeo's hand, reading what had happened while he thought she was comforting him. "Did you see Becky?"

"She made us come back. We saw her and followed. When we realized there was a way out, we voted to take it. Becky was down at the exit,

waiting for dark she said, when the other two girls ran out.”

Roy peered up at Doug. “She was mad at us. When she shouted, we ran.”

The adults were happy that Becky had sent the kids back, but also angry that she hadn’t escorted them.

“We were coming, but it got so cold!” Romeo shivered. “We voted to build a fire and wait for the Eagles. We knew you’d find us.”

Doug hugged both children. “We won’t let them take you!”

Marc gestured for half of a team to escort Doug and the kids.

As the marching recommenced, Kyle kicked out the small fire and waited for Jennifer to take the lead again. Marc was having her guide them down each set of adjoining corridors, trusting her to track as she’d been taught. Kyle didn’t tell her that every man here had also evaluated the evidence after her and arrived at the same conclusions. It was likely she already knew, but it was to be expected. Eagles were taught to do the math for themselves, as well as to trust their leader. Problems only arose when one of their totals didn’t match up, something they needed to know anyway.

Seth stayed in the rear, dwelling on his bad thoughts. He didn’t care that the men here outranked him. That wasn’t why he stayed back. Seth knew he wasn’t in the right frame of mind to lead a mission. A few months ago, he would have

been fighting for lead, but he wasn't Marc or Adrian. The best people for this job were already doing it.

Jennifer and Kyle rounded another corner, only to stop again. Becky had written a message on the wall, carved with her knife. A small flashlight was shoved into the crevice across from it so the words wouldn't be missed.

Unless I'm a hostage, stop chasing me.

Jennifer and Kyle stepped aside to let Seth read it, not sure what to do. Marc and Angela would probably say to locate her anyway and be certain that she was okay, but Adrian would say it was her right to leave or stay. It was a hard choice. These men had been trained using Adrian's methods, but Marc was in this rescue party.

Seth stared at the message for a long time, fury and disappointment warring with common sense.

Jennifer and Kyle went to opposite ends of the curve to wait, keeping the team between them.

Seth slowly twisted toward Marc. "Is she?"

"No." Marc shrugged. "We only have one prisoner right now. Chauncey."

"Then I'm going after her." Seth couldn't make any other choice. "I'd like the escort if you want to send a few people with me."

Relieved, nearly everyone nodded. If Becky made it out, the Mexicans would get her. Her time with Rick would seem like a vacation in comparison, but Seth wouldn't be there to save her this time.

Marc knew where he was needed most. He gave Seth all but two of the men and hiked back up the corridor to help Doug and the others with the kids.

Seth turned toward the bottom of the tunnel and resumed walking. Behind him, the Eagles came, but Jennifer didn't retake the front of the group. Seth was the leader now, able or not. She was his protection.

2

David had Adrian's plate and mug ready when he returned. Adrian ate all of it, relishing the taste and smells. He didn't let his worry interrupt his appetite. When Marc got things under control, he would care for Angela. Until then, Kevin and the others would do it. Right now, Adrian needed to care for himself. Later, when they figured out that only his light could heal her, things would be as they had been before his secrets had destroyed so much trust.

Not fast enough. Angela had implied he only had weeks. How was he supposed to prove his worthiness and earn forgiveness from everyone in just a few weeks?

Stomach full, Adrian lit a smoke and sipped his sweet, hot tea, not hating the tunnel as much. Down here, he could think.

"Is she okay?"

Adrian belched. "She's surviving, like the rest of us. A lot going on up there."

“You hear how she handled the call?”

“Just like I taught her.”

“Was she really a rookie when she came to Safe Haven?”

“A level one. Marc had been teaching her on their way to us.”

“So their story is true? Childhood sweethearts?”

“So they say.” Adrian didn’t let himself lie, though it hurt. “Seems to fit. You could fry eggs on the heat between them.”

“Must be nice to feel something like that for someone.” David washed Adrian’s bowl, then refilled his mug from his thermos. Li had also insisted he make his own tea to carry.

“Were you married?” Adrian tossed the soldier a smoke from his pack.

“No. Never found the right girl, or she never found me.”

“Isn’t this the part where someone says there’s still time?” Adrian understood loneliness too well.

David chuckled, finished with the cleanup. He dug out his bedroll, placing it across the fire from Adrian. He knew the former boss was expecting an explanation of some sort. “Wake me in a few hours for my turn.”

It hadn’t been lost on David that Adrian was the terrifying guard dog Safe Haven needed. David was honored to help. He often wished he’d been with them from the beginning and then he too would feel as though he belonged here, that he deserved to be a part of this amazing group.

Adrian sympathized. The soldiers would have taken longer to adjust even if he had still been in charge, but David had the same craving as Kenn when he'd first come. This man wanted to prove he was valuable. David would make a great right or left hand for a smaller group. He didn't deserve to be saddled with a disgraced leader. He was worthy of...

Adrian froze as a premonition overwhelmed his senses. He still hadn't learned to control it. The moments were too rare to allow practice.

The tunnel morphed into a western town Adrian had never been to. The swinging doors, muddy streets, tolling church bell, and dusty horses suggested the old west, but the sky was lit with an unnatural backdrop he couldn't mistake. He spotted other signs that implied it was after the war, like the use of modern lanterns and tents. The handstitched patches in modern fabrics confirmed it as a post-war date.

The vision grew clearer. Adrian saw an empty blacksmith hut gleaming from pristine care. A reflection sparked in the window of the hut, showing a group of hardy fighters. Adrian studied their leader with the love a father held for his only daughter. "Alexa."

David glanced over to find Adrian's eyes open but rolled back in their sockets. It was more than odd.

"I knew you were alive." Adrian blinked as the vision vanished, forced to replay it in his mind as he scoured for details. He'd stayed away from Alexa to

protect her. He hadn't had fresh information about her in half a decade, until today. The vision with Sally had been quick, but this second premonition was detailed.

"You okay?" David rose up on one arm. "I'll make a run if you need something."

"I don't suppose you know how to shoe horses?" Adrian looked over distractedly.

"I do." The soldier smiled, remembering his days as a rodeo cowboy. "Loading them can be a bitch. Shoeing is easy in comparison."

Adrian felt the magic of fate all around them. "If I told you there was another me out there, one who isn't broken and needs you, would you believe?"

"Maybe." David sat up. Adrian clearly needed to talk.

"What if it took years of waiting?"

David frowned. "I'd need proof of some kind, but yes, I'd probably want to know if it was true. There doesn't seem to be a place for me here."

Adrian sighed in relief and frustration. "What proof can I offer?"

3

Seth spotted Becky's prone form as they left the shelter of the cold corridor, heart pounding in dread. They'd been traveling for an hour since finding the kids.

Before he could rush forward, Jennifer pointed to the glint of metal in the distance.

Becky waved at them. “Get down!”

Seth collapsed in relief, joining the others on the icy, rocky ground.

Becky watched the Mexican army surround the bottom of this mountain section in the fading afternoon light. She didn’t reciprocate when Seth crawled up and clutched her as if she’d been gone for days. She shrugged him off. “We’ve got trouble.”

Seth and the others realized the guerillas were coming straight toward them.

“They know about this tunnel somehow.” Becky was furious about it, assuming they had another traitor. “We have to close it.”

“And quietly.” Kyle concurred with the choice. “If we call it in, they’ll rush up right now. A lot of our people will get hurt.”

“Fall back.” Jennifer motioned to their men in the rear.

Jennifer motioned to Kyle. *Do you have anything on you?*

She sent an image that made Kyle shake his head regretfully. *No, but I will from now on.*

Jennifer studied their surroundings as they reentered the cavern.

“We’ll shoot it, make the entrance fall.” Greg dug through his kit, quietly. “Or a grenade?”

“What if they know about the other tunnel we still have open?” Ben ducked down as the Mexicans got closer.

“Yeah, there could be another group coming up to that passage right now!” Greg swung toward the entrance. “We have to call Marc.”

Kyle made the choice after a quick evaluation. “We’ll move further up and then contact Marc. Let them get into the tunnel here first.”

“Then we set off the emergency charges?” Greg knew they’d placed them all over the summit of their mountain. They’d had all this set up for the top, where it neared their actual camp. No one had wanted to have to dig out the entire mountain when it was time to leave.

“That’ll seal us off completely.” Becky’s tension rose. “We’ll be trapped.”

“Yes, that’s what Angela wants.” Jennifer was too tired and cold to scan Becky deeper. “The fallout is coming. She thinks we’ll be safe if we’re buried under the earth.”

“She might be right.” Kyle motioned them to go up the corridor. “Come on.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” Becky darted out of the cave.

Seth turned to Kyle for help.

The mobster shook his head. “She just made her final choice. Make yours.”

Seth followed Becky.

Both of them vanished into the shadows.

When no shouts of discovery came, Kyle and Jennifer stuck to their plan.

“We’ll use all three launchers.” Kyle got his from the kit. Special Forces teams now carried

bigger gear for moments like this one. Angela had added to their arsenal and Marc had insisted that they bring it.

“Aim for the cracks and gaps. Theo said those are weak spots.” Jennifer jogged up the tunnel. Except for Kyle and the three guys doing the launching, the teams would keep traveling. They needed to be out of the way of the blast, but there was also a chance that this entire passage could collapse and kill them all where the last one hadn’t. Everything was a risk.

Jennifer heard the sound of the launchers firing and keyed the radio on her belt. “Incoming! Check the tunnels! Incom—”

4

“Check the tunnels! Incom—”

Adrian and David leapt up, grabbing for weapons at the broken transmission. They staggered to the entrance that came from the bottom of this passage, not waiting for orders.

“You see anything?” David turned his radio down as it went crazy with voices.

Adrian squinted into the darkness. “No...but I feel something.”

“All teams to stations!” Adrian’s radio blared with Tonya’s angry voice. “This is not a drill. We have intruders! All teams to stations!”

“Down!” Adrian lunged toward David, taking them both to the hard ground.

A blast of bright red light flew through the darkness. The blast of energy sailed over their heads and slammed into the stone, splintering chips in a dangerous shower.

“Blow it!” Marc commanded over the radio. He had just sent the kids to the medical bay for a checkup when Jennifer’s warning came.

“Hit the button!” Adrian fired back.

David scrambled toward the box Theo and Kenn had rigged, dodging bullets and bright flashes.

Adrian spun, knocking David out of the path of another energy blast. He bounced off a wall, spinning again to avoid a small hail of bullets. It put him right next to the box. Adrian dropped down on top of it, bringing up his shield. “Get in here!”

David crawled, returning fire, until he was touching Adrian’s leg. The shield immediately enlarged to include him.

David stared in fascination.

Adrian hit the button.

The cave below them imploded in a series of thundering explosions, shaking the stone to send showers of dust and dirt through the lower passages. The mountain groaned in agony.

The Mexicans who hadn’t been buried kept coming through the corridor, reaching them despite great shooting. It forced Adrian and David to retreat to the ladder. There were too many guerillas to fight this way.

“Hurry!” David lunged through to the next floor and began pulling the rope. Adrian, halfway up,

grunted at pain in his leg, but managed to help yank the ladder up as he hit the stone. They got it out of reach as the Mexicans reached the hole, firing through and into the rock around it.

Both men cowered from the barrage, hearing nothing but the ringing of guns and slugs pinging off cold stone.

“Get back!” Marc called loudly from behind them. He knew hearing was difficult when you’d just had your ears overloaded.

Adrian and David rolled out of the way of the advancing Eagles who were carrying vials.

Adrian scowled as he realized what they were doing. He didn’t approve of taking hostages, but he didn’t interfere. He was just glad to be up here and not down there.

Marc deftly tossed two vials through the hole, ducking gunfire and flying metal.

Two more Eagles ran forward to do the same. Glass shattered. Coughing replaced the gunfire and shouts.

Marc and his team retreated, scanning the areas around them in case anyone had gotten through. On the top level, Greg and Daryl were doing the same if it was needed. Marc didn’t think it was. Greg had been out there working on the gate all day. He would have spotted anyone entering through that part of their mountain.

The homemade knockout gas worked quick. In less than a minute, the loudest noise below them

was the shifting of the mountain as it settled, then soft groans and thuds as bodies hit the ground.

Marc gestured the Eagles forward. “Keep dosing them until they’re all out or they surrender. If it kills them, so be it.”

Billy snapped a salute that hurt Adrian as much as it made him proud. He’d overlooked the driver. Marc hadn’t.

The radio lit up with a barrage of furious Mexican words that only a handful of people in Safe Haven were able to decipher. The Mexican leader was furious that both his attempts to penetrate the mountain in broad daylight had failed. Marc went to the other site, where Kyle and Jennifer had been heard from last. He didn’t spare a glance for Adrian or David, who now had to be given a place within the camp. All of their gear was below.

Marc waited for a clear pause while he walked, then addressed the man over his belt radio. “I now have fifty of *your* men. Another undetermined amount have been buried alive. Leave these lands and I will release your men, unharmed, after we finish digging them out. Refuse and I’ll let them die where they are.”

“You will pay for this!” The radio vibrated with Mikel’s fury.

Marc kept climbing to the upper level. “No one fucks with Safe Haven while I’m in charge, little man. You’ll learn that.”

Despite his revulsion, Marc had finally accepted Angela’s plans for the Mexicans. They’d proven

they couldn't be trusted by trying to infiltrate as soon as they arrived. Guerillas had been sneaking into place before that first verbal exchange or they wouldn't have reached Adrian's sewer site yet. Mikel was another snake, something Marc had no remorse over removing. It was why he'd become a Marine. Some people needed to die. That was even truer now.

Adrian was impressed with Marc's mindset. It showed the man was coming to the important realizations faster than Angela had estimated. It was encouraging. While Adrian was earning his way back into the camp's good graces and Angela was healing, Safe Haven would be taken care of by someone who was a fierce defender of right and wrong. Marc's time in charge would be short, but productive.

The need to document it came. Adrian thought of his notebooks and valuables, all now within reach of gassed enemy hands. *That won't do.*

"I'm going back down." Adrian glanced at David, ignoring the surprise of the Eagles now on duty here. "You got me?"

"You know it." David stood. "Been too quiet for me, Boss."

The other Eagles, the ones who had trained with Adrian and lost faith, felt his absence keenly at that second. Those had been their moments, their emotions and words coming with every victory together. Adrian had found new Eagles, but they didn't have a new Adrian.

Adrian knelt by the smoky hole. "I'm coming down. You shoot me, you'll die." Adrian didn't wait for anyone to stop him. He dropped through the ten-foot hole, landing on bodies.

David fearlessly followed him down.

The Eagles, bound by orders, crowded around and tried to watch.

Adrian chuckled as he took in the scene. The vials of gas had succeeded. Nothing was moving. "They're all out."

Adrian and David quickly gathered their personal items. Then they took all the weapons from the captives on the way back through the tunnel that looked like this part of the mountain had collapsed. It took a little while, enough for both of them to become nervous about the Mexicans recovering. This fresh gas wasn't concentrated; it didn't last. When you were stuck inside a mountain with only a few vents, poison gas wasn't just dangerous to the enemy. It had to be used carefully, in low strengths.

Adrian tied his kit and the two bags of weapons to one end of his rope while David tossed the other end to the watching Eagles. Those men now approved Adrian's action. Disarming the enemy while they were unconscious was brilliant.

Drawn to one of the collapsed forms, Adrian carefully hefted the short man over his shoulder and went to the hole to be pulled up.

When the Eagles got his doubled weight to their level, they took the prisoner from him so he could help David up.

Groans and mutters came a few seconds later.

Billy hurried forward to drop another vial of gas. After the crash, there was silence again.

Adrian motioned toward the man he'd brought up. "I'd get your new enforcer on him ASAP. If he wakes up before she gets here, just shoot him. He's too much for you guys to handle alone."

The Eagles took the warning seriously, dispatching two men to take the prisoner to the brig while another went to get Jennifer. The rest stayed on guard around the hole.

Adrian claimed a nearby corner and put his sleeping bag down. He was beyond tired.

David took first watch, impressed. Adrian might be in disgrace, but he was still a genius. All survivors needed people like that. David reflected on their conversation, on the agreement he'd given after hearing the details. If it was a hoax, he would be left behind when Safe Haven got on their boat. If it was true, he would have the chance to serve a pure descendant who was worthy of his devotion. It was a hard choice, but in the end, he'd had to acquiesce. All David wanted was to belong with a good leader, but those here were too corrupt. He'd come to their light too late.

5

"Kyle!" Jennifer crawled through the rubble and smoke toward where he should have been. The tunnel was groaning and shifting around them,

dropping more rocks and dirt through the darkness.
“Check in!”

Kyle coughed in a series of painful hacks.

The sounds sent relief through Jennifer.

A light flashed on as the team counted off.

“We’re here,” Morgan forced out roughly at the end of the count, wiping his face. They were all coughing, covered in dark dirt and glowing particles.

“What is that?” Jennifer pointed to a glint on one wall.

Kyle and the others edged forward to check it out.

“Looks like...gold.”

Jennifer chuckled. “We struck gold?”

The teams cheered even though they didn’t have a use for wealth now. The old world mentality would never be erased from the generations who’d lived in it.

“We’ll have uses for it, I think.” Barry led the way as they headed back to the main camp. There was no sound from the Mexicans on the other section of the new stone and debris wall. The cave-in had been perfect, but they’d been too close. The rush of debris and dirt had slammed into all of them, knocking them off their feet and surrounded them in a smothering whirlwind of dust and debris.

“I’m sure Angie will think of something.” Jennifer curled an arm around Kyle’s waist. She wasn’t afraid of him anymore, but he was still scared of her. His embrace was filled with control

and longing. Jennifer rested against his arm as they trudged victoriously up the passage. He'd waited enough and so had she.

Can you get us a sitter for tonight?

Kyle tripped, hitting the wall. "What?"

Jennifer giggled.

"No." Kyle understood why she might be asking for that.

Jennifer smiled wider. Now that she'd made the choice, she would follow through.

Kyle swallowed nervously, sensing her thoughts, her mood. He wanted her body. He always had, but he also wanted her love. Without the second, the first was meaningless. He wasn't going to let her pay off a debt with sex and ruin what they had.

Jennifer put a hand on his arm, slowing them until the others got out of sight.

Kyle tensed as she stopped, not sure what to expect. He had to do this slowly, he had to be careful, he had to protect—

"Kyle."

He froze as her lips neared his, heart pounding.

"All you have to do is love me. Do you?"

"More than anything, Jenny." Kyle groaned in desperation. "I want to marry you!"

He immediately regretted spilling the truth.

Jennifer spoke against his clenched lips. "Autumn will make a cute flower baby."

Kyle almost stopped breathing. "You... You'd..."

Jennifer laughed again. She placed a soft kiss to his dusty lips, body warming despite the cold temperature. "If you ask me nicely."

Kyle kissed her back, unable to fight it. *I love you. I love you. I love you!!!*

Jennifer soaked it up to replace the awful cruelty that Cesar had stored for their physical moments. Kyle wanted to love her, not possess her. As she curled her arms around his neck, ignoring the approaching footsteps, Jennifer connected their minds. *I love you too.*

Always?

Always.

Marc waited impatiently as the couple sealed their new bond. He could tell this tunnel was no longer a danger or these two wouldn't be necking in the dark. As they broke apart, still exchanging mental promises, Marc sighed, heart hurting. He missed those days with Angie. Would they ever have them again?

Marc's demon, who had been angry for the last few days, spoke up. *Only if you accept Adrian in her life. She needs him.*

Marc locked down on that voice, furious again. She wouldn't need him for anything once they dumped Safe Haven on that island. Adrian would become a vague, shifting memory.

Jennifer felt Marc's anger surge and reluctantly broke the connection with Kyle.

"Adrian went down and grabbed their descendant." Marc was now scanning their entire

cave system and the thoughts of the nearest guards. “I want you to check him out and report back.”

“You got it.” Jennifer kissed Kyle once more and then jogged up the corridor. She was quickly out of sight.

Marc turned to Kyle, who had tensed as soon as he realized who was waiting for them. Marc could have said any number of nasty or supportive things in that moment. He chose to be a friend to the mobster. “Double the foreplay. Pretend she’s a virgin.”

Kyle flushed. “I’ve considered that already.”

Marc snorted. “Yeah, I’ll bet you have.”

Not hearing any condemnation in Marc’s tone, Kyle stepped closer. “You went through this with Angie, right?”

Marc flipped his light around to shine behind them. His hinky feeling hadn’t gone away yet. “She was terrified. After a while, she loosened up, but that first time was hard on her. I could tell how scared she was. All those old fears came back in that second. We fought it together.”

“She loves me.” Kyle grinned like an idiot.

“You’re about the only one who didn’t know that. Some observant Eagle.”

The men shared a laugh, but Marc didn’t take them out of the tunnel yet, sensing there was more he needed to do here. He waited for Kyle to speak, trying to be the boss everyone needed.

“We struck gold.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Kyle coughed, still trying to clear dust from his lungs. "I'd like to take some of it. For a ring."

"I have no problem with that now. A wedding sounds like something the camp needs."

Kyle was relieved. It had been his way of asking if the camp would accept him and Jennifer as a married couple.

Marc motioned toward the darkness. "Get what you need. Theo can shape it for you."

Kyle vanished into the darkness.

Marc went back toward the main camp, full of new contemplations. Kyle and Jennifer were going to get married. That would give other couples the idea. Safe Haven was about to have a rash of proposals and broken hearts, but also parties and celebrations of normal life continuing. Angela would love that.

Marc stopped. *Damn. Will she? What if she's worried over who might ask her? Does she expect me to, even though we just lost a baby? Does she want Adrian to ask? Would she say yes to anyone right now? I have to figure out what she needs and then I can answer those questions.*

Now dwelling on personal drama, Marc slowed for more time to weigh things. Marriage wouldn't solve their problems... Angie would never betray him, but if they were married, Adrian would be distanced even more.

Wondering if he'd inhaled too much gas, Marc continued to stew on it as he went to the upper levels. He wasn't the boy scout anymore. He was a

man determined to fight for his love, no matter how
dirty that battle got.

Chapter Twenty-Two
The Hard Way

1

“**S**o what now?”

Becky leaned against the stone, hating where she'd chosen to hide. Hundreds of Mexicans were coming up the road and swarming around the collapsed entrance. She and Seth were trapped fifty feet above the patrol that appeared to be making camp as well as investigating the scene. When the corridor collapsed, a billowing cloud of shrapnel-filled dust had enveloped the area, allowing her and Seth to climb, unnoticed, onto this ledge. They were now hunkered down behind two boulders that barely hid them.

“We'll sneak out during the chaos.” Becky wished she'd kept walking when she saw the vehicles coming. She also could have warned Angela, but she hadn't. She'd waited for Seth.

“Why didn't you keep going?”

Becky winced. He was so smart sometimes that it was frightening. “I wanted you to come with me.”

Seth sighed. “Well, I guess you got what you wanted.”

Becky didn't reply. She hadn't meant for it to be this way. When he got over being mad, he would realize she hadn't planned on this happening. Then he would get pissed again when he found out she hadn't warned the camp. The excuse that she'd known the rescue party was close wouldn't fly with him or anyone else. Seth might be able to return to Safe Haven, but she couldn't.

Becky sighed as the weight of the choice lifted from her chest. It was over. She could go forward from here—away from her ghosts, with the man she loved. Yes, she was getting exactly what she'd wanted.

“Where are we going?” Seth wondered how he would be able to protect her while they were alone. They were both cold and scared already, and it had only been thirty minutes.

“South, for now. I... I can't be locked up in that mountain, Seth. I just can't.”

Seth felt a little better after hearing that. He hadn't known she was suffering from mountain sickness. Many people were and the distractions only worked so well. If too much fear came, the camp would also have run. Now, they couldn't. It was tough it out or die.

Sort of like us. Seth was glad for once of the dim sunlight trickling through the thick clouds. He had faith in making an escape if Becky could take the climb. He had almost no faith in his ability to help her give birth out in the wastelands. That was one

of a hundred problems to conquer—not the least of which was the radiation they were now absorbing.

Reminded of the dangers of waiting, Seth noticed a lapse in the dusty security patrol below them and motioned Becky to start climbing. There was a partial passage right above them. It went half a mile into the stone before coming right back to this section of the mountain, but they would be out of sight of the Mexicans. When it got darker, they could walk out using Safe Haven Hill, where that short tunnel ended. It was a former ant hole, however, and could still be dangerous. Once in that cavern, Seth planned to radio Marc and ask if he wanted them to do anything before they headed off on Becky's adventure. He had no idea where they might end up, but at least they would be together without seeing Neil every day.

Spirits improving, Seth climbed up the mountain with Becky's ass in his face. *Yeah, this might work out well.*

2

The quick resolution to the Mexican infiltration was a comfort to Safe Haven. Instead of the massive panic it could have caused, most people went about their daily routines while listening to the radio. It was almost as if they were enjoying a show about something happening to someone else, instead of being right above where the action was actually taking place.

“You’ll be sorry that you have done this!” the radio crackled.

Marc didn’t respond to the threat even after he finished draining his water bottle. He was going to let this play out, at least for a while. When the camp started to have a problem with it, he would have to have another solution ready. Until then, it was as good as any and it didn’t risk any of Safe Haven’s people, which made it ideal. As a military strategist, Angela would have been valued.

“Are you there?” the Mexican shouted through the radio. “I will make you pay for this!”

Again, Marc didn’t answer. It was a mental tactic. Not only would the man hate being ignored, it also told the camp that leadership wasn’t in a hurry, that he had things under control. Marc frowned as he realized he had learned that from Adrian.

“You will give us the children or every one of you will die under that stone!”

Marc was forced to reply, able to feel Angela’s anger at the threat. “The children in question do not wish to leave the safety of Safe Haven. They were asked. They said no. I will tell you this for the last time. Get lost or face our wrath.”

Marc exited the radio room, gesturing Kenn to go quiet. Word would be passed to use the lighting system. As of right now, the Mexicans wouldn’t be able to monitor their transmissions. There wouldn’t be any.

As Marc left, Billy and a few others joined him, waiting for orders. Eagles liked to stay busy, but it was also easier to work than it was to dwell on what could happen if things went badly.

Marc didn't have much for them to do. Thanks to how things were already set up in their haven, all they needed to do after blowing the entrances was to ensure that they had security cameras and audio up. Kenn and a few of the lower Eagles were doing that now, using it as a training class. It had occurred to Angela they didn't have many dwellers who could handle explosives or wiring.

Marc had concurred that it was a future problem and approved the schedule. He wanted to go to the weather room to check on the cloud that was coming, but he had other things to take care of first. Because he was Safe Haven's boss, he would have to make himself accessible. After that, he would be free to do rounds and get updates, then sleep. With past administrators, information had been handled. They didn't have to search for updates and numbers. Marc hoped the tradition would continue with him, but if it didn't, he knew what to do. There might be moaning from people who still wanted Adrian or Angela in charge, but Marc didn't anticipate many problems. Now that they were in here together with no way out, people would obey the rules or occupy slots in the brig.

Thinking of the brig brought Chauncey to mind. Marc frowned again. He still wasn't certain what to do with that traitor or the one Adrian had brought

up. Common sense told him to use bullets and not waste tears over it. Morality said the man hadn't committed a crime that was against Safe Haven's code of conduct. Those laws were currently being redrafted by the council during their free time. They all wanted to make sure traitors were dealt with harshly from now on, and that there were strict rules for handling those issues. Marc didn't want public executions, but maybe for a little while, it might be necessary. The results from his demonstration at their gates had proven to him that the method was still effective, even if it was intolerable to him personally. He would do whatever it took to keep the peace here, to keep people safe and alive. Adrian and Angela didn't think he had reached that point yet, but they were wrong.

3

“What about them?” Billy and Marc stood a few yards from the hole where Adrian and David were camped. Neither of those guys knew Marc was here, but the guards did. They'd snapped to attention, proving they were alert enough to continue their shift.

“Leave them alone for now.” Marc's mind protested, but he didn't take it back. Angela's notes had made this choice.

*Leave them alone when you have the hostages.
It's covered.*

Billy didn't know how Adrian and a few others were going to keep the Mexican prisoners down in the hole from escaping or plotting, but he didn't question it. He assumed that come morning, different orders would be given. The camp had been told the guerillas were in a lower corridor that was blocked at both ends.

Billy pondered that for a minute and then followed Marc out of the area. If Marc buried this hole, the guerillas down there would die of suffocation or starvation. It was a neat, awful solution.

Marc let the understudy assume what he wanted. Marc didn't know what Angela meant by it being covered, but he didn't doubt that it would indeed be awful. With her and their enemies, it always was. She had no mercy. As he left, Marc fulfilled the last order on her notes concerning the Mexicans. "No guard."

Now Billy began to protest quietly, but Marc refused to rescind the order.

As the two men went to the main camp, followed by the confused guards, David and Adrian didn't wake up. They had both been up for more than twenty hours. They were beat.

Half an hour later, a tall, gangly man in a white coat approached the hole where the Mexicans were waking. He could hear their low murmurs of fear and anger at their situation.

Chris ignored the two sleeping military guys near the hole as he approached it. The vet dropped a pouch into the darkness. "I brought some food. Please don't tell on me!"

David, awake and now angry, tensed to grab the man.

Adrian, lids still closed, slid a hand over David's wrist to keep him from reacting.

Chore finished, Chris hurried back to the animal area, where he had placed his cot. He couldn't stand sleeping around the guards in the general living quarters. He never knew if he might talk in his sleep. That would be a problem.

David rose up on one arm when the vet was gone. "Why?"

Adrian didn't answer.

"Should we tell Marc they're awake?"

"Go to sleep. In the morning, keep your gob shut."

Confused, David listened to the eating and plotting below until exhaustion forced his lids shut against his will.

4

"Billy loves me. I don't understand why we can't tell people or spend time together."

The twelve-year-old's voice carried to the Eagles who were cleaning up the mess from extra hours in the reading and entertainment chambers by upset camp members. All conversations stopped so

the men could listen. The girls weren't supposed to be up here right now. No one was. The kids also weren't supposed to be alone. Someone would be in trouble for letting these girls give them the slip again. All four guys instantly thought of Shawn.

"You can't say that!" Missy hushed the older girl, pointing to the adults gathering trash from the cans that lined the passage. "They'll tell."

"Not if we don't have to." Shane stared at Missy. "But when you break the rules like this, it isn't going to help him, you know?"

The two girls glared back in response to the warning.

Shane firmed his shoulders. He was the highest level among this group. He had to do what was right. "I don't care who you are or what you can do. Why are you up here? Everyone heard Marc say the top floor was off limits until tomorrow."

Leeann reluctantly held up her hand. "I want to put this in his locker."

The sight of the handmade card brought grins and frowns in equal responses from the Eagles.

"Go on." Shane waved. "But this still gets put on the report. We don't break the rules for anyone."

"And that's why we can't ever talk in front of you! Shawn is nicer!" The little girl stuck out her tongue and shoved Leeann toward the training room where the lockers had been set into an impression in the stone.

Logan shook his head. "Someone should warn him about her."

Jake scowled. “She’s just a baby. Let her alone.”

Logan shrugged. “His problem, not mine.”

“Don’t think he wants it either.” Whitney tied the bag gently; his arm was only recently out of the cast. “Shawn is honoring a debt he doesn’t really owe.”

“Looks like rough duty.” Logan shook his head. “That one is trouble.”

Missy, who had excellent hearing, marched back out to the men. Her hand came up to her tiny hip. “Why don’t you like me?”

The males all flushed, going quiet. It wasn’t often they were scolded by a child.

“I didn’t do anything to you. Tara did. Stop blaming me. I’m only five!”

No one knew what to say.

“You do blame me. I knew it.” Missy’s facade became angrier instead of oozing tears like she could feel them expecting. “I’m almost sorry I saved you all, you know? This place sucks for me.”

She went back to the tunnel where Leeann was gaping in shock. “Come on. His locker is right in front, by the boss. Let them tell. The Ghost understands love even if they don’t.”

The men didn’t speak again until the girls were gone. As the pair disappeared haughtily down the ladder, Shane glanced at the book. “Someone record it. Put it down as...girls being girls.”

That brought amusement back to erase the tension. The four guys continued their labors, but the girl’s accusation stayed. Missy was right. The

people who had hurt them were gone, but the Eagles were still unhappy. It was showing.

Whitney sighed. “We need Angie to take control again.”

Jake nodded. “I think so too.”

“Would she approve of those two matches?”

“She already has, as far as I know...” Logan caught Shane’s hint. “You want to help them?”

Missy was obviously too young, but Leeann wanted Billy’s attention. That came from spending time together.

“Do we trust him to only cover her needs?” Shane frowned. “I don’t want to get her hurt.”

Jake snorted. “He’s the boy scout’s double now, remember? He’ll handle it like Marc did with Angie. The girl will probably still be a virgin when she’s twenty.”

“Good.” Shane shrugged. “If it’s time spent as friends, I have no objections. Anyone else?”

The rest of their shift went by as they discussed trading and rearranging future schedules to give the girl what she wanted. Billy’s preferences weren’t discussed. He’d cut his hair and begun attending the couples’ class right after Angela had killed Donner. They already knew what he wanted. They just needed to be sure he didn’t get it too soon.

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this.” Whitney was worrying as they went to the garbage floor. “It might cause trouble.”

Logan swung a leg over the ladder as he held onto the three bags of trash. “Might also be fun to watch, like Morgan is always saying.”

Shane chuckled. “I guess it was getting kinda boring down here.”

“Yep. Bet it changes soon.”

“Why do you say that?”

Logan pointed to where Cynthia was slipping into the showers that were usually used by the rookie Eagles. Kevin and Jeff had gone in there right before Shane and his crew had gone up to collect the trash.

Jake gestured the others to go on, feeling like he should hang around and see if Daryl was about to be cheated on.

“It’s none of our business.” Shane jerked his thumb. “Let’s go.”

Jake reluctantly did as the ranking man ordered. They would all hear about it later. The guard in the shower area down here was Allan. That guy couldn’t keep his mouth shut about anything.

Cynthia handed the bottle to Allan. If she kept him in whiskey, he didn’t care what she did. He had a thing for her too, so that definitely helped. Usually the bottle was a bribe to be allowed in to interview rookies before their excitement could wear off. Tonight, she’d come for something more dangerous.

Showering in stalls that were in the front of the drafty room, Kevin and Jeff spotted her at the same time.

“What did you do, man?” Jeff switched into fast rinse mode.

“Nothing. I mean, I don’t know of anything.” Kevin floundered. “Help me!”

Cynthia glowered at Jeff as she came to stand in front of Kevin’s stall.

Jeff shut the water off and stepped out to grab his towel. “You’re on your own, dude. See ya.”

“Hey!”

Jeff decided to get dressed near the guard booth and took his kit there. He would watch the show from a safe distance.

Kevin slapped the faucet, flipping off the water. “What?!”

Cynthia stepped closer. “I want you to leave.”

Kevin blanched at hearing her say it so cruelly, anger rising. “Yeah, I guess so. You don’t have to feel any guilt if I’m not here.”

“I don’t have anything to feel guilty about!”

“You and I were dating before the Donner plan.” Kevin pointed. “When it was over, you were with someone else and I was left holding a hard-on that I never got to use.”

Allan and Jeff stared, dumbfounded. Kevin never spoke to anyone that way.

Cynthia sneered. “Been holding it for a long time, have you?”

Kevin knew what she was doing, but his own unhappiness wouldn't allow him to cave. This time, he was going to win an argument. "I'll leave on one condition. You agree, meet that condition, and I'm gone the same day."

"What do you want?" she asked warily.

Kevin leaned on the stall to leer at her from hair to boots. "You."

Cynthia turned red, hand coming up to cover her stomach.

"Adrian's kid doesn't scare me, lady. Let him loose. As soon he does something, you'll be killed and so will the father."

"He doesn't understand that." Cynthia switched tactics. "We're not safe here."

Kevin didn't doubt that was true, but she only held power over him in one way now. "Two hours of your life. It's not that much to pay."

"How can you do this to me?" Cynthia was shocked. She'd never believed he was the type of man to do this.

Kevin came from the shower, hard for anyone to witness and not caring. His desires weren't a secret. "See, that's the problem with you, shark bitch. You believe we're all as ruthless as you." Kevin reached around her for a towel, making her flinch. "I'm already leaving in two days. I don't need your bribe or your body. Go away."

It was a powerful moment for Kevin and the witnesses.

For Cynthia, it was proof that she'd made the wrong choice. "I'm sorry."

Kevin nodded, wrapping the towel around his waist. "So am I. I could have had a loyal mate by now if not for you."

Kevin left her standing there, crying.

Jeff followed, not sparing the reporter a glance. He was firmly in Kevin's corner.

Humiliated, Cynthia stormed out with her heart on fire. She'd had it all and in the same night, she'd also lost it. Fate was a cruel bitch. Just when she'd believed her past was conquered, it had returned to hit her hard enough to take her breath away. People from the past weren't supposed to come back to haunt you. They were supposed to stay gone.

5

Marc was shaken from sleep by a light tapping. He opened his lids to find Billy in the cubby where he'd crashed. "What?"

Billy leaned down, whispering.

When he rose, Marc had already shut his eyes. "Good. Tell the camp they dug themselves free. We're on radio silence. They won't know otherwise."

"Some folks have their own radios." Billy tried not to get upset. "This won't go over well."

"They won't know."

"They will, and you'll be blamed."

"I already am, either way."

“This isn’t right.”

“Fine.” Marc yawned. “You tell them Angie gave the vet orders to kill off as many of our problems as he can before he gets caught. They may give him a medal.”

Billy scowled as he realized Marc was right. “So why not tell them the truth?”

“Because they’re trapped in here with a psycho that has orders to kill anyone who proves to be a problem. It’s a catch-22. Damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”

“So we’re not?”

“No, we’re not trapped.” Marc pulled the blanket up. “Tell the traitor to handle the cleanup. He’ll love it.”

Billy was happy again as he shut the door. The image of Adrian disposing of all those bodies was great. It was exactly the type of work a banished dog should be given.

6

Thanks to the excitement, Safe Haven was up early. It was barely dawn, but the mess was crowded as Marc made his way through the line to get a cup of coffee. He’d gotten three hours sleep and considered that good after everything that had happened. He was already looking forward to bedtime.

“Good morning, Boss.”

“Need anything, Boss?”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

Marc tried to ignore the pride, but it was impossible not to feel it. The power that this position gave a person was incredible. “Not right now, thanks.”

Marc was hit with the same question repeatedly as he joined the line to get his coffee, occasionally stopping to chat with someone to receive an update. While he mingled with the crowd, he listened to the people. The things he heard were better than what he had expected.

“We should be fine. This mountain is old. Been here longer than humans have.”

“Yep.”

“The Mexicans don’t know who they’re messing with,” another member added, shoveling eggs into his mouth.

There were still a few chickens laying and producing enough to keep offering them for breakfast as long as there was a wide variety of items for people to pick through. Not everyone wanted eggs, not everyone wanted oatmeal. It worked out well as a buffet style. So far, Safe Haven was satisfied with the meal choices despite being on rations.

Marc joined a small group of Eagles at the furthest table, wanting to blend into the crowd. It was easier to observe when he wasn’t the center of attention. Taking over leadership of Safe Haven wasn’t something to play around with. He needed to get organized. After that, it would be a simple

matter to put his personal choices in place. He was picking people who were trustworthy and loyal, worthy of the positions that he would gift to them.

Sitting not far away, Jennifer nursed her hot chocolate and pondered Marc's thoughts. Didn't he realize that was the same mentality that Adrian had shared with Angela to bring them all to this chaos? *Why do all of Safe Haven's leaders have to learn things the hard way?* It wasn't like they set out to be corrupt, but they became that way every time. Jennifer wondered if it was because they spent too much time fighting who they were and what needed to be done.

Jennifer thought of Kyle and his words to her when he'd come to bed last night.

I want to wait, Jenny. Our wedding night will be beautiful.

She'd been tired and relieved. Now, she was full of love and respect for him. She really did have the best one here.

Jennifer scanned the eating masses, much as Marc was doing. For some reason she believed it was important for her to keep track of what was going through his mind. She wasn't stalking him, though she certainly didn't trust him yet. It was an instinct that said she could be useful if she monitored the things that he wasn't able to say.

Marc wasn't certain why Jennifer was keeping track of him. He assumed that she was doing her duties as the Enforcer in Safe Haven. He didn't mind. He didn't have things to hide, unlike their

former leaders. He had morals and ethics. He would run Safe Haven by those values.

Taking advantage of an opportunity, Marc motioned to the couple who had just entered the mess.

Charlie guided Tracy toward the table where his dad wanted him, not caring why he was being asked to distract Jennifer. It worked out well with his plans. Tracy needed to get back into regular camp life. She wasn't spending enough time with other people and he knew that wasn't good for her. He planned to encourage her to spend time away from him now, to see if she was healing, and if she was ready for duty.

Marc sighed. *Not even close, kid.*

"I wanted to ask if--"

"No." Jennifer flushed as she realized she'd overstepped.

Charlie scowled when Marc didn't override Jennifer's choice. "Why not?"

Jennifer looked up as the couple sat down, noticing the relief on Tracy's profile. "Because she's suicidal, like Angela. How did you miss that?"

Tracy winced.

Marc tensed.

"Not anymore." Charlie patted Tracy's tense shoulder. "She's good."

Jennifer's brows drew together. "She'll blow her brains out if you give her a gun."

That's enough. Marc's handsome face didn't reveal his displeasure. Angela's mental condition was now common knowledge.

"I thought they knew." Jennifer dropped her chin. She would have to find a way to monitor people, but not let them know about it.

With Jennifer subdued, Marc returned to his observations of the camp. They had new inhabitants who needed to adjust, on top of those who were already members and having trouble adjusting to being underground. Then there were the nosey ones who wanted to know exactly what had happened with the train people. Those folks were eager to read the latest edition of Cynthia's newspaper for details the guards wouldn't give them. The paper was due out in a few days, but Cynthia wasn't in the mess working on it like she had been daily until now. She was avoiding Kevin.

That man, with Jeff, was currently occupying the rear table with Zack and a few others. Mostly Eagles, the group was spreading their mirth across the room, telling the camp members there was nothing to be afraid of, that Marc, Angela, and Adrian had it covered.

Marc hoped that was true. If Angela's plan for the Mexicans failed, if there was a problem inside the mountain where they needed to get out quickly, all the plans might come crashing down and everyone could be lost. It was a relief to know that the plans were solid. It was also a terrible weight to carry. He scanned their army.

Near the table with the Eagles, Doug and Allan were sitting across from the boys who had run away. The brothers looked like they'd been thoroughly scolded. They were also relieved to be back in the warm embrace of Safe Haven. Their hours alone in the tunnels had been a reminder that any world was a hard, cold place for kids without a protector. The other children had already eaten and were back in the living quarters, being scolded by the den mothers. Hilda was supervising it, as Peggy wasn't in any condition to. Becky choosing to leave Safe Haven without saying goodbye was a hard blow for her to accept. Marc didn't expect to hear anything else about women being in control. Peggy would spend the next weeks and months evaluating her choices as a mother and coming up short.

At the table next to Marc, Theo and Debra were sharing a meal; both of them were recovered enough that they'd been released from the medical bay. They had injuries people stared at, but everyone was happy to have a new hero in their midst. If not for having a cast, Debra would have already earned a slot to try out for the Eagles. There was still talk about whether or not she was eligible. No one wanted to bother a boss with an unimportant question during a situation like this, but Marc was positive someone would gather the nerve eventually. Eagles always wanted to know their hierarchy.

Marc tensed as Julia and Cody came through the passage, followed by two guards who were unhappy

to have the duty. Marc hoped she knew better than to join him at this table. Not only was she not a member of Safe Haven, even if she had been, her rank would be so low that it would have been an insult to the other Eagles who knew better than to approach the table before they achieved a level of rank that was respectful. Until then, all requests went through their team leaders or den mothers. The military system Adrian had insisted on kept order. It succeeded as long as people followed the rules.

Marc winced inwardly as a tray slammed down on the table in front of him.

“Do you know what they expect me to do here?!”

“Work?” Marc lifted a sarcastic brow. “Be honest?”

His open bitterness lent more truth to the boy’s story that his mom had stolen him from his dad.

Julia ignored his anger. “They want me to put him in classes. They want me to teach Cody how to use his gifts. Are they crazy?”

Marc didn’t waste sympathy on her. “The boy will be taught to control himself or he won’t be allowed to stay here. The only way that can happen is if he attends the classes with the other kids that are like him. You are *not* allowed to interfere.”

Julia wanted to protest, but a group of Eagles approached the table, forcing her over.

Cody didn’t like being ignored; he squirmed out of his mother’s hand and returned to Marc. He stood there silently, waiting to be acknowledged.

Marc waved at the empty bench. “You can stay.”

Julia was forced to leave her son.

The guard trailed the older brunette back to the temporary cot she had been assigned. When she wasn’t carrying out duties or chores, Julia was supposed to stay in the living space where Hilda and the other den mothers could keep track of her.

Cody sat quietly while Marc talked to the Eagles about security shifts for the rest of the week. Safe Haven already had a great routine. There was only a few things he was going to adjust and that was mostly how leadership handled issues. A moral society had to have a moral leader. Without that, everyone was screwed.

Marc wondered what the child was thinking, but he didn’t dig into Cody’s mind again as he’d done in the tunnel on the way up here. He would respect the boy’s privacy, but he would have to develop a way to deal with the strange kid. Cody was obviously different and Marc wasn’t sure how to handle him. He didn’t have instant love for the missing child, and he was now experiencing guilt over that, but it was just like sitting next to someone else’s kid. He would be polite and he would care for the boy, but he didn’t feel like it was his son, not the way he did about Charlie.

“Mom told me you would react that way. She said it’s because we don’t know each other.” Cody peered at his father through the same shaggy locks.

“Do you want to get to know me? I can leave you alone.”

“Easy there.” Marc automatically offered comfort. “This is new for me and it’s new for you. We will adjust. At some point, the bond of family will show up. It’s the normal course of events. We have to be patient, but we also have to obey the rules. We never lie to each other. No matter what it is, no matter how hard it might be to talk about, we *never* lie.”

Cody blew out a relieved sigh. “I have no problem with that. I don’t like it when mom lies. It causes trouble.”

Marc thought of the coming argument with Angela over the child. “Ain’t that the truth.”

The two males shared a smile, unintentionally sending a wave of positive energy across the mess that reminded everyone of Adrian. Angela didn’t have the same effect. Her waves of energy made people want to accomplish things. Adrian’s energy provided the peace and calm of home. Marc’s was a combination of both, depending upon the situation. Right now, he didn’t expect much from anyone except for them to continue their daily business as if he wasn’t watching and observing. Later, when he was ready to make changes, things might get a little tense. Marc still didn’t anticipate trouble. These people were going through an apocalypse. Surely, they could do the right thing.

Marc remembered assuming the same thing about Angela before she’d made the choices that

had stolen all the joy from their lives. He had never believed she would fall as far as she had. He'd often suspected that she would have been an activist or someone who fought for the rights of others even when the odds were unwinnable. He had never believed she would order a death, let alone do it herself. It was amazing and awful, how a person could change depending upon what life shoved them through. Some people handled changes well. They seemed unbreakable, while others collapsed at the first sign of pressure, but not Angie. She thrived during the process. It was scary.

Marc noticed that Cody didn't have anything to eat or drink. He hooked a thumb toward the food line. "Are you hungry?"

Cody shrugged, shy. He didn't know these people. It was scary.

Marc melted. "Come on. Let's get you something to eat."

Marc was right about the attention it drew as he took the boy's hand and led him to the line. It sounded like all conversation ceased.

Stressing, Cody immediately put his thumb in his mouth and began sucking.

"That's bad for your teeth."

Cody bobbed, not removing the thumb. "Mama says da same fing."

"You're also too old to suck on your thumb."

Cody nodded again, slowly putting his hand down. "She says that too."

Marc sat two cups and plates onto the tray. “Then why do you keep doing it?”

Cody regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, trying to decide if he could trust this new stranger in his life. He leaned in. “Because I get scared.”

Marc felt it then, the bond and the thick fear that implied Cody needed to be protected from his mother. He put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about that now.”

Cody stared up in fearful admiration. “You promise you won’t leave us?”

“I won’t leave *you*. Your mother will have to make her own deals. She’s done bad things to me.”

“She tried to hide it. I didn’t know until a few months ago. I’m sorry she did that to you.”

Marc’s forgiveness snapped into place for the boy, who didn’t deserve his anger. He knelt down to give the child a quick hug. “Not your fault. You’re safe now. You’re here with me and that’s all that matters.”

Angela stopped in the mess entrance to lean against the cold stone, unobserved except for her escort, her suicide watch. Observing Marc with the young boy was heartwarming.

It was also heartbreaking.

Angela slowly went toward the medical bay, and then detoured to where Adrian had found her earlier. She suspected it would become a favorite location.

Chapter Twenty-Three
Good And Bad

1

“So, what are we doing today, Boss?” David and Adrian were enjoying a hot shower on the top floor among the Eagles. He was hoping to cut through some of the tension. The other men in the shower weren’t exactly happy about them being here, but no one had protested yet. The Eagles were busy casting harsh glares at two soldiers from Tonya’s captivity who were in stalls near the front guard booth. At that moment, it was easier to overlook Adrian’s pale, freshly scarred body for the healthy men who would be able to compete with them for rewards and women. David knew there was going to be trouble either way. The Safe Haven fighters didn’t like living with their enemies.

Steam floated through the stone space as two dozen stalls ran at the same time, creating a sauna effect that would normally have been soothing to the two men. David wasn’t enjoying it.

“They’ll adjust.” Adrian scrubbed his dirty hair into a thick lather. “She’ll handle it.”

David frowned, keeping his voice low. “Is she capable of handling anything right now?”

Adrian refused to answer that.

David sighed. “So, today?”

“Today, we walk. Marc wants a complete evaluation of the cave and all security. We’ll be on rounds of these tunnels all day.”

David was both relieved and nervous over the plan. It meant Adrian was being put to work and that was good, but it also meant his boss would be around all the people who hated him and wanted him gone. David didn’t believe that was a good idea, but it was a waste of time to tell Adrian to be low-key about it. The former leader had been chomping at the bit to get in here. He wasn’t going to hide.

“No, I’m not.” Adrian rinsed water from his face. “I’m going to follow my orders to the letter. I expect you to do the same.”

“Just as long as they keep their hands to themselves.” David wasn’t going to let anyone abuse Adrian.

“I appreciate that loyalty. But I’ve earned a lot of this. Don’t get involved or they’ll blame you.”

David wasn’t worried about blame. He cared for Adrian’s health. The former ruler had had a heart attack, been shot and beaten, and then forced to live on the outskirts of the camp he’d built like a wild animal. He’d been punished enough.

Warmed by the allegiance, Adrian toweled off quickly, eager to be busy. “Five minutes. Meet me in the mess.”

Adrian wrapped his towel around his waist and went to the locker he’d been assigned. He calmly pulled the banana peel from the grate and opened it.

He didn't react to the written message on the interior: *Die, traitor!*

David glowered at the snickering Eagles in the corner stalls, but they ignored him. They knew he was powerless here.

Whistling happily, Adrian tugged up his jeans, flashing his bare cheek toward the corner.

The Eagles there scowled as they got the message. *Kiss my ass.*

David laughed out loud, temper soothed. He hadn't been with Adrian long enough to believe the man could take what was dished out to him. This loyalty made the need to protect Adrian overwhelming whenever there was a threat.

Adrian strolled from the shower with his towel around bare shoulders, carrying his kit, leaving the wash area before tempers could flare. He was a catalyst. *I'm not going to let one of you young shitheads aggravate the boss and force him to banish me again. I see your tricks coming and in a minute, I'll raise you a blast of light that'll remind you who gave you this new life. It certainly wasn't Marcus Brady.*

Gathering his joy, Adrian pulled on his shirt against the chill. It pleased him that only his damp skin made that necessary. Heat was flowing nicely, keeping the top three levels of the cave at an even, comfortable temperature.

Adrian moved through the corridor as if people weren't staring and pointing, grumbling. That would change once he was contributing again. After

that, he would be ignored. Adrian had no delusions about what his future now held with these people. Many of them would never forgive him and even those who did would never trust him again.

“Momma warned me there’d be days like this...” he sang. She really had and he’d still agreed. The price was worth the goal. “Anything for you,” he whispered, letting his light glow for the first time in the cave.

The bubble around the mountain lit up vividly. It sank down into the stone to surround the survivors with care and kindness that was shadowed by a fierce rage promising to shelter them in any time of need. Their shepherd had returned.

2

“I hate it now, when he does that.” Jeff thrust his kit into the floorboard and slammed the door. “Hurry up, will ya?”

Standing by the passenger seat, Kevin was still caught in the glow. Adrian’s magic was light and warmth, pleasure and compassion. It was amazing.

“Are you staying?” Jeff glared. “Caught the fever again?”

Kevin only needed to reflect on what all that would entail, how hard he would have to work to earn his way back up through the ranks. “No. I’m set.”

Jeff and Kevin were at the top of the camp, near the new gate Greg, Daryl, and their crew had almost

finished. Their Rover was loaded and they were dressed to travel. Goodbyes, the few they'd given, had been delivered last night.

Jeff slid into the icy seat, eager to drive through the avalanche aftermath. A very narrow ledge hadn't been hard to clear once they'd gotten approval to shove abandoned and damaged cars over the edge. They'd finished that an hour ago and decided to blow this popsicle stand before things melted. They would be the last people to use this route for a long time. As soon as they were gone, Greg and his crew were going to blow this street so travel here could only be on foot, discouraging the Mexicans from advancing further. Everyone was assuming the road was already closed anyway because no new refugees had come yet. Marc wanted to make that a reality.

Jeff scanned the surroundings. It looked like half of the mountain had come down on their doorstep. The drifts of snow were higher than the Range Rover he'd chosen from among the available vehicles. The gate had obviously been destroyed while being mobbed by refugees. It bothered Jeff to know the bodies would remain buried. He wanted them piked on the new gate, as Marc had done before. Those invaders had taken a place of freedom and liberty and changed it into an Orwellian, camera-infested zone where every moment had to be under scrutiny to protect leadership from assassins. It was sad to have their dreams shattered this way.

Kevin got in and shut the door, shuddering at the wind. “Heat up, okay?”

Jeff obligingly increased the warmth coming from the vents. “Getting off this mountain might be fun or it might be deadly. You sure?”

Kevin forced the excitement. “You know it!”

Jeff shifted into drive and inched through the open gate.

Neither of them waved at the crew, though the crew did pause to wave at them. The crew understood the urge to roam, but most of them were still hoping Jeff and Kevin would change their minds.

Not gonna happen. Jeff braced for the first deep drift. *Without leaders who can work together, you're all gonna die in there. I won't be a part of that in any way.* Jeff eased on the gas.

3

“He’s gone?”

Daryl nodded, going from cold to concern. He dropped his gear near the washroom, wincing at how wet his socks were. He needed to get warmed up and into dry clothes. He’d come in to do that and run into Cynthia near the ladder.

Daryl didn’t care for her wild appearance. Her jeans and blue button down shirt didn’t appear to have been washed or changed recently and a lace of her boots was undone, but it was her dazed, lost expression that had made him pause.

“Noise coming,” the radio cracked.

Daryl flipped it off, assuming Marc had given permission for the one-time break from radio silence.

“I can’t believe he didn’t say goodbye.” Cynthia was stunned. Kevin was gone.

“Why does that surprise you?”

The reporter heard Daryl’s jealousy, but it didn’t penetrate. Kevin had abandoned her. *I told him that I’m in danger and he left me here.*

You deserve this for what you did to Matt, her mind accused. Killer.

The ground rattled above them as if to reinforce her belief, showering her with dust from the levels above.

Cynthia stumbled toward the washroom, not responding to Daryl’s questions. The wash spaces were on every floor and mostly identical. There was a row of deep sinks, a guard booth, and shower stalls. In these small crevices, there wasn’t much room for anything more. Cynthia chose the smallest one, slamming the door shut.

Daryl let her go, too busy to spend real time on it. Marc had restarted a tentative training schedule and Daryl, along with the other senior men, had classes to teach.

Daryl detoured toward the couples’ area, realizing he’d forgotten his notebook. There hadn’t been a reason to carry training notes if they weren’t in training, so he’d gotten out of the habit.

As Daryl entered the living chamber, he saw a tense guard watching three men in the rear from his booth. No chatter came from camp members around them who were in various stages of living.

Nathan, the sentry on duty, spotted Daryl in relief. He wasn't certain how to handle these personal drama situations. Pamela usually did it when they had this shift together, but she was in the far bed with female trouble. He hadn't asked what kind.

Sighing, Daryl joined the possible COPs scene in progress. He hated to get involved. He was fine with Dale and he liked Ray. Dennis was a stranger.

Daryl scanned the room and the new man as a tense silence fell over the trio at his arrival. Dennis's bright clothes fit in perfectly with the colorful curtains and blankets that members had chosen for their forts, their privacy. Even the sheets and pillowcases were shaded, making the space appear a bit like a carnival to Daryl.

"Ray, Dale." He looked at the new man, hating the stinging in his toes as they warmed against damp socks. "Dennis, is it?"

Dennis flashed a huge grin. "Cool. You've heard of me."

Daryl frowned. "None of it was good. Why don't you run along?"

Dennis's mirth vanished under a hurt profile. "What? Dale and I were just hugging. We've been through some rough shit since the war."

Daryl pointed toward the exit. “Don’t you have a job?”

Dennis grinned again as he left. “I traded my shift for my dessert. People love Li’s pies.”

Daryl glanced at Ray, who had his hands shoved into the pockets of his Eagle jacket. Daryl saw embarrassment and dislike, but none of the wild rage that usually accompanied a mistaken moment. Ray had clearly witnessed something that made him think Dale was cheating on him and he’d confronted his partner, as anyone else would have done.

Daryl knelt down in front of Dale, who was sporting a split lip. Dale, unlike Dennis, had chosen to stick with browns and greens for his ensemble, but the colors weren’t flattering. *They should switch. Dale’s skin is too pale for brown.*

Around the men, the camp and Eagles went about their rituals and schedules, but all of them were listening. Daryl was sure the story would spread before the conversation was even finished. “Who hit you?”

“One of the shower babies didn’t like me being in there. Dennis helped me, brought me here.” He gazed up at Ray with fear and anger warring. “Why are you so mean to me?”

Trapped, Ray spun away from the cots and stomped to the exit. He wasn’t capable of rational thought right now, let alone rational discourse.

Daryl forced himself to get involved even though he didn’t want to. “Dale? Are you cheating on Ray?”

The pale man flinched. "I'm not. I won't."

"But you want to..."

Dale didn't answer.

Daryl patted Dale's delicate wrist. "I remember when you first came to Safe Haven. Do you?"

Dale nodded, not looking up or speaking. He was waiting for more abuse.

"Do you recall what Adrian told you that night after we rescued your group? Not Ray or the others, but you?"

Dale sniffed. "He said to be brave and I can be happy."

"Do you know what he meant yet?"

Dale shook his head, tears coming. "I've tried to, but I'm not like you guys!"

Daryl patted him again. "He meant moments like these, Dale. If you're not happy with Ray, tell him. Be brave and make the choices that are right for you."

"But he'll be so hurt!" Dale whispered in horror. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

Dale's tears overflowed; Daryl hugged him awkwardly, telling himself he would have done this for anyone in the camp.

"I'm so sorry!"

Daryl glanced over Dale's shoulder to find Ray standing in the tunnel entrance. When Ray raised a sad brow, Daryl didn't reply. It was up to Dale to do the right thing. Daryl set Dale back. "You have every right to be happy. Just be sure what will accomplish that, you know? We need all of our

members, including you, to try their best. Do the right thing and the rest will work itself out, okay?”

Dale sniffed again. “I’ll try.”

“Good.” Daryl rose, grunting as both knees popped. “Oh, Dale?”

“Yes?”

“Stay away from Dennis until you make up your mind. If Ray kills him over you, I’m the one who’ll have to hang my friend. Please don’t let it come to that.”

Daryl left him with that warning, hoping he’d handled things correctly. They really didn’t need any more shootouts in camp. The people were twitchy enough already over having a Mexican army camped on their doorstep. They didn’t need another reason to stampede.

Kenn watched from the rear corner of the living quarters where he was checking the wiring, a little concerned. Ray had promised not to tell anyone that his power had finally presented, but Kenn wasn’t certain the firefighter would keep his word while he was upset. Now that he and Dale were having trouble, Ray would need a friend to talk to and spill his guts.

Kenn turned toward the tunnels, mind once again a ball of confusion. He hadn’t minded the beer and conversation with Ray before, but now, it would be strictly for nefarious purpose and Kenn didn’t think he could withstand the fall from grace this time. It was a long way down.

“The numbers are going up rapidly. Well above danger levels.”

Marc had stopped by for a report, but he hadn't expected to see levels increasing on the strips. The personal badges were stuck to the wall under the air vents and to the under edge of a ledge near the camera outside. The numbers in here were the same as they had been yesterday, but the outer numbers had almost doubled.

“It rained last night.” Samantha tried to remain emotionless as she updated him. “Just a little, but it was enough to bring down more of the radioactive debris. They're being exposed as we speak.”

He saw the clipboards had been switched to the hourly monitoring sheets instead of the daily copies they'd begun with. They would go to hourly if the levels down here began to rise. “When?”

“It's individual, so I can't determine it to the minute, but I would guess we'll start seeing signs in the next couple of days.”

“What kind of signs?”

This cluttered weather chamber was the base of their operations with the Mexicans, but most people wouldn't be able to tell that from getting a peek. They'd put the vents up high, lining the wall below them with tape that would be labeled and contain nametags a short time from now.

“No energy, bleeding from orifices, hair loss, sores.”

“And it gets bad from there, right?”

“Yeah. It’ll be a hell of a cleanup if we’re spared.”

Marc had already covered that in his notes, but he didn’t tell her that he’d chosen to leave it to nature. There were some details people didn’t need to know. Samantha would watch them die on camera. That was enough guilt and horror to carry and Marc was aware of the weight. Samantha wasn’t showing yet. Most of the females weren’t, but Samantha also wasn’t getting much exercise or sleep while doing this. Marc was glad it would only be for a couple more weeks, but he wished he had more Eagles so he could give her a break from this.

Samantha tried to smile. “I’m good. Honest.”

Marc had to take her word for it. She was needed here.

“Li’s still adding the potassium iodine like John did?”

Marc nodded. It had been strong enough to taste through the improvised chili the cook had made last night. “We’re easing it down, though, waiting to see if we need it. There’s only so much and there have never been tests to determine if prolonged use diminishes effectiveness.”

“So we could make ourselves immune to the iodine, like an antibiotic?”

“We don’t know. Test results were limited even before the war on anything connected to a military weapon or program.”

“I’d forgotten where all of this came from. What are we doing? Are we like them?”

Marc left without answering. Unlike Adrian, Marc refused to lie and say they had no choice. There was always a choice. They could have warned the Mexicans. They knew the army waiting for them to emerge had little experience in nuclear meltdowns. They’d chosen not to because in the end those men had to die anyway. Making this choice would save their own camp, their own troops. It hadn’t been an easy choice, but it had been the one that gave them a future.

5

“He shouldn’t be here.”

“You don’t get to make that choice.”

“Yes, I do. We voted.”

“The boss has the final say. We need him.”

“So she says.”

“So all of them say or he’d be dead by now. Let it go. We have bigger problems.”

Adrian refused to make eye contact with the tables of Eagles at the mess. He’d come in after breakfast was typically over, but there were still four dozen men and women enjoying a lingering meal.

He took a cup of coffee and went to a rear table that had no one around it. He wanted to make it clear that he didn't believe he'd been forgiven or that he was a full member again. He much preferred David's notion of a dangerous guard dog that couldn't be trusted not to bite if you were stupid enough to extend your hand. It suited him.

Adrian was thrilled with the mess. Angela had taken his advice in the notebooks and placed the tables in the center, with the lunch counters and drink lines along the walls. As a result, the warmth from the counters negated the need for the heating vents to blow in here as strongly, which also cut down on foreign objects winding up in their food from swirling through the air. It gave the room a community-meeting mood. He was willing to bet Eagles on downtime spent many hours at these tables, contemplating their future.

The mess returned to the previous levels of noise and chatter, but the people continued to stare and glare in Adrian's direction.

Adrian ignored them. They had to get used to seeing him around again before he could ask them to recognize who he was now.

And who are you? his demon questioned sarcastically. *Besides trouble for all of them?*

Adrian sighed, clamping down on his guilt. *I'm not that person now. Go away.*

Who is that?

At a nearby table, Kyle shifted his arm so the baby could see Adrian. *Our first leader.*

Why do they love him and hate him? The infant batted at the air with sticky fingers.

Kyle continued wiping away the spit from her neck and arm. *Because he's both good and bad.*

Autumn gurgled. *Like me.*

Kyle frowned. *Why do you think that?*

Mommy cries when she holds me. I must be a bad girl.

Kyle stifled a moan. This ghost would never leave them. *Your mommy adores you. She cries over other things, not you.*

Good. Love mommy.

Me too, Squirt. Kyle captured the fingers that needed to be cleaned, gently wiping them.

Autumn couldn't view very far with her infant sight. She squirmed unhappily, grunting.

What, Honey?

Wanna see!

Kyle realized what she wanted and sighed, dropping the used wipes into the basket hanging from her pumpkin seat. "Just for a minute and then you have to get a nap."

Autumn let out a happy sound that Kyle couldn't name. It sank into his heart and made him content. *Nice. Your mom does that to me too.*

Adrian glanced up as a shadow fell over the table.

"This is Autumn. She wanted to meet you."

Adrian grinned at the baby. “Hi. You sure got big since the last time I saw you. Growing quick.”

Not quick enough. A cloud came over the child’s perfectly pink little cheeks. *Stuck.*

Adrian sympathized. He extended his arm, not certain if Kyle would allow it.

Kyle almost didn’t. If not for Autumn’s eagerness, he wouldn’t have.

Please, Daddy?

Kyle resignedly handed the baby to his former mentor. *She’s gonna twist me up like that for the next sixty years or so.*

Adrian settled the cute girl into the crook of his arm, smiling down at her. *How old are you?*

Three months next week!

Adrian got the sense that she was struggling to force her fingers to hold up that many. *Can you count?*

Up to twenty. Daddy taught me!

Adrian gave Kyle a nod of approval. *That’s good. Try hard to learn everything you can during this period. The smarter you are when you get control of your body, the better.*

Why?

Because you’re the future, Sweetheart. You may lead these people after your mom. Adrian glanced up at Kyle, who was frowning. *Your dad won’t like it, but you have a big future.*

Autumn’s little face wrinkled up. *Sleepy.*

Adrian carefully stood up to return the child. *Come talk with me again. I’m not all bad.*

Autumn cooed. *Oh, yeah!*

Adrian grimaced as the diaper against his arm grew warm and heavy. A terrible odor rose to assault him. *Wow, kid. Just, wow.*

Autumn gurgled happily.

Kyle took her back, chuckling. “That’s my girl.”

Adrian found his arm dry, but sniffed it anyway. He recoiled in shocked offense at the stench. “What the hell are they feeding that kid?”

David entered the mess and spotted Adrian. When he saw that his mentor only had a cup of coffee, that’s all he took from the empty line as well. He didn’t speak to anyone, but he nodded at the small table of soldiers in the opposite corner who were also getting the banished treatment despite being taken into the Eagles. He joined Adrian, taking his notebook out.

Around the mess, those who’d served with Adrian scowled at the sight. The sense of loss, of not being the one to do that with him, was keen.

Adrian knew. He gestured toward the exit. “We’ll do it while we walk.”

David followed without argument, but he knew why Adrian was leaving and it bothered him.

It also bothered a few of the other members in the mess, but they knew better than to defend Adrian. He had to earn that first.

“Make it count. We all have the urge to start popping off rounds, but you have to repeat it to yourself until you no longer need it. *Make it count.*”

The Eagles reloaded their weapons, glad of the ear protection and the thicker barrier on this room. If not for that, their hearing would be damaged and the camp might panic. The sound of gunshots in a cave was awful.

Outside, Adrian and David waited for a pause in the noise. They knew better than to just walk on in, but a sign had been posted on the door for those who didn't.

David frowned, nose wrinkling. He kept catching a rough smell, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Adrian knocked. “Coming in!”

David followed him, sniffing as the odor increased and then vanished. Maybe there was a sewage problem.

The sweaty, uniformed Eagles glowered at the interruption, telling David to stay back, that he would never be one of them because of who he was loyal to. David mourned the training, not the friendships and bonding. He'd had that both before and after the war with his fellow soldiers. That wasn't what he was searching for now.

This training space had four-foot thick concrete barriers in the rear and a long distance between the shooters and the targets. Adrian still saw places where bullets had chipped shelves and ledges, and had to force himself not to comment on it. This was

the longest chamber. If there had been a safer place to put their range, Angela would have chosen it.

Marc motioned the class to holster their arms. “He has a signup sheet for anyone who wants to kick up their training. Five minute break.”

Marc refused to give it more support than that. If Adrian wanted students, he would have to gather them himself.

Adrian set the clipboard, one of many that he’d made for today, onto an empty weight bench. “Think you can kick my ass? Come prove it.” Adrian twisted neatly on his heel and left the room.

Marc’s eyes narrowed. *Damn! Now I want to take the class.* He wasn’t surprised when half of the students went over and put their names on the sheet while boasting. He also wasn’t upset. These men needed to know how to defend themselves and this camp. Adrian deserved to be beat on. It was a good match.

“Was that wise?” David stayed close as they walked to the ladder for the next level.

Adrian shrugged. “I have to get them there before I can get through to them.”

“Fair enough. What’s next?”

“Let’s start at the bottom and work our way up.” Adrian swung onto the ladder. “I have more fans down there.”

David drew back from the stench now rising from the hole. *It’s a wonder the ladder doesn’t melt!*

He tried not to gag. *We must be in the direct breeze of the sewer right here.*

David understood Adrian's joke about having friends down here as soon as he saw Cynthia prowling the bottom cavern, muttering and twitching. Her hair was wild, clothes wrinkled and dirty, and her face wasn't painted.

"Should we tell someone about that?" David followed Adrian into the nearby waste sector.

"No. They'll know soon enough, if they don't already. I can't interfere."

"Even though it's your kid?"

"Especially because of that."

"But it's your kin."

Adrian sighed, voice lowering. "It's pure evil. Safe Haven can't handle it."

"Could you?"

Adrian considered it again and came to the same conclusion. He sighed. "I don't believe so. Conceptions during bloodlust are dangerous. We never meant to create a life at that moment."

David understood as much as he could, but he still didn't agree. *A baby can't be evil... Can it?*

7

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Julia leapt to her feet as Jennifer's harsh words rang through the cell.

Jennifer stormed into the detention center, angry to discover Marc's ex around their prisoner. "I asked you a question. What are you doing here?"

"I got lost. I was —"

"That's not gonna fly!" Jennifer grabbed Julia by the arm and dragged the older woman toward the door with a strength that surprised her. "I don't know who the guard is on the detention center, but you just lost them their place in the Eagles. They won't thank you for that. If I were you, I'd stay in the living quarters until I was given permission to leave. You've got one more mistake and then Marc will throw you out to the Mexicans!"

Jennifer dragged her into the corridor as Eagles came from every direction.

"Who are you?"

"Who goes there?"

"What are you doing in there?"

"Where's the guard on the detention center?"

Julia kept her hands in the pockets of her jean jacket, fists clenched to keep from resisting. Her survival had always depended on fighting back, but she already knew that wouldn't succeed here. If she attacked this girl, Marc would throw her in the brig for the duration of her stay.

Jennifer waited for the guards to come through the darkness, braced against the coming flashlight glare. The lack of light in this tunnel was what had drawn her in the first place. "It's Jennifer."

Marc and Billy came through the small crowd of Eagles, neither of them missing the way Jennifer's hand was clenched around Julia's arm.

"Let's step inside, shall we?" Billy waved, sounding much like his mentor.

"No." Marc waved Jennifer on. "We get the report later. If it was an emergency she would have been shouting for us." Marc and Billy disappeared down the corridor as the crowd broke up.

Jennifer shoved Julia toward the living quarters.

Julia allowed the teenager to get away with the rough handling, but inside she was secretly reveling in the information that she had learned from Chauncey. The Keeper had welcomed her with a mental invitation that would have been impossible to resist. Once she unscrewed the bulb from the tunnel, it had been easy to distract the guard and send him for a replacement while everyone else was asleep and crews were at skeleton levels. Once Chauncey began talking, she had learned a number of things that could be useful once she figured out how to use them to her advantage. Marc was the boss here and Angela was the power, but the information Julia had just learned could change everything.

Julia winced as Jennifer's step quickened, grip tightening. Julia dug in her boots, trying to stop them, but the teenager had more strength. Julia was forced to go where Jennifer wanted. *For now.*

Chapter Twenty-Four
Insanity Runs Deep

1
The Quest Chronicles
Cynthia Quest Reporting
October 13th

Page 1

**Should Safe Haven have a Non-Descendant
Ruler?**

Slaughters, planned mass murders, and another foreign invasion. Nothing has changed since Angela's mad plan to defeat the government. Nothing has changed since she let hundreds of terrified refugees die in an avalanche. Nothing has changed since the slaughter at the train station. Now, we have a foreign army dying around us. What's next? Burning people to please the spirits? How can Safe Haven keep espousing morals while killing without consideration? We can't, folks.

**Should Safe Haven have a non-descendant
leader?**

I obviously think so, but I was curious about how the rest of this refugee camp felt. I spent the last week interviewing the camp members who have

been hurt the most by our fearless rulers. Here are some of their words, uncensored.

Tracy: I don't know. I mean, they see things before they happen and protect us.

Cynthia: You weren't protected.

Tracy: I'm lucky to be alive. I was protected.

Cynthia: So you like having a magic user in control of your life, deciding it was okay for you to be raped and beaten?

Tracy: I didn't say I was okay with it.

Cynthia: So you're not.

Tracy: I'm done talking to you.

Cynthia: How do you feel about having descendants running this camp?

Zack: I don't care who it is as long as they do a good job. So far, Marc is fine.

Cynthia: Marc isn't really the leader here and you know that.

Zack: Yes, he is.

Cynthia: You sound protective.

Zack: People keep trying to kill our leaders. We have to defend them.

Cynthia: With your life, even when they murder innocent people to achieve their goals?

Zack: Since their goals are to keep us alive, yes. Our leaders need us to do these things because no one else will.

Candy: I would vote for a non-descendant leader, as long as they were strong enough to keep us all safe.

Cynthia: What about our current and former rulers? Are you happy with the job they've done?

Candy: Happy? You're kidding, right? I lost my love, my heart. I'll never be happy again.

Cynthia: Who do you believe should be in charge?

Peggy: I don't make those choices.

Cynthia: You do, actually, every time you vote.

Peggy: Marc wasn't voted in. The title was passed to him, like with Angela.

Cynthia: Yes, these descendants appear determined to keep the crown in the family. Do you think there should be a new rule about that?

Peggy: Yes, but not the kind you mean. I believe women should be the only ones allowed. I don't care if they have gifts. I want them to be female.

Cynthia: Well, that'll come as a surprise to some of the camp. Can you tell me why you feel that way?

Peggy: Under Angela's leadership, I felt safe. I can't say that anymore and I never felt that way while the traitor was leading us. I want Angela back and after her, who knows? Maybe you.

As you can tell, there is turmoil in Safe Haven over the choices and methods of the descendants. Perhaps the time has come to consider removing them from power now, while we still get a small say-so in the way things are handled. If we wait, we'll be even more powerless than we already are.

Marc sighed, turning the page. Cynthia was foaming at the mouth after being denied the position of Angela's XO for the train run and, of course, Kevin leaving again. She didn't understand how valuable Jennifer had been and she never would. Angela had reduced Cynthia to need-to-know status right before she'd gone up the mountain to challenge Vlad.

Page 2

What Happened to the Train Descendants?

We don't know for certain. We were told another fight was coming. We were given an estimate of five hundred fighters, many of them descendants, coming to take revenge for one of Angela's murderous choices. So what happened to them? Did we make a deal? Was there a fight? The clues I've found are below. You can make your own choice, but I personally believe the men who say they saw it.

Kyle: The train people are gone, no longer a threat. Let it go.

Shane: We burned it. There isn't a mess. Wait. Don't print that, okay?

Chauncey: More than five hundred. The trains were full of slaves.

Jax: There was a call made to their town. Something about establishing a trade route now that their leader is dead.

Quinn: The library went up in flames. No one could get out.

That sounds like mass murder to me. When I asked our current ruler about it, this was his answer.

Marc: We had a problem and now it's gone. Can't you just be grateful that you didn't have the chore this time?

I'm not comforted, ladies and gentlemen. You shouldn't be either.

We now have as many descendant children as we do normals. Does that scare you? It should. We need to keep track of these kids and what they can do. Unleashing them on the world isn't right, no matter where we settle. They need to be tracked and maybe even locked up until they learn the Safe Haven code of honor.

Marc growled in anger, not caring that Cynthia was sitting in the far corner of the mess while he read her paper. He could sense her fear of his reaction, but he didn't sense any regret. She'd meant to piss him off and stir up the camp. The only thing he didn't know was why.

Marc continued reading, controlling his emotions to present the passive, bored face he'd used all his life. It had served him well in the Marines, but here, it was lifesaving.

What would this registry accomplish?

For starters, when certain powers were used against us, we would know who it was. We could track them down if needed, using the Keeper, Chauncey. If we get them in line now, we may not have as many problems later. I realize they've done amazing things for us, but do you honestly want to let them roam loose? When other groups use them against us, it will make the human assassins seem like a joyride. Tell our ruler we want a descendant registry, starting with Marc and his mate. Tell him

we want to know exactly what they can do and how it works, so we can protect ourselves from it.

Are the descendants reading your thoughts?

There's really no way to know, is there? The very idea revolts me. It is unnatural, but it's also a violation of our right to privacy. None of us here agreed to have our minds, our deepest and most private contemplations, read by people who do not have to subject themselves to the same humiliation.

How can you defend yourself?

Guard your thoughts by singing, humming, and thinking of nonsensical things while around known descendants. Warning! They will know you're hiding something if you don't do this very carefully.

Page 4

Should there be a law against magic?

After witnessing the horrible things these descendants are capable of, we would be safer if there was no magic used inside our gates. Let those terrible powers be used in our defense, never in offense or against each other. We have a right to be protected here. That was promised to us, not toiling under the thumbs of beings who wield their odd powers like ignorant children playing during a lightning storm. If they are forbidden to use magic here, some of the people hunting us will stop. They won't know we have descendants and they'll bother

someone else. We can't keep exposing ourselves to the dangers of magic. We need to ban the use of it except in extreme cases. Please join me in signing the back of this page. It is a petition, asking that the things discussed in this paper be added to the next mandatory camp meeting.

Marc closed the newspaper, aware of people watching both him and Cynthia for their reactions. He wanted to shout at her for the lies and half-truths, for the accusing tones and insinuations, but he only nodded to her and left the mess. Lunch was over for him.

Cynthia watched him go, eyes glittering. Angela wanted her unborn child dead. The baby had picked it up and informed the reporter of the coming threat. Cynthia was now taking direct, challenging steps to prevent that. "If you think this is too far, you have no idea what I'm capable of. But you're gonna find out I'm no one to double cross. Everyone else has missed you when they tried to take your life, Boss Lady. I won't."

Not far away, Angela sighed in relief. *I'm counting on it, Cyn. Please keep shouting for justice. Fate is listening.*

2

"What did you and Julia talk about?"

Chauncey paused in reciting the types of toys that were in the wash area. Jennifer scared him.

Jennifer sat down at the mess table, aware of people quieting to listen. Word about her new job had traveled.

“She asked about Marc and Angela.”

“What did you tell her?”

Realizing he should have kept his mouth shut, Chauncey paled. “I’m sorry. I thought she was one of you.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because of her son.” Chauncey smiled. “Cody’s a great kid.”

“What about his mother?”

Chauncey gazed at her blankly. “I only track descendants.”

Jennifer stored that. “We’re going to move you into the general population. You’ll still be under guard.”

“I get to stay?”

“For now. All of our tunnels are closed. When the thaw comes and we dig out, you’ll be sent on your way with a vehicle and gear.”

Chauncey crossed his arms over his chest, lower lip sticking out. “I wanna stay.”

“That’s already been decided. The answer was a unanimous no in the council vote. We can’t trust you.” She stood up. “Be glad they didn’t vote *my* way.”

Chauncey understood she had voted for his execution. “I had to do what Donner told me to.”

“Now, you’ll do what we tell you.” Jennifer took a notebook and pen from her deepest pockets. “Start writing the history of the descendants.”

“Why should I?” He glared sullenly. “I’m not getting anything out of it.”

Jennifer let her eyes glow red. “If you refuse, the council voted to let me kill you for tracking our kind and selling them to Donner.” Jennifer moved toward the exit, not letting her eyes return to normal yet. “There’s trouble in the security room. All patrols to duty!”

The mess flooded with movement, no one doubting Jennifer’s warning. Marc was alone in the security space, eating there while catching up on paperwork.

3

Marc wanted to respond to the illegal calls on the radio and the frantic feet flying toward him, but the woman with the red scarf cocked the 9mm in her hand.

Marc lifted his palms, indicating that he wasn’t going to do anything.

“I want out of here.”

Marc lifted a brow. “I’m not sure that’s possible after this.”

The stocky woman slowly lowered the weapon, but she didn’t remove her finger from the trigger. “I decided not to do this a long time ago. I became one of you.”

Marc chose a polite tone. “What changed?”

“You have an enforcer!” Gladys trembled. “She knows why I was sent here.”

“So what’s the plan now? Force me to take you top side and vanish.”

Gladys hesitated. “I don’t want to leave...”

Marc sighed, hating this part of his job. “You can’t stay after this and I can’t let you go.” Marc braced for it. “Open fire!” He dove under the shield of the desk as two guns began to shoot through the door.

Gladys flew forward onto the chair, blood flying across Marc’s papers. Her gun didn’t fire.

“Clear!” Marc stayed down.

The door, now broken, swung open to reveal Angela and Kenn standing shoulder to shoulder. Marc could tell her not-so-neat shots from Kenn’s perfect aim, but all of hers were good enough to qualify for level three.

Angela’s hands trembled, arms cramping, mind screaming. She stared at the body.

Marc gestured Kenn to take the weapon.

Kenn was impressed. He and Angela had arrived at roughly the same time. Everyone else was lining the sides of the corridor.

Angela shoved the gun into Kenn’s hands and staggered toward the medical bay. She jerked away from those who would have helped her, growling in pain and anger. Her injuries were burning.

Kenn holstered and placed Angela's warm gun on the corner of the desk. "I'll call in a cleanup crew."

Marc began to gather his papers and gear to take into the brig, mind already going to other problems. Missy had warned him about Gladys. If the Eagles had missed, Marc would have tried to shoot her from under the desk.

He stepped over the legs of the corpse as if he hadn't been attacked. "I'll be around."

4

"We need to talk."

Cynthia slammed her coffee mug onto the desk. "I'm working."

Marc settled into the chair across from the reporter, seeing she was busy scratching out another inflammatory edition of her paper. "I'm reassigning you."

Cynthia looked up in confused surprise. "What?"

"Someone else will run the newspaper for a while. I'm giving you a break."

Cynthia glared, leaning forward aggressively. "You are not taking this away from me."

Marc crossed his arms over his chest and stretched out his legs so she would have to step over him to leave the janitorial closet that she'd appropriated with permission.

Cynthia tried being meek. “Please. It’s all I have.”

“You’re going to have a baby. I’d like you to concentrate on being healthy. We need children. You know that.”

“Tell your bitch!” Cynthia’s tears of rage filled her eyes to spill over pale cheeks. “She’s going to kill him. Are you in on it? Why are you here?”

Marc realized Cynthia was having more trouble adjusting to life down here than anyone had believed. He sent a calming force over her, using his alpha strength.

“No, don’t!”

Too late! A cold wave of hatred flew down his throat as the chair tipped. *This isn’t my night.*

Marc released his demon to fight the choking force, but reigned it in when the evil inside would have finished the job. His strength was easily able to force the child’s hatred back into Cynthia’s trembling body, where she would hopefully reabsorb it.

“I’m sorry.” She cowered along the wall. “Please don’t.”

Marc slowly stood up and righted the chair that had fallen over when the force hit. *I’ve gotta start expecting this stuff.*

Marc stewed on what he knew of issues like these, waiting for both of them to calm a little.

Cynthia slowly sank to her butt on the cold stone, knees drawn up for protection.

“I’d like for you to meet with the doctor,” Marc cleared his sore throat. “He’ll give you something to help you stay relaxed, something that won’t hurt the baby.”

Cynthia stared back in abject terror. “That’s how she’ll do it.”

“A lot of people have the mountain sickness. Combine that with a child like yours, and you’ll have an even harder time of it. You need help adjusting.”

“She’s never going to let us out of here alive.” Cynthia lowered her forehead to her arms. “You remember this conversation, boy scout, ‘cause when I die, you’ll know who did it.”

There was no mistaking the fact that the reporter needed help right away. Marc opened the door. “Please stay here. I’ll send someone down to help you to the medical bay.”

“I’ll kill her if you put me in there.” Cynthia shuddered. “It’s her or us.”

Marc shut the door, waving Nathan over. “Don’t let her out of there. Someone will be by.”

Nathan, frowning at Marc’s newly mussed condition, nodded. “You got it, Boss.”

Marc didn’t feel a sense of happy pride at the name this time. Right now, he didn’t want to be in charge. He had to handle something he was almost too tired for, but considering how badly things were going with the woman who still had her child, this couldn’t wait.

“You haven’t been to see her.”

Adrian didn’t glance up. “I’m doing what I’m supposed to—staying away from both of you.”

Marc took a seat across from his enemy. It was too bad he couldn’t let Adrian stay down here in this dusty place atop the cavern holding the Mexican bodies. Adrian and David hadn’t presumed to go upstairs for sleeping arrangements and Marc hadn’t told them any different. He hadn’t been certain then. “You’re supposed to help her.”

Adrian didn’t respond.

Marc could feel the wheels spinning in Adrian’s head, but he didn’t pick up anything negative. It appeared as if Adrian was trying to find an honest way to obey the rules and was having a hard time with it. That wasn’t surprising. Changing from a piece of shit into a good person was almost impossible for anyone, let alone for someone who had done the things Adrian had. Marc didn’t believe it was possible.

Adrian didn’t respond to the thought. He wasn’t sure if it was possible either. He also wasn’t certain which way he would go when things all came down. He missed teaching Angela. He missed leadership, missed being a hero. At some point, all of those things were going to come to a head, but for now, Marc was the boss. “Are our deals still in place?” Adrian fished. It didn’t seem as if Marc was here for anything particular.

“Do you think she knows we have these talks?”

Adrian sighed, setting his plate down. He’d enjoyed the first few bites of Ramen, but his appetite had left with Marc’s arrival. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe she has a reason for it?”

“Yes.” Marc did, he just hated it. Sighing in resignation, Marc pushed out heat to warm the tunnel. He’d discovered a new gift by accident in the shower when the water had gotten cold. He could now modify the temperature of the environment around him.

“Do you know what her reason is?”

“I have suspicions. Probably the same as yours.”

Adrian groaned as sensations began to return to his cold toes. “Most likely reason?”

“So we’ll learn to tolerate each other and recognize that our skills are complementary.”

“Yeah.” Adrian leaned back, accepting the moment for what it was. Marc was upset and needed comfort. He’d come to the only person available who understood. “Imagine a leader like her, with arms like us and legs like Neil and Jeremy.”

“What would Kenn and Tonya be? The ass cheeks?” Marc forced himself to give it a chance for this one moment in time.

“Nice.” Adrian chuckled. “Guess that makes Kyle a middle finger.”

Marc snickered. “He’d like that.”

“So would Jennifer. She’s the matching finger on the other hand.”

“You think? I’ve been guiding someone else into that slot.”

“Where do you have Jennifer?”

“I don’t. She’s above me, according to Chauncey.”

“No one is above the alpha.” Adrian loosened his top jacket button as the heat in the corridor increased.

“Then I don’t know. Tell me.”

“She’s Kyle’s match in every way right now.” Adrian made sure his tones were neutral so the man would listen. Marc needed to know these things. “In time, she might become Angela’s match.”

Marc hadn’t considered what would happen as their descendant powers continued to grow. “And Billy?”

Adrian tensed. “He has work in the west.”

“What kind of work?”

“The hard kind that might lead to miracles.” Adrian shrugged tiredly. “I don’t know what happens exactly. The flashes are only strong when I’m...” Adrian sat up and got a drink of water from his canteen.

“When you’re with Angie.”

Sorry the tension had returned so soon, Adrian grunted. “It’s more like when I’m in her thoughts. When she won’t let me in, I can’t pick up much.”

“She won’t talk to you?”

“No. I’ve only tried once or twice. Didn’t want to start new problems or push her too hard. She’s in a lot of pain.”

“What does she need?”

“A lot of things. Mostly, your forgiveness.”

“What if I can’t give it to her?”

“Then let her go and I’ll do the best I can to keep her alive.” Adrian glared. “But I don’t think she’ll be okay if you walk and neither do you or you’d already be gone.”

“I wouldn’t leave her in this condition.”

“Would you leave her if she showed signs of recovering? Have you brought down that wall yet? Will you give her to me now?”

“Not on your life!”

Adrian smirked. “Good.”

Marc stared in confusion. “What?”

Adrian’s grin widened. “Things have changed on you again. I’m done making deals and plotting against fate. I’m going to be one of the good guys...for real this time.”

Marc’s stomach flipped. Adrian being evil was the only advantage he had over the man.

“See, that right there is what I don’t want to put her through anymore.” Adrian yawned. “I refuse to be the cause of more pain.”

Marc wasn’t certain if he believed that, but there was no doubting the genuine tone and concerns. “So how does it work? We follow Neil and Jeremy’s example?”

Adrian shrugged. “If that would succeed, I’d agree. You already know that.”

“It won’t.”

“We know.”

“What would?” Marc could sense Adrian’s reluctance to discuss that part of it. “What gives us all peace from the garden mistakes?”

“Nothing.” Adrian’s eyes became dead pools of certainty. “We can’t call again. I won’t ever do it and neither will she. Stop.”

“But if we did, what would we have to have ready? What does He want to be able to forgive us?”

“A society without any of the commandments being broken. If we call again without that, the world will end. All life will be removed.”

“Just one or all societies at that time?” Marc leaned forward to poke at the fire with Adrian’s stick. “And what constitutes a society?”

The silence said Adrian wasn’t going to give him that information willingly.

“It’s not that I’m unwilling.” Adrian hesitated. “It’s just that I can’t trust you to do what’s right for her anymore. Our roles have been reversed, except you still get to be with her. You’re only hurting yourself, by the way. She doesn’t miss you when you avoid her. She misses her babies.”

Marc winced, then pushed on. “At least tell me why you won’t tell me.”

Adrian took a small pouch from his pocket and rolled a thin joint. “I found this while scavenging. If I don’t die, you can try it.”

Marc snickered. “Maybe that’s how we can get along. I’ll use you to taste my food first.”

“At least I’d be useful then.”

“You want to do quiet labor for me like the other men?” Marc was surprised.

“You’re the alpha.” Adrian sighed. “Of course, I do. Then there’s the fact that I’ve been up front for so long that I don’t fit into the rear now.”

“You’ll have the classes.”

“Yes, and I’m grateful, but it’s not the same. I could help you personally. Not with her, but with leadership.”

Marc had already decided to do that, but it was gratifying to hear Adrian’s almost begging tone. “I’ll think about it.”

Adrian immediately brightened. “Cool. Thanks.”

Adrian’s happiness hit Marc while he wasn’t braced for it. The brief time he’d been in awe of the man flooded back as he stared. “You had it all and gave it up, for Angie.”

“No.” Adrian didn’t make eye-contact. “For a one-in-a-million chance that I might have a short time with Angie. You can’t imagine my level of devotion.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Adrian ignored Marc’s new wave of rage. “I’ve observed your history from her point of view. You never sacrificed anything for her. You still haven’t. She’s been destroyed. You’re the same as when you arrived.”

“I’m a lot angrier.”

“That’s another reason why I won’t give you whatever plan you’re subtly asking me for. I’ve corrupted you in ways. So has she. We’ve agreed not to do that to you again. If you want the information, you have to ask her.”

Marc had expected that. “If you don’t have the knowledge I want, you’d better get it. No information for me means no FND from me and no acceptance from the camp.”

“You can’t buy me on this. I’m not going to let you try using a loophole during a forbidden call to the Creator.”

Now that it had been spoken aloud, Marc could hear how crazy it was.

“Does that change your mind?”

Marc shook his head. “Not one bit. I’m relentless when I believe something will succeed.”

“You can’t fool the Maker.”

“It’s not fooling or lying. It’s using the exact terms to satisfy the requirements.”

“But it’s meant to apply to a society that is actually living by the commandments, not just obeying them.”

“The difference wasn’t specified, was it?”

Adrian’s brow puckered. “Not that I know of, but all we’ve ever had is tattered remains of books or scientific papers we were able to steal from government labs. There is absolutely no proof that it would earn us forgiveness. That is purely speculation.”

“And it came before the call you two made.”
Marc knew that mattered. “What did that change?”

“I’m not sure. So far, I haven’t found anything, but the connection was short and without compassion for our remorse. I don’t believe your society can have any killers in it, Marc. Think about that for a minute. No killers, of any kind, for any reason. It’s not possible.”

“Is it no killers or no murderers?”

“No one knows for sure. Another reason the call was, and remains, too big a risk to take.”

“Where can we get accurate information?”

Despite his objections, Adrian did want to secure their future that way if it was possible.
“You’ve been scroll diving?”

“Yes, but I can’t go much further. I don’t have enough breath left to explore by the time I get down there.”

Adrian was surprised Marc had already explored his demon that far. “I can help with lessons to strengthen your mental lungs.”

“Do I have that information down there somewhere? Because it feels endless. I’ll never be able to sort through it all to find what I need.”

Adrian realized Marc had been gifted with a full knowledge bank, but he didn’t say so. “Take the witch next time, instead of your demon. She’s ancient. You’re new. She might have an instinct for it.”

“How can I be new?”

“You’ve locked your power away in every lifetime, except for this one. You’re new in many ways.”

Marc gestured toward the abandoned joint. “You gonna light that or what?”

Adrian chuckled, getting his lighter. “Yes, Boss.”

“It’s nice when you do that.” Marc sent out a wave of obedience.

Adrian sighed. “So is that, but I’m not going to tell you what you want to know. I’m not going to give you a plan.”

Marc smiled cruelly. “I already had the plan. I just needed you to confirm it.”

“Confirm what?”

“That it’s even possible.”

Realizing he’d been tricked, Adrian tossed the joint at Marc. “Test your own shit.”

Marc laughed as he caught it. “Thanks. I will.”

Silence fell for a moment as Marc smoked and Adrian thought.

“Are you gonna try it anyway?”

“No.” Marc blew out smoke in a steady stream. “I will keep digging for all the information, though. Maybe in the future, we’ll have the right set of circumstances.”

“And until then?”

“We build it. Maybe He’ll come on His own and we won’t be in trouble.”

Adrian let out the breath he’d been holding. “Good. That’s good.”

“It’s Angie’s plan.” Marc stiffened. “The one she was working on right after we returned from killing Donner.”

“How far did she get?”

“She has two big notebooks, but it only covers the top issues. She didn’t even want to try the coveting commandment. Wanting what someone else has is natural, up to a point. It’s what drove mankind to create a world that can do heart transplants and walk on the moon.”

“It’s also what caused our downfall.”

“Yeah.”

Both of them internally deliberated their own roles in that and fell silent for another long moment where scenes replayed repeatedly while they dug for meanings and solutions.

“This is what she wanted from us spending time together.” Marc knew it for certain at that moment. “Both of us working on her goals.”

“Yes.”

Marc met his eye. “Cynthia is having trouble.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ve been forbidden from interfering. And I won’t.”

Marc knew an order like that could only have come from one person. “So Cynthia’s right?”

Adrian lifted a brow. “About what?”

She didn’t trust him with it, Marc realized in elation. She doesn’t trust him.

“Get moved into one of the living areas. David too.” Marc passed the joint and stood up. “Then I want you to spend time with Angela. Make sure she doesn’t have the trouble that Cynthia is.”

He ignored all of the expected responses that came from Adrian, holding up a hand. “That’s an order, and I’d better hear about it soon or I’m sending you out by yourself to kill Mikel and all of his men. Do your job carefully, but do it. No one slacks off in my camp.”

Adrian stared in suspicion as Marc left. “You just gave me something I want more than anything... What are you up to?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Tough Love

October 14th

1

“**W**here do you think they want us?” David snorted sarcastically as the two guards in the singles’ area both motioned at cots next to the security booth.

Adrian grunted, trying not to react to all the hostility. No one wanted him in here. Adrian could imagine the fight Marc had gotten on this one. He also assumed the boy scout had soothed them with the idea that he could be hit more often if he were bunking with them.

Adrian dropped his kit on the cot and strode to the security booth, holding out a sheet of paper. “Make sure the boss gets that.”

Green read the note. “I’ll handle it.”

Adrian didn’t know the guard and the guard didn’t know him. There was no reason for animosity. There wasn’t any until the other sentry read the note.

“We are not wasting Marc’s time with suggestions like this!” Zack crumbled the paper and tossed it into the trashcan. “You can’t earn your way back in with us. We won’t allow it.”

Adrian didn't reply. Tempers were too hot right now, but he had faith that Green would still deliver the message. Having mice in the cave wasn't a good thing. In time, it could be downright dangerous.

Sort of like sleeping in here. Instead of bringing up his shield or trying to converse his way out of future beatings, Adrian sent a wave of his magic over the room, coating them all in his good mood. He smiled as the mutters became confused murmurs. "I'm glad to be back. Thanks."

People glared and scowled, but with his light smothering their negativity, there was no choice but to accept that Adrian was still a powerful force.

"We'll handle something important first. It's gonna be a long day. Might as well start it out right."

2

"I have updates for you, Boss."

Marc waved Morgan into the brig.

"We put people on the other possible threats that Missy identified. We'll let you know as soon as anything breaks there."

Marc made a note on it as Morgan continued.

"We passed the word about no magic. Most descendants have been told by now, but we can't stop the kids from using it."

"I know. The kids aren't the problem."

"Ray is asking for a few minutes of your time, alone."

Marc wrote it down. "I'll find him later. Next?"

“Candy resigned from the Eagles.”

Marc wasn't surprised. She hadn't been spending any time with Theo's team. “Next?”

“Billy got into it with Jax over the punishment you assigned.”

Marc looked up at that. “Why isn't someone in the brig here with me?”

“Because Billy said he slipped and Jax let him.”

Marc sighed. Quinn was slowly accepting it, but Jax was a hothead who still believed he was perfect. “Put him with Adrian on the next schedules. Don't tell Mr. Perfect what's going on. Let's see if he can still work that old magic and bring Jax around.”

Morgan made a note, smirking. If Adrian couldn't do it, that would prove he was useless to the camp and he could be removed. Marc was clever.

“We haven't had any attempts at contact from Tommy's group or Seth, but the Mexicans are still calling and so are refugees. Samantha saw another big group of them come in last night. They were given shelter.”

“With Mikel's army?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that can't be good,” Marc sighed. “Keep me posted.”

“I will. Last thing is health. The doctor is reporting an increase in colds.”

“Colds?”

“Said it might be a Yellowstone effect.” Morgan shrugged. “He’s pretty nasty most days. I didn’t ask for details.”

“I’ll handle it. Next?”

“We’re passing the word now about the monthly celebrations for birthdays and holidays. Are we ready to do it on the 14th?”

“Sounds fine. Angie had things gathered for this. She knows people need to have a good time.”

“Cool. That’s it from me for now.”

“Okay.” Marc saw Morgan was wearing the full Eagle uniform, the one Adrian had always required men to wear while on duty. He didn’t protest. Morgan had the right to forgive Adrian, like everyone else. “You’re off tonight?”

Morgan grinned. “Yep.” He scanned their prisoner, not liking his baby face or his long blond hair. The stocky man was trouble, from his alligator boots to his uni-brow.

“Gonna watch the lessons later?”

Morgan’s grin widened. “Yep.”

Marc chuckled. “Have fun.”

Morgan closed the door, motioning the guard to stay alert. Not only was he going to watch Adrian get his ass beat, Morgan planned to participate.

Marc glanced over at the exhausted prisoner who had pretended to be sleeping while the guard was giving him updates. “You can go to sleep soon. You’ve been found guilty of treason, murder, and other crimes. Do you deny them?”

Mickey, only alive because his time to walk the mile had been scheduled for the day after war, didn't answer. He was now waiting for his chance to escape this future, as he had that one.

Marc tried to dig into the man, but the shield over Mickey's mind was too thick. Marc shrugged. "I could have the Enforcer talk to you."

Mickey jerked upright, voice cracking. "You have an Enforcer?"

Marc smiled, putting his hands behind his neck. "And she doesn't like you. You're in our brig. That's really all she'll need to know."

Mickey talked. He didn't stop until Marc told him to.

An hour later, Kenn and Neil came into the brig with duct tape and a bag.

Neither of them spoke. They didn't need to. Both men had been expecting the chore.

3

"It's about time."

Adrian didn't respond to Wade's mutter as he entered the medical bay.

Angela was still in the rear, behind a partition. Other than her guard, they were alone. The doctor and his students were doing fieldwork on some of the animals the vet had chosen for a class. Adrian wasn't certain why Angela wanted the medical crew to know how to milk a cow or feed a chicken, but

he wasn't going to ask. He assumed something like that was prep for problems they were going to have on the island.

"It's to teach them compassion." Angela flinched as he pulled the partition open and left it that way.

Adrian saw the bruises on her arm where a new IV had been inserted and understood the doctor had been letting his students practice on her. "That son of—"

"I insisted." Angela hadn't heard Adrian come in, but she had, at the same time. Her soul had felt him when her senses had failed to. It was scary.

Adrian took the empty chair next to her bed, wondering if she'd had another episode or if something else had made the doctor decide to strap her down again.

"He said I was intentionally scratching myself while I slept." Her voice broke. "Now I'm afraid to sleep."

Adrian flipped the buckle on the strap and actually felt the wave of relief and approval from her guard. His own sentry, Greg, was sending out the same vibes of anger that Adrian was experiencing. Marc should be here helping her through this.

"He has to help himself first." Tears oozed over her hollow cheeks. "He checks on me every night."

"Like that's enough!" Adrian went to the neat cabinets that were stuffed into a small impression in the stone. "Where are your clothes?"

Angela gazed up blankly. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Adrian noticed a slight slur this time. “He’s drugging you? You’re letting him drug you?!”

Adrian’s roar brought several Eagles into the tunnel, but Greg and Wade quickly shut them down and sent them away. The doctor had been given free rein with Angela and her depression was letting her agree to things she normally wouldn’t have.

“Does Marc know about this?” Adrian looked at the guard instead of her.

Wade shrugged. “If it was me, I would, but he hasn’t asked for details and he cuts us off when we try to give them.”

“He has his own pain.” Angela sighed miserably. “You’re not being fair to him. He also lost a child.”

The Eagles fell silent, but Adrian’s mental cursing rang in Angela’s mind loud and clear. She couldn’t help the small part of her that concurred. Marc should be here caring for her, but the leader in her knew he was needed where he was.

“There’s room for both,” Adrian dropped a pair of green scrubs onto her leg. It was all he could find. “I told Kenn no one could balance the two, but I was wrong.”

Angela didn’t answer. She also didn’t touch the clothes.

Adrian didn’t want to force her to fight, but their bond was feeding him too much of her agony and depression. He began to dress her.

The guards were relieved. If Marc wasn't going to make her start living again, someone had to.

Angela's eyes blazed with rage, but Adrian didn't stop. He slid his hand over her arm and gently pulled her into a sitting position.

Realizing he wasn't going to quit, Angela shoved his arm away. "Give me a minute!"

Adrian closed the partition, but didn't leave. He did turn around, but he wasn't positive about making her do it all alone. She was too pale, too fragile, to not need assistance. It was hard to believe she'd had the strength to reach Marc last night, let alone enough to fire a weapon.

This is what it looks like when a soul dies, Angela sent bitterly. *I don't want any part of your plots or plans. Get out. Go away.*

Adrian didn't budge.

I'm going to scream for Marc.

"Please do," Adrian replied instantly. "He sent me. He'll know I did what I was told and get off my back."

"Marc sent you?"

"Yes." Adrian didn't respond to any of her curses.

The guards were eased to hear it. That meant Marc wouldn't be mad over Adrian being here. Not that it mattered to Wade. He was tired of Angela's misery. At this point, he didn't care who helped her.

"Come on. It's time for a lesson."

Angela folded her arms over her chest and glared with red orbs. "Make me."

Adrian leaned over to push out an incredibly strong wave of alpha command. “Get out of this bed and get dressed. Do it now!”

Angela laughed in his face.

Adrian leaned closer. “Fine. If you aren’t up in five seconds, Sweetheart, I’m climbing in with you.”

“You can’t—”

“One.”

“Don’t ever—”

“Two.”

“I should let you so Marc can shoot you again!”

“Three.”

“Fine! Asshole.”

Adrian moved back, but held out a hand. “Let’s go. Nice and easy.”

Angela tried to do it fast anyway, to hurt herself for the way her heart was responding to Adrian’s arrival, to his presence, to his hand around hers. It wasn’t an attraction, but relief that he still wanted her. *I’m not supposed to feel that way! Stop it! Hate him! He’s bad!*

“Yes, I am.” Adrian firmed his arm for her to lean on as she stood. Her smell wafted over him.

Adrian grimaced. *No vanilla now.*

“Then take me to get a shower.”

Adrian scooped up the clothes and waited for her to clutch the ends of her gown shut. “Up or down?”

Angela balked. “Out in camp? Like this?”

“What would you tell one of your patients?”
Adrian led her slowly to the corridor.

“That injuries come before appearances.” She glared. “Do you know how much I hate you?”

“I’ve got some ideas on it. Living area or Eagle showers? They’re equal distance.”

Adrian shook his head at Greg when the Eagle started to insist they stay and use the showers in the medical bay. They needed to get her out, not give her a way to stay hidden.

“Up.”

Adrian’s mood lifted further. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t welcome. Angela was and the magic of the Eagles was amazing to witness, even if you were an enemy.

“You’re not their enemy.” Angela’s cheeks were bright red as they trundled by guards and camp members who stared in surprise.

“You’re not either.”

“I’m not the one feeling that way.”

“No?”

“No.”

“They have no reason to view you with hostility?”

Angela considered it.

Adrian led them to the stairs and gestured her to go first. He quickly turned his back so he wouldn’t be able to view her ass.

Now a very deep shade of red, Angela climbed the ladder as quickly as she could while holding her gown closed.

Adrian counted the seconds, two per rung, and then followed her up. He kept his chin down. People would be watching even small moments like this. He had to be careful.

“No, they don’t. We’re not the enemy.”

“I agree. However, there’s always a good guy and there’s always a bad guy. While we’re in this cave, that’s my role. Let them vent when we get up there. They’ve earned it.”

It took five minutes to reach the top level of the cave; word spread quickly, drawing curious, relieved people who kept their distance when they saw her escort and their two guards. Greg and Wade motioned people away when some of them would have welcomed Angela or questioned her. As they walked through the damp, drafty tunnels, now the complete center of attention, Greg understood why she’d chosen the Eagle showers instead of the living quarters. The Eagles would give her privacy once she was in there. The camp would mob her even when she was naked.

Angela was aware of the improvements in the cave and the health of the people they passed. She’d been secluded so long that it was like witnessing something that someone else had accomplished.

“You built this.” Adrian came to her side as she paused to stare up at the massive catacomb of ladders and corridors that were filled with survivors of multiple wars and atrocities. It was amazing.

“We.” She sent her witch out to survey her domain. She hadn’t done it since before going up the mountain.

Settling into his role with a sigh of contentment, Adrian took her arm and kept her on track while she searched for trouble.

“Tell him there are moles in the maze again.” Angela stared at nothing they could see, voice like the dead. “Watch the kitchen. Dark spot there.”

Adrian noted the warnings like he always had, but he also made sure Greg wrote them down.

Angela came out of the mental daze, hating the drug haze she couldn’t shake.

“We’ll get coffee after this.” Adrian braced. “In the reading room.”

Angela nodded stiffly as they came into view of the showering men and women. It was almost full. Angela looked at Adrian with deep displeasure. “Nice timing.”

“I thought so.”

“You knew the Eagles were going to use me for bait the first time I came out?”

He gestured toward the rear of the steamy stone space. “They have a stall waiting for you and an assistant.”

Angela scanned the profiles, spotting just as many rookies as senior level men. She stared at Adrian with open fear. “I am sorry that you were banished.”

Adrian’s heart broke for her all over again. She wasn’t sure if he was about to pay her back for it.

She didn't trust a single soul on the planet now. "It's okay, Baby. We'll keep you alive."

Greg glanced at the guards on the sector and made a sharp gesture.

Allan and Pamela hurried over to give her an escort, glaring harshly at the rookies. "Finish up and clear the room!"

Adrian kept a hand on his holster, able to sense the tension without touching Angela's arm. Someone in here wasn't friendly. Marc was wrong about her being safe among the Eagles.

It may be my mental state rubbing off. Some of these people are sensitive to our moods.

Adrian assumed she was trying to be positive she wasn't overreacting, but he could feel the danger and swept the chamber. *Are you getting anything?*

No.

Are you searching?

No.

Adrian realized she was hoping to be killed and cursed as he twisted too late to stop the assassin who ran up behind them.

Adrian watched the gun go to her head.

Click!

Adrian tackled the man.

"Get them!"

Three other traitors were also pulling triggers on blanks as Kyle and ten other pissed Eagles slammed them to the ground.

"She has to die! Kill her!"

“Kill her now!”

Adrian held one of the struggling would-be killers while Wade and Greg tied his arms and then gagged him to stop the awful shouting.

The other three men, tall and not appearing the sort to do this, began shouting as well.

“It’s the end! She’s brought the end!”

“God hates her! She has to die!”

Kyle and the Eagles quickly gagged the men, not being gentle. “Take them all to the brig.”

“Wait. Maybe we shouldn’t do that.”

Heads twisted toward Barry, who was furious and ashamed—the same emotional brew of everyone here who’d been part of the plan to trap the ammo thieves. “We have them dead to rights. Do we need a trial?”

Muffled screams came from the bound and gagged assassins as the senior men shared agreeing glances.

“Take them to the brig.” Kyle satisfied both sides. “They may have information we want. If not, we’ll drop them into a hole on the bottom level, like we did with Jayson’s body after the Ghost finished slicing and dicing him.”

Relief and fear came from the four assassins as they were shoved out of the showers.

Kyle waited until he was sure the acoustics of the cave wouldn’t carry his voice further than this room. “Nice work, everyone. Please remember to thank Barry, who had the courage to suggest this plan.”

Adrian still wasn't allowed to express his outrage. He'd fought against using her this way, but as a banished traitor himself, he'd been ignored.

He turned to Angela, ready to take his anger out on her for not even trying to fight back, but she was already in the rear stall with Jennifer.

Left without an outlet and unneeded, Adrian walked toward the tunnel, where David was now lingering with the coffee he'd been sent for.

No one spoke to him at all.

“Did you know Barry told us to put blanks in all rookie guns today?” Jennifer was helping Angela soap her hair.

“Yes. Barry snuck in to get my permission. He didn't know the day then, so I wasn't positive it had been covered.”

“You didn't believe Marc had you covered.”

“Does he know about this plan?”

“No. We didn't think he would have agreed.”

“He wouldn't have, but that's beside the point.” Angela rinsed her hair, stomach cramping as she leaned back. “He didn't have me covered. He's just now realizing I was in danger again and he missed it. He'll show up here soon, but Adrian will keep him out or piss him off to distract him.”

“Because he knows you don't have the energy for this right now?” Jennifer wrapped the towel around Angela's clean hair.

Angela shrugged. “More likely he knows that each moment like this forces me further into

isolation. I'm not safe even to take a shower. Marc will never be able to protect me..."

"Like Adrian could."

"Yes and no. Adrian would do better because he would use me exactly as you did today and it would remove these wolves from our sheep faster. It also risks my life, so there's a price to pay if he ever miscalculates."

Jennifer paled. "How many more are there? Please tell me we're about done with this part."

Angela didn't answer right away. With the capture of the four today, the future might have changed.

Jennifer could feel Angela straining to open doors and sent a burst of her youthful energy into her mentor's arm. "Here."

Angela was grateful as the barrier swung open, but the darkness wasn't a comfort. Tiny pinpricks of evil lit up the darkness like fireflies on a summer night.

"Damn." Jennifer was getting the vision clearly. "Too many to count."

Angela ended the connection to conserve the energy she had and to save what she'd been given. "Yes. The future holds much more of this before we'll have peace, but even then, there are killers, betrayers. We have a long fight remaining to achieve peace." Angela shivered.

Jennifer wrapped the large towel around Angela, wishing she could speed up the recovery time. With all that danger waiting for them, this

camp needed Angela at the helm. “I have updates and notes for you. Adrian told us you won’t want them yet.”

Angela forced herself to ask. “Anything that can’t wait?”

“No.”

Jennifer didn’t push. Adrian’s suggestions had sounded good, and he’d gotten her here. It was a start.

“He dragged me from the bed!”

“You’re lucky he didn’t climb in with you and try to soul meld or something. He’s looked rough for the short time you’ve been apart.”

Angela stared in dismay. “You know.”

Jennifer nodded, keeping her voice low enough to be shielded by the few showers that were still running. “I scanned Adrian when he came to me. I don’t trust him at all.”

“Good.”

“When will you tell Marc?”

“Marc figured it out weeks ago.” Angela slowly buttoned the long shirt over her comforting tank top and stretchy jeans. Jennifer had had them waiting for her. “That’s why he sent Adrian instead of coming himself.”

“The big guns, huh?”

“Something like that.” Angela sat on the bench outside the shower to let Jennifer help with her socks and shoes. Bending over was still hard. “He hoped Adrian would be able to use his alpha command on me because of the bond.”

Jennifer chuckled. “Wonder if he’ll be surprised to find out you’re above Adrian in every way.”

“He hoped it would succeed, so he tried. He didn’t expect Adrian to drag me here and let you use me for bait. Be prepared for that reaction.”

“I am. I have a few words ready.”

Angela didn’t tell the teenager not to scold Marc. Jennifer would find out that was a bad idea on her own. Marc had to learn to handle all the roles of leadership, including unhappy people.

“You look better.” Jennifer dropped Angela’s gown into the small dumpster set aside for extremely dirty or contaminated materials. It would all be burned later.

“I smell like me again, at least.” Bracing for the pain of the weight, Angela slowly slid the wrist blade into place with a satisfying click that drew approving glances from the senior Eagles using the stalls near her. The other men and women were in various stages of dress and waiting.

Angela understood they expected to talk to her or at least for her to talk to them. *Do I have anything to say?*

Jennifer held out Angela’s gun belt, making the chamber go silent.

She strapped on the heavy weapons and squared her shoulders. *Can I do this now?* Angela let go of her control for a brief second; tears immediately flooded down her cheeks.

She didn’t look away, but most of the hopeful Eagles did.

Angela slowly wiped her arm over her face and walked toward the corridor.

Adrian came through with a huge scowl, drawn by her waves of pain. “Don’t do that! Lock it up!”

Angela sucked in a deep breath, taking Adrian’s comfort openly as he placed a hand on her arm. “I’m sorry.”

Adrian sighed, voice gentling. “So am I, but you have to control it. Your emotions can trigger new gifts or activate them, and you don’t have the energy for that right now. Breathe.”

Angela allowed him to guide her out of the shower and into the first training space. She didn’t bother to scold him for lying about where they would go next. She headed for the rear, where she’d planned for the coffee pots and water cases to be placed upon stocking the cave for the camp’s entry. She had wanted the people guarding their lives to have places where they could gather and bond, but also places where they could escape the constant demands of the camp.

Angela poured a cup of the thick coffee, but refused the thin cookies when Tracy gestured to the tray.

“You sure?” Tracy smiled. “Li had them sent up. He thought you’d come here next.”

Angela scanned Tracy, delving in without permission or consideration.

Tracy paled. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. None of us are.” Angela set her cup down untouched and walked toward the exit.

“No.”

Angela stopped, but didn’t turn at Adrian’s command. This wave of alpha order was stronger because it was open, fueled by the witnesses and the emotions at having two of their leaders in the same place.

Adrian released his hold, sorry he’d revealed it to her. He should have waited and used it on her when it really mattered. “Let’s work on your arms.”

Angela turned around with so much rage showing that Adrian dropped his head. “I won’t do it again.”

It flashed Angela to her past, to another voice saying that to her for an unrelated reason. She and Marc had been children then, with no idea of the horrors waiting for them. They’d thought the ones they were dealing with then were as bad as it would get.

“Come back to me,” Adrian called.

Angela felt his warmth surround her, pulling her from the haze of the past. She spent a lot of time there now, searching for meaning, for clarity. Everything she’d become was connected to those miserable years and she searched them relentlessly.

Adrian took her hand, sending a wave of need that snapped her out of the maudlin and into angry awareness.

Angela jerked her hand free, unable to hide the wince. Her arms were always sore and heavy.

“A few days of this will help. You should have been in physical therapy already.”

“I refused it.” She stepped into the machine to avoid his touch.

“It’s on the easiest setting. Do five reps on each arm. Wait two minutes between sets.”

“How many sets?”

“I’ll let you know.” Adrian switched the machine on.

The entire room was a training area, with gym equipment, lockers, and mats that lined the floor. It was also a defense lesson area. Adrian could tell from the faint blood splatters on the mats. Most of their fighting lessons didn’t draw blood, but kai always did. He spotted the couch along one wall and the counter with drinks and snacks nearby. *She made them a place to hang out and bond away from the camp.* She’d known they would need that. Camp members weren’t allowed in the training areas.

Around them, the Eagles slowly resumed their workouts and conversations, but everyone watched as Angela began pulling on the rope with two pounds of weight.

“Damn.” Angela clenched her eyes as pain seared her arm on the first pull. “That’s insane.”

“Because it’s only been a few weeks?” Adrian stayed close enough to grab the rope if she slipped.

“Yes. I never watched the patients suffer through rehab.” Angela pulled down for the second rep, almost tearing up. “Yeah, this sucks.”

Adrian started to ask if she wanted to do something easier first...

“It’s perfect. Thank you.” Angela yanked harder, pulling the weights smoothly this time. Tears flooded over her cheeks.

“Two more.” Adrian watched her shirt for signs of wounds breaking open. Her stitches had been out for a week and the scars were bright on both arms. The right was bigger than the left. More damage had been done there.

Angela struggled with the fourth pull. *It hurts! I deserve this.* Angela groaned as she reached the bar, breath coming out in a hiss while she controlled the descent. Before she had time to recover, she pulled down with her self-hatred.

Adrian flinched at her low cry, but didn’t interfere as she controlled the release and immediately began on the other arm. This wasn’t about his emotions or her physical pain. It was about the future.

It took all of Angela’s concentration to keep pulling on the bar. She wanted to die. Hurting herself was the next best thing, but her body didn’t want to do it. Every pull was a fight for life that her mind didn’t want, but her heart longed for. It left no room for stewing on anything else.

Adrian made sure she was left alone, but he didn’t let her go so deep into her thoughts that she

was able to tune out again. The pain was horrid, but it was also healing. He knew.

So did the men and women around them who'd been hurt or made mistakes and had to claw their way back up to being okay with surviving. Those here who hadn't had those epiphanies yet would still tell the camp members that Angela was fighting hard to recover and get back to them. It was a win-win for everyone, if Adrian could get her to keep doing it.

"Don't let Tracy leave." Angela was openly crying now. "I need company."

Adrian motioned to the guard.

Greg stopped Tracy and Charlie. The couple had been invited in by Daryl, who had hoped they would stay. He didn't get many opportunities to observe them. Tracy still wasn't spending any more time in the camp's eye than she had to.

Tracy didn't want to stay. It was clear in her expression, but she took the machine next to Angela anyway. She had thoughts that she needed confirmed or denied. She just wasn't positive she was ready for the answers.

"You're doing better in some ways." Angela waited the allotted time before starting her next set. "You can think again."

"Yes." Tracy switched on the machine and set it to her last Eagle level automatically. When she pulled, she wasn't prepared for the pain either. "Ouch!"

Angela nodded, bracing. "Yeah."

Both females did their set without speaking or sweeping the room, needing their energy to complete it and their will power not to make any more sounds.

Tracy was able to do it.

Angela wasn't. The last rep tore a cry from her.

Adrian stepped forward. "Three minutes between sets."

Angela ignored him to look at Tracy. "Please forgive me."

Tracy's eyes filled with tears. "It was me or her, right?"

Angela winced. She hadn't thought Tracy would figure that out.

"Right?"

"Yes."

Tracy blew out an angry breath. "Death, or rape and a beating. Great choices."

"I'm sorry."

"What if it hadn't happened?" Tracy had to know. "Was there another way?"

Angela gave her the truth. "There were many ways. I chose the one that saved the most lives."

"It saved lives?" Tracy hadn't believed anything good had come from it, other than how real it had appeared to Donner and the big bunker.

"Yes. If Sherman hadn't found a hostage, he would have been the sniper we couldn't guard against. Crista would have survived. You would have been unharmed. Sherman would have shot

Donner and then me. The big bunker would have blown up the mountain. It saved everyone.”

Tracy stared into Angela’s eyes, wanting to believe her. “Can you prove that?”

“No.”

“I’m supposed to trust you on it?”

“You are alive,” Angela pointed out ruthlessly.

“Why is that?” Tracy frowned. “Why me over her? Was it because Charlie loves me?”

“No. In fact, that almost swung it the other way.” Angela braced to do another set. “I didn’t want his possible misery to influence me, so I used a list of pros and cons. It was close until I got down to service for the camp and then you outmatched her in every way. She spent her time chasing Jeff and adventure. You labored behind the scenes because you wanted to be a part of something bigger than yourself. We needed you more.”

“You’re okay with making choices like that?” Charlie demanded from behind them.

Angela shook her head. “No. Not at all.”

“Then why do you do it?!”

“What’s the alternative?” Angela shot right back, reaching for the rope. “I could have not done it and we’d all be in labs, bunkers, or graves right now.”

Charlie couldn’t deny that. He stomped over to a bench in the corner and plopped down to wait.

Tracy sighed. “He’s so young.”

“And angry. When he scares you, tell him. He won’t even see it if you don’t.”

Tracy didn't deny it.

Angela understood. Her heart broke again. "My entire life has been that way. I thought Safe Haven would be different."

"It is." Tracy tried to see the bright side. "We're hurting, but the camp isn't. They're happy and healthy because of it."

Angela paused. "Does that make it worth it?"

Tracy considered, wanting desperately to heal. "I believe so. It lets me sleep easier now, since I decided that it matters. What you've told me will also help when it's three o'clock and no one hears my mental screams."

Angela flashed to her last dream, of still being on the mountain with Vlad, except Adrian didn't come. "It'll get better if we stay in the light. We've told other people that, right?"

Tracy nodded shakily. "Together? I don't think I can do it alone."

"Yes. I owe you that."

Tracy started to say she didn't agree, and then closed her mouth.

"Good girl." Angela pulled on the rope. "When you need it, call in the marker and I'll honor it no matter how hard it is."

"Thank you." Tracy accepted what none of the others here would receive from Angela for her actions to save them from Donner and the government.

"We'll need to do this every day."

Tracy didn't argue.

Adrian was more than relieved. He was ecstatic. His wave of joy flooded the chamber, along with determination to keep those good vibes flowing no matter what it took or who it pissed off.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Detained

1

“**W**hy is Cynthia being held in the detention center?” Tonya turned around on the stool as soon as Kenn entered the radio room. She was eager to be finished here. The radio space was warm, adding to her impatience. She didn’t need as much heat as some people did, but Kenn liked it roasting most of the time.

Kenn had paused at the query. “How do you know that?”

“I gathered the air quality reports from Samantha a little while ago. Nathan was busy, so Greg asked me to get them. I saw it on the monitor.”

Kenn realized Samantha and Neil had been given the full feed from the entire cave. He wasn’t sure why that bothered him, but it did. “She had a run-in with Marc and melted down. She asked to be put there.” Kenn only told her what he was supposed to. Tonya was among the biggest gossips in camp. “Let me have those reports. I’ll take them to Marc.”

Tonya handed him the packet. When she finished with this, she was going to the lab to check

the results from her first tests. It had sucked to discover their friendly cat had cancer, but it did make a good test subject. If her research helped the cat, maybe it would do the same for people. Tonya had no idea if it would. No one did anymore. All she could do was try it and hope.

Kenn stuck the envelope into his notebook and left. He didn't feel guilty about using her this way, but he did pity Tonya that she couldn't be brought deeper into the chain of command. She would never be a full partner for him, not like Angela might have been.

Kenn made sure he was alone in the tunnel before dumping the envelope into a burning trashcan like Marc had told him to do. The camp couldn't know the real levels of radiation out there until it was gone, so these papers had been invented with good numbers for Tonya to spread. In reality, the numbers were still rising at the bottom of the mountain. The Mexicans were dying. Samantha was now filling out nametags. Until they had to use the dosimeters, the camp didn't need to know what was coming.

2

Tonya spotted Peggy as she came from the radio room at the end of her shift, but it surprised her when the den mother fell in step. The cool corridor was a nice relief from the sweltering radio space,

but Tonya didn't stop to enjoy it. She had plans for the evening.

“Got a minute?”

Tonya shrugged. “You can walk with me if you want. What's up?”

Peggy kept pace as Tonya walked to the lab to check on the cat. She'd given it a dose of oil mixed in canned foods every morning since she'd prepared the concoction. So far, none of the results was promising.

“I'd like to ask you how you feel about leadership.”

Tonya met Peggy's eye. “What do you want?”

“Your help. All women need your help.”

Tonya knew what was going on with Peggy and Hilda. She was just surprised to be a target of their conversions. “What did Angela say?”

“Nothing, recently.”

Tonya frowned. “And before that?”

“She encouraged it. She's one of us.”

Tonya shook her head as they reached the ladder. “Not me, then. If she was still encouraging it, the camp would get to vote.”

“Wait, you don't understand.”

“No, I get it.” Tonya pointed. “You want me to screw up my place here to take a chance on being the next female ruler, but I've got news for you, Peggy. This camp wants Angie; they don't want any woman other than her.”

“That's not true.”

“It is.” Tonya stepped onto the ladder. “The fact that you don’t know it, but you still believe you can find a candidate, is scary. Listen to the camp. They want Adrian back.”

Peggy’s profile iced over. “That will not happen.”

Tonya shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not, but I do know he and Marc would both have to die, along with half the men in this camp, before they’d give it to another woman.” Tonya went down the ladder. “And then there’s the fact that I don’t want it.”

Peggy let the younger redhead go as she caught sight of the guards at the bottom of the ladder. They were both rookie females and neither of them were happy with the conversation they’d been able to hear. Peggy glowered at them and got the same in return.

Is Tonya right? Is the time for female rule already over? Stewing, Peggy marched toward the living quarters.

Behind her, Doug moved through the tunnel with a huge scowl.

3

“The doctor won’t treat her.” Morgan joined Marc in the brig, where they had the place to themselves. “He doesn’t want to treat any of the descendants.”

Marc sighed, putting his pen down. “What happened?”

Morgan grinned sheepishly. “Autumn told him his hands were too cold.”

Marc laughed. “Well, I can see where that might shock him.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Nothing. We’ll have our other doctor take over the descendants.”

Morgan frowned. “Angela can’t be around the pregnant women right now. Maybe not for a long time.”

“I meant Millie. She doesn’t mind dealing with us. Send her in to talk with Cynthia.” *I have to know if Cynthia’s right. I have to know if Angie is that far gone.*

Morgan swept the empty cells. “The hole is filling up.”

Marc didn’t answer. They’d disposed of the assassins who’d attacked Angie in the shower while she and Adrian were there. While he was relieved that another set of assassins had been unearthed, Marc couldn’t help feeling useless. He and Missy, along with Neil and Jennifer, were going to dig out the rest of their moles. Then maybe he could sleep at night.

4

“Why were you in there? Tell me the truth!”

Candy paused outside the washroom, where Jennifer was interrogating Julia in the shower.

That's to get her off guard and make her nervous. Angela taught us that in one of the last few classes before Donner came. Candy lingered, not eavesdropping, but so restless that she had no idea what to do with herself.

“Whatever your deal is, it won't succeed.” Jennifer glared. “I'm watching you. If anything else goes wrong with them, I'll know who to come to about it.”

Candy moved away from the entrance before Jennifer came out and directed that anger on her. Candy didn't think she could take it. All she felt like doing was sleeping and that scared her. Unlike the other women, Candy wasn't feeling any movement yet or hearing any contact attempts. As far as she knew, Lee hadn't been a descendant and she knew she wasn't. Her babies were normal. She wasn't disappointed, but in the excitement of having fetuses who could communicate, her own wonderful pregnancy was being overlooked. “So am I.” She took the ladder to the lowest level. “We're alone now, kiddies. Just you and me and you.”

Candy, wearing a long white dress over leggings and slippers, trailed a hand along the corridor wall as she went. She didn't care about the bugs down here, the dampness, or the draft from where the heat refused to come much lower than the third level in any strength. She liked this tomb.

Candy went to the hole where the Mexicans had almost gotten through. There was no need for a

guard now, so she didn't have to find an excuse to be here.

Candy slid the board over the hole aside and carefully sat down on the edge. The smells coming up weren't bad because of the piles of dirt that had been dumped and shoveled, but it was still enough to make her guts roil.

Candy stared down at the skeleton hand right below her swinging feet. *I'll bet no one would miss me. I spend over half my time here and no one knows. I'm really the invisible.*

5

Billy hurriedly took the card from his locker amid the teasing and disapproving glowers. He stuffed it into his pocket and wiped his expression before turning toward the exit.

“Got plans, Billy?” Zack teased.

“Yes, I do.” Billy coolly gestured toward the top floor. “I have duty over the TV room tonight for the preteens. Wanna join me?”

Zack made a face. “No thanks. All the stolen kisses makes me sick.”

Billy laughed. “I understand.” Billy walked calmly to the ladder, keeping his profile blank. Leeann was watching a movie there tonight with the other older kids. He and Ray would be the adults for those two hours.

Billy's heart thumped at the thought; he controlled the reaction, forcing himself to go slow enough to appear normal. *This is wrong. She's a kid.*

Billy shoved away the thoughts. Leeann wouldn't always be a kid. When she grew up, he wanted to be there. Until then, he would spend innocent time with her so they knew each other. When she was older, they would be a couple.

"Unless she changes her mind," a voice warned from nearby as he hit the top floor.

Billy grinned at Jennifer. "Easy there, Enforcer. I'm like Kyle. I want them willing."

Jennifer blushed, snickering. She liked Billy, and Leeann was already positive they were going to get married at some point. Jennifer was just exploring her new duties while reminding the men here that she was keeping track of things. She was also still a bit wound up from grilling Julia and getting nothing.

"It's good when you do that." Hilda would be roaming the floor during the movie, eager to catch anyone committing offenses. She scanned Jennifer's Eagle uniform and then her own blue jean jumper and t-shirt. "We need you."

Jennifer studied the den mother without regard for who had been in Safe Haven longer. "I see the lies you told to get accepted."

Hilda's cheeks became red. "I didn't lie to Adrian."

"Yes, you did, but that isn't what I mean. I meant to get into this country." Jennifer leaned

forward. “Are you really a good guy in all that? ‘Cause I’m starting to believe you weren’t.”

Hilda’s rage flooded the tunnel. She stiffened in severe offense. “How dare you!”

Jennifer shrugged, moving down the corridor. “I think the better question is, should *you* dare?” The teenager placed a hand on the rail, aware of the guards listening to the conversation. “If you’re the best that female leadership has to offer, Hilda, we’re all gonna pass.”

“What about you?!” Hilda clamped her lips shut, angry that the girl had been able to get her to say it aloud in front of witnesses.

“You guys are planning for me to take that job?” Jennifer began to laugh, loud and long. She was still expressing her mirth when she hit the next level.

Logan and Whitney, the guards on this level, stared at Hilda with raised brows and smirks, waiting for her reaction.

Hilda huffed off down the corridor, shoulders hunched in frustration.

The two guards snickered, not being quiet about it. And then they recorded it, positive Marc would want to know.

Billy slid into the movie room, glad to find he was the first one here. Instead of immediately getting things ready, he took the fragile card from his pocket to examine.

Happy Birthday, Billy. Love you.

It was a simple card from a prepubescent child, but it lit Billy's heart up and brought a huge smile to his lips. No one here knew his birthday. He hadn't told them. Leeann had cared enough to dig for the information.

"Hi, Billy!"

Billy's heart skipped again as Leeann's voice rang through his mind and went straight to his heart. *I'll love her forever. I'll have others until she's ready, but once she is, I'll never stray.* "Hi, Leelee."

The girl blushed at being called by his endearment in front of Missy. She also beamed.

The heavier, steadier furniture was on this floor. It had been easiest on the movers, but these chambers would get the most use and therefore, the most wear and tear. The heavy bookshelves and plush couches were favorites of everyone in camp. When shifts ended, members rushed to get the recliners and the best flat screen views. Billy motioned toward the shelves. "You ladies get the movie. First come, first pick."

Missy ran to the shelf, but Leeann came straight to Billy. "Did you like my card?"

Billy showed her his other hand, where the card was still clutched in a death grip. "I love it. Thank you for knowing what day this is."

Leeann took her hand from the pocket of her jumper. She held it out.

Billy took the cookie without seeing it. Only her eyes existed for him. He felt like he was drowning.

Leeann let go of him and the cookie, spinning toward the shelf as voices of the other kids echoed.

Billy recovered slower, barely getting the card into his pocket before a dozen preteens flooded the room with different hormones.

Across the din, Leeann smiled at him again. *Sorry.*

Billy chuckled. *Don't be. I'll build up a tolerance after a while.*

Leeann giggled. *No, you won't.*

Billy sighed happily and went to set up the DVD player for their choice. Even two hours of babysitting couldn't dim the mood.

“We did him a favor.” Logan and Whitney walked by on their round of this level.

Whitney, still not convinced it was a good idea, couldn't deny the happiness flowing from that space. Both Billy and the girl were throwing off those vibes like a dog shaking water. It was nice, unlike most of the emotions in this cave right now. Whitney didn't know exactly what was going on, but his stomach had cramped into a ball after dinner and hadn't eased yet. Something was coming and he had no idea what. It was terrifying.

6

“He knows a lot of stuff, Marc.” Kyle dropped down into the chair, delivering his report on Chauncey. “We need him to write it all down.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Jenny thought of it.” Kyle was proud of her. “After he gets it on paper, she still thinks he should be handled like we have the other prisoners we’ve had since coming down here.”

“I’ll take it into consideration. I’d really rather keep him, the way he’s kept us, you know?”

“Yes.” Kyle did. Chauncey had a handy talent, but he couldn’t be trusted. It was dangerous.

Marc sighed. “Get a place set for him in the singles’ room. We put strong guards in there. Have them record anything he says that we can use or need to know.”

“You got it.”

“Any problems with Hilda or Peggy?”

Kyle shook his head, smiling a bit. “Not a word for weeks now. It’s been good.”

“Yeah.”

Kyle heard the tone. “What is it?”

“No news is not always good news. It’s nothing, I’d bet...”

“But it’s bothering you, so it isn’t nothing.”

“Exactly. Keep an ear on that for me, will you? I’d be willing to bet they’ve tried to have conversations with people even if they didn’t have any success.”

“Be happy to. Anything else?”

“Nope.” Marc felt the mood improve. “Enjoy the fight.”

“Where are you going?”

Cody plopped his thumb into his mouth at his mother’s icy tone.

Lying on the cot she’d been assigned in the singles’ area, Julia rolled her eyes. “Go on. Stay away from the ladders.”

Cody left the thumb in place as he walked through the tall cave toward the exit. There were many people in the living area, but none of them spoke to him. The little boy assumed it was because of his mom. They didn’t talk to her either.

Cody stayed close to the wall, scared of the edge even though it had a rail with fencing. He went by the bathroom and continued toward the ladder. Cody peered up at Quinn, seeing the eagle on his jacket. It was pretty.

Quinn, on duty, smiled. “Hey, Cody. You okay?” The boy wore what the other kids here did—jeans and a shirt with a jacket—but his pale skin and bright eyes marked him a descendant upon sight. He didn’t need to do anything to be known for what he was.

Cody shook his head, speaking around his thumb. “She needs me. My dad’s busy.”

Quinn motioned Brandon to take his place, then held out an arm to Cody. “Want a lift?”

The boy smiled and stepped forward.

Quinn carried the child carefully down the ladder, not positive who he was talking about but

willing enough to help the kid. He liked Cody. The boy's mother was a different story. "Which floor?"

Cody's little shoulders shrugged.

"Okay. We'll search them all. Top or bottom?"

"Boffum."

Quinn gently took the boy's hand from his mouth. "That's better." He looked around, nodding to the guards on duty as they reached the next level. "This floor?"

Cody concentrated, then pointed down.

Quinn went to the ladder.

As they vanished into the depths of the cave, Cody waved at the sentries.

Gary smiled. "Cute kid."

Francis nodded. "Yeah. Quiet too, like his dad."

"Think he'll be like Marc?"

"Too soon to tell."

Quinn shifted Cody to his other hip as he reached the next ladder, this time not stopping. While holding the boy, it was almost as if he didn't need to wait for directions. He could sense the wave of misery, of desperation. He needed to get lower.

Olivia frowned. "What's up with that?"

Andrew, her partner for this shift, shrugged. "No clue. You think Quinn is doing something he shouldn't be?"

"Not after Marc knocking Jax down in rank this morning. He wouldn't take that chance."

Quinn, who was climbing slower after three levels, frowned. He hated it that the camp was

gossiping about his jealousy of Billy. He didn't want to feel that way. He just did.

Cody pointed as they reached the bottom of the ladder. "Vere." Cody squirmed down. "Fank vou."

Quinn followed the child to a rear storage area, not about to leave the kid down here on his own.

Cody stopped in the entryway to the corridor where Adrian had been staying.

Quinn froze behind him, spotting Candy sitting on the edge of the hole, legs dangling. Quinn brushed by Cody quickly, wishing he could use his radio to tell Marc they had trouble. Training on the new threat lights system hadn't happened yet.

Cody went to the ladder. When he reached the top rung, Olivia hefted him up and into a safe area. "Where's Quinn?"

"Helping the lady." Cody straightened his shirt. "She needs help."

Both guards rushed down the ladder as Cody continued to the storage area nearby. He entered the darkness without fear, going to a rear shelf that hid the woman lying on the floor.

"You're very brave. Thank you."

Cody sank down next to Angela and rested his cheek on her shoulder.

Angela felt the pain again of her missing child, but it was swamped by the confusion of the boy next to her. She shoved her agony aside to help him with his. "She might change."

Cody shook his head. "Momma's bad."

Angela didn't lie again. "We'll love you. Your dad already does."

Cody looked up at her. "Can you?"

"Easily." Angela smiled, sliding her arm around his shoulders. "Would you like that? I get lonely."

Cody nodded sadly. "Yes, please."

Angela's wound sealed a fraction as the boy wrapped his thin arms around her. "Thank you," she whispered.

Cody smiled. He brushed his dark hair from his eyes and used his free hand to finger Angela's thick black braid while they waited. The shade was identical to his own.

8

"She broke up with me."

Marc didn't spot anger or depression and was glad. Angela's notebooks had given him a timeline. They were nearing what she called the wildcard flip. He had asked and been told that meant fate got to play a card and they never knew what it would be, only that it was always lethal to them. Marc was very aware that they had entered that timeline now. They needed their people to stay alert, not to be love-stricken or heartbroken. *Like me.*

Daryl sat down across from Marc at the mess, aware of those around them listening. "I tried to talk to her, like you asked and she told me to move out of the couples' area!"

Marc grunted. "It was worth trying."

“She’s rough, Marc.” Daryl lowered his voice to a mutter. “She thinks Angie wants to kill her and the baby.”

“I know. That’s why I sent Millie to her. I believe she has Mountain Sickness.”

Daryl’s profile eased a little. “I didn’t think of that!”

“She needs time to calm down; we’ll get her up toward the top as soon as she’s okay to be out in general population. We’ll help her as much as we can.”

Daryl hesitated.

Marc shook his head. “No, you don’t have to. If it was over, it was over.”

“I didn’t want to abandon her that way, but she’s not stable. I’ve been noticing things.”

Marc spotted Billy and Jeremy coming into the mess and waved them over. “Let’s get the updates done so you guys can go to the lesson tonight. You’ll feel better after a good workout.”

All of the men grinned, pondering how enjoyable it would be to beat on Adrian. Marc was almost sorry he wasn’t going.

Jennifer came through the tunnel.

Marc waved her over. He’d sent her to interrogate Julia and Chauncey, hoping she could tell him once and for all if those two were trustworthy to be loose in camp.

“Definitely not.” Jennifer joined him. “I talked to her while she washed, but she went into the living

quarters and there were too many ears. Plus, the boy was there and I didn't want to scare him."

"What did she ask him?"

"The basics about you and Angela—where you met, how long you'd been a couple. Then she asked about the gifts you two have."

"What did he tell her?"

"He says he only tracks people, but he's lying. I don't think he told her, though."

"Why's that?"

"Because he wants to go to the island with us. He won't screw that up."

"What about her?"

Jennifer frowned. "I wouldn't let her roam anymore. Give her guards that do their jobs."

"You."

Jennifer shrugged, pleased. "Sure."

Marc gestured toward the small group of Eagles leaving the mess. "Are you going to watch the chaos?"

Jennifer smiled a bit. "No. I'm spending the entire night with my daughter."

Marc waved her off in approval and resumed his paperwork and meal.

9

"Are you about done?" Neil gently smoothed a curl behind Samantha's ear. She appeared dead on her feet. Neil hoped to get her out of here for some

fun soon. The camp party on the mess level would be a good start.

Samantha took in his new bruises and smiled tolerantly. Neil was preparing for the new training. He still hated Adrian, but he enjoyed having a challenge. Samantha assumed he would attend all the lessons his former teacher held.

“Just a couple more minutes. I have procedures to follow now.”

Neil realized something had happened and scanned. As he got to the desk, he realized Samantha was filling out nametags on the unused dosimeters. Horror rose in his throat. *Getting them ready for the camp.*

Neil studied the monitor, where the bonfire showed several people who appeared to be staggering around drunkenly. “They’re sick?”

“They’re dying. The numbers outside are now toxic after a few hours of exposure. They’re living in it.”

Neil took out his notebook and flipped to the rear pages, where he’d been given notes. “She told me to do something when the levels went up... Here it is.” He read the scribbled message. *“Turn off the monitors. You don’t need to watch what I’ve done.”*

Samantha sighed in relief. “Thank you. It was getting hard.”

Neil reached over and switched off the screens, now understanding why Samantha hadn’t allowed her relief in yet. That man was sitting outside the

door in confusion. “I’ll send him to do something else.”

“Good. After I finish these tags, I have to take the packs of iodine to Li to add to the food. We need to increase our intake right now.”

“I’ll do it. What else?”

“Unfortunately, not much.” She opened the next box of personal radiation monitoring badges. “All we can do is hope it only kills them.”

10

“It’s time for bed, children.” Hilda waved at Billy to shut off the second video the girls had slipped in when the first ended.

Billy did as instructed, but he hated to end their time together. He didn’t know when he would get to see Leeann again.

Leeann glowered at Hilda, bringing the German woman to a halt.

Hilda frowned, hands going to her hips.

Leeann began to pout, bottom lip quivering.

Billy started to step between them and froze when Leeann gave Hilda a pointed glare of triumph.

“What’s going on?”

“She says you won’t protect me,” Leeann told him, making Hilda wince. “You just proved you would.”

Beaten, Hilda jerked a hand at Billy. “You have ten minutes and then you bring her straight to her cot! I will be waiting.”

Billy thought quickly. “Don’t you need help getting them all down there?”

Hilda happily seized on that. “Ya. You come along now.”

Leeann pouted, but Billy was relieved and told her so silently. After he explained how much trouble them being alone could cause, Leeann marched up to him and took his hand.

Billy froze at the fiery bond now running up his arm and into his mind. “What did you do?”

Leeann let go of him. “We won’t see each other again for a long time. I had to make sure you don’t forget me too.”

Billy paused in fear and confusion. “What?”

Leeann skipped ahead to avoid the question, leaving Billy to round up the slower kids. Her words were echoing with a certainty that was horrifying.

In the movie room, Ray was closing it all up and putting things away. As he knelt down to retrieve a hair barrette from under the edge of a chair, two people walked by. Ray glanced over, recognizing the shoes. They were Dale’s sneakers.

“In here!”

Ray stayed down as the couple came in, laughing and hugging. When they began to kiss, Ray cleared his throat. “This chamber is off limits. If you get lost now, I won’t report it.”

Dale and Dennis found him on the floor; their reactions were the complete opposite. Dale was humiliated, crushed. Dennis was ecstatic.

Ray stiffly stood up, eyes locked onto Dale in fury. He wanted to hit his partner for the first time ever in their relationship. Ray's fist clenched.

Dennis immediately cowered, pushing Dale aside to get out of the way.

"We're through." Ray left the room. Then he left the floor. If he could have left the cave, he would have kept going until this fire, this lethal hatred, had burned itself out. As it was, he was locked in here with them.

Ray's gut boiled as he marched straight to the blanket-covered corner he shared with Dale. His mind flashed to waking this morning, to Dale's soft kiss on his cheek, to their words of never fighting again. He ripped the blankets down, not caring who fled or who watched.

When Ray was finished, all of his things were in two duffle bags and Dale's were untouched. The Eagle stuck his chin in the air and left under the knowing gazes of the people who had witnessed Dennis and Dale's romance, but hadn't told him. The two weren't being subtle about their attraction whenever Ray wasn't around.

Ray went to the other end of the corridor, to the singles' area. He paused in the entryway, cheeks scarlet with embarrassment.

"Over here." Daryl recognized the expression since he'd just been wearing it himself.

Ray took the empty cot by Daryl in relief. "Thanks."

“Sure.” Daryl grunted. “Bitches, man.”

Ray paused, almost smiling. “Yeah. That’s exactly it. Bitches.”

The two new bachelors shared a bitter laugh as they got settled into their new roles as single men. Daryl hadn’t been out of it for long, but Ray had been with Dale since the war. When tears threatened, he sat on the edge of the cot and began to converse with Daryl about whatever topic came to mind.

After a bit, Daryl realized what Ray was doing and understood he would be able to do the same when things got rough. Daryl allowed Ray to use him for support. *Why not? No one else in this tomb understands how much I already miss her.*

11

“I can’t find Cody.”

Marc didn’t glance up from his paperwork, but he did send out his grid to scan for the child.

Julia leaned on the table. “Where is my son?”

Marc pushed deeper. “Bottom level.” He scowled at her. “Why is *our* son in the bottom level alone? Are you trying to get him killed? There are gaps and holes down there, not to mention bugs and the occasional angry ant.”

Julia flushed, arms crossing defensively. “He had to use the bathroom. He didn’t return.”

“You let him go alone?” Marc’s anger grew. “Without worrying over the strangers he might run into or the dangers he might face? Some mother.”

Julia stuck her nose in the air. “I was told we were safe here. Is that not true?”

Marc sighed, trapped. “Yes, it’s true, but I can’t control bad people and you should know that since you are one yourself!”

Julia realized Marc had gotten too angry for conversation. She turned to go.

“Leave them alone.” Marc recognized the other hot spot on his grid. “He’s with Angie. She’ll look after him.”

Julia’s face flooded with anger.

Marc shrugged. “Go talk to her about it. When they find your body, that’ll make things easier for me.”

Julia left the mess, ignoring the frowns and grumbling at the way she was treating their leader. She didn’t care about any of them, Marc included. She cared about Cody. That was it.

“She’s a strange one.” Doug nodded as he went by the table with Roy and Romeo.

Marc grunted in agreement, smiling at the boys who stared at him wide-eyed. He didn’t know why, but he doubted it was anything to worry over. “Want to join me?”

Doug grinned happily. “That’d be great.”

Doug settled the boys with their trays and went back for his own, leaving Marc with the shy kids. He smiled again. “You boys okay now?”

“We’re good,” Roy answered.

“Are you gonna kill Uncle Mikel?” Romeo asked abruptly, bringing the noise of the mess down several notches.

Marc thought of Cynthia’s paper, the accusations, and then the future. He nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. He farts a lot.”

Laughter rolled across the mess, allowing Marc to relax. He liked telling the truth. It always worked out better than a lie.

If only that were true. A few tables over, Kenn sighed. *If only that were true.*

12

“Boss wants to know if you’re done with the evaluation of the cave.” Kenn joined Adrian and David on the second level. The two men had clipboards and were scribbling notes as they studied the new lighting system.

Once he’d taken Angela to the training space, Adrian had returned to his other duties to show people he wasn’t going to try riding her coattails into forgiveness. He wasn’t positive where she was right now, but he hoped it was with Tracy in the mess, having a public evening meal. “Shortly. He’ll have it before I sleep.”

“Good enough.” Marc had asked for it by morning. “Need any help tonight?”

Adrian grinned, getting a flicker of their old connection. “That would be great.”

Kenn nodded to David and left, unable to deny the need to serve Adrian that still existed. The Marine went toward the lab to check on Tonya, not worrying over it. There was nothing wrong with him still helping Adrian as long as his goals were the same as Marc's goals.

Adrian caught the thought and lost his good mood. He motioned toward the lights. "Tell me."

David frowned at the coldness Adrian was using to hide his hurt feelings. "You don't need them anymore."

Adrian sighed. "Yes, I do. Tell me what these lights mean."

"Red is a fire," David recited in boredom. "Green is all clear. Orange is an unknown problem."

"And blue?"

"Total alert for the entire camp."

"Good. We'll be posting notes and signs around these so people know which button to hit."

"Does it connect to all the floors?"

"It does now." Adrian led them to the top level. "Theo's crew finished it up this afternoon. Since we don't have radios right now, this will help us keep track of issues."

"Can't we use a short-wave frequency?"

"Not yet. The Mexicans are close enough to pick it up."

David followed his mentor tiredly to the top level. They'd been touring all day, fighting off hostility and silverfish in the dark, damp corners. David was ready to be done.

“I’ve got that class in a few minutes anyway. I want to hit the lockers and then you can take the notes to Marc.”

David forced an eager attitude. “Can do, Boss.”

Adrian tried to hurry in the training room. The few fighters in here right now were putting off violent waves that forced him to skip evaluating the rear wash area and the storage crevice where they were keeping the gear. He didn’t believe it would matter much. He’d noted what was important. “I’m headed to the mess for a mug and then I’ll be up here for a couple hours. Deliver those to the big chief and then you’re off duty.”

David yawned, taking Adrian’s clipboard. “You’ll find me in my cot, snoring, unless they smother me.”

Adrian doubted sleep would be happening anytime soon, but didn’t say so. After a long day of labor, Eagles felt like they could drop off the instant their heads touched their pillows, but that wasn’t usually the case. Even mundane work had to be gone over mentally, and the brain enjoyed doing it while the rest of the body was stationary. He’d often found Eagles up in the wee hours, sorting through paperwork for a form they’d forgotten a question on. Adrian had encouraged that. After a while, people did it automatically and the good ones corrected their future behavior.

Adrian yawned. The class might be a good place to catch a nap if no one showed up. He hadn’t returned to collect the clipboards so he didn’t know

if anyone had signed up. It might be a very boring night.

Adrian shrugged. *I don't care if it is. I'm with my camp. The rest is secondary. I'm home.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Laughter

1

“**T**his is boring.”

Charlie looked over to find Tracy staring toward the hall steps to topside. The exit was patrolled by three rookie Eagles. Thanks to the avalanche and then blowing the tunnels, this top entrance was finally the only one still open. Safe Haven would be trapped in here if anything happened to this level.

Charlie checked his watch. It was evening snack time for most of the camp, but some members had activities or training lessons on this top floor. One of them was Adrian.

“Three more minutes?” Charlie had brought her up here on the pretense of helping with his shooting, but she’d quickly discovered that he didn’t need it. After half an hour of practicing on wall targets in the farthest training chamber from the stairs, she had lost interest. But Charlie hadn’t. He’d felt her restlessness days ago. When he’d spotted the name on the class roster, he’d begun gathering gear.

Tracy sighed. “Okay.” She didn’t ask why he was here or why she was along. She was trying not to let her mind get the best of her. When things got dark and quiet, she got scared. Charlie usually kept

her occupied, but tonight he'd insisted they gear up for paintball so he could practice without having to register for the big training room.

"How many signed up?"

"Almost a dozen. Marc sent three others. He wants them calmed down or sent out."

"You got it."

Tracy and Charlie went still and silent as voices came down the hall. Kenn and Adrian were the first people to arrive for the kai class that was in the center impression along this corridor. Neither of them noticed the couple.

"Okay." Adrian scanned the training sheet, hiding his pleasure at being here. "We'll get his picks out of the way and then do evals. Angela wants to know where the Eagles are."

"All of them? That's a tall order."

"Yep. Should keep me busy for a while."

Kenn nodded, but didn't say if he liked that or not. He was still playing it cool with his former idol. Kenn suspected Marc had put them together to test his new loyalty and he didn't like it.

The two men stopped at the entrance to the large training area that was one door up from Tracy and Charlie.

"Any notes or messages?"

"One from each."

Adrian sighed. "Give me *his* first. Might be the easiest."

"No fraternizing during the class or sucking up to get into anyone's good graces."

“Never did that before and it wouldn’t work for me now. Hers?”

“You leave the door open tonight.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Kenn hesitated. “I think she wants them all to know you’re here, doing FND.”

“Easy enough.”

Kenn and Adrian paused to let Shawn and Missy by. The little girl was still having trouble sleeping in the common chamber. Shawn had gotten into the habit of bringing her up here in the evenings to settle her down with cartoons or reading. Kenn liked the kid. She refused to lie to anyone. That was so hard to do in any environment that Kenn was impressed the child was sticking to it.

Kenn smiled when the girl gave Adrian an ugly glare and then turned it on him. “Good night.”

Missy rolled her eyes. “You’ll see.”

Kenn frowned. *I don’t like the sound of that.*

Shawn led Missy into the reading area without acknowledging either man. Missy had her favorite blanket and her bunny slippers, but her pink pjs set it off for Shawn. She was a baby. She needed to be protected.

“You got it all set up or should I?” Adrian sensed Shawn’s coldness. Missy, he didn’t know, but the power she held was being used on all of them. He could feel the peeks into his mind and into Kenn’s. She was strong.

Kenn flipped on the power, being careful with the wires connected to the switch. They didn’t have

covers over most things yet. “Mats are down and chairs have been stacked.”

Adrian admired the lighting and equipment. “We’re all set then.”

“Just need students.”

Adrian was more nervous about his reception from the Eagles than he was willing to show, but the thrill of being back with his camp was the strongest emotion right now. Later, if no one showed up for this class, he would be crushed in a way that even Angela’s brutal rejections hadn’t been able to accomplish. “Might be a boring hour.”

Not even close. Charlie gestured Tracy to follow him further into the dark room that was being used for overflow training or those who wanted to exercise.

“What are you doing?” Tracy knelt down next to Charlie when he stopped to dig through his kit.

“I have fifty paint balls. You?”

Tracy counted, frowning. Charlie’s excitement was clear. “Thirty. Why?”

Charlie sent her the image that had brought him up here when he really preferred to have nothing to do with either of the men talking in the tunnel.

Tracy shook her head, mouth opening...

Charlie didn’t give her a chance to protest. He checked his gun as he walked toward the doorway. “He’ll take me down quick... Unless I have a partner.”

Tracy stood there, unable to deny the excitement. Since the attack, she hadn't done anything Eagle related or even much physical activity. She hadn't cared that her skills were rusting or that other people were getting ahead of her. *I've been blaming my job!*

She looked toward the doorway, where Charlie had paused in the shadows to wait for her. His expression said he understood, but she was wrong and he was going to prove that to her.

Do I want him to? Do I still want to do this? Tracy sighed. *Maybe. I need to know how it feels now. If it hurts too much, I'll officially resign.* If she could handle it, she would think about staying in. *He must know me pretty well to be able to predict my reaction to this.*

Tracy gave Charlie a small smile he returned in relief. There was also a bit of arrogance that he had been able to guess what she would choose. It was sexy without trying.

“That’s dirty.” Tracy hurried to catch up.

“Yeah. You ready?”

“What happens after you do it?”

“We run to the mess, dropping gear as we go, and try to blend in. When people see who it was, I think they’ll hide us.”

Tracy tried not to giggle. “Okay.”

Charlie knelt down, aiming for Adrian. Kenn was still next to him and there were students coming in now, making it a challenge. The teenager waited patiently for the right moment.

Adrian was surprised at the polite nods from some of the senior men who'd signed up for his class. He had expected lower level members with bad attitudes. Adrian didn't speak to any of them, feeling things out first. The mood was tense but not ugly. He took hope from that. He'd been looking forward to this moment since learning Angela had plans to bring him back into the camp. Once he was useful again, the hatred would stop and his light could once again shine and protect them.

Neil and Kyle entered the training room without the respectful nod. Neil had been unable to resist the workout Adrian would give him. Kyle couldn't find another excuse for the conversation he wanted to have after the others had gone. Everyone else had come to either watch the fights or check their skills for the next tests.

Morgan and Greg were the last two students to come through the hall. The two Special Forces men wore foreboding scowls. Neither of them had forgiven him.

Getting a clear spot as the two fighters glared at their former leader, Charlie pulled the trigger...right as Allan came out of the training space.

Blue paint splattered against his shoulder, spraying Adrian's arm.

"Ow!" Allan spun around, grabbing his shoulder. "What the hell was that?"

Realizing he'd trapped them, Charlie slid deeper into the shadows.

"Uh-uh!" Tracy shoved him back out, determined that he would take the heat for this, not her.

Panicking, Charlie lifted the bulky gun and fired again. If he was going down this fast, he at least wanted to get Adrian.

Allan ducked and rolled inside, out of the crossfire.

Too late to get into the safety of the training chamber in time, Morgan and Greg were splattered with blue paint.

"Come on!" Charlie grabbed Tracy's hand, dragging her by the surprised Eagles with a pointed glare at Adrian.

Morgan slung paint from his arms. "Why you little...!"

Adrian cleared his throat, wiping away the light splashes. "That was meant for me. Sorry." Adrian motioned toward the mats. "Paint washes off."

Tracy's giggle floated down the hall, convincing the senior men to let it go. Hearing her happy was wonderful.

Charlie thought so too. So much that he made another rash choice as they passed the small shower area that was for people who had finished a workout or class. Shane, in flip-flops and a large red towel, was leaning against the next entrance—the reading room. Brittani and her group, along with several camp members, were enjoying the quiet and the

selection of books. Shane was staring in wistful awe at the black woman sprawled across the plush recliner with a copy of Moby Dick.

Shane heard running feet. As he turned, a cool draft sent chills over his bare legs.

“I got it!”

“No way!”

Still holding hands, Charlie and Tracy fled down the long hall, cackling wildly.

Shane, realizing his towel was gone, turned around to find everyone in the reading chamber staring at him. He dropped a hand over his shriveling parts, flushing scarlet. “Excuse me, will you?” He took off running after the couple. “I’m gonna kill you!”

Gus looked at Brittani, noting her small smile. “These people aren’t right.”

Tracy, caught up in the fun, fired at the naked man chasing them. Instead of being traumatized at the sight of his fury and his big body, Tracy was empowered. Her aim was rusty, however. The shot went into the TV area, where Shawn had been reading a book to Missy in hopes that she would get sleepy. Pink paint flew through the room, coating his jacket hanging on the wall.

“What’s that?” Jerked into alertness, Missy’s head came up fast, slamming into Shawn’s chin.

“Damn!” Shawn lurched backward, hands coming up to clutch his skull as stars and tiny flickers of hot pain danced across his vision. Hitting the arm of the couch, he flailed helplessly. Losing

the fight, he fell over the edge and thumped heavily to the carpet.

“You!” Hilda came by an instant later, shouting and pointing at Shane. “Clothes! You put on some clothes!”

Shane and Hilda moved away from the TV chamber.

Shawn rubbed his chin and jaw, wincing at the fresh flare of pain.

“Your big head hurt me!” Missy stared at him over the arm of the couch. “Say you’re sorry!”

“I am.” Shawn groaned, dazed. “I really am.”

Missy gave him another reproachful glare and then climbed back into her blankets. “I didn’t know you were gonna be so much work.”

Shawn stared at the couch in startled pain. “I’m sorry?”

“That’s better.”

Shawn began to explain it and then stopped, slowly standing. He wasn’t sure he could handle that right now.

More shouting echoed through the tunnels.

“Try again.” Shawn rubbed his jaw. “Hilda will quiet them down.”

Missy pointed at the light above them. “Bright.”

Shawn obediently got up to switch off the light, able to hear remnants of the chaos as Hilda tried to convince Shane to get dressed. She insisted on accompanying him, bringing more shouts of unfairness.

Ahead of them, Charlie and Tracy had reached the stairs, but the couple hadn't counted on the boredom of the Eagles. The noise had brought half a dozen guards from the third level who were now standing at the top of the stairs, staring at Shane in amused surprise.

Charlie spun Tracy toward a small cubby to reload. "Get set. We have to go back."

Tracy was having too much fun to protest. The guns they were using weren't harmful and the paint was washable.

Charlie was determined to get Adrian. If that meant running back and forth until he got a clear shot or they were captured, that's what he was going to do. "Let's go."

Zack and Nancy spun around as Tracy and Charlie burst out of the shadows, but it was too late to evade the pink and blue balls that hit their legs and shoulders.

The laughing pair ran down the hall during the shock, shoving by Hilda and Shane.

"See! They started it!" Busy arguing with Hilda, Shane didn't see Tracy stop and take aim.

"Ow!" Shane jumped forward as he was hit in the ass.

"Tattletale!"

Thrilled, Charlie tugged her down the hall.

"Here they come again." Gus tensed. "Maybe we should go downstairs."

Tracy and Charlie ran by the open doorway, followed by three Eagles.

“Duck!”

Blue paint sprayed the wall of the reading room as one of the men was hit.

“We’re probably safer where we are.” Brittani was smiling. They’d all been cooped up in this mountain for a while now. Paintball sounded like fun. She got up and went to watch, not worried about being caught in the crossfire.

Still near the doorway after he’d turned off the light for Missy, Shawn stared in shock as Shane, naked except for one pink cheek, ran after Tracy and Charlie. “Idiots.” Determined to get Missy to sleep, Shawn walked toward the couch.

“Give me that towel!” Shane’s voice carried loudly through the tunnels and chambers. “No. Wait! Don’t shoot me there!”

Distracted, Shawn’s foot caught an edge of the rug. He flailed again for balance and lost it, falling over the couch and onto the coffee table.

Startled, Missy began screaming.

“I’m sorry!”

In the next room, Missy’s scream was chilling.

It echoed as if someone was being murdered, causing the training to stop before bodies did. Adrian took Neil’s knee in a bad place. He dropped to his own, groaning.

“Damn.” Kenn hurried over. “Can I do anything?”

“Your radio,” Adrian grunted, unable to move. “Key...your radio.”

Kenn leaned down, hitting the button.

“Making me...leave the door open...was cruel and unusual punishment!”

Angela’s hard chuckle echoed back.

“What’s going on down there?!” Marc was busy supervising the mess. With hundreds of people here to eat and many of them new, it was a bad time for leadership to leave. He also wasn’t happy about radio silence being broken for such a trivial matter.

“An unprovoked paintballing, de-towelings, butt decorating, and emasculations. Just the usual.”

Aware that most of his Eagles were tied up or off duty, Marc hit the button on his radio. “FND on level one for off duty Eagles. Quiet things down.”

Billy, Jax, and Quinn immediately tore out of the mess, shoving each other into walls to get the lead.

“They didn’t ask what it was.” Wade was Marc’s shadow.

“Nope.” Marc snickered. “They’ll remember it next time.”

Wade had already gotten an update from one of the men the pair had shot. He snorted, thinking of how well both Charlie and Tracy handled their real guns. “Five guys shot so far. Doesn’t say much for security on that level.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Marc took out his notebook and wrote that down. He would have to punish Charlie and Tracy, but it had exposed a weakness, so two good things would come from it. Angela would like it that Tracy had come out of her shell, no matter the reason why. So did Marc.

Fighting the urge to watch, Marc switched his attention back to the camp members who were waiting for his answers on the questions that kept coming. How had Angela stood this all the time?

I enjoyed it, Angela answered tiredly, hard amusement gone. *I like the job. You don’t.*

Marc couldn’t argue that point. He didn’t try. Instead, he sent her the image of a happily snacking mess of survivors, knowing she would be comforted.

Thank you.

Anything for you.

More than pleased, Angela used a small bit of her recovering energy to bring the shield up around the mountain. It glowed vividly for a few seconds over every doorway, corridor, and chamber, bathing her people in peace. She couldn’t give that to herself, but she could do it for them.

Marc felt the mood shift and recognized the cause and effect, but he couldn’t duplicate that. Only Angela gave the camp this sense of safety. Not even Adrian had provided this level of protection and defense. Angela would do anything, risk anything, to keep them safe and when things went

wrong, she was always there to take the blows for them. Her weakness for Adrian was her only flaw.

Marc glanced around the mess, but his thoughts went to the training class and Adrian's strangled words over the radio. He doubted the fun was over up there yet. All the guards were lower level because of so many senior fighters being on that floor for Adrian's class. Charlie would take advantage of it. As long as Tracy kept laughing, the boy would keep shooting.

2

"Are they training or playing?"

"Both, I believe."

Instead of her being mad about Gus witnessing the Eagles having fun, Brittani stared at Shane, who had been stopped in his tracks by Zack.

"At least put the towel on." Zack didn't want to listen to Shane's complaints about Charlie and Tracy. Hilda had gone to get Marc.

"Duck!"

"There they are!"

Ahead of them, another group of Eagles was shot and began shouting.

Jax and Quinn came up the ladder with paintball guns in hand. They'd seen the defeated Eagles on their way up and detoured to grab their gear, hoping it wasn't over by the time they got here.

In the training space, David edged closer to the door where Shawn was taking Missy to the

bathroom. The child appeared calm now, but Shawn didn't.

Jax and Quinn ran into the storage area right after Tracy and Charlie, but the clever woman remembered her training and spun around to shoot out the light.

Paint splattered over the bulb, dimming instead of breaking it. Sizzling sounds came from the hot glass.

Tracy dove under a stack of boxes and then crawled away from the noise she'd made, hearing them tearing boxes from neatly stacked lines.

Across the room, Charlie did the same. He also used his gift to track the two Eagles who had gone quiet.

Tracy edged back toward the door; positive Charlie was doing the same. They'd been trained not to trap themselves and this cavity didn't have another exit.

Charlie met her at the end of the boxes, waving her to go first.

Behind them, Jax spotted the movement. "There!"

Charlie and Tracy both fired, splattering the men and then taking off out of the tunnel.

Shawn, coming from the bathroom with Missy, jerked toward the wall, shielding the little girl with his body.

Jax and Quinn returned fire without checking for a clear line; green paint splattered all over Shawn's spine.

“Oh, come on!”

Seeing the door was still open, Charlie fired into the training room, laying down a spray pattern.

Adrian jerked as paint hit the side of his neck, putting him in the wrong place for Kyle’s swing. The fist landed on his chin instead of his palm. Adrian staggered, arms flailing.

Also hit with paint and scrambling to get to cover, David ran into Adrian and knocked them both to the mat in a painful heap.

The other fighters in the training space ducked behind equipment and stacks of mats, laughing.

On the covered edge of the door, Kenn kicked it shut. Adrian had been punished enough for one night. *But I got off clean. No paint, no punches, no bleeding.*

David lifted his head to find Adrian. “We match now. My piss is blue.”

Kenn burst out laughing.

“Billy just came up the ladder!” a voice called excitedly. “We have them trapped!”

The sound of paintballs pinging off the walls and door echoed, proving Quinn wrong.

Adrian and Kenn winced, exchanging looks.

“You think he wants both of us?”

Adrian sighed. “Unlikely. You and the others can probably leave.”

Man, it feels good to not be a target. Kenn spun around and banged into the closed door with his nose. Blood rolled over his lips and chin as he dropped to the floor.

“Send Mitchel out and we’ll spare the rest of you!”

“Too late for that,” Kenn crawled away from the door. He looked up at Adrian. “You had to teach them to shoot first and talk second.”

The Eagles in the room smirked and chuckled hard, but they also stayed under cover.

“We’re serious. Send him out or we’re coming in!”

Adrian sighed resignedly, going to the door. He opened it while bracing for a blow.

Charlie and Tracy started to open fire when yellow paint began to pelt Adrian, driving him back into the training chamber. More paint splattered the room, spraying Kenn’s boots and David’s knees.

Charlie lowered his weapon, turning. “Who stole my thunder?”

“That would be me.” Marc dropped from the ledge behind them. He’d donned the gear Angie had been gathering for the guards during their time in the mountain. The new stonewashed fatigues hadn’t been given out yet, but Marc was sure they were about to be very popular. “You were stealing my target.”

Eagles laughed in gasps and wheezes, some of them crying.

Charlie and Tracy joined the others with smiles, weapons now pointed at the ground.

Marc lifted his gun and emptied it into their legs, arms, shoulders, and chests.

Tracy cowered under the onslaught, arm coming up as Charlie attempted to fire back. Marc hurried forward to place his boot lightly on the boy's wrist. "You're out. It's over."

Marc scanned the training room. Kenn and David had hit the deck again when he'd begun shooting. Adrian still hadn't risen. All of the other guys were splattered, disheveled, and twitchy, waiting for the next shot to come or the next blow to land.

"Good class." Marc gestured. "Keep it up."

Adrian groaned. After the kick he'd taken, that wouldn't happen for a while.

"All the better." Marc grinned. "Beers in the mess in one hour. The attackers are serving."

3

"Got a minute?"

Adrian was sitting on a chair near the mats that were covered in pink, blue, and yellow paint smeared into odd shapes. "What's up?"

Kyle waited until the last two Eagles left. "What happens to an Enforcer when they can't enforce anymore?"

Adrian gestured toward the other chair, now taking a pain pill from his pocket.

Kyle grinned as he realized Adrian had expected to be hurting when this night was finished.

"Not like this." Adrian sighed. "I think Marc's balls were rigged."

Kyle chuckled again, but inside, he waited tensely for the answer.

“Some of them do fine with retirement. Most don’t make it that far. They usually die doing their jobs.” Adrian took a pack of baby wipes from the desk by the chairs and then put them back. Wipes weren’t going to handle this mess.

“Autumn is asking questions about her father and about why her mom gets sad.”

Adrian winced. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t usually happen so fast, but our children are surrounded by others who are learning new things every day. It spreads.”

“Are you saying their gifts can transfer?”

“No, but they can help kick in the gifts of others around them, depending on what theirs are. Puberty is the normal age line for most physical gifts, though. The mental conversations are actually very handy when they’re little.”

Kyle concurred with that part. “Is there any way to slow it?”

“Keep them away from others who have gifts. But that’s impossible down here and not good for her anyway. You know that.”

“I do. I’d already considered it and ruled it out.”

“Good. If you isolate her, she might believe she’s bad and then become that way because of the perception.”

Kyle moved toward the exit. “Thank you for your time.”

Adrian grunted, body throbbing in several places. He was happy to help the mobster, happy to help the camp period.

Adrian forced himself to his feet, wincing and groaning at the pain. His groin flared with agony as he John Wayne walked to the exit. He couldn't wait to climb down the ladder. "Maybe I'll fall off. It's gotta be better than this."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Tears

“In the dark of night, the wildcard flipped.”

1

“**I**t comes.”

Marc smothered a chill, glancing up at the doorway to the empty brig. “What?”

Now wearing the same clothes as their hosts, Natoli and his men had kept to themselves while being locked in the mountain. Other than the day they’d handled the train people, Marc hadn’t seen them the entire time. He’d assumed the Indians were practicing their natural skills and avoiding possible trouble with the camp. Marc had been surprised they’d returned the night of Angela’s fight with Vlad.

“Get to her. It comes.” Natoli marched from the doorway, moving fast.

Behind him, the hall was littered with people walking through the cave to get ready for sleep.

“Hey!” Marc went to the hall, noting Adrian’s head peeking out of the shower entrance. “What is it?”

Natoli didn’t stop in his quick march toward the rear of this level. “Death.”

Adrian entered the hall. “For who?!”

“For all of us, Adrian Mitchel.” Natoli vanished.
“But especially for those *you* love.”

Marc and Adrian immediately thought of Angela and took off running.

Fucking assassins! Marc swore furiously. *I’m piking this one. I don’t care if it is inside with us. I’m piking it and then I’ll make every camp member walk by it!*

Adrian understood Marc’s outrage, but he didn’t believe Marc’s Indian friend would have come to him if there were an assassin with Angela. The Indian would have saved her first, and then reported it. Natoli and his men truly were Shadow Warriors in Adrian’s opinion. The two who’d been following him around the cave had blended in to the stone and people perfectly. If not for their occasional reflections on something he was doing, Adrian wouldn’t have known the braves were there.

Marc slid down the ladder, using the metal, outer part to avoid splinters. He hurried toward the medical bay, frowning at all the calm chatter and relaxed people moving through the corridors. It didn’t feel like there was a threat here.

He drew attention when he pulled his gun and slipped into the dark medical bay entrance. People hurried out of the crossfire.

The guards on the ladder and detention center observed nervously from their posts, not sure what to do since Marc hadn’t waved them over.

“Where is she?!”

Marc’s shout brought them on a run.

The doctor and his students quacked unhelpfully about how Angela never slept here anymore and barely spent time here and why didn't he already know that.

“Find Greg! He's her shadow.”

The small group of men spread out as Marc used his grid to search for Angie. She'd been in the bottom level earlier... “She still is!” *Maybe she needed help all this time. When Julia came, I should have gone to her then.*

Maybe. Adrian looked at Marc. *But she isn't scared.*

You can feel her emotions?! Why didn't you tell me that?!

Adrian stayed on Marc's heels, but he didn't answer that question. “She's sad right now. Incredibly sad.”

Marc realized Angela might be the danger and increased his pace. *Don't do it! Please don't do this.*

2

“Come on!”

“We're in trouble already!” Tracy protested, but she let Charlie pull her from the living quarters where they'd been grounded and then tug her toward a storage hall. She didn't realize her usual fear of the dark had been replaced with annoyance. “We're gonna get put in the brig this time.”

Charlie moved faster, heart beating wildly. “Hurry!”

Tracy got the idea something was wrong and stopped resisting. She kept pace with him, but he didn't release the death grip on her wrist. "What is it?"

"I don't know. I can't see yet." Charlie jerked her into the pitch-black crevice as a loud crunching noise sounded through the cavern. It was as if every radio had switched on all at once and then shut right back off.

Tracy let Charlie put her into the washroom where pile after pile of dirty laundry waited for the washing crews. "What are—"

"Sh..."

"But we should tell your dad!"

Charlie placed himself between her and the exit. "He's sensing it. He'll get to my mom."

"Is it more assassins?"

Charlie struggled to force the barrier open in his mind, wanting to warn people, but he couldn't because he didn't know what the problem was. He'd never felt anything like it. The sense of death hadn't been this thick even when they were fighting Donner and people were dying daily. "Stay close to me."

Tracy was suddenly terrified. She came forward to wrap her arms around his lean hips. She rested her cheek against his stiff shoulder, shivering as a thick sensation of doom swept over her. "We're not all coming out of this one, are we?"

“I don’t think so...” He gasped, finally getting a clear glimpse of the future barreling toward them from the west. “But you will!”

Charlie spun around and shoved her into a pile of the clothes. He fell on top of her, locking their mouths and their minds. *Come fly with me. Neither of us needs this memory.*

Tracy responded eagerly, not ready to face another horror in the darkness. She wrapped her arms around his neck and let him bury them in the clothes on the floor and the thick, protective fog that was filling his powerful mind.

Around the couple, Natoli and his men were doing much the same. They hadn’t been noticed by Charlie and Tracy. They were already under the piles of coats, shirts, and pants, mentally chanting rings of protection in hopes of surviving what shouldn’t be survivable.

3

“Come here! Hurry!” Angela and Cody slid into the farthest corner of the storage crevice as the stone began to shake. She shielded the child with as much of her body as she could, crooning to him when he began to cry.

Dust and dirt fell from the walls and ceiling as the stone started to vibrate. The tremors they’d had before were light and short, but everyone knew this was different from the instant it began. The sound was harder, thicker, deeper in the ground.

The mountain around them groaned as the tremor increased. Pictures rattled from walls; dishes slid from shelves. Cabinets fell over, crashing to the floor to spray people with shrapnel.

Lights flickered as the rock shifted, snapping power cords that sent darkness through sections of the cave. Startled cries began to echo from every level.

Marc had one concern. He flew through the tunnels, shoving by people to reach the ladder. He had no words to calm his camp in this moment. There weren't any. "Get to Angie!"

Adrian, still layered in paint, was shaken off his feet as the rumbling thickened, but he used the motion to swing onto the ladder. He gripped it lightly, letting his body weight carry him swiftly to the bottom. Ignoring the wooden splinters in his palms, he landed in a heap, arm coming up as part of the wall fell.

Marc leapt over the debris pile, zigzagging through falling rocks and dirt to reach the storage area. As he got there, Adrian appeared, covered in dirt.

"Blocked!" Marc shined the light on his belt as dust fell on them and sound became distorted.

Adrian would have gone forward to start digging a hole into the storage chamber, but Marc pulled him back as another part of the wall collapsed and piled up where Adrian had been standing.

Waves of dust from the impact slammed into the men, coating them in filth and tiny cuts. The ceiling

above them cracked from the violent shaking and gave way.

Adrian tried to shove Marc clear, but it wasn't far enough. Both men were coated in falling rock and debris.

Coming from the bathroom next door, Greg hurried toward the fallen men.

Clumsily climbing down the ladder to reach the bottom tunnel, Julia lost her balance and slipped, falling straight down.

The third level crumbled. It slammed into the bottom floor, crushing anyone who wasn't under a ledge or another strong shelter. Pieces of the radio chamber and security area fell in front of the storage room, blocking it further.

In the rear of the crevice, Angela held the boy tighter and tried not to feel the agony of her people as they died.

4

In the animal area, Bobby held onto the wall and tried to stay on his feet. Debris fell from the levels above like deadly rain as he waited for the quake to stop... "Hey!"

Bobby was grabbed from behind and shoved. As he fell down the deep chasm that had opened, he stared up at his killer in shocked betrayal.

The vet jumped back as people below came toward the body. He spun around to leave the scene of the crime and found Ray standing there.

Ray had been hit by falling debris, causing blood to run over one eye. He gaped at the vet, unable to believe what he was witnessing. He staggered forward, hand out...

The vet shoved him away from the edge, hard. Ray slammed into the stone wall and dropped onto the ledge the vet had been hiding on when he'd spotted his opportunity to get rid of an assassin.

The rumbling came again, a second tremor the vet assumed, but Chris kept moving. Others could be dealt with the same way during this chaos. He wasn't going to waste this chance to do his job.

5

"In here!" Peter shoved his men into the narrow crevice behind the guard booth. He and the two soldiers had been following Marc, hoping to earn points by helping him out somehow, but the ladder was gone now and the hole had widened into a huge gap that couldn't be scaled in the flickering panic.

Boothe and James squeezed into the crevice with the guards and a few of the camp members who had already taken cover here.

"Move back!" Peter spotted another group coming from a corridor that hadn't been blocked off yet. He ran out to help them with the elderly man and woman, recognizing Brittani's mother and father.

Behind them, Gus and his brothers were carrying people who couldn't run fast enough.

The walls trembled thinly, dust falling...

“Get away from there!” The ledge collapsed heavily onto the group, knocking several of them down. Gus and his brothers shoved those in front of them to safety, lunging with their precious packages.

Peter pulled Gus’s big arm, trying to rebalance the big descendant who was tilting toward the crack. Peter grunted, yanking them onto the floor as the rest of the corridor collapsed.

Gus shoved Missa into Peter’s arms and twisted around. “Gotta go back!”

Joseph took the terrified female as Peter held onto Gus. “You can’t! It’s gone.”

Gus stared in horror at the twenty-foot gap where the tunnel had been. On the other side, shadows moved and screamed as the quake continued to rip their lives apart.

6

Nancy screamed as she fell through the deep crevice that opened up in the washroom. She braced for death.

Shane saw her and dove without thinking. The fast action allowed him a lucky leap that slammed him into her falling body and carried them both into the now open cavity of the washroom.

They hit the floor and rolled into the debris piles already there.

Nancy groaned, being pelted with falling rocks. “Help!”

Shane didn’t react at all. He was unconscious from hitting his skull.

Nancy crawled over to him, aware of pain and blood in various places on her body. “Shane?”

Nancy saw something moving through the dirt and dust, crawling toward her... “Help!”

The ants came through the crevice in a small horde, chittering angrily.

7

On level three, Samantha curled under the edge of the desk in the weather room as the rock fell, collapsing the chamber. As the bottom dropped out, all she could do was scream.

In the corridor by the weather room, Neil and Jeremy had come running. They were knocked into what remained of the radio cavity as the rest of the floor fell onto the level below.

“Samantha!”

She didn’t answer.

Jeremy, flooded with guilt over being too drunk to be in there instead of her, threw himself into the hole after her.

8

The medical bay and the lab were also struck with the strengthening tremor; the sounds of

breaking glass were as loud as the screams for a few seconds. Half of the medical bay crumbled, taking two of the little ducks along. The doctor shoved the rest of them into the showers and crammed in with them, hoping the reinforced floor there would hold.

In the lab next door, Tonya and the cat huddled in a far corner, unable to get out for a huge gap in the floor. Through the dust and rock, Tonya could see the bodies of those who had already fallen. More dust came through the lab as another part of the wall collapsed into the hole.

Tonya shuddered, not feeling the cat claws sinking deep into her arm.

9

On the second level, where the majority of their people had been, the washroom caved, trapping camp members and Eagles. The ladder was crushed by falling stone, killing several citizens as they tried to reach the lower levels and loved ones.

In the sleeping areas, forts fell over and people were tossed from their cots. Candy and Cynthia, both sedated, slept through it all. Around them, there was chaos as people tried to flee. Many were stepped on and kicked by the panicking crowd. Dale was one of those. He cowered on the floor as the chaos grew worse.

“Come on!”

Dale felt a hand on his wrist and followed his rescuer blindly, coughing at all the dust.

“Stay in there!”

Dale tried to see who it was as he huddled in the tiny closet of the sleeping chamber, but a white jacket was all he glimpsed before the person was gone.

Dale sank to his knees and cried as he listened to the tragedies unfolding throughout the cave.

10

Li tried to make it to the rear of the kitchen, where most of his family had gathered for their evening tea, but the shaking was too strong to fight. He fell into the cabinet, knocking pots and mixing bowls to the floor where they clattered and banged endlessly as the tremor intensified.

“Li!” Li’s wife, Sophia, crawled over to hold him as the debris continued to fall from the upper levels and the kitchen came alive with dropping dishes and breaking equipment.

In the attached mess, Hilda herded the children and pregnant women into a corner, with the help of Jax and Quinn. Doug and Peggy joined them, reaching the space right as the center of the mess dropped out. Tables and screaming people fell through the hole, including Chauncey.

11

Trapped in the destroyed garden area, Jenny held her squalling baby, aware of the screams of the

children in the cave more than the shouts and cries of the adults. Jennifer could sense their terror, and the pain of those who were injured. Because she was experiencing it, so did Autumn.

“Jenny!”

“Here!” Jennifer coughed, lifting her jacket to slide Autumn under protection from falling debris and dust. She couldn’t see much beyond a faint glow above them.

Kyle shined his light across the gap, unable to see her through the falling dust that looked like ash. He narrowed her location by the sound of her coughing and Autumn crying. The infant was also screaming for him mentally, driving Kyle to leap across the gap without waiting or surveying further.

Jennifer shouted as a shape came hurtling through the loud darkness, cringing away with the baby shielded.

“It’s me, Jenny!” Kyle wrapped arms around them, heart beating furiously. He reached around her gun to put a calming hand on the baby.

Her tiny fingers clutched at his, shaking in horror. “Shh... Shut it off, Jenny. She’s getting it all.”

Jennifer gasped in pain as she realized their mental connection was feeding the baby details she couldn’t handle. Jennifer slammed the wall down, trembling. “Kyle...”

“I know. I know.” He held her tighter as the tremor continued to shake the mountain and shatter their dreams. “I’ll get us out. Shh...”

Across the gap, Billy and Shawn scanned the hole and chose not to follow Kyle. Both men were listening to the screams of the children above them; their future mates were calling for them relentlessly. In that moment, there was no pretense.

Billy gestured toward the ladder that had fallen but only broken in half. “That’ll get us part of the way. We’ll climb the rest.”

Shawn immediately staggered through the debris and shaking floor to help Billy get the ladder. Missy was up there. He was going.

Billy and Shawn hefted the heavy wooden ladder toward the hole, climbing over items they refused to identify. If someone had moved or groaned, they would have helped, but there was nothing from the piles of furniture and broken rocks.

“Look out!” Shawn leaned into the ladder as a huge chunk of something whizzed by his shoulder from above. It crashed heavily to the floor below. “You okay, man?”

Billy didn’t answer.

12

“Fire! There’s a fire!”

“We have to get up there!” Theo pointed toward the top of the cave, to the thin glow. His clubfoot was forgotten in his fear for everyone. “We’re on fire!”

Debra clung to his arm, not hearing but deeply experiencing the quake and the agony around her.

Greg was trying to dig Marc free. He'd been using the bathroom by the storage crevice, waiting on Angela when the cave had begun shaking.

Theo grabbed his arm. "Fire!"

The word got through to Greg. He shined his light toward the top, breathing heavily through the dust and smoke.

Theo took the rope from his belt. "It's not long enough to get all the way up, but we can throw it between levels if there's anyone there to catch it."

Greg took the rope, reluctantly leaving the pile of big stones. He hadn't heard any sound from Marc yet.

Theo shined his light so Greg could evaluate the situation while he tied the rope with hard knots for gripping.

"Are we the only ones down here?"

Theo shined his light, seeing bodies but no survivors. "I believe so."

Debra gestured toward a nearby pile of debris.

"Help..."

"Billy!" Theo rushed over to help dig the Eagle free as Greg started to climb. The rope was long enough to reach the next level, if they got half way up to it first.

"Stay with him." Theo signed to Debra, giving her the smaller light from his belt. Billy was now unconscious but still breathing, which was better than most of the people under the debris were doing.

He shrugged off Debra's concern to follow Greg even though he'd only had his cast off for a week. This was no time to let that hold him back and he wasn't going to.

"Hello up there!" Greg grasped the dusty rocks and began to heft his body upward. "Is anyone up there?"

13

Stuck on the second floor, Kenn stared down the hole in shock. He didn't know how anyone could still be alive down there but he could hear the screams and shouts that verified someone was. "Tonya!"

"Kenn!"

Kenn spun around to discover Morgan and Daryl coming toward him, coated in dust and dirt.

"She's down there!" Kenn winced at the distortion. "Part of the radio room fell!"

Daryl and Morgan also needed to get to the lower levels. Morgan held up the rope he'd grabbed as they shoved their way from the singles' chamber.

Kenn grabbed it and tied it around his waist.

"Is anyone up there?" someone shouted from below.

On the other side of the gap, Neil was gawking in horror at where Jeremy had disappeared from view.

The tremor increased in strength as the full heart of the destructive waves reached the mountain.

Rock fell in thick chunks; dust swirled through the air. On the top level, the tunnel collapsed most of the way through, trapping people and cutting off any chance of reaching the top through this tunnel. As the cords were severed, the entire cave was plunged into darkness.

Topside, the mountain shuddered. Barns and shelters fell over, unable to take the violent shaking. Snow began to slide. When the new avalanche barreled down the cliffs to crash through the gate and cover Safe Haven, only the people at the bottom of the mountain noticed.

Mikel gazed up in horror as the snow and rock crumbled, barreling toward his army. “You treacherous bitch!”

Mikel’s men staggered toward their vehicles as the ground shook. Nearly all of them had sores and bleeding gums from the curse Angela had put on them.

“I will not be killed by you!” Mikel was aware of men fleeing and his women screaming at him to run, but the Mexican didn’t run from anything.

Groups of soldiers and refugees from the west flew toward their vehicles as the tremor strengthened, trying to escape the path of the snow that was almost upon them. Some of them helped each other; some of them shoved people aside in panic.

Mikel was still ranting at Angela when the avalanche reached the bottom of the mountain. As if unable to get through his hatred, the rocks and

snow slammed into the ground on either side of him. He was knocked to his knees and pelted with tiny blades of ice and rock, but he survived.

His army wasn't as lucky. The two streams of snow smacked into the hard ground and flew across the camp, smothering the tents and campers. It wiped through the vehicles as if they weren't there, sending metal flying through the cloudy air. Snow rained down on everything, blanketing the entire center of the camp all the way to the next mountain ledge and then part of the way up it.

"Keep sending your curses, witch!" Mikel cackled madly as the ground continued to shake under his knees. "Nothing you can send will kill me!"

Above the destroyed camp, the sky sparkled hazily under the dim shelf of clouds that had hung over the area for the last week. Even after it rained, the cloud was there. The Mexicans hadn't noticed, but the refugees had. Many of them had fled Mikel's tents and nightly parties when the sores appeared. Those who hadn't fled then now did so without stopping for any of their gear that may have survived the earthquake and avalanche.

The soldiers on both sides of the destruction observed it all in horror, unable to do anything else. When the refugees ran and drove by them, the Mexicans let them go. None of them cared about the freeloaders or the women. They wanted power.

"I will never leave!" Mikel was still screaming through the rumbling. "I cannot be killed by you!"

The men who heard him were filled with his confidence even while rubbing at sores and watching their friends die under the snow. Mikel was invincible, immortal, and after they dragged the witch from her fortress, they would be as well. The two boys in there weren't valuable at all except as an excuse to the pathetic refugees out here who could have overwhelmed them if given enough time and reasons.

“We will have the witch!”

Many of Mikel's men cheered at the proof of their leader's words. The rest were dead or dying.

Inside the mountain, screams began to fade into groans and tears...and then silence.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Dirce's Way

October 15th

1

“**S**o, who do I have to kill for that load of locals in the collateral room?”

Kendle's voice cut through the gym, where slave time had come around again. Kendle had spent the last days staying out of Dirce's way and avoiding Rice, who had begun to hound her. She and her partners had chosen to camp on the outskirts of town while they recovered. None of them had missed these signs and scents of civilization.

Dirce, lounging in Xavier's center chair, waved her forward. “We have made arrangements for them, through the private bid you provided. I have agreed.”

Kendle gave an uneasy smile. “Thank you. What's the cost?”

“Don't come back.”

The chilling demand brought silence to the steady crowd of traffic that was still lingering from the matches. As long as she was here, some of these people would stay just to say they knew which way she'd gone.

“I won’t. Do I collect them or are they delivered?”

“They’re being released now.” Dirce’s eyes narrowed. “I hear that Ori will be joining your team.”

“On probation, like my other two rookies were.”

The two men shared grins. “We leveled up!”

Ryan frowned. “She can’t do that.”

“I’ll bet she can.” Tommy slapped Ramer on the shoulder and shook Carl’s hand. “Welcome aboard the nightmare.”

The team’s laughter was odd to those viewing it, but Kendle understood completely. They were bonded. It would be hard to break those bonds after being held captive together.

“He is a good man.” Dirce brought the attention back to him. “We will miss him.”

“Do I owe you for that?” Kendle asked suddenly. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask sooner.”

Soothed, Dirce shook his head. “Ori has been docked for the mistake. He’ll meet you at the gates when our business is finished.”

“Excellent.” Kendle was instantly worried. She knew that tone. *Ori will need medical care. Light duty for a while.*

Dirce’s lip curled as he read her thought, but he didn’t change his mind. The sooner she was gone, the better. “Our last item is the funds owed to you. After totaling it up, you are owed a thousand dollars. How would you like to be paid?”

Kendle blinked. “Wow. Ok. Uh...what are the options?”

Dirce gestured at the racks of gear she’d assumed were trade-ins. “You can take it from there, from any of Renda’s booths, or you can make a deal with Iram to get your vehicles.”

“Vehicles. Fully gassed.”

Iram smiled, greed bleeding through the charm. “The boy.”

“No. Counteroffer?”

“Can’t blame me for trying.” Iram grinned. “Take the vehicles as my gift. I made more profit during your time here than I have since we landed at Souther Field.”

Dirce frowned. It was the barest flash of disapproval, but Kendle knew he didn’t want people to know where they’d landed. Kendle stopped herself from considering it further. “I can’t do that. I still owe you for the two totes of food you sent on my first day.”

Iram now frowned, telling Kendle she wasn’t supposed to mention that. She sighed. “Can’t get it right today, gentlemen. Please let me leave now before I make this worse.”

Dirce waved a curt hand at her. “And do it now, before I decide that Yuri was right to want you eliminated.”

Kendle turned furious eyes on the Russian.

Yuri smirked. “You knew what I was when you handed me the oil.”

Kendle nodded angrily, jaw clamped as she resisted the need to spill his blood for the betrayal. She regarded Dirce with scarlet cheeks and plans for revenge displayed prominently in her mind.

Dirce smiled, seeing that she wouldn't be letting it go. That was good. It would bring her back, against their deal, and allow him to execute her. He couldn't do it now because she hadn't done anything wrong by the public view. She was too loved. He couldn't take another riot in a town that he controlled. Those in charge of the rations wouldn't forgive another slaughter, even to get things under control. It interrupted the food supply.

Kendle spun smartly on her heel, snapping her fingers at her team.

Each of those men gave Yuri a nasty glower as they also spun neatly and followed her from the gym.

Yuri felt the menace, but Kendle and her people were forbidden from returning. He was safe.

Dirce rose, disguising his laugh with a cough. *You don't know what you've done, my stupid friend, but you'll figure it out too late. I have faith in that.*

Dirce went to Renda's apartment, taking a position at the window to view Kendle's exit. It bothered him to see how many of the locals came out to wish her well and beg her to stay. "You could have had them all, Ms. Roberts. You gave up too easily."

Kendle stopped, glaring at him from the chattering patrons and fans, across his flytrap shops

and distractions. *I don't want it. If I did, all I would have to do is tell them what you are. Be careful planning my death, Dirce Resi. Every person who tried so far has ended up shredded.* She grinned widely, making sure he could view it. *You're in good shape. Bet you'd scream for a week.*

Against his will, Dirce shivered. He dropped the curtain, hating himself for the weakness.

Kendle ignored the concern of her partners to exit the market and leave the town. She waved Ori to join them as she spotted his beaten face and empty hands. Rice, she ignored. He was busy greeting the family he liked and reluctantly accepting responsibility for those he didn't as they came through the gate. She'd told him to meet her where she'd been taken for a fool. Kendle was trying to get set up to be certain they weren't followed. She also wanted satisfaction from Yuri.

Kendle and the team made camp near Rice's tunnel entrance, using the light trees and the chilly breeze to remind themselves they'd won this round in the constant battle for survival.

"Weren't you supposed to be branded so we have safe passage?" Ori was standing near the tent Carl and Dexter had erected.

Kendle lifted her sleeve, where two letters glared in bright red scabs. *MT. Market Town.*

Kendle dropped her sleeve as the rest of the team muttered and grumbled, flashing glowers at their unwanted guest.

Ori flushed.

Kendle waved him into the tent. “You’ll be on duty tonight. Rest up.” She didn’t wait for him to argue. “Do it now, or stay here and forfeit your end of the deal.”

Ori scowled. “I know why you want me in there.”

Kendle scoffed. “If I wanted you dead, I would point and every one of my men would try to be the first one to blow your brains out.”

Kendle stood up, moving toward the open area that bordered the spot where she’d chosen to camp. “We’re going for a walk. Sleep or don’t, but you fall out on sentry duty tonight and I will point.”

Tommy and the others snickered, joining her to make their plans. The feeling of revenge had flooded the team upon seeing how much Kendle had been hurt, but that brand had sealed the deal. They weren’t leaving yet.

2

“Where did they go?”

Xavier, now reduced to messenger, pointed toward the south end of town. “A mile out.”

“She didn’t keep going?”

“No.”

Dirce pounded his fist against the desk. He had new orders to follow her to Safe Haven while the troops prepared this place for a fight, but she wasn’t leaving. He’d pushed her too far by revealing Yuri’s betrayal. Dirce realized it too late.

“What’s wrong?”

“It isn’t over yet.”

Xavier didn’t know what to say and kept his mouth shut. He sensed a punishment coming for the deal, but he wasn’t sure what he’d done wrong. Massive trades to increase profits were in their guidelines for this type of situation.

“I need her to leave.”

Xavier was surprised at the admission. “How can I help?”

“Let her finish her business here so she’ll go.”

“I thought we’d settled it all.”

Dirce snorted harshly. “You have no idea what someone like that is capable of. You’re lucky to be alive.”

Xavier didn’t doubt that after witnessing Dirce’s fear. There was no mistaking the scent of it.

Dirce’s shoulders tensed. “I can still end you.”

Xavier paled at the proof of magic. Dirce was the reason this market and all the others they conquered were cleansed of their kind.

“I didn’t know that,” Dirce stated softly. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Xavier questioned nervously.

“For finally giving me a reason to kill you that my boss will accept.”

Xavier glanced down as pain swept through his abdomen. His guts began to slide out.

Xavier looked up to see the scythe slide back under the chair Dirce was sitting in.

“Tea with that?” Dirce asked politely.

Xavier slid to his knees and then slumped over without making a sound.

Dirce laughed quietly and gestured for the guard to clean up the mess. “Pass the word. Magic users are no longer to be hunted. Anyone who harms a magic user will be disemboweled.”

Dirce cackled again at the sight of intestines roped over Xavier’s gory shoes. “I make friends everywhere I go.”

3

Yuri snapped awake as his door opened.

“Baby?”

The sound of Kendle’s voice was enough to get Yuri on his feet. He grabbed his gun, but Kendle shut the door, plunging them into darkness.

Outside, the sounds of a struggle came, along with shouts and shots.

“No protection. Yuri, baby...”

Yuri shuddered at a caress on his cheek. He spun to fire as something sharp sliced into his wrist.

His scream echoed loudly, gun falling as blood sprayed the bed and walls.

“Beautiful.” Kendle crawled along the ground at his bare feet. She stabbed hard, pinning him to the ground as her blade sank through.

“Ahhh!”

“We had a deal...” She clucked as he dropped to the other knee, screaming, trying to pull himself

free. “I did know what you were when I handed you the oil.”

“No more! Please!”

“You had a second chance and you blew it.” She punched the foot pinned to the bloody floor, getting another scream that made her demon beam in happiness. *Nice. Again?*

Kendle obliged, chuckling. “I aim to please.”

Outside the room, the Eagles had secured the guards and were standing in two groups on either end of the red door. None of them considered interrupting, despite the sounds of footsteps and shouting coming up the nearby stairs.

Tommy finished reloading his gun. “Stay there or we’ll kill all of you!”

Dirce opened the door anyway. He was immediately driven back by a single shot that splintered a chunk of wood from the frame. Tiny shrapnel flew into Dirce’s hand.

“That’s your only warning, mister. The next one goes through your brain.”

Dirce paused behind the wall, waving a patrol of men forward.

“Is that the Black Widow?” One of the patrol men stilled. It was the one Josh had dubbed Demetri.

“Get in there!” Dirce advanced furiously.

“Do it yourself.” Demetri ran down the stairs, joined by several of the guards who hadn’t wanted

to come at all upon hearing who was causing a ruckus.

Dirce slammed the butt of his rifle against the banister. The top knob snapped off, flying down the stairwell.

“We’ll be gone in five minutes,” Tommy stated in the pause. “Let us out and no one else has to die.”

All around the team, cubbies were being barricaded and people were getting down on the floor. The locals knew Dirce wasn’t going to agree to those demands.

Josh pointed. “We have a runner.”

Tommy shook his head. “Let it go.”

Dirce waited for them to be distracted, planning to sweep the team with gunfire as he ducked into the cubby across from Yuri’s.

Josh eased toward the door. “I’m going after him.”

Tommy scowled. “Boss said to stay together.”

“I’ll catch up.”

“Josh!”

Dirce eased the door open...

Bullets slammed into the wood and glass, shattering the pieces into Dirce’s unprotected face. He dropped down to his knees as the troops behind him were hit by several of the slugs. Bodies fell heavily over the rails.

Dirce held his bleeding cheek. Two more men fled down the stairs. Dirce was forced to wait. He only had a dozen men with him now and he already knew they couldn’t match that type of shooting. He

wasn't even certain that he could. He'd never witnessed anything like it. In real gunfights, people always missed or went full retard, but not these men. Their descendant masters had trained them well.

Dirce counted two minutes and then stood up, motioning for the remaining men to go down to the first floor. "I'm not beaten yet. You wanna play with fire? Let's play!"

4

Kendle emerged from Yuri's apartment coated in things none of the team wanted to try identifying. It reminded all of them strongly of fighting Donner alongside the women. The females liked to wear their enemy's blood. It was intimidating.

Kendle calmly walked through the halls of the second floor, passing cowering residents to reach the manicurist cubby across from her shop.

"I'll owe you for the damage." Kendle used her arm to shatter the glass in the booth. Rita hadn't pulled the gate down over it tonight.

No need. Rita came from her cubby wearing a thick pack. *I'm coming with you. That's why it isn't locked down.*

Kendle didn't have time to bargain. She marched to the rear of the shop and began prying off the paneling that shielded the window. She'd noticed the draft while getting her nails done and marked it as an emergency exit.

Kendle shoved the rusty window up and climbed out onto the fire escape, glad the gate guard had taken her advice to keep locals around the front. She tried to be quiet as she went, going half way before waving at Rita to come next.

The team waited until the women were on the ground before slowly easing their weight onto the rusting metal. Thin clangs and groans echoed.

Everyone was relieved when they were all on the damp ground, but it had taken so long that they were all twitching and jumping at shadows as Kendle led them toward the hole in the fence the guards hadn't sealed yet. Once his men had inspected the wall, Xavier had been told there were multiple problems. He'd assigned a crew, but those workers hadn't been eager.

Kendle held the bush for her team to go first, studying the lit market. She could see shadows on the top floor, through the window they'd used.

Kendle concentrated. *Bring them now or keep them. We have to go.*

Positive Rice would make it in time, Kendle took her partners through the dark, silent streets toward the alley where she'd torn apart the guards. She was glad they couldn't see the bloodstains in the dark. She was still hopeful that her men would never have to know what she'd done here.

Kendle chuckled, catching herself. She was coated in Yuri's blood. They knew what she was.

Tommy placed an arm around her tense shoulders, not letting his stomach interfere with

what he needed to do. “We’re Eagles. That includes you.”

Kendle smiled gratefully. “Thanks.”

Tommy gently shoved her away as he felt the heat baking off her skin. He couldn’t stand that much fire at once.

Kendle sighed. *No, not many can. Even Yuri needed chemical help to handle me.*

Adrian didn’t, her witch commented snidely.

Kendle led the team through the large hole in the broken wall and then began circling toward their campsite to pick up Ori and the twins. She couldn’t wait to be gone from here.

“We’re one short.”

Kendle stopped. “Who?”

“Josh went after a runner.” Tommy took her arm to keep them moving.

Kendle slowed her pace, considering the options. “Fine. We’ll wait around. Should be a breeze.”

The men snickered at the joke, not as worried as they probably should have been. They were free and they had their guns. Using them was appropriate after what they’d been through in this shitty little town.

5

Demetri ran harder, hearing the heavy steps. He assumed it was the Black Widow. His heart thumped heavily, remembering the promises of pain

and death that her partners had given. If he got caught, it would be ugly.

Demetri detoured into an alley near the gate, hoping to get lost in the din of shouts, guns being set up, and troops coming from all areas of town at Dirce's calls over the radio. Demetri had already shut his off. He held still, trying not to gasp as the steps came closer...and stopped!

"How many do I owe you?"

Demetri blanched. *Too many.* He darted out of the alley as a hand shot out and grabbed his pocket.

He scrambled loose, shouting in triumph as he got free. He ran faster, not peering over his shoulder.

Josh stayed where he was, waiting...

The explosion wasn't huge but it blew parts of Demetri across the troops that he was shoving aside, also killing several of them.

Josh vanished into the darkness, smiling happily. *I'll have to thank Angela for sending those grenades with us. That was cool.*

6

"Where are they?" Rice held a gurgling baby in each arm.

"She said they were going for a walk." Ori was sitting in the opening of the tent. He was busy digging through the kits and packs for valuables. He was positive he'd been abandoned, but he couldn't go back to the market emptyhanded. He planned to

gather what he could use and set off for the western wastelands, where neither Dirce nor the Black Widow could reach him.

Both men jumped as an explosion came from the town, lighting up the section where the market would be. They'd already listened to the gunfire with growing worry.

"I can't stay here." Rice shoved the kids at the sentry. "These are hers. Keep them alive or she'll kill you."

Ori tried to resist taking them, but he refused to let the babies fall. He juggled them awkwardly as Rice ran off into the woods and vanished down the hole he'd come from.

Ori regarded the two startled babies, stunned. "What just happened?"

"You got stuck holding the diapers." Kendle came from the opposite thicket of tall trees beside the camp.

The Eagles hurried over to grab their gear and the tent, loading Ori with the diaper bag.

"Time to roll. Keep up." She motioned Ben and Ryan to help him and took off running away from Market Town. Her team brought up the rear as the group disappeared into the coming sun, leaving a furious UN boss waiting behind a barricade that wasn't going to be used.

Ori ignored his shock and revulsion at Kendle's coating of blood, seeing Rita from the nail shop. He stayed next to her as they fled for a new life, both hoping Safe Haven was everything they'd been

dreaming of since the Black Widow had arrived. The voice they'd heard in those dreams had been a person of great power and empathy that they wanted to believe in. The need to put a face to that power was urgent.

Kendle took them for a fast run, leading them to the abandoned farmhouse she'd studied several times during her workouts. The two trucks in the garage hadn't been much, but she'd been able to sneak out and bring back a battery and some fuel. She was now deliriously happy that she'd planned things out this far.

"When did you do this?" Conner and Tommy were filling the tanks while everyone else climbed in, not using lights and not slamming doors.

"I had a week to wait before I could kill anyone." Kendle shrugged. "I had to stay busy."

Conner smiled at her. "You did really well."

Kendle refused to waste time on emotions. "Get in."

Tommy and Kendle took the driver seats of the rusty brown and red trucks that Kendle believed had once been used to haul hay. Pieces of yellow, molded straw stuck to them as they piled in the cabin and the bed, hunkering down in case there was gunfire. Kendle met Tommy's eye in the mirror. *Ready?*

Yes. I'd like to go home now.

Kendle started the engine. *Me too. Let's roll.* Kendle drove calmly, without lights, down the

driveway and steered them away from Market Town.

I'll be back, Dirce. Watch your six.

A mile away and realizing she'd gotten out of town somehow, Dirce didn't need to catch the thought to know what Kendle would do. He knew of Safe Haven. If he'd had another choice, he would have killed her and her men, and pretended they'd never even been here, but by the time that he'd arrived, the locals had already been converted. After seeing what she was capable of, the UN boss decided he'd had enough of this town too. "Load us up. We're leaving."

"What about the locals?"

"Leave them alone." Dirce decided he would send a cleanup crew tomorrow night while this town was busy celebrating Kendle's victory of breaking the UN hold over them.

"We can't tolerate that type of disrespect, Ms. Roberts." Dirce climbed into his warm, bulletproof UN vehicle and waved at the driver. "Take me north. I want to know where she's going."

7

"We have a tail."

"I know." Tommy didn't slow down. He was staying on Kendle's bumper. "She isn't stopping. She knows too."

Ben settled back, content to let Angela help them finish off this unexpected danger. No one doubted she would when she found out what had happened here.

Ahead of them, Kendle wasn't as certain. She'd gotten her men out, but she'd chosen to take them back in and do damage.

"She'll understand."

Kendle glanced over at Conner, catching the tone. "Did she tell you this might happen?"

"My dad said we'd be home early, without making it to our destination. I didn't believe him."

"Wish he'd told me that." Kendle grumbled, but she wasn't mad. She'd had dreams that could be called predictions, but she hadn't told anyone about them either.

"Why not?"

"Because I wanted those things to happen." She admitted it without guilt. "So I let them."

"You sound like my dad."

Kendle was startled into a grin. "Yeah, I guess I do. Could be worse. I might sound like Angela."

Conner snickered. "Man, when she finds out about this place..."

Kendle hoped he and the men were right. "Should be ugly."

Conner glanced back to where Ori, Rita, and a few of the team members were settling in and caring for the babies. "Can we make it on the gas we have?"

“Not a chance, kid. We’ve got about six or seven hours and then we’ll be on foot. Sleep now, while you can.”

“What’s the plan? New wheels?”

“Hopefully. Half our time will be gone before daylight gets here. I think I can get us to the town that had all those car lots.”

“The one with the big yellow Hummer?”

“Yes.”

“Cool!”

Kendle and the others smiled tolerantly at Conner’s excitement, his crime and banishment forgotten, forgiven. He’d pulled his weight during their crisis. He was now an official Eagle rookie.

Kendle steered them down the dark highway, increasing her speed as the clear stretch opened up in front of them. When she flipped on her lights, Tommy did the same.

Confident he was following her alertly, Kendle flew north, praying the half a tank each that she’d been able to sneak out would be enough.

8

The trucks ran out of gas at almost the same time.

Tommy carefully pushed Kendle’s vehicle until his also began choking from sucking air instead of gas. As the engine died, Tommy glanced over his shoulder. “Everyone ready for a nice romantic walk?”

There were grumbles and laughs as they piled out, taking all the gear they'd stripped upon getting comfortable.

Kendle and Tommy took the lead, rifles out to make a good show for anyone who happened to be around. As dawn finally began to show, the team realized there was no one around here. The homes had been burnt to the ground, as well as the businesses.

“Not good.” Ori was bringing up the rear. “Not good.”

Ryan shushed him angrily, still upset that they had to bring another enemy into their camp. He agreed with many of the Eagles that people who had fought against them should be left to fend for themselves.

The march through the chilly morning fog wasn't a fun time, but it was better than being captives. Even Rita refused to let her worries ruin the fact that she was free. When the UN troops had come to her town, she'd been alone. Her husband was a truck driver. She hadn't seen him since before the bombs fell.

Kendle tried to hurry, needing to get them out of sight, needing to get them new transportation, but the sound of engines an hour after they abandoned the trucks left her no choice. Kendle ran for the nearest shelter. The barn was too obvious, but there were no other buildings in sight. She waved them all in, glad the babies weren't crying to make their hiding place even more obvious.

She and Carl slammed the heavy wooden doors; Tommy and Josh dropped the bar to secure them.

The engines grew louder... No one spoke as fear filled the musty shelter.

Kendle watched nervously, using a crack in the rotting boards to view the cars coming from the north.

“Not our guys.” Kendle spotted the two blue sports cars flying down the highway. She wanted to warn them what they were running into, but there was no time. The two cars, racing each other, were out of sight in seconds.

Kendle picked out big shapes under white tarps. The barn floor behind them was bare and huge. “See what’s in here.”

“Oww!”

“You okay?”

“My knee isn’t. I hit a tractor.”

“A tractor?” Kendle smiled. “Does it have gas?”

Tommy scanned. “There’s a cart attached to it.”

Scott groaned. “Not another cart. I still smell like the last one!”

Kendle laughed with them, tension broken. “Spread out, search for gas cans. We might get lucky and discover something usable.”

An hour later, they eased out of the barn, cart hitched to the tractor. It was cold and slow, but they were moving again and it wasn’t on foot.

Kendle consulted the map, pointing at the field. “That’s our road. They won’t even notice these

tracks with all the others out there. We'll take the first wheels we find and get gone."

Tommy steered them over the bumpy, frozen ground, rationing the fuel even though his nerves were shot. He expected to hear more engines at any point.

"A little quicker." Kendle felt it too. Dirce was close, hunting her as he'd promised.

Using the method Marc had taught her, and Adrian had practiced with her, Kendle shielded her group in the bubble and blocked off all mental communications. Nothing would get in or out to provide Dirce with a location. *Bye-bye, asshole. See you on the flipside.*

9

Dirce lost the connection all at once and knew what had happened. His gifts couldn't beat that, but he didn't need them to know the group would continue north, to the last known location of Safe Haven. Dirce narrowed his eyes. "Is that a...BMW?"

"Two of them, sir," his driver answered. "Blocking formation?"

Dirce shook his head. The vehicles were slowing down. "Curiosity kills most cats. Let's see if these will come to us. Flash our lights. Tell them we're friendly."

Across the divider, the two cars stopped, windows coming down as they communicated.

After a minute, the drivers agreed, both getting out and advancing across the median.

“Hey! Do you have any weapons for trade?”

“We’re from Safe Haven. We mean no harm.”

Dirce stepped from the truck, still bloody and battered from Kendle’s surprises. “We’d be happy to help you. Where is your camp?”

Seth realized the danger too late. He grabbed Becky’s arm, pulling her toward the shiny new cars, but a squad of troops in UN clothes rushed forward with dozens of guns.

Seth and Becky shared looks of regret and concern as they were shoved to their knees and handcuffed. They’d thought this was a convoy of citizens who had found military rides. They’d agreed to ask if there were any weapons they could buy. Both of them had been feeling guilty about leaving the camp surrounded by Mexicans.

The guards hauled the couple to their feet and shoved them toward Dirce, who was already digging into their minds. “Interesting.”

Becky saw Dirce’s expression light up as they came to rest on her stomach. Her arms crossed over her gut instinctively.

Dirce gestured for them to put the prisoners into the truck. A minute later, they were rolling again, searching. He’d run across two rats and where there were two, there were a dozen.

Dirce rolled by the barn without noticing the tracks in the field, as Kendle had predicted. Inside

the safety of his truck, he also didn't hear the engine of the tractor that carried his prey further away each second. But he felt it. The Black Widow had escaped his net.

Chapter Thirty
Fate's Way

1

“We have to stop.” Conner slowed down.

“What’s going on, kid?” Ben was in the passenger seat. Kendle had gotten them fresh wheels, picking two service vehicles that scavengers hadn’t searched for fuel. Then she’d collapsed in exhaustion. Her last order had been to keep traveling.

“There’s a storm coming. It may be snow.”

“I believe we should keep going.” Ryan swept Kendle’s sleeping features. “She said to.”

Scott was against it. “We can’t take these shuttle vans through a big storm. We’ll get stuck.”

Ben frowned. “Okay. Flash Tommy to pull over. We need to make this choice as a team.”

Ori and Rita took care of the infants and kept their mouths shut, but they both hoped the team kept going. They didn’t want to die out here.

It only took Ben the jog to Tommy’s window to understand that Conner’s guess on snow was accurate. The temperature had gone from mid-fifties to freezing and the wind was brutal.

“We’ve got sleet.” Tommy pointed it out as soon as Ben was within hearing distance. “Maybe we should hole up?”

Ben nodded, climbing into Tommy’s van. The wind was too strong to stand outside without thicker gear.

Josh pulled their maps from his kit. “We’re not far from the cabin we stayed in on the way down here. We have enough gas to reach, but it would be breaking an Eagle rule.”

“Never stay in the same place twice while on runs,” Carl echoed from their lessons.

“Other options?” Tommy knew there couldn’t be many. They’d chosen the cabin because it was in an isolated location where the smoke from their campfire wouldn’t show above the tall tree line.

“No. We’ll secure it twice as well as we did before.” Ben opened the door to groans as the icy wind flew in. “Straight there. We can’t waste the fuel on circling first.”

Tommy was glad Ben had agreed. When he’d seen the first layer of sleet on the windshield, he’d known they would be stopping soon. *Why did I know before him? And why did I wait until he came to the same conclusion?* Puzzling it out, Tommy let Conner pull around him to take the lead. He didn’t mind sharing command, especially on a trip like this one.

Conner eased the van to the off ramp, aware of sleet coming in thicker sheets now. It wasn’t sticking to the ground yet, but it was bad enough

that Conner glanced at Ben in the mirror. “I’m a rookie. Someone needs to take over for me.”

Impressed with the maturity, Ben denied him. “You’re an Eagle in your father’s army. Act like it.”

Proud and ashamed at the same time, Conner sped up a little and took his team to safety.

2

Kendle jerked awake as the engine shut off. “Gas! I’ll get us gas!”

“Easy.” Ben shifted in the seat next to her. “It’s snowing. We’re holing up. Come on.”

Kendle let Ben help her from the van, shivering as soon as the wind slammed into her thin jacket. They’d brought snow gear, but hadn’t had to use it before now.

Ben hurried her into the cabin as Tommy and the others secured it, their vehicles, and their supplies. This cabin sat down in a valley off a cliff that overlooked a formerly overpopulated town. Kendle had considered it a good den on their way down and she agreed it was the best option for their return trip. There was no way to know how long the snow would last. “Babies?”

“They’re fine.” Rita and Ori were still caring for them. “Very quiet. It’s like they know.”

Kendle didn’t offer information about the descendant children in Safe Haven and neither did the men. Ori and Rita weren’t trusted yet. That

would be made clear to Angela and Marc upon their arrival.

Ben led Kendle to the couch and helped her down. She was barely conscious. He covered her with his long jacket and dug out his sleeping bag. When he placed it on the floor next to the couch and then slid in, Kendle tried to stay alert. “What’s up?”

Ben shrugged, groaning in enjoyment at the warmth. “You’re injured. Tommy put me on duty over you. No better place than right here.”

Kendle was too tired to argue. She let her eyes close, hoping the dreams would leave her alone at least until they returned to camp. She’d done well so far, but this trip had taken another heavy toll on her. “But I did it. I got them out and helped people. She has to forgive me now.”

Ben frowned as he realized Kendle was trying to earn forgiveness for wanting Marc.

“No. For being a killer. I’m atoning.” Kendle yawned. “She’ll recognize that.”

Ben was sent into deep contemplations at those words. He let her fall asleep without asking any of the questions he had about her and Marc, or about Market Town. It would wait.

Conner spread his sleeping bag out at the bottom of the couch. “Will she be okay?”

“I believe so.” Ben watched Conner scan the rest of their settling group before getting into the bag. “You’ve done well, kid.”

Conner didn’t answer, but he did smile. He was too tired for more.

Ben realized he wasn't going to get the conversation he needed and forced himself to try sleeping as well. He hated to waste these bonding moments. Full Eagle teams always talked when the run was over.

Maybe it isn't over... His eyes flew open and stayed that way until snores sounded.

3

Tommy yawned in the darkness, rifle across his knees as he sat on the reading ledge in the window of the second floor. They'd agreed a guard wasn't needed, but Tommy hadn't been able to sleep without someone on duty.

"Damn," a voice stated from the stairs. "I came up to do that."

Tommy chuckled, sliding over. "There's room."

Ben placed his shoulder against Tommy's, following their training to share body heat in the cool cabin.

"Oh, yeah. That's good shit right there!"

Ben tried not to let his laughter roll down the stairs.

Tommy scanned the dark still life apocalypse scene below them, wondering if there was anyone around here trying to survive. Snow swept harshly against the glass as if to mock the thought. They'd only been here for a couple hours, but their tire tracks were already filled in. The two vans were behind the cabin, under the concealment of snowy

trees, but they were facing the street for a fast exit. Tommy hoped it wasn't needed. He was ready for a break without the fear of death or the chains of captivity. They all were.

“We shouldn't have gone back in.”

“Maybe.” Tommy shrugged. “But I've been considering this run. Wanna hear some crazy observations?”

Ben nodded. “Sure.”

“This was an odd crew to send.”

Ben thought about that. “We were set up to fail?”

Tommy glanced over his shoulder, toward the stairs. “I don't believe we failed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm not sure. Just a sense of success when there shouldn't be one, I guess.”

Ben grinned. “That's it! I feel like we won.”

“We did, somehow.”

“Angela will know.” Ben was confident of that.

“She better, since she chose the people for this mission.”

“It was the perfect crew for an exploratory of a town that she couldn't be certain about from a distance...”

“True. It was also a good trial run for taking the camp south.”

“Yes.”

But neither of those felt right to the two senior men. They spent the next hour trying to wade

through Angela's possible motives as snow built up along the window.

4

Kendle sat up on the couch, eyes still closed. "Yes, they're safe." She blinked rapidly, dreaming. "Soon. We're coming."

Kendle sucked in air in a great gasp and screamed as Ethan stabbed her in the stomach.

Tommy and Ben flew down the stairs to discover their group cringing from Kendle's hoarse shouts and swipes. She was standing on the couch, not seeing anyone.

Tommy approached her carefully, aware of babies crying and rookies flinching from their duty.

"Kendle!" Tommy roared her name, bringing the din to a halt for a brief second.

Kendle's eyes flew open. "What?"

The men breathed a sigh of relief as the two infants protested loudly. Rita hurried to soothe them.

Kendle glared at the people staring at her. "What?"

Tommy sighed. "Screaming. You."

Kendle grimaced. "Oh." She yawned, lowering her weapon. "Sorry."

Tommy sat on the couch and then lay down next to her, forcing her over.

Kendle put her weapon away. Embarrassed, she started to get down, but Tommy tugged her onto his chest. “Come on. They need sleep.”

Kendle flushed and stopped struggling. When he curled warm arms around her, pressing her ear to his chest where his heart thumped steadily, Kendle surrendered. She cuddled up to him gratefully and went back to sleep.

“Thanks.” Ben went back up to the window to resume keeping watch. They’d won something and he was happy they were only a week of travel from home, but the twitchy sensation kept him near the frosty glass. He would be better once the sun rose in another hour. Anyone could be sneaking up on them in this darkness and they wouldn’t know until it was too late.

5

“They’re close.” Dirce concentrated, catching waves of agony and insanity. Someone was dreaming...

“Up there.” Dirce pointed to the illuminated hill that was dotted with abandoned cars and snow. There was barely enough room for a truck to slide up that incline.

Nero, Dirce’s driver, did as he was told even though he hated traversing in this crazy American weather. Until he’d come to the United States, Nero had never observed snow, let alone driven through it in the dark.

Dirce, picking up every emotion of every living thing in a five-mile radius, leaned over. “If you wreck, I’ll eat your tongue.”

Nero grimaced and then steeled himself. “Well, I’ve been kissing ass for a long time, so don’t expect the taste to be good.”

Dirce was startled into laughter. “No, I won’t.”

The two men used the mirth to distract them from their concerns as Nero took them up the dark mountain. Their worries were very different, but in that moment, they were bonded.

Dirce realized he could use it to his advantage. He studied Nero. “You came here on Yuri’s team, as his protection.”

Nero nodded. “It got old.”

“Should I expect the same treatment?”

Nero shrugged. “Depends on you, like with Yuri. He stopped being a leader after Malia was killed. As long as you don’t change, we’re good.”

Dirce found himself liking the driver he’d grabbed from the chaos to follow Kendle. Dirce also understood that Nero was a good example of how all his troops were feeling right now. “What do you think we’re doing?”

Nero carefully took them around a winding curve, barely missing a beaten-up Volvo with stickers all over the bumpers. He didn’t try to read them. “We’re tracking the Safe Haven people to their lair.”

Dirce was satisfied with that answer, but he pressed anyway. “And if she gets away?”

“Then Safe Haven will know the UN is on American soil.” Nero glanced over. “Why hasn’t she called to her boss yet?”

Dirce frowned. “Because she knows we’re out here, waiting for it.”

“So they won’t call in, but they’ll lead us there?”

“She believes they can kill us if we follow them all the way to their camp.”

“Can they?” Nero asked tonelessly. All of his fear was currently being used on the narrow, snowy road.

“Yes. She and the boy alone could have laid waste to Market Town.”

“Then why didn’t she? Why only kill Yuri?”

“We made a deal.” Dirce kept explaining, not sure why he was bothering. “He betrayed her.”

“How?”

“He was supposed to support her.”

“He did.” Nero added it. “The cubby, weapons, protecting her while she slept.”

“He broke into the cubby searching for evidence. He told the guards to let Renda into his apartment. He kept Renda wound up so the Widow would make it her goal to kill our slave master. He earned every bite.”

Now Nero felt something—revulsion. “That woman is crazy.”

“Yes. She’s the next generation of patriot that must be removed. Yuri was right about that.”

Nero slowed, narrowing in on an oily spot under the edge of a thin snowdrift. “That looks fresh.”

Dirce leaned out the window as Nero stopped by the stain. He shined his flashlight. “It is. Still warm enough to melt the snow landing on it.”

Dirce rolled up the window, scanning the treetops and empty, looted cabins around them. “This is too obvious. Find the most isolated, hardest to reach building. That’s where she’ll be.”

Nero obediently did as he was told. He had no problem with switching his loyalty from Yuri to Dirce. He’d wanted to be on this man’s crew since he’d first met him.

“And why is that?” Dirce glared. “Easier to knife me?”

Nero snickered. “Yeah, but that’s not my reasoning. Xavier did want it, though.”

“Xavier told you to knife me?”

“He said to get rid of you in any way that I could.”

“Why didn’t you follow orders?”

“I had already met you.” Nero grinned. “When you called Xavier in after the Widow left, I knew he wasn’t coming out.”

“Would you have tried if Xavier had been stronger?” Dirce asked, tone becoming dangerous.

“Of course.” Nero wasn’t concerned. He knew who he was dealing with. The truth mattered more to a descendant than emotional ties that were usually useless in a battle. “I’m a hired gun. I do what I’m told.”

“As long as you don’t have to risk your neck?”

“I like the risk. But I’m not going to die for nothing, you know? I have to get something out of it.” Nero steered up the hill at the next intersection, not consulting the ground or his boss. He’d been given an order on this hunt. It was the mental battle going on in Dirce’s mind that he had to be careful about. “I prefer to serve people with vision. You have big plans and I follow orders to the letter. We should get along well.”

Dirce chuckled, impressed with the man’s courage and honesty. “I’ll remember that.”

“Good; I just found them. Don’t forget that I like redheads.”

Dirce ignored the words to narrow in on a thin beam of light shining up from a valley between two jagged, snow-covered cliffs. There was a very narrow road leading down into that valley. It both looked and seemed extremely dangerous. He could sense the driver’s hesitation. This time, Dirce took heed of it. “Find a place to stash the trucks. We’ll go in on foot.”

Nero slowly reversed in the frozen front yard of a cabin that still had holiday lighting on the porch rail. He felt like death had just chosen to skip him.

6

“Put that fire out!” Ben flew down the stairs. His shout and heavy boots woke everyone in the cabin. “Put it out now!”

Kendle and Tommy jerked awake, almost falling off the narrow couch as Ben jumped over them to reach the fireplace.

“Who started a fire?” Tommy was shocked. “What dumbass did that?”

Ben shoved Ori away from the fireplace to fasten the flue and stomp on the flames. He’d been about to drift off when he’d thought the sun was up. When he’d glanced at the black sky, he had realized light was glowing from the first floor.

Scott hurried over to douse the fire with his canteen; others did the same, sending clouds of smoke rolling into the cabin. Coughing echoed loudly over the voices and babies crying.

“Get in the rear until it clears out!” Kendle kicked the locked barrier open when it wouldn’t budge. They’d assumed there were bodies in it, but Conner hadn’t sensed life inside, so they hadn’t forced it open last time.

Kendle scanned the secure room in relief, able to feel the nerves before a battle now settling onto her shoulders like a brutal, familiar vest. “Stay here. Don’t come out.”

She grabbed the arms of three men, pushing them into positions along the hall that led to the rear room. She didn’t try to explain yet, unable to get a clear breath through the smoke. She shut the door to keep the others from breathing as much of it, hoping they were sealed up tightly. It was probably about to get ugly.

“What is it?” Ben checked his gun, coughing.

“Dirce is here. I feel him.”

Ori had remained outside the room of his own volition. He came to Kendle. “He’ll burn it first. We should give up.”

Kendle stared at him, taking the precious time to dig into his mind. “...you son of a bitch.” Kendle pointed her gun at him. “He lit the fire on purpose. It wasn’t an accident.”

Now afraid of blowing Dirce’s plan, Ori quickly held up his hands. “No, I wouldn’t do that. We have a deal.”

“A deal you know I can’t keep my end of... You loved Renda and still helped me kill her. Why?”

“Because she was corrupt!” Ori spat suddenly, accent thickening with his anger. “All those men! She and Yuri enjoyed the slaves too much. There can’t be that type of open relation in the new world order.”

Kendle’s guts twisted. “New world order?”

Ori smiled as the rest of the men in the hall pointed their guns at him. “I covered my real thoughts so you couldn’t read me. You’re all going to die.”

“You first.” Kendle pulled the trigger.

7

“There’s the first shot. Care to make a wager, mate?”

“Against the Black Widow or for?”

“Against, of course. She’s got no chance with Dirce. He loves the snow.”

“Didn’t you see how quickly she won every fight? And she’s a descendant.”

“Dirce called her a healer. She’s harmless, and her partners are just normals.”

“If she’s harmless, how did she tear apart the three Iranians?”

“Wild dogs did that.”

“You’re bugger, mate. Renda said Ms. Roberts did it.”

“Renda was scared of the fight. She lied.”

In the backseat, behind the arguing guards on the vehicles, Becky and Seth shared a glance. They knew that name.

“Well, what about Yuri? His body looked like the dogs got in and we know it was Ms. Roberts in there alone because her men was in the hall, shooting at us.”

“She got lucky.”

“I don’t think so. She was covered in scars. A lot of people have tried to kill her.”

“Then we have a wager. I’ll take that humidor you love so much.”

The dickering went on in the front, but in the rear, Seth and Becky were now certain who Dirce’s target was. He’d left them here with two guards, taking a small force to capture someone. They’d hoped to escape while he was busy, but hearing who the UN was hunting changed those plans.

Seth nodded when Becky lifted a brow. *Do it.*

Given permission, Becky stared intently at the unsuspecting driver of the transport truck.

8

Dirce heard the truck moving over the snowy ground behind them and twisted around in surprise. Because it was Nero behind the wheel of the transport truck, Dirce waited until the vehicle was closer before he began gesturing. In the snow, there was no way the driver would be able to make out his gestures from this distance. Anyone else, Dirce would have ordered shot for blowing their cover.

Dirce assumed it was something important for Nero to risk blowing their ambush this way. If not, Nero would die right here.

Dirce heard the engine accelerate... His eyes widened, survival instinct kicking in. "Watch out!"

The transport truck barreled toward the huddled group of ambushers who had paused under the shield of the last tree before moving in on the cabin.

It ran them over and then reversed to lunge forward and do it again, hitting the dead and the wounded.

Dirce was frozen in disbelief. Nero's mind was blank, foreign... Being controlled!

I should have killed them! Dirce took off running as the truck swerved his way.

Kendle and the Eagles watched in nervous surprise as the troops below them were murdered by

their own driver. Their screams echoed up the valley and into the cliffs, causing fresh snowdrifts to shift.

Kendle kept her attention on Dirce as she and Ben lined up the rifles on the railing for Tommy and Scott. They were the best shooters on this mission team.

“I’m locked.” Tommy was lost in the groove of what he did best. “Here we go.” He lovingly pulled the trigger.

Dirce arched as the bullet slammed into his spine, flight halted. He fell forward into the snow as the truck reached him.

Some of the team glanced away from the impact, but not Kendle. She was waiting to be sure he was dead. “Reload.”

Tommy got set again, aware of Scott’s jealousy over the great shot through a snowstorm.

Scott took his place again, trying to smother the need to come out on top. He couldn’t help feeling it. He didn’t have to act on it.

“I see movement under the truck.” Josh was the spotter.

Kendle watched the tires on the truck spin in vain. “They’re done.”

Carl tensed. “Here come the survivors.”

The two dozen remaining UN troops flew toward the truck, presumably holding their fire because they didn’t know where Dirce was and didn’t want to hit him if he was only injured.

“Open fire!” Conner ordered from Kendle’s right. “We have people in that van!”

Kendle took the boy at his word. She tapped Tommy on the shoulder. “Do it.”

Gunfire rang across the mountain, mixed with screams and shouts for mercy. Slugs pinged off the truck, the trees, and the rocky ground as the Eagles tried to eliminate the rest of Dirce’s men.

Used to this type of fighting, the UN troops fled. They got under the concealment of the trees in small groups and running streaks, and then disappeared. The few men who were loyal to Dirce also ran, but not as far. They too wanted to see if their boss had survived.

Josh studied the scene. “Anyone got a grenade left?”

“We can’t do that.” Conner pulled on his gloves. “I told you; we have people down there.”

Kendle grunted. “Well, let’s go get them.”

“Who is it?” Tommy stayed next to Conner as most of them trotted down the slippery stairs and into the slushy, bloody, body-littered valley.

“I can’t tell. They have a strong mind, though.”

That could be about any of us. Kendle dropped to the rear of the group with Conner as they advanced on the truck that was idling but no longer spinning wheels. The shadows in the front seats weren’t moving.

Carl led the way. “Is that blood on the inside of the window?”

“That’s not good.” Ramer knew to stay a step back.

“You, in the van!” Tommy called loudly as they surrounded it, all scanning underneath for signs of Dirce. “Come out now!”

No noise or response came, causing the tension to thicken.

“Open it.” Ben motioned to Carl.

The former rookie ran forward eagerly and jerked the passenger door open.

Guns came up at the sight of the guard holding his own weapon.

“Put it down!”

“Drop it!”

“I’ll do what she tells me to do.” The UN man shuddered in terror. “Please don’t shoot anymore.”

“She, who?” Tommy saw the driver had been shot in the temple. He assumed by this passenger.

“The bitch Dirce grabbed outside Market Town. She’s in the back.” Patrick’s finger tightened on the trigger. “I’m sorry! Please don’t!”

Kendle stepped forward. “Let him go now. It’s over.”

There was a raw, primitive growl from the rear and then Patrick dropped the gun. It fell harmlessly into his lap, where Ben snatched it.

Tommy slid the door of the truck open.

Becky stared up in fear from beside Seth’s bloody body. “I think I killed him.”

Kendle hurried into the truck, seeing Seth’s injury was from being flung against the truck during

the troop chasing. “He’s just knocked out. We’ll get him in.”

“We’re staying here?” Ramer was surprised and disgusted.

“Oh, yeah.” Kendle helped Becky sit up, cutting her bonds. “Thanks.”

Becky helped the Eagles get Seth into the cabin.

In the distraction, the UN passenger took off running down the same path the others had taken. The few troops who had clustered under the trees followed him, realizing Dirce wasn’t coming.

Scott raised his rifle.

Kendle put a hand on his wrist. “Becky did enough to that one. Let him try to live with it.”

No one argued.

Kendle and Tommy, along with Ben and Ryan, scoured the ground around and under the van that they could reach. After half an hour and near frostbite on hands and faces, they were forced to accept that Dirce’s body wasn’t there.

“How did he survive that?” Ben was still shocked. “He was shot and ran over.”

“Maybe he has a healer too.” Kendle trudged to the cabin as the snow and wind increased. “Let’s get set to roll out the minute this storm breaks.”

“Do you think he’ll be back before then?”

Kendle shook her head at Carl’s concern. “No. We may not have killed him, but he’s injured. Like a wild animal, he’ll run for his den to nurse his

wounds and feel safe. He'll come for me when he can fight.”

Knowing they were safe for a while let them all relax. When they finally settled down again hours later, everyone went to sleep, including Tommy and Ben. The sense that they were being protected was hard to ignore.

9

The elderly couple jerked awake as the door to their tiny cabin flew open, letting in snow and evil.

Dirce raised his gun to fire, but Nero's passenger beat him to it.

The couple tried to reach their weapons, not bothering with begging, but they stood no chance against the ready gun. Patrick was furious about falling victim to Becky's control, about being in the truck while Nero ran over their fellow troops. The fear and the rage wouldn't leave him alone. He kept pulling the trigger even after the click sounded.

“That's enough.” Dirce placed a hand on Patrick's shaking wrist. He certainly understood the uncontrollable rage. “Take care of the bodies. Make a fire.”

That sounded good to the terrorized man. He holstered and strode forward with no qualms, grabbing the bare feet of the female. He wished it was the redhead who'd stolen his mind.

Dirce went into the small kitchen and eased down onto the chair, grunting harshly at the pain in

his spine. He could feel the slug in there, pressing on his vital organs and nerve endings, but he was stronger than the shooter had given him credit for. He'd managed to bring up his shield before the truck struck, going dim. When the Widow and her team had left the scene, he'd crawled away.

"I've got the medical kit." Andrew came in, slapping the heavy case down on the Formica counter. "Do it in here?" He'd followed Patrick and found the boss.

Dirce stripped his coat, jacket, and shirts, revealing a tapered body that was out of place in the quaint kitchen.

"That's what saved you." Andrew scanned the wound in relief. "We weren't sure if you'd evolved again on us."

Dirce didn't respond to the man's emotions, but he did store them. "Give me something."

Andrew shot a generous painkiller into Dirce's tensed arm. "There ya go."

Dirce remained still as the medic worked on removing the bullet. He felt the pain and he worried over Andrew's shaking hands missing and getting one of his needed nerves, but the biggest issue in his thoughts was the Black Widow.

He'd underestimated her. He'd known Xavier and Yuri had, but he'd committed the same offense when he knew not to. It was humiliating.

Andrew was conscious of Dirce's rage growing as he worked. The medic quickly injected his boss with another dose of painkiller, hoping to calm him

down. They couldn't go anywhere in the snow without transportation, and half of their dozen survivors were injured. It would be days stuck here with Dirce in high alert mode if they didn't soothe him in as many ways as they could.

"Then find me some wheels before the madness finishes me off." Dirce was aware of the dangers that came with his condition, with his evolution. Choosing to embrace his dark half had resulted in a monster that had to be satisfied whenever the lock snapped on the cage.

"We'll cover it." Andrew dropped the slug onto the table.

Dirce grunted, feeling blood flowing down his spine, but only the warm sensation of it. He closed his eyes as the buzz from the medication took effect, making him dizzy. He felt the monster inside yawn, paused in building the rage. "That's better."

Andrew breathed a sigh of relief that let the other men know their boss was okay now. Dirce had only blown one mission with his temper, but it had been memorable. The Canadians still hadn't recovered.

Chapter Thirty-One
Giving Way

1

“**C**ome in, Safe Haven. This is mission team Freedom. Come in, base.”

The long pause after the call implied the tired voice didn't expect an answer.

“Come in, Safe Haven.”

“Should we go home, man?” Kevin was in the passenger seat of the truck, ignoring the grumbling woman in the carefully stacked bed behind them. Jeff had devised a shelter for her and the wolves, made from tarps and boxes. Once an hour they opened the connecting window to give her warmth.

Sally tapped on the dirty glass. “It's cold!”

“Take a bath.” Jeff still wasn't happy to be responsible for Sally. It was better than being in that tomb, but not by much. “You stink.”

“Fuck you.”

“Go to hell.”

“At least it would be warm there!”

Kevin ignored the usual bickering between the two to repeat his concern. “We felt the quake, and they didn't answer our calls either.”

Jeff's lips twisted. He flipped off the radio.

“Come on, man. At least tell me what you’re thinking.” Kevin tried to stay calm so he could get what he wanted. “That’s Kendle calling. What if she found the boat?”

“Then Angela will take them south.”

“But there hasn’t been an answer since we left. We didn’t get a response after the quake.”

“Do you want me to stop somewhere so you can find wheels?”

Kevin realized Jeff didn’t care. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I do care!” Jeff smacked the wheel. “That’s why I can’t do it. Losing Crista and our child was enough!”

“You think they’re dead.”

Jeff nodded stiffly. “It’s been weeks since we’ve heard a single call from them...and that quake was ugly.”

Kevin nodded. The apartment building they’d taken shelter in had collapsed. They’d barely gotten out, losing most of their gear in the process.

“I can’t go back to bury them,” Jeff declared brokenly. “I won’t. Let them stay under the stone.” Jeff wasn’t going back to that graveyard just to verify what he already knew. *Safe Haven is gone.*

2

“Why aren’t they answering?” Josh was taking his shift on the hourly radio call Tommy had

ordered before claiming the couch. “Is something wrong?”

“Maybe they went quiet.” Ben shared a look with Tommy. They’d discussed it upon waking. They’d been the first of the team to rise, though the afternoon had been waning. All of them had been tired. Even Kendle was still asleep, along with Rita and the twins.

“Maybe.” Josh switched the channel again. “When was the last time anyone had contact with base?”

Team members around the table added it up.

“Not since before we hit Market Town.” Josh pulled it up in his memory. “Kendle had Conner check in with his dad.”

Everyone looked at Conner.

Conner shook his head, revealing what he hadn’t told them. “I’ve been trying since Kendle cut the deal with the town masters. She wanted to know how to handle them. We never got an answer.”

“She also had Rice’s brother, the baker, call on his illegal radio. He said no reply.” Rita joined them with a baby in each arm. “I found out from Ori. He was one of the guards assigned to keep track of her as soon as Xavier realized she was a magic user.”

“Xavier didn’t know.” Carl gestured at Kendle’s bruised, sliced skin. “He tortured her to prove she wasn’t.”

Tommy held out his chair for Rita, seeing the babies were both alert and appeared to be listening. “Start from the beginning.”

Rita explained her deal with Kendle, telling them how she had made the nails hollow to hold poison in a bubble of superglue. When she revealed how she'd been questioned by the bossy sentry, they learned that Xavier had been plotting to kill Yuri and Iram to take control of the market.

“But how do you know all of this?” Ben believed her, but he wanted proof anyway. “No offense, but you’re just a nail tech.”

Rita grinned at them, showing a huge difference from her sullen attitude of daily market grind. “I’m a descendant. I listen to every word and every thought that happens around me.” She glanced down at the two children. “I don’t usually talk to anyone about it. I wasn’t allowed.”

“You’re the spy who was reporting to Dirce.” Kendle joined them in the warm kitchen amid smiles and chair offers.

“Yes. How else would a female have a shop in the market?”

Kendle realized she had overlooked that. She contemplated the other female owner. “Sylvia?”

Rita pulled a face. “Bad one there. Never did like her. Too free with information. She ratted out the locals when they didn’t pay their tabs.”

“What was your bet with Yuri?” Tommy smiled at her. “He wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Renda’s death. If I lost, he was already getting Conner. If I won, he had to kill Xavier.”

Rita frowned. “But Dirce killed Xavier.”

“Yes.” Kendle smiled cruelly. “I almost miss Yuri a little. He was brilliant.” Kendle settled at the table, taking the cup of instant coffee. “How many descendants are in Market Town?”

Rita shrugged. “Just the four of us, as far as I know.”

“Four.” Kendle counted them. “You, Sylvia, Dirce... Who else?”

“Iram.”

Kendle blanched. “What type?”

“Iram is an Invisible. Or, at least, he was. When Dirce brought him here, his gifts evolved. He’s the best mental manipulator I’ve ever observed.” She nodded at Becky. “No offense. You’re young. You’ll get stronger.”

Seth slid an arm around Becky’s shoulders, wishing that wasn’t the case. It would bring more trouble.

Rita scowled at him. “You act like it’s all her. What about you?”

Seth grimaced in confusion and dread. “I’m not a descendant.”

Rita gaffed. “Of course, you are, boy. I know a levitator when I meet one.”

“Levitator?” Becky smiled, finally getting an answer to what she’d been sensing in her mate for months. “He...moves things?”

Rita grinned. “Wait till he learns to use it in the bedroom.”

Becky blushed as Seth flushed and the table laughed.

Seth accepted the slaps on the shoulder, the acceptance from his fellow Eagles, but in his heart, fear bloomed bright and strong. *I'm like them, like Becky. I might hurt people too.*

Becky's face cramped up. She left the room, shrugging off Seth's arm.

Rita snorted. "You people are new."

Kendle sighed. "Yeah, we are. Tell me about Dirce. I want everything you can think of."

Rita extended one of the infants. "You rock her. I've got him."

Kendle took the baby reluctantly, glad she'd been able to rescue them, but not caring beyond that until the girl opened her eyes. They were the exact shade as Angela and Marc's. "Oh, hell." Kendle stared at the baby, making the connections now. "We need to get home. Draft a team. Find us transportation."

The others didn't argue or ask more questions when Kendle showed them the baby's face.

"Well, that explains some things." Ben sighed resignedly. "And it raises a whole new set of questions. Someone get out there and get us wheels. I'm on the fuel crew."

Kendle handed the cooing girl back to Rita. "Guard those with your life. They just became the most valuable items we have."

Tommy joined Kendle in the small shed next to the cabin. Half of the team was out on the scavenging mission, searching for beans, bullets, and vehicles. Kendle had said she was going out to see if the shed held anything they needed, but it had been half an hour and she hadn't returned. "You okay?"

"Over here."

The shed was narrow, but long, running the length of the cabin.

Tommy found her on a dusty couch, laying there staring at the thin wooden beams and her own icy breath clouds. She was also sweating, telling him she'd done a fast, hard work out.

"What's up?" He sat next to her, letting their legs touch. It wasn't for the warmth.

"Not interested!"

"Liar." Tommy laughed, leaning against the musty cushion. "Man, this has been a long run."

"Yeah." Kendle sat up. "Hard to believe all the things I missed."

"No one gets everything. I personally believe we've done fine."

"Really?"

Her tone told Tommy she was worrying over the choices she'd made. "Sure. I'd be happy to have you as my XO again."

Kendle laughed at the joke. She'd been running this mission since they were carjacked.

Tommy tugged her over. "They're okay, you know."

Kendle didn't answer. She didn't know.

Neither did Tommy, but he had faith in Angela, especially now that he thought he knew the real reason for this run. "You'll see. Come on. Let's get in. Cold out here."

"Not me." Heat was baking off her skin.

Tommy flashed to Marc's advice before they'd left. "Let me know when it gets bad."

"Why? You think you can handle the fire now?"

Tommy grinned, pulling her to her feet. He leaned in close enough to kiss her. "Yes. Try me?"

Kendle was tempted. The heat always needed to be soothed now, but witnessing Dirce die, and not die, had reminded her of how strange they were. She turned from Tommy without answering. If she wanted real relief, she would have to pick someone who was like her. Normal men couldn't get her there.

Tommy felt the challenge even though nothing had been said. Plans began forming in his mind. He liked Kendle and didn't mind the thought of helping her, but his sexual skills were well known among Safe Haven's female population. His pride demanded that Kendle be made aware of it too.

4

"They took off."

Kendle peered up from the maps she and Josh were studying. "Who?"

“Seth and Becky. They grabbed their coats and flew out as soon as we came in from scavenging. We thought they wanted to be alone.” Ryan gestured. “But Carl found a note.”

Kendle took the paper as the rest of the team gathered around to listen.

“Becky hasn’t gotten an answer from Angela in weeks. Safe Haven doesn’t exist anymore. The Mexicans got into the mountain. We’re not going back. Good luck.”

Tense silence filled the room as Kendle considered the words. She understood the choice, but at the same time, she loathed it. Kendle crumbled the note and tossed it into the fire that they weren’t afraid to have burning now. “I have to know for sure. We leave at daylight.”

Eased, the team returned to sorting through the items they’d scavenged. Not going back wasn’t an option for these men.

Kendle was surprised to discover that it wasn’t for her either. She’d caught the Safe Haven infection. “Man, I hate it when this happens.”

5

Seth got into the small wagon he’d found with half a tank of gas. They would need to get lucky and find fuel to put in the tank after this was gone or the vehicle would be useless, but at least they would be away from here. “So where to?”

Becky thought of Dirce and Market Town, and then Kendle's team. "If they are alive, Angela will bring them south. Let's roll west."

"West?" He inserted the key that had been above the visor. "Why west?"

"I'm not certain. Just feels right."

Seth was glad when the engine came to life. He hadn't had to do much to the wagon. Older vehicles had been built to take abuse before they became a pile of junk. "You got it."

Becky watched the snowy cabin roll by, mind on the battle that might happen between their people and Dirce. If she began hearing calls that said their camp had survived, she might want to come back and help. To prevent that, she needed to get out of range.

Seth didn't catch the thoughts or plans in his mate's mind. He was busy trying not to flip the wagon down the slushy hill.

Becky allowed her heart to settle into a calmer rhythm as the mountain slowly released them. She wanted to get as far from here, as fast as possible. They'd broken the hold Adrian had placed over that cursed camp. She didn't want to be infected with the light again. It hurt too much whenever the bulbs popped. She couldn't take that disappointment anymore. She'd rather be dead than to believe in anyone ever again.

The CB crackled. "Come in, Safe Haven. This is mission team Freedom. Come in, base."

Becky reached over and switched it off, smiling brightly. “I think we need to replace this junker with matching Hummers this time.”

Seth chuckled. “I do like a tall ride.”

Becky blushed, leaning over. “Me too. Drive faster, baby. Momma’s gonna hum for you.”

6

It took Dirce three days to get back to Market Town. Finding transportation had been easy, as had scavenging fuel, but the bullet had damaged his spine enough that Andrew had insisted on two days’ rest. Faced with not being able to walk, Dirce had been forced to agree. His healer hadn’t been along for this hunt. Sylvia wouldn’t have survived the firefight anyway. She couldn’t take loud noises. At least this way, she would be able to take care of him when he made it back to base.

Andrew placed an arm around Dirce’s shoulder. “We’ll get you in and send for your woman.”

Dirce, in a lot of pain, tugged Andrew closer. “Will you help me with something else?”

Andrew heard the dangerous tone and knew what was coming, but he couldn’t escape Dirce’s grip as the man wrapped him up like a lover.

Dirce took the lifeforce eagerly, moaning at the pleasure, the evil fun of breaking rules. He reveled in it, not caring about the concerns of the witnesses. He wasn’t going to hobble into the market and reveal his injury, his vulnerability. He had enemies

here, and everywhere he went. Dirce never forgot that, even during the chaos.

Dirce shoved the body into the seat and climbed from the van without help. He flashed a finger at the locals who were now showing their displeasure about his survival. "Taxes are tripled!"

Fear flooded the disappointed locals, who ran to their shops to work. Triple taxes would cost almost everything they made daily.

Dirce gestured toward the slave rooms. "Get me a few of those. I want to be ready by daylight."

"To go where, sir?" one of his weary escorts inquired as two others trotted tiredly to the slave area.

"The airfield first." Dirce ripped a sign from the wall that warned against harboring magic users. "Then, we'll roll north."

"Frontal or ambush?" The guard took out his notebook. Jarvis knew what his job was and he'd always done it well enough that he couldn't be easily replaced. Andrew had forgotten to do that, but he'd also been too familiar with the boss, too jovial. Dirce didn't like amusement or happiness of any kind in his men.

"Both, if the Secretaries-General will send more troops. Ambush, if not."

"I'll get things drawn up to cover us." Jarvis opened the door to Xavier's apartment for Dirce to enter. Jarvis went to his own allocated cubby nearby, ignoring the glares of the locals and the groans of his troops when they saw him writing

down new orders. Jarvis was relieved they were going to Souther Field. The Secretaries-General would be waiting for them, wanting an explanation for everything that had happened, including the deaths of the three market masters they'd put into place. If Dirce could talk his way through that and still get out with clearance to chase Safe Haven, Jarvis planned to be ready with drawings and detailed notes. Dirce wouldn't be in a good mood when that meeting was over.

Dirce settled onto Xavier's bed as the door opened again. The guards shoved and dragged three tall women in, ignoring their fear and their pleas for freedom.

Dirce lifted a hand. "I need your love."

Sensual vibes floated through the room, drawing the females against their will. When an alpha called, everyone answered.

7

"Is everything ready?" Kendle joined Tommy in the cabin of the truck. They'd traveled for the last three days, only stopping this morning when they'd run out of fuel again. They had spent this morning draining lawnmowers and other small appliances to get half a tank for the cargo van Josh had found under a tarp behind a mechanic shop.

“All set for us to roll out again at dawn.” Tommy had come out here in the cold darkness to wait for her.

Kendle shut the door softly, hoping Rita had been able to get the kids to sleep. The twins had colic.

Kendle shuddered at a wave of pain and need.

The heat baking off her body was so thick that Tommy lowered his window. “You okay?”

“Are you really a camp provider?”

Tommy stared at the scarred island female in surprise, not certain how to answer.

“I’m sorry. Never mind.” Kendle looked over, orbs glowing. “I need to go out running for a bit.”

Tommy had been briefed for moments like these, but he’d honestly thought Marc was hazing him or testing his loyalty. He’d also heard the rumors about Kendle. He hadn’t seen a single sign of it until now. “You have to control it.”

Kendle’s hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. “You don’t understand.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then answer the question!”

Tommy began to understand why she’d asked as waves of need pierced his grief to tempt him with the one thing he enjoyed most in the world—pussy.

Kendle caught the thought. “Well, you’re shallow, aren’t ya?”

Tommy frowned. “I like to fuck. You like to eat people.”

“Do you?”

Tommy flushed scarlet, almost unable to believe this was her approach. *Has to be some kind of bad joke.*

Kendle moaned in frustration. She'd never felt heat like this, or such hatred. *I don't know what to do with it!*

Tommy ran through his reservations and found one. "Are we gonna hafta put you down some day over Marc?"

Kendle's heat increased with that name. She controlled herself by a hair. "I have to go." Kendle reached for the handle.

Tommy grabbed her by the other arm and jerked her over the seat. He held her close and tight, flipping the recline switch. She wasn't struggling yet, mostly because of surprise, but Tommy was certain that she would react soon and it might be ugly. He wrapped his legs around hers and waited, heart thumping wildly. If Marc was wrong, this would be bad.

Kendle had frozen. At first in fear, then in anger. When desire flooded, she snapped, lunging against her captor in violent jerks and shifts meant to dislodge him.

Tommy flipped them again so he was on top of her. Fiery heat smothered him in warning. She was about to use her gift. Tommy shifted again, this time to thrust between her legs. He was already hard.

Kendle shuddered in lust, body wracked with chills that sent sweet relief over her burning nerves. "Again!"

Tommy immediately stopped moving. “Now that I’ve got your attention, Ms. Roberts, I’d like to discuss an arrangement.”

Kendle opened her mouth to scream; his words penetrated. “I... What?”

Tommy smiled at her. “I’ll handle your needs. I can ease it for you, like I do for others in camp.”

Kendle struggled to think. “You’re answering my question.”

Tommy grinned at her haze. “Yes. I eat.”

Now Kendle went scarlet, half in embarrassment and half in need. “What do you want from me? I’m doing the best I can!”

“Answer my question.”

Kendle paused to run through it as the rage eased off a notch. “Uh, it was... No! I’ll leave before I hurt him.”

“And Angela?”

“I’ll slit her throat with my fingernails if I can get close enough!” Kendle stared in horror at the admission.

Tommy released her arms and adjusted so they were both more comfortable. When Kendle would have sat up, Tommy placed a hand on her chest.

Kendle arched into his touch.

Tommy gave her a light squeeze that returned both of them to the fiery heat of a moment before.

“Will you service me?” Her eyes faded to miserable blue. “I’ll pay whatever you want.”

Tommy slowly leaned down. “I don’t charge for doing what I love.” He nuzzled her neck softly,

voice deepening to a thick bass that revealed his own desires. “You have a beautiful body. I want to enjoy it.”

Kendle’s expression threatened anger, but Tommy shook his head. “I mean that. I’m gonna love every inch of Kendle Roberts, like I used to dream about when I saw you on TV.”

“You watched me?” She gasped as his hand tightened over her breast.

“Every show.” Tommy popped the buttons on her shirt. “Unhook your bra. I wanna kiss those.”

Kendle hesitated.

Tommy ripped it open, spilling out scarred breasts with misshapen nipples that withered under his intent gaze. “Don’t do that.” Tommy leaned forward to lick, groaning as lust hardened him into one long throb. He unsnapped his jeans. “Do this.”

He placed her hand where he wanted it, no longer concerned with anything except bringing them both as much ecstasy as he could. He unsnapped hers next, sliding her pants down.

Kendle shivered. *What am I doing?*

Tommy felt her tense in the wrong way. “Keep those eyes open! Feel *me!*” Tommy shoved forward to claim her body and her mouth.

Kendle cried out in pain and pleasure. Her body jerked wildly, kept in place by the weight of his now rotating hips. She arched as he mashed them perfectly, sent over the edge.

“That’s it. That’s good!” Tommy was unable to stop and wait like he was used to doing when he

serviced the camp's women. Kendle's body was an inferno of delicious sensations that was drawing him toward a rapid conclusion in the wrong place.

Respecting the courage that it had taken for him to insist, Kendle spread her legs wider. Luke had liked it when she did that.

Emboldened, Tommy slid an arm under her leg and tossed it over his shoulder, grunting in delight at the unrestricted access.

For an instant, Kendle was flashed to the cave. She felt smothered by his weight, his breath, his leering...but it wasn't Ethan. This was Tommy and even in his lust, he wasn't hurting her. In fact, it seemed as if he was holding back to keep from it. Testing that hypothesis, and her own courage, Kendle placed her other leg on his other shoulder. She was completely open and vulnerable to him. She hadn't been able to do this with Adrian.

"Oh, hell!" Tommy groaned. "Don't... You shouldn't... It's good. I got it."

His hips met hers with exactly the same force as before, despite the vein now popping out on his forehead.

Empathizing with always having to remain in control, Kendle pushed into his mind. Erotic images of her on her show were playing in a constant loop.

"What are you...?"

Kendle flipped the bolt on his control and left.

"Son of a!"

Kendle arched in invitation, body tightening.

Tommy growled, dropping on her heavily, shoving deep. “Damn you!”

He slammed in a few more times and then froze, spilling anger and bitterness about the ending.

Kendle waited for yelling or even violence, braced to take what she deserved for pushing him.

Tommy stayed where he was, trying to reason it out. He didn’t talk.

It made Kendle nervous. She shifted restlessly under him.

Tommy shrugged and began thrusting against her in a slow, steady motion that immediately began giving new life to his body. “Thank you.”

Glad he understood, Kendle smiled.

Tommy gasped at the sensation, at the beauty under her scars and violence. *She’s perfect.*

“Not even close.” Kendle pushed him off and rolled over.

Tommy grabbed her hip and slid in from behind.

Content, Kendle stayed still and let him have his moment. He’d given her relief. The least she could do was return the favor.

Observing the couple from the shadows, Conner also listened mentally. He had to hope she wouldn’t notice, but he needed that information. Kendle and Candy were a lot alike. If he could use that charm on Candy... Conner spun into the darkness, rebuking himself. *I’m not like my dad. I won’t blow my second chance. Candy can have Theo. I don’t need her.*

Conner went into the small farmhouse, where the comradery of his team surrounded him with support and caring. *This is all I've ever wanted. No one can match this feeling. I belong now. I'm happy.*

Inside, that cruel voice would have protested, but the teenager gently shut the cage. *Go to sleep now. I banish you.*

For how long? The demon struggled as he was forced into the small cell.

Conner rested his cheek against the chair. *As long as it takes for you to become good. Until you can do that, I don't need you anymore.*

The barrier to the mental cage slammed shut, blocking off the screams for mercy.

Conner sighed in relief, gesturing to Josh. "Let's play some cards. They're gonna be a while."

Chapter Thirty-Two
Which Way?

1

“**T**his is a bad idea.”

Kendle didn't respond to Scott's nervous comment. The marina was small and dark, and lined by a variety of boats. Many of them looked as though people had tried to live on them after the war.

Tommy didn't see anyone now. “Are we doing this?”

Kendle nodded. “We have two hours of gas left. We have to find something here.”

Conner frowned. “Can we wait for daylight? We're not alone.”

Kendle stilled. “What do you sense?”

“A small group. They're not awake, but they will be if we make any noise. I don't want to scan further and maybe alert anyone that we're here.”

Kendle scanned the boats. “Are they in one of those?”

Conner shrugged. “I'd have to track them. If they're like us, it will wake them up when I do it.”

Kendle was too tired to deal with their kind tonight. “We'll go in on foot, grab what we can and get gone.” Kendle glanced in the mirror at Scott and

the few others who had been chosen to stay with the vehicle and the twins. “You wait an hour and then you go. Get them as close to home as you can.”

Sitting behind the wheel, Scott nodded tensely. The van was long and black, but he couldn’t find much else good about it. The vehicle was loud and guzzled gas. They’d run low long before they’d estimated. “I don’t like this.”

Kendle sighed, zipping her jacket and then her coat. “Me either. Last chance for alternate suggestions.” Fuel was getting harder and harder to come by. In the next few months, horses would probably make a comeback, as would bicycles and jogging.

“Let’s get it done.” Tommy added support to her choice. She was a rookie being mentored and trained on this run, but she’d already earned a bump in rank as far as he was concerned.

Tommy directed Kendle as half of them climbed out of the vehicle. “Stay center of us.”

“I will.” Kendle wished there had been another option. She stayed in the middle of the six men as they walked through the darkness that surrounded the small parking area. The team traveled swiftly down the stairs and across the dock; the eerie sound of water lapping against warped wood mocked their bravery.

Tommy stopped part way down the dock and gestured two men to each side. The five boats right here appeared to be intact. Tommy shined his light

over more of them, not spotting people. He could almost feel them though.

Kendle kept her hip against Tommy's, shining her light in the opposite direction. They tried to watch all the ramps and stairs, but it was clear that they were in danger. The darkness held lethal combatants—not the least of which was Mother Nature. The wind stinging them right now would have their eyes blurring if not for their goggles.

The two Eagles on Kendle's side came straight back to them, gesturing. *Nothing we can use.*

The two men on Tommy's side were now kneeling near the rear of the lightly floating houseboat. Not wanting to be split up, Tommy waited for them even though they were short on time and the temperature was around freezing.

Josh and Ben refused to hurry. They'd been trained to be meticulous on missions or people died. They carefully examined the fuel canisters, surprised that there were three of them sitting out in the open. This boat was loaded with boxes and crates, all strategically located to keep an even balance. There were also suitcases visible through the window. Ryan grimaced. *Guess they didn't get out in time.*

Ben sent Eagle code, glad of the illumination from Tommy's flashlight. *Someone lives here.*

Ryan nodded, hating the guilt. They might be stealing from someone who was in the same dire condition they were.

But why leave it out in the open? Something isn't right about this. Ben sniffed the can and recoiled. It was definitely gasoline.

Ben hefted two of the cans as Ryan grabbed the third and brought up the rear with his gun in hand. This place felt hinky.

Kendle and the others were relieved to see the men carrying fuel. They were also surprised at how quick and easy this had been.

Let's go. Tommy motioned. He listened to the waves and soft bumping of the docked boats. He had goosebumps.

The team hurried across the dock and up the stairs, breaking into a fast trot as their vehicle came into view.

“Damn.”

“You have something of ours!” The tall man in front of their van pointed coldly. “You give it back and we'll do the same.”

The Eagles immediately spread out into that dangerous V, guns coming up.

“Step away from the vehicle and put your weapons on the ground!” Ben was the center of the V.

The local standing by the driver's window of their van had his gun against the glass. Two other men stood with their weapons pointed at the rear windows.

“Are we all going to die?” the leader asked calmly. “I offered you a way to save your lives.”

Kendle lowered her gun a little. “We didn’t know anyone was here. We need the fuel. Can we buy it?”

The leader scanned them, picking out their gear, their weapons. “Maybe. Three cans are worth the van.” Clyde and his boys were bundled from boots to ski masks, with only their red, raw facial skin showing. Tall and brunette, they might have been models before the end of the world. Now, they were scavengers like everyone else.

“We have a few rounds of ammo and a little food.” Kendle braced. “We’re from Safe Haven.”

Tommy and the others frowned at her disclosure, but the leader of the four men shook his head. “No one’s heard from them in a month. You’re lying.”

Kendle snorted. “I’m on the Safe Haven council. We will pay for the fuel.”

“How?” Clyde waved a covered hand. “You got nothing we need but that van.”

“Are you leaving?” Tommy had a bad feeling glowing brightly in his gut.

“Everyone is.” Clyde was suddenly exhausted. “Put the fuel down and get out of here.”

Ben and Ryan put the cans on the ground and followed Tommy away from them. As the two groups changed places with leery glances and light steps, all of them were relieved.

Once her people were safe, Kendle spoke with the leader, using the vehicle lights to study him. “Is there anything we can do to buy it?”

Clyde examined the woman, noting her scars and wild hair. He had already recognized her, but being a former TV star wasn't more valuable than being from Safe Haven now. All dynasties fell. It was the law of the land.

Kendle pushed into his thoughts carefully, needing something to bargain with. What she found made her shudder.

“Come on.” Tommy put an arm around her shoulders to lead her to the van. “We’ll keep searching.”

Kendle let him guide her into the van without speaking, still digging into Clyde. She shuddered again.

Tommy only waited until they were all inside. “What is it? I saw your reaction. Tell me.”

It reminded her so strongly of Marc that Kendle was shocked to discover tears behind her eyes. She shoved them away. “The Mexicans came through their hometown. These men are barely surviving. We have to keep going.”

“So why are you whiter than the moon?” Ramer asked from the seat next to her.

“He saw them, so I could see them.” Kendle glanced around at her men. “There were thousands.”

“As in plural?”

Kendle nodded shakily at Ben’s concern. “If they got into the mountain, Safe Haven might really be gone.”

Tommy shut the door. “Get us out of here.”

Scott shifted the van into drive, but rolled slowly, searching for fuel. As their driver, he was doubly conscious of how low the fuel line was on the dial in front of him. They were almost out of time.

“Where else?” Scott held an edge while Josh consulted the maps again.

“There’s a strip of businesses along the interstate, but there’s no way they’ll have anything left if thousands of troops went through there.”

Kendle gestured toward the junkyard that was across from the marina. “Think that’s been cleaned out?”

Tommy shrugged, pointing their driver toward it. “We’ll find out.”

“Do you think it belongs to those people we left?” Carl hadn’t liked sitting there waiting for the rest of the team with a gun to the glass by his ear.

“I’d say they’ve scavenged it, but they’re in the middle of leaving.” Kendle hoped she was right. “They were leaving at sunrise. It’s why the gas cans and crates were all in view.”

That answered a few of their questions, but as they rolled into the dark, creepy junkyard, they weren’t comforted. The locals were fleeing, which meant something bad was coming. Thousands of Mexican guerillas would definitely qualify. In a month, they could have looted Safe Haven and be on their journey home. Clyde’s mental timeline had been roughly thirty days ago.

The junkyard had the typical stacks of cars and the crushing machine, but it also boasted signs promising technology that outshined their neighbors. Kendle had no idea what that meant.

“What are we searching for in here?” Scott scanned for trouble. “They drain all the gas tanks before they bring these cars in.”

“Not all of them.” Kendle led the way. “The police don’t have the same rules as the public when they bring in wrecks. There are also operating equipment and employee vehicles.” Kendle was glad to observe no signs of people; this time, it felt that way. They drove around the recycling warehouse that still had shutters and broken doors that smacked their frames as the wind picked up.

“How do you want to handle this?”

Kendle grimaced at Ben’s question. “I almost got us killed over there. Someone else needs to...” Kendle trailed off as the men laughed. “What?”

“We’re Eagles. You saved our lives by negotiating.”

Kendle realized she’d underestimated her team. “We were caught off guard. I didn’t want to lose anyone.”

“We wouldn’t have.” Now that they were free, Tommy had his confidence back. “We’re trained to handle it when things go wrong a lot more than we are for when things go right, but we don’t like killing if we don’t have to. You did great.”

Kendle blushed at his warm tone. “Thanks.” She studied the employee parking lot across from a

crushing machine, using the spotlight on the van. “Keep going. There are scratch marks by the gas flaps on all these cars. They’ve been drained.”

Scott slowly took them around the winding dirt path, picking out tall shapes of smokestacks and another long warehouse.

“Nice!” Tommy grinned as he spotted the sign on the next building. “It’s a small refinery.”

“No way it hasn’t been cleaned out.” Kendle didn’t want them to get their hopes up.

“We can get it going and make our own fuel to get home.”

The team both liked and hated Tommy’s idea. It was safer to make it, but took more time. All of them wanted to be home.

Kendle shrugged. “Or we can take what those dying men have. We’ve lived through an apocalypse. It is survival out here.”

“We’re Eagles.”

Kendle smiled at Ryan’s words. “Yes, you are. Let’s learn how to make fuel and get a good night’s sleep. We’ve earned it.”

2

“I found some manuals.” Kendle came from the rear of the building that stank of awful chemicals even after all these months. “We’ll need to power this place, but I think we have the rest of it.”

The refinery was full of tall, metal tubs and vats, with robot arms and miles of piping and wires. It

reminded Tommy of the cave that Angela had chosen before their people had moved into it.

Knock-knock!

Kendle and the team froze at the light tapping...then drew their weapons.

Tommy moved into a good position behind the door. "Come in."

The door swung open to reveal the four men from the marina.

Before Tommy could order them to get lost, Kendle waved at the mess behind her. "Did you guys do this?"

The leader nodded, not entering. "We tried to make our own."

"No power?"

"Exactly." Clyde looked at her. "We're too short to reach our destination on those three cans."

"So you want to work together to get what you need?"

"Yes." Clyde was relieved no one was shooting yet.

Kendle frowned. "What changed your mind?"

"You said you're from Safe Haven." Clyde didn't meet her eye. "If they lived, we know they're a place we can trade with in the future."

It was a flimsy excuse, but it was clear the men wanted no problems, just fuel.

Kendle shrugged at Tommy's lifted brow. "I got nothing bad from him or his men."

"My sons." Clyde motioned the boys to come in and shut the door. "Lost their mom about six months

ago. Nothing to keep us here now except lack of transportation.”

Kendle and the others understood. If Safe Haven really was gone, they probably wouldn't stay around that mountain either.

Ben lit the lantern and placed Rita along the wall that had no windows, helping her get settled with the babies and Conner, who was fighting a cold. His runny nose was worrisome to all of them. They only had Tylenol and morphine along.

Ben gave him the Tylenol.

“How long do you think we'll be here?” Conner sounded stuffed up even to himself.

“A few days.” Ben capped the bottle. “Maybe we'll get lucky and roll out in two.”

Conner put his head down on the bedroll. “If I die, take me to my dad.”

Ben snickered. “You're not going to die. Sleep for a while. When you get up, we'll have hot soup.”

Ben joined Kendle and the new people as the rest of the Eagles secured the building and got set to spend the night. “You okay?”

“I'd be better if we could figure out how they powered this place.” Kendle picked up a blueprint.

Ben handed her a rolled up paper from the shelf by her knee. “You'll want this one.”

Kendle unrolled the paper. She scanned the map key. “Hey! They had solar and wind power. Well, that's interesting.”

“That makes it easier.”

Kendle was glad something about this trip might be easy. So far, nothing else had. “Good. Okay, well, we’ll get sleep and start working in the morning.”

Clyde didn’t want to wait. “Why not now?”

“Too many lights on without knowing what we’re doing.” Kendle stared pointedly. “I don’t want to be held up by...company.”

Clyde flushed.

Kendle gestured toward the opposite wall. “You guys can have that space. Please honor our hospitality. I don’t want to waste bullets on you.”

Clyde was just glad to be getting a night where he could sleep and not have one eye open while doing it. For some reason, he trusted these new people. “Getting soft.” When he’d been on the run from the law, he would have carjacked anyone, but twenty years of living his life right had changed him into a good person. “Probably gonna get me killed.”

3

“It has to be primed with gas? You’re kidding!”

The shed was built for the equipment it held, boasting shelves and hangers made in odd shapes and sizes. The wooden floor held footprints that were nearly filled with dust.

“We also have to fill up this generator.” Scott pointed to a chunk of hoses and metal in a shiny case. “It runs the windmill and the battery banks.”

Tommy saw the generator was an older model. “This is gonna make a lot of noise when we fire it up. Get some people on duty and I’ll help Ben handle this.”

Kendle moved toward the main building. They’d been thrilled to discover the generator shed right next to the windmill, but that was the extent of their happiness.

“We need two monkeys for guard duty.” Kendle chose the first two hands that went up, then joined Scott at the small desk where he was trying to decipher the chemicals they needed to add to the fuel mix during the refining process. He didn’t look thrilled.

“I have no idea what we’re doing.”

Kendle pointed toward the tank on the end that was one tab full, according to the measuring devices on the front. “I don’t believe we need to know how it works exactly. This all shut down when the power stopped. It was probably in the middle of a batch.”

“You think if we get the power on, it will resume like normal?”

“Yes. I hope we’ll only have to collect the fuel.”

“That would be great.”

“You found the generator shed?” Clyde looked up from the bedroll where he and his sons were still enjoying the warmth. He had woken when she’d come in, but he hadn’t heard her depart.

Kendle didn’t reply. She’d had time to consider things and now she wasn’t sure that making a deal with these locals was a good idea.

Clyde sensed her reluctance to talk and put his head back down. “Let me know when you’re doing it. The noise will bring problems, maybe. We’ll help if it does.”

Kendle opened her mouth to tell him to get ready, but a horrendous squealing filled the air.

Clyde’s lids popped open in dismay. “Now?”

Kendle grinned. “We’re go-getters, Clyde. The sun rose. That’s all we needed.”

Clyde rolled his eyes. “Sounds like Safe Haven shit to me.” He nudged his boys. “Come on, kiddies. The lady says we need to rise and shine.”

Kendle snickered as the boys rose, grumbling about slave drivers. “That was the last town we went through. They didn’t care for earlier risers there either. Must be why we made it out with our gear and our lives.”

Clyde flushed, but didn’t argue. The apocalypse had given everyone the license to sleep in. It just wasn’t wise to do so.

Kendle glanced around at her group. “Get ready for trouble.”

“How long to finish a batch once it’s started?”
Scott skimmed the papers.

“No idea. Might be days.”

“Days?”

“Days?”

Scott and Clyde’s voice merged to form one large whine.

Kendle grimaced. “That’s it! Get up and get to work! I want us gone.” She couldn’t let them get lazy or careless. It would kill them all.

“We need milk for the twins,” Rita called.

Kendle sighed. She’d known that, but hadn’t made plans for it yet. She looked at Clyde with a lifted brow.

Clyde shook his head. “Not in months. Milk products of any kind are high trade items. They go fast.”

Kendle considered her options. She gestured to Josh. “Find me a suburb near here.”

Josh frowned. “You gonna walk?” They were using the last of their fuel to prime the generator.

“Yes. The closer the better.”

Josh poured over the maps, not sure why she wanted a suburb. “We have one about three miles to the east. Condos.”

“That’ll work.” She marched to the corner for her kit. “People relocated to the suburbs to raise a family. There should be formula and diapers in some of those homes. No one ever cleans it all out because no one’s needs are the same when they scavenge.”

Kendle was ready to leave in minutes. She stopped by the shed, where the generator was huffing and puffing in protest of the ten-month pause between shifts. “I’ll be back in about six hours. The twins need milk.”

Tommy shook his head. “I’m coming with you. We never forage alone.”

“Can we do that? I wasn’t sure about weakening the group here since we’re making so much noise now.”

Ben supported Tommy. “We don’t go out alone. I’ll cover things.”

Tommy finished filling the generator with the can he was holding, then replaced the cap. “Six hours. Hold down the fort.”

Ben snickered. “We’ll have supper waiting, Pa.”

Kendle and Tommy laughed as they strolled out, aware that none of them were amused. Being split up was dangerous.

“I’ll be a minute getting my kit.” Tommy jogged into the refinery, aware of Tyler and Josh now in the trees with rifles on their knees.

Kendle waited restlessly, hating this. She wanted to be back in Safe Haven. A team this size couldn’t survive for long. Humans had to come together or they would die out.

4

“Why isn’t this place looted?”

Kendle and Tommy were kneeling behind the tall, open iron gate of the complex. The homes were dirty, and there was debris on the tiny porches and balconies, but the doors were all fastened and most of the shades were drawn.

“Maybe there are people here. We should try somewhere else.”

“I agree.” Kendle backed away. “There are two more complexes like this near here.”

Tommy and Kendle jogged back toward the main road. They both hated being in the open, but running through yards was just as dangerous and much more time consuming.

“Do you think we’re crazy for passing up an almost sure deal?” Kendle stayed close as they reached the main road and hunkered down behind bushes to scan it.

“No. If they’ve survived as a community, we have no cause to steal from them. Eagles do the right thing.”

“Like with not killing Clyde and his sons for the three cans of gas last night?”

“Yes. We could have, and that might have even gotten us all the way home, but Adrian always told us one bad deed gets repaid with two.”

“Meaning we might have had something else go wrong before we could get there?”

“Exactly. They might also have had family that would have suffered with them being gone, maybe even died. We would have earned the bad karma from that. There are ripples to everything a person does. Eagles are trained to be conscious of that.”

Kendle was glad. She wouldn’t have been able to sleep if they had killed innocent people for any reason, let alone one as petty as cans of gas.

Tommy didn't see anything moving. The main street was lined in neatly planted rows of trees with bars around them and trash cans on either side. The iron light poles still boasted bits of faded tinsel that reminded them the war had come at Christmas time. Stores had been looted and windows were broken, but he assumed that was from the weather. A tree branch impaling the glass window of an appliance rental shop supported that theory. "You good for this?" Tommy hadn't forgotten she'd been injured to secure their freedom.

Kendle nodded, even though her legs and arms were aching. "You know it."

Tommy flashed his approval. "Come on."

Kendle followed him onto the main road, forcing her mind into that place where pain was just pain and not something debilitating. They needed milk. She would get it.

Tommy and Kendle approached the complex cautiously, happy to spot kicked in doors and spray painted graffiti that was so fresh it hadn't faded yet. The two suburbs were nearly identical with their matching brown and white condominiums and soccer vans displaying families of stick figures in the rear windows. Even the mailboxes and sheds were the same cheap, copied design that had taken over real estate offices and middle class lives.

"Much better." Tommy paused to give Kendle time to recover before they went in. Looted areas were the best places to search for odd, non-common items. Tommy doubted they would find canisters of

formula, but powdered milk was something people had used during camping trips and in diet combinations. In the past, the poorer populations had recognized the benefits of powdered products, but the middle classes had been catching on. The rich had also used some powdered items, but they'd been more able to afford to replace perishables. *Doesn't do much good for them now.* "Which one?"

Kendle drew in a breath and concentrated, trying not to be nervous about using her gifts in front of him. She pointed. "That one. There's something in there."

He led the way toward the middle row home. "How can you tell?"

"It's a signature in my mind. Like a heat source, but it's yellow."

Tommy shrugged, not understanding. "Okay. I'm first in. You watch my six."

Kendle kept her gun ready, but she didn't think they would need it. She'd scanned the entire street of homes. No one was here. Kendle wished she'd taken the time to do it last night and even as far back as right before Market Town. She'd been afraid to alienate the men on the mission team by trying to act like Angela or Jennifer. *That backfired. Acting like them is exactly what I should have been doing.*

Kendle went into full alert as she followed her partner into the condominium.

Tommy swept the tiled kitchen and hallway that were coated in filthy dishes and trash. It looked as

if it had been used for a flophouse. “Do you know which floor?”

“Low.” Kendle flipped on her light when he did. She pointed hers toward the ground so she didn’t blind him with glare from the mirrors and pictures they were passing. *Nice art collection.* She recognized some of the expensive knockoffs. She’d loved to visit museums on her downtime.

“Stairs here.” Tommy waved his light. “And a door at the bottom.”

“Why isn’t it kicked in?”

“We’ll find out.” He went down. “Stay there.”

Kendle waited as he examined the barrier.

“Looks like they tried to kick it in. Lot of scuff marks.” Tommy bumped it lightly with his shoulder and groaned. “Oh, yeah. That’s reinforced.”

“So there are probably bodies in there?”

“Yeah, that’s been the case whenever we’ve found one of these rooms. They locked themselves in to wait out the first couple weeks of chaos, but they did too good of a job on the seals and ran out of air.” Tommy tried to be quiet as he pulled the crowbar from his kit and got to work; the noises echoed loudly.

Tommy grunted in effort, prying with his legs... The door popped open, squeaking.

He peered in, gun changing places with the other tool. “Wow.”

Kendle braced. “Bodies?”

“Yeah, but it’s not as bad as some of them.”

“Then why the...” Kendle paused in the narrow doorway. “Is that cheese?”

“And it only has mold on the edges!” Tommy scanned the table. “There’s also wine.”

The wine room was small and rectangle, with two chairs and a serving tray between them. On the tray was a football sized block of cheese and a few empty cracker packs. The two wine glasses still held drops of the potent alcohol in the bottoms.

Kendle scanned the small space and found a short shelf that still had several bottles in the rack. She also spotted two bodies on the narrow couch and faded red sprays on the wall. “They didn’t run out of air.”

“No.” Tommy sighed. “They ran out of hope. Get those guns. We always resupply ourselves from the dead. It’s crazy not to. They don’t need it anymore.”

Kendle swallowed her revulsion to take the weapons lying in the laps of the skeletons that were too runny for her liking. She understood the cool conditions of the basement had preserved them, but it made her eager to go.

Tommy and Kendle filled their bags with wine and cheese, along with two of the corkscrews and a roll of summer sausage they found stuffed in the tiny cup cabinet on the wall. For a scavenging trip, the haul was great, but for what they needed, it wasn’t enough.

“Let’s check the shed.” Kendle slid her kit to the porch as they left the building. Despite the chill and the wind, she was glad to be outside.

Tommy popped the lock and opened the shed. It was neatly lined with all the equipment ground workers would have needed to care for the property. “Lawnmower...chainsaw...gas can!”

Thrilled over the find, he grabbed the can to verify it contained fuel.

“We’re good.” Tommy replaced the cap. “About half of what we need.”

“You want to drain these or search for more cans?” Kendle pointed toward the lawnmower and the chainsaw.

Tommy considered. “Let’s check other sheds. If we don’t find anything bigger, we’ll do the smaller tanks.”

It took them another hour to hunt up and drain enough gas to get them back to Safe Haven. The sun was high in the cloudy sky when Kendle pointed at the next street. “I see another yellow signature.”

Tommy led her across the yard of a farmhouse and into the parking lot of a small shopping strip. A daycare center was nestled in the rear corner.

“It’s been looted.”

“But these cars haven’t been.” She went to a red Toyota with shattered windows. “Let’s get these trunks open. Look for diaper bags.”

The cars in the parking lot were mostly minivans and wagons, all complete with dice and air

fresheners hanging from dusty mirrors. None of them were easy to open. Tommy had to resort to cracking the locks with a screwdriver.

“Yes!” Kendle grabbed the pink diaper bag, digging into it eagerly. “We have two cans of formula! Expires...in another year! We’re good!”

Kendle and Tommy quickly loaded up a few other items from the trunks. It would take them all of their remaining hour to reach the refinery and maybe a little more. Neither of them wanted to worry their teammates. Being apart was stressful enough. Being late was cruel.

5

“Do you hear that?”

Tommy nodded. It sounded like something with big machines was running. The echo was coming to them loud and clear.

“Sounds like they got it going.”

“That would be good for both groups.” Kendle tried to think good thoughts. “We can all go our separate ways with full tanks.”

“Will they?”

Kendle sighed. “I didn’t get anything bad, but in this world, that’s a hard question to answer.”

Tommy got his gun out again, fingers raw from having so much time off and then being at it again. “Go around the side. Let’s make sure we haven’t had any more company.”

Kendle hurried to the edge of the wide building as Tommy rushed toward the front. He didn't see the guards in the trees as he made it around the front, increasing the tension. "Hello inside!"

The lack of voices or greetings sent chills over Tommy. Following his instinct, he dove to the ground just as the bullets began to fly through the windows and door.

Slugs pinged off the wood and concrete as he crawled toward the ditch that ran along the road. Tommy flung himself down the small hill, relieved when he didn't sense pain from any injuries.

The gunfire didn't stop.

Tommy realized Kendle was being shot at now. He popped up in time to witness her jumping through the window.

Tommy sighed in admiration. *Damn, I like her.* He gained his feet and ran into the front entrance while everyone inside was hopefully distracted by her gutsy move.

Bang! Bang! Kendle drove the three women back. She didn't know who they were and she didn't care. She was tired of people holding her team hostage, threatening them. She wasn't negotiating this time.

Kendle angrily fired again, bullet smacking into the short female with the AK. The body hit a nearby shelf, midsection blooming red.

Tommy fired at the braided woman with the machete who lunged at Kendle, shooting her in the

shoulder. Shouting, she stumbled into Kendle, knocking them both to the ground.

Tommy wanted to make sure Kendle would be okay in the immediate struggle that ensued for the machete, but an older copy of the short woman jumped onto his back and slid her knife into his cheek.

“Ahhh!” Tommy slammed himself backwards into the desk and then the wall, dislodging his attacker. He spun around and punched her in the face as she lunged forward with the bloody butcher knife.

Knocked out, she dropped heavily onto the floor.

Tommy turned around to help Kendle.

Kendle swung the machete repeatedly, methodically hacking off limbs at the joints. Gore splattered across the window.

I think I'll wait 'til she feels like she's done. Tommy scanned the rest of the building that he could see, not finding their team. The gear was where they'd left it, and the refinery around them was loud with noise and movement from the big machines that could be hiding anyone still lurking. Tommy reloaded his gun and looked at Kendle, hoping she was ready.

Tommy's actions snapped Kendle into awareness. She dropped the bloody weapon, wiping an arm across her face so she could see through the blood.

Tommy waved her toward the rear, hoping she obeyed and didn't flip out on him.

Kendle forced herself to step over the mess to take the far aisle.

Tommy let out a breath and covered the opposite side.

Kendle spotted two big women standing in front of their bound men and Rita. She didn't see the twins at all.

We're under the carpet, a voice stated clearly in her mind. *They wanted us.*

How do they know about you? Kendle was only a little surprised that the kids were able to communicate this way at so young an age.

Market Town sent them.

I should have known. Kendle risked a quick peep around the corner to verify that Tommy was in place. She saw his fingers waving three...two...one...

Kendle stood up and strode forward, following their training for a situation like this one. Tommy was the top gunslinger in Safe Haven after their leaders. That made her the decoy. "Hey! I want my team. You have no idea what I've already done to keep them."

The women turned toward her, but didn't fire. They'd clearly been waiting for her to come.

"We got the men we wanted. We need the babies now and we'll go." The redhead who was the most wrinkled lifted a worn AK. "Where are they?"

Furious, Kendle didn't stop coming.

When the woman took aim on her, Kendle darted to the right; Tommy fired.

Kendle also fired, aiming for the remaining threat. She got the other female in the leg and fired again, double tapping. This time she hit the woman's chest. The gun dropped from her grip as she fell forward.

"Clear?"

"Clear."

"Is everyone okay?"

As Kendle and Tommy untied their people and then retrieved the babies, they scanned the mess and the running machinery.

"Where are Clyde and his sons?"

"They took off out the back when they saw the women coming in." Rita spat scornfully. "Didn't even warn us! We found out there was a problem when the front door opened."

Kendle knelt down by the chest-shot female who was gasping, and close to death. "Why did you attack us?"

"Slaves...babies."

"Did Dirce send you?"

"Our turn came...to serve the town."

Kendle considered healing the local, then decided not to. These big women with their jumpers and Carhartt coats were okay with slavery. They'd had their second chance after the war and blown it.

"Rice is...dead," the woman gasped out. "Dirce will come. Jerry told him...everything."

"Who is Jerry?" Tommy untied Carl.

“Jerry is Rice’s father-n-law.” Conner sucked in more air to talk with. “We were in the collateral room with him.”

Kendle shrugged. “I guess he didn’t like Rice sending his grandkids off with strangers. Too late to fix that now. He’ll have to come to Safe Haven if he really wants them.” Kendle looked around, dread forming a hard ball in the pit of her stomach. “Where are Tyler and Josh?”

Ryan didn’t meet her eye. “We haven’t seen them. There was a lot of gunfire when the gang first came in. We got separated in these aisles and ran out of ammunition.”

Kendle followed the others out to search for their missing men as a sense of failure settled onto her tired shoulders. *I got them killed. I don’t want to play this game anymore.*

6

Kendle glanced in the mirror, inspecting her team. Rita and the babies were out of her view in the rear of the van, hidden among various boxes and bags, but all of the team was in sight.

Those who survived. She saw it reflected in Tommy’s expression as they drove by the two crosses. They hadn’t been here when their men needed them. No one would forget this moment, this feeling of failure.

Kendle noted the injuries, the filthy, torn clothes, the hollow eyes and the cuts, the scrapes and bruises. This had been a rough trip.

“Everyone ready?” Kendle pulled out of the driveway of the refinery. They had a full tank and five extra cans from two days of struggling to figure out how it all worked. They could have had more, but this was enough to get them home and that had been the goal. “All set?”

“Yes.” Ben stared at the crosses in the mirror. “We can’t take any more of the wastelands right now. We want to go home.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Close

October 22nd

1

“**O**h, my God!”

Kendle and her team stood on the snowy ledge, using binoculars to view the mountain. They hadn't been able to see anything in the darkness when they'd arrived. Forced to wait for dawn, the view was uglier than they'd imagined. The vultures circled and cried, fighting for scraps even though the field of bodies stretched for miles across the valley.

“Some of them are Mexican.” Tommy pointed through the late afternoon sunlight. “There are flags and vehicles.”

“Anything moving out there?” Ben was following their training to the letter. He was above Tommy in skills like this, so he was guiding him through the process. When it came to anything weapon related, those positions were reversed.

“Flies.” Tents flapped in the wind, sounding hollow, empty in the winter wind, and under that, was a low hum of insects. Kendle controlled her guts. Even this far up, the smell was enough to

choke her. Hundreds of bodies in various stages of decomposition littered the valley at the bottom of the mountain.

“What about corridors and roads?” Ben didn’t want to study it anymore. He’d been on duty when the sun rose. He’d stared at it for an hour before waking the others.

“They blew the tunnels or had cave-ins...” Tommy lifted the binoculars. “All the roads are gone!”

“Avalanche, I’d guess.” Ben sighed. “We have no clear route up or in?”

“There’s quake damage on the ground.” Tommy examined and relayed details. “A lot of it. Most of the tents are down and there are piles of rocks at the base... Wow. There are rocks everywhere. What do you suppose they planned to do with those?”

“There are also drifts in places between the destroyed tents.” Ben continued teaching even though he didn’t want to discuss it any more than he wanted to walk through it. “The sun melted some of it. They didn’t gather the rocks. The rocks were...deposited.”

“Holy shit!” Ramer was scowling. “That must have been some avalanche to deposit so much rock.”

“We felt the tremor the night before we left the refinery.” Ben put his gloves in his pocket. “It hit harder here.”

Tommy handed the binoculars to Kendle, unable to endure more of the scene. “I vote we do some testing first.”

“What makes you say that?” She studied the place where the entrance was supposed to be. The map Angela had provided was specific about where to be when they returned.

“The birds haven’t gotten to all the bodies.” Tommy’s mutter hid his need to gag. “Check out the skin.”

It took Kendle several minutes to locate a body that hadn’t been pecked or chewed on. When she did, stomach boiling, she noted the sores on the woman’s hands and arms. “That’s what we had on the boat! That’s the sickness I had!”

“We have a counter in our gear.” Ryan remembered hoping they didn’t have to use it while on this run. He’d never thought it was for their return to Safe Haven.

Tommy gestured. “Let’s get back inside until we know what the levels are out here.”

The team followed him into the cave, trying not to dwell on what this felt like, but the sense of being in a graveyard was too obvious to miss.

2

“What happens if we get there and Safe Haven is gone? Chances are good they didn’t survive the earthquake. We haven’t heard a single response out of them.”

Dirce glanced up with an expression of arrogant contempt, pinning Jarvis in place. “Just because I haven’t recorded descendant vibrations, doesn’t mean I haven’t picked any up. You would do well to follow orders and leave the thinking to those who know how to do it.”

Jarvis’s lips disappeared into his face. He spun around and tossed himself into the copilot’s chair.

Satisfied he’d put the man into his place, Dirce decided it would be a good idea to let the man in a little. “Descendants are able to open private lines. It takes a lot of energy and a lot of practice, but there are confirmed instances of the Safe Haven group being able to communicate without being registered. The only way to track the calls is when they connect through someone’s dreams. That’s how I knew where the Black Widow was going. That’s how I know someone in that mountain survived.”

Jarvis pulled up the map of the mountain they were using, trying to ignore his bodily needs. Dirce had pushed them hard to get here, refusing to stop for things like meals and bathroom breaks. As a result, everyone was uncomfortable and grumpy. However, the explanation calmed Jarvis a bit. It had angered him that Dirce had been sleeping so much with such a large battle ahead of them, but he understood the descendant had been doing recon. It was often hard to tell what Dirce was doing until it was done. “Why are you here? What’s your motivation for being thousands of miles away from

home, risking your life for people who are probably dead?”

Surprised at the questions, Dirce turned away from the monitors to regard his newest second-in-command. “The human race is supposed to conquer. Where else should I be?”

Jarvis wasn’t certain how to respond to that, so he went with honesty. “Assholes like you have destroyed the world.”

Instead of being angry, Dirce chuckled. “You have no idea.”

Jarvis hated sitting still. Their convoy was rolling into position now, but with two thousand troops in position, it would be another day and a half before they were ready to begin the battle.

Jarvis had a sudden sense that he shouldn’t be here for the battle. *Maybe I won’t be.*

Dirce caught the thought, but he wasn’t worried about being betrayed. Jarvis was the type to find something else to do during the main battle that would ensure his own survival. Dirce respected that.

3

“High.” Tommy held up the counter so everyone could view the reading. “But not enough to kill them all like that unless they’ve been here a long time.”

“Does that mean the levels are dropping?” Kendle was stirring a pot of oatmeal that no one had the stomach to eat. This cave was short and wide,

with stone ledges that appeared to have been cut into shelves, but there hadn't been signs of inhabitants. Kendle had approved it after a sweep. They'd parked a mile away and hiked in through the darkness, something she never wanted to do again.

"Maybe." Ben marked the numbers in his notebook. "I vote we wait until it's at a safe level before we try to locate a way in."

"Are we going to?" Ramer's expression was grim.

"What do you mean?" Scott clenched a fist, glaring. "'Cause if you mean we don't go in at all and bugout instead, I'll punch you in your mouth!"

Ramer didn't answer, but all of them felt his reluctance. No one wanted to spend a week digging into a rotting tomb.

Tommy lifted a brow at Kendle.

She sighed. "We'll wait. How long are we set for?"

"A week." Ryan paused. "More if we ration."

"We'll scavenge as soon as the levels are down."

No one answered Tommy's comment, all thinking of what that would be like. The bodies would have food and gear they could collect while trying not to get sick from any of the various health concerns in that valley.

Kendle glanced around, sensing their need, their grim outlook for the future. *What would Angela do here?* Kendle dug through her memories.

Well, she's always been a bitch to me when I was at my lowest and I'm still alive. Kendle stood up. "You're Eagles. Act like it."

Kendle marched away before any of them could pick out her doubts about their future. They would discover it together over the next few days or weeks. Until then, she would try to have faith that such a cruel leader was strong enough to keep her camp alive even under these impossible conditions. *Don't let me down, Angie. I'm almost out of tricks to keep my team alive.*

4

"There are refugees alive down there. They were under tarps!"

Scott's call brought Kendle's team to the entrance where they took turns looking through the peephole. On the ledges around Safe Haven's blocked passages, refugees were coming out to forage while the late afternoon sun was out. It was clear that most of the few hundred scattered people were too ill to make it out of the valley.

Kendle's stomach dropped. "They aren't doing well. We should wait."

"It's been three days." Carl glared from his bedroll. "The levels are almost twice as low as yesterday. The counter manual even says we can stand limited exposure at these rates."

Kendle studied the tired, sad faces that had endured the last trio of sunrises with her. “We’ll vote.”

There were enough relieved nods that Kendle knew which way it would go. “I say we find out. Half of us.”

“Agreed.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

The vote was close enough that Kendle worried about it causing a fight. She’d already gotten two of them killed. She didn’t want to add to that total.

Tommy gave her a questioning glance.

Kendle straighten her shoulders. “Those who voted yes will leave at dawn. The rest will stay here until the levels are lower or until they decide to find another shelter.” Kendle looked at the twins in Rita’s lap. “You’ll care for them?”

“I’ll get them a good home before I die.” Rita wheezed and then coughed. She still had the cold.

Kendle gestured at the rear of the cave, where they had tarps that kept them warm most of the time. Today’s temperatures had been good enough that they’d all enjoyed having the flap over the cave open for half an hour. “Get some more sleep. Tomorrow will be a hard day.”

Kendle edged closer to Tommy's heat without waking him, unable to sleep longer. The dread was thick in her gut. She had little faith the inside of that mountain would be any different than the outside.

Sighing, Kendle gave up the fight and rose. She tiptoed through the mass of bodies that kept the cave warm enough to sweat some nights, and took up a place near the flap. She pried open the hole they'd cut and taped for viewing, hoping to view some tiny flicker in the darkness to convince her it was worth the risk. Climbing that mountain would be dangerous, but they also had to locate a way in. She didn't believe they could do either with the gear they had.

Kendle peered through the hole. "There's a light."

Kendle's whisper came through as a distorted muffle of sleepy haze.

"Did she say there's a light?"

"She saw something?"

Eagles flew from warm spots, tugging on jackets and boots.

Kendle stepped aside for Tommy to view, praying that she really had observed a light, though she knew that she had.

"Top of the peak, to the right." Tommy spun away from the flap. "Someone's alive in there!"

Scott held up a hand. "Listen!"

Low rumbling echoed, causing everyone to tense.

“Quake?” Carl glanced around as the vibrations continued.

“No.” Kendle had felt plenty of earthquakes while growing up. “The rocks are sliding.”

Men started to exit the cave, but Tommy blocked the exit. “Coats!”

The team hurried to get into their gear.

Choosing to stay in this time and observe from here, Ramer kept them informed. “The light’s getting brighter... More rocks are shifting... There’s a hole!”

The team went out, sharing the night vision monoculars they had.

“It’s them! They’re digging out!” Tommy handed Kendle his monocular. “They survived!”

“All of them?”

Her toneless question brought the happiness to a halt as they took turns observing the yellow digger clawing through the mountain. As each scoop of earth was brutally plowed aside, the mood grew thicker. They’d had deaths. It was logical that Safe Haven would have suffered the same.

The sky lightened as the machinery rumbled, engines ringing across the valley that separated them. The dirt slid faster as two diggers cleared, widening the exit.

The dozers shut off suddenly, leaving an ugly silence. Lights behind the hole became brighter... Four shadows appeared.

Ramer squinted. “Who is that?”

Ben struggled to get a better view. “I can’t tell with those spotlights glaring, but refugees are climbing up there.”

“That’s half of the council.” Kendle was able to feel them.

“Which half?” Conner was trying to read them.

“Stop.” Kendle waved at Conner. “We don’t know if they’re on alert or not. They might not know we’re here.”

Conner stopped. He hadn’t thought of that, but she was right. Most descendants couldn’t read through the stone or ground, so they might know someone was out here, but not who it was and think it was a threat.

“Switch on a radio.” Tommy gestured. “Hurry. I think we’re being signaled.”

Kendle frowned. “Can you tell who it is yet?”

“No. They’re staying behind the lights. Too much glare for features.”

“Male or female?”

“Both. Two of each.”

“Could be anyone.” She knelt down in the flap, cold.

Ryan switched on his radio so they could listen. As soon as he turned it to their common channel, they heard the clicking.

“That’s our code.” Ben waved. “Get a paper.”

It took the team a few minutes to translate the code coming over the radio. It repeated three times before going silent.

Scott, who had gotten the last of it on the final transmission, blew out a sigh of relief. He grinned sheepishly at Tommy. “I’ve gotten rusty.”

Tommy chuckled. “Yeah, we all have. Get that decoded so we can send an answer. They’ll expect it fast if they’re trying to verify who we are.”

Scott and Ben got on it together as they’d done many times on runs.

Ben hated to deliver the message. “It says stay here. Not safe.”

Kendle scowled. “That’s it?”

Scott shrugged, also disappointed. “Just to be quiet.”

Kendle grunted as the men around her groaned. “I guess we’re waiting again.”

Tommy motioned people in and re-secured the flap. It was getting cold anyway.

“We just got orders in Eagle code.” Ben brought it up as Tommy had the same thought. “I believe we’re the surprise force the bad guys aren’t expecting.”

“Wouldn’t the bad guys have seen us arrive?” Ramer was worried.

“Not if they aren’t here yet.” Tommy was considering all sides.

Kendle scanned her team. They weren’t going to be much of a powerhouse like they were now. Low on food and ammo, out of fuel and missing two men, they were barely surviving themselves. “She must be desperate if we’re the heroes. And if Angela’s desperate, magic is needed.” She looked

at Conner, who was recovering from his cold. “If we stuff you with energy, can you fight?”

“I’ll fight anyway!” The boy was furious. “That’s my dad in there!” *And Candy.*

Kendle swept the Eagles who weren’t tensing like she’d expected. “Can you guys help us get ready to do this?”

Tommy nodded. “We’ve been waiting for you to ask or let us know you needed it.”

“I didn’t so far, but I don’t know what we’re facing here.”

“We don’t mind.” Ben smiled. “Angela sent us cookies after we helped her this way.”

Kendle laughed. “I have a jar of peanut butter stashed in the mountain. Adrian has it.”

Ryan brightened. “First one to reach Adrian gets to have the burnt ones!”

“No, I want those.” Tommy rose to Ryan’s challenge. “Li always saves them for me.”

“So that’s where the crusts keep going!” Scott’s comment brought fresh laughter.

Kendle joined in their amusement, but her boiling stomach and sweaty spine warned of danger. She had no idea what it was, but the sensation was so ugly that she shivered. Death was coming.

“You okay?” Tommy took her hand to give her his energy.

“No.” Kendle frowned. “Don’t make any noise. We’re not alone.”

The team hurried to peek through the flap.

Tommy leaned down. “Take what you need.”

Kendle drew hard and fast, heart thumping. The wave of darkness sweeping over her heart was cold and hot at the same time. Her eyes shut as the barrier to the future swung open.

“Hey, are—”

“Don’t.” Ben stopped Ramer from touching her. “She’s busy.”

Ramer realized she was using her gift to search and retreated, observing in fascination. They hadn’t viewed signs of her power or Conner’s on this trip.

Kendle released Tommy, standing. “Hang on.” She went to her smaller kit, the one she used the least. In the bottom, she found the book she’d been reading before they’d been carjacked. She flashed the title at them. “Angela sent this with me.”

Tommy began chuckling, as did Ben.

Ramer joined them. “What?”

“She sent the equipment with us.” Tommy pointed to where their heavier gear was stacked. “There are five rappelling kits in there and a lot of rope.”

Kendle breathed a sigh of relief and then tensed again. “Get the lights out. Something’s coming.”

“Lights went out over there too.” Ben was observing from the flap.

“What’s going on?” Rita was burping one baby while the other slept near her leg.

“Shh...” Kendle concentrated, trying to make them all dim.

Conner, realizing what she was doing, added his power to hers. A brief blue glow went over the cave and then everything went dark.

“Shh... Easy.” Kendle soothed her team. “That’s just us. Be still.”

The team waited in stiff silence in the chilly cave.

Kendle heard it first.

Conner tensed a second later. “What is it?”

“Trucks.” Kendle paled. “A lot of trucks...”

The UN rolled into the valley in full force, crushing the dead under their wheels as they forged their own road through the refugee camps. The convoy was so long the end kept rolling long after Dirce ordered his vehicle to halt. The trucks and tanks rolled through streets and yards without consideration for what stood in their way; the UN logo flashed a warning of who they were.

The front vehicle stopped at the bottom of the hill, where the gaping hole in the mountain was obvious.

“We’re screwed.”

Kendle ignored Carl’s comment as they watched the convoy continue to enter the valley, large wheels crushing bones and ice. The bodies didn’t make them stop or even pause. She tried to count the troops, but couldn’t. Carl was right. They were screwed.

Kendle winced as a bullhorn began to echo through the darkness.

“Come out with your hands up. We have you surrounded!”

Why does that sound like a cheesy line from an old movie? Kendle listened for a response.

“I repeat, come out with your hands up. You are all being detained.”

“Detained?” Kendle’s brow puckered. “Detained?”

“Dirce.” Rita breathed in a lung of raspy air, clutching the babies. “He’s here.”

Kendle grunted in acceptance of what had to happen next. She released the dim mode for a brief instant so she could see where everyone was. “If anyone moves, they might die. Please don’t even breathe if you can help it.” Before anyone could ask questions, she blanketed them in darkness again. “Dirce has been here for days. He saw us come out. I think that’s why he’s rolling in now.”

Tommy went on full alert. “He sent troops up here?”

Kendle set the book near her feet, wishing she’d been able to use the information in it, but this was going to happen faster than Angela had anticipated.

“What should I do?” Conner joined her. He could see everyone’s heat signature like his dad had once said he would be able to do.

“When I start firing, you do the same and don’t stop until they’re dead.”

“I don’t have any mags.”

“We’ll be using magic, Conner. We have to kill these roaches, right now, before Safe Haven

surrenders to save us. Dirce is telling Angela he'll blow up this cave."

"Can he reach here?" Ramer was scared. This cave was a death trap if one of the tanks fired on them.

"I think so." Tommy had to force himself not to try to see through the shroud of darkness that Kendle had cast over them. "What should we do?"

"Just don't move." Kendle was gathering energy to handle whatever was coming. "You'll be able to see again, but if you get out of place, you'll screw me up."

"We won't." Tommy was used to working like this with Angela. He was also too drained to get upset. He couldn't wait to sleep without so much stress on his mind and heart.

Kendle and Conner went to the flap, zipping jackets. As they stepped from the cave, the lights came on for everyone. They stayed frozen, listening intently...

"Get in there!"

Kendle was shoved into the cave by three tall peacekeepers in black and tan uniforms. They had weapons the team would have recognized from the market if the lanterns had been lit.

Kendle dropped to her knees as she was shoved. "Stop! Be still!"

"Get the kids." Jarvis was in charge, but the climb up here had worn him out. He wasn't used to this much hunting for their prey. He'd hoped to attack this small team during the chaos, but the

woman descendant had come out and spotted them getting into position, forcing him to act now. “If you use magic on us, we’ll kill those babies.”

“No need.” Kendle snatched the knife from her boot and threw it at the soldier who was leaning down to pick up the baby.

He staggered, falling on top of the bundle.

The babies began to cry.

Rita flew toward the kids.

“No!”

“Don’t move!”

Rita grunted heavily, also falling on top of the kids as Kendle’s second knife sank into her chest.

Kendle threw again; her last blade stuck in Jarvis’s throat.

She and Tommy grabbed the third soldier as he tried to draw his gun. Climbing up a mountain was a serious disadvantage. He’d needed both hands free and hadn’t bothered to draw until now.

Kendle swung them toward the flap, not giving Tommy a chance to protest as she shoved them through the flap and heaved the struggling soldier toward the edge.

Tommy helped her.

Together, they pushed him off.

The man’s screams echoed down to Dirce, who glanced up in resignation. “Figures. Never send boys to do a man’s job.”

Dirce climbed the ladder of his tank and popped the hatch. “Line it up. Blow the Black Widow out of there.”

“What about my grandbabies?!” Jerry and Dirce had been commanded to collect them.

Dirce paused. “Fine. Aim at the other side. Blow her friends and family out of the mountain.”

Jerry grinned as he told the tank driver. He loved watching stuff explode. It didn’t matter what it was.

“They’re firing on Safe Haven!” Tommy lifted his rifle. “We have to stop them!”

It was too late. The tank fired, blasting directly into the gaping hole.

The mountain thundered, shaking, sliding, and exploding.

The team watched in horror as a chunk of the mountain slid down to bury the new exit. A huge dust wave coated the scene, hiding it from view.

Dirce was pelted with rocks and debris he didn’t flinch from the way his men did. He took the bullhorn his new man held out. “This is the UN. We are here to liberate your children and reeducate your population. Surrender or we will fire again.”

Kendle’s team listened to the demands in horror and anger. It was unbelievable that this was happening.

“We will not spare you if you resist!” The bullhorn blared with Dirce’s heavy accent. “Come out now, if you can.”

“Here we go.” Kendle knelt by Rita’s body, shoving away the guilt. “We should stay in, maybe behind that ledge.”

Kendle and Carl retrieved the startled children; everyone crammed into the rear of the cave, hoping it was out of range.

“Are we still supposed to be the heroes?” Conner was confused.

“I don’t believe that’s the plan now.” Kendle admitted her failure. “I screwed it up by letting Dirce know we were here. She had to switch.”

“She?” Ben frowned. “You mean Angela?”

“Of course.” Kendle handed the baby boy to Carl. “She picked our gear. She knew we’d be trapped here and need the book on rappelling so we could get down.”

Ryan waved. “But we have the path we came over to get here.”

“I’m not sure we will after this is all over.” Kendle began gathering energy again. “I think the shooting has just begun.”

“So what do we do now?” Ben was pissed. “Sit here and get shot at?”

“I couldn’t view beyond this point.” Kendle’s voice revealed her frustration. “I say we stick with our previous orders to stay here and be ready.”

“If Safe Haven knew this was coming, they weren’t near the entrance when he fired. Dirce can

shoot all he wants.” Ryan gestured again. “He won’t reach them.”

“He *can* reach us.” Ramer was the twitchiest member of their team. “Maybe we should bugout while we can.”

The radio that had gone silent clicked a few times and then went dead again.

Kendle exchanged glances with the team. “That means an hour, right?”

“Yes.” Tommy had translated it. “Be ready in one hour.”

Carl scowled. “Ready for what?”

Kendle sank down to rest, leaning against the cold wall. “The conclusion, of course. One hour from now, all hell will break loose. That’s when we’ll find out who lived and who didn’t.”

Scott took the spot by Kendle. “Will *we* survive the fight?”

She shrugged, leaning against his heat. “As usual, that has not been revealed.”

The End of Book 7

What would you like to do now?

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Deleted Scenes BK7

“Let me speak to the witch.”

Adrian’s demand surprised them both.

Angela shrugged. The witch had plenty of heat for him.

Adrian braced. “Will you go away, so we can talk in private?”

“Yes.” Angela didn’t blink, making him wonder if she’d been expecting it.

“No. But there’s nothing she can do either. I’m being punished. It’s what I deserve.”

“Chauncey’s wrong!” Adrian tried anger. “Why are you letting him trick you?”

Angela didn’t respond. She curled into a ball in the witch’s dank cell as the mental barrier closed.

Adrian stared at the crimson orbs now glowering resentfully, not sure where to begin. He couldn’t care less about her whining or her accusations. He needed information.

The witch knew he wanted to help her host, but the rage at his betrayal was too great to ignore. She forced herself to settle for glaring. It was the best she could do.

“I can’t give her what she asked for.” Adrian chose to be quick and blunt. “Marc will never agree to try.”

“He might now.” The witch pouted. “If you asked him the right way.”

“He’ll say it’s too dangerous for her. He won’t do it.”

“But you will, right?” the demon accused hatefully.

“To bring her around? You bet your tight, sexy ass.”

“That won’t work on me!” The witch sent out a fire blast.

Adrian caught it and tossed it back. Angela couldn’t spare the energy. “Yes, it will and that’s why you’re pissed. You still want me.”

The witch lunged forward, putting her demon face inches from his. “Slam you!”

Adrian kissed her, but not in the fiery passion that they’d shared before. He placed a loving kiss on her scaly lips. “I am sorry.”

The witch jerked as if stung, returning to her place in Angela’s mind. “Bastard.”

“Always.” Adrian waited for a moment, and then asked the question that mattered most. “Is the doctor right? Will it kill her to have another baby?”

“With the right care, miracles are possible.” The witch peered through the foggy barrier to the future. She studied the carvings and elemental formations that spiraled toward Angela’s demise. All souls had the same curve at the end that was supposed to slingshot them into a repetition of their previous lives. When the person finally achieved their goals, the curve straightened out, supposedly, leading them home to the Maker. The witch had never witnessed that phenomenon.

“What do you mean by the right care?”

“Get her and the camp out of here. These mountains are cursed.”

“Because of the refugees she eliminated or the radiation clouds that are coming?”

“Because this is a flow point for evil.” The witch tried to explain it in a way he could understand. “Your jet...swim? It carries more than rain. All the negative feelings it picks up are deposited here. Bet you didn’t know that when you picked this rocky burial ground.”

“No, I didn’t. Before, I thought the mountains would be good for us.”

“And when you realized the number of catastrophes that would converge here?”

Adrian sighed heavily. “I decided it was perfect. It would force the camp to understand we have to leave our homeland.”

“You made that choice without knowing how awful it would be.”

“Yes...but I wouldn’t change that choice, even if I could. We have to go.”

“You’ve been on that trip since it all happened because you saw something else. What did you witness that convinced you to sacrifice your children?”

Adrian winced, but didn’t deny it. He studied the beautiful face with the demon’s fire lighting it. “It’s not what I saw. It’s what I know. Biological agents were released during the war. I hoped being

in the stone would protect us, but it took too long to get here. *I took too long.*”

“Agents?”

“It was important that the population wasn’t smart enough to immediately rebuild. If the survivors were busy fighting everyone they came into contact with, rebuilding efforts would fall apart. In case that wasn’t enough, biological warfare was chosen to infect massive numbers. Remember all the medical commercials with effects that included dementia, suicide, or violence? That data came from clinical testing of chemicals on unsuspecting populations—many times as a new medication. The tiny things they cure are actually the side effects of the weapon.”

“You were part of this?”

“I reached my limit during the Gulf War, when we were sent in to test things on any troops we encountered—theirs or ours. I’d had enough when I got lost after a run and found an entire village that had been murdered. I recognized the cause of death because I was infecting people with weaker doses of it.”

“You’re a carrier of disease!”

“No.” Adrian shook his head. “We used dispersing devices. The government was testing ways to kill off the human population. We wanted to have descendants in control openly.”

“Because advanced societies will never accept magic.” The witch shuddered. “See magic, get the fire.”

“Except, we aren’t afraid of fire anymore,” Adrian gently reminded the demon. “Are we?”

“No. Now, we love it as another needed tool.”

“These chemicals were supposed to gradually change a population into chaos, so that magic users could come forward and save mankind, be accepted.”

“This wasn’t a government plan. This was from someone like you, someone who believes he’s helping humanity, while obliterating it.”

“My father worked on it while he was governor of Arkansas. This has been in the works for thirty-five years.”

“Your father destroyed the world.”

“And gave us a chance to come back in control of it. Between the descendants who want power, and the government officials desperate to stay in power, the herds are in grave danger. It may seem as though there are a lot of us here, but we’re the minority of our kind. Most descendants love my father’s plan.”

“And you?”

Adrian snorted. “I love Angie. I love my fellow Americans, my Eagles. I loathe my evil side more than your host does.”

“Prove that and regain your honor with me!”

“How?”

“Agree to Marc’s deal and uphold your end, no matter what. Give them the peace they deserve.”

Adrian knew better than to blindly agree, but it wasn’t something he could promise anyway. “I won’t ever give up on Angie, no matter how many

times she trades me for our people. In fact, each time she does it, I respect her more, need her more. Go away? Never!”

Angela snapped back, fury blazing, but his words couldn't be denied. She hadn't chosen Marc over Adrian. She'd chosen Safe Haven. They would have their leader. She would have another chance at a child... Angela's heart broke all over again; she shoved herself into the grayness to keep from melting down. She had a few more weeks to get through and then none of it would matter. Marc didn't know the time line was shorter than he'd estimated. He thought he had a year to bring her around, but her rule was over now.

Adrian stewed on the information, wondering if she'd let him know how long so he might have time to stop it. After examining the clues, he understood that wasn't the case. She was telling him he didn't have a year to become Marc's Mr. Perfect if he wanted to be back in control of Safe Haven. He had mere weeks.

“Marc once told me you two were childhood sweethearts.” Adrian wanted to be selfish and use this time to advance his bond, but it was obvious that Angela was bad off. She deserved to be with Marc, though it wasn't what would give her the elusive happiness humans were always searching for. At this point, Adrian didn't believe he could either. Maybe a combo of the two of them, like Neil and Jeremy, but they all knew there was no way it would ever be peaceful. Adrian wasn't sure what

she needed. Until he was and he knew he could provide it, she should stay with Marc.

“You know, all my life, people have planned my future as if I didn’t exist. I think I’m done with that.”

When she turned away and tugged the blankets up, Adrian sighed. He was going to push now and duck if needed. “He said you grew up together. Same small town and all that.”

Angela’s grunt wasn’t encouraging. Adrian tried again, pushing a little harder. “He also said he taught you to give a blow job?”

Angela’s form went rigid; Adrian prepared to duck.

“So?”

Adrian grinned. “Just wondering what else he taught you. That was a question you avoided when you first joined my refugee camp.”

“I didn’t trust you yet.”

“You do now.”

Silence.

“Please?”

“Why?”

“I’m bored.”

Angela snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“Is it something awful?”

“To me, it was. He taught me that men leave. That’s what you guys do.”

Adrian never would have guessed at her hidden bitterness over something that had happened so long ago. Did Marc know?

Angela shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. He can’t change the truth any more than you can. Now let me be.”

Adrian refused with his own snort. “What else did he teach you?”

Angela felt the tears welling again, but she was helpless to stop them. Her emotions were in control, not her mind. “To love him.”

Adrian swallowed his jealousy to help her. “And?”

“That...I could only trust me.” Angela looked up with horrible clarity. “I never have, you know. Trusted another person since him. I can’t.”

Adrian nodded. Now they were getting deep enough to maybe honestly help her. “You should tell him that.”

“I’ve already told him he’s forgiven, that we were kids. I meant it.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’ve let it go.”

“Letting it go and forgiving are two totally different things. It’s cause and effect. I don’t hate him or blame him anymore, but I have no trust for my fellowman.”

“And that made it easy to kill.”

“Yes. My lack of compassion allowed me to murder.”

“And if you’d had compassion?”

“Safe Haven would have been lost.”

Adrian sent sympathy. “It’s hard, what we do. Those choices are so terrible that we can’t forgive ourselves afterwards.”

“No.”

“I understand. You’ve seen me at a low point. I didn’t know how I could continue after everything I’d done.”

“Same.”

“But I did. Because my job wasn’t finished yet. Neither is yours.”

“We’ve been over this.” Angela knew she needed these talks, but it didn’t make them any easier or more welcome.

“Not really. So far, you’ve deflected and misdirected each time we’ve gotten close to the worst of your chaos. When you can admit the last part, you can begin healing.”

“I don’t deserve to heal!” Hot tears burnt a path down her raw skin. “I deserve to die!”

Adrian leaned against the cave wall in satisfaction. “Keep going.”

“I got her killed! So many deaths to defeat Donner. I’m awful. Marc should kill me!”

“And?”

Angela tensed in heavy pain. “And I’m sorry...but I’d do it again.”

“Tell me why.”

“Because Safe Haven survived. I would give up anyone for them!” Angela collapsed in tears.

Adrian left her alone. He was always impressed with her strength, but more, with her refusal to lie to herself at moments like this. She wasn’t excusing it, only admitting it. She was a true leader. He was

honored to have been her mentor. Now, she would mentor him.

“Or we’ll die together.” Angela’s witch glared at him.

Adrian closed his eyes, not responding. At some point, he would have to make a truce with that one. For right now, he would try not to antagonize the demon. Angela had enough power now to kill a person without raising a hand. It was amazing. When the ocean became its usual wild self, this council would be able to handle most of it because she was along. The rest would be up to fate. If he was meant to reach the island, he would. If not, at least some of them would because he and others had seen Eagles on that island. Either way, their people would be safe there for a while.

“And after that?” the witch demanded angrily. “Will you be dead, finally?”

Adrian reflected on the deal Marc had offered and on the one that he had made with Angela. Then, he thought about his own desires. “Be gone, witch. She’s too tired for you right now.”

The demon burst into harsh laughter that rang in Adrian’s mind as she faded. Marc thought he hated enough to kill, but he had nothing on Angela’s demon. If she ever turned the witch loose, Adrian would be gone in seconds. He was at the top of her list, and rightly so. Betraying a descendant was unforgivable.

Deleted Scene #2

Explicit

“Can I rub you to sleep?” Yuri had answered all of her questions and then some.

Weary, Kendle nodded. She’d known this moment would come. Now that it was here, there was no anger or revulsion, only a thick heat that needed to be satisfied one way or the other.

Yuri joined her on the bed, bringing a fresh bottle of oil. He got settled with a leg on each side of her, hardness pressing into her cheek.

Kendle closed her eyes as his knowing hands began to spread the oil over her skin. As he reached forward to get her shoulders, that hardness thrust against her cheeks, bringing light gasps from the man on top of her.

Kendle obliged him by lifting her top half when his hands came up, allowing him to cup her breasts through the bra. She waited to experience rage or fear, but there was still only heat. Now certain that it wasn’t against her will, Kendle rested her cheek on the soft pillow.

Yuri rubbed her for a long time, sticking to areas that would allow her to drowse. She hadn’t arched into his touch when he’d tried, telling him she probably would give him what he wanted, but she

would be tense and ruin the mood for him. He waited, patiently, rubbing her to sleep.

When her breathing finally evened out, Yuri let his hands live out the one fantasy he'd been using since his teens. Observing his brother and his girlfriend acting as if she was asleep had damaged him so that only that scenario played in his mind during sex. Now that Kendle was asleep, he could live out his dream.

Yuri stretched to rub her shoulders, thrusting lightly into the bare crack of her ass. While rubbing, he'd moved her underwear into that scented heaven, exposing both globes. He humped them slowly now, trying to control his breathing. When she didn't resist, he dropped the pretense and braced himself with an arm on each side of her lean hips.

Yuri bounced her a little harder, ready to stop if she woke, but there was no resistance. He kept going. Her underwear slid down slowly, pulled by his single finger to keep from disturbing her. As they went down far enough to show the treasure underneath, Yuri groaned lowly. It was wet and pink. He hardened further, breath shortening.

Yuri rose up, positioning by guess as he braced himself. "Tell me now."

Kendle sighed. But she didn't speak.

Yuri slowly pressed his dick against her hot, damp pussy, groaning again. He pushed forward, sliding into her. "Thank you, thank you."

Kendle held still as he pulled out and then pushed right back in, deeper this time. She started

to slide a hand under her hip, hoping to enjoy it, but she was pulled over with a quick movement that put Yuri's head between her legs.

He licked, softly.

She shuddered, violently.

The night passed.

Deleted Scene #3

“What happened?”

Kyle smiled down at her. “I took longer than I thought. You fell asleep.”

Jennifer stretched, naked under the blanket. Tension flooded the air as she remembered why she didn’t have a nightgown on.

Kyle fastened the thin door to the chamber. It was supposed to be for council members who were on long shifts and needed a moment away from the relentless demands of the camp.

Fresh from a shower, Kyle was dismayed to discover himself too tired to run through the mental plans he’d made for this moment. Not wanting to ruin it, he settled into the small chair by the cot to take off his boots. “I know you’ve made up your mind, but we’re both beat. Can we do this in the morning?”

Jennifer nodded in relief. She felt sore all over and a bit queasy from skipping dinner.

“You sure?” His eyes darkened at the sight of her bare shoulders and wild hair.

Jennifer flushed. “Yes, please. Hand me my gown?”

“Will you leave it off?”

Cheeks turning scarlet, she did. It was a good way to ease into things. It was also a bit awkward

and embarrassing as he stripped down to his boxers and slid in with her.

The narrow cot only allowed them to be on their sides. When Kyle gently rolled her to face the wall, Jennifer felt terror rush over her mind.

Kyle felt her freeze and sighed unhappily. He slowly placed his back to her and felt the tension break. Still aroused by the sensation, Kyle smothered the need to hold her. The trekking they'd done today had worn him out.

Kyle's body was a warm comfort to relax against. Jennifer sighed in pleasure. "Thank you."

Kyle grunted, already drifting. "My honor."

Jennifer smiled, shifting a little to enjoy his heat more fully. She really was a lucky girl. She had the best man in this camp.

Deleted Scene #4

“Grab that dog!”

Tonya knelt down and picked up the cute puppy as Jennifer ran into the lab. “Oh, good! You got him before anything was broken.”

Tonya gave the squirming pup to the teenager and went to the small deep sink to wash her hands. “No problem. Still in training?”

“Yes.” Jennifer spotted the cat too late. The dog leapt from her arms and chased the thin cat from the lab and down the tunnel.

Jennifer sighed tiredly. “I’m sorry.”

Tonya shrugged. “Cats and dogs aren’t friends by nature. They may adjust as long as she doesn’t scratch his eyes out.” Tonya gestured toward the bubbling and boiling beakers. “She’s already got a big strike against her survival.”

Jennifer realized the cat was ill. She glanced down at the book Tonya had opened on the desk. “Cannabis Oil Concentrates in the Use of an Effective Cancer Treatment. Wow. Nice.”

Tonya smiled. “Thanks. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Jennifer spent a moment scanning the redhead’s mind to check for trouble, but she didn’t need to dig far to see that Tonya was doing this from the good of her heart. “Can I help?”

“I don’t think so. This stuff has to cook for a long time. I’ll be here all night.”

Jennifer moved toward the exit. “I’ll send you some coffee.”

“That would be great!”

Jennifer tiredly tracked her puppy to the ladder, following the noise. When she got there, she was glad to see the cat climbing the ladder. It was slow, but successful, disappearing over the edge of the hole.

The cat, Maybelle, stumbled down the cold stone and wandered into the living quarters. She twined around the legs of Samantha, who was sitting on a stool next to Cynthia.

Sam smoothed Cynthia’s wild hair down and tugged the blanket up to her shoulders. She’d been here for half an hour, but the reporter hadn’t spoken once despite her eyes staying wide open. “I’ll come visit you tomorrow. Keep fighting. This mountain sickness can’t be worse than facing down Cesar.”

Sam stood up.

Cynthia’s hand wrapped around her wrist, focusing with ugly intensity. “Tell him I’m calling in my marker.”

“Your what?”

Cynthia let go. “Tell them both they owe me for her life. I’m calling in the marker.”

“What do you want?”

“Freedom. I want out of here, alive.”

“We all want that.”

Cynthia's expression blazed with diluted madness. "They're going to kill me."

Sam began to say that was the mountain sickness messing with Cynthia's mind, but the cat ran across the floor and tripped Stanley. He fell awkwardly, slamming into Daryl, who had been making his cot.

Daryl landed on the floor as Stanley landed in his bed.

Daryl glared up at the klutz. "Should I read you a story?"

Stanley struggled from the bed, tipping it over. As the cot collapsed on Daryl's leg, the cat trotted from the chamber with its tail up.

Samantha joined in the laughter, forgetting Cynthia's words. When she looked down again, the reporter was asleep.

Sam left the living area, and moved into the corridor. She felt her stomach drop as she saw Neil coming toward her.

"What is it?"

"We need you to run the weather post for the next shift."

"Okay. Wait. Jeremy has it right now."

Neil leaned down. "Jeremy threw up all over the bathroom stall and called off."

"Mountain sickness?"

Neil shook his head. "I need to tell you something. Please try not to be mad."

Place a Review BK7

Reviews are one of the biggest ways that readers can help their favorite authors, or warn their fellow readers! Reviews do not have to be long. Just let the world know how the book made you feel while you were reading it, and maybe who you think would enjoy that type of story. To place one on this book, [take this link to my website page](#) and pick the store of your choice. Thank you, really. Reviews mean a lot.

Bone Dust

If Alexa Mitchel and her crew of hardened gunfighters complete their quest, they'll earn a chance to heal the rift in reality. If they fail, the monsters will be here to stay and humans will become the myth.

[Bone Dust Page](#)

Note From The Author BK7

Reader: How can you leave it there?!

Writer: Before you use the pitchforks on me, please know I intend to travel back in time a little for book ten and show you what happened in the mountain. You'll get a little of that in the excerpt that follows this note.

Reader: So Safe Haven does survive the quake?

Writer: That has not been revealed.

Have a wonderful week, world, and watch your six!

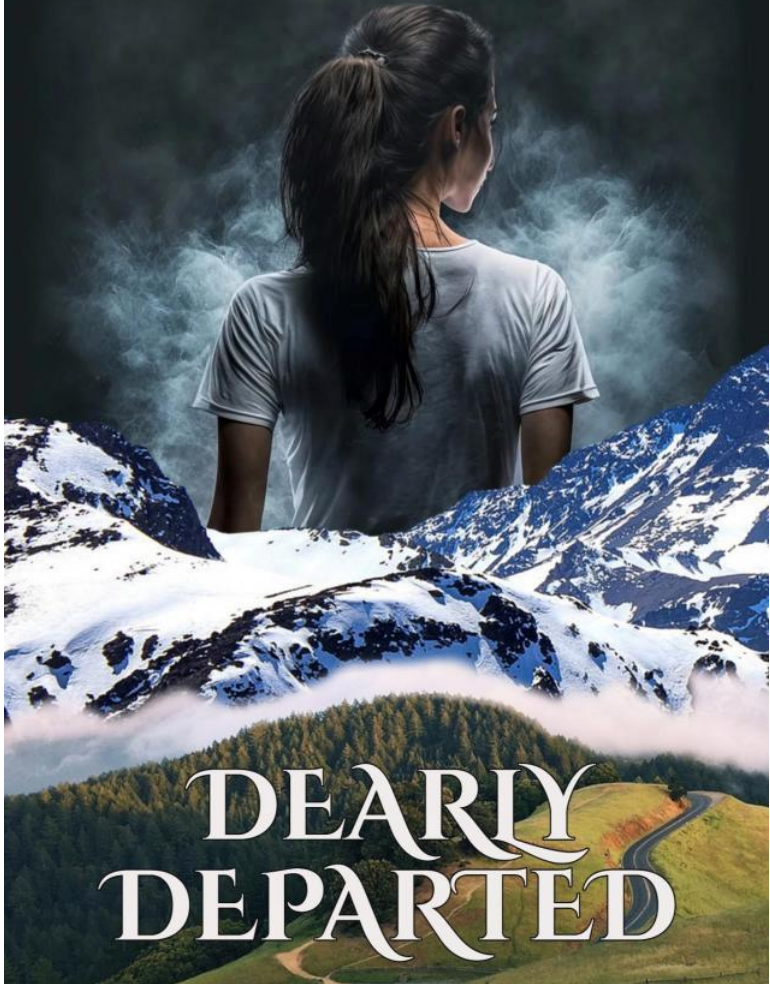
Angela

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

Book Eight

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #8



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Dearly Departed

by

Angela White

Title: Dearly Departed

Life After War Book 8

Edition: 2024

Author: Angela White

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Reason And Law

When we emerged from that cursed mountain,
 We had become hardhearted.
We turned sinners away for any infraction,
 Still mourning our dearly departed.

The light of Safe Haven continued to beckon;
 Our people were protected.
 But we lost all compassion,
For any trace of evil we detected.

 If they killed or stole,
 We removed that disruption.
The only survivors welcomed,
 Had souls without corruption.

 Our population began to recover;
 Our hearts began to thaw.
But we refused to forget the lessons learned;
 There has to be reason and law.
 Without that,
 Societies always fall.

Chapter One BK8
Survival

1

“We will have the witch!”

Some of Mikel’s men cheered. The rest were dead or screaming for help.

Inside the mountain, shouts began to fade into groans and tears...and then silence.

“Why is it so quiet now?” Tracy wiped away tears as she and Charlie burrowed deeper under the clothes pile.

“The smoke.” Charlie kept digging downward. He was trying to reach the bottom with his feet. The ledge had broken off and slid during the quake, but he didn’t know how far it had fallen or how they had landed. For all he knew, they were dangling. The darkness was smothering. He couldn’t even smell anything but laundry—some of it cleaned, most of it not.

“We have to help them!” Tracy cried harder, but she didn’t resist when Charlie pulled her boot, dragging her down.

Around them, the laundry was moving. The Indians had joined the teen as the cave fell apart, but there hadn't been time to formulate a plan.

Natoli stayed on Tracy's right as Charlie took them through the maze of laundry and stone. His men surrounded the couple, as he'd instructed them to do before they'd rejoined Safe Haven. Marc had told Natoli of his fears for the future, of the deaths and lives that had been promised. Natoli had vowed to protect Marc's heart so that warrior could fight for all people. Natoli was fulfilling that vow.

Charlie was just glad they weren't alone. He was in the lead for the first time and it was terrifying.

Charlie stopped as his foot hit something hard, hands fumbling for the light on his belt. He tried not to think about everything that might be on top of them or how hard it was to breathe down here. They had survived the quake. That had been his only goal when he'd brought Tracy to the laundry area. Now, he had to keep them alive in the aftermath.

Around them, others were coming to the same realizations. Through the broken stone and shifting dangers, battered survivors began to emerge.

2

Adrian groaned as the weight shifted off his shoulder. The pain in that arm was bad enough to convince him that he was alive, but there was too much debris on him to move. Adrian remembered

shoving Marc forward and the ceiling collapsing on them, but nothing else. He assumed he'd been knocked out. The buzzing ears and roiling guts supported that theory. He groaned again.

“I heard someone!”

Adrian kept his eyes closed as more debris was cleared from his body. He hurt everywhere. Sharp rocks were digging into his arms and legs, and there was a warm heat from below making him sweat. *That's a body. I'm not sure if it's breathing.*

“It's Adrian! Grab that end. Lift on three. Ready?”

Adrian screamed as the weight increased and then it was gone. He coughed as smoke and dust rushed into his lungs, and then screamed again as he was dragged free of the rubble by his arms. The pain in his shoulder was excruciating.

As his own cry faded, Adrian could hear others begging for help, but not as many as there should be. He struggled to clear his mind, dazed. Something crawled across his bad hand and scurried into the darkness. Adrian felt it as a vague sensation dulled by the stabbing throbs in his arm and shoulder.

“There's another body here! Keep digging!”

Adrian was left alone as rescuers ran back to the debris pile. He stilled, listening to coughs and shouts, to tears and groans. *Light by a lot*, he thought, ears buzzing in loud confusion.

There's a fire! Angela thundered. *Get up!* She and Cody were trapped in the storage chamber on

the same level as Adrian, but the fire was more important.

Adrian shoved into a sitting position, arm useless except in the flaring, ugly pain that came each time he tried to move it.

Dislocated. Angela didn't sense anything else wrong with him that was serious, but the arm was enough to keep him from helping. *You can't climb like that. Damn!*

Adrian forced his hurting body to stand on legs that shook, scanning the new, more dangerous environment. *There!* He stumbled over rocks, bodies, and wooden beams, lurching toward the entrance to the tunnel where he'd been camped in exile before the Mexicans found it.

This will hurt. Adrian clenched his teeth. *Go away.*

He felt Angela withdraw as he lurched forward. Adrian slammed his shoulder into the unmovable wall and popped the humerus back into the glenoid.

“What is he doing?” Theo had paused in shifting a large stone, drawn by Adrian's chilling shout.

“Fixing himself.” Greg's tone matched the roughness of the debris he flung aside. “I see a Colt. This is Marc!”

The digging resumed with more energy.

Adrian fumbled for the light on his belt. He shined it upward with his good hand, blinking at the waves of falling dust. The sight was so awful that Adrian needed the throbbing shoulder, along with

every cut and bruise, to prove this was happening. Safe Haven had been destroyed.

They'll all be dead if you don't get that fire out!

Adrian staggered backward and fell, startled at Angela's mental shout. He groaned, trying to focus. *Everything is so blurry...*

Hurry!

Give me a minute!

We don't have it. Smoke has already reached the top floor. Everyone up there is dying. Can't you feel them?

Adrian managed to get on his feet, but his flashlight had rolled too close to a crevice for him to reach it without his balance. He staggered toward the ladder instead, blinking in dull comprehension. The ladder was there. Bodies were hanging from it, sprawled below it... He stiffened in pain and then puked.

Breathe. Breathe. Angela shoved deep into his mind, to where their connection was glowing brightly. *You can do this. I believe in you. I always have. Now, hurry!*

Adrian wiped his mouth on his gritty sleeve and began to climb the ladder. The pain became a way to stay alert as he fought bodies for space while trying not to inhale the smoke wafting down.

Adrian reached the next level and yanked his shirt up, wishing he had time to stop and wet his bandana. Then he remembered he had been getting ready for bed and didn't have it. All he had was his jeans, boots, jacket, and belts—tool and gun. Those

last two he even slept with. *Good thing*, he praised, taking out his spare flashlight. After this, he was down to the headlamp. He didn't want to try using it yet. The buttons were little and his hands were shaking. He might drop it. That would be worse than the dim illumination from his small flashlight.

Far above, Adrian saw a shadow illuminated by an orange glow. The man hefted himself onto the level with the fire and vanished. Adrian realized Angela was telling others of the problem and directing them too.

“Right behind you!” The wood vibrated as Greg climbed the ladder. Theo and Debra were taking care of Marc, but so far, there were no other survivors on the bottom level. Angela was telling Greg about kids trapped by a mess fire; he was determined to save everyone he could.

“Adrian!” Kyle shouted from his right. “Can you tie off this rope?”

Adrian missed the rope that Kyle threw, but it caught on wooden debris, allowing him to fumble for the end of it. As he tied it to the sturdiest thing he could find—a heavy-duty hitch that had been used to tie up their larger animals for milking—fresh screams sounded from above them.

“Going up!” Adrian winced at the awful pain, cradling his head. His hands came away bloody, but there wasn't time to worry over it. He climbed as Kyle anchored the rope to the other end of the ledge and began inching Jennifer across the gap. There was a very narrow ledge, but no room to even glance

down or they would throw themselves off balance. Hopefully the rope would keep them from falling.

Greg spotted a familiar red canister under the debris. He dug it out, ecstatic to locate a second extinguisher below it. Lungs starting to hurt, Greg used the rope from his belt to tie them together. The panic from the level above him increased while he worked.

“We need more hands in the mess!”

“We need something to put out the fire!”

“Where are all the extinguishers?!”

“I found two!” Greg pulled himself up the ladder, extinguishers clanking together against his chest. He’d tied them on like a necklace.

Adrian took one and put it inside his tucked-in shirt so he had both hands free.

Greg did the same and followed. Both men were aware of heavy coughing, but the lack of people helping worried them more. In a camp of over five hundred, only having a dozen workers active was horrifying.

“Someone got a light on.” Greg was sweating so much that his shirt was soaked.

Adrian grunted. “It’s not a light.” The climb was clearing the mental fog and sending in misery. There were bodies on every floor he’d reached so far. *How many have we lost?*

Greg climbed faster as he understood what Adrian meant. The top levels were bright, meaning it was a large blaze. *Two extinguishers won’t be enough.* Greg pulled himself onto what remained of

the security and medical level. He shined his light right and left, spotting a few survivors on both sides. None of them appeared to need immediate help.

The two men hurried to the next ladder. Half of it was gone, but there was a rope hanging down from where someone else had already climbed up.

“That was Adrian and Greg!” Morgan had stood up when the flashlights shined through the dusty residence tunnel. “They’re going to the fire.” Morgan and Kenn had been together when the floor fell out, taking friends with it.

“Good.” Kenn tied the rope to his waist and then to the outcropping that had split and started the huge crevice. He was glad he’d been on duty and was wearing full gear. “We can’t reach them that way. We have to go down and get over to the ladder.”

Morgan knew he was right. The tiny ledge on either side wasn’t going to hold their weight, and there was no way they could jump the 20-foot gap in the middle.

Next to them, Neil was still staring at the hole where Jeremy had jumped. He hadn’t moved yet.

Kenn nudged Neil’s shoulder. “We’re going down there. You want one?”

Neil took the unused rope, but only held it. The gears in his mind had ground to a slow crawl.

Kenn tied it to Neil and then to a different outcropping that he hoped would hold. He understood Neil’s dazed response. If not for hearing Tonya’s voice in the medical bay, Kenn might have

been experiencing the same emotion. He held great sympathy for Neil.

Neil followed Kenn to the edge of the gap, but he didn't go first. He squatted at a pile of rubble and began digging through it, hoping he had the right place. They'd kept medical supplies on every level, but this floor had also held the medical bay, so the majority of their stock was here somewhere.

"Come on." Kenn lowered himself into the hole with hands that protested the lack of gloves. *Got softer.* Kenn reached down with his leg to find a place that might support his weight. He found something that felt sturdy and tested it.

Kenn hefted himself up as the hard object rocked and vanished, breathing rough.

A shattering crash brought Neil to the hole. "Be careful!"

Nose burning from all the smoke, Kenn nodded toward the rope he had tied off for Neil. "I was able to see down five foot. It's clear. I'm dropping."

Neil had found the shelf of medical kits. He slung two of them around his neck, then shined the light as Kenn began to descend, using his own rope. It would have been incredible to watch if not for the situation.

"Okay. Come on down."

Now that he'd observed how it was done, Neil tried to copy it. He lowered himself, arms straining. Sweat broke out on his neck from the heat as his lower body descended into the cool darkness to search for solid ground. He hadn't realized it was

hot and bright up there. Down here, it was pitch black and cool. *And quiet.* His ears were working overtime as his headlamp flickered off bodies, rubble, equipment that was mangled, and shards of thick plastic that had been crushed. *Water tanks.* His heart pounded.

Kenn had stopped a bit below, feet crunching. “Careful man, it’s a maze.”

Neil’s foot hit crushed plastic and slipped.

Kenn grabbed his arm, guiding him down. He didn’t tell Neil what he’d seen. The man would view it for himself any second now.

Neil’s light blurred as he caught his balance, but it was enough to show him the entire rubble field was made up of those huge plastic shards. Across the glittery field of danger, Samantha sat with her knees to her chest. Neil thought he could hear her breathing, but he wasn’t sure. She was covered in dust and dark shadows.

Kenn took Neil’s arm before he shined the light on her. “Easy man. If she gets up to run to us, it might all fall.”

Neil blanched, lowering his light.

Kenn lowered his voice. “She won’t want to leave the body. You’ll have to make her.”

Neil shined his light on Samantha anyway, mind blanking. *Body?*

Neil hadn’t seen Jeremy at first because his body was covered in blood, blending in with the broken cave walls. Jeremy had landed on one of the plastic tanks. He was still hanging there. *Oh, God!*

“Neil?”

Neil swallowed his horror. “Don’t move, Sam! Please, don’t move!”

“He knew this mountain would kill him.” Sam choked up. “And I made him come here!”

Samantha’s sobs were a torment to the men, but all they could do was listen and curse fate. Without help and equipment, they couldn’t reach her.

Kenn, aware of Morgan joining them, stepped and then slid toward the only exit he could view with his light. It was also lined in plastic shards, but most of them had been crushed and were covered in large pieces of debris Kenn identified as stone from the radio room. It had been darker than the outer walls.

Now flying through ways to rescue Samantha, Neil was barely aware they’d left.

Across the dark, bloody debris field, Samantha continued to cry.

3

Sweating and grunting, Kenn and Morgan removed the last two large stones so they could ease through the debris piles to reach the bottom level.

Morgan pointed. “We cleared a hole with those.”

Kenn shined his light and tried hard to force a grin. “Can we give you a lift?”

Angela wanted to reward his effort at lighthearted calm, but the best she could manage was a grunt. “Get us out of here.”

The ceiling of the storage chamber had cracked and fallen in. She and Cody had cowered under a shelf and hoped they weren’t hit. Afterward, she hadn’t been strong enough to stack the broken stones for a ladder to get out.

She held Cody up so Kenn could reach the scared boy’s arms, but Angela wasn’t in any shape to be pulled up that way. Some of her stitches were still healing wounds and hadn’t dissolved yet. She knew that by the way they pinched as she held Cody up. Angela chose to climb. She wouldn’t have been able to do it with Cody on her back, but she could handle herself.

Kenn watched as she came up the debris pile and then the wall. As soon as she was in range, he planned to grab her.

As Angela neared the top, she chose the wrong grip. The small ledge crumbled under her fingers, sending her flailing...

Kenn snatched the front of her shirt and jerked her out of the hole.

Angela screamed but didn’t struggle. When Kenn set her down, she clutched her stomach, trying not to puke.

Are you okay?! Adrian’s guts had clenched into a nasty cramp that had stolen his breath.

“Fine. Keep going.” Angela waved off Kenn’s apologies. “We’re even.”

Kenn grinned, but he'd never felt less amused. "Nice. Let's go."

Kenn guided them through the slippery debris, with Morgan bringing up the rear. Morgan was carrying Cody, who was staring toward the ladder with tears rolling down his dirty cheeks.

Morgan shielded the boy's eyes as they joined Debra and Theo at the bottom of the ladder. He didn't need to see his mom's body.

"Damn, we're glad to—"

Debra flung herself into Kenn's arms, hugging him hard enough to make the Marine stagger. Flushing, he pried her off and handed her to Theo.

"See you," Theo finished, holding her. She was the gentlest person he'd ever met. She wanted all of them to survive, even Kenn and Adrian. When she'd said she'd never attacked anyone before Tara and Jayson, Theo had believed her, but he knew it for certain now.

"We're going up to help with the fire." Kenn glanced at Angela, expression hardening. "Stay down here with the boy. If the smoke gets worse, get into the tunnel with the Mexican bodies. It'll be rough, but the drafts there might keep you guys alive."

"Marc!" Angela ran toward the injured man who had been dragged under the ledge.

Kenn rolled his eyes and started up the ladder that shook dust over those waiting to do the same.

"Help me!"

Everyone who heard it swung toward the scream, pinpointing it to right above the bathrooms on this bottom level.

Kenn was torn about which way to go. The fire was lethal, but that scream said help couldn't get there fast enough. Kenn looked at the men about to climb the ladder behind him.

Morgan went toward the screaming without being told; Theo limped behind him. The two men disappeared into the dark passage that Kenn and Morgan had come down after finding Sam.

Kenn returned to the climb. He wasn't sure how much more of this his arms were going to tolerate without a break. He hadn't been to sleep yet and the smoke was making it hard to breathe and see. He was running through his energy and the sweat was stealing needed liquid that he couldn't replace. If more people didn't recover and start helping, things were going to get a lot uglier for all of them.

Debra held onto Cody and refused to let him stare at his mother's body. Debra wanted to cover it, but there wasn't anything close to use and she was scared to leave the light. She no longer trusted the darkness. Safe Haven had changed that for her, but now, Safe Haven was gone.

Chapter Two BK8

Falling

1

“**H**elp!”

Samantha screamed again as the ground shifted. The tiny ledge she’d been on collapsed, dropping ten feet through the sharp darkness.

The debris fell in a shower of plastic dust, revealing huge stone slabs that Neil ran across as fast as he could. The cave grumbled, releasing another cloud of dust and shakes that sent his feet sliding downward as he ran. He leapt as the floor fell, reaching Samantha’s location by bare inches.

He scrambled away from the edge, bags slamming into his chest and the ground as he crawled. “Sam?!”

She didn’t answer.

Neil knelt at her side, wincing as his light revealed her bloody body. A thin shard of plastic had gone into her leg, above the knee. Too loose to plug the hole that it had created, the shard vibrated as the cave continued to shake.

Neil covered her with his body as best he could, trying to remember the lessons. *Do I pull it out?*

The choice was taken from him when Samantha groaned, rolling. The shard hit a slab of stone and

broke off. Blood gushed from the wound, pushing out the remaining piece.

Neil followed the training he'd received in Angela's class. He yanked the medical bags from his neck and dumped them out on her chest. He ripped open packages he thought he needed, but when he got to the tourniquet, he wrapped it around Samantha's thigh, as far up as he could get it over her pants. He knew it needed to be under the clothes to be most effective, but there wasn't time. Blood was pouring from her leg.

Neil grabbed his lighter. He had to cauterize the wound. There was no time to sew it—not with his big stitches and clumsy hands. *What do I use?! Uh... Uh...*

The flashlight bobbed...

Neil grabbed it off his belt, unscrewing the cap. Plunged into darkness, he managed to keep a hold of the cap and the lighter.

Hands shaking, Neil heated the cap, willing it to glow faster. He'd witnessed this at the rest stop with Angela and prayed he would never need to do it. His nightmare had become a reality.

Neil ran his sleeve over the gaping wound that cleared for a brief instant and then began to refill with Samantha's life. He slammed the cap over the injury, trying to get it all in one shot.

Blood ran from the edges, but the center of the cap held the flow. Neil hoped he'd gotten it hot enough.

Samantha groaned, but didn't respond otherwise.

Neil lifted the cap, horrified at burnt skin and the gap still there. Blood ran over her leg.

Not hot enough!

Neil reheated the warm cap, praying again. He forced himself to wait until the cap was glowing this time, then he centered it over the flowing wound. He swiped and pressed.

Samantha screamed, rising, but Neil pushed her down with his other hand, dropping the lighter.

He leaned down so he could grope for his lamp button, fighting the need to shout for help when he knew there was nothing anyone could do. They were all in desperate situations right now.

Neil lifted the cap... Blackened skin, but no fresh blood. *Now do it again. Then check the other side.*

He did it with a twisting stomach, trying to get the entire wound again before he rolled her over. In his mind, her odds of survival went down with every second. He had to get blood back into her, but the medical bags didn't have that. Blood needed to be packed on ice.

Neil considered where that refrigerator might be as he reheated the cap to do the rear of her leg. The plastic shard had pierced a smaller hole here, but he wasn't able to sew it up for the same reasons as the front. He needed to get the bleeding stopped now. Neil held Sam down and cauterized the back of the thigh he had lovingly kissed the night before.

Cody jumped as a man carrying a body descended from the ledge right above him and Debra. They recognized Neil and Samantha in relief and then concern. Theo and Morgan hadn't returned from helping the screaming woman, but Cody had told Debra the noise stopped, so she assumed they would be back soon.

Debra helped Neil settle Samantha next to Marc, but she also kept track of Cody, tugging on his arm when he would have gone toward the ladder. She gestured.

Neil, who had been learning sign language, frowned. "She's right, boy. You don't need to see her like that. Stay here and protect your dad."

Given a job, Cody stumbled over to Marc's body, where Angela was kneeling and muttering.

Neil hoped she was healing Marc. They needed him and Angela right now. If he died, they would lose them both, but more than that, once Angela was finished with Marc, she could help Samantha.

"He has a concussion." Angela guided Cody onto Marc's chest. "Can you keep him warm while we help? Debra will be here with you, and others will come."

Cody was sad. He was also picking up everyone's pain. "You'll come back?"

Angela placed a soft kiss to the boy's forehead. "Yes. So will your dad. He just needs to sleep for a while."

Cody laid on Marc's chest, comforted by his even breathing.

Angela turned to Neil. "I can't heal yet. You have to find blood for her. Others need it too." She scanned the area.

Neil pointed his lamp toward the rubble to help her.

"That's the lab shelf where we kept medications." Angela eased around the crevice and went to the spot. "We need everything in it."

"Antibiotics?"

"Yes." Angela pointed toward a dark corner. "Over there, maybe. We kept it in the rear of the room, so it might not have fallen at all."

Neil also went to the rubble pile, studying. "I can't tell if this came from bags or...you know, but there's blood on this end."

Angela joined him, collecting things as she came. The gun, she shoved into her belt. The dented flashlight, she switched on, but the blood was too close to the ladder to be able to determine the difference under these limited conditions.

"What if it's gone?" Neil's expression was desperate.

"We'll get the doctor down here." Angela headed for the ladder. "He might know her blood type."

Given hope, Neil flew up the ladder ahead of her. He understood time wasn't on Sam's side. As soon as he'd released the tourniquet, the cauterized wound had bulged, telling him there was an internal problem. She needed real help.

Angela inched up the ladder, reaching out to those she could connect with through the panic and agony. Adrian and a few others were trying to get the fire under control, but they needed more hands. *Get to the mess. We need help at the mess.*

Angela's call was a comfort to some of her terrified people, but for those in bad situations, it said they would have to help themselves until she could get to them. A fire had priority.

Angela used her shirt to cover her mouth as she reached the next level. The smoke was thicker up here. She realized the light above her was going dim and celebrated it even as she mourned the illumination. Their few flashlights weren't going to hold them for long. They needed power, but opening the vent had to come first.

Angela found Ozzie and Logan coming up the ladder behind her, both covered in dirt and tacky stains. "Kenn is going to the top level. Go help in the mess."

Both men went without protest. They'd been in the wash area when it collapsed. The carnage from that moment was replaying in their shaken minds. There wasn't space for other concerns yet.

“There’s Kyle!” Ozzie hurried to help Jennifer over the last few feet of the gap between the tunnel and the medical bay.

Kyle let go gratefully, arms aching from the tight grip he’d kept while they walked the tightrope.

Kyle joined Angela at the ladder to the next level, aware of Jennifer checking their quiet daughter for injuries.

“She’s okay.” Jennifer leaned her cheek against the baby. “Thank you! Thank you!”

Angela understood the emotion. She started climbing again while Kyle tried to convince the teenager to go to the bottom level and wait for them. Angela doubted Jenny would, but it was the safest place for her and the baby right now. The smoke up here was thick enough to make her eyes water.

Angela felt impatient males on the ladder behind her and tried to hurry, but her body had gotten lazy during her time off. *Mistake*. Angela hefted herself onto the next level. She rolled to the side to clear room for the men who were in much better shape.

Ozzie helped her stand. “You okay?”

She nodded, making the cave walls spin. “Keep going.”

The men hurried up the ladder, listening for survivors but not hearing many. The third level residence corridor was destroyed; they hurried into the mess. It was the only reachable area where the majority of their people could be.

Ozzie stopped in shock, as did those behind him. The gaping hole in the center of the mess stunned them. Camp members were trapped behind it, except they weren't moving. Body after body lay sprawled across the floor, including kids and pregnant women. In the rear of the mess, flames from the kitchen were spreading out through the door. A group of men was trying to combat the fire with powdered goods and tablecloths.

Ozzie turned toward the tunnel, grabbing Logan's arm. "Help me!"

"Do what? We have to get them out of there!"

"We are." Ozzie hurried into the adjacent corridor. "There! That might be strong enough to hold."

The two men uncovered the wide sheet of jagged metal and dragged it into the mess to put over the smallest corner of the gap.

3

Across the mess gap, Adrian saw more people finally joining the fire fight and paused to evaluate. He and the others had jumped the corner and managed to push the fire back into the kitchen, but it wasn't going to hold. The cooking oil and gas from the stoves was feeding the fire that had spread across the ceiling by wires. Melting plastic and popping cans filled the air with dangerous shrapnel.

Ozzie and Logan were dragging unconscious people out of the mess, but there wasn't room for

more than ten in the passage. As the two men brought bodies out, more men and women came up the ladder. Forced to use them like ants, Ozzie began loading bodies onto shoulders to be taken to the bottom. It was slow labor.

“We can’t get up there without digging.” Kenn dropped down from the broken ladder that led to the top level. “All the other ladders are gone and most of the ceiling caved-in. It’s blocking our exit. Lots of smoke. We can’t get up there without breathing equipment.” Kenn grabbed a heavy camp member, aware that most of the men around him wouldn’t be able to carry that one. “Let’s get these people below. Look for fire extinguishers on your way. We had ten to fifteen per level. They have to be here somewhere.”

“I’ve got one.” Shawn came from the level below them. Adrian had been next to him a few minutes ago while they tossed salt—all they could locate—onto the fire, but he hadn’t noticed when the man left. “There’s five more right below us.” Shawn sucked in smoky air, lungs hurting. “I need help carrying them up.”

Eagles hurried to collect the extinguishers, aware of the time running out for those who were still in the mess but even more, they were aware of their own limits. The constant climbing and smoke was taking its toll. So was the silence. Grief was sneaking in now, telling them they’d lost friends and family this time.

“I found the blood!” Neil’s shout echoed upward. “Working on getting the doctor.”

Angela grunted in answer, pulling herself to the top level. She’d gone right by the wonderful men laboring on the mess level without being noticed. It wouldn’t be long before the smoke overwhelmed her workers. The loudest noise now was coughing.

Angela breathed through her shirt and began working on the pile of rubble blocking off the ramp entrance to the corridor that led to the top. The ladders were gone from the other entrance and the hole was filled with large debris. She’d chosen to try digging out their backup tunnel, hoping its narrowness and odd shape would have kept it intact. Angela used her witch to help her with the heaviest pieces; she hadn’t gotten very far when Adrian joined her.

Adrian pulled the larger rubble aside, not trying to speak. The men below were evacuating their camp members from the mess as fast as they could, but without the vents being opened and the fire being out, they were all going to die down here.

Angela heaved a heavy chunk of stone to the right by rocking it.

Adrian saw a gap and helped her.

“That’s good!” She ducked into the darkness.

Adrian followed, wincing at the heat blast as warm air found the newest vent and rushed through.

Angela stood up as soon as she saw the floor was whole, fighting the need to run. There were rocks and dirt on the ground, along with big ants she

stepped over and on without reacting to their squeals of betrayed misery. She had her own colony to save.

Adrian grabbed her arm when she would have stepped into the smoke-filled corridor that led up a ramp to the top floor. He put her behind him and then advanced while shining his light. He found bodies sprawled across the rocky floor.

Angela hurried to check them, but she already knew she was too late to save those who had been trapped up here. The smoke had found every nook and cranny and smothered them while they waited for rescue.

“Come on!” Adrian helped her up, leading them through the smoke and horror to the large control panel Theo and Ozzie had welded to the entrance wall of the cave. He shined his light. Something from outside had almost pierced their steel door. *Not getting out that way.* He ripped the panel open.

Angela shined her light while Adrian flipped switches. Once the buttons were set correctly, he had to hand crank the wheel.

Angela winced as metal clinched, grinding, and then it popped like normal and a huge rush of cool air came at them. Behind it was a thick cloud of smoke that was impossible to view through or keep from breathing in.

Adrian staggered toward the washrooms, dragging Angela with him as the smoke disturbed the debris and sent fresh clouds of smoky grit over them. Angela and Adrian cowered in a far corner of

the chamber and waited for it to settle or for their lungs to shut down. There was no way to know which one would come first.

Adrian groped for her hand, blind from the smoke. He tugged her into his arms and brought up his shield, wishing he'd thought of it sooner. It would tire him, but they would be protected from the worst of the smoke racing to the top of their den.

Now that there was time, Angela put her head on his bad shoulder and sobbed.

Adrian didn't know which one hurt him more—the shoulder or her tears.

4

“They are burning!” Mikel's scream echoed over his devastated campsite. He keyed his mike in ecstasy. “You have to come out now! We will have the witch!”

In the mountain, the few radios that had been on when the earthquake hit blared with Mikel's insanity, causing ripples of anger throughout the cave.

Kenn was glad. With the smoke clearing, they were able to see how badly they'd been hit. To know that Mikel had been spared brought rage forward and gave Kenn the strength to keep working on the fire, as it did with the others who had been spared. If they survived this, Mikel was still out there planning their demise. Instead of causing panic, the

determination to end the threat hardened in their hearts. Mikel was on borrowed time. He just didn't recognize it yet.

Kenn ducked behind the ladder and into the medical bay entrance. Neil had told Kenn that Tonya was still trapped. When he'd heard she was okay, Kenn had kept working on the fire. He still didn't have time to spare, but he was checking on her anyway.

Tonya grinned at the face peering across the gap. "Thought we'd be seeing you soon."

Kenn scanned the sleeping cat in her lap and the narrow ledge of stone where Tonya was sitting cross-legged. Without equipment or stacking debris up, he couldn't get to her yet.

Tonya already knew. She'd been thinking about ways to get herself down, but the drop into the darkness had stopped her. She didn't know what was down there, but she had heard Neil tell the doctor that Jeremy jumped into a gap after Samantha and died. After that, Tonya had chosen not to jump.

Kenn scanned again, trying to come up with something. He estimated their ladders would reach it, but they were in use now—both of them. The others had been destroyed or were buried.

"I'll be fine." Tonya flashed another grin. "Time to go be a hero."

Kenn snorted and went back to helping, but his mind stayed on Tonya. She had become the perfect

mate when he wasn't searching for one and she was carrying his child. *I might have to marry her.*

Chapter Three BK8

Burning

1

Gunshots rang out. It scared Cody, who had fallen asleep. He jerked upright to find Debra helping Theo and Morgan bring down a woman whose name he didn't know. She was splattered with blood.

"I can't believe he's gone!" Nancy hung onto Morgan's arm as he guided her over the rubble. "I tried to help him..." She broke down sobbing.

Morgan scooped her up, carrying the former sailor the last twenty feet. He put Nancy next to Samantha, hoping she might be able to help with their wounded once she calmed down.

"Ants." Theo signed it to Debra. "They killed Shane."

How? Debra didn't understand. *They're little.*

"Strength." Theo wiped away sweat. "He was knocked out. They took him right from her arms."

Debra started crying.

Cody came to her and wrapped his tiny arms around her hips. "Shh..."

Debra held onto the boy, taking comfort where she could get it.

Cody instinctively led her over to Nancy.

The two women fell into each other's arms, crying.

Cody retreated, glancing at Theo. Crying women made him nervous.

“Good job.” Theo patted Cody's shoulder. “Can you watch them?”

Cody nodded. He returned to his place on Marc's chest, but he shifted so he could view the upset women.

Theo and Morgan felt the draft in the tunnel switch, glancing upward. The light from the fire was dim now, but fresh showers of dirt and dust were falling over everything.

“Backdraft?” Morgan questioned as the wind increased, knocking more debris over and down.

“No.” Theo shielded his face from the flying dust. “We set it up so that couldn't happen.”

The two men fought the wind to get to the ladder, where Theo began the dangerous climb with his casted leg. Morgan followed, ready to grab the man if he started to fall. There was a lot of work waiting for them all and behind that, grief and anger that would have to have an outlet. First, they had to get out of this cursed mountain.

2

“She's over here. I cauterized it. I didn't know what else to do!”

Jimmy ignored Neil's babbling, grunting at popping joints as he knelt by Samantha. The doctor

was filthy and his hands were shaking, but he was calmer than some of his students who were crying and holding each other.

“It’s bad.” The doctor took packages from the kit by Samantha’s feet. “Find me a bag of A+.”

Neil found that type in relief. The carry kits weren’t organized anymore, but the bags were labeled and none of them had been punctured. In fact, the refrigerator had stayed intact when it fell, even keeping the glass in the door, though it had cracked. The shelf next to it, which had held the stronger medications, was absent and presumed destroyed.

“It’s coming out again!” someone yelled from an upper level. “Get more extinguishers!”

Neil was torn, but it was clear what his duty was. He left Samantha in the doctor’s hands and went up to help. That fire had to be put out. They had planned not to vent any smoke until the source was contained, but this situation was more than any of them had counted on when they’d implemented safety features for the cave.

Neil stopped at the next level. Unable to reach the exact place where they’d stored their fire equipment, he’d chosen to dig through the rubble below that gaping hole. They’d placed half a dozen extinguishers on each level, but they’d also stocked three dozen as replacements.

Kenn spotted Neil. “Over here!”

Neil helped Kenn and Morgan clear the rubble from the shelf and pull it over. Anchored to the wall,

a huge chunk of broken stone shifted with it, sending new groans and dust through the cave.

“There they are!” Neil and the others grabbed as many of the red bottles as they could carry and took them to the rope.

Kenn went half way up. “I’m ready. Toss it easy.”

One hand holding on and one hand catching, he was only able to do it twice before he felt the rope slipping through his raw fingers. He pulled himself up as Simon and Neil tied the rest of the bottles to their waist to bring them up. The extinguishers were heavy and awkward, jerking Neil around as he climbed and they swung.

Kenn tried to control the rope so Neil could reach the floor. The hard labor made both men grunt and sweat in the smoky dimness.

“I found a bag.” Morgan stuffed the rest of the red bottles into it. He slung it over his shoulder and joined Neil, Simon, and Kenn at the top.

Now armed with a dozen canisters, they hurried to the mess, dodging Eagles and camp members carrying down injured and the dead.

In the kitchen, Ozzie and the others switched out with the main crew, happy to go get a breath of air that had oxygen in it. More knowledgeable about fires, Ozzie and his team had been able to beat the flames back into a corner of the cooking area where most of the oil and gas for the stove had been stored. Covered in soot and burns, the men retreated as the

fresh help came in with the extinguishers and began firing.

In the mess, workers continued to drag bodies into the passage, where they were either stacked for a crew or taken below to the doctor. Few of them responded to any of the first aid attempts by their loved ones. Bodies began to pile up; wails of grief echoed in small waves as new victims were found.

3

Shawn set Missy down next to the doctor, but he didn't insist the man stop to help her. The doctor was wrists-deep in Samantha's leg, trying to sew something, Shawn assumed by the instruments. He waited as patiently as he could, wincing at the blood. Samantha didn't react. Shawn hoped she was just drugged for the impromptu surgery.

Shawn smoothed Missy's hair from her face, glad to see her chest rising in steady breaths. He'd done CPR on her, but he was terrified it wouldn't hold.

The doctor felt the tension, but Samantha's leg was torn up. He was trying to stitch it together with a bouncing flashlight as his guide.

"More gauze!" he snapped when one of the students would have gotten up to avoid the pooling blood on the filthy floor.

Face green, the student let blood gather around his knee. He didn't mind viewing it or causing it,

but Teddy didn't like to feel it. After this, he would probably ask to be put into a different job.

The rest of the medical trainees were caring for the wounds that they could or watching the operation with grimaces and awe.

Nearby, Debra and Cody stayed away from the gruesome sight. Under Cody, Marc hadn't woken.

"Hey! He's up!"

Some people looked, but few of them cared except for the little girl sitting with the other kids that had been brought down from the mess.

"Billy!" Leeann ran over the debris. "Are you okay?"

Billy squinted through the dimness at the dirty little girl, skull pounding. "I think so. What happened?" He glanced around, frowning at the strangers in lamps and filthy clothes. "Where am I? What's going on?"

"Earthquake." Leeann motioned toward the rest of the cave. "We're in the bottom level with the other survivors."

"Okay." Billy blinked, trying to clear cobwebs while dealing with a headache. "Why am I in a cave? How did I get here?"

Drawn by the questions, a few of the students came his way with one of the medical bags Neil had brought down with Samantha.

"What's your name?" Daphne held up a light in front of Billy's blackened eyes. She was still shaking from almost dying. If not for Morgan grabbing her, she wouldn't be here right now.

“I’m...uh. Damn. I just...” Billy stared around in panic. “I don’t know! I don’t know my name! Who am I?”

Leeann took his hand, sending calming warmth over his skin. “Shh... It’s okay.” *I’ve got you.*

Billy snatched his hand away. “I heard you in my head! Freak!”

That brought cold silence from everyone who heard it. Both gifted and not gifted glared at the man. It had been months since anyone reacted that way to the descendants in Safe Haven. Even the newest refugees they’d let in had known.

Billy stared in panic. “All freaks!” He scrambled to his feet, hands going to his guns without realizing it. “I want out of here!”

“We all do now.”

Marc’s mutter brought a wave of relief. He had come up from a place of thick sleep that lingered as he scanned his surroundings. “Stand down. We’re all scared right now.”

Billy was unable to refuse the command. He settled onto his haunches under the ledge, staring around at everything and everyone as if he’d never seen them before.

Marc didn’t rush as he sat up. His throat was dry and his ribs hurt. “Someone give me an update.”

When no one spoke, Marc realized none of his men were down here except for Billy. Marc stood up, bracing against the rough, dusty wall. “Where is everyone?”

Debra gestured at Cody, who had begun inching toward his mother's body again.

"Angie went to open the vent." Cody squinted upward through the smoke and dust. "The others are fighting the fire or helping."

Hoping they had it covered up there, Marc swept what he could see of the survivors, trying to recover enough to think. What did they need the most?

Water. He stumbled toward the rear chamber where they had kept the heavier tanks. They'd had to build them in place and fill them with hoses.

Marc staggered over the debris where he and Adrian had been buried. *Memorize that scene. I know something important happened there, but I can't remember it yet.*

Marc's demon sketched the area in detail.

"Go with him!" Theo glared at Billy. "You don't need your memory to understand we all need help here, right?"

Billy accepted that and followed the Colt-wearing stranger out of the dim illumination from the lamps of the doctor and students. Billy noticed that he and the man both had the same style clothing and weapons. *Are we in the army?*

"Over here." Marc's mind flickered unpleasantly. "We have to clear some of this debris, but we got lucky. The big tank didn't bust."

Billy waded through the ankle deep water in the impression, fumbling for a safe hold in the mess of stone and plastic debris. It was hard to see or walk.

As Marc took hold of a large rock and hefted it aside, it occurred to him that he wasn't in pain despite being buried. *Shouldn't I still be knocked out? Or dead?*

"Man, that's heavy!" Billy groaned as they shifted a large layer of outcropping from in front of the tank by the nozzles. Those shiny objects were gone now, knocked off in the quake.

"Damn!" Marc spent a moment planning it and settled on a high puncture. There was too much debris on the tank. He was afraid to try clearing it further for fear of collapsing what remained of the floor above. Much like he had while escorting Angela to Safe Haven, Marc tapped the tank. This time, the water level was lower; none of the precious liquid escaped.

Billy frowned at the smell. "Is this clean?"

"No. It's been filtered, but it needs boiling or bleach."

Billy scanned the debris. "Any chance you kept bleach down here?"

"Too dangerous to leave chemicals out. It's in two storage rooms. One is on the top level. The other is on the same floor as the mess, so the cook had easy access for cleaning."

"Sounds like a good plan until this happens." Billy was fighting the need to beg the stranger for details about his life. The words he was using didn't make sense when Billy was trying to remember his own name.

“It’s Billy.” Marc began searching for containers. “You’re a well-liked member of my army. Everything else has to wait, okay?”

Billy nodded, then clasped his temples. “That stings!”

“Tell me about it.” Marc sympathized, able to recall the exact sensations of being knocked out. *Someone healed me. Not Angie. She’s too weak, and not Adrian because he wants me dead. Charlie?* The teenager was the only other healer in Safe Haven right now... Wasn’t he?

“Who was that girl?” Billy frowned again. “I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“Leeann.” Using the same screwdriver he’d tapped it with, Marc ripped the hole downward until a small stream of water began to run out. He set a container under it. “Your future wife, she believes. She’s had a thing for you for a while.”

“That kid?” Billy was revolted. He didn’t know who he was, but he knew he didn’t mess with little kids.

Marc didn’t answer.

Billy frowned again. “I encouraged it?”

“Not that I know of or you’d be dead already.”

Billy wasn’t offended at the warning. “Good. That’s sick!”

Marc again held quiet, letting Billy figure things out for himself. Marc had heard that loss of memory was common after being hit on the head, but Marc had never had that problem himself and he’d been

hit more times than any man should be if he cared about his health.

“What’s going on?” Billy was now worrying over something he didn’t know if he’d done.

“Listen, we’re busy right now.” Marc switched containers and held out the one that was almost full. “You aren’t bleeding or dying, but a lot of people we both call friends are. Can we work now and talk later?”

“Yeah. Sorry, man. It’s just hard to wake up and not know who...” Billy took the dirty water and trudged out.

“Tell them it isn’t clean!” Marc began trying to locate the chemicals they’d stored down here. The water purification tablets had been locked in a small metal case. Marc had the key in his pocket. It was poking his hip.

Noises echoed from the upper levels, telling him the effort was increasing up there. He hated it that Angie was out of his sight, but she was glowing on his mental grid and that would have to be enough. The real leader was back in charge, whether she wanted to be or not.

4

Jennifer reached the bottom floor and held the rope as Kyle came down with Autumn wrapped against his body in both their jackets. The baby held still, like her mom told her to. They’d been lucky to be wearing jackets when the quake hit, but the

parents would have used their shirts or even pants if it had been all they had to work with.

Autumn wasn't scared, but she was impatient.
Hurry, Daddy.

Kyle didn't let her impatience rush him. The clothes were far from a real sling. The knots could slip at any time and then Jennifer would have to try to catch the child. Neither of them wanted that.

Kyle inched down, noting a new ladder as an important chore to accomplish as soon as he could. A row of people needed the doctor, but they couldn't get down there because of their injuries.

Kyle reached the ground and shifted so Jennifer could take the baby from the slipping clothes before she fell.

Jennifer cuddled her squirming daughter close, trying to comfort.

Now, go. Crying!

Jennifer frowned, confused. "Who's crying?"

Babies!

Jennifer scanned their injured and only found one person Autumn could be talking about. "You mean Samantha?"

Yes!

Jennifer went to the woman who was being worked on by a sweaty, growling doctor covered to his elbows in bright blood.

Down!

Jennifer sat down by Samantha; almost immediately, she could hear the faint crying of an infant.

Two, she realized. Samantha's twins were upset. Autumn had been able to hear them before she could.

Autumn cooed sadly, reaching out to her fellow children.

The twins stopped crying and cooed in return.

Entranced by the communication, Jennifer took Samantha's hand and tried to send good vibes while the doctor worked. It didn't look good for the weather tracker. She was pale in the dimming lamps.

"We need more hands!"

The shout came from above them.

Jennifer handed the baby to Debra. "I have to go help."

Debra patted her wrist and then patted the baby, smiling.

Jennifer hated to leave her child with someone she barely knew. With no other choice, she went up the ladder.

Debra settled the baby by Samantha's shoulder, where she was out of the way and protected by the ledge. Debra sat next to them, also keeping track of Cody. He was staring at where Marc had gone.

Billy came from that room, holding up a canister. "Water's here! Clean it first." He set it by the line of wounded and went back toward the dim water room. There was too much blood out here for him. He was going back to the other guy who put off vibes of being dependable.

Billy entered the damp darkness, not minding the water as much as the stares. Everyone out there was too hurt to be useful or seemed flaky.

“They’re shaken up.” Marc paused and then gestured. “Except for the doctor. He’s always been flaky.”

Billy caught it this time, realizing Marc had read his mind. “You’re a freak too!”

“Yep. And if you call any of us that again, William, I’m going to knock you back out.”

“But it’s... You’re...”

Marc shoved another container into Billy’s arms, sloshing water onto both their arms. “Shut up for a while, will you?”

Frowning, Billy did as he was told.

Marc sighed in relief, not wanting to resent Billy for his lack of memory. It might even be better that he didn’t remember right now. Some of their members were too dazed by the losses to help.

“Grab that shelf!”

A huge crash echoed from above him, making Marc want to be up there with Angie and Charlie... *Charlie. I don’t have him on my grid.*

Chapter Four BK8

Issues

1

“**Y**our father calls loudly.” Natoli and his braves were following the boy down a winding passage. When they’d reached the bottom of the ledge, a gap had led them to a corridor that appeared undamaged. They’d been tracking it for almost an hour.

“Give me a minute.” Charlie concentrated. “We’ve got another problem.”

Natoli and his men went into alert mode, drawing weapons.

Tracy stayed close to Charlie, hoping he was wrong. *Isn’t an earthquake enough?*

The tunnel was lightening as they walked, telling them they were near the outside and that their defenses had been breached. The only question was if it was from the quake or something else. Not giving themselves away with noise, the small, cold group was able to hear the clink of tools and the low murmur of voices.

Charlie signaled everyone backward. “Pick a curve and we’ll take them out.”

Natoli gestured to his warriors as they retreated ahead of the men coming into the corridor. He

assumed Charlie hadn't answered Marc because it might give them away, which meant this group could have their own special person. Natoli stayed close to Charlie, determined to keep his vow and prevent the evil men from getting into Safe Haven. The survivors in there wouldn't last against an invasion right now. The blow they'd been hit with was too harsh.

"I feel you, boy!" a voice growled in delight. "Come out or you'll be sorry."

Charlie flipped the safety off his gun. Unable to communicate in any other way, the teenager struggled to remember the hand codes.

Natoli and his men were also just learning them, but Tracy recognized the message. She motioned the warriors to get down.

Charlie tried to wait until a large group of the Mexicans were in the tunnel, hoping to get a chunk of their fighters, but the steps came forward without the noise of a group.

"I smell you, runt!" The man's taunt rang through the corridor. "I'm gonna drain your girlfriend!"

Tracy felt the terror the man was sending, but after the earthquake, she hadn't calmed down enough to be scared of anything else. She tapped Charlie and pointed to her belt, where three grenades were cushioned in pouches.

Charlie grinned. He took the first one and tugged on the pin.

Tracy led the braves up the passage in a hurry, praying Charlie would be okay. She and Natoli had to get back to camp and tell Marc their den had been breached. If Charlie's aim was good, they could also tell him the hole was plugged. If he missed, she had two more tries on her belt.

Charlie rolled the grenade, skipping it along the wall so it wouldn't be easy to catch or kick away. As soon as he let go of it, he grabbed his gun and fired in a sweeping pattern, hoping to hit the descendant as he ran away from the explosion.

The grenade blew in a thudding bang that echoed through the narrow cavern. The ceiling collapsed, sealing the exit, but no one came through the dust toward him.

Charlie stood up, coughing. *Did I get them?*

Not a chance, kid. Look up.

Charlie barely felt the boot to his face, too shocked to find a small man wearing black clinging to the ceiling above him. The boy didn't understand how the descendant had gotten up there.

Knocked off his feet, Charlie lost the grip on his weapon. It slid down the tunnel, toward the pile of rubble and the cloud of dust that was coming their way.

Charlie ducked, blood dripping from the injury on his cheek, but the man dropping from the ceiling didn't notice the danger in time. The traitor was hit full force in his uncovered face.

Charlie wanted to stay down, but the killer letting out harsh coughs was distracted. That made it a perfect time.

The teenager leapt up and tackled the man, also breathing in the dust as they struggled.

Power flew through the corridor. Both males tried to hit the other with their gifts and their fists. It was chaos for Charlie, who only had the basics of rookie training. There wasn't time to replay the lessons or to plan. He reacted as violently as he knew how, instinctively mirroring his father.

The descendant swung them around, slinging Charlie off his neck.

The teenager shoved off the wall and slammed into the man with his knife. It sank deep into flesh, shocking Charlie with the sensation. As the dust cloud began to dissipate, they stared at each other in shock—one scarring, one dying.

Shifting rocks clunking down the rubble pile got through to Charlie. He yanked the blade loose and took off up the corridor.

Behind him, the descendant dropped to the stone floor with a heavy thud, bleeding out. He hadn't been able to hit the kid with his power. It was as if the boy had been wearing a shield even though it had to be down because they'd been touching. Confused, the descendant clutched his wound and closed his eyes.

People were trapped in corners and on small, narrow ledges throughout Safe Haven. The smoke was being pulled out, allowing for deeper breaths and more coughing as everyone tried to clear their lungs. Lights bobbed continuously, glancing off rocky outcroppings covered in debris that was barely identifiable. Muted voices called out to each other in comfort and grief as dozens of people went up and down the ropes and ladders to take supplies and wounded to the bottom floor.

When the first gunshot rang out from a distant tunnel, all movement paused.

“That’s not good.” Adrian took the lead. He and Angela had come from the top level, horrified that there had been no survivors up there, but glad they had gotten the smoke venting.

Angela tried to hurry, but the debris in their way prevented it. She settled for letting Adrian go first to clear the path while she concentrated on the new noises echoing through the cave system. It sounded as if there had been another collapse, but she couldn’t tell where.

Angie! Do you have Charlie? Marc blared in her mind.

No. I’m searching too.

Marc waited impatiently, working on the water. He could hear the murmurs of the survivors, and faint cries from the wounded, but underneath there was a heavy hum he hadn’t identified yet.

“Hey, can we help with anything?” Brittani and Gus, with the rest of their group, joined Marc in the water area. “We aren’t sure what to do.”

Marc pointed toward the containers he had filled. “Take those out, but let everyone know it has to be cleaned first. I’m hunting for the purification tablets.”

Brittani motioned to her family. “Let’s dig around and see if we can locate it. What do they look like?”

While Marc described the box the tablets were in, Gus took the water containers out to the line of wounded. The row waiting to be treated had grown steadily over the last half hour. Now that the fire was out, serious injuries had to be handled, but the doctor was still working on Samantha. The rest of the students were helping the few that they knew how to, but this was all new to them and everyone was in shock. Not much was getting done.

Gus slid aside as more bodies came down the ladder, recognizing Li and his wife. Both of them were alive, but they had been burned. Gus couldn’t tell how badly and he didn’t want to. He’d already seen people fall to their deaths. He didn’t need to view the effects of fire too. Gus spun on his heel and rejoined Marc in the water area.

“This is a little bit of what it’s like to be an Eagle.” Marc gestured toward the wounded. “If you can’t handle the sight of burns, you’re better off just being a camp member.”

Gus wanted to argue that he was made of tougher stuff than that, but the shock of watching friends die was making him doubt his own strength in that area.

Brittani, on the other hand, felt as if she should be doing more. She went out to their wounded to see if she could assist any of them.

Marc knew what Gus was feeling. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, when your woman is stronger than you in some ways. In fact, it can come in handy.”

Gus was subdued. “She’s always been like that. I wanted to be an Eagle to prove to her that I was strong too, but after seeing everything that goes on here, I’m not sure I can hang.”

Marc shrugged, filling a new container. “You’re not viewing everybody in their best moments, you know. Maybe you should hang on before you make a final choice. It’s not always like this. There used to be a time when it was almost fun.”

Gus found that hard to believe while they were surrounded by all the death and misery.

Marc waved a hand toward the jug. “The rest of these go to the upper levels. Don’t forget to tell everyone the water is dirty. We can’t handle an outbreak.”

Gus took the containers out without asking how he was supposed to get them there. Brittani had already taught them to make use of whatever they could since the war came. They’d done pretty well on their own. They hadn’t been as organized as Safe

Haven, but there hadn't been as many people in their group either. Now that everything had been destroyed, they were stuck using archaic methods to get things done.

Marc continued to call for Charlie as he labored, wishing he could go search for the boy, but if they didn't have water soon, they would have even more problems.

The gauge on the water tank was broken thanks to the falling debris, but Marc estimated there was half a tank remaining. Based on their previous population, that amount would have held them a week. In these conditions, that would be cut in half and they would lose some of it while they cleaned it. If they didn't find the purification tablets, they would have to boil. Marc began kicking around in the debris with Gus's brothers, determined to locate them. With boiling, they might lose 1/3 of the water they had and that would end up costing lives.

Do you have him yet? Marc demanded of his demon.

Yes, he lives. There was a breach.

Where?

Second floor, rear passage. Half a mile out. The boy sealed it with a grenade, but the enemy is already digging through the debris.

Marc went to the rope and shimmied up to the second floor. Shining his light, he determined there was no way to reach the other chambers from this entrance.

Neil appeared, coming down from the mess where the fire was finally out. “Kenn and I left ropes hanging from...” Neil paused, heart hurting. “Where Sam and Jeremy fell through.” Losing control, he strode to the ladder so he could check on Sam.

Marc followed him down.

As they reached the bottom floor, Neil pointed to where he had brought Samantha down. “It’s rough over there. You might not be able to get back up that way without help or stacking.”

Marc disappeared into the darkness, connecting to Angie. *We’re about to have company.*

3

Angela and Adrian exchanged worried glances as Marc’s message came through. If the Mexicans had breached a tunnel, they were about to be attacked and they weren’t ready for it. Most of the camp didn’t even have their guns right now.

Adrian signaled toward the bottom levels “That’s where you should be.”

Angela ignored him. “We need to bridge this gap. Get Theo up here, and Ozzie. As soon as we can get across, we’ll set up a welcoming area.”

Adrian did as he was told, uncertain how the feat would be accomplished, but more than willing to let her run things while he was her right hand. It was more than he could have hoped for before the earthquake.

Angela was aware of his sleazy contemplations, but she didn't have time to scold him. Alone for a minute, she took the ladder down to what remained of the second level, just missing Marc and Neil. Instead of taking the next ladder, Angela went around it and over to the gap where Jennifer and Kyle had come across. The rope they had used was still tied; Angela grasped it tightly.

She went across the ledge without anybody noticing, and entered the medical bay. The doctor and the students had also come across the ledge, so Angela was assuming it was sturdy enough to hold her and the other person waiting here for rescue. She didn't know why Neil hadn't helped Tonya, but she understood overlooking someone in a moment when a loved one was injured. Maybe Neil hadn't known Tonya was trapped in the lab behind the medical bay.

She figured out that wasn't the case as she entered the bay and saw most of the floor was gone. "How did he get them out of the showers?" She was a little impressed at the ingenuity.

"He made them jump."

Angela peered through the doorway to the lab and was able to see Tonya in the far corner. The pale redhead was perched precariously on a far ledge with the ugly cat in her lap.

Angela swept the gap between the door and the showers. "Jump to where?"

"Just kidding. There was a board across it. As they were coming through, it fell." Tonya paled a

little more. “We almost lost another one of the students, but Morgan grabbed her hand and pulled her up. It was kind of scary to watch.”

“I bet it was.” Angela scanned the area again. “We’ll find something.”

“What if we put a ladder under from the bottom?” Gus was standing behind her.

Angela gave him a small smile through the smoke. “Can you and your brothers handle that?”

“Sure.” He looked her up and down. “Shouldn’t you be on the first floor with the other injured people?”

“I’m fine. After you help get Tonya out of there, there’s a group trapped in the living area. We haven’t been able to get there yet, but Marc is headed up from the bottom floor. I’d like you guys to help them.”

Gus understood what she wasn’t saying. She wanted him to make sure Marc was okay.

Angela patted his arm gratefully. “Don’t give up on the Eagle idea yet, Gus. You’re more capable than you give yourself credit for.”

“Brittani doesn’t want that.”

“What does Gus want?”

He looked down at her with open fear. “Out of this mountain.”

Angela understood that sentiment. Many people would be experiencing it, thanks to the losses taken here. Their den had become a tomb.

“Mmm...”

A moan near the ground startled them both, coming from under a large debris pile.

Angela and Gus hurried over to dig the person out, both horrified they hadn't known anyone was right there and needed help. At this point, they weren't expecting many more survivors. The miracle stories in the news were exactly that—miracles.

Angela and Gus helped the man stand, recognizing Ray underneath the dirt and dust. She gave him a quick pat down and determined he had been knocked out, but not hurt seriously. “Gus has to go to the first level. He'll drop you off.”

Angela helped settle Ray on Gus's large back, and then went with them to the ladder, hoping it was sturdy enough to handle the double weight. Most of the bodies from the mess had been cleared now. Almost all the people who had been in there were dead. Those they had been able to resuscitate had been taken to the bottom floor where the doctor would examine them when he had time. The injured were stacking up and lining up, all handling their own issues as best they could. It was calm for the moment, but Angela knew that wasn't going to remain. Often, the worst part of a crisis came during the aftermath. Fear, anger, greed, and jealousy didn't go away just because a tragedy struck.

Gus lugged Ray down the ladder.

Alone again, Angela concentrated, trying to determine what was the next most important thing to handle. They had hundreds of bodies to deal with.

They needed food, water, medicine, and very soon, they would need light.

Angela frowned. That was going to be a big problem. In the next 48-hours, most of their lamps and flashlights were going to be used up. They wouldn't be able to clean the water or prepare any of the food they found. They also needed something that wasn't flame. They might have a gas leak in the kitchen and maybe from other areas as well. Until they got repair crews going, it would be impossible to tell.

If she got the power on, they would have limited light in the area where the wires hadn't been damaged. Most of the wires would have been destroyed on every level, except for the top. Only the rear areas of that floor were too damaged to access. The ceiling had collapsed over the big and little training chambers and the TV room. The reading cavity was almost pristine, but crowded with bodies. The bathrooms up there were also destroyed, as were the laundry and storage chambers, but the corridors, the weapons compartment, and their power room hadn't been damaged. They'd lost power because the connections had snapped as the flooring collapsed.

Angela grunted as she leapt up for the rope to the next level, stomach pulling and twisting. She climbed awkwardly, feeling like a rookie again.

As Angela got to the next level, she was met by Jennifer.

“Marc said to keep my ass on the bottom floor or stay with you.”

Angela was glad to have the teenager. “We’re gonna go do some work on the power. Once the smoke finishes clearing, you can bring the baby up. And Cody.”

Jennifer understood Angela was trying to ease her mind about being so far away from Autumn. “Thanks.”

“It’s also for Cody. I like that kid.”

Jennifer stepped over the large debris pile, and scanned the broken ladder to the upper level. There was only one remaining. There would only be one on the level below them now as well, since Gus’s brothers were busy removing it to use for Tonya’s rescue.

Jennifer shined her light toward the living quarters. “There are people over there.”

“Marc’s working on that. We have to get the power on.”

Jennifer followed Angela, neither one of them commenting on the stack of bodies they passed as they climbed the ladder above the mess tunnel. They knew each face. They had laughed and eaten with them just six hours before, and now, they would never hear those people again.

Jennifer didn’t know what Angela planned to do with all of the bodies, but since they had no way to bury them and they couldn’t burn them in here, she suspected they would be dumped into the pits. The rest of the camp wouldn’t be told.

Angela and Jennifer went up to the first level through the same entrance she and Adrian had used when they got the vent open. Jennifer was fine until they hit the rear room. Angela needed to check each of the chambers to determine if the cables on this level were intact; that meant traversing the bodies to reach where the wires had been stapled to the wall.

“Oh, my God.”

Angela didn't echo Jennifer's horror but she felt it. There were kids up here, kids that shouldn't have been.

“Why were they here?” Jennifer scanned the faces with her light. “Why weren't they in the mess with the other kids?”

Angela made her way through the horror. “We've always had roamers. Slaver kids were locked up for so long they couldn't stand to stay in one place. You know that.”

Jennifer did. It explained some of the smaller kids, but not the teenagers who never missed the evening snack together. It was another mystery to add to the list of things she had already come across since Kyle had helped her over the gap. There were bodies that didn't have injuries from the earthquake and there were bodies nowhere near debris that looked as though they had been bashed in. After they settled down, she would tell Angela about the things she'd found. They had yet another killer in Safe Haven.

Angela caught that, but didn't respond to it. They'd always had killers in Safe Haven—the good

kind and the bad kind. It was sad, but the odds were high on that never changing.

Chapter Five BK8
Four More

1

“**S**hine that light over here.”

Angela and Jennifer both swung around as steps echoed through the passage behind them. It was a group of men coming to the weapons compartment.

“Take whatever you can carry.” Kenn’s voice echoed. “There are vests up here. Most of us don’t even have our jackets, so get suited up.”

Angela listened in approval as she continued to track the wires.

Jennifer watched the shadows and listened to the grumbling of the mountain around them, wishing she could turn back time.

“Is anyone else up here?”

“I am, with the boss.” Jennifer stepped into the corridor so Kenn could see her. “She’s working on power.”

“That’s good. Marc stacked a way up to the residence level. Some of us are gonna secure the people there and help them get down to the bottom. The rest are going with Marc to make sure the sealed tunnel will hold until we’re ready to handle the Mexicans.”

Angela didn't contradict the orders, but she was certain the small blast had sealed the passage. If not, they would already be hearing shouts and screams, and fighting of the men coming through. She could feel Charlie's troubled mind, but that also had to wait. The camp needed power.

Jennifer listened to Kenn talking to someone.

"Stay here. Don't let anybody through that the boss doesn't approve."

"You got it."

Relaxing now that Kenn had put someone on guard, Jennifer joined Angela in tracking wires.

The women forced their minds away from the bodies of their friends. It felt awful to step over them. Some of these people had been terrified of dying down here; it added insult to injury.

2

"Keep going." Charlie knew his parents were worrying. "My dad's on the way."

Charlie and Tracy stayed between the warriors as they hurried toward their damaged camp. Behind them, came the sounds of digging through the rubble.

"Hey! There's a new tunnel!" Tracy pointed as they ran by.

The group stopped to sweep it with their lights and gifts, hoping it was empty. If there was another breach, it would make it even harder to protect what remained of their camp.

“I see a boot.” Tracy walked into the darkness without considering the danger.

Charlie hurried in front of her. “You don’t have your gun. Stay here.” Charlie shined his light as Natoli took his right.

Tracy slid into the middle of the warriors like Charlie wanted. She was regretting all the time she had spent mourning instead of strengthening her body. The few lessons she’d done with Angela last week had been great. It had cleared her mind and helped heal her heart a little. Now, she wished she had been doing that the entire time.

“It is a boot.” Charlie picked it up. “Looks like... It’s Shane’s!”

Charlie went deeper into the corridor despite not having time to do so, light shining on blood spots and torn clothing. He didn’t know what had happened in here, but the feeling of someone needing help was too strong to ignore.

The cavity dead ended in a pile of stones and dirt. As Charlie approached the blockage to be sure there were no gaps, fresh grit fell over his shoulder. Goosebumps breaking out on his arms, the boy shined the light upward in horror.

Ants were on the ceiling. They were carrying something bloody that appeared to be human.

Charlie wasn’t sure about firing. He could tell the person was alive, but with those injuries, he doubted it would be for much longer.

Natoli rushed forward and began stabbing the ants with his staff.

Squealing as they fell, the ants tried to fight by clawing and biting feet that stomped on them.

Tracy and Charlie stayed back as Natoli and his warriors killed the ants. During the battle, the body fell, but neither of them hurried over to it. They didn't want to get in the way.

As the last ant was knocked from the ceiling, the others scurried off, squealing in hurt rage.

The rescuers all gathered around the body.

Shane opened his eyes, unable to see. "Shoot me."

It was obvious the man wasn't going to survive his injuries. He had missing fingers, chunks of flesh were gone, and his skin was waxy from the loss of blood. He would be dead before they could get him to the doctor.

Natoli knelt down next to the man, "Close your eyes, my friend. Close your eyes."

Tracy glanced away as Natoli slid his knife across Shane's neck.

"Aww, Shane." Charlie stared. Viewing this much death up close was also shaking his desire to serve.

Natoli wiped his blade across his knee and stood up. As he sheathed it, he noticed Charlie's glazed expression, as well as the pale countenance of his woman. The Indian directed them toward the tunnel, understanding these were rookie warriors. He treated them the same way he would have any of his braves. "Get to work!"

Charlie and Tracy left Shane's body with slow steps. It was heartbreaking to treat their friend this way after he'd died such an awful death, but they couldn't do anything else right now.

As they stepped into the main cave, the sound of digging was louder. There were also voices coming toward them from the direction of the camp, along with the heavy stomp of running boots.

Natoli marched his group in the direction of the boots, hoping whoever was coming was ready for the problem. The Mexicans were coming through behind them. The sound of shifting stone was distinctive.

Boom!

The group broke into a fast run as part of the passage behind them exploded and Mexican shouts filled the dusty corridor.

3

“I got a complaint, boss lady.”

Distracted by the battle she was keeping track of, Angela turned to face the camp member who had muttered in her ear. “What can I do for you?”

Benny grinned cruelly, big hands reaching out. “Die.”

Angela struggled to reach her gun as the man squeezed her neck, preparing to snap it.

Angela tensed her muscles as tight as she could get them and lashed out with her demon's wrath.

Benny jerked, body stiffening.

The vet snatched his knife from Benny's thick neck.

Angela absorbed the lifeforce, groaning.

The vet spun back into the shadows.

Jennifer and Olivia gaped in shock. Both women had been about to shoot, though Jennifer had drawn her weapon first.

Angela gasped air into her lungs, hating the painful sensation. Roger had done worse to her, but that didn't stop the dangerous, hungry rage that had to be controlled. Feeling fate call, Angela glanced at Jennifer.

Jennifer sighed, holstering. "Are you sure I should?"

"Yes. That's four of them. I was certain there was double that number. Expose them now."

Jennifer went to join Marc and Kyle. Angela believed their other hidden assassin was in the group that was fighting the invaders.

"I can get others up here to watch over you." Olivia stepped closer, hoping the vet didn't come back before she finished. He was eliminating all of her kind. If she didn't act now, she probably wouldn't get another chance.

Angela knelt down at the wires again. "Do it fast, before you lose your nerve."

Olivia stiffened. "You know?"

"I've always known." Angela pushed harder, wanting it over. "You were the one confused by your destiny."

“I don’t know what you mean.” Olivia lifted her gun.

“Yes, you do.” Angela’s voice didn’t shake as she challenged her next would-be killer. “You could have been one of us. You’ve chosen to follow old orders and kill me instead. At least admit what you are and why.”

“I’m your enemy. You let me in.” Olivia’s face tightened, finger squeezing... Blood ran over her lip and dripped down her chin.

Angela didn’t glance up. The vet was handling the heavy chore she’d given him and doing it well. So far, only a few people had witnessed anything, and Olivia wasn’t going to tell. The vet’s knife had slid through the back of her neck to cut her vocal cords, among other vital items. Angela had heard him plan it out in his mind when the woman left her post. Angela hadn’t known Olivia was a traitor, but the vet hadn’t cared. He viewed everyone that way, allowing him to see things she didn’t.

Angela watched the vet caress Olivia’s twitching fingers.

“Killing is wrong. If you can’t control yourself, Marc will slit your throat while you sleep.”

Chris frowned, dropping the body. “Sorry.”

Angela sighed. “So am I. You can’t be cured. I should have you removed.”

“Yes.”

Angela didn’t speak again.

Neither did the vet. He watched her as she worked, protecting and obsessing.

Shouts of a victory echoed, along with a short series of blasts that said Marc had blown up more parts of the tunnel to buy time. If it was bad enough, the Mexicans might abandon their attempts to reach Safe Haven that way. Angela hoped it was. They'd already lost a quarter of the herd. She couldn't take much more.

The fighting in the corridor echoed from the second floor and spread through the cave. Those with minor injuries and those not sure what they should be doing began to gather around the tunnel entrance, listening in concern.

4

Marc swung at a short Mexican and knocked him into the cave wall, then fired his gun. He heard a body fall behind him, but there was no time to see who it was as the rest of the Mexicans came through the passage screaming for blood.

This part wasn't wired like the rest of the tunnels around the cave had been. Marc watched in horror as one of the Mexicans threw a grenade that bounced off the stone wall and landed in a crevice about four feet up.

"Duck!" Marc threw himself to the ground.

The explosion echoed, making ears pop as showers of dusty debris fell over them. Men didn't have time to avoid the blast; they were knocked off their feet or killed outright from the shrapnel.

The ceiling collapsed in front of the Mexicans, blocking them from coming in farther, but it also blocked Safe Haven from getting out. Now they were trapped in here. The entire fight had lasted less than two minutes.

Marc stood up, wiping dust from his face. As he swept the bloody, dusty corridor, his flashlight began to die. "Let's get back."

They were forced to leave the bodies where they were. That had to come later.

Jennifer met Marc and his group as they reentered camp. "The boss says to scan your group."

Marc understood this was to flush someone out. He raked the group with his demon's penetrating sight.

"Hands up!" Eddie drew his gun before Marc could read his mind. "I'll shoot the boy. None of you can heal the healer."

"My mom can." Charlie wasn't afraid. He was angry. "Bluffs won't work."

When the others didn't react, Eddie scoffed. "See, boy? They know I'm right. Your momma was hurt bad and she hasn't healed well." Eddie motioned toward the passage. "All of you get in there and start digging."

"You're working with the Mexicans?" Jennifer burrowed into his thoughts. She caught a glimpse of Eddie trying to shoot Marc during the fight they'd just had and missing only because of bad aim. "How can you do that to us after escaping them?!"

Marc realized the man was like Rick and snapped. He lunged forward, taking the surprised killer to the ground.

Everyone else got out of the way as they fought for the gun.

Marc tried a mental shove when he felt the assassin's strength, but there was no response. *Another one who's immune or a psychopath?*

Eddie slammed his chin into Marc's nose, trying to break it.

You want down and dirty, you got it, asshole. Marc rolled over and pretended to stand. When he reached halfway, he lunged forward and slammed his head into Eddie's face, shattering the man's nose and splitting his own brow line open in a blinding stab of excruciating pain for both of them.

Kenn was there to drag his knife across the traitor's throat as Marc rolled away.

Marc stayed down for a minute, recovering. "This has been the longest day of my life."

5

"Help me!"

Terrified, Dale heard a shout and then struggling as he cowered in the shower where the curtain blocked his view. Not wanting to, he ducked under the edge of the flap and peered out.

The vet slammed Dennis onto a pipe that had fallen from the ceiling, impaling him.

Dennis screamed, clutching his stomach. Blood pattered to the dusty ground like rain.

Finished with his chore, the vet left the smoky residence.

Dale crawled into the far corner of the shower, not about to come out and challenge the vet. The man had saved his life, but Dale had also watched him kill someone. Dale was scared he would be next.

Noise from fighting came to Dale a short time later, then footsteps.

Marc and a dozen fighters entered the living quarters and walked around the gap in the center of the room, hoping to locate more survivors.

Recognizing someone he knew he could trust, Dale barreled out of the shower. He ran into Marc's knees, knocking them both to the floor near the gap. "He killed him! He killed him!"

From his awkward position, Marc scanned and found a fresh body.

"Get off." Marc shoved Dale back toward the shower and joined the other fighters around the scene.

"He killed him!"

"Who?" Kenn swept the position and condition.

"Her pet killer." Dale shivered. "The vet. She told the vet to kill my Dennis!"

At that moment, Ray came through the tunnel into the living quarters. Relieved to find Dale alive, he hurried forward, smiling.

Dale flew across the bodies and debris, striking Ray. It knocked them both to the floor. “You did it! You told her to do it! I hate you!”

Marc and Kenn separated them, not sure what to say. It was possible that Dale was right.

Dale was still screaming horrible things at Ray as he was dragged down to the line of wounded so one of the students could give him a sedative. It was a long minute where Ray stood up and refused to look at anyone except the dead man he had come to loathe over the last month.

“I hate this place.” Dale’s miserable statement echoed up to Ray.

Me too, Baby. Me, too. Unable to help his mate, Ray followed Marc and tried to forget about the emptiness in Dale’s heart for him now.

6

Gus stroked gently, loving the softness under his fingers. “Pretty pussy.”

Tonya snickered despite the gravity of the awful situation they were in. It sounded funny.

Gus also chuckled as he realized what had triggered her amusement. He held onto the cat while Tonya wrapped it in her sweater. She cradled the hissing feline under her weakest arm.

“Is it sick?”

Tonya took the first step on the ladder. “It has cancer. I’ve been treating it, but so far there hasn’t been any results. Now there won’t be more

treatments, so I guess we'll have to hope that was enough."

She and Gus descended, both inhaling deeper of the cooler, cleaner air as they reached the next level.

Tonya untied the cat, but kept a hold of it, trying to calm the angry animal. She stared at the line of wounded, horrified at everyone's condition. Tonya swept the wounded and the debris piles. "Where's the boss?"

Gus pointed upward. "Working on power, I believe."

Tonya released the growling cat and went back up the ladder. She didn't like the idea of Angela being without a guard and she needed something to do to keep her mind off the fighting she had heard. One of those shouts had belonged to Kenn.

Tonya got to the top level to find Ozzie and several of their team with Angela and Jennifer. All of them were tracing down wires, except for Olivia, who was lying face down in a pool of blood. Tonya didn't ask what had happened even though it was obvious the injuries were recent. Tonya joined the others, eager to have the power back on. The light on her belt had already died.

"Here's tape." Angela tossed the roll. Most of the supplies on this level were accessible.

Tonya watched as Angela directed her dimming lamp toward a small line of wires stapled to the wall.

"Like this." Angela spliced snapped connections together by twining the matching wires

around each other and then wrapping them in the tape.

Tonya got busy, hoping Angela would go to the bottom level soon. The camp needed her down there.

Sighing, Angela motioned to Jennifer. “You’d better stay with me so Marc doesn’t flip out. Let’s go.”

Happy that her mental suggestion had been accepted, Tonya stayed where she was.

Angela walked into the main room with the control panel, stopping by Ozzie. “Any idea on time yet?”

Ozzie didn’t stop working. “Give me half an hour and then I’ll be able to tell you. Once we get all the wires reconnected up here, we have to go through and disconnect the lower levels or we’ll start more fires when we flip the power on.”

Angela patted his arm. They all had work to do.

Angela did a brief evaluation of each level of the cave as she went down the ladders and ropes. She was forced to go slow because of her physical health, but she also needed an idea of what came next. Marc had been gathering water. Ozzie was working on power. Kenn and the others were providing protection. They still needed food, blankets, and medications. Many of their injured would develop infections if they didn’t get antibiotics.

Angela stopped near the ladder on the level with the former medical bay. She used the last of her

flashlight battery to scan the rubble, trying to determine where the precious cases had fallen. When she thought she had a general idea, she descended to the bottom level and began to dig through the rubble.

Billy spotted her and came over to help. It was obvious what she was hunting for when he realized all the debris in this pile was medical related.

As they worked, shifting debris into a bare corner of the floor, other survivors came over to help.

Voices drew attention again as another small group came down the ladder. Everyone was overjoyed to see new survivors.

Missa helped Joseph lower himself down the rope, face streaked with tears. Behind them, James, Boothe, and Peter followed, all loaded with dusty bags and boxes.

People rushed over to take the burdens.

“We were trapped behind the guard shack.” James waited for his turn to come down the rope. “Marc put rations under there. I’ve got about 400 packages of Mountain House Beef Stew.”

Angela marked that off her list as one hot meal for their current population, relieved. That would buy more hours.

“I found the purification tablets!” Brittani shouted from the water chamber.

Eagles hurried to get the case so they could start treating the water the doctor was crying over not having access to yet, despite it sitting right there. He

needed to be able to clean some of the wounds, but more than that, he needed to be able to wash his hands. The blood was building up on his skin.

“You have to help her!” Shawn grabbed the doctor’s arm.

Jimmy pushed out of Shawn’s tight grip. “She has smoke inhalation. There’s nothing I can do for her without oxygen. Get off me!”

Before Shawn could grab the man again, Nancy distracted him. Much calmer now, she led Shawn and Missy, who was pale and quiet, toward a corner of the bottom level. “Let’s try over here. There might be a fresh breeze.”

Shawn let Nancy talk to him, but he was terrified the little girl wouldn’t recover. To him, she looked bad. She wasn’t the active, talkative, bossy kid he had gotten used to caring for during their time together.

All around the doctor, others were in the same situation. Terrified for their loved ones and unable to help them, panic was about to set in. Those who were calm enough to foresee it coming hoped Angela, Adrian, or Marc were able to get it under control before things got any uglier than they already were.

As if drawn, Angela came down the ladder and began helping the doctor.

Two minutes later, Marc and his group came from the opposite end of the bottom level, where they had found a way to put a ladder up to the

residence areas. The tension went down another notch.

Marc went straight to Angie, with Charlie on his heels.

Angela took a moment to embrace both of them, grateful that they had survived the first wave. *Now I just have to get us through the aftermath.*

Chapter Six BK8
Life And Death

1

“**S**tay with her. When you see the baby’s head, yell for me.” The doctor limped away, sweating. He had twisted his ankle earlier while treating patients.

Nancy stayed crouched next to Mandy, who was in labor two months early.

Still helping with the wounded, Angela worried over the coming birth and a lot more. Smoke being pulled out of the mountain was a concern now. The trouble in the passage wouldn’t be the end of it. The steady smoke said they were in trouble, making this a perfect time to attack. They needed to get real security set up.

Marc joined her. “I’ll need six hands to take care of it.”

Angela felt better. With Marc on duty, no one would get through without paying the price. “You pick them.”

Marc glanced at Charlie, who was kneeling by Samantha. “We need more food and medicine. I’d like you guys to work on that.”

Glad to be able to help, Tracy hurried toward the ladder and Charlie followed. They knew most of the

supplies had been on the destroyed level. Like Angela, they would track things from their origin.

Marc let the couple get out of earshot before meeting Angela's eye.

"Thank you."

He smiled, glad she approved. He didn't want the boy down here using himself up on the wounded. "My honor." Marc picked his six men and motioned them toward the corridor where he'd fought the Mexicans and killed a man he'd called a friend. Eddie's betrayal was disheartening. Marc had chosen him for the rookie team.

Angela felt the same way. She had believed Olivia would make the right choice in the end.

"I found one!" Jennifer grasped the edge of the box, tugging hard. Angela had put her on searching while she helped the wounded. Jennifer lost her grip and slid down the rubble pile.

Gus grabbed Jennifer's arm, helping her gain her feet. The shifting rock sent a fresh cloud of dust across the bottom level, recoating everything.

"Thanks."

"Sure." Gus gave her a little shove to help with momentum as she went back up. They were all tired.

The doctor and students would handle distributing the medications in the box, but it was one of the smaller containers. Jennifer knew they needed to locate a large one that held enough to treat their entire population for a week. That was the emergency outbreak bag and there was only one of them. She recognized that as a mistake.

Jennifer got a stronger grip on the box this time and jerked hard. It came free, sending a small slide of rubble down the pile.

People jumped and gasped as rocks crashed to the ground, terrified the earth was shaking again.

Jennifer hurried over to Samantha with the box, already flipping the bent latches.

Angela told one of the students how much to give the injured storm tracker and watched to make sure it was correct. She scanned the area, seeing Cynthia and Candy had been brought down. Sedated, both women had slept through the chaos. Autumn was snuggled between them, also sleeping. That made Angela wonder where Cody was.

It only took a minute to find him next to his mother's body. Someone had covered her with jackets, but the little boy had uncovered her face.

Angela put an arm around his small shoulders. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Cody leaned against her, sniffing. "She wasn't a good mom, but I loved her."

Angela held the boy, scanning the other bodies. Several people had fallen during the quake. They had broken their necks or been impaled. Chauncey was one of those. Angela wondered if he had foreseen his own death and pushed away the gruesome contemplation.

"He told her something before it happened." Cody was staring at Chauncey now, tears dripping down dirty cheeks. "She told me what it was. Do you want to know?"

“Yes.”

“She said the Onion man is coming.”

Angela frowned, trying to decipher the words. “Onion man?”

Cody glanced up in fear. “The Onion man isn’t supposed to be here. He doesn’t like America. He’s a descendant too.”

On a break, Adrian had come to check on Angela. He’d been staring at her for five minutes, pondering things, but now, he stepped from the shadows near the water chamber. “Do you mean the UN man?”

Around them, people stilled, trying to listen.

“He has a lot of men.” Cody craned his chin at Adrian. “They’re coming here.”

Angela knelt in front of the boy. “Can you tell us when?”

Cody began to count on his fingers. “Six, seven, eight! Eight days.”

Angela and Adrian both sighed as fresh tension flew through the survivors. That was the last thing any of them wanted to hear.

“Help! Help us!”

Missy had collapsed.

Angela hurried over to begin CPR. The doctor was busy dealing with an impalement that had just been brought down, and three of the students were occupied with helping Mandy give birth. From her cries and groans, that moment was fast approaching.

Responding, Missy sucked in oxygen and coughed, body twitching.

Angela held up a finger. “What’s your name?”

The little girl frowned. “That’s not funny.”

Confused, Shawn crouched over the girl in terror. “Is she okay?”

Angela caught a flash of Missy’s thoughts and added it to her list of things to handle once she had time to settle things down. “She needs oxygen treatments.” Angela pointed toward the medical bay. “I think I saw two setups where Tonya was trapped. They were caught on the ledge with her. You might be able to reach them if you’re careful. They look like a breathing mask with a hose and a plastic bottom.”

Shawn was moving away before she finished speaking.

Angela helped the little girl over to the line of wounded that was finally shrinking. Missy had been following Shawn around as he dug through rubble piles to find something to help. It had worn her out and overloaded her already saturated lungs.

Mandy screamed in agony as the next contraction hit.

A few feet away from the doctor, Neil began grunting. “Come on, Sam! Come on!”

Two of the students were performing CPR on Samantha.

Angela ran, aware that she was at her limit. She hadn’t been refilling her magic from anyone and her injuries were too fresh. The single lifeforce had healed the last of her injuries from Vlad, but there hadn’t been any reserve. She doubted she would be

able to help, but she took one of Sam's clammy hands, determined to try.

Terrified, Neil waited for something to happen, but none of the previous orbs shot out and there was no blue light. Sam didn't respond. "What is it? What's the problem?"

"She's too weak." Cody had followed Angela. He placed a hand on her wrist.

Almost immediately, multicolored orbs began to shoot from Angela's fingers. They slammed into Samantha with enough force to shake her body.

"Thank you." Angela didn't scold the boy for not telling them sooner and she didn't reprimand herself for not knowing that Cody was a healer. These gifts weren't predictable, good or bad, and they didn't have anyone who could identify power. As far as she knew, there wasn't a descendant with that ability.

Samantha inhaled deeply, body arching. She curled into a ball, coughing violently.

Uh, I can do that. Sonja also had a beta who could do it. I'm not sure that we're rare.

Angela frowned at Marc's message. *Do what? Identify descendant gifts...on sight.*

Evolving. Angela sighed, standing up so Neil could help Samantha sit up. *It's good.*

Marc sensed she was unhappy, though. *Why?*

I had hoped you wouldn't evolve, Marc. It's part of my nightmares. It's why you die.

I don't get the connection.

With that skill, you've just become the most sought after type of descendant on the planet. Keep quiet about it, please? Even when it's hard?

I will. Marc hadn't asked her for the exact details of that moment yet, but now he understood it was more complicated than Adrian stabbing him in the dark some night.

I've never told you because you wouldn't have believed the truth. I still don't think you will, but your gifts are evolving. The second part of what I saw has come true, so I'll tell you now if you want to know.

He does it for a good reason. Marc had always been fast on his feet.

Yes. He saves everyone—the same as he's been doing all along. Angela groaned as she stood, spine popping.

Would we still be enemies if you had told me that?

Angela was hopeful at his reasonable response, but she didn't censor the truth. The time for that was over. *Of course. If he could get away with killing you, he would. Same for you. The rivalry will never end until one of you is dead.*

Marc caught a very fast flash of Angela shoving Adrian into the line of fire and then she was out of his mind and hers was closed to him.

Angela left Neil to comfort Sam, hoping what she and Cody had been able to do would be enough. She was weak and the boy was young. Together, they might have bought Sam a day or two, but her

own health would have to take over from there. Neither of them would be able to do it again.

Cody tensed. Angela realized the other injured, and those with friends who were injured, were coming toward them. Forced to make an ugly choice, she held up a hand. "I'm sorry. We can't do anymore. Help them as best you can."

She led the boy over to Gus, confident the big man would keep him safe.

Gus knew what she wanted without being told. He had been watching. "I got him."

Angela squeezed Gus's arm and returned to their line of wounded. She couldn't help magically, but she could assist with the skills of a doctor.

Adrian pointed to a few of the healthier survivors and signaled toward the ladder. "We need to get the levels covered while Marc secures the tunnels. Come on."

In situations like this, most of the camp was grateful he still cared enough to help them. As Adrian climbed to the next floor, followed by people who were happy to be distracted from the misery on the bottom level, Jennifer came after him. "I need to talk to you."

Adrian motioned the others to go ahead.

"We have another killer in here." Jennifer lowered her voice as she remembered there weren't appliances or electronics running to cover the conversation. "And not the kind we can use. I've found five bodies that weren't from the quake."

Adrian wasn't surprised. It was a prime opportunity, for both good and bad, to take advantage of the lack of security. "I'll tell the boss."

"She already knows."

Adrian frowned. "Then why are you coming to me with it?"

Jennifer put her hands on her hips. "Because we can't have a killer running loose in Safe Haven. It's the wrong choice."

Much like Angela had, Adrian snorted. Surely the teenager understood killers had a place, considering that she was one?

Jennifer would have argued further, but Marc and Kenn came up the ladder. Wanting more weapons, Marc had sent his crew on to secure the tunnel while he and the filthy Marine collected them.

"I'm not sure we should do anything." Kenn had heard the conversation. "Whoever it is, they're eliminating problems for us. We were watching Bobby and Howard before the quake."

"Fewer problems are a good thing." Marc stiffened. "'Cause we do have a lot of them."

Everyone rotated to find two men with guns standing in the shadows of the rubble.

Neither of the traitors was in the mood to talk or try taking a hostage. Both men knew they were about to die. They were only determined that they wouldn't go alone. They had found the bodies of their co-conspirators and assumed Angela was

having them eliminated. Both men raised their guns...

A tall figure bathed in shadows appeared behind them.

Chris swung, bringing the short, metal pipe up from the hip with the force of his body.

Jennifer winced at the awful crack.

Marc and the rest of his group watched in astonishment as the vet swung again in the same form. Blood splattered the cave wall.

Chris swung the pipe a last time, enjoying the squelching noise as his feet slid in the pool of blood. Job finished, he disappeared back into the shadows without looking at any of the witnesses.

Marc shared a glance of amused concern with everyone, then shrugged. "I didn't see anything."

The vet was glad to hear that as he went down the rubble on his hands and ass. He was already bruised and scraped, and covered in dirt and dust from the labor he'd been doing. It was a relief to know Marc wasn't going to have him hunted down yet. Chris had no doubt there would be serious consequences from the actions he was taking, but saving the important lives would help in that moment. Right now, he wanted to be certain Angela was okay.

As the vet came down the rubble pile in the far corner, Angela felt his inspection. *Very good.*

Chris beamed and settled into the shadows nearby.

Angela signaled James and Peter to carry the water container around for people to get drinks. The purifying tablets had been in them the required time. It wasn't sanitary to have everyone drinking from the same containers, but it was better than passing out from dehydration.

As the camp got a drink, the adrenaline crash started to wear off and people got sleepy, but there was no actual sleeping or even drowsing with the wounded man now shouting under the doctor's rough hands or the woman screaming as she pushed out a new life.

Angela paused as the cry of a newborn baby echoed through the horror. It was the only good sound to the entire mix. She closed her eyes, filled with gratitude that at least some of her friends had been allowed to survive. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...that saved a wretch like me."

As Angela began to sing in honor of their dead, others joined in.

2

Outside the cave, the singing echoed over radios. Those who were wearing them had hit the buttons to be certain their tormentors knew they hadn't been successful. The tunnel invasion had obviously been planned before the quake.

Mikel was furious to hear singing instead of screams. He started to fill the air with a string of

threats, but a new noise caught his attention. He swung around, staring west. *Shit! Too many!*

This new refugee wave was bigger than the previous few. Thousands of people in vehicles and on bikes streamed over the hill and into Mikel's camp. They ran over tents and fighters, crushing what little the Mexicans had been able to gather since the quake. Gunshots echoed as the camp was overrun.

Mikel ducked into a crevice in the mountain as another tremor sent stones and snow skidding down into the valley.

Above them, the sky opened, drenching the area with fallout rain.

Mikel huddled in the narrow shelter, watching his remaining men be executed or run over by the panicked refugees who'd heard singing and assumed they'd found Safe Haven. The fact that they hadn't wasn't sinking in at all. Cars were stopping; people were getting out in celebration, all ignoring the shaking ground and the ill Mexicans lying all over the snow around them.

Furious but impotent, Mikel began climbing the mountain, vowing vengeance. He didn't get very far before the weakness in his legs and bowels forced him to stop. While he waited for it to pass, he stewed. The witch's power was hurting him. *I have to kill her. If I don't, her curse will surely kill me.*

“We’re almost ready to try now.” Theo gestured at the control panel as Marc and Adrian came up to the top level. Everyone had been working for hours. “We’ll have to be ready for fires from connections that we missed or couldn’t reach.”

A small supply of extinguishers that hadn’t been used were lined up outside the mess. Marc instructed their group to grab them and be on standby for areas that began to smoke or flame. He also instructed them to use the flashlights that had battery life to scan around the cave walls while that was going on. If they didn’t go searching for it, a fire could get out of control before they even realized they had one. It was worrisome that none of their smoke detectors had gone off during the mess fire, but Marc stored it as something to figure out later. He already had a list of those.

Theo got ready to flip the switch.

Marc stayed there, hoping to be bathed in light if only for a minute. The future had weighed on him the entire time they’d been reestablishing security.

“You have more luck than me.” Theo changed places with Ozzie. “You do it.”

Ozzie flipped the switch.

For a few seconds, there was no response and then the bulbs above them began to glow with a familiar, comforting light that brought a cheer of relief from everybody who noticed it.

“Now we’ve got a chance.” Adrian clapped Marc on the shoulder with his good arm. The bad

one was reminding him it had recently been out of place. “Nice!”

Marc couldn't help but share in the good moment. Without power, they'd been doomed, but now there was a chance they might recover. He shoved Adrian toward the door. “Get to work. It's not over yet.”

Pleased, Adrian did as he was told.

On the level below, a small fire started. It was extinguished by overeager helpers who used half of the valuable canisters. Marc realized they should have cautioned people against that. Another mistake. *How many more can we afford before it's too much?*

4

“Did you hear that?” Angela tilted her head. She was picking up a call that wasn't mental or oral, but both blurred together. The only time she'd heard anything like it was when she had tried to listen to Donner while she and Adrian were being held captive on the train.

“I'm sorry, no.” Jennifer tried to expand her range, always working on her gifts. She had a daughter and a man to protect.

Angela put a hand on the healthy teenager's wrist. “Let's listen together.”

Jennifer held still while Angela navigated through mental portals the girl didn't have in her own mind. She gazed in wonder at the quick images,

at the levels of power hidden behind a row of doors, and then one of them opened. “That’s Za—”

Shhh...

Jennifer watched as rocks flew and guns fired. “That traitor!”

Angela sighed, letting go of the connection. “I’ll be taking his place when it happens. Keep this to yourself.”

Jennifer understood the choice. She would do the same for her man. “I will.”

As Angela left the level, Adrian came from the corridor behind the rubble pile the women had been digging through for supplies. He locked eyes with the teenager.

Realizing he wanted to know where Angela was going, Jennifer crossed her arms and lifted her chin.

Adrian grinned, stepping forward. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way, little girl.”

Jennifer paled but refused to run. “She has a right to do what she wants.”

Adrian understood Angela was being reckless again. He sent out a wave of misery and need. “Wouldn’t you rather I took the bullet for her?”

Snared, Jennifer gave the truth. “Yes.”

“Then tell me what she’s planning.”

Chapter Seven BK8

The Toll

1

Angela propped her feet up on a boulder and leaned against the wall of the small reading room. Over the last few hours, workers had been up here. They had gathered furniture and tried to clean up some of the garbage, as well as removing the rest of the bodies. She and the others in leadership had decided to use this as a temporary base of operations. Angela had called all of them up here for a brief meeting on what to do next.

She waited for everyone to be settled, not scanning faces. They were allowing their true emotions to show now that they were with people who could accept it without panicking. Around the camp, leaders tried to remain calm, but around each other, the truth had to be told so they could have support to bolster their own faith.

“I’d like to start with the dead, dying, and the missing.” Angela steeled herself. This part was going to hurt.

Marc motioned toward Kenn. “I asked him to get a copy of that for us a little while ago.”

Kenn began reading off names of the dead he knew were important to her. “Peggy, Hilda, Shane,

Dennis, Bobby, Howard, Chauncey, Jeremy, Julia...”

Angela winced each time a familiar name was called.

“Li and his wife both died about an hour ago. We found Roy and Romeo; they’re okay and we got them out. Cody’s keeping them company.”

In agony, Angela signaled him to keep going. She needed this part to be done.

“So far, the death toll stands at 122. We have 228 injuries, with 50 of them serious. The doctor only expects half of those to survive. We also have 100 minor wounded and roughly 80 of us with just scrapes, bruises, and scratches. So far, the list of missing is Allan, Doug, Donald, Francis, Pam, Stanley, Lawrence, Wade, and Zack and his sons. We’re also not sure about half a dozen camp members, but some of the bodies are still buried under the residence chambers and under what’s left of the mess. I’ll have a final list on that in a few hours.”

Angela moved on to the next part of her list, unable to stop the wave of sadness. “We need to set up a waste area and a food area. We’ll put the waste area over the hole where Adrian was camped. The smell was already awful, so it isn’t going to make that much difference. Anything you can find to sanitize hands needs to be put there.”

“We gathered all the weapons. They’re under guard now.” Neil’s gaze strayed to the tunnel, worrying over Samantha.

Everyone had been surprised when he joined the meeting.

Neil shrugged miserably. “The least I can do is get her out of here alive. I couldn’t do it for him.”

Everyone winced at the reminder of Jeremy’s awful death.

“We also have to sleep.” Adrian glanced toward the restless camp. “The quake hit us right as we were settling down for bedtime and it’s late afternoon now. People are exhausted.”

“Agreed.” Despite the situation, Marc still resented Adrian being here. He didn’t let it control him, however. Serving with someone he hated had been almost constant when he was in the Marines.

Jennifer brought up the next big concern. “What are we doing with the bodies?”

Everyone went quiet, waiting for Angela’s choice. Marc and Adrian both knew what they would choose. They also accepted that Angela had more compassion than either of them, so neither man was sure what she would pick.

A tear rolled down each of Angela’s cheeks. “We’ll find a place to dump them.”

Everyone understood her choice and the pain. They felt it too. No one wanted to dump a friend or family member down the pit, but between diseases and the constant reminders, it would crush what was left of their fragile camp. The next week would determine if Safe Haven survived at all.

“If we can get things settled enough, we can hold a funeral service. That might help a little.”

Tonya's suggestion was met with nods, but it was too far away for them to worry about making specific plans.

"I'd like to talk about the problems that are coming." Angela guided the conversation to where she needed it now that the basics were settled. "We have yet another threat coming to our door. I'm tired of being the one to handle it." She swept the council she was honored to be a part of, including all of them. "We'll make this choice together."

It was a moment of change for Safe Haven. Until now, the person in charge had been the one to make all of the choices like this, whether people agreed with it or not. Adrian had set things up that way and so far, it had kept them alive. Now their leader was too burdened to keep carrying it alone and everyone else was too corrupt, too young, or not willing to shoulder the weight. That meant everyone had to change again. There would be no more protecting the innocent in their group. They would do whatever it took.

"I had crews working the entire time we were getting ready to come in. I instructed Kenn to design a bugout plan. I had Samantha and her group clear the route out of here. The UN will use that same route to get in here, so our escape is blocked until we deal with them. Does anyone have hope of being able to negotiate?"

Heads shook, but no one spoke. Safe Haven didn't have any bargaining chips right now, except for the descendants, and they weren't going to hand

them over so just a few could escape. That wasn't what they stood for.

"What about fighting?" Angela felt it was a useless question, but she had to make sure these people felt like all the bases were covered. She already knew what had to be done, but she wasn't willing to carry it alone this time.

"Maybe if we use magic." Marc thought of the limited dealings he'd had with the UN during his military career. None of them had gone well. "They'll come in force and hit us hard."

"Is there a chance of slipping out somewhere so we can fight them a different time?"

Adrian denied Angela's question. "No. We shut down all of the tunnels in and out of this mountain except for the two we were going to use for backups. The Mexicans just breached one of those. The other is full of Mexican bodies."

"That means we go out the top and face whoever might be there." Angela scanned the tired group. "Does everyone agree with that?"

"Do you mind if I offer a suggestion?" The vet was in the doorway, leaning against the dusty frame. His white coat was layered in blood, dirt, and ash.

Angela motioned him in, hoping no one else was in the corridor listening to them. "What have you got?"

The vet sank down on the ground near her feet, knowing not to touch her or even look up with Marc, Adrian, and Kenn glaring at him. "We should dig a

new hole and come around to hit them in the rear. They'll be trapped."

While the others grumbled and shot down the idea, Angela, Adrian, Kyle, and Marc considered it. At this point, all options were on the table.

"How would that work?" Marc gestured. "We'd be lucky to even locate shovels right now."

The vet pointed toward a stack of weapons boxes that had been brought in for the council members to rearm themselves. "We have a lot of small weapons and explosives. If we can reach the level where we had our heavy equipment stored up, we might have a chance to use the bulldozers."

Marc stared at the vet. "How do you know about that?"

Chris shrugged, yawning. "I hear things."

"From slinking around like the dog you are?"

The vet didn't flinch at Marc's growl. "That's exactly what we are—her dogs."

People continued to grumble about the idea, but the main trio exchanged knowing glances. They had suspected they might get trapped down here from one problem or another. They had brought boxed heavy equipment. It would be a simple matter to assemble it, if they could find a passage or starting point with enough space and of course, enough manpower.

Angela glanced at Marc with the hint of a smile playing along her lips. "They're all expecting us to come out the top or bottom."

Marc was relieved they had another option. “We don’t need a full size tunnel if we dig a hole.”

“Exactly.” Chris curled into a ball. When he closed his eyes and let out a deep rumble of weary exhaustion, Angela refused to answer any of the mental questions that came. She had a list of reasons for keeping the deranged killer around. Saving all of their lives was the title on that page.

“Are we done?” Marc’s tone exposed his weary anger. He hated the vet despite the good things Chris had done. The man was a threat.

On the floor, the vet lifted his head to glare at Marc.

Before a fight could start, Kyle stood up. “Let’s get this done and get a sleeping shift set up. All of us need to curl up somewhere.”

“I’ll be right here for a bit.” Angela yawned. “Alone.”

Except for her pet, everyone exited the chamber with glares.

Angela leaned back and shut her eyes.

“How long?” The vet knew there was a lot of work still waiting for both of them.

“Half hour.” Angela was already dozing.

The vet set his internal alarm and joined her in sleep, but his ears twitched at every noise like a dog.

“How are we handling him?” Kenn asked as they got out of earshot.

“You aren’t.” Adrian motioned toward the body Logan was dragging down to the bottom level. “She

said there are eight assassins and we've only accounted for six. Let him be."

"For now." Marc was too tired to argue with Adrian over giving orders. "I'll be in the mess, handling things there. Everyone pick a floor or a chore and get on it. Report to the boss in half an hour."

As the rest of the council went to work, Jennifer came to Marc. She didn't say it or think it, and Marc didn't ask, but she still nodded. "I'll handle it when the time comes. I've never been a threat."

Marc didn't doubt her. The vet would have to be eliminated, but he would be expecting it. The teen would be a surprise that might keep the vet from hurting Angie. Marc had no doubt it would come to that ending. Obsessions always did.

2

Neil found the doctor with Samantha. The man's expression said to leave him alone and Neil did. He took Sam's hand, seeing how uneven her breathing was, how waxy her skin had become. "I'm sorry, Sammi."

Neil slid down against her arm and let sleep carry him away for whatever amount of peace was allowed.

The doctor kept working. He had two more bags of her type of blood, but he couldn't come back and do this later when she was stronger. It was now or nothing.

“Can I help?” Tonya knelt down and took a cloth from his bag. The man was sweating so hard she was surprised he could see to operate. She patted his forehead like she’d watched nurses do on television, trying to keep the edges up so she didn’t block his view.

“Get a suture ready.” Realizing it wasn’t a student, the doctor added more information. “They’re in little baggies at the bottom of the bag.”

Tonya found them and read the marker instructions on the front. Doing it wasn’t as easy, however. It was a long time before she was able to say, “It’s ready.”

The doctor took it. “Keep them coming until I tell you to stop.”

Tonya hurried. She was glad to be able to help, but also to be distracted from whatever was going on in the upper levels of Safe Haven. They’d heard screams and gunshots up there over the last hour, though no one other than Neil had come down yet. She’d been hoping to ask if things were under control now, but the trooper had crashed before she could find the words.

Around the gruesome scene, the camp was in mourning. They’d put all their hopes into this mountain and it had crushed them. The few non-Eagles who were functional were helping, though most had curled up in a corner to sleep. Everyone had been awake for twenty-four hours. Tonya didn’t think it would be long before all the survivors were sleeping, but she doubted the peace would hold. If

leadership didn't get down here and calm things, there would be a riot and in these conditions, that would be lethal.

Tonya glanced over at the new mom and baby who were sheltered under the ledge, snoozing. The baby was fine, but Mandy wasn't. The students couldn't help her and the doctor was busy. *Where's Angela?* Tonya had expected her to be down here the most.

"She's not strong enough to help everyone yet." Adrian joined Tonya in helping the doctor. He had participated in enough of these moments to be a rookie nurse. He began opening packages the doctor needed.

"Shouldn't she at least try?" Tonya swept their wounded and dying. "This is bad."

"She helped Sam as much as she could and it wiped her out." Adrian subtly gestured toward the corner where a small group of survivors stood, staring at them. "If they know she can't help, they'll panic. Right now, they're counting on it. She has to deliver."

"Can she?"

Adrian didn't answer. He wasn't sure a power nap would be enough. They had hundreds of injuries and a dozen of them were life threatening, but they also had fear. That was the most dangerous part of any crisis.

"Are we trapped in here for real now?"

Thought proven. Adrian handed Dr. Brooke the suture so Tonya could assemble another. “We have other tunnels. It’s okay to tell everyone that.”

Tonya understood she was supposed to keep her mouth shut about the other, but the doctor blew out a curt huff of offended air.

Adrian didn’t threaten the man or try to bribe him. He told the truth. “If they can’t get help from her, they’ll overwhelm Jimmy. He’s not going to be safe when these people wake up. Stay with him.”

The doctor’s anger fled as he accepted that. If Angela couldn’t heal them, they would indeed expect the camp doctor to be able to handle things. If he couldn’t, even if it wasn’t his fault, the results could be deadly.

Tonya reached into the bag and frowned. She leaned in. “This is the last one.”

Jimmy sighed at her whisper. “There’s a ball of thread in my pocket. I put it there right after the quake.”

Tonya reached into the man’s filthy jacket and fished out the thread. She left the gun.

Jimmy met her eye this time, ignoring Adrian. “You’ll hang around?”

Tonya nodded. “Yes, but if it comes to that, let me use it. I’ve had the classes.”

Jimmy went back to replacing stitches that hadn’t held the first time. “My thoughts exactly.”

Please.

WHY?

Because I love them. Don't you?

WHY?

They'll die if you don't help.

YES.

Why won't you help? They're your children.

WHY?

Stop saying that!

Stop asking for things you know I will not provide.

I can't. I don't understand.

You only need to obey.

Why?

Silence.

Tell me why?!

They turned away my other children. They were happy when the souls went out. Why should they be spared?

Angela couldn't give an answer to that. Instead, she said the only thing she thought might succeed in breaking through the indifference. *You enjoyed punishing them.*

YES.

We were made in your image. If we were wrong to enjoy their punishment, then so are you.

The roaring rage in response jerked Angela from her deep doze and sent the vet yipping into the hallway in terror.

Angela calmed herself, nodding to James and Peter, the new guards who had arrived right after

Marc left. She was relieved when the ground didn't start shaking, but she wasn't sorry for giving the truth.

The vet kept going even when Angela mentally apologized for waking him with her nightmare. She suspected he had caught the scent of another assassin. She didn't know how he was flushing them out, but it was succeeding.

Angela contemplated her dream, replaying the words, the meanings. In real life, she never would have spoken that way. In her dreams, there were no filters or censors.

Maybe that's why you were able to make contact, the witch suggested uneasily. She was terrified of being destroyed.

So I would piss Him off?

Maybe.

I don't understand.

Nor do I, but we're not dead, so it can't have been that bad...right?

Angela shrugged. She had no idea how it all worked. All she did know was that she needed help, and it wasn't coming.

Happy about the anger of her host, the witch tempted her. *There are two traitors...*

Angela moved into the darkness, waving off her protection. With the vet following her, having a guard was a waste of manpower. She also ignored her witch's suggestion. She didn't want to hunt down the traitors and drain them to become healthy

again or even to gain new gifts. She wanted out of this cursed mountain.

Chapter Eight BK8
Lost Sheep

1

“I don’t know what to do.” Zack waited stiffly for the condemnation he felt he deserved. They’d scouted to the end of this tunnel and found the exit unblocked, as it was supposed to be, but there was a large camp of Mexican soldiers below them. This end of the corridor was blocked by a cave-in. The temperature was freezing, and they were all in normal gear. The situation was bad.

“We’ll think of something, Dad.” Timmy hoped that was comforting. He couldn’t stop shivering. It hadn’t been so bad while they were patrolling. Before the mountain started to shake, Timmy had even been bragging about it not bothering him. He was shivering on those words now.

“We will.” Mike was the parrot of his older brother. If Timmy said it, it had to be true.

Zack didn’t tell the boys he’d been working on it for hours now. They were trapped in a passage that was no longer connected to the main camp, and there was only a mile between them and an army that could be climbing up even now to explore the spoils. “Move over.” Zack slid toward the end of the

corridor. “Get between me and the rubble pile. You guys will stay a little warmer.”

“They’ll come for us.” Allan flashed a comforting smile at the boys. They’d all been on a patrol together, with senior men training rookies. “No worries.”

“I agree.” Donald sounded as if he believed it, but he didn’t. The people inside were just as bad off. Leaders would need to care for the main camp first and stragglers later.

“Has anyone tried to contact the boss?” Wade patted Stanley on the shoulder as the clumsy boy shivered at a strong gust of icy wind that blew down the tunnel.

“I have.” Zack fastened the top button of his shirt. “Still am.”

“I don’t think she can hear us through the stone.” Timmy gave Mike an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Mike shrugged. “We promised to always tell the truth.”

Zack frowned. That wasn’t common knowledge. “How do you know the stone blocks most descendants?”

“We heard Matt and Charlie talking about it.” Mike’s confession brought a tense silence.

Zack didn’t scold the boys. Their punishment for being bullies was over. They’d been brought into the Eagles to repair the damage to their future, but Matt was a sore spot for everyone.

“We need to start digging.” Wade forced himself to get up even though all he wanted to do was go to sleep. “Someone will hear us.”

The small group followed Wade’s lead, with all of the adults mentally calling out to Angela for help. If the Mexicans found this tunnel, they were dead.

2

“We want out of here!”

“There is no way out!”

“Liar!”

The argument between the two camp members escalated into a brawl that sent shouts for help echoing through the cave. Everyone was tired of the sound, but there was no ignoring it.

The fighting men slammed into the counter, scattering the breakfast that had just been put out.

“Grab them!”

Around the men, hungry camp members advanced. Fists swung and bodies fell under harsh kicks. The fury camp members had been controlling broke free.

“Who do we grab?” Logan asked as he and Marc’s shift of guards hurried toward the melee that included a dozen men from camp and one scrappy woman.

“All of them!” Marc reached the edge of the fight and jumped. He landed in the middle and began to toss the fighters into those around him.

Seeing what Marc was trying to do, the other men attempted to copy him. Logan made the jump and landed, grinning at how smooth it went. He grabbed the scrappy woman and gave her a light shove into Marc, who flung her toward the safer camp members who had gathered.

Daryl leapt, too hard, and went sailing over the main fighting.

Simon also jumped at that moment. Daryl hit him in the chest, knocking his fellow helper into the crowd.

“Well, that was funny.” Gus laughed, unable to help it.

Next to him, Angela also chuckled. Gus was right. Daryl missing his mark and taking out an Eagle instead would be the highlight of conversations today. Angela patted Cody’s shoulder as the fighting stopped. “Stay with Gus.”

Cody took a hold of the big man’s arm, smiling at him.

Angela ignored the surprise at her using Gus to guard Marc’s son. They assumed because Gus hadn’t been trained, she wouldn’t trust him with something so important. The camp hadn’t noticed it yet, but she was using everyone. The people who hadn’t been vetted now were Eagles.

Marc spun Tony toward Simon, who had landed in a heap. The two camp playboys crashed into each other, dazing them both.

“Stop it right now!” Marc advanced, willing to get rougher if that’s what it took to settle things

down. “Sit down and shut up!” Marc already knew what had happened. He even understood. Hadn’t he been on missions where scared troops had needed to be calmed this way? Humans were hard to control, especially when frightened.

“We want out!” Tony was shouting now. He was sitting next to Simon, who hadn’t risen yet.

Simon was lying there trying to get his breath back. His lungs had already been hurting from all the smoke he’d inhaled while helping rescue people from the mess. Being rattled by Marc hadn’t helped.

“Listen!” Marc needed them to be more scared of him than they were of each other or the cave. “Do you hear those engines?”

The crowd dropped to silent, straining to hear and to be clear of his wrath.

A low rumble came to them all, pleasing those who understood. Those who didn’t, panicked.

“It’s another quake!”

“We’ll all die this time!”

“We’re digging out!” Marc’s shout echoed over the mutters and cries. “Listen!”

Now that it had been pointed out, it was easy to distinguish the hum of machines. The rest of the mutters quieted.

Angela came through the crowd and bent down to start picking up the food packets that hadn’t been damaged. She didn’t speak to them yet. Right now, the remaining camp was trying to decide if she should have known, if she was to blame. She only

needed to say one thing to break that hold over her people, but it had to come at the right time.

“When can we get out?” Tony asked, still sitting by Simon. The two men didn’t look at each other.

“It will take us a week.” Angela tossed food packs into hands that didn’t have one yet. Hungry bellies being filled would bring more calm.

“The Mexicans are out there,” someone stated from the rear of the group. “When you go out, you’ll let them in!”

“We’ll be wiped out this time.”

“The Mexicans are gone.” Angela ignored the nagging twinge that said she had missed something important. “They were overwhelmed by refugees. We’re working on the camera cables to verify that.”

New interest swarmed the group.

“We’ll be able to leave without fighting our own people.”

“No, we won’t. Remember them crashing our gate?”

“So what?”

“We didn’t let them in because it wasn’t safe, because they couldn’t be vetted. That hasn’t changed, asshole.”

“Less fighting!” Marc didn’t want to let things degenerate into a refugee argument that would suck in his men. “More listening!”

Angela hid a smirk as the crowd fell silent again. No one wanted to deal with Marc. Adrian was the brains. Marc was the enforcer.

I’m more than that!

Angela rolled her eyes and tossed him a food packet. It was the same as saying sit down and shut up.

Marc flushed and did, glaring.

Angela stood up, feeling the moment arrive. “I’m sorry that I didn’t see it coming. The quake caught all of us by surprise—including Samantha. I’m so very sorry.”

Marc rubbed her leg as Cody came over and crawled into his lap. “You just lost a baby. No one blames you.”

“Yeah, you can’t predict an earthquake.” Gus liked Angela. He didn’t like it that she was in pain.

“When are you gonna let us out of here?!”

“In a week.” Angela glowered at Tony. “Now shut up, okay? We’ve had enough of you.” She waved at the damaged food. “Some of us may go hungry now.”

The crowd turned that dangerous anger on Tony; he fell silent, face flushed, lip bleeding.

“We’re going to the crushed level.” Angela gestured. “Some of the meat can be pulled out and prepared. That’s a nasty job, folks, but I need you to help.”

“We’ll have fresh meat for weeks once we dig it out.” Logan knew this was a time when their leaders needed Eagles to speak up. “Power on the top floor is solid now. We’ll get the mess straightened out while crews work on food.”

“Exactly. I can’t promise, but I hope to have the smell of cooking meat filling your noses a few hours from now.”

That was something everyone wanted to hear and such an obvious solution couldn’t be faked. There were also a couple of smiles. Even before the quake, they’d been eating thawed foods that didn’t taste the same.

“I also need a body crew.” Angela assumed only Eagles would volunteer for it. “We’re clearing the upper levels. We’ll get it cleaned and move up there. It’s closer to the topside exit, so expect it to be noisy.”

“What happens when we open that passage in a week and the refugees find us?” someone asked from Angela’s right.

She turned that way. “The descendants are going to provide a distraction while some people leave. Then we’re sealing it up until everyone forgets this place ever existed.”

“After the winter, we can come out, right?” Simon clarified.

“Yes, I believe so, but that won’t be up to me.” Angela squared her shoulders. “I’m not staying. You have to pick a leader before I go.”

Shock ran through the crowd despite knowing Angela had always planned to leave.

“What kind of distraction?” Morgan was sitting with Roy and Romeo. The boys were eating.

“Avalanche.” Angela swallowed a shudder at her choice. “We’re not strong enough to fight the

UN troops and we won't leave them to haunt those of you who stay here or even those who've chosen to take off on their own. We're going to bury them alive and pick off any survivors. Then we're getting into trucks and leaving this place." Angela signaled Adrian. "Time to go."

Angela glanced at Neil. "We need another way out, one that lets people exit unobserved, but we can't use the top entrance."

"I'll scout it."

"I'll go with Neil to scout. I need to know the new layout." Kenn gestured at the tired trooper. "Come on."

As the two men departed, Angela waited, hoping the camp would help instead of being carried.

"I can help the doctor." Missa's voice was clear, lighthearted even. "Joey will help with bodies."

Angela stared with everyone else. She'd never heard Missa speak. "Uh, that's great."

"We'll help in the mess." A camp member patted his wife's hand lovingly. They hadn't been in Safe Haven long before the mountain was shut down.

"I'll do body chores." Simon didn't look at anyone. He was ashamed that he'd lost control of himself. That was why he hadn't joined the Eagles. If he did, everyone would know he wasn't as steady as he pretended to be.

"So will we."

"I can cook."

The camp began assigning themselves to chores; Angela motioned Kyle to keep them going. As he took over, giving needed comfort and information, Angela went to work on the next part of the list.

Marc and Cody followed, giving her space and protection. She was clearly in the zone.

“Why did she lie?” Cody’s question was whispered.

Marc leaned down. “People wouldn’t understand. She would be in danger.”

“Me too?”

“You knew?”

Cody scowled. “We talked about it. She said it had to happen or the bad men would get in and kill everyone.”

“Do you doubt her about that?”

“Oh, no.” Cody tightened his grip on Marc’s hand. “She’s right. They hate us.”

“Are the bad guys alive?”

“One for sure.” Cody’s face filled with fear. “He’s coming.”

Marc put an arm around the boy’s shoulders and kept him close as they followed Angela. Marc didn’t tell the boy he would keep him safe, but Cody knew his father would try.

Will it be enough? Angela asked.

There wasn’t a reply.

“Where are you going?”

Gus moved around his mate. “Helping.”

Brittani grabbed Gus’s big arm. “You’re staying right here with me!”

Gus sighed. He cupped her pretty, dirty face with his large hand. “Stop now.”

Brittani shuddered. “I can’t. I’m scared.”

Gus stroked his fingers over her cheek the way she liked, leaning in. “I’m joining the Eagles. Do it with me.”

Brittani froze for an instant and then wrapped her arms around him. “No. I forbid it.”

Gus chuckled. “I’m gonna go help our people. You be careful here. These folks are upset right now.”

“You telling me not to start trouble?”

“*Are* you.”

She chuckled at the correction, emotions welling up to change the mirth into tears. She pressed her lips to his in terror. This was what she’d been afraid of—the waiting.

Gus enjoyed her attention for a moment and then ended the embrace. He joined the small rescue crew Angela had drafted, chin up in pride at having been chosen. She’d appeared to each of them and directed them with hand codes. They didn’t know what they were facing yet. Angela said she didn’t know either, that all she could hear was someone begging for help and someone promising to kill her as soon as they were rescued. She had asked Gus to be there when that happened, to help keep her alive.

He'd been honored then and he felt honored now as he joined the team. He was useful to the boss. It's what everyone here wanted.

Brittani was angry that Gus had been infected with the desire to serve, but she couldn't gather enough rage to follow through on her threat. She settled for stomping over to their exhausted doctor to help with the wounded.

4

Angela met Gus and the others at the entrance to the tunnel on the second level. Neil and Kenn had been here shortly after the mess fire was put out. They'd found a cave-in.

Angela nodded to the guards standing in the corridor. She led her small group by them without explaining what was happening. She'd lied to Gus and the others. That voice had been threatening to kill Marc as soon as they were rescued, not her. There was no explanation she could give for her rage.

“You're not going.”

Angela spun to find Adrian and Kyle coming into the passage.

“I'll shout and wake Marc up if you say one word in argument.” Adrian gestured at Gus. “Will you make sure she gets back?”

Gus regarded Angela. “What do *you* say?”

Angela sighed. The assassin wanted Marc, but they would settle for her to get to him. “Take me to the new mess.”

Adrian knew better than to gloat. He kept his thoughts blank as he and Kyle took their places. “Kyle has lead.”

Adrian’s order was followed in relief. None of the men she’d chosen had liked Angela going in her condition.

Angela was angry, but she also hadn’t wanted to wake Adrian to take Marc’s place, and she liked Kyle too much to ask him to do it. “Can we go slow?”

Gus shrugged at her lifted brow. “I don’t want Brittani to know I didn’t help.”

Angela snorted. “You’ve helped since it happened, Gus. And you were just given guard duty over the boss.”

Gus hadn’t thought about it that way. He was grinning as he escorted Angela back to the relative safety of their camp.

5

“It’s daytime.” Mike yawned, shivering.

The adults woke and made sure that the teens did too. All of them were very cold and very hungry.

“We’ll start digging again in a few minutes.” Zack wanted everyone to be alert enough to help without getting hurt by morning clumsiness. They had cleared a small dent in the rubble pile before

sleeping, but Zack doubted they would get through before the weather or lack of supplies killed them.

“Do you hear that?” Timmy was lying near the rubble pile.

Everyone quieted to listen.

Zack frowned, rubbing his hands together. “Sounds like an engine.”

Lawrence perked up. “Around here?”

“We hid vehicles at each exit.” Zack listened harder. “Doesn’t sound like a car, though.”

“No. More like...”

“Digging equipment?”

The boys let out a small shout as they realized what it could mean.

“We’ll be okay.” Zack motioned the boys toward the rubble. “Let’s meet them in the middle.”

Behind them, Lawrence and Donald watched without comment, both eager to get inside and do their duty.

6

Kyle moved closer to the mound of stone... “I hear Zack...” Kyle gestured. “They need help. Keep digging!” He began shifting rock, not understanding why Zack was laughing when the others were shouting. He tried to listen to the fight as he and the group flung debris aside.

“Traitor!”

“I’ll kill you!”

Bang!

The gunshot caused Kyle's team to work faster. If that had been one of the good guys, the clock was ticking.

"Look out!"

Adrian and Kyle shifted a big stone over to reveal a narrow crack that revealed Lawrence placing his gun against Wade's head. He pulled the trigger.

"No!"

The gun misfired, sparing Wade's life.

Adrian and Kyle jumped aside as Greg and Daryl hit the pile with a battering ram made of a ceiling beam that had fallen during the quake. They broke through, stumbling over bodies as Lawrence fired again.

"Dad!"

Allan shot Lawrence in the hip and then again in the chest. The man fell, firing into the ceiling.

Bleeding from a trim, Zack shoved Timmy and Mike into the warmer tunnel and then himself. Allan and Donald followed, leaving the fresh fighters to deal with Lawrence as he crawled toward the gun he'd dropped.

"I have to kill her!"

Kyle came through the hole, Glock racked. "Go to sleep." He fired twice.

Kyle scanned the bodies and motioned Adrian to grab one of them. "Let's go."

The rest of the lost sheep also went through the hole. Everyone was eager to put the rocks back until

Angela was ready to attack. The rest of the corridor was clear. They'd been able to see daylight.

7

“You need to sleep now.”

Tonya didn't glance up from the leg she was holding in place for the doctor to finish splinting. “I will.”

Kenn edged her out of the way with his big body. He had just returned from surveying the tunnels with Neil. It had taken them longer than expected. “I've got it.”

“You'll stay with the doctor?” Tonya had to insist or she wouldn't be able to rest. “Assign someone and stay until they get here?”

“My word on it. Neil's updating the boss when he figures out where she is. I'm off duty for now.”

“Thank you.” Tonya pressed a quick kiss to Kenn's stubby cheek. “Wake me in five hours.”

“I will.” Kenn didn't worry over the lie. She needed more than five hours. He was just glad that he didn't have to worry about someone trying to kill her like they were Angela.

Jimmy gestured. “Get him on his feet. I'm done.”

Kenn helped the camp member stand. He was led away by a family member who didn't say a word of thanks.

Kenn understood and resented it at the same time. They'd had to wait for injuries that were

serious. Because of it, they'd suffered more than necessary. At the same time, some of those folks would have died and a broken leg was little compared to a life.

"Next?!" The doctor's tired bark echoed.

Kenn swept the bottom floor, where a medical area was being set up for the wounded who couldn't be transported upstairs yet. He watched Tonya curl up near Samantha, who hadn't moved or even moaned in hours. Few people believed she would survive.

"Me."

Jimmy and Kenn turned at the same time to see Doug staggering from the chamber where they'd been dumping bodies down the pit.

Kenn caught the doctor as he fainted, lowering the man to the ground, but he couldn't look away from Doug. Covered in blood and other gore, he was like a zombie from the old horror films. The fact that he'd just come from the dead pool didn't help the impression. "Doug?"

The big man nodded slowly, hand coming up. "I feel strange."

Still not convinced things were okay, Kenn inched a hand toward his gun belt. "Strange, how?"

Doug stared at him with bleary, unblinking eyes. "I'm really hungry."

Oh, shit! Kenn panicked, retreating. "Uh, we've got MREs."

“Doug!” Romeo flew toward the big man. He was one of the last kids waiting to be carried upstairs.

Doug caught the boy before Kenn could intervene.

Do I shoot?!

“Easy, grunt.” Angela had been drawn by Kenn’s panic. It didn’t happen often. She swept the scene and burst out laughing. Doug had been knocked out. Someone had thought he was dead and put him in the body pile.

Doug stared in confusion as Romeo hugged him. “I missed something.”

Angela was still laughing.

Kenn flushed. “I’ve gotta get more sleep.”

Chapter Nine BK8

Numbers

1

“I found something.” Neil came to Angela. He scanned Doug, figured out what had happened, and dismissed the gentle giant as luckier than most. Neil handed Angela a small, bent card.

Angela stared at the numbers, trying to remember the ranges.

“I don’t remember either.” Neil scanned Sam and found her the same.

Angela put the card into the pocket of her jeans, distractedly wishing for clean clothes. “When Samantha wakes up, ask her. She spent a lot of time in that cubby. I’d bet she knows. Until then, there’s nothing we can do about it without locating the rest of the medication boxes. I should have had multiple stashes around the cave.”

“With more food and water.” Neil regretted not thinking of it before the quake. Like the other council members, he’d believed it was better to keep their supplies together to prevent theft. “A lot of the camp wants you to stop digging. Kenn and I were listening while we scouted. There are two places we can try.”

“What about you?”

Neil shrugged. “Refugees or the UN, doesn’t matter. They both suck. If we can get the meat gathered and start rebuilding, maybe we *should* stay in.”

“What about water?”

Neil hadn’t been into the water room yet, but he’d come by it when he carried Sam to the doctor. “Low?”

“Less than a week’s worth.” Angela stretched, back cracking in painful, delightful pops. “We’ll have a few days beyond that, of course, because we’re finding personal stashes, but right about the time that the UN arrives, we’ll all be getting very thirsty.”

“Bad time for it.”

“Yes. We have to clear a way out and get to snow for water collection—all while the refugees see and hear us.”

“We have to create a distraction for them.” Kenn handed Angela a sheet of crumpled paper that she shoved into her pocket with the radiation badge.

“Maybe.” Angela refused to commit. “If not, I have other ideas. We’ll need the equipment for it. The weather isn’t nice right now.”

“We don’t notice it because we’re so far underground, right?” Neil scanned the exits, restless despite all the walking.

“Yes.” She rotated toward the ladder. “That’s one of the biggest reasons I agreed to bring us here.”

The men heard the loathing in her tone, the regret, but there was little they could say. Safe

Haven had voted on it. Adrian had led them here and she'd helped. That weight wouldn't ease without serious payments.

Doug spoke to Kenn. "What do you need?"

"For you to go to the showers. Neil will escort you." Kenn swept Doug's attire. "You're creeping me out."

"Why do I need an escort?"

"So you don't get shot before you get there." Neil led Doug to the rear of the bottom floor where a portable shower had been rigged up. A soft fire nearby was keeping the cleaned water hot.

Neil waved off the surprise and cries as Doug was noticed.

Kenn hefted the unconscious doctor over a shoulder and put him down by Tonya so he could watch over them both.

Satisfied things were as under control as they could be for this situation, Kenn began rooting through debris piles that hadn't been touched yet. He would salvage anything they could use.

When Neil returned, he scanned Samantha again and then joined Kenn.

Kenn sensed that Neil needed to talk about Jeremy, but he wasn't sure what to say. *I'm sorry*, wasn't enough.

"Have your gifts shown up yet?"

Kenn stared in surprise, guilt making his voice crack. "What?"

Neil tugged to dislodge a dented flashlight. "You heard me."

Faced with the old lies and the need to hide, Kenn was too tired to keep it going. “Thoughts, sometimes. Nothing else yet.”

Neil grunted in disappointment. He’d been hoping Kenn was a healer. Cody was too young, Angela was too weak, Conner and Kendle weren’t here, and that only left Leeann. Neil didn’t want to ask if she could. It felt wrong, even though it might save Samantha’s life.

“Leave the kid alone...” Kenn paused, thinking of how valuable Samantha was. “Talk to the boss first, at least.”

Neil nodded stiffly. He would, but if Angela said no, he wouldn’t listen.

“I don’t believe the kid can help. If she could, Angela would have her under guard.”

“Maybe that’s why Angela doesn’t.” Neil had considered that. “To protect her.”

Kenn shrugged. It was possible. “Still, leave her alone unless you get permission.”

“Easy for you to say.” Neil glowered. “Your woman is fine.”

Kenn glanced over in time to see the knife coming down. *No, she isn’t!*

Tonya punched the nun in the throat, knocking the woman away from her.

The nun tripped over her grimy skirt and fell. The knife clattered across the stone.

“Devil child! It’s one of them!”

Kenn and Neil hurried to restrain the woman, but with the doctor knocked out and the drugs still

missing, all they could do was gag her and tie her hands.

Angela and Marc reached them at the same time, followed by groups of Eagles and camp members.

Kenn locked eyes with Marc. *She tried to kill Tonya!*

Marc adjusted for the knowledge that Kenn could communicate mentally now. Marc had been expecting it for a while.

“It’s okay...” Angela placed a hand on the shrieking woman’s shoulder. “Easy.”

The nun drooped and then fell over.

“That’s better.” Angela knelt by the woman and arranged her so she would be comfortable. Angela also untied the gag and ropes. “She’ll sleep for a few hours and forget this. When she wakes up, she’ll need a guard. Forgetting won’t change how she feels.”

Listening from the ladder above the chaos, Billy froze. *Forgetting didn’t change how I feel. I have a job waiting for me and it isn’t here. I need to go.*

“Pass the word that we’ll hold a camp meeting during dinner, which will be after everyone wakes up.” Angela ended the conversation. “We’ll do updates and make choices. Until then, try to sleep.” She gave Marc a warm look. “I’ll be around.”

Marc smiled. Then he waved Gus along instead of an Eagle. Like Angela, he knew who the remaining unvetted people were. Gus wasn’t on that list.

“This is a mandatory camp meeting.” Angela held up a tattered notebook. “Please sign in. We’re trying to get an update on anyone who may still be missing.” Angela handed it to the closest person. “We’ll start with what we know, allow everyone to ask questions that weren’t covered, and then we’ll vote.” She waved at Kenn. “He’ll tell you how and when we’re getting out. This part, we’re not voting on. You will not be allowed to endanger the rest of us because you can’t wait two more days to leave. We’ve all suffered down here. You’re not alone.”

Kenn stepped up to the front of the mess that had been repaired. Having power on the top level had allowed them to salvage flooring from the debris and weld it into enough of the ledges to create a new floor. Not sturdy enough to hold them all at the same time, half the camp was sitting in the tunnel and reading room.

“We drew some maps. The roads south are clear, but we believe the UN will use those. Avoid all roads south. If you’re leaving, go west and circle around, and then head south.” Kenn swept the crowd that was short over a hundred. “Any of you are welcome to meet us at the coast. Safe Haven will always be your home.”

Angela approved the add, remembering a time when she had fed those lines to the Marine. Now, he

didn't need that; he'd learned to be compassionate on his own.

“After we clear the tunnel, Eagles will scout the exit and search for our stash of vehicles. Then those cars and trucks have to be prepped. They won't fire up after months of being frozen.” Kenn heard the mutters and rolled his mental eye. *All set to run out there, but you forgot about the cold, the refugees, and not having wheels ready to roll. That's why we call you sheep. You don't think. You just stampede.*

Angela stayed expressionless, but around Kenn, a few of the other descendants nodded in savage agreement. Angela understood, but she didn't view them that way. These were her people, like them or not.

Standing nearby, Jennifer agreed with Angela the most. She understood the sentiments of the descendants, but she couldn't help loving their people. Even the ones she wanted to beat on still held value. They were America's chosen survivors.

“We're going to pool the supplies and distribute as fairly as we can. It will be based on the number in the group. For example, if half the camp stays, half the supplies stay. If a quarter of the camp leaves, they get a quarter of the supplies to split. Marc is supervising distribution.”

Marc didn't expect arguments and there weren't any. Everyone knew he would be fair, but they also knew he wouldn't tolerate theft, coercion, or whining about the amounts.

“We need to know your decision at the end of this meeting. You can put it by your name on the sign-in sheet if you want or write it on a different page. Just make sure I see it.”

“How are we splitting the power?” Tony didn’t care about the beans and bullets. “Who gets the magic?!”

Marc stood up, glowering at the man. “The descendants have chosen to follow their alpha.”

“All of them? Willingly?” Simon had counted on having at least a few magic users to help them. “What about all the orphan kids?”

The kids that Neil and Seth’s teams had rescued from the boarding school ran over to Marc.

Tony scowled when more kids and teenagers went to stand with Marc.

Watching, Angela was proud for her mate and still glad that Adrian wasn’t here to be hurt by a show of support that should have been his to enjoy.

“We’ll die without you.” An old woman sitting by Marc’s feet stared in tearful reproach.

Nursing a black eye, Tony added his support. “You’re making us come. We won’t survive without magic users.”

“You’ll die even with us here.” Angela waved a hand at the cave. “Didn’t you notice that we can’t protect you anymore? The hundred bodies weren’t a clue?”

Tony flushed scarlet.

Angela signaled Kenn to go on.

He did. “Five days from now, we will do what I’ve already told you and then anyone can take their things and go.”

“What about the refugees out there?” Simon had been nominated to replace Angela as the leader staying in the mountain, along with several others.

“They’re dying.” Kenn didn’t believe censoring his words would help, so he hadn’t. “We have the badges now and later, we’ll have the cameras reconnected to prove it.”

“Is it from fallout?” Logan didn’t care. He just wanted a distraction from the voices in his mind.

“Yes.” Kenn wondered why Neil hadn’t been given this part of informing the camp. “The conditions out there are bad. Five more days in that toxic soup at those levels will kill them all, like with Mikel’s men. We believe the Mexicans are already gone. That means you have to hit the ground running. Once you’re cleared to go, hit the gas and don’t stop. And for crap’s sake, don’t go east. The cloud was drifting east the last time we had a readout, which was two days ago.”

“Some of them may be alive.” Marc wanted everyone prepared, but he also wanted camp members to fall in line behind the Eagles—where he believed they belonged until they could care for themselves. “There may be fighting, but we expect that will happen while we’re trying to prep the vehicles. That’s another reason for you to wait until we get things ready. Let us fight them for you, like we’ve been doing since the war.”

Marc's bitter tone brought varied reactions. For a few of the camp, it was resentment that they didn't have powers, but for most, it was guilt. They'd taken a free ride without trying to change.

"We request that all groups keep radio silence for the first few days and that you don't call here to the mountain at all. If refugees believe it was all destroyed, our people who stay might have a chance to rebuild."

"That brings us to the bigger threat." Kyle gestured toward the top. "What happens when we do go out?"

Kenn fed the next lines with passion. "The descendants will handle the UN like we did the other problems that have challenged us—without mercy!"

Eagles cheered, as did a few of the camp members.

"When are they coming?" Tony wanted to be gone before then. He was collecting people to head southwest even though he'd also been nominated for leadership here when Angela left.

"Six days." Angela was depending on Cody's timeline. There was darkness whenever she tried to look. She'd never felt so weak. "If you go out before we handle it, there's a high chance you'll be caught and used against us." Angela swept the camp, making eye contact with those who wanted to leave. "I won't negotiate for your return. I can't." Telling them if they were caught, she wouldn't save them.

“Will there be another big fight? Like when you took down the government?” Gus had heard the radio calls and the stories from the men and women who’d been there.

“I think so.” Angela sighed. “But I’m too weak to use any magic right now and all the kids are too young to even make the connections. Coming here hurt us in many ways, but please, you must know I’d kill all of them for even one of you if there was a choice. Just let us handle things first and then you can go in peace, without staring over your shoulder every night.”

Those words were a balm to some of the camp. Worries over resentments from magic users had caused more than a few of them to hide their choice until now.

Angela watched people ask for the notebook to be passed back so they could add or change their decision, heart sinking. She’d known that comfort would allow more of them to run, but it still felt as if they were abandoning her. In fact, the names being added right now were an awful blow. She stared at Neil in hurt surprise.

Neil didn’t talk as he scrawled Samantha’s name and then his own on the bottom line. He added ‘Group of two’. “She woke up an hour ago. We made the choice together. Don’t bother her. Let her rest.” Neil left the meeting to go make sure of it.

Angela’s heart unclenched. She held herself in check and didn’t react again.

Neil's choice sent a fresh wave of abandonment through the crowd; there was only mutters and paper rattling for a few minutes.

Adrian wouldn't like this, Marc contemplated. He'd be talking them all into staying with him, into trusting him even when they knew they shouldn't.

That's why Adrian isn't here. Jennifer tried to make sure only Marc caught the thought.

Angela doesn't want them to go?

Some of these people were destined to die on the trip to the island or after.

She's saving them. Marc calmed down about how she would react afterwards. By not encouraging them to go, she's hoping it changes their future.

Yes. Amazing, isn't she?

I've always thought so.

She adores you.

Marc waited for more, but Jennifer left it there. Angela was regarding her with a lifted brow that made the teen wonder if the boss had been listening. Jennifer didn't want Angela to suspect she was passing secrets or anything else.

I don't. Angela finally let Jennifer in all the way. Not even you can keep me out, Jen. I'm not the same anymore. The call...changed me somehow.

You're an alpha.

Yes, but it's more than that.

From the lifeforces you've taken?

From being connected with the Creator for a split instant. He marked me.

For good or worse?

That has not yet been revealed.

Marc winced. He didn't tell the women that the same thing was happening to him and he hadn't even been there for the call. It felt like a battle was coming and he was in training for a major role in the fight. It had felt this way since the day the war had destroyed the world.

3

“This is Kendle. Anyone there?”

Angela denied Kenn when he lifted a brow. “We can't answer radio calls from anyone.”

“They'll think we're dead.”

“Yes. So will others.” Angela stored the papers with the camp choices in her pocket, but she didn't ask how the vote had gone. She assumed Simon had been chosen. He was a far cry from the leaders who'd come before him.

“This is Kendle, calling Safe Haven. Come in, Safe Haven.”

Kenn was curious if Kendle had found the boat.

“No.” Angela only answered so he would know she was getting his thoughts. “That wasn't Kendle's true mission, though she wasn't told that either.”

“What did you send her out for?” Kenn had a terrible idea forming.

“We couldn't beat them on their own turf.” Angela surprised both of them by explaining at all.

It showed trust in the Marine. “I needed them to come to us. Now, they are.”

“I never stood a chance, did I?” Kenn half-joked.

Angela stared at him. “If not for the war, I would have rotted in your prison to keep my son safe. I thank fate every day for that release.”

Kenn winced and went in the other direction. Some mistakes from the past would never be erased or forgotten about. He understood that now. Part of his reform was living with her bitterness. She had a right to it.

“This is Kendle. Come in, Safe Haven!”

Angela switched the radio off and went to the crushed level. They’d brought out chunks of meat she thought were beef, but could have been pig. Now, they were hauling out flattened chickens. The smell was enough to make grown men gag, but it was better than the basement of dogs they’d rescued. Everyone was on break right now, trying to clean up.

“We got the last assassin!” Brandon blared through the corridor as he and Kyle joined her. “It was Cammie, a rookie. She just tried to stab Neil.”

Angela didn’t speak. *I miscounted. One of these days, it’ll get me killed.*

“Damn it!” Kyle swore, following her line of sight.

Jennifer didn’t struggle under Francis’s blade. Autumn was in his other arm, being squeezed so hard she was having trouble breathing.

Francis jerked his chin at Angela. “I’ll trade you for these two. Say no or use your gift and I’ll kill them both.”

Do it! Face almost calm, Jennifer was mentally screaming at Kyle. *Do it!*

Angela lunged forward to the right as Kyle drew and fired. She caught the baby and spun out of the chaos before she could be hit with either falling body.

“Jenny!” Kyle rushed forward.

Angela checked the crying child, relieved to find her scared but not injured. She glanced at Jennifer.

“Medic!”

Angela took the baby toward the top floor as Kyle started shouting, cooing. “She’ll be okay, sweetheart. Don’t connect right now. Let’s go check on Samantha. I heard you can talk to her babies.”

“Medic! Help!”

Angela climbed the ladder around Eagles sliding and jumping down to answer Kyle’s shouts. “Is that right? Please tell them they’ll get to see the island. I promise.”

Kyle held his hand over the gushing wound, once again in torment. This time, it *was* his heart lying there bleeding.

“Let me by!” The tired doctor hadn’t been awake long.

Jimmy lifted Kyle’s hand and probed the angry wound, ignoring Kyle’s flinch and impatience. He dug deep. “It went through.”

“I know that!” Kyle’s curt tone sharpened. “It’s my slug.”

“Cover it up.”

Kyle did, about to panic.

Jimmy ripped open a trio of packages. “We watch for infection for a day and then close it up. She’s young and strong. She’ll be fine.” Jimmy paused to frown up at Kyle. “Unless she’s pregnant?”

“No! We haven’t broken the rules!”

“Good, cause that might drain her. If there’s no infection, she’ll be fine.” The doctor liked Kyle even though he didn’t want to. “...I thought you were the best.”

“He pushed her into it when he saw me firing.” Kyle lifted his chin. “But I would have shot her to kill him, so stick that up your ass.”

Jimmy chuckled without amusement. “Of that, I have no doubt. When the boss says fire, you do it.”

“No one ordered me to shoot.” Kyle watched. If the doctor knew that was a lie, then he’d read Jennifer’s order and that meant the man was another hidden descendant.

“It’s how they train you.” Jimmy began cleaning the wound. “I’ve watched it for months. They tell you killing is okay, that it’s good.”

Kyle picked up the tone of someone trying to convert followers for a dangerous, unapproved mission. He stared. “You’re not going with us.”

“No.”

“How can you abandon the people who saved you?”

“How can you support the people who blew up the world?” The doctor had never worked in conditions like this. Even right after the war, they’d had power for a few weeks and then he’d found a group at a hospital. This was a nightmare.

Kyle had stopped talking. The doctor didn’t think he’d won, but it bothered him that the mobster had stopped talking. Instead of loathing, the doctor often felt sorry for the way Kyle was used by leadership. “You deserve a better life than to be their killer.”

Kyle stiffened. Jennifer had said that to him right after the meeting...and now she’d been shot.

Jimmy stuffed the wound with cotton from the maxi pads they’d found and torn apart. They’d used all the gauze in the medical bags Neil had found.

Kyle waited. And he thought. Jimmy was both wrong and right, as was Jennifer. The opinion that mattered the most to him hadn’t weighed in on the subject yet, but he couldn’t discuss it with her. Autumn would never understand why her daddy had to kill. That’s why he’d told Jennifer yes, they could stay or go off on their own if she chose to. He wanted Adrian back in charge. There was a tiny chance the former leader would stay here if enough of his core group did too. It would get him away from Marc and Angela.

Nearby, Charlie caught that contemplation and immediately began designing ways to make it

happen. Adrian here, while his mom and dad were on a romantic southern island, sounded perfect to the fast-maturing teen. He hadn't forgotten that Adrian was a threat.

Chapter Ten BK8
Fighting Fate

1

Marc leaned over the narrow gap as Adrian crawled through it. “Where have you been?!”

Adrian jumped, banging his hurt shoulder on a sharp rock. “Damn it, Marc!”

Marc snickered, straightening.

Grumbling, Adrian pulled a large bag in and then began closing the gap with heavy boulders.

James and Boothe hurried to help him.

Marc glared at the soldiers on duty, certain they’d helped Adrian get out and then recovered the hole.

“He had orders.” Peter shrugged at Marc’s glower. “Sorry, man, but she’s the boss, and she’s back, you know?”

Marc grunted. That was what he wanted, but it didn’t include all the sneaking around. “Where have you been?” Marc followed Adrian when the man went by him with his burden.

Adrian spun and shoved the bag into Marc’s arms. “Those eggs go to the cook. This corridor comes out on a ledge that’s being used as a nursery. I got about a quarter of them before I was chased

off.” He didn’t tell Marc that Lawrence’s body was still out there.

Marc spotted the feathers in Adrian’s hair and snorted at the images.

“Our stash is there, but if the refugees come up any farther, they’ll find it. The temperatures are nasty and it’s keeping them in their tents and cars. When it breaks, our barrier won’t hold.”

Marc kept quiet, smelling game bird and coldness.

“There are hundreds of them. Some are sick. I didn’t want to talk in front of the soldiers.” Adrian rubbed his cold hands together, wishing he’d found gloves. “One of them may be like us, so I couldn’t send messages. Sorry for ignoring you.”

Marc noted the possible new magic user. “How did you vote?”

Adrian stopped, but didn’t turn. “Bet you can’t guess.”

Marc’s lips thinned into a dangerous line. “Despite your banishment, you’ll tag along.”

“Nope.”

“Have you spoken to Angela about that?”

“Nope.”

“Then I won’t hold my breath.”

“I wish you would, though,” Adrian confessed, walking again. “Your jealousy will be what kills her. Even Kenn knew when to quit.”

“Stop it.”

Angela's order brought the men to a halt. Expecting a tirade, they faced her angry stance in the shadows.

"I don't need you, either of you." Angela drew in a deep breath and tried one last time to fight fate. "Maybe it would be better if you *both* stayed here."

As she vanished, Adrian turned to Marc in shock. "What have you done?"

"Beyond restarting the old shit with you just now, nothing." Marc scanned his rival. "What have *you* done?"

Adrian sighed. "The right thing. I'm staying."

"And I'm letting you." Marc went down the tunnel without saying anything else.

Adrian went to the portable shower on the bottom floor, where the water barrel was low. If not for the bird shit on the eggs, he would save the water for someone else to use. After he was cleaned, he planned to go dig out their refrigerator and get it working. They had a lot of meat to store. Not happy, but at least content to be useful, Adrian missed the silence. He was alerted to someone being there by a footstep.

Naked, Adrian listened for the attack. *Never gonna be rid of all the assassins.*

"I'm not an assassin." Marc smiled coldly. "At least not in the normal sense."

Adrian's heart thudded. "I'm getting out of your way. What more do you want?"

"The same as you, of course." Marc's evil smile fell into disappointment. "But if I can't have your

death, being a thousand miles apart will be a good start.”

“So what do you want?”

“You can’t lead another camp. You’re a traitor.”

“Kyle and Kenn will lead.” Adrian gestured at the bag in Marc’s arms. “I’m a scavenger.”

“Yes, you are.”

Tiring of the intimidation, Adrian dumped the bucket to rinse.

Marc was relieved to hear that Adrian wasn’t going to be a leader, but it also worried him. “You’d stay for that?”

“For her.” Adrian gave complete honesty this time, hating himself for the truth. “I’ll never be able to leave her alone. I want her too much, need her too much. This way, I can’t hurt the dream anymore.”

Marc left. He really went to the new cooking area this time to deliver the food, but he didn’t believe a single word the former boss had spoken.

Adrian sighed. Marc would never trust him again. The camp would once he was useful enough, but he still wouldn’t take leadership. He’d had that honor and burden. He couldn’t carry it anymore. *Doing the right thing sucks. No wonder most people don’t bother.*

2

The sounds of hammering and digging continued throughout the day and into the evening as Safe Haven continued to recover. It wasn’t easy

when the news came of finding two more bodies. Alice and Rodney, their butchers, had been in the animal area when it collapsed. Doug being alive did help, but it also hurt. Everyone who'd lost someone was now tempted to go into the body pit to make sure they were really dead. Angela hadn't wanted the camp to know about the dumping pit, but there had been no way to hide it when relatives and friends had insisted on carrying their loved one to the burial site. The crew filling the hole with loose gravel had suffered the hard stares and tears, but no one had refused. They understood there wasn't a choice.

The smells in the rest of the cave were great. Cooking meat was a sign of life. Angela sank down onto a pile of clothes, cradling the hot mug of tea their new cook, Brittani, had made. They hadn't found any coffee, but the tea was perfect as far as Angela was concerned. So was the job for the pretty black woman, for now. Angela was grateful Brittani had cooking skills, but she wouldn't remain in the mess. Gus was first, but his mate would also join her army.

Marc lifted his head, already half buried in the pile with Cody. It had been two days since the quake and everyone was wiped out. He'd ended the shift by gathering a pile of clothes and putting them in the weapon compartment so they could rest for a bit and free up the guard who had been here. "You just now getting here?"

“Yeah.” Angela leaned against the hard wall of the cave. She hoped it would stay peaceful while she slept.

“Things okay?”

“Yeah.”

Marc yawned. “You still mad at me?”

Angela sipped her tea, enjoying the warmth on her hands. Without their heaters and vents blowing warm air, the cave was becoming cold again on these upper levels.

“Angie?”

“No.”

“Liar.”

She chuckled. “Some days, but not this time. I understand.”

“Are you going to be okay if he stays?”

“I’ll survive and so will they. It’s for the best.”

Marc didn’t hear anything bad in her thoughts or tone. “Coming in here soon? It smells like feet.”

Angela snorted. “In a bit. I have hot tea.”

Marc let sleep pull him down.

Angela waited until Marc’s light snoring said her mind was her own again and dropped her mental shield. The immediate flood was scary.

After a minute, she forced it all away and spent the time being glad her family had survived. So many hadn’t. Her witch insisted a lot of those gone had been trouble in one way or the other, but the words weren’t a comfort to Angela even if they were true. She’d wanted all of them to live. Her visions hadn’t foreseen so much death.

Would you have done things differently? Adrian asked from the floor below them.

Angela considered. I would have warned them.

Would that have changed anything?

Only who died.

Adrian sighed at the sarcasm. He hated her pain. It wasn't your job to decide which ones were saved. Fate picks that, not you.

Angela winced at the copy of her words to him when she'd first joined his refugee camp. So much had changed since then that those days often felt like a dream. Everything before being shot was like that. I'm losing them.

Fate is also making that choice.

I lost the notebooks. She switched topics abruptly.

Do you need them?

Not anymore. I've got it all memorized.

Just copy it from the beginning of our journey when you're ready to pass it on to someone.

To Jennifer.

Yes.

And after her?

One of Samantha's sons. I couldn't tell which.

What's going on in the north right now?

Herds are gathering under nature's command.

Killing off survivors?

Yes. You're dreaming about it too.

Yes.

Tracy wants to stay.

I know.

Are you going to talk to her about it?
No. Charlie sees things too. He'll convince her.
Maybe he's not supposed to go.
Maybe.

Adrian grunted, shifting in the clothes pile near the soldiers he would be on duty with in a few hours.
You're very...unreachable right now.

I'm weighing my options, like everyone else.

You're... Adrian sat up in concern. *You're thinking about staying.*

Angela didn't answer.

This is Marc's fault. Adrian concentrated. He spoke directly to Marc. *Fix this.*

Angela glanced at Marc, not able to track him in her mind even though he was obviously awake.

Marc sat up, sighing. "We need to talk."

Angela nodded. "Yes, we do."

Go away, Marc snarled at Adrian, angry that he'd missed her emotional chaos and Adrian hadn't.

Adrian bowed out, closing the mental door. Marc wanted her on the island. He would convince her. Adrian went to sleep.

Angela stared at Marc in anger and honesty. "If you're breaking our deal, so am I."

Marc stared at her uneasily. "How did I break it?"

"He gets the camp and you get me."

"So if he doesn't go, we can't be together?"

Angela set her cup down. "We made a deal, Marcus. A deal that already lets you take advantage of me. Break it and we're through." Angela left as

he began sputtering excuses and reasons. She went to the bottom level to check on their wounded and the doctor. She was too angry to sleep now.

Trapped in his own web, Marc burrowed under the laundry and let full sleep claim him.

In his dreams, Marc told his demon everything.

Worried that his host was being corrupted, the demon fought his nature to tell Marc what he needed to hear. *If you stay here, you'll live. She knows all of your secrets and doesn't care about them. Your life is her prize.*

Now on the bottom level, Angela gritted her teeth in frustration. Now that Marc knew the truth, her plan to push him away wouldn't succeed. She'd tried everything else to protect him. The only thing left was for her to stay here so he would too. That meant someone else had to guide them to the island and it had to be Adrian.

If fate wants his life that badly, it will happen here, the witch warned. *You know that. Why do you continue to fight it?*

Have you never loved anyone? Angela growled mentally. How sad for you to never be human!

The witch departed in a huff, slamming the mental door.

Glad to be alone with her thoughts, Angela kept trying to find a way to save her camp and her heart.

Adrian woke to the sound of laughter. It brought him upright, staring around in confusion.

Next to him, David and the other soldiers also woke, not sure what was going on.

Peals of laughter echoed through the cave, waking everyone with the now rare sound. They'd lost a hundred loved ones. Who was disrespecting them with loud laughter?

That's Angie. Marc and Adrian recognized it at the same time. *She sounds happy.*

The camp gravitated toward the sound, curious and uneasy. Angela hadn't laughed like that since they'd come to this cursed mountain. They filled the corridor outside the repaired mess, not willing to go in and interrupt once they discovered what was happening.

Adrian made sure that Marc was already there before joining him in the charred doorway. Kids running by caught his attention and held it. All dressed, washed, and faces dotted in crumbs, it was obvious that they'd been cared for, but so had the mess. It had been swept and tables had been brought in. Rickety and charred, with missing chunks, it was a reminder that life goes on.

Angela blew the bubbles faster, laughing at the kids as they popped them, but also at the cat that was doing the same between their feet. Simple, all it had taken was five hours of hard labor and a couple of others who'd also been too upset to sleep.

Angela handed the sticky bottle to Jennifer and motioned toward the kitchen. "We found oatmeal

packets and there's a cleaned batch of water. Come eat, and if you feel like it, blow some bubbles."

Angela went to the uneven counters that had been on the floor below it. She made herself a packet by pouring the steamy water into the paper, a little at a time. "It won't hold long, so eat fast." She gave the men in the doorway a nod. "While you eat, I'll tell you something that was told to me an hour ago. It'll make the oatmeal easier to swallow."

Angela perched on a rough ledge and shook the packet, then held it closed. She smiled at the camp as they entered, motioning toward the food. She held up her packet and donned another grin. "Quaker Oats. The breakfast of all apocalypse champions."

Loud snorts and surprised chuckles filled the room.

Marc and Adrian shared a look that said they'd missed something important, something that could have helped, but she'd caught it.

Angela shuddered at the mouthful, swallowing, and then grinned. "Smooth to the last gag."

More snickers hit the walls, lightening the mood.

Despite not really liking oatmeal, Angela finished the entire packet, then tossed it into the trashcan she'd lugged up the ladder. "The cameras are functioning. Ozzie found the right wire, Theo spliced it, and they were able to connect it to a laptop. You'll get to view the images later. Right now, just know they aren't doing well out there. By

the time the UN comes, any remaining refugees won't be strong enough to fight." She held up a hand. "Which brings me to the news that will make these packets taste better. I said the camera was on. We connected that same wire bundle to the explosives around the mountain. When the UN comes, we can trigger it and bury them alive. Descendants will handle any survivors."

A loud cheer broke out, echoing into every passage.

"In a week, this will all be over. In the meantime, let's get this cave together for the folks who are staying, you know?" Angela tried to sound eager. "It doesn't feel right leaving them with a mess they won't have the manpower to fix themselves."

"Has she been to sleep yet?" Adrian was still standing in the rear of the crowded mess. Made smaller by the repairs, it was serving to show the camp they still had a lot of people.

"Not that I know of." Marc was in awe of her mind. He'd known of the explosives and had even helped to place a few of them, but he hadn't thought about the wire bundle. It was wrapped around itself dozens of times. Putting the fuse in the center of it had been brilliant. The way things were arranged, any detonation, on any part of the mountain, would trigger the rest. The only way to stop it would be to cut every single bundle at the connector part and no one would go to that much trouble. They would cut

the top or the bottom, maybe even both, and leave the rest.

Adrian turned to stare at a new map on the wall. He recognized the handiwork. No, Angie hadn't been to sleep yet. She'd been caring for the herd. "She's amazing."

Marc spun around to glare, but Adrian still was studying the map.

"We'll have cooked meat for lunch." Angela promised. "I tried the first batch a couple hours ago. Tasted great. I haven't started hurling, so I believe we're good on food now."

"And reckless." Adrian studied the map harder.

"Yeah." Marc wasn't happy about that. Testing the food herself was dangerous. Now that people knew she was doing it, that also made their food a larger target.

Adrian frowned. "Are we clear on that now? Eight of eight?"

"As far as I know." Marc shrugged. "I'm watching for more. Blind spots suck."

Adrian understood Marc had received that always frustrating answer about it not being revealed yet and assumed there might be more problems they didn't know about yet.

"I hope not." Marc was deep into Adrian's thoughts anytime they were around each other. "Just a feeling."

With no reason to doubt Marc's instincts, Adrian began searching for the next possible

problem. If he'd overlooked the obvious cord solution, then he'd done the same with other issues.

"If she stays here with me and you take the camp to the island, is there happiness for any of us?"

Adrian stiffened, resisting the light alpha wave that Marc had tossed with the surprise demand. "These people will survive."

"And our triangle of anger?"

Adrian snorted at the wording. "Triple misery, like we've had in each lifetime we've tried this. It never ends well for us."

Marc sighed. "I'm not fighting with you anymore. All deals are off."

"What did she say?" Adrian was aware of Angela watching them from the other end of the chattering, eating, bubble-blowing camp.

"That I was taking advantage of her."

"You are. *We both* are."

"She's trying to save my life."

"That's what I believe too." Adrian noted Angela's frown. "Fate is determined to get you on Pitcairn Island."

"And you."

"But as an outcast. When we leave here, I'm back to being banished. Maybe even before that."

"You'll keep your distance?"

"In the ways you mean, yes."

"In every way."

"No, and I'll show you why." Adrian turned toward Angela, sending an open wave of respect and approval.

Angela lit up like a kid on Christmas morning, grin widening to erase the tension from her face. Bathed in Adrian's glow, she was once again the young girl Marc had loved and abandoned.

"She needs me." Adrian left, unable to take the emotions bubbling up. He didn't want the man in his thoughts right now. When Marc died, when fate took him, Angela would need someone to put her back together.

Or vice versa. Angela dug the knife in deep. *I'll trade you for him in a heartbeat.*

Adrian winced. *I'm sorry.*

So am I. Angela fired the next mental bullet. *You can't be trusted. You're the threat he's still searching for.*

Yes, Adrian agreed, not hiding his joy. *And you love me, want me, need me. How's that for irony?*

It's a horrible guilt that I carry.

But you get to be a leader, so stop whining. Adrian was unable to contain his bitterness. *Go on and love your boy scout while you can. We both know you'll be in my bed less than a month after his death.*

Angela gasped in pain. *Bastard.*

Yep. Adrian began to whistle. *I'd wait a lot longer for you. It's already been thousands of years, love. A few more are a drop in the bucket to me now that I know what's coming.*

I'll stop that future.

And I'll help you if I can, but fate has his life planned out and you know that. You've tried to

interfere in several ways, but none of them have worked because you're not the Creator. You can't control death.

Stop it.

No, you stop it. Be happy you have him right now. Love him, make another baby if it helps you, but understand this, woman. After he's gone, you'll beg me to love you.

Never.

Adrian chuckled mirthlessly, sliding down the ladder to the bottom floor so he could join the water crew. *I love you. I always have and I always will. Now leave me alone. I don't want anything to do with you until I can love you openly. I'm tired of being the toy you toss to the cat when he's getting too close to the truth in your heart.*

What truth?!

You love us both, but you don't like either one of us. You'd rather be alone.

Angela slammed the mental door and stormed into the kitchen to get a moment alone to recover. He was right. After the crap they'd done and the extra stress they'd put her through, she didn't want to belong to either of them. She wanted to spend time with whomever she wanted, whenever she wanted, and nothing more. All those dreams of happy ever after were in Marc's memories and Adrian's dreams. It was so far from what she wanted that it wasn't even in sight.

Sex and physical bonding were nice. She enjoyed both, but they came with so much drama

that she didn't believe she would ever be happy again. If she got to make the choice today, without it killing anyone or destroying the dream, she would declare herself single and tell them both to go to hell. It was unconscionable that they would be worried over garbage like this while their fellow camp members were rotting in the tunnel below. The respect she'd once had for both men lowered another notch. *Maybe Hilda was right. I should be rooting for Marcella.*

What is the dream, exactly?

Angela found Kenn sitting in the corner of the charred kitchen with a cup of something that steamed. She wasn't surprised by his gift, but she was surprised that he wasn't using it to his advantage yet.

"He always said he'd explain the rest of it to me when I was ready, but it doesn't feel right to ask him."

"That probably means you're ready." Angela studied Kenn, noting how tight he was wired. "We're creating a society the Maker will approve of and accept."

Kenn had made a mental list of what it could be, but that hadn't been on it. Despite being so close to Adrian, he hadn't added up those clues.

"Why are you twitchy?"

Kenn shrugged. "I want to stay and she wants to go. She wants to stay and I want to go. We can't settle on it."

“Yeah, I noticed your choice wasn’t on the sheet.”

“I’m torn.”

“There’s no need to be.” Angela put him out of his misery. “Adrian’s going to the island. So am I.”

Kenn’s expression lightened. “Really?”

“I’ve seen it.” She scanned his dirty clothes and weary position in the chair. “You should try to sleep for a while. We’re sending you out tomorrow for water.”

Kenn’s mood lifted. He was eager to be out of here for any reason or length of time. “She made me sleep for a full eight earlier. I couldn’t doze off yet even if I wanted to.” Kenn saw the yearning glance and waved at the far corner. “Brittani had Gus over there for a while. I’ll hang out if you want to make use of it.”

Angela started to refuse and was interrupted by a huge yawn.

Kenn’s lips tilted up. “Two hours?”

Angela considered the state of things before nodding. “Three, if the peace holds.”

“You got it.”

Angela dropped onto the large pile of laundry and shut her eyes without bothering to find a comfortable position. In a lumpy pile of laundry, there wasn’t one and she refused to waste her time on it. She was asleep a minute after lying down.

Kenn didn’t leave the room.

Chapter Eleven BK8

Sneaks

1

Angela woke one layer at a time. The first impression told her to get busy. The second alerted her to a deep thirst and a vague hunger. The final sensation said she wasn't alone in the bed and the heat wasn't from Marc.

Angela jerked upright, twisting around in angry confusion.

Cody lifted his head to regard her with sleepy concern. So did Roy and Romeo. All three boys had morning hair.

Angela forced a smile for the kids. "Sorry. Bad dream." She looked around, realizing she was surrounded by children. All of those awake sent silent declarations of loyalty.

"That's why we're here." Romeo put his hand on her ankle and his cheek on Roy's arm. "We'll keep you safe."

Humbled, Angela almost cried. "Thank you."

"...honor." Cody was almost back to sleep already. Resting next to the alpha was wonderful. He'd never felt this safe.

Hearing footsteps, Angela pulled her filthy jacket closed against the draft before sweeping the

dim room. Also still streaked in dirt, Kenn was walking toward her with papers and a dented mug that steamed. It was obvious that he hadn't been down to the portable shower yet.

Around the room, other people were sleeping on laundry piles. Angela realized all the forms were small and lifted a brow.

"The kids insisted." Kenn shrugged, starting to feel tired. He'd handled kids and camp members while she rested. "Seemed like the safest place to me too."

Angela noted that most of the two dozen children were descendants. "Problems?"

Kenn handed her the mug, then dropped down onto the floor. "Not yet."

You foresaw something.

Kenn glanced at Cody. *He's not safe. I can't tell from who.*

Angela viewed Kenn's replay without panicking. She'd just observed it in her dream, with the same problem. "I'll assign it to someone."

"I figured you would." Kenn held up papers. "Read or be read to?"

Angela sipped her tea, waving. The mess floor had been repaired, but most of the kids had been placed next to the walls, where the ledges had held during the quake. Lamps swayed above them, creating a dim den that still smelled of smoke. They didn't have water to spare for real cleaning. The charred walls glared at her, screaming with the faces of the dead. "This isn't a good place for them.

Figure out a population number per room and split the kids from the adults. Get guards posted as soon as you clear it. Only people going with us will be allowed on the top floor.”

“What about the others?”

“They’ll sort that out for themselves.”

Kenn got as comfortable on the charred floor as he could. *People first. We’ll get this out of the way and then I’ll give you some good news.* Kenn was practicing his new gift.

Angela allowed it. *Deal.*

The Marine brightened. “You’ve been out for five hours. Marc said to let you have seven, so if you could lie for me there, that’d be great.”

Angela chuckled like he expected, but she braced for bad news.

“We had to sedate Dale again. He wouldn’t stop screaming. Our nun, Sister Sarah, swears she’ll stay away from all the kids. We put Logan on her.”

“Why Logan? He hates religion of any kind.”

Kenn stared at her.

“Oh.” Angela flushed. “Okay. Keep going.”

Kenn knew she wasn’t all the way awake yet, so he didn’t comment on it. Logan would watch the nun more closely than anyone else they could have assigned. “Candy and Cynthia also have guards, but we’re letting them help with the wounded on different shifts.”

Angela sipped again, nodding to Doug when he appeared in the doorway to check on his wards. She

could feel his pain over Peggy as he swept the boys, then left.

“They both want a meeting with Marc.”

Anger woke Angela another layer. “Candy, yes. Cynthia can talk to *me*.”

Kenn was surprised the reporter had survived the quake, especially with Angela’s pet dog roaming. “No one has seen Chris since you dropped out.”

Angela glanced toward the dark kitchen.

Kenn followed her line of sight. He sighed in exasperation. “How did he get by me?”

“He was here first.” Angela yawned, rubbing at her face. “Hit me with the bad.”

“The numbers are going up in here...and we’ve had three more deaths.”

“Wounded people?”

“Two were. Agnus lost a leg. Jimmy cauterized it, but we’ve run out of blood type A+. She was too weak.” Kenn steeled himself against her coming misery. “Jax died about an hour ago.”

Angela’s mood dropped.

“He was lucky we found him under all those floor stones at all.” Kenn didn’t like her pain. “He didn’t wake up. Jimmy kept him doped so he didn’t feel anything.”

A tear ran down her cheek.

Kids stirred in the piles.

Kenn sighed, fighting the urge to hug her. It was the same reaction he’d always had when delivering bad news to Adrian.

Angela locked down on her emotions. “Who was the third death? How high are the numbers?”

“Tony. Medium, approaching high. We found some of the iodine pills. Our new cook is crushing and mixing. We had a dose in the food the night of the quake.”

Angela shoved away an image of Li telling her the camp wouldn’t taste the increased levels in anything he cooked. She suddenly wished for a cigarette to soothe her ragged nerves. “Why did Marc shoot Tony?” *Why didn’t I wake up for that?*

“They wanted Jennifer and Autumn for the trip. Tony was supposed to grab the baby, but he got cold feet.”

“How do you know all that? Witness? Someone overheard?”

“When Tony found out Francis was dead, he confessed.”

“Marc shot him?”

Kenn snorted. “Kyle grabbed Tony and took off down a tunnel. If Marc hadn’t shot the poor bastard, we’d still be listening to him scream. Kyle’s hot. He has Jennifer and the baby in the cubby where you were trapped. Won’t let anyone in except the doctor.”

“Put that top on my list.” She shoved into Kenn’s thoughts. *You’re my right hand until you piss me off.*

Kenn straightened his shoulders. *That’s what I told Adrian when he came to check on you. Then I*

told him to get lost or I'd call Marc. He's stalking around somewhere.

Angela smiled as she stretched.

Kenn dropped his eyes back to the list. “The water system can’t be repaired from in here. It didn’t bend much during the quake, but it’s blocked from the top. We assume by snow, which works out because we’ll collect what we remove. I assume you still want me along for that?”

“Yes.”

“I only ask because I haven’t been assigned to the crew. Marc thinks I’ll be in here with you.”

“I know.”

Catching the tone, Kenn locked down on a question. Business came first. “There are no leaks, but the oil is gone. Vents from the stove are connected, so we’re cleaning them. Theo hopes the appliances can just be switched. We had all the extras stored in boxes in the animal areas. They’re messy and dented, but intact.” Kenn paused as another guardian appeared to check on a sleeping ward.

Angela smiled at Shawn, but he paid her no attention. Missy was in a pile of clothes on Angela’s right, sleeping. The girl appeared better. Shawn had found the breathing treatment equipment. The doctor had instructed a student on using it.

Shawn ducked out to be replaced by Marc, who hadn’t been down to the shower either. He was dirtier than Kenn and Shawn combined.

Marc swept the mess, also ignoring her. He centered on the kitchen.

Angela sighed. *Chris, he's coming.*

Kenn and Marc both paused to regard her in surprise.

Angela motioned at the remaining paper. "Next?"

Kenn noted Marc's angry stride toward the kitchen. That was the final warning walk. Kenn had witnessed it during his time on Marc's team before the war. Back then, it had sometimes become the last straw moment that had preceded removal—in one way or another. "Charlie and Tracy want to be on the water collection crew. Marc said no, but Charlie insisted you would agree."

"Why is that?"

"He dreamed Marc got shot."

"I'm surprised Marc didn't listen."

"He did, but he asked Billy to cover his ass."

Angela's lips thinned into a line.

Kenn was positive that order would change. He switched to the final page of updates he'd collected. "The doctor said Mandy will live if we can get regular food into her. The baby is fine. Small little thing."

"Breathing okay?"

"Yep. Jimmy said Mandy miscounted. Little Sandy was only a few weeks early instead of two months."

"That's wonderful."

"It's time you and I got something straight."

Marc's tone was harsh. It drew Kenn's attention toward the kitchen.

"Was that the good news?" Angela tried to keep them on track.

"Uh, Ray wants a meeting. So do Simon and Nancy."

"Tell Nancy she'll be on the rookie list when we get things settled." It was easy for Angela to guess what the former sailor wanted. After having Shane taken from her, Nancy wanted to be strong enough to keep it from ever happening again. "The other two want answers that I can't or won't give. Stall them for a few days."

Kenn frowned. "I don't like Simon."

"The camp does." Angela waited for his reaction to the light challenge in her tone.

"I can't tell if he's a fake or not."

I have the same problem. "So ask him."

Kenn stared. "What?"

"Very few people know you're a descendant." Angela smiled a bit. "You have a gift. Use it."

Kenn scheduled a visit with Simon for himself.

"None of that matters to me. I don't know why she's protecting you and I don't care."

Kenn tried to keep going and listen to Marc at the same time. "The collection team will be ready an hour from your call. We're sending out..."

"I'm watching for you to become a danger to her. When it happens, I'll kill you. Then I'll kill you again. You get me?!"

Kenn tried to keep going. “Uh, we’re sending out forty men. Half are protection. Half are labor.”

“You say that now, but I know better. The best thing you can do is finish your work, then find a new settlement that needs your skills. And I mean animals, not people!”

Kenn glanced at Angela. He found her staring back expectantly. He cleared his throat. “We decided to leave Shawn in charge on top, with Natoli and his crew. Neil’s got the bottom, with the vetted Eagles who aren’t going on the run.”

“That sounds good. You’re moving everyone to those places?”

Kenn nodded. “In process as we speak.”

“You won’t get a second warning. When she says she’s finished with you, I’ll come hunting!”

Kenn braced as Marc marched toward him and Angela. Instead of the argument Kenn expected, Marc held out a single cigarette.

Angela laughed, jumping up to retrieve the gift. “Where did you find it?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

Laughing, she wrapped her arms around Marc’s neck. The wave of happiness she let out wasn’t planned, but it was powerful.

Marc didn’t even try to fight. “Whatever you need, baby.”

His surrender was noticed by everyone in the mess. The tension broke, letting kids fall into peaceful, dreamless sleep. Snoring came, making the voices outside the tunnel sound harsh in

contrast. The worries of the adults in the mess faded a bit.

On the level below them, Adrian let out the breath he'd been holding since realizing Angie cared for him too. *Finally.*

Angela turned her head, lips sliding across Marc's scruffy cheek. "Kiss me?"

Kenn glanced away. It allowed him to observe the vet slinking out of the mess behind Marc. *She's an evil genius. I'm never fighting with her again.*

Marc kissed her again.

Angela was delighted when her body responded without pain. It had been long enough in normal circumstances, but this wasn't normal.

"I'm glad you're getting better." Marc kissed her one more time, then stepped back. "I forbid you to go on the water run. I have spies watching for you to try. The only way you're getting out of here is if you can become one of my men." Proud of himself, Marc rotated toward the tunnel, chin up, and fled before she could respond.

Angela gawked, jaw dropping. Then her eyes narrowed into slits and the V in her chin stood out in vivid contrast.

Kenn snickered. *Are you ready for my good news?*

"Updates are finished?" Angela was glaring at the doorway in thoughtful contemplation.

"Yep."

"Hit me."

When I gathered gear for the run, I gave Jennifer's full kit to Kyle. He has them both.

Kenn grinned when Angela turned to stare at him. He liked pleasing her. *That's two complete sets unaccounted for. No one's going to bother Kyle about that.*

Did you do things like this for Adrian?

When I needed to. It's part of the job. He smiled at her again. *I also happen to know that Charlie and Tracy swiped two sets of gear in case they were told no.*

Angela sighed. She couldn't stop Charlie from becoming an adult who lived in a child's body. She'd gone through that herself. "I'm in. Tell me his plan."

Kenn wasn't surprised she knew it was all Charlie's idea. The boy was like her in almost every way. When he'd told Kenn to find extra gear for Angela, Kenn hadn't argued. "There's a third crew going out as support. We'll blend right in."

Angela surveyed the mess, where nervous children were peering at them through laundry piles. "Who did you get for duty?"

Kenn pointed at the trio of women entering the mess. "Gus and his brothers will be up here in a few minutes to help them."

Angela watched Brittani, Nancy, and Tonya clear every inch of the mess and kitchen before taking up places around the walls.

Dirty, worried faces melted back into the laundry. Those guards were good. It was okay to sleep.

“Brit fed everyone with beef stew that only had beef and broth. It wasn’t bad. They’ll all hold for a few hours.” Kenn frowned. “I hope, ‘cause that’s all I’ve got.”

Angela welcomed the adrenaline now waking her. “It’s more than enough. We’ll be the four wildcards.”

“Any idea yet who we’re aiming for?”

“Anyone who aims at us.”

2

Kenn went down the repaired ladder first. The water collection team was outside. Digging noises were echoing through the cave, telling him the crew had gotten the steel door open.

Angela studied everything as she descended, trying not to cry or be bitter over how much work they’d done just to have it destroyed. She knew what her mood was. She needed to know theirs.

It took only a minute to determine that most people were too tired to fight. Those who had energy were with the water crew. *Good job, Marc.*

Angela controlled her expression as she began a search for danger next. She wouldn’t leave camp if she found anything.

Waiting for her, Kenn surveyed repairs that had been made while listening to the thoughts of

survivors. Theo's team had stretched extension cords to the bottom for lamps and small appliances. Fires were burning in rock piles in the corners, with the top vent pulling the smoke out. It was dim and stank, but at least the people weren't fighting. Most of the guards were going with Angela, while the students and many of the wounded were staying here with the doctor.

Kenn had worried over assigning some of the Eagles at all because they were friends with Simon or had been with Tony, but Marc had insisted it was fine. The possible problems were going with him. Kenn knew Marc planned to scan the remaining unvetted Eagles while they collected the water.

Angela took her time moving through the bottom level to the storage area that had been cleared. She talked to people, making promises that brought more calm. Most of the survivors just wanted things back to normal. She vowed to do that for them. She ignored the man who had point on this level, but she was aware of his pride as he observed her.

Adrian knew she would help Kyle. He was impatient for it. They needed the mobster back. Jennifer's injury had cost them two reliable people.

Kenn rapped sore knuckles against the stone storage chamber. "Boss is comin' in."

Kenn scanned the space, approving of the camping lantern and the Glock pointed at him. If it had happened to Tonya, he might be reacting the same way, but like Adrian, Kenn was certain

Angela would get things under control without trouble. He stepped over to let her through the narrow entrance.

She stopped at Kyle's wounded, accusing glower, ignoring the gun. "Why would I do that? She's going to inherit leadership when I've had enough. I've been protecting her at other people's expense." Angela stepped into the cubby, not needing to use her gifts. She had the truth. "And why would I do that to you? We're just as bonded. I haven't forgotten the rest stop. I never will."

"I told you."

Jennifer's mutter was lost in Kyle's relief. He sank to the edge of the wall and began to weep through bloodshot eyes.

Kenn made contact with the sentries on the level, then blocked the entrance to the storage chamber with his big body.

Angela resisted the urge to hug Kyle. Shooting Jennifer hadn't been easy on him. "You're not trapped. She's not in danger from me. You can leave whenever you want. Today, even."

"I go where the boss goes." Jennifer stuck her chin out, glaring at Kyle as he holstered. "So does he."

Angela studied the teenager, noting the fresh bandage and a small pile of non-perishable food. The baby was sleeping between Jennifer's outstretched legs, covered with Kyle's jacket. Nearby, all their possessions were packed and ready to be grabbed. The two Eagle kits were with it.

Angela understood Kyle had been getting ready to try to sneak them out of here as part of the crew. “Are you out for four weeks or six?”

“Three to five.” Jennifer’s anger lightened. “Jimmy said Kyle pulled the shot. It didn’t do as much damage as it should have.” She inched out of the coat Kyle had insisted she wear beneath the Eagle gear. She’d been about to bundle Autumn in random clothes when Angela came in. When she’d asked Kyle if he would leave with her, it had been a test of his loyalty to their relationship. She hadn’t meant to make him doubt Angela and she certainly hadn’t intended to leave. Safe Haven was her home.

Kenn congratulated Kyle, impressed with the disheveled man. “Nice job, man. The rest of your team can’t do that yet.”

“Yeah.” Kyle began to recover himself. Exhaustion flooded in next. “I couldn’t before.”

“Jennifer’s life being in danger sharpened the focus.” Kenn couldn’t have explained it further. It was just something a gunman learned how to do. Turning a kill shot into a wound, without changing the fire point or trajectory, was a level of skill Kenn respected.

“Are you glad you didn’t kill her?” Jennifer sent the image of Kenn shooting Dean instead of Angela.

Kenn was relieved that Jennifer’s tone wasn’t nasty. It allowed him to be honest. “I wasn’t at first, when I realized I still had to pay. I’ve adjusted.”

“You’ve done well for someone who should have been found on the side of the road with one of Kyle’s bullets in your brain.”

Kenn flushed. *There it is. I can’t trust that one.*

Jennifer snorted. *Not true at all. We finally have the same goals and you’re almost a real person. I’d bet we’ll talk about important shit someday.*

Kenn didn’t know how to respond to that. He glanced at Angela for help.

Angela was staring at Autumn.

Jennifer stiffened.

Kyle stood up.

Kenn scanned the bottom level in case anyone was sneaking up on him while Angela was in the zone. Tension slammed into his gut. He pushed hard, sending his gift out for the first time to explore the levels above them.

Jennifer tried to read Angela, but she couldn’t penetrate the shield around the private connection. She’d never felt anything so strong.

It’s Autumn’s. Baby magic is rare, powerful. It’s why the government built breeding compounds. If they could have harnessed this, control wouldn’t have been an issue over anyone. Angela opened the line to let Jennifer connect. She had a right to know how important her daughter would be to their future.

Kenn gestured toward the two kits, getting Kyle’s attention. “The boss wants to borrow those.”

Kyle figured out why in less than ten seconds. He wanted to say it was too dangerous to be out

there, but he couldn't do that while staring at Jennifer's injury. It was just as bad in here. "That was my plan." Kyle gave up his hatred of Kenn, sighing in relief as another yoke was removed from his neck. "You'll be with her?"

"Also Charlie. We're sneaking out with the support crew." Kenn didn't say Charlie would be busy protecting Tracy.

Kyle's lips twitched. "Marc really forbid her? Publicly?"

Kenn nodded, smirking. "I was proud of him. Right up 'til he ran."

Kyle chuckled. "Do you blame him?"

"Nope. She's dangerous."

"So why are you helping her against Marc's decision?" Kyle's flip was sudden. "Still trying to get Adrian back in charge?"

"That's settled." *Tell you later.*

Kyle was too tired and too relieved to be surprised at Kenn's power. He didn't react.

"That was amazing." Jennifer motioned to Kyle. "Give them the kits, then deflect Marc's spy. She's coming down the ladder right now."

Kyle hurried from the storage room. After shooting her, he wasn't even thinking about Jennifer's requests. If she wanted it, she got it.

Kenn grabbed the two Eagle kits and stood by the entrance. They were taking the hard way out by climbing up the ropes on the residence level to the top floor ramp. No one wanted to mess with a rope now that the ladders had been repaired.

“Kyle says to go while he’s complaining about not having power down here yet. Nancy’s view is blocked.” Jennifer caught Angela’s eye. “I’ll do everything I can to help that all happen.”

“So will I. Four years of peace sounds perfect after everything we’ve gone through.” Angela followed Kenn. Like Jennifer, her mood was better. She’d told Adrian there would be a period without hardship once they cleared the island. It was a relief to know she hadn’t been lying.

Chapter Twelve BK8
Go West, Young Man

1

“You should have gone to protect Marc.”

Neil hurried to help Samantha into a sitting position on the laundry pile he’d gathered yesterday. She was a lot better today. The doctor had told him so.

“I’m not one of them anymore.” Neil handed her a bottle of water that Kyle had dropped off. “Besides, Marc asked me to keep things calm down here.”

“He let you off so you can play nurse to me.” Samantha shifted, searching for a comfortable spot that didn’t exist. The laundry was lumpy. “And you *are* one of them.”

“We’re leaving, Sam. It changes everything.” Neil picked up the air pump he’d been bending into shape when she woke.

“I know we agreed to go, but it’ll be weeks before I’m able to travel...”

“You believe they’ll convince us to stay in that time.”

Sam watched him open the box he’d brought in with the air pump. “Yeah.”

“We need to go, before they can do that.”

“Maybe.” Samantha rubbed her stomach.

Neil was positive there was more. He hadn’t wanted to mention how much it would hurt not to be an Eagle anymore, but that was the only thing he would miss.

“Can I have a minute?”

“No!” Neil glowered at Angela as she entered the tarpred area he had built around Sam. “Go away.” Kenn, he ignored.

Kenn returned the favor, thinking Neil needed a shower more than he did.

“Neil!” Samantha gestured, not feeling much thanks to the latest pain shot. “Hurry up or Marc’s spy will tell.” Sam wasn’t panicked like some of the men were. The last time she’d been hurt, she had suffered through it all alone. This injury was hard, but minor in comparison because she had help.

Angela didn’t glance at Neil. He was Marc’s best friend in this mountain. Of course, he would promise Marc to keep her here.

Angela approved of the air mattress Neil had dug out. Samantha would be as comfortable as he could make her. “I’m sorry.”

Sam sniffed, sadness breaking through. She wasn’t doing well at controlling it yet. “Me too.”

Angela went to her friend, taking Samantha’s hand. “What can I do for you?”

Samantha held the tears in, but not the pain. “Make me forget him.”

Angela couldn’t contain her tears. They rolled over her dirty cheeks in thick rivulets. “No.”

“Then I can’t stay here.” Samantha shuddered, pulling her hand away. “Let us go.”

“I’m not staying.” Angela wiped her face dry. “I’m going to the island.”

“But if Marc goes...”

Angela’s tone revealed her terror. “I’ve tried everything. I’ll have to handle it from there, when it happens.”

Samantha held sympathy, but she was also relieved. “We’ll be with you.” She looked toward Neil. “Won’t we?”

Neil wasn’t convinced. He didn’t want Samantha endangered again.

“I can’t promise that. Not for her, your twins, or for you.” Angela moved toward Kenn, who was waiting with impatient huffs and gestures. “I do know you haven’t thought about her giving birth alone. *She* has.” Angela left him with that terrifying image.

Kenn smirked, following her into the darkest part of the cave where they had debris piles that hadn’t been touched yet. Neil would come with them. Women giving birth had been scaring men into submission for centuries. The trooper wouldn’t be any different.

Kenn handed Angela one of the kits, then gestured at the swaying rope. “If you can’t get up there with this kit, you’re not going. If you do make it, which I doubt, we’ll change in corners of the training rooms where we can squeeze through the debris.”

Angela laughed. “You’re learning.”

Kenn let out a sigh of suffering. “I’m giving it my all.”

Good. Angela pulled the heavy kit onto her shoulders. Taking a deep breath, she jumped for the rope. Grunting at the discomfort, she got a better grip and began to pull herself up, forcing her body to do what she wanted. *Now stop staring at my ass or I’m telling Tonya.*

Kenn dropped his chin so fast he bit his tongue.

2

Marc rotated to sweep the bundled, working crew. They’d found enough winter gear to outfit everyone with everything they needed, except for gloves. Progress was being constantly interrupted by people putting their hands into pockets, but that also allowed them to survey the site for trouble like Marc had told them to do. Things were calm, but...

Next to him, Daryl frowned. “Something wrong?”

Marc shook his head, cheeks stinging from the strong wind. “I got an odd vibe.”

“You felt a disturbance in the force.” Daryl laughed, warm breath visible as it hit the freezing air. He was happy to be out of the mountain. He didn’t care that the snow walls they’d dug made it impossible to see around them or that it was so cold his balls were frozen. He could feel the air and view the late afternoon sky. It was wonderful.

“Something like that.” Marc scanned deeper, using his grid. He stiffened suddenly. *Angie! Where are you?*

With Kenn and Charlie. We’re teaching Tracy some descendant things.

Marc didn’t hear anything wrong in the tone or the words, but he scowled. *What things?*

Blocking locations.

Marc swung toward the cave entrance, where the third crew was keeping the entrance clear from snow piles that were collapsing from the heat coming through the open steel door. They were also watching over him. *Where are you?*

Shouldn’t you be concentrating on your job?

“What’s up, man?” Daryl’s good mood was fading fast at the sight of Marc’s thunderous expression.

“She got out. I don’t know how. I assigned...”

The wrong people, Angela supplied when he fell silent.

Studying the group by the entrance, Marc spotted Kenn’s wide shoulders next to three Eagles who were grinning sheepishly. Tracy even waved.

Kenn avoided Marc’s eye as he stood guard.

Marc groaned in frustration. *How did you get out?*

None of them would answer.

Marc wanted to order them back in, but knew it wouldn’t do any good. By putting the boss back in charge, he’d limited his own power.

If you really want me to go, I will. Angela rubbed her hands together for the hundredth time. *As soon as you clear the problem coming up the hill.*

Marc and Kenn resumed their positions.

Engines sounded next, alerting the rest of the crew.

It's four vehicles of Mikel's men. He sent them up here a week ago. They're all sick.

Kenn drew his gun, moving in front of Angela. *That'll make it easier.*

Angela and Charlie also drew their weapons, like the rest of Marc's crew was doing. Tracy stayed huddled with the workers, blending in as she'd been instructed to do.

"Pay attention!" Marc shouted so he was heard over the engines and wind. "Get ready for trouble!"

Camp members crunched through the ice toward the safety of the cave.

Angela and her group stayed by the snow wall as workers ran by. The steel door had been removed for repairs. She wasn't leaving this entrance.

Kenn studied the people running by, much like Greg, the entrance guard, was doing. After Eddie and Francis betraying them, it was clear that anyone could be an enemy.

Marc climbed up the wall of snow they'd dug out, hoping to get a visual of the coming threat.

"Don't move."

Marc felt a gun shove into his hip. His heart sank. *I really believed he would cover me.*

Billy edged around Marc to be closer to the cleared snow pile. “I have to go. Don’t try to stop me.”

“I wouldn’t have.” Marc spun around to slap the gun from Billy’s shaky hand. It fell into a snowdrift and sank.

Billy scrambled away, expecting to be killed.

“Amnesia is no excuse for betrayal.” Marc contemplated Angela’s warning again. “When you come back, I expect an apology.”

“Here they come!”

Marc hurried up the wall to take the rifle Daryl had ready. He had already forgotten about Billy.

Greg hadn’t. He grabbed the driver by his jacket and shoved him toward the end of the snow walls, where their old camp was buried. “Get out of here.”

Billy lunged forward to grab the gun, then took off running.

Marc fired. His aim was good, sending the slug through a windshield to embed in the first driver’s chest.

Gunfire filled the cold air as the Eagles followed Marc’s lead.

Behind Marc, a thin man in black burrowed through the snow wall near a pile of large rocks. A sentry ran by, not seeing the man crouched behind the rocks and snow.

Mikel let the guard get out of sight before peering around the thick pile of rocks. He saw the witch right away. She glowed to him in ways that were impossible to explain. Mikel swept the

workers gathered near her to observe the gunfight, then the military man firing from atop the snow wall. No one was glancing in his direction.

“That’s three, Marc! One more!”

“Get those camp members in the cave!”

Taking advantage of the chaos, Mikel hurried into the short line of people trying to get in the mountain.

I’m scared. So loud. Let me in! Mikel sent out decoy fear as he neared the witch at the entrance. He ducked his head and kept his sore-riddled arms beneath the black coat he’d scavenged from a car in the avalanche zone. He’d lost his weapon during the descent. He needed to get in and hide until everyone went to sleep. Mikel couldn’t contain his glee as he neared the entrance. *So loud! Scared!*

Angela pinpointed the glee under the fake fear, hand rising. *Him!*

Mikel shoved into the workers by the dented door, trying to get around them.

Tracy shoved her gun into the sick Mexican’s stomach. A shot echoed, loud and sharp. Two more followed it.

Mikel didn’t live long enough to ask how they’d known.

Marc fired again, hitting the last jeep as it chugged over the broken gate and mounds of snow that had thawed and frozen repeatedly for over a month. The jeep sank, taking a body and a screaming Mexican under the snow.

“Wait for it...” Marc was talking to himself like he’d always done on missions. “Wait for it...” Marc fired at the man as he popped up, spraying crimson across glistening gray.

He surveyed the area for the next threat.

Marc determined the fight was over. Angie had said four vehicles. He’d crashed them all by concentrating on the drivers. The Eagles with him had picked off the survivors. It had been quick and neat. *Don’t know what happened, but Charlie was wrong.*

Marc turned toward the entrance to verify Angela’s safety and found a body.

Tracy fired once more for good measure.

Marc stared in anger. *Billy was supposed to catch that. I didn’t bother to adjust for him being gone. Because it came from Charlie and not Angie? Marc was forced to admit that was the truth. I won’t write him off again.*

Angela met his eye. “It’s over, as far as I can tell.”

He recovered faster than the Eagles around him who were noticing and gaping. “No refugee wave up here?”

“They heard the fight. We’ll have a few hours before any of them reach us.”

Marc gestured at Daryl. “Get them back out here. I want us done before our new friends arrive. Make sure Ozzie’s crew is ready with the welding tools we dug out.”

Daryl hurried to collect the workers. Once they finished digging out the delivery tube, the camp would have fresh water every time it rained. They would also get water after snowstorms, when things thawed. The tubes ran to their remaining water tank.

Marc glared at Angela and her group of sneaks. Angela smiled. “Yes, dear?”

Really? Marc swung toward the wall, shaking his head. *I don't know what to do with you.*

Love me.

Marc sighed, melting. *Always. Now get inside, will you? I need to concentrate.*

Angela laughed, going in.

“We’re going to stay.” Charlie led Tracy toward the walls where they were collecting snow in buckets. “Until her teeth chatter, then she’s going in too.”

Kenn followed Angela, wondering why she was so eager to get back in. He’d hoped to be out of the mountain longer.

Angela hurried toward the ramp that led to the top level. “We have a possible hostage situation on level four and a fight between kids in the mess. I didn’t tell Marc because he’s right. He does need to concentrate.”

“Which one first?” Kenn stayed on her heels, bumping into camp members to do so.

“The kids.”

Kenn wasn’t sure why until they entered the mess.

“Down!”

Kenn ducked a wave of energy that slammed into the wall and knocked ashes from the ceiling. Leeann was in the far corner with Roy and Cody, blocking Romeo. On the other side of the mess, Nancy and Brittani were huddled over Gus. Near them, kids from the boarding school rescue were throwing insults and magic.

Angela waved her hand, sending a chill through the air that froze the anger. She clenched her fingers into a fist...

All of the kids cried out in pain or tensed.

Romeo grinned in savage pleasure at their punishment. The other children who didn't have powers watched from the kitchen in fascinated fear.

Angela lowered her arm, releasing the hold she'd taken over them. "If this ever happens again, I will remove your gifts until you reach the required age. The pain you just felt was nothing compared to having those powers ripped away."

The descendant kids stared at her and each other. They hadn't known that could happen.

"Starting tonight, all magic users under the age of eighteen will join me every evening for a meeting. If you miss the meeting without a great reason, you get a strike. Two strikes, and I lock up your power. Are we clear?" Angela got a nod from each of them before looking at Brittani. "Is he okay?"

"Didn't even wake up." Nancy stood, smiling for the first time in days. "He was hit with a mug. We ran over to check on him."

At their feet, Gus snored.

Brittani kicked him. “Oh, get up!”

Gus jerked awake, blinking in tired confusion. “What do you need?”

“More condoms. We are *never* having kids.”

Gus gaped, frowning, as Brittani stomped toward the exit and the adults laughed. Shrugging, he scanned the mess, then the sheepish kids cleaning up fresh damage. “Whatever.” He was back asleep a minute later.

Angela paused in the amusement, listening.

“The other situation?” Kenn was at her side, ready to do what she ordered.

“Yes, but it’s covered.”

“By Adrian, Neil, or Kyle?”

Angela let out a relieved breath. “Jimmy.”

3

“What are you doing?!” Simon stared at the doctor in shock. “I’m trying to help us!”

“No, you’re trying to force her to stay.” Jimmy motioned toward the ladder with his gun. “The boss says for you to stay with your members or she’ll have you arrested.”

Simon scowled, realizing he had failed and been exposed. “Why would you do that? We need a magic user to stay!”

“Not against their will.” Jimmy gestured again. “Go on.”

Simon tossed a final pleading glare at Samantha, then fled toward his group on the top floor.

Jimmy let out a deep breath. “It doesn’t have bullets.”

Samantha laughed. She’d been expecting trouble as soon as Neil said he’d notified Angela. She was glad Neil hadn’t had to kill the man, but that’s what would have happened if the doctor hadn’t intervened in the argument.

Neil scowled. He dug in his pouch and handed the doctor a magazine. He’d already acquired a stash. One less mag wouldn’t hurt.

Surprising the couple, Jimmy slapped the mag home with a smooth move. He shoved the gun into his deepest pocket. “I lived in a city. You need a defense in a place like that, so I learned.”

Samantha smiled at the tired man. “Thank you for helping me.”

Jimmy blushed at the warmth. “Neil did the hard part.”

They all knew that wasn’t true, but at the same time, it was. It had hurt Neil to operate. The doctor had been impatient to sew the artery shut.

“I have to make rounds.” Jimmy left them alone without worrying over Samantha’s safety. That wasn’t why he’d stepped in. Simon had caught Neil sleeping by her bed, but Jimmy was certain the camp member would be dead if he’d been stupid enough to bring a weapon. He had threatened Samantha, so Jimmy had brought out his gun to

keep Neil from attacking the idiotic new leader of those remaining in the mountain. The newest boss for those running away hadn't been chosen yet. That group was still reeling over Tony being shot in front of them.

"That was good." Kyle had been near the corner of the tarped shelter where Samantha was stashed, ready to kill Simon if it was needed. "Maybe *you* should be the leader here."

Jimmy snorted. He didn't hate the idea, but he also didn't want that job. "Like I have the time for that."

"Maybe you should make time. When we leave, Simon will make you pay." Kyle nodded to Adrian, who was on the opposite corner of the tarp.

Feeling better about the sullen doctor, Kyle returned to Jennifer. She'd sent him out to help, but it hadn't been needed.

"It's over."

"You're right." Jennifer adjusted the homemade sling that Kyle had made from a large shirt, trying to hide her discomfort.

Kyle lifted a brow, handing her a bottle of water he'd cleaned himself an hour ago. "About?" He was too tired for puzzles.

"Jimmy. He's perfect for the group that doesn't like magic."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'll mention it to the boss when she stops by later."

Kyle paused. “Angela’s coming back down here tonight? Why?”

“When she said all gifted kids, she meant *all* of them.” Jennifer sighed. *That means Autumn too.*

Kyle stared at the sleeping baby, frowning. Jennifer had told him about the kids fighting in the mess, but he’d refused to leave her for that.

“Rules have to be learned.” Jennifer patted the lumpy pile with her good hand. “We’re clear for a little while. Come sleep.”

“Are you sure it’s okay?”

Jennifer nodded. “I’ll listen. You sleep.”

Kyle dropped onto the pile with a low grunt. “Awesome.”

Jennifer rested her hand on his shoulder, letting her fingers play with the ends of his curls.

“That’s nice.”

She smiled. “Yeah.”

Kyle yawned. “Jenny?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry I shot you.”

Jennifer leaned over, bracing on her good arm. “I’d do the same for you.” She kissed his brow, drawing a groan. “Sleep. We’ll shoot each other later.”

Kyle drifted off with a smile on his face.

4

Billy didn’t stop until he was off the mountain. It took him six hours and two breath-taking falls that

helped freeze his miserable body. When he finally hit bottom, he went away from the flickering campfires of the refugees waiting for Safe Haven to emerge. Billy didn't doubt Marc about them being dangerous, but Billy hadn't planned to join them anyway. He was going west. Why, he wasn't certain.

Billy crunched across the ice and into the tree line, hoping it was dark enough that his black clad form wouldn't be noticed. The noises from the sprawling refugee camp weren't comforting. There were screams and fights, and even gunshots, but the constant echo of vomiting would have kept him fleeing in the opposite direction anyway. The refugees were ill. He wanted no part of that.

Billy found a stripped farmhouse around midnight. He crawled in through a rear window that was missing glass. The front door had been blocked by a rusting tractor. It didn't have a rear entrance.

Billy thumped to the floor in agony. The house didn't have furniture, but the four walls were enough. As he lay there, hoping it wasn't frostbite on his toes, Billy became aware of something poking him in the ass. He rolled over to search his pockets.

The stiff paper had bent during his flight, but stayed intact. Billy read the pink card with a cramping stomach.

I know you don't remember me, but I'll never forget you. Please be careful on your trip west. Tell Alexa I said hi.

-Leeann

Billy crumpled the card up, but before he could toss it into the corner of the house with the other useless garbage, his hand had stuffed it back into his pocket.

Billy closed his eyes, breathing harsh, extremities pushed to the limit of cold endurance. He didn't care about the little girl or anyone else in that mountain. He had a job waiting in the west.

What job? Billy tried hard to recall it, but couldn't. All he knew was that he didn't belong here now—if he ever had. Let the freaks die. *What do I care?*

In his heart, a wall came down to seal the tiny niggles in place. When he went to sleep, he dreamed about a blonde huntress with braids and guns who needed his help.

He also dreamed about Leeann, except she wasn't a little girl anymore and she wasn't in the mountain cave he'd escaped.

I'm going to be gone a long time.

For reasons he didn't understand, Billy was comforted by that knowledge.

Chapter Thirteen BK8

The Alpha

1

“**Y**ou’ll see him again, honey.” Angela rocked the girl, trying not to cry herself. “He’ll be okay. So will you. I promise.”

Leeann continued to sob.

Angela scanned the other kids she’d gathered for the meeting. They were bored but happy that she cared enough to comfort the girl who had joined them last, already crying.

“Why did he go?” Cody had only been here for a month. That wasn’t enough time to learn all of the secrets in Safe Haven.

Angela set the girl next to her, needing to get the meeting going. “Adrian sent him. He has to help people out there.”

“You promise?” Leeann hadn’t expected it to hurt so much.

Angela wiped tears from Leeann’s cheeks. “Yes. And think; you won’t be a little kid anymore when he comes back.”

Leeann smiled a little. “That’ll be great.”

Angela understood more than she could ever explain. She gave the girl another hug, then stood up. “There are rules for kids. There are rules when

you become an adult. Billy is following adult rules by leaving.”

“Because he used to like me?” Leeann welled up again.

“He still does. Nothing has changed except he won’t be here to get in trouble. You don’t want to get him shot or hung, do you?”

Leeann’s braids swung. “No!”

“That’s what would have happened because you couldn’t leave him alone.”

Leeann was crushed. “He left because of me?”

“Yes, to keep you safe until you’re old enough for him to love you. He’s a good man. Keep him in your heart and grow up strong enough to be his mate when that time comes.”

Leeann sniffed. “I can do that.”

“Good. Now let’s talk, okay? You kids are all in danger again.”

“We’re always in danger.” Robbie was from the boarding school. He was the oldest of that group.

“It was worse for our kind before the war.” Angela sat in the center of Jennifer’s cubby, aware of Kenn and Kyle outside the doorway.

“This is a bad idea.” Kyle was upset at having so many descendants in the space with Jennifer and Autumn.

Angela was prepared. “Jennifer’s hungry.”

Jennifer blushed, playing along. Kyle had already gathered blankets for the kids to ease her concern over the drafts. Most of the children were

snuggled in them while having a snack from Kyle's stash—another request. “A little, yeah.”

Kyle disappeared to go get food.

Angela got comfortable. “After I tell you a few things, we'll go over the basic rules that our kind has used to survive. New rules will come as needed.” She did a fast count. They were all here. Parents and guardians were trolling the bottom level, trying to listen and worrying. The fight in the mess had been a concern for all of those adults. Few people had known the magic kids from the boarding school were bullying Roy and Romeo, or that the children had formed into three groups that all hated each other.

“Jealousy is bad. Hating someone because of their skin color is bad. Using your gifts to hurt someone because they don't have magic is bad. Bullying is bad.” Angela's tone had grown harder with each sentence. Leeann backed up so she wasn't the only one who was punished.

“I meant what I said about locking down your gifts. As an alpha, I can strip anyone's power.”

“If they're underage, right?” Charlie was gazing at Kenn in dismay. He'd sensed the man's new gift.

“Actually, no.” Angela also looked at the Marine. “I can lock down on anyone as a punishment.”

“For how long?” Leeann was entranced by the notion of adults being punished that way.

“My choice.”

Kenn stored that information, but he didn't need the warning. He had a gift. That was all he'd really wanted.

Angela smothered her bitterness over that as best she could. "It would take a lot to get me to do that to an adult descendant. When you reach age, your gifts are supposed to be yours to explore—if you're not bad."

"What will you do if one of us is bad?" Robbie was part of the group that believed kids without magic shouldn't be allowed around the rest of them. Robbie's father, who had been much like Zack, hadn't even allowed them to watch movies with magic or anything supernatural.

"He was scared it would trigger your gifts." Angela was trying to get all of their thoughts. "Was he a descendant or was it your mother?"

"My grandma. Daddy stole me from her and ran so I wouldn't be like the women."

"What happened to your father?" Angela planned to spend this first meeting getting to know the kids. That meant their stories had to come out. She was also hoping they would accept that they weren't so different.

"He got sick. The traders found us and promised to help if I did things for them." Tears rolled down Robbie's thin cheeks. "They never went back for him."

Sitting next to Jennifer, Cecilia dropped her chin. "The slavers killed my dad when they took me. Jennifer tried to help my mom, but it was too late."

Angela forced herself not to respond to the waves of pain as the other kids began releasing their nightmares. The stories were awful.

To keep herself in place, Jennifer opened a direct line to Angela, hoping none of the kids could break through. She believed Leeann and Missy were able to. *Why are we here?*

Angela refused to answer.

Jennifer began hoping Autumn fell asleep as she sensed the two boys about to join the meeting.

Next to Jennifer's bed, Charlie sat with Cody in his lap. He and the little boy had bonded right away. They'd both been without a good father when they needed it most.

"We've all been hurt because of who we are." Angela motioned toward the entrance. "They've been hurt because of who they *aren't*."

Roy and Romeo peered around Kenn in fear. Doug was standing behind Kenn with a frown and a hand on each boy's shoulder. He was ready to jerk them out if any of the descendant kids fired anything.

Angela waved at the boys, then patted the ground next to her.

Because they would be by the boss, Doug let them go. He didn't think the magic kids would attack with Angela in the way, not after the threat she'd made about taking away their power.

Roy held onto Romeo's hand as his big brother led him over to Angela. The tiny boy sank down into

her lap with a smile of pleasure that sent a wave of yearning through the warming cubby.

Angela hugged the boy, heart hurting. She tugged his angry brother down next to her. “Roy and Romeo had bad parents. Does that make them bad?” Feeling his cold skin, Angela covered Roy with the edges of her jacket. He was dirty and smelled, reminding her that they’d lost both den mothers. Peggy and Hilda had hated men, but they’d loved children—all of them.

None of the kids spoke. They’d shared their awful wounds with the group. If parents being bad made the kids bad, then nearly everyone in this room was damned.

Next to Jennifer, Charlie protected Cody and the baby within his personal shield. This meeting wasn’t going to be fun. It was a lesson. He’d known that as soon as Angela asked him to be there to stop the baby from experiencing her demonstrations.

“We’re going to make changes. Until now, we’ve let you kids pick who you hang out with, who your friends are. I’m taking over that. My first change is to put magic kids with non-magic kids.”

Frowns came from everyone, including Charlie. He wanted a more important job than babysitting.

Angela hugged Roy again. “The kids without magic are in danger.”

“So are we.” Robbie wasn’t willing to make peace so fast. Mean things had been said, blows had been exchanged. His feelings were stinging over it.

“Yes, but they can’t defend themselves. Between the two, it’s like you guys are slapping a little baby.”

Romeo stiffened, but the magic kids stared at Autumn. She was a little baby.

“Would you slap her?” Angela kept pushing them. “Any of you?”

Scanning as deep as she could, Angela was relieved. All of the children were good. It wasn’t too late. “Okay. Now look at Roy here. He’s three. He still wears diapers sometimes. He’s a baby like Autumn. He doesn’t even understand the things you say. He just gets hit with your anger and he gets scared.” Angela swept the shamed children, then gazed up at Romeo in pride, picking out bruises and scrapes on his arms from where he’d been fighting. “You’ve done a good job defending your brother from so many threats. When you’re ready, you’ll be in my army.”

Romeo lifted his chin, glaring at Robbie. “Then I can prove I’m not like my dad.”

Angela was happy to feel a bond of commonalities start burning. “A lot of us have spent our lives doing that. It’s a worthy goal.” Angela sent out a small wave of anger. “I’m tired of bad people. I don’t care who they are or how old they are.”

Roy cringed, closest to her.

Withdrawing the anger, Angela patted his leg. When she was upset, everyone felt it. “I’m putting all descendant kids into a team. Each of you will pick a non-magic child to protect. We’ll meet in the

mess in the morning for that part. You'll sit with them to explain what's going on. This is not a punishment. This is a job. If you do well, you'll be given other serious duties."

Angela waited for the excitement to settle, then told them what she hadn't told anyone else who had asked. "All the descendants are going with me. They've all told me so, in one way or another. A lot of the non-magic camp is staying here. They're scared of us. What happened with you kids tonight will push more of the undecided members into staying. Your careless disregard for others has cost me."

Roy crawled from Angela's lap onto Romeo's thin legs.

Romeo got the boy on his feet and headed for Doug. Angela's pain over losing people was intolerable.

"I'm sorry." Leeann stood up, blanket in a tight grip. "Please stop. It's not their fault. I didn't try hard enough to make them get along."

Angela withdrew the tiny bubble of true emotions. She took a deep breath and sat for a moment without speaking. She hated doing this.

In that time, Leeann became a hero to the other kids for protecting them.

"I'm going to hold you responsible for them." Angela glared at Leeann. "Make friends or don't. What matters is that you do your job, your new duty. Got it?"

The girl nodded, face streaked with tears. Angela's displeasure hurt.

Angela sighed. "Sit. We'll go over some basic rules now. Remember them. Tomorrow night, I'll quiz you on it."

Kenn heard feet approaching and shook his head, not looking to see who it was. He also wanted to hear the rules of the descendants.

"Never without permission. It's rude to get into someone's thoughts when they don't know you're there. If we can't trust you to do that, you'll never be accepted as an adult descendant. We value our privacy above most things that others would tolerate. Never without permission is rule number one."

"I told you she has things covered. Be quiet or you'll interrupt it."

Kenn turned to find Kyle glowering at Adrian. The mobster had figured out that he'd been sent away.

Kenn motioned Kyle to take his place, sacrificing being able to listen for calming the man. Kenn joined Adrian on duty over the level, not speaking.

Kyle didn't care about the words at first. He was busy staring at Jennifer and the baby, and then the dangers in the packed chamber.

Jennifer frowned at him, telling Kyle not to interrupt. It forced him to listen.

"Never use your gifts unless you have to. Your power is like a health bar on a game. When you use

magic, you lose health. It's hard to refill. We'll discuss those things during these meetings, but for now, rule number two is, don't use your magic unless you have to."

Kyle approved of that rule. He waited with the adults in the tunnel and the kids in the cubby for the next rule.

"That's all for tonight." Angela hid a smirk at the instant groans and disappointment. The adults were louder than the kids. "The rest of this meeting will be spent talking about the craziness we can expect over the next five days. I'm going to need a lot of help, but the adults are shaken. They don't know what to do or which way to go. I need you kids to come through for me where they don't."

Shame filled the adults, while the kids perked up in excitement.

"Can I count on all of you to help get us on the road?"

Cries filled the bottom of the cave, sending out a wave of energy that was good for the entire camp. The sound of happy kids was a wonderful noise.

"It won't stop when we bugout. Survivors will want to join us again. We miss bad souls because we're tired or busy, or because the person is an Invisible or has an ability that prevents us from detecting their evil. You kids won't be suspected. You can listen to everyone. Like you've been doing."

The adults were dismayed to realize the children had been listening to everything.

“I don’t want you tattling on people, but I do want you to tell us about dangers. You’re going to become our ears.”

Adrian remembered his talk with Marc about body parts and jobs. The kids were now her ears, whispering secrets that would protect the future.

It’s almost complete. Adrian left duty to Shawn and the new shift arriving. He wanted to be certain Simon wasn’t causing more trouble. In his mind was a large form with legs, arms, ears, hands, mouth, and a huge heart. Angela’s time as ruler of Safe Haven would build a foundation that could be followed for centuries to come. The only thing missing was two eagle eyes, but Kendle and Conner were almost home. Once they were put into place around Angela, the magic would carry Safe Haven through an impossible boat trip that was now six weeks away. Everything was about to go faster.

2

“What’s going on with our gifts? Why are we becoming closed to each other?”

Adrian led Charlie into a deserted spot on level two. “What’s going on?”

Charlie explained how he hadn’t been on Marc’s grid during the fight in the tunnel. “He and mom were calling for me. Why didn’t they know where I was?”

“Evolutions.” Adrian’s mutter was followed by a frown. “I forgot about that, honestly.”

“What?”

“When we evolve, things shut down during the process. It can be days or even months. Once it stops, a new gift or stronger version of a current gift is available.”

“For me or my dad?”

“In this case, you. The evolution cycle blocked your dad.” Adrian swept the resourceful teenager who was wearing his Eagle gear and carrying his kit. “Where’s Tracy?”

“In the mess, sleeping. Will the cycle stop me from using the gift that’s evolving?”

“Why do you ask?”

Charlie lowered his voice. “I can’t mentally touch.”

Adrian grinned. “Ah.” He leaned in. “Do you, uh, use that skill often?”

“Not since she got hurt, but things have changed since the quake. She’s...”

“Better?”

Charlie flushed, not minding the cooler temperatures or the sharp draft. “Yeah. I’ve been worrying over not being able to...you know, when she’s ready.”

“Impress her in ways that guys without our gifts can’t?”

The boy blew out a breath. “Exactly.”

Adrian smiled. “You could just use hands.”

Charlie stilled. “Touch her?”

Adrian left him standing there with mental wheels spinning so fast he could almost smell fresh smoke.

“He may stand there for the next hour.”

Adrian chuckled as Marc fell in step. “Yeah.”

“It’s interesting that he comes to you for things like that.”

Adrian shrugged. “Did you ask your dad or mom?”

Marc was startled into a laugh. “Not even once. You?”

“No. My dad was busy and my mom stayed drugged most of the time. I was a virgin until I hit twenty.”

Marc was surprised. He didn’t volunteer his shadow-draped memories of him and Angie as teenagers, or the girl who’d come before that.

Adrian took the rope that was still hanging from the residence level, not glancing toward the spot where Samantha and Jeremy had almost died together. “I’m calling it a night unless you want me to do something.”

“Let’s find two shaken beers.”

Wondering what Marc wanted to talk about, Adrian kept pulling himself up the rope. “You’re the boss.”

“Nope.” Marc grinned in triumph, feeling safe to let it out. “The boss is in the mess, having a snack.”

Adrian snickered. “You’re getting better at handling her. Don’t give up when she calls you on it.”

“What do you mean?”

Adrian waited for Marc to reach the level so he could look at the man. “You think you’re off the hook as a leader. That’s sweet.” Whistling, Adrian went into the residence chamber that was untouched so far except for body removals. Mounds of rubble were everywhere.

Marc followed, frowning.

“What was that about?”

Nancy shrugged at Brittani’s question. They were passing the rope Adrian and Marc had come up. “Don’t know, don’t care. Let’s get this water up to the mess. We have a lot of mouths to feed for breakfast.”

“Oatmeal again?”

“Yes. Lunch will be ham sandwiches, though.”

“Wasn’t the flour ruined?”

“Marc found a way to strain most of the ashes from it. I was the manager in a bakery before my service, so I volunteered to help.”

“Fresh bread? That’ll be amazing.”

Nancy responded to the enthusiasm. “Glad you think so. I need someone to mix the dough. We’re making enough for four hundred.”

Brittani made a face. “Four hundred?” She gazed down at the first clean clothes she’d had on in days. “It was nice while it lasted.”

Nancy felt Adrian's approval as he overheard. She tried not to respond, but she was helpless against the sensation of his pleasure. Guilt flooded. Nancy marched faster. The sooner they recovered and repaired, the sooner she could leave. Like Samantha, Nancy couldn't stay here. She would do anything to get out.

Brittani came up slower, admiring the repairs that had been made. Ladders were up, cables were running everywhere to provide power to the lower levels, and guards were standing watch. The smell of dinner—beef and noodles without noodles—was lingering in the air that was almost free from the harsh odor of smoke. Even with all the damage and death, it was beginning to feel like home again.

Brittani spotted Gus laboring in the dimness with lamps and plastic bags. Sweating through layers of dirt, he and his brothers were salvaging things from the personal care area that had been crushed by the floor above it. She didn't distract them. Gus had asked for FND work. Angela had given him a short list. Brittani was scared, but controlling herself. She'd decided to stay busy in the mess. She loved to cook. *But four hundred? I didn't think this through.*

Gus knew when she went by. He loved her even more when she didn't stop. Brittani had spent her life caring for others. Gus was determined to become that strong. If he died in the process, at least she would remember him as a man and not as another child to be rescued.

3

“I found a case of Little Kings.”

Marc groaned. “Oh, man. Worst headache I ever had came after Cream Ales!”

Adrian laughed, tugging the green package free. “Should probably sit for a little while.”

Marc dropped down on the rubble with a groan of relief. He couldn’t do this if they hadn’t accounted for everyone. Dealing with Adrian required his full concentration. “We’re wearing more filth than clothes. What’s a little spray?”

Adrian opened the battered case, worrying. Marc wanted to talk now, while Angie was occupied.

“Yes, I do.”

“Good or bad?” Adrian dropped down a few feet away, adjusting for angle and light if he had to defend himself.

Marc lifted a brow. “Would you like to hold my Colts?”

Adrian flushed under his scruffy beard. “What do you want?”

“I promised Charlie personal training from all his idols. Now that he’s taken a life, he needs it.”

Adrian hadn’t thought Marc or Angela knew.

“How do *you* know?”

Adrian shrugged. “It’s all he’s thinking about. He didn’t like it. He may drop out of the Eagles.”

“I’m scanning him. I know why he’s not on my grid. I heard what you told him, but why don’t I hear him like you can? That part of him isn’t evolving.”

“You are.”

“Yeah.” Marc had wanted to confirm it. “Same time frame as what you told him?”

“Not even close.” Adrian popped the cap from the beer that had already been sitting for days. A small bit of foam ran over his hand. “Well, that was disappointing.”

“Faster?” Marc took a bottle and slid it into the hand that Adrian couldn’t see from where he was sitting. Marc’s fingers twitched as he waited.

“Weeks at the most. When did it start?”

“The quake.” Marc swept the piles, the damage. He didn’t have an estimate on how long it would take to get the cave in living condition again. The generator had fired up and their solar panels were collecting again, but the survivors were crushed. They needed something good to happen.

“That makes sense. Many scientific papers were published on theories that evolutionary leaps are the result of disasters forcing adaptations for survival. You’ve figured out you’re not strong enough, so your demon is trying to give you what you need.”

“That doesn’t sound good.” Marc realized his demon had been absent this entire time.

“Get sleep, drink a lot of water.” Adrian remembered his first big jump in gifts. “When it pops in, it hurts. The pain will last the same amount

of time as it took to evolve. Many of us wait until that passes before we try to explore it.”

“I won’t.”

“No, I didn’t think you would.” Adrian tilted the warm beer, drinking enough to keep the remaining foam from flowing over. It gave him a great belch that echoed across the tunnel, making Gus and his brothers chuckle.

“Will anything speed it up?”

Marc’s tone was too casual. Adrian stared at him in annoyance. “You used me again.”

“Not yet.” Marc grinned. “You haven’t answered.”

Adrian snorted in admiration. “Yes, you can speed it up. Bonding with a mate.”

Marc’s smile faded. “Full bonding?”

Adrian looked back without betraying his jealousy.

Marc shook his head, enjoying the images. “Too soon. Next?”

“There is nothing else. This isn’t an engine you can modify to get more power. It feeds off love. Nothing else.”

“I’ll wait.”

“I wasn’t saying you should or shouldn’t.” Adrian wanted that clear. “You asked. I answered.” He tilted his bottle up.

“It is, right? Too soon?”

Adrian choked on the drink.

Marc snickered.

It bothered Adrian when he did a fast count. Six weeks wasn't much, but it was enough.

"I already know that."

"Waiting for her to come to you?" *'Cause that might work.*

"A willing woman is worth waiting for." Marc's fingers played with the cap again. He had no interest in drinking.

Adrian took another drink of the warm beer. He already had a small buzz. Since the war, his drinking had faded into almost nothing. "How long can you hold out?"

The cap under Marc's restless fingers popped off, making them both jump.

"I see." Adrian belched again. "Well, good luck with that."

Marc flung the foam from his hand onto the rocks. "Why do you disapprove? I'd have thought you'd be happy that I'm waiting to knock her up again."

"I didn't say to knock her up at all." Adrian's voice dropped to a mutter. "But we both know you get to at least try."

"So?"

"So, nothing. It would make her happy. I don't care about you."

"There's the truth."

Adrian frowned at Marc's sarcasm. "Did you expect me to declare loyalty just because you've accepted things?"

"A little, yeah."

“Good, because I’m going to, but not in the middle of this pit.” Adrian gestured upward. “When you get us out of this mountain and she’s smiling again, you’ll have it without needing to ask.”

“I can’t imagine that day.”

Adrian shrugged. “I’ve seen it, but I have no idea how we get to that point.”

Marc sipped his beer. “Moments like these.” He held out his bottle. “To Angie. The one thing that will always keep us from tearing these people, and each other, apart.”

Adrian clinked and drank, surprised. He didn’t speak, however. He knew better than to ruin the mood.

Marc stood up, leaving the bottle. “Again tomorrow?”

Adrian nodded, unable to make a joke. He was looking forward to it. *How did that happen so fast?*

Walking away, Marc didn’t have to hide his triumphant smirk.

Chapter Fourteen BK8

Picking Sides

1

“**T**hat is one of the most awful things I’ve ever seen.” Kenn looked up from the images. He’d been hungry until Angela ordered him to check the cameras. “Are we really going to show this to the camp?”

“Yes.” Angela surveyed the laptop feed. Kenn was concentrating on those who were dying. She was more interested in those who had life yet to abuse.

“In two days, they’ll all be dead.”

Angela winced this time. “Yes.”

“Can’t we wait? Things are so calm right now.”

Angela scanned the small cavity Kenn had claimed for security. “That’s the problem, grunt. The Onion man is coming, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” Kenn switched off the feed, then closed the laptop. “In the morning?”

“Yes. You deliver the news.”

Kenn grunted. “Figures.”

Angela saw Marc duck into the weapons room. Curious, she went to the doorway. *Why is he sorting laundry?*

“Making a better bed. I hate lumps.”

Angela stared. Marc’s jacket was hanging on the wall, drying from where he’d cleaned off the blood with snow before he came in. His bare arms and chest beckoned to her fingers. *Come rub me...*

Angela shook off the daze. “Uh, what?”

Marc chuckled. “We’ve got two weeks’ worth of water.”

“That’s good.”

“You can have a shower. I put clean clothes in your kit.”

“Has everyone else gotten one?”

“Everyone who wanted one tonight. The morning line will be irritable and lengthy.”

“Yeah, maybe I will.”

Marc glanced up as chills went through his gut.

Angela was caught in a web of desire. When she’d scoffed about physical bonding, she’d been upset and not remembering how hard it was to ignore her mate.

Marc returned to making the bed, hoping she hadn’t noticed his fast scan. Her mood was good for what he had planned.

“What *do* you have planned?”

Marc smiled, not stopping. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

Angela’s cheeks were pink from the vibes. “You think I’m going to cuddle with you?”

Marc used his charm, but he also added a healthy burst of his newest skill.

Angela tensed as a hand slid down her cheek to brush hair from her face. “Wow.” She stared. “Where’d you pick that up? Julia?”

Marc froze. He’d forgotten about Julia. “Uh, Charlie, actually.” Marc caught her frown and distracted her. “I didn’t know about Cody.”

“You’ve made a habit of that.”

Marc felt his heart drop. *Please don’t view it that way. Like with you, it was a special circumstance.*

“She lied to you.”

“Is it so hard to believe that a man in a moment of passion would accept the woman’s word on birth control?”

“No.”

“Then why are you mad at me?”

“Because she isn’t here to be a target for my jealousy.”

“It was years after us.” Marc paused. “You’re jealous?”

“Not enough to kill her, but I could have shoved her into a wall a few times and still slept okay.”

Marc snorted, thinking of Adrian. “That’s only level one, baby. It gets a lot worse.”

“Heard you two had a sit down.” Angela came in a few steps, happy with the stacks of kits and boxes that had been gathered. It wasn’t just weapons in this room anymore.

“We talked for a bit.”

“Anything I should know about?”

“Nope.”

Angela heard the tone. “Marc?”

He peered up at her with a childish stare of innocence. “Yes, dear?”

Angela groaned. “Oh, hell. Look, I’m sorry, okay? You forbid me—in public. I had to.”

Marc nodded, tucking corners of clothes around edges of more clothes. “I hear ya. You had to do it. I get that.”

“Oh, man. Please?”

“Trade me for something.”

Angela felt the trap, but she didn’t know how to avoid it. “Like what?”

“Don’t bust my balls over Julia again.”

“In exchange for you not ragging me about being reckless since the quake?”

“If you don’t keep doing it.”

“Don’t forbid me. Convince me or take me along.”

“Deal.”

Angela made a face at his immediate agreement. “You plan this?”

“I’m just keeping to our deal.” Marc found a stray corner to labor on in dedication.

“Uh-huh.” She studied his efforts, enjoying the vibe he was throwing out. “What *do* you have planned for tonight?”

“You should get a shower. No offense, but you stink a little.”

“What?!”

Marc ducked the lighter she threw, chuckling. “I’ll be down after you.”

Angela grabbed the new kit he had put together for her and stomped from the room.

2

“Where’s the boss?”

Kenn jerked a thumb toward the top level. “She got a shower and went to sleep. What do you need?”

“Where’s Marc?”

Kenn made the same gestures. “Got a shower and went to sleep.”

Adrian’s mood fell. “Well, I guess that’s good.” He held out a sheet of wrinkled paper. “Updates.”

Kenn put it in his pocket. “What else?”

“Just a vibe. I’m doing a sweep.” Adrian moved away, hunting.

“Good or bad?” As soon as Kenn said it, he realized Adrian was only wearing boots and jeans. It had to be bad to bring him from sleeping in Nancy’s arms. Kenn began listening, hoping it was minor.

A gunshot ruined that dream.

3

Adrian slapped the gun from Stanley’s hand. “Use your knife!”

The clumsy rookie flushed as sentries came from every direction. He grabbed his knife and hurried forward to stab at the three big ants that squealed in anger.

Stanley jumped backward, letting out his own squeal.

Adrian sighed.

Stanley flushed darker. "I'm sorry."

Adrian spotted Marc coming through the tunnel, also in jeans and boots. "You aren't yet, but you will be." Adrian went back the way he'd come. "Bye."

He went to the bottom floor to let Kenn know what had happened. Then, the former leader took a liberty that he didn't think Marc would mind. Adrian sent out a strong wave of sleepiness. He couldn't do it for long, but the blast usually hit everyone. He hadn't used it much on Safe Haven because it would make the guards sleepy too, but Adrian was willing to take that risk. If these people didn't get a full night of sleep now, even Angela wouldn't be able to control them tomorrow.

Angela stretched out on the warm, lumpy bed, trying to stay awake until Marc returned. She'd told him to let the Eagles handle Stanley, but his answer had lingered.

"I want that place in their minds."

After some of the thoughts from the camp, then his comment, she had a suspicion she wanted to confirm before she fell asleep and forgot about it.

Right outside the room now, Marc paused. *Damn. I shouldn't have said that.* He waited for a moment, keeping his mind secure behind the new shield he'd been playing with all day, but it was clear she was waiting up for him.

Marc went to the bottom level. He found Adrian next to Kenn. Both men stared at him in wary, weary resignation.

Marc stopped on the ladder. “Can you do that again?”

Adrian nodded. “Yes.”

Marc waited, looking upward.

Adrian realized why Marc was waiting. He grunted. *You get a new gift and she's the person you practice it on?*

Marc's grin widened. “You were first. Now do it.”

Adrian bowed in sarcasm, then sent out the blast, using another chunk of energy to make it a strong dose. Despite what Marc was using it for, he had asked for something. Adrian would deliver.

Marc yawned so hard he shuddered. “Damn. Nice.”

Adrian beamed.

Kenn rolled his eyes at the blatant manipulation, but kept his mouth shut. *You won't get me so easy.*

Marc gave him an approving nod for keeping his mouth shut, adding a light blast of approval.

Kenn fought the urge to bow in return.

Marc smirked at Kenn's confused expression, then went up the ladder.

Adrian shook his head as Kenn yawned. “I knew this would happen at some point, but I believed I'd be able to hold out longer.”

Kenn shook off the daze. “On what?”

“Becoming a convert. He’s actually a good leader. It’s hard not to respect that.” Adrian walked away before Kenn could ask another question. “I’ll be around.”

Marc snuck into the weapons room and pushed his boots off. He moved slow as he slid up against Angie’s warm body. They’d almost been asleep when the gunshot echoed.

Marc tucked the blanket around her shoulders and put his head down. He’d rubbed her back for half an hour. She’d been jello under his tender hands. He’d been hard enough to dig them out of the cave.

“You’re awful slick these days.”

Marc tensed.

“Anything you want to tell me?”

“I’ll rub some more if you let it go.” Marc’s face was buried in her hair.

“I’ll let you do more than rub if you confess. Don’t make me torture it out of you.”

“What?”

“Don’t give me that innocent crap.” Angela rolled over to face him, not trying to find a comfortable position. She’d given up on that yesterday. “You know what I’m talking about.”

Marc leaned down to kiss her, wishing it had been longer since her injury. “No deal.”

Angela snuggled up against him. “Hold me like we used to?”

“Anytime you want.” Marc shifted, pulling her onto his chest.

Angela was sleeping a minute later.

Marc spent some time enjoying the sensations of her warm body, the rise and fall of her chest, her scent. *I've missed this.*

Angela snuggled closer, hand gripping his hair.

Marc smiled in contentment and joined her in sleep.

It took Adrian another hour to figure out that Marc had put him on duty without assigning him to it. Marc had known the sentries would fall asleep if someone didn't keep them alert. He'd also known that Adrian would worry over it and be the one to keep them all awake.

"He's getting better at this too." Adrian headed for the mess to check on the kids. "I'm never going to be able to keep up."

4

"Got a minute?"

Simon paused at Kenn's question, worried and angry. "Did Angela send you?"

Kenn ignored the other camp members in the water chamber who were helping Theo and Ozzie get the supply tube reconnected to the cave plumbing. All of them were pretending it didn't stink bad enough on this level to make their guts churn. The bodies in the tunnel were rotting. They would have to be dumped soon.

“Of course.” Kenn leaned against a wall, out of the way of the early morning crew.

Simon’s expression slid into relief. “I’ve been waiting for the vet.”

Kenn snorted. “She’d send Marc for a public execution.”

Simon paled at the reminder of Tony’s death. “I didn’t have anything to do with that plan.”

Deep in the man’s mind, Kenn was able to tell that was true. “Why do you want to be the leader here?”

“We have to have someone normal to lead the normal people.” Simon had let his voice carry.

Mutters echoed from those in the shower line who had heard him.

Kenn felt his dander rise and smacked it down. “And?”

“I don’t trust anyone here enough to vote for them.”

“Why do *you* get the deciding vote?”

Tall, muscular, and arrogant, Simon stared back with blank brown eyes half hidden by his shaggy brown hair. “Why wouldn’t I? My father was a governor. So was his father before him. My family was born to lead.”

Kenn didn’t waste any more time. He headed up the ladder. The camp had adjusted to careers like Simon’s better than he’d ever imagined they would. After Samantha’s confession and leadership defending her, the herd had realized government employees weren’t to blame. Adrian’s confession

had also helped with that. He'd pointed them at the real culprits.

Passing the blocked training rooms, Kenn stopped, drawn by movement. He spotted Ray sifting through a rubble pile, alone.

Kenn joined him, off duty until Angela woke. He waited for Ray to speak.

Ray was smothered in dust, dirt, and horror. Dennis was dead. Dale believed Ray had asked Angela to do it. *I'm an Eagle. I have honor. I wouldn't do that.*

Kenn believed him, but he also knew Angela wouldn't have interfered in their personal life that way. She had more important issues to spend her time on. Kenn thought about the images their camp was going to view in the morning, then about how few Eagles they had now. "We could use you for protection over the boss."

"Which one?"

"Marc." Kenn adapted, hoping Angela wouldn't be upset.

Ray gave him a curt nod. "I need to clean up."

"Visit Dale on your way through. He's awake."

Ray stiffened. "He'll scream again."

"Maybe." Kenn headed toward the ladder, yawning. It was exhausting to read minds. "Stay away from the vet. He's off limits."

"He did it?"

"Yep. Marc...spoke with him."

Ray followed Kenn, interest piqued. "Bet that was fun."

“Come do rounds with me during breakfast. I’ll drop you off with Marc when he’s ready.”

Ray brightened. He wanted to be busy and he trusted Marc.

Me too. Kenn sighed, tired of ladders and ropes. “We’ll begin with the shower line. I hear a fight.”

Ray listened hard, but he didn’t hear anything.

He did by the time they made it to the bottom floor. Camp members were harassing someone who had gone over their allotted time in one of the two portable showers.

“Break it up!”

“Stop it! Get in a damn line!”

Ray’s barking shocked more people into obedience than Kenn’s did. Ray sounded as if he wanted to tear them all apart.

Kenn scanned the tired guards, flashing an old signal that never failed to please. *Shift ends in half an hour.*

Men grinned, straightening. They returned to their posts without scolding the camp members.

Kenn saw Greg, Morgan, and Natoli’s group coming from the top levels to help. He sent them a quick signal. *We’re 5-by.* All of those men were due down here soon for the next shift. “We’ll hang out here until duty change.”

Ray didn’t respond. Dale was sitting behind the ladder they’d descended, staring at him. Ray couldn’t tell what Dale was thinking with all those shadows hiding his expression, but he could guess.

“I’ve got this.” Kenn gestured toward Dale.
“He’s calm. Go try.”

“I don’t know what to say to make him believe me.”

“The truth. Angela wouldn’t have done it. Neither would you.”

“I’ve tried that.”

Kenn took a chance, wanting to be able to help his friend. *I’ll listen, if I can.* Kenn sent it mentally to find out if Ray was okay with him being so personal.

Ray didn’t care. He would do anything to help Dale. He walked toward the man with slow steps, giving his mate time to react.

Dale tensed, lips coming together into a thin line.

Ray forced himself to keep going.

As he neared the ladder, recovering wounded and camp members waiting to shower quieted to listen. The guards prepared for noise. Dale wasn’t speaking to anyone without making a scene.

He’s not sure how to react. Go slow. Kenn stayed out of Dale’s line of sight while he concentrated. New, he hadn’t learned to mask his facial responses yet.

Ray stopped a few feet away. “Can I talk to you?”

Dale didn’t want to be sedated again. He controlled his anger. “I’m okay for a minute or two...I think.”

Ray knew not to get close. He struggled to find an opening that would reach the troubled man. "I wouldn't do it."

"She would."

Don't lie.

Ray didn't. "She would if she found something bad."

Dale's hands clenched into fists. "Yeah."

"I don't believe she told Chris to do it. I think he was trying to be a friend."

"To you!" Dale spat.

"Maybe. I want to ask him when they find him, but...I'm scared to know the answer." Ray's voice cracked. "How am I supposed to live with it?"

Dale hadn't known Ray was experiencing that too, but it didn't ease the rage. "You're going to the island?"

Ray shrugged. "I want to. Will you come with us?"

Dale immediately shook his head. "No. We're through. Please go with your masters."

Ray swallowed that blow. "You can come. You'll be safer with us."

Dale glared, tears starting to roll down his cheeks. "You should leave. I can't take your lies."

Ray wanted to say more, but he wasn't sure if anything would succeed. Dale knew the vet had killed Dennis without orders, but that didn't matter. He was hurting and taking it out on everyone. "Please don't do this. Let me help you."

Dale began screaming.

Ray backed away as the doctor rushed over to sedate the man.

Jimmy had been observing with everyone else; he'd instructed a student to get a syringe ready.

Ray walked to the ladder with scarlet cheeks and stiff shoulders. When he went up and out of sight, Kenn didn't blame him. The Marine wanted to help, but Dale's mind was full of bright rage. It would be a while before he could be reasoned with, but even then, he would never trust another descendant. Half the camp felt that way. Kenn didn't believe Angela would be able to sway those people into going. The earthquake had taken over a hundred. The aftermath was removing double that number. When Safe Haven rolled out, it would probably feel like the old days when Kenn had first joined Adrian's camp.

Kenn tried not to be happy about that part of it and failed. He had hated it here. The only thing that made it tolerable was when their leaders were happy. Now, they were all stuck in here with misery beyond levels anyone could tolerate. Kenn couldn't wait to be free of this cursed ground. He doubted he would ever agree to try a mountain settlement again, no matter what landmass it was on or who was in control. Humans weren't meant to live in the earth. He hadn't appreciated that before. Adrian had, though. He'd known it wouldn't work.

Man, I wish the camp had listened to him.

Chapter Fifteen BK8
A Father's Love

1

“**M**orning.”

Kenn jumped at the voice behind him, spinning around to fight.

“Easy.”

Kenn tried to recover, not wanting the guard to know he hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings. “Yeah, I've heard that about you.”

Morgan chuckled. Dressed in Eagle gear, he had blended into the shadows of the tunnel. With so many noises from repairs, he couldn't hear problems coming, so it was important to be able to see them before they saw him. Even in this grave situation, he hadn't been able to resist scaring Kenn. That opportunity didn't come around often.

Kenn continued to the mess, aware of the camp waking. It sounded almost normal, but they were all on borrowed time. Marc getting the thin flow of water running a month ahead of schedule was almost a miracle. They had weeks of food again, thanks to the butchering that had been done without the vet's sullen attitude. The power would hold for a little longer without outside repairs. And none of that mattered. The vibes were clear. These people

couldn't endure anymore bad luck. At the next crisis, the camp would stampede, forcing Eagles to shoot them or let them out. Kenn didn't know what Angela would decide on that. She wanted to save everyone, but she had also helped nature and the second war to kill off large chunks of the post-war population. Kenn paused in his steps toward the short line for a cup of Brittani's strong coffee. *She's thinning the herd again.*

It's not me. Angela entered the mess, not glancing at Kenn so he wouldn't be able to absorb her pain. She still didn't want to bond with him, for any reason. *Fate has control now.*

"Grab it!" Fresh thuds and clanks echoed from another level, along with shouts and a thick thud of something falling.

People in the mess flinched before realizing it was a repair crew. New ladder anchors were being hammered in, air vents were being forced into new shapes to fit new spaces, and cables were being nailed into the ceilings that remained. The constant symphony of noises grew louder, waking those who had been sleeping.

Pushing for more information, Kenn kept his tone neutral. *You didn't tell the vet to handle individuals or give mental pushes to—*

No... But I'm no longer interfering. Adrian was right about that in some ways. Fighting fate is exhausting. I don't have the strength to defend from all sides.

The floor of the mess now consisted of steel plates, wooden beams, plastic patches, and thick welds that made walking hard. Because it had collapsed during the earthquake, most people were sticking to the edges that hadn't fallen, refusing to trust the engineering. Angela didn't blame them for that, but she strode across the middle of the floor with her chin up, trying to remind them it was fine when the cave wasn't shaking.

The rear of the mess, by the burnt kitchen, was full of tables and chairs that had been stacked to make space. Around that crooked wall of beaten furniture were bags and boxes that had been pulled from various rubble piles. Brittani was scrounging meals from there and from the refrigerator on the crushed level. Marc had chosen to keep it all on the same floor, including storage. The smells were unpleasant, deterring people from digging there unless they had to.

Angela and most of the Eagles were wearing the spare uniforms they kept in their kits. Everyone else wore mismatched collections of whatever they'd been able to locate. Workers were digging out blankets, medical supplies, and gear, but any clothes found were being used for blankets and not being worn. Kenn wrote it in his book. While the camp was working, he would confiscate the laundry and hand it out to individuals who didn't have shirts or pants. He couldn't do much about the bare feet. A large pile of shoes was on the bottom level, pulled from bodies, but the camp had refused to wear them

out of respect for the dead. Some of the Eagles had tried to convince people their loved ones would have wanted the shoes used, but it had caused fights, so Marc had ordered the men to stop insisting. Kenn wrote in his book again. If they could alter the shoes enough so they wouldn't be recognized, Marc could tell everyone they had been in the rubble pile with their excess stocks.

Without planning it, Kenn asked a question that had been nagging him since Angela had returned from Little Rock as leader of Safe Haven. *Why am I still alive?*

Angela sighed. She'd been asked that twice today and it was only breakfast. *Why do you think?*

You knew it would be this bad, that I'd be needed.

Angela felt his next question coming. *Was there anything I could have said or done to get them to skip this cursed ground?*

Kenn considered as he poured his coffee from a dented steel pot. *I doubt it. Other than bad events when we arrived... Kenn stared at Angela in shock. You are ruthless.*

Angela faced the rickety tables instead of him. *I tried everything I could think of, good and bad. I borrowed ideas from history and from people who had ideas, but didn't volunteer them because the plans were too bloody or too risky. Then I stayed to save as many as I could, even though I knew going in that only half of us would come back out.*

Kenn and Angela tensed at a wave of anger.

That choice cost us a child. Marc entered the mess, glaring. For people who don't deserve the loyalty!

Before Angela could respond, Kenn scowled at Marc. *Get off her. She's saved your life too many times, so you don't get to act righteous when you're benefiting from her plans.* Kenn stormed from the mess.

Surprised, Marc lifted a brow at Angela. *Is he okay now?*

She went to the farthest table to observe while she finished waking. *No. None of us are.*

Marc felt her mood worsen and realized she'd sensed something. *How bad is the next blow?*

Extinction level. If I don't kill Dirce, he takes control of this country and wipes out all American survivors.

Why? Wouldn't he at least want slaves? Marc tried to joke, but deep down, he knew better. If they lost the fight, becoming UN slaves was the best outcome for them.

Dirce believes his people at the UN headquarters are counting on him to clear North America for their arrival. He won't stop until we're cleansed and he can report it done.

Isn't he going to be easy after the battle we had with our own government?

Should be? Yes. Will it be? That's up to fate. I can't view beyond the avalanche. Angela motioned toward the tense couple entering the mess. *Jennifer had the dream. Get your coffee and we'll listen.*

“I don’t like this.” Kyle led Jennifer to Angela’s table, scowling so hard that kids hurried to surround her with their protection.

Angela held up her hand. “It’s okay.”

Kyle’s face went blank as he realized he was scaring the children. All except Autumn, who was enjoying attention and care from Samantha and Neil, who had insisted they needed the practice. Both Kyle and Jennifer had refused to consider bringing the sensitive baby up here where the smell of smoke hung in the air, lingering to remind them all of what they’d suffered.

Jennifer ignored his worry. “I trust Angela and so should you.”

“It’s not her. It’s *you*. You’re so blinded by whatever common goal brought you two together, that you’ll put yourself in danger to accomplish anything she asks.”

“Yes, like you’ve been doing all along.”

“Exactly!” Trapped, Kyle’s lips thinned into a line.

Jennifer smiled at Angela as Kyle slid the chair out for her. “Morning, Boss.”

Angela patted Jennifer’s hand as she sat down. “Get a pain pill the minute we’re done or I’m going to tell Jimmy to put something in your water the way John did with me.”

Jennifer made a face. “Tattletale.”

With her hair in a messy braid and arm in a sling, Jennifer didn’t appear capable of what the future held, but Angela wasn’t fooled by the

outside. Jennifer would tolerate less than she or Adrian had when she took over. The teenager would become a powerhouse of right and wrong.

Kyle stomped to the coffee line. Jennifer had told him she'd already taken a pain pill. He hadn't confirmed it with the doctor. *I will from now on.*

Jennifer studied Angela, noting the mood of deep despair. She got to business, glad that she could help. "It's not good. The cave collapses again. We need to be in the corridor where Charlie found Shane." Jennifer pulled her jacket closed and zipped it up over her injured arm as best she could. The colder air was from drafty passages that were no longer sealed all the way. Rubble piles blocked them from intruders, but not the wind. Jennifer missed warm heat flowing from the vents. Those were gone now, crushed and buried when the ceilings had collapsed.

"What about the one we're digging?"

"No good. The refugees force their way in right as we clear it." Jennifer began to recite her dream from the beginning as Marc and Kyle lingered to drink coffee, listen, and worry.

While Angela and Jennifer talked, descendant kids began to arrive for food. With not enough tables, the kids were directed to Angela's corner of the mess to sit on the floor. None of them spoke. It was clear they were being careful around the alpha.

The non-magic kids and their guardians came in next, casting nervous glances at the other inhabitants.

Leeann stood up before Angela could tell her to.

The three dozen adults in the mess went quiet as they realized something was about to happen.

“We’re sorry for being mean to you.” Leeann’s tense little shoulders became ridged as Angela stared at her. “And...we’re going to become your friends. Right now, the...Angela wants us to protect you.” Leeann joined Roy and Romeo, who had just come in with Doug. “Come on, I’ll help you get a cup.”

Doug scowled toward Angela, but Roy and Romeo had been at the meeting and felt Angela’s displeasure. They knew they had nothing to fear while the boss was so close. The two boys followed Leeann into the food line.

Doug left before he could argue with the choice. Showered and wearing an Eagle uniform, Doug was one of the rare clean inhabitants in the camp and more than lucky as far as everyone was concerned. The body pit was supposed to be a one-way trip.

The other descendant children also chose a non-magic kid to help, but they didn’t speak. They joined the child they’d chosen and waited for them to adjust.

Angela didn’t comfort the guardians or worry over the descendant kids being mean when she wasn’t around. Magic kids obeyed their alpha. It was in their DNA, but until now, their alpha hadn’t known about their treatment of the camp children. *My mistake. You’ll have to monitor them when I can’t. The non-magic kids will realize our children*

can't hurt them and take advantage. Get them to become friends.

“I will.” Jennifer didn’t believe it would be that hard now that Angela had given orders. In fact, Jennifer was optimistic that trouble might even be over.

Most of the thoughts floating around were about getting out of the tunnels and into the sunlight. Angela didn’t detect worries over the refugees or the UN troops who were coming. Her people just wanted out of the mountain, at any cost. *Things are about to get uglier.*

“We have a missing kid!”

Marc and Angela shared a glance of dismayed realization that not all of their traitors had been caught after all.

“Who is it?” Marc went to Nancy, who was once again crying.

She staggered against Marc. “Cody! I was in the bathroom for two minutes and we had a guard on duty!”

Marc concentrated despite knowing his grid was useless right now. Getting nothing, he looked at Angela, who shook her head. “Does anyone have him?”

Kids and adults hesitated to speak for fear of being reviled as a descendant.

Angela sent a wave of calm as she rose. “Chris?”

Everyone was unhappy to witness the vet emerge from the dark kitchen. He stood in the

doorway, rumpled and stained. “Either Logan or Greg.”

Angela ignored the mutters and cries from supporters of both men. “Which?”

Chris’s green eyes grew hazy. “He took the boy through the body tunnel while the guard was talking to the doctor. He has all the medicine.” Chris shuddered. “I won’t do this one.”

“Damn right, you won’t!” Ray marched toward the vet. “You’re under arrest for murder!”

Ray’s fury was underscored by a countenance that implied he hadn’t slept well, if it all. His rumpled clothes and light beard would have been a giveaway under normal circumstances, as Ray preferred to be neat at all times, but right now, he was wearing what everyone else was—exhaustion.

“Dennis was a molester.” The vet didn’t budge from his weary, slumped stance. “He would have dragged our friend into it. Dale hates us both now, but he’s still good and still alive, isn’t he?”

Ray paused to regard Angela as the camp muttered around them. “How can you trust him?”

“Where do you think he got the information?” Angela’s tone was cool. “I could have announced it, let Dale be killed too when the camp strung Dennis up. Would that have been better?”

Ray shook his head in weary frustration. “I can’t go with you.”

Angela had been expecting that. “It’s your choice. It always has been. Gather a team for a manhunt. Chris is scared of ghosts down there.”

“Ghosts of those he’s killed?”

The vet didn’t respond to Ray’s bitterness.

Angela didn’t either.

Ray stormed from the chamber to do as he’d been told, furious and without an outlet.

Let him lead the team.

Marc agreed with Angela’s mental suggestion. Ray needed to vent his anger on someone.

The vet went back into the kitchen to curl up and sleep.

Daddy! Help me!

Marc groaned as a crushing sensation settled into his chest and tore his heart apart.

Help me, Daddy!

Marc ran, beating Ray and everyone else to the ladder.

Angela gestured Eagles along, also reeling from the desperation in Cody’s message. It wasn’t pain, but horrible sadness that another parent might fail him. Angela wanted to be with them, but she wouldn’t be able to keep up with Marc. Only a few of their military men or fathers might be able to.

I can...if you want.

Yes, please.

Kenn’s heavy boots went stomping by the mess.

Trusting Kenn to help, Angela waved at nervous camp members gathering in the mess entrance. “We have the images from outside. You can view them if you want to. You won’t be able to eat afterward.”

Distracted, a small group went to the laptop that Kenn had set up in the far corner. Angela hadn’t

asked why he'd decided to put it in here, but assumed it was a wire issue. To get power to other levels, Theo and Ozzie's team had been splicing and dicing. They were working long hours to accomplish that.

“Oh, my God!”

The woman's exclamation drew the rest of the camp over to the small screen.

Angela didn't stay for the reactions. Once people got over revulsion of the bodies, happiness would come that another enemy had fallen. Then, they would begin to wonder what kind of a leader could let so many Americans die such a horrible death. *If my herd gets any thinner, it won't survive on the island.*

2

Many of the bottom floor residents jumped up in fear as Marc slid down the ladder and ran to the rear corridor. It was worrisome to witness him panicking. They'd known the man to always be cool and calm unless Angela was in danger.

Jimmy didn't glance up from his examination of Samantha's leg. He could only handle one problem at a time.

Marc barely noticed the reactions or smells as he ran into their impromptu morgue, but it was a nightmare without his grid or his demon. Like when he'd been alone after the war, Marc had to force himself to keep going. Back then, it had been letters

searching for missing Americans tugging on his guts. This time, corpses glared at him with unforgiving accusations. Cody could be buried under any of the rotting bodies, but Marc was counting on the kidnapper wanting a descendant to help them survive in the wilderness. Greg and Logan were both smart enough to pull it off, but Marc had figured out which one was guilty. What he didn't understand, was why.

Marc jumped over three corpses, recognizing all of them. Workers had been careful about stacking the bodies at first, but after bringing fifty friends down, they had been tired and depressed, just wanting to be done. The result was a four-foot high wall that was ten bodies wide, surrounded by haphazard piles and shorter stacks in horrible stages of decomposition.

Disrespectful.

Marc shoved the thought away. Disrespectful would be what came after the stacking.

Marc ran by the bodies, but there was no time for planning as the passage ended in a wider area that was blocked by the cave-in debris that had trapped the Mexicans. The pit where workers had dumped the Mexican bodies was along the wall. Next to the pit, Logan was crouched down, holding something.

Marc's gut twisted as he realized it was Cody. Logan was holding him by a thin wrist, dangling the boy over open space. If Marc attacked, Logan would let Cody fall.

Cody whimpered, but he didn't struggle. Logan's grip wasn't steady.

In the corner, Tonya's mangy cat observed the scene with glittering yellow orbs.

"I wasn't certain that you cared." Logan saw Marc's arrival. "That's why I took the medicine too. Even if you don't want the boy, you need the medicine."

Logan didn't appear to have slept since the quake. He glared at Marc through bloodshot, angry eyes that held no trace of their previous friendship.

"What do you want?"

Logan let out a weary sigh. "To go back in time."

Marc used his alpha command. "Pull him up right now! You don't have the strength to hold him. Your arm is shaking."

Logan did lift the boy, but only enough that Cody's terrified little face came above the edge of the pit. "Make me one of you."

Marc didn't betray his fear. That was something none of them could do, so he lied. "We'll need the alpha."

"Then you'd better get her down here. Not working out daily has cost me muscle mass." Logan heard more steps coming toward them and flinched, grip tightening. "Please help me. I don't know what's going on."

Marc swept the man again, recognizing Logan's pre-quake clothes. He hadn't slept, changed, or eaten. All of those were bad, but the insanity peering

from Logan's eyes spoke louder. In that moment, Marc recognized the symptoms of mountain sickness. "I'll help you. We can help you."

Logan snorted in soft resignation. "Death by Marc or retraining by Kenn. Not much of a choice."

"There are other options." Marc wanted to get closer. He also wanted to use his grid to discover where his backup was, but he didn't take his attention off Logan. If the man let go, Marc would follow his son. He hoped the bodies down there might break Cody's fall. "You need to rest. It doesn't have to be this ugly." Marc used a light wave of this new gift, trying to get Logan to snap into himself. "Let me help you."

Logan didn't feel anything but anger. "Like you helped Tim?"

Marc sent a stronger wave. "He was a traitor. You have an illness. You're sick."

"Stop saying that!"

Tonya's cat fled at the shouting, staying along the wall to duck into a crevice and vanish.

Logan's arm shook as he stared in hatred. "You caused this. It started when you picked Quinn over me."

Bangs and clangs sounded, telling them repairs were continuing. For an instant, Logan's eyes flickered with horror and awareness, and then he shut down. "Make me a descendant."

"Keep the kid." Too aware of time running out, Marc sent a mental order and spun toward his surprised men.

Logan gawked in confusion. “What?”

“I’ll post guards here so when you come out from hunger, you’ll be shot. There’s no reason for me to stay.”

“I’ll drop him!”

Marc shrugged at the scream. “I’ll make a new one.”

Desperate to stop Marc from leaving, Logan yanked the whimpering boy up and wrapped his big arms around Cody’s little neck. “Come back or I’ll snap it!”

“Like this?” Kenn reached out and snatched Logan into his bigger arms.

Logan’s hands came up, attempting to reestablish an air supply.

Cody dropped to the rocky ground, gasping.

Kenn twisted, using a burst of strength the struggling man couldn’t fight. The crack was awful.

Marc rushed to check Cody for injuries while the rest of the hunting party provided security or resumed their posts.

Ray didn’t stare at Dale’s den as he went up the ladder.

Dale stared until Ray was out of sight.

“Are you okay?”

The little boy held onto Marc’s arm. “I don’t feel good.” Cody threw up, splattering them both. “Ugh. Sorry.”

Marc scooped the boy up. “No worries, son. It all comes off in the wash.” Marc switched the boy to his back.

Cody held onto his father with a relentless grip as Marc climbed the ladder, followed by an Eagle escort. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I didn’t kill him.”

Marc missed a step and slipped, hand coming up to catch Cody. “It’s okay. That’s not your job.”

“I’m also sorry for what my mom did to you.”

“Also not your fault. When you’re older, we’ll discuss that, but I didn’t leave you then either. She stole you from me.”

Cody wasn’t ready to talk about his mom yet. “You lied a lot to Logan.”

“Yes. Thank you for knowing it wasn’t true.”

“I did, but the other man told me that too. He’s happy now.”

“What do you mean, now?” Marc sat the boy on his feet as they reached the mess level. “You didn’t know Kenn before.”

“I mean since the earthquake.”

“When his gift arrived?”

“I guess.” Cody tried to fix his collar with his left hand.

“Here.” Marc helped Cody take off the splattered jacket and then guided the boy into the mess. He wanted to watch him walk to determine if there were other injuries.

Angela was by the entrance with her medical kit. She knelt down in front of the boy, noting how calm he was. *He’s a Brady.* “Not upset, huh?”

Cody shook his head, watching Angela's orbs sink into his wrist as Marc and Kenn blocked the camp's view. "My Daddy's a badass."

The other adults laughed while Marc breathed a sigh of relief that he had retrieved the child.

"You're pretty scrappy yourself." Angela wrapped a loose bandage around Cody's wrist, glad she'd had her medical bag with the kits on the top floor. "You have a sprained wrist and a nasty scrape on your ankle, but you'll be fine." Angela took the bag from Kenn, glad it wasn't covered in Logan's blood. *Thank you for making it quick.*

Kenn nodded at her and went to get Marc a cup of coffee. He could hear the man wishing for something to soothe his nerves. Kenn wanted that too. When Marc was twitchy, *everyone* was twitchy.

Becoming aware of stares from camp members who had watched the laptop feed, Angela walked toward the exit. She'd returned when Marc did, so she could examine Cody. Marc didn't trust Jimmy with his son since the doctor disliked descendants.

"Stop."

Angela paused, heart pounding. "Why? They're already afraid of me."

"We respect you for making hard choices." Marc hoped saying it would make it true for the camp and for her. It already was for him. "You did it for our survival. We know that. We also know it hurts you."

Angela fell back in love with Marc in that moment. Her aching soul rushed out to connect with his in a flash of need and completion.

Angela locked down on her emotions and sat at the table by Cody, obeying Marc's wishes. She hadn't wanted to hide at all, but her worry over his opinion had clouded everything. She'd assumed he was disgusted by her callousness when the camp was threatened.

Never. Marc sent his own wave of love and need. *You're my Angie.*

My Marc.

"My God!" Cynthia entered the mess, sarcasm carrying. "How is anyone supposed to eat with that mushy crap going on?"

Cynthia had traded the medical gown for dirty jeans and a sweater, shunning the spare Eagle clothes. So far, she'd adjusted well to waking up in this situation, but everyone was watching for signs that her mountain sickness wasn't under control. Jimmy couldn't cure it, but he could drug them. That came with a new set of problems.

Cynthia gave Marc a wide berth after getting a cup of coffee. She was lucky to be both alive and still pregnant. That was making it possible for her to control herself. If Angela wanted the baby dead, he would have been killed in the quake.

"I've got room here."

Angela's offer brought silence from those observing and sent Cody to a different table. He didn't like Cynthia.

Cynthia had tensed, flushing at Cody's denial of her company, but she accepted that he was Marc's son and she had tried to kill Marc. His reaction was reasonable.

"Is that a good idea?" Kenn frowned as the reporter carried her cup toward the boss. "She has a guard, but I don't think we should let her around any of the council."

Angela waved off Kenn's concern. "She's been ill. Let's treat her like it."

Kenn shrugged at the lie. He hadn't hesitated to kill Logan and that man *had* been sick with the mountain disease that caused paranoid, schizophrenic behavior. Kenn wouldn't hesitate with Cynthia either. Her baby wasn't strong enough to kill, not even in defense. It would be over quick, like Angela would want.

Are you sure?

Kenn ignored his demon's warning, loathing that evil. It had been in his mind every time he'd beaten on someone, spurring him on. It was a shame that he would never escape. *Can I keep my gift if I banish the monster?* Kenn stewed on it as he went to do a round of the cave.

His demon didn't speak again. It was too scared.

Angela marked that off her list as something else that had never been done with descendants, but Kenn's reform was something she would continue to monitor. If he ever showed signs of reverting, she would kill him herself. Old debts had been overlooked, but nothing had been forgotten.

Chapter Sixteen BK8

More Questions Than Answers

1

“**T**his is Seth. Come in, Safe Haven.” Multiple radios crackled with his cheerful voice. “Hello, Safe Haven?”

Angela grunted in frustration as the call echoed across the mess of citizens eating oatmeal from dented plastic cups. They went from watching council members and kids, to staring at her with pleading expressions and thoughts.

Angela shook her head at Kenn, who had stopped at the call. “We can’t. The UN is monitoring all broadcasts.”

“When will Kendle arrive?” Kenn tried to help by diverting the camp’s focus.

“Three or four days.” Angela’s tone was sharp due to her previous thoughts. “We’ll clear the blockage while everyone out there is distracted.”

“Will we have enough time?” Kenn assumed Angela was ready for his leading questions. Adrian always had been at this point.

Angela observed Cody and Missy playing tic-tac-toe on the dirty floor. The thin boy didn’t appear upset by his ordeal; he was just glad that Marc had

cared enough to come for him. “The waiting isn’t over for us yet, but it is close. In less than a week, anyone who wants to go will be able to.”

Doug stomped from the mess without speaking to anyone.

Angela understood his reaction. Doug was feeling guilty because he was relieved by the decision not to answer Seth’s call. He didn’t want Becky to know her mom was dead. Doug hoped the girl was recovering from everything she’d been through since the war. Peggy’s death might derail that.

Subdued conversations and noises floated through the air, but it wasn’t the happy chatter of before. This was a tense feeding at a waterhole known for taking lives without warning.

We have to stop eating in here now.

Marc nodded. *I’ll figure something out.* The floor collapsing had ruined this space for anything except storage and preparation, and even those chores would be handled with mistrustful glances. Marc was glad people weren’t blaming the crew who had installed both floors. They understood the earthquake and structure of the mountain were at fault.

They should. Kenn joked from across the mess. *You’ve had the Eagles say that enough.*

Marc grinned and went back to scanning. The odorless, tasteless oatmeal was even being eaten by the kids today. It was all they had and bellies were growling.

Angela hated that, but ration conditions were required. The oatmeal was healthy, which would keep her workers on their feet where she needed them. Hoping to get reluctant individuals to follow her lead, Angela made a show of eating her cup. The faces were almost real. *I hate this stuff.*

In two weeks, you'll have cinnamon rolls.

Angela squinted at Kenn, stomach clenching as the thick goo hit bottom. *How?*

We're entering a cinnamon growing zone for the US. It needs special conditions. We're almost certain to locate a farm that's been overlooked.

Angela felt her spirits lift a bit. *In winter?*

It'll be warmer once we're off this mountain.

Angela had forgotten that some southern areas didn't get much snow or cold. *Thank you.*

For what? Kenn was confused.

For giving me something good to think about. Spread it around about the warmer temperatures where we're going. If I've forgotten it, so have they and we need all the good vibes we can make.

A woman's throaty chuckle rang out, drawing their attention. Gus was joking with his mate, putting her in a good mood to start the day. He and Brittani were in the corner by the charred, dark kitchen, working from a set of long tables piled with cups, sporks, oatmeal packets, and pans of boiling water on hot plates. That corner of the mess had an odor other than smoke or sweat, but a few steps away lost the scent. The entire cave system was beginning to reek. The lack of illnesses and fast

recovering wounded were bright spots, but Marc knew the calm wouldn't last. All of their problems were going to converge if they didn't get a handle on them soon.

Speaking of future problems. Marc scanned for the person giving off the unstable vibes slapping him, waking his demon, and found two. It wasn't hard to determine which woman was the threat.

Sitting by herself, Candy listened to the whispers in her mind. One was arguing in favor of killing Angela to escape this tomb. The other said if she could be strong enough to hold on for one more week, she would regain control of her sanity.

Angela gestured Kenn toward Candy. "Put her to work on something."

Kenn went that way. The hairdresser wasn't speaking to anyone or making eye contact, and her appearance was worse than most of the camp despite her not being awake for the quake. It appeared as though she'd been rooting around in debris piles on her hands and knees.

"Must be nice to be queen."

Angela studied Cynthia, changing her mind about putting the reporter to work yet. Cynthia wasn't stable. "It must be nice to blame everyone else for your choices."

Cynthia flushed. "Why didn't you kill me?"

Angela sighed. She was tired of that question. *Can't they just be glad that I didn't?* "For the same reason I didn't eliminate Candy and others. We need you."

“Our duty to the kingdom isn’t over?” Cynthia couldn’t stop being snarky. It was all she had left in her heart. Waking up to find the camp destroyed and her hold over Angela reduced to ashes was hard to swallow.

“Our duty to humanity.” Angela stood up, sensing Cynthia needed space more than insults. “I believe that.”

Cynthia let her go, brooding. If she was wrong about Angela, she had a lot to make up for. If she discovered she was right, there was a queen to behead.

“Don’t make me kill you.”

Cynthia froze at Marc’s growled threat in her ear.

Marc leaned down so he wasn’t overheard. “You don’t have mountain sickness as an excuse. You’re being corrupted by Adrian’s evil seed.” Marc patted her dusty shoulder, making the reporter jump. “If you can’t be loyal, be very careful to follow every single rule. I can change Angela’s mind about you with one sentence.”

“What’s that?”

I don’t trust you around our people. Marc left the reporter sitting there with a pale face and a mind full of confusion. Like everyone else, he was surprised Angela was giving the reporter another chance.

Do you really feel that way? Angela was in the drafty corridor, trying not to be drawn into a deeper depression at the sight of dirty stuffed animals piled

by the reading chamber. Many of their owners were no longer alive to love them.

Marc wrapped his arms around Angela and buried his nose in her hair. *I don't trust any of them, vetted or not. You shouldn't either.*

Angela hated it, but he was right. The camp members here now weren't killers or traitors, but they were dangerous because they were so scared. In fact, that might make them even more of a threat than the UN. "One more week. Then we're clear for..." Angela paused, mind taking her into the future.

Marc waited, sweeping guards and people around them. There was curiosity and relief, but there was also resentment and jealousy in their minds. Everyone wanted the powers of a descendant.

"Are we ever going to get a break?!"

Angela complaining while in a trance shook Marc more than her tears might have. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Angela connected their minds. "We're being sent to Market Town."

Marc caught images of Eagles ramming tall gates to kill almost everyone. "What reason could we have for..." Marc picked out signs of slavery and felt anger rise to smother protests of more killing. "Damn it!"

Angela agreed. She was beyond tired of this job, but she would do it until she was dead.

Angela came out of the daze. She saw this tunnel had a sentry. It was more than they could spare from crews, but Marc had put a trusted man here anyway. Daryl was loyal to both of them, so she didn't need to censor her words. "Get a plan ready for it? Since we're the power on US soil, we have to handle it."

"I will." Marc kissed her cheek and then her lips. "Come back and eat more goo?"

Angela grinned, trying to force light into their lives. "Maybe you should get a shower..."

"Yeah. You too, now that I've dirtied you up again."

Angela took his hand and led him toward the ladder. "You wash mine..."

Marc was chuckling as he descended, but he understood what she was doing. Each level they went down revealed more misery than the floor before it. If these people didn't get a break soon, the council wouldn't be able to bring the camp together. Angela wanted to show them that no matter how ugly it got, life had to continue. It was okay to take a break, but giving up wasn't an option.

2

Angela entered the dank monitoring cubby where Samantha was on duty and shut the door before anyone except the guards saw her.

“Sorry, we’re closed.” Samantha knew she sounded curt and tried again. “I have to eat. Come back later.”

Angela fastened the thin barrier, aware of how it muffled the sounds of her huge camp. She needed it to do the same from the outside.

Samantha swiveled around to get mean. She had to talk— “Oh, good, it’s you.” Samantha grabbed a paper from the neat desk. “We have another problem.”

Angela took the satellite image that had been printed.

“I’ve been studying that picture.” Samantha pointed to the center. “Yellowstone is still active.”

Angela sank down into the empty chair. “We need to talk.”

“You know something.”

Angela couldn’t hide her mental agony. “There’s little that I don’t see, Sam.”

Samantha started to make connections, but Angela wasn’t positive there was enough time to let her. Death was flying toward them, rushing over the broken country like a plague. “I need you to help me make a choice.”

“What kind of choice?” Samantha asked warily. The last time she’d had this conversation with Angela, it had led to awful destruction.

“As it will this time.” Angela put the paper into a pile on the desk, lining up the edges. “I need to know if the benefits outweigh the crimes.”

“Is there another choice?”

“There’s always a choice.” Angela motioned to the dark monitors. “We can fight.”

Samantha blanched. “Next?”

“We hide in here and try to survive what’s coming. People will die in either case.”

“Numbers, then.” Samantha concentrated. “Which one saves the most?”

“Exactly. Except...” Angela tried to hold in the tears. “It hurts too much this time.”

Samantha assumed Angela had come to her for strength. “There’s nothing I can say that will make it okay if you don’t tell the camp. Not letting them make their own choice is wrong if it’s life and death.”

“I know.” Angela was certain Samantha would catch on, but she worried Jeremy or Neil would interrupt them before she could finish this horrid business.

“Are you talking to other people tonight?”

“Yes, some.”

Sam’s pale face went green. “My clock stopped.”

Angela’s tears came. They rolled over her cheeks in fat drops of remorse and grief. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, God!” Samantha shuddered. “You’re here to handle my last wishes like you did with John.”

Angela leaned forward to take Samantha’s cold hand. “No, Sam. Not you.”

Samantha's free hand went to her flipping stomach, but her heart knew better. "Neil or Jeremy? Which one am I losing?"

"That has not been revealed."

Samantha snapped awake with a strangled gasp that brought Neil to her side.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Samantha chose not to tell him about her bad dream. That moment with Angela had happened hours before the earthquake hit and it would haunt her forever. If she'd told someone, Jeremy might have lived. With this pain in her heart, she didn't care that it would have cost them the camp.

"What did you dream about?"

"It's snowing again. Temperatures out there are falling fast."

Neil covered her with his jacket. "Good evasion."

"It really is snowing."

Neil went to the tarp entrance instead of sinking down next to her to crash. He didn't want to sleep until Kyle was back on this level. "I'll tell a guard on the next sweep. I don't want to get in the way of the crew lugging garbage down."

"Okay." Samantha tugged a corner of the jacket over Autumn. The baby had been sleeping next to her since Jennifer and Kyle went upstairs.

With two salvaged tarps and one of the ropes that he and Kenn had used to reach Samantha, Neil

had formed half a square against the wall across from the pit tunnel. The tarp shack provided privacy and held in warmth, but it also gave him a place to stash the items he was collecting on his scavenging trips. He had bags and boxes around the edges, preventing the draft from entering. Samantha was against the wall on the air mattress he'd inflated, but it bothered Neil that he couldn't offer her a shower or a hot meal that wasn't oatmeal or broth. She needed food, water, and a safe environment. They had none of that.

Samantha smoothed her reeking shirt. "I'll wear my Eagle set now, if you'll bring it down."

Neil knelt to dig through a nearby bag, not scolding her. He'd mentioned it yesterday, but she'd snapped at him. "I brought it down when I collected mine."

Samantha studied Neil, noting he had his uniform on; all of his spare ammo pouches were filled. He was expecting trouble. The feeling was unmistakable.

Samantha sat up straighter, hiding a wince. Jimmy had given her a shot, but it hadn't been morphine and she had a high tolerance for drugs. Not that she planned to mention that. Samantha would rather tough it out than to fall into that drug haze again.

Being careful not to wake the baby, she gathered her hair and began running her fingers through it to brush out the tangles. Neil's glance had revealed how bad her appearance was. Samantha hated

herself for worrying about things like that right now, but she still fixed her hair.

“What are they doing?” She was supposed to be resting, but she was bored and useless.

“Concreting the pit.” Neil watched from the tarp entrance. “They’re dumping debris down first, hoping to block the hole and give the concrete something to stick to.”

“What are they using for water?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Can I see?”

“No. Stay in bed.”

“What about dinner?”

Neil sighed. He knew she needed to be around the others, but he wasn’t positive he could stand it. Angela’s comment about giving birth alone had bothered him, but the idea of staying with Safe Haven for that moment was worse. “Okay.”

Samantha smiled. “Cool. I’ll even take a nap.”

“That’s a great idea.” He came over to help her slide down on the mattress and rearrange the sleeping infant. “Can I get you anything?”

“No.” Samantha held onto his hand. “You’ll stay?”

“You know it.”

They both winced.

Neil recovered first. He leaned down and hugged her, but he couldn’t take away the pain. That’s why he didn’t believe they should stay here or go with Angela to the island. Every Eagle

moment would be a reminder of Jeremy that stopped them from forgetting.

“I don’t want to forget.” Samantha held in the tears. “I want to honor him. He’d be ashamed of us for leaving when we’re so needed.”

Neil knew that, but he didn’t want to go through it if he had another option.

“I’d never force you.” Samantha felt his struggle to find the right words. She paused for him to collect his thoughts, listening to the workers and the wounded on the level around them.

“I can’t stand being around them because it will hurt me every time I’m reminded of what happened...of how I couldn’t save him.”

Samantha shuddered. “That’s how I feel too.”

“Then why do you want to stay with Safe Haven?”

“Because Jeremy did.” Sam fought the sobs. “He wanted to walk in the surf with his son.”

Neil held her as she cried, barely keeping from it himself. Jeremy had been the partner that comes along once in a lifetime.

Samantha didn’t let herself cry for long. She knew Jeremy wouldn’t want her to be miserable. He also wouldn’t want her to abandon their leaders.

“Okay.” Neil caved without a fight, as he’d known he would. They’d both lost a wonderful soul from their lives. They would cling to each other and honor his memory.

“Dump in the next load!”

Samantha and Neil both tensed, pain rising. Jeremy would remain in the mountain that he had feared so much. There was nothing honorable about it.

Neil dropped down on the rock he'd dragged over for a stool, grunting at the soreness. He hadn't had more than three hours sleep since Jeremy's death.

Footsteps came.

Simon paused to wave at Samantha.

Neil glared until he left. "Let me know if you have more trouble with him."

"I will."

Simon hurried out of their view, leaving them to stare at the ladder, and behind it, Dale. He had made a den there and hadn't left it as far as either of them knew. If not for the doctor bringing him food and water, Dale might have died with no one to notice. Samantha wanted to talk to him, but after the way he had spoken to Ray, it was clear that descendant contact wasn't welcome.

A cluster of Simon's camp members walked by next, also waving at Samantha. They were hoping to sway her into staying here. Angered, Neil went over and dropped the flap he'd created with a sheet.

Outside their den, labor and grief echoed without end.

Adrian snapped awake as pleasure shot through his body, bringing him to full hardness in seconds. He figured out what was going on and carefully rolled over. “Figures.”

He yawned, stretching, and then brought down a mental shield that he hoped would prevent more of Angela’s desire from getting through.

He had chosen to sleep on the level that was crushed because the Runaways had claimed a corner near the corridor where Charlie had found Shane and fought the Mexicans. Adrian was uneasy to have that group so close to freedom. They might make a run for it and leave the camp wide open to invasion while everyone slept. Knowing he was on this level would slow their possible plans.

Oh, Marc!

Adrian jerked upright, on fire. “Oh, hell!”

Grouching, he headed for the top levels to get coffee and find a distraction. On the way, he stepped into the cold draft instead of avoiding it, hoping it would help. He didn’t care as much about Marc loving her, but he didn’t need to experience it. *I haven’t been with a woman in so long that I might drown the next one.*

Adrian shifted his tacky jeans to one side, allowing for the unwanted growth. Not doing so wasn’t an option. He hurried down to the bathroom, glad someone had put a tarp barrier between the port-o-potties and the bodies.

Fighting a gag, he held his breath to do his business. *This has to change soon or we'll all be sick.*

Adrian went straight back to the ladder when he finished, not glancing toward the couple in the shower by the water chamber.

Piles of supplies were building up in all the corridors on every floor. Many of the items were unusable, but crews sorting through debris didn't know what else to do with it. For some reason, the two-foot layer of toothbrushes bothered him more than the shoes in the body tunnel.

It was also colder up on the top levels, something their inhabitants could handle if outfitted correctly. Angela had ordered mattresses given to the wounded and to the kids. The children, along with the elderly, would share those beds in the rear of the TV room. The body heat would keep those two vulnerable sections of their population warm for a couple of days and then the coughing would start and illnesses would finish them off.

Yeah... Oohh...

“Oh, come on!” Distracted, Adrian missed the rung on the ladder. He kept a grip, but not his footing and slid down the wood to land in an awkward heap on the cold floor. Adrian took a deep breath as a roaming guard detoured in his direction.

“You need a hand up?” Morgan tried to hide his amusement and failed.

Adrian grunted in resignation, still hard. “Up isn't my problem.”

Morgan helped the man to his feet, chuckling. He didn't have a woman in Safe Haven either and he'd heard Angela's moan as he passed by the shower. "She wants you in the small training room tonight."

Adrian spit out a splinter from his hand, admiring Morgan's semi-clean uniform, but he didn't comment on it as he scanned the quiet floor. It was two hours after dinner and most of the camp was sleeping. "Aren't those rear chambers blocked?"

"Yeah. That's why she wants you up there."

"Really? Perfect." Adrian climbed the ladder, being careful this time. Clearing it would be exhausting—exactly what he needed.

Morgan resumed his rounds, going to the crushed level next. There was a lot of work waiting. Morgan estimated it would be a month before the cave was repaired, but he hoped Angela wouldn't change her mind and stay to help. *I can't be in here much longer.* Voices in the walls were whispering ugly things whenever he was alone. It was becoming harder and harder to ignore them.

4

Adrian found light glowing from the small training chamber and realized someone was in there. Eager to be with his men again, Adrian nodded to the two sentries, then slid through the gap and into the tight space that hadn't been blocked.

Charlie extended a paper without glancing up from the game of checkers that he was playing with himself. "Updates. Coffee is on the ledge by your shoulder."

Adrian stood there for a moment, trying to understand what was going on. It had been a rough week.

Charlie jumped three spots and kinged himself with rocks he was using in place of the missing red and black tokens. "I'm with you until this shift ends."

Adrian added up the pieces, including those Marc had given him the night before. "You're okay with it?"

"My dad made a promise."

Adrian's happiness fell. "That was before, though, right? When you didn't hate me as much."

Charlie nodded, but didn't add to it.

Adrian retrieved the coffee mug and skimmed the notes. Coming out of the blue, he wasn't prepared for this, but he would give Marc and Angie what they were hoping for with their rebellious son. This wasn't the first time he had helped to correct a child on the edge of taking the wrong path in life. It also wasn't the first time he had feared failing to correct that child's path. There was a lot riding on this.

"No pressure." Charlie shoved the warped board aside, scattering the stones. "You're only gonna get this final chance with me and everybody else. You know that, right?"

Adrian opened his mind to the boy he would have been proud to call his son. “I’ll prove it. I am trustworthy now.”

Charlie stood up, dusting off his jeans. “We’ll see. In the meantime, this room needs to be cleared and she said you can train me while we’re doing it. Let’s get to work.”

Adrian chuckled. “You’re gonna raise more hell than your parents have, aren’t you?”

Charlie grinned, but didn’t add to it.

Outside the small training chamber, Kyle and Jennifer listened while on guard duty. Kyle hadn’t wanted to do a shift and be away from Autumn, but Jennifer had insisted they were needed. It also gave Samantha something to do. Autumn liked the storm tracker and Samantha wanted the practice. Since Sam was about to have two babies, Jennifer thought it was a great idea all the way around.

Kyle asked Jennifer a question that had been bothering him. “Why did she pick you over everyone else?”

Even though his tone wasn’t insulting, Jennifer was offended. “Why wouldn’t she?”

Kyle backtracked. “I know you deserve the slot.”

Jennifer flushed, hoping he would let it go. “Sorry. Eagles are competitive. It rubs off.”

Kyle laughed. “I know what you mean.”

Jennifer leaned against Kyle’s arm, sweeping the cold passage where random camp members

were walking around in an effort to keep busy. Survivors were now experiencing guilt because they were happy about the deaths outside. Full of conflicting emotions, most camp members weren't speaking to anyone, even among their own clans. Jennifer also believed the pit work had brought such a somber mood to the cave that it was impossible not to feel the weight of the latest tragedy they'd survived.

"You'll still be banished when we bugout, right?" Charlie's voice dared Adrian to give the wrong answer.

"Yes."

Jennifer and Kyle were both relieved to hear Adrian's confirmation. Neither of them had faith that this trio would achieve the peace Samantha, Jeremy, and Neil had enjoyed for such a short time.

"But you'll be training us?"

"That's up to your mom and dad, but I assume so."

"She said to ask you if I would do as your right hand. If not, she'll send someone else."

"I'd be honored to have you as a student."

Waves of bonding floated out of the room, making Jennifer breathe a sigh of relief and Kyle grit his teeth in annoyance. *That bastard always gets away with it.*

Jennifer patted Kyle's arm. "He hasn't gotten away with anything."

Kyle took that to mean Charlie would put Adrian through hell during the training process. It brought the happiness back.

Kyle spun around to sweep the corridor. They had full power on the top floor and limited power on all of the levels below them. The refrigerator was working and Ozzie's team was trying to repair their deep freezer. Kyle remembered putting that thing together and grimaced. They had two more in boxes, but he didn't want to help. In fact, Kyle didn't want to be involved in any of the repairs in this cave. He was positive that within a month of Angela leaving, everyone here would be dead. He didn't see the point in wasting manual labor on those who weren't going to survive.

Jennifer agreed, but she knew it would hurt Angela to leave the Mountaineers in a desperate situation and that was unacceptable. What the boss needed, she would get. Jennifer planned to see to that personally.

Chapter Seventeen BK8

Nutcracker

1

“**T**he numbers are holding. Dangerous but not deadly.”

Angela pulled a face. She’d been hoping for an answer one way or the other. “No up or down at all?”

“Nothing that Samantha felt comfortable enough to write down.” Ray didn’t tell her about Neil’s bad attitude. He didn’t need to.

Angela sighed. “Thank you for the update. Go to bed now.”

Ray departed without promising anything. His misery was obvious.

Angela was still in the mess, where the rumble of machines was drowning out hundreds of tired citizens gathered for dinner. They’d all spent the day salvaging and repairing while Brittani cooked. The resourceful woman had cleaned the stack of crockpots that Li had insisted be brought into the cave. Stored in a corner of the mess, the pots were dented, but worked, and the scent of cooking meat had been floating through the dank cave in thick waves for hours. Even that had caused hard feelings. The hunger was a reminder that normal activities

had to continue, no matter how awful the day before had been, or the week before, or the year before. The world didn't stop spinning because of misery, but it always created an atmosphere of bitterness tinged with guilty relief. Even those who hated the world moving on were glad when it did.

Angela sympathized, but she'd known this was how it would be as soon as she brought them here. The awful flashes of what Safe Haven was going to suffer had tormented her almost nightly. The will of the people had been hard to accept, but she had, and now, they were a week from the end of this ugliness. All she had to do now was kill two thousand UN soldiers.

Around them, the cave shifted and groaned, loudly. Small rivulets of dust and dirt rained over the levels. It had been doing that the entire time they'd been here, but now, it seemed ominous. The twitchy inhabitants all quieted, glancing around in concern. They were holding dented, warped bowls of soup with bandaged hands. They belched, scratched, sniffled, and coughed, but their attention stayed on the cave.

When it quieted, they were able to breathe again.

The complaints resumed immediately. The two biggest gripes, after not being able to get out of here, were divided by the sexes. The men mourned the lack of pain medications like Advil for their sore, cutup hands and weary legs. Digging through rubble was dangerous and painful, as was the constant

climbing. Used to being in pain but having to pretend they weren't, the women cared about sleeping on the hard, rocky ground. They wanted off the cold floors and into the warm beds that used to protect them from drafts.

Angela saw Greg coming her way with a grim expression and sighed. Too many more days like this one and she might snap.

Hang on. The UN is a great target and the battle isn't far away. Keep your shit together!

Glad no one had noticed her mental fight with herself, Angela drew on her stash of patience.

“Can I talk to you?”

“Of course.” Angela led the Eagle toward the kitchen as the camp observed, speculating on what would happen.

Greg followed, unhappy with what he was about to do, but there was no doubt that it had to be done.

Angela flipped on the light, ignoring the pet in the charred corner who peered up in wary concern. The kitchen hadn't been cleaned yet, but it was covered in two prints—one a man, one a cat. The walls were black. Ash was thick across the floor and warped shelves that had tried to withstand the heat. The extinguisher foam had dried into hard flakes on top of the ash, sending up small puffs of dust from Greg's feet as he joined her.

Angela faced him with a blank expression. “What can I do for you?”

“I was accused of being a traitor. I want you to search me and clear me.”

Angela held out her hand. “We have to be touching for the search you want, but it isn’t needed. We all know you aren’t.”

“But you don’t, not really.” Greg shot an ugly glare toward the vet. “*He* put doubt in everyone’s mind. I need that gone or I can’t be in your army anymore. I may not even be able to stay in your camp.”

“You’re too closed off for me to read without touching you and I couldn’t do that without you noticing.” Chris paused, and then forced himself to finish it. “I was wrong. Sorry.”

Mollified a little by the explanation, Greg shrugged. “I can get with that. I don’t worry over you the way the others do because the boss trusts you with her life. Don’t make another mistake, though. You’re out of rope. I have a camp of friends staring at me as though I’ve done something wrong. This may ruin my life here.”

Chris nodded. “I’ll fix it.”

The trio paused as something moved in the rear corner of the kitchen. They watched in silence as Li appeared, walking between appliances that didn’t exist. All of the stoves and such had been dragged out after the fire, but Theo had chosen not to put them in here because this is where the fire had started and he didn’t want to take the chance on it happening again if there was another quake.

Angela was aware of Chris studying the ghost. She thought the vet would flee, but he stared at Li with sadness.

“He was nice to me.”

Angela’s heart broke again. “I’m sorry.”

The vet shrugged. “We all die.”

“Some sooner than others.” Angela clamped down on her misery. “Li loved to cook. He still is.”

The ghost vanished, leaving a tense silence that spread out to the mess where people quieted to listen.

The vet caught Angela’s mental order to get lost. “Excuse me.”

Angela touched Greg’s hand. He wanted her to support his innocence and she would if she could. “If you’ve been hiding things, this is a chance to confess.”

“I’m an Eagle in Adrian’s army.” Greg straightened his shoulders. “I have nothing to hide.”

“Then stand and be judged.” Angela’s witch slammed into Greg’s mind without mercy, finally able to break that mental barrier. She’d asked the vet to observe Greg for that reason. He had one door she hadn’t been able to view through.

Welcome home.

The witch purred in response to Angela’s greeting and then dug into her work with a new strength.

Greg tried to hold that final door shut, but the witch wrenched it open to reveal his love for someone who was already taken.

Greg bowed to the power. *I never meant for it to happen. I would never come between them like the others have.*

You are judged innocent. The witch withdrew, satisfied.

Angela wasn't. Thanks to Adrian, she knew how dangerous the situation could become. She stared at Greg as she released him.

Greg knew what that meant. "Please don't. You'll destroy what's left of the teams."

"*You* could have that honor, if it gets out of hand. He has a right to know."

"Yeah." Greg sighed. "I'll leave when the tunnel opens. As soon as he finds out, I'll be ostracized."

"When it opens, if you want to leave us, you can. But wait to tell anyone, will you? I'd like to think on it."

Greg assumed she was trying to figure out a way for him to stay. He wanted that too, but didn't see how it was possible. "I'm sorry."

"So am I." Angela motioned toward the mess. "Grab some coffee and sit with me for a while. We'll begin there."

Greg let out a deep sound of relief. Once the Eagles saw Angela accepting him, the vet's momentary doubts might be forgotten.

In the distraction, Angela sent a hand code order to Zack, who had duty over the mess.

Zack frowned. He didn't want to give the vet food and water or a blanket. He wanted to put a bullet in the man's forehead and dump him with the other bodies.

“Will he be okay overnight with such a light shift on duty?” An hour had passed since the show, but few inhabitants had gone to bed yet. Kenn didn’t like the mood of the camp, but it was more than that. He just didn’t want to say it.

Angela wiped dampness from her bloodshot eyes so she could see to scan the mess. More tables had been brought in to accommodate the doubled number of people in here. Everyone had come for this meal. With the smell of meat floating through the cave, the mood had lifted a bit. Everyone was having apples that had been foraged from the crushed levels, tea and coffee, fresh bread slices, and chunks of meat that Brittani had cooked in condiment packs all day.

The resourceful woman had topped the meal off with small bags of trail mix that had dehydrated berries, nuts, and granola. Crews had pulled all of those items from rubble piles.

“He can handle it.” Angela swept Adrian’s table. It was him, with Charlie, Zack and his boys, Donald, Allan, James, Peter, and Bruce. All of them had duty together as point guards over the levels, but there would be another dozen Eagles reporting to them—including Greg.

“If you say so.” Kenn didn’t like the idea of anyone performing those duties for Adrian, let alone a 14-year-old boy. Word had gotten around that Charlie was now Adrian’s student.

Other than Kenn, no one appeared to care. Around the mess, descendant children and non-magic children were eating together. There wasn't a lot of conversation, but the awkward gazes from this morning had been replaced with expressions of frustrated annoyance. After they were finished eating, Tracy and the other women were going to help the kids with showers. Natoli and his warriors were guarding the reading chamber tonight, where all of the children and their guardians would be. The entire camp was sleepy, like she'd been hoping for. The true aftermath of the earthquake was arriving in the crash. It would allow these folks to rest, but upon waking, they would be even more volatile than they had been today.

Angela inspected the mess again, picking out people she needed to speak to and people that needed to speak to her. She gave Greg a quick glance.

Greg never looked up from his bowl.

He doesn't think about it often. I've been monitoring his memories and thoughts since we found out. Angela's witch had returned in full force, eager to be useful with her new powers.

Angela was curious about those, but she was too tired to explore it right now.

Across the room, Angela noted Shawn and Doug standing behind the table that held Cody, Missy, Leeann, Roy, Romeo and half a dozen non-magic kids. It was clear from Doug's expression that he didn't want to be here.

He's leaving when the tunnel opens. Angela's witch dug deeper. He is not going with us.

That doesn't surprise me. Doug has the boys and he feels responsible for Becky. He'll join her and Seth. Angela turned toward the entrance of the cave as the chatter around her came to a halt.

Jimmy pointed at Simon, who was sitting near the center of what he considered his camp now. "I challenge you for leadership."

Angela sighed in resignation as the camp lit up with fresh chatter at the second surprise show. She stood up. "There is a challenge for leadership. Before we go to the trouble of the next step, is there anyone who will support Jimmy?" Angela wanted to do it herself, but couldn't. It would be a conflict of interest. That rule would be added to the new constitution draft while they were on the boat.

"I second Jimmy's challenge. Simon isn't fit for leadership." Neil came through the passage and stood by the surprised doctor. "Simon tried to force Samantha to stay. Jimmy told her it was her choice and ran Simon off." Neil didn't mention the gun.

Jimmy was grateful. He didn't want his citizens to believe he was as violent as the leader who was leaving. "Simon doesn't care enough about right and wrong. I demand a vote."

Jimmy was covered in sweat and dirt. He looked nothing like a politician. Angela was certain that would swing people in his favor. Simon had also spent the day sifting through rubble, but he hadn't put his finds in the community bin. He hadn't taken

water to the injured or helped with body removals. Jimmy had done all of that and more. The two candidates were equally dirty, but only one of them smelled good to the five-dozen members of that group who were scattered around the mess.

In a corner, the Mountaineers watched without comment, eager to discover who they had to deal with in the future. Some of those who were leaving would come back here to trade if the mountain camp survived. Angela knew it wouldn't, but those who were leaving didn't care about her predictions.

The Runaways. Angela finally caved. She'd been calling them that in her thoughts anyway and it was on everyone's lips. The folks going off on their own would forever be known as the Runaways.

Angela held up a hand to stop the shouts and yells from supporters and critics. "To call a vote, someone not in leadership has to support your nomination. Neil is a member of my council and cannot do it. Will anyone else support Jimmy's nomination?"

The mess went quiet for a second and then it echoed with camp members who had been helped by the brusque doctor in their time of need.

"Me."

"I will. He saved my life."

"Me too."

"How dare you! You said you were on my side!" Simon shoved away from the table. "Fine! Vote! It won't matter. I have a lot of friends here!"

Adrian and Marc both stepped closer to Simon.

“We’ll hold a vote.” Angela regarded the fascinated, angry, tired populace. “Everyone meets here in one hour. If you’re not staying in the mountain, get done eating and be out of here before that hour is up.”

Satisfied, Jimmy went to the food line to get a tray. He was quickly surrounded by people congratulating him on standing up for something they felt he deserved.

Simon stormed from the mess.

Marc motioned a guard to follow the man. Marc was glad Jimmy had challenged the man, but Simon’s words had been true. He did have a lot of friends here—enough to win. *Maybe we can do something about that.*

Angela shook her head at Marc’s suggestion. *We’re not going to interfere this time. Fate has control.*

Marc didn’t argue.

3

“Let’s get clean, huh? Who’s ready?”

Nancy’s over-happy tone drew small cheers from the kids who were picking up on the tension of being on the bottom level while the Mountaineers held their vote.

Charlie observed the stream of kids, impressed with how well the women were handling it. Dirty kids were in a line, surrounded by guards from

Natoli's camp. Nancy, Courtney, and Tonya were herding the kids toward a tarped area that had been placed behind the edge of the wall by the water chamber, providing a semblance of privacy. As the kids finished, another group of Natoli's warriors took them upstairs to where the rest of the women and guardians were waiting to get them settled for bed.

Dressed in Eagles clothes that had been fastened with string, the children were miniatures of Angela's army. Charlie observed the difference in their moods. The kids in line were quiet, nervous. The children being taken upstairs were chattering at their escorts nonstop. Being clean was good for them.

The smells were better down here with the body pit closed, but only by a little. Human waste stank. There was no avoiding that. The clothes that were too dirty to be worn again were piled near the water room, drawing Charlie's attention. He had no idea what his mom planned to use them for, but she'd ordered all clothes to be kept, no matter their condition and he was curious about the order. It was minor, but he kept thinking about it, trying to figure it out. With his mom, the smallest details were often the most important. "My shift is about to start. Are you okay down here?"

Tracy nodded at Charlie's question, waving him on. She was busy trying to convince little Bobbie to release his teddy bear long enough to get a shower. "I'll hold him for you, okay?"

Bobbie pulled the filthy bear from her grip. “He keeps me safe.”

Tracy smiled, understanding. “Okay. How about we give him a shower too?”

Bobbie glanced down at the toy and then up at her. “Will it hurt him?”

Tracy knelt down. “Let me read his tag. It should say on there, if we can make out the words.”

Bobbie kept a tight hold on the bear’s leg as Tracy felt for the tag.

“Actually, you’re right. He’s not supposed to get wet.”

Bobbie wrapped his arms around the bear, lip coming out.

Tracy studied the boy, working on the problem. She could take the toy and make the child scream, but she couldn’t stand the thought. These kids had been through too much. “I’m the guard here. You know what that means?”

“You keep camp people safe.”

“Yes. You’re camp people. So is your bear.”

Bobbie peered at her through layers of dirt and distrust. “Are you a good one or a bad one?”

“One what, honey?”

“Angel.”

A descendant. “Oh. Well, I’m not one of them at all, but I am a good person.”

Bobbie was satisfied with that. He shoved the bear into her arms and ran toward Nancy, who was the main shower handler. “Get my legs. They itch!”

Tracy chuckled, standing. She glanced over to find Charlie gazing at her with emotions she hadn't witnessed since she'd been attacked.

Charlie sent his respect, his admiration. "You are, you know."

"What?" Tracy blushed at the heat in his gaze.

"One of us and a good person."

"I'm not a descendant."

"You're my chosen mate. When we have kids, you'll be one of us through that baby until it's born."

"That's not the same thing." Tracy's cheeks were scarlet at the conversation, but she refused to deny his words. It was what they both wanted.

"Are you sure?" Charlie hoped he wasn't pushing her too hard. He wanted her to know that nothing had changed for him except that he'd become a more compassionate person while caring for her.

"Yes. I love you."

Charlie came over to hug her. "I love you too."

Tracy sighed in contentment as he held her, rubbing her arms. He never crossed the line, but she knew he wanted to. That made it better. It proved he could be trusted to do the right thing.

Charlie stepped back, full of her scent, her exciting thoughts. "See you after shift?"

"You know it." Tracy watched him leave, heart settling into a normal rhythm. *My life was so empty before that young man picked me up and dusted me off.*

“You shouldn’t play with them, not even the cubs.” Simon came from behind the tarp where Samantha and Neil were living. “They’re animals. Be careful or you’ll get hurt again.”

Tracy scowled at the grungy man, smelling alcohol. “You’re supposed to be holding a vote right now. What do you want?”

“For you to stay here with us.” Simon leered at her, slimy gaze crawling over her tensing body. “We need normal, breedable women.”

“I’m sterile.” Tracy walked away, hoping that lie would discourage the man. Jimmy had declared her physically as good as new.

Simon studied her ass, belching. “Liar. The boy said *when you have kids*.” Simon took a small notebook from his dirty jacket and scribbled her name into it.

“Stop!”

Angela’s shout grabbed everyone. Her order was impossible to ignore or resist.

Simon spun around to find the vet standing behind him with a knife and an expression of confusion as he stared toward Angela.

Angela didn’t come down the rest of the way. “He’s about to show up to the vote drunk and lose. We don’t want him to miss that.”

Chris lowered his arm, smirking as he left. “Guess I’ll catch you later.”

Simon gaped at the killer. Angela was gone when he staggered around to voice a slurred protest. “Hey! Where’d she go?”

“The same place you are.” Adrian grabbed Simon’s arm and propelled him toward the ladder. When Angela had exited the mess without talking to anyone, walking fast, Adrian had followed.

So had Marc and several others. They all glanced down with sheepish expressions.

Angela chuckled even though she wasn’t amused. “We’re good. Let’s handle the vote.”

The guards kept their bodies between Angela and Simon as soon as she reached the next level, all casting dirty glares at the man. If the vet had marked him as bad, he probably was, but Angela’s words had declared him a drunk too and that would hurt the man worse.

Angela didn’t tell them the vet would handle it while the UN hit them. She didn’t know what Chris had pulled from Simon’s thoughts, but it had been about Tracy and bad enough that the vet would have killed the man in front of a line of showering children. “Get a guard ready for him. Simon isn’t going to like the outcome of the vote. He may need to be held somewhere until he calms down.”

“You did this!” Simon growled at Adrian when the man shoved him. “You turned everyone against me.”

Adrian stepped back, realizing Charlie was right to want Simon dead. “It can’t be me. I’ll finish what Chris started.”

Marc gestured Morgan to it. “If he becomes a problem, do it as quietly as you can.”

Simon stumbled, understanding his death was coming sooner than he'd anticipated. "I want out of here!"

"You have one chance for that to happen." Angela swung around instead of going up the next ladder. "Ready to listen?"

Simon flinched from her glowing red orbs. "Yes!"

"Be good. Think good thoughts."

"That's it?"

Angela snorted, but she didn't tell him it was too much for him. She motioned toward the ladder. "Your group is ready to hear why they should vote for you."

Marc was ready to grab the man as he shoved by Angela to get to the ladder, but Simon was filled with dread and fear. He couldn't think good thoughts. He didn't have any.

"Nice." Angela grunted as Marc put an arm around her. "Don't tell Charlie or Simon won't make it through the night."

"Too late." Adrian pointed to the teenager standing in the shadows by the ladder.

Charlie was staring at Simon.

Noticing the teenager, the man climbed faster.

"Don't!" Simon wasn't hurt as far as anyone could tell, but the man didn't stop yelling.

Angela sighed again. "He's going to fall off. Catch him."

Simon's screams grew louder and then stopped. He gasped, letting go of the ladder.

Adrian and Morgan broke his fall with their arms and hips, not catching Simon, but stopping him from being injured. He slumped into a pile at Angela's feet, wheezing.

Charlie came from the shadows. He knelt down to dig in Simon's pocket, ignoring the guards who edged closer to grab him if they had to.

Camp members were walking around the scene. Some were going to the mess to register their vote—drawn out of their holes at the chance to avoid Simon's leadership. Instead of fear, they glared at the cringing man on the ground with no sympathy for his pain. In a few of those expressions, Angela also found satisfaction. It sealed the deal for her. Simon wasn't going to be put in charge, even if the vote went his way.

Angela took the notebook from Charlie, scanning the pages without responding to any of the thoughts or concerns in the minds around her.

"It's a list of the females in our camp who can have children—including the children." Angela read the names. "Have someone talk to all of them. Find out if Simon has been bothering them."

Adrian swayed on his feet, ears buzzing, mind growing foggy. He'd been up for 24-hours now, as had Kenn, Charlie, and Neil. All of them looked rough, but no one doubted they could still be counted on if something went wrong.

"We wanted him at the vote." Marc glowered at his son. "You'd better have a good reason."

“He threatened Samantha. He was thinking bad stuff about Tracy.”

“So you popped his nuts for bad thoughts about your girlfriend?” Marc grew angry.

Charlie shrugged. “I crushed them a little. If you’d heard those thoughts about mom, the man would be dead. Even Adrian wouldn’t hurt her.”

They had all assumed Simon had been thinking about sex, but he’d been fantasizing about pain.

“He’s very jealous of the descendants. If he can hurt us, he will. That’s why Chris was handling it.”

“You knew what the vet was doing?”

“He should, since he called him.” Adrian knew that was the only way Angela had needed to come down to control Chris. She hadn’t given the order.

Caught, Charlie wasn’t sorry. “I was trying to keep my hands clean, but you saved him, so I had to interfere.”

“Why?” Angela wasn’t mad. She was worried she had missed something that Charlie hadn’t. She was also reconsidering her future plans for Charlie.

“I’m not going to tolerate that anymore, from anyone. Safe Haven is about the good, the light. We have to stop giving evil a pass because of politics.” Charlie left the trio of stunned adults standing there. He’d delivered a harsh blow, but they’d needed it.

He’d also told his mom that he didn’t care about the greater good. He would do what was right all of the time, no matter what it caused or who it hurt. Angela looked at Adrian.

Adrian shook his head. “Not me. Tracy might be able to do that. He trusts her.”

“Then that’s what we’ll count on. In the meantime, work hard on those lessons. He won’t take it from me, but he has to be able to see the big picture or I can never put him into a leadership position.”

“Maybe he doesn’t...want one.” Simon was trying to breathe so he didn’t pass out. “He enjoyed doing that to me. That’s why...we want you gone. You’re dangerous.”

“What about your list?” Marc let his demon dig in when Simon didn’t answer. Around the bright pain, Marc saw the fantasy Charlie and Adrian had. “You want slaves to abuse? Let me make sure you can’t do anything to them.”

Simon’s screams rang through the cave again, echoing to all corners.

Now on the bottom level, Charlie smiled in cruel satisfaction and continued his rounds.

The dim corridors echoed with footsteps now. Inhabitants came from the top and bottom floors to discover who was screaming and why, but the voters didn’t. They recognized the voice.

Simon didn’t notice. He was turning blue. Angela would have interfered, but Simon’s thoughts had flashed her to the slavers, to Cesar and the rest stop.

“Are you okay?” Adrian stepped closer to her.

“Yeah. It doesn’t happen often.” Angela was subdued. “But some horrors you never forget.”

Chapter Eighteen BK8

Survivor

1

It took a long time for Safe Haven to recover from Simon's screams. The guards didn't know what to tell people who gathered the courage to ask. Because Simon wasn't being touched by anyone, most of the camp assumed he was suffering from an acute case of mountain sickness.

Angela ordered him sedated and a painkiller given, but she didn't tell Jimmy why. Charlie and Marc hadn't touched him physically, but the mental pain had been debilitating. Simon would stay away from all women when he woke.

New concerns about the mountain illness kept the camp awake. It meant Angela had to stay up as well. These souls were too twitchy to be up without the alpha overseeing them.

Aware of how tired she was, Marc stayed nearby, watching out for her and helping.

Angela chose to handle one of her scheduled morning meetings now, detouring toward the kids' room.

The man sitting there peered up in resignation. "I felt you coming."

“You’re worried about nothing.” Angela didn’t have the energy to be subtle. “You are not a predator.”

Shawn flushed a dark red that almost matched the wrinkled shirt he was wearing under his Eagle jacket.

Angela placed a hand on his wrist, scanning.

Shawn was relieved that he hadn’t had to ask, but he was also scared that she would tell him she’d been wrong, that he was a threat.

“Do you feel like a threat?”

“No, but what about when she’s older? Will I be a danger to her then, like Billy would have been with Leeann?”

Angela snorted. “He wouldn’t have hurt her. They would have broken the rules too soon. With you, that’s not a problem.”

“Why not?”

“Missy won’t push you like Leeann would have Billy. She’s not as...forward, though I know it doesn’t appear that way. She’s just lonely.”

Shawn breathed a bitter sigh. “Yeah, who isn’t?”

“Your mate is here now. I’ll tell you the name when you’re ready.”

Shawn frowned. “But I thought Tara...”

“You assumed Tara.”

“Then the kid.”

“That’s Missy’s obsession, not yours. Do you remember the exact words of our conversation?”

Shawn struggled to pull it up. So much had happened since then.

“Get me to our new home by sunset and I’ll tell you which Eagle to ask for a one night stand.”

Shawn laughed. “What if I get you there an hour early?”

“I’ll tell you which one will sleep with you for the rest of your life if you want her to.”

“I can still give you those answers, one of them. Choose based on your needs right now, not on what you hope to have later.”

Shawn leaned in to whisper.

Angela blinked as he leaned back. “Wow. Really?”

Shawn nodded.

“If that’s all it takes to make you happy, consider it done.”

“Honest?”

Angela stood up. “Of course. I understand wanting time with him.”

“You can spend time with him now, I’ve heard.”

Her shoulders tensed. “Yes.”

“But you aren’t.”

“I’m very busy. We all are.”

“But still...”

Angela sighed. “I don’t want to hurt Marc, so I won’t until I can’t stand it. Desperate moments are the only kind we’ll ever have.”

“Until Marc...” Shawn dropped his chin at Angela’s wave of pain. “I’m sorry. It must be awful to know that’s coming.”

Angela grunted. “Actually, it gives me a chance to alter the future. If I didn’t know it was coming, I’d be blindsided.”

“That makes sense.” Shawn yawned. “I’d like to be put to work if my punishment is over.”

Angela chuckled, walking away. “You’ve been on duty over Missy and the other kids this entire time, Eagle.”

Shawn grinned as he realized she’d been using him without him knowing it. “That is so sexy.”

Angela’s raspy laughter floated through the tunnels, killing some of the fear.

2

Adrian had gone after Charlie. He didn’t believe it was good for the boy to be running loose right now. He needed to be busy. Adrian found him on the shattered level, digging through the rubble. “Want some help?”

“Sure.”

Adrian spotted the two piles and joined the boy in approval. The blankets and sheets would help the camp and the toys would please the kids.

“It’ll also get them out of the way while mom works on the next plan to kill everyone.”

Adrian paused, brow lifting. “You mad at her for that?”

“No, just cautious.”

“Maybe you should—”

“Put myself in her shoes?”

Adrian gave a curt nod at the rudeness.

“I can’t do that. She’s the alpha and I barely know what that means.”

“She’s your mom first and a leader second, most days. You just don’t use her for that anymore.”

“I don’t think she’s the same.”

“She’s not. She evolved. All of us could do it if we were strong enough, but only a handful of our kind ever achieves what she has. The war forced her to. You do know she didn’t want any of this?”

“She says that and my dad says that, but who wouldn’t want that kind of power?”

“Your mom.” Adrian sighed in wistful longing. “She never would have become this way if not for you.”

Charlie scowled. “It was all you and my dad fighting over her! I didn’t have anything to do with it. I’m a burden and a duty, like this camp.”

“She came for you.” Adrian sat down on the edge of a large, chipped boulder. “If you had been unhappy in Safe Haven, she wouldn’t have stayed. If you ever become unhappy in Safe Haven, she’ll walk away.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“You don’t have to. I know it.”

Charlie studied the man. “And you do know her better than my dad...”

“Yes. I accept the parts of her that he refuses to acknowledge. It lets me see what makes her tick and what ticks her off.” Adrian dropped his mental shield so there would be no mistaking his honesty.

“If you told her you were leaving unless she had the vet kill me, she’d do it.”

Charlie flushed. That’s what he’d been thinking about since learning Jennifer had been announced as the heir to that council seat and not himself. That would get his mom’s attention.

“Why would she honor you with leadership? Just because you’re her son?” Adrian snorted, standing up. “You haven’t acted like it.”

“She got Tracy raped and beaten!”

“No one catches everything, boy. Many people were killed. It’s called war for a reason.”

“We didn’t have to fight.”

Adrian stopped. “You think she should have given up and let the government have this camp?”

“Isn’t that what you were doing?”

“No, you don’t get to excuse that with my mistake.” Adrian didn’t pull any punches. “What you’re saying is you wish all of these American citizens were in a government bunker with your mom, all being tortured and abused, so your girlfriend wouldn’t have been hurt? That we should all die, so you two can be together, but your mom should have chosen you to rule this camp?”

Charlie hung his head. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.” Adrian opened his mouth to pull the support of being the kid’s teacher and then snapped it shut. He rotated toward the ladder, wheels spinning furiously. Charlie needed a teacher. He had to understand that his selfish desires meant nothing in comparison to the survival of their

country. It was a huge disappointment to learn that the teenager hadn't already figured it out from observing everything around him. Angela had made the right choice. Charlie might never be a leader.

“The water stopped!”

Climbing up the ladder, Adrian reversed direction. The guards on the water level could work on the problem, but it would distract them. Adrian stopped in the mess. “We need four hands on the bottom level for guard duty.”

Zack stood up, knowing his boys would follow. He'd heard the water call. They would be listening to the sounds of repair attempts all night. Zack didn't mind. He was having trouble sleeping and his teenagers had the energy of youth to burn through. All the boys had been disappointed with their day of scavenging and salvage. This would put them in a better mood.

Adrian went to the top floor for a fast round, skipping the weapons room where Angela and Marc would soon be settling down for the night. The reading and TV chambers, now cleaned, were full of camp members that hadn't responded to the call about the water. It was peaceful.

Adrian checked on the guards next, glad to find them alert. He didn't stay to exchange small talk or insults. While Marc and Angela were sleeping, he would do his best to make sure nothing went wrong.

The mess level still held fifty residents, however, and it wasn't peaceful or quiet even though the vote was over. It also wasn't out of

control. Kyle, along with Neil and Doug, were in the corner playing poker until their shift on that level began.

Adrian went by the crushed floor where Charlie was still toiling and descended to the bottom. He wanted to check on Samantha and Jennifer.

Adrian found Daryl, Allan and Donald perched around the various cubbies and tarps, sharp glances missing nothing.

Satisfied, Adrian tapped on the tarp. “You decent?”

“No!”

Adrian heard Samantha’s grunt and ducked inside. “I’m not a snitch.”

Samantha paused in getting back into the bed. “We both know that isn’t true.”

Adrian’s lips thinned, but he still came over to help her get settled. As he pulled the blanket up, he spotted the red bandage. “She picked women just like her.” Adrian ignored Samantha’s coming protest and left the tent.

Samantha sighed, arms crossing over her chest. “See? A snitch.”

Adrian went to Daryl. “Can I borrow your medic bag?”

“Should we get Neil?” Allan eyed the tarp. “We’ve been watching her shadow for half an hour.”

Donald chuckled. “She was up before he hit the top of the ladder.”

“He asked you to keep an eye on her?” Adrian took the medical bag.

“We...offered, so he would give her a break. Same for Kyle. After the crap down here with Simon, both of them refused to take a shift.”

Adrian’s lips twitched. “Let me guess. You told them they’re slacking off for a woman during a camp crisis?”

Daryl slapped Allan on the shoulder that wasn’t injured. “Genius here reminded us that the favorite weapon we used to use against wayward Eagles was the truth.”

Adrian was still chuckling as he ducked back into the tarp. While still warmer than outside, this level was getting an awful draft. When they’d had the heat going, it had pushed into the bottom floors and brought the average 60° up to a comfortable 70°. Now, the 60° down here was cold to everyone.

Adrian handed Samantha the kit. “I don’t remember what to do.”

“Why didn’t you call my watchdog?” Samantha’s grumble was lost in the sound of banging on metal. The workers were trying to reestablish a water flow.

“After I patch you up, I’ll find a spot on the top level for you and get your stuff. If we’re careful, he won’t notice until I take you up.”

Samantha handed him the alcohol wipes and then began to thread a suture. Neil had gone up for two more bags of medical supplies late last night. Jimmy had been thrilled. So had the patients who

knew the supplies were low. Jimmy had been using what he had to for the more serious injuries. Samantha had needed more stitches, but the doctor had run out. Now, Adrian would put in the others.

“He’ll be pissed at you.”

Adrian cleared the dried and fresh blood with the wipes, hating the ugly injury that marred her leg. “Was he okay with me before?”

Samantha was surprised into a laugh that helped distract her from the pain. “No.”

“Then it won’t matter much, except that you’ll be happier.”

Samantha’s frown returned. “And maybe forgive you in time?”

Adrian took the suture. “I’d settle for not being considered a snitch.”

Sam realized she’d gotten under his skin with that remark. She didn’t apologize.

Adrian would have been surprised if she had. He pinched the end of the seeping wound together and inserted the needle a quarter inch below, piercing both layers at the same time to make it faster. As he pulled the thread through and tied the stitch, Samantha’s breathing became shallow; the strong hum of descendant energy filled the small enclosure.

“Someone else survived. I can hear them screaming.”

A bit creeped out that she wasn’t reacting to the stitches, Adrian tried to hurry and finish before her magic did. “Can you tell where?”

Samantha shoved into the darkness with the person, shaking at the fear. “It’s a man... He’s alone under something. There’s no light, but he can hear someone.”

Adrian snipped the stitch and took the second finished suture from her icy hand. “What sounds are they making?” Adrian pinched the skin tighter as the blood came out faster, sticking the needle through with a grimace.

“Clinks...clank...a step...”

Adrian tied the stitch and wiped his bloody hand down his shirt to clean his grip for threading the last suture he needed. “Keep going, Samantha. Stay with them.”

“Stay with who?!” Neil stomped into the enclosure. “What are you doing in here?!”

“Shut up!”

Neil stared in shock at Samantha’s witch glaring through her eyes. He’d never viewed it before.

Adrian pinched the skin together as Neil came over.

“There was a shout... Someone kicked something and it rolled very close to where the man is.”

Adrian inserted the needle for a final time and tugged the thread through, aware of Neil’s growl. He didn’t let the anger rush him. Samantha didn’t need to go through this again.

“He heard Charlie!”

Adrian tied the stitch. “We have someone trapped on the crushed level where Charlie is right now.”

Neil realized Adrian expected him to handle it. “Hey—”

“Don’t wake the boss!” Adrian controlled his anger, snipping the stitch. “We have a lost sheep alive under a rubble pile. Get to it!”

Neil spun out of the tarp with his fists clenched.

Samantha tensed as Adrian wiped the blood from around the wound. The pain was back. “Thanks.”

“For Neil or the leg?”

“Neither.” Samantha handed him the half used tube of antibiotic ointment. “For never doubting me when I’ve told you something like that.”

Adrian placed a bandage over the wound and taped it into place without speaking.

As he cleaned up the mess, Neil returned.

Samantha waved him over. “Come sit by me and get the lecture out.”

Neil advanced, giving Adrian a nasty glare. “You should have had a real doctor do it.”

“The real doctor did, twice, but his glasses are still missing and he drops stitches and doesn’t notice it sometimes.”

“One of the students, then.” Neil sat on the edge of the bed.

“They’re sleeping. Adrian caught me out of bed and threatened to tell. I told him I’d yell and wake Angela. We’d compromised on him doing it.”

Neil snorted at her. “Do you expect me to believe that?”

Samantha shook her head. “No, you’re right. Let me try again.”

Adrian ducked out while she had Neil distracted. He climbed the ladder to prepare a space. Neil was mad now. When he found out it wasn’t over yet, he would be—

“No, you are not!”

Adrian winced at Neil’s shout. *Very unhappy.*

“Stop with the noise, Neil. You’re an Eagle. Act like it!”

Daryl’s shout settled the floor into sullen submission and let Adrian continue toward the top. The women wanted to be with the rest of the camp even though they couldn’t be with their teams yet. Neil and Kyle would adjust.

3

All of the Eagles who didn’t have duty or couldn’t sleep were called to the crushed level to help search for the survivor. They were also joined by camp members. It was hard to get to sleep with all the noises, but those who were already out when it started didn’t appear to notice. Snoring echoed between every sound of shifting debris.

“Over here!” Charlie dropped down near a large boulder. “He’s under here.”

It took five of them to roll the large rock. None of them was positive how anyone could be alive

underneath that, but they assumed the person wouldn't live.

It was a relief to discover a couch beneath the boulder. Upside down, the person was under it, moaning and groaning.

“Lift it from the side.”

“Be careful.”

Eagles shined their lights as the couch was lifted, eager to discover who had been so lucky.

David peered up at them, blinking from the glare of light. He didn't speak, but he tried to sit up.

“Help him.”

David grimaced as joints popped and muscles protested. He had been underneath the couch for days, listening to the camp around him while starving. His Eagle kit had kept him alive. He'd carried bottles of water and crackers. Both of those had run out yesterday.

“Can you walk?”

David shook his head at Charlie. His knees were shaking.

“Sit down over here. Someone get a student or the doctor to come up.”

Eagles rushed off to collect medical personnel as David sat down on the boulder that had been imprisoning him. “What happened?”

“There was an earthquake.”

David peered around at all of the debris. “We're in the cave?”

It was obvious that he was dazed. The Eagles didn't try to explain. They had pulled enough

survivors out with head injuries to understand it was a waste of their breath.

“Why don’t you stay here with him?” Adrian gestured at Charlie. *I need to make rounds in case someone is sneaking up on Angela while all of this was going on.*

“I’ll take care of it.” Charlie had no problem with the soldier staring at them in wary concern. He almost liked the man.

Pulling someone alive from the rubble gave hope to the Eagles that there may be other survivors. They began to dig through the piles in earnest, all of them hoping despite knowing that almost everyone was accounted for now.

Content that Charlie would be occupied for a while, Adrian went to the bottom level and tapped on the tarp. He stepped in to find Neil shoving Samantha’s belongings into bags and pockets. Neil had put guards to work digging for the survivor, then came straight back to Samantha.

Samantha was on the bed, also gathering the items that she could reach into a bag or her pockets. Adrian realized she had laid the law down. Adrian was glad he didn’t have to sneak around between Neil’s anger, but he would have. Samantha’s opinion meant a lot to him. Neil’s did too, but not as much as the storm tracker. It wasn’t because they were both descendants, however. It was because Samantha would come to trust him again in time. He didn’t believe Neil ever would. Adrian lifted a

brow at Samantha. “I can take his place on duty for a while if you like.”

“No. Neil’s taking a load up since he’s due on the top floor in five minutes. You and I will handle the rest.”

Adrian ducked out of the flap before Neil could get nasty. Samantha and Jennifer did need to be with the camp, especially since Jennifer had been named heir. If she was kept away from the herd, it would cause resentments and not just among the camp members, but also among the descendants. Even though her future was scheduled, favoritism and other jealousies could ruin it. Jennifer would have to be careful to earn the position she was being gifted with.

“I will.”

Adrian jumped out of his skin.

Jennifer snickered. She had been standing by the tarp, waiting for Adrian to emerge. “I’m going up too.”

Adrian grinned. “Both Special Forces men pissed at me at the same time. Sounds like fun.”

Jennifer stared at him in mock seriousness. “Don’t worry. Sam and I will protect you.”

Adrian groaned. “I’m in deep shit.”

4

Kyle’s attention was drawn to the entrance of the mess as Jennifer walked by. A few seconds later,

Adrian followed, carrying Samantha. Both women waved.

“What the hell?” Kyle gestured Peter into his position and went to track down the small convoy. He found them on the top level, where Adrian was making a small nest for the two girls in the far corner of the reading room.

Instead of yelling like he wanted to, the mobster observed. All the old resentments were hitting him hard, but so were the memories. Adrian helping the two rookie females brought flashes of Angela’s training. That had angered a lot of folks. Kyle hadn’t agreed with the consensus until he fell for Jennifer and she decided to join Adrian’s army. If he wasn’t so in love with her, he doubted that he would be upset with Adrian for taking an interest in the females who needed attention that their men didn’t have the time or energy to give. *Including me.*

Kyle perched in the doorway, letting go of his anger. *Neil will have plenty of that for both of us.*

Kyle barely finished the thought when Neil came stomping through the corridor with a small kit from the mess. Neil shoved it into Kyle’s hands. “They need that.”

Neil went in the other direction, determined to do his job and not cause another scene. He didn’t care about waking the herd and he didn’t care about Marc or Angela’s anger. He cared about Samantha’s disappointment. Neil couldn’t take hurting her like that. She wanted to be up here, so he would accept

it, but for right now, he needed to stay away from her so he didn't voice his opinion again.

In Neil's mind, he wasn't allowed to be happy with Samantha now because it would be an insult to Jeremy's memory. The only way he could live with this was if he forgot the man entirely, but Samantha wouldn't ever do that. Jeremy's son would be told about his father daily and Neil would suffer in comparison to the glowing hero who had died. *This isn't what I signed up for.*

I know the feeling. Angela was leaning against the wall, studying him with sleepy annoyance. "We need to talk."

Neil stiffened. "I don't have anything to say to you."

"Because you believe I picked you over Jeremy and let him die in your place?"

Neil paled. He'd been able to hide that from Samantha.

"I didn't pick between you, Neil. Fate did." She motioned toward where Marc was coming up the ladder from checking on the water problem. They'd both gotten up at the shout. "The same as with my men."

Neil watched Marc and Adrian share tired glances that weren't hateful but also weren't friendly. "So it'll blow up right about the time they're getting along in their need to service the queen?"

Angela tensed at the insult and the truth. "You're a coward, Todd O'Neil. You'd be one even

if Jeremy had lived. Don't blame your weak character on me. I've proven who I am." Angela headed for the weapons chamber and the soothing bliss of Marc's arms.

"I'm not scared of staying and doing my duty!"

"But you are. You're terrified that Samantha will always love Jeremy's ghost more than you and you're scared that she'll need someone else to fill his place because it's clear that you can't."

Neil wanted to deny that, to scream all the ugliness in his mind, but he couldn't. She was right about all of it.

"It's called being human." Angela slipped by Marc, ignoring Adrian. "We all have flaws and weaknesses. Don't let a horrible loss destroy the progress you've made in no longer being a tight ass who has to be perfect to have friends or a mate. That'll drive her away faster than you can imagine." Angela shut the makeshift door Marc had erected earlier, too tired to say more or worry over the conversation about to take place. Fate had control now. She had surrendered it the moment her unborn baby stopped living.

Angela cried herself to sleep.

Chapter Nineteen BK8

Bad Vibes

1

Adrian and Marc glowered at Neil. They'd caught it all, including Angela's pain, but after their anger was a blank slate. What could they say to Neil that would matter or even change his mind?

Neil stared back without remorse. He didn't have room for it. There was a hope that someone could help him, but with the gaping hole in his heart, he couldn't just snap back into the man they'd known before Jeremy's death.

Adrian walked away, muttering about men who had the whole world in their hands and didn't know what to do with it.

Marc let Neil process some of what he'd been hit with. Marc hated all the awful moments that came with becoming a better person, but there was no denying that Neil needed one of those now. "You think it'll be easier without all of us reminding her of Jeremy."

Neil was ashamed and angry. "It would be."

"Probably." Marc waited, trying to time his advice to a moment where Neil would be able to accept it.

"What if I don't want your advice?"

Marc stared in surprise. “You caught that?”

Neil snorted bitterly. “It rubs off, remember?”

Marc grinned. Being around three descendants all the time would have driven him crazy before he’d acknowledged his own gifts. With Samantha and their twins, Neil was going to learn a lot about magic.

Neil tried to push aside the anger, missing his friends—all of them. “What’s the advice?”

“Take a vacation with her. When the passage opens, skip the next fight and locate Seth. Hang out for a couple weeks and discover if it’s what you’d prefer.”

“Why would you suggest that?” Neil studied him in confusion. “Everyone else is thinking I should tough it out and suck it up because I didn’t die in his place. Some of them even wonder if I asked Angela to do it because I couldn’t stand the competition. Do you know how that hurts?”

“How the camp views you has always been your drive. You liked being the hero. You liked all the attention. So did Samantha.”

“So?”

Marc snorted at the sarcastic response. Angie was right. Neil was terrified. “A vacation would let you make a better choice. If you don’t want to fight for a place in the spotlight anymore, you’ll figure it out while you’re out in the wilderness.”

“How?”

“You’ll either miss us or you won’t.”

“So if I miss this hellhole, it means I still want to serve and fight?” Neil let out a nasty curse.

Marc didn't rise to the bait. “That attitude right there tells me you already know what you want, but you're scared of it.”

“She's right.”

“Yeah. That's been a pattern with Angie.” Marc put a hand on Neil's slumped shoulder. “We're all scared in some way. I'm afraid she'll go to the traitor now that I've stopped fighting whatever it is that she needs. Doug is terrified he won't be able to raise his new sons without Peggy and Hilda. Shawn is afraid he'll be stuck with Missy forever and never be forgiven for his mistakes with Tara. We all fight our private fears daily. You're not alone.”

Neil absorbed those words and then asked a question he hoped Marc wasn't ready for so he would get honesty. “What does Angela fear?”

“Wow. Right now...” Marc rotated toward the weapons room. “Damn. She cried herself to sleep again. I hate it when she does that.” Marc sighed, turning back to his friend. “She's afraid of losing so many people that we won't recover, even if we're on the island. She fears being hated. She's also scared of being burnt in her sleep by some of you and then burning in hell.”

Neil's shame grew. “She shouldn't feel that way about some of it.”

“Yeah, but which parts?” Marc shrugged. “We all have different opinions on that.”

“Don't we have all the traitors now?”

“Traitors? Yes. Scared citizens who’ve come to hate magic for any reason?” Marc glanced toward the chambers where uneasy snoring echoed. “We have a mountain of them. None of us are safe here.”

“That’s why you want us to go.” Neil hadn’t realized the council was in danger.

“Yes. Because of Samantha’s injury, she’s a weaker target. Lying low until she recovers is a good idea.”

“Did you give that advice to Kyle?” Neil couldn’t help being snarky. It felt like Marc was pushing him out of camp.

“I am. And yes, I did.”

Neil tried to think through the anger and the shame, but the new fear refused to be ignored. “I thought we had all the traitors.”

“So did I, until listening to Jennifer’s prediction. It could get bad for all of us, but mostly for Eagles like you who will have to shoot camp members. In some cases, families may turn on each other.”

“To control magic?”

“To wipe it out.” Marc kept his voice down. “As soon as we hesitate to hurt them, they’ll overwhelm us. Give Samantha a gun. Make sure she understands that she has to use it, not to trust people with a hand out.”

“I will.” Neil felt survival instincts rise up to replace the heavy shame and breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ll speak to her tonight—quietly.”

“Use hand signals if you can. Angie’s going to declare magic use forbidden, I think, until we’re out of here. She hopes it will calm things down.”

“She expects trouble when the tunnel opens.” Neil hadn’t thought about that either, despite hearing conversations between the people on the bottom level.

“Before that. As soon as we begin digging, impatience and mistrust will ripple through these corridors and take a final cut. Don’t leave Samantha alone when we start digging. Stay with Kyle and Jennifer, no matter what happens. Angela wants Samantha with her for that battle.”

Neil paled as another theory snapped into place at Marc’s revelations. “It was supposed to be her, right? Not Jeremy?”

“Yes.” Marc didn’t tell Neil that Angela had pissed fate off by interfering. She was the number one target again. He would figure it out. “Fate is very angry with all of us for not dying, but three of her main targets escaped.”

“Samantha and Doug?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

Marc glanced toward the crushed level this time. “The man they pulled from the rubble. David shouldn’t be alive either, but he is.”

“Wasn’t he Donner’s helper?”

Neil’s question implied that he believed the man shouldn’t have been spared after that fight. It was another hard truth about the trooper revealed. He’d

done his job before, but he also hadn't liked serving with soldiers after the battle.

"Should I like eating and showering with soldiers who should be dead? I hate Adrian for what he's done, but he was right about that. Mercy for survivors always bites us in the ass."

Marc wanted to argue the point so they wouldn't have to return to all the fighting after the bugout, but he couldn't. He agreed.

Twitching, Neil rotated toward Samantha's location. "Meeting in the morning?"

"Bright and early." Marc went to join Angela in bed, replaying the conversation. He'd almost told Neil that there had been four targets, but Marc hadn't wanted to discuss it. Charlie had been on the top floor. He and his small group had been the only survivors out of seventy-five. The boy had been marked. Fate knew the easiest way to hurt Angela now. She could be stabbed, shot, punched, strangled, and raped, but she came back stronger. Take away a child and her strength broke. Take away enough kids and she could be crushed into dust on the wind.

Marc slid a hand around her warm body, placing it over her stomach. *Daddy misses you.*

2

"I want you to switch to the top floor." Kenn sat next to Tonya on the dusty ground outside the tarp.

“Why?” Tonya held tight to the squirming cat as she tried to examine it. She hadn’t seen the tabby in days.

“Just do it, okay?”

Tonya glanced over to find him leaning against the stone, eyes shut. “Getting bad?”

“On the edge right now. After a full night’s sleep, it might settle down a little.”

“But?”

“When the tunnel opens, we’re expecting problems. I want you with the other mates and wives.”

Tonya huffed, releasing the cat so she could record the results on the paper she’d scavenged from the medical debris pile.

Indignant, the cat sprang around the tarp and darted into the nearest debris pile.

“I mean it. No women’s lib shit right now, okay?”

Tonya understood Kenn was worried and smothered the part of her that wanted to say she could take care of herself. The truth was, she couldn’t yet and she knew it. “Okay.”

Kenn slid a hand onto her leg. “Thank you.”

Tonya leaned against his shoulder. “When are you off duty?”

“I’m off now, but I volunteered for duty over the morning council meeting. I need to stay up or I won’t get up in time.”

“I’ll keep you company and then we can sleep together.”

“That’ll work.” Kenn put his arm around her shoulder. “How are you?”

“Not bad.” Tonya smiled as he rubbed her back. The heat from his big hands was wonderful. “Staying thirsty, but Jimmy said that’s normal for a descendant pregnancy.”

Kenn stilled. “How would he know?”

“Jimmy’s been studying us since the war. He’s put together a folder of information on our different health issues.”

Kenn lowered his voice, aware of their audience. “Anything we should get rid of?”

Tonya also made sure her words didn’t carry to the dozens of residents on this level. “That depends on what he plans to do with it. Until I heard he wasn’t going with us, I assumed he was collecting medical files on everyone.”

“And now?”

“He’ll know how to kill us, hurt us. Jimmy is a coward, so it won’t be him. He hides it with a nasty attitude to prevent anyone from getting close enough to discover his secrets. Maybe one of his sons would do it, but they’re both his students, so I doubt it.”

“How can a coward lead?” Kenn already knew the answer, but he was curious to know if Tonya did too.

“He won?”

“Oh, yeah. Simon’s actions sealed the deal, but folks already respected Jimmy for his help during

the crisis, while Simon spent the time dumping bodies of their loved ones. It's not fair."

"Agreed, but that doesn't change people's minds. The last time they saw their cherished friend or family, Simon was dragging them toward a mass grave." Tonya shrugged. "They probably would have picked anyone over him."

Kenn was impressed with her intelligence and disappointed by the camp members who viewed things that way. "They weren't going to make it with Jimmy or Simon; this mountain is cursed."

"Yeah." Tonya shivered. "Who got the vote for the Runaways?"

"They've refused to pick one. They all want to be leader." Kenn sighed. "I hate that name."

"Because you think we should too?" Tonya snuggled tighter to his neck, not minding the smell of man sweat. It was a lot better than having a man who smelled good, but couldn't be counted on to get a job done.

"Maybe, maybe not, but it doesn't matter now. We decided to stay with our kind, remember?"

"*Your* kind."

Kenn held Tonya back and found her frowning. "What's the problem?"

"I worry over it sometimes." She dropped her head. "I'm not like you now."

Kenn tugged her around and into his arms until she was straddling him. "Listen, okay?"

Tonya crossed her arms in defense.

"I'm locking it away."

Tonya gaped. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No. I’ve thought about it and I can’t be like them after everything that’s happened. I don’t deserve it.”

Kenn’s demon cringed at the news. *No! Please, master!*

“It’s the evil in me.”

Tonya leaned down, bracing her hands on his wide shoulders. “I understand that. I really do. Now, you listen, okay?”

Kenn nodded, ready to bask in her praise.

“You can’t give up your gift!” She slapped him, hard. “You have a baby to defend. Snap out of it!”

Kenn was almost shocked. “I thought you’d be happy I’m continuing to demonstrate that I’ve changed.”

“Your precious Angie is the one you did that for.” Tonya climbed off him and stood up. “I fell in love with a ruthless bastard who would do anything to keep his family together. Don’t fail me now that I’m a convert!”

Kenn chuckled. “Okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t look at it that way.”

“Protecting our baby?”

“Yeah. I was trying to protect you and what we have together. I forgot the kid might have a gift.”

“Oh, there’s a gift all right.” Tonya grinned. “Can we find a quiet place for an hour?”

Before Kenn could answer, an arm snaked around Tonya’s throat and dragged her out of view.

Help on the bottom level! Kenn sent the mental call as he leapt up and drew his gun. There was no noise coming from around the tarp. Kenn rushed out, ready to shoot.

Tonya held up a hand as Kenn came around the corner of the tarp. She pointed to where Mandy and Sister Sarah were locked in a death embrace. “She saved me!”

Mandy shoved the knife deeper, grunting at the pain and the familiarity. The man who had raped her had died the same way.

Sarah staggered, taking the knife. It stuck out of her stomach like a horror scene in a movie, then clattered to the ground.

Holding her pouring gut, Sarah staggered toward Tonya, glazing eyes fixing on her. “Kill it.”

Kenn scanned for more problems and found none. The woman had acted alone.

“Just to kill my baby? You weren’t after me?” Tonya spat at the dying woman. “Hypocrite!”

“Devil!” Sarah’s lips ran red as she fell.

Tonya let Kenn hold her while he told the guards what had happened, but inside, she changed. The woman had wanted to kill her baby. Kenn had a real reason to want her up top with the other Islanders. Tonya shrugged out of his protection and went to gather her things.

Around the awful scene, residents who had been torn about their choice finished making it. Many of them followed Tonya’s lead and began to pack up what meager belongings they’d gathered from the

wreckage. Others ducked into their quickly-constructed holes to wait for the magic users to be gone. Many of them were disappointed that Sarah had failed in her mission.

“Stay with her.” Kenn gestured Greg after Tonya. “Sarah tried to kill the baby.”

Greg went without argument, glad the rest of the Islanders were going to be on the same level. It would make duty a lot easier.

Kenn went to Mandy, who was also telling the guards what had happened. He swept the area behind her and saw the baby sleeping under the ledge where she’d been born.

Kenn collected the infant, marveling at how small little Sandy was in his big hands. He took the baby to its mother, wanting Mandy to understand that he owed her a debt.

Mandy was still shaking as she took the baby. She hugged the child, almost crying. “When does it end?”

Kenn refused to give her the answer that anyone else would have gotten from him. He nudged her toward the ladder as he spotted Tonya, carrying her cat, heading for the same spot. “Let’s get you settled upstairs. I’ll come back down for anything you want.”

Mandy went, grateful. The mood on this level was ugly now that everyone had declared loyalties. The Runaways were getting desperate because they were so small in number. They weren’t going to get

much in the way of supplies and they weren't going to be able to protect themselves.

The Mountaineers were trying to hold out until both the Islanders and the Runaways were gone, but Mandy knew the Islanders were the only ones with a chance at survival. They were ruthless enough to handle what came, but loyal. Mandy knew where she wanted to be during the tunnel opening and it wasn't down here.

Kenn waved Greg after the females. Feeling as though he'd missed something important, Kenn decided to do a round of this level before abandoning it. He started where Mandy and her baby had been living on cardboard and laundry piles, then went into the body corridor.

The pit was filled in and the smell was almost gone, but the vibe was still creepy. Kenn didn't linger, but he also didn't shirk his duty or ask his demon for help. Like Marc, he would do this on his own until he couldn't anymore.

Kenn walked the floor, noting all the rabbits waiting to inherit the cave. He didn't speak to them. They'd made their choices. He didn't expect to see any of them again.

Kenn departed the bottom floor with something nagging. *I checked the body pit. I hit the bathrooms and the storage area. The water chamber ...* “Only had one guard, Greg, and I can't relocate that to the top floor.”

Kenn went back down to stand watch over the remaining water while Greg escorted the women to the top floor. Sleep would come later.

3

Outside the boss's door, the guards felt it when the powerful couple drifted off. The temperature dropped, the draft increased, the mood nosedived into fear of the groaning mountain around them, and dangerous thoughts began to play in people's minds.

"This will get bad." Quinn was glad to be on duty, but he was missing the use of his left hand. He'd been impaled by a piece of the mess floor as he fell with it. Jimmy said he was lucky to have survived at all. With the ugly healing wounds across his wrist glaring in the dim lantern light and throbbing in time to his pulse, Quinn agreed. He felt lucky to be alive.

Kyle nodded at Quinn's comment, but didn't add to it as a cluster of magic supporters came up the ladder. Kyle was eager to check on Jennifer, but Kenn hadn't come up yet. He needed the Marine to be here before closing down this level. Marc hadn't ordered it, but Kyle was.

That's why he gave you point here. Adrian joined the men on guard. "Go find out what's holding him up. I've got your post."

Kyle went without caring that it was Adrian. He had one of those feelings in his gut that implied the night's activities weren't over.

Adrian caught the thought and sent a mental call on a private line.

A minute later, Charlie and the warriors headed down to patrol the bottom level until everyone had been brought up. After that, the Mountaineers were on their own for protection.

“You okay in here?” Kyle shined his light on Kenn, who was wrestling with a large boulder.

“We have a leak.”

Kyle came over to help, light bobbing off a small debris pile and cleared floors covered in a thin layer of water.

“The tank cracked.”

Kyle saw Kenn was trying to get the rock under the bent edge of the tank. If they could tilt it, the remaining water would be below the crack that had opened up. Kyle and Kenn muscled the stone into place and then tried to shift the tank, but it was too heavy for them.

“Let me help.” Gus and his family had been staying on the mess level to help with the cooking. When he'd witnessed Adrian carrying women to the top, Gus had ordered his brothers to help while he came down to ask if they needed anything else carried or even an extra sentry.

Gus was able to shift the tank so Kenn and Kyle could get the rock under it far enough to keep the

container tilted. As they finished, Kenn scanned the low water level, groaning. “That’s not good. We don’t have water flowing.”

“Is it frozen?”

Kenn wiped his hands down his grimy pants. “It’s hard to tell unless we go topside again.”

“And there are refugees up there now.”

“Yes.”

“Then this would be a good time for another tremor.”

Kenn frowned at the man who was his size and then a bit more. “We need another earthquake?”

Gus smiled a little. “Just a tremor. They’re weaker and shake less. It might clear the clog.”

Kenn grunted. “I hadn’t thought of it that way. Should we ask Angela to arrange it?”

Gus laughed. “At least she’d be nice about saying hell no. My woman’s gonna flip when she finds out that I switched all of us to the top without permission.”

Kenn understood Gus was asking if that would be okay with everyone. He slapped the man on his huge shoulder. “Welcome to Angela’s army.”

4

“Is it midnight yet?”

Adrian paused shifting through the rubble to glance at his watch. “Quarter after.” Kenn and Kyle had resumed their posts on the top floor, freeing

Adrian to rejoin Charlie. They hadn't spoken for a while, just worked.

“Good. Mom wants a relocation handled. She wanted me to wait until after midnight to tell you.”

Adrian matched the news to his sense of something coming. “Who, where, what, when, why, and how?”

Charlie laughed. “Okay. Who, is the Runaways. Where, is to the mess level, anywhere on that floor. What, is ants and packs of honey when they're asleep.” Charlie paused. “Which they are now. Why, is so we control that passage and how, is without making any noise or waking them up.”

Adrian found no fault with the plan except for the supplies. “I can filch the honey packs from mess bags, but we haven't observed ants in here since right after the quake.”

“They had a nest somewhere around Shane's Cavity.”

Adrian liked the name. It sounded painful, like the man's death had been. “Half an hour, meet me there.”

“She said to tell you three is good, four is enough, and five will ruin it.”

“Ants?”

Charlie shrugged. “She was sleepy when she sent the message. It made me yawn.”

And that's where my exhaustion came from even though I got sleep. Adrian was still matching up the effects of their bond and being surprised by the depth each time.

Adrian tensed as steps creaked. They both spun around, but didn't locate anyone or any thoughts.

Charlie went back to work, but Adrian felt like they were being observed and stayed alert. Invisibles were able to get close to everyone because their gifts were dormant. Descendants couldn't detect them as one of their own kind. *But we can root them out with the same methods that have always worked.* "I'm going to the top for a while. Yell if you need me."

"You know it."

Adrian didn't move, listening.

The sound of hasty footsteps faded down the tunnels.

"What should we do about that?"

"Report it and finish the chore we were given."

Adrian also resumed digging, not about to leave the boy alone in this situation. Charlie was a badass like his father, but he was also young and that wouldn't keep him alive. Wisdom needed time to grow. That's where guards came in.

"She said something else. Actually, she was thinking it." Charlie shrugged. "She didn't know I caught it."

"Don't betray her, in any way."

"I won't."

Adrian waited for more, frowning at the sounds of restless citizens and an angry mountain. "Well?"

"You said not to tell you."

Adrian grunted. "After this, don't betray her."

Charlie smirked. “She thinks you and my dad can team.”

“We have teamed.”

“She was thinking about magic.”

“Ah.” Adrian considered it. “Very few souls are that compatible.”

“That’s what my dad told her when he caught the thought.”

“He’s been scroll diving.”

“Yes, but he’s wrong about the teaming.”

“How do you know?”

“You and I are teamed right now, and I can’t stand you.”

Adrian hadn’t noticed. His first thought was to worry over the boy reading his private fantasies and then he realized that had been the case for a while. If Charlie was revealing it now, he’d been using it before.

Charlie shrugged at Adrian’s disapproval. “I didn’t know what I’d done. When I...evolved this time, I understood because it got stronger.” He grinned. “I’m a lot stronger now.”

Adrian found himself facing a vicious demon that wanted him dead. He immediately used humor to stop an attack. *Wha’s up, big boy?*

Charlie was startled into a laugh.

The demon vanished.

Adrian breathed a sigh of relief. Charlie’s demon was indeed strong. That mental fight would be ugly and in the end, neither of them would have won.

Charlie flipped off the teaming effect.

Adrian blinked as he was shoved out. “That means we can team with people we don’t like.”

“Exactly. Mom wants you and dad teamed for the fight.”

“I should have known she’d push it right away.” Adrian resumed digging. “Tell her I’ll do it. She already knew I would, but tell her anyway.”

“Is there anything she could ask that you wouldn’t give her?”

Adrian snorted.

Charlie didn’t ask again.

Chapter Twenty BK8
On The Outside

1

“**A**re we all here?”

Marc handed her a sheet of paper. “That’s every name. All adults and others with passes for this meeting are here now. Like you ordered, all of the children are in the reading room with guards. We also have a dozen sentries patrolling this level.”

Angela surveyed the residents gathered in the TV chamber, *her* citizens. There were one hundred and sixty-two of them. It was cramped. People were sitting on the floors with some couples sharing laps, but it wasn’t twitchy or uncomfortable, like it might have been with the others in this mountain. Everyone here knew they could count on her to keep her word. “I’m beginning with updates. If you have information, I want you to speak up. I’m holding this meeting openly, as I will all future council meetings. You can’t understand the choices that we have to make, if we don’t let you in. The secretive plots ended when we came here. I promised you that and I meant it.”

Angela took a paper from her pocket and began to read. “We’re dividing the food, water, medical

supplies, equipment, and everything else that has been scavenged. The radiation levels are holding steady. We're leaving the remaining iodine to the citizens who stay in the mountain. I've made several choices like that, based on where which group is going. For example, we won't need the heavy winter gear once we reach the coast. The Runaways are getting out too late in the season to be able to locate these items for themselves, so we're sending a chunk of it with them. While we're on the island, we'll make what we need, but the temperatures rarely fall below 50°, so we won't have to worry about that for a while."

Angela gestured toward Kenn, aware that the man was asleep on his feet. He hadn't been to bed yet. "Kenn is in charge of the bugout when we open the tunnel. We expect problems. The best thing you can do is stay where we put you. If you have concerns or special needs, speak to Kenn right away. He also has the travel arrangements. We'll have to make a trip through the corridors in the winter weather to reach our vehicles. All adults will be assigned a child to take care of during the bugout." She let the mutters fade before continuing. "There are new rules for descendants. Until we leave here, no one is to use magic in any way and that includes thoughts. We need to settle the situation down. Demonstrations of the things we can do scare people and make it worse."

Few of the descendants were happy with the order, but they understood she was trying to avoid a

fight. They didn't believe it would succeed, but all of them respected her for trying.

“The cave is ten percent functional, but I decided not to stay and help them with the repairs.” Angela sighed, letting everyone feel her misery. “We all know they're not going to make it. Right now, our energy has to be put into our own survival and the threats that are on the way. I need you to spend the day helping with salvage. We have to have a week of supplies to get us through leaving. We don't have that yet, but our chances are better than those who are staying. Help us salvage.”

Angela skimmed her paper again and then regarded the uneasy crowd. “Are there any questions or anything anyone wants to discuss before I start the council meeting?”

There were many things that people wanted to know, but none of them felt important enough to interrupt the boss for.

Angela took a seat next to Marc, handing her paper to him. He would read it and then pass it along. They hadn't found enough equipment yet to be able to make copies. “Kenn will go first so he can sleep for the rest of the meeting.”

“I'm good.” Kenn yawned. “We had three fights overnight, with minor injuries. Sarah's body has been stored in the pit tunnel. The guards are all fresh, the water levels are on the sheet in front of you, and the mood is worse.” He met Angela's eye. “I'm tired. I may not be reading that correctly.”

Angela understood. “We’ll do the best we can with attitudes. They don’t like us leaving, but they want us to go. It makes it ugly for them because they don’t know how to handle those emotions. I don’t want any of you to argue with them. Tell them to talk to me.” Angela looked at Theo. “Where are we?”

Debra stayed still as everyone turned toward her and Theo. She was sitting with his team, along the wall that was next to the council members.

“I have all the equipment in the right passage and most of the tools. I hope that our scavenging over the next couple of days will give us the rest of what we need, but if it doesn’t, I can improvise.”

“How long will it take you to put it all together?”

Theo shrugged. “At least two hours with a five-man crew. I can get it done in half that if you could lend me a couple of your upper Marines.”

“I’ll try to arrange it so they’re there during that time, but we’ll plan on a three hour window.”

“Are we going over specific plans right now?” Neil wasn’t positive about how much Angela wanted to say in front of the camp. Whenever Adrian had done things like this, it had been smoke up asses.

Angela doesn’t do that.

Neil snorted at Adrian, but he didn’t have the energy to do more.

Adrian didn’t push.

“We’re not giving out the supplies until we clear the tunnel so there are no extra guns or ammo floating around except for what people salvage. Unfortunately, the level that fell held our security area, and as you know, it did have weapons. Everything that gets salvaged goes into community buckets and boxes that Marc will sort between now and the bugout to make sure everyone is allotted their fair share. That doesn’t mean we won’t have thieves. Unless it’s something important, I don’t expect you to confront them. We’re leaving. Most of the items they’ll want, we don’t need anyway.”

The camp didn’t like the idea of anyone getting away with thievery, but again, no one argued.

“What are things like in the mess right now?”
Angela looked at Gus.

Put on the spot, the big man stuttered. “Uh, Good.”

Angela waited patiently.

Gus flushed as he realized she expected more, but he didn’t have it. “I can find out.”

“That would be great. I need to know if I should feed everyone up here or if it’s okay for us to come down. That will depend on what the mood is. Adrian will escort you.”

Adrian and Gus were gone a few seconds later.

“What type of weather can we expect for the bugout?”

Also put on the spot, Samantha swallowed her embarrassment. “Cold and windy, but no new snow as far as I can tell. It was sunny.”

Angela wrote that in her notes, as did the other members of the council. “How do you feel about us going? Anything I should know?”

Samantha shook her head. “No, but I’m watching.” Samantha was sitting next to Neil, with her legs stretched out in front of her and covered in blankets.

Angela looked at Jennifer. “Have you picked up anything new?”

“There’s something shiny on the hill. I haven’t figured out what that means yet.”

Angela wrote it down. “Anything else I should know about or that we should discuss?”

“Yes.” Jennifer drew in a breath. “We should make the other groups come with us, rather than leave them here to die.”

Angela let the disapproving mutters subside. “Sell me.”

The camp didn’t like it that Angela wasn’t shutting the idea down, but they also wanted to hear Jennifer come up with a reason that they could support. No one liked the idea of leaving their fellow Americans to die this way.

“I can’t give you a reason, other than it will save their lives.”

“Holding citizens against their will is not what we stand for, even if it’s going to cost them their lives. You know that.” Angela frowned. “I’m a little surprised you’re suggesting this.”

Jennifer was in pain. “I can’t stand the thought of them dying. I love some of these people.”

It was hard, but Angela refused to give in. “As leader of the council, I overrule that suggestion. We will not consider it.”

Jennifer shrugged. “I didn’t expect you to, but I had to ask.”

“I don’t hold that against you. I love them too.” Angela glanced at Neil next. “During your exploration with Kenn after the earthquake, did you locate any evidence of structural failures or ant nests?”

Neil considered. “There were several new passages, but all of them dead ended. A couple of those had debris, but I don’t think we saw any ants. Why?”

“I’m trying to verify all the possible entrances in here. We can’t rebuild the cave for them before we go, but we can at least help them with some security.”

“If they want us to.”

Everyone regarded Marc at his comment.

Marc shrugged. “It’s ugly right now. They won’t want us to know their security procedures. The best thing we can do is stay away from them, split up the supplies fairly, and go.”

Angela nodded. “I agree, but I still want to ask them.”

Marc wrote it down.

“If they say it’s calm in the mess, we’ll eat together. We’ll also escort people into work areas. Let them pick where they want to be. We have debris piles on every level. If all of them decide to

stay up here, that's okay. As long as they're working, it will help." Angela gestured to Kyle next. "You and Neil have security over the cave. I realize having injured partners will be distracting. I have to remind you that if you fail to do your job, your women will end up getting hurt too. Please don't slack off. That goes for all of you. Everyone wants out of this cave. We're all trapped and we're all scared. You've witnessed some of the crazy things that can happen in situations like this, but it could be worse. If you're asked to do something, do it. Please don't be the one who brings us down because you forgot to gather gear or load a weapon."

Angela could feel Neil and Kyle's displeasure at being singled out. Both of them were honorable and strong. The camp needed them if they could do the job while having a mate. Angela didn't tell them their women would be unhappy if they couldn't. She didn't need to. Her reminder had also been for the females. If Jennifer and Samantha kept their men too close, they could interfere and ruin the fragile plans.

"As soon as we start digging, everyone in this mountain will twitch. They'll be able to breathe in the fresh air and taste the snow. For a little while, they won't be thinking about the UN, the refugees, the illnesses, or any of the other problems. The only thing they will hear in our heavy equipment is possible freedom. That's when we expect trouble. I'm telling you so that you can watch for it. We will

be guarding the passages and equipment, along with our lives. We'll need you to help with all of that.” Angela looked at her council and then the tense people. “Does anyone have anything else that we should discuss or any questions?”

Even though it was time for doubts about the plans or approaches, none were spoken. The descendants were satisfied their alpha had things in hand and the rest of her camp felt the same.

On the levels below them, bits and pieces of the meeting floated down to remind those who were staying of what they were giving up. Now that they had chosen to remain in this mountain or flee, they weren't part of the real Safe Haven. They didn't get to join the meetings or have a vote. They were staying in, but they had ended up on the outs.

2

Everyone quieted as Gus returned, nudging Brittani ahead of him. The surviving members of Li's family were following. All of the cooks were peering over their shoulders.

“You didn't need to do that.” Brittani pulled away from him and went to stand along the wall by her mother and father. “I had it.”

Gus snorted. “Threatening to poison everybody's food is handling it?”

Brittani shrugged. “It would handle the problem.” She didn't care that camp members were

hearing her. She would never do it, but she was frustrated at how stupid people were being.

“What happened?” Angela had a good idea already, but she wanted everyone else to know.

“They came in and tried to take the rest of the food. They said what Marc was giving them wasn’t enough. So Brittani told them they could have it as soon as she finished poisoning the rest of it, but she couldn’t remember which ones she’d already dosed. It got their attention.”

Angela shared a glance with Marc. “They may not want the food from us now.”

Marc shrugged. “They won’t need it anyway.”

It was a reminder that the Mountaineers weren’t going to survive. That allowed the anger to fade and sadness to replace it.

Sensing the perfect time to end the meeting, Angela stood up. “Eagles will collect breakfast for everyone now. Adjourned.”

Angela didn’t go toward the tunnel. She could feel Marc tensing for the fight, but she had no intention of it. The people on this floor were nervous enough. Angela went to Samantha and Jennifer. “Want some company?”

Marc waited for Angela to get settled and then began pointing at men. He took those who could fight and think. He was hoping to avoid an issue, but at this point, the mess would have already been looted as soon as Gus and Brittani had left. There might even be a fight to get back in.

Adrian came in and took up a post not far away from the three chatting women. He gave Marc a nod and then began watching for trouble.

Satisfied for reasons he chose not to explore, Marc and his team left.

Angela reached over and pulled the blanket up over Samantha's bandaged leg. "We don't want to get that dusty."

Both women frowned. They didn't have to wonder long.

The cave around them began to shake, sending showers of dust and drawing cries from below.

Angela gathered energy to calm her camp, but she didn't need it. Her people were scared, but waiting for her to give them instructions.

Angela smiled, sending out an unchecked wave of happiness. "You honor me. I *will* return that."

The tremor around them faded without notice from most of the top level, but a new distraction took its place, pulling people from the mass hypnosis that she'd accidentally slammed them with.

The sounds of fighting echoed, along with harsh shouts and clangs from items being knocked over. It brought quiet to the rest of the cave system as inhabitants listened to determine if this was the free-for-all everyone expected to happen at some point.

When the noises stopped, residents resumed what they'd been doing, relieved. Most of those who wanted out of this mountain didn't want it to be a violent escape. That wouldn't prevent them

from attacking guards however, and Angela knew it. Despite the civilized veneer, these people were wild survivors who would do anything to stay alive. It was the thing that she admired the most about each one of them.

Marc and his team returned with food. The rebels in the mess hadn't put up much of a fight when they'd discovered who Angela had sent to quell their disobedience. Two punches had been thrown—both from himself. “Dylan was chosen to lead the Runaways. He's on the floor in the mess, recovering from his gratitude.”

Angela smirked. “Got elected and thought he'd claim an extra share of the food?”

“And the people.” Marc turned toward the doorway. “You're welcome, even if you're just staying with us long enough to get out of here.”

Angela motioned the small group into the room. “All survivors are welcome.”

Relieved, some of the Runaways joined the Islanders with heads down in shame for their choices.

Angela didn't expect that or want them to apologize. She just hoped they would change their minds and remain with her. If they didn't, she would comfort herself that they'd at least known who they could come to for protection and who they needed to be protected from.

Marc set the food bags and pouches near Brittani's feet. “You got this?”

Brittani smiled up at Marc. “Anything for you.”

Marc grinned at the innocent remark.

Angela glowered.

Kenn and Adrian laughed.

Unaware of the drama, Brittani got up and began digging through bags.

Content the woman would get them all fed, Marc gathered his team. “We have guard duty shifts open and we need every hand we can get for salvage. Make a careful round of the other levels and find out if anyone is interested in earning extra rations. Put them to work on the crushed level if you get any takers. Meet in the mess in fifteen minutes.”

Marc lifted a brow toward Angela.

She smiled. “I’m good.”

Marc exited the room. *Yep.*

Blushing, Angela directed Brittani and Li’s family toward the front of the chamber. “Work there. We’ll all stay here and drool.”

Before Brittani could ask Gus to help, Angela motioned the big man toward Kenn. “He’s fuzzy. Watch him for me?”

Gus straightened proudly. “You know it.”

Brittani’s scowl took up most of her face, but she didn’t protest. She understood Gus was needed. She also knew this was what he wanted for his future and she had no right to interfere.

Angela was proud of them, though she didn’t embarrass the couple by pointing it out. Brittani had believed Gus’s gift was a type of disability. That made sense, considering that the old world had

disapproved of supernatural experiences. Their society had preferred illusions of control and civility over the painful adjustments required after admitting any hard truth.

“We have water again!”

The shout echoed through the cave, bringing relief.

Just making it to the exit, Kenn grinned at Gus. “You called that one.”

Gus chuckled, shrugging. “Dude, I got it like that.”

Kenn was still laughing as they disappeared into the tunnel.

Brittani noticed the interaction and allowed herself to hope that Gus would fit in. It was impossible not to worry over how people would react. They’d been dealing with it all their lives. Most people were great, but those who weren’t had made it hard not to brace for trouble with everyone.

The room went quiet as two more men appeared.

Ray went to stand by Jennifer, cheeks red from all the stares.

Jimmy went to Angela. “All three in one place. Perfect.” The doctor sank down next to them and opened his bag. “How are we all today?”

Jennifer and Samantha laughed, while Angela rolled her eyes. The doctor would put on a great show to encourage some of the Islanders to stay because of his skills. Angela wasn’t mad about it. In fact, it was what she would have done if she’d

thought any of his could be converted. All this show meant was that he'd sensed some of her members didn't trust magic, but they wanted the defense, so they'd chosen the Islanders. He was right, but that didn't mean his show would succeed, especially not after the blast of her love. When an alpha was happy with you, nothing else in the world could compare to it.

3

Kyle went to the mess floor while Jennifer was busy. Those going off on their own were supposed to meet and decide how to divide their supplies. Kyle had already had reports of fighting there. He wanted to be positive everyone in that group was willing.

“I won't do that.”

“You'll do what I tell you. When the freaks are gone, I'll be the ruler here.”

Kyle paused at the edge of the debris pile, out of sight. It sounded as if dangerous plans were being made.

“All you have to do is tell them you're sick and hang out with their wounded. We'll need you to let us back in.”

Kyle's anger was caught in a war with his disgust. He was sick of the plots and schemes, of the betrayals. If not for Angela's desire to keep the peace, Kyle would have ended this meeting with gunshots. Not certain what she would want him to

do, Kyle sent a mental call. Jennifer would pass on the message.

When he finished, Kyle left the area, joining the mess guard team. There would be trouble on this floor. He needed to be here for it.

4

“Tell him.” Angela stood up, walking toward the passage. “All of it.”

Jennifer began to tell Jimmy what some of the other Mountaineers were planning.

Angela paused by Ray. “We’ll need to add that to our list of prep for the bugout. They’ll try to grab our gear or vehicles.”

Ray added it to his list.

Angela motioned at several people. “I’d like to make rounds. Are you guys up for it?”

Tracy and Greg nodded, but Charlie frowned. “I’ve been up all night. I may not be much help.”

“When I let Kenn go, so can you.”

“Deal.”

Angela stood up and found Adrian a few feet away.

Adrian was thrilled at the time with her. “Marc said not to leave you alone.”

Also pleased, but unable to show it, Angela’s lips thinned into a line.

Connected, Adrian felt her true emotions and hurt because he couldn’t share it with her. As he realized it would always be that way, Adrian sighed

in defeat. *And I thought I was an evil bastard. Marc topped me.*

Not far away, Marc began to whistle happily.

Ray took up Adrian's post along the wall to watch over the camp. Despite wanting to go along, Ray was relieved he hadn't been chosen. Angela would tour all the levels, including the bottom floor and Ray couldn't endure that right now. The tremor had sent his mind straight to Dennis's death and he was positive that it had done the same to Dale. He was the last person his former lover wanted comfort from. In fact, they probably wouldn't see each other again.

Ray shuddered. *I'll never be the same.*

Chapter Twenty-One BK8

Digging Deep

1

“**W**here to?” Adrian took the lead, while Charlie brought up the rear.

“We’ll work our way up from the bottom.” Angela ignored Adrian’s disapproval. Until the bugout, she *was* the queen and every inch of this mountain was her castle.

Adrian couldn’t help the chuckle. She’d decided to regain control or arrest them all; she’d brought a handful of support he doubted she needed. He and the others were only here to serve as witnesses.

“More like my conscience.” Angela didn’t censor her words or lower her voice as she reached the bottom level. “I’ve run out of patience and mercy. If I detect evil, it will be eliminated unless all of you agree they should be spared.”

Adrian’s amusement fell as he understood Angela had also decided to do a final cleaning of the residents here. Not sure why he was so worried, Adrian led her into the body tunnel, hoping she would calm down. Her anger was boiling.

“Should I be pleased they’re tearing it all apart?” Angela’s tone was cold, drawing attention from those on the bottom level. The odors were

staggering on this floor. The waste was becoming a bigger problem than the bodies. “Would you have stood by?”

Adrian didn’t answer. He wasn’t positive how he would have reacted. He might have ordered a cleaning or he might have tried again to reach those he deemed worthy of saving.

“My call is to eliminate future threats. If they plan to come back here or come for us, they will be arrested.”

Satisfied that she didn’t intend to kill them on the spot, Adrian gestured toward a stack of bodies. “Recent losses.”

Angela scanned the stack, betraying no expression. “Those aren’t losses.” She swept the corridors that led to the pit, noting the other bodies had all been removed now.

Tonya shrugged. “No ants so far, but the spiders and centipedes are all over the clothes. We’re not sure what to do until we can get it cleaned.”

“That will be a while. We don’t have water to waste on laundry or cleaning. Shut down all usage that isn’t cooking or drinking. Full ration conditions on all consumables and that includes flashlights. No nightlights. Use your ears.”

Tonya wrote it down. “We’re almost out of sedatives. We didn’t consider having to use so much in a week.”

Angela sighed. “We can’t fix that until the UN fight. Keep digging for our power gear. We had ten boxes of those useless glow sticks. That would hold

us a few days.” Angela listened to coughs and nose blows ringing through the tunnels. “We found a bag of those little tissue packs. Hand those out. It won’t hold us for long, but maybe we’ll get lucky and locate the toilet paper boxes today.”

Tonya wrote that down too, thinking of the morning dump she was used to. Without a wipe, it wasn’t the same.

Angela took her time going through the wounded and the camp members who were staying. All she found in them was fear and mistrust. They wanted her to be gone. All of them were convinced *she* was the evil in disguise.

Angela went to the ladder with a heavy heart.

Coming down, Jimmy caught her pain. He tried to ignore it, but the emotion was too vivid. “You’ll gather other sheep.”

“Yes.” Aware of being studied from cubbyholes and shoddy shelters, Angela said goodbye. “Thank you for being a part of our light. I wish you peace and prosperity.”

“Will we have it?” Jimmy hadn’t meant to ask, but at that moment, he had to know. “Do we survive?”

Angela sighed, head shaking in slow motion. “Not even one of you.” She went up the ladder without trying to convince him. Jimmy had made his choice to be against magic before he ever came to Safe Haven. He wouldn’t change his mind.

Angela stopped on the crushed level where a dozen souls were working on the debris piles.

Thanks to finding a survivor alive, the piles had been dented. She noted they were being sorted into blankets and toys, and gave Charlie an approving nod. The bugout would be hard on the kids. Even dirty comforts were still comforts.

Ivan was enjoying his easy post, happy to see James, Peter, and Boothe digging through the rubble with camp members. They'd known each other in the bunker. Ivan lingered around the edges, trying not to get in the way. Marc had told him Angie would give him something to do when she realized he was an extra guard that could be working, but Ivan was content to observe. It wasn't very often that he was in the same area Angela was and he wanted to know why they were having so many problems with her. From what he could see, she was like any other female.

Laughter echoed from multiple directions.

Ivan flushed as he realized every descendant within mental range was snickering at his thoughts. He studied Angela harder. *What am I missing?*

Wearing dirty jeans and an even dirtier Eagle jacket, her long braid was in wild disarray and had begun to show her age. Though well shaped, with a nice face, Ivan didn't understand the attraction. Shrugging, he studied the other workers. After his decision about her, Ivan was surprised to find half the males staring at her in admiration and desire. Frustrated that he couldn't see what they could, Ivan put his back to all of them, trying to work it out. He'd heard the stories. He'd helped Marc track her

down, but that wasn't why he had come. He couldn't care less about Angela or whatever an alpha was. He was here to serve Marc.

"He knows that. That's why you were given duty over me."

Ivan felt a chill. *So what? Any woman's voice can do that to me. I stay hard.*

Angela refused to rise to the challenge. Ivan was hoping she would prove she was worthy of the attention she was getting, but Angela didn't want yet another dog panting after her. In fact, she liked Ivan because he wasn't interested. Angela faced her crew. "I'm ready for the other updates."

Adrian switched places with Tracy. "We had no survivors from the animal population except for that damn cat and a few honeybees. The hive was destroyed, but the vet managed to stick pieces of it in a coffee can for their survivors. They might make it. We found food on this level, but a lot of it was ruined. Kenn and I oversaw it. We salvaged as much as we could. Two weeks' worth."

Angela counted quickly. "That's less than four days per group."

"Yes, but we're still digging. We had months of nonperishable items. We just have to locate them."

Angela scanned the debris piles, unable to get a read on anything specific. Her abilities were wonky again today, but she didn't have time to stress over it. She pointed. "Let's concentrate our efforts on this pile here. When we get back to the top level, we'll spend some time with the kids, doing a private

lesson. By the time that's finished, we'll need to start on lunch for everyone. I want you to tell Marc to divvy up the supplies now. If we do it later, we'll lose some of it during the transfer."

"I'll make sure he knows." Adrian scanned his notes. "What about the water and the weapons?"

"We're leaving most of the water for Jimmy's group. We're taking the weapons. The citizens who are going out on their own are already acting desperate. If there's a single incident after this, I'm going to order the Eagles to disarm them of what they already have. It would be foolish to give them more so they can use it against us."

"Dad's handling some of that now." Charlie glanced upward. "We'll hear it in a minute."

Angela wasn't worried about Marc getting hurt or about the camp being triggered into a stampede at this point. Things had already gotten so far out of hand that if they didn't clamp down on the worst of the offenders, everyone would stop obeying the rules. "We'll skip that level." Angela walked around Ivan, who was standing near the exit with his back to everyone. "The kids should be eating right now. They're no threat to me. I want the guards on that level working instead of babysitting."

As she went by, Ivan shivered at an unexpected wave of loneliness. He knew what had triggered it and crossed his arms over his chest. *That doesn't mean anything. She's just another walking, talking piece of ass.*

Angela stopped.

She turned and locked eyes with Ivan, unable to walk away from that. She connected them mentally, doing a deep scan while she was there. Marc trusted him, but Angela had no dealings with Ivan other than what was happening right now.

Around them, everyone stilled, waiting for Angela to determine the man's fate.

Ivan understood that if she found anything bad in his mind, he was likely to be killed, but it didn't matter. The feel of her was indescribable. There wasn't anything she could ask him for that he wouldn't try to deliver now and that was just from a mere impersonal mental scan. What would it be like to have her smile?

Angela studied the man, not breaking the connection. "Perhaps you should try to find out..." She let another second of communication flow between them and then rotated toward the corridor. "Put him on my detail while I sleep."

Adrian frowned. "What?"

Charlie laughed.

As they went up the ladder, a tense silence filled the cave. Few of the Runaways or Mountaineers understood, but the Eagles knew a call was coming through. During their time in the mountain, they had learned to identify some of the common noises. That tense pause where it felt as though the mountain had frozen around them always preceded a radio transmission.

"This is Kevin. Come in, Safe Haven."

Angela paused this time. She wanted to answer that call. Jennifer's vision had included both Kevin and Jeff, but there was no way for her to communicate that. She was positive their enemy was listening for responses 24-hours a day. She wanted the UN caught off guard, but more than that, she needed the time between now and their arrival to be sure the refugees outside were too sick to fight. Deep down, as much as it bothered her, she hoped they were all dead. She hadn't ordered the laptop switched on yet today, but that was on her list of things to check after the meeting with the descendant children. Despite the constant chaos, that young band of magic users had to be brought under control before they hurt someone.

"Come in, Safe Haven. This is Kevin. Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

The call echoed through weak radios on each floor.

Forced, Angela sent a command that reached every person in the cave. *We are on radio silence. Do not answer or use your radios. If caught, the penalty is immediate death.*

"Is there any way we can confiscate the radios?"

After her threat, Angela didn't scold Tracy for the mutter. "I had hoped it wouldn't come to that, but I did make a plan. It will depend on our cook's willingness to add a special sauce to tonight's meal."

It was unlikely that Brittani would agree to drug an entire cave of people based on a request from any

of them. She wasn't an Eagle yet. She wouldn't understand the need for radio silence.

"I'll speak to her." Tracy was behind Angela on the ladder, eager to be useful. She'd settled most of her demons.

"I'll assign you to help with the meal. If she won't do it, will you?"

"Yes." Tracy wasn't bothered by the chore. She was terrified of being captured by the UN, however. If putting the camp to sleep a couple hours early saved all their lives, she would do it and be glad.

Charlie looked at Adrian for help.

Adrian shook his head. "I'm not the one you have to talk to. I'm not running this show anymore."

Angela didn't respond. Tracy wanted to serve and she needed things done. "Let's hit the top floor now. The kids are getting restless and that's not good."

2

"That's my gun!" Dylan lunged toward Marc.

Marc shoved the man against the wall, letting his demon bleed through. It had returned in a burst of anger and defense as the camp member swung on him. "Sit down and cool off!" Marc studied his crew and saw Eagles ready to shoot. "Dylan is under arrest. Cuff him." He regarded the group of scared, tired survivors Dylan had been forcing to stay. "If you're staying in the mountain, get to the bottom level. If you're going with us, get to the top level."

“What if we’re not doing either of those?”

Marc located the owner of the defiant question. The man was tall and thin, with grungy clothes and wounded hands. “The mess has guards. You can stay there until we open the passage.”

Instead of gratitude, the man frowned. “Why do we have guards?”

Marc scowled back. “Really? We’ve had guards the entire time you’ve been here. Why would this be different?”

Oliver scowled. “We aren’t in your camp anymore. We don’t have your rules.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong, my friend.” Marc was hot. “You’re enjoying our hospitality and being fed from our stocks. You’ll behave or you’ll be arrested.”

“On what charges?”

Marc grunted in annoyance. “Dylan is being charged with holding people against their will, threatening lives, causing panic, and assault. Would you like to join him? You are his partner.”

Oliver held up a hand. “Those were his plans, not mine.”

“You didn’t stop him or tell anyone he was planning to attack.”

“I figured we’d get out there and he’d forget about it.”

“He’s lying.” Dylan was on the ground, dazed from Marc’s shove into the wall. “He said he could get by the guard on the water room because they’re friends.”

Marc scanned Oliver and gestured. “Arrest him.”

“On what charge?!” Oliver’s demand didn’t hide his fear at being exposed.

“Theft and conspiracy to start. We’ll speak again later. I suspect I’ll be adding planning a murder to it.”

“Of who?” Morgan was writing in his notebook.

“His friend on the water tanks. Greg is one of ours. He would have told us as soon as his shift ended.”

“Freaks!” Oliver spat at Marc and rushed forward.

Daryl and Morgan grabbed the man, forcing him down so he could be handcuffed.

Marc pointed at Dylan. “Take them both to the bottom floor and stay with them.”

As the troublemakers were shoved toward the ladder, Marc faced the remaining two dozen Runaways. “I see your relief. I smelled your fear. You’re not going to survive. Please reconsider going with us. We won’t hold you against your will.”

“You already are.” One of the women glared at Marc, daring him to deny it.

“If you don’t understand why that’s happening, then you’re gonna hate my next order. I want all your weapons, even the knives. You are not to be armed in this cave. You will not be given weapons or ammunition, and guards will watch you at all times.”

The cries and protests faded as Marc glowered. “Give up your guns or I will arrest you.”

The men and women began to hand their weapons to the nearest Eagle, exchanging nasty glares that warned of more trouble.

Marc gestured at his guards. “Let’s go.”

Marc hated the frustration that he and others were experiencing, but everyone had made a choice now. It was do or die time for them all.

3

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No. I’ll get something at dinner.”

Marc assumed she was making sure everyone had enough to eat and respected her for it even as he refused to allow it. He held out a tattered candy bar.

Angela took it with a guilty expression. She shoved it into her pocket.

“No. Now.”

“I’d rather—”

“No. The kids don’t need the energy boost or the mood fix.” He smiled. “Besides, I dug it out for you.”

“Share with me?”

Marc sat on the floor next to the papers she was reading through while the rest of the camp ate lunch. He took a small piece of the bar and popped it into his mouth.

Angela did too, moaning. “I love chocolate.”

Marc handed her another piece and swept the small training chamber. It was half emptied of debris, but Marc was positive they wouldn't finish it. "Something's coming."

"Jenny and Sam said that too. We're all twitchy."

"It's too early, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but we'll make it work."

"We have to."

"We will." Angela ate another small piece, sucking the gooey sweet from her fingers. "You on break?"

"Fifteen minutes. Adrian has it covered."

"None of us have it covered." Angela slid the candy into the wrapper, aware that Marc had only eaten the piece to get her going on it. "Later, okay?"

Marc paused as her eyes changed to a rolling, smoky blue that mesmerized him.

"Love me?"

Marc glanced down at his filthy clothes and then at the doorway where residents were walking by. "You sure?"

Angela answered with a mental wave of desire that took his breath away.

4

"Should I be doing this?" Jennifer kept glancing toward the entrance, expecting to see Angela. "She didn't tell me to answer their questions and handle their problems. In fact, she told me to rest."

Tonya and Tracy, flanking the girl, exchanged glances that implied they still didn't understand why Jennifer had been chosen over them.

Tonya gestured. "She announced you as her heir. She wants you to jump in."

Jennifer didn't mind that. She was happy to be useful and to have a distraction from the pain in her shoulder, but she also didn't want to step on Angela's toes—especially when she'd just been named heir.

Tonya lowered her voice. "Kenn said the reason she didn't put you to work yet is because she feels bad that you got hurt again."

"She needs our help. If you can do this, do it." Tracy swept the room. "Here come more Runaways. Ready?"

Jennifer braced against the nervousness. "Good afternoon. What can I do for you?"

"Convince us we'll be safer with you."

Jennifer understood the people were afraid to be on their own. "All I can do is tell you what might happen. It may be ugly. I have no control over that."

A tall, tired woman came forward, holding out her hand. "We have to touch or something, I think."

Jennifer cleared her throat. "There are prices to deals like this."

Ellie frowned a little, but shrugged. "If I have anything you want, it's yours. Just tell them the truth."

The males were confident they could survive, but Ellie knew better. She wanted her father and two brothers to stay under Safe Haven's protection.

Jennifer took an iron grip on the woman's wrist. "You'll owe the debt to the boss for allowing this, not me."

Ellie nodded, free hand shoved into her pocket to hide her clenched fist. "Deal. Do it."

Jennifer drew hard, using the woman's energy to open the mental barrier. "Ask your questions. You have three."

Ellie was ready. "I only have one. What happens to our family on our own or here?"

Jennifer took another healthy drag of the woman's nervous energy and opened the door wider. "Death comes to this cursed ground fast now. Don't linger." Jennifer studied the images, always wishing for sound. "You make it west. Women now rule those lands. Your father dies in battle with them. Your brothers are taken captive. You die trying to rescue them." Jennifer connected their minds and allowed Ellie to witness the images.

Ellie tensed, gasping. "Stop."

"See what you came to deny. All of you." Jennifer blasted the family with the images of their deaths. "This is your future."

Tracy and Tonya observed for problems, but the family was rattled by the vision. The men hadn't believed Ellie's claims of dreaming about their deaths.

Jennifer let go, slamming the barrier. “That’s it.”

Ellie gathered her wary family at one of the rickety tables. She was hoping they were convinced now, because she was. “I’m going with them.”

“It’s a trick.”

“Maybe, but I won’t take that chance. Angela is never wrong.”

“She’s not Angela.”

“She’s Angela’s heir. Do you think Angela would pick someone who couldn’t be trusted?”

“No, I guess not.”

“We’ll stay with them. Later, we’ll ask her to search again.”

“We won’t get it for free next time.”

“We didn’t get it for free this time. Did you catch how powerful that was?”

“Yes. We’ll find some way to pay for it.”

Jennifer and her two guards listened to the conversation without comment or much thought. That conversation was taking place on every level of the caves right now. People were trying to be sure they could live with their choice. The recent problems had caused some folks to reconsider their decision, but only a few of them would.

Jennifer believed Ellie would be the exception, rather than the rule. Deep down, the normal people viewed descendants as dangerous. It was in their thoughts so much that Jennifer had been blocking them. She wasn’t able to pinpoint when the camp had turned against magic, but it had happened faster

here than in Cesar's camp. The other slaves had loathed it because they didn't have it to use for their defense. They hadn't understood it was there to help them.

Jennifer turned toward the doorway again, feeling the next group coming. "Good afternoon. What can I do for you?"

As Jennifer worked, Tonya and Tracy chatted.

"He gives me the creeps." Tracy stared toward the dark kitchen, certain the vet was studying everything. "You?"

Tonya shrugged. "He's been more useful than I have since the earthquake. Makes me guilty, frankly."

"That's odd."

"Because I'm okay with him facing traitors so my man doesn't have to?"

Tracy paused. "I hadn't thought about it that way."

"I hadn't either until I heard Ray trying to talk to Dale. Dennis was bad. Howard and Bobby were under observation as possible assassins. Maybe the vet just takes care of bad souls."

Tracy accepted that mental change, okay with almost anything that kept Charlie out of the line of fire. He was sleeping now, due for another overnight shift with Adrian and Kyle, who were also sleeping. That was how they'd been able to sneak Jennifer out of the corner where the baby and mobster had crashed. Both women were hoping to

get Jennifer back there before Kyle woke up. “Do you think the vet’s had anything to eat?”

Tonya shrugged. “He’s afraid to come out here. A lot of people aren’t dead.”

Tracy scanned the room and didn’t locate any problems. “I need three minutes.”

“I’ve got this. And if I don’t, she does.”

“Do you mind?!”

The women glanced down to find Jennifer staring up at them in annoyance. It was clear they’d been distracting her.

“Sorry.” Both women apologized. Jennifer was a lot like Angela when she was upset. You could almost feel her disapproval.

Jennifer turned back to Doug. “My apologies. Where were we?”

“I don’t know what to do about Becky.”

Jennifer took Doug’s big hand in hers, connecting them. Again, she used his energy so she didn’t deplete her own. “She already suspects. Seth is helping her.”

Doug sighed in resignation. “I’m going after them. Peggy would want me to watch out for Becky.”

Jennifer patted Doug’s hand. “Just don’t forget where your home is.”

Doug smiled. “No problem there, little girl.”

Jennifer motioned toward Tonya. “Go write it in her book. We’ll deliver it, but it has to be in your handwriting.”

Doug did as instructed.

More residents came into the mess. Rumor was flying that Jennifer was using her gifts and everyone had a question they needed answered.

Tonya leaned in. “Hang around, will you? We don’t have enough guards in here for this.”

Doug finished writing and then took a place by Jennifer. Unlike the rest of the people who hadn’t been positive about staying or going, Doug knew what he wanted to do. The problem had been that what he wanted and what was right were different. The citizens coming into the mess didn’t have that problem. They wanted to be told they would survive, but Doug doubted many of them would hear that.

If there was any chance at all that the Runaways and Mountaineers would survive, Doug had faith that Angela would have told them. But she hadn’t, which meant the situations that came next would be worse than what they had already dealt with. Doug planned to be back with Safe Haven before that happened.

Tracy entered the dark kitchen without fear of the vet. She was worried about all the people in the mess. Most of them didn’t care why Chris had done what he had. He was a violent person trapped in this cave with them. Tracy didn’t want their views of him to color their opinion of her so much that it caused problems for Charlie. “I brought you something to eat.”

A flash light came on in the corner, illuminating the vet on the floor in the corner. He glanced up at her in bleary confusion.

Tracy shrugged. “It felt like the right thing to do.” She set the bottle of water and packs of nonperishables on the ground by her feet, then walked toward the mess. “You may want to get out of here soon. When we shut everything down for the night, it’s very likely that looters will be on this level.”

Tracy heard Chris stretch and pause, wanting to be able to hear anything he might be about to say.

“He’s good for you. You should reward him for that.”

Tracy spun around, understanding who he meant. “That’s none of your business!”

Chris put his head down. “He doesn’t expect a reward. He has a pure soul. When you bond with him, his light will ease your pain. The nightmares will stop.”

Tracy stared, a little shocked by the conversation, but more by her reaction to it than by the words or who it was coming from. She’d had the same thought not long ago, but during a crisis was a bad time to be conquering fears.

“Is there a better time to conquer your fears than when you’re afraid?”

Tracy didn’t know what to say to that. It made too much sense. She left the kitchen at a quick trot, resuming her post with Tonya.

“How did it go?”

Tracy shrugged. "He still creeps me out."

Tonya chuckled. "That's part of his charm."

"He told me to sleep with Charlie."

Jennifer stared up at them again.

"This is getting interesting." Doug chuckled.

"Do you mind if I take notes?"

Startled into a laugh, Jennifer turned back to the student who was waiting for her answer. "I'm sorry. Where were we?"

The Next Step

1

Charlie muttered as a hand slid over his brow. Soft and cool, he grabbed it before it was gone.

Tracy gasped at the fast reaction. “Sorry.”

“You’re all right.” Charlie smiled at her. “Wake me anytime.”

Nose full of her scent as she leaned over him, Charlie rubbed his thumb over her fingers. “Good morning, beautiful.”

Tracy blushed. “Hi.” She didn’t pull her hand away even though sparks were flying between them.

Charlie wondered how long she’d been sitting by his pallet in the partially cleared training chamber. “When does my shift begin?”

“Hour and a half. It’s evening now. Sorry I woke you.”

Charlie kissed her hand, then released it. “I’m not. We don’t get much time alone anymore.”

Tracy smiled. “I don’t think they’ll keep us apart once we get out of here.”

Charlie stretched, causing the blanket to drop down on his bare chest. “Why do you say that?”

“Because we’ll already be bonded.”

Charlie stiffened—in both ways.

Tracy chuckled, thrilled to be interested instead of sad. For a while, she'd believed the physical side of love was gone for her. "I'm better now."

"Good." Charlie pushed into a sitting position, staring at her. "What brought this on?"

Tracy paused. He sounded angry. "Why did something have to happen?"

"It doesn't, but I know it did by your reaction." Charlie cursed meddling fools. "Come on. Give up the bee buzzing in your ear."

Tracy was confused. "Why aren't you happy about it?"

"It wasn't your idea."

She smiled softly for him. "It is my choice, though."

Charlie wanted to say yes, but couldn't. "We can talk, but I won't do it because someone convinced you."

Tracy put a hand on his leg, snickering when he jumped and covered her hand with his own. "No one convinced me. I thought about something that was said and decided to take the next step."

"Us having sex."

She withdrew her hand. "It's crude when you say it like that."

The boy shrugged. "It's crude when you approach it like this. You're not a whore anymore."

"Ouch." Tracy sat back, embarrassed. "Why aren't you happy?"

"I'm sorry." Charlie sighed. "I want it to be special for you, for us."

Tracy understood this wasn't what he had in mind, but she wondered if it was more than that. "Are you okay? This isn't like you."

Charlie fought against the need to be a man and the need to let her into his immature concerns. He settled for the middle ground. "I don't know enough yet. I need to ask more questions. I can't just Google it, you know?"

Tracy laughed, delighted he'd told her the truth. She didn't tell him she would handle that.

He knew. "I didn't want it to be like all the others."

Tracy stilled. "Does that bother you?"

"I worry if I'll be as good as they were."

Tracy's heart melted. "Most of those moments weren't for my fun, honey. I didn't enjoy it. *They* did."

"I'll make sure you enjoy it with me." Charlie wasn't boasting. He'd already promised himself that she would want more when it was over.

"I believe you." Tracy slid into the pallet next to him, lying on her side. "Can we discuss it now?"

Charlie grinned. "I'm starting to understand what they mean about women. You guys are sneaky."

Tracy took his hand in hers, twining their fingers. "I love you. Will you love me?"

Charlie didn't have the willpower to refuse her again. As he sank down into her arms, he brought up his personal bubble to prevent them from being disturbed.

Tracy didn't notice. As soon as their lips met, his mental touch slid over her in a wave of new power that stole everything except the desire to be his in every way.

Charlie felt it and obliged. He wasn't stupid.

2

“She spent the afternoon doing what?!”

Kyle's shout echoed to the top level of the cave, waking residents on every floor and causing guards to shake their heads. Everyone had expected him to react badly when he found out, but there had also been the small hope that he would realize as Angela's heir, Jennifer was going to be doing a lot of that.

Kenn scowled at Kyle. “Angela's asleep. Do you want her up again?”

“No. I can yell at her later.” Kyle stomped toward the tunnel, ignoring the stares. He didn't care about their disapproval. Jennifer had been in the mess, surrounded by people who might want to hurt her and he hadn't been there to help.

“By the time it was over, there were more Eagles in the mess than any other area.” Kenn followed Kyle. “Seriously man, don't blow up on her. This is Jennifer's job now.”

Kyle knew that, but it didn't make it any easier. She was going to be in danger all the time. “I wanted her to say no.”

Kenn snorted. “Like we said no to Adrian?”

Kyle stomped toward the ladder. “I can’t wait to be out of this shit hole.”

That, Kenn agreed with completely. “Coffee or rounds? They have us as top bananas for the overnight shift.”

“Coffee... What about Adrian?”

“He stayed up and provided guard duty for the boss.”

“Okay. Coffee and updates. This shit you brought me is too weak.”

“Marc gave the majority of our staples to the Mountaineers.”

Grumpy, Kyle didn’t acknowledge that. He slid down the ladder using his hands, pretending the splinters he got didn’t hurt. In a mood like this, he didn’t care about small punctures. What he needed was a release that he couldn’t get while they were trapped in this mountain. He had to control the wild side of himself.

In that moment, Kenn bonded with the monster against his will. “I was thinking we should do some training, once everybody is settled down.”

“What type of training?” Kyle ignored the disappointed annoyance of the guards who were glaring at him for his bad attitude.

“Hostage rescue without gunfire.”

Kyle nodded, calming against his will. “Add that to our list. We’ll be making rounds of corridors that don’t have guards. I want to be able to tell Angela we have full perimeter security when she gets up.”

“Deal.”

They got coffee and settled at a small table in the far corner to finish waking and to observe those around them. Dinner was over, but people had felt comfortable enough to linger for weak coffee and soothing conversation. Since the quake, it was harder to get to sleep.

“Jennifer’s messages for you.” Kenn handed them over. “I assumed you’d want them first.”

Kyle read the short message at the top with a snort.

Please don’t be mad. It’s my duty.

Kyle loved that about her, but it was also something he was coming to hate. He read the next note and then the three lines after it, frowning more at each one. Jennifer had convinced several people to remain with Safe Haven, at least until they were out of the cave and away from this mountain, but she had also discovered a thief and a possible traitor—both in the Mountaineers. Those residents had been wounded and not evaluated by descendants because they hadn’t been capable of posing a threat. With a few more days of healing, that would no longer be true, but those citizens hadn’t been vetted. “I’ll handle it during shift change. Next?”

Kenn and Kyle got through the updates in record time, both listening to the noises of the cave fading into sleep. For Kenn, this was the best part of the day. For Kyle, it was the worst. Bonded by their

women and their differences, not a single insult was exchanged during the update.

As they finished and stood up to make their first round of the guards, Kenn met Kyle's eyes. "I'm glad you guys are going with us. We would have missed you."

Surprised into a better mood, Kyle shrugged. "Maybe in time I'll be able to say the same about you."

It was as close to peace as they had gotten. Kenn accepted it gratefully. It was more than he'd ever expected.

"Why is everyone so quiet?" Kyle checked his watch. "It's barely bed time."

Kenn handed Kyle another paper. "Hard work. We got most of the remaining debris piles sorted today."

"Yeah, I guess." Kyle read the note.

Light dose of sleeping medicine.

Kyle didn't like that, but he understood the need for it. He handed the paper back and gestured. *Everyone?*

Kenn glanced toward the yawning folks in the far corner of the mess. *Just the Runaways.*

That told Kyle there had been trouble while he slept.

"Marc disarmed them and arrested their new leader, Dylan. They're afraid to pick a new one."

Kyle snorted. "Yeah, I'll bet. What else?"

“She ordered the supplies split up. Everyone was unhappy with the amounts. Repairs have been halted.”

Kyle lifted a brow.

Kenn handed the paper back again. *Jennifer’s prediction.*

Kyle read the rest of it this time.

Watch Candy and Dale.

An unvetted guard has duty over the boss right now.

The water stopped again.

Kyle shoved the paper into his pocket and stomped toward the ladder. “Who put an unvetted guard over the boss?”

“The boss.”

Kyle scowled. “Any idea why?”

“Marc thinks as bait. He yelled at her for it.”

“I’m certain that worked.”

“Yeah, well, they weren’t yelling afterwards, so I assume she distracted him.”

Kyle’s lips twitched. Marc had been without for a while. That would succeed.

The other females will try the same thing.

Kyle shrugged at Kenn’s silent observation. *We need babies, right?*

Kenn grinned, thinking of his coming parenthood years. “We say that now.”

Kyle chuckled, unable to hold the bad mood he’d woken in. “Come on. Let’s play with the mouse she put in the hall.”

“You want good or bad?”

“Let’s use Eagle lessons. If he’s not bad, then he’s one of us or she wouldn’t have put him on her detail.”

“Makes sense to me. Bring him in and get him to confide?”

“For now let’s feel him out.” Kyle was used to operating on instinct, whereas Kenn preferred to plan every detail. It had created some hard moments when they were forced to work together, but when they were on the same page, it was perfect.

With the groups segregated, port-o-lets had been put up on each level and the smells were awful. Coughs and snores echoed through the filth, as well as gasps and moans of souls having nightmares. It wasn’t peaceful, but it was calm enough for Kyle to breathe a sigh of relief. He’d expected things to be much worse when he woke.

As they went by the sleeping kids, Kyle made eye contact with the guard. Jennifer and Autumn were in a rear corner. Kyle nodded to Greg to show the man that he had support. Kyle hadn’t worried about Greg for an instant in the entire time they’d been dealing with assassins and traitors in their ranks. He had no problem with Greg on duty there. He just wanted to be the one doing it.

Greg returned the gesture, working hard to earn back the respect he felt he’d lost. Greg had chosen to become so useful to Safe Haven that his loyalty could never again be doubted. He took out his notebook.

Kyle continued toward the weapons room.

In the hall, Stanley and Shawn were curled up in sleeping bags. Kyle didn't wake them. He was glad to see Shawn, but the clumsy kid next to him wasn't dependable in a fight. Stanley had spent two days carrying water and spilling half of it. No one was happy with him. Before he'd crashed, Kyle had reassigned the clumsy boy to helping with the kids. If he couldn't do that, he would be taken from the rookie Eagles and placed onto the list of camp members.

As they neared the next post, Kyle saw that all the soldiers were together. David, leg bandaged, was sleeping next to Peter and James. Boothe and Ivan were standing near the makeshift barrier, with Morgan in a far corner, watching them all.

Kyle joined Morgan while Kenn checked in with Ivan. "Anything I should know?"

Morgan yawned. "They like pussy and they hate this mountain—same as the rest of us."

Kyle snickered. Babysitting duty was boring when the target was innocent. "Shift change in half an hour."

That brought smiles to all the men.

Kyle nodded to Ivan, no longer worried over him being here. Morgan would shoot him if there was a problem.

Kenn took the paper Ivan handed him, digging into the man's mind. Kenn didn't think there was a problem, but he'd heard about Ivan's challenge concerning Angela and he was curious if the man had altered his opinion yet.

Spotting nothing, Kenn withdrew and headed for the tunnel. “She’ll come out in a minute because she felt us out here. We’re just doing rounds. No problems, nothing new.”

Ivan didn’t tell Kenn he doubted Marc or Angela would come out until morning. They’d both worked all day and then had sex. After that, anyone would be knocked—

The door behind him opened a crack. “Update me.”

Ivan grinned, impressed. “No problems, nothing new.”

“Rounds?”

“Yeah. Kenn and your other guy—the mobster.”

“Kyle.” Angela shut the door and returned to Marc’s arms.

Ivan looked at Morgan. “She always like this?”

Morgan nodded. “Yep.”

“Good. It’s kinda nice to have a leader who hears everything, you know?”

“Not like that in government work?”

“Not even close.” Ivan stopped talking and went back to observing.

Morgan checked the man off his mental list. It was always hard to tell, but Ivan had the right answers and attitude for a good guy who wanted to become a hero. Morgan recognized it because that’s how he’d been when he joined Adrian’s army. The need to serve hadn’t faded even though the camp had switched leaders and locations. Morgan understood these souls carried as much magic as

their leaders. Together, they were an immune system that an infection couldn't conquer.

Kyle retrieved the paper from his pocket and read the next set of notes Kenn had prepared.

Our new jail is on the bottom level.

Missa and Joseph have joined Jimmy's group.

Morning viewing of the outside feed is set up in the mess.

Kyle sighed, going to the bottom level to check on their prisoners. He didn't know what Marc planned to do with the men, but Kyle doubted they would be let go. The days of second chances in Safe Haven were about over.

Kyle found the prisoners in the tarped area where Samantha and Neil had been, all three sleeping heavily.

Kyle caught Kenn's motion. *Sedated.*

Kyle swept the short row of wounded and then the cots nearby where the doctor and his students were snoring and shifting restlessly. They had a lot of cuts and bruises throughout the camp, along with burns and rashes. Down here were broken bones and impalements. None of these people were healing as fast as Samantha had, but they hadn't received an energy blast from Angela and Cody.

Kyle spotted Joseph and Missa curled up back-to-back by the storage room where Jennifer had been stashed. The nuns from Sarah's group were next to them. Kyle wondered if Missa and Joseph shared the views on descendant children being devils. None of the religious population was coming

with them, something that had shocked Kyle. Didn't they know the magic came from God, that the descendants came from Christ? He assumed their fear wouldn't allow them to accept that, but he had no doubt that when Safe Haven departed, those same people would claim to have been touched by heaven. As they died, they would curse those same angels.

Kyle gave the two guards down here a hard stare that said to stay alert, then went up the ladder to make sure things were calm on the level that had been crushed. There wasn't supposed to be anyone there right now, but he was positive he'd heard digging noises as they'd come down.

Spotting a female shadow, Kyle gestured Kenn to it. *I'm not awake enough for this one.*

Kenn grimaced, but didn't argue. He didn't know what to say to Candy. He had no idea where she fit into Angela's plans.

Candy gave him a huge smile. "Good morning!"

"It's not even midnight yet." Kenn swept the area and noticed she was creating new piles and sorting. "Who told you to do this now?"

"Conner."

"Conner?"

Candy nodded, sitting on a broken stool. "I had a dream. We talked. When I woke up, I felt better."

The mountain sickness is getting a hold on her again. Kenn sighed. "Maybe we should speak to Jimmy."

Candy pointed at a nearby pile. “I need to get that cleared. I’m going slow so I don’t get hurt or wake anyone up. Besides, you told me to do this if I could.”

Kenn spotted the small case Tonya had kept with her in the lab. He regarded Candy in suspicion. “What’s going on?”

“Conner said I need a friend.” Candy scanned the messy piles and gloomy shadows. “He’s right. I like Tonya. If I find something she wants, she might be willing to give me a chance.”

Kenn went over and began clearing the rest of the heavier rocks and debris from atop the dented case so Candy wouldn’t try it in her condition. “Did he say anything else or have a message for us?”

“Oh, no. He wasn’t supposed to break silence and call in.” She blushed. “He was worried about me.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing.” Candy smiled. “I yelled at him for breaking the rules. Man, if that hadn’t been a dream, he’d be mad at me.”

She is still sick. Kenn wasn’t sure what to do, so he chose to be honest. “Isn’t it weird to be bonding with your stalker?”

Candy’s smile fell into anger. “He’s a lost kid who needs some help. Why do you have to be so mean?”

Kenn wiped away sweat. “People will view it that way.”

“Conner is a hero now. He proved himself on that trip. When he comes here, he’ll—”

“Still be Adrian’s son.” Kenn tugged the case loose and set it by Candy’s feet. “I don’t have a problem with Conner. Neither does Tonya, as far as I know.”

Candy swiveled around to watch him walk away, mind clearing for a moment. “You’re good now.”

Kenn nodded. “I’m trying.”

“Me too. I miss the old Safe Haven.”

Kenn paused. *Me too.* “She had a notebook with the case. If you locate it, you’re guaranteed a chance to be friends.”

Candy beamed.

Kenn joined Kyle near the ladder.

“Problem?”

“Not yet.” Kenn filled Kyle in as they went to the next level. He wanted to use his gift to send the thoughts, but Angela had outlawed magic use and that meant him too.

Kyle grunted, filing the information. “We’ll keep an eye on things, but it appears we may have been wrong about him.”

“You think?”

“Maybe. He’s like any other teenager peeping through holes. We all did it.”

Kenn laughed. “And then some.”

“We’ll see what Kendle says when she returns.”

“Agreed.” Kenn gestured. “Let’s get this level cleared and then handle Jimmy’s three problems.”

“You want to do our prisoners at the same time?”

Kenn thought about it. “Can we make it genuine?”

“I don’t see why not, but even if we can’t, does it matter? They all believe we’re evil now.”

Kyle’s bitterness bothered Kenn. “Are we?”

“It’s much too soon to tell.”

Candy got up and began digging again. She hadn’t told Kenn there had already been a lot of papers and notebooks dug out. Cynthia had gathered many of them while she worked here today. One of them had been the petition.

Descendants are dangerous. Please join me in signing the back of this page. It is a petition, asking that the things discussed in this paper be added to the next mandatory camp meeting.

Candy thought about those words and about how ugly it was in the cave now. Cynthia’s views had gone public, and then the quake had come and ripped them all apart. It was easy for people to believe the two were connected. When Candy had asked Conner about it, the boy hadn’t been able to give her an answer that made sense.

Sometimes fate provides an opportunity, but at the same time, it also provides a trap. Angela caught both of them where almost no one else could have. Serve her if you can. She’s the alpha now.

Candy was trying, but the hole in her heart where Lee had been was still screaming. It had been months, but she missed him. That wouldn’t change

and it made it hard to view anything else without pain clouding her judgment. The only light she saw now was in a teenage boy who was probably hundreds of miles from here and not thinking about her at all.

I think about you constantly.

Candy smiled as Conner's warm hand settled onto her shoulder. *I know I'm imagining these moments, but thank you anyway.*

For what?

For wanting me. No one else does.

That'll change once they watch you grow with life and realize Lee was honored. The wives and girlfriends are always cared for.

We haven't been since Angela took over.

She doesn't know the code. My dad will teach her. There were a lot of other things that had to come first.

Shouldn't he have tried to pass it to you?

Never. I've disgraced myself. I'll never be a leader.

You could be an Eagle.

I am an Eagle, Candy. Things have changed.

Candy felt the hand withdraw and shivered at the drafty replacement of nothing, of being in a cold corridor that stank and cried with the ghosts of the dead.

"I've always been alone, really." Candy resumed digging. "I'm different. That's okay as long as someone needs me."

"You could come with us."

Candy didn't look up at Jamie, who was staying with the Runaways. He'd stopped on his way up the ladder. "No, thank you."

"You believe her about us all dying out there without Safe Haven?"

"What I believe doesn't matter." Candy tossed a crushed bottle lid onto the pile, wincing at the noise even though she'd done it to draw a guard in case Jamie got violent. She didn't know him. "I'll be able to touch that island, to grow food and raise herds, and I'll always be safe because I can see my enemies coming and be ready before they even make it to shore. You can't offer me that anywhere on American soil. I'm an Islander. I can't be converted."

Jamie knelt down to help dig through the pile, determined to try anyway. "You're not like them. You belong with your own kind."

Candy thought of Conner. He was more like her than anyone she'd ever known. "Simon was arrested for harassing women and trying to force them to stay. I've refused. Accept it."

Jamie looked up as Kenn and Kyle appeared in the tunnel. Both guards had their arms over their chests, scowling at him.

Jamie stood up. "I didn't do anything. We were just talking."

"I told him I'm not going." Candy kept working. "If he comes out before morning, I'll scream."

Kenn nodded and went to the ladder.

Kyle glowered at Jamie until the man was back in his area. The mobster wanted to do more than deliver a warning.

Kyle nodded at Candy and joined Kenn. They would stay on this level for a while and visit it more than they had planned to.

Candy went on searching for Tonya's notebook, but she also gathered little items she knew were needed or treasured by someone. When morning came, she would be able to give some smiles to residents and begin repairing the damage she'd done to herself since Lee died. She didn't know what would come after that, but she knew nothing could come before it. The foundation of an Eagle determined everything else in Safe Haven and Candy was determined to have everything she'd laid out to Jamie. She wanted to be on Pitcairn. Once she was, the island would be her home. They would never get her to come back.

3

Ray snapped awake as a warm body crawled in with him. He recognized his mate's smell.

Ray tensed, expecting Dale's knife to slide between his ribs.

"Don't speak. At all."

Ray nodded.

Dale put his arms around Ray and his cheek against Ray's shoulder. They stayed still, listening to each other, feeling each other.

Ray cried a little. He understood Dale had needed to hold him one more time before they were split.

Dale went straight to sleep, not experiencing Ray's pain as he'd been able to in the past. It was really over.

Chapter Twenty-Three BK8

Honor First

1

Across from Ray and Dale, the prisoners in the tarped-in area were talking in low tones. They'd woken a short time ago and faked sleep when Kyle came through.

“Shift change is coming. We'll act then.”

Dylan glared at Oliver. “You blew it by getting caught. Now, we won't have anyone on the inside.”

“That's why we're attacking them when the shift changes. If we don't, we'll be killed or tossed out in the cold with nothing.”

“Who are we grabbing?” Simon was no longer the leader of anything. His balls had never hurt this much. “They have all the magic users on the top floor.”

“The reporter is down here in the cubby where Jennifer was stashed. She's carrying a descendant baby.”

“But everyone wants the kid dead.” Dylan wasn't eager to experience what Simon had.

“Not the mother. She'll do what she has to.” Oliver was determined to get what they needed to survive. Once they left Safe Haven, there wouldn't

be any more easy meals or warm beds, and these men needed to accept that.

“Maybe. What about the other guards?”

“We’ll go out through that top passage.”

“If we can get by the top level, you mean.”

Simon didn’t want to agree, but they were sure to be killed...or reclaimed, in the next day or two. He shuddered. “We’ll start a fire down here for them to fight. We know how they fear fire now.”

“Hey, that could work!”

“I know, right?”

The trio continued to make plans, not budging from their sedated, sleeping positions. They were hoping the next guards would also do a fast check, like Kyle had done. If the Eagles had come into the tarp, they would have noticed the uneven breathing of nervous prisoners getting ready to attack.

2

Cynthia hadn’t crashed yet. After spending the day digging through the rubble, she was tired enough to sleep, but she didn’t want to. She’d come across a copy of her last newspaper edition before the earthquake. Containing the petition and her accusation against the descendants, it had reminded her of all of the things that had been wrong before her life had been spared. She didn’t understand why Angela hadn’t killed her. *I didn’t imagine my life being in danger. I’m not prone to irrational*

behavior and I don't believe mountain sickness exists.

She did believe in mental breakdowns, however. It was obvious that she'd had one, but that didn't mean her reasons for it were unjustified.

Cynthia pulled the next notebook over, flipping pages in an attempt to identify who the author was. After she finished, she would give the books to their owners, most of them. She was hoping for leadership pages.

Cynthia ignored the smells and sounds outside the cubby. She had a lantern and a bottle of water. That was all she needed right now. Despite holing up on the bottom level, Cynthia wasn't staying in this mountain. There was no way she could tolerate living here, but she also felt unsafe with the Islanders. That meant being alone, but she wasn't certain that she would be up to that even if she wasn't pregnant. All that left was for her to find a way to tolerate Safe Haven.

Adrian had once been a light in the darkness for Cynthia. She was hoping the leadership notebooks would prove that he and Angela did have the best interests of the camp at heart, that they were good and worthy to be followed. Cynthia wasn't sold on that, but the camp had split into three factions. That meant no one was certain, not even the descendants who had no choice but to follow the alpha and their converts. That wasn't enough for Cynthia.

Seeing the book in her hand was a light, flowery script, Cynthia set it aside. It appeared to be female

handwriting, but not Angela's. Their boss had a heavy hand that was sometimes hard to read—making it easy to believe she had been a doctor before the war.

Cynthia grabbed another notebook, noting the no-longer glossy eagle on the front. *That's what I'm hunting.*

Outside the cubby, the sound of footsteps began to echo. The changing of the guard was quiet other than footsteps that crunched over fresh debris from the small tremor. The bottom level wasn't being cleaned the way the top level was.

Sounds of a struggle snapped Cynthia's attention from the notebooks. She glanced around in guilty fear, worried that one of the descendants knew she had Angela's notebook.

"Stop!"

There was a loud grunt and then a dull thud, then quiet.

Cynthia stepped to the cubby entrance.

"Get her."

Cynthia was grabbed by the arm and dragged into the middle of the bottom level. She saw three guards on the ground and three of the Runaways standing over them.

The man holding Cynthia spun them toward the other two. "If you scream, you lose the baby."

Cynthia recognized the bluff, but she didn't want to fight and endanger her child.

"Get their guns."

Simon and Dylan also took the Eagle kits from the bodies. She couldn't tell if the men were dead or not.

Cynthia was dismayed to realize that the bodies on the ground were the new shift of guards. There wouldn't be a check in for at least half an hour. Not wanting to, but not seeing another choice, Cynthia woke her son. *Mommy needs you to send a message.*

Sleepy waves of dangerous power filled the bottom level.

3

Kyle slid down the ladder, once again taking splinters. Jennifer was relaying the scene to him, but Kyle had known there was a problem because there were three guards on the bottom floor. There was supposed to be two. Allan hadn't come up yet.

Kyle slid to a stop, hand going to his holster as he took in the situation. Oliver had an arm around Cynthia's neck. His two henchmen were pointing their stolen weapons, and they had three men down. Weber, one of the Runaways Kyle had believed was still in the mess, stepped from the shadows of the waste corridor with a gun in his hand and a grin on his cracked lips. "Take us straight to the top and do it right now."

Kyle gestured toward the guards on the ground. "Leave them alive and I won't shout. You hurt anybody on the way and I'll wake every descendant in here."

“You’ll be shot before they reach us and so will she.” Oliver shoved Cynthia in front of him.

“I’m willing to die here. Are you?” Kyle was furious. He wasn’t bluffing.

Simon stepped away from the unconscious guards. “We don’t want to hurt anyone. We just want out.”

Oliver shoved Cynthia ahead of him again. “If anybody attacks us, she’ll die.”

The small group went up the ladder in silence. Kyle was connected to Jennifer, feeding her everything that was happening. He assumed she was relaying that information to Angela, but there were no incoming instructions. It didn’t take Kyle long to figure out he was supposed to do what he’d always done—defend the camp. *When we get to the top level, have Shawn, Morgan, and Ivan each grab a man.*

Hang on with that. The boss said it’s covered.

Kyle was relieved to hear it, but he stayed ready to help.

As they reached the mess level, Simon went to the entrance. “If you’re going with us, get out here now!”

He came back alone, scowling and muttering about being betrayed. He gestured toward Kyle. “Get up there and get the door open.”

Kyle hurried up the ladder and got out of sight.

“You shouldn’t have let him go.” Oliver pushed Cynthia toward the ladder. “You next.”

Cynthia also climbed quickly, but she didn’t try to get out of sight. Her son was telling her that

someone was at the top of the ladder and wanted her to duck and roll as soon as she reached the floor. Cynthia was trying to figure out how to do that and cushion her stomach.

The ladder shook as all five of them climbed at the same time. Above, there were no sounds to alert anyone.

Cynthia reached the top and pulled herself up onto the floor. She dropped onto her knees and crawled toward the residence chamber where a line of bleary guards were standing.

“Grab her!” Oliver climbed quicker up the ladder.

Kenn hurried out of the shadows. Sliding on his ass to the ladder, he used his huge foot to kick it free of the new anchors that weren't as strong as the first ones had been. He kicked again, using repeated blows until the ladder broke free.

“No!”

“Stop him!”

Kenn kicked once more and sent the ladder careening into open space with the four men on it.

Sounds of the ladder and bodies crashing down three levels of the cave brought everyone awake.

Kenn stared down, listening for the call. As the bad guys had cleared each level, sleeping guards had woken and taken up posts in tunnels and cavities to be a surprise. “We'll need a body crew down there.”

Not needed, the extra sentries went back to their uncomfortable beds and uncomfortable dreams.

Kenn got to his feet and went to check on Cynthia.

Cynthia was huddled on the ground near Shawn's feet. She peered up at Kenn in tired confusion. "Am I safe anywhere?"

Kenn gestured toward the reading chamber, where most of the adults were. "You should be okay in there."

Cynthia understood it was a test of her loyalty, of her decision on remaining with Safe Haven, but until an official invite came from the boss, she couldn't do that. "I'll stay here."

"You're still better off up here than you were on the bottom level." Kenn went to join Kyle, who was giving an update to the boss.

For one moment, the old Kenn burst out in a flash of jealousy that couldn't endure the boss being surrounded by Kyle, Morgan, and the new men. He hated being on the outside in any way. "Four problems solved and it didn't take any of your pets to do it."

Everyone stared at Kenn in surprised disapproval.

Jackass. Angela slammed the door. Three hours was not enough sleep.

"I wish you wouldn't push her that way." Adrian came from the passage behind him, followed by Charlie. "She's almost gotten to the point where she can forgive you for some of the mistakes, but not if you keep doing stupid shit like that."

Adrian ignored Kenn's automatic protest and gestured to Kyle for the update. "Let's go to the mess so she can sleep."

Kyle had no problem with that. He was glad things had turned out as well as they had. It bothered him that he hadn't been expecting issues. Before they came to this cursed mountain, prisoners wouldn't have been able to fool him by faking sleep.

Adrian understood. He wanted to offer comfort or advice, but the only thing that would help any of them at this point was to get out of here. Every time they had to eliminate another traitor or threat, their own mortality flashed before their eyes and reminded them that if they made a mistake, they would be eliminated the same way.

Some days, that was easier to deal with than others. For Kyle, it was more difficult. The mobster was still upset with himself for not being able to prevent Jennifer from being used as a hostage, and for shooting her to save her. It was a choice that no one should have to make for someone that they loved, but Kyle had been forced to do it repeatedly since he joined Safe Haven. During Angela's time at the rest stop, Kyle had absorbed all of her misery and then some. Despite being a hardened killer, he was also sensitive and needed someone to talk to. Adrian doubted the mobster would accept him in that position now, even in these limited circumstances, but he was determined to try anyway. Once Kyle settled down, and Neil accepted

the fact that sometimes bad things happened to good people, the council would reconnect.

“Body removal.” Adrian gestured at Charlie.

Charlie was out of sight a few seconds later, eager to get that done. He didn’t like the chore, but he also didn’t mind it. Simon had been dangerous. It was good to know he was dead.

Adrian caught the thought and reminded himself that he needed to have that in-depth conversation with the boy. Angela had arrived in camp already understanding most of the big picture, so it had been easy for her to pick out the right choices and the wrong ones. Charlie didn’t have the wisdom of age to guide him.

Adrian went to the corner of the mess that had the laptop and switched on the computer. While it loaded, he monitored the people in here. The rest of the Runaways were huddled in the corner together. They’d been chased from their area by ants and then put under guard. All of them assumed they were going to be punished for Simon’s actions. Adrian didn’t believe any of them would choose to stay with Jimmy or go with Angela, but they hadn’t supported Simon when it mattered most. Nothing would happen to them as long as they didn’t try to repeat his behavior.

The computer finally loaded; Adrian typed in Jeremy’s old code. The screen flashed to a view that was haunting.

So many!

It was impossible to count how many bodies were out there. In some places, they were stacked three deep. In others, it was impossible to determine where the stack began and where it ended. Sprawled in every position imaginable, the dead consisted of every age and race. It was awful to think that Safe Haven's survival had depended upon so many Americans dying. *Wasn't there some other way we could have handled this?*

No.

Adrian winced at Angela's curt response. It was obvious that Marc hadn't gotten her back to sleep.

The witch is watching things. I've been thinking a lot. If they were good, fate would have spared them to help with repopulation, don't you think?

Adrian shrugged, staring at the bodies of young and old alike. *I don't know anymore.*

Now is not the time for you to lose faith in the grand plan, Mr. Mitchel. Get to work or join the Runaways.

Adrian grunted. *Yes, my queen.*

Angela broke the connection between them, like he'd known she would. It was hard for him to fight the need to comfort her, but while she was in Marc's arms was the wrong time to try. Especially since Adrian could feel Marc's demon patrolling, waiting for another interruption. The fury coming off Marc was impressive, but it paled in comparison to the witch now invading the mind of the reporter sleeping not far from their door. Adrian hoped Cynthia was okay now, but he didn't stay with the

witch or try to interfere. Instead, he replayed their last conversation before the earthquake.

“You shouldn’t be down here.” Adrian sat up on his bedroll as Cynthia came around the bend in the drafty corridor. He looked for her guard and didn’t find one. “And you’re alone? Oh, wonderful.”

Cynthia ignored his sarcasm and nervousness. Despite being their grand poohbah, he didn’t know what she wanted. Asshole, she sniped mentally while flashing a bright smile. “I’d like to interview you for the Quest Chronicles. Got a minute?”

Adrian frowned as she took a seat on the boulder across from his bedroll. “Got permission?”

“Would I be here if I didn’t?”

Adrian sighed unhappily. “No. I guess not.” He yawned and stretched, aware of Cynthia’s cold gaze going over him like a shark scenting chum. There was no heat in her heart for him though, other than hatred.

“I am sorry.” He was.

“Did you even consider claiming me and your baby?” She already knew the answer.

“No.”

Cynthia took out her notebook and pen. “Neither did I, so you know.” She smirked at him. “I want Marc.”

“Who doesn’t?” Adrian sighed again, bitter. “He’s fucking perfect, right?”

Cynthia bobbed her head, eyes glittering like a snake. “Yes. He’s kind and trustworthy. Two things you can’t be.”

“Not in my job description.” Adrian’s voice was harsh. “He got the good guy role before I ever came into the picture.”

“Aww. Suffering from comparison, are we?” Cynthia taunted happily, eager to pay him back for the disappointments.

Adrian reached for his smokes, but didn’t pull on a shirt or jacket despite being out of the warmth of his blankets. He wasn’t cold right now. He was angry. How dare Angela put me through this! How dare she put Cynthia through it after the reporter saved her life!

“I felt the same way at first.”

Adrian understood the baby’s power was allowing Cynthia to read his thoughts. He frowned as he realized this wasn’t the first time. “Is that why Kip is gone?”

Cynthia blanched. “No! He died in the explosion at the den.”

“I don’t think so. I hear your guilt and I’m reading it in your body language. What did you do to Kip?”

“He died at the den!” Cynthia was haunted. “...after I told Angela he was bothering me.”

“Ah.” Adrian drew in a thick lungful of smoke and shot it across the fire toward her. “Confess your sins, Cynthia, and be allowed to return to her good graces.”

“I thought that’s why she sent me to you.”
Cynthia’s red cheeks paled. *“My hatred of Matt and my desire for her mate were bad, but when I told her about Kip, I wanted him gone. She knew that’s why I’d come to her, even after I’d already handled him.”*

Adrian resisted the urge to search in her memories to discover what else she’d done.

“I’ve become corrupt.” Cynthia regarded him with confused anger. *“How?”*

“Your secret plan to steal Marc?”

Cynthia flinched from the perfect shot. “She can’t know that!”

Adrian laughed.

Cynthia began to shake. “I’m not coming out of this mountain alive.”

Adrian tried hard to find compassion or a bond to the powerful child studying him, but all he found was pity. “I’m sorry, Cyn. You crossed a line with her. She’s the one who has to forgive you for that error in judgement.”

“She won’t.”

“Because you aren’t sorry?” Adrian asked.

Cynthia stood up, interview forgotten. She stared down at him with a layer of insanity showing. “Why can’t you be like him?”

Adrian glared, full of resentment again. “Because this world requires more than a boy scout and you know it!” He jerked a hand toward the tunnel. *“Maybe Marc can save you since I’m the piece of shit.”*

Cynthia wanted to deny that was what she had come for, but she couldn't. Deep down, she had hoped Adrian would claim her.

Adrian forced himself to stay put, not letting her misery or fear through. "Confess your sins to her and beg forgiveness. Then stay away from her mate."

"What if I'm not sorry and I'm not going to stay away?" Cynthia's voice was a whisper.

Adrian grunted. "Then get your affairs in order."

*"No faith at all that he'd be happier with me?"
Adrian laughed again.*

This time, it was harsh enough to echo and send Cynthia fleeing from his painful mockery. Everyone else believed she had a touch of mountain sickness. Angela, and now Adrian, had figured out that it was madness. They both assumed she had cracked while being in here. It had happened to a couple of other folks who were being drugged each morning to help them control their reactions, but the reporter had started to get this way after shooting Cesar. Marc's gratitude had flipped her over the edge. Much like Kenn and Conner, she had an obsession.

"I've been fighting it." She climbed the ladder to the next level, muttering. "Maybe I shouldn't worry about that anymore."

Confess...

Cynthia shoved that out. She could do it, but she wouldn't mean it and Angela would see right through that.

“Marc will help me.” She ignored the curious, worried glances of those she passed. “One boy scout can be enough to save the world if the rest of you evil creatures are gone.”

Bang! Bang!

Sounds of work echoed, snapping Adrian back into reality. It told him that Kenn and Charlie had handled the bodies and were replacing the ladder that had broken into several pieces. The sound of hammering came again, along with citizens coming from every level to complain about the noise. *So much for a peaceful night.*

4

Kenn observed the boy on the level above him. Charlie was anchoring the ladder while Kenn held it steady. As their lights flashed and threw shadows, Kenn had caught a glimpse of a bruise on the teenager’s neck. At least, he assumed it was a bruise, because the boy wasn’t supposed to be having contact with Tracy yet. Kenn did a fast count and realized if it had been long enough for Angela to be sexually active again, then it had been long enough for Tracy.

Kenn studied the boy, trying to spot anything that would prove or disprove his new theory. When he couldn’t, Kenn jotted a mental note to ask the next time they were alone.

“Here. This is the last nail.” Greg handed it to Kenn and helped hold the ladder while the Marine pounded it into the connector piece he’d had to rig. They hadn’t finished sorting all the debris piles. Kenn knew there were plenty of nails to be found there once they did. Right now, these basic repairs would hold them until morning when they had more hands.

Around Kenn and Greg, the Mountaineers were observing in fear and suspicion. They’d woken to falling bodies. Most of them didn’t know what had happened.

Jimmy did. Kenn had told him while also warning the doctor about his thief and the possible traitors Kyle hadn’t had time to handle before Simon attacked. Those loose ends needed to be cleaned up, but it would have to be on the next shift. Everyone on the bottom floor was too alert. The top levels were settling down, however. Kenn hoped Angela would forget his thoughtless comment. He’d been full of adrenaline and eager to brag about his quick fix for what could have been a nasty situation. He hadn’t thought about his words before running his mouth.

“She’s got other things on her mind than you.” Charlie came down the ladder. “And it’s not a bruise.”

Kenn gawked.

Charlie snickered, not caring if he was about to be ratted out or scolded. Making love to Tracy had been everything he’d hoped for and then beyond.

“Did you wrap it?”

Charlie blushed. “We handled that.”

Kenn caught a hot flash and brought down his mental barrier. “Keep that shit to yourself or you’ll be caught before lunch.”

Charlie laughed. “It was worth anything mom does to me for breaking the rules.”

“Even being separated?”

Charlie snorted. “She won’t do that. She’ll be happy that Tracy is better.”

“So rules don’t matter now?”

“Rules always matter.” Charlie became serious. “She’ll be my wife before we hit the island. I proposed to her. She said yes.”

Kenn was startled into a laugh. “Wow. You’re fast.”

“I know what I want.”

“I’ve always assumed you already knew.”

“I do. Let me rephrase that. Now, I *have* what I want.”

Kenn connected the pieces without his gift. “A love like your mom and dad.”

Charlie nodded. “We’ve both got a lot to learn and we’ll have issues like anyone else, but it won’t be like what you’ve all gone through.”

“What makes you two so different?”

“We’re learning from your mistakes.”

Kenn couldn’t find fault with that. “Well, remember a couple of things, okay?”

“Like what?” Charlie didn’t mean to be arrogant about it, but Tracy’s sounds were still ringing in his mind. She’d been pleased.

“Your honor has to come first, even before her. Don’t lose her respect. And always try as hard to get her off, every time, as you did tonight.”

Charlie’s cheek went scarlet, but his shoulders straightened into a young man’s confident stance. “I will.”

Kenn clapped the boy on the shoulder, proud of him. “Cool. Now shut up about it or you’re gonna stress people even more than they already are. Tracy doesn’t need it and neither do you.”

Charlie zipped his lip and resumed work on anchoring the bottom of the ladder while Kenn held it in place, but in his mind, Kenn’s advice took the place of Tracy’s throaty moans. *Honor, respect, and full effort every time. I can do that.*

Chapter Twenty-Four BK8

The Onion Man

October 22nd

1

Shawn woke up because of the whispers. Eagles weren't quiet unless they needed to be. Leadership and spies whispered, and leadership was sleeping right now.

He lifted his head to peer into the dim room where all of the kids and older citizens had been put, along with two guards. Those two men were in the deep corners, away from the whispers by the door, but the words came through clear enough for Shawn to understand.

“We can go anywhere you want. Ever been to Disneyland?”

“No. It's cold out there.”

“I have coats stashed under some debris. We'll get them on the way.”

“The guards will be mad at me.”

“We'll be gone, sweetheart. They can't yell at you if you aren't here, right?”

“I guess so.”

Shawn hoped this wasn't what it sounded like.

“We can leave right now, if you'll search for us. You want to be out of here, don't you?”

“Everyone does.”

“I’ll take you right now. Just tell me if we can get out.”

“I can’t do that. The alpha said no magic.”

“She’s asleep. She won’t know.”

“She’s the alpha. She knows everything.”

“Kid, I have to get out of here and you’re taking me. Get up!”

Shawn felt the fear. He wished he could tell Missy to come on out here, that he would handle it, but he wasn’t a descendant. He didn’t know how to talk to them that way.

We’re connected. Missy’s scared voice whispered in his head, making him jump. *We’re coming out now.*

Shawn stood up, careful not to wake the reporter or make any noise that would alert Bethany to his presence. He waited for their shadows to come through, pressed against the wall by the door.

Missy led the way, staying in front of the tall, thin woman like Shawn was telling her to do. She pointed toward Cynthia, who was opposite Shawn’s position now. “Shhh…”

Bethany nodded, walking around the reporter. She didn’t glance in the other direction.

Shawn’s heart clenched as he grabbed the woman and dragged her backward into the half cleared training room.

Missy was experiencing Shawn’s dislike of the chore. She heard a dull thud and glanced down at

the reporter who was staring around in wary confusion. “Go back to sleep.”

Exhausted and scared, Cynthia did what the child told her.

Shawn came alone, gesturing to a guard in the hall to give his explanation.

Missy held still as the sentry came to her for a verification. She wasn’t afraid of the Eagles. They were like Shawn, but she didn’t want the soldiers guarding the alpha’s door. They were hard to read.

Shawn put an arm around Missy, not worried over comforting her now. Angela had told him he had a mate in this camp when he was ready for it, but he’d chosen more training with Adrian in place of that—mostly because he had a child to care for now. He was beginning to look on Missy as a daughter, something he’d never thought to have. Parenthood had never crossed his mind as an Eagle. There was too much other work.

The boss’s door opened, revealing Angela’s tired face. “I’m sorry. We weren’t positive that Bethany was in with Howard. I couldn’t get into their minds and I didn’t want to ruin her life here if she was innocent.”

Shawn wasn’t mad at her. “We’ve had so many betrayals that I regard everyone as an enemy. They have to earn my friendship.”

Angela nodded. “Same here. It’ll keep us alive.”

Shawn glared at Ivan for a moment, arm around Missy, then he took the girl toward the repaired

ladder. “Let’s hit the bathroom and then get you something to read, okay?”

Missy had grown to enjoy story time and bobbed her head eagerly. Shawn had saved her. He was her hero.

2

Adrian patrolled the top floor with light steps an hour later. He was trying not to wake anyone, but this level was full of descendants, making that hard to do. Adrian listened to the sounds of heavy wind beating against the top of the mountain. He wouldn’t have been able to hear it if the heat and other utilities had still been active. It was a comforting noise, but at the same time, it called to him. It said that air would be better than a woman’s touch after being in these passages for months. Sweet freedom was just one door away.

Adrian sighed, going to check on the kids. As he neared them, he caught flashes of dreams and nightmares. Some of them were ugly.

Adrian spent a minute blasting the kids with calm, happy thoughts that he hoped would replace the nightmares. The months since the war hadn’t been easy on them.

“He comes.”

Adrian spun around to find Leeann sitting up. Her eyes were shut and her face had the expression of sleepwalkers, but her voice was as alert as Adrian was right now.

“They’re here.”

Around Leeann, other kids began to stir and mutter.

“He’s here.”

“They’re here.”

“The Onion man.”

Adrian shivered. More kids were sitting up to repeat the words.

“He’s coming for us.”

“The Onion man wants us.”

Adrian flipped on the light, hoping it would wake the kids before they got louder, but more of the children jerked upward, mumbling.

“What’s going on in here?”

Adrian didn’t respond to Kyle, still trapped with the kids in their mass vision. He’d never witnessed this anywhere except in the government labs.

“He’s here.” Leeann peered at Adrian with blank eyes, voice eerie. “He wants *you* most.”

“We’re ready for him. It’s okay.” Adrian went over to hug Leeann, who was shaking. “We won’t let them get you.”

Leeann wrapped her arms around the only adult male she felt like she could trust now, other than Billy. “He knows I’m here. He wants me to open the door.”

Adrian patted the girl, aware of the other kids lying down as if nothing had happened. “Let’s talk to the boss, okay? You’ll feel better after that.”

“She scares me.”

Adrian paused. “Angie? Why? She would never hurt a kid.”

“She let Matt die.”

“Matt was bad.”

“Matt was confused.” Leeann sniffled. “I liked Matt. He was my friend.”

“I’m sorry. So is Angie, but it had to happen or Matt would have hurt someone. You know what he was planning?”

Leeann nodded. “I told him the bullies would stop if he would tell on them, but he wouldn’t listen. He wanted revenge.”

Adrian took the little girl by Kyle, not responding to the mobster’s hand code questions. “It’s hard for you because you’re not like the other kids. You’ll be an alpha someday. That means you have to try harder than the other kids to understand what’s happening around you.”

“I’m trying, but I miss my friends.”

They had lost a dozen children in the earthquake and mess fire. Adrian sighed. “Me too. Jeremy was a good man.”

Leeann felt his pain and hugged him again. “I’m sorry he died.”

“Me too, sweetheart.” Adrian saw the door was already open and nudged the little girl into Angela’s cubicle. “Tell her what happened and then talk to her about your fear, okay?”

“She won’t get mad?”

“Not at you, I promise.”

Leeann ducked into the shadowy room.

Adrian listened for a minute, glad when Angela comforted the girl. He could also sense her anger at the situation and her misery at the kids being afraid of her, but that was also a part of the job. If the citizens didn't fear her a little, she wouldn't be able to lead them. Even a man in this job would have problems right now.

Adrian spun around to find Kenn staring at him with a blank expression that sent chills down his spine. There was no way Kenn was faking it.

"He's here. The Onion man is here."

Adrian put a hand on Kenn's shoulder, remembering the first time he'd gone through it. Visions rarely happened to him anymore, but in the beginning, he'd been freaked out by it.

"He has thousands of men. They're in trucks and tanks. The Onion man has no mercy."

"What are his orders?"

"He has no orders."

"What does he want?"

"Death."

Adrian swallowed a shiver. "We'll handle it. Come back to us, Marine."

Kenn slowly became aware of standing in the hall by the weapons chamber. He peered at Adrian in confusion. "How did I get up here?"

"Tell me what you saw."

Kenn realized he'd had a vision and grinned. "I didn't know that would happen."

Adrian snorted. "Yeah, it's fun now." He gestured toward the mess, where their relief was

getting coffee and preparing to take over. “Let’s check the cameras before the camp gets in here.”

Kenn followed, mind replaying the UN convoy rolling in. “We’re not ready for what’s coming.”

“Are we ever?”

“No, and yet, we end up winning. It’s almost like we’re being protected or something.”

Forced into a laugh, Adrian ignored the surprise from those in the mess, but his mirth vanished as soon as the laptop screen loaded. It was impossible to laugh when faced with so much death. Nothing was alive on the screen except for blurry hordes of flies, but the mood was one of imminent danger. The UN had come.

“This is Kendle.” Radios crackled across the drafty cave. “We’re home. Come in, Safe Haven.”

Adrian turned, feeling Angela behind him. He took in her grim face and the worried alertness of the wolfman by her side.

“We’re out of time.” Angela’s voice was haunted. “The next mass slaughter is about to begin. Dig the tunnel.”

3

“Oh, my God!”

Kendle and her team stood on the snowy ledge, using binoculars to view the mountain. They hadn’t been able to see anything in the darkness when they’d arrived. Forced to wait for dawn, the view was uglier than they’d imagined. The vultures

circled and cried, fighting for scraps even though the field of bodies stretched for miles across the valley.

“Some of them are Mexican.” Tommy pointed through the late afternoon sunlight. “There are flags and vehicles.”

“Anything moving out there?” Ben was following their training to the letter. He was above Tommy in skills like this, so he was guiding him through the process. When it came to anything weapon related, those positions were reversed.

“Flies.” Tents flapped in the wind, sounding hollow, empty in the winter wind, and under that, was a low hum of insects. Kendle controlled her guts. Even this far up, the smell was enough to choke her. Hundreds of bodies in various stages of decomposition littered the valley at the bottom of the mountain.

“What about corridors and roads?” Ben didn’t want to study it anymore. He’d been on duty when the sun rose. He’d stared at it for an hour before waking the others.

“They blew the tunnels or had cave-ins...” Tommy lifted the binoculars. “All the roads are gone!”

“Avalanche, I’d guess.” Ben sighed. “We have no clear route up or in?”

“There’s quake damage on the ground.” Tommy examined and relayed details. “A lot of it. Most of the tents are down and there are piles of rocks at the base... Wow. There are rocks

everywhere. What do you suppose they planned to do with those?"

"There are also drifts in places between the destroyed tents." Ben continued teaching even though he didn't want to discuss it any more than he wanted to walk through it. "The sun melted some of it. They didn't gather the rocks. The rocks were...deposited."

"Holy shit!" Ramer was scowling. "That must have been some avalanche to deposit so much rock."

"We felt the tremor the night before we left the refinery." Ben put his gloves in his pocket. "It hit harder here."

Tommy handed the binoculars to Kendle, unable to endure more of the scene. "I vote we do some testing first."

"What makes you say that?" She studied the place where the entrance was supposed to be. The map Angela had provided was specific about where to be when they returned.

"The birds haven't gotten to all the bodies." Tommy's mutter hid his need to gag. "Check out the skin."

It took Kendle several minutes to locate a body that hadn't been pecked or chewed on. When she did, stomach boiling, she noted the sores on the woman's hands and arms. "That's what we had on the boat! That's the sickness I had!"

"We have a counter in our gear." Ryan remembered hoping they didn't have to use it while

on this run. He'd never thought it was for their return to Safe Haven.

Tommy gestured. "Let's get back inside until we know what the levels are out here."

The team followed him into the cave, trying not to dwell on what this felt like, but the sense of being in a graveyard was too obvious to miss.

4

"What happens if we get there and Safe Haven is gone? Chances are good they didn't survive the earthquake. We haven't heard a single response out of them."

Dirce glanced up with an expression of arrogant contempt, pinning Jarvis in place. "Just because I haven't recorded descendant vibrations, doesn't mean I haven't picked any up. You would do well to follow orders and leave the thinking to those who know how to do it."

Jarvis's lips disappeared into his face. He spun around and tossed himself into the copilot's chair.

Satisfied he'd put the man into his place, Dirce decided it would be a good idea to let the man in a little. "Descendants are able to open private lines. It takes a lot of energy and a lot of practice, but there are confirmed instances of the Safe Haven group being able to communicate without being registered. The only way to track the calls is when they connect through someone's dreams. That's how I knew where the Black Widow was going.

That's how I know someone in that mountain survived."

Jarvis pulled up the map of the mountain they were using, trying to ignore his bodily needs. Dirce had pushed them hard to get here, refusing to stop for things like meals and bathroom breaks. As a result, everyone was uncomfortable and grumpy. However, the explanation calmed Jarvis a bit. It had angered him that Dirce had been sleeping so much with such a large battle ahead of them, but he understood the descendant had been doing recon. It was often hard to tell what Dirce was doing until it was done. "Why are you here? What's your motivation for being thousands of miles away from home, risking your life for people who are probably dead?"

Surprised at the questions, Dirce turned away from the monitors to regard his newest second-in-command. "The human race is supposed to conquer. Where else should I be?"

Jarvis wasn't certain how to respond to that, so he went with honesty. "Assholes like you have destroyed the world."

Instead of being angry, Dirce chuckled. "You have no idea."

Jarvis hated sitting still. Their convoy was rolling into position now, but with two thousand troops in position, it would be another day and a half before they were ready to begin the battle.

Jarvis had a sudden sense that he shouldn't be here for the battle. *Maybe I won't be.*

Dirce caught the thought, but he wasn't worried about being betrayed. Jarvis was the type to find something else to do during the main battle that would ensure his own survival. Dirce respected that.

5

“High.” Tommy held up the counter so everyone could view the reading. “But not enough to kill them all like that unless they’ve been here a long time.”

“Does that mean the levels are dropping?” Kendle was stirring a pot of oatmeal that no one had the stomach to eat. This cave was short and wide, with stone ledges that appeared to have been cut into shelves, but there hadn't been signs of inhabitants. Kendle had approved it after a sweep. They'd parked a mile away and hiked in through the darkness, something she never wanted to do again.

“Maybe.” Ben marked the numbers in his notebook. “I vote we wait until it's at a safe level before we try to locate a way in.”

“Are we going to?” Ramer's expression was grim.

“What do you mean?” Scott clenched a fist, glaring. “Cause if you mean we don't go in at all and bugout instead, I'll punch you in your mouth!”

Ramer didn't answer, but all of them felt his reluctance. No one wanted to spend a week digging into a rotting tomb.

Tommy lifted a brow at Kendle.

She sighed. “We’ll wait. How long are we set for?”

“A week.” Ryan paused. “More if we ration.”

“We’ll scavenge as soon as the levels are down.”

No one answered Tommy’s comment, all thinking of what that would be like. The bodies would have food and gear they could collect while trying not to get sick from any of the various health concerns in that valley.

Kendle glanced around, sensing their need, their grim outlook for the future. *What would Angela do here?* Kendle dug through her memories.

Well, she’s always been a bitch to me when I was at my lowest and I’m still alive. Kendle stood up. “You’re Eagles. Act like it.”

Kendle marched away before any of them could pick out her doubts about their future. They would discover it together over the few next days or weeks. Until then, she would try to have faith that such a cruel leader was strong enough to keep her camp alive even under these impossible conditions. *Don’t let me down, Angie. I’m almost out of tricks to keep my team alive.*

Chapter Twenty-Five BK8

Billy's Run

1

Billy was still on the move. Other than brief stops for sleep or to warm up, he hadn't paused in his westward trek. He was out of food and water, but his training was keeping him alive. He didn't remember learning the lessons that kept popping up in his mind, but he didn't hesitate to use them. It was a relief to have skills to rely on, but he would have tried anyway. The need to be in the west had strengthened since he'd escaped the cave and the odd residents trying to survive there.

In the west, the sky was an ugly shade of green that warned of bad weather coming. Billy wasn't worried. He was just glad to be out of the mountain and alone. Before the war, he'd been surrounded by people. After the war, he assumed it was the same since Safe Haven had been so large, but he liked being by himself. *I know I can trust me. No one else has that honor.*

I will.

Billy nodded in recognition of that. *Yes, I'll trust you with my life and beyond, but don't disappoint me or I'll kill you.*

Remember those words.

Billy shuddered.

He was near the town of Anniston, skirting around it as he had every other sign of civilization. It didn't matter that the buildings were windowless or that the only thing moving on the streets was garbage. What he was hunting for wouldn't be found in a concrete jungle—at least not one above ground. The town was looted and half burned to the ground. It held no signs of life and that was a relief, but he wasn't going in. The supplies and gear he needed wouldn't be in there. The town wasn't large enough to have a military supply depo or a hidden weapons cache.

Behind Billy, storm clouds brewed. He had holed-up in a shed overnight while the rain had drenched everything. Back on the road as soon as it stopped, his boots and jeans were stiff with dried mud and tiny bug carcasses. The insect swarms as he cleared the body field around the mountain had been impossible to avoid.

Billy scratched his neck absently. He would have to venture into a city soon to find more gear. Though he wasn't sure how he knew it, the specific items he was searching for wouldn't be found in the country. He also knew he was more than capable of driving, but the dreams he was having were too random and distracting for him to risk losing control while at the wheel. It was better that he was on foot. When the visions came, he could kneel down behind brush or debris and wait for them to pass.

Billy shivered at a strong gust of wind, but not from the temperature. It reminded him of his visions. The apocalyptic scenes in his dreams were real. That was where he was going.

The sun was high in the sky above the clouds of grit as Billy passed the town and reached the open countryside. According to the map he had found in his pocket with the card from the little girl, he would be in a rural area for the next week. Billy wanted that time to collect his thoughts and finish making plans for the journey. Despite his injury, he had many of his memories back now, but all of it was from before the war.

He knew who he was now and who he had been, but he had no idea where he had been for the last ten months or what he'd been doing. He had skills and instincts that hadn't existed before the war and he was hearing voices. Half of his mind was telling him it was from his injury. When he healed, it would go away. The other half of him wondered if he was like the folks in the mountain. That thought didn't scare him as much now that he was out of that tomb.

Thirsty, Billy detected the sound of water. He went that way, digging into his kit. He didn't know if he had packed it before his injury or if the little girl who had provided the card and map had also given him the items in the waterproof pouch, but he was happy to have most of it. Billy took the Life Straw out and knelt down next to the slow-moving creek. He didn't pick out anything that implied the water was dirty or infected, but the Life Straw was

supposed to filter 99% of it anyway. He began sucking the cold water in, letting his mind wander.

Almost as soon as he began drinking, visions began hitting, slapping at his reality until he was standing in the west with his matching Colts in hand. Using them to protect a woman, it was amazing to watch himself in action. His guns fired in rapid succession, never missing a target.

Billy snapped out of the vision, aware that the Life Straw had fallen from his mouth. He spotted it bobbing down the water and splashed in after it. He only had the one.

Billy stored it in his pocket, pants soaked to the knees. The wind wasn't as bad as the day he had escaped the mountain. Every hour that he had traveled westward had brought better temperatures, but it was still too cold to be in wet clothes. Billy studied the surroundings and found a small farming shack. After circling the building twice and peering into the windows, he was convinced it hadn't been used in a long time.

The wind whipped around him, creating small snow tornadoes that slammed into his legs and broke apart. Billy shivered.

He pried the creaking door open, wiping cobwebs away as he stepped in. Once the hut was shut and the draft stopped, he felt better.

Using the items in the kit, it only took a minute to get a small fire going, and get his boots and socks drying by it. There had also been jeans and a shirt in the bag, along with a thin blanket. Billy wrapped

up in the blanket, saving the clothes for morning. It was late afternoon right now, but by the time his clothes dried, it would be dark and that was a bad time to be roaming the wastelands. He had learned that the hard way right after leaving the mountain. He'd woken to the sound of people around the building where he had curled up, half frozen. It had forced him to spend the entire day in the attic of the small building, hoping he wasn't found. When the refugees had settled down for the night, he'd been able to slip away, but it had taught him a huge lesson.

As he sat there, thirsty and hungry, but enjoying the warmth and the freedom, Billy again let his mind wander. It took him to the woman who haunted his dreams. Tall and slender, with long braids and a hawk-like profile, she beckoned to him relentlessly.

I'm in the west. Where are you?

Billy snapped awake. He hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep, but it was obvious that he had been out for a while. The fire was down to fading coals.

Snap!

Billy heard the sound of footsteps outside, but it was too late to run. He lifted one of the Colts from his hip, bracing to do whatever he had to in order to survive.

“We're coming in. Don't shoot.”

The door opened slowly, revealing two men in dark clothes.

Kevin hurried into the hut, not worried about the gun pointing at him so much as the expressionless way the man was regarding them. “It’s Billy!”

Jeff shut the door, not sure how he felt about that news. He nodded at Billy, also spotting the lack of recognition and the defensive position. “How’s it going?”

Billy struggled to pull up any memory of the two men staring at him in recognition and surprise. They had beards and dangerous eyes that scanned him the same way he was scanning them. He felt a brief connection, but it couldn’t compare to his visions. “Do I know you?”

Jeff studied Billy’s mind and was dismayed to locate no memories of Safe Haven before the earthquake. He was relieved however to find all kinds of memories of Safe Haven after. “They survived. He was there.”

Before Kevin could respond, Billy’s grip tightened on the Colt. “You’re like them. You should leave!”

Jeff set down the bags he had carried in so his hands were free. Next to him, Kevin did the same.

“Get out of here!”

Billy’s fear reached both men. Kevin looked at Jeff. “Was he hurt or something?”

“He doesn’t have any memories of before. It’s like he wasn’t even there.” Jeff noted Billy’s shaking hand and dazed expression. “He’s having a vision. He may not mean to fire, but he might.”

For one second, Billy recognized Jeff's voice. He lowered the weapon and released the trigger as the mysterious woman flashed in front of him again.

Never fire without a reason.

I won't.

There's a time for conversation and there's a time for shooting. You have to know which is which.

I'll work on it.

See that you do.

Billy stayed with the woman, absorbing her lessons as if they were water and he was dying of thirst.

Kevin and Jeff observed, both confused, but Kevin more so than Jeff. Jeff almost understood what was happening. He was missing a small piece of the puzzle, but even that was taking shape as they listened to Billy talk to himself.

"No, but I don't trust any of them."

Kevin and Jeff sat down where they were and began making their camp, staying between Billy and the exit so he couldn't disappear before they were able to grill him about Safe Haven. It was obvious that he had left, but not why.

"No, they were scared."

Jeff pushed into Billy's thoughts. Not used to using his gift in this way, it was a struggle to locate the correct door out of the hundreds that appeared in his mind to connect them. He followed the brightest light, assuming it was live. As he opened the connection, he was sucked into the vision.

The woman in front of Jeff resembled Adrian and Angela so much that he flinched, scowling.

The woman regarded him without a change in expression, but her disapproval was clear.

Ashamed, but not sure why, Jeff examined the surroundings in the vision. In front of the woman was an ocean shore guarded by monsters that he refused to linger on because he didn't want to have to admit things like that could exist. He was already having trouble adjusting to magic. Around the woman were six men dressed as Eagles. Jeff recognized two of them. In the vision, Billy was on the woman's left. One of the soldiers from the government fight, David, was on her right.

Be gone now.

Jeff was shoved out of the connection. He winced as the door slammed, breaking the line. "He believes he has a job in the west. I didn't see the past. We'll have to hope he can tell us what happened."

Billy lifted his chin, wiping away drool. "Ask your questions and go."

Kevin scowled. "That's no way to treat a teammate."

Billy stared at Kevin. "I don't know what I was before. I only know what I am now and I'm *not* your teammate."

Jeff motioned Kevin to stop before the man could argue. "We want to know what happened in Safe Haven. We're on our way there to help if we can."

Billy's lips tightened; his face became hostile. "I was trapped in the mountain with the freaks. They wouldn't let me out."

Jeff and Kevin both frowned.

"Why do you call them freaks?"

"Is everyone okay in there?"

Billy looked at Jeff. "None of them are okay. Everyone in there was sick or hurt or a freak. I had to get out. I had to do it."

"What?" Kevin was trying not to get angry but it was hard.

"I forced them to let me go."

Jeff's hand slid toward his gun. "Did you hurt anyone?"

"No, I didn't have to."

"But you would have?"

Billy nodded, tone dropping into danger. "I'll kill both of you if you try to stop me from leaving here. She told me not to, but I will."

Jeff held up a hand, sending a wave of calm through the hut. "We just wanted to get out of the cold. The freezing rain started again. It's not safe to drive through. You can leave whenever you want."

Billy calmed down, yawning. "Ask your questions and be gone."

"Who survived in the mountain?" Jeff led the conversation, not trusting Kevin to handle it correctly.

"I don't remember any of them enough to tell you most of their names." Billy concentrated, trying to remember. "Angela, Marc, Leeann."

Jeff and Kevin exchanged glances, but neither of them mentioned the little girl. They didn't know if Billy remembered that he and Leeann were connected.

“What do they need?”

Billy shrugged. “They were worried about the refugees waiting for them to come out. They said something about an army too, but I didn't stay for that conversation.”

“There's a woman named Cynthia. Did you see her?”

Billy shrugged at Kevin in dull comprehension. “I'm sorry. I don't have information about your woman.”

Kevin didn't argue with the term. “What about the other Eagles?”

Billy made a face. “I don't know who they are.”

Jeff again motioned Kevin to stop. Billy's memories were limited to being in Safe Haven after the earthquake. “Are they using radios?”

“They're on radio silence. They said someone was listening.”

Jeff believed that was all the information Billy could give him. He picked up his bag and took a spot away from the exit. It was his way of saying Billy was free to go.

Billy nodded in recognition. “Thank you. I am sorry. I wish I could remember.”

Kevin joined Jeff on the other side of the small hut, aware of how Billy was studying them without holstering. “You can put that away now.”

Billy peered down at the gun as if he hadn't known it was in his hand. He slid it underneath his leg with a smooth movement that implied more skill than they knew the driver to have. Clearly, Billy had changed.

Kevin concentrated, also not used to communicating this way. *Are we safe to sleep around him?*

Jeff was trying to connect to Billy's mind again, glad for the gift. Kevin was a rookie as far as he was concerned, prone to rash actions and wrong words. It helped to be able to tell him to shut up without anyone overhearing. *Shut up.*

Kevin did, wishing he hadn't left Safe Haven at all.

Billy stared at the small fire, appearing to forget he had company. After a couple of minutes, his light snores filled the shack.

Jeff and Kevin lay down, exhausted from the driving they had been doing to get here. They had dropped Sally off two days ago.

The fire burned down quickly, leaving the hut dark enough to avoid attention from random refugees who were still coming into the area. Everyone was searching for Safe Haven, even in their dreams. The trio in the hut slept soundly, not afraid. If they were found, they would kill the intruders or die trying. It was how they'd been trained.

“Jeff! Jeff, wake up, man. He’s gone.”

Jeff came to with a grunt, not surprised. Before he had fallen asleep, he’d put himself in Billy’s shoes to figure out what the man would do. Since it didn’t appear that he was crazy enough to kill them or rob them, the next logical thing had been that he would be gone before they woke. “Good luck to him.”

Jeff studied Kevin, not sure why the man had chosen to stay out here with him. Kevin belonged in Safe Haven where he could get the clean shirt and shower he was always whining about. Jeff didn’t care about appearances. They’d left that strict society. Their rules no longer applied.

“He’s hurt. Shouldn’t we bring him back?”

Jeff lifted a brow. “One or the other. You pick it.”

It was a reminder that coming here had been Kevin’s idea. Jeff hadn’t argued, but he never would have brought it up if Kevin hadn’t.

“Fine, the mountain.”

Jeff felt a wave of urgency at those words. He wasn’t anxious to talk to anyone from Safe Haven, but at the same time, he was.

The radio on Kevin’s belt crackled. “This is Kendle. We are home. Come in, Safe Haven.”

Kevin was struck with the need to hurry. “How fast can we get there?”

Jeff did a fast count, estimating and adjusting. “Two days on our current schedule. A little over one

if we drive straight through, alternating.” Jeff felt Kevin’s need. “You pick it.”

“Straight through.”

“You get to drive first.”

Kevin hurried to prepare a fast breakfast, happy enough with the call. The weeks out here in the wilderness had been rough on him. Unlike Jeff, Kevin missed everyone in that mountain, including Cynthia.

Jeff thought about the limited information that they had gleaned from Billy and then his own uneasy gut. “We need to make a stop on the way.”

“For what? We’re set for two weeks.”

“I need ammo for my rifle. So do you.”

Kevin caught the tone. As he snapped it into place, he groaned. “We’re walking into a shit storm, aren’t we?”

“It’s Safe Haven. When isn’t there a shit storm?”

3

Billy was miles away from the hut as a sullen, angry dawn broke over the frozen land. He didn’t look back.

By noon, he had made it to Birmingham. With no way to detour thanks to damage from a war he didn’t remember taking part in, Billy had to pass through the town. Unfortunately, it wasn’t empty.

Billy eased into the city with one hand on a gun and eyes rotating, searching for danger. He could

hear refugees somewhere in the city. The gunshots and screams kept him on high alert.

Billy tried to stay to the southern edge of the town, judging the refugee camp to be in the northern direction. It was impossible to tell for sure in these apocalyptic conditions. Everything echoed for miles on the stiff wind, no longer drowned out by traffic and appliances.

Instead of using the streets that were almost clear, Billy stuck to yards and alleys while hoping no one was observing him from the heartless buildings that surrounded him.

It took Billy three hours to cross the city, counting for time he was forced to duck out of the wind to get warm and for the two times he had to take cover from engines or others on foot. It appeared as though refugees were coming in from the west, making it more dangerous for Billy, who was trying to get to the same bridge these refugees were crossing to enter the city. As he neared the bridge, late afternoon sun mocking his attempts to stay warm, Billy realized he would have to be in the open to cross it. He didn't see guards on the area or traps, but that didn't mean there weren't any.

Instinct told Billy to wait for nightfall before trying. He estimated that to be in four hours. There were dozens of buildings and homes around him, but Billy wanted a place where he could sleep without worrying. Not afraid of the dark or the underground, Billy pried up a rusting manhole and shined his light down the metal stairs. Seeing and

hearing nothing, he disappeared into the darkness, not bothering to replace the cover. If he had trouble down here, an escape path would be open.

It took Billy a minute to figure out that this sewer system wasn't for sewers. An abandoned railway car glared at him as he approached through the dusty darkness. Billy's light bobbed off skeletons and rodents, as well as shell casings and blood sprays that had dried on the walls.

Billy stepped into the car, glad that the bodies had already rotted. He didn't mind sleeping with bones.

The former Eagle curled up under one of the seats, using his kit for a pillow and was soon asleep.

Above him, the refugee camp continued to grow.

4

Billy woke to the sound of voices above him. The subway car was twenty feet below the ground, but in the dark of night, words carried. Billy listened without reacting.

"I swear it was a vampire."

"Stop now. We've all heard the stories of monsters in the west and that's all they are—stories."

"I saw it. I'm telling you that's what it was."

"You're drunk."

"What a horrible thing to say!"

Loud laughter split the quiet of the night.

“I don’t believe in vampires. I also don’t believe in witches, trolls, warlocks, or magic. All the stories we’ve heard are from religious fanatics or idiots who can’t accept that the world ended.”

Billy snickered a little. *Man, do you have a surprise coming.* Billy laid his head down and tried to rest some more. He was in a hurry, but getting caught would slow him down. All of his decisions from here had to be made with wisdom, and for whatever reason, he appeared to have been well trained. Billy didn’t know who he had been before, but it didn’t matter. He had a destiny in the west.

“Safe Haven is full of magic users. I’m telling you, I’ve been there.”

“You’re drunk too.”

“No, he’s right. We were refused by magic users.”

“You went to the mountain?”

“We came west after they denied us. There were too many refugee camps at the bottom of that hill. We would’ve lost everything.”

“Why didn’t they let you in?”

“They never said. That girl with the dark hair just told us no and then moved on to the next people like we didn’t even matter.”

“I think she knew we killed that old lady for her water.”

Below them, Billy’s eyes snapped open. Alexa had begun giving him orders.

“We didn’t mean to kill her. She wasn’t supposed to wake up.”

“I know that and you know that, but the Safe Haven bitches didn’t care.”

“I heard there’s an army headed toward them. They’re gonna pay for turning us away. We could’ve been there to help them fight.”

“And pad our stocks for the bugout.”

“Well, yeah!”

Harsh laughter rolled across the darkness.

This time, it brought Billy from under the seat. There was work for him right here.

Chapter Twenty-Six BK8
Can You Fight?

1

“**W**e’re out of water. You have to open this tunnel!”

Angela was standing at the entrance to the corridor they’d been digging. The machines were off. “We only have to wait twelve hours. Get back to your area.”

The Mountaineers were angry and desperate. If not for the line of Eagles with her and the other descendants scattered around the corridor entrance, they would have attacked.

Angela motioned. “It’s not clear yet. We’re still digging.”

“I don’t hear anything.”

“The machines have to cool down or we’ll break them and have nothing.” Angela glowered. “I’ll count to three and then the Eagles will eliminate you. *Get back to your area.*”

The group of nine went, but they cast ugly glares and mutters toward the descendants holding them in the mountain.

Angela spotted lingering shadows from the Runaways and understood they had stirred up the

Mountaineers so she would have someone else to blame.

Angela looked at Marc. *Where are we on the relocation?*

All of her group was sheltered in another passage. The rest of the cave citizens didn't know the top floor was empty now except for the guards on the ladder who weren't letting anyone up there.

Almost complete. It's cold, but they're safer.

Angela took up a post near the entrance, wishing she could be with her people. Samantha and Jennifer were there with Neil and Kyle, but Angela was worried. Some of her people were as upset as Jimmy's.

Twelve hours until he gets here?

Angela sighed. *He's been here for days. Twelve hours until he moves in.*

Adrian came through the corridor, frowning deeply. "Things are winding up on all the levels. Permission to stay with our camp until this is all over?"

"Denied. I have work for you and everyone else." Angela scanned to make sure they were alone. "I don't want any magic use because Dirce might be able to read it. We'll use Eagle codes and signals—something he won't know." Angela gestured at the line of guards. "Your shift is almost over. Sleep for six hours and then come right back to this post. When it all goes crazy, let them through. Do not fire on anyone, except in defense."

The guards were relieved they weren't being told to shoot citizens.

Angela knew and gave them a nod. "It'll be over with quickly on this side of the cave. As soon as Dirce shoots, he'll reseal this exit without knowing. When it's done, get to the real tunnel as fast as you can."

"How many hits will we take?" Marc wanted to be ready for the aftermath.

"Like usual, at least one and maybe two, but that'll be it. As soon as he closes this corridor for us, we'll trigger the avalanche." Angela hoped no one was listening to them.

"What's the catch?" Adrian knew there had to be one. She was blocking him from reading her thoughts right now.

"Some of us have to leave through this passage, so Dirce believes it's the right one. If he doesn't fire here, the remaining refugees outside this tunnel will overwhelm us while we're fighting him. We have to make the Onion man believe this is the spot."

"That shouldn't be hard." Marc was frowning. "You and I, along with Adrian and Tonya."

"Why Tonya?" Kenn didn't like it. He'd kept Tonya out of action since the earthquake.

"She's Jennifer's size and at dawn, in hoods, Dirce won't be able to tell the difference."

"And where will I be?" Kenn's tone was dangerous.

"Right here to make sure she gets back safely." Angela was impressed with Kenn's caring for

Tonya, but there wasn't time to reward him for it right now.

Mollified, Kenn crossed his arms over his chest, mind racing with plans to do just that.

“So that's it? He blocks this tunnel and then we trigger the avalanche?” Marc wanted to be clear on the plan.

“For the most part. I have the rifles and ammo with our camp. Eagles will all be on sniper detail, picking off the closest target at all times. All descendants will use their gifts on Dirce. Once he's gone, the rest of the troops might run.”

“And if they don't?”

Angela grunted. “We'll kill them all. This isn't our first war.”

2

“Today's rad rate is lower than yesterday.”

Dirce grunted at Jarvis's daily report on the toxic levels at the base of the mountain. “I said dawn. I meant it.”

Jarvis didn't respond. The weather sucked and they were on rations that included four-hour sleep shifts in their vehicles. Dirce had them camped on the opposite side of the mountain from Safe Haven's last known entrance, waiting for the levels to lower enough to be out in it. Dirce was positive he could handle things here that fast. All he had to do was threaten the little mice that had crawled into a hole across from that entrance. Dirce himself had

trekked in on foot to observe. While he'd been gone, his thousands of troops had kept to their posts and followed orders.

Dirce's wrath wasn't worth the risk, but these troops also believed in what they were doing. All of their countries wanted to claim America. Once it was under UN control, a new fight for ownership might start, but right now, Dirce was in charge and the mission was set. He had returned at dawn and ordered an attack in 24-hours. Then he'd crashed until almost dusk. Up for a short time now, Dirce was foggy and grumpy.

"We have reports of another refugee camp less than three miles from here. They might hear a fight."

"We'll handle it if it happens. What about conditions?"

"Clear and cold, but it appears as though another reactor is melting down in the northeast. The winds might carry it this way. We'll know tomorrow."

"We have gear for it."

Jarvis frowned. "Not if the levels rise."

"Take a reading every hour."

"I will. We received a message from the Secretaries-General after you went to sleep. He confirms your plans and wishes you good health during the battle."

"Just as long as he doesn't have to be out here."

Jarvis sniggered. "Yes, he does like to stay at base camp. Market Town is 70% ready for combat."

They're bringing in laborers and fighters from other locations that we control."

"It won't be needed." Dirce opened a compartment in the tank and took out a map. He spent a few minutes adding the things he'd noted during his recon.

Jarvis got busy preparing a meal for the boss. He'd stayed busy the entire time Dirce was gone—not because he was loyal or wanted to, but because it was his job.

"I'll reward that when we've finished this mission."

Jarvis shrugged. "I'll accept it, but I'd do it anyway."

"How do you feel about descendants?"

Jarvis recognized the trap, but he had little to hide and none of it was related to magic. "If they aren't working for us, they need to be detained or retrained."

"Is there anything you won't do to achieve your goals?"

"Nope."

"Is there anything I should know that isn't in your file?"

Jarvis didn't hesitate. "I have my soldiers deal with women so I don't kill them before I can get the information I need. It's happened twice."

"And?"

"I like to kill. Whatever you want from me isn't a problem."

“There are two infants on our sheet. We’re to collect them and deliver them, alive, to the Secretaries-General.”

“I saw that. Descendants, I assume.”

“Rare gifts. The mother reported being able to observe time passing.”

“I’ve never heard of that. Is it a form of time manipulation?”

“We don’t know and that scares our leaders.”

“Do you want them dead?”

“The SG does. I want their gifts.”

Jarvis wasn’t surprised. He didn’t worry over this being a test of his loyalty. He was able to be hired for multiple purposes. “What’s in it for me?”

“You’re an Invisible?”

“As far as I know.”

“If you’re an Invisible, you can have two lifeforces from the duplicate powers. It will unlock your gifts.”

Jarvis bowed as deep as he could. “I’ll leave at your command.”

Dirce pointed to a small cave on the map. “The infants are being held by a group of normals with two descendants for protection. One of those is Conner Mitchel. I want him brought in.”

Jarvis added up the bounty on that. “I’ll need hands.”

“Take your pick, but we don’t need witnesses unless they can be trusted.”

“I have names.”

“Good. You’ll go at nightfall so they don’t pick you up on any cameras.”

“I need to prepare. Can I send you a replacement?”

“Yes, but tell him to give me an hour alone. I need to think.”

Jarvis exited the tank, fighting against the stiff wind and layers of snow that had accumulated overnight. He vanished into the blowing snow, eager. He liked his job, but he also felt the need to run and that told him Dirce would fail. He didn’t want to be around when it happened. Dirce had a nasty habit of taking his troops on suicide runs and abandoning them. Jarvis preferred to avoid that; this private mission was a perfect excuse to do so.

If he got lucky, Safe Haven would kill Dirce, leaving Jarvis free to return to base as the new leader of the Allied Forces in North America. If Dirce lived, Jarvis would honor their deal and be promoted to official second-in-command. Either way, this run would provide a better future than what he had now. Getting older, Jarvis was tired of being a knife-for-hire. He was ready for something more.

3

“There are refugees alive down there. They were under tarps!”

Scott’s call brought Kendle’s team to the entrance where they took turns looking through the

peephole. On the ledges around Safe Haven's blocked passages, refugees were coming out to forage while the late afternoon sun was out. It was clear that most of the few hundred scattered people were too ill to make it out of the valley.

Kendle's stomach dropped. "They aren't doing well. We should wait."

"It's been three days." Carl glared from his bedroll. "The levels are almost twice as low as yesterday. The counter manual even says we can stand limited exposure at these rates."

Kendle studied the tired, sad faces that had endured the last trio of sunrises with her. "We'll vote."

There were enough relieved nods that Kendle knew which way it would go. "I say we find out. Half of us."

"Agreed."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

The vote was close enough that Kendle worried about it causing a fight. She'd already gotten two of them killed. She didn't want to add to that total.

Tommy gave her a questioning glance.

Kendle straighten her shoulders. "Those who voted yes will leave at dawn. The rest will stay here until the levels are lower or until they decide to find another shelter." Kendle looked at the twins in Rita's lap. "You'll care for them?"

“I’ll get them a good home before I die.” Rita wheezed and then coughed. She still had the cold.

Kendle gestured at the rear of the cave, where they had tarps that kept them warm most of the time. Today’s temperatures had been good enough that they’d all enjoyed having the flap over the cave open for half an hour. “Get some more sleep. Tomorrow will be a hard day.”

4

“Why are we up here, man?” Kevin shivered at the wind and dangerous darkness. The cliff they were on was narrow and slick, with nothing to use for a grip.

“I’m trying to figure out why Safe Haven isn’t answering. I assume there’s a threat around here and I’d like to find it before it finds us.”

Silenced by good sense, Kevin took out his binoculars and began to help Jeff scan the dark, jagged cliffs around the snowy valley that formed an oval between the tall ranges. “Nothing, man. Come on.”

Jeff ignored Kevin’s whining, positive he hadn’t wasted their time by making them scale slick, dangerous cliffs in the dark for three hours. They’d hidden their vehicles and stayed off the radio to be a surprise, but Jeff wanted to know what the threat was. He studied the land to the south, admiring the glow of the moon... Jeff frowned as he realized the moon wasn’t visible through the

clouds. That light had to be coming from the ground.

Kevin spotted it next, because Jeff was staring there. “Whoa. That’s a lot of refugees.”

“Soldiers, I think, but not American.”

“What makes you think that? We can’t see anything from here except lights.”

“Only fighters stay out in weather like this. Or an army on the move and that light is coming closer.”

Kevin was glad when Jeff began their descent, but his relief faded as he realized Jeff was going toward the light and away from their truck. “Are you sure we should do this?”

Tiring of the constant whining and second-guessing, Jeff shook his head. “Nope. You’ll die here. Stay with the truck.”

Embarrassed, Kevin stomped along behind Jeff without responding to the sarcasm.

“Be quieter, will you?”

Kevin tried to silence his steps, but the snow crunched under his boots and echoed through the night. He had no idea why Jeff wasn’t making the same amount of noise.

“Because I try hard. You don’t care anymore.”

Kevin wanted to deny the claim, but he hadn’t thought about Eagle rules or training much. He liked doing whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

“And what happens when I’m tired of carrying you?” Jeff faced Kevin in the cold darkness. “I don’t

need you. I never have. Either get with my program or get lost.”

Kevin shoved by him. “What do you think the light is from? Campfires or something better?”

Jeff sighed. *What an asshole.* “Mobile spotlights. I’d assume solar.”

Kevin dropped back to let Jeff retake the lead, mind filled with his threats. Kevin wanted to get with the program and be dependable, but he also wanted to be wild because it was easier than living the way Jeff expected them to. After this adventure together, Kevin doubted there would be another. If he didn’t stay in Safe Haven, he would go off on his own where he would be the only one who told him what to do.

5

Kendle edged closer to Tommy’s heat without waking him, unable to sleep longer. The dread was thick in her gut. She had little faith the inside of that mountain would be any different than the outside.

Sighing, Kendle gave up the fight and rose. She tiptoed through the mass of bodies that kept the cave warm enough to sweat some nights, and took up a place near the flap. She pried open the hole they’d cut and taped for viewing, hoping to view some tiny flicker in the darkness to convince her it was worth the risk. Climbing that mountain would be dangerous, but they also had to locate a way in. She

didn't believe they could do either with the gear they had.

Kendle peered through the hole. "There's a light."

Kendle's whisper came through as a distorted muffle of sleepy haze.

"Did she say there's a light?"

"She saw something?"

Eagles flew from warm spots, tugging on jackets and boots.

Kendle stepped aside for Tommy to view, praying that she really had observed a light, though she knew that she had.

"Top of the peak, to the right." Tommy spun away from the flap. "Someone's alive in there!"

Scott held up a hand. "Listen!"

Low rumbling echoed, causing everyone to tense.

"Quake?" Carl glanced around as the vibrations continued.

"No." Kendle had felt plenty of earthquakes while growing up. "The rocks are sliding."

Men started to exit the cave, but Tommy blocked the exit. "Coats!"

The team hurried to get into their gear.

Choosing to stay in this time and observe from here, Ramer kept them informed. "The light's getting brighter... More rocks are shifting... There's a hole!"

The team went out, sharing the night vision monoculars they had.

“It’s them! They’re digging out!” Tommy handed Kendle his monocular. “They survived!”

“All of them?”

Her toneless question brought the happiness to a halt as they took turns observing the yellow digger clawing through the mountain. As each scoop of earth was brutally plowed aside, the mood grew thicker. They’d had deaths. It was logical that Safe Haven would have suffered the same.

The sky lightened as the machinery rumbled, engines ringing across the valley that separated them. The dirt slid faster as two diggers cleared, widening the exit.

The dozers shut off suddenly, leaving an ugly silence. Lights behind the hole became brighter... Four shadows appeared.

Ramer squinted. “Who is that?”

Ben struggled to get a better view. “I can’t tell with those spotlights glaring, but refuges are climbing up there.”

“That’s half of the council.” Kendle was able to feel them.

“Which half?” Conner was trying to read them.

“Stop.” Kendle waved at Conner. “We don’t know if they’re on alert or not. They might not know we’re here.”

Conner stopped. He hadn’t thought of that, but she was right. Most descendants couldn’t read through the stone or ground, so they might know someone was out here, but not who it was and think it was a threat.

“Switch on a radio.” Tommy gestured. “Hurry. I think we’re being signaled.”

Kendle frowned. “Can you tell who it is yet?”

“No. They’re staying behind the lights. Too much glare for features.”

“Male or female?”

“Both. Two of each.”

“Could be anyone.” She knelt down in the flap, cold.

Ryan switched on his radio so they could listen. As soon as he turned it to their common channel, they heard the clicking.

“That’s our code.” Ben waved. “Get a paper.”

It took the team a few minutes to translate the code coming over the radio. It repeated three times before going silent.

Scott, who had gotten the last of it on the final transmission, blew out a sigh of relief. He grinned sheepishly at Tommy. “I’ve gotten rusty.”

Tommy chuckled. “Yeah, we all have. Get that decoded so we can send an answer. They’ll expect it fast if they’re trying to verify who we are.”

Scott and Ben got on it together as they’d done many times on runs.

Ben hated to deliver the message. “It says stay here. Not safe.”

Kendle scowled. “That’s it?”

Scott shrugged, also disappointed. “Just to be quiet.”

Kendle grunted as the men around her groaned. “I guess we’re waiting again.”

Tommy motioned people in and re-secured the flap. It was getting cold anyway.

“We just got orders in Eagle code.” Ben brought it up as Tommy had the same thought. “I believe we’re the surprise force the bad guys aren’t expecting.”

“Wouldn’t the bad guys have seen us arrive?” Ramer was worried.

“Not if they aren’t here yet.” Tommy was considering all sides.

Kendle scanned her team. They weren’t going to be much of a powerhouse like they were now. Low on food and ammo, out of fuel and missing two men, they were barely surviving themselves. “She must be desperate if we’re the heroes. And if Angela’s desperate, magic is needed.” She looked at Conner, who was recovering from his cold. “If we stuff you with energy, can you fight?”

“I’ll fight anyway!” The boy was furious. “That’s my dad in there!” *And Candy.*

Kendle swept the Eagles who weren’t tensing like she’d expected. “Can you guys help us get ready to do this?”

Tommy nodded. “We’ve been waiting for you to ask or let us know you needed it.”

“I didn’t so far, but I don’t know what we’re facing here.”

“We don’t mind.” Ben smiled. “Angela sent us cookies after we helped her this way.”

Kendle laughed. “I have a jar of peanut butter stashed in the mountain. Adrian has it.”

Ryan brightened. “First one to reach Adrian gets to have the burnt ones!”

“No, I want those.” Tommy rose to Ryan’s challenge. “Li always saves them for me.”

“So that’s where the crusts keep going!” Scott’s comment brought fresh laughter.

Kendle joined in their amusement, but her boiling stomach and sweaty spine warned of danger. She had no idea what it was, but the sensation was so ugly that she shivered. Death was coming.

“You okay?” Tommy took her hand to give her his energy.

“No.” Kendle frowned. “Don’t make any noise. We’re not alone.”

The team hurried to peek through the flap.

Tommy leaned down. “Take what you need.”

Kendle drew hard and fast, heart thumping. The wave of darkness sweeping over her heart was cold and hot at the same time. Her eyes shut as the barrier to the future swung open.

“Hey, are—”

“Don’t.” Ben stopped Ramer from touching her. “She’s busy.”

Ramer realized she was using her gift to search and retreated, observing in fascination. They hadn’t viewed signs of her power or Conner’s on this trip.

Kendle released Tommy, standing. “Hang on.” She went to her smaller kit, the one she used the least. In the bottom, she found the book she’d been reading before they’d been carjacked. She flashed the title at them. “Angela sent this with me.”

Tommy began chuckling, as did Ben.

Ramer joined them. "What?"

"She sent the equipment with us." Tommy pointed to where their heavier gear was stacked. "There are five rappelling kits in there and a lot of rope."

Kendle breathed a sigh of relief and then tensed again. "Get the lights out. Something's coming."

"Lights went out over there too." Ben was observing from the flap.

"What's going on?" Rita was burping one baby while the other slept near her leg.

"Shh..." Kendle concentrated, trying to make them all dim.

Conner, realizing what she was doing, added his power to hers. A brief blue glow went over the cave and then everything went dark.

"Shh... Easy." Kendle soothed her team. "That's just us. Be still."

The team waited in stiff silence in the chilly cave.

Kendle heard it first.

Conner tensed a second later. "What is it?"

"Trucks." Kendle paled. "A lot of trucks..."

Chapter Twenty-Seven BK8

Action!

1

The UN rolled into the valley in full force, crushing the dead under their wheels as they forged their own road through the refugee camps. The convoy was so long the end kept rolling long after Dirce ordered his vehicle to halt. The trucks and tanks rolled through streets and yards without consideration for what stood in their way; the UN logo flashed a warning of who they were.

The front vehicle stopped at the bottom of the hill, where the gaping hole in the mountain was obvious.

“We’re screwed.”

Kendle ignored Carl’s comment as they watched the convoy continue to enter the valley, large wheels crushing bones and ice. The bodies didn’t make them stop or even pause. She tried to count the troops, but couldn’t. Carl was right. They were screwed.

Kendle winced as a bullhorn began to echo through the darkness.

“Come out with your hands up. We have you surrounded!”

Why does that sound like a cheesy line from an old movie? Kendle listened for a response.

“I repeat, come out with your hands up. You are all being detained.”

“Detained?” Kendle’s brow puckered. “Detained?”

“Dirce.” Rita breathed in a lung of raspy air, clutching the babies. “He’s here.”

Kendle grunted in acceptance of what had to happen next. She released the dim mode for a brief instant so she could see where everyone was. “If anyone moves, they might die. Please don’t even breathe if you can help it.” Before anyone could ask questions, she blanketed them in darkness again. “Dirce has been here for days. He saw us come out. I think that’s why he’s rolling in now.”

Tommy went on full alert. “He sent troops up here?”

Kendle set the book near her feet, wishing she’d been able to use the information in it, but this was going to happen faster than Angela had anticipated.

“What should I do?” Conner joined her. He could see everyone’s heat signature like his dad had once said he would be able to do.

“When I start firing, you do the same and don’t stop until they’re dead.”

“I don’t have any mags.”

“We’ll be using magic, Conner. We have to kill these roaches, right now, before Safe Haven surrenders to save us. Dirce is telling Angela he’ll blow up this cave.”

“Can he reach here?” Ramer was scared. This cave was a death trap if one of the tanks fired on them.

“I think so.” Tommy had to force himself not to try to see through the shroud of darkness that Kendle had cast over them. “What should we do?”

“Just don’t move.” Kendle was gathering energy to handle whatever was coming. “You’ll be able to see again, but if you get out of place, you’ll screw me up.”

“We won’t.” Tommy was used to working like this with Angela. He was also too drained to get upset. He couldn’t wait to sleep without so much stress on his mind and heart.

Kendle and Conner went to the flap, zipping jackets. As they stepped from the cave, the lights came on for everyone. They stayed frozen, listening intently...

“Get in there!”

Kendle was shoved into the cave by three tall peacekeepers in black and tan uniforms. They had weapons the team would have recognized from the market if the lanterns had been lit.

Kendle dropped to her knees as she was shoved. “Stop! Be still!”

“Get the kids.” Jarvis was in charge, but the climb up here had worn him out. He wasn’t used to this much hunting for their prey. He’d hoped to attack this small team during the chaos, but the woman descendant had come out and spotted them

getting into position, forcing him to act now. “If you use magic on us, we’ll kill those babies.”

“No need.” Kendle snatched the knife from her boot and threw it at the soldier who was leaning down to pick up the baby.

He staggered, falling on top of the bundle.

The babies began to cry.

Rita flew toward the kids.

“No!”

“Don’t move!”

Rita grunted heavily, also falling on top of the kids as Kendle’s second knife sank into her chest.

Kendle threw again; her last blade stuck in Jarvis’s throat.

She and Tommy grabbed the third soldier as he tried to draw his gun. Climbing up a mountain was a serious disadvantage. He’d needed both hands free and hadn’t bothered to draw until now.

Kendle swung them toward the flap, not giving Tommy a chance to protest as she shoved them through the flap and heaved the struggling soldier toward the edge.

Tommy helped her.

Together, they pushed him off.

The man’s screams echoed down to Dirce, who glanced up in resignation. “Figures. Never send boys to do a man’s job.”

“The tunnel is open!”

“We’re going out!”

“Let us through!”

The decoy corridor was cold and dusty, with random debris flying through the curves and cavities on the wind. The Runaways were streaming by with violent expressions that declared only death would stop them from leaving. Angela wasn’t going to. Their choice to flee was going to save everyone else in this cursed mountain.

Angela and her crew stayed against the walls as the panicked people flew by them to reach the exit. The laborers had just finished clearing the collapsed section, but the cold wind blowing through was unmistakable. It had alerted all levels of the cave to the change.

Gunshots sounded.

“Get out of here, you cowards!”

Morgan’s shout told Angela her workers had been attacked. She was glad when they all emerged through the fleeing citizens, escorted by Morgan and the team of Eagles she’d assigned. The crew joined Angela and took up guard places in front of her.

“Incoming!” Marc and Adrian said it at the same time.

The final Runaways ran by with harsh glares, not about to attack such a strong crew.

Angela was relieved. She’d chosen this team with that in mind, hoping it would save some of

their lives if panic overrode everything else. Fear was a strong deterrent.

More gunshots and shouts came to them. It sounded as if there were refugees coming into the passage, as well as going out.

“They aren’t firing the tank yet. Why not?”

“He needs a push.”

“Be careful.” Adrian scanned the tunnel. “He’s devious and we have an open door now.”

Angela ignored him, concentrating. *I told you! They’re out of shells for the tanks. We’ll meet at our last campsite and circle back.*

I’ve sent out the first group of descendants. Marc joined her for his role in the ruse. I’ve got the front. Get the rest of our people out of there!

Angela opened her eyes, shuddering. “He got it. Let’s go.”

Angela’s team took off running toward the ladder, keeping her in the center. Their footsteps drowned out the fighting, but not the response of the furious descendant outside.

Incoming, you bitch!

The tank blast slammed into the open decoy tunnel in a direct hit. It entered the corridor and slammed into the wall. The resulting explosion sent a cloud of dust and deadly shrapnel over the refugees trying to get inside.

Then the fireball consumed them.

An instant later, the cliff slid, collapsing to cover the entrance.

3

“We have runners alive, sir.”

Dirce grabbed the field glasses, picking out the fleeing refugees. “Fire.”

The tank belched out a shell, rocking the armored vehicle. It flew through the cold air and slammed into the ground near the camp of refugees who hadn’t been smart enough to flee when the fight started. Hoping to ambush Safe Haven as they came out, the desperate people hadn’t counted on the UN firing.

Angela had.

Dirce was pelted with rocks and debris he didn’t flinch from the way his men did. He took the bullhorn his new man held out. “This is the UN. We are here to liberate your children and reeducate your population. Surrender or we will fire again.”

Kendle’s team listened to the demands in horror and anger. It was unbelievable that this was happening.

“We will not spare you if you resist!” The bullhorn blared with Dirce’s heavy accent. “Come out now, if you can.”

“Here we go.” Kendle knelt by Rita’s body, shoving away the guilt. “We should stay in, maybe behind that ledge.”

Kendle and Carl retrieved the startled children; everyone crammed into the rear of the cave, hoping it was out of range.

“Are we still supposed to be the heroes?”
Conner was confused.

“I don’t believe that’s the plan now.” Kendle admitted her failure. “I screwed it up by letting Dirce know we were here. She had to switch.”

“She?” Ben frowned. “You mean Angela?”

“Of course.” Kendle handed the baby boy to Carl. “She picked our gear. She knew we’d be trapped here and need the book on rappelling so we could get down.”

Ryan waved. “But we have the path we came over to get here.”

“I’m not sure we will after this is all over.” Kendle began gathering energy again. “I think the shooting has just begun.”

“So what do we do now?” Ben was pissed. “Sit here and get shot at?”

“I couldn’t view beyond this point.” Kendle’s voice revealed her frustration. “I say we stick with our previous orders to stay here and be ready.”

“If Safe Haven knew this was coming, they weren’t near the entrance when he fired. Dirce can shoot all he wants.” Ryan gestured again. “He won’t reach them.”

“He *can* reach us.” Ramer was the twitchiest member of their team. “Maybe we should bugout while we can.”

The radio that had gone silent clicked a few times and then went dead again.

Kendle exchanged glances with the team. “That means an hour, right?”

“Yes.” Tommy had translated it. “Be ready in one hour.”

Carl scowled. “Ready for what?”

Kendle sank down to rest, leaning against the cold wall. “The conclusion, of course. One hour from now, all hell will break loose. That’s when we’ll find out who lived and who didn’t.”

Scott took the spot by Kendle. “Will *we* survive the fight?”

She shrugged, leaning against his heat. “As usual, that has not been revealed.”

4

Dirce climbed the ladder of his tank and popped the hatch. “Line it up. Blow the Black Widow out of there.”

“What about my grandbabies?!” Jerry and Dirce had been commanded to collect them.

Dirce paused. “Fine. Aim at the other side. Blow her friends and family out of the mountain.”

Jerry grinned as he told the tank driver. He loved watching stuff explode. It didn’t matter what it was.

Not sharing in the man’s good mood, Dirce knew something was wrong. He felt the trickery, but he couldn’t identify it. Waiting in the small tank with troops who smelled like he did sucked. *Why am I waiting?* “Start firing.”

“We’re under attack, sir!”

Dirce studied the ill refugees on their right side. Attacking troops for their gear and vehicles, it was sad to witness how bad the refugees were doing. “Tell the men to pick them off while I negotiate. I don’t want them to get bored.”

The driver relayed the message as Dirce concentrated.

Surrender now. Save your people.

I’ll give you the same offer.

Dirce laughed at Angela’s fast response. *I’ve heard the stories. I know your weakness.*

Angela laughed. *Ditto, Baby.*

Ditto? What is ditto?

Angela didn’t answer. She was busy climbing the ladder to the top floor so she could reach her camp. She’d assigned guards, but the need to be with them was overwhelming.

I wish to negotiate.

Angela swallowed her triumph. *Can I think about it?*

You have ten minutes.

Angela didn’t tell him it was more than she needed. She concentrated again, letting Marc and Adrian guide her along the dark passage they’d layered in dirty blankets and clothes for protection from the cold while they fought. *Take the shot, Jeffrey. Save us all.*

5

Jeff froze for an instant at Angela’s command.

Kevin lowered his rifle, hands going to the extra ammo. He felt it coming.

Jeff lined up the scope, adjusting for the stiff wind as best he could. The kill flash hid the glint from the glass in the scope as he centered on Dirce's heart. "Aim small, miss small."

Dirce rotated toward the winter camo poncho blind that Jeff and Kevin had hidden in for three days, zeroing in. *I feel you.*

"Feel this." Jeff pulled the trigger.

Dirce was knocked off the tank at the shot. He fell into the snow, leaving a trail of blood as he scrambled under the edge of the tank. *You'll pay for that! All of you!*

Jeff watched through his scope, trying to get a second clear shot. The wind had gusted at the wrong moment, changing his kill shot into a shoulder wound.

Jeff couldn't get a clear shot with Dirce behind the tank. He began to pepper the edges and sides, hoping to get lucky and force the man into view.

Dirce slapped the tank. "Shoot him!"

The tank's barrel began to rotate.

Jeff's eyes widened. "Uh, time to go!"

Kevin jerked the plastic sleds from under the poncho blind, shoving one of them at Jeff. "I can't believe we're doing this!"

“Hurry up!” Jeff swung his rifle over one shoulder and then threw himself onto the sled, face down. He shot across the mountain, leaving Kevin.

Kevin tried to copy Jeff’s actions, but he landed awkwardly and almost slid off the sled as it flew down the cliff. He recovered his balance and grip just as the tank fired.

Angela made it to the tunnel sheltering her camp and shoved by them to reach the exit hole they had finished yesterday and blocked off with heavy tarps and their gear.

“Open it!” Angela’s shout echoed over the mutters and frightened cries of her citizens, but all of that was drowned out as the tank fired.

The concussion rattled the mountain and sent showers of dirt over Angela’s group. “Now, kids!”

Along the walls, the kids stood up. All of them had their hands out and eyes shut. A hum of energy filled the space and then a shield blinked into life around the huddled camp. Protected from even the cold wind, Angela watched as the mountain cliff across from them began to fall.

“Someone’s over there!” Greg had his binoculars up. “It’s Jeff! And Kevin!”

“Get ready!” Angela began gathering energy. “Pull everything you need from his men. Hold him in place until I give the word. Start pulling!”

Descendants picked the nearest soldier and began to steal their energy.

6

Dirce realized he'd been tricked. He could feel the power at his back, and his shoulder was gushing blood, but it was impossible to look away from the two sleds coming down the mountain ahead of an avalanche that was gaining on them.

Freezing, Jeff hauled on the sled as he neared an edge, hoping to gain more altitude to clear the rock field below.

Kevin did the same on his right, trying to watch the path and Jeff. He needed to get onto the same groove.

Jeff's sled slammed into the rock field at the base of the mountain. It flipped, sending Jeff flying into a snow bank.

As the sled fell, Kevin hit it. He had just cleared the cliff edge. Kevin was knocked from his perch and flipped into the snow not far from where Jeff had landed.

The small avalanche hit the bottom of the cliff seconds later, burying them and everything else.

In Angela's cave, people groaned and cried out, but there was no time for mourning.

Dirce stood up, dripping blood into the dirty snow. He pointed at Angela. "Fire!"

"As soon as it lands, fire!" Angela's shout was accompanied by a high-pitched whistle that caused the fighters to brace.

Angela placed her hand on Leeann's shoulder, adding her strength. "Hold the shield!"

The shell slammed into the entrance of the corridor.

It should have killed everyone, but the shield absorbed the impact with a ripple of cries and groans from the kids. The shell vanished into the energy field, but then the shield failed, melting down from the top.

Angela let go. "That's it. Get them!"

Adults hurried to grab their assigned child. The exhausted kids couldn't run. What they'd done was a huge task. Angela had refused to let them kill, but a onetime defense had been perfect.

"Open fire!" Angela followed her shout with a blast of flames that flew through the air toward Dirce.

Dirce's men were enjoying the show. Over the years they'd been together, they'd become familiar with his pattern of attack. Dirce liked to toy with his prey. So did his men, who were still killing random refugees even though those pathetic citizens were finally fleeing the battlefield. Mercy was for the weak, but they also knew they'd be sent in to cleanse everyone after this fight. Killing them now meant less hunting later.

Then it changed and they were under attack without the energy to fight back. Several types of magic flew through the air, slamming into the troops who weren't ready for it. In all their years

under Dirce, they had never experienced this type of fighting. Their prey had always surrendered or ran.

Angela was glad the troops were falling under the angry power of her fighters, but it wasn't going to be enough. They would recover soon and start shooting her people without mercy. She could feel the order coming. Dirce had to die before he could give it.

7

On the opposite cliff, Kendle raised her glasses. "He survived! Shoot at Dirce. Don't let him look toward Jeff!"

Tommy and those with rifles began firing, all trying to be the one to kill the UN leader. They didn't care about his men.

Dirce's troops waited for orders, still just shooting and laughing at the refugees who were trying to steal gear and wheels. Dirce had his personal shield up now, but his energy was being drained from too many levels to return fire. He had to use it all to prevent his shield from falling. He had underestimated the strength of the Safe Haven descendants. All of them were real threats, but two of them were impossible to keep out of his energy field.

Angela and Jennifer didn't fire again after the opening to the magic fight. They labored together to make Dirce concentrate on his shield. Weakened

from their time in the mountain, it took both of them to keep him occupied.

Realizing he was about to be without his shield, Dirce leapt up onto the tank, meaning to drop into safety. “Fire!”

The tank had already been reloaded. The gunner, weakened like the rest of the soldiers, was slow to respond to the order.

Jeff wasn't. *You asked for it!*

Dirce spun around as Jeff pulled the trigger.

The bullet plunged into Dirce's chest. Two more slugs slammed into him right afterward, knocking him into the snow.

Marc fired his grenade launcher.

The grenade went into the open hatch of the tank and blew it up from the inside.

Around the convoy, other commanders began shouting orders. Dirce's job was up for grabs. The man who won this fight would be promoted.

“Move in!”

“Fire!”

“Kill them all!”

In the passage, Angela jerked a hand at Kenn. “Bring it down.”

Kenn flipped the switches and pushed the buttons, hoping the splicing they'd done would be enough. He and Marc had helped Ozzie and Theo, but in the end, it was all up to fate.

“Come on!” Jeff grabbed Kevin by the arm and dragged him through the drifts and bodies toward the nearest tank. Angela was telling him to get under any protection they could find.

Above the running men, the mountain rumbled. At first, it was a tremor shaking the fresh snow loose. Then it became an explosion that seemed to echo forever.

Kevin stole glimpses over his shoulder as he stumbled alongside Jeff, breath coming in short, painful rasps. “It’s coming down!”

Jeff ran faster, heaving and grunting as they raced the troops who were centered on the tunnel.

The mountain exploded. It showered the body-ridden battlefield with snowy rocks that knocked troops to the ground and broke windows. Glass shattered, spraying shrapnel as the ground under them vibrated with the force of a full avalanche.

The explosions continued, ringing the mountain valley on all sides. The UN troops began to notice and run faster, but they didn’t alter direction. Hell was raining down all sides of the mountain. The open corridor was the only shelter they wanted.

Snow rolled down all sides of the mountain, covering the jagged cliffs until all anyone could see was blowing white coming for them. It thundered as it fell, sliding along outcroppings and cavities to swallow the refugees trying to flee the valley. They were lost from sight as the snow continued to crash down onto the battlefield. Troops, fighters, and

refugees were buried, but the avalanche kept coming.

Jeff shoved Kevin against a tank and hefted himself up, hoping the crew had already fled.

The hatch flew open; a hand with a gun came up.

Jeff kicked the gun into the air and brought his boot down as hard as he could, shattering the man's face. He dropped into the tank, punching the gunner who went for his gun.

The tank driver fled up the short ladder.

Kevin grabbed the man and tossed him into the snow by the wheels. He dropped into the tank to help Jeff subdue the gunner as the wall of snow hit the bottom of the valley and buried everything.

Chapter Twenty-Eight BK8

Cleanup

1

Angela's group watched as the valley was buried under tons of rock and snow. The decoy passage was covered, as was the top entrance where a camp of wild refugees had been arguing about fleeing or staying to fight, but the explosions didn't stop. They continued to circle the jagged cliffs, reminding Angela's army of their battle with the government. She had used a chain event to their success then; she'd repeated it here.

Snow and rocks thudded in front of Angela's tunnel, blocking their view and showering them all with icy dust.

"Move!" Angela got her people away from the entrance and then gestured at her fighters. "No survivors."

The Eagles didn't hesitate. With over seventy percent of Dirce's troops suffocating under the snow, they were eager to be finished before those men dug out.

"Stay here."

Angela didn't argue with Marc's order. She wanted to be here to protect her camp from anyone who might get through.

“No one will.” Adrian stepped by her, following Marc.

Comforted, Angela went to the rear of her scared people to make sure no one was sneaking up on them. Some of the refugees had gotten in before Dirce blocked that corridor with his first shot.

“You line ‘em up, I’ll knock ‘em off.” Adrian had his rifle. “Give you a chance to practice that new grid.”

“I don’t know how to use it yet.” Marc brought his grid up. There were now names where the red heat signatures had been.

“Narrow in on any of them and I’ll be drawn to it while we team.” Adrian linked them.

Marc concentrated on the troops around the tank where Jeff and Kevin had taken shelter.

“You’re not asking much.” Adrian’s mutter was lost in the noise of his shot.

Marc grunted as blood sprayed from an exposed ankle. “One more miss and we switch.”

Adrian frowned. “I can do better.” He narrowed in on Marc’s grid, lining up a new shot.

The UN soldier peered over the tank; he flew backwards as the bullet plunged into his eye socket.

“Again.” Marc picked out the next target.

Around them, Eagles, descendants, and camp members were fighting side-by-side with guns and magic. Not afraid of each other in that moment, their bond brought the bubble over the camp to life for the first time in months. Their unhappiness and differences were no longer blocking it.

The troops firing into the dark tunnel were angered that their bullets and magic were absorbed by the shield. This one didn't fall from their blows. It grew stronger, feeding off the emotions of the citizens it was protecting.

Digging their way free like Jeff and Kevin had, UN troops were now rising up to replace those who'd been killed. No sooner had Adrian and Marc cleared the tank then more troops clawed up and tried to get inside it. Kept to one area of the battlefield, they were both quickly aggravated with the limits.

"If your new gift came, now's a good time to discover what it does."

Marc concentrated, bringing up the hall of doors. There were several new options. "Um, this one. I think." He opened it without knowing what was behind it.

"Sonic. Nice." Adrian put a hand on Marc's shoulder. "I'm blocking everyone behind us. Send it out."

Marc shoved energy through, trying to aim at a cluster of troops running toward the corridor as they fired.

Marc staggered as the blast shot out of his chest and slammed into the dozen soldiers firing at Angela. He glanced away as their eyes exploded.

"Wow." Adrian wanted to grin and congratulate him, but the horror wouldn't let him. "I've never seen that before."

Marc grunted, gathering energy for the next blast. “Line us up.”

Adrian concentrated on the closest threats to the passage, positive that’s what Marc wanted. “Go.”

Marc fired the next blast.

Angela waved at Cynthia and Samantha. “Do what you can.”

Both women frowned, but neither refused.

Neil fired his rifle, scowling, but he didn’t tell Samantha not to. She had the right to defend herself and there were still too many troops. They needed her help.

Sitting by the exit she’d crawled to, Samantha lifted her hand and then slammed it into her palm.

The ground under the battlefield vibrated as if it had been punched. Men screamed as the snow shifted, splitting open in places.

Samantha slammed her fist into her palm again, hair standing on end as she used the gift her demon had revealed after her injury and Jeremy’s death.
Thud!

The icy ground broke apart in front of the tunnel, dumping troops under the snow. Behind the thud, came a cold wind that froze them in snowy graves.

Cynthia rubbed her stomach as she directed her child’s power. She and Samantha weren’t teamed, but they worked together anyway. Samantha dumped the men into the ground and Cynthia froze them. It was just as awful as Marc’s sonic blast, but

the women felt it more. They weren't seasoned fighters yet.

Thud!

More troops fell under the snow, screams locking in their throats as they froze.

2

On top of the cliff, Kendle's team was using the last of their ammo to pick off troops who were in range. Most of them weren't.

Realizing they were about to be out of the fight, Kendle waved toward their cave. "Get our rappelling gear. We're going down to help."

While the men hurried to do as she ordered, Kendle motioned at Conner. "You're a Mitchel. I know you can do things from here. Get on it."

Conner's frosty cheeks paled. "They can't know how different I am. I've got their respect."

"Do it now. If you don't, I won't support you when this is over and neither will they."

Afraid of losing it all just as he'd gained it, Conner lifted his hand.

The sky above the battlefield clouded over and then kept going. The dim sunlight was blocked, turning day into dusk and clear vision into blurry guesses. Heavy wind slammed through the valley, hitting everything in its path. Tanks rocked, tilting, and troops were knocked into each other and their vehicles with brute force.

Conner lifted his other hand.

Kendle couldn't look away from the hundreds of troops who rotated toward the boy with blank expressions. Their faces held no emotions, but their eyes were haunted as their bodies obeyed Conner's command and not their own. It was terrifying.

"Get it over with." Kendle knew what was coming and was impressed as much as she was horrified.

Conner clenched both hands into tight fists.

The soldiers below lifted their weapons in unison and blew their own brains out.

Conner's range from up here had only hit a quarter of the battlefield, but it was enough to get the attention of some of the remaining troops. A few of them fired at the boy instead of Angela, but many of them began to retreat toward vehicles that weren't blocked.

Those are my kids you're shooting at! Angela's wave of fire laid waste to the pocket of troops hiding behind a row of tanks while they shot toward Kendle's location. The men fled, screaming and burning as she blasted them with so much heat that paint melted and tires popped. She couldn't stop the tears as she killed them. All life held value to her, even that of the enemy, but she didn't stop firing. This wasn't a time for mercy. It was survival.

3

"To the right!" Kevin was still being Jeff's spotter.

“I’ve got it now.” Jeff had needed time to figure out how to work the controls. He rotated the barrel toward the final cluster of troops that were about to shoot a rocket into Safe Haven’s tunnel. He didn’t know if magic would catch that, but he wasn’t taking the chance. Jeff fired.

The tank in the center blew up, spraying metal and fire in all directions. Troops fled, dragging injured friends and leaving dead ones.

Jeff and Kevin didn’t know how to reload the tank, but they didn’t want to keep using it anyway in case their side didn’t know who was in here.

“Time for ground work.” Jeff checked his weapons and went up the ladder.

Kevin followed, no longer afraid or whining. Jeff knew what he was doing.

Jeff caught the thought and grinned. *That’s rich. I’m as clueless as he is.* Jeff dropped to the snowy, bloody ground around the tank and began shooting troops trying to make it into the corridor.

“We have runners!” Neil called Angela’s attention to the access road the UN had used to get into the valley. “About thirty, on foot, and two vehicles.”

“No one gets out this time.” Angela opened her hand, shoving it toward the road where the two mountain ranges stopped short of kissing.

“That’s our way out!”

“We’ll dig a new one.” Samantha saw where Angela was aiming and switched her next fist slam

to the same location. Together, the two women pounded the mountain until it began to fall.

4

Kendle's team was suiting up as fast as they could; frustrated with the rappelling equipment they barely knew how to use. Still targeting troops, Conner saw the access road become covered in a thin layer of snow and rocks. Realizing Angela was trying to cut off the path of the retreating men, Conner focused there. If the boss wanted the road closed, he could do that.

Conner lifted his hand.

Huge boulders rolled down the cliffs, crushing the vehicles and the men. Those who survived were shot by snipers—magic and non-magic. Awful to view, it was also gratifying. Safe Haven had defeated every threat strong enough to wipe it out. They were the superpower.

Angela lowered her arm, halting the battle. Her fighters stopped firing, searching for survivors. There weren't many. Angela counted a hundred, split across the bloody battlefield. Gunshots faded into screams from the wounded and the howling of a wind that wasn't natural.

Angela rotated toward Kendle's location. *Bring them down now.*

Conner drew in his power, gasping at the energy he'd used. "I'll need a minute."

You don't have it. Angela gestured toward the camp members she'd chosen yesterday. "We need twenty vehicles. Collect their trucks and all the fuel, and get them to the road. I'll get it cleared. Do it as quick as you can. More refugees will come here, drawn by the fight. We leave at first light."

The crew strode out of the passage, already dressed for the chore. Angela had told them the UN vehicles would have toolboxes and other caches of supplies they needed. She hoped they were able to scavenge enough vehicles. The UN hadn't been prepared for a battle with magic users who fought alongside the humans. They'd also assumed Dirce's negotiating would prevent a real battle. The amount of troops he'd brought was an intimidation technique, but they'd forgotten that Safe Haven was fighting for their very existence. They'd used every weapon in their arsenal.

Angela waved at her next team. "Walk it."

This crew went slower, finding no sport in shooting wounded men. They understood the order and obeyed, but it was too personal. This battle might be the last for some of them.

Jeff had no trouble with it. He fired into a begging man's chest and then knelt down to dig through his pockets and pouches for anything he could use.

Next to him, Kevin did the same. "Extra mags for my 9mm. Nice!"

Jeff tossed him a bloody pouch. "Full of candy. You've got the sweet tooth."

Kevin threw him a pack of unopened cigarettes. “I don’t smoke those.”

Around the two men, fighters paused to stare at their callousness.

Jeff and Kevin didn’t notice.

Gritting his teeth, Adrian began looting the corpse at his feet. They’d been forced to do this at points during the battle with the government, but it had been random and the soldiers had already been killed in one of Angela’s many traps. These men were moaning and puking, crying and trying to bargain for their lives. It was wet work.

Angela joined her army. It was fair that she shared in this shame, but she also needed to replace her energy. Distracting Dirce had drained her.

She stopped by the first wounded soldier she reached, hand lifting. As his life rushed out and into her, angry lightning flashed above the battlefield.

“I’m already damned, remember?” Angela moved onto the next one. “If you didn’t want me to do this, you should have stopped them from coming for me.”

Across the battlefield, descendants began to follow her lead and absorb lifeforces of the dying peacekeepers instead of shooting them.

Adrian was horrified. He was also relieved and impressed. He’d never believed she would condone such a thing, even for their survival. “That’s heartbreaking.”

Marc approved. “It’s survival.”

“Yes.” Adrian stayed with Marc, providing protection and storage. He didn’t look at anything Marc handed him, not taking his attention away from the remaining troops trying to burrow under the snow to escape.

5

“Ready?”

Conner nodded at Kendle’s question. He wasn’t afraid.

The team around them swallowed their protests. Kendle had chosen to bring the babies down in the first group. Both infants were snuggled in her pack. The contents had been shoved into other bags and pockets, but Kendle had also padded the sleeping babies with Rita’s jacket and shawl. Kendle didn’t think the dead woman would mind.

“Don’t rush.” Kendle stepped off the edge of the cliff and began to walk down it, anchored by a static rope. They’d hammered the anchors in deep, knowing they would have to be used twice.

Kendle hated hanging over open air. If the anchors came loose or the rope broke, they would fall to certain death, but she didn’t hesitate. If she did, so would her team.

“It’s Kendle’s crew!” One of the camp women, Sylvia, pointed. “There’s Tommy!” She’d missed his weekly relief sessions.

Eagles watched the team descend, many of them comparing it to old movies with secret agents rappelling down the side of a tall building together. It appeared as though the team had done it often, with no errors the fighters on the battlefield or in the tunnel could spot.

Kendle's boots touched the ground three minutes after leaving it. She grinned and waved to hide her queasy stomach. The wind had pushed so hard that her grip on the rope had torn holes in her gloves. *I'm never doing that again.* Kendle looked at Conner. "Tell Carl to hammer the anchors in again before we unhook and let go, or they'll come out. Mine was shaking."

Conner did, then helped Kendle take off the pack with the twins.

Kendle felt the rope vibrating as the anchors were pried from the rock and then hammered into a new spot. She approved of the change, but she didn't relax. She wouldn't be able to until all of her surviving team was down.

Adrian looked around, noting who was on the field with them and who wasn't. "Where's Charlie?"

"Guarding the rear of the passage from refugees."

"How did she get him to stay in?"

Marc sighed. "She gave him something he wanted more than blood."

Adrian considered that as he scanned for survivors. Tracy had to be involved... “They’ll be recognized as a legal couple, like Kyle and Jennifer?”

“Yep. She knew exactly what to use.”

“On us, too.”

Marc wiped his hands down his frozen pants. “But I’d still kill you and you’d still kill me. She’s the only one getting what they want.”

Adrian recognized the fuse if he wanted to light it. Instead, the former leader shook his head. “After everything that’s happened, she barely needs us at all. I think we should just be glad if she still wants us.”

Marc would have argued with that, but he noticed Kendle’s team striding triumphantly toward Angela with laden arms and huge grins.

Adrian frowned, narrowing in on the two bundles. “Damn.”

Marc joined Adrian in the instant mood change. It was hard not to think that she’d ordered a replacement.

Adrian’s heart hurt. “I guess she doesn’t need us at all now.”

Marc winced at the double pain, still teamed. “That changes things. I can’t fight that.”

“I’m not going to try. She doesn’t need us.”

“But I do want you.” Angela walked toward them with a cooing infant in each arm. She looked at Adrian as Marc studied the babies. “Secure the perimeter.”

Adrian walked away after a fast glance at Marc that begged him not to fight with her.

Angela smiled down at the children. “We’re going to have a large family. Can you accept that?”

“That’ll be the easiest part.” Marc took the little girl, noting her eyes were the same shade of blue as Angela’s. “Cute.”

“They have rare gifts. They’ll need a strong family to help them follow the light.”

“And that family has to include Adrian?”

“No. I’ll give that love to the children and make it work. I no longer believe we’ll fall without him.”

“I never did.”

Angela also refused to trigger that fight. “It’s your call. Hold a vote, talk to your friends. I won’t have anything to do with that decision anymore. Fate controls both your lives now, not me.”

Marc was a bit worried to hear her say that. He assumed she really did mean to give her attention to the kids. It should have made him happy, but it didn’t. He wasn’t noticing sadness in her or concern. It was as if she didn’t care.

“I just can’t be hurt that way anymore. You’ve kept us apart for so long that I’ve adjusted to hurting in that place now. I locked it in my crypt with the other horrors of this miserable existence we call a life. All I care about is getting to that island. Your love comes with too many strings and confinements. I gave up.” Angela walked away, cooing to the babies.

Marc scanned her thoughts, but he found nothing to imply she was bluffing. Adrian's life was in his hands now. *I can reinstate Adrian's banishment right this minute.* Marc wanted to. He also wanted the fighting to end. Angie was offering him a second chance at a life together. All he had to do was give her the personal freedoms he'd always enjoyed. Despite how hard it sounded, Marc was positive he could do it—anything to keep from being out of her light. He hurried to catch up, decision made.

“We need a door crew, asap.”

Marc was on her heels, scanning for trouble. “I'll handle it.”

Angela took the babies toward the corridor. “The Mountaineers are coming. Do you want to handle that too or should I?”

Marc was fed up with the doctor and his group. “You should do it. I'll kill them all right now.”

Angela walked faster, ignoring everything going on around her as she stared at the twins. “Kendle will help you clear the road.”

Now Marc frowned. It felt like she was pushing him toward a woman who desired him.

“It's free will, Marc. And she's more than earned a reward. Be nice. She can't help wanting you. None of us can.”

Appeased, Marc motioned at Kendle and then headed for the road into the valley that was blocked by destroyed vehicles and huge rocks.

Kendle swallowed her apprehension and followed. She wasn't sure if she was being banished now that she'd delivered the babies to the boss.

Behind her, Kendle's team also followed, not giving them much space. Kendle had earned their loyalty and that extended to defending her against leadership if necessary.

Marc was pleased by their thoughts of the run. It was good that she'd bonded with her team, but after scanning the babies, Marc understood Kendle's mission hadn't been to locate a boat. Marc stopped by a crushed car, letting Kendle catch up. It would have taken them two days to remove this blockage with manual labor, but he knew what gifts Kendle had now.

Kendle stared at Angela. *Are you sure?*

Angela ignored the woman's doubts to address a more important problem. *If he wants to spend time with you, I won't stop it.*

Marc and Kendle both turned to gawk at Angela as she carried the twins into the shelter of the tunnel.

Angela didn't respond. She couldn't. The jealousy was trying to come up her throat and spew out in a burst of fury. Doing the right thing was hard.

Kendle stopped by Marc, unable to control her emotions. She stared at him with all the pent up desire she'd hidden on her trip.

"Nothing has changed for me. I only want her."

Kendle didn't get mad. She was amused. "That must be some pussy."

Marc laughed in surprise. "You have no idea."

Kendle scanned Adrian and then the vet who was slipping out of the passage as Angela entered. “I do have an idea. If I were a guy, maybe I’d feel the same.” Kendle shrugged. “We’ll all survive our emotions. Let’s be certain we can survive the conditions.” Kendle lifted her hand.

Across the calming battlefield, descendants turned, drawn by the wave of power that swept across the scene and stole the remaining energy from the wounded. Bodies collapsed as Kendle’s hand began to glow. She took in a deep breath and swung her fist as if she were punching her enemy.

The hit created a clearing force that ran ahead and knocked the crushed trucks and rocks farther into the gap. Her second hit blasted them into the open countryside, clearing most of the road. It was impossible, like everything else that had happened here today.

Marc put a hand on her shoulder. “I was told you deserve a reward.”

Kendle locked down on her first request, not wanting to restart the old fighting by begging to have his puppies and share his every waking moment. She asked for the thing she wanted the most after his love. “Let Conner back in. He’s a good kid deep down, just horny.” She grinned at him. “And who isn’t horny these days?”

Marc’s laughter rolled across the battlefield. “We’ll reevaluate his punishment after we leave here.”

“Thank you.” Kendle turned away from him, road unblocked and heart sealed up. “Tommy asked me to be his woman last night. I’ve agreed.”

“Congratulations. He’s a good person.”

“He’s better than good.” Kendle smirked, hips swinging as she walked away. “He practiced on the camp women. I’ve got the broken-in model and it’s perfect.”

Marc sensed no sarcasm or bitterness, just the satisfaction that came from a lover who had taken care of her. Marc grinned. *That’s Tommy. Making men proud everywhere.*

Adrian snickered. “Yeah, he’s always been a favorite with the older women. Wonder how they’ll react to him being off the auction block.”

Marc and Adrian didn’t fight the bonding that came with their laughter. It felt too good after all the months of spewing vile at each other. Needing to come to terms with all of it, Marc gestured toward the tunnel. “I’m labor. Give her your information.”

Adrian watched Marc join Kendle’s team, pointing at the crew who was gathering vehicles. Heart thudding, Adrian allowed his joy to burst free over the scene, drenching his army with happiness that bathed them in all crimson-killing golden glows.

Angela felt Adrian and Marc’s truce. She was relieved and proud of them, but it didn’t matter anymore. Only the survival of her people did.

Angela walked into the corridor with the babies in her arms, content that the Eagles on the battlefield would handle the aftermath. As she walked toward the inner cave, people parted to let her through.

At first, Angela thought it was because they were scared of her. That was what she had expected after the fight. As she walked into the middle of them, attention on the babies, their thoughts came to her.

The Alpha.

She saved us again.

More people will come with Safe Haven now.

That's what the UN gets!

Angela was gratified to know the descendants were with her, but the opinions of the other people held more value. She loved them for not hating her for what she'd done to save them.

Eagles followed on Angela's heels as she strode toward the doctor. Those residents were arguing with some of her camp members, but Angela didn't stop. As she reached the shouting, her camp stopped to let her handle it—including Charlie. Their expressions implied Jimmy was in trouble, but they didn't believe he was smart enough to know it.

Jimmy knew exactly what he was doing. He didn't want descendants back in the cave. Now that the fight was over, there was a chance Angela might stay here and try to rebuild their settlement.

Angela hadn't stopped walking. As she neared the point of impact with Jimmy, she finally looked

up. The witch's red orbs glared out at him eagerly.
If I were you, I would move.

Jimmy wanted to stand strong, but under his hatred of the descendants, was fear. He retreated, motioning for the rest of his group to do the same.

Angela kept walking, striding through the middle of his rebels without acknowledging their presence or their stolen weapons.

Behind her, the rest of Safe Haven also entered the passage.

Jimmy's group wanted to protest. It was in their expressions and their body language, but under it was the same motivation that drove the doctor: Fear.

Angela didn't care. If they pushed it, she would kill them too. *I'm already damned. There isn't anything I won't do now.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine BK8

Butterflies And Unicorns

October 26th

1

Jeff and Kevin were surrounded by Eagles as they entered the cave. Jeff was hoping for a warm drink and to sit down to catch his breath. *I sledded down a mountain during an avalanche!* It was the height of his adventures so far. Unlike Kevin, who was already disappointed that they were sharing the glory, Jeff didn't care. He only had to impress himself and he'd done that.

As the fighters walked and talked, Kevin spotted Cynthia by the tunnel entrance, but he couldn't break away from the chattering group without drawing attention. Kevin wasn't sure what he wanted from being here again, but he was almost certain he would stay for a while.

Jeff was having the opposite thoughts. Each time they got near Safe Haven, people had to be killed. He understood there was evil in the world that had to be eliminated, but Jeff was tired of the constant pattern with Angela. If she were the leader, he didn't think he could stay.

"You'd both be dead without her."

Jeff and Kevin stopped at the cold warning.

Cynthia ignored Kevin to glare at Jeff. “It’s funny that you believe we needed help at all.” She disappeared into the shadows.

Icy wind swarmed into the tunnel, bringing the smell of smoke and blood, along with precious freedom. The floors and passages of Safe Haven would become slippery paths that sent citizens to their knees and hands when they misjudged.

Jeff shook his head. “She’s crazy.”

“Actually, she’s right.” Morgan gestured for Jeff to go first up the ladder. “You two aren’t the heroes today.”

Jeff didn’t care about their opinions. He’d made up his mind on Angela after the government battle, after losing his heart.

Morgan understood, but there was nothing he could do about Jeff’s pain. All he could do was hope the rebel Eagle understood that their survival came at a high price.

“I know the cost.” Jeff climbed the ladder. “I’m not okay paying it unless it’s my idea.”

“You’re a lot like Charlie. He hates her for Tracy’s suffering, but neither of you had to make those choices, so it’s unfair to blame her.” Morgan waved for the rest of the guards to go on. “Watch those two. We don’t know who they are anymore.”

The two men scowled, but the Eagles knew Morgan was right. Jeff and Kevin had been gone long enough that they weren’t going to get trustworthy status right away even though they’d returned in time for the fight. As far as the men here

were concerned, Jeff and Kevin had left just when they were needed most. They would have to be forgiven and that would only happen if they stayed this time and did their share.

Kevin was eager for it. He wanted his place back.

Jeff was eager for daylight so he could bugout, alone.

The guard on the top ladder, Daryl, grimaced at the voices. He didn't want Kevin here. Cynthia was getting better, but Kevin would remind her of Matt and all that had happened. Daryl met Jeff's eye as he reached the level. "When are you two leaving?"

Jeff ignored the insulting tone. "Whenever we want. You don't make the rules here."

"But I do."

Jeff spun around to discover Jennifer and Kyle standing behind him. He lifted a brow as he added up the clues. "She named you heir to Safe Haven? I'm glad I left."

Jennifer glared. "I'll protect it with everything I have, like she has." Jennifer raked Kevin with a contemptuous glance and then studied Jeff. "When are you two leaving?"

"Now, Jenny, be nice." Kyle patted her tense arm. "I'm sure they don't mean to cause trouble."

"Yeah." Jennifer grunted, scanning the two tense men. "I don't see any caring for the future or for the greater good. One wants a woman and the other wants to forget a woman."

Jeff blanched as Kevin flushed.

Jennifer walked by them, tone scornful. “You’re either with us or you’re against us, gentlemen. If you can’t be with us, you need to go. Make your choice by dawn.”

“She can’t do that!”

Kevin’s protest was lost in Angela’s rough chuckle floating through the top level.

Yes, she can. We’ve had enough of men who won’t commit because it’s hard. Make your choice by dawn, like everyone else in this cursed mountain.

Jennifer went to stand by Angela’s door, relieving Ivan on duty. “Boss wants dinner set up, said for you to handle it. Now.”

Ivan scowled at Kyle. “Can you tell her she doesn’t have to be a hardass to get stuff done?”

Kyle smiled at her. “Says who?”

Ivan rolled his eyes. “Another one who likes a mean woman. What is it with you guys?”

“She’s not mean.” Kyle stroked a thumb down Jennifer’s cold cheek. “She’s bitter. There’s a difference.”

Jennifer blushed at the heat in Kyle’s gaze. “I can be mean.”

Kyle resisted the urge to hug her. “I have no doubt about that. She wouldn’t have chosen you if it was all butterflies and unicorns in your heart.”

“I have a lot of hatred in there.”

“We all do, honey. After what we’ve been through, how can there not be?”

Jeff moved by them and picked a spot in the corridor near Angela’s location. Once he rested,

they would talk. If she gave the right answers, he would leave here in peace or maybe even stay with them. If she told him what he feared the most, Jeff planned to ask her to remove his gift. He didn't need it and he didn't want it. After that, he would return to the wilderness where life made sense to him.

Pretending that her arm wasn't aching, Jennifer stood up straight until Jeff was out of sight. As soon as he was, she slumped against the wall, letting out a grunt.

Ivan didn't comment. He didn't want problems with her man, but he was leery of Jennifer. He knew she was like Angela and he knew she was trustworthy, but he didn't know what she thought about him. He wasn't going to push it until he'd earned a higher place.

Wondering where Kevin had disappeared to, Jennifer didn't initiate a conversation with Ivan even though this was a prime moment for one. Leery was a great vibe for a chat. Too tired to even do a scan, she concentrated on getting her energy back. The fight wasn't over yet.

2

Cynthia breathed in as deep as she could, relishing the air coming through the open tunnel. It was so cold that it was almost painful; she'd never felt anything as wonderful. She had been positive she wouldn't make it out of this cave alive.

Lingering in the shadows, Kevin took a moment to study her, not caring who noticed or got offended by it. She was skinnier than he remembered and the bags under her eyes implied she hadn't been sleeping well. That was satisfying to him.

Cynthia was having the same thoughts about Kevin. He looked scruffy and worn out, as if the trip had been exhausting.

Around them, people coming into the passage gave them a wide berth, but stared in curiosity. Had their time apart softened the bad blood between them?

Kevin saw her wistful gaze and pushed, trying to figure out how she felt about him now. "You can leave right now, if you want to..."

"Yes." Cynthia didn't face Kevin, but she did nod to her guard in the shadows to let the soldier know she was okay. She and Peter had been put together for the battle because the former soldier wouldn't hesitate to kill her if she tried to betray Angela. Cynthia hadn't even considered it. She had chosen to reform.

Kevin needed more information. "You could come with us."

Cynthia sniggered. "Yeah, Jeff would love having *two* burdens along."

Kevin flushed. He'd been hoping she wouldn't notice Jeff's dissatisfaction with his company.

Thanks to the baby, she caught the thought. "Why do you care? You walked away from all of this."

Kevin lowered his tone to a seductive whisper. “I’m here now, baby.”

“Just like that, huh?” Cynthia got mean. “You didn’t fight for a place before, but you’ll do it now that the hard part is over.”

Kevin’s red cheeks turned a deep scarlet that brought Peter a few steps closer. He was aware of Cynthia’s reputation for stirring the pot, but he didn’t know Kevin and therefore, the former Eagle was the threat.

Cynthia felt the anger and waited for a denial, but there wasn’t one. She grunted. “It’s up to Angela, not me.”

Kevin pouted. “So until she makes a choice on me, I need to stay away from you, right?”

“You need to stay away from me because I say so.” Cynthia glared at him. “I told you I was in danger and you blew me off. You can’t be trusted and I won’t ever forget that.” She left him standing there, dumbfounded, to join the packing islanders. She’d made her choice. In time, Kevin would also make his, but their chance at a relationship, of any kind, was gone.

3

“Hey!”

Adrian spun around at the shout, not drawing his gun but coming close to it. He paused when he saw who it was, noting Kendle’s confident stride. Before she and her team had gone south to find the boat, or

whatever their true mission had been, she had tiptoed around everyone in Safe Haven as if she wasn't worthy to be here. Now, she walked close to people, laughing and grinning at their comments before returning her own. *She's not afraid of us now. She's not afraid of herself.*

Kendle had the opposite observation about Adrian. He acted as if he were uncomfortable in public and couldn't wait to be back in the cave. As soon as she had the thought, Kendle realized Adrian wanted to be inside because that's where Angela was. She understood that because she was happy even though the wind was stinging the skin off her cheeks and clogging snot into her nose. Marc was out here. Kendle stopped a few feet away from Adrian. "I see you're protecting your life a bit more these days."

Adrian smiled, but it faded into a frown as he spotted Tommy waiting for her in the tunnel entrance. "And I see you're not. Where's your guard?"

"After what I've been through, these people need a guard from me."

"That's what I meant. You're making it worse by being seen with a traitor. What are you doing?"

Kendle realized he'd hoped she would ignore him so she wouldn't be held responsible for him and Conner. "I'm ending our relationship, publicly. Mr. Mitchel, we are no longer a couple. Thank you for all the lovely moments."

Adrian was glad her voice carried to the guards. “Nice. I release you without shame or anger, and hope, sincerely, that he can keep up with you in every way.”

“Aww. How sweet. As for Conner, I want his banishment lifted. The kid saved our asses as much as anyone else. He deserves a break.”

Adrian was relieved to hear it. He’d been afraid to ask any of her team and draw attention from Marc or Angela if the news was bad. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Kendle danced forward to place a soft kiss on his cheek. “And thank you. I may be okay with being alive now.”

Adrian signaled to Tommy, not surprised when he only received a curt nod. “Tell him I said I’m watching. It’ll keep him on his toes.”

Snickering, Kendle returned to the entrance, where Tommy gathered her close and kissed her to make their relationship public.

Around the scene, most people ignored the new couple, but a few of the camp women who were wrangling their assigned child back into the cave paused to glower or sigh in defeat. Another good man was off the Safe Haven market.

4

“Are you okay?” Neil knelt by Samantha, positive she was cold. She was sitting in the shadows of the entrance, where most of the coming and going people weren’t noticing her.

“I feel so bad!”

Neil held her as she sobbed, already certain what had triggered this latest emotional burst. She’d been sitting here enjoying the fresh air that Jeremy never would. On top of that, the adults herding kids by her were promising the children they could play outside again after the camp bugged out. Samantha was thinking about how hard it would be to leave Jeremy here in the morning.

“I don’t even have flowers!” Samantha’s body shook from the force of her misery.

It bothered Neil more than he could ever express, but he didn’t know what to do. Death came with life. It sucked, but there was no changing that awful fact. “Maybe I can scavenge something.”

Sam tried to choke off the tears. “Really?”

The tiny bit of hope in her voice made Neil vow to find flowers. “I’ll go right now, but not with you here and not with you like this.”

She sniffled. “Take me to the top?”

“Of course.” Neil helped Samantha button up her coat. She’d had to unfasten it during the fight so her movement wasn’t as restricted. Normally, it wouldn’t have been a problem, but as soon as Neil had discovered her role in the fight, he had layered her with extra vests that made it impossible for her to get far without help. He had stayed by her during the fight too, providing her with protection and then energy when she had run out. Samantha hadn’t recovered from her injuries yet, but the damage she’d been able to inflict was astounding. Neil

didn't want to know what she could do when she wasn't limited by injuries or a pregnancy.

Samantha was proud of Neil, of how he had handled her being in danger on the front lines of the battle, but she didn't have room to express that emotion yet. She missed Jeremy. He should have been here for this, celebrating alongside them.

Neil slid his arms under her, feeling that she was indeed frozen inside her clothes. He cradled her against his chest, ignoring offers to help and questions about her health. The camp would be happy on the top levels, full of good energy from the victory. It would help Samantha to be hit with that. Down here, it was just bodies, Eagles looting or setting up security, and disappointed kids who'd been hoping for a chance to kill. The adults almost had all of the children in now, but the complaints of the remainders about wanting to do more were overpowering even the occasional gunshot still echoing from the battlefield. None of them needed to be in this.

Neil spun around to glare at a trio of preteen kids by the entrance. "Get where you're supposed to be or I'm telling Angela."

All the kids in hearing distance took off running toward the inner cave.

Adults flashed grateful glances at Neil before following. The non-magic users were glad it was all over, but they were tired. The energy drains hadn't all stayed on Dirce's troops. Kids were clumsy in aiming, Neil had discovered. Samantha had been

forced to protect him as well as herself from the disjointed siphons. Still, the children had helped them win this fight. Neil was sure they would be rewarded. In fact, he expected everyone to be awarded something from the boss. He didn't want anything for himself. Neither did Samantha, as far as he knew, but most of these folks would want to be recognized for their contributions.

"I'll mention it to her, if she doesn't handle it."

Neil agreed to Samantha's offer, shifting her to his back so he could climb the ladder. After tonight, he might not ever have to do this again; the sensation of that weight being lifted was indescribable.

Neil felt Samantha's hot tears roll down his neck and into his shirt. He paused on the ladder, heart shattering. "Please, Sam."

Samantha bit into her lip, nodding against him. She would try harder to let go of her sadness and remember the good times they'd had together. Maybe it wouldn't keep hurting this bad if she shoved those images through the gaping hole in her heart.

5

"We're leaving in a few hours."

Marc glanced up from the bloody body he was looting. "Are you sure you want to? It will be dark then."

Doug nodded. “It feels like there are more problems coming here. I need to get these boys out of danger and go find Becky.”

Marc stood up and extended his hand. “It was an honor.”

Doug pumped his hand, grateful that there wasn’t going to be a guilt trip over the choice to leave. “We’ll be back...” It was Doug’s way of asking if they would be welcome.

“Good.” Marc grinned. “It wouldn’t be the same without a bunch of redheads in Safe Haven.”

Chuckling, Doug went to the entrance to collect their gear. “Allan is going with me.”

Marc wasn’t surprised to hear that. Allan had never been happy in Safe Haven, like Kevin hadn’t been. Jeff was a different story all together. “The trucks out by the road have full tanks. Scavenge what you need from the ones on the field.”

“Will do. You’ll hear from us again.”

Marc hoped that was true, but he refused to spend time worrying about the civilians who were leaving. While he had been out here, freezing, shooting, and looting, several small groups had escaped the mountain. Angela had instructed the guards not to interfere. Marc didn’t expect any of them to survive, but if they did and found their way home, they would be subjected to the same evaluations and medical checks as they had been the first time.

Marc spotted Zack and his sons, along with Shawn and Ray coming toward him. He waited for

them to reach his location, again scanning the battlefield to make sure all of the threats had been neutralized. Across from him, where Kendle and her group had taken shelter, the mountain was much the same. Other than a new layer of rocks and snow at the bottom, it was unharmed. The area to the south was destroyed. First, Dirce's shot had closed the tunnel, and then the avalanche had buried that location. Anyone who came through here in the future would never know that there was an entrance buried under there unless the snow melted.

To the north, was the path the UN had used to get into this valley. At the moment, there were six trucks lined up, with two dozen Eagles scurrying around them to fill the beds and kick the tires. To the east, another large group of fighters was entering the tepid warmth of the cave to escape the scene of death all of them had participated in this time. Marc didn't catch bad thoughts or jealousies as the group entered, even though it was made up of both magic and non-magic fighters. In this moment, they were all bonded by their disgust at what they had been forced to do to survive.

Zack and his group reached Marc. "We went through the cave and took care of what we found. There weren't many. Bodies are in the tunnel. Do you need help out here?"

Marc pointed toward the cold workers who were trying to get their transportation together. "Go relieve somebody."

All of them hurried to do what they were told, except for Shawn.

Marc knew what the man wanted. “This is a bad time. We need you to stay at least until after the bugout. If you want to leave then, go, but Safe Haven always needs good Eagles.”

Shawn was relieved to hear it. During his punishment and time caring for Missy, he had been lost. “Do you want me to help with the vehicles?”

Happy to have someone by his side who was eager, Marc denied that. “Stay with me. If the boss discovers I don’t have a guard, she won’t let me hear the end of it.”

Shawn took up a nearby post to watch over Marc. It was as close to being back in the Eagles as he could get right now.

“How are things inside?”

Shawn shrugged. “Calm, mostly quiet. Angela has all of the kids that she can fit in the cubby with her. Everyone else is in the TV or reading room, packing and waiting for instructions. There are guards on every level again, except for the bottom floor. We told Jimmy if there are any problems overnight, we’ll hold him responsible. We haven’t spotted a member of his group since.”

“What about personal dramas?”

Shawn shrugged. “Honestly, man, I haven’t been paying enough attention, but it didn’t seem like there was much going on. Everyone’s afraid to bug the boss.”

“Good.” Marc knelt down to finish digging through the pockets of the soldier who had begged him for mercy. *That will haunt me later.* “Are all the Runaways gone now?”

“As far as we can tell, yes. Gus and his brothers are going through the cave again in case we missed something. Kenn and Tonya will make the next sweep in half an hour.”

Marc wanted to be in there to do those sweeps himself, but any surviving troops out here were more dangerous than refugees who had made it inside. Angela was in there. “Doug and his group will be leaving soon. Let the guards know.”

Shawn got the attention of a sentry standing at the entrance and flashed the message through hand code.

Brandon, sniper rifle in hand, nodded and went back to scanning.

People paused as the sound of hammering echoed across the valley. Theo’s team was busy installing the barrier that had been cut from floor panels after the earthquake. Everyone knew it wouldn’t hold, but no one hassled the workers. The boss had insisted on a door, no matter how weak.

Marc started to tell Shawn something, but his attention was snagged by the crackling of a radio near his feet.

“You are an hour late for your check in, Jarvis! Dirce had better have a good reason for the delay this time.”

Marc and Shawn exchanged glances. Dirce hadn't gotten out a call to his base during the fight. Maybe no one had thought to do it, or maybe no one had done it because Dirce hadn't ordered them to, but it was clear the caller didn't know the fight was over.

Marc knelt down to root in the snow, hoping to find the radio. Attached to the soldier, Marc took the entire belt instead of fumbling with cold fingers for the snaps. Even through his gloves, it was rough out here.

"Come in, Jarvis. This is base and you are late for your check in!"

Marc keyed the radio. "All of your men are occupied right now. Would you like to leave a message?"

Around him, other radios fed the exchange to Eagles both in and outside the cave.

"Who is this?!"

"Just a Ghost."

Chuckles and snickers came from all the Eagles listening, but the voice on the other end of the radio didn't laugh.

"We have orders for your arrest, Mr. Brady. Please surrender to the nearest UN representative."

"Well, as I've stated, all of your men are busy drawing flies. If you'd like to send another thousand, maybe I can surrender to them."

There was an awkward pause where the enemy tried to determine if Marc was lying. When he

responded, it was obvious that he remembered Marc had a reputation for never bluffing.

“You’ll be sorry for that. Where is Dirce?”

“With his men, of course.” Marc chuckled. “Sorry I can’t send you a picture.”

“You may have won this battle, but in the end, America will be ours.” The response was straight out of another old movie.

Angela hadn’t told Marc how to handle this, but like during his career, he had an instinctive feel for what would push buttons on the other end of the radio. “Socialism will never succeed.”

The response was fast and furious. “Yes, it will! I hate Americans! Stupid! You do not understand how—”

Marc switched the radio off. He had the urge to spew threats in return, but it was a mistake to let the enemy know how soon death was coming, how hard it would hit, or who was going to deliver it.

Around the battlefield, Eagles approved the tactic. Adrian and Angela had both used it and it was effective.

As if to prove the thought, the other radios continued to echo with threats and screaming.

Marc waved a hand. “Unless you have duty out here, get inside. In one hour, this entrance is closing.”

People around him hurried to get in; groups of fighters left the battlefield as they received the message, all eager for warmth and different views—

even if it was the cave again. The gore out here was hard to handle.

Marc and Shawn lingered to do another scan. A few survivors were still trying to hide or sneak away, but Marc wasn't allowing that. He and Shawn marched back over the icy, bloody ground to eliminate those future threats. They had a tedious night in front of them.

6

Candy slipped away from Kenn and Tonya in the mess, unnoticed, returning to the open tunnel. She stood at the cold entrance, searching the battlefield. Most of the people were inside now, making her guts churn. The few who were missing were important to her.

“There you are!”

Busy studying the bundled men and women outside, Candy jumped. “What do you want?!”

Tommy held up a hand. “To talk, that’s all. Got a minute? I’d like to discuss Conner.”

“What about him?” Candy knew her tone wasn’t right, but she couldn’t help it. Conner was a sore subject with her now, mostly because she was so confused over the boy. Distracted, she swept the battlefield again.

Tommy knew when Candy spotted Conner. The tension in her shoulders faded and a softer look came over her face.

Tommy frowned. “What’s going on with you two?”

Candy locked down on her emotions, donning an expressionless facade. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Did he have contact with you?”

“How could he? You guys just got here.”

Tommy recognized the evasion and the reluctance to get Conner in trouble. He studied her as she stared at the boy. It was almost as if Candy had missed Conner.

Candy couldn’t help staring. Walking proudly with a gun in hand and a grin on his lips, the boy was attractive, but that wasn’t what drew her so hard. It was different, but at the same time, it was almost like one of Lee’s homecomings. She had spent most of their life waiting for Lee to get home from something. After the war, when he’d come for her, she’d believed life would be different.

Then she’d realized he was a full time member of the Eagles and she’d had to suffer once again, waiting for his shifts to end. Now, she had feelings of some sort for yet another male who would spend his life serving the greater good instead of spending the time with her that a relationship required. It was a lot to take in all at once, especially with smoke wafting in and faint pleas for mercy echoing across the battlefield. *I’m so confused.*

“He did well on our trip south.”

Candy was surprised as she realized what was happening. “You want to lift his banishment!”

“Yes. He’s just a kid with a big crush. We’ll keep him away from you.”

“He’s already avoiding me. You don’t need to do that.”

Tommy caught the tone and smiled a bit. “You did miss him.”

Candy shrugged, surprised into the truth. “No one else wants me.”

“That’s not true.”

“You haven’t been here. You don’t know what’s happened.”

Tommy shrugged. “I noticed you have a guard.” James had followed them.

“Yeah.” Candy sighed. “I had a rough time in here.”

“It looks like a lot of people did.” Tommy delivered another smile. “You’re alive. It can’t have been that bad or you wouldn’t be.”

“I’m not sure why I am.”

“Maybe she knows you’ve been sick.” Tommy had spotted the injection marks on Candy’s arms and assumed she’d had to be sedated. Angela had planned to use that on all of those who had trouble being trapped in the mountain.

“I don’t feel well yet.”

“That’s why you still have a guard, I’d guess.”

Candy studied Tommy. She picked out the bigger muscles and the better health under his coat, wondering how many of the camp females would try to signal him as soon as security was reestablished. Candy had never used Tommy’s

services, but she'd heard the stories. She'd always assumed that when her urges got that bad, he was the one she would talk to, though.

Candy saw his fast glance toward Kendle, who was conversing with Marc. The fondness in his expression told Candy he wouldn't be doing that anymore. "What if I want to spend time with him?"

"That's not up to me, but I'd guess Angela will be glad you're finding some happiness. If you're willing. If he's put some spell on you, she'll order his death."

"I'm not under a spell."

"Are you sure? You've done a complete flip since I left." Tommy had to point it out. "You might be."

"How would you know?"

"I wouldn't, but the boss would. Talk to her."

"She's busy right now."

"Unless you're in danger, let it go for a few days until things settle down."

"And so I can be sure it's what I want?"

"Of course. I'd hate to get the order to eliminate him. I kinda like the boy." Tommy left, nodding to her sentry again.

Candy let him go, mind full of confusion. *So do I, but I don't know how it happened. Maybe I am under a spell.*

Do you want me to leave you alone? I will try if you tell me to.

Conner's voice in her mind brought a level of peace that Candy couldn't fight. *Just don't hurt me, kid. I'm defenseless right now.*

Conner appeared in the entrance of the tunnel, but he didn't look at her. *I'll be around when you need me and gone when you don't.*

It sounds perfect. What's the catch?

There isn't one. I want you to be happy. If that's without me, I accept it. Conner looked over with all his emotions hidden under a cool layer of adult control. *It's all up to you now.*

Candy's cheeks were hot and her body was alive. Even without seeing his expression, she could feel his desires, his obsession. Instead of fear, it gave her hope. Candy turned away, not wanting to be caught staring. *Welcome home, Conner.*

Conner grinned. That was worth more to him than even the respect of Angela and her army.

Chapter Thirty BK8

The Cold Hand Of Fate

1

Theo found Angela on the top level, caring for the twins. Both babies had needed a diaper change, judging from the smell. “We’re about to slap a lock on the door, but it’s not going to hold long. The Mountaineers will have to reinforce it. We want a few of them to come watch us now, so they’ll know how.”

“I doubt that any of them except Jimmy will agree to go down there, but you have my permission to try.” She glanced up. “How long?”

Theo sighed, exhausted from all the climbing with his dead leg. “Hours, maybe.”

Angela sighed. “Do the best you can.”

“Incoming.” Ivan was at the entrance to the weapons room, screening everyone who wanted to get near Angela.

Angela scowled. “We may not need the door at all, Theo. Hang around a minute, will you?”

“Trouble?” Theo drew his gun, waving at Debra to get away from them.

“That depends. If they fire and Jimmy’s group rushes us like they’re considering, we won’t need a

door. I'll kill them all and leave this cursed ground wide open."

Jeff started to get up from his napping spot, but Ivan delivered a fast glare and warning. "I don't know you. Don't draw your gun or I'll consider you a threat to the boss."

Jeff held up a hand to indicate he wasn't a problem, but he stayed ready to help if the cocky soldier got his ass handed to him.

"Let us in there!"

"We'll fire this place up. Move!"

Theo and Ivan tensed, ready to kill at those words.

A small group of battered, desperate refugees shoved into the passage, only stopping because Ivan pointed his gun at them.

"We want to talk to her!"

"She has to let us stay!"

"We haven't done anything wrong!"

"You entered our home without permission, but you didn't do anything wrong?" Ivan signaled toward the ladder. "The bottom tunnel is open. Get out of here."

A large guy with two females cowering behind him lifted a hand. "We want your boss. Move aside!"

Ivan glanced at Angela. "Dead or alive?"

Angela sighed, feeling Jimmy gain control of his group. "He'll ask, I'll answer, you'll shoot."

"Got it." Ivan slid his finger onto the trigger. "Ask your question."

The big man paused as Eagles surrounded him and his family. “Hey! We’re not a threat. The threat is outside. We’re dying!”

Angela placed the twins next to each other and covered them with the blankets Marc had left up here from their bed. She stood up with tired movements that declared her patience at an end. “Where were you during the fight?”

The refugee frowned. “Uh, out of your way!”

“So you’ve been out there the entire time, but didn’t help even though we were trapped in here like rats being tested?”

“Um, no. I mean, we all wanted to...”

“Liar!” Angela lashed out brutally, inhaling as she condemned him. “You helped our enemies. You celebrated when the quake came.”

Ivan didn’t need to hear more. As Angela took the man’s lifeforce, Ivan and the Eagles gunned down his unarmed family. Though it was two men and an older woman, not children, all of the Eagles felt the chore deep in their guts, but they didn’t hesitate. The time for second chances was gone.

2

Adrian and Marc both rotated toward the cave. Angela’s pain was fresh.

Marc scowled. “What is it?”

Adrian didn’t want Marc to know how connected he and Angela were, but their truce didn’t allow for lies or even evasions. “She hates to kill. It

tears her apart. She's too hurt by all of this to hide it from me."

"We're still teamed." Marc frowned as he realized Adrian would always be connected in ways that he couldn't.

"That's not true." Adrian resumed their walk of the perimeter. *Trek through the snow-pocalypse.* "You share a unique bond with her. When your powers merge for the first time, it might create the soul mate connection."

"The what?"

"Where do you think the legends about soul mates came from?"

Marc considered that. "Like with twins?"

"Yes. They share the same brain functions during tests in the lab, especially during emotional moments. They also experience each other's pain if they share enough. It creates a neuro-bridge."

"How is that possible?" Marc's tone rose into near panic as his mind tried to adjust. "How is any of this possible?"

Adrian didn't stop walking. He'd spotted a survivor lurking behind a cluster of boulders. "How is life possible? A big bang? Where did the material in the bang come from? Where did the empty space it filled come from? A God? Where did the God come from? Spores? Random? It all had to be created and that, my hesitant friend, implies some type of power beyond rational understanding for us mere specks in the universe."

Marc was stunned for a second. He'd never considered that angle. "We're not meant to understand?"

"Actually, I've always believed that when we can, it means we're ready to go home."

Marc paused for Adrian to fire into the skull of the bleeding soldier who was crawling away with only one leg. "And until then, we have to obey?"

"That's where the problem lies with our kind. We have gifts, but we're not supposed to use them for anything other than good. Taking a life, for any reason, is forbidden, but we want to survive, so we kill in self-defense and corrupt ourselves a little each time."

Marc thought of all the evil he'd eliminated from the world since becoming a Marine. "I can't regret the deaths. It prevented those bastards from becoming big enough to abuse people on a mass scale."

"I feel the same way, but it doesn't change our rules."

"Will it help us in the end?"

Adrian shrugged. "Some of us hope so. Angela believes it will at least pardon her fighters, but I don't. We're damned. That's the price heroes often pay."

Marc didn't want to discuss it anymore, but he refused to hide from his fears. "What about the kids?"

Adrian was impressed that Marc had jumped over concerns for himself so fast. "There's a limit.

What they've done to stay alive will be judged. They can't escape that. In some cases, forgiveness will come because they didn't know it was wrong or they didn't know what would happen. Nothing they've done as a part of Safe Haven would damn them."

"How do you know so much about us?"

Adrian had forgotten that Marc had been out fighting the government while he made the call that had exposed his shame and history to the world. "I was raised in the government labs."

"I thought you worked for them, hunting our kind."

"I did. But I was born in a lab and spent most of my childhood in one between escapes." Adrian sighed, unable to ignore that old, haunting pain. "Then they took something I loved and everything changed. I wanted to kill, to hunt." Adrian started to say more and stopped. "Are you good for a bit?"

Marc turned toward the path. "I'll check the transportation progress."

Adrian felt the cold hand of fate slide across his neck. He spun around. "Duck!"

Marc hit the snow as a bullet was fired. It went over his shoulder and slammed into the teenage girl about to jump down from the cliff and stab him with a butcher knife.

Angela's gratitude swarmed over Adrian.

Adrian arched, unprepared for the open blast that was magnified by their bond. Groaning, his hands clenched into fists and his knees trembled.

Across the valley, Eagles stared in confusion and amusement. A few of the sentries had witnessed it all, but they hadn't been close enough or fast enough to help.

Marc was only a little jealous as he observed. He grinned at Adrian's expression. "Do you need to check your shorts?"

Adrian shuddered, trying to recover. "I think so, yeah."

Marc stepped over the body. "You know where I'll be."

Adrian didn't respond. He was still trying to breathe.

3

"Get ready for the bugout." Kenn's voice echoed through the levels. "All Islanders will be at the exit at dawn. Bring what you can carry. I repeat. We leave at dawn."

Kenn and Tonya marched through the corridor, making sure everyone knew where to be and when. They were also walking each passage to verify no one was hiding. They didn't know how many refugees had made it in before Dirce's shot closed the tunnel.

Tonya stayed close to Kenn, her gun in hand. She was the unexpected wildcard for any lurkers. Kenn hadn't liked the order, but he hadn't been able to argue that she was safest by his side.

As Kenn and Tonya walked the cave, people understood what they were doing and got out of the way. Most of those were already dressed for the weather and on their way out, carrying small pouches and bags. More civilians huddled in corners and crevices to make plans. Some of them would stick together, but Kenn believed most of them would abandon their group as soon as they departed.

The sound of the cave with the passage open created a roar that was magnified. People flinched at coughs and nose blowing, at loud chatter and shouts. Tonya assumed the avalanche was responsible for the new sounds in the cave. Everything was coated in a thick layer of snow, ice, and rock, except for the open tunnel on the bottom. It had also changed the draft.

“The bugout starts at dawn. Be at the exit, with your possessions. All members of this mountain are welcome with Safe Haven.”

Tonya held in a snort. None of Jimmy’s people would defect. The fight they hadn’t participated in had scared them, as had Angela’s fast reaction to the refugees who had barged their way through with weapons and threats. Jimmy’s group was all on the bottom level now, crammed into the tarp area to defend themselves against the evil descendants. It was pathetic.

Kenn heard voices and signaled her into the shadows.

Tonya got ready to kill for her man.

“The bugout starts at dawn...” Kenn walked down the dim passage, not recognizing the voices. “Be at the...” He slid into the open, pointing his gun. “Come out of there!”

Tonya gasped at the condition of the three kids who came from the shadows, lowering her gun.

Kenn didn’t take a chance. These were outside refugees. “Put your hands up.”

The trio did as instructed, shirts lifting to reveal rib bones and bloated bellies.

“Please.” The smallest girl tried to smile. “We need help.”

Kenn waved the gun toward the ladder. “Go to the top.”

Tonya hoped Angela would let the kids stay.

Kenn gestured for Tonya to go between them, splitting the group up so he could examine their behavior.

By the time they made it to the top floor, kids weak and gasping for air, Kenn had made his choice. He scooped up the smallest girl, ignoring her surprised cry. When she sagged against him in relief, Kenn patted her little back. He bumped Angela’s door open without a warning and sat the child on her feet. “We’re keeping these.”

Angela smiled at the scared kids. “His name is Kenn. You’ll owe him.”

All of them turned to Kenn with adoring gazes that implied his family was also going to be bigger than he’d expected.

Tonya snickered at his expression, not unhappy with it. She could practice on these before her own came.

“Stay and help?”

Tonya was glad of Angela’s offer. “He’d rather that I did anyway.”

Satisfied, Kenn went to the exit.

Tiny feet followed him.

Realizing it was the kids, Kenn pointed at Tonya. “She’ll help you get settled.”

Tonya gathered the kids, spotting what Kenn hadn’t. “You’re descendants. Come sit down. We’ll get you something to eat while you hear the rules and promise to always follow them, okay?”

Kenn stepped out and closed the door, glowering at Ivan. “Guard this cubby with your life or you won’t have one.”

Ivan stared at the Marine, frowning. The menace of these Safe Haven men was impressive. *I can’t wait to be like that!*

4

“There goes another group.” Shawn directed Marc’s attention to the tunnel entrance.

They observed as David and a few of the others came out onto the battlefield in full gear and proceeded west. David was bundled up so thick that as soon as he left the grey stone of the mountain and stepped onto the snow and ice, he almost disappeared. Everything he was wearing blended in

perfectly as he broke away from the others to go northwest.

“I’m sorry to see him leave.” Adrian joined the two men by their vehicles.

Marc assumed Adrian and David had become friends, so he wasn’t surprised by the response. “Was he a good guy?”

Adrian rotated to sweep in another direction, making sure no one else was sneaking up on them. “He’s a killer.”

In the middle of looting a body, Marc snorted. “Who isn’t, these days?”

Adrian thought about elaborating, but realized they would have plenty of time to discuss things like that in the future. From the dreams he’d had, Adrian knew David would survive, as would Billy. Both men had a hard road in front of them, but their destinies were entwined with Safe Haven in so many ways that the bond could never be broken.

“Does Angela want them to go now?”

Marc shrugged at Shawn’s question. “If she didn’t, we would have already gotten a message to stop them.” Marc headed toward the entrance, finished with the check in and complete walk through of the battlefield. It had taken five hours. “Spread the word. We shut down in thirty minutes. No exceptions.”

Shawn frowned. “What about transportation?”

“No exceptions. Find a way to hide them.”

“A few of us are willing to camp in the vehicles overnight.”

Marc considered Shawn's offer. "Fine, but you choose the crew and you're in charge of them."

Thrilled to be useful again, Shawn hurried off.

Marc reached the entrance as another small group was coming out. He recognized Joseph, Missa, and the group of nuns who had been with Sister Sarah. Marc stepped aside, making a rude gesture. "It's open. You can run away and hide now."

The entire group hurried by with ugly glances and no words of gratitude. It was clear that they couldn't wait to forget descendants had ever existed.

Marc tried hard not to resent them, but failed. He couldn't resist a last parting shot. "How many of you would be alive if not for magic?"

The group took off running without a response to Marc's glowing red orbs. He had no interest in arguing and he wasn't trying to change their minds. He just wanted to remind them they owed their lives to Angela.

Marc paused near the garbage can one of the guards had dragged down and set on fire, grateful for the warmth on his frozen fingers. He lingered around the can, making eye contact with the guards while listening to the few people still coming into the cave. It was the fighters now, happy they'd gotten their share of loot and kills.

"It's so sad, man. All of them would have been welcome here."

“I bet the boss isn’t doing well. She hates killing.”

I’m still not sure why I don’t believe that. Marc kept listening.

“A lot of people think she gets hot from killing.”

“Do you?!”

“No, man, take it easy. I’m just saying, a lot of people didn’t like it. They believe she did.”

“They’re wrong and you should tell them that. Life is valuable to us.”

“But she killed so many!”

“She did what she had to, to make sure we survived. Everyone is jealous of magic and repulsed by death, but remember that if she wasn’t a ruthless bitch, we would all be in government bunkers right now.”

Marc let the men go by without adding anything to the conversation. The guard had summed it up.

Marc advanced to the inner cave, signaling toward the guards. “I want this cave shut down in twenty minutes. No one in, no one out—no exceptions.”

5

“Hey, wake up.”

Jeff jumped at the hand on his shoulder, jarred into alertness that he wasn’t ready for yet. He’d never been so sore. “What?!”

Ivan pointed toward Angela’s location. “The boss is ready for you.”

Jeff staggered to his feet, not positive he was ready for the conversation he needed to have. He hadn't expected to fall asleep.

Jeff eased into the cubby, noting all the kids around Angela were sleeping. At least they seemed to be. It was hard to tell. After what they had done during the fight, he could understand the need to rest. He was amazed by it.

"Have a seat anywhere you can find room." Angela was busy changing the diaper of a small baby.

Jeff took a seat against the door. "This can wait."

"No, it really can't. A group of people are leaving shortly. You should go with them."

Jeff winced. "I'm being banished?"

Surprised, Angela paused to inspect him. "No. Should you be?"

"Not that I know of, but life keeps changing on me."

"Because Safe Haven keeps pulling at you, but when you're here, it reminds you of everything you've lost, so you're miserable?"

"That about sums it up."

"It was hard for me to stay too." Angela covered the baby and met Jeff's eye. "I lost a child here. I wanted to leave and never come back."

Jeff hadn't considered that she might feel that way. "Wow."

"I know, right? But they needed me here more than I needed my sanity. You don't have to do that

to yourself. You can walk away, and maybe find happiness somewhere else.”

Jeff shrugged. “I’ve tried, but I haven’t gotten far either time.”

“Fate knew how much we needed you to help. Maybe the third time will be the charm.”

Jeff caught her not-so-subtle hints that he should leave and frowned again. “What is it that I should do out in the wilderness?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe find a group of people and make sure they make it to the boat on time?”

Instead of being angry, Jeff stared. “Are you intentionally giving me trips in and out of Safe Haven?”

Angela looked up with an innocent expression. “Who, me?”

Jeff chuckled. “I might be willing to do that.”

“If you decide not to, don’t worry about them. I believe Seth and Doug can handle it. I just think it would be easier on the kids if they all had someone around who isn’t distracted.”

“But I am distracted. It’s one of the reasons I need to leave Kevin here this time. I don’t want to get him killed.”

“Even though you’ve felt like killing him?”

Jeff snickered at Angela’s joke. “You know it.”

“What I know is you’re not ready to settle down. I also know there’s nothing wrong with that. If we don’t have scouts out in the wastelands, how will we know if another threat is coming? Not

everybody has to go with Safe Haven to be in our light.”

Jeff was seduced by that. He didn't want to betray his loyalty to the future, but the constant reminders of Crista's death were too much for him to handle yet. “I loved her.”

Angela sent a wave of comfort, not sure that he would accept it from her. “I am sorry.”

Jeff allowed her gift to soothe him, willing to take a relief from the pain. “What if I want to stay?” He braced to hear anything.

Angela shrugged. “You always have a home with us. We'll help you adjust.”

Jeff wanted to be relieved, but he was too aware of the response from the kids in the room. Many of them were now glaring in disapproval. “What?!”

Leeann glanced to Angela for permission before she spoke.

Angela nodded. He needed to hear it and it shouldn't come from the boss he mistrusted.

“You don't belong here.”

Jeff scowled at the girl. “How do you know?”

“I know a lot about you. I know stuff about everybody who comes in here to talk to the alpha. You don't even have a shield up.”

Jeff realized the kids were reading his mind. “I don't know how to do that yet. Get out of my brain!” He didn't feel anything, but he knew the little girl had withdrawn. “Don't do that again.”

“This is my job.” Leeann's expression darkened. “You don't really like it here. Why?”

“I don’t like magic and this alpha stuff is bullshit.”

“That isn’t it.”

Jeff sighed. “No, I want my old world back.”

“And that’s why you don’t belong here. When you’ve made peace with your past, then the future can open.”

Jeff thought the little girl sounded like a religious therapist, but didn’t say so. “Whatever.”

Angela grinned at the common response from Eagles who didn’t want to face something they knew they needed to handle.

“I might want you to lock up my gift.”

The kids went still and quiet, worried they were about to witness what some of them now feared more than fire.

“Not for any reason will I do that to you. Neither will Marc, though Adrian might be cruel enough.” Angela forced a smile. “How about a beer and another nap?”

Jeff got up and departed the cubby.

When the door slammed, several of the children who had been sleeping lifted heads to peer around in groggy concern.

“It’s alright. Enjoy your rest.”

Satisfied they weren’t in danger, all of the kids went to sleep except for Leeann and Cody. Those two sat in the corner, cheeks together, whispering.

Would you like to share?

Both kids looked over, drawn by Angela’s mental attention.

Cody shook his head. “Not me. You tell her.”

Leeann shrugged. “We’re trying to figure out who farted. It stinks in here.”

It was me! Jeff was snickering as he sent the message. *I gassed all of you for being rude.*

Angela’s laughter filled the top levels.

6

“I hate this part.”

Marc nodded at Kenn’s comment. Saying goodbye sucked.

Natoli came forward with his arm extended. “It has been one hell of an adventure, my friend.”

Marc chuckled. “That it has.” He clasped arms with the Indian he had come to view as a brother. “I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

It was clear that Natoli wanted to respond to the comment, but instead, he inclined his chin in acceptance of the possibility.

Marc motioned Natoli toward a table, glad the mess wasn’t full. “Do you have a minute?”

Natoli followed him gratefully. There were many things that he needed to say, but all of them required privacy.

Marc knew something was up. “What’s the problem?”

“The future holds many challenges for you. I have had a dream of a time that all the ghosts will live with my people.”

Marc sat down on a rickety, charred chair, and gestured at the seat across from him. "Tell me."

While Marc and Natoli conversed out of hearing range, Jeff waited with Natoli's warriors. He had something he needed to ask Marc. It wasn't bad, but it was necessary. Trying to be patient while fighting the feeling of being trapped, Jeff scanned the mess. It felt a little like the Safe Haven he had known before they came here, but only a little. It was obvious the quake had devastated this camp in multiple ways. The hardest one to accept was how it had changed the people. Jeff had never thought to feel such desperation from Safe Haven, let alone to see it split into factions that all wanted each other dead.

Natoli and Marc left the table to join his warriors. Marc shook with each of the men. "You're always welcome with us."

The warriors returned the gesture, but didn't speak. They were all eager to get back to the families they'd been away from while protecting Marc.

"You will tell your woman what I said?"

Marc nodded at Natoli's question. "You have my word on it."

Natoli signaled to his warriors and walked toward the tunnel.

Marc was sad. He would never forget his time among the Indians. Natoli and his warriors were part of the reason it had been so special. Marc had never felt closer to any group of people in his life,

and that included the Marines he'd risked his life with on a daily basis around the world. Marc shrugged it off. "Next?"

Jeff gestured toward the small table this time. "Got a minute?"

Marc chuckled. "If you have news about Dog, I have a couple of minutes."

Jeff sat down. "I talked to Dog before we left Sally. He said his duty wasn't done yet and refused to add anything to it except that he's monitoring the herds."

Marc didn't ask for more even though he wanted to. "He has the right to be free."

Jeff shrugged. "I'm not sure he's doing it willingly, but duty is often like that."

"Ain't that the truth."

"I need to ask a question. It will help me make up my mind about going to the island or staying here."

Marc waved a hand, telling Jeff to go ahead.

Jeff took in a breath. "Do I die on that boat?"

Surprised, Marc frowned. "I'm not usually the one people ask things like that."

Jeff didn't keep his voice down. "You're the only one I trust to tell me the truth. The other so-called leaders here will use it to their advantage or only tell me what they want me to hear."

Marc didn't deny the claim. "There are prices to deals like this."

"I agree to the price. I trust you."

Marc concentrated and immediately began to pick up visions of Jeff's future. It was a tense moment before he began to speak.

"You're not safe anywhere. As long as you are able to breathe new life into the world, you will be hunted relentlessly." Marc shuddered, unable to fight the emotions of his body as the visions played out in front of him. "The island is the place you may have peace, but even that will come at a high price."

"Haven't I paid enough?!"

Marc didn't react to Jeff's shout, though it drew attention from everyone else in the mess. "When you're able to face your demons, then you have a chance of happiness. Be it here or on the island, you won't find peace without that."

"I don't know how to do it."

Marc came back to himself, shaking his head to clear the daze. It didn't help. "You have to study the choices you've made and try to figure out why you made them. You're a very angry person. When you understand why you're mad, maybe you can solve the problem and then fitting in would be easier." Marc stood up before Jeff could respond. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go. Angela is calling."

Jeff let him go, able to see Marc was dead on his feet. The information, he stored until he was ready to face it. It was a copy of what Leeann had told him, but Jeff felt it this time. Until he faced his losses, their ghosts would never leave him.

Chapter Thirty-One BK8

Goodbye

1

“It is time for us to go, my friend.”

Charlie and Tracy both glanced up in surprise.

“Go?” Charlie caught on quicker than Tracy did and stood up. They were in the small training room that was almost cleared now, stealing time alone.

“Our people worry. Winter is coming to us.”

“I didn’t know you had winter.” Charlie tried to come up with a way to stall the group, but he understood from their expressions that it wouldn’t be successful. The Indians wanted to go home.

Natoli held out an arm. “Your family is always welcome with us.”

Charlie shook, sad and proud at the same time. The only way the Indians would leave was if the threat was over. That meant he no longer needed the escort. “Will we see you again?”

“Several of my warriors would like to visit Safe Haven Island.”

“My dad would love that!”

Natoli gestured at the group of braves standing stoically behind him. “Three of these, and others from our camp, will find you at the boat. They will

expect to be treated like any other who joins your camp.”

“Oh, they will be. Anyone coming into our ranks will be vetted and trained.”

“That is good.”

“This wasn’t all of the UN troops. The rest are in Market Town with Dirce’s boss.”

“That is the town of slaves?”

“We believe so.”

“If you are wrong, the town will be spared?”

“Yes, but we aren’t. Kendle’s group swears the UN is using an airstrip near there.”

“We will take this information to our people.” Natoli shook with the boy again. “You are doing well on your quest to become a man. Do not give up on that.”

Charlie smiled, assuming the Indian was referring to him and Tracy. “Full effort, every time.”

Natoli grinned. “In the rest of life, as well.”

Charlie put an arm around Tracy’s shoulders as the Indians left the training room.

“They’d take us along.”

Charlie was surprised Tracy had mentioned it. “Do you want to?”

“You do.”

“Yeah, but they need us here more. For now.”

“I know you’re thinking about not going to the island. That will kill your mom and maybe even ruin everyone’s plans to stay in Safe Haven.”

“Adrian said she’d give it up if I asked her to.”

Tracy wasn't sure about that, but she nodded. "You're her son. You come first."

Charlie sighed. He wanted to go off exploring, but he also wanted Tracy to be safe and even Natoli couldn't do that. Only the descendants could. "We'll stay with our camp."

Tracy snuggled against him, relieved. She trusted Charlie and Natoli, but she loved Safe Haven. This is where she wanted to be. "Do they need help packing?"

"Yes. We've had a break and warmed up. We should help." Charlie stood up and extended a hand. "Let's do it."

Tracy chuckled. "We did."

Charlie tugged her into his arms, almost as tall as she was now. He'd done a lot of growing over the last months. Not all of it had been pleasant, but he'd come through it smarter. "I love you."

Tracy melted under his tone and lips. When he let her go, she was gasping for air with a heart that was pounding in her chest. "Nice."

Charlie led her from the room before he got carried away. The sound of her pleasure was the sweetest dessert he'd ever had. Nothing on this earth would ever make him give her up. He would die first.

2

"Water is at full function now. The top avalanche re-covered the tube with melting snow."

Kenn skimmed Ivan's report. "That was convenient."

"Yeah, it'll last until it melts down to the tube again. Jimmy's group will need to go out a few times a month and use the big cats up there to pile the snow back over it." Ivan shrugged. "We'd planned on doing that once as a demonstration for them, but the boss says none of our citizens are to go up there now."

"That's fair, isn't it? The Mountaineers haven't done much to help. They didn't even reload guns or body-collect during the battle. Let them secure their own water."

"I agree. So does Angela, which is why you need to pass these new orders around."

Kenn recognized Adrian's handwriting. "Is he with her?"

Ivan kept his tone even. "No one was happy about that except her. Even he protested."

"Who sent him up there?"

"The Ghost."

Kenn chuckled. "Marc's playing with him. Don't worry over it. What's next?"

As point man for the bugout, Kenn was getting updates on everything that Angela was, plus all the smaller stuff that was below her paygrade. Ivan liked being the go-between. "They have two weeks of meat. Four, if they ration. We've found and delivered a month of non-perishables to them as well." Ivan skimmed his notes and cleared his throat. "She said...*I don't want to hear anyone's*

shit over that choice. We're not animals. We'll share what we have."

Kenn grunted. "Good job on the tone. Sounded just like her when she thinks something is a clear case of right and wrong."

"I practiced it on the way down." Ivan went back to the notes. "The repair crew almost has the door installed. They're waiting to test the lock and seal it until the last group is gone. Theo implied it might trigger a new fight if they came down to discover it locked. People might not believe it's part of the repair effort."

"Smart and correct." Kenn signaled toward the small group on the opposite side of the mess from them. "But those Eagles will handle it. The boss wants us secured for the night. Tell Theo to finish it. We'll cover any problems."

Ivan rotated to give a hand coded message to the soldier lingering in the doorway for instructions.

James hurried off as Ivan continued to update Kenn.

"The power in here is one third functional, but with more sunlight, that'll go up to fifty percent. The rest of the levels won't have power unless the Mountaineers know how to do it. Angela implied it doesn't matter, so we shouldn't worry over it."

"That means it will only bother her." Kenn liked being able to translate. "I knew it would be an issue. You can tell her I left detailed instructions for Jimmy. He can do it himself. I also gave him a box of tools and wire pieces for repairs."

Ivan wrote it down, happy to be able to give Angela good news on something. “That leaves heat for them. She asked for ideas.”

“None. Without the vents in place and the furnace running, I can’t do anything. We’ll leave them all the extra clothes and space heaters if she wants.”

“She knew you didn’t have anything. She said we’d be out in the open in winter weather, so we get the heaters and clothes. Jimmy’s group will burn everything else to stay warm. It might hold them for a month.” Ivan studied Kenn. “Why won’t they go find another furnace?”

Kenn grunted. “We brought three. Two were buried and haven’t been found. One was destroyed in the quake. If Jimmy’s smart, he’ll keep digging for the boxes that are here.”

“But he won’t, will he?”

“No. He’s going to have his hands full with his wounded and the would-be leaders as soon as we drive away. You know how we used to go into shitty towns, fix them up, and they’d be stripped the same night we were pulled out?”

Ivan grunted, angered at the memories. “Yes. Made me want to go back in with a shitmaker. That big gun would have cleared the problem.”

“Me too, but those were desperate refugees trying to survive in the only ways they knew how.” Kenn gestured at the cave around them. “Not much difference here.”

“I get your point.” Ivan skimmed a last time. “That’s all of it except for your specific bugout plans. She wants a copy now.”

Kenn handed Ivan two sheets of paper that had been folded into a small square. “Boss only.”

Ivan understood that meant he wasn’t allowed to read it either and let out a sigh. “See? That’s the hard part for me. I’ll fight and work, but I hate to be out of the loop.”

Kenn felt an instant bond with the soldier despite them being natural rivals as Army and Marine. “It will take longer because of all this. Be patient and be loyal.”

“Been that all my life, so no sweat. Hey, I have a question that’s been bugging me for months. Got a minute for something not related to anything that matters now?”

“Go ahead.”

“Well, I’ve noticed that our camp doesn’t have some types of people.”

Kenn frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“No allergies, no asthmatics, no drug addicts, no diabetes. I can’t figure out why.”

“They didn’t survive. Medications ran out, withdrawal-weakened bodies starved, the crippled and handicapped were abandoned. Society was cleansed.” Kenn scratched his arm where something had bit him during the battle. “Fucking stupid war.”

“The price was too high, you know?” Ivan clammed up, face clouding over.

“Yes.” Kenn remembered Ivan mentioning losing an elderly parent and assumed his mother or father had been abandoned at a nursing facility. They’d come across many scenes like that since December.

Ivan rotated toward the passage. “Catch ya later.”

Kenn recognized the next team leader of a group of Eagles who would fly through the ranks. Military men and women fit right into Safe Haven. It was usually the average Joes they had to convince to fight or work.

“That’s great!”

“We’d love to have you!”

Kenn’s attention was drawn to the small group making plans to leave while having a last warm meal with friends. Doug and Allan were shaking Jeff’s hand, welcoming him to their group. Roy and Romeo also appeared relieved. Kenn made a note to tell Angela that. It would help her later when weeks had gone by without word from Doug’s clan. Kenn was also glad that Jeff was going with them. Doug would be busy protecting his new sons, and Allan couldn’t handle all the security on his own. Having Jeff along would help.

Kenn expected Kevin to go with them too. He had hit on Cynthia as soon he got in the cave, so the other Eagles were ignoring him. Kenn assumed their reactions would have been different if the reporter had been willing to resume that relationship. He believed that because Conner was

being treated to a hero's welcome that included Candy sitting at the same double table. All of Kendle's team was there, regaling the eating citizens with stories of their Market Town adventures. Candy had joined them, taking the seat farthest from the boy, but she'd been laughing with them and making eye contact with the teenager the entire time. Word was already flying that Candy might have forgiven Conner; his banishment might be up.

Kenn hoped so. The boy had done well. It would please Adrian, and it would make life easier for the camp, but most of all, it would ease Angela's guilt over banishing him in the first place. Kenn knew she hadn't wanted to do it. Kenn glanced at the man sitting by himself in the far corner. Like Ray didn't want to leave Dale. They were all doing things they didn't want to do.

As he had the thought, Ray stood up and marched toward the ladder with determined steps.

Kenn braced to hear Dale's screams in a few minutes. Ray had tried to talk to Dale a couple of times in the last twenty-four hours, but it always ended the same way. Kenn hoped this would be the last time Ray tried to reach his former mate. They had all heard enough screaming for one day.

Ray shoved by the doctor to reach the den where Dale was still hiding. “I have two things to say to you before I go. You’re gonna listen and then you can scream all you want.”

Dale pushed himself up against the wall, shaking from the effort.

Ray hated how thin Dale was, how scared he was. His trembling form needed a hug that Ray was no longer allowed to deliver. He could see that Dale hadn’t packed and knew he really was staying here. Ray wouldn’t have supported it even if the mountain hadn’t been in danger of being breached. The doctor couldn’t help Dale the way he needed.

“They’ve always meant more to you than I have.” Dale sneered, scanning Ray’s outfit. “You’re already packed to go. I’m not stupid.”

“I told you I was going.” Ray couldn’t help explaining again. “Safe Haven is the only chance any of us have.” He tossed a pouch at Dale’s grimy feet, making him jump. “I’ve cared for you when no one else did. I’ve worked hard to earn a place so that our kind would be safe. You wanted me to pick between you and doing what was right for our future. You were wrong to do that to me.” Ray rotated toward the ladder. “Goodbye, Dale.”

“What was the other thing?” Dale couldn’t erase his anger or his confusion, but he swallowed it long enough to speak. “You said two.”

Ray didn’t stop walking. “If you call for me, I’ll always come, no matter how far apart we are. I love you. I always have and I always will.”

Ray was out of earshot before Dale could blink.

Dale knew Ray didn't want to hear the screams again, but that was his only defense against the pain Ray kept shoving into his heart.

"It's not his fault."

Dale scrambled up against the wall now, opening his mouth to scream for help.

The vet spit in disgust, also going up the ladder. "What a waste. See if I save your ass again."

"You killed Dennis!"

"And I'd do it again." The vet kept climbing so he would be gone before the guards came to check on Dale. "If you knew what I knew, you would have killed him too."

"I don't believe you! Get out of here, freak!"

Jimmy's group gathered near Dale to offer him comfort now that he'd declared himself one of them.

The vet spotted Ray crying in the shadows on the crushed level, but kept going up the ladder. He wanted to offer a hug, but that would have to wait until Ray's pain had eased over this awful ending of his past life. After that, the vet would still have to keep his distance for a while so Ray didn't resent him more than he was already going to. Then, Chris planned to offer Ray a shoulder to cry on and anything else his little heart desired. He'd wanted Ray for a long time. Now, Dale wasn't in the way. The vet's obsessive fantasies about Angela would never happen, but his desire for Ray was a real

possibility. One of two wasn't bad as far as the vet was concerned. This life was good for him.

4

Alone while the kids were being fed and taken to the bathroom, Adrian and Angela leaned against the stone walls, staring at each other. It'd been an exhausting day and both of them were afraid to let their emotions escape, but concern over Marc's anger was the top priority. The temporary truce between the two men was helping Angela recover faster than she had expected, but she'd used up all her energy during the fight. It would be days before she was okay again unless she took more lifeforces. The ones she had taken only kept her from becoming a withered husk. She'd refused to take enough to create a reserve.

Adrian didn't speak, not wanting to interrupt her contemplations or spread bad vibes. He didn't know why Marc had sent him in here, but he wasn't in any big hurry to find out.

"You know what will happen after we leave here."

Adrian winced, mind flying through a repeat of his banishment. "Thank you."

"And this is the last time we'll be alone together."

"We shouldn't be at all."

"I know."

They could have spent the time doing a hundred different things, but Adrian was content when Angela began to drift off. He watched her and let his mind wander. This was her way of showing him that she trusted him enough to rest in his presence, something she didn't do with many people even though the Eagles had been vetted. Kenn had only received this honor recently and Adrian had been surprised then. He was shocked now. Everyone knew they were in here together. Fighting the urge to open the door so people would know it was innocent, Adrian continued to watch over her and enjoy the reward.

Angela didn't tell him this was so she could rest uninterrupted for an hour. The guards would put everyone else on hold, thinking she wanted privacy, and she did, but not for a bonding moment with Adrian. She needed a break. Marc was helping her get one.

5

“What are you doing?”

Cynthia tossed another stack of notebooks into the can fire by the closed tunnel door. “Getting ready to go, same as everyone else.” She didn't look at Daryl. “What are you doing?”

“Taking care of loose ends.”

She tensed. “Does that mean me?”

Daryl backed up a few steps. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to apologize.”

Cynthia relaxed, understanding she'd taken it the wrong way. "It's all good. You didn't want to be a part of my drama. I get that."

"I didn't want to be another distraction to my team and to the leaders who are trying to keep us all alive. I won't do that."

Cynthia respected him for it. She also thought better of him because he'd come to apologize even though he didn't have much to be sorry for. "This is my mess, but thank you for caring enough to talk to me about it."

Cynthia regarded Daryl when he lingered, not blinking as smoke curled around her nose. Harsh, it brought tears to her eyes that she refused to shed or even blink away. She was using the gift of her child to try to penetrate Daryl's mind. She wasn't searching for a friend, only needing to be positive that he wasn't lying to her or trying to set her up for something.

Daryl noted the reporter looked better without the weight she had lost over the last two weeks, but that was the extent of the good. The chipped, broken fingernails that were layered with dirt, and the greasy, flaky hair that hadn't been brushed since the quake, were giveaways that she wasn't recovering the way everyone had hoped.

"We're good. You can go now."

Daryl wanted to accept the dismissal. He had work and friends waiting for him, but he also had a small hole in his heart where Cynthia had been for a short time. "Please forgive me for hurting you."

Tears came to her eyes.

“I’m not asking because I want to be with you. I’m asking because I miss our friendship.”

“I don’t.” Cynthia wiped her face. “I miss the sex.”

Daryl burst out laughing.

Cynthia smiled. “I forgive you.”

Daryl held out a hand. “Maybe in the future, we can be friends again.”

Cynthia blushed, shaking. “Maybe.” She’d always liked Daryl. She still did.

“Good.” He left her with a better mood, glad it had gone so well. He’d half expected the screaming that Ray was getting from Dale whenever he tried to speak with him.

Cynthia returned to burning books. She’d already destroyed the copies of her newspaper and petition. *I’m going good. The only way to stop me is to kill me and Angela won’t let you. Fate, be damned. You can’t reach me now.*

6

“When did he come inside?”

Adrian shrugged, emerging from the passage outside Angela’s room. “Didn’t see him. Maybe Theo knows.”

Marc studied the vet. He’d been aware of the man as soon as he came up the ladder, even though it wasn’t in sight of where he and Adrian were standing. The vet was bundled up in the same

clothes he had been wearing before the earthquake, complete with tacky gloves and bloodstained boots. As he slipped through the cave, he left awful tracks.

Adrian and Marc both tried to scan the vet's mind, aware of him mumbling and muttering, but neither of them could get through. It had been a long day and their energy was gone, something they were glad that Jimmy and his group didn't know.

Marc made a note about the vet. "He has to go soon."

"Yeah, but how?" Adrian thumbed toward the door. "He's under her protection."

"She'll order it."

"You think?"

Marc sighed. "No, like with you, she'll say he helped the greater good and deserves another chance."

Adrian flushed, but didn't argue. He was too cold and too tired for it, but more than that, he'd enjoyed the peaceful moments with Marc today. He didn't want it to end.

"That's because I've blasted you with alpha slime at every opportunity. It'll wear off."

Adrian tried to joke. "Alpha slime. That just sounds wrong."

"I know, but it's perfect for you."

Adrian spun around and left.

Marc stared, sensing the man's churning emotions, but he didn't enjoy it. In fact, he disliked it. "Guess the slime works both ways."

Marc proceeded to the room to check on Angela and get the next set of orders. He'd already stopped at the mess to give Kenn updates.

Marc found a line of people waiting to meet with Angela. He could hear the happy voices of children in with her and hoped there were also a few guards. Marc slid between people to reach the cubby, but he didn't go in so he didn't interrupt the current conversation. He didn't know what it was about, but that didn't matter. The boss got respect first, and nagged later.

The door opened.

Marc did a quick sweep. All of the team leaders were crammed into the cubby. He grinned as he realized their laps were being used by children who played with their jackets, their hair, and absorbed the good vibes from all the safety.

"Come on in."

Marc pushed the door shut and sank down right there. A few seconds later, Cody crawled into his lap.

Marc hugged the boy, waiting for the conversation to get around to something he could add to or was needed for. Before he knew it, he was leaning against the barrier with his eyes closed and heart settling into a rhythm of peace.

Kyle gestured. "Told you it wasn't just me."

Angela smiled. All of them being together again was producing great vibes, but everyone had worked hard today and hadn't slept well since the

earthquake. It was natural that when they got into an environment where they felt safe, they would crash.

“Let him rest. I’ll get his updates later.” She glanced at Kyle. “You’ll be in charge of security during the bugout. You report to Kenn.” She held up her hand at Neil’s frown. “You’re in charge of transporting the wounded to the vehicles, including Samantha and Jennifer.” Angela paused for the protests.

Neil and Kyle both had them, but didn’t speak. It made sense that their females would be with the wounded, since they were both injured. That didn’t mean they had to like it.

“I want the tunnel open an hour before dawn so we can load the vehicles with our supplies, gear, and belongings. From that point on, I want guards on the vehicles. It’ll be chaotic. People will be packing, running in for stuff they’ve forgotten, and of course, there will be lots of drama from goodbyes. I don’t expect any fighting, but we will interfere where necessary. I’ve instructed Jimmy to keep his people inside until we go. If you find them outside, keep them away from the vehicles and our group. I’m not sensing problems there either, but again, we won’t take chances.” Angela picked up a small stack of papers on the ground next to her knee and passed them out. “I haven’t found my notebooks. Sorry about the crudeness. I drew them from memory.”

The team leaders were happy to have maps. They were even happier to scan them and see stashes of supplies.

When they would have questioned, Angela denied it. “Later.”

All of them understood there might be a mad dash to the supplies if the locations were revealed.

“It’s going to be cold. We don’t want to put people into the vehicles until we’re ready to leave. However, we need to have them in the bottom and ready to go before then. I don’t want to be running gas for heat in cars while waiting half an hour for them to finish gathering stuff and saying goodbye. Get with Kenn and make sure that’s organized. We don’t have fuel to waste.”

Shawn held up a paper. “We managed to find fifteen trucks and cars, along with ten UN vehicles. I don’t know how many people we have now, so I don’t know if that’s enough. If it isn’t, we’ll go back out there in a few hours and do some more salvaging in the dark.”

Angela did a quick estimate. “It’ll be cramped, but we can make it work. The UN vehicles will hold six people each. It should be enough to carry us until we can pick up new wheels, like we used to do.” Angela held up her copy of the map—the worst one to read thanks to her being so tired when she’d finished it. She pointed at one of the locations. “We won’t stop until we get here. Make sure each vehicle has food, water, and weapons. If there’s a problem and people are cut off, I want them to be able to reach us. I also want these maps put into the glove compartments of the vehicles driven by camp members who are not Eagles. The rest of us will

memorize the locations. We also need to draft a crew to roll out before the rest of us, as scouts. They will clear the path and set up perimeter security on the first site. We'll maintain radio silence during that time, as well as keeping the no magic rule in place. We have to do this the old-fashioned way."

No one argued. It had been that way since the war. They were getting used to it.

7

"The boss wants us to talk."

Nancy peered up from her cup of oatmeal. "I'm surprised she sent you."

"So am I." Adrian sat down in the chair across from her, not sure why he'd been sent. Having a conversation with Nancy after leaving the cubby had been on his schedule, but that was it.

Nancy waited for him to speak. Around them, the mess was deserted other than Brittani and Gus's brothers. They were preparing for the next meal.

Adrian studied Nancy, assuming Angela wanted him to figure out her problem. As far as he knew, there wasn't one.

Growing bored, Nancy's mind began to roam. That was happening to her a lot lately and she didn't know what to do about it. She wasn't having bad dreams and she didn't believe mountain sickness existed. Guilt was her problem.

"What do you have to be guilty about?"

Nancy flinched. "Shane."

In that moment, Adrian thought he understood why Angela had sent him. Nancy was having trouble adjusting to Shane's death and Angela knew Nancy and Adrian had shared moments together. She had sent someone that the woman might consider a friend. "Would you like to discuss it?"

Nancy shrugged. "If Angela sent you, I don't have a choice."

Adrian wanted to rub Nancy's hand as a wave of her guilt rushed over him, but he was afraid it would be crossing a line. He wasn't sure how close Nancy had been to Shane. "Did you love him?"

"I don't even miss him."

Now Adrian understood the guilt. "How long was your relationship?"

Nancy scowled. "We only flirted a couple times, but shouldn't I at least care that I lost a friend and a fellow Eagle?"

"How do you know you don't?"

Nancy regarded him pointedly.

Adrian caught the desire and put the pieces together. "You want a physical relationship again?"

She flushed. "I want a few dozen orgasms and then a baby."

Adrian stored that information. "If you and Shane weren't bonded, there's nothing to be guilty about. Even if you were, Shane was a good guy. He wouldn't want you to be alone."

She studied Adrian. "I feel bad because he hated you and I don't. I feel guilty because he's dead and

I'm just glad it wasn't you. I feel awful because I only want you."

Adrian hadn't realized Nancy felt that way about him. He wasn't sure what to say.

"I'm not in love with you or anything, but I like you." She lowered her voice "We used to spend time together. Special time, if you know what I mean."

Adrian chuckled. "Yeah, baby, I do."

"I miss being able to spend an hour with you, or any guy for that matter, but it feels like I should be in mourning for Shane."

"We should be living." Adrian met her eye, oozing charm. "After we leave this mountain, you and I could resume spending time together if you're not afraid those moments with a traitor will hurt you."

Nancy snorted. "You're no more a traitor than I am."

Adrian would have kissed her right then if not for their audience.

Nancy knew. She ducked her chin to break the intense contact. "Not here."

Adrian understood she meant the mountain. He stood up, not wanting to hurt her by spending more time with her. "I'm gonna hold you to that."

Nancy refused to look up. "The first night we're out of here, schedule me an hour or two."

"You got it, sweetheart."

Adrian was smiling as he left the mess. He had no doubts about where Angela would spend the first

night out of this hellhole and he hadn't been looking forward to being alone. Now, he wouldn't be. It never occurred to Adrian that Angela had sent him to Nancy instead of anyone else for that reason.

It was the first conclusion Nancy came to after Adrian left.

Chapter Thirty-Two BK8
Someone's Cow

1

“Open the door.”

Theo limped aside at Marc's order so his crew could do it. The constant use of his crippled leg since the earthquake had done two things for Theo. He'd never been in this much discomfort in his life; he was in better shape now and wanted more of it. He'd also regained some of the use of his leg. He could almost put his foot down flat now. The result was a man determined to keep using it until it healed or he died from the pain.

Cold air flew into the passage as the door was shoved open, bringing shivers and the sound of zippers being drawn up as far as they would go. It was a grim reminder of what the leaving people were about to face.

“Five minutes.” Marc climbed to the exit. Bundled in more gear than he felt he needed, he took up a post.

Next to him, Adrian and Kenn did the same. Angela had sent all of them to guard the entrance into their den. She'd also insisted on their thickest armor and a five-minute window. Her demands had shaken the men a bit. It kept them searching for

problems outside the cave instead of listening to the drama happening inside it.

“Kendle said they went southwest. Seth is from Arizona. Maybe they’re hunting for his daughter. Eventually, we’ll meet up.” Doug lifted a bushy brow at Jeff. “Right?”

Glad to be leaving again so soon, Jeff pulled on his pack. “Sounds good to me. If we hear anything, we might be able to narrow it down.”

Allan tugged another set of gloves over the two pairs he was already wearing. “We’ll check in once a week.”

Doug made sure the boys were bundled up. Roy and Romeo were bouncing around in excitement, eager to be out of the mountain. Doug understood. He’d almost died here. It was more than time to go.

Doug placed Roy in Allan’s arms, who tickled the boy.

Romeo took Allan’s other hand, as he’d been instructed to do.

Jeff took the lead. They had to secure the vehicle, start and load it, then get out of the valley—all without drawing unwanted attention. Jeff had his rifle in hand. He and Kevin had spotted enough refugees while climbing to know there were random pockets of trouble all over these cliffs.

Doug shook Marc’s hand, nodding to Kenn and Adrian. “May God go with you.”

Marc slapped Doug on his shoulder, hard, but the big man didn’t budge. “Hurry back. We need you for Eagle training.”

Laughing, Doug marched off into the night. Doug and his group were wearing thick coats and layers of guilt. It was clear they felt bad for leaving.

Their guards didn't give them a hard time. They'd been told not to hassle any of the Runaways and that included people from their camp. Still, it was hard to let Doug and Allan go when the two men were so dependable for everything the Eagles needed. A little bit of hope for the future went with them.

The small group of guards followed to provide security. It was tense and cold, with boot steps crunching as the loudest noise. Above them, a moonless sky forced the use of remaining flashlights. Jeff had told Marc they could get by without an escort, but he was glad Angela had insisted. It was dark and too quiet out here. Jeff could feel eyes on them. "Let's make this quick."

"Hand over the keys and food!"

Jeff glowered at the ragged band of refugees who came from between the dark, cold vehicles. "Leave and I won't kill you."

The man in the front lifted his gun.

Jeff raised his rifle and began pulling the trigger. He assumed Eagles were joining him, but he didn't need the help against this group. His gift was holding them in place, unable to duck his rage.

When Jeff stopped firing, the men behind him hurried forward to make sure the attack was over even though they knew it was. The Eagles needed this practice for their own bugout. None of them

flashed glares at Jeff or called him a freak as they went by. These were Angela's men; they had accepted magic in their midst.

Some of us are also descendants.

Jeff regarded Brandon in surprise. Over all the times they'd fought together, Jeff hadn't suspected.

Brandon grinned. *Then I've done a good job at blending in like Adrian told me to do when I joined Safe Haven.*

Are you safe to be coming out now?

Adrian cleared me today. He still hasn't told me why I had to hide, but it feels good not to have to do it anymore.

Same here, though I didn't know until recently. Good luck.

Same to you. Jeff looted the first body and didn't bother with the rest. It looked as if the small family had been starving. They had no loot.

Jeff slid into the cold truck they'd been given and stuck the key in the ignition. As it fired up and he adjusted the heat and seat, Jeff thought about staying. It was a brief second that implied he would miss the companionship of real men and the comforts of a home. It passed in a flash of Crista falling from the metal cart.

Jeff slammed the door and switched on the radio.

Doug got the boys settled and hurried in with them.

Allan filled the passenger seat, waving, and then they were gone.

The Eagle team lingered for a moment as the taillights faded and then switched off.

Morgan watched them go. “Will we see them again?”

Daryl shrugged. “What would the boss say?”

The entire crew mimicked her as they returned to the trio of guards at the entrance.

“That has not been revealed.”

Laughter rolled across the valley, but it wasn’t enough to lift the curse. The mountains glowed in dangerous anger as the tunnel was resealed. Darkness was everywhere except one corner of a jagged cliff right above the door. A small campfire burned in simmering resentment, keeping a single form alive inside a stolen tent. The man, with one gun and four bullets, was waiting for dawn.

2

“You told her we’re low, right?” Adrian had to ask.

Kenn was asleep on his feet again. “She said the camp needs the water now, to pass out a snack and be generous on the H₂O.”

“She’s the boss.” Adrian wrote it down, aware of the chatter in the mess around them. It almost sounded like the old Safe Haven. Everyone’s mood was better now that they weren’t trapped.

“The door is shut and locked, and has three guards. We’ll also have a roaming patrol checking

it hourly, along with the top corridor exit, even though we know it's blocked."

Adrian made more notes and signaled for Kenn to keep going. "As soon as we're done here, you can sleep."

"Awesome. Uh, no trouble with Jimmy's people, but all overnight sentries have orders to eliminate threats. It came straight from Marc."

"That should keep them in line."

"I think so too. We've had radios on for hours, but there hasn't been another broadcast from Market Town. Angela believes they're keeping off the waves so their bosses don't discover their loss. She said to use your best judgment there, but she plans to hit hard and then travel south within a few days. She wants you to adjust for anything she hasn't counted on."

"I'll go over it with Marc in the morning." Adrian took the sheet of paper that presumably held Angela's next battle plan. "You scan it?"

"Not this time. Too tired."

"Fair enough. What's next?"

"All of the Runaways are dead or gone. We searched the bottom floor a couple of hours ago, against Jimmy's wishes. The entire cave is secure as far as we know."

"We still have a lot of restless souls in here."

Kenn scanned the mess that held no less than fifty people. "They'd be this way even if Kevin and Tommy weren't trying to outdo each other with tall tales."

Adrian grunted. “What I’ve heard so far hasn’t been stretched much. Someone will have to teach them how to lie.”

Kenn chuckled, agreeing. It sounded as if both groups hadn’t had an easy time of it on their own.

Gus came over to the table with two mugs that steamed. “Ready for fresh?”

“Oh, yeah!” Adrian traded his cold cup for the hot one. “Thanks.”

Gus took his tray to the next table while Kenn sniffed his cup with a grin. “Only a few things in the world smell as good as a cup of coffee.”

Adrian snickered. He could name the top four and coffee wasn’t on that list. “We done?”

Kenn skimmed his notes, focusing through red eyes. “She said to wake Marc in four hours and he’ll handle it from there.”

“I’ll make sure he’s up.” Adrian glanced toward the tunnel. “He’s with her now?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Sleeping with your mate is great for healing. She needs it.”

“Others did more.”

“Not alone. Her gift magnified all of ours. No one is that powerful without an alpha backing them up.”

“Damn.” Kenn ran a hand through his matted hair. “I’ve got a lot to learn about this stuff.”

“But not now, Marine. Hit the rack.”

Kenn went without another word. He was too tired to do more than climb the ladder, nod to the

guard on the TV room, find Tonya, and then slide in beside her. He was asleep before his cheek came to a stop on her arm.

3

“Jeremy too? Aw, hell. That sucks.”

Kevin’s loud voice carried to where Neil and Samantha were having drinks in the corner. She’d refused to even try to sleep again until they were out of the mountain. Neil hadn’t argued. He couldn’t have either.

“But no more fighting over her, right?” Kevin laughed, missing Samantha’s tensing shoulders and Neil’s ugly glower toward the table.

“Keep it down, man.” Greg glanced at Samantha. “Have some respect.”

Kevin flushed. Here or out there, he was always being scolded or made to feel bad. *One day I won’t need any of you.*

“Sorry about Tyler and Josh.”

Kendle’s team accepted Greg’s sympathy.

While Jeff had been avoiding Kevin, Kendle was surrounded by her team. They had shoved two broken tables together, putting her at the connector spot along the wall. To her right were Conner, Whitney, Carl, and Ramer. On her left sat Tommy, Ben, Ryan, and Scott. Dexter was across from her and next to Kevin, but it was clear they didn’t consider Kevin one of theirs as they joked around and over him.

The changes in Kendle and her team were obvious. Compared to the thin, twitchy, subdued camp members, Kendle's crew was a light in the darkness. Full of laughter and jokes, the mood around them was better than anywhere else in the cave. Eagles and camp members gravitated toward the tables where the team was busy regaling them all with tales of their adventures in Market Town.

"So, Kendle tricks the townspeople into staking her bet even though we were carjacked. We didn't have a single item to trade except for our lives and she still managed to make a good deal and get a VIP bed with one of the rulers." Ramer's voice carried across the mess. "We were shocked when she killed him."

Everyone broke into laughter and questions at that revelation.

Kendle flushed, shrugging. "He wasn't that good."

Amusement rolled across the mess.

"We couldn't believe we got out of there, but then, we went back in!" Carl saw people frowning as if they didn't believe him and held up a hand. "If you had seen how they were treating travelers, and then you'd been betrayed by them the way we were, you guys would have gone back in too."

Tommy pointed at Kyle, grinning. "Where do you think we learned it from?"

Fresh laughter echoed through the passages.

As they joked, Kendle's team was observing everything that was going on around them. They

noted the people who were missing, and the people who were split into different groups, but the most obvious thing about everyone in the mountain was the desperation. People were thin and shaky, with twitchy glances that rotated, searching for the next threat. It reminded everyone on Kendle's team so much of how life had been right after the war that all of them concentrated on spreading good vibes, hoping it would help.

Hating it that he wasn't the center of attention even though he considered himself a hero from the fight, Kevin only saw standoffish people who hadn't missed him at all.

"So, we were locked in this cage..." Tommy tried to get the tension to shift back into amusement at their adventures. "Naked."

That got everyone's attention, even the guards on the room.

Bored with their stories, Kevin fell into planning how to top whatever Tommy said next. He'd missed the competitions.

Kendle frowned at Kevin. "This isn't a competition. This is how we survived. Unlike you, we didn't have Jeff to take care of us."

Kevin glowered as he stood up, cheeks scarlet. "Excuse me!"

Kendle sighed as Kevin stormed from the mess.

"Don't worry about it." Daryl had been listening from the table with Greg. "All the descendants have been dealing with that since you left. The people

without gifts hate us for having them, even when we save their lives.”

“Safe Haven people aren’t like that.” Conner smiled as men glanced at him. “No one had bad thoughts about us today or this evening when I went up to meet with Angela.”

“You spoke with Angela?” Greg leaned forward. “I guess things went well.”

“She said she’s lifting my banishment. It’s great.”

Kendle and her team congratulated the boy, happy for him.

Conner accepted it gracefully, but the proud smile from his father meant more as Adrian entered the mess. *I’m good. I’ll stay that way.*

Adrian nodded. *And I’ll do everything I can to help you, son. So stay away from me for a while, okay? It may not rub off.*

We’ll see. Conner went back to listening to the stories of their adventure, glad Kevin was gone. The man had a bad vibe.

Ramer looked around. “Hey! Did Kevin ever say where Dog is? I miss that wolf.”

Kendle had already picked out that detail. “Dog stayed with Sally. He has a duty too.”

The men chuckled. Everyone liked Dog. Sally, they hadn’t met; no one asked about her.

“I wonder if they’ll run into Billy.”

Tommy glanced at Morgan in confusion. “What happened to Billy?”

“He took off on us, man, as soon as we opened the top cave to collect water. Pulled a gun on Marc and everything.”

Tommy and the team were shocked. When they’d left, Billy was Marc’s understudy, set to become his heir.

“What the hell happened?”

Greg shrugged. “Some people think he had mountain sickness or cracked from so many deaths in the earthquake. He was knocked out for a while. I think his injury wasn’t healed yet.”

Tommy frowned. “Will Billy be forgiven if he returns?”

“Probably, but he’ll have to redo Eagle training if he really wants to be one of us again. We no longer give free rides.”

4

By midnight, the number of people in the mess hadn’t changed much. Kendle’s team couldn’t sleep in the cave. The small amount of time they’d spent in the cavity across from Safe Haven had been too much. Eager to be on the road, the adrenaline kept them conversing for hours. Glad to have distraction, the other people who couldn’t sleep, and the guards who were off duty, enjoyed listening to the stories and speculating on what Angela would do about Market Town.

Neil and Samantha were also still in the mess, playing cards with the charred deck that Li had always kept here. Neither of them was speaking.

Adrian and Morgan had point duty overnight, with Conner and Zack as support. The small group made continuous rounds of all levels of the cave, including the bottom floor. All the camp people were settled down now. Those who were staying up had gathered in the mess to keep from disturbing the others. The rest of Safe Haven was on the top floor. Most of the children were in the weapons cubby with Marc, Angela, Mandy, and her baby, and a few other adults. Angela had requested Mandy to help her with the babies since Mandy had milk. Mandy had been glad to be able to help.

The last one to fall asleep, Marc swept the crowded room. It felt as if everyone was resting without nightmares for a change. The number of kids in here was almost unbelievable, but Angela had said anyone that wanted to be with her could. Nearly all of the children had chosen to do so. Marc was in the corner, leaning against the wall with Cody asleep on his chest. He was also surrounded by children; their little bodies were baking off enough heat to make him sweat. After being outside all day, it was wonderful.

Marc finally allowed sleep to take him, content things were as peaceful as they ever got since the war had blown away his life.

Outside the weapons cubby, guards were on duty. Ivan had slept most of the evening, as had

James, Booth, and Greg. Fresh on duty and determined to make sure that Angela got to sleep, the guards kept their voices down as they observed the changes in the camp.

Ivan glanced at Greg. "It feels different."

"They're tired. They don't put off as much energy when they're tired."

Ivan lifted a brow. "It'll wear off right? Or they'll sleep it off?"

Greg shrugged. "I've never seen them use this much power at one time. It may take a few days or a week for them to recover without energy."

"How do they usually replenish it?"

"It happens naturally, like healing from a cold. When they really need it, people offer theirs."

Ivan grimaced. "They get energy from us?"

"Yes, but they can't ask for it. We have to offer."

The guards who had been in Safe Haven for a while studied Ivan and the other soldiers to see their reaction to the news.

"That's why they take such good care of the herd. We're their food." Booth's voice was disgusted.

"I don't think it works like that." Ivan batted at a fly. "Even if it does, that's obviously not all they need from us or we'd be reclaimed like she did with the UN troops."

The Eagles were relieved that Ivan had understood, but they observed his companions to make sure that wasn't going to be a problem. At this

point, many people refused to accept magic. It was hard to know that you were someone's cow.

"We should offer to help."

The other soldiers turned to James, who shrugged. "It doesn't bother me. The government wanted me because I can kill. This is worlds better than that."

Now that it had been laid out in terms the soldiers could understand, all of them nodded in agreement.

The Eagles marked the men off their list of people who had to be shielded from magic. It was a relief to know they would have more hands on duty. After everything that had happened, and all their losses, the Eagles were taking too many hits. Entire teams had been destroyed over the last two months. It would be a long time before they recovered; they needed everyone they could get.

"We'll pass it around the rest of the camp, come morning. During the ride, descendants will be encouraged to draw from us."

The soldiers understood Greg had just needed to make sure they were okay with it. The mood improved as the small group of men continued to discuss the plan to help their protectors.

On the bottom level, it wasn't as calm. Jimmy's people had begun to crawl out of their holes now that most of Safe Haven was asleep. The voices coming from the mess informed them there were people awake, however. Jimmy took a post at the ladder to prevent any of his camp from going up. He

understood how close they were to being free of the freaks, but he also understood how on the edge those same freaks were. If his people went up there and started trouble, they wouldn't come back.

On the level above Jimmy, Adrian stopped at the ladder. If Jimmy got pulled away, Adrian would take his place. Angela needed to sleep. Adrian was determined she would get to.

Shifting noises behind Adrian made him spin around to locate it. Spotting Candy digging through the rubble like she had for the last few nights, Adrian joined her. "How are you?"

Candy shrugged and then did a stretch. "Better now."

Instead of asking how her feelings for Conner had grown so fast, he pointed toward a rubble pile that hadn't been touched yet. "Kenn told me what you were searching for. I'm almost certain I saw notebooks while we were digging for survivors. Everyone piled the debris over here before we had a chance to sort it."

Candy switched piles, still hoping to locate Tonya's notebook. She waited for Adrian to go, but he didn't.

Adrian wasn't sure why he was lingering. He could hear Jimmy at the bottom of the ladder, now arguing with people. He might need to support the doctor, but he stayed with Candy, waiting for whatever he was supposed to do to become clear. This felt important.

"Did Conner put a spell on me?"

Adrian winced. “I don’t know.”

Candy didn’t like the answer. She glared at him.

Adrian shrugged. “Honest. I don’t know.”

“How can I find out?”

Adrian frowned. “Angela will dig into him if you ask her to. I’ll do the same. If he’s hiding something, we’ll know it.”

Candy’s face paled even more. “No, don’t do that.”

Adrian’s scowl grew. “You don’t want to get in trouble. What did you do?”

“I haven’t done anything!”

“Yet?”

Candy flinched at the accurate guess. “I’m thinking about doing something.”

Adrian sensed Conner knew what it was. If Angela grilled him, then the boss would know whatever it was Candy was trying to hide. “I’ll tell her about this conversation. You know that.”

Candy nodded. “I just need to know if he put a spell on me.”

Adrian sighed in resignation. “Why don’t you ask him? He’ll tell you the truth.”

“If he’s around me, he’ll get in trouble, even if it’s my idea.”

“How can you have Stockholm?”

“Because he’s in my brain all the time!” Candy stared in shock. She hadn’t meant to tell anyone that.

Adrian studied her, spotting what she didn’t want Angela to know. Once he finished, Adrian

pulled out of her mind. The things he had found weren't as bad as she believed they were. "Conner and I will be at a table in the mess once the shift is over. Sit down with us and ask your question if you want to. I'll be scanning him the entire time. We'll find out together."

"You'll protect him if he has?"

Adrian turned toward the ladder. "He's my son. What else would I do?"

Satisfied, Candy went back to digging in the rubble without telling anyone what was going on. She wouldn't show up. She didn't want Conner's voice in her mind to go away. She liked it.

Chapter Thirty-Three BK8

Stupid People

1

Kyle walked the top floor with tired legs and a relieved mind. The Runaways were gone. The first wave of UN fighters had been defeated. Jimmy's group was cowered on the bottom levels. Most of the camp was asleep, and that included Jennifer and Autumn. They might have a peaceful night.

Kyle froze as a cold chill came down the tunnel. An instant later, a familiar scream split the air and caused his heart to thump in his chest. *Jennifer!*

Kyle took off running, wincing at the shouts. It was clear to him that Jennifer was having a nightmare, but the noise was going to wake everyone, including the boss.

“He has to get them out of here! They have to leave!”

Jennifer was sitting up in the middle of the room, unaware of other sleepers cringing back or trying to shush her. “We have to tell them! They’re all going to die!”

Kyle rushed in and grabbed Jennifer's shoulders. He gave her a light shake and then a hug. “Jenny!”

Jennifer gasped and cried, words indecipherable.

Kyle paused for the panic to pass, hoping Angela would understand it was a nightmare.

Not a nightmare! Autumn pushed into Kyle's mind. *It's so bad, Daddy!*

Kyle put a hand on the baby's legs, trying to comfort both of his females at the same time.

Jennifer continued to sob until Kyle had had enough. He helped her to her feet, motioning Nancy to watch the baby. "Come on. We'll talk to them right now."

Jennifer quieted, eager to try to change that future. She followed Kyle into the cold hall, shivering.

Kyle helped her down the ladder, nodding at Adrian and the other guards who had come running. "Nightmare. We're gonna have a discussion."

The men understood that Jennifer had foreseen something bad about Jimmy's group and let them pass. If it'd been anyone other than Angela's heir, they wouldn't have.

Disappointed, Kyle took her to the bottom level. He had been hoping the guards would say no. He already knew what Jennifer was about to tell them and he knew how the doctor was going to react, but he led her to Jimmy anyway so she could try to convince the stubborn man to leave with them.

Jimmy listened to the story with no change in sullen expression. He had just gotten his people to sleep when the screams started. He couldn't wait for Safe Haven to be gone so he could establish a normal camp.

When Jennifer finished speaking, staring at him with tears in her big, brown eyes, he finally spoke. "You said what you wanted to say, now get back to your level."

Jennifer would have kept trying, but Kyle tugged on her good arm. "We've overstayed our welcome. Let's go."

Jennifer's heart broke. "I can't believe you're going to sacrifice all of these souls because you're scared."

Jimmy's hand went to his pocket. "You have five seconds to get out of here."

Kyle spun around. He didn't need Jennifer's gift to know what was about to happen. "Draw the gun. I dare you."

Kenn and Tonya had both told all of the guards Jimmy was armed.

Jimmy paled. "You have to go!"

Kyle nudged Jennifer toward the ladder. "We're leaving."

Jennifer went up slowly, fighting tears and anger. "Why won't they listen?! They know I'm not lying!"

Kyle waited for her to reach the next floor and then spent a minute to comfort her. He knew his arms weren't much in comparison to all the lives

that were going to be lost, but it was all he had to offer. “Human nature doesn’t always do what’s best. I know that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“You wouldn’t believe the things that are going to happen here when we leave.”

“Yes, I would. That’s why we’re leaving.” Kyle herded her toward the next ladder. “Let’s make sure Autumn is okay.”

Distracted, Jennifer went. “I’m sorry for the screams.”

Kyle shrugged. “It’s been a common sound in this place, Honey. You just added yours to the mix.”

Jimmy’s people returned to what they’d been doing. Roughly three dozen of them were moving about, all wearing extra layers of clothes and carrying a weapon of some sort. None of them had guns, as Angela hadn’t given them any, but that didn’t mean there weren’t bats, poles, knives, and other dangerous objects lying around that could be used for defense or offense. They carried these weapons in their hands as they came out of their shacks and tents, verifying the Safe Haven people were back on the top levels.

Weapons were stored in belts and pockets, but the twitching didn’t stop as a few dozen began to scavenge while some stood around the ladders and tunnel entrances. All of them made use of the bathroom, making noises and smells that echoed through the cave.

The guard on point observed the people as they came out of their holes, hoping none of them

climbed up the ladders further than the crushed level. That was the only place where the camps were still having contact, though most of it had been peaceful because everyone had been busy grabbing anything they could use. Quinn stared down the ladder. He had strict orders not to disturb Jimmy's people, but that didn't mean he wasn't supposed to listen to them. As he heard their angry conversations and watched them scurry back-and-forth, Quinn suddenly felt sorry for them. Unable to accept their own lack of magic, they had chosen to hate it instead. It was sad.

Quinn did a fast walk of the crushed level, trying not to gag at the smells. Animal bodies, and parts of them, were still buried under the rubble. The slaughter site was also putting off smells that were unpleasant; Quinn didn't pause in any of the areas after a quick sweep with this flashlight. He climbed to the next level, breathing in deeply of the draft. He hoped it would settle his stomach.

Quinn paused as two shadows approached each other near the passage to the mess. The guard waited, listening.

Adrian and Conner exchanged a hearty hug that allowed the guards to relax a little. No one had known what type of reception the father and son would have for the other.

"You look good." Adrian hugged Conner again. "Welcome back!"

Conner hugged his father, filled with pride and a wave of loyalty he enjoyed. Only his dad could cause that sensation. "It's good to be here."

Adrian caught flashes of Conner's adventure and wished there was time to explore some of them.

"Angela said you need to talk to me."

Adrian felt the temperature drop as he regarded his son. This wasn't how he wanted to welcome Conner back, but it couldn't wait.

Conner knew what was coming. Now that he was here in the cave, he was catching every thought that went through Candy's mind. "I didn't. I might have before I left, but I didn't need to and now, I wouldn't."

"I'll let her know."

Conner shrugged. "She already knows, but you do whatever your idol wants you to."

Adrian scowled. "I'm not doing it for her or for the camp. You know that, right?"

Conner scowled. "How is it for me? All it does is show that you didn't trust me."

"You just admitted you might have done it before you left. I don't have reason to trust you. Neither does she."

Conner's good mood fell. "I understand."

Adrian was proud of the boy for accepting his scold without a rebellious tirade in return. He changed the subject. "How are Becky and Seth?"

Distracted, Conner frowned. "Different. It was as if they were worried about something and didn't

want to tell anyone. We were surprised when they took off.”

Adrian listened as Conner explained how they had woken to discover the couple gone. As Conner repeated the note, Adrian sighed. “Doug’s group will help them. We’ll have to hope that’s enough.”

Conner knew his dad still felt guilty for what had happened to Becky, but he didn’t know what to say that might make the man feel better. He changed the subject. “Have *you* made any progress?”

Adrian knew what he was referring to. “Yes, actually. I’ll tell you about it later, when I’ve had time to think it all out myself.”

Conner had picked stuff up from the guards as Marc and Adrian walked the battlefield. “I hear you guys have a truce.”

“And it was his idea. I’m very confused.”

“You seem happier.”

Adrian’s expression lightened. “Do I? That’s good. I am.”

Conner assumed Adrian had been able to spend time with Angela. It gave the boy hope for his future endeavors with Candy.

Topic coming full circle, Adrian faced it. “You can’t make one single move. She has to do it all.”

Conner already knew. “That’s what I’ve been working on all this time.”

Adrian snickered. “Like father, like son.”

Good morning.

Angela smiled, stretching as she woke. *And the same to you.* Angela didn't want to be disrespectful to the man sleeping a few feet away from her, but this might be the last time she had this opportunity and she chose to take it. When she'd told Marc a month ago that she no longer had rules and limits to follow when it came to who she spent time with, she had meant in every way—even mentally.

Adrian was surprised at the acceptance. He had expected to wake her up, give her an update, and get out before making her or Marc mad. Caught by surprise, he paused, enjoying her welcome.

Marc tried hard to stay under the blanket of sleep, not needing the emotional roller coaster of witnessing their moments together, but it was impossible. He wanted to observe them so he could try to figure out what Adrian gave her that he couldn't. Then he would learn how to provide it.

Adrian risked Marc's wrath by lingering, unable to pull away. Fresh from sleep, Angela wasn't angry or ruthless. She was just a woman—one that he loved and wanted.

Angela allowed Adrian to make contact mentally. She swallowed a groan as his energy swarmed over her, lighting dark places. She enjoyed the sensation, not letting the guilt interfere. It was rare that Marc tolerated any moment between her and Adrian, but today of all days, she needed the support.

We can do this.

*We have done this. We just have to do it again.
I know. I'm sorry.*

*So am I, but it's necessary. They never would
have left without all of this. If there had been
another way, we both would have taken it.*

*I don't believe anyone else could have done as
good a job.*

*I don't either now, but I hated you for it a month
ago.*

I'm sorry about that too.

Angela didn't respond. The pain from losing her
baby would never fade. She knew that because it
wasn't the first time it had happened.

Adrian sent a wave of love, hoping it would ease
the pain seeping into her mood.

Please don't do that.

I can't help it. I don't like it when you're in pain.

Some things, I deserve.

Agreed, but not today. Adrian sent another blast
of light. *Today, you need to concentrate on getting
our people out of here.*

*I will. This will be the last time that we're
trapped anywhere.*

Adrian didn't doubt her. *I should go now. He's
been very patient.*

Sensing the request that wouldn't be spoken,
Angela dropped her shield for a brief second and let
Adrian fully connect with her.

Adrian mentally nuzzled her cheek, hugging her
close and tight. His next wave of light didn't just hit
her.

“Do you have to do that while I’m right here?!”

Adrian withdrew at Marc’s growl.

Angela stretched out a hand so she could touch Marc’s wrist. The room lit up with her emotions, smothering them in unconditional love.

Unable to stay mad, Marc patted her hand. “Good morning to you too, baby.”

Angela laid there for a few more minutes, enjoying the warmth of the bodies around her and the peacefulness of the cave. Doing a light scan, she didn’t find many people awake yet. The guards were alert, which was wonderful, but the camp needed sleep.

Marc stewed on the moment he’d just shared with them against his will and better judgment. Because he’d done so, he had learned something. Angela was scared. He wouldn’t have known that if not for Adrian’s repeated whispers of comfort and strength. He’d been shoring her up for the bugout, which meant it would be ugly.

Marc didn’t know what could be worse than fighting the UN, but he didn’t doubt that it would be. He clasped Angie’s hand and began sending in his own strength and light. “Whatever it is, we’ll handle it together.”

“Yes, just you and I.”

Marc caught the ominous undertone, but couldn’t ask about it because of their listening company. The kids had been awake before Angela, but they’d refused to budge for fear of disturbing her. Marc had told them she wouldn’t be mad, but

Leeann had informed him it was so Angela would sleep. Stewing, he added that in. The kids were also trying to prepare her.

Marc's scowl took up his entire face as he growled for his demon. *Who dies this time?!*

4

"We're two guards short on escorts to the vehicles." Marc handed Angela a cup of oatmeal an hour later, refusing to dwell on what he'd learned. "Do we need security over Candy and Cynthia today?"

Angela's stomach rolled as she regarded the grey goop. "The bad vibes from both of them stopped as soon as the cave opened. They'll recover."

"That's great to hear." Marc met her eye. "But you won't be alone with either of them, right?"

"No, I won't." She smiled. "And neither will you."

Hoping they wouldn't have to eliminate either female, Marc continued his rounds. He was in charge of clearing each floor, but he wasn't doing that yet. People were coming and going in an effort to locate missing items or say goodbye to their loved ones at the makeshift memorial that had sprung up over the last two days in the body tunnel. Until Angela made the radio call, his first job was to be sure there were no problems.

"Make a hole!"

Marc jumped aside as Kenn came barreling through the corridor. Chasing Tonya's cat, the Marine was leaving laughter in his wake.

The agile cat leapt down to the bottom level, landing on a debris pile.

Items rolled off the sides, crashing into the floor as the tabby darted into the body tunnel.

Kenn slid down the ladder. "Got gloves this time!" He ran into the tunnel, ignoring the complaints and the snickering. Tonya wanted to take the cat. He would get it for her.

Kenn stuttered to a halt as the people shifted away from the rear of the pit cave in fear. The vet was standing in the shadows with his hands full.

Kenn pasted on a bored expression and took the cat, keeping a firm grip on its neck skin.

"Take this too." Chris shoved a large coffee can with holes in the lid into Kenn's other arm.

Kenn heard the angry humming of bees and frowned. "Why?"

The vet glared. "Why not? They didn't ask to be brought down here. Why should they die with the rest of the doctor's sheep?"

"Fair enough." Kenn dropped the can into the hands of the nearest guard as the cat began to fight to get free. "Put this with the rest of the gear to be loaded."

Kenn went back to the top floor, trying not to lose the active tabby. As he forced it into the box that Tonya had ready, it occurred to Kenn that the cat didn't act sick anymore. He stored it for later,

when he had a moment to make his woman smile with the news. Right now, they were too busy. Everyone was eating, but they still had to be dressed and led to the exit, then guided into the vehicles. All of it would start as soon as Angela made the call. Kenn assumed that would happen any time. Once things were rolling up here, he had duty at the exit with the boss. He and Angela would make sure everyone who wanted to come was accounted for. It was an important position and he was honored, but deep down, he would rather have been with Tonya and the kids.

5

“They’re taking too much!”

Jimmy’s shout hurt Marc’s ears. “Move, so I can check the levels.”

Jimmy stomped toward his clutch of ducks, muttering.

Marc shined his light, noting the tank was almost full. He motioned to the line of camp people waiting to fill canteens. “Hurry up. Angela is about to—”

“Safe Haven, it’s time to go.” Radios crackled and whined throughout the cave. “Everyone coming with us needs to be at the exit in five minutes. I repeat, Safe Haven is leaving in five.”

“—to call,” Marc finished. He stepped aside so people could get through, but he didn’t leave yet. With him here, there was less chance of fighting.

“Get them out of there!”

“We need all that water!”

Marc rested his hands on the guns he no longer needed. “Quiet down!”

Jimmy’s group did, but the glares and snide remarks implied it was the last time being ordered was going to be successful. The next time they shouted, it would be followed with action.

Marc stayed ready to handle it, hoping he didn’t have to.

I’d like you up here.

Marc signaled to the half dozen people left in line. “Time to go.” He strode toward the body passage and popped in. “I’m going now. Three minutes left, folks. Don’t be late. We won’t wait.”

Marc nodded to Neil, who was standing next to Samantha as she sat by the memorial. He also gestured at Charlie, who had brought Tracy down to pay her respects. “Let’s go.”

Marc paused for the young couple, noting how close they stayed and how familiar they seemed with each other now. He stored a new suspicion and followed them up the ladder. Charlie and Tracy had point over the kids during the short walk to the trucks. The couple would be making multiple trips in the open. Marc was glad they were both geared up and dressed right for the situation. The bulky clothes they were wearing hid their vests and provided extra warmth.

As they reached the top level, the mood of the cave dropped.

“She’s already outside. Damn.” Marc motioned toward the kids. “Let’s load and go.”

The line of Eagles each picked up a child and followed Marc through the rear exit and down to the snowy ground. Marc would accompany them on the first trip and give Cody to his assigned adult. Then, he would get Angela’s ride and be ready to guide them all out of here. The vehicles for leadership had been placed right above the tunnel so they could be monitored during the loading process, and because the leaders would be the last to go.

Marc crunched through the snow with his demon searching for trouble, but all he caught was the joy of people leaving the mountain. Everyone was ecstatic to see him emerge. It meant it was time.

Marc handed Cody to Brittani, nodding to Gus and his brothers as they stood with the soldiers and a few others.

Cold, all of them were glad when Marc and his group immediately went back toward the corridor for the next load instead of staying to help the kids buckle in first. The need to be gone was strong and growing.

6

Kenn and Angela stood at the entrance, bundled up to watch their surroundings as supplies and people were taken to the vehicles.

“What other precautions did you put into place?” She knew he hadn’t put some things in the

notes for her, covering his own concerns instead—which she respected. It had bothered him to be such a failure in the bugout where Rick had kidnapped two of their women.

Kenn gestured toward the long row of guards standing in the stiff wind around their wheels. “All of them have been assigned to a vehicle. That way, each group is accounted for and the drivers only have four to six people on their list to keep track of.”

Angela nodded her approval, restless for this part to be done. “Keep going.”

Kenn didn’t ask how she knew there was more. “There’s a list in each glove compartment. The guards have been told not to swap seating arrangements without my express permission. I gave out a notebook with everyone’s name in it that they’re to check off or initial as they’re loaded into the vehicles. Everyone will be accounted for this time.”

“Good.” Angela studied the people around them. It was cold with the barrier open and noisy as everyone came and went. Those who had worked overnight would be able to sleep and ride, but until then, everyone was working. Supplies, gear, and belongings were already loaded; the wounded were being brought out at the same time as the kids. Some of the injured, like Jennifer, had been able to come down the ladders on their own, while others couldn’t. That process was taking place with Kyle and his crew supervising it to handle any problems

from the doctor's people. "How long until we're ready to go?"

Kenn looked at his watch and tried to estimate. "We're thirty percent loaded at this point, but the guards are spreading the word that all of Safe Haven's Eagles will be out here soon and there won't be any protection in the cave. That should speed things up."

Angela wanted to make sure all of their people made it out, but she needed to trust Kenn to do his job. Her assigned place was here in the passage and this was where she was staying unless there was trouble.

Kenn gestured toward the trio coming down the tunnel. "That's kinda nice."

Angela turned to see three soldiers, followed by Ivan. All of the men were carrying a wounded child.

Kenn and Angela stepped aside to let the men through. As soon as they strode into the stiff winds, the Eagles assigned to those vehicles came forward to provide protection.

Angela was impressed.

Kenn enjoyed the silent praise, no longer hating himself or her.

The moment was ruined by shouting in the cave and then a single gunshot.

Angela started to go back in, stopping only when Kenn's heavy hand grabbed her arm.

"We stay here." He immediately let go, but it was too late.

Flashed to the past, Angela braced to be hit and then remembered that she wasn't that person anymore and Kenn almost wasn't that man. She shoved the witch back into her cell and crossed her arms over her chest, but she didn't enter the cave. She settled for scanning the minds of those who were still inside to find out what had happened.

Kenn went back to monitoring their surroundings. To ensure security for leadership, he had chosen to put those three trucks away from the others. They had been better camouflaged, and still had the steel panels from their travels before coming to the mountain. They were among the few trucks that hadn't been stripped and had their parts taken into the cave. Covered in feet of snow, it had taken the guards hours to clear them and put the batteries back in. Fuel additives had gotten them running, but it had also drawn attention from random refugees. The guards were taking care of those problems as quietly as they could, not wanting to bring more people into the valley.

Those three trucks held all the supplies for the camp and enough fuel to get them to two of the stash places Angela had marked on the maps. The first stop didn't have fuel, so as soon as the guards verified the vehicles would start, they had shut them off to conserve gas. It was almost calm now, but the Eagles had their guns in hand and extra mags in their pockets. Most of the threats weren't in range though, something Kenn had counted on when he made the plans.

Another shout echoed through the tunnel, drawing Kenn to the drama inside. *What's going on in there?!*

Kenn was shocked by the fast response from Samantha.

Stupid people. Neil's got it.

Kenn's grin covered his entire face as he relayed the message to Angela. Being one of them was even better than he'd imagined it would be.

7

“We want you gone!” Jimmy was kneeling at Derrek's side, tying a ripped shirt around his wound. “Get out of here!”

Most of the people who'd been in the body corridor were already running toward the ladder.

Neil and Samantha had been in the passage for the last ten minutes while nearly everyone from their camp came down. Most of them hadn't stayed long, but Samantha was struggling with her guilt and Neil was trying not to rush her even though the call to leave had come.

Around them, the cave had been loud with people shouting for their group members to hurry and people calling to each other on the radios. Samantha had spotted the man trying to ambush Neil and shot him. Now, they were alone in the tunnel with Jimmy and Derrek.

Jimmy was forced to ignore Neil as blood continued to gush from the wound in Derrek's arm.

Neil scanned the floor for any of their people, noting the stack of bodies had been looted, as well as the waste area. Even the toilet had been taken. Behind him was the makeshift memorial that consisted of stuffed animals, toys, books, and other items people associated with showing their respect to the dead.

Samantha didn't rise from the plastic flowers that Neil had scavenged until he slid an arm under her bad leg, insisting. "It's not safe down here now."

Sam froze as he lifted her. "Wait for it..."

Neil sighed, stopping to let her vision come. He didn't know if it would interrupt her to be on the move. He kept a gun in hand, other arm straining from holding her.

"We have to go." Samantha's lids flew open to reveal terror. "Right now!"

Jimmy glowered as they went by. "You didn't have to shoot him!"

Neil scowled at the man, holstering. "He was going to stab me. Get your priorities straight!"

Neil shifted Samantha onto his back and quickly climbed the ladder. "I can't wait to be out of here."

Samantha stared down at Jimmy as Neil took her out of sight. "There's a new wave of refugees coming. You have to go!"

"No, you get out!" Jimmy motioned her to keep going.

Samantha put her cheek on Neil's shoulder, but she refused to cry as Jennifer had. These people didn't deserve her sympathy.

Neil keyed his mike as he hit the next level.
“Load the council. Now!”

Everything

1

Kenn accepted the order, not doubting that Neil had gotten the command from Samantha. Something else was coming.

“Let’s go.” Kenn stayed as close to Angela as he could, but she insisted on helping to take the final group of kids to the vehicles, keeping her out in the open. The best he could do was stay so close that any sniper bullet would hit him first.

Angela felt the urgency as she handed Missy to Shawn. She was about to panic. “We won’t get them all out of the valley in time. We took too long...” She stopped, rotating toward the cave. “Maybe we should...”

Jimmy’s triumphant face vanished behind the closing door. The latches began clicking.

“That son of a bitch!” Angela ran for their vehicles, praying all of their people were out.

“Samantha and Neil are right behind us.” Kenn grabbed her upper arm to hurry her along. “They were the last ones.”

Angela hit her mike. “Count off!”

“All accounted for.”

“We have everyone.”

“We’re two short!”

Arms full of two of the three orphans he and Tonya had found in the tunnel, Kenn directed her toward the truck signaling they were short two people as the rest of the count off continued. “The kids go here. You come with me.”

Kenn slid the kids into Nancy’s waiting arms and ran with Angela toward the lead vehicles on the small ledge above the path. Marc and Adrian had just finished gassing and loading them. Behind the trucks was a smaller access tunnel that had been closed when they first arrived. While the passage below was being dug, this access route had also been cleared in case Dirce was able to bury the bottom exit.

Kenn hefted Angela onto the icy platform and signaled Adrian over. “You have point over the boss until we pull out.”

Kenn joined Marc in front of the three trucks. He was one of the drivers. “Let’s roll!”

“Wait for me!”

Angela and everyone else spun around to find Cynthia hurrying toward them with her arms full of books and bags. “Please wait!”

Coming from the small exit, Cynthia didn’t notice the shadowy figure sneaking up on her.

“Get down!”

Bang!

Cynthia regarded the nun in shock, unable to believe the woman had just tried to kill her.

Angela holstered her gun, heart pounding rapidly. It was the first time she'd used the weapon in months.

Cynthia turned toward Angela in shock. *You saved me.*

Angela started to smile at the stunned reporter...a chunk of ice broke off the cliff above them.

Cynthia looked up at the loud cracking noise; not needing the baby to tell her death was coming. She threw her arms up for protection, too panicked to run, but she already knew it wouldn't matter. The sheet of falling ice was five times her size.

It hit Cynthia with enough force to drive her into the weak layer of fresh snow that immediately bloomed red.

“Roll out, Safe Haven. Roll out now!” Neil gave the order as the wave of refugees started to enter the valley.

Riding with the camp, Kevin tried to open the door of the truck.

Greg locked it and then grabbed the seatbelt Kevin had fastened out of fear for the rough ride. “She's gone. We will be too if you don't fight!”

A bullet slammed into the windshield and was held. It splintered the glass however, enraging Kevin. He yanked his gun out and began shooting at the nearest refugees, screaming in his mind.

Greg let go of the seatbelt, needing both hands to force the truck overtop a rusted Beetle that tried to block his path.

Kevin fired with an arm around the windshield, hitting the Beetle's driver through his open window.

Greg pushed the car aside with the truck's bumper, glad Kevin was helping. Greg hadn't believed this many people still existed in the world.

"Get them out of here!"

Kenn's order was already being followed. Safe Haven trucks and cars rammed through the traffic coming in, shooting where they needed to.

"Keep the kids down! Do not stop!"

Angela ran, already positive it was too late. She slid through the drifts and sprawled by Cynthia's body, drawing weak power forward.

You cannot revive the dead. Even you have limits.

"Slam you!" Angela sent the orbs into Cynthia's barely recognizable body. "Help me!"

Ordered, the witch added her strength, but there was no response from the reporter. Even when Jennifer tried with her growing gifts, they couldn't stop Cynthia from dying. Connected, both witches arched violently when it happened, straining against fate.

Adrian placed a hand on Angela's shoulder, feeling her pain and Cynthia's, but also his son's. "Let them go."

Angela did, sobbing, but only because she was empty and had nothing left to give.

Jennifer allowed Kyle to hold her when she stood, not wanting to break down in front of Autumn, but unable to keep from feeling the misery of her companions. "I'm sorry."

Angela nodded, crying against Adrian's big arm. "Me too. It didn't have to be this way."

"We could have saved him, made him good." Jennifer swallowed a painful noise. "We just needed time."

"Fate made the choice." Adrian was also crying a bit. He had assumed Angela would save his son, so he'd stayed out of her plans. It was a comfort to know that she had indeed wanted the child to live, but it didn't ease this newest agony. He untangled his arm from hers, for once not feeling a single spark.

Marc had been observing the scene while he worked on getting everyone into the vehicles. He sent a blast of love toward his mate, hoping to ease her torment. It was also a relief to him that she had intended Cynthia's child to survive. If she hadn't, she wouldn't be so upset.

Angela waited for Marc to get close enough and fell into his arms, unable to stop bawling. Not being able to save Cynthia and her baby was like losing her own all over again.

Marc caught that and quickly led her toward their truck, eager to be away from this cursed mountain.

Kyle followed his lead, pressing Autumn into her mother's arms.

Jennifer tried to put on her calm face as she hugged the child, and failed. "Momma loves you so much!"

Autumn touched Jennifer's hair. *It's okay, Mommy. It's okay.*

Kyle's heart broke; he had to wipe away tears before he could open the truck for his family. *When does the pain end? Haven't we all suffered enough?*

"The island." Jennifer was using willpower to recover. "When we clear the island, we're good for a while."

"How long?" It was the first time Kyle had used her gifts.

Jennifer stared at his demand. "Years, baby. Years."

Kyle relaxed and went around to the driver's seat.

Jennifer locked down on her mind, playing with Autumn's tiny braid. She'd already searched as far into that future as she could, breaking several magic rules to do so. Kyle was on a need-to-know basis on that subject. Everyone was, including their leaders.

That's an awful heavy weight to carry alone. A voice shoved into her mind with brutal force. And a betrayal.

Jennifer searched through the windows as Autumn stiffened in fear. Neither of them had ever felt anyone so strong, so dangerous.

Kyle caught the vibes and stilled, also searching for the threat.

Who are you?

The voice chuckled in her mind. *Merely a Messenger, young one.*

A messenger from who?

From He.

In that moment, Jennifer's youth could have caused her to say the wrong thing, but her grief only allowed one response. "Why didn't you save her?!"

Kyle froze, feeling the presence. It was pure light and he was afraid.

The Creator swore us not to interfere.

And yet here you are. Jennifer's bitterness was free for everyone to feel now.

Shall I go?

Jennifer tried to keep up the brave act. *I didn't ask you to come. I didn't make the forbidden call.*

Kyle's hand on her wrist was urgent. "Don't, Jenny. Don't make it mad."

That hard chuckle came again. *I am no threat to you and your family. Now be quiet!*

Kyle jerked, but didn't speak again.

Jennifer tried to concentrate, caught off guard. Was the angel here for her child or Kyle? Both were precious to her.

Neither, child, the Messenger soothed with no change in tone. *You drew me with your light. I'm curious.*

About what? Jennifer sensed this being had the ability to destroy all of them with a blink of an eye.

Everything. The Creator sent me to observe those who called him. He wants to love you again. I'm curious if that's possible.

Jennifer connected Angela and Adrian to the conversation, aware that they had both gone still and silent.

Neither of them spoke while Jennifer relayed the message.

As she finished, Adrian clamped his lips shut, passing it to his successor. Even with all her choices, Angela was still purer than he was.

Surprising even herself, Angela bowed out of the conversation completely. *I'm not worthy to speak with the Messenger. Good luck.*

Adrian didn't bow out. He wanted to hear everything, but Jennifer didn't want this chore either.

None of you are willing to satisfy my curiosities?

I will. Marc had been listening all along. *If I'm good enough.*

The messenger smiled toward Marc, letting him feel the warmth. *You are still pure. Ease your troubled mind.*

Thank you. Marc took a deep breath. *I think I speak for everyone when I say, slam you!*

Everyone froze, even Angela, who was getting it through Adrian.

I don't understand.

Sure you do. Marc snorted, shifting into drive. *He abandoned us here, yet we're the problem. He*

set up life around a chain of constant violence, but believed the people would be peaceful. He is fucking crazy and we're all pissed at him. When he apologizes and makes it right, we might agree to talk. Until then, let him go on as if we don't exist. Been doing it for so long, he won't even miss us when we wipe ourselves out.

But... You can't... The messenger was shocked for the first time in eons. *You can't mean that!*

Listen to the words. Marc spat. *Get lost! You didn't help us before and we don't want it now!*

The messenger blasted Marc with hot, dry heat that instantly flashed him back to the rest stop.

Did He not care for her at that moment?

You said you guys don't interfere. Wonder if your boss knows you break the rules while he isn't around.

Stung, the Messenger vanished.

All around them, people were stiffly waiting for retribution and glaring in Marc's direction.

Angela's amusement filled the cabin.

"Uh, maybe you shouldn't laugh at him." Marc felt caution was prudent. "I already took it pretty far."

Angela kept on chuckling as she answered. "It's at irony, Marc, not our Messenger. I refused to talk to him because I knew I couldn't keep from screaming."

"And I did it for you." Marc finished it when she broke into hard laughter again.

“Yes. All you missed was *and the wings you flew in on.*”

Marc chuckled uneasily with her, but he didn't see as much humor. He may have doomed them all.

“If anything, you've proven we deserve to be treated with caution and respect. We're not evil. We fight for the good daily, sometimes hourly. Righteous anger is different from violent spewing. He'll be okay with it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Every story we've ever heard of His anger. We get it from him.”

“But aren't we supposed to control it, lock it away?”

“Not against evil. Anger, like every other emotion, has a place. Sometimes, it helps drive demons away. Sometimes, it reminds a Creator that we think, we breathe, and we feel his absence. You sent a clear message. He was wrong to abandon us here.”

“I scolded the Creator?”

“And he may destroy us now, but I believe it will work the other way. The lonely child has shouted for his parent to return and do their duty. Who could refuse?”

“I challenged him!” Marc was horrified.

Angela chuckled again. “Never would have thought you had that in you.” She smiled, hoping to ease his tension. “It's making me hot.”

Marc scoffed, trying not to snicker and failed. He tugged her over, draping an arm around her shoulder. "I'd tell anyone to go to hell for you."

"Not just me, though. You really do speak for all of us now."

Marc sighed, coming down from his rage. "God help us."

Angela leaned her cheek against his chest. "That's what we're all hoping for. This world is exhausting."

"It's not over." Marc pointed to dust trails that came from fast-moving vehicles. "The next wave of refugees."

"Get us out of here." Angela had already seen that Safe Haven was gone. She'd been aware of a few fights for the road, but the Messenger had needed to be handled first.

Marc shifted into gear. As he got them rolling, there was another awful cracking noise.

Marc hit the brakes, but it was too late. The ledge under them crumbled, taking the truck with it.

The other two vehicle's occupants observed in horror as Marc and Angela were buried under the snow and then swarmed by refugees on foot coming in ahead of the other cars and trucks.

Kenn hit the gas as Adrian did the same.

Adrian began to blow the horn on his truck, hoping the refugees below would follow him and leave the wreck. He could feel Marc and Angela already fighting down there, but he couldn't reach

them from this angle. Adrian shifted, glad Kenn was on his bumper.

The passengers in both vehicles stayed quiet and held on as the drivers rammed through incoming cars and people, trying to reach Angela.

Power slammed through the valley, toppling refugees, but it didn't make a dent in the flood of people searching for safety. Hundreds of them poured into the valley, blocking the exit.

Kenn was glad all of their vehicles were gone, but he assumed they were on their own now. There was no way out of this valley even if Marc and Angela were okay and able to climb onto one of these trucks. The only thing that might save them was magic. Kenn began gathering energy.

Next to him, Jennifer did the same.

Kyle held the baby and hoped it was all over soon. He drew his weapon, but there were too many targets around them.

Kenn ran them over where he could, knocking cars aside to stay on Adrian's bumper, but the gap was getting wider.

Autumn began to cry. *Shiny on the hill! Shiny on the hill!*

Kyle found the glint of light and knew it came from the glass in a scope, not the barrel of the gun, though a few high-polish finishes or plain stainless steel materials could be guilty. Kyle went with the most likely reason. *They should have gotten a kill flash or a scope shade.* Kyle threw himself overtop Jennifer and the baby.

The bullet plunged through the window an instant later, hitting Kyle's shoulder. Blood sprayed the rear glass.

"Kyle!"

A second slug dove through the windshield, hitting Kenn in the chest.

Jennifer scrambled for the wheel as Kenn grunted and let go.

2

"I have to go." Ivan slowed the rig, pulling out of the line.

"What are you doing?" James hated to disobey orders.

"She needs me. I can hear her screaming."

Peter frowned as Ivan spun the truck around. "Maybe that's why she likes you. You can hear her when we can't."

The other soldiers in the truck made personal vows to get Angela to bond with them so they could also hear her. Ivan's desperation was coming in waves that his team wasn't used to; they wanted to be able to share it with him. They also wanted to be sure it was worth risking their lives for.

Behind Ivan, the second tank followed them. The soldiers didn't want Ivan's crew to have all the fun.

Some refugees were chasing the convoy. Ivan enjoyed running them off the road with the big tank.

“Someone get on the gun, but don’t go full retard. We’ll need the ammo.”

Catching the excitement, James hurried to claim the firing position. He adored any big gun.

Not allowed to break radio silence, Eagles watched the soldiers take off with shouts and curses at being abandoned.

3

“I don’t see the boss!”

“Where is Kenn?!”

The radio was a garbled mess of shouts and cries as Jennifer steered the truck into Adrian’s rear end. She couldn’t reach the brakes.

The crash was over fast, spraying small parts across the melting snow. Jennifer slammed it into park as Adrian ran toward her.

Conner slid behind the wheel in his father’s place and hit the gas, determined to reach the fighting and help. Flames and bursts of blue power were coming from the other side of the collapsed ledge, but Conner couldn’t see the actual battle yet. He tried to hurry but not get stuck as more trucks and cars came through the valley entrance.

Jennifer pulled Kenn over into the floorboard as Adrian shifted into drive and got them rolling. Refugees were pounding on the door and trying to climb in the open window as she sat up.

Jennifer punched a leering face, knocking the guy off the truck. The window went up too slow for

her, catching another man's finger in the glass. She let the window back down enough for Kyle to slam his gun into the man's skull.

She and Kyle shoved the body out and got the window up, both hating Autumn's screams. Squished between them and splattered in blood, the baby wasn't happy, but she hadn't been harmed. Jennifer wanted to comfort her, but she ripped open her kit and grabbed a tourniquet for Kyle.

Adrian bumped into Conner as the boy got stuck, knocking him free, but not taking his place. The trucks bounced along the rocks and ice, finally reaching the edge of the collapsed ledge. Refugees swarmed them, beating on the metal and glass.

Conner ran into the group of refugees who were shooting guns at Angela and Marc, sliding to a stop in front of them.

Adrian's truck shuddered to a sliding halt on the other side, creating a long, temporary wall of protection.

Marc shoved Angela toward the opening truck door, following her up as a shield. As soon as she was in, he brought up his real shield and studied the tunnel. He wanted to know who had done this.

Right above the tunnel, another flash glinted.

Angela yanked Marc down as Conner hit the gas.

The bullet slammed into the roof of the truck and skidded into a refugee who had crawled under Adrian's rig. "Test your shield later!"

Marc had to laugh. "Okay."

“Which way?!” Conner was trying to stay calm, but it was harder this time.

Marc pointed. “Straight through the center. We have an escort.”

Conner and everyone else was overjoyed to spot two Safe Haven tanks rolling back into the cramped entrance of the valley. Armed with huge tires and .50 caliber guns, the soldiers were enjoying themselves now. Refugees ran as the big slugs plowed through the traffic without mercy.

Conner and Adrian took their semis right overtop the bullet-ridden vehicles, taking the center path between the cheering soldiers.

The refugees behind them tried to follow at first, but the big guns kept firing in sweeping patterns that couldn’t be argued with. Now in fear for their lives, the refugees fled to the only safety available—the door in the mountain.

“Let’s roll!”

Angela’s order brought the soldiers to their bumper in seconds, providing an armed escort that didn’t waste ammunition but eliminated any threats that chased them.

In Conner’s truck, Angela slid onto Marc’s lap to make room.

Marc could feel her rage boiling. After a few minutes of it, he sighed. “Okay. Pull over.”

Conner found a wide area that appeared empty and brought the rig to a stop.

Adrian pulled in on the passenger side to provide protection while the soldiers surrounded the small convoy.

Marc took Angela to the next truck so she could check on their injured. As soon as she was busy, Marc teamed with Adrian and sent her latest order.

“Good.” Adrian had been surprised when they left the valley without handling it. “The two of us or does she think she’s going too?”

“She wants to. I told her the camp needs her more. Use that.”

Stop it, both of you. I’m going to the camp. Everyone here is going with me except the two of you. Take what you need, set up right here and wait for him

Marc grinned, eager to repay Bryson for the scare they’d had. He’d recognized the man’s feel now.

Adrian motioned toward Jennifer. “Get the boss to base.”

Jennifer frowned a bit. “I, uh, don’t know how to drive one of these.”

“I can drive.” Kenn groaned, peeling his jacket open. “Three vests and still I’m stunned.” Kenn forced himself up. “He wants us dead. That packed too much punch to be anything but personal.”

“I agree.” Marc zipped his jacket and gestured to Kenn. “Get them to base.”

Adrian and Marc let the trucks get out of sight before moving, but they began before that. Teamed, they agreed on a plan without argument. They also

disagreed with Angela on how to handle the assassin once they captured him, but neither of them argued. Both men wanted a conversation more than payback. If Bryson was alone, they needed to know. If he had more friends, Angela's newest battle plan would be put in effect. They were sick of loose ends.

Marc began working on their blind while Adrian chose the setup location. Both of them listened for vehicles or refugees, but it appeared that most of them had stayed in the valley.

They didn't discuss what was happening there.

4

Bryson was standing a hundred feet above the collapsed ledge where Safe Haven's leaders were supposed to be crushed in bloody heaps. The fury kept him warm even when the winds became intolerable. Bryson couldn't believe his plan had failed. There was only one thing he could do now and that was die for the cause. This was no longer just his war.

Bryson tucked himself back into the shadows of the crevice, scanning the awful battlefield below. The refugees were still swarming into the valley, fighting each other. There were fires and screams, gunshots and wrecks as cars plowed into each other in an attempt to be the first one to reach the door.

Bryson got his breath and then used his remaining energy to direct his gift in a single direction. It had been one of Sonja's favorite tactics

to use against other descendants. Only a few of their kind were able to open direct lines of communication that prevented other descendants in the area from hearing them. Bryson was one of those. *Erik, I failed. They escaped.*

We knew you would, Bryson. You underestimated them.

Bryson could have argued that no one could prepare for a wildcard, but shame wouldn't let him. *What do you want me to do now?*

As Bryson paused for the answer, he continued to berate himself for failing to foresee some people coming back for the leaders. It had been easy to figure out what Angela had planned once he'd found their hidden vehicles; he'd gotten cocky. *I should have disabled their wheels.*

We want you to do what you would have done if we hadn't found you on their doorstep like a lost puppy. Chase them.

Bryson brightened. He might get a second chance at revenge.

Do everything the way you would if we weren't here. That means using stealth, so don't call us again.

Bryson frowned, rubbing his cold hands together. *If I hide, they won't be able to find me.*

Erik's laughter increased Bryson's humiliation.

Like I said, you underestimated them. As soon as they get their camp to a place they consider safe, the hunters will be sent out. Make sure you're found by the main targets.

How do I do that?

You do that by ignoring the sheep. When they fail, the shepherds will be sent out.

Bryson couldn't discover a flaw with the plan—not that he would have argued anyway. His chance to do it alone had been blown the minute the soldiers came back for Angela. *How will you know when they've got me?*

We'll be watching. You can't escape us. You stink of loyalty to Sonja. You're easy to find.

The mental connection closed before Bryson could respond. Angry and ashamed, he curled into a ball and forced himself to rest until it got dark. He had a lot of climbing to do.

Chapter Thirty-Five BK8
Moments Like This

1

“**W**ho wants first watch over him?” Erik glanced around his camp. Seventy men and women had come with him from the abandoned town where Sonja had enslaved half the population and stirred the rest into needless violence that had always cost lives.

“Nicholas and I will take the first shift.”

Erik gave his approval of Isaac’s offer. “Pick half a dozen for your crew. My team will relieve you in six hours.”

Erik’s mercenaries were all tall, dark, stocky, and hungry. Wearing concealing clothes in multiple layers, and black boots with chains that were taped down to hide the noise, the crew was intimidating. They had found similar gear in one of the towns they had raided, which had led to everyone dressing alike. Erik didn’t care what they looked like. He didn’t have rules on hygiene, uniforms, or anything else that didn’t matter. None of it mattered to him. He only cared that they followed the orders he gave.

As the group of descendants got set to leave, Erik ducked into the small canvas where their cook

was trying to produce a meal while fighting the wind from untucked corners.

“She won’t eat.”

Erik ignored the woman glaring at him from a dark corner. That was the only place the wind wasn’t coming through—where it was blocked by her rounded body. Her dark, curly hair no longer glowed and her eyes no longer lit up in welcome, but Erik’s affection for her had never wavered. He would do anything for her, except what she had only asked once. Her freedom was not an option. “Let her starve. How long?”

Brian shrugged, hating the duty he’d been drafted for. “At least an hour. This rehydrated shit sucks.” The young man dumped a canteen of water into the pot and slammed the lid on. “I can’t wait to get back to civilization.”

Erik scowled at him. “Our town is empty. As soon as people found out Sonja was dead, they took off. We are all that’s left.”

Brian shrugged. “I assumed when you got revenge for Safe Haven killing your friends and family that we would return to base and reestablish our town. To me, that means power tools and lights.” Brian gestured at the dim lantern and the muddy ground under the camp stove he’d set up. “You can’t expect miracles in these conditions.”

Erik scanned the tent and then looked over his shoulder. “Two volunteers for mess.”

Two volunteers strode toward the tent.

Erik had made his camp in a small impression in the mountain range, liking the angle for his sentries so they could view in every direction. He was aware of stragglers around them, but he wasn't concerned. If anyone was unlucky enough to stumble across this camp, the guards would handle it.

Erik was retired, but he'd been doing jobs off the books for years. Hired mercenary pay was better. Many of the men and women around him had been doing the same; no one complained about the weather or the hardships that came during tracking down prey. They were used to it.

Erik ducked out as the two men came in, noting who was eager to earn his approval. Everyone on this trip wanted the Safe Haven descendants dead. Many of his crew had lost family members, including Erik. Sonja and Vlad had been his relatives; duty demanded that he avenge them. Erik might have ignored that if not for the call Safe Haven had made after poisoning everyone.

The open challenge in that call had told Erik if they didn't take care of the Safe Haven people now, that camp would continue to grow in power until they were out of reach. Erik was confident the fighters with him were more than enough to handle ten new descendants now, however. All of the people in the makeshift camp were killers, even the women. Sonja had insisted on keeping the sexes apart for battles, but Erik had never believed that was a good idea. Many of the mercenaries in his

group were couples, which always encouraged them to fight harder. Having something to live for mattered.

Erik thought about the furious woman he had left under the mess canopy. Michelle would never forgive him for the abuses she'd suffered, but Erik loved her. She was the other half of the reason he was doing this. If Safe Haven took control of the United States, he would have to release her. She had been his slave for three decades now. She had born him ten children, three of whom they had buried. Two had died on the train with Sonja. The one she was carrying would join the other five here as protection while he set up a new base further south to take advantage of the better weather and to fish now that the herds were gone.

“We have a group of refugees coming in. Four of them. No big weapons that I can see.”

Erik came over to take the glasses from Mango, who had duty. Erik scanned the group and smiled. “Invite them in.”

The mercs around him chuckled, knowing what came next.

Erik swept the camp, ready to be settled for resting until his shift came up to follow Bryson. They were using ATVs and carrying Glocks, but Erik didn't believe that was how this battle would be won. He also didn't think Adrian Mitchel was stupid enough to hunt Bryson himself, but there was always a small chance he was, so they would monitor Bryson just in case. Erik expected the real

fight to take place in Market Town, where Safe Haven was running to hide. Erik and his group had observed the UN fight. Now that they knew the gifts Adrian's crew had, they were ready.

Erik nodded at the other guard on duty as the refugees entered his camp in drunken staggers that implied they were wandering from site to site, partying. He ducked into his private tent and sat down in the empty chair, taking the warm mug of tea from one of the four men lounging in his travel home.

This quartet was the most powerful of his crew. Hugh could throw a slashing rain and Jon had a type of fire. The other two were only able to zap, but they were both good at it. Erik was able to magnify any gifts around him. Hugh and Stephen were brothers from Maine, but they hadn't been home in decades. Dugan and Jon were relics that Erik had rescued from bunkers after the war. All four men were loyal to the point of death.

"As soon as Mitchel is in sight, we all aim for him. According to the stories we were told, he was banished. They won't protect him. They don't understand how important he is."

"What about the woman and the Ghost?"

Erik shrugged. "Once we kill Mitchel, we'll take the others captive. You can play with them for a while and then they'll be reclaimed."

Outside the tent, a short scream cut off abruptly. Erik smiled. "Such a beautiful sound."

Jon handed Erik a packet of dehydrated ice cream to snack on until dinner was ready. As their magnifier, they needed Erik to stay healthy. “We all know Mitchel needs to die, but why are you so insistent that one of us has to do it?”

“I don’t have faith that anyone else can.” Erik revealed his fear. “You remember what a pain he was on our team.”

“Sure, but that still doesn’t explain why he wants you more than the rest of us. We all set him up.”

“I did a little more than that after we were sent to different corners of the globe. I’m at the top of his kill list.”

The men around him scowled. “Why?”

“I was supposed to bring in one of his kids for lab work. The little bastard didn’t make it.”

“You killed a kid?” Jon wasn’t as evil as the others who turned to him in disapproval.

Erik shrugged. “Feels like anyone else. Never bothers me.”

Under the mess canopy, Michelle struggled to her feet. As usual, she was pregnant and miserable.

Brian watched her go, assuming she needed to use the bathroom again. Michelle had always been around. Nothing had changed for her during his lifetime so far.

Brian had lost his cousin on the train, but unlike the rest of Erik’s group, Brian wasn’t angry and he didn’t care about duty. He was just delighted to be

the surviving member of his family. These men were all evil. Brian, like Erik's wife, was very different from the rest of Erik's group. Tall and blond, he could have been a Mitchel.

Michelle stumbled through the remaining camp of four dozen sprawling, screwing, killing, laughing descendants who no longer had any rules they were required to follow except for Erik's. She ignored the leers and knowing glances from them, the same as she ignored the rare looks from those who would have helped her. Michelle had given up hope a long time ago. All she wished for now was an easy death.

Michelle stepped behind a boulder and squatted. As she finished and stood up, a man came from the cover of the huge rocks next to her.

Before she could scream for help, Michelle was grabbed and dragged backwards.

2

"Pull over."

"Are you sure?" Kenn glanced at Angela. "We're almost there. We should view Safe Haven vehicles within the next few minutes."

"Yes. I don't want Conner pulling into camp alone. It will send a bad message."

Kenn flashed his lights to get Conner's attention, then pulled the truck over. Before he could arrange security, Angela had already jumped out and slammed the door.

The area where Kenn had pulled over was sparsely populated with tall, moldy trees that shed light showers of snow and cold drops over her as she ran to Conner's truck. None of the farms appeared to be occupied and all of the fields were bare. If anything had been growing, the refugees who had come through from the west would have stripped it anyway, but it was still depressing.

As Conner got them rolling, Angela spotted movement on the ground near them.

A small line of ants came from the dense undergrowth, presumably in search of food. Angela wanted to order Kenn to run them over, but she held herself in check. She had a schedule to keep, but she wouldn't forget that the mutations needed to be handled. Until Safe Haven sailed away from America, the Eagles would be using the ants as targets again and dropping bait balls into nests. She would do everything she could to eliminate the mutations. She hoped Pitcairn Island didn't have that problem and she was determined not to bring any of them along for the cruise.

Kenn was glad that Angela had hurried, but he also had faith in the soldiers surrounding her. He gave Ivan a wave of approval.

Kenn suddenly wondered what conversational topic she and Conner would have for the last mile of this journey. Whatever it was, the boy would benefit from it. Angela was a lot like Adrian in that way. She liked to prepare people.

In the truck in front of them, Angela was trying to do exactly that. “There’s going to be an official vote tomorrow to lift your banishment, but there’s a chance they’ll overrule me.”

Conner fell in behind Kenn’s truck this time, distracted. “Will it go well?”

Angela shrugged. “Depends on Candy.”

“Cool.” Conner grinned, forgetting that he wasn’t supposed to have had contact with her. “She likes me now. It’s all good.”

Tension filled the truck.

Conner glanced over to find Angela glaring at him. Instead of the myriad of excuses that he could have used, Conner sighed. *She was miserable and I could sense it hundreds of miles away.* He steered around the debris like Kenn was doing, but his mind was in the past. *I was in Market Town the first time she called out for help. I knew I wasn’t supposed to answer, but I had to.*

“I already knew all that. The problem is that you didn’t think I did. If you’re going to hide shit from me, maybe I should keep you two apart.”

Conner frowned. “If she and I are both willing, what does it matter to you?”

“It’ll hurt your dad.”

Conner realized why Angela was in the truck with him. “You’re not here for me. You’re here for my dad!”

“Of course. I don’t want to hurt him any more than he already will be when the camp reinstates his banishment. You’ll be allowed back into the camp,

but everything you do will reflect on him. I want your dad to have another chance in the future and I can't do that without your help."

Conner relaxed, understanding he wasn't in trouble. "I want that too. What can I do?"

"Stay away from Candy."

Conner became angry. "For how long?"

"As long as it takes her to come to you."

Conner scoffed. "I can have that tonight."

"That may be true, but only because you'd be taking advantage of her loneliness or using your gift. If you do it the honorable way, it'll take time. During that period, the camp will learn to trust you again, your relationship won't be suspect, and your dad may not pay for any mistakes that you make. That's a small price for the type of happiness you two will have together."

It wasn't a hard choice for Conner, but at the same time, it was. He had been looking forward to spending time with Candy now. "I'll give it a month. I can wait that long."

"I won't forget this and neither will your dad." Angela motioned toward the line of vehicles they could see in the near distance. "Keep rolling around and take the lead."

Proud that he would be driving Angela in the front of the convoy, Conner sat up straighter. "I can do it for two months if you give me moments like this."

Angela smiled. "Why do you think we're having this ride together?"

Angela opened the glovebox and took out a small testing kit like the one Conner had witnessed Kendle use in the cave. It was more accurate than a badge that needed a length of exposure to start registering a rise in the danger.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief as she read the results. It was lower than it had been in the cave the last time they'd been able to do a test like this. The clouds were moving east again—out to sea to kill anyone surviving there. If multiple reactors melted down at the same time, it would deliver a constant flow of radiation into the Jetstream that would coat the planet. That included remote islands, though it might take a year or more to reach their hopeful haven. The recesses of her mind began lighting up with plans for a bunker they could survive in while living on Pitcairn. Everyone loathed the mountain, and even a basement would be argued about right now, but if people began to die from exposure, the camp would follow her into the earth again, she was sure. It wouldn't be because she was the alpha, but because they wanted to live.

3

“Wow.” Kyle scowled as he caught sight of Conner driving Angela. “She never stops.”

Jennifer shrugged. She didn't care what Angela was doing so long as they hurried to camp so Kyle's injury could be cared for. Kenn had already told her

it wasn't bad, but she wanted to hear that from someone with medical training.

Kenn pulled into the rear of the long convoy, aware of Jennifer's displeasure, but there was little he could do about it. She knew as well as he did that none of the doctor's little ducks had come with them.

We can do it, Momma.

Frustrated, Jennifer looked down at the baby. "Just this once."

Autumn and Jennifer sent energy into Kyle, healing his injury in seconds. Even if Kenn hadn't viewed it before, he would have been impressed with how fast they had done it.

Jennifer sat back in tired satisfaction, crossing her arms over her chest when Kyle would have scolded her. Both of their injuries had been healed.

Kyle picked up the baby with a shoulder that was no longer bleeding or screaming. "Thank you."

It was a touching moment that Kenn enjoyed sharing with them, especially when he caught sight of a vehicle pulling out of the convoy. "Here she comes."

The radio lit up a few seconds later. "Driver switch has been approved. Ivan's team will provide escort."

Kenn pulled over once again, tiring of the motion. He wanted to get as far from the mountain as he could.

Tonya slipped from the vehicle in front of them, running toward the driver door. She jerked it open

and climbed into Kenn's lap, then dropped into the tiny space that Jennifer quickly made by picking up the baby.

Kyle and Jennifer glared at Tonya.

Tonya put her arms around Kenn's neck. "We can go now."

Unable to fight the mood, Kenn snorted. "Women!"

Even Jennifer chuckled.

Kenn got them rolling, unable to fight how it felt to have the love of a woman because she wanted to give it.

As they settled into a frustrating thirty-five miles per hour, it occurred to Kenn that no one had asked about their two missing men. Everyone was so glad to have Angela back that they hadn't even noticed Marc and Adrian weren't with them. Kenn had an idea of why the pair had been left behind and locked down on his thoughts. He didn't want to be responsible for giving away their ambush. He didn't speak again until late afternoon shadows were settling over the convoy.

4

"They're set up and waiting."

Angela breathed a sigh of relief at the radio call from the truck behind them. She'd been too drained to connect. Jennifer had been able to reach Marc and do it for her, against Kyle's mutters about the girl needing to rest.

Angela let sleep reclaim her, trying to gain enough energy to help set up camp when they stopped.

Conner paid attention to the road. Their soldier escort was rolling half a mile in front. They'd been instructed to keep going even after it got dark and that's what they'd done. Refusing to answer radio calls asking for a break, Ivan would only stop when Conner flashed his lights twice. Angela had marked a place on his map; they weren't pausing until he reached it. Angela had given him a job that he could do. It was great. The only thing better had been when she'd told him to take the lead and keep driving. Everyone had watched him and known he was forgiven.

"Help!" The radio in the truck jerked Angela up in the seat.

"We need help!"

Jimmy's voice was panicked, as were the screams of the people in the background.

"They've breached the door! Please, come back!"

Angela switched off the radio.

Conner saw the tears rolling down her cheeks and felt like he could join her. The misery was so clear he could almost taste it. "That hurts, you know. Suck it up."

Angela was startled into a harsh laugh. "Just like your dad, aren't ya?"

Conner nodded proudly. "Of course. That's why I'm with you, right? Because he can't be?"

Angela winced at the boy's accuracy. "A chip off the old block."

Conner shrugged. "He said you would need to talk. I didn't know where I'd be then, so I was snotty to him about it. Sorry for that if he told you."

"He didn't rat you out." Angela thought of Charlie's short, rude demand that she make him and Tracy an official couple or he and the girl were staying with Jimmy. She had agreed because she'd already known it was coming. The basics of life never stopped, but it was galling to have the boy believe he'd been able to blackmail her. It was also annoying that Conner believed he could keep up with her in his father's place.

"I can, for an hour or two at a time. I'm practicing on you for a much weaker target."

Angela sniggered at her first thought. *Candy is gonna eat you up and spit you out, little boy.* "Just drive the truck, James."

Conner laughed. "That makes me wish I had a special hat or something."

Angela leaned down to pull something from her kit. She handed it to him. "Congratulations on level one status."

Conner yelled in excitement, snatching the Eagle hat to slam it on his skull. "All right!"

Angela let his joy wash over her in place of the awful guilt for not turning around to help those in the mountain. Fate had given them dozens of chances to change their mind. Now, it was too late.

Behind the convoy, a single vehicle came to a stop.

“Are you sure, man?” Morgan waited for Ray to get out of the truck.

“Tell her I’ll catch up if I can.”

“He’s dead, Ray.” Morgan hated to say it, but he did. “You know it’s already over. Don’t waste your life on a corpse.”

Ray wasn’t angry. He knew it was a suicide mission. “I shouldn’t have left him. He was testing me and I abandoned him.”

“I’m sorry, but it doesn’t change the result. He’s gone and you’ll be killed too if you go back.”

“Tell her I’ll catch up if I can.” Ray slammed the door shut and took off running in the opposite direction, eager to find a set of wheels.

Morgan signaled at their passenger as he got them rolling. “Tell her when she’s already getting bad news. Don’t ruin a good mood with it.”

Boothe wrote it down, now being trained. He liked it in Safe Haven, but he hadn’t minded the cave until the quake and he’d also worked well in the Army. Boothe figured he could survive about anywhere that had females and whiskey. Being required to kill bad guys just made it better.

5

“Do you want to eat first or after the fun?”

Marc shrugged. “I could eat.”

The two men had fashioned an oval blind to blend in with the evening shadows. Only big enough for one at a time, it allowed them to alternate staying warm while watching for their target. Both of them were very cold and aware of how alone they were, but neither man worried about anything that might run across their path. Both of them had powerful gifts that had been practiced recently. The isolated feeling came from being out of Angela's light.

Marc ate all the food Adrian gave him without comment, not caring what it was, only that it would stop his growling stomach. He did notice that the coffee was only warm, but it was bitter, the way he liked it. He assumed Adrian had brought the thermos along, but didn't ask. He didn't want the man to assume he was trying to fill the empty space they had been working in over the past hours. While they labored, the sky had gone from dull shades of blueish green to a deep purple that was stunning. Resting while the blond took his turn outside the shelter, Marc stared at it, hoping Angela was also enjoying the view. It was wonderful to be out here again.

Adrian felt Marc's contemplative mood as he stood in the whipping wind and darkness. There were lights around them, flashing and bobbing to prove the existence of survivors. Adrian was almost certain it was refugees. The calls for help coming from the mountain had been desperate. None of their people were among the stragglers out here

searching for food, though. Adrian stayed alert. If a problem came right now, he had to handle it silently. It had been long enough for Bryson to reach them.

Adrian wasn't sure how Angela had chosen this particular location, but he had suspicions. The biggest was Bryson's need for revenge and his anger at failing. A furious killer would start tracking his prey right away, but until he got close, he would stomp and storm, rampaging to vent the humiliated fury so that when he needed to go quiet again, he had the control to do so. This spot was only a few miles from Bryson's failure and it was at a junction of three roads that circled the mountain, bringing traffic south. Bryson would know the terrain by now and come here first to let off some steam on survivors. He would also look like any other refugee who had escaped that mountain, which is why Angela had sent Adrian to identify him.

“Are you okay with this job?”

Adrian didn't stop what he was doing, but Marc felt him pause.

“For the most part. Bryson wasn't so bad.”

Marc wasn't worried over Adrian having sympathies for the man. Bryson was a threat to Angela, and that was enough, but Marc was curious as to how Adrian really felt about this mission.

Adrian shrugged. “I'd like it to be over—mostly because I forgot about him. He wasn't along for the meeting with Sonja and I didn't spot him at the train. There was no sign of him when we counted the bodies, but when we couldn't find her remains, I

should have known. Sonja gave Bryson something he'd wanted all his life and he vowed to be her body man forever. Until he's gone, it's a constant reminder that I missed something so obvious."

Marc understood how that felt. It was hard to account for everything, which is why Angela was getting so much respect. Other than a few deaths and injuries, she had led them through hell. Marc couldn't hold the earthquake against her. Descendants didn't read well through stone, and it's not like Mother Nature had sent a postcard warning what was coming. Earthquakes traveled hard and fast, and did the most damage during the first few minutes. Safe Haven was lucky Angela had put so many safeguards in place, but no one could have prevented the deaths.

"Make sure you tell her that a few hundred times a day for the next month or two."

Marc accepted that as solid advice. Angela was ruthless, but she also had a conscience. He finally understood why she didn't sleep very often. The things she'd been forced to do weighed on her in the wee hours.

"I'm glad you get that now. I wasn't a Jody at first. Many of the times I was trying to comfort her should have been yours to handle. They will be now. She won't come to me for that anymore."

Marc frowned. He didn't want to be distracted from the mission, but they weren't expecting a lot of trouble from Bryson and this might be the last time they were alone for a while. Once they returned

to Safe Haven, there was a lot of work waiting. “What will she come to you for?”

Adrian sighed. He didn’t want to discuss this either, but he’d known it would happen at some point. “A break in doing the right thing.”

“An example?”

“Once we reach the island, she’ll become a little reckless again. You have to stay out of her way as much as you can or it will cause problems. She’ll need to set an example for the men that fear of the unknown can’t rule their decisions.”

“I’ll work on that. What else?”

“She’ll be bored on the boat. You’ll need to keep her busy, but she’ll see through half-assed attempts. Spend some time on that before we sail off into the sunset. It will make the trip easier on all of us.”

Marc made a face. “Maybe you should write this down.”

Adrian wanted to laugh, but movement got his attention. “One o’clock, bold as brass.”

Marc hunkered down, finger caressing the trigger.

Doing the job of a spotter wasn’t needed. Adrian put the telescope-shaped gear away. He spent the time scanning their surroundings to make sure no one was sneaking up on them. Aware of other voices and other thoughts in the area, he braced for the ugliness to begin. Some of his past sins were about to come back to haunt him—ugly things he had assumed were long settled.

“But this time, I’ve got your back.”

Adrian was stunned by Marc’s words, so much that he almost missed the vet coming up behind them. “Damn!”

“The boss sent me.” The vet hunkered down between the two men without saying anything else.

Marc and Adrian exchanged glances that implied he might not make it back to camp once this mission was finished.

Chris chuckled softly. “She won’t thank you for that.”

Marc scowled toward their target. “Later. You take the shot.”

Rifle now in hand, Adrian lined up the shot and pulled the trigger without an ounce of regret. Despite what he’d said about Bryson, Adrian had no problem doing his duty to Angela.

As Adrian took down the target, Marc pinned the vet in place. They didn’t communicate, but at the same time, they did. As Marc finally rotated to study the body on the ground, he sent a single sentence. *It would be best if you were not on the boat with us.*

Chris didn’t respond. Angela had told him not to argue with either of the men, but especially not Marc. The vet knew that was wise. The wolfman didn’t like him at all.

Marc and Adrian assumed he was support for this run; that bothered them both.

“Let’s spring the trap.” Marc stood up, acting as if he didn’t know they were being watched.

The vet remained where he was.

Adrian stayed on Marc's heels as they slid down the icy embankment and came to a stop near the body. As Marc knelt down, footsteps and voices rang out from the cliffs and crags around them.

"Hands up!"

"Move in!"

"If you go for your gun, we'll kill you both!"

Marc and Adrian lifted their hands, standing close enough to exchange whispers as half a dozen men dressed in white camo slid down the hills toward them.

"Is that all of them?"

"No. They never travel anywhere without females."

"So another dozen at a campsite?"

"Double that. They use monitors too, usually Invisibles."

Marc stored the information as they were surrounded and stripped of their weapons. It was brisk and routine, without extra abuse, but the menace was clear and all of it was directed at Adrian.

Marc scanned the enemy, quickly discovering these were relatives of the people who'd been killed by the poisoned food Angela had gifted to Sonja. That explained the motivation for all of these killers to be waiting in the cold weather for a month for Safe Haven to emerge.

One of the mercenaries clicked the radio three times. When he let off the mike, he drew two pairs of handcuffs from his belt.

Adrian swept them, not spotting anyone he recognized except for Isaac. He took a fast look at Bryson's body to verify he was dead, regretting that he hadn't gotten to speak with the man first. Bryson had always been a wealth of information in the past. As it was, the body was already covered in a light layer of the snow that had begun to fall.

Three of the men came over to shine lights in faces. Marc and Adrian both glanced away from the glare, but they didn't try to hide their identities.

"We've got them!"

"That's the Ghost and Mitchel!" Isaac laughed, slapping hands with a member of his team. "We got 'em on our own!"

Four of the team surrounded them while the other two approached Bryson. "What do you want me to do with his body?"

Still studying his former team leader, Isaac snorted. "Why do you have to do anything with it? We were taught that animals need to eat."

Adrian winced. He'd delivered that lesson.

Marc caught the reaction and braced for more bad news. *Does it never end with you?*

Adrian dropped his chin. *I'd really like to say yes.*

Not resisting as he was cuffed, Marc sighed at Adrian's memories of amazing sex and a trial that

had cost him command. *It's a wonder you don't have AIDS.*

“Adrian Mitchel.” Isaac moved in front of his nemesis as soon as Adrian was secured, cruelty glinting. “I hoped we’d have a minute alone.” *Thud!*

Held up by one of the grinning mercenaries, Adrian gasped at the blow to his chest. Isaac had obviously heard about his weak heart.

“Erik said to bring you in. He didn’t say what condition you needed to be in.” *Thud!*

Adrian fell to the ground, ears ringing.

Isaac laughed. “I remember when you were the badass we all tried to match. Where’s that fire now?” *Kick!*

“Broken by another tramp, I’ve heard. Is that true?” Enjoying himself, Isaac leaned down to sneer. “Garrett shared Shannon with all of us after the trial. It wasn’t that good. Good was the one you killed on the train!” *Thud!*

Isaac’s arrogance was offset by the reactions of the team around him as the mercenaries considered the consequences of facing Adrian Mitchel and the Ghost at the same time. The legends of both men preceded them.

“It’s a shame about Bryson. Didn’t you even consider keeping him alive for information?”

Adrian spit blood into the snow. “Of course, but our boss said no survivors.” He grinned. “That includes you.”

That information made even Isaac twitch. He reacted with another punch, trying to cover his fear.
Thud!

The other mercs began to retreat, hoping to be out of range when Adrian decided to pay Isaac back for the abuse he was currently dealing.

Thud! Thud!

Marc was being held at gunpoint, supposed to concentrate on making them believe he only had military skills to rely on.

I wonder what Angie is doing right now.

Marc studied Adrian as the beaten man pushed himself up again. *Why would you be thinking about her at a time like this?*

Adrian chuckled through the split lip. *I always think about her. More than I ever did with Shannon, but don't tell her that. I'm hoping to use it.*

Marc growled at him.

“See?” Isaac laughed, hauling back. “That’s the Adrian Mitchel I know. He brings that out in everyone.”

Isaac punched Adrian in the stomach. As Adrian bent over, gasping, Isaac leaned down. “I’ve wanted to do this for a long time.” *Thud!*

Adrian fell again, but he gave a harsh laugh as he sat up. “I fucked your wife harder than this.”

Thud! Thud!

Marc didn’t enjoy the beating. He wasn’t the one doing it. He also knew Adrian’s pain would draw sympathy from Angela. With a small flick of his finger, Marc tossed Isaac across the snowy

cavity, slamming him into the nearest rock. There was a nasty crack; blood sprayed across the icy ground.

Adrian brought up his shield as he glared at Marc. “I was fine.”

The stunned mercs didn’t fire magic or bullets, hoping Adrian and Marc would let them go as they ran. It was obvious their gifts were small in comparison.

Marc pulled his demon in, worrying over it a little. If there ever came a day that the demon was stronger than he was, he wouldn’t be able to lock the power up and prevent it from harming others. He would have to monitor for that. Some of the scrolls he’d brought up told stories about demons who had taken over their hosts, forcing them to do awful things.

“Why did you do that?”

Marc sent out a mild blast of sonic to knock mercenaries off their feet and then his anger reached out to steal their courage and replace it with terror.

Now running as if they were being chased by ghosts, half of Isaac’s crew was out of sight before Marc formed an answer. “Angie wouldn’t like it.”

Adrian realized Marc felt the need to protect him and basked in it. Even though he wasn’t willing, it was amazing. Adrian lowered his shield, aware of some of the evil descendants trying to regroup. “Get out of here!” He sent the strongest fear wave that he could muster, but it was nothing

compared to the distinctive roaring in his mind as Marc added his power to it.

The rest of the descendants fled.

“Do you think that’ll be enough?”

Marc shrugged, pulling the anger in. It’d been a good show, but he was tired. “Probably. They didn’t seem smart enough to go back to where they came from.”

Adrian scanned the small battlefield, glad Isaac was no longer in the picture. That guy had been dangerous. He’d told Angela that months ago. Isaac had been on his list of hunters to watch out for over the last twenty years. He just hadn’t known the man was also in love with Sonja.

“Pick us up.” Marc let off the mike and began to loot the two bodies.

Adrian stood guard, hoping the vet didn’t take long. There was always a slim possibility that someone would try again. The next part of Angela’s plan should prevent them from being followed, but Adrian didn’t want to push their luck. The team he’d led hadn’t been smart enough to quit, only clever enough to betray.

Marc switched his radio to the channel Safe Haven had been using before going into the mountain and gave Adrian a nod.

Adrian keyed his mic. “Don’t leave me behind! Wait up!”

Marc grinned as he hit his button, wishing he really was. “We’ll meet at Market Town! Keep going! Keep going!”

“You need my help! Don’t leave me!”

“Go quiet and that’s an order. No more open calls!”

Both men switched off the radios. It was such an obvious setup that they were confident it would work. The UN already considered Americans to be stupid farmers, and the mercenaries wouldn’t want to challenge him and Marc again until they had their entire group together. The refugees were also listening and all they’d heard was the word *town*, which meant food. Everyone would converge on the UN while they sat there waiting for Safe Haven to deliver itself into their hands.

Chris pulled up in a battered RV that had survived the avalanche, but had been sprayed with slugs from the 50 Cal. Dropping small parts of itself as it chugged over the ice and stone, the engine was quiet; no one complained once they were inside where heat rushed over them in blissful comfort.

Adrian tensed in the doorway, moving aside so Marc could see the blanket-covered woman in the rear seat. Bound and bruised, her glowing red orbs warned of power.

“She’s drugged right now, no worries.”

Marc and Adrian turned toward the vet in anger.

“What’s going on?”

Chris held out a sheet of paper.

Adrian read while Marc joined Chris in the front, scanning the killer. *“Neither of you would have done this part.”*

Adrian knelt down to help the woman sit up. He tried a deep scan, but found only the haze of drugs. “You hit her a little hard.”

Chris steered into the darkness without using lights. “It won’t hurt her or the baby.”

Marc and Adrian exchanged another glance.

“Well, that should ensure the plan.”

“What if it was Isaac’s baby and not the boss?”

“Well, there’s a possibility that Isaac was the boss now...”

Marc snorted. “That was way too easy.”

“I agree, which is why I also don’t think she belongs to Isaac, but I’ll know more when she wakes up.” Adrian helped the woman lay down, but he didn’t remove the ropes around her wrists. Any female who was a leader, or the mate of a leader, was valuable in any number of ways. Knowing his enemy, Adrian assumed the woman had a gift that enhanced power. He based that on how she was cared for. Her clothes were threadbare, her skin was tight against her bones, and her hair had been chopped off as if in punishment. It didn’t look as though she had been willing, but Adrian was counting on their enemy not caring about that. In fact, if their enemy had, they wouldn’t be considered enemies.

“How long?”

“Two hours at this speed.” Chris felt Marc’s disapproval and pushed the pedal down. “All right. Half that, but hang on.”

Satisfied he understood they wanted to get to camp as fast as possible, Marc and Adrian both settled in for the ride. It didn't take long for the exhaustion to hit.

Sensing Marc and Adrian had fallen into light dozes, Chris tried hard not to wake them up but it was difficult. The road wasn't in good shape. Ten months without repair or regular use had morphed the road into a dangerous path through a deadly wilderness. Large potholes were hidden by a surprising amount of debris, ready to deliver flat tires to unsuspecting travelers. It didn't help that some of this area had also been hit during their fight with the government. Most of that had been looted, but it was clear there had been other battles here too. Chris assumed the Mexicans coming through, and then the UN troops, were responsible for that.

Around the RV, the landscape flew by without mercy. Skeletons, fires, and long, dark, silent stretches were his company. It was hard to look at. Chris tried not to think about all of the similar misery he had brought to people. Unlike most of the fighters, the vet didn't regret it. He just wished he didn't have to limit his prey to Angela's choices. He wanted to be free to kill anyone he felt needed it.

Chapter Thirty-Six BK8
Don't Screw This Up

1

“**M**eet us in Market Town.” Radios on belts and in vehicles echoed with Angela’s tired voice. “Market Town is ground zero.”

Conner took the next street that would lead them in the opposite direction. By dawn, several groups would be traveling toward the town that was sheltering the rest of the UN men, but Safe Haven’s citizens would be fifty miles away and out of range. That’s all Conner knew about Angela’s plans and that’s all he wanted to know. During the battle, he would be with the camp and so would Candy. Knowing she wouldn’t be in the crossfire was good, but knowing he would be close enough to protect her if needed had allowed him to hold on to his happiness for the last three hours.

“Slow down.” Angela yawned. “It will give the guards time to clear the perimeter.”

Conner dropped them to twenty from thirty-five, the speed Angela had told him to maintain. Thanks to the UN already clearing the roads in this area, it had been a straight drive with no blocks.

Behind them, lights flashed in recognition. Many of their members hadn’t traveled like this

before. The evening would be spent listening to complaints of aches and legs twitching. Angela expected to join them in the discomfort. She hadn't worked out in the cave enough. She could feel her stomach getting ready to cramp as soon as she stepped from the truck.

Angela checked the thermometer on the window, accounting for the warmth inside that would have a slight effect on it. It was dark, windy, and 38°. She needed to get them set up fast.

Angela stretched, getting the cramp over with now. "Stay with me when we get there. Be useful if you can."

Conner grinned. "I was thinking about that. How would you like your very own car parker?"

Angela nodded at the image in Conner's mind. "Perfect. Don't forget to gas them up."

Some of Conner's excitement fell. "That's a lot of gas."

"You'll have help once other things are done. Don't slack off and the Eagles might include you in the party."

"What party?"

"The one they'll have tonight when they hope we're all asleep. You've earned a spot at the campfire."

Conner fell into plans to get the work done in record time.

Satisfied the boy wouldn't be a problem tonight, Angela swept the cold darkness around them. *Hurry home, Gentlemen. It isn't Safe Haven without you.*

Conner stayed with Angela as she exited the truck to watch the camp get set up. The small State Park she had chosen was wide and barren enough to accommodate them now that their population had been cut in half. The guards who'd arrived before them continued their roaming patrols of the area; their weak lights provided comfort to the weary travelers. Burning trashcans were lit up at the four corners a few seconds after they stopped, showing the boundary lines of camp. Vehicles were pulled into haphazard positions that Conner would straighten out later.

A small group of Eagles went to the center to erect the two large community tents they had salvaged from the cave. Portable bathrooms would be put alongside it, in smaller tents. Crammed in, it wouldn't be comfortable, but the heaters, blankets, and body heat would keep the temperature up.

Angela scanned the herd for their mood as the guards called all clear and the people began to emerge. Everyone knew by now that she was sending anyone on their trail to Market Town to fight the UN instead of them. It was another example of how ruthless she could be, but all she picked up was happiness that Safe Haven didn't have to handle the chore this time. Angela didn't tell them that wasn't true.

Angela watched the line of kids being taken to the bathrooms, glad all of them were in a good state of mind. The adults, however, appeared annoyed. Babysitting duty was always a chore, but it was

necessary. The people without magic needed to understand the descendant children were only that—children. They needed to be cared for and protected like any other kid.

Angela spotted Kevin standing at the edge of the new caution tape, staring forlornly in the direction they had come from. Angela thought about talking to him, but before she could make up her mind, Daryl joined the man. The two fell into a conversation she was positive included the reporter. Peaceful enough, the men chatted as Daryl led them toward the rear of the camp that was still being set up.

Daryl would keep Kevin occupied, but Angela wouldn't be surprised if he decided to leave camp again. She just hoped he didn't join Jeff this time. Jeff's patience with Kevin had run out. Kevin's misery was understandable, though. Cynthia hadn't even been buried. Her body had been left where she'd died.

Angela spotted the guard on duty that was taking Ray's place. Her mood fell a little more. She'd seen Ray pull out of line and knew where he was going, but she hadn't tried to stop him because he wouldn't have listened. She also hadn't spent energy searching to see if he survived. She already knew the mountain was a death trap. She was lucky to have gotten out with as many of her people as she had. "Get the supplies dug up so we can have a hot meal."

The crew she'd already drafted hurried to get their shovels.

It took half an hour for the Eagles to bring up the stash once the crew had verified a location. The two large crates were 4 x 4 x 4. As the first one was hefted out of the hole, muscles straining and dripping sweat, the observing camp let out a cheer.

"Let the camp into the first one. The bottom one is off limits."

Kenn stepped forward to carry out Angela's order, signaling a few others to help.

Morgan used a crowbar to pry the lid off the crate, popping nails at the corners first. As the lid dropped into the dirt, people rushed forward.

"Toilet paper!"

"Oh, thank God!"

"Chapstick!"

"Water!"

Angela listened to the happiness, glad she had foreseen needing the small stashes. There were two more of them, which would buy her crews time to build up a new reserve. Hunting teams that would trek door-to-door through empty apartments and houses would be sent out as soon as she felt like there was enough distance between them and the mountain.

"Chocolate!"

Angela spun around. "Really? Who put that in there?"

Standing next to her, Greg grinned. “That would be Marc.”

Angela made a face. “I didn’t think he knew about this.”

“You told Adrian not to deny him any information. He asked a lot of questions.”

Angela smiled as Greg dug out a candy bar from the bag and handed it to her. “He always knows the right gift.”

Greg snickered. “He’s a guy. He’s been around enough to know what works.”

Laughing, Angela gestured at the adults who had point over the kids. “As soon as they’re settled, let me know.”

Nancy and Tracy promised they would.

Charlie continued trying to herd the children. He was eager for this part of his duty to be done. He wanted what his mother had agreed to.

Angela was too tired to be upset. She would give Charlie what he wanted. In time, he would understand that what a person wanted, and what was best for them, were not always the same. It was a lesson almost all teenagers had to learn on their own, much to the suffering of their parents and the people around them. “Take care of the vehicles.”

Conner was gone an instant later.

Kenn joined Angela for rounds. Tonya was helping with the older population. “Has his banishment been lifted?”

“Yes. A conditional banishment does not require a vote to be removed. Make sure everyone knows that.”

Kenn made a note to tell Tonya. She was the biggest gossip in camp. Everyone would know before dawn arrived.

“Are you good for duty until I’m finished with the kids?”

“Yep.” Kenn didn’t tell her he felt like he’d been in the cage with Marc again.

Angela knew. Thanks to being shot, she had the memory. “I have you off duty tomorrow, when *we* get back.”

“I knew it was something like that.” Kenn moved a little closer to ask the question that mattered to him. “Where will Tonya be?”

Angela pointed toward the camp. “In a truck, with Candy.”

“You got it.” Relieved Tonya wasn’t going to be a part of the battle, Kenn found a second wind. “What do you need tonight?”

Kenn had served Adrian faithfully the entire time Angela was being trained. It was a relief to know the Marine could still be counted on. “I need everyone to sleep as soon as possible, so the Eagles can get their party out of the way.”

Kenn chuckled. “They don’t think you know.”

Angela shrugged. “Let’s keep it that way.”

“You’re the boss. I’m gonna hurry things along, unless you need me right now?”

“No, Marc’s bodyguards have me under watch, and there’s a sniper moving into position. I’m good.”

Kenn did a sweep and found Ivan nearby. He scowled. “Those aren’t the best.”

“No, but we are.” Shawn and Daryl stepped out of the shadows nearby. “We’ve got it. Get to work.”

Kenn was laughing as he walked away. This time, the two Special Forces men had gotten by him without being noticed.

2

“What’s going on in there?”

Quinn gestured for quiet. “The nightly descendant meeting with the kids. She started doing this a couple weeks ago.”

All of the adults and sentries around the small tent had drawn her attention. Kendle had expected to be stopped, but the guards had nodded to her and then went back to their duty, telling her that she had been forgiven for coming between Marc and Angie during the government battle. Kendle was relieved, but at the same time, it didn’t matter to her. She wasn’t here for these people. She was here for Marc.

Quinn, who still had a crush on Kendle, kept his distance. Kendle and Tommy had spent the night together. They’d been kissing and hugging all day. It was obvious that they were a couple, and Quinn wasn’t going to come between them. He was just grateful to have come out of the mountain alive.

“You are the future. As I’m sure you know, things are changing. The people who came with us have accepted magic, but there’s more to it than that and I know you sense it. Something snapped. Our souls aren’t healing. I, and several others like us, believe the fabric of reality has been breached. We can’t find another explanation for some of the stories we’ve heard. Many of you have the gift of mind reading. I know that you’ve heard the stories too. It makes it hard for you to sleep and it will even more now that we’re out of the safety of the cave. The monsters couldn’t reach us while we were in there. Out here, we’re surrounded.”

Kendle and Quinn both frowned at the images Angela was putting into young brains. It bothered them even more that the children had already been feeling this way.

“As we travel, we may run into monsters. For us, I believe they will look like everybody else. I mean people.”

The sound of movement came, along with the clunking thumps of someone digging in a kit.

“Here’s the third rule. Don’t trust anyone.”

There were more clinks, followed by a grunt of effort.

“These are the things I see in my dreams. They scare me, so I draw a picture or write notes about them. You’ll notice that most are human. That’s what scares me.”

“What about the people here?”

“The survivors here are special. We all have good souls. We all follow the light. As we travel, refugees will join us and it will take time to figure out if they also follow the light or if they’ve been corrupted. I need you to tell me if you sense things that I miss, but under no circumstances are these people to ever know that you have gifts. Many of you were hurt. You were stolen from your family and your parents. You were forced to hurt people. All of that will happen again if you don’t follow rule number three—do not trust anyone.”

Most of the kids spoke up, promising they would only trust Eagles and the people who were here now.

“Once the new people have been vetted, it’s okay to treat them like everyone else, but you have to remember rule three. I’ve been betrayed by people I believed were my friends. The same thing probably happened to you. Sometimes, you’ll be tempted to talk to a stranger because you’re lonely or because the adult you want to spend time with is too busy. I promise you, once we reach the boat and sail away, all of you will get time with the people you need—including me. You have to be patient. There’s another month before we’ll be on the boat and every bit of that time will be spent gathering what we need. I can’t have you guys running loose and getting into trouble during that time. I need to be able to count on you. Can I?”

The chorus was loud enough to drown out the sound of the wind for a brief moment.

Tiring of the repeating lines, Kendle rotated toward the parking lot. She had noticed not everyone was in camp. "I'll be around."

"You'll be at the party, right?"

Kendle stopped. "What party?"

Quinn grinned. "A small Eagle celebration of life. Bring your team. You guys have all earned it."

Kendle lifted her brow. "Even Conner?"

Quinn frowned a little. "We took a fast vote while we were traveling. As long as the boy continues to respect Candy's wishes, we have no problem with him."

"That's great. I'll let him know."

Quinn was unable to stop the special, approving smile. "Nice job on keeping your team alive."

Kendle winced instead of being pleased. "I didn't. I lost two of them."

Quinn watched her vanish into the darkness, aware of how much it felt like he was conversing with one of his previous team leaders at this point. It was hard to be happy with the success when a teammate had died, no matter whose fault it was or how it had happened.

Quinn made a note to discuss it with Tommy and then went back to listening to Angela's meeting with the kids. The rules she was laying out were fascinating.

“Coming back in!” Angela held the flap for the line of kids as they returned from the bathroom trip. The hour-long meeting had worn her out. Holding the attention of any child was tiring, but descendant children were so fast on the uptake that it had exhausted her trying to stay in front of their questions about the rules. They hadn’t understood why she wasn’t going to lift the ban on them using their magic. It had taken longer to get that across than it had about not trusting the new people who came into the camp until they were vetted.

When all the kids were in, Angela motioned a guard into place on the flap and joined Mandy in the far corner. The new mother had her child asleep and was nursing both twins at the same time. Aided by several pillows, Mandy looked as tired as Angela felt. “Is she ready to be changed?”

Mandy nodded without opening her eyes. “Everyone is stuffed. We may have fallen asleep.”

Angela missed those moments with her own babies. She forced a smile. “That’s one of the joys of motherhood. They take a lot of naps.”

Mandy chuckled, dislodging the small girl.

Angela took the baby, and laid her across the blankets next to Mandy to change her diaper. As they worked, the two females felt comfortable companionship fill the canvas.

Angela glanced around to discover the descendant children being welcomed by the non-magic children who’d gotten used to having them

close after only a few days. Angela smiled. “Thank you.”

A wave of sleepy approval filled the tent, drawing yawns from everyone.

No sooner had the good mood flooded the area, than tension took its place. All of the descendant children turned toward the flap.

Angela sighed as it opened and Charlie came in. He didn’t speak to her or anyone else as he placed a bedroll in the corner, near the other couples.

The tent was crammed with people. All of them went silent so they didn’t miss Angela’s reaction.

Tracy came into the tent with red cheeks. She hadn’t wanted Charlie to push the issue yet, but the teenager hadn’t listened.

Angela pinned Tracy with a hard look. “If you don’t get a handle on him now, you never will.”

Tracy got what Angela was saying, but she also wanted the restrictions lifted. “I love him.”

Angela motioned toward the bedroll Charlie was busy putting out. “You have the same rules as Kyle and Jennifer. We officially recognize you as a legal couple, but don’t break the age rule on inappropriate contact.”

Among the chatter, Tracy’s happiness and Charlie’s satisfaction pushed the bad vibes back out.

Angela refused to allow any thoughts to form while the boy was able to catch them. She could tell Charlie what was coming, but he would never believe her and the camp was too tired to hear fighting right now.

Jennifer motioned to Tracy. “Can you help me tie this bandage? He won’t hold still.”

Kyle tried to shrug out of the girl’s grip. “I’m fine.”

Jennifer glared at him. “We have matching shoulder wounds now. Be still!”

Kyle laughed, submitting. She and the baby had healed his injury, but the camp didn’t need to know how fast or that Autumn had been involved. In the morning, they would make a show of spending a moment with Conner or Kendle to explain the lack of wounds.

With the latest drama settled, Angela gave the little girl the pacifier and took her brother so she could also change his diaper. They were low on formula, but she planned to send out scavengers as soon as the Market Town business was finished. Until then, Mandy would be able to handle it. “Thank you for caring for them.”

Mandy smiled, picking up her daughter, who was beginning to fuss from all the noise. “I went up two cup sizes and I stay full. It’s nice to have the relief when she’s sleeping.”

Angela chuckled. “Yeah, there are some things they don’t tell you about motherhood.”

“Don’t I know it.” Mandy shifted into a more comfortable position and secured her hold on the baby. “I’m gonna sleep now.”

“In peace, I hope.” Angela finished changing the little boy’s diaper and put him next to his sister, seeing he didn’t need a pacifier. The small eyes

roamed her face continuously, as if trying to memorize it.

Angela clasped his small hand. “Mommy’s got you now. You can sleep.”

The baby boy closed his lids and drifted off.

Angela lingered for a moment, then went out to handle the rest of her list.

She joined Kendle by the chilling vehicles. “How are you now?” It was Angela’s way of asking if Kendle had learned to control the violence inside.

Kendle shrugged. “I’m having more good days than bad.”

Satisfied Kendle wasn’t hiding anything in that area, Angela asked the next question she needed an answer to. “Are you still a threat to me?”

Unprepared for the question, Kendle was horrified by the answer that flew out of her mouth. “Absolutely.”

Angela wasn’t surprised. She was just disappointed. “You’ll need to take care of that if you want to keep your place on my team.”

Kendle had been thinking about that. “I guess I need to resign until I get this cleared up. You can’t have someone like me on your crew. It will rub off on everyone else.”

“Actually, I was hoping that everyone else might rub off on you. You’re the only one who still hates me.”

Kendle considered that. She hadn’t been back long enough to know if it was true, but she had seen how Cynthia and Candy, along with Tracy and

Tonya, had been very protective since the tunnel opened. It wasn't hard to believe that Angela had won everyone over while she was gone. "I didn't volunteer so I wouldn't be in the way. I wanted to help. I didn't know I was doing rug-rat patrol."

Angela chuckled at the wording, but her tone was serious when she answered. "You've given me a gift that will allow me to continue to do my job no matter how hard it gets. I don't care that you hate me. If you want the place on my team, it's yours."

"I'll do my best."

"I know that."

Kendle stared into the darkness. "Do you want me to go after them?"

"No."

Kendle frowned at the denial. "I'm worried."

Angela didn't say she was too. "They've done harder jobs than this and made it through. Have faith."

Kendle wanted to. She wanted to be as cool and calm as Angela was, but her fear for Marc's safety was already out of control.

In the shadows behind them, Kendle's team was half an hour from being off duty. She could feel the displeasure at her reaction to Marc's absence, but Kendle couldn't fight it. She had almost everything she wanted now. Safe Haven was her home and it would help her survive, but not if they lost Marc. After all the stories she'd been told, it was obvious Marc's life had been in danger since the war.

“Before that, really.” Angela hadn’t meant to tell Kendle. She didn’t want to bond with the island woman, the same way Adrian and Marc didn’t want to, but it was too late for holding back. “We went through a lot of stuff as kids, and not all of it came from people. It wasn’t odd for tornadoes to come through our neighborhood every year. I’ve always believed they wanted him.”

Kendle scowled. “There’s something coming, right? Something that fate wants him to miss.”

“We’ll have years of peace, if we have both of them with us. They offset each other and will keep a balance that I would never be able to manage alone.”

“You love them both.”

Angela didn’t answer.

Kendle scanned the darkness, hoping to spot lights. She wasn’t happy to discover that Angela did indeed have feelings for Adrian. It meant somewhere down the line, Marc would get hurt.

“No.” Angela’s voice dropped into stone. “Adrian is the one who will get hurt.”

Kendle watched Angela fade into the shadows, followed by half a dozen guards who wouldn’t hesitate to pull a trigger on her command. “I don’t doubt that a bit.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven BK8
Crossing A Line

1

“She’s getting worried.”

Marc sat up, stretching. “I know.”

“I’ll call if you want. I can reach her.”

“She said to stay off the waves. She wasn’t specific about which kind, so I assumed both.”

“That makes sense. Our gifts are a lot like radios. The closer someone is, the clearer the transmission comes through.”

“It won’t be much longer.” The vet didn’t want the men getting upset with him. He was under Angela’s protection, but both of the males riding in the RV wouldn’t hesitate to kill him and say it was because he was a threat.

“What does she have you doing once you drop us off?” Marc was concerned about the woman with them who had woken half an hour ago and pushed herself into a sitting position. Studying them, she hadn’t spoken yet. Marc wasn’t expecting good things when she finally did. The power coming from her was as strong as Angela’s had been while she was pregnant. Marc assumed the baby held the power though, and the mother was strong enough

and smart enough to control the child until she knew what the future held.

In the driver seat, Chris's lips thinned into a line that drew Adrian's attention, but Adrian didn't question him on it. He already had an idea of what was going to happen; he didn't want to make it harder for any of the people involved than it already would be. He didn't even consider interfering.

"I'm supposed to be back in camp by dawn."

"What about until then?" Marc insisted on knowing the truth, certain he wouldn't like it.

Chris met his glance in the mirror. "Justice."

Marc frowned. "If that means what I think it does, I'll have to interfere."

"I follow the boss's orders to the letter."

Satisfied the woman would be safe at least until Angela gave a kill order, Marc grunted. "Don't forget what I told you."

"I haven't and I won't, but you're wrong. I'm not a threat to her or to you."

Marc didn't feel like continuing the argument. He had already told the vet everything he had to say. As soon as Chris stepped out of line, he would follow through with his threat.

Adrian was glad when the conversation went in a different direction. He knew what the vet was hiding. He was also positive that Marc did too, but as usual, the boy scout was refusing to face it so he didn't have to deal with the natural emotions that would come afterward. "Anyone around?"

"There were lights a few times. I went dark."

Marc and Adrian realized they had fallen into full sleep. Both men checked their watches.

“You were out for two hours. As far as I know, we don’t have a tail. This RV is a lot quieter than it should be.”

Marc approved of the ride. He only had a problem with the driver.

Adrian gestured to remind Marc the vet could read their thoughts, but he couldn’t see their hands in the mirror and drive at the same time. *Go easy on him. Don’t ruin her plans.*

Marc ignored Adrian’s warning “The camp is afraid of you now. You can’t eat mess with them. You can’t shower with them. Stay with your animals.”

“You’ll gather me new ones?”

Chris’s excited voice did get Marc to ease up a little. “Yes. I’m sorry we lost so many in there.”

Chris shrugged. “Angela has her reasons.”

I wish I could accept her choices that easy. Marc tried a different topic, positive that one would also lead them into an argument. “The Eagles will let you eat with them and sleep with them. You’ll probably have a guard. Don’t try to duck out on that.”

Chris frowned. “Why are you helping me?”

“I’m not helping you. I’m helping the boss.”

Chris realized Marc wanted him to settle into camp so Angela could calm down. “I want that too.”

Satisfied they were on the same page, Marc studied Adrian. “What about you? Are you going to be a problem?”

Chris was glad to no longer be the object of Marc’s consideration. He tried to dim himself and get Marc back to camp before the man switched his attention again.

Adrian wasn’t ready for the question. He also wasn’t in the mood to play games. “What do you want from me?”

Marc grinned.

Adrian scowled. “Whatever it is, just say it. We don’t have to keep doing this.”

“Fine. I’m your boss and I hate your guts. I want you to spend every waking moment trying to earn my forgiveness—openly.”

Adrian understood it would please Angela and the camp. “But it won’t work, will it?”

Marc swept him in furious contempt. “What do you think?”

Adrian glared back, sealing up the hurt. “Fine. In return, you’ll follow my instructions with her even when you don’t want to. If you don’t or can’t, I *will* be whatever she needs and you’ll accept it without retaliation on either of us.”

Ignoring the caution from his demon, Marc held out a hand. “We have a truce in place. Don’t ever break it.”

Surprised, Adrian shook. Before he could ask why, Marc released him and the coldness returned.

Adrian understood Marc didn't want to discuss it further and pushed the issue anyway. "If you want to set down new rules or give limits, I'll listen."

Marc sighed in frustration. "I've already tried that and it doesn't work. When she's happy, so is everyone else. You and I will work together to make sure the boss is pleased."

Adrian didn't ask about the limit on that. The answer was clear. The limit was whatever Angela would allow or what she wanted.

Tense, Marc forced himself to accept the situation, again. "When we get there, she'll be fighting the urge to hug you. Just get it over with. It'll make her happy and let her sleep."

Adrian didn't answer. He couldn't speak yet.

Marc chuckled. "I like it when you're speechless."

Adrian laughed too, but carefully. "You mean it this time."

Marc's desolation swept through the RV, causing the vet to turn up the heat.

"She shut me off for two months. She wouldn't smile at me. Even when I slept next to her, I couldn't reach her. I can't go through that again."

Understanding more than he was allowed to say, Adrian made a promise. "It'll be better now."

The only thing that would make this better is if you were man enough to kill yourself.

Adrian wisely didn't respond. He also didn't draw attention to the lone survivor who was still waiting in Erik's camp and was now reaching out

for instructions. Adrian had been relieved not to see the cook on the battlefield. He hated to kill relatives.

Adrian switched his thoughts back to the camp setup and finding things they needed.

Marc acted as if he hadn't caught any of it, but he stored the information in case he wanted to use it later. With Adrian, it was possible that he'd need it. Marc knew better than to trust the man. Despite the good act, very little had changed between them.

2

“Where are they?”

Angela pointed. “Three minutes.”

Mollified, Kendle went quiet, but she didn't leave. She wouldn't until she got to see Marc for herself. She was aware of Tommy's unhappiness, but she would handle that later. He'd been off duty for a while now, following her around.

“When they get here, you'll have the urge to hug him. Just do it and get it over with. It'll make him feel special.”

Kendle gaped. “What?”

Angela glowered at the island woman. “If I have to say it again I'm going to punch you right in your throat.”

Kendle grinned. “You rock.”

Angela grunted. “Whatever it takes to make him happy. I know you're bonded to him in ways.”

Kendle chose to be just as honest. “You know I’ll spend the time trying to get into his heart. Why would you do this?”

Angela walked away. “I’ve already answered that.”

Kendle was stunned. She was also overjoyed. Even without the attraction, she had gotten used to Marc while they were in the west. No one else made her feel that way.

“So this is what insane jealousy is like.” Tommy snorted. “I don’t care for it.”

Conner tried not to laugh. He had duty over the parking area on this side of camp right now, but he wasn’t paying attention because there was too much personal drama going on. He loved to watch Angela work and he had missed being around organized men and women who were helping to cover everyone’s survival. While on the road with Kendle, they had alternated sleeping and driving, with very little time off. In the Safe Haven environment, it was okay to steal a minute or two for himself.

The Georgia park was dark and quiet around the sleeping camp. The guards didn’t spot people or animals, though there were occasional flashes of light in the distance that implied refugees were around. Angela hadn’t given them any instructions. She expected them to do their job, which meant following their training. For the rookies, that was a concern. For the senior men, it was a relief.

Most of the Eagles were okay with Charlie and Conner having so much time on duty and being

drivers for leadership. It cleared the other men for more important duties, but it also gave them time to observe the teenagers who would one day take their places. When training resumed, it would also make it easier to know on what level the boys should be placed. With teenagers, it was always important to stay in front of them. When they got bored, bad things often happened.

Tommy spotted the lights in the distance and braced himself. He'd heard everything that was exchanged between Kendle and Angela, but he wasn't angry over it. He just wanted her to feel that way about him.

"In time, she will." Conner put the man's mind at ease. "She's smart. She'll recognize what a great match you are. Give it time."

Tommy had no reason to doubt the boy. To make sure his emotions didn't get in the way of Kendle's happiness, Tommy turned toward the community tent. "Tell her where I'm at when she's ready."

"I will." Conner didn't watch Tommy leave. He was too busy observing as Marc and Adrian arrived.

Angela was in his arms before Marc climbed out of the RV.

Marc enjoyed the attention, holding her close and tight—the way he now knew she preferred.

Adrian and Kendle tolerated the reunion without the usual bitterness as Marc kissed her.

Angela's resulting happiness almost knocked them off their feet.

"Well, I can't match that." Kendle grunted at Adrian. "Welcome back."

"Thanks. The seats in that RV suck."

They shared laughter.

Angela held onto Marc, making sure he understood how happy she was that he was home.

Marc set her on her feet. "I have to hit the head."

Angela laughed as Marc left, thrilled with his attitude. She wouldn't take advantage of him very often, but after everything they'd gone through together, she and Adrian deserved to have one moment where they were allowed to be themselves. She'd chosen to do it now, where there were only a handful of witnesses. All of those were people who could be trusted to keep their mouths shut. Their hour in the cubby had only happened because she'd needed a nap and the other men she felt safe around had been busy. Angela waved Kendle on. "He'll need updates."

Angela was aware that Marc had left to avoid experiencing her bond with Adrian, but also to avoid Kendle's needy grasp. He'd felt the hug coming.

Overjoyed at a second chance, Kendle hurried off as the guards on the area turned their backs to give Angela privacy.

Instead of falling into Adrian's arms the way everyone was expecting, Angela climbed into the RV.

Chris swiveled around in the captain's chair to regard her in adoration. "Everything went just like you said."

Angela leaned over and kissed the vet on the cheek, making him freeze.

Adrian slid into the RV to get between them if he needed to.

Angela lingered for a moment, trying to reward him for following her orders without question. "You know what comes next."

"I'll handle it."

Angela leaned back, controlling a boiling stomach. "Has she said anything?"

Chris forced his attention to their captive. "I made her give me a name when I pulled her out of their camp. It's Michelle."

Angela locked eyes with the woman. "Erik's wife and Vlad's sister. Welcome to my Safe Haven."

Michelle glared at Angela. She didn't speak yet, but everyone could sense a tirade coming.

Chris restarted the engine at Angela's signal. She didn't want the camp disturbed, but she didn't want to knock the woman out again either.

"Your brother stole something from me that was priceless. Even though he's dead, I'm taking something from him that he considered to be priceless—you."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"No." Angela had no trouble lying. The hatred she felt for this woman and all of her family was

immense. “I’m going to flip you. When you leave us, we won’t ever leave you.”

Michelle settled in to the uncomfortable seat of the RV. All she’d wanted to know was Angela’s immediate plans. If she wasn’t going to be killed yet, she had nothing else to say.

Angela exchanged a quick glance with Chris that Adrian caught. Adrian took her arm to help her down the stairs, then closed the RV.

Chris pulled away, leaving them alone together in the darkness.

“You can stop him. It isn’t too late to change your mind.”

Angela looked at Adrian. “We have three minutes alone. Is that how you want to spend it?”

“That would be honorable, wouldn’t it?”

Angela’s heart thumped when he took a step closer. “Yes, but you aren’t honorable, are you?”

“No. That’s why you have Marc.” Adrian stopped with less than a foot of space between them. “What do you need from me?”

“Everything.”

Adrian gently took her into his arms. Their souls bonded in a blinding flash of joy and completeness that neither of them had ever felt with anyone else.

“Do all soul mates feel this way?”

Adrian held her tighter, breathing deeply of the scent that was unique to her. “I think so. Other couples in camp would be able to describe it.”

Angela also tightened her grip. “Thank you for saving his life.”

“It was a hard choice.” Adrian’s laugh told her he was joking.

Angela rested her cheek against his shoulder, inhaling of his musky scent. “I won’t ever do this again.”

“I know.”

“I could overrule them.”

Adrian kissed the top of her head. “No. You can’t lift my banishment without a camp vote. Not even Marc can do that.”

“I know. It won’t be official.”

“Don’t break the rules, not even for me.” Adrian pushed the moment as far as he could. He held her back a little bit and pressed his lips to her cheek. “At some point in the future, we’ll be allowed to have moments like this whenever we want. Please don’t let your emotions ruin them when they happen.”

Angela stiffened in anger and guilt at the reminder. “Already planning that far out, are you?”

Adrian was sorry he’d ruined her good mood. “I’ll do everything I can to keep him alive.”

“I know. I trust you.”

That meant more to Adrian than the physical moment. It allowed him to press another soft kiss to her cheek and then stepped back. “You always can, no matter what it is that you need.” Adrian rotated toward the parking lot. “I’m gonna get ready for tomorrow. Have a good night.”

Angela felt a chill in the wind as he disappeared into the shadows, but her heart was at ease. When Marc joined her, slipping an arm around her

shoulders, she leaned against him in tired satisfaction. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you can do this.”

Marc kissed the top of her head in the same place that Adrian had. “Let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

“Are we in the community tent?”

Marc led her toward one of the trucks. “We have a bunk.”

Thrilled, Angela allowed Marc to help her inside. Her boots came off first, followed by her gun belt. Both were placed within reach. As she slid over to make space, she noticed Marc staring over his shoulder. “Two minutes?”

“Thank you.” Marc had brushed Kendle off when she’d followed him, not even letting her give him the updates.

Angela pulled the blanket up over her shoulders, moaning at the wonderful sensation of being able to stretch out. When the truck door closed, she refused to stress over what could happen. Loving someone more than yourself was hard. It was even harder when you accepted that you weren’t the center of that person’s universe, that they needed other people in their lives to be happy. Once she and Marc adjusted, the jealousy would still hit them occasionally, but it would be easy to fight because the result was no longer carrying the weight of hating someone just because you couldn’t be the center of their universe.

Angela began to drift, bringing the witch out.
Keep an eye on my camp.

The witch barged out of her cell and flew toward the perimeter.

3

“Got a minute?”

“Sure.” Kendle happily followed Marc away from the truck where Angela was stashed. They both felt it when she went out, along with the rest of the camp. The temperature dropped, but the mood held. She was happy.

Marc wanted this done and over with, but he also hated the part of himself that was looking forward to it. He didn’t owe Kendle anything. This wasn’t a reward for her coming back or a pity moment to keep her rage under control. He wanted this.

Marc paused between the trucks, hoping that only one guard would witness it. Even though he had Angela’s permission, and didn’t care what the rest of the camp thought, it felt disrespectful.

Kendle knew what he was experiencing and didn’t push. She didn’t say any of the million things that were going through her mind. Instead, she settled for staring at him. Whenever Angela was around, she tried hard not to do that.

Marc couldn’t help being attracted to the warmth in her gaze. It was obvious that Kendle was smitten with him, but he also remembered their time

together while fighting the government. She had been a wonderful distraction from his pain of being away from Angela. She had also been a great partner to fight with. She was smart, funny, and had always managed to succeed in whatever chore he gave her. It was hard not to be impressed by that.

It's only a hug. It's only a hug. Marc moved closer, opening his arms.

Kendle tensed. She couldn't help but expect Angela's fire to hit them.

Marc rubbed her arms and then pulled her into his embrace. "It's okay."

Kendle shuddered at the sensations. Luke had made her feel more alive, but she didn't have the full experience with Marc to compare it to. Kendle knew she never would. She assumed Marc was doing this because it would drive Angela crazy for the next few days and pay her back for the moment with Adrian. She felt him running through the reasons, but as she slipped her arms around his neck, Kendle felt his reaction.

Marc didn't want her to know that. It wasn't fair to her to know he was attracted to her, especially when nothing would ever come of it. He assumed the attraction existed because they were both descendants.

Kendle refused to let Marc lie to himself that way. She slid her lips across his bristled cheek, making them both shiver. Two tiny kisses later, she was at the corner of his mouth and Marc reacted, searching for more contact instead of pulling away.

Using strength she didn't know she had when it came to him, Kendle stopped. Heart throbbing and body alive with need, she blew out an angry sigh. "If you ever need me, even for ten minutes in the dark, you only have to ask." She stepped back, but didn't look at him so she could finish what she had to say. "We won't talk about this again. I won't touch you. I won't say things that are inappropriate. We'll work together fine, like we did before, but you know, and I know, that if Angela wasn't in the picture, you'd be mine."

Marc couldn't argue with that. Out of all of the females in the camp, only Kendle and Angela drew any fire from him. "I'm sorry."

Kendle shrugged, meeting his eye. "I'm not. I believed Luke was one of those moments that happen to random people at random times. I didn't realize I could create that type of a bond with another person. If not for my attraction to you, I never would have let Tommy in. He's a great guy."

"Yes, he is." Marc was happy she'd found someone other than Adrian and even more relieved that she wasn't going to be a problem. While he would never cheat on Angela, he also didn't want to fantasize about another woman. As long as Kendle kept her distance, that wouldn't happen. If she spent too much time around him sending out vibes of being available, it would cause his thoughts to wander. But that would be all. Like any other guy who was happy in his relationship, Kendle would be one of the few females who would be able to turn

him on, but also like those happily married men, he would never betray his mate. He loved Angela. Wanting Kendle was just a natural physical evolution.

That's an interesting theory. Adrian joined Marc as Kendle left. "Do you think it's a survival drive?"

"I don't know, but it's too common in Safe Haven for me to say no." Marc opened the door to the truck. "I don't like it when you guys distract me. Don't do it again."

"I won't, but I can't speak for her." Adrian didn't pretend ignorance. He didn't want to ruin the fragile peace between them.

"If he carries out that order, you and I will take care of it tomorrow."

Adrian was relieved. He had planned to ask Marc about it. "At your call."

Marc climbed into the rig.

Adrian walked toward the camp, not sure where he should sleep. Leadership couldn't clear him without a vote, but he needed to stick around at least until tomorrow's business was finished. Steps slow, Adrian noticed a shadow near the edge of the caution tape. He caught the vibes before the mental invitation and smiled. He gestured in response and then detoured toward the bathrooms. It appeared he had a bed waiting.

Body lighting up and guilt screaming, Nancy faded back into the shadows to wait.

“I want to go to the party.”

At that moment, Neil realized Samantha had made her choice to stay with Safe Haven. She wanted to be with her team. Instead of arguing, Neil felt relief swarm over his tired body. *I didn't want to leave. Imagine that.*

Samantha rubbed Neil's wrist. “I'm sorry. I needed time to be sure.”

Neil kissed her cheek. “There's nothing to be sorry for. I wasn't sure either, apparently.”

Samantha put her arms around his neck as he lifted her, wishing her leg was ready for use. She hated to be carried everywhere.

To her surprise, Neil put her on her feet.

Samantha smiled. “Really?”

Neil grunted in reluctant approval. “Adrian did a good job on those last stitches. I don't think it'll bleed through again if you take breaks while you walk.”

Samantha was elated. She zipped her coat and took the cane Neil had made from a thick stick. “Let's go!”

Neil chuckled. He understood how it felt to be away from the activities he loved. His breaks hadn't been because of physical injuries, but it had still been hard to be on the outside.

Kyle joined them, frown taking up most of his face as Jennifer went to Samantha. Both women were obviously uncomfortable as they fought the

stiff wind. Kyle glared at Neil and everyone else, but when Jennifer looked over her shoulder at him, his expression faded into tolerant annoyance.

Neil got that too. No matter how much he wanted Samantha to hide in a tent, he loved her being happy. *And she is right now. I can feel it.*

Tonya and Kendle appeared in front of them. Both females joined Jenny and Sam, after a quick nod to their men. When Tonya put a hand under Samantha's arm to steady her, Neil forced himself to relax. Samantha's team would protect her. They were Eagles. Neil felt his spirits lift. He stepped over to Kyle and took the man's good arm.

Kyle regarded him in icy confusion. "What are you doing?"

"Helping an old lady across the street."

Neil ducked Kyle's shove, snickering with everyone else. More Eagles joined them as they strode toward the far end of camp, all grinning. The party wouldn't last long and there wouldn't be music, but it would still be a celebration of life and survival that all of them needed.

5

"Do you want me to keep an eye on things?"

Angela's grip tightened on Marc's arm in response.

Marc let sleep reclaim him.

Angela held out for a few more minutes, listening to her team leaders and her conscience.

She'd made her choice for tomorrow, but it hadn't been an easy one. If she'd miscalculated, Safe Haven's descendants would be crushed and the camp would only have children to defend them.

Angela thought about Leeann and Cody, then Missy and Charlie. All of them together wouldn't be able to fight a group that had been able to kill the parents, so she'd told Leeann to gather the descendant kids who could travel and run. She hadn't given the terrified girl a location. If they lost tomorrow and were captured, Angela didn't want to have that information in her mind. Their enemies would already know where Safe Haven was going. It would take a miracle, but there was at least a tiny chance the kids might survive. Safe Haven wouldn't.

We'll win. Try to sleep.

Angela allowed Adrian's wave of sleep to sink in and carry her off.

Thanks.

No problem. Adrian got away from Marc's demon. The spirit was patrolling the perimeter with Angela's witch and neither of them was in a good mood. Both of them wanted him gone and they didn't care about his truce with Marc. If he stepped out of line in any way, it would be a contest between the demons to see which one could kill him first.

Chapter Thirty-Eight BK8
Reality Sets In

1

Adrian jumped as Charlie joined him. He hadn't spotted the boy coming.

Charlie held out his hand.

Adrian gave him the sheet of paper without speaking. He also refused to think about anything.

Charlie put the paper in his pocket. "I already know."

"Know what?"

"I'm being tested. She told me to stay with Safe Haven while you guys run off and fight tomorrow."

Adrian didn't hear the usual defiance that laced Charlie's every word these days.

"I want to fight. I also want to be with Tracy."

"You're not alone in that. It's one of the hardest choices an Eagle ever has to make. Most of the time, we have rules that keep us on the right path, but our emotions blur the lines."

"Are the lines right? Is any of this right?"

Adrian was impressed that the boy had come to that after the last months of stress. "Of course not. It's survival and that's more important than any rule when the moment comes."

"That doesn't make it easier to decide."

“I know. That’s why it’s so easy to make a mistake even when you’ve been doing this for years.”

Charlie didn’t care about Adrian’s guilt or half-assed apology. “What will Conner do?”

“He’ll follow orders, even if it costs Candy’s life.”

“I can’t do that.”

“We know.”

“Which means mom planned on me not being here to keep them calm.” Charlie glared at Adrian. “She gave it to Conner, didn’t she?”

“Why do you care? You’ll be getting to fight and you’ll know Tracy’s safe.”

Charlie clamped his lips together as he fought his jealousy to figure out his motives. He knew that was important.

Adrian gave the boy time even though he was frozen and exhausted.

“I like Conner. I wanted to be sent on missions, like him.”

“What else?”

“I hate him because he was sent on a mission and I don’t think I ever will be.”

“There you go.” Adrian rotated toward the shadows, where Nancy’s warm truck now held his sleeping roll and kit.

“Hey! Aren’t you going to help me figure this out?”

Adrian kept walking. “Take the next steps—face it, and then change it. You don’t need me here to

clutter your thoughts for that.” Adrian grinned at Shawn, who now had point over the camp. “You know where I’ll be.”

Shawn laughed. “Yep. Lucky man.”

“I’ve often believed so.” Adrian took Nancy’s cold hand, sending warmth and desire in thick waves as he vanished into the foggy truck with her.

2

Conner observed the Eagle party from a distance. Morgan had invited him, but Conner had been wise enough to refuse. As Lee’s widow, it was possible that Candy would attend. Conner didn’t want to risk ruining his new chance at a life in Safe Haven. He had refused without telling Morgan that, but he was certain the Eagle had understood because Morgan had clapped him on the shoulder and invited him to sit with the teams at breakfast. Conner had accepted gratefully, but now, studying the party from the outside, he wished he were able to be there without it causing problems. While the group of fifteen wasn’t making a lot of noise, it was sending good waves across camp. They were obviously having a good time.

Instead of moving closer as he was tempted to do, Conner took an opposite route that would lead him to the other end of the camp.

Around the boy, his guards noted Conner’s choice and approved of it. Many of them had believed his punishment was a little harsh, but

Conner was busy proving he could be trusted. As long as he continued to do that, he would be accepted no matter who his father was.

Another former Eagle strode through the shadows, this one going toward the party.

Daryl and the other men on duty sent sharp glares, but they didn't stop Kevin from going toward the group who had tucked themselves under a semi for privacy and shelter.

Kevin stopped a few feet away as the people went silent. "Is this a bad time?"

Quinn gestured toward an empty place. "Have a seat. We were just wondering where Dog is."

Kevin took the seat, eager to tell them all about his adventures.

Before he could get started, Greg handed him a bottle. "Hang on until the rest of Kendle's team gets here. I know they'll want to hear it too."

"Is it okay if I ask about Seth?"

Kevin's question was met with frowns and scowls.

"It's not a secret. They ran off."

Kevin frowned at Greg. "They were part of the Runaways?"

Arm aching, Quinn spit into an empty can. "They took off right as we were closing the passages, before the camp split into three factions. We were under attack when they ran off."

"That's not exactly the way it happened." Greg filled in the blanks, still just as angry as everyone else was about it. "Becky ran away and a bunch of

the kids followed her. We almost lost them. There was an explosion and people were trapped. We had Mexicans coming in the bottom tunnel and assassins every time we turned around who were trying to take out leadership, and Seth still followed that girl out.”

“Well, she is carrying his baby.” Neil tried to be the voice of reason.

Kevin understood it was a sore subject and took a healthy swig off the bottle instead of commenting.

“Here they come!”

Kevin realized what was going on in anger. Kendle’s team and Ivan’s soldiers were the heroes of the party. He and Jeff had sledded down a mountain in front of an avalanche, and Jeff had killed Dirce, but they weren’t being celebrated because they’d left without orders.

Kevin’s bitterness increased as Ivan and Tommy slid under the truck with them.

Tommy dropped down next to Kendle, heart warming at her soft smile of welcome. “We made a second round of the guards. Lot of rookies on duty tonight.”

“Did you talk to Adrian?” Greg and the other Eagles felt like he should be here; they’d agreed to invite him.

Tommy nodded. “He said it wouldn’t be right, but I thought he was gonna cry, so he understands how we feel.”

Satisfied, Greg gestured toward the parking area. “Boss out?”

Ivan chuckled. “Like a light. She won’t hear a thing.”

The senior men rolled their eyes and chuckled.

“We’ll keep it down. She won’t care.” Kyle took the bottle from Kevin. “Let’s hear about Dog and then some more from Market Town.”

Saving the best for last. Kevin’s anger increased again. “Dog stayed with Sally. He said he wanted to monitor the herds for another week, but Jeff woke us up shouting, so we rolled out.”

“We saw that happening on the radar before the quake. I put it in the books. Any idea what’s going on?”

Kevin shook his head at Samantha’s question. “No, but it was like that everywhere we tried to dump Sally off.”

Samantha frowned at his mean tone. “Where did you leave her?”

“A little town northwest of here. Quiet, remote, and all sorts of farms with root cellars that hadn’t been looted. She should be good for a while if she hides when people come through. Jeff told her to, but I doubt she will.”

“Why not?”

“Because she hates people and if they’re descendants, she’ll probably try to kill them.”

“Why would you leave someone out there to hurt our kind, even if it was a woman?”

Kevin glanced at Brandon in confusion. “Because Angela said to, of course.”

That brought silence where Kevin could feel them doubting his honesty. Angered, he rolled out from under the semi. "I'll be around."

The group watched his boots vanish into the camp, each of them worrying. Kevin was a loose cannon—one of the few they had left.

"It wouldn't take much to get him to run off again."

People nodded at Greg's comment, but Neil frowned. "The boss wants him here. We need to find out why."

"Maybe it's so Jeff doesn't kill him."

Everyone joined Kendle in the laughter. It had been clear that Jeff hadn't enjoyed his time with Kevin. Under the amusement was concern over not having enough help to guard the camp. They needed Kevin to stay, but they also needed Doug and Seth to come back. Those men were trained, experienced. Right now, Safe Haven had more rookies than teachers. The shift at this moment was under the guidance of Zack. When the party was over, half of them would join that tired man and help until dawn.

Boots crunched near the semi again. The teams watched as a camp woman walked toward one of the rookie guards.

Ivan watched the woman's boots, all he could see from where he was. "Should we stop that?"

"No." Neil waved the bottle on. "She initiated it."

Understanding Conner was about to be tested, Kendle started to get up, but Tommy put a hand on her arm. “He’s got this.”

Kendle settled back down, trying to listen instead.

Tommy knew. He distracted her by handing her the bottle. “Tell them about the fight you had with the chick who held us all naked in the cage.”

“Woman?!”

“Naked?!”

Not all of the Eagles had heard yet.

Kendle was drawn into the story, forgetting about Conner as she tried to explain how she’d handled the whip-toting slave master in Market Town.

3

Candy knew she was being watched. Guards were trailing her in case she’d made a mistake, but she wasn’t worried. Being out in the open air had finished clearing her mind.

Conner stiffened as he felt her approach. Back to the camp and mind on tomorrow’s activities, he still knew who it was. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Candy stopped a few feet away. “We need to talk.”

Conner nodded to Zack as the man made a round of the area. “About what?”

“About what happened while you were gone.”

Conner’s heart dropped. “Okay.”

Candy waited for him to turn around. When he didn't, she frowned. "You're allowed to look at me now."

"No, I'm really not."

Candy understood he was determined to follow the rules of his banishment. She also knew he wanted to stare at her. She could feel him fighting it. "You were with me, right? It wasn't my imagination."

Conner hated this choice. The easy way was to pretend ignorance and let her believe it was part of what she'd suffered during her breakdown over Lee's death and being trapped in the mountain. "Damn." Conner couldn't do it. "Yes, it was real."

Candy felt the relief that she wasn't going crazy and a small fear of his power. He had to be strong to be able to reach her over such a distance without anyone knowing.

"You don't have to be afraid of me."

"How can I be sure of that?"

"Over time, I guess." Conner hadn't budged, aware of a dozen guards now in the area. "Deep down, you already are or you wouldn't be this close to me."

"I feel something for you. It scares me because you're just a kid and I miss my husband."

"You're lonely." Conner's fists clenched. "So am I. I recognize it... I'm drawn to it."

"Because you believe we're soul mates and we can fix each other." Candy frowned as she said it, hearing how crazy it was.

“Because I love you.” Conner expected her to leave or call him names. He hadn’t meant to say that.

Candy considered her options, too tired to think it through as far as she should. “Turn around.”

Conner braced to be slapped and screamed at, hoping the guards would remember that she’d come to him. He hadn’t been stalking her.

Candy noted a young man’s healthy body and shaggy hair that needed a trim. She saw his clenched fists next and realized he was scared.

The guards also knew. It was all over the boy’s face and in his body language. Whatever Candy said or did here might break Conner’s plan to follow the rules.

“Angela will officially lift your banishment tomorrow. Did they tell you?”

Conner nodded his head, allowing himself to breathe. “I’m finished with the punishments.”

Candy expected a yelp of happiness or any reaction other than sadness. “What’s wrong?”

Conner was staring at the ground. “Not you, right?”

“Yes, me too.”

Conner’s joy swarmed over Candy in powerful breakers that caused her to stiffen in guilty pleasure.

“Don’t do that.” Conner’s whisper was just for her. “Enjoy me, if only for a minute.” He slammed her again, letting her feel how much he wanted her.

Candy was helpless against Conner's emotions. She didn't know what she wanted, but she knew instinctively that he could give it to her.

Conner shut it down, gasping. He hadn't meant to do anything like that yet, let alone in front of so many witnesses. He put his back to her again, trying to get himself under control. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not." Candy glanced toward the semi where the party was now making enough noise to be noticeable. "I won't be there. You should join your team." With that, Candy cleared him.

Conner listened to her walk away, heart pounding. He didn't know where they went from here, but at least it wasn't back to the dead silence that implied he was a danger.

The guards around them made a note of it. The demonstration of his emotions had come after he'd been provoked, so there wouldn't be any charges for that. In fact, Conner could now be around Candy without the tension. It was another problem solved.

4

"I can't believe they're all still sleeping. It's almost 8 AM."

Adrian kissed Nancy's bare shoulder. "Everyone's happy to be out of the mountain. They're sleeping it off."

Nancy covered his hand with hers and put her cheek against his chest. She listened to his heart, feeling the rise and fall of his chest. There was so

much she wanted to say to him, but none of it formed correctly, so she didn't. She could do that when they parted. For now, she wanted to enjoy being close to someone.

“So you and Shane really never...?”

Nancy shook her head. “We were too busy playing games.”

Adrian didn't need Nancy to tell him that this time was just one of those moments that two people sometimes shared. He had often turned to her in the past, but this time, it had been different. She had been waiting for him. Because of that, Adrian had taken the time to make sure she was pleased, twice. He was hoping for a repeat performance whenever she needed it, of course. After all, he was a guy. The other thing she needed wouldn't happen without a real discussion first.

Nancy lifted her chin as a guard went by. “Will anyone care?”

Adrian shrugged. “I doubt it. It's not like you plan to make this a habit.”

Nancy was relieved he understood. “You have others. Not everyone here wants you banished anymore.”

“I know, but unless it's removed, I'll be spending a lot of time out of camp. When you want to be with me, I'll be around, but you'll have to leave camp. Be careful doing that, not because of how the herd will react, but because we're out in the wilderness again.”

“I’m happy about that. I never wanted to be in the mountain.”

“Neither did I.”

Outside the warm truck, noises of the camp echoed through the foggy dawn. Adrian listened to it with a heart that was both hurting and healing. Because of Angela and the choices that she had been strong enough to follow through on, some of their people had survived. More importantly, Safe Haven and the dream had survived, and Angela was back in the lead. That was the happiness. The sadness was what came next.

“Try not to think about it. Please?” Nancy didn’t want their time together to be marked with her tears. She wasn’t searching for a way to trap him. She didn’t expect him to claim her or expect them to have any type of a happy-ever-after. She just wanted him to be treated fair, but it wasn’t going to happen.

Adrian could have told her he deserved it, that it was part of rebuilding a second chance in life that he had to handle if he wanted to be able to look at himself in a mirror every morning, but he didn’t need to. That was one of the reasons he enjoyed spending time with Nancy. She was a lot like Angela. She knew some of what he needed so that he didn’t have to ask for it.

Only one other relationship had been better, but Conner’s mom was gone. He hadn’t meant to love her, much like with Angela. When Angela first came to his camp, he’d tried to fight the attraction,

but it had been too strong. Conner's mom and Angela had been very different, but he loved them both as much as a man could love a woman. There wasn't anything he wouldn't give to bring Shannon back or to have a chance with Angela now, except his honor. He'd been without that since the camp discovered his betrayal; it was surprising to Adrian to discover his obsessions were taking a backseat to the desire to be considered one of the good guys again.

He had forgotten what it felt like to be on the outside, to be hated. Many people still believed he deserved it, but the sharp pain in his gut and the sense of shame he carried was too ugly for him to tolerate any longer. With Angela's help, and maybe a little luck from fate, he would be allowed back into camp at some point. Right now, that was his goal.

Adrian rubbed Nancy's shoulder again. "We have half an hour until the next guard change. Would you like to snooze in my arms?"

"No, thank you."

Adrian grinned, catching the vibe. "A repeat performance then. Come here. I want your titties in my face this time."

Nancy giggled.

The guards moved away at the familiar noises and motions of the vehicle. It surprised them that the rest of the camp wasn't up yet, but it was also a relief. The small layer of frost on the ground from the stiff winds made it easier to identify threats and to keep track of the few camp members who were

out of bed. There were quick bathroom trips going on right now, but soon, the hundred and seventy people here would rise in search of breakfast and companionship.

Morgan saw the RV coming and made a note of what time the vet was returning. The guards had orders to let him in, but Morgan didn't like it. The vet was a nasty leftover from their time in the mountain that would continue to upset the camp every time he was around them.

The RV came to a halt in the far corner of the camp, almost out of sight, but the vet didn't emerge. Morgan assumed he was going to sleep there and was relieved. Keeping order would be easier if people didn't have to be reminded there was still a killer among them.

Morgan spotted Marc staring through the small window of the semi. Marc was also studying the RV. Having worked with Marc enough in the past, Morgan recognized that stare. Not wanting his thoughts to give away anything Marc had planned, Morgan strode to the other end of camp, where the bathroom tents had a short line of grouchy people needing to use them. He would be distracted by the complaints—exactly what the situation called for.

Marc observed the RV for a moment longer, finalizing his plans. As he lay down, draping an arm back around Angela's slender waist, it occurred to him that she knew what he was going to do. He could tell by her breathing that she was awake. When she snuggled in his embrace, groaning at his

warmth, Marc allowed the plan to become final. The vet had outlived his usefulness. *Finally!*

Marc knew he shouldn't be happy that he had received the silent okay to eliminate the man, but it was impossible. Unlike Adrian, who honestly loved Angela and wanted her to be happy, the vet was obsessed with something he could never have, which made him dangerous.

Across the camp, the vet missed all of it. He'd been up for two days straight. As soon as he'd shifted the RV in park and shut it off, he'd curled up in the floorboard of the front passenger side and crashed. He'd been asleep seconds later.

Around him, the empty RV screamed in silent accusation that the vet was too corrupt to feel.

5

“Adrian isn't here. Does that matter?” Marc didn't like not knowing where the former leader was.

Angela sipped her coffee. “No. The camp is used to him not being around now.”

Made up of team leaders and council members, this meeting was happening before the rest of the camp woke. Not that everyone was asleep. Half a dozen members were in line for the bathroom, with another dozen at the tables around the meeting. None of those were descendants however, and Angela chose to keep going. They wouldn't learn

much from this meeting anyway. All of the plans had been delivered yesterday.

Around the camp, the surroundings reminded everyone of the dangers of not being sheltered by the mountain. The nearby town was burnt to the ground. From the graffiti, people were assuming it had happened during a fight with the UN. Signs of that army were everywhere.

“I’ll make the call in thirty minutes. Fifteen minutes after that, we’ll be in the trucks. As we pull out, everyone will see us in the vehicles where we’re supposed to be. We’ll meet back here.”

Half of the people at the table were happy they’d been chosen for the mission. The other half of the fighters were furious they hadn’t been. Kyle was among those who were having trouble controlling their anger. Jennifer should be staying here with him.

Tonya felt the same way even though Kenn wasn’t hurt. The huge bruise on his chest was a reminder of how close he’d come to dying.

“Charlie and Conner have point over the bugout.” Angela made sure that was loud enough for everyone to hear and then studied the reactions. When there were no hostile thoughts, she shifted into the next phase of the plan, hoping it was the last one like this that she ever had to make. “Bring all the weapons you want, but energy is what we’re going to need the most. Don’t waste it.” She glanced around the table. “Questions or comments?”

“The RV is gone again.”

“He also has work to do today.” That was Angela’s way of telling them the vet would be along for the run. No one liked hearing that, but at the same time, they did. Chris was lethal and he had no compunction about killing anybody that got in her way. On a run like this, that could be an advantage.

“What happens if you don’t come back?”

Marc scowled at Neil for the question, but Angela was ready for it. “I’ve made plans to get the girls back here to help you with the camp. All I can tell you from there, is to run.”

Not satisfied, but hoping Angela wasn’t lying about having their mates covered, Neil and Kyle accepted the answer.

Angela motioned toward the food Brittani was putting out. “Everyone needs a second helping, and drink as much water as you can hold. Our ride has a bathroom. Meeting adjourned.”

Most of the council rose from the table. Two of the team leaders lingered with their mates until Angela gave Jennifer a gesture that said it was time. “Be safe.”

Jennifer took Kyle’s hand and led him away from the table. *She wants me to leave now because I can’t tuck and roll very well. Act like you’re putting me in one of the vehicles for a nap.*

Kyle didn’t argue. He did consider sneaking along with her, however. That, he didn’t mention.

Jennifer knew. She didn’t scold him or tell him it was too dangerous for the camp to be without protection. She said the only thing she knew would

work without a fight, taking a page out of Marc's book when it came to dealing with Angela. "Autumn needs you here."

Kyle growled at her. "That is so unfair!"

"I know, but it's the truth. I could never do this if I didn't know you were here to take care of her."

Still an Eagle at heart, Kyle didn't want her to be distracted on the run. It was clear that she wouldn't refuse to go. "I'll handle things. You finish up and come home where you belong."

Jennifer gave Kyle a lingering hug and then climbed into the backseat of her assigned vehicle. A few seconds later, she was buried beneath the blankets.

Kyle assumed his assigned duty of verifying all the vehicles held the proper occupants, heart pounding. Jennifer would slip out, leaving the blankets and jackets bundled up in an attempt to fool anyone who peered through the windows. Kyle was certain Angela had assigned passengers who knew not to report Jennifer's absence. Unable to help the worry, Kyle tried hard to keep his mind off that part of the plan in case any of the descendants who were not privy to the information were reading minds right now. Without a gift of his own, Kyle had no way to tell when that was happening.

Kyle saw Neil helping Samantha into her assigned truck in much the same manner that he had just done with Jennifer. The two men exchanged a glance that implied the next twelve hours would be hell.

“Incoming!”

Guards rushed toward the parking area, where the call had originated. As they neared the edge of the squared-off protection around the camp, they spotted a dust trail from a single vehicle flying toward the camp.

Conner and Charlie reached the parking area together. The boys didn’t discuss how to handle the problem. Both of them were busy scanning the occupant.

“It’s one of the ducks.”

Conner frowned in confusion. “One of the what?”

Charlie motioned the guards back to their posts. “It’s okay. It’s one of the doctor’s students. We started calling them ducks because of the way they followed him around all the time.”

Conner observed the vehicle, aware that it hadn’t slowed. “That might be a problem.”

Before the boys could decide on a plan of action, the vehicle swerved toward them, horn blaring.

Eagles hurried to pull Conner and Charlie out of the way as the small, dented wagon slid to a stop where they’d been standing.

The vehicle had come through hell. Missing glass and dotted in bullet holes, the driver door fell off as the medical student staggered out.

“Help him!”

“All gone!” The dead duck stumbled around the open car and dropped to his knees. “Help me.”

Dan's shirt was tacky with blood. Fresh streams ran from multiple holes in the front of his coat as he knelt before them. Beaten and bloody, his waxy skin told them what was about to happen.

Conner moved forward to help, but Charlie put a hand on his arm. "It's too late."

Conner shrugged off Charlie's grip. "It would take a lot, but I can do it."

Charlie stepped in front of Conner, forcing the boy to look at him. "No."

Conner wanted to argue that it was the right thing to do. He also wanted to scream that he was in charge. Wise enough to know both of those were the wrong reactions, Conner swept the Eagles around them.

Kyle shook his head. "This camp needs your energy more than that one soul."

Conner stomped away from the scene before he could do it anyway. It felt wrong to let someone die when he could help them.

Charlie approached Dan, holding his hand out. "I'm sorry."

Dan tried to focus on the boy, but his vision was blurry and his ears were ringing. "They're dead. All gone."

Charlie patted the man's wrist, trying to offer what little comfort he could. "Even Ray?"

Dan stiffened; his breath came out in a rough gasp. "Didn't see him."

Before Charlie could ask another question, Dan slumped forward on the ground.

Charlie spent a minute trying to read any remaining thoughts the duck might have, but there was nothing. He stood up and strode toward the Eagles who had a medical kit waiting.

Neil squirted hand sanitizer into Charlie's palm and then stored the bottle, along with the kit. It was impossible to guess what Dan may have come in contact with during his escape. Neil gestured toward the body. "Burn it. Use gloves."

The car was splattered in blood and there was a puddle in the seat. It wouldn't be used for transportation, but they would drain the fuel and water.

Three senior men came forward, reminded of their time before they had made it to the mountain. Under Adrian's leadership, this had been a normal chore. None of them had missed it.

Charlie did a fast sweep and found Conner lingering near the community tents. The Eagles around him had considered the boy might be spying on Candy, but the idea was dismissed. Conner was stewing over what had just happened. He didn't even realize Candy was in there.

"I'll make sure that doesn't get out of hand." Morgan hoped nothing else happened. Half of leadership was still in camp and the tension was already crazy. What would it be like when they were all gone?

While Morgan spoke to Conner, Charlie turned toward the people who had witnessed Dan's arrival. He joined them with calm tones and regretful

words. A fresh death in front of everyone was a grim reminder of the people they'd left behind. It was also proof of what Angela had been saying all along. The choice to bugout of the mountain hadn't been an easy one. They'd been taunted and made fun of, shunned, and even attacked, but in the end, she'd been right to get them out of there.

Kyle and the others observed for a moment, and then went to their assigned places. It was obvious Charlie could do the job when he wanted to. The question that everyone had was could he follow the rules. No one would stop him from leaving to join his mother and father, but if he did that, no one would follow him anywhere afterwards.

"It's time to go!" Angela's call came over the radio. There was a brief pause and then it crackled again. "In five minutes, I'm leaving. Be in your vehicles in five minutes."

The camp exploded in a flurry of activity as everyone hurried to finish eating, repacking, and using the bathroom. Once they got into a groove again, the smaller number of camp members would make this faster. Until then, it was organized chaos carried out with fond memories of previous travel days where they had whined.

The guards burned the body in the center of camp, where some people had spent a cold evening readjusting to the outside noises. It was another reminder and a warning at the same time. It increased their speed and the bad mood. No one liked to be rushed, but burning flesh added an awful

layer that made them run. Camp members were afraid of being left behind, especially now that they saw what would happen. Dan's burning body said if they got separated, not only would they be on their own, but they wouldn't be okay to be buried if Safe Haven found their remains.

Conner and Charlie directed people to where they were supposed to be while mentally searching for problems. They didn't find any, but they didn't stop searching. The boys were about to be in charge of almost two hundred lives. It was terrifying.

Chapter Thirty-Nine BK8
Hard And Quick

1

Within five minutes, Safe Haven's vehicles were full. It was the fastest travel day load up that many of them had ever experienced.

"We're ready. Let's roll." Angela hung up the mike. Those might be the last words her camp ever heard from her. She glanced over as Conner climbed into the driver seat. "All accounted for?"

Conner started the engine. "I checked it, Charlie checked it, and then the senior Eagles checked it right behind us. We have everyone."

Angela settled in like she was getting comfortable for another long day of travel as Ivan and his soldiers came up to take the lead. Staying half a mile in front of the convoy at any time, they would also make hourly returns to the line for a complete circuit all the way to the rear vehicles. It was the best Angela could do in her absence.

"Charlie said to tell you he is staying with the camp."

Angela was glad to hear it. "Tell him we'll be in line when you stop for the night."

That answer pleased Conner, but he was worried about Marc killing Adrian while they were

on the run. The Eagles weren't worried about it anymore, and Charlie was annoyed because it wasn't going to happen, but Conner refused to believe it until he had seen it.

"If we don't come back, stick to the plan you made."

Conner glanced over with guilt written on his face. "What plan?"

Angela snorted. "Your plan to have your Candy before dinner."

Conner was startled into a chuckle at the wording. He knew it was a bad time to laugh, but he couldn't help it.

Angela let the teenager gain control of himself, remembering when life had been that simple. It seemed like eons ago.

"It's not a bad plan. It doesn't break any rules."

"That's why I'm telling you to stick with it. If you change your plan, you'll make a mistake."

"Is that what happened to you?" Conner and his team had heard the stories. He knew what had happened to Angela. They'd noticed upon arrival that she wasn't pregnant anymore, but hadn't felt like it was right to ask.

Angela sighed. "I tried to do it all alone."

Conner frowned. "I'm doing that now."

"But you're not, really. I know your plan. A few other people also suspect what you have planned. No one knew what I was doing."

"My dad did at the end. He told me he couldn't get to you fast enough."

“He saved my life that night.”

“I’m sorry for all of you.”

Angela sighed again, hating the subject. “We’re going to spend more time together, Conner.” Angela ignored the way he tensed. “I need to know that I can trust you because I’m going to use you for things. One of them will pit you against Charlie, enough for him to see that there’s someone else to take his place.”

Conner wasn’t sure if he was okay with that, but he was also positive he would agree if it helped him get what he wanted.

“I only care if it’s what *she* wants. Without any more manipulation.”

Conner flushed. He had contacted Candy when he wasn’t supposed to. It had only been to offer comfort, but it was still a violation of his conditional banishment. He refused to think about the other moments while sitting by the alpha.

Seeing her destination coming up, Angela let the boy off the hook, mostly because the reports about his behavior on the trip had been exemplary. “You were on conditional banishment during the times that you were in Safe Haven’s perimeter. Any contact you had with her after that is not a violation unless she reported it as one.” Angela gestured. “Around the next curve is a field. The weeds around it make a good cover. Do not change your speed. I’ve accounted for it.”

Conner understood she was getting ready to exit the vehicle. “Good luck.”

Angela popped the handle on the truck so she would be ready when they reached the right location. “Same to you.”

Angela shoved the door and lunged toward the ground, tucking and rolling.

As Conner went around the curve, gravity forced the door shut.

Angela was poked, scratched, bumped, and jostled on the way. It had been a long time since she’d done anything like this and her body reminded her of it with pain that flared up in several areas, including an ankle that smacked against a rock. Angela rolled to a stop deep in the weeds and curled into a ball to wait for the convoy to pass.

Less than a minute later, she felt two large, warm forms join her, one on each side.

The trio braced for someone to roll down a window and point, or call on the radio asking what they were doing. They were only hidden by weeds and half of their clothing didn’t match.

It was a relief when no one noticed, but it was also a problem. Before they’d come to the mountain, the men and women who were passing them would have noticed people hiding in the bushes alongside the road.

While they waited for the convoy to pass, the trio kept their thoughts normal to avoid alerting descendants who weren’t going with them.

Adrian concentrated on figuring out a way to earn more respect. It was a common thought in his mind since his banishment.

Marc centered on finding the next location for their camp, something he had done on travel days even though Angela or Adrian usually chose the route.

Angela thought about her missing babies.

As soon as the last vehicle was out of sight, Angela got onto her feet and marched toward the campsite. Without Safe Haven sitting in the middle of it, bringing light and life, the bare ground was like every other abandoned space remaining from a society that had destroyed itself. Trees waved mocking greetings and the wind blew through the underbrush in ominous growls.

Marc and Adrian stayed on her heels, searching the cold, snowy cliffs and trees around them. There had been enough time for surviving refugees to track them, and there was always a chance that Bryson's mercenaries hadn't taken the bait and were setting up their chance to pick people off.

Angela knew all of that. She'd been worrying about it for weeks, but now that the moment was here, she was certain she'd made the right choice. It was bothersome that it would be hours before she could make contact and verify a location, however. Eager to be on the way, Angela made a quick signal in the air.

Marc and everyone else watched the RV come toward them with frowns. She'd told them the vet was going along, but they hadn't realized he would be their driver. Among the Eagles, that was an honored position.

Angela hurried into the vehicle, sliding over so she could see Chris in the mirror.

Jennifer and Samantha were put in next, with Kenn helping both females. They were the reason Kenn was along. As an Invisible, his gift to read minds during the battle would help, but he would have been better served taking care of Safe Haven. With Jennifer weak and Samantha injured, Kenn's big shoulders were needed more than his descendant ability.

Kenn knew that, but it didn't bother him. He was thrilled not to have been left behind for the run.

The last one in, Adrian took the passenger seat. As soon as he shut the door, Chris pulled out in a wide arc and turned them back toward the mountain.

No one spoke for a few minutes. Warming up from their short walk in the cold weather, it was also a tense minute of deciding to trust the vet when they weren't positive he was worthy of it.

Marc and Adrian both swept the RV and then exchanged glances. The woman wasn't here.

Angela kept her mind on the kit between her feet, mentally running down the gear she had brought as if she wanted to be sure she'd brought everything.

Adrian wasn't fooled. He scanned to discover if Marc had been.

Marc snorted. "I've known her longer. That stopped working before I was out of school."

Adrian chuckled as Angela frowned. “Good. You can give me pointers.”

The rear of the RV was packed with boxes and crates that obviously hadn’t been opened since the war. Wrapped in thick layers of dusty plastic and yellowing tape, some of the items were intended for Safe Haven. The bottled water and canned peaches would go over well with everyone. Some of the other items, like the stack of vests and the ammo cans, the team assumed they would use in their upcoming confrontation.

The temperature in the RV was stifling. Jennifer lowered the window, inhaling the fresh air.

The team around her did the same. Fresh air had been hard to come by over the last few months.

For a little while longer, there was quiet. They observed the devastated land around the road through the windows or rested to conserve energy like Angela had instructed them to. Other than Adrian, none of them had faced their kind enough to know how to prepare for a fight like this. Marc and Kenn relied on their military training. Samantha and Jennifer worked on their lessons. The others did a similar version that they found comforting, bringing a mood of teamwork and companionship only the level leaders usually shared.

“I don’t understand why I’m here.” Morgan looked at Angela. “I’ve had a little bit of the mountain sickness, but I’ve been better since we left.”

Realizing Morgan believed he'd been brought along to be eliminated, Angela put his mind at ease and stirred him up at the same time. "You're a descendant. That's why you're here."

Morgan was as surprised as everyone else. "I thought the voices were from mountain sickness."

"There is no such thing as mountain sickness." Angela confirmed what many of them had suspected.

It took Morgan longer to put the pieces together. As he did, the myriad of expressions that ran across his face kept the team distracted. While they were, Angela handed Chris a small pouch.

Chris tucked it under his seat and put his hands back on the wheel.

"Do I have a gift?" Morgan couldn't help himself. Everyone wanted to be a descendant.

"I don't know. Do you?" Angela regarded him expectantly.

Morgan tried to find out, but he had no idea how to do that. He looked to Marc for help.

"Told you he'd want you." Angela leaned back and tried to rest.

Marc leaned forward. "Shake my hand."

Morgan put his hand in Marc's, unable to keep from tensing. Even without being a descendant, Marc was lethal.

Marc entered the private space and guided Morgan toward a small door in the rear of his mind. It was dark and narrow, but felt powerful. "I'm

leaving now.” Marc withdrew as Morgan opened the barrier.

Morgan flinched from the red orbs that appeared in his mind. When he wasn’t attacked, he stole a glance at his demon. Tall and muscular, with a nasty sneer, Morgan was intimidated. He was also impressed. “Now *that’s* a badass.”

Laughter filled the van.

A cold wave came a few seconds later.

Chris switched on the van CB, not needing Angela to tell him to do it. He had felt it coming.

“We found her! We found her!”

The vet drove faster.

“What happened?”

“We’re bringing in the body.”

An awful scream filled the air, one so ugly that even the vet shuddered. He reached down to flip off the radio.

“Leave it on.”

Angela’s order stopped Chris, forcing him to listen to the man’s pain. The scream was followed by more of the same.

“That’s Erik.” Adrian recognized the voice. “Not a good guy.”

“Did you work together or was he someone you brought in?”

Adrian frowned at Marc’s question. “A little bit of both. After he lost command, his wife conceived. When she sold the baby to the government, he went crazy and kidnapped it. No one has heard from any of them in decades.”

Angela reached down and flipped her radio to the correct channel. When she lifted the mike, everyone in the RV tensed, knowing it would be bad.

Angela let her hatred come forward as she purred into the mike. “She thanked me for setting her free.”

Stunned silence filled the air for a few seconds and then Erik’s cold voice echoed across the radio. “You know where I am. Come set *me* free.”

“I’m an hour out. Is there anything left of Market Town?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. You saved me a lot of work.”

The radio went dead as Erik realized he had been tricked into wiping out a town for her. Angela hadn’t told him they were slavers, but she doubted that would have mattered. Erik had also confirmed his location and it was exactly where she needed him to be.

“Right about now, he’s realizing they’ve used up all their energy on the wrong targets.” Adrian’s voice held more approval for her than any of them were used to hearing in public these days. “He’ll order his men to take any lifeforces of captives they have, but the crew he keeps are true killers. There won’t be many survivors and none of them will be descendants. He’ll be lucky to find enough energy to replenish even a third of his army.”

Angela glanced at Marc. “And that’s where you come in.” She gave him a soft, evil smile. “I like your sonic gift, baby.”

“There are refugees ahead.” Chris’s call got attention.

“Pull over.”

It took Adrian a few seconds to figure out what Angela was going to do. He studied her in surprise. “Really?”

Angela didn’t answer.

As the RV slowed, the dozen desperate men and women ran toward it, shouting and waving. At first, they looked like normal survivors who needed help. As they began to pound on the windows, screaming about death to all Safe Haven citizens, it made Angela’s decision more palatable.

Crash! Something heavy rapped against the rear window, shattering the corner of it to let in a cold draft.

Angela braced. “Open the door.”

Marc did it, recording every second of the encounter to study later.

The force that shot out of Angela’s hands slammed into the first two refugees, knocking them into three others. Two more angry bandits lunged toward the door only to be driven backward by a wall of flames that burned them alive.

“No one escapes.” Angela’s order came out in the double timbre of the alpha, allowing no refusal.

Marc and Adrian jumped from the RV.

Angela climbed out, signaling for Kenn to bring the girls. “What you do here is your choice, but you need to view it to understand how awful it is. Once you do this, you can never go back.”

The refugees were too well covered to determine if they were Mexicans, UN men, mercenaries, or just desperate survivors. They slipped and stumbled across the rocks and snow, chasing Marc. Attacking without provocation or thought, they only looked like wild animals.

Kenn set Samantha on her feet. With Jennifer nearby, they watched the other descendants hurry toward the attacking refugees.

Chris and Morgan didn’t participate, but both of those men observed in fascination as empty husks hit the ground in horrible, dull thuds of blasphemy.

Angela glanced at Jennifer, who was studying the scene as if she were a student learning a lesson.

Samantha climbed back into the vehicle, determined never to experience either side of that moment.

Angela held Jennifer’s eye. “It will heal your health and split your soul.”

Jennifer considered everything she had been through and everything she’d done to survive, and didn’t find this more than she could handle. The only thing that made her climb back into the RV was how disappointed Kyle would be when he found out.

Glad the teenager had made that choice, Angela turned to see how Marc was doing.

Marc dropped the body, able to feel the man's life force replenishing his gifts. It was an incredible experience; he was sorry he'd done it.

Marc let Angela hug him, but he already knew nothing would eliminate the stain from his soul. Like Jennifer, he could have resisted, but this was something he needed to know how to handle. It was the only way he was going to be able to bring Angela back from her depths of corruption. He had to be able to understand everything that she had done.

Angela let Marc put her in the RV, reading his thoughts but not responding to them. Some problems, a person had to work out for themselves.

Kendle hadn't left the RV. She was watching the vet.

Chris got them rolling. "Three minutes."

Hoping to settle everyone's nerves, Angela went over the plan. "The leaders are inside the gates that they crashed through to take the town. They have snipers on top of the buildings that we'll have to pass through to reach that open entrance. There are four-dozen descendants and two-dozen invisibles." Angela looked at Kendle and Sam. "We need an ice wall. Lock them inside with us."

Kendle knew how to do it. She'd been in Market Town. She knew the small alleys that would have to be blocked. "I'll need a lot of wind and it will take time."

“Start on it as soon as we’re in range. Samantha will provide the wind. Kenn is whatever you need, but mostly, energy.”

“I’m the shield, right?”

“Yes, Jennifer. You and Adrian are the shields.”

That left Morgan, Chris, and Marc.

“Chris will stay in the driver’s seat to take us out if we need a fast escape. Morgan will keep Chris covered.” Angela lifted a brow at Marc. “Are you mad yet?”

Marc shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“A little, yes. The angrier you are, the more powerful the fear attack will be when I tell you to hit them with it.”

“Ninety seconds.” Chris slowed down a little to give her more time.

“We’re gonna step out together. Shields will be up before we step out. All you guys have to do is hold the shield and build the wall. Marc and I will do the rest.”

Plan in place, everyone concentrated on getting ready for their part in it.

Angela and Marc clasped hands for a last peaceful second together before the battle began. Then she made him mad. “I’m asking for a vote tonight to lift Adrian’s banishment.”

Raw fury slammed through the RV, making Adrian and the vet cringe.

“Perfect.”

“Here they come!”

Erik and his top men stood in the middle of the smoldering square, surrounded by bodies. Market Town had been destroyed. They’d rammed the gates to get in, encountering little resistance that could penetrate their shields. Even the UN tanks hadn’t been able to stand against his crew. Within ten minutes of starting the attack, Erik and his band of dissidents had slaughtered all of the military and the residents. It had been frustrating to discover they’d been tricked into doing it, but it was too late to change that now.

“Get ready! Mitchel is tricky. Don’t give him a chance to hit you with anything. Concentrate on Mitchel!” Erik began to gather his energy for his most powerful spell that would stun everyone in the oncoming RV.

“Now!”

“Start now!”

Angela and Erik gave the order at the same time. Magic filled the air.

Chris hit the gas, feeling a shield come up over the rolling RV.

Fueled by Adrian and Jennifer, Erik’s blast was useless. There was no evidence he’d even fired at them. He stared in shocked fear as the RV kept coming. *That’s never happened to me!*

You’re gonna have a day of firsts. Adrian enjoyed the taunt.

Recognizing the tactic, Erik ducked behind his men. “Kill them!”

The snipers on the rooftops began to pepper the RV with bullets in place of the magic they didn’t have. While they fired their weapons, Erik’s mercenaries concentrated on the passenger they could see through the front window of the RV.

Pushing his luck, Adrian waved at them.

The windshield in front of Adrian’s face bowed in from a powerful burst of energy that slammed into them from above.

Jennifer groaned in concentration, managing to absorb the hit instead of deflecting it. “I didn’t know I could do that!”

Adrian felt the shield strengthen and tried to copy her actions. “How did you do it!?!?”

“Like a straw—slow and steady!”

Adrian felt the next hit bow in the windshield and inhaled mentally, not sure if he was doing it right.

“That’s it!” Jennifer took the next one, loving the way she was able to feed the awful blasts into the power of the shield. It was too bad the enemy was already figuring it out and not shooting with magic.

Relieved that their protection was holding, Kendle and Samantha concentrated on the walls of the town around them. The RV was half a mile from the gates, but the ice would need to come out further to account for the missing front door.

Samantha blew harsh winter wind toward the gaps, following Kendle's pointing finger. The two females pressed their faces against the windows in an effort to maintain sight with the side of the wall they were building as Chris flew them down the access road.

More bullets hit the shield, but these weren't absorbed. Some of them bounced off and sank into the ground and trees around the RV. A few of them also made it through the shield.

"Hold the corner!" Adrian and Jennifer struggled to close a gap in the shield that they hadn't known was there. Doing this in a speeding vehicle was hard for both of them.

Chris took the RV straight through the small barricade of vehicles Erik had ordered to replace the gate they had crushed. Descendants ran to get out of the way.

Tough, the RV plowed into the vehicle and knocked them aside like toys. It shuddered to a rough halt in front of Erik and his top men.

Kenn waited for Angela's gesture and then popped the handle, pushing the door open as Marc sent out a wave of his sonic blast to disable the closest foes.

Angela followed it up with a huge ball of fire that blasted a path through the center of Erik and his men.

Jon and Stephan flamed up into bright screams that ran around banging into cars and people until they fell over.

“Hit them again!”

Marc obeyed her, slamming everyone outside the shield with a feeling of terror that was nearly impossible to fight. Men took off running, hoping to escape.

Marc didn't see Erik anymore, but there wasn't time to look for the evil man yet.

Samantha and Kendle struggled to stay in front of the running mercenaries with the ice wall. As soon as an area was high enough with snowdrifts, Kendle used her gift to merge the melting flakes into a wall that Samantha then froze. Tall and smooth, it blocked the retreat of Erik's men with a barrier that seemed impenetrable. Angela was positive a few of them would be able to melt their way through if given enough time, but she wasn't going to allow that. This fight was almost over.

Crouched under a wrecked truck, Erik shot a wave of hatred toward the man standing outside the RV. He didn't recognize him, but Adrian didn't have any of the gifts Erik had been hit by. They had to have come from the other man. That had to be the Ghost.

Marc was knocked back into the RV as Erik's hit slammed into the ground by his boots, sending up a cloud of dust and snow. Unharmred, Marc marveled at how their shots could get out of the shield, but enemy shots weren't getting in.

“Getting tired!”

Jennifer's call brought concern and made Marc sharpen his aim. Able to sense how unwilling Erik's

men were to die, he concentrated on cutting the head off the snake. As usual, he expected the cowards to flee once their leader was gone.

Kendle grunted, running low. “I don’t have enough to finish it!”

Next to her, Samantha slumped against the seat. “I’m out!”

Kenn was empty too. Jennifer and Samantha had drained his energy in seconds. He drew his gun and took the shots that came open.

Angela scanned the ice wall, spotting a place where it wasn’t closed. Hoping it was the only one, she darted from the RV and ran toward the area. If she could get there before anyone else, she could defend it.

Marc went with her. As they ran, they left the safety of the shield Adrian and Jennifer were providing. Marc replaced it with his. He concentrated on making sure nothing got through, no longer able to fire. He didn’t have the energy to do both at the same time.

Angela threw her knife at a merc who was going to get there before her, trying to run faster as the body fell. None of Erik’s crew had their shields up. They hadn’t expected the fight to reach them.

Angela spun around and threw out a ball of flames that caught the two men on her heels. Flames flared up all along their clothing and arms, bringing screams.

Marc saw the flaming men and got out of their way. He stopped next to Angela in the opening, smothering her in protection.

Adrian reached them a few seconds later. “Chris has the others covered. Finish this!” Adrian put one hand on Marc’s shoulder and the other on Angela’s. Connected, Adrian took over shielding so Marc was free to fight.

Angela and Marc sent out power at the same time; the two gifts combined into a spell that sent blood spraying across the smoldering remains as eyeballs popped.

Angela’s flames ran along the ice wall, starting where they were standing. Sent out in both directions, the wall of flames merged into a giant circle that was only broken by the space where their RV was sitting. Horrible heat filled the square. It began to smother the mercenaries as Angela drew the flames in toward her.

“Hold the shields!” Adrian didn’t know if Kenn was feeding Chris energy or if that man was also out, but Samantha and Jennifer were no longer in the fight.

Angela drew on all the anger and misery she had experienced during her time in the mountain. The death of her child was a peak of emotions that sent out a wave of horrible fury to consume the rest of Erik’s men.

All her people could do was pray their shields held so they weren’t consumed along with the enemy.

Marc shared his strength with Adrian as the flames rushed over them. For a long moment, the sounds of fire and screams were deafening.

The familiar symphony sent Angela straight back to the rest stop. She dropped to her knees, shuddering as men and women screamed.

Marc scanned the battlefield, searching for Erik. He found the leader a few feet away from the RV, almost burnt beyond recognition. As he wondered which one of them had done it, Morgan stepped out with a shocked expression and flames dancing across his fingers.

Adrian grinned. “He *does* have a gift.”

While Marc continued to search the battlefield for surviving threats, Adrian helped Angela to her feet. He was aware that her mind was in the past. Even though the fight was over, this was a bad time to be distracted. He gave her a little nudge, glad the screams were dying. “It’s over.”

The words were fading into the air as a gunshot echoed.

Everyone spun to find Chris standing in the open RV doorway with a gun. One of Erik’s top men, Hugh, was lying on the ground in front of him, also clutching a gun. From the angle, everyone assumed Jennifer had been the target.

In the RV, Jennifer gave Chris a nod of thanks.

Distracted, the vet missed Samantha’s quick draw.

Bang!

Chris didn't have time to throw up a defense. He hadn't thought Samantha was a threat. He hadn't been monitoring her, only concentrating on Jennifer and Kyle, who he believed would be assigned to eliminate him when the time came.

Marc and Adrian ran toward the RV, not sure what was going on.

Angela followed, but she didn't run. Marc wasn't the only one who had asked for permission to eliminate the vet.

Chris's body fell at an ugly angle, revealing an expression of betrayed shock and hatred that a few of them marked in their memory so Angela would see it later. It was fair to them that she had to share in the result of the game she had played with the vet. He'd been a serial killer. He should have been removed as soon as she'd discovered that.

Samantha slid her gun into the holster. Even Neil hadn't known if she would do it, but Samantha had been using the bathroom when the vet dropped Marc and Adrian off. She knew what he'd done to the pregnant woman. Samantha hadn't been okay with it. She still wasn't and at some point, Angela would have to answer for that order.

“But not today, okay?”

Samantha agreed with Jennifer's mutter. They were all too tired for more drama right now. It would keep.

Angela expected to hear many complaints at some point. As she sank down in the seat, exhaustion overwhelmed her. “Let's go.”

Morgan took the driver's chair, glad there wasn't blood on it. "Same route back?"

"Yes. Same pit stop as well if it makes itself available."

Morgan didn't balk at the order. This time, he planned to participate.

So did Jennifer.

Samantha's gut twisted. "I'm gonna be sick."

Kenn slid in next to her, sending waves of calm. "It was your first big fight and your body wasn't ready for it. Try not to think about anything that happened for a little while and your stomach will settle."

"You can also try curling your thumbs into your fists." Jennifer shrugged at people who turned to her. "It works for me every time."

Half of the people in the RV immediately curled their thumbs into their fists in an effort to get their stomachs to calm. The smell of burning flesh was strong even with the door closed.

Morgan got the RV rolling, knowing without being told that Angela wanted to be back in camp by the time Safe Haven stopped for the night. If they were very lucky, the camp would never know they had left. People would suspect Angela had taken care of the remaining UN troops when Safe Haven wasn't followed, but only the people here and a few in camp would know for sure. She'd kept them out of it this time. They would love her for it.

Adrian wasn't so sure. She'd promised no more lies or nasty plans, but she'd already broken both of those. Some camp members might call her on it.

"Let them." Marc took the seat by Angela. "We'll tell them the wolf was at the door, but we sent it away. They won't care how it happened."

Angela and Adrian both felt it snap into place. Marc was on board now, finally seeing the bigger picture.

"Who says I didn't see it before?" Marc yawned, suddenly exhausted. "I just got used to being able to change the channel when I didn't like the program."

No one needed to ask what had happened to cause the change of heart. She was in the seat next to him.

Chapter Forty BK8

The Past

1

“Damn.” Angela forced her tired body up.
“Get the guns.”

As the truck bounced over debris, nearing the main intersection from the valley, dozens of refugees streamed out to converge on the RV.

“Get down!” Marc shoved Angela over as a bullet came through the window. It plunged into the seat next to her shoulder.

Adrian brought up a shield that wouldn’t last long.

Morgan swerved the RV out of the line of fire of the two troops and into the path of three descendants who had come with the refugees. Magic flew through the air.

Morgan hit the gas and jerked the wheel, causing the RV to skid and groan in protest. He grinned as he fought for control.

The vehicle skidded sideways at the impacts, but the steel walls and shield protected the people inside.

“Get your rifle!” Marc popped the door and climbed onto it, balancing with one hand while he aimed with the other.

Adrian grabbed Marc’s belt to help him hold on, using his free hand to pull the rifle from the kit by his feet.

“Get ready to trade!”

Understanding what Marc wanted, Adrian put the rifle on the seat and began digging for more ammunition with his free hand. He would have his gun ready when Marc’s was empty so they could swap.

Gunfire outside of the rolling RV was deafening. Adrian’s ears rang as Marc fired shots that knocked descendants and UN troops into the slushy debris piles.

“Swap!”

Adrian shoved the rifle out, letting go as he felt Marc grab it. Still using one hand to hold him, Adrian grabbed the hot rifle Marc dropped with the other hand. It took him longer than he wanted to reload, but Adrian did it in time for Marc’s next call.

“Swap!”

The switch was smoother this time.

“That’s enough! Get in here!”

Angela’s shout forced Adrian to pull Marc into the RV where they both yanked the door shut and tossed themselves into seats, laughing wildly. Only during an apocalypse could they have a moment like that.

Angela didn’t mention the upcoming pit stop.

Marc peered at his watch. “We made good time with the battle, but it took too long to get here. We might show up after them.”

Angela sighed. “Fine. Skip the pit stop.”

Satisfied, Marc put a hand over hers. “I forgive you.”

Angela almost cried.

In one of the swivel seats across from them, Adrian observed in approval. Marc hadn’t needed to be told this time. *You’re getting better.*

Marc ignored the compliment. All he wanted to do was sleep. He didn’t have time for Adrian’s emotions.

Angela gestured toward a kit. “I brought water. Somebody pass it out.”

Slowly recovering, Jennifer leaned down to pick up the kit.

Kenn took it from her and handed out the water, hoping he would be able to get her and Samantha back to their men and ditch them without having to listen to the scolds and nagging Neil and Kyle would deliver. The two men would be upset they had been alone for the entire day without knowing what was going on. It was frustrating even as it was understandable. Kenn expected the same reaction from Tonya.

Barely alert, Kendle dropped into the open seat by Marc and rested her head against his shoulder. When he didn’t push her away, she let sleep mask her guilt.

Marc felt Angela's jealousy, but also her acceptance of the situation and understood the future now held more hope for them as a couple than it ever had. Once they could let go of their preconceived notions about how monogamous a relationship had to be, they would stop projecting their own inadequacies on each other and be able to be happy with the moments that came. Marc was looking forward to that time.

Angela felt the tension shift out of the RV; waves of tired triumph took its place. It had been a hard quick battle—the only kind she knew how to plan now. She didn't have the patience for long drawn-out schemes that left too much room for things to go wrong. Facing the problem in a way the enemy wasn't expecting, and couldn't defend against was the cornerstone of her fighting style.

Angela let out a deep breath. There hadn't been much doubt about their success, but it had been enough for her to make plans. Knowing the descendant children didn't have to run and Conner and Charlie were not going to fight for Safe Haven's survival alone was enough to forgive the awful atrocities she'd done to ensure that. When it came to the survival of her people, she would never change. There wasn't a wall of guilt high enough to compete. *Which leads me to the final step in my grand scheme.*

“Tell me a story.”

Everyone in the RV glanced at Angela to verify who she was speaking to.

Adrian sighed. “What kind? I don’t have many with happy endings.”

“I don’t expect those from you and neither does anyone else.”

Samantha and Kendle paused on their way to the rear bunks.

“You’ve been hunted by so many people since I joined your camp that I wouldn’t be able to narrow it down.” Angela paused, letting the new tension build. Then she smiled, sure he couldn’t see it from where he was sitting. “Tell us how you lost your team.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Angela sent an image of a lone figure huddled under a canopy, waiting for a dead man to return.

Adrian assumed she was making a choice and began searching his memories for one that might save Brian’s life.

“No. Tell us how you lost your team.”

Adrian grimaced at the repeated demand. “I’d rather not.”

“Are you refusing to tell the alpha a bedtime story?” Marc mocked the man. “Now I’ll have to insist. Anything you don’t want her to know is a story I *have* to hear.”

Adrian’s heart sank. “How about something from my time in the labs?”

Marc stared with an expectant expression that didn’t cover his happiness. He’d felt Adrian’s fear. There was no way he would let it go now.

Adrian caught that and slumped against the seat, glaring. “Fine. It was 1989.”

2

“This final round of shooting will determine the winner.”

Adrian looked over the two tables that had held the same class for the last four years. This was the bi-annual team leader challenge that he hadn’t lost since the first time he’d entered. As he scanned the two halfmoon tables that were divided by a small target range, Adrian realized he didn’t like many of the men he was leading. Erik and Garrett were okay at times, but Jack, Ryan, and Vlad were just troublemakers, as were Kranten and Stevens, the two lightly gifted men who were responsible for Jack being here. The other side of the table held Jon, Stephen, Hugh, Dugan, Isaac, and Bryson. Other than Bryson, Adrian considered that the lethal side of the room.

“Our next shooter is Adrian Mitchel!”

Adrian waved at his fans as he swaggered up to the line. He was always a favorite at this competition. Carrying the confidence of the world in every step, Adrian was exactly on the timer as the buzzer went off and the targets began to flash.

The rest of the team observed Adrian’s amazing shots with resentful glares and grumbles. Adrian was a good team leader in as far as he made sure they were outfitted properly and no man was left

behind, but that was as far as their goodwill toward him went. Adrian's father was a big wig—the first strike. Adrian was also a stickler for the rules, refusing to let them slack off or take extra benefits on runs. That was strike two. Not being able to come close to Adrian in shooting or descendant abilities was strike three for most of the men. The last four years had been a constant competition to improve their skills to remain on his team. They were tired of it.

“I think we have a new record, folks!”

The true fans of the competition—the wives, daughters, cousins, and girlfriends—let out cheers.

Adrian stayed there for a few seconds, enjoying his moment of glory. He knew how his team felt about him, but as long as they completed their missions, he didn't care. That wasn't his job. He was a hired killer and a government stooge. Emotions had nothing to do with his position in life.

Adrian returned to his seat at the head of the first table and sat down, confident that only Garrett or Erik might be able to match the shooting. Neither of them could equal him on skills tests however, so the competition was pretty much his again.

Resentment splashed the tables, causing Adrian to give them sharp glares. He didn't mind their feelings about him, but he wouldn't tolerate evidence of it in public. Without using his alpha gift, Adrian controlled his team.

The higher-ups who were watching the competition were aware of how tightly Mitchel

ruled his men and how little effort it took. While they liked that, it was obvious it wasn't going to work out with this crew.

“The next shooter is Jack Devine!”

There was thunderous response from the females. Considered the playboy of the team, Jack also had a wife. Adrian had met her during a company gathering and wondered how Jack had gotten lucky enough to snag the former beauty queen.

Jack swaggered up to the line, also hitting the timer just right. As he began shooting targets, he preened for the crowd of women, missing his chance to match Adrian.

“Good, but not good enough!”

Flushing at the public embarrassment, Jack scowled at the announcer.

Bryson dropped his head and continued to relay what was going on for the crowd. He didn't like the public part of his job, but he was determined to do it well. “Our next shooter is J. Stevens!”

As the underlings took their turn, Adrian let his mind go to the place it preferred to be these days—with Shannon. Assigned to watch her while in witness protection, Shannon was an Invisible, but he didn't hold that against her like some of his team would have. Shannon's relatives had been gathering rebel descendants for a war with the government. Because she had turned them in, she was being given protection until she could be transported to a safe facility.

“Not even close!”

Stevens and Kranten shared roughly the same shooting ability, so Adrian wasn't surprised the two men were doing so badly. They always had. Their gifts didn't rest with guns.

“The next shooter is Garrett!”

The crowd cheered for Garret, but not as loud as they had for Adrian and Jack. Even the women knew Garrett wasn't right somehow, though he hid it well. Still, he was the most reliable man on the team and Adrian's friend—as far as he had any here. Adrian had taken Garret's spot as leader when he arrived, expecting problems, but Garrett had accepted it like a man and offered a hand. He was the only one Adrian trusted.

“Ready to call me boss?”

“Sure.” Adrian grinned as his friend sauntered to the line. “Let's see what you've got.”

Challenged, Garret's timing off the line was good, allowing him to do some of the best shooting Adrian had ever witnessed off the field. It wasn't good enough, but it was still great for Garret.

“Close, but no cigar!”

Garrett slid into the chair next to Adrian, noting a bruise on his forearm. He assumed it was a bruise, because even though it looked like a hickey, it was an odd place to have one.

“Better luck next time.”

Garrett nodded at the quip as if it didn't bother him, but inside he was boiling. There had to be something he could beat Adrian at. Glad for the

powerful mental shield he'd been gifted with, Garrett stewed.

Erik took a spot on the line, knowing they now had Adrian as their team leader for another year. Garrett had been their only real hope. If not for how strong Adrian's alpha ability was, and his military skills, the man never would have been placed with them. It helped that he had a protector in the chain of command, but Erik wasn't petty enough to deny that Mitchel deserved to be team leader. He just wished the man would screw up somewhere, somehow, and prove that he was human. Frustrated, Erik directed the rage into his aim and not where Adrian was sitting.

"That is just amazing, folks! Did you see that!"

Not immune to the rivalry, Adrian snickered. "All muscles and no brains."

It told Erik, and everyone else, that Adrian had access to their test scores.

Erik flushed, giving Garrett a pointed glower.

Garrett sighed. They didn't have anything on Mitchel. If one of them challenged him for team leader through other channels, they didn't have anything to back it up and they would lose. Then, Adrian would pay them back for their betrayal. After ten years of hunting descendants for the government while doing jobs on the side, Adrian Mitchel had already built a reputation that few men would be able to match in their lifetimes, but everyone on his team was forced to try.

"Let's have Vlad next!"

Vlad moved toward the spot with a saunter that implied he knew he was about to win the competition. Adrian suspected the killer was about to be disappointed, but he wasn't sure. Vlad was mostly unreliable in a firefight, but sometimes he got lucky. The tall, lanky man's gift rested in his ability to zap someone before they knew it was coming. Vlad was incredibly quick when it came to magic and movement.

"Want to get a beer when this is done?"

Adrian actually did, but he shook his head. "I have duty for the next twelve hours. Catch me in a few days."

Garrett would have accepted the answer if not for the slightly defensive edge to Adrian's tone. It was something that only happened when their team leader was lying. Garrett was one of the few people who'd picked it up. He had shared the information with Erik, who exchanged a glance with him now. Adrian was lying about being on duty for the next twelve hours.

Without speaking or even directly thinking about it, the two men agreed to follow him.

3

"Well, that certainly explains things."

Expecting a reply, Erik looked over to find Garrett staring in the apartment window with an expression he immediately recognized. He had his own obsession hidden away in the little shack in the

hills. “Should we change our plans?” While following Adrian, the two men had decided it was time for him to die in battle.

“I have a better idea now.” Garrett hadn’t looked away from the bed where Adrian and a stunning blonde woman were entwined, moaning and groaning. “You go on. I’ll catch up with you.”

Erik assumed Garrett would be the team leader again after they got rid of Adrian. He left without argument, thinking of the dusky woman who was on missing posters in several states. He had loved Michelle since he’d first met her and even though she had refused his advances, they were together and would be forever. He wished the same happiness on Garrett.

Behind him, Garrett continued to study the woman. Adrian’s death was a certainty in his mind now. After seeing the female Adrian was spending time with, Garrett understood that man would have to die to avoid payback. Garrett wasn’t sure how it would happen yet, but he was certain it would be by his hand.

Mentally complaining about how long that could take, Garrett overlooked the obvious until he noticed the security guard standing in front of the building where Adrian and the woman were. She was a witness under protection. Adrian was an agent assigned to guarding her. The relationship was forbidden.

Garrett smiled.

“You realize the outcome of this trial will determine your future in the service?”

Adrian nodded stiffly, horrified that Shannon had been dragged into the military trial that was going on around him. He also felt bad for the embarrassed team huddling in the corner, trying not to draw attention.

“Before we hear from you, we’ll talk to your team. We’ll start with the XO and work our way down.”

“Sir, the witness needs to be back under protection as soon as possible. Can we switch the order of testimony?”

“Defense?”

“Defense has no objection.”

“Very well. Miss Meeks, this is an informal hearing. You are not required to take the stand. However, you are required to swear an oath.”

Adrian watched Shannon flush and twitch. As she recited the oath, her eyes landed anywhere except his.

Adrian’s stomach churned as he caught her thoughts. He didn’t know what had happened, but Shannon had turned on him.

“Miss Meeks, we only have a few questions for you. Is there anything you would like to say before we begin?”

Shannon clenched her fists together, casting a quick, scared glance toward the team of men in the corner waiting for her response.

“Miss Meeks?”

Shannon finally looked at Adrian, stunning him with the hatred there. “I was scared of him. He didn’t rape me, but he did take advantage of me. I have a drinking problem.”

The room rang with protests and shouts, but Adrian didn’t hear any of them. All he could hear was Shannon’s betrayal. It was a loud, cracking sound that broke his heart and then set it on fire.

Shannon refused to look at him as she continued her testimony.

In the corner, Garrett and Erik exchanged a satisfied glance. After the team added their testimony, Adrian would be found guilty. He wouldn’t be dead, but his punishment would include a transfer and that was good enough.

Realizing he had been betrayed, Adrian felt hatred enter his heart and take up a permanent residence. *There will be payback for this.*

5

“It took me three years to get to a place where I was ready to have that moment.” Adrian looked around the RV, where he had full attention from everyone except the driver. “I’m sure you can imagine how I felt. I’d been set up and betrayed by

all of them. If not for my connections, they would have gotten away with it.”

“Let me guess.” Marc sneered. “Daddy stepped in.”

Adrian nodded. “I was transferred to a Marine base. I had a great team there. We did some amazing things and not all of them were bad. However, my anger made me reckless. Since I didn’t care if I died, they were quick to send me into the most dangerous places that needed to be cleared. I always survived.”

My nightmare. Marc gestured Adrian to go on. He was enjoying the story.

“Do I have to do this?” Adrian turned to Angela suddenly, angry. “Haven’t you paid me back enough yet?”

Angela didn’t respond.

Sighing in resentment, Adrian threw himself backward into the seat and finished his story. “I watched *them* through the window this time, picking the perfect moment to make my entrance.”

6

“Congratulations!” Garrett slapped Erik on the back.

“Same to you!”

Both men now had a baby on the way, joining four other members of their team who were also about to be fathers. It had turned their weekly celebration into complaints about being tied down that masked their pride.

“When is our new team leader supposed to get here?”

Close to drunk, Garrett shrugged at Jack’s question. They’d been informed that Erik was being replaced, but they hadn’t been told who it was.

Erik was taking it well. He hadn’t liked being team leader. There was too much paperwork and not enough blood.

“There are only half a dozen candidates. I hope we get Shelby.”

“We had the best team in the field last year.” Erik sneered. “Shelby can’t keep up with that.” While he didn’t want the job anymore, he wasn’t about to serve under someone who couldn’t live up to what they’d built.

“As long as it’s not Mitchel.”

The table of four agreed, tossing nasty remarks and complaints.

“I was in Venice eighteen months ago when he took out that terrorist cell. I got tired of hearing his name.”

“Same here. I went to South America last year and that was all I heard. He’s been busy making a name for himself since we ran him out.”

“Yeah. He was in New York two months ago while Shannon and I were on our honeymoon.” Garrett’s scowl took up his entire face. “With his name all over the news like that, it ruined the mood. I had to demand my husbandly rights.”

The men fell back into complaints about the women in their lives and the restrictions of fatherhood.

In the corner, Bryson watched the table in resentment. It had been three years since they'd betrayed a great team leader, but Bryson hadn't left. He wanted to, but he didn't have the courage. Instead, he'd stayed in the outcast position so he could say he was a member of the team. It was a lonely life, but Vlad's sister, Sonja, was here. Bryson wasn't leaving even if she did marry Isaac.

The door to the pub opened, ringing the chime as their base CO entered.

"Gentlemen, your new team leader."

The dead silence in the room alerted the men at the table to the problem. All of them turned toward the doorway, where their nightmare stood, grin encompassing his face.

The commander slipped out, not wanting to be here for the fight in case the civilian police were called or the press found out.

The team waited, wondering if Adrian had figured out what they'd done to him.

Adrian was enjoying the moment. He'd been fantasizing about this for years, especially while making their wives scream in pleasure. "None of the babies are yours."

Everyone in the RV was laughing or grinning, almost unable to believe it was a true story even though they knew it had to be. Adrian's reputation with the ladies since they had known him was legendary. It had just become infamous.

The only person in the RV not laughing was Angela. For Adrian to do something like that, he'd been bitterly hurt by Shannon's betrayal. That only happened when you loved someone.

"What did you do to the woman?" Morgan had to ask.

"I loved her." Adrian didn't tell them he still believed Shannon had been under Garret's control. Adrian had been the stronger alpha on the team, but Garrett had been right behind him and he hadn't been above using his gifts on non-descendants. None of them were allowed to do that except on runs.

"I almost feel bad for her." Samantha was peering down the hallway, now lying in the bunk. "It sounds like she got screwed."

"It sounds like she was a skank."

Angela flushed as people laughed and stared at her.

"Jealous much?" Kenn wasn't worried about her reaction. It was clear that she was.

Angela shrugged, crossing her arms over her chest. "Whatever."

The cabin filled with loud laughter.

"What happened next?" Kendle was wide awake. "Don't leave us hanging like that."

“Yeah, did you ever see the woman again?” Samantha hadn’t heard all of the stories from Little Rock.

“Why didn’t you just kill them?” Morgan didn’t understand.

Marc did. “He let them live so he could keep paying them back.”

Adrian nodded at Marc’s observation. “I was in their faces for the next ten years. I was there for every run, every drill, and of course, every company family reunion, where I rubbed it in as deep as I could get it. By the time the war came, they hated me more than anyone else on the planet.”

Marc sympathized with the men. Adrian was an unshakable virus that continued to wear down the immune system until the host simply gave up.

“My team felt the same way long before then.”

“What about the babies?”

Everyone was surprised that the question had come from Kenn, who was glaring at Adrian.

“A few of them lived happy, healthy lives, never knowing who their real father was.” Adrian had the grace to flush. “I didn’t think about the kids when I planned things.”

“You never do.” Marc was angry. “Conner’s problems are your fault.”

Adrian nodded. “I wish I had thought it through. At the time, I believed he would be taken care of and that Shannon would be happy to have our baby. She was, by the way. She loved me without

reservation. She accepted me for who I am—a killer. *No one else ever has.*”

Angela winced.

No one spoke for a moment, feeling the sadness Adrian had obviously gone through for a long time.

“That was one hell of a bedtime story.”

Adrian shrugged. “You asked for it.” He frowned at her. “I’m just not sure why.”

Angela gestured at the other members of the team. “They need to know what kind of person you really are. They thought they knew how harsh you can be, but I wanted them to understand it goes way beyond that with you.”

Adrian frowned. “Why? I’m not a threat to anyone here anymore.”

“We both know that’s not true. You’re just as coldhearted now as you were back then.”

The other occupants of the RV didn’t necessarily agree that Adrian’s actions had been coldhearted. Kenn did, and Marc believed that it was proof of every suspicion he’d ever had about Adrian lingering until he wore Angela down, but everyone else almost understood the men had deserved it for their betrayal. The only hang-up was that the women and children had suffered.

Not wanting to, but without a choice, Adrian gave Angela what she wanted. “At the time, it seemed like the perfect revenge. I’m older now. I doubt I would make the same choices.” Adrian refused to look at anyone as he finished. “I’m sorry for all the things I’ve done, all the trouble I’ve

caused. I'll work as hard as I can to earn your forgiveness. I'll understand if I never get it. If any of my team had apologized to me afterwards, I don't think it would have mattered, but it still would have been the right thing to do. I should have already apologized to all of you personally. I'm sorry that I didn't."

Satisfied for the moment, Angela gestured toward the clock on the dashboard that was no longer working. "Enough drama. How long until the camp stops?"

Morgan frowned. "Less than two hours." Angela's stare caused Morgan to pull the RV over. "She wants a hell hound behind the wheel."

Marc took the seat.

Chapter Forty-One BK8

I Dare You

1

“They aren’t here! What should we do?”

Charlie wasn’t sure. He and Conner had decided to slow the convoy to thirty miles an hour as soon as it got dark, hoping to buy more time, but the Eagles had just called in a cleared campsite and everyone in the line of cars and trucks behind them was ready to stop for the night. As soon as people began to get out of the vehicles and Angela didn’t take charge of setting up camp, they would know something was going on.

“We’ll tell everyone we still have point. The Eagles will help. It might stall them for a little while.”

Conner approved of Charlie’s choice. He couldn’t think of a better way that didn’t involve magic. “If they ask where she is, maybe we should just admit it. She wouldn’t want us to lie.”

“I agree.” Charlie pulled his kit onto his lap as the truck came to a stop. “Ready?”

Conner pulled the rig into place and put it in park. “No, but I’ll follow your lead.”

Both proud and scared, Charlie opened the door to find two people standing there.

“Oh, my God!” Charlie jumped so bad he almost fell out of the truck. His kit did fall, sliding to the ground at Angela’s boots.

Marc picked up the bag and held it out, grinning. “Miss us?”

Conner and Charlie had to laugh. They hadn’t considered that Angela would beat them to the campsite. They’d been waiting for the RV to fall in with the convoy.

Marc didn’t tell them that the RV’s engine was still warm and they’d only been in place for minutes before the lights of the lead rig had lit up the dark park where they were camping.

“You did well.” Radio on the correct channel, Angela keyed the mike on her belt while Marc praised the boys. “Charlie and Conner have point for set up.”

Charlie and Conner slapped hands.

“All right!”

They marched off to get started, proud to have been given the job. It had been a long day, but it was an honor to have point at their age and both of them wanted to enjoy the moment.

“Ah, to be a rookie again.” Morgan stayed with Angela and Marc. He was practicing his skills now that they were back out in the wastelands and he’d done well enough that the teenage descendants hadn’t spotted him as a guard on the boss.

Around the convoy that was stopping, people from the RV stepped into sight as the vehicle they had been assigned to parked and opened doors,

including Samantha, who leaned against the truck for support. Exhausted, she didn't protest when Neil came around to pick her up.

“Are you hurt?”

Samantha shook her head at Neil's whisper. “Just very tired. I'll tell you all about it later.”

Relieved that she was uninjured, Neil carried her and his kit toward the area that had been staked out for the community tents. As soon as the first one went up, he would get her settled so she could sleep.

“I did it.”

Neil heard the self-loathing, but he also caught the eagerness to be praised. “I'm proud of you for being able to.”

Jeremy had come to him with the awful idea right before the quake, pointing out that none of Angela's top people were able to get close to the vet because they were known killers. Then he'd suggested Samantha because she wasn't. Neil had almost punched him, but after the quake, when he'd been forced to tolerate the vet, Neil had realized Jeremy was right. The vet would sense it coming and monitor everyone who had killed for Angela. The list was so long that it had been clear he wouldn't bother with people who hadn't done that yet. The problem had been telling Sam. Apparently, she'd come through perfectly.

“Does it change anything between us?”

Neil paused, considering her muttered query. When he formed an answer, he set her on her feet so he could look her in the eye. “Yes, it does.” He

reached out to tug her hood up against the stiff wind. “It means you need the next level of kai training and I can do that now.”

Neil kissed her cheek and found hungry lips under his. After holding himself in check for so long, Neil swept her up against his chest and kissed her like he meant it.

2

Conner and Charlie made sure everyone was escorted out of the vehicles and into the perimeter, flashlights bobbing and weaving in an entertaining path that would get the attention of anyone in the area. That was unavoidable.

The familiar yellow caution tape around the camp was a welcome sight to everyone. It flashed them back to the days in Safe Haven when the fate of the world hadn’t rested on everyone’s shoulders, but only on Adrian’s.

Kyle wanted to get Jennifer settled down to rest, but the teenager refused. “I’m with Angela until she says otherwise.”

He recognized the satisfied tone that came from a large battle that had both risked and cost lives. He swept the people emerging from the shadows as if they had been in the convoy and noted the one absence.

“Samantha did that.”

Kyle was surprised. “You’re kidding.”

Jennifer shook her head. “We were pretty surprised too, but I think Marc and Adrian were about to handle it anyway. The vet was dead before he woke up this morning.”

Kyle felt Jennifer’s slender body shaking against him as she fought to do her duty. After a long car ride, she couldn’t be seen weak or it might give them away. “Take what you need.”

Jennifer surprised him by stopping and putting her arms around his neck. She pulled his head down to hers, sealing their lips as she drew. *Thank you!*

Kyle was helpless against the onslaught. He wrapped his arms around her, returning the kiss with all the love he usually kept hidden.

Around them, people smiled or detoured to give them privacy.

Nearby, Angela motioned at the woman stomping toward Kenn. “Just tell her to stop.”

“Yeah, like that’s gonna work.”

“You might be surprised.”

“What the hell.” Kenn turned around and held up a hand. “Talk to this.”

Laughter rolled through the darkness, lighting up shadows and bringing a reluctant grin to Tonya’s face. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Kenn leaned down to kiss her cheek and then led her toward the camp. “Come on. I know what you need.”

Tonya chuckled, anger forgotten with the reminder that she needed the bathroom. She’d been crossing her legs for the last hour.

Angela gestured at Morgan. “Start spreading rumors. I want to be able to call a vote during the meal.”

Frowning, Morgan left Angela and Marc alone.

“You don’t have to do this now. I’m not going to demand anything tonight.”

Angela shrugged. “At some point, someone in the camp will demand it. You won’t have to. I’m just staying ahead of problems.”

Marc didn’t say anything else. He knew how hard the next few hours would be for her and he didn’t want to make it worse. He was also surprised that he wasn’t looking forward to Adrian’s pain. He still hated the man, but Adrian had been a lot of help after the earthquake and it was fair to recognize it.

He had also helped Angela before that, something Marc had been jealous about before, but wasn’t now. Adrian had brought her back. She wasn’t the same girl Marc had loved, and she wasn’t the same woman he’d brought to Safe Haven, but this new person was strong enough that he could count on her in every way and that almost made up for the misery he’d suffered. The baby was a different type of pain, one that Marc assumed they would deal with together as the future came. Marc kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll be around.”

Angela stayed in the darkness for a few more minutes, running through her options again. Despite it being what she had to do, she didn’t want to. She wanted to clear Adrian, but the vote wasn’t going to go that way. He hadn’t done enough yet to earn the

camp's forgiveness. Marc was still the only one who could really give that and their bond wasn't strong enough. Angela hadn't expected it to happen this fast, which is why she had based the next action so soon after their escape from the mountain. In the end, it wouldn't be as bad as everyone believed. She and Adrian were the only ones who would be crushed. *And it's not like we don't know how to survive that way. We've been doing it in every lifetime.*

3

Brittani, with help from a dozen people, prepared her first full meal for the camp in the traditional Safe Haven style. It took an extra hour and items were burnt, but no one minded when she produced two large pots of chicken and dumplings to ward against the cold. Even the children were thrilled, coming back for seconds.

The meal had taken a lot from the stash. Angela wouldn't be able to let them use so many supplies at once again until they built their reserves up, but tonight was a celebration of life that delivered the smells of a home cooked meal and thoughts of happy times through the crowd. It was sad too, but that was also needed. They'd lost so many people that it was hard to know when they'd mourned enough. Angela planned to limit these moments, even though she too felt like their dead deserved

more. They just didn't have time for grief. The boat wasn't going to stock itself.

"These are the nightly updates." Angela let the mess quiet as they realized she was holding a meeting now.

At the table in the corner, Conner got up and left.

Angela moved to the center of the crowd to keep their attention. "I need volunteers for tomorrow. I'd like to send out two scavenging teams and two hunting teams." She motioned toward the clipboard lying at the end of her table. "All of this is volunteer basis. If you sign up, all I can promise is the shifts will not be longer than five hours. Later this week, I'll try to get us back into the routines that worked so well for us before. Such as, the rules required each Eagle to do a certain number of shifts each month. It would be better if camp members volunteered for that too, but I'm not going to worry about it right now."

The camp muttered and chatted, sipping their drinks and eating on their food while enjoying the cold weather. It was very different from the camp she had led over the last two months. Many of the members were ignoring what she was saying, staring at the sky, the trees, and everything else that reminded them they were no longer trapped.

"All the food and water is being rationed. I expect that to last about ten days. During that time, we will have a mandatory camp meeting where we will discuss what's going to happen over the next

six weeks, but Safe Haven will no longer vote on destinations. Most of you understand that I've made the choice to take us to the island. However, I'm always willing to consider new information, so every mandatory camp meeting will have a reminder of where we're going and why. For this next meeting, I don't need to remind you why. We just left that."

Nods of agreement caused movement in every corner of the mess. Even those who were twitching from the night noises or the weather were glad to be out of that rocky tomb.

"As of this moment, all of Safe Haven's rules are in full effect. We followed them before we went into the mountain. You lived by them while you were there. It won't be hard for you to do the same now. Please don't let the freedom go to your head. I will make you dig toilet holes or bust you down to rookie level." She grinned. "And that reminds me, we'll be restarting the Eagles next week."

A huge cheer filled the air.

"We're also going to be restarting the garden as soon as possible. Samantha did an excellent job the first time around and she's agreed to do it again. She'll need volunteers to help a couple times a week when the plants start growing. In the meantime, any seeds that you find, give them to her. Samantha will also be on the hunting team as soon as her leg is healed." Angela gestured toward Neil, who had brought Samantha here at her request. It was important that everyone saw all of the team leaders

and council members functioning like they were supposed to. “Neil is in charge of security and leader of Special Forces team B. Kyle is the leader of Special Forces team A, which provides security for the council. Kenn, with help, will be taking over Eagle training. Details about all of those positions will come out as soon as I get us sorted.”

Angela sipped her coffee before it got cold. “Now that we’re out in the open, scavengers of all types are a problem. As you can tell from all the cones around our campsite, the ants are also everywhere. I’m not using them for anything anymore. They need to be eliminated. From this moment on, Eagles may practice on all mutations—even during sleep hours, providing a quiet method is used.” Angela glanced at Kendle. “Over the next few days, you’ll hear a lot of stories from Kendle and her team. You’ve already caught some of them and I know they were hard to believe, but everything she’s telling you is true. However, we are not handling the Market Town problem. Safe Haven will roll out in the morning, going south to find a boat.”

The cheering quieted as Angela held up her hand. Made from tarps secured to trees, this was nothing like their old mess, but it was great for everyone to be able to gather. The sounds of the eating people echoed differently. Wind rustling debris outside the tent caught everyone’s attention for a minute.

Angela pulled it back. “Conner was placed on conditional banishment. I have lifted that, as many of you know. He still has restrictions, but I consider his punishment over.”

Many of the camp turned to Candy, judging her reaction. If she were upset, they would be too.

Candy blushed under all the stares. “I don’t have a problem with that. We all overreacted, blaming him because of his dad.”

Relieved, the camp looked to Angela. They now suspected who the vote was for. Word had spread fast.

“I’m calling a moral camp vote.”

Most citizens were thinking she didn’t need to do this now, but Angela knew she did. Even if she only waited one more day, people would think he was getting preferential treatment because of her feelings, and that couldn’t be allowed. Adrian’s offense was serious. “I’m doing this while he’s out of camp so everyone can give an honest vote. I’m not going to do paper ballots or a lockbox because we don’t have them. It’s a simple yes or no. If you vote yes, raise your hand.”

Angela doomed the man. “This vote is to decide if Adrian’s full banishment will be rescinded and a conditional banishment will take its place. If you vote yes for Adrian to be placed on conditional banishment, raise your hand.”

Already knowing how the vote would go, Angela sighed as only a few hands rose. There was no need to count them. The number was small.

“The camp has spoken. His banishment will not be lifted. He’ll be arriving soon, but he won’t stay here tonight.” Angela sat down, indicating that it was over.

“We want to be trained by Adrian.”

Sitting at the next table over, Ivan’s comment drew attention.

“Will that get us in trouble?”

“No. The reason the camp didn’t choose death for Adrian is because he still has stuff to teach us. He will be a part of classes and training, but those moments will happen outside of camp. After tonight, he will not be allowed back inside our perimeter.”

Lights glinted off the vehicles around them, alerting everyone to the arriving truck.

The radio on Angela’s belt crackled. “He’s here.”

Angela strode to the parking area, aware of everyone observing and a few of them following.

Adrian pulled the flatbed truck as close to the mess as he could get it, not wanting Angela to be that far out of the protection of camp, even for a moment like this.

As he pulled the flatbed into place, it reminded the Eagles and many of the camp members of the old mess that Adrian, Kenn, and Doug had put together. Those people felt guilty for not voting to lift his banishment. If Angela had called for a recount right then, the tally would have been closer.

Angela didn't. It would be taking advantage by playing on their emotions. She didn't want other people to do that to them, and she wasn't going to allow herself to do it to them anymore either.

Eagles faded into the shadows as Adrian stepped from the truck and walked toward Angela.

Angela tensed, butterflies filling her stomach. A thick, musky scent filled her nose as Adrian stopped in front of her. "We did it."

"You did it."

Angela smiled. "I had a great teacher."

"You have amazing instincts for battle plans." Adrian reached out and took her hand. "Thank you for being strong enough to do this."

"It was my honor." Angela choked back tears, rubbing his hand with her thumb. "You have one request."

"I want your true feelings, for one minute."

Expecting much worse, Angela braced for it and then dropped all of her defenses. "Granted."

Adrian hugged her.

Angela was helpless against the emotions as he opened his heart. Lights and love swirled around them in blinding flashes that sent pulses of contentment across the camp and out into the night.

Adrian kept them that way for the full minute, connected to her in every way except for physical. He hadn't considered asking for that, but as he held her, Adrian let her see those fantasies too. There was nothing between them at that moment.

Angela was aware of their audience. Marc, Kendle, and several camp women were watching the scene openly, with a dozen more who thought the shadows obscured them. Angela didn't care. It wasn't their heart ripping out. She didn't want to love a bad man. She just did.

That's the first time I've heard you admit it! Say it again! Say it!

Adrian's pleas broke her. *I love you, all of you. From your evil plans to your ability to survive anything. Tell me the same, if you can.*

Adrian moaned at the feel of their glowing connection. *I adore you for everything they fear. I'd never change you from what you are at this exact moment—a leader who would kill her own mate to protect this camp.*

Angela trembled at the truth, at the guilt and the bond that was pounding through her mind. *Do it now if you're going to and then don't ever touch me again.*

Adrian kissed her, hands coming up to frame her face.

Kendle turned into the shadows, not wanting to be here when Marc exploded.

Marc forced himself to watch, to feel it. He and Adrian were still teamed.

Nothing else existed for Adrian at that moment. Angela was kissing him back, arms going around his neck, body leaning into his. He'd never felt her willing before. He would be hers forever now.

I know. Angela broke the kiss, stepping back. But until I call for you, the rules apply.

Adrian winced, but didn't fight what was coming.

"Adrian Mitchel, your banishment stands until such time as the camp overturns it. Be out of our perimeter within the hour." She motioned a guard to stay with him.

Shivering with need and misery, Angela put her back to Adrian and left him standing in the darkness.

Marc closed the door on his connection with Adrian and followed Angela.

4

Adrian dropped the keys for the mess truck into the guard's hand and climbed into the RV that was too warm. He'd gotten lucky to find the flatbed nearby. The battery charger Angela had placed in his kit had been perfect for the job.

Adrian slid into the driver's seat and started the engine, and switched the A/C on. He would run it long enough to bring down the temperature while he got settled for the night. After that, it would be cold and dark.

Adrian pulled the seat up as far as it would go to clear more space behind it. As the seat slid, a small pouch rolled out, catching his attention.

Adrian picked it up, recognizing the smell that came. He took out a small packet of food and then

two bottles of water. Next, came two mags for his gun. Adrian took out the empty notebook and pen from the kit, and placed them on the small utility table that slid out of the dashboard. As he placed it on the dirty table, Adrian saw a title had been scribbled onto the front of the book. *Eagle training after the mountain.*

In the bottom of the pouch, pressed between the folds and a foil package, Adrian found his dog tags.

Smiling and crying, he slid them over his neck. *She really does love me.*

Adrian recovered quickly, sensing someone coming toward the RV. Not sure what to expect, he swiveled the seat around, hoping whoever it was didn't linger. Dozens of new ideas had come to him during the last months. He was eager to put them on paper.

“Coming in.” Kevin hurried into the RV, hating the wind. He shut the door and dropped down into one of the rear seats. “Do you mind company tonight?”

Adrian assumed Kevin was thinking about Cynthia. He had expected to spend the evening the same way. If not for Angela's gifts, he would have. “Not at all.” Adrian pointed toward the rear of the RV that was no longer jammed full of boxes and gear. “There are two bunks back there.”

Kevin tossed his kit in that direction, but didn't follow it. “Feel like playing some cards or something?”

Adrian started to say no, that he would rather have quiet, but it occurred to him that his duty wasn't done. It was very possible that Angela had sent Kevin to him. She would have known Adrian was happy with the work she'd given him, so that meant it was for Kevin's benefit. Assuming Angela wanted Kevin back in the fold, Adrian shrugged. "I got the time if you do."

Kevin pulled out the rear utility table and began to root around in his pocket. He didn't want to play, but he didn't think he could sleep. Cynthia's death was haunting him.

"Incoming."

Adrian and Kevin were both surprised at the three men who came into the RV. They would have thought that Neil, Kyle, and Tommy would be asleep.

Morgan came in behind the trio and dropped down into one of the remaining seats. "Who brought a bottle?"

Adrian realized this was the Eagle way of showing support even though the camp had upheld his banishment. Adrian wondered if Neil and Kyle had voted yes on it, but he wasn't dumb enough to ask. Them being here at all was a huge concession.

Kevin motioned toward an empty box in the rear. "Pull that over and we'll have a better table."

The team leaders assembled a playing area while Adrian opened his last gift from Angela—a baggie wrapped in foil. "It's stale cookies, with a lot of burnt ends!"

Cheers filled the RV.

Kevin began to deal the cards.

“Incoming.”

Adrian was floored as Marc stepped in the RV and closed the door.

The other Eagles were also surprised, but hid it better.

“You want me to deal you in?” Kevin looked at Marc.

“Not yet.” Marc took the passenger seat next to Adrian. He swiveled it around so he could watch the game, then leaned back and crossed his ankles. “I didn’t come to lose my pants. I came for the good vibes.”

It was Marc’s way of adding his support. Adrian didn’t know what to say.

“There’s that speechless thing again.” Marc snickered. “I can get used to it.”

Everyone laughed, including Adrian.

Kevin finished dealing the cards as Tommy opened his bag. “It’s cheap hooch, but it’ll do.”

As the bottle began to make a circle, Adrian studied Marc. He still didn’t know what to say.

Marc crossed his arms over his chest. *I dare you to find a gesture that will match this one in her eyes.*

Adrian laughed, unable to be mad. “You are one sneaky son of a bitch.”

“I’ve also had a good teacher—you.”

Three hours later, men were beginning to yawn; Adrian ended the game. He pointed toward the

camp. “You all have duty. Don’t use me as your excuse.”

Chuckling, the tired men left. No words were said about Adrian having their support now, but he knew that he did.

Adrian started to latch the door and then realized Marc hadn’t left. Adrian lifted a brow. “You sleeping here?”

Marc snorted. “And miss Angie’s arms for this uncomfortable chair? Not a chance.”

Adrian settled into a rear seat, curious about what Marc wanted. He wasn’t expecting ugliness so he didn’t brace for it.

“This is our evening meeting.”

Adrian frowned. “I had assumed we would do it another time. We’ve all had a very long day.”

“I was going to skip it, but something’s bothering me. I’ll sleep better if I have an answer.”

Adrian pushed off his boots, going ahead with his bedtime routine. “I’m all yours.”

“You mentioned that I’ll have to keep her busy on the boat with lessons, but I can’t figure out what kind. Everything that I can teach her, she already knows.”

“That’s not true. She really hasn’t gotten into the complicated plans yet.”

“But that’s not what you mean by lessons, right?”

Adrian stripped his weapons and sat them on the utility table that was covered in ashes, cards, and tiny rocks that they’d used for betting. “No. She’s

fighting the evil inside. The lessons she needs have to center on that. Angela has broken every rule for our kind and then a few that we didn't even know existed. She needs you to be her conscience."

"She has a conscience, otherwise she wouldn't feel bad."

"She no longer listens to *her* conscience." Adrian decided to share his observations with Marc. "Why do you think she ordered the vet to kill so many people?"

Marc considered it. "Most of them were assassins in disguise."

"What about Michelle?"

Marc scowled. "There was no reason for that."

"To her, there was." Adrian handed Marc the almost empty bottle. "It was payback. One baby for another."

Marc was revolted, disgusted, and completely understood at the same time.

"She's still as hurt and furious as she was when it first happened. If you don't help her get back on the right path, she'll do all of this again and maybe worse, but we'll be on a boat then, where a bugout won't be possible."

"Angela would never hurt the camp."

Adrian didn't answer.

Understanding the former leader was worried about that, Marc took a small swig off the almost empty bottle. "This is why I'm still here. Tell me how."

Notebook forgotten, Adrian gave Marc as much information as he could, hoping it would be enough. The darkness in Angela's heart was growing. If it didn't stop soon, she would be consumed.

In the tent not far away, Angela laid next to the sleeping twins, but she wasn't at peace. Her mind raced over the things she'd done and was willing to do to save the lives around her. *There isn't anyone I won't kill now.*

The kids around Angela felt the evil in her, but they were comforted by it. As long as Angela was the alpha, kids would never be hurt. Females would never be slaves. Men would never be forced to choose between doing what was right and survival. Angela was going to save the world and the kids were going to help. They didn't care if she was a killer, because she was theirs.

5

As dawn approached, Marc held up a hand. "I have to ask something personal."

Close to drunk now, Adrian gestured for him to go ahead.

Marc gave him a sheepish look. "How many kids do you have?"

Instead of laughing, Adrian's expression filled with pain. "I have one daughter."

Marc sensed he had hit an important topic and kept going. "How many sons?"

Adrian sighed, letting out a belch at the same time. “At last count, I have fathered eighteen sons.”

“Holy shit.”

Before Marc could ask, Adrian gave him the next answer. “Four are still alive, that I know of.”

“Why are you in Safe Haven instead of searching for your kids?” Marc couldn’t have hidden the contempt in his voice even if he’d wanted to.

Adrian’s responding tone was just as incredulous. “Why would I need to search for them?”

Marc had assumed Adrian’s children were missing. He hadn’t considered that the man had stashed them somewhere. “You know where they are and you didn’t go to them instead of doing your job for the government that caused all this?”

“All I would have been doing was leading my enemies straight to them.”

“Don’t they need you?”

Adrian shook his head. “The only thing they need is for me to stay away.”

Marc wanted to let it go, but an unfinished story really would bother him. “What happened to your other kids?”

Adrian gave a scornful look. “You know what happened.”

“When you went rogue, they were rounded up.”

“Of course. I was too young and stupid to realize that would happen. I thought the government would only come after me. When I realized what

was going on, I rescued the ones I could and hid them.” Adrian stopped, hating Marc even more for bringing up the nightmares from his private crypt.

Marc didn’t like Adrian’s pain. He also didn’t like Adrian’s choices, so it was hard for him to offer sympathy. Instead, he chose to ask the next logical question. “How many of your kids were like Cynthia’s would have been?”

Adrian winced. “Over half. That’s why they had to be rounded up. They took after their father too much.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Marc, implying that the kids didn’t deserve to live just because they were his, enraged Adrian. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. Kids are not born evil. They’re made that way!”

In that instant, Marc understood the bond that Adrian and Angela shared. They were both parents who were missing their dead children. In Adrian’s case, he was using the camp kids to cover his pain at not being able to be with any of his own.

“She’ll do the same thing.” Adrian finished the bottle and let it fall to the carpet.

“Why? Because you have?”

Adrian shook his head, closing his eyes at the buzz. “Because it works where nothing else does.”

Marc waited for a minute and then asked his last question. “Ten of the kids were payback for your team. What about the rest of them?”

Adrian made a gagging noise. “Only seven came from my team. Three of those guys had wives that even I wouldn’t touch.”

Marc almost fell out of the chair.

As the laughter faded, Adrian grew pensive. “The others were gifts.”

Marc frowned. “Gifts?”

Adrian reclined his chair, trying to get comfortable. “I’m virile and some people are not. When I felt like I should, I helped couples conceive.”

Marc immediately thought of dirty movies.

Adrian denied the images. “This was for longtime friends that wished for a child in their lives. They were able to care for them, they just couldn’t conceive. I considered it a part of our friendship to help.”

Marc snorted, tone laced in scorn again. “And you got to enjoy their wives.”

Adrian thought back to some of the moments and grimaced. “Actually, if not for Viagra, some of them wouldn’t have happened.”

Marc chuckled, not believing him. Adrian’s reputation with women had grown since the war, but it was clear from his story that it was well earned. He had seduced seven women in three years, and gotten all of them pregnant. Marc wasn’t sure about the rest, but for thirty-six months at least, Adrian had been a very busy man. The only way he could have succeeded was by lying or using his gifts.

Adrian didn't tell Marc the women had been unhappy in their relationships, making it easier. If Marc thought about it all, he would know. It was hard to take a loyal woman away from a man she loved, as evidenced with Angela. Adrian had been trying for a long time now, with very little success.

Marc sensed the direction Adrian's thoughts had taken and pushed into the man's mind.

Adrian refused to hide anything anymore, even from Marc. The only punishment they could give him now was to banish Conner and he knew Angela wouldn't do that unless Conner deserved it. That meant he didn't have to hide his true nature.

Marc watched the replays of Adrian's leadership lessons with Angela, seeing how the man had pushed his alpha waves at every opportunity. He had indeed tried to seduce Angela, almost since her first month in camp. Instead of the rage that Marc had expected to feel upon having that suspicion verified, all he could do was laugh.

Offended and not sure why, Adrian waited for Marc to recover for the explanation.

Marc wanted to leave the man hanging, but he knew Adrian was smart enough to figure it out on his own and Marc wanted this moment of seeing Adrian's expression when he realized he wasn't as smart as he thought he was.

Adrian felt something awful coming and tried to brace for it. "What? What did I miss?"

"I just figured out why she made you tell us that story."

Adrian was confused on the quick topic switch. He didn't see how the two were related. "Why?"

"It was a message to you in front of witnesses. They'll figure it out once they spend a little time on it. You would have too, but I didn't want to miss this."

Adrian was suddenly sure he didn't want to know, but the challenge in Marc's expression wouldn't let him ignore it. Adrian began adding up the clues Marc had just given him.

Marc observed eagerly as Adrian finally put it all together.

"She knows."

Marc laughed at Adrian's stricken expression. "Yeah, even while she let you dig a hole by acting like the victim." Marc mimicked him. "*Haven't I been paid back enough yet?* You pissed her off there."

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah, she's figured out that if you hadn't been using your gifts on her, your bond wouldn't exist in this life. She knows you betrayed her."

"I didn't betray her."

Marc shrugged. "I doubt she'll agree, but you can always try that."

"She can't know or I'd be dead."

"It took me twelve hours to figure it out. How long do you think it took her?"

Adrian paled as the obvious answer came. Angela had known all along that he was using his gift to seduce her.

“Oh, man, are you in trouble.” Marc stretched, feeling better than he had in a long time. “I sure wouldn’t want to be you.” He stood up, once again enjoying Adrian’s speechlessness.

Adrian couldn’t form a response. He was thinking about the kiss and her declaration. How could she love him if she knew he’d used his gifts to soften her heart and lure her in?

Marc spun around and punched Adrian in his mouth, sending the man to the floor. “Because it worked, you piece of shit! The spell worked!” He followed Adrian, grabbing him by the dog tags he’d spotted upon entering. “You lied to all of us! You said you wouldn’t go after her! I didn’t deserve a payback!” Marc shook Adrian with brutal anger. “Why did you do this to us?!”

Adrian shoved Marc backwards, sending him over the other chair, but he didn’t get up. “Because I couldn’t stand to see another woman ruined the way my mother was!” Adrian spat out blood again, knowing this split lip would stay. Marc wasn’t going to heal him again. “I set her free. I set them all free!”

Marc had leapt up, but he stopped at the accusation. “Kenn was the one keeping her prisoner, not me! Why not destroy his relationship?!”

“I did! I got both of you at the same time!”

Marc wanted to keep beating on Adrian, but he already knew that didn’t work. Desperate, he sent

the strongest alpha wave he could muster. “Tell me how to break your hold over her!”

Adrian didn’t need to fight it. “You already know how.”

Marc lunged forward as he drew his gun, putting the warm Colt against Adrian’s forehead. Even Angela wouldn’t be able to bring him back from a bullet to the brain.

Adrian might have accepted that fate if Angela hadn’t let him in tonight. “My life doesn’t belong to you!”

“Let go of her!”

Adrian shook his head even though he could see Marc’s finger tightening on the trigger. “Never.”

“You said she’s free, but not from you. Let her go!”

“I can’t!” Adrian shoved the gun away and leaned against the seat. “I can’t. Even if I wanted to, I can’t.”

“Why not?!”

“Because it backfired.”

Marc dropped into the seat as he understood. “You can’t break the charm because you’re under it too.”

Adrian sighed in defeat. “I could have been free of it if she’d died in that rest stop.”

Marc shared Adrian’s memory, his fear of not being able to save her. The emotions were no longer hidden behind a bond of leadership. Love and terror swirled through the memory, marking it genuine.

“If she knows...” Adrian’s dog tags clinked as he forced his bruised, battered body back into the chair. “then she’s giving you the choice by making sure that you know the truth too.”

“We don’t need you anymore.” Marc’s heart thumped. “That’s the only way she would let me know this.”

Adrian shook his head, confirming what Marc had suspected when Angela had only made Adrian the spotter and shield magnifier over the last few days. “No.”

Marc didn’t want the choice now. Either one he made would destroy his relationship.

“Only because you can’t share!” Adrian spat at Marc. “Greedy bastard!”

Marc used a fast movement to slam his gun into Adrian’s face. “Fucking Jody!”

Guards outside the RV exchanged concerned glances. They didn’t know what to do. The fragile peace had obviously been broken.

“Leave them alone. They’ll work it out.” Kendle was also observing from the shadows.

“How do you know?” Conner was worried. “It sounds like they’re tearing each other apart.”

“I know because there hasn’t been a gunshot yet. Marc will beat on your dad and then they’ll talk.” Kendle motioned the boy toward the tents. “You could use some sleep.”

Conner refused. “I’ll be right here until this is done.”

Kendle shrugged. “Suit yourself. There are two hours until dawn. I’ll be snoring.”

As Kendle left, Conner edged closer to the RV, trying to listen. A sudden silence had fallen in place of the shouts and crashes, scaring the boy.

“When did you decide to do it?” Marc had sat down, too tired to waste his remaining energy on drawing blood when he still needed information. “What happened? What did I do?”

“It wasn’t you. It was her.” Adrian sucked in air now that Marc wasn’t hitting him in the face or choking him. His skin slowly returned to black and blue instead of purple. “She would have wasted away as your mate. You wanted her to be a member of the herd. She wanted to be a shepherd. She allows me to live because of that. She knows that if I hadn’t done this to all of us, she would be one of the sheep and she can’t stand that idea because she would have hated you for it by now.”

Marc gestured for him to keep going. “There’s always more with you. Don’t stop now.”

Adrian didn’t get up off the floor this time. “What do you want to know, Boss?”

“I want to know what flipped you into destroying our lives.”

“She doesn’t see it that way.” Adrian rested his head against the floor and let Marc into his memory so the man could understand how powerful the moment had been for him.

“Jeremy found everything on his list and says he has pictures of an entire town that’s undamaged. Cherry Creek. Says it’s completely deserted, but the stores and malls are still intact. Figures the whole town just evacuated in a neat, orderly fashion.”

Adrian grinned ruefully. “Be the first one of those we’ve run across. Okay, that’s it.” He closed his notebook. “You’ll put the dogs out?”

“Yeah. Chris says Star’s gonna have a litter come May.”

“That’s great. We need all the babies we can get,” Kyle glanced at Kenn, speaking before he thought about it. “Didn’t you tell us you had one on the way?”

Angela froze, heart ripping open.

Every man at the table scowled when Kenn flushed and turned questioning, embarrassed eyes her way. He hadn’t asked that yet? They’d been alone in his truck for hours!

Angela couldn’t hide the hate as the awful pain dug into her chest. My baby! “I lost my other son.”

Her voice was like broken glass; no one was surprised when she stood up. “Excuse me.”

“I watched her walk away with her head up and guts spilling out. I had to have her.”

Marc felt like he was going to be sick. Adrian and Angela were bonded through their horrible grief over dead children. He couldn’t compete with that. Only a crazy man would keep trying.

“But that’s the problem, don’t you see? Neither of us get her if we remove the other. I have to protect you. We have the same catch-22.”

Marc considered that, remembering times when Adrian had saved his life. He’d always known it was for Angela, just not how deep that went. “What are your three strongest gifts?”

Adrian wasn’t expecting the question, but he wouldn’t have lied now anyway. “Charm, magnetism, and alpha control.”

“The charm is what you used?”

“I wish. Jennifer probably could have broken that.” Adrian felt shame as he admitted his weakness. “I knew I didn’t have a chance unless it was strong. I waited until I felt things for her and then I combined it into a three way hit of all my big gifts. I’d never done it before. I didn’t need to in the past.”

“You ruined my life with her.”

“I gave her a new life—one you were too scared and greedy to provide.” Adrian pointed at him. “You knew what she was capable of and you still tried to keep her from it because you wanted her all to yourself. You hated the idea of her being hurt, but it was always the jealousy that made you react the way you did.”

“You stirred me up at every turn, making me look bad to her, causing us to fight.”

“Only by telling her yes whenever you said no.”

Marc hadn't ever thought to feel this much helpless hatred toward any person. What'd he'd felt for Kenn was now dim in comparison.

Adrian knew. He would feel the same if he was Marc, but he wasn't. He was a corrupt descendant who had fallen in love and was trying to go straight on the off chance that Angela might need him some day. "I'm pathetic."

Marc nodded. "That, you are." He stared at his enemy, mind flying over moments when he'd suspected Adrian was using magic on Angela. "Tell me why I won't kill you before I leave this RV. Remind me or I'm going to start beating on you again."

"How about I give you some advice that will calm you down after you think about it, but will also secure your relationship?"

Marc used his middle finger to gesture. "Sure, why not?"

"Act a little more like me."

Marc was morally offended. "Never."

Adrian shrugged. "She's dark inside. Your constant halo makes her feel like shit and she comes to me for the break. Am I supposed to turn her away when I'd give anything to be with her?"

"Yes, you are!"

Adrian fingered his black eye. "Might as well kill me now because I can't do it."

"And I can't do that or she'll hate me!"

Adrian jerked his hand. “Then take my advice and stop being the perfect person all the time. She can’t handle it.”

Marc paused. “I did a bad thing on the trip.”

Adrian frowned. “That one bothered her.”

“I don’t understand the line.”

“It’ll take a few, but I’ve got the time to explain it if you want to listen.”

Marc propped his feet on an empty seat, anger fading in place of finding a solution to the mess. “I’m all yours. I will be from now on.”

Adrian grimaced at the warning. Marc would be in his head all the time now, watching for tricks. “You don’t need to do that. I meant it when I shook on our truce.”

“I didn’t.”

“That doesn’t matter to me. I gave my word on something.”

“You broke it when you promised you wouldn’t go after my woman!”

“I’d already done it.” Adrian shrugged. “The bunker wanted Safe Haven. I had to act fast.”

Marc’s anger simmered again, but he crossed his arms over his chest to keep from lunging. “I can sleep while we travel. Start explaining.”

“I’ve been with a lot of women.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

“I mean I’ve *been* with them, as in we’ve bonded. Every time we had contact, I made sure we bonded in some form. You could do that without it

being a betrayal. She'd not only approve, she'd love it that you care so much."

Intrigued, Marc waved him on. Adrian had been the clever one until now, but Marc had learned a valuable lesson after the quake. He'd already begun to mimic some of Adrian's actions and tactics. Now, he was doing recon for more and Adrian was helping without knowing. Plus, he'd gotten to hit the man a few times. It was the perfect close to the day.

Chapter Forty-Two BK8

Close

1

*T*hat's enough. Let that one go.

Billy paused in the downward swing of his knife, staring at the terrified man whose life had just been saved by the voice. As if asleep, Billy stood up and stepped back. "Be good now."

The man scrambled backward, not taking his eyes from Billy. He thumped over the curb, smacking his skull on the ground.

Billy turned away so the rapist would get up and run. He didn't want to watch it, however. After the way he had spent the last-24 hours, someone running might trigger his instinct to draw and he still had half a magazine of bullets.

Billy scanned the town, not caring that he stank or that he was coated in drying layers of gore. When he'd come up from the sewer the night before, he had eliminated the refugees above him. He'd planned to leave the city at that point, but more conversations and thoughts had come, requiring him to take action. The woman in his brain had watched in tolerance while he handled the chore, but now, she was urging him west again.

Billy stepped over a small stack of bodies, noting the familiar bullet holes. Very few refugees had escaped the city once he'd come out of hiding. Slipping through the darkness like the Ghost he could remember now, but still couldn't place with the man he'd pulled a gun on, Billy had slit throats, stabbed people in their sleep, smashed skulls with bricks, and smothered them with their own packs. All the while, his mind had been in the west.

Billy marched down the middle of the street, hands resting on his guns. Even though one of them was empty, he was comforted by the sensation under his calloused, bloodstained fingers. Behind him, large crows and other winged scavengers were circling the city. Billy was happy to have fed them.

As the sound of engines came to his sharp ears, Billy slid into an alley, once again having to step over remnants of his night. The girl the two men had been holding captive had fled east. Billy hadn't spoken to her after snapping one man's neck and slamming the other man's face into the wall. She'd still been screaming when he walked away. When the screams had stopped, he'd heard her running.

Billy paused for the vehicle to reach him, noting the travelers were on a parallel road to the city. He wondered how they would cross the river.

Billy slid out of hiding long enough to get a view of the approaching people.

The bright yellow hummer glared in a disrespectful reminder of the old world.

Billy drew his gun.

Leave them.

Billy holstered, turning away. He stayed behind the wall, out of sight, and the engine soon faded. Almost disappointed that he hadn't been allowed to kill again, Billy made his way across the bridge.

Deep down, he was certain he'd gone mad. He had many of his memories back now, but it was all distant to him, as if it had been a movie of someone else's life. All he wanted from the future was to find the woman who kept calling to him. She was a demon in his mind. He had to reach her.

“Either to rescue or to kill. I don't know which.”

Neither do I. Hurry up and we'll discover that together.

Billy broke into a jog, and then a run.

2

“I felt someone over there.”

“Too late now.” Becky took the hummer down the muddy embankment, relieved that the water was only going to reach the tires. Neither of them wanted to waste time finding a safer place to cross.

In a farmhouse near where they'd left Kendle's team, Becky and Seth had stumbled onto a UN man who had snuck off from his fellow invaders. Seth had forced the terrified Polish man to tell them about the UN's dirty secrets in America. They'd discovered a child trafficking ring that had been based just fifty miles from Seth's home town. They were on their way there now, in hopes that his

daughter wasn't lost after all. It was a tiny hope, but it wasn't a pleasant one. If the little girl had survived the war, her captivity wouldn't have been easy since then. Becky assumed it was right to hope the child had died in the war and been spared such a fate, but she couldn't do that. She wanted Seth to have his daughter back.

Seth watched the water roll by them with ugly, fresh debris. He didn't want to know where the feet and hands had come from. This new world was already ugly enough with blurry vision that came from staying up too late and sleeping too late. He didn't want to see it any clearer than that.

“Help!”

Banging on the roof made Becky cringe.

Seth ignored it, taking another drink. He was going through half a bottle some days, but the guilt over his daughter was eating him alive. The alcohol was the only thing that shut it up for any length of time.

“Please! Let me in!”

Becky didn't need any more guilt to carry. Abandoning Safe Haven had been a mistake, one she couldn't change because the camp had been destroyed. They'd heard the celebration calls that the mountain was on fire, but they hadn't heard any of their people responding, implying no survivors. Becky had taken them out of range after that to keep from going back to kill those who were happy about it. All she could think about was her mom dying in there. She'd dreamed about it. She didn't know

what had happened, but everything that had tied her to the old world was gone.

“I’m sorry! I won’t try anything! I’m frozen!”

“Should we bring him in?”

Seth belched, blowing scotch fumes through the cabin. “He has the strength to bang, so he’s still a threat to you.”

“It’s raining out here!”

“Can’t we at least give him clothes?” She could imagine how ugly the ride was for the man. Seth had used two full rolls of duct tape. He wasn’t getting off there unless someone cut him free.

“No. We found him naked with a goat. He can stay that way.”

3

“How far behind are we?”

Allan held up the map. “They were last seen here, going southwest. At twenty-five miles a day, they could be in Oklahoma by now.”

Doug fell silent, studying the landscape as Jeff drove without speaking. They would be lucky to find them at all. This was a suicide run, but Doug didn’t change his mind. He owed it to Peggy to make sure Becky was cared for. He would do his duty and hope for the best. In the end, that was all anyone could do.

Predawn wasn’t still or silent around them. Screams and gunshots echoed randomly, along with glares of fires and lights. Jeff avoided it all, going

through yards and alleys when he needed to. He'd gotten good at discovering an alternate path where bandits weren't lurking in search of weary travelers.

Jeff thought of the radio calls they'd listened to and forced himself to examine the implications later. Driving through the apocalypse was bad enough, but he was responsible for the lives of two little boys and that was important to Jeff.

He wondered if Doug knew how useless this trip might be and decided the big man did. Doug and Allan had needed a break from all the light and safety, Jeff assumed. He understood that and didn't resent them for getting him right back out here. In fact, they were a convenient way to avoid facing his issues. It might be months before he saw another eastern mountain range. Like everyone who'd been in that hellhole, he was grateful.

Allan had no idea why he was here. It could have been a side effect of almost dying in the tunnel shootout, or maybe he couldn't take any more death, but whatever it was, he felt the weight of the world slip from his shoulders as they continued to roll away from Safe Haven. He'd been carrying it for so long that his shoulders were hunched and pain radiated through his spine. Free of the stress, his body didn't know how to handle it. Allan settled for stretching and a nap. The future could hold anything. He wanted to be ready for it.

Doug helped the boys remove their coats as the vehicle warmed, stewing on them a little. He'd half expected Angela to insist the boys remain with her.

Because she hadn't, he was worried it meant they wouldn't have been safe in camp.

“Did you consider that they're going south, with Mexican children whose families recently died trying to take them back?”

Doug stiffened. “She got them out of reach.”

Jeff shrugged. “We're going west. The boys were last spotted in the east. There's an excellent chance she's trying to protect them while the Eagles load the boat. If anyone comes for them, she'll handle it and knock out another threat before they sail for the island.”

Doug was impressed, and relieved to be leaving Angela's path of destruction.

Jeff swallowed a sharp comment there, trying to come to terms with his bitterness at Angela. He'd almost reminded Doug that he'd lost his woman because of Angela's grand plans.

Doug seemed to know and shook his head. “I've never blamed her.” The big man locked eyes with Jeff in the mirror. “And that's why you're here—because you do. Time around me and Allan will help you.”

“What if it doesn't?”

Doug grinned at the little boys who were listening. “I'll have to sic the kids on you.”

Jeff groaned. “Oh, I am so screwed.”

David observed the jeep rolling by without reacting. He had traveled steadily since leaving the mountain, only stopping to avoid people and to sleep. He had the proper gear for the weather, thanks to Adrian, but it wouldn't have mattered if he had been naked. The woman who had started coming to him in his dreams was now speaking during the daytime too. She had informed him that a small family near here needed help. Then she'd told him to keep them alive as long as he could or he wasn't welcome with her. David hadn't hesitated to obey.

It had taken twelve hours to reach them on foot. He was miserable physically, not used to roughing it out here anymore, but he'd found the cabin with no problem. It was exactly where the woman had told him it would be.

The soldier waited until the jeep faded into the distance and he couldn't hear the engine, scanning his surroundings. The refugees he'd fought and avoided since leaving the mountain were everywhere. He didn't want any of them to track him to the family he was supposed to protect.

As David went toward the cabin, he noticed there was smoke coming from the chimney—something they would have to quit doing. Now that there were so many people around, it wasn't safe for the family to give away their presence with open fires. The woman in his mind said the family was starving and would soon die. Because of that information, David assumed he would be the only fighter in the group. That meant they would have to

lay low and that wasn't having every window lit up like a beacon in a three-story vacation rental cabin. David guessed they'd been trapped here by the war. He was impressed they'd lasted this long on their own.

David approached the cabin with his hands in view, able to feel someone studying him from the front window. He didn't spot them, but he knew they were there. The woman in his mind, Alexa, insisted this family wasn't supposed to be a part of Safe Haven yet, that they had an important job waiting in the north. David hadn't asked what the job was. He didn't care.

“Stop right there!”

David stopped. “I'm not a threat. I came from Safe Haven.” He used the exact words he'd been given, studying the noises.

There was a pregnant pause and then the sound of scraping. David assumed someone was lifting a bar from the door.

I'll have to teach them not to open the door to strangers too. A short, stocky guy in baggy clothes appeared, pointing a shotgun. “What do you want?”

David could hear the hope that he honestly had been sent to help, but he also noted the steel of someone who would do whatever it took to ensure his family's survival. David came to the bottom of the steps. “I'm supposed to stay and help you.” He braced for scorn or anger.

Lance lowered the shotgun immediately, relief stealing over his features. “We ran out of food two

days ago. The water was gone this morning. I don't have a choice."

David slowly lifted his hand to remove the pack. "You can have everything in here. I'll scavenge for the rest of what you need." David placed the pack on the bottom stair and then retreated. "I'll do some foraging now."

David didn't turn his back, but it was only out of habit and training. He doubted the man would shoot him. Any hope was better than none.

Lance waited for the stranger to get out of sight and then grabbed the bag. As he took it inside and shut the door, it occurred to him that it might be a trap. Anything could be in the backpack.

"Is it food, Daddy?"

Two thin kids flew toward him from the couch bed, stomachs growling.

The mother didn't try to stop them. She was also running over at the hope of a meal. Her housecoat hung off a thin frame that couldn't afford to drop any more weight. The adults had been giving their share of food to the kids, along with their medications, shoes, and clothes, but everything was gone or too small now. Within the next month, they would die and the kids would be alone.

Lance signaled the children away as he set the bag on the floor and opened it.

"It is food!"

His wife's excited cry was the first sound she had made in days. Lance held the bag out for her so she could grab what she wanted, smiling in relief.

“Where did it come from?” The woman ripped open the pouch of dehydrated apple slices and popped one in her mouth. She was the food taster. The family didn’t eat anything that she didn’t try first.

Lance gestured toward the porch. “He said he’s from Safe Haven, that he’s supposed to stay with us. He went out to find more food.” Lance caught his wife’s concern and shrugged. “We don’t have a choice and there’s only one of him.”

The adults shared looks that said they would kill the stranger if he became a problem or a threat to their children.

“I’ll make him a place on the porch. That old dog house will hold him for a few nights.”

The woman grimaced, but didn’t argue as she handed the apples to the drooling kids. They’d fought off intruders and gotten lucky that neither of their children had been hurt in the chaos. Having the stranger outside was better than in here with them.

They didn’t trust anyone. The two children were special and the adults had protected them off the grid since they’d been born. Even going to Safe Haven had been too big a risk, but now, it seemed that Safe Haven might have come to them. They’d hoped that wouldn’t happen at first, but desperation had changed their minds.

“What if he really is here to help us? We need it. We don’t want to run him off or make him mad.” It was her way of reminding her husband about the reputation of Safe Haven when provoked.

“Then he’ll slaughter us in our sleep or we’ll starve to death. When I said we don’t have a choice, I wasn’t lying.”

The wife returned to her dusty chair, letting the kids eat. When the stranger came back, she would talk to him. If he had a single bad thought, she would know and he would be the one to die in his sleep. It would be an easier meal than some of what they’d survived on since the war.

She and Lance had agreed on the new diet only a few nights ago, after they’d read Hansel and Gretel to the kids. It had reminded them that there was another awful, forbidden food source still available if they had the strength to make use of it. That’s when she’d called out for help and promised to repay it in any way required. Now, someone had come and her kids were eating. Praying it wasn’t a trap, the woman conserved her energy like she’d been doing since making the call. She was scared of Safe Haven. Any time that many of their kind got together, there was always death and betrayal—especially when a Mitchel was involved. Her grudge was against Adrian’s father, but she already knew better than to trust the son. If Adrian came here, he wouldn’t leave. Old debts were still debts, and someone had to pay them.

Dog shook his head at the scent of a vehicle that had gone by recently, not recognizing it. *That's not them.*

The wolf padded down the center of the road, sniffing weeds and trees that lined it. He had lost the scent of Jeff's truck two days ago, but it wasn't hard to figure out which direction to go. It was the opposite of every other animal in the country.

As if conjured by his contemplations, a large herd of deer began to come through the area, moving north. The herbivores scented Dog in fear, but they didn't stop their forward march.

Positive they weren't going willingly, Dog stayed still and quiet as the herd passed close enough for him to lick their furry necks. Dog controlled his hunger. He didn't understand why all the animals were traveling north, but he had figured out what effect it would have on the remaining humans. They would have nothing to eat. Nature's intention was to eliminate all of the food from the land.

Dog's urge to hurry grew. He had to reach Marc. He had to tell Marc what was coming.

Dog growled as a human form stumbled toward him. Studying the deer, Dog hadn't noticed the human.

The man didn't stop. It was as if he didn't see the wolf in front of him.

Dog prepared to leap and run, now reluctant to kill a human.

A familiar scent hit his nose. *Safe Haven!*

Breathing harsh, muttering and groaning, Dog wasn't able to understand the man. Covered in blood, Dog didn't recognize him either. Fur bristling, he padded closer.

Ray curled his arms over his head and waited for death. He didn't know how he'd escaped the mountain. All he remembered was finding Dale's body.

Dog caught the thought. *Ray!*

Worried for Marc, Dog sat down next to the man, but he didn't try to communicate. Dog and Dale had been friends; Dog didn't want to experience Ray's pain on top of his own or make him run off.

Exhausted, Ray fell asleep while waiting to be attacked by a wolf he wasn't sure was even there.

Dog curled up next to Ray and put his snout on the man's cold hand. Ears twitching at every sound around them, Dog knew what he had to do. If he helped Ray, Ray would take him to Marc.

Dog shifted his weight onto more of Ray's body to keep him warm, then lifted his head.

The herd of deer took off running as the long howl split the quiet air. Followed by more of the same, the sounds echoed through the morning like gunshots.

6

“I want notebooks on this stuff—like you gave her for leadership.”

Adrian nodded, exhausted and in a lot of pain. “I’ll work on it between her lessons for the Eagles.”

“Do hers first.” Marc knew better than to slow progress on anything Angela had asked for.

“Is this what our nightly meeting will be now? Me teaching you how to lie, cheat, steal, and manipulate?”

“Do you have anything else you can teach me?”

“Of course. I may not be useful to the camp anymore except as a drill sergeant, but when it comes to women, I know a lot that hasn’t even been tapped.”

“I’m tapping it now.”

Adrian rubbed his face, carefully. “Yeah, we’ll call it tapping.”

Marc chuckled, opening and closing his aching fist. “I can try again.”

“Or you could just tell me why you’re here.” Adrian glanced over, still lying on the floor. “You could have beaten on me and then enjoyed curling up to that perfect ass.”

Weary, Marc completed their new bond. “I’m doing recon.”

“On women?” Adrian snorted. “You already have the charm and magnetism, and you don’t need to manipulate them.”

“No, I don’t, but that’s not what the recon is for.” Marc waited, letting Adrian prove how smart or stupid he was.

Adrian flashed to Marc’s response when the Messenger had contacted them. He went there

because it was the only thing they hadn't discussed yet. "You did it on purpose."

Marc was dismayed that Adrian was so fast. It would make it hard to stay ahead of the man. He'd been hoping for lucky and stupid.

"You fooled Angela. She thinks you let emotions rule your answer."

"Shhh..."

Adrian switched his thoughts. He wouldn't betray Marc again. Once had been too much.

"Yes, it was." Marc waited, now sure Adrian would get the rest of it.

"And if you did it on purpose, you had a reason, a plan for something." Adrian pushed himself into a sitting position. "You took my advice!" Adrian saw Marc's thoughts, parts of the plan that was forming, and grinned. "Outstanding!"

Marc let the bond glow between them, accepting Adrian's praise this time. The man was a true leader. It was bad, of course, but Marc wasn't going to use those parts of what he was learning. He would form a connection that was too strong to let Adrian cross him in any way once it was complete. And when the time came, Marc wasn't going to be the one who killed him. He'd settled on a much harsher judge.

Adrian paled at Marc's revelations, realizing the man had trapped him in a cell that he would never be able to escape. "You're going to trade me for Safe Haven again."

“Oh, yeah, and you’re going to help me to do it, aren’t you?”

Adrian nodded, unable to fight the images. The only thing he wanted more than Angela was for Safe Haven to become the society that God would accept so human torment could end. Panicking as the walls closed in on him, Adrian glared at Marc in rage. “Swear it on her life!”

Marc winced, but he didn’t hesitate. “I swear on Angela’s life that I’ll build it or die trying.”

Thrilled with either side of that, Adrian muttered a few words and waved a hand through the air between them. “An official record has been made.”

“Remember that.”

Adrian felt the cell becoming solid around him and tried to crawl out through a tiny hole in the top. “She’ll know you’ve done this. You can’t hide it. When she finds out you’ve wagered her life, she’ll turn to me.”

“And she’ll know it was your demand to the deal. You didn’t ask for anything else.”

Steel bars came down over the cell, blocking the tiny hole of hope. Adrian surrendered to his cage with a last wave of hatred. “Slam you.”

“Meeting adjourned.” Marc stood up. “On a more personal note, I don’t care what she thinks about the deal. I only care that she won’t cross the Creator and ruin Safe Haven’s chance now that our deal is official—not even for you.”

“Because she wants that goal too much.” Adrian realized his methods to lure her in had also backfired. Like himself, she now wanted Safe Haven to succeed at any cost. “She’ll never forgive you for tricking her this way.”

Marc shrugged. “She’ll still love me at the same time. I know that because she’s been doing it with you and this is giving her the ultimate goal. You’ll never mean more to her now. You’re just the swinging Jody who might be around to sleaze his way in when I die. I’ll be the legend in her mind. You’ll be the afterthought.”

Marc gave a final shove as he popped the handle on the door. “After you sleep, go away for a few days. When she blows up over this, I want her to have to deal with me. You’re done being the sympathetic shoulder she runs to. We both know she can take whatever she dishes out.”

Adrian nodded. There was no fight left in him. “I will.”

“Excellent. I’m glad we had this little chat. I can’t tell you how good it feels to be on this end of things for a change.”

Adrian’s response was a bitter chuckle that came out as a sob.

That’s the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard. Marc was grinning as he braced to face the cold weather outside the RV.

“Marcus?”

Marc frowned at the tone as he looked over his shoulder.

“Don’t fuck up, you know? You won’t answer to me or her on this one.”

Marc shuddered at the warning. “Yeah.”

“Can you do it?” Adrian hated his groveling tone, but he suspected Marc would drag it from him on a regular basis now.

Marc sighed. “Fifty-fifty. I know I can get the camp to do it. I’m just not sure that I can stand to see you kiss her again. If I ever do, I might snap and damn us all. I’m still like Adam in that. I thought she was just supposed to be mine.”

Adrian didn’t say what they both knew. Instead, he pointed at the window. “Someone’s coming.”

Before Marc could open the door, it was pulled out of his grip.

“Uh, sorry.” Conner tossed two big kits into the RV at Marc’s feet.

Marc looked at the kits and then Adrian.

Adrian stood up, pains forgotten. “Something happened.”

Kendle appeared behind Conner, kit in hand and sleepy, confused expression on her face. “I was told to get here with my gear. What’s up?”

Marc frowned, stepping from the RV to discover the camp alive with activity.

Conner shoved a paper into Marc’s hand and then ran to help.

“She called a bugout. A new wave of refugees is...”

“What?” Adrian caught Marc’s smile. “What’s going on?”

“Dog needs to be picked up! We’re his ride.” Marc climbed back into the RV, motioning at Kendle. “You’re the driver.”

“That explains the keys and map in my kit.” Kendle got into the RV and began to adjust the seat.

Adrian looked toward the rear bunk, where Kevin had crashed hours ago. “What about him?”

Marc dropped into the reclining rear seat and pushed it down. “He seemed bored to me. Maybe he didn’t get enough adventure out there with Jeff.”

Adrian snickered, walking to the bunks while Kendle started the engine. “Wake me in four.”

“Same here.” Marc laid down and tried to get comfortable.

Kendle realized she would be with Marc for a mission and couldn’t hide the grin or the happiness that swept through the vehicle and then the camp. “This is great.”

Marc would have preferred that Angela was along, but he didn’t say so. Instead, he encouraged her. “Dog needs help. Don’t spare the peddle.”

Kendle shifted into drive, waving to guards who would be told later what was happening.

“Hey! Why are we rolling?” Kevin’s confusion was amusing.

“Marc needs to see a man about a dog.” Adrian slid into the opposite bunk.

Kevin stared around for a minute and then shrugged. “Oh. Okay.” He went right back out.

Marc laughed, already starting to drift. His satisfaction dimmed a bit as he asked the dreaded

question he'd planned to avoid if he could help it. "Do you think she planned this so we would keep working it out away from the camp? 'Cause that would mean she knew about the deal before it happened and used us against each other to get what she wants out of it."

Adrian stretched out on the narrow, tight bed, spine popping. "If she did, I wouldn't disappoint her by coming back without the wolf."

The men let the mirth carry them into sleep, leaving their lives in Kendle's hands. They knew she could handle it. Angela wouldn't have sent her if she couldn't.

The End of Book 8

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Deleted Scenes BK8

1

“Angela called for everyone to come eat lunch.”
Adrian found Marc knelt down by a body near the entrance. “She’d like a personal check in from you.”

“Is she okay for a little while?”

Adrian noticed Marc’s dazed expression and joined him in the snow. “Yeah. What’s up?”

“Market town.”

“Ah.” Adrian resisted the urge to keep talking.

“They know Dirce is dead. They know the troops are gone.”

“Are they leaving, by any chance?”

“They’re glad jobs have opened up. They’re getting the town ready to fight us.”

“What gear do we need?”

Marc’s expression was as cold as the wind.
“None. She already told me how to do it.”

“You needed to make sure that it was required?”

“None of us wants to do this again, do we?”

Adrian swept the frozen battlefield that was sprayed with scarlet in more places than he cared to count. The Eagles out here were on duty over the entrance and Marc. Everyone else had gone in to avoid the views and smells of death. “Not unless they have to.”

“She promised a break. These people need peace.”

“That won’t happen here. You know it.”

“Yeah.” Marc stood up, wiping away snow from his pants. “We already have what we need—trucks and men willing to drive them overtop the enemy. It’ll be enough.”

Adrian followed Marc toward the passage. “You’ll keep scanning to make sure nothing changes before we leave?”

“Of course.” Marc signaled toward the men on duty. “You have point.”

Adrian took the post, happy Marc wanted him to do something.

Marc didn’t tell Adrian he wanted one of them on the entrance at all times until the door was up. Theo’s crew was laboring on it, but it would be dark before the basic barrier was even in place. That team would work non-stop to get it installed.

Marc was glad of the tepid warmth when he entered the passage. He hadn’t realized how cold he was or how long he’d been out there.

Marc motioned to the men on duty to stay alert, then proceeded to the top level, where they’d agreed their people would sleep over night. Now that it was noon, most of the adrenaline from the fight was gone and fear had replaced it. Marc assumed Angie was getting bad vibes and wanted him inside to help reinforce the impression of safety among their group.

Angela chuckled. *I got tired of cold toes and want you to come in and warm up.*

Marc smiled as he climbed the ladder, relieved there wasn't a new set of problems in here to handle. Picking off loose ends for hours was depressing.

I'm sorry about that.

You didn't make them come to America with plans to conquer. Not your fault. You did what you had to, to keep our country alive.

Thank you.

Marc stiffened as heat flooded him, groaning. *That's nice.*

Angela ran a mental hand over his brow, caressing. *I need to rest now. You have point.*

Marc realized she hadn't felt safe without him nearby. *I've got it. Sleep well.*

He could feel her drift off almost right away. The mood of the cave was ugly without her light flowing through.

Marc sent his own blast of calm, sensing the unrest on the bottom level, but not the top. It felt as if their people were all taking a nap, while Jimmy's clan was furious about having to spend another night with the descendants. Marc didn't pick up any plans of betrayal, but he went straight to the bottom floor to speak to Jimmy anyway. The doctor needed to know that in this mood, if there was a single problem overnight, Angela would kill them all and Marc would help her. The best thing the Mountaineers could do was go to bed early and sleep late. Safe Haven would be gone when they rose, without more deaths.

Marc heard low, vicious whispers before he made it to that floor. He dropped down the ladder in a fast slide. “Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy. How can you be a leader if your people don’t follow orders?” Marc pointed at a trio of two men and one woman in a far corner near the body corridor. “They’re planning bad shit, Jimmy, but I’m not going to just take it out on them when they do it. *You’re* the leader. You’d better lead them.”

Marc stayed to support Jimmy as the doctor demanded to know what they were planning, and then afterward, while he tried to figure out how to control his people. Marc believed it was a lost cause, but he only needed one night of peace. Jimmy needed a lifetime and he wasn’t even going to get a week. Angela’s visions of the mountain future had been grim to say the least.

Marc didn’t try to convince Jimmy again or allay his fears over this last night in here with the people he hated. The Mountaineers needed to toughen up and they needed to do it fast or there wouldn’t be any peace for them—only survivors.

Deleted Scene #2

1

Marc slid against Angela's warmth while smothering a groan. The shower had felt good, but being against her while lying down was indescribable.

Angela shifted toward him, letting their bare skin connect in that special way.

Marc hesitated for a split second, making the choice.

Angela felt it and waited. Last time, she'd taken the choice from him. Before that, neither of them had known what the future held. Now, it would be a conscious choice to create a life.

Marc slowly rolled her over to face him and sealed their lips.

Angela wrapped her arms around his neck, sighing happily as he slid on top of her.

Marc tugged her jeans down and quickly lined them up, using his eagerness to lube the way. As he gently pushed into her, Marc claimed her mouth again and sent his hands roaming.

Angela let him go for a minute, listening to his pleasure, feeling her body adjust and accept his. As his knowing fingers began to stroke and rub between them, she let the sensations carry her away.

Marc waited until she was on that edge and then shoved them both into the light together. As he

strained against her, aware of her being locked down around him, Marc sent a request. *Please let this one live.*

“Do they need us?”

Marc shook his head, wrapped around her and shuddering.

Angela let sleep take her far away, but she kept her hands clamped around Marc’s wrists, refusing to let go of him even for a moment.

Marc shifted over, breathing evening out. He listened to the footsteps and voices, glad the rest of their group was up here with them now. He shut his eyes and drifted in light dozes until exhaustion finally yanked him under.

Deleted Scene #3

1

As the RV pulled away from the campsite, Angela sent her own well wishes. She would worry the entire time they were gone. It had been rough with Adrian banished, but with Marc out of camp too, the mood would plummet into misery and joyless traveling through the land they used to know. Both men carried enough hope for the future to banish any shadows. Angela didn't have that ability. She only knew how to kill for their love. Wishing them a speedy journey, Angela got into the lead truck with Kenn and Tonya.

The cat in the box yowled in rage as Tonya held the flap closed. "I think she might live."

Angela knew Tonya wanted to show her the tabby, but the animal's noises implied now was a bad time. "I'd like you to keep working on it, no matter this outcome. We'll need your research in the future."

"I'm already having the Eagles bring me back any stashes they find, but only what we talked about."

Angela wasn't worried over it anymore, but she'd made it clear before the quake that the testing of chemicals in Safe Haven would be rare, limited occurrences based on their need to survive. She

glanced in the mirror and found lights flashing. “Make the call. We’re leaving now.”

“What’s the rush?” Tonya wasn’t ready to be on the road again.

Angela put her feet on the dash and tried to get comfortable. “I need to see a man about a boat.”

In the RV, Marc chuckled at her copy of their words as they left. He should have known that Angela was monitoring the RV instead of sleeping.

My witch does it for me now and reports to me when I wake up. Saves me a lot of energy.

Marc immediately demanded to know how to do it, glowering at his demon for not telling him.

Angela left them to spend a moment with each person in the RV. Kendle and Kevin didn’t know she was there. Kevin was still sleeping off his drunk and Kendle was concentrating on running over ants as she drove. Angela didn’t disturb either of them.

Adrian felt her arrival in his thoughts and opened the door wide. Before he could extend a greeting, a vicious plan of attack appeared in his mind.

Adrian groaned.

“What?”

“Is everything okay?”

The team woke quick and hard.

Adrian sat up, grumbling. “Yeah, it was supposed to be a quick pick up, but she just sent me this.”

Marc and Kendle blanched at the battle plan.

Kevin didn't notice. He was busy running to the bathroom to vomit.

“She wants us to go to the UN airfield first and make sure all the troops are gone. If we find a base, she wants it destroyed.”

Tell them the rest.

“She also wants us to team when we get there and stay that way, no matter what happens—all four of us.”

Fresh moans and mutters filled the cabin, including Marc's this time.

Angela's laughter was harsh and cold.

Adrian shoved her out of his head, grouchy, sore, and frustrated that she hadn't told them.

Why do you think she did it this way? Marc wasn't unhappy with the order. In fact, he thought a new adventure might be just what he needed.

Adrian grimaced as he realized Angela had done this to hurt him. *She won't forgive me.*

Did you ask her to?

Adrian groaned again as he realized he hadn't even apologized yet. “Damn it!”

Marc's laughter brought a smile to Kendle's lips. “This should be fun. Maybe your old lady isn't so bad after all.”

“She's amazing.” Marc settled back down to sleep, not caring that Adrian and Angela were still communicating. He had the man under his thumb now and that's where he would stay. It was the first of many who would come under control before they reached the island. Nothing would be allowed to

interfere with their chance. He would labor on the society and when it succeeded, he would be rewarded. Marc only wanted one thing now and it wasn't Angie.

Adrian shivered as if a ghost had gone over his grave.

Connected, Angela felt it and knew her devious plan had finally succeeded. The fight was over. Marc had won.

Crushed and delighted at the same time, Angela locked down on her emotions and broke the connection with her men. She'd figured out that the battle would never stop unless both of them found something they wanted more than her. With Adrian, it had been easy. He wanted his people to stop suffering. With Marc, it had taken an ugly shove, but she'd replaced his need for her with his need to kill Adrian. Letting Marc see the kiss had pushed the tiger back into a cage and he'd lashed out exactly as she'd expected him to—he'd made a deal with the Creator that no one else could have. Because he'd been so betrayed, Marc had the right to ask for justice. If she or Adrian had tried, they would all be dead.

Will it work? Can Marc do it?

Angela considered Jennifer's mental query. The girl hadn't helped with the schemes, but she'd been aware of them. Angela hadn't tried to keep her out. She was teaching Jennifer everything she knew. *Marc doesn't know how to fail and I'll stir him up again if I have to.* She paused, hating herself for

being willing to do this to him, but he'd traded her life for Adrian's death upon success and that offset it. *Yes, he can, but he'll be just like me by the time it's finished.*

Corrupt.

Yes.

You won't be able to stay after it's built.

No.

Neither can I.

No.

Will we come back here?

For a while.

And then?

Then we do what we were born for—we'll die.

I don't understand.

We're the martyrs, Jenny. We have to die in service to the God who left us here to rip each other apart. The good society buys our loved ones a chance to be forgiven and taken home. It doesn't mend the rift between humanity and the Creator.

How will our dying fix it?

I have no idea. I can't see any further than the final fight. I assume that's because I die there. After doesn't exist for me.

Jennifer immediately began searching the future and this time, she didn't skip the forbidden doors or methods. She'd slaughtered a hundred men. She was definitely corrupt. What did one more strike matter against knowledge?

Satisfied she now had all of her army on the path to accepting what a grim, yet glorious future waited

for them, Angela tugged her hood over her face and cried. She couldn't stand what she'd become, what she'd done, but she also hated herself for what she'd gained from it. The people who whispered she was ruthless had no idea how far off that was.

If it saves my kids and my people, how can I not be this way? I didn't ask for this destiny, this awful, awful duty, but if I'm the only one who can do it, don't I have to? Humanity has been cursed since the garden and it no longer matters why we have the mess. We just have to clean it up, by any means necessary. That's why we were born into this time and place. It wasn't to sit or stand in safety, but to run headfirst into the darkness and challenge the demons waiting there.

Angela forced herself to lock it all away in her crypt. That future was years ahead of them. They had made it to the start of a small break that would give them the strength to handle it. After being the most manipulative bitch on the planet for the last six months, Angela was ready for everyone to enjoy the peace that she had traded so many lives for. Tears drying to her cheeks, Angela went to sleep. It was all up to Marc now.

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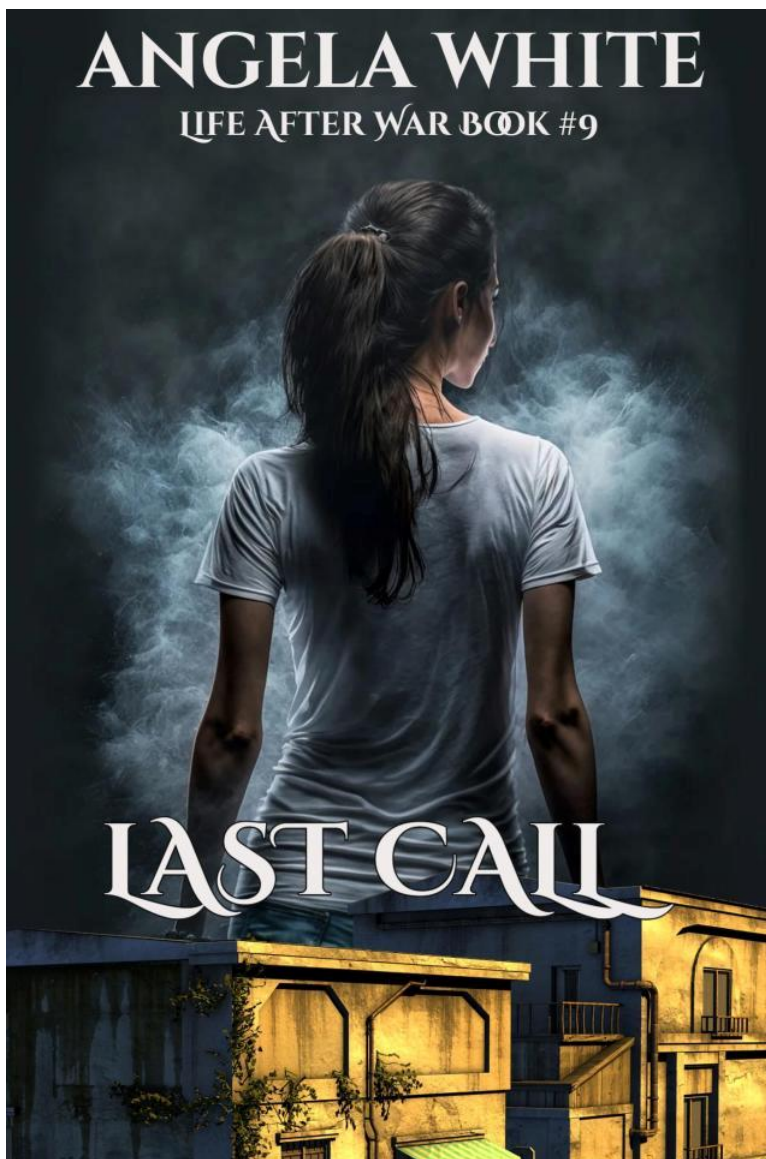
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Book Nine

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #9

LAST CALL



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Last Call

by

Angela White

Title: Last Call

Life After War Book 9

Edition: 2024

Author: Angela White

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Last Call

We had nowhere to turn upon our escape;
The horrors followed as we fled.
We tried to stay ahead of them,
And keep our people fed.

Sickness came with the cold,
Turning survivors into beasts.
We stayed on the move;
The hounding never ceased.

No longer protected by the stone;
Surrounded by men and ice.
We battled down to our last stand,
And begged fate to cast the dice.

We watched the cubes tumble across the dead,
Praying for sanctuary to fall.
The dice came to a bloody stop,
On Safe Haven's last call.

Chapter One BK9
On The Road Again

Near Rome, GA

11am

1

“It’s the first of November.” Kenn steered the muddy semi around a wreck, glad it didn’t require stopping the convoy to clear. He saw where both dented vehicles had been pushed aside by Ivan’s tank. UN blue was smeared on the fenders.

The area they were driving through was still and quiet, with frozen trees and empty homes that begged them to stop, to stay. Kenn suppressed a shudder. He could almost hear them. Until the war, he hadn’t ever considered that houses had souls, but the ones around him held ghosts pleading for new life to be breathed into them.

They had been out of the mountain for twenty-seven hours now, driving straight through except for one bathroom and fuel stop. They had made it 220 miles and were now near the Talladega Forest. Kenn estimated they would reach the ocean in another 700 miles. This first stretch had gone so fast because the roads were clear from the UN troops and the Mexican army coming through, as well as from their own fight with the government. The area

around the mountain was still lingering in everyone's mind. The wrecks and battle sites had been ugly, but the barren, frozen wilderness beyond it had been just as haunting. Some of their people had secretly hoped to emerge and find the old world up and running. They hadn't, of course.

Kenn glanced over to determine if Angela had heard. "Yesterday was Halloween."

Angela lowered her stained, wrinkled map. "Time was different under the mountain. Most people didn't know when it was light or dark. How did you keep track of the date?"

"I have a great watch." Kenn shifted his body to accommodate the woman dozing against his arm. Tonya was tired.

"So does Marc." Angela held up her wrist. "I use his."

Kenn's lips thinned. "You knew we'd missed holidays and birthdays."

Angela let go of the map. It flapped loudly as it rolled up, waking Tonya. "What's your problem?" She wasn't going to be reprimanded over something so petty.

"It isn't petty to the kids who've missed a birthday."

Angela shoved the map into the kit at her feet. "Adrian found time for it?"

"Yes." Kenn braced for ugliness. He was learning to read her tones.

"I'm not Adrian."

Kenn kept trying. “People need those moments. It might not have been so bad in the mountain if we’d celebrated.”

“It also might have reminded them of the old world so much they rioted to get out.” Angela was cold and grouchy. “I did think it through. You should try that.”

Tonya glanced between them. “Everything okay?”

Kenn patted her wrist. “It’s fine.”

Tonya took in Angela’s pinched lips and sighed. “Stop it.”

Neither of them knew who she was talking to; neither of them responded.

Tonya yawned. “Adrian’s parties always made me sad. We never knew when the next one was coming, and he didn’t celebrate all of the holidays—only the ones he approved of. Either give them all back or keep them. Middle ground sucks.”

Angela stored Tonya’s secret as Kenn stiffened. He’d believed Tonya would be on his side. He was distracted and hadn’t realized she’d just read both of their minds. “I’m going to reinstate them all and add a few new ones. We just can’t do it right now. We don’t have the supplies, manpower, or time.”

They had healing injuries and grieving citizens who were happy to be free and also terrified of it. Their faith in her to keep them alive was an honor and a nightmare she carried every moment.

“Which you would have told Kenn if he’d asked instead of accusing, right?”

“Yep.”

Kenn flushed as Tonya made her point. They’d argued over this a few days ago. Not the holidays, but the way he talked to people. Tonya insisted it wasn’t just her. She said he was unintentionally aggressive to everyone.

Tonya yawned again and put her cheek against his arm. “It takes time. Keep working on it like you do everything else.”

Angela stared at Tonya. Sometimes, it still hit hard that the redhead was smart.

Kenn couldn’t let it go. “I agree with Jeff a little. The misery since she took over has been awful. Adrian gave us rewards and good moments to offset this new life.”

Tonya grunted in resignation and pulled earbuds from her pocket. She slid them in, brow puckered, and switched on the truck radio. Kenn had rigged it up this morning while teaching her to drive the semi. Each vehicle had two wheelmen, two guards, and passengers—except for this one. It was just her, Kenn, and Angela. Tonya was tired of the mix.

Angela was too, but she also didn’t understand what Kenn’s... “Why didn’t you just tell me you saw something coming?”

Kenn was afraid to answer.

Unable to trust him or give him time to come to her when he was ready, Angela dug into his mind.

Kenn didn’t resist. He knew better.

Angela scanned him hard and fast. “Oh, good grief, Kenn! If I wanted to lock away your gifts, I already would have.”

He flushed darker. “I didn’t know what it was at first.”

Angela tried to be patient. “We evolve after tragedies. A new gift isn’t something to hide.”

“...Marc won’t like it.”

“Ah. Fear of the Ghost.” Angela smirked. “That’s healthy for you.”

Kenn sighed. “I’ve always been afraid of him, even before the war.”

“That pleases me.”

“Yeah.”

Angela was relieved Kenn’s secret wasn’t bad. Marc wouldn’t care that the Marine could levitate now. Marc hardly ever thought about Kenn anymore. Adrian was always his target now.

“How do you think the mission team is doing?”

Angela grunted. “Better than we are.”

“Why do you say that?”

The radio on Kenn’s belt crackled. “Boss, we have a winter storm coming from the northwest.”

Kenn pushed the mike. “How long?”

“Less than three hours.” Neil’s reply was curt. “It popped up fast and plans to hang around.” The trooper had obviously thought Angela would answer.

“Copy.” Kenn glanced at Angela for instructions.

Angela shifted in the seat, searching for a position that hurt less. “Same course I gave you this morning.”

“You knew.”

“Samantha told me she felt something brewing. Our lunch location can double as a night stop.”

“Excellent.” Kenn increased speed. He quickly caught up to the tank that was running point.

Ivan and the soldiers also increased speed, but Kenn stayed on their bumper. They were still an hour from the lunch site and it took longer to get camp set up and running now than it had before.

“Are we going to another state park?” Tonya was already tired of sleeping in the open. She was exhausted because she’d jumped at every noise around their flimsy tent overnight. Dealing with the kids during stops had added to it and exhausted her. Many people had the same problem. The convoy was full of snores and mutters from those who were dreaming of the mountain.

Angela shook her head. “We’ll be indoors.”

“Awesome.” Tonya increased the volume of the music. There hadn’t been much entertainment in the mountain. She’d missed it, but not like Kenn had.

“Okay!” Angela groaned. “I give! We’ll have a party. Just one for everything. You handle it.”

“We’ll go easy on rations.” Kenn was thrilled to get what he wanted.

Angela’s face darkened. “You’ll have to. We don’t have much unless the teams unearth more stashes.”

Kenn now understood her concern. “Do you want them contacted?”

“They know where we’ll be. They might even beat us there.”

Kenn hated to admit it, but despite all the deaths they’d had, Angela was more thorough than Adrian. She covered issues before they became problems. It was comforting. If she would ease up a little on fun, things could be great.

“I’ll try.”

Kenn didn’t push. He would do that later if it was needed. For today, he was satisfied he’d gotten something their people needed.

“Adrian will have a notebook for you on Eagle training.”

Kenn’s mood lifted. “Cool. Soon?”

“A few days, probably.”

Distracted, Kenn fell into mental plans.

Both women breathed a sigh of relief as the bad vibes faded. Not all of the negativity was coming because of Angela’s choices. Kenn’s gifts were coming in and he hadn’t learned to lock down on the mood swings yet. He would, but not before making everyone else suffer the emotional blasts. The descendant children were the same. They had to learn to control it; so did Kenn. Everyone else had to be patient.

Even distracted, Kenn was keeping track of her thoughts. “Thank you for understanding. I don’t mean to let it loose. It just happens.”

Angela stared out the window. “We’ve all gone through that, even Marc. After a while, you’ll know when it’s rising and be able to control it.”

“Like our personal shields?”

“Yes.” Angela was curious. “Can you do that yet?”

“Not fully. I can’t make it big enough.”

“It takes continuous energy and we’re all drained.”

“Yeah, that reminds me. Why did you say no about drawing from camp members when they offer?”

“They can’t afford the energy either. None of us are healthy. I’ll eventually reverse that decision, if you give me time.”

“You got it.” Kenn stopped scanning her and really sank into training plans.

Angela resumed her futile attempts to discover what the future held. Samantha hadn’t been certain how long the storm might last or even what type it was when she’d first mentioned it. Now that they knew it was snow, most of the preparations depended on how bad it would get. The location Angela had chosen would hold them for a few days if needed, but they had refugees following and those folks had been out in this weather all along. They wouldn’t sit around and wait for it to be over. While Safe Haven took shelter, numerous threats would start catching up to them.

Meanwhile, their three strongest fighters were out of camp. The next few days might be as hard as

the last few had been. Angela was too weak to see that far. All the descendants were and that was going to get worse until they reached the boat. Once on the ocean, there would be time for recharging. Until then, the same constant struggle for survival would continue to wear them down.

One more month, Angela told her aching body and weary heart. Do it for one more month and then we'll try to figure out how to be happy again. We've more than earned it.

2

“Why is he on my ass?” James kept one eye on Kenn in the mirror, and the other on the road in front of the tank.

“She wants us to hurry up.” Ivan wasn’t surprised. The clouds coming in were heavy. They were going to need shelter soon, but this area was uninviting. Even the animals didn’t like it here. Ivan understood it was cold, but people hadn’t been decimating animal populations for ten months. There should have been deer herds, stray cats, possums, and dogs being flushed out in panic by the sound of their convoy. He hadn’t even seen a bird yet. It was unsettling how quiet the world was becoming. “Speed us up.”

“That’ll be noisy.”

“She knows.”

James shrugged. “Okay.” He drove into a rusted dumpster, knocking it out of the way instead of

slowing to push it aside as they'd been doing since leaving the mountain. The noise was awful. "This might attract problems."

Ivan nodded. "If she wants us somewhere sooner, we make it happen and she handles the consequences. That's why she's the boss and we're just the soldiers."

James laughed at the old joke and aimed for the next chunk of debris.

3

"Are we all clear?" Angela looked to Ivan for the confirmation. The stopped convoy was growing impatient, but they'd arrived twenty minutes early.

Ivan was at the truck's passenger window. "They say we are, but I'd like to do one fast sweep myself."

Ivan was the guard over her vehicle. She'd assigned him. "We'll wait."

Ivan marched off.

Kenn gave signals to the guards around the stopped cars and trucks. Everyone was ready to be out of the vehicles, but Kenn and Angela both liked it that Ivan was taking the job seriously.

"The teams are all here. No contact, but they also didn't find much." Kenn translated the hand code updates while Angela got her coat on. The tiny town had a dozen homes in a square, surrounded by thick woods, short barns, and empty fields. It didn't appear looted, but it had the abandoned feel of most

American societal centers now. Kenn didn't expect trouble upon sight, which was a nice change. Still, it paid to be careful.

"All clear!"

Everyone scrambled for bathrooms and assigned posts, relieved at the call from Ivan. The adrenaline crash from their escape was gone, leaving a deep weariness that kept them all yawning and rubbing their eyes. Everyone who had duty was looking forward to being finished so they could sleep for eight hours in a bed that wasn't moving.

Angela understood. She planned to order lights out an hour after mess. They needed the rest and so did she.

Angela zipped her parka and stepped out into the stiff wind. Shivering almost immediately, she longed to have the old world comforts back for the millionth time. Like everyone else, she loathed this post-apocalyptic life. She wanted to settle into one of these empty towns, but that wasn't possible. All the horrors they'd suffered were still waiting to hit them again if she made a mistake, but this time, there was no bunker or radiation cloud to save them.

"My legs hurt."

"My hips are shouting at me."

"I can't stop yawning."

Angela silently echoed the complaints of camp members walking by. Traveling again after being in the mountain for months was hard on everyone. Eagles just preferred not to admit to their physical weaknesses. It was the same with adapting to night

sounds and weather. Angela had forgotten what it was like to be so cold she couldn't stop shivering, but she remembered now as the wind whipped and blew her braid over her shoulder. Winter was her least favorite season.

Refusing to wear the hood on the parka that would conceal her identity, Angela did don the thick hat Marc had insisted she take. She also pulled on the matching gloves, hoping she didn't need to reach her weapon quickly. The Eagles had flat-out refused the gloves for that reason.

Groups of workers were waiting as she emerged. Most were dressed in the same gear as Eagles. Angela felt lucky to have scavenged enough to outfit everyone. Some of their hard-found supplies would remain in that tomb forever. There hadn't been time to dig it all out. Angela doubted the refugees would unearth much of it. Their lives would be short and hard, always in search of a surviving town. The next two years would be the hardest fight for survival ever experienced in this country.

Angela took a stack of folded papers from her pocket and passed them out. With so many untrained rookies, she couldn't just tell them. Things would be missed, forgotten. "That's it."

The men and women hurried off. No one wanted to linger for a chat.

Angela waved the next group forward. This was the door-to-door crew she'd drafted. They needed oral reminders of what to do, unlike the senior men

watching them. “Be careful as you clear the buildings. Besides scavengers, there could also be animals. Go in teams of four. Clear every nook and cranny where a small person could fit. Also check for snake tracks and such. Go slow and verify it’s clear before you call it. I won’t be forgiving if you miss something.”

The rookies took a minute to form the teams, then marched toward the dozen homes. Camp members hurried out of the way.

Conner joined her, with Charlie at his side. “Do you want us to handle the vehicles again?” The boys were almost hidden under thick parkas and gloves.

“Yes. We’ll form a complete block around the buildings. Get them as tight as you can. Gas tanks should be facing in.”

The boys assumed that was to prevent theft and allow them easy access to the fuel if it was needed for something during the storm.

Charlie jogged to the lead rig to move it.

Conner went to the rear trucks holding their remaining livestock while he waited for the next vehicle to empty. He could hear Angela now worrying over the condition of their small herd. They were taking these animals to the island.

Angela watched him walk away. Conner might turn out to be everything that Adrian couldn’t. They were getting him young enough to ensure he didn’t follow a dark path. It was too late for his father.

Refusing to waste time dwelling on what couldn’t be changed, Angela strode to the vehicle

carrying her twins. Daryl and Greg followed. The two men were her personal protection until the camp was up. After that, she was putting them to work, no matter what Marc had told them to do. The camp needed them more than she did.

“We’ve got it.” Jennifer walked by with Candy, Mandy, and Tracy. All four women were carrying an infant. “Stop by later. We’ll save you a diaper.”

“Thanks.” Relieved and disappointed, Angela tried to scan her surroundings and got nothing with her gifts. She was forced to rely on sight and normal senses. What she could see was barren, deserted. There were no birds in the air and no ants out of their cone-shaped hills. An ominous wind was the only thing making noise. Angela listened to it intently. It said the coming storm wasn’t going to go away until it wanted to.

Angela joined the crew clearing houses. They were shorthanded, so she would help where she could. If she became too tired, she could still stand guard while the others worked. In Safe Haven, there was always a chore waiting.

Daryl and Greg stayed close to her, but neither man was surprised when she pointed to one of the homes that hadn’t been cleared yet. They didn’t argue despite Marc’s possible anger when he found out. Angela was the boss. If Marc took over, he would also have the authority to change scheduled guard positions.

Daryl and Greg cleared the farthest house from the camp people now forming lines around the bathrooms.

Angela went to the home next to it, noting dead flowers and an open, empty shed. It appeared the residents here had left peacefully. Angela clumsily drew her gun and flipped off the safety as she walked to the house.

Running boots crunched behind her.

Angela paused to let Ivan take the bodyguard position, aware of frowns coming from everyone witnessing it. The Eagles didn't trust him. Angela didn't either, but they hadn't spent much time together yet. With Marc and Adrian away, that would change. Ivan had appointed himself (or had been appointed. She wasn't sure which yet) her guardian. He hadn't let her out of his sight except to piss and sleep.

Ivan sighed, impatient for her to move so he could clear the house.

Angela braced mentally for action as she'd been taught, then braced for pain... She kicked in the door.

Not locked, the door gave easily and slammed into the wall.

Angela flew awkwardly into the dark house, crashing into furniture.

Senior Eagles rushed her way.

Ivan wanted to help her, but he was laughing too hard.

“Yeah, I deserved that.” Angela grunted, pushing an end table off her leg.

Ivan was shoved aside by Kyle’s team. He heard Angela pick herself up.

“That’s gonna sting later.”

Ivan laughed harder as she sent the Eagles back to their duties. He couldn’t help it.

Angela appeared, limping and rubbing at scrapes and sore spots. “You can stop now.”

“No.” Ivan shook his head, tears rolling as Eagles scowled deeper.

Angela limped back in to find her gun and clear the house. “Never gonna live that down.”

4

By sunset, Safe Haven was fed and settled, and patrols were on duty. Angela and Ivan were also outside, though only the snipers knew. Lurking between the homes, Angela once again tried to scan the future and only found darkness.

“Funniest shit since her boy ambushed Adrian with paintballs.”

“I haven’t laughed that hard in a long time. Was she embarrassed?”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

Angela listened to the first group of sentries who strolled by without spotting her or her guard. The rookies had a lot to learn and she had a lot of training to do—on them and on herself. She hadn’t been this out of shape since before the war.

Ivan stayed right next to her now that the shadows had lengthened, limiting sight. Wearing his army outfit, Ivan blended in better than the other men. He was also warmer, but no one complained. They were all enjoying the fresh air, no matter how cold it was. They were free. To celebrate, the guards were talking to each other more than they had in the mountain.

Ivan was fascinated by the new routines. Each shift had a descendant to sweep for trouble. The same was true of each house, though many of those were children. The organization was impressive. He had a few things to add to their security if Angela would let him, but overall, it was tight. After the chaos in the mountain, Ivan hadn't been certain if being outdoors would be the same.

“We'd never been in a mountain before. Out here, we know what we're doing.” Angela tried not to shiver. “Most of us, anyway. New arrivals always took a month to settle in.”

Ivan controlled his reaction to her reading his mind, not wanting to be eliminated from her guard. He liked learning from her, but he often forgot how powerful she was even when she wasn't trying or didn't appear to be.

Angela grunted, breath streaming out. “We used to forbid it. The invasion of privacy isn't something we like doing, but after you've almost been killed as much as we have, you adjust.”

“I can understand that.” Ivan saw the next patrol coming and felt Angela tense. “What are we doing?”

“Testing nerves.” Angela finished the explanation by stepping in front of the three unsuspecting guards.

“Ah!”

“Son of a...!”

Angela didn't snicker. Her earlier humiliation was fresh in her mind. She wasn't going to enjoy this small moment after doing something so dumb. “Good evening, gentlemen.”

“You scared the sh...” Nathan stopped himself. “I didn't see you there.”

“I didn't want you to. The same as an intruder won't want you to.” She swept the tired level two men. Their shift was almost up. “Get a hot meal before you crash. We'll wake you up for the meeting.” Angela left, spotting Samantha and Neil near the rear of the truck he had driven today. She connected to Samantha so she could see whatever had frozen the woman in place with no reaction to the rough wind trying to push everyone off their feet. If not for Neil's hip against hers, Angela was certain Samantha would have already fallen.

Ivan put his back to them and stayed alert.

Neil kept his eye on Ivan. Samantha's injury and Jeremy's death hadn't allowed time to size up the new guy who was making a fast name for himself. Whenever that happened, he and Kyle usually

grilled the person, but Neil wasn't sure if they would restart the tradition.

Neil glanced around at footsteps. Kyle was walking toward him, accompanied by Greg and Ben, who were Ivan's relief.

Neil flashed a fast hand code question.

Kyle grinned. "You know it. I'll entertain until you can join."

"Perfect." Neil swept the landscape, not minding the chill in the wind or darkness around them. They were outside. It was wonderful.

Angela shivered, withdrawing from Samantha's mind. "Well, we needed the break." She frowned at Kyle. "Reschedule it or make it quick. You're busy tonight."

Kyle nodded. "You got it. What's up?"

"We'll be here a couple days. I want you to supervise the set up. Neil and Shawn will handle the vehicles. We need batteries pulled and brought in like while we were in the mountain. Get the terracotta heaters set up too. We also have to cover the livestock trailer and put guards in there with heat. Pick two people who can sing. It calms them." Angela paused, considering. "I don't want people to come out unless it's a bathroom trip. Put an escort in each house with rope in case the storm reaches whiteout conditions. We're not sure yet."

Kyle and Neil were both writing down her instructions. Ben and Greg took Ivan's place, leaving the soldier free to observe the boss and catch anything she missed.

She won't miss anything. Kenn joined Ivan, admiring Angela's leadership. She's the alpha. She sees further than we do.

I don't know. I see pretty far.

Kenn shrugged. *Do you see an interrogation coming?* Kenn left Ivan frowning. He went to Angela for orders. "Boss."

Angela gestured. "We're still doing the meeting tonight, even if it's 4am. Be ready for it."

"I will. Where do you want Tonya?"

"Where does *she* want to be?"

Kenn's lips thinned at Angela's tone. It warned him to be careful about trying to control his mate. "With you."

"Then that's where she'll be—after I finish rounds. She can take notes during the meeting."

Kenn walked away. "I'm sending someone else to tell her."

Angela snickered. "Don't blame you at all."

The amusement calmed the men around them.

Samantha didn't notice. She was trying to determine how bad the storm would get and how long they would be trapped here. Like Angela, Samantha knew they were on borrowed time every second they weren't moving south. She exchanged a glance with Angela, then let Neil lead her to the house where their other injured people were resting, but she didn't expect to sleep. It would be a long night of searching.

Whitney joined her. "Where to first?"

Angela pointed at the house Daryl and Greg had cleared. “Weapons and food.”

Candles and lanterns had eliminated the gloom from the buildings and from the town itself, but the guards weren’t feeling bathed in safety. Light attracted attention; attention brought bloodshed. That pattern hadn’t changed since the beginning of time.

Angela tapped twice.

A child’s voice cleared those inside to open the door. “It’s the boss.”

Whitney remained outside. He and Ben would switch off at each house to stay warm and alert, while Greg provided a roaming patrol.

“Good evening.” Angela swept the crowded home as people returned her greeting. The shelters were almost barren. Only heavy furniture had been left. That included dressers, beds, and tables. It was enough to make Safe Haven’s stay almost pleasant after the limited comfort in the mountain.

Some of the homes also had Christmas decorations. Angela was certain most of it would be eliminated before morning. People couldn’t handle those reminders. It had already been handled here. The plastic tree had been covered with a checkered tablecloth.

Angela acknowledged Brittani, but she went to Gus. Both of them were still wearing parkas. Damp tracks on the wood floor told Angela they were making trips to the supply trucks. She had ordered

their food and water brought in. The pair was handling it personally between meal shifts.

Brittani and Gus's family was also here, in addition to Cody, Mandy and her baby, the Market Town twins, and a dozen jumpy camp members who stared at her. That would get worse if she didn't make these rounds. People were twitchy. They needed to know she was looking out for them. "I'll be holding a meeting here in a few hours. I'd like food ready, but I want your woman to sleep while you cover it."

Gus agreed happily, missing Brittani's frown. She didn't like being treated as if she was just one of the camp.

Angela hid a smirk and went to kneel by Mandy. "Any trouble?"

The twins perked up, as did Mandy's child. The trio stared in blurry happiness, able to sense an alpha even though they could barely see.

"No. They're sweet."

"Any sign of power?"

Mandy shook her head. "No. I'm watching."

"Good." Angela didn't linger. She went outside, letting Ben shut the door behind her.

Next to the house, Kenn was now working in a small pup tent that held crates of weapons. She didn't disturb him, but she did verify his guard was nearby and ready to kill if needed.

Morgan nodded in recognition of that duty and resumed sweeping the landscape with both types of sight.

Wind whipped overtop the town, blowing frozen debris from a roof. It crashed to the ground nearby, scaring people.

Faces appeared in every window, forcing Angela to flash hand codes in repeated directions to settle them down as she went to the next house. She'd covered the food and weapons. Now it was time to check on the wounded. Without doctors here, other than herself, this was a priority. She tapped.

“It’s the boss.”

Another child cleared her, confirming that she'd drafted a descendant child to cover each house. *Smart.* Ben wasn't convinced the kids would be a defense, but he'd figured out they were a warning. The Eagles and camp members in each home would do the fighting.

Conversations stopped, letting them all hear the wind. It was growing stronger.

Samantha was in the far corner, bundled into her sleeping bag and covered with a thick quilt. Leeann was next to her, holding a bottle of water and a bottle of pills. “She won't take her meds.” Wearing a white jacket and a white beanie, Leeann was a mini angel of mercy from old films.

Angela was glad the smells in here were medicinal, but not overpowering. They might have to open the windows tomorrow, when those who hadn't been able to use the bathroom tents were finally forced to make use of the cracked bedpans

they'd dug out. "She wants to be awake in case she's needed."

Leeann frowned. "But she's in pain. I can feel it."

The other injured men and women in the room watched them. Hair pinned up and faces dirty, they still appeared happier than they had two days ago. A few were even smiling. They'd been bundled up and fed, then medicated and encouraged to sleep—all by a child who wasn't as tall as any of them. Angela had known there wouldn't be problems in this house, which is why she'd put the girl with them. It wasn't because Leeann was too weak to fight or too young. It was so she wouldn't have to.

Leeann was reckless—much like Angela had been at that age and still was when life became too hard. Angela didn't tell the adults in the room it was to keep the child occupied until she was tired enough to sleep. Many of them were or had been parents. They knew what she was doing.

"It doesn't matter to her." Angela finished her mental sweep. "She's willing to hurt so she can keep monitoring the storm."

Leeann's brows puckered. "Well, I don't like it."

Samantha and the others snickered.

Angela shrugged. "What can I say? Eagles are stubborn. It keeps them alive."

"Whatever." Leeann went to the window to give the adults time alone.

It made Angela wonder if Leeann might be able to sense the storm too. Hopeful, she stored the information for later and went to Samantha for the update.

“No change so far.” Samantha looked at her with bloodshot eyes. “We’re in the direct path. We’ll be here a while.”

Next to them, Michael frowned. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

Michael didn’t know about the refugees on their trail. He’d been unconscious for most of the escape and trip here. Angela shrugged, not wanting to explain it right now. “Send for me if anything changes.”

“You know it.” Samantha shut her eyes and resumed searching the darkness.

Angela paused by the front window.

Leeann peered up at her. “The mission team is almost at the UN base.”

“You’ll keep me informed?”

“Absolutely!”

Angela stepped outside; light snow began to fall.

Chapter Two BK9
Making Rounds

1

“**G**ood evening.”

“Evening, Boss.”

Like in the other houses, conversations ended abruptly when she entered. A loud cough echoed in the silence. Angela left damp prints and small snow spots as she walked across the wood floor.

As the door shut and Angela came her way, Candy contemplated faking an illness to avoid the coming conversation. If not for their problems in the mountain, Candy was certain she would have already been subjected to this interrogation.

Angela sat on the fading couch next to Candy, lifting a brow. “Why does it have to be an interrogation? Just tell me what you want. We’ll skip the rest.”

Huddled under a blanket, Candy was pale; her eyes were layered in dark bags. Angela hoped she would sleep tonight. The mother-to-be needed it. All her people did. Months in the ground had made them fragile.

Candy frowned, flushing. “I don’t know anymore.”

“That worries me.” Angela didn’t keep her voice down. As the leader of Safe Haven, it was her duty to remind people of dangers. “Have you seen the misery the older Mitchel caused?”

Candy nodded, though she wanted to defend Conner and his dad. Instead, she stayed quiet and hoped Angela’s scold wouldn’t be that bad.

“You haven’t done anything wrong. There’s no reason for me to scold you. I’m just reminding you that Mitchel men are dangerous, no matter their age. The women probably were too, but there’s none left alive to tell us tales.” Angela didn’t mention Adrian’s daughter, Alexa. People didn’t need to worry about that one for years yet.

Angela stood up before Candy could defend Conner. Witnesses were listening. It was a bad time for Candy to admit she had developed feelings for him against her will. No one was certain if the boy had put a charm on her, but considering what his father had done, it wasn’t a stretch to assume he might have employed the same tactics. Angela didn’t want him banished again. Safe Haven needed every descendant they had. “You’ve been given the chance to find out, twice. Both of those people offered to protect you. You’ve refused. That’s a huge switch from where things stood when you voted to banish them both.”

Candy scowled. “I didn’t do that alone. It was clear the camp wasn’t going to accept anything less.”

Angela refused to let the woman lie. “That’s not even close to the truth.”

Anger flashed across Candy’s face. “I don’t know why I don’t hate the kid anymore. Maybe it’s because I watched too many of my friends die. Some kid playing with himself because he likes my butt is small in comparison. Let it go. It’s over.”

Satisfied she’d gotten what she wanted from this slowly warming house, Angela swept the other people in the room that included three Indians from Natoli’s tribe, Eagles, camp members, and Missy, who was the descendant guardian for this shelter. “Send someone if you need me.”

“I will.” Missy didn’t glance up from the book in her hand.

Angela smiled as she left. Missy sounded like an Eagle.

Whitney shut the door, then rubbed his hands together for warmth as the wind gusted. There was a light layer of snow covering the ground now.

Angela marched to the fourth house, noting the bathroom tents were finally empty, and Kenn was finished in the weapon tent. She expected him to join her at some point. She tapped on the door.

“Grab the cat!”

“I’ve got it!”

Angela waited until the loose cat was rounded up before opening the door. As she entered, a thin blast of snow and icy wind followed her, waking the sleeping soldiers. Peter, James, Boothe, and two of their buddies had overnight duty. They were resting

until then. Also in this house were the three descendant kids Kenn had insisted they keep, a dozen male camp members, and a team of rookies. If they were attacked, this house was a fighting base. Before Kenn went to sleep, the weapons would be moved in here.

Angela acknowledged the other people in the room who were trying to sleep, then went to Tonya. The howling wind sounded a lot different here than it had in the mountain.

Angela knelt to help Tonya get the cat into the carrier. “Kenn wants to propose.”

Tonya tensed for an instant, then shrugged. “It’s okay.”

Angela didn’t pick up a mental celebration or fear. “Doesn’t that make you happy? You’ve been hinting to him about it for weeks.”

Tonya fastened the carrier. She was aware of their audience, but she refused to lie to, or for, anyone anymore. She didn’t have to. “I hate it that he had to get permission. It’s embarrassing. It’s a reminder of who he used to be. That makes me...uneasy.” Tonya pulled her jacket together and zipped it against the draft that had come in with Angela. She’d refused a parka. It didn’t allow her enough movement while working.

“Because you’re afraid he’ll do it to you or because you’re afraid you’ll use it against him at some point to get what you want?”

Tonya winced. Apparently, Angela knew about her fears about reverting to her old self. “A little of

both, I guess, but more the latter. I get tempted sometimes.”

Angela was relieved it wasn't going to be a new problem. “I'm going to give my approval, but not until daylight. You have a few more hours to be sure it's what you want. I imagine he'll ask you in front of everyone and make it hard for you to refuse right then. I'm giving you a safety net. If you want it, use it—no strings attached. I've lived that life. I don't wish it on anyone.”

Tonya and everyone else in the room stared as Angela and her escort left, but there wasn't a conversation about it once she was gone. It was Tonya's decision.

The soldiers exchanged dismayed glances that said they hadn't known Kenn was a problem. They didn't know exactly what the infraction had been, but it wasn't hard to infer. Kenn instantly went to the top of their shit list. Tonya had earned their respect and loyalty. Kenn had just lost it.

2

The fifth house was full of light and laughter. Jennifer and the older kids, plus Shawn and a few Eagles, were telling jokes.

The laughter stopped when Angela joined them. Everyone regarded her warily.

All signs of Christmas had been cleansed from this home. Angela assumed the adults hadn't wanted to spend hours discussing the coming

holidays. Other than that, this house had it all, from heaters and snacks, to noises and odd smells. Angela didn't try to identify the odors of youth. She just enjoyed them. "I came to help with bathroom breaks. Anyone need to go?"

Kids jumped up, all eager to play in the snow. Pale, thin faces flushed in eager anticipation, making Angela's heart warm. She didn't believe it was a good idea, but it was impossible to resist their need. "Just while we wait in line."

Angela helped Jennifer and the others bundle the cheering children into coats and hats. She hadn't forgotten she'd promised playtime as soon as they were free of the mountain. It would have to be taken in short shifts, but one of those could happen now.

The small coats had a lot of buttons and the kids found it hard to hold still. Little fingers couldn't hit glove holes; scarfs fell to the floor before they could be twisted. The adults stayed as patient as they could, understanding the children were excited, but it took longer to get the kids ready than it should have. Angela wasn't sure why she was in a hurry. She had already finished rounds of half the houses, but instinct said trouble was coming.

Angela led them out, gesturing to several faces in the windows around them to come stand watch. She didn't have them relieve the current guards, however. She wanted a doubled shift. The snow was coming down heavier now. The Eagles had shrunk the perimeter for better visibility, but she wanted more security.

While at the four bathroom tents, the children scooped up handfuls of the fluff that had accumulated and chased each other around the adults. It should have been a wonderful moment for all of them, but the oppressive darkness surrounding their camp made it impossible for the adults to enjoy.

Guards actually winced at the noises. Angela had instructed them to rebuild the wall panels as they traveled, and they would soon gather items to muffle or suppress the sounds, but nothing was blocking their lights or noises right now. They couldn't do much about it yet. Safe Haven didn't have enough men to stand guard for three shifts a day, let alone enough hands to scavenge too. When crews went out, security would be light, leaving them all vulnerable.

Angela stilled, listening. *Trouble...*

Around her, the last group of children entered the bathrooms. The adults began to herd the ones who were finished toward their shelter.

The wind dropped into an eerie silence that brought goosebumps to Angela's cold arms.

The descendant children who were still outside ran to her.

The witnesses assumed the children were scared and wanted protection. Guards drew weapons and got ready to fight.

Angela let the kids surround her, tiny bodies rigid as they waited for the danger.

Cody took a place right in front of Angela. “Stay behind us.”

Molly, a rookie, kept her distance. She was creeped out by how the kids were so willing to give their lives for an alpha.

Shawn came forward to add his body to the circle of protection. After months of caring for Missy, magic no longer rattled him. It was a tool.

Jennifer stayed where she was, waiting for the last kids to come out of the bathrooms. She had left Autumn sleeping next to Pam. Jennifer glanced toward the house, unable to pinpoint the danger either. Like Angela, she’d been using her energy continuously since they left the mountain and the small amount of sleep she’d gotten overnight without Kyle next to her hadn’t allowed her a recharge.

Standing in front of Angela, Robbie rotated toward her in concern as snowflakes landed on his cold face. “She knows you’re here.”

Angela couldn’t help the shudder. “Who?”

“Nature.” Robbie’s eyes were dazed. “She knows she can reach you now.”

As if released from the spell, all of the kids relaxed.

“She’s hitting someone else.” Robbie stared at Angela as the wind started blowing against them again. “Don’t leave camp. We can’t protect you out there.”

Angela didn’t tell the boy she wasn’t safe anywhere. She didn’t want him to keep worrying.

“I suggest we get inside.” Shawn had the sudden urge to check on Missy. He was upset he’d been assigned to a different house. His consolation was that almost all parents and guardians in Safe Haven had been split from their loved ones so no one would ignore their duty.

Angela helped the kids into the house, aware of Jennifer lingering on the porch for a private moment.

Angela got the kids in and then stopped near the teenager who was coated in a light layer of melting snow.

Whitney shut the door, then left the porch.

Jennifer focused on Angela, hand going to her hip. “When will you give Kyle the same permission you’re giving to Kenn in the morning?”

“What?”

“Kyle needs your permission to marry me.”

“Oh, Jenny.” Angela gave the girl a weary smile. “He’s had it for months.” Angela left the surprised girl standing on the snowy porch. That explanation had to come from Kyle.

Angela skipped the next house. There were only two people in there—Ivan, who was resting for a shift later, and Neil, who was glaring at her from the tiny front window. She’d asked the trooper to keep it covered from the inside until the meeting. That very small house only had room for half a dozen people crammed in. Angela had chosen that as her base.

Another face glared at her from the window of the adjacent house as she neared that porch. Neil

and Charlie were both angry they hadn't been assigned to a shelter with their mates. Angela wasn't taking any chances. The wind was howling, even making senior men jump. They couldn't be lax.

Angela didn't tap on the door. Instead, she snatched it open and entered, making a dozen camp members cry out in alarm. Clumps of fluffy flakes fell to the floor, revealing the outside conditions.

Angela swept the people and then she swept the house. The Christmas items in this shelter were bagged in a corner to be burned.

Angela took out her notebook while everyone waited. *On the island, we'll burn garbage in community sessions and use it as fuel for making tallow and resin.*

All the men and women in here with Daryl, Charlie, and a team of rookies were going to be in her army soon. She was going to use every opportunity to train them, as Adrian had done with her. "There's a team meeting in the mess house tonight. Someone will tell you when. I want *all* of you there."

Charlie's attitude improved, assuming Tracy would attend.

Everyone had questions, but Angela went to Daryl. Most of what they wanted to know would be answered during the meeting. She would handle the rest of it privately. Right now, she needed something from Daryl, but she couldn't ask.

“Evening, Boss.” Wearing his old uniform, Daryl felt better than he had in a long time about the future. The past still bothered him.

Angela nodded, but didn’t speak. She stood next to the Eagle, wondering what he had been thinking about before she entered. He was wearing a pensive expression.

When Angela didn’t speak, Daryl was drawn from his reflections on Cynthia’s petition. He focused on her, frowning. “Is there a problem?”

Angela yawned. “No. I just needed to warm up for a minute.”

Daryl recognized the evasion, but he wasn’t certain how to handle it with so many witnesses. Despite the fact that she had declared everyone in this room an Eagle in one form or another, Daryl didn’t know half the men here and therefore they couldn’t trust them yet. “Is it as cold as it looks out there?”

“Would you like to give one of my guards a break for a minute and find out?”

Daryl nodded. “I’m a little stir crazy from the walls. Isn’t that nuts?”

Angela was glad she had chosen Daryl. After his time with Cynthia and his descendant research, he was as close to being one of them as a person could get without actually having gifts. Tommy was next in line after that. Angela didn’t know if they were Invisibles, but it didn’t matter. They were strong additions, no matter their ancestry.

The pair went out, where her guards once again stepped aside to give her privacy. Both of them knew what she was doing and were relieved. Marc wouldn't like it if he came back and she was sick.

Daryl waited until they were clear of the window, then put his hand on her shoulder. "Take what you need. I give it willingly."

About to sleep until his next shift, Ivan peered out the window in time to witness Angela sliding her arms around Daryl's neck.

Behind Ivan, Neil was doing a sweep of the attic and missed it. The narrow space had a tiny window with a flimsy lock, requiring an hourly check.

Enraged, Ivan stormed to the door and jerked it open.

"Close your mouth!" The guard in front of his building hurried up the stairs and got in Ivan's face. "Do it right now!"

Neil came jogging down the stairs at hearing the door open, but he didn't grab Ivan yet. He was judging the man's reaction. The boss had told the other descendants not to draw from the herd. She hadn't said anything about the Eagles lending *her* strength.

Ivan struggled to understand why he was getting the order to allow Angela to either drain one of their men or betray her mate. As he observed over Donald's tense shoulder, he got to witness what very few of them ever had.

Behind him, Neil stayed ready to help Donald if it was needed.

Beautiful orbs of multicolored light shot out of Daryl's chest and into Angela's, bathing them both in the stunning glow of an energy exchange.

After a moment, Angela stepped back from Daryl even though he had more to give. She might need it later. As the healing energy ran through her body, Angela slid to her knees, unable to remain standing. She was so empty it hurt.

Daryl didn't care about their witnesses. He also didn't want to hear Angela's gratitude. He slid back into the house and resumed his position in the corner but now, he dwelled on the sensation and the bond it created to do such a thing for any of the descendants. Thoughts of Cynthia's vendetta and death had been pushed aside.

Angela got to her feet and felt the strength of a quick meal flow through her limbs and heart. Daryl tasted good. His energy was pure, making it sweet. Marveling over the different flavors of power, she proceeded to the largest house sheltering their most likely troublemakers, and Kyle. She didn't look at Ivan. The guards would handle him if it was needed.

“What was that?!”

Donald stepped back out into the snow when Ivan didn't try to leave the house. “You know what it was. Use your brain, not your mouth.” Donald was jealous of how much time Ivan was getting around the boss. He didn't want to be Ivan's mentor

too, though one of the Eagles would be gifted with that job.

Ivan sat on the edge of the moldy mattress he'd covered in his army jacket, running it through his mind. When it finally connected, he lay down, grunting in resignation. "I gotta stop expecting her to be like the other females I've known. She clearly isn't."

3

Angela didn't need to knock on the door to the eighth house as Kyle moved from the window to greet her. Angela entered, cold bones aching. When she came out next time, she would have to lift the hood.

Conner, Zack and his boys, and other known troublemakers watched in apprehension.

Angela understood their fear. Her last dream had been from the point of view of a member who had been terrified to think anything critical of leadership for fear of having their minds read. After waking, Angela had realized she'd connected to the dream of a camp woman. Angela glanced at that female now and saw her pale.

Positive she should, but ashamed of the ability like she had been as a child, Angela didn't scan the woman. She had a great compassion for non-magic people, but she also had a great loathing. If she saw something bad enough, she would kill them all openly and panic the rest of the camp. It was better

to let it play out the way Jennifer had told her it would. “Are we set?”

Kyle gave a grunt. “As much as we can be. Are you sure we should leave the vehicles unattended during the meeting?”

That was Kyle’s way of asking if she had changed her mind. Angela was appreciative of his consideration, but she shook her head. “No, but we don’t have the manpower. I need everyone there.”

Kyle hid his relief at her choice as he turned around to point at Conner. “I want you next to me.”

Done in front of everyone, it was actually a protection. If there was trouble, everyone would know Conner was innocent because he had been with Kyle.

Conner agreed instead of arguing the way Charlie would have.

Zack didn’t care what game they had going this time. He was just glad his sons were allowed to come to the meeting. He didn’t want to leave them alone with any of the people in this house. The ten men and women in here had been on the verge of joining Jimmy’s people from almost the minute the camp had split. Angela had vetted them, but no one had forgotten who was with who when shit had hit the fan.

Angela left before anyone could say anything to give her away. This house would be under the heaviest protection during the meeting, but the people inside wouldn’t know. They now assumed they would be able to do whatever they wanted

while her army was at the meeting. It was a horrible test of their loyalty. If they failed, the consequences would be harsh. No one could be allowed to carry tales of weaknesses and locations.

Emily exchanged a terrified look with Craig as Angela left.

Craig shook his head. He didn't care if Angela knew their plans. He wasn't changing them.

Scared and relieved, Emily rolled over as if she were going to sleep. She needed to get out of here before the clock stopped ticking. Emily had been listening to it since agreeing to Craig's plan. Emily loved the old Safe Haven. This new camp was so strict it was impossible to relax. It felt as if death was always tracking them.

Angela pulled up the hood on her parka and fastened it. The wind was frigid, and her boots were not waterproof. She was looking forward to being finished so she could take them off and warm up her frozen feet. Without Marc's heat next to her, she expected it to take a while.

Angela spent a minute scanning the town. The same dim lights were coming from all of the houses she had visited, but there was also a different glow in some of them now that she recognized as calm. The houses she hadn't been to yet were still tense.

The sentries watched, not sure if there was a problem. Kenn had shrunk the perimeter again. Right now, he was the only one who had the authority to make that choice, other than Kyle. Kenn had done it many times for Adrian.

As if her thoughts conjured him, Kenn came around the corner of the house to join her. Now dressed in all black overtop his parka, only his bright blue eyes and red cheeks stood out in the darkness. It was impressive.

“I’ll put something together for you like this, if you want to sneak out and play without your masters knowing about it.”

Angela’s frown was ugly.

Kenn wasn’t intimidated. “I learned from Tonya. She needs that sometimes or she’ll go crazy.”

Angela was sure that wasn’t the extent of the story, but there was no time to explore it right now. “Update me.”

Kenn pouted at her curt tone, but didn’t remark on it. “Everything is set and ready for us to get lost.”

Angela didn’t ask for more details this time, unlike when they’d been doing the mountain bugout. He had done such a good job that it had earned her respect. The only person they had left behind had been Cynthia, who Kenn hadn’t included in his plans because he had been certain the woman was already under removal orders.

“How about wildlife?”

“A few ants and coons.”

“What was the score?”

Kenn chuckled. “Coons and ants 2, Eagles 1. We’re regrouping.” The ants were avoiding the perimeter of camp. Kenn suspected they were plotting revenge.

So did Angela. “Come along?”

“You know it.” Kenn stayed on her heels as Angela went to the ninth house. Full of conversation and squeals of laughter, the noise didn’t stop when she entered.

Stanley, their clumsy radioman and medic was entertaining the five children. Using sock puppets and lantern light on the wall to create a show, he had the children so entertained all but one of the people in here missed Angela’s arrival.

Brandon, the top Eagle in the home, met her at the door. “Thank you.”

Angela nodded, sure what she was receiving the gratitude for. There was no tension in this house and no threats. After all the work they’d done and all of the men they’d killed, Angela was trying to give her people a chance to rest—not because they’d asked for it, but because that was a standard rule on how to handle Adrian’s army. Angela hadn’t wanted to tell Kenn that. She was hoping he figured it out on his own. She would deem it more proof of his progress.

Angela wanted to enjoy the great vibes, aware that the Christmas tree here was decorated. From a wallet to a comb, it appeared the adults had found presents for the children in the house with them. “I’m running short on time and people. I need you for sentry duty. You can listen to the meeting, but don’t get distracted.”

Brandon didn’t mind. He was still high on being out of the mountain. “I got great sleep today during

the ride. I can pull a double if you need it, or cover somewhere else after the shift is over.”

Angela pointed toward the house she’d just left, where Kyle was giving the signal to the other guards to let them know the trap was set. “They may need assistance in a bit. We move dark, we move silent.”

Brandon chuckled, copying the code. It meant not to make any noise and blend in with the colors of their surroundings. It was also a copy of a joke from the military movies they’d enjoyed before the war.

“It’s warm in here. That’s good, but let’s step out.” Angela led him, not caring that the man didn’t have his coat on. As he shut the door, the real boss came through in Angela’s hard tone. “Why did he make you hide?”

Brandon smiled uneasily, hand going into his pocket. He assumed she’d brought him out here so the Eagles could handle him away from the kids. “I’m glad you asked.” He handed her a note.

Frowning, Angela read it.

He’s a Mitchel.

If not for Adrian’s handwriting, she wouldn’t have believed it possible. She groaned in shock and dismay.

“Yeah, he said you’d react that way.” Brandon shoved both hands into his jean pockets as the wind whipped small drifts around their feet. “I’m sorry.”

“How did you hide it?” Angela shoved the note into her pocket to burn later. Brandon looked nothing like his... Angela concentrated. *His cousin.*

The brown eyes and hair had allowed him to blend in devoid of suspicion, but he had to have a strong gift to be able to keep a secret like this. “Did you lie?”

“No. We don’t use last names in Safe Haven. We’re Jim, the level four, or Jim, the level two. You know?”

It was such an obvious loophole that Angela immediately began drafting plans to close it. “And?”

“I’m a shield. It’s about all I can do so far.”

“Must be a strong shield.”

“It is, because of you.”

She frowned. “Me? How?”

“When you and Zack were fighting, my shield seemed like the coldness you were getting from all of his team, but when you two bonded, it became harder. I had to keep it up all the time. It made it strong.”

Angela could see how that would succeed, but it was disconcerting to learn she’d missed it for so long. She wouldn’t even know now unless Adrian wanted her to. “Why did he free you at all?”

“He gave me two reasons. He said I deserved to enjoy bonding with my own kind. I’d earned it. He also said you need me.”

“Does Marc know yet?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t have bruises and I’m still allowed around you.”

His hopeful tone told Angela he feared being held responsible for Adrian’s actions. Conner had

the same problem. “You’ve lied to us the entire time I’ve known you. Why should I hide your secret?”

“You shouldn’t. I’m just asking for a fair trial.”

Angela grunted. “This won’t get a trial. If the Eagles find out, they’ll dump your body somewhere and say you ran off, like Mitchel men always do.”

Brandon flushed. “Yeah.”

“Damn him. He’s always throwing a wrench in my works!”

Brandon sighed. “And it’s not over.” He gestured toward the house she hadn’t been to yet, where Nancy was slipping out to use the bathroom. “She wants a baby.”

Angela’s fury was thick enough to cause the woman to glance at her in wary concern.

Angela dropped her head, controlling herself. “We need babies.”

“What about the camp? They don’t like one Mitchel here, let alone four.”

“For Nancy, it won’t matter because she’s been open about their relationship. As for you, they’ll feel betrayed.” Angela sighed. “And frankly, I don’t have time for it. As of this moment, your last name is anything but Mitchel. Got it?”

Relieved, Brandon nodded. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah. When Marc is told, and he will be, a final choice will be made. If you’re lucky, we’ll be on the boat by then and you’ll have done something to prove you’re nothing like your cousin.”

“I’ve been doing that all along.”

Angela stepped around him. “If that were true, I wouldn’t be having this conversation and a new cloud of crap wouldn’t be hanging over my head.”

Brandon went back inside, determined to earn her respect. It meant more to him than Adrian’s ever had.

The ninth house was colder than the others were, but it had good ambiance. The boarding school kids were at a long kitchen counter with Theo’s team, putting together models that the engineers had scavenged from the entertainment section of the cave. As Angela entered, her annoyance sent a wave of unhappiness through the room. Ten profiles swung her way.

Angela flushed. “I’m sorry. Everything okay here?”

Theo and Ozzie came over to talk to her while his team and the boarding school kids continued to work. The few camp members in here put their heads back down and tried to return to sleep. There weren’t enough heaters for all of the houses. They had been given extra blankets, socks, and gloves. Despite the chill in the air, Angela estimated it to be at least 40° in here with all the bodies.

Hating it that she didn’t have enough supplies to cover all of her people, Angela sent a tiny burst of flame into the fireplace and lit the garbage that had been placed there.

Everyone in the room was grateful as small waves of heat began to radiate outward.

“If you can find things in here to burn, it’s okay to keep that going for a little while. Sorry about the cold.”

Everyone was quick to assure her they didn’t mind toughing it out so their injured people and the younger children could have the heat. Angela let them console her, joining the kids at the counter to see what they were building.

Already indoor types, Theo’s team appeared pale and sickly in the dim lantern light. They hadn’t changed much, other than to grow beards. Angela smiled at Ozzie as he stroked his, unconsciously responding to her observation. “It’s good on you.”

Ozzie chuckled, hand dropping. He didn’t comment on her greying hair. Like before, the stress and lack of fresh energy was turning it white.

Now Angela’s hand came up to smooth the strands back under the darker locks.

Outside, her guards waited impatiently for this part of her rounds to be done. It was cold.

Kenn leaned against the inside of the door, enjoying the break from the weather. It was the first time he’d been in a shelter since Angela started her rounds of the houses.

Angela kept her voice low, but she included everyone at the counter. “There could be trouble in one of the houses during the meeting. It’s okay for you to scan them and contact me through a guard. There are men listening for that call right now, so do not leave this house even if one of the other kids

are in danger. The adults will handle it. You do your job and they'll do theirs, okay?"

The boarding school kids, older and bored, were thrilled to be given a job. All of them agreed to follow the rules.

The camp members in the house were unaware of what was going on. Theo and his team made noise while Angela instructed the children, hoping to cover the small bits of conversation that might give it away. The people in this house had all been vetted. Theo didn't expect trouble from them, but that could be said of half of the assassins they'd had; the handicapped engineer didn't want to take any more chances. Next time, it might be his life stolen instead of his mobility. Or worse, maybe it would be Debra, who was assigned to the house with Tonya and her soldier friends.

Theo knew how determined the soldiers were to earn a place in Safe Haven. He considered Debra safe with them. He hated to be away from her, but he wasn't as annoyed as some of the males in camp were over being split up for the night.

When Angela was finished, she went to the door, signaling for Theo to follow. As soon as they were out of hearing range of the others, she pierced him with an intent glare. "It's time you pulled your team together."

Theo frowned. "Who am I missing?"

Angela focused on one of the houses, where Candy was coming out for another bathroom trip.

Theo's thick eyebrows came together. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Did she do anything wrong?"

"Of course not. It's just...awkward."

"You mean like half the relationships in this camp between people who used to be a couple or wanted to be a couple?"

Theo got her point, stomach starting to boil. "You believe I was unfair to remove her from the team."

"I know Candy resigned, but yes. She didn't do anything wrong. She was a good addition, and you eliminated her because you don't want to date her anymore. How is that fair?"

"I didn't look at it like that. I saw the drama. The stress wouldn't be good for any of us—including her."

"I understand your reasons and I'm telling you now—you're wrong. I want you to get your team together or give leadership to someone who can be unbiased." Angela left before Theo could respond; glad the night's business was almost over. She didn't like scolding her men, but sometimes it was necessary and there was no one else who could do it as well as she could. If she had the time and energy to scan every person in her camp, maybe she could solve all their problems and they would actually have peace. That was another goal during their time on the boat. Things would be better for all of them then. "Just wish I knew who's going and who's staying. Not being able to look ahead sucks."

Chapter Three BK9

Hard Rules

1

Kendle's former team met Angela in the doorway of the next house.

Angela motioned them out onto the porch to talk, despite wanting the tepid warmth of a shelter. The wind whipping her coat against her skin and jeans was freezing.

“Nice of you to stop by!”

“Yeah. We were getting lonely.”

Angela laughed with the team as they joked and shoved each other into snowdrifts on the porch. Tommy and his team were happy. It was in their easy smiles and guiltless greetings. She knew there was an issue to solve, but they weren't thinking about it. All she'd caught while coming up the stairs had been hopes that Kendle was enjoying her time with Marc, but not causing new problems. Angela was rooting for the same. “Is everything okay here?”

“Other than needing something to do, we're good.” Tommy was speaking for the team in Kendle's absence.

Angela gestured toward the first house, where they would have the meeting. “I want you guys to provide security.”

The team brightened as Tommy let out a sigh of relief. “Yes, please.”

Angela wasn’t in a good mood at this point, but she did admire their eagerness. She waved them on. “Take over now if you like.”

The team hurried back into the house to get their gear.

Kenn joined Angela on the porch. That would leave Tracy and the camp members here without protection, though Tracy would probably go to the meeting. This was where being shorthanded was going to hurt them.

Angela stepped in the house as the team came back out, gesturing for Tracy to follow them. “You can help until the meeting and then I want you indoors.”

“Awesome!” Tracy hopped up. With her Eagle jacket and bobbed black hair, Tracy appeared content, but Angela could sense the restlessness. She was certain the men in here could too, but they wouldn’t encourage bad behavior. She and Charlie were an official couple. Safe Haven had been living by Adrian’s rules on that since the camp was formed, though Adrian himself hadn’t followed it.

Angela studied the people in this house. All of able mind and body, she was certain they would be fine on their own, but she wouldn’t take the chance.

“I can use witnesses for the meeting. You guys up for it?”

As the house emptied out, Kenn made notes of who was going to be at the meeting. These members may have to be handled afterward. He’d been doing the same work for Adrian, but it made more sense to do it for Angela.

“This will be a quarantine area. Put the mission team here when they return, if there’s time for that.”

Kenn took a strip of tape from his pocket. Bright yellow, *quarantined* was written across it in ominous red.

“You counted, I guess?”

Kenn slapped the tape across the glass and joined her at the bottom of the stairs. “Actually, I used to carry them in my pocket any time the Eagles went into a new area. I found my old kit while we were scavenging debris piles.”

Angela shivered, but not from cold. It felt like a goose had just gone over her grave.

The last house was empty. They were using it to store their fuel and a few other valuables. Kenn had set alarms on it. Angela didn’t go in there. She had a meeting to host and another set of rounds after that to verify everyone was in for the night. Then she could go to her cot to toss and turn while wondering how Marc was. Adrian, she refused to think about at all.

“Effective immediately, these are the new rules for everyone in my army.” Standing in the lit doorway of the mess house, Angela would have been a prime target for snipers if not for being surrounded by fifty Eagles. There wasn’t room for everyone, so she was standing in the doorway. The house was packed with weaker fighters and females. The stronger men had insisted on standing out in the cold. A few of the women had protested, but they’d been outvoted. Angela didn’t think the women were going to care for her new rules any more than they had cared for that, but all of it was necessary. She was hoping the explanations she gave would make it tolerable.

“Magic use is still forbidden. The more people see our gifts, the longer it will take them to figure out that death comes from challenging us. I’m tired of killing my fellow Americans over jealousy of my abilities. None of us will use magic, even in front of our own camp, unless we have to. But public awareness is not the only reason I made this rule. We’re weak and we’re tired. We haven’t had a chance to recharge. I’m not sure we’re going to get one until we reach the boat.” Angela drew in a cold breath, lungs aching. “The last scan I did wasn’t good. We’re going to have to keep moving until we reach the coast and then we’ll have to fight to leave. I need all descendants to save every bit of energy they can for that battle.”

The crowd didn’t like hearing there was going to be another fight, but everyone was happy Angela

had chosen to share the information this time. They waited with low mutters and restless movements for her to continue.

“All Eagles need to pick a camp member to take under their wing and convince to become one of us. Everyone misses the people we left in the mountain, and the people we lost before that, but it wasn’t the only damage. All the teams have lost members, which means security is low. We’re vulnerable. That terrifies me.” Angela scanned the crowd. “I don’t scare easily, but I can’t sleep knowing we don’t have enough Eagles to cover us. Pick a student and teach them everything you know. That includes rookies. Senior men will guide you and I’ll guide the senior men. Marc and Adrian, plus Kenn and others, will guide me.” Angela consulted her notebook while judging reactions to Adrian’s name.

There were a few mutters, but it was common knowledge that he was going to help train Eagles. Angela waved. “You guys should be writing this stuff down.”

The senior men had already been doing so. There was a flurry of activity now as other Eagles found notepads, pens, and scraps of paper.

“I understand we’re low on supplies. Share your pens and pencils, and I’ll do the best I can to get everyone a new notebook during our supply runs.” Angela gave them another minute to get ready, then rattled off the first of three rules that were certain to draw annoyance from a portion of this crowd.

“Rule one: No female will leave camp unless it’s an emergency.”

“What the hell?”

“You can’t do that!”

“Oh, thank God!”

“That’s why she’s my hero!”

Angela didn’t respond to the dozens of comments that were tossed across the groups. Thanks to the women being placed inside the home, the dozen men squished in with them were subjected to the worst of the verbal abuse.

When it quieted, Angela revealed her second rule. “All shifts have been increased from four hours to six. The number of shifts is also being increased to four days a week.”

Now there was anger from both sides. Angela withstood it without a change in expression. She had been expecting this type of response. She would feel the same if she was in their place.

It took longer for the crowd to quiet this time. Their unhappiness drew attention from the houses around them. Windows opened as camp members tried to listen.

Tommy motioned a few of his team to take care of it.

Angela paused for the windows to be closed, but it was really time for the cold wind to take effect. She hadn’t chosen to do it this way just because they lacked space. It was hard to stay enraged when your toes were frozen and snot was forming an icy mustache along your upper lip. “The last change is

going to be the hardest. After I tell you, and you scream at me, I'm going to explain why I've implemented these rules. After that, I'm going to list the new teams and levels, and then send you off to get warm and vent in private. Everyone ready?"

The men and women nodded or delivered rude gestures that made senior men frown at them, though they felt the same way. Even when in disagreement, only a certain level of disrespect was tolerated.

"There will be no dating between Eagles." Angela leaned against the house, crossing her arms over her chest to keep from flinching as angry men and women shouted and shoved toward her for an explanation. Some of the more obvious couples, like Kyle and Jennifer, waited, frowning.

"Are you trying to get women to quit?!"

"What gives you the right to change Adrian's army?!"

Angela let her red orbs glow. It was answer enough, but it enraged the people who saw it. Those inside who didn't view it imagined she had shrugged or even extended her finger in response. It caused another nasty wave to fly through the small town. *Perfect*, Angela thought.

Ivan shoved his way through the angry people, coming to stand in front of Angela. He glowered at those closest. "Where's all your loyalty to the boss now?"

Angela placed a hand on Ivan's shoulder and felt him tense through the thick army jacket. She

would have to find him a woman soon or he might get as out of hand as the vet had during her manipulations, but now wasn't the time for that. "I made them angry on purpose. At ease."

Frowning, Ivan slid to one side, but refused to go further.

Angela moved back into the doorway so those inside were able to see her again. "I need you to think about that makeshift memorial we left in the bottom of the mountain."

Several people immediately guessed what her strategy was going to be, but it was impossible to argue that she was right.

Charlie stormed off into the darkness.

"We've lost husbands, wives, children, and beloved friends who meant the world to us. Our population has been cut in half. We had a limited number who were capable of childbearing before we went into the mountain. It's even less now. We spent a lot of time in radiated areas and the ladies have not been taken care of the way they need to be. I can't guarantee the health of any baby right now, born or otherwise. That includes the new twins in camp, who are descendants. I know some of you have been curious about them. They have a rare gift the UN wanted to destroy. If I find out it is evil, I will handle that." Angela was taking the opportunity to settle several rumors going around. She figured if she had to deliver bad news, it was best to get it all over at the same time rather than to keep hitting them with blows when they weren't expecting it.

“Everything that takes a female out of camp puts her in harm’s way. Every recoil jars the body, the baby. Under normal circumstances, I would stand up for the females and say it’s their body and their right, but in this case, we need those babies. We need those people. Our country is dying around us, and all women have a duty to reproduce. Whether you know it or not, that has always been a Safe Haven standard. That’s why women get first choice of the food. That’s why women are allowed to raid supply trucks at any hour. That’s why female areas have more security than others. That’s why Adrian went out of his way to rescue more women and children than he did men. This is not a vendetta against males. This is survival. We need women and children. I will not endanger the future of humanity for our pride. The rule stands.”

“If we need kids, why can’t we date?” one of the rookies called out, just curious. He didn’t have a woman in Safe Haven yet.

“For the same reason none of you were assigned with your mates or family tonight. Because there are so few of us, I need you to pay more attention than you ever have. Being away from your loved one will make you twitchy and jumpy, which will keep you alert and keep us alive. I am sorry to have to use that, but all of us will be going through it.”

Other than the females, the guards were calming at her answers. Angela knew that demographic would have a lot more to say about it over the next weeks. To help stem some of the restless anger,

Angela gave them hope. “I will hold a camp meeting to revisit these rules once we get on the boat.”

“How long will that be?” the same rookie asked.

“Roughly one month.”

Satisfied they wouldn’t have to endure the new rules for long, the Eagles once again became aware of the miserable conditions and their desire for the meeting to be done so they could get out of the weather.

“I have one new training rule to announce.”

The crowd tensed again, realizing she’d only covered personal relationships and runs so far.

“As soon as we leave here, I’ll be doing a new set of schedules. I’m going to put these new teams together for everything. I want you to become as close as any team has, but twice as fast. We need it. To do that, you’re going to spend every waking moment together. You shit together, shower together, shave together. The only time you’ll be apart is when some of your team is out on a run and even then, the members who remain in camp will spend that time together. If you hate each other, now is the time to sort it out.” Before anyone could ask, Angela lifted a hand. “Can you imagine what it would be like to be on a boat with hundreds of people you hate?” She didn’t explain further. The senior men would give details to the rookies if it was needed. “Here are the new teams. Special Forces One is Kyle, Daryl, Brandon, Morgan, Shawn, Kendle, Whitney, Donald.”

Small cheers came from the people who hadn't been Special Forces before. Claps came from those who were, to welcome the new members.

“Special Forces Two is Neil, Greg, Ben, Quinn, Wade, Tommy, and Tim.”

As Angela ran through each team, those men and women left, clearing room in the house for the others.

Only the women remained when Angela was finished. She paused for Ivan to close the door before facing the ten glaring females. Angela slid onto a bench and regarded them expectantly. “Hurry up. I'm tired.”

“Will you consider changing your mind on any of the new rules?” Samantha had been elected unspoken leader for this mini rebellion. She still wasn't sure how that had happened.

“No.”

“Did you know this was coming?” Samantha looked at Jennifer.

The teenager was stunned. “No.”

“What about your man?”

Jennifer shrugged. “I don't think so.” She glanced at Tracy. “What about yours?”

Tracy shook her head, secretly relieved. She didn't feel like she belonged on a team anymore. She didn't want her accomplishments to stop, but she didn't feel like she was stable enough to be dependable for someone else's life until she had her own under control.

“Why did you put couples on teams if we can’t be Eagles anymore?” Jennifer was steps in front of the others when it came to questions.

“Because it was impossible for me to tell who would quit and who would end their relationship.”

“Is there another option?” Samantha wasn’t far behind Jennifer when it came to digging out information.

Angela leaned forward, elbows on her knees in an attempt to stop the cramping in her stomach. “You can volunteer for the new den mother force for one month and then resume spots on teams after the camp reverses the dating rule. They’ll do that because I’ll tell them we need babies more than we need security once we’re on the ship.”

It took a few minutes for the rookie females to figure things out, but Samantha and Jennifer immediately agreed. For Samantha, it would be that long before her leg allowed her to resume training anyway and Jennifer was busy with Autumn, her wedding, and her guilt over the kids in camp no longer having a protector. Angela had known exactly what to use to get their cooperation.

Outside, Ivan, Kyle, and Kenn listened in amusement as Angela handled the women better than Adrian ever had.

As Angela and the women came out a bit later, Kyle pointed at Ivan. “Let’s have a chat.”

Realizing Kenn had been right about the interrogation, Ivan went to one of the tables. *At least it's warm in here.*

“Why did Marc give you protection over the boss?”

“I can tell you, but you're not going to like the answer.” Ivan took a seat at the table furthest away from the cooks, hoping this conversation wouldn't take long. Even though he was off duty now, his ears were ringing and his eyes were blurry. He needed to go back to sleep so he could wake up and pull a double.

Neil and Kyle settled onto the bench across from him.

“He doesn't trust you guys to keep her alive.”

Tension flew through the small house, reaching to where Brittani was sorting supplies for the morning meal and eavesdropping. Kyle had asked her to, but he had made it clear that it was a favor to him and had nothing to do with the Eagles.

“You're lying!” Neil leaned across the table. “Why would he trust you over us? You came from the government!”

“So did Marc.” Ivan was too tired to find nice words. “You're just a state trooper and Kyle was a mobster. I was a member of the same military.”

“Marc knows he can trust us.” Kyle glanced toward the cook and was dismayed to find he could read her expression without her voice in his mind.

He's not lying.

Kyle and Neil were disappointed. They had been certain that Ivan was a threat in some way.

Brittani sent them a final message. *He is a threat—to both of you. If he has enough time, Ivan will take your places in this camp. That’s what he’s thinking about right now.*

Neil shoved up from the table. “If your story doesn’t check, you’ll be out of here!” Neil left, slamming the door.

Ivan waited for Kyle to make a similar threat so he could also go. His toes were still frozen from earlier and he couldn’t believe how sore he was. He had never spent so much time in a vehicle. His body was letting him know that.

Kyle tried hard to keep the rancor out of his tone so the soldier would answer. “Why did Marc trust you so fast?”

“When we met, the Ghost had just come from my CO’s tent after killing him. I was too scared to think about putting up a mental wall. He was able to read me from end to end. I guess he liked what he found.” Ivan stood up. “I’d love to continue this chat, but I have a dusty bunk calling for me.”

Kyle let the man go. Like a few other people in Safe Haven, Kyle was carrying a bias against the government soldiers who had been allowed to join them. He was grateful Angela had drawn the line and not allowed any of the UN men to become members.

As Ivan pulled the door closed, he saw Angela coming from the kids’ house, flanked by Whitney

and Ben. He strolled their way, deciding to ask if there was anything else she needed before he crashed, even though he was beat.

Angela was smiling as she stepped out of the house. She had allowed the women to escort her from the meeting and then decided to have a fast visit with the twins before things got crazy again. She felt guilty for spending so much time away from the infants, but Mandy had assured her all they were doing was eating, sleeping, and filling diapers. “Do you have another ten minutes?”

Ivan hurried to her. “You know it.”

Angela motioned Whitney and Ben to go off on whatever chore she had assigned them. Ivan immediately began to look around for problems. Marc had made it clear before he left that Angela was never to be alone unless there was an emergency.

“Shit!” Ivan shoved Angela to the ground and fell over her as shadows came from the darkest edge of town. The fuel house door banged against the wall as more men joined them.

Tommy’s team had waited for the thieves to make their choice, relieved when they left camp instead of following their first plan. The number of Eagles guarding the descendant children was staggering. The thieves would have been killed on the spot, which might have endangered others in camp.

Tommy was glad the men and one woman had chosen wisely on that. Kidnapping a child was a

killing offense here. He waved his team back into positions around the homes, aware that his men were also relieved. No one wanted a shootout tonight. Angela's plan was silent; that made it better.

Ivan drew his gun, but Angela placed a hand around his wrist, absorbing his heat. "Just thieves."

"But we need that fuel!"

"It's covered. Save your bullets."

Ivan helped Angela to her feet as the shadows vanished into the storm near their vehicles. When the sound of engines came, Ivan figured out the troublemakers had chosen to leave. "Did you threaten them?"

"I gave them a test."

"That they failed?"

"In some ways. They didn't try to kidnap a descendant child to use out in the wilderness, so it was a success as far as I'm concerned."

"Won't they come back to haunt us later?"

"No."

He didn't holster his gun. "Because of the storm?"

"Because of the poisoned water I stored in there with the fuel. It was only two gallons, but they'll all be thirsty after a quick snatch and run like that. Tommy's team will recover the fuel and vehicles come dawn."

Even though he'd been about to shoot them, Ivan was revolted. "You said they were just thieves!"

Angela shrugged, moving toward her warm cot. “So?”

She left him there to stew over her ruthless answer, letting him figure it out for himself. When he finally got it that loose lips sank ships, he still wasn't sure that he was okay with it.

Angela didn't care. Those threats wouldn't come back to kill them in their sleep or try to steal their children. Nor would they be allowed to terrorize anyone else they ran into. She had zero tolerance for evil now.

3

“You should try to sleep. You look like a zombie on crack.”

Neil and Kenn frowned at Ivan for the comment.

Understanding he wasn't going to get any support from the senior men even though the interrogation had cleared him, Ivan raised up on his elbow. “Can I at least help you, so you're done quicker?”

Angela shrugged, not looking at him. “There isn't much to do. I made the list. Now I'm checking it twice.”

Without a heater, there was frost on the window that Kenn was forced to wipe away each time he did a check of the sentries. He was on duty in here until dawn, when Neil would take over. Because she was the only female, the two senior men were staying

visible to the guards outside. Neither of them wanted trouble with their women in the morning, but more than that, they weren't sure why Angela had chosen them to be in here. It made them nervous.

Ivan didn't care if anyone got angry. He hated watching the boss shiver. She'd already refused their coats. "Isn't that easier if you have an unbiased eye?"

"Ideally, yes."

Ivan took her silence to mean he could help. Ignoring the surprise of the others, he grabbed his blanket and brought it over to drape around her shoulders. He plopped on the bed close to her and picked up a notebook. "What am I looking for?"

Angela leaned against him, enjoying the warmth. She wouldn't feel comfortable doing this if it was Neil and she would never even consider it with Kenn, but she couldn't warm up and Ivan was hers if she wanted him. "There are two hand drawn maps in the front pocket of that notebook."

Ivan ignored her intoxicating scent and dug up the sheets. He held them out.

"I know them by heart. You guys look at them."

Glad to be included, Neil and Kenn hurried over to take each paper as the soldier finished. Ivan was officially only a rookie, but Neil and Kenn knew he was more like a level three or four. During his time in the army, Ivan had covered multiple positions and learned as much as he could, eager to increase

his skill set so that he would survive in any situation. Only facing Marc had given him pause so far.

Ivan frowned. “They looked the same.”

“They do, don’t they?” Angela sighed. “Adrian and Marc drew those at different times. As you can see, the difference is that Marc forgot to add the windmills that give the town power and Adrian forgot to include the airstrip where the supply plane landed. We’ll use Marc’s; store Adrian’s copy. Kenn, will you add what’s missing from that one? I made notes on where it should be.”

Kenn took the map to a clear counter and started making changes.

“The island has a small town with half a dozen main buildings. That’s where we’ll take the camp as soon as we get it cleared and security set up. Our main issues to cover are the same issues we’ve needed to handle all along, just in a more confined space. Compared to the mountain, I don’t believe it will be a problem. We have to cover food and water, communication, power, medications, tools, clothing, security, and gear. Somewhere in there, we also need to have a backup shelter for storm season and a method of travel to it that accounts for the conditions of the island and the ocean. I thought bikes and 4-wheelers, but we’ll see what we find. We’ll also try to figure out how to operate the weather tracking equipment we’ll be gathering, and of course, we’ll need descendants to monitor for issues.”

The three men had already covered many of those topics on their own whenever they thought about what life on the island would be like. They had all been hoping for time to pick Kendle's brain for information, but it was clear that leadership had already done that. Below each item or location on the map was a list of suggestions and details that covered nearly everything.

"If you do think of something, please mention it ASAP. I'm trying to finalize where all the supplies are coming from so we can pick them up on our way to the boat. I don't want to be sitting on the dock for a month while we build something we forgot and lose our window between storm seasons."

The men scanned harder, hunting for anything she missed.

Kenn pointed. "I see we're going to use tallow, but you said there isn't room on the island to cover enough food for everyone through animals or farming. How are we accounting for that?"

Angela motioned toward the notebook. "I didn't have room on the map for all the details. Tallow doesn't just come from animal fats. You can also use palms or whale oil. We're going to hunt it, grow it, and take as much material as we have room for so we can produce our own. Confined production is going to be the key on this island. Wait until you see the plans I have to make use of fireplaces that aren't needed in such a temperate climate."

Still scanning the map, Kenn didn't comment, but he could imagine what the ruthless genius would

figure out for a space that couldn't be harmed. Anything that could hold a fire was valuable in their situation.

“Safe Haven will also become fishermen, but it won't all be fish. Some of it, we will raise. There are three other islands near Pitcairn. Over the years, we'll use them too.”

It was a relief to know there were other landmasses near the island. The senior men were positive Angela had told them so they could mention it to the rest of the camp and ease their minds too.

“The shoe store is over here on the map.” Angela pointed. “It can be converted into a bunkhouse for fifteen to twenty people. We're going to keep the smaller shops as what they are. We need the clinic, and of course, we'll keep the restaurant. Everything else will be turned into apartment homes, including the wealthy properties behind the town. They won't be used for leadership. For example, the mansion behind the restaurant will go to the cooks and their assistants, and Eagles sharing shifts over the main town. The useless flower gardens behind it will be fruit and vegetables in one half, with a small herd of whatever survives the trip in the other. We'll do that to every property. We'll also build a barn if they don't have one, but that's the extent of the space we're going to use for the first year. We'll stay close and tight, and share everything we have. By the time we've been there

one year, we'll have a small stock and be adding to it monthly."

"You said fuel for the ship is the biggest problem?"

Angela nodded at Ivan's question. "A cruise ship will require an enormous amount to bring us home when we're ready, let alone what we'll use to get there. Even if we were lucky enough to run across abandoned ships, or a refinery that has something usable, we will still have the same problem around that one-year date. So far, I don't have a solution. Some of this is common knowledge and some of this needs to stay between leadership." Angela ignored the frowns from Kenn and Neil when they realized she was including Ivan as a leader. "Do I need to explain which is which?"

Kenn and Neil shook their heads.

Ivan nodded. "I'll need to know that line, but I'm certain your boys here will be happy to set me straight on it while they give me another interrogation. Thanks for that, by the way. I didn't ask for this shit."

Angela swallowed a smile at his attitude. He reminded her of Marc. "Just think, a week ago you couldn't wait to be like us. Now, here you are, afraid of mere conversations."

Challenged and embarrassed, Ivan crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm afraid of you and your man, and not in that order."

All of them laughed except Ivan, who was serious. Angela was ruthless. Marc was a killer.

Without the muck of combat and the ugly hat he'd been forced to wear as a government soldier, Ivan's face was interesting. He had a lengthy scar down one cheek that likely came from a knife, and his neck was dotted in small scars that Angela assumed were related to that wound. They looked roughly the same age.

Ivan felt her first real examination of him as a man instead of a fighter in her army and froze, hoping she wasn't disappointed.

Angela knew anything she said or did would be misconstrued. She settled for closing the mental door.

Ivan was glad she hadn't shown an interest. That would cause problems because he definitely wanted her. The only things keeping him from trying were his loyalty to her mate and banishment. Ivan didn't want to leave Safe Haven. He loved it here.

"So do I." Angela enjoyed Ivan's heat and wished Marc's run was over. It wasn't the same without him.

Kenn caught the reflection and agreed. Marc was a comforting strength they needed. It was too bad he couldn't accept things. Kenn had overheard Eagles discussing it. Marc's attitude was almost certainly going to cost him a place in leadership and he was the only one who didn't know it.

Chapter Four BK9
Under Pressure
Outside Greensboro, GA
November 3rd

1

“**S**he’s dreaming about you.”

Adrian grunted, unwilling to discuss it with Kendle and Kevin both awake and listening.

Marc didn’t care about sparing feelings. “Why can’t I get in when it’s a dream?”

Adrian sighed. “Let her have some privacy. She doesn’t invade your dreams and try to change them, does she?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never asked her.”

“She doesn’t.”

“How do you know?”

Adrian glanced over, hoping that because Marc was driving, there wouldn’t be retaliation. “She hardly ever dreams about you. Why should she? She has you.”

Marc knew a lot more than he was letting on. “So dreams are our brains crying for the things and people we don’t have in our lives?”

“Mostly. It’s also a place for random shit, so don’t go stalking her there. She won’t like it.”

“I don’t like it. Why can’t I reach her?”

“She figured out how to block herself off while she sleeps. She has secrets she doesn’t want other descendants to know.”

“It’s not to keep me out?”

Adrian snorted. “I can’t believe you’d consider that. It’s like you believe she’s out to screw you over with every move.”

“Isn’t she?”

Adrian sat up straighter at the bitter tone. “What’s your beef this time?”

“She used our hatred to trick us.”

“You.”

Marc scowled. “What?”

“She tricked you. I knew what she was doing as soon as you made our newest deal.”

“Excuse me, but is this all the ride is going to be?” Kendle was tired of the topic. “Cause I’ve got better things to do.”

“Same here!” Kevin added from a rear bunk. His stomach was still upset. The negative vibes weren’t helping.

“Mind your own business!”

“We’re trying.” Kendle wasn’t intimidated by Marc’s anger. “Spit it out and then shut up, will ya? Everyone’s tired of it.”

Marc gaped at Kendle in the mirror, aware of Adrian’s smirk. The urge to lash out was strong. “You need a lesson in manners.”

“Me?” Kendle was offended. “You’ve been tormenting Adrian every time he drifts off and pulling us into it against our will. Keep that shit to

yourself and do your job. You can return to fighting when the run is over.”

“No, I can’t.”

Kendle realized Marc was using the last opportunity of them being out of camp together. He assumed it wouldn’t happen again for a while, if at all. Kendle laughed as she reclined the seat. “Wow, do you keep underestimating her.”

Neither Marc nor Adrian wanted Kendle to keep going. Neither of them responded.

Kendle knew, but the last twenty-two hours of annoyance needed an outlet. “Your perfect Angela screwed you both and you’re so jealous you don’t care. She’s been playing you two against each other to get what she needs—probably since she first realized what Mr. Sleaze was doing. When will you guys figure it out? Everyone else has.”

Their resentful silence filled Kendle in. “Ah. You do know what she wants and you’ve refused to give it.” She shook her head, eyes closing. “Not smart, but I can’t say I blame you. If I had to live by my rival and watch her love my dream man, it would kill me... No, wait. That’s exactly what I’ll be doing every day, and yet, you don’t see me and Angela acting like this. What is it with you two?”

Kendle didn’t know about the lives they’d wasted in the past doing the same thing, but both men thought about that now.

Any chance we’ve caused our own doom in each life?

Adrian nodded. "I know I have. I'd assumed you were innocent until recently."

"What changed your view on that?"

"You demanded I swear on her life. A pure soul wouldn't have done that."

"No, but a jealous idiot would," Kendle muttered. "Good luck making that right."

"He agreed!" Marc's dread was growing.

"Yeah, but she knows Mr. Sleaze will agree to anything that gives him a possible shot, like I would. She thought you were better than that. Frankly, so did I."

Marc considered her words and accusations without denying or defending this time. *Is she right? How badly have I hurt my relationship?*

Kendle snorted. "Not at all. You did exactly what she needed you to. The fighting during this trip so far tells me you lied too. You don't intend to make peace. She won't like that, Marc. Be careful." Kendle rolled onto her hip, away from the men. "I'm going to sleep now because I drove for fifteen hours straight while you two whined. Keep it down."

Kendle sounded so much like the boss that Marc clamped his lips together and tried to lock down on his thoughts so the castaway would go to sleep and leave him alone.

"Finally!" Kendle had wanted to say all that for hours.

Silence, thick and ugly, took the place of the fighting.

In the rear of the RV, Kevin shut the homemade curtain.

Supplies and gear were strewn around the RV. They had all picked a kit and packed it, then got dressed for the run while Kendle drove. Angela had them clothed like mercenaries, right down to the creative tool belts that allowed for reloading while fighting. She'd also insisted anyone attached to their weapon bring a spare for this mission.

The roads under them were rough, but the empty homes glaring in reproach as they passed were rougher. It didn't appear as though there were people left when they hit streets like this one. Then the radio would flare up to remind them that was an illusion. Marc had switched it off when his driving shift began, unwilling to listen to another ten hours of fighting and begging.

The mood grew uglier as he continued to dwell on Kendle's words and the future.

Unable to take his displeasure, Kendle joined Kevin in the rear, taking the bunk across from him.

Marc ignored them. He was feeling tricked.

Adrian sighed. He moved into the passenger seat. "She did and she didn't. Once you build it, we all have to leave to keep from corrupting it."

Marc contemplated Natoli's prediction that all the ghosts would live with the Indians at some point in the future. "Another big fight where we all go down in a blaze of glory?"

Adrian was again dismayed at how fast Marc's mind went through clues to form entire pictures. "Good and evil always come to that in the end."

Unlike when Angela had spoken to Jennifer, Marc didn't need the details explained to him. He shifted in the seat. "Will I be there for it? Has my future changed?"

Forced to answer an alpha, Adrian shook his head. "No to both, though I'm no longer the problem."

"Who is?"

"Fate. You can't outrun fate, Marcus. Some things are carved in stone."

"She's been trying to change it."

"Yes, almost since you two came to Safe Haven, I imagine. Maybe even before that. I don't know everything you went through on your way to my camp, but she'll keep searching. If there's a way, she'll find it."

Hating Marc's sudden depression, Kendle poked her head around the edge of the bunk. "What makes you think she hasn't already?"

Both men stared at her—Marc through the mirror and Adrian with a neck crane that hurt to witness.

Kendle shrugged at their expressions. "Didn't you wonder what she was getting out of the deal?"

Marc scowled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Adrian gets the society we need so suffering can end. You get his death for building it. What does the boss get for making you both do that?" Before they could respond, she delivered

another truth as she saw it. “And stop asking Adrian about your future. He wants you dead. Of course he can’t see if that future has changed.”

Marc opened his mouth to get nasty and paused. He stared at her in the mirror. “Can you?” Because Kendle didn’t have a horse in the race, her vision might be unbiased. As soon as Marc thought about it, he shook his head. “Never mind.” She did have a horse—him.

“You need to ask one of us who doesn’t care if you live or die, or the answer will be colored by the seer’s desires.” She frowned deeply at the men. “Now let me sleep or I’m going to get unpleasant.” All of them were grouchy and uncomfortable. Teamed, they were forced to keep their thoughts locked or suffer the doubts and fears of their companions.

Kendle shifted to get off the sharp edge of the mattress, refusing to contemplate the many souls who had likely used it before her or the spiders probably calling it home. She’d survived worse.

In the front of the RV, Marc snickered. “She needs to get laid.”

Adrian reclined the seat. “Isn’t Tommy taking care of that?”

“Not well enough or she wouldn’t be growling at me.”

“She’s jealous. You don’t care what Kendle dreams about.”

The hard truth brought a wave of silence that lasted until they reached their destination seven hours later.

2

Marc shut off the engine and swiveled his seat around. They'd agreed to make plans upon arrival. He paused for Kendle and Kevin to come from their bunks.

Yawning, Adrian sat his chair up and retrieved his notebook in case it was needed.

"What's the plan?" Kevin plopped into the seat behind Marc, not sure why he was along but willing enough to be a part of it because of who was here and who wasn't. This was a leadership team and he was the only Eagle.

"You're not an Eagle anymore."

Kevin flushed at Marc's tone. *Here we go again.*

"That's your problem, and I suspect, the reason you're here." Kendle sat across from Kevin. "The boss wants us to get you into shape or get rid of you."

Kevin's face clouded over as he realized Kendle was right.

Satisfied Kendle had the sullen man under control, Marc looked at Adrian.

Adrian scowled. "I don't have it. I assumed she sent it in a folder."

"No folder this time. Just your mental map."

Adrian shook his head. “She wouldn’t have sent us out without a plan.”

“That’s why I thought you had it.”

Kendle cleared her throat, holding up a sheet of paper. “She wanted us to rest before we got here. She told me not to mention it until now.”

Adrian snatched the paper from Kendle and began to read.

Marc snatched the paper from Adrian and handed it back to Kendle. “She gave it to you. Read it.”

Smirking, Kendle did. “The boss says we can use one of her plans or make our own.”

“What are hers?” Marc knew better than to skip hearing them. “Those will be the extreme.”

“A is to use the refugees to overrun them and let those lost souls have the supplies. With B, we get to bring the supplies home.”

“B,” Marc and Adrian declared at the same time.

Kendle kept reading. “All it says is infiltration. There’s a kit, but I haven’t opened it. She says not to unless we choose plan B.”

“Open it now.” The mood in the RV lifted in bright pleasure as Marc caught Kendle’s thought when she opened the kit. He grinned at Adrian.

Adrian tensed. “What?”

Kendle held up the UN uniform, amusement growing.

Adrian groaned. “Really? Again?”

Marc drew his cuffs and lunged, slamming his weight onto Adrian before the man could resist. “I love that woman.”

Now face down against the seat while Marc cuffed him, Adrian grunted. “My affection is waning.”

Kevin laughed.

Kendle frowned. “Liar. Every time she gives you what you deserve, you want her more.”

“Yeah.” Adrian slid onto his butt, grunting. “Well, I am a man.”

Kendle snorted while Kevin snickered.

Marc refused to allow his mirth to show, though he had to agree with Adrian on this one. Angela delivered hits and they kept asking for more. That behavior implied a pathological need for discipline.

“Stay with the ride.” Marc pointed at Adrian and then Kevin. The driver would remain in the vehicle the entire time, and they didn’t need anyone spotting Adrian yet.

As the pair exited the RV, Adrian slid his fingers into his pocket and retrieved the cuff key he’d begun keeping there after the last time Angela had surrendered him to the enemy. He curled it into his palm and looked at Kevin, who had missed it for studying his maps. “Are you okay?”

Kevin tensed. “Surviving.” Hearing his ugly tone, Kevin forced himself to relax. “I’m sorry about the baby.”

“Me too. And Cynthia.”

Kevin stared, no longer seeing roads and bridges. “She told me she wasn’t going to make it out of the mountain. I blew her off.”

Adrian’s own guilt rushed out of his mouth. “She came to me, hoping I would claim her. I laughed.”

Kevin’s shoulders drooped. “We’re responsible.”

Adrian sighed unhappily. “I’d like to say no, but my guilt won’t let me.”

“Yeah.” Kevin stored the map. “I saw the key. If you go against Marc, I’ll tell him.”

“Of course you will. You need to earn back your place in the camp. Keeping secrets won’t help.”

“But I’m not mentioning it unless you cross him,” Kevin finished. “Because I want you cleared. I want things like they were before she died.”

“A lot of us want that, Eagle, but it isn’t possible. You know that.”

“Yeah.”

Both men fell silent.

3

“We’re going to have to pick a plan C.” Marc handed the binoculars to Kendle.

The airstrip had a dozen blue and white planes, and twice as many military vehicles. A line of jeeps were being unloaded from a huge cargo plane at the far end of the airport. Marc centered there, spotting a secondary row of trucks with workers scurrying

around them carrying bags and boxes. It appeared that supplies were being loaded and sent out, probably back to their headquarters. Heavy fuel tankers were all over the base, with UN troops rotating among vehicles. It was chaotic, devoid of a supervisor.

Kendle also examined the makeshift base. Housed in the main terminal, it was obvious that renovations had taken place over the duration of the apocalypse. The terminal was now surrounded by a narrow wall made of Hesco Barriers, and protected at every junction by a squad of five men. Another squad of armed sentries was positioned fifty feet from those on the wall, all the way around. The spiral formation kept the troops in sight of each other and prevented infiltration over or under, even if an attacker took out the first set of guards.

Marc studied the main terminal building, where lines of sentries were waiting to get in. They were having a drill or being instructed on something, but Marc still didn't see a boss. He also didn't spot radios. Hopefully these men didn't know the details of the descendant gifts they were about to face. Market Town and Safe Haven Mountain had been destroyed. It would be hard to know exactly what had happened unless the men were there and it was obvious that these chubby bellies hadn't left the safety of this base.

Kendle scanned the fortified walls and variety of guns and men providing an impressive show of

force. “You don’t think you can pass for one of them?”

Marc shook his head. “Not a chance. They’re on alert and they have at least one descendant. I can feel the edge of a shield, which means they can sense me prying on it. They may know we’re here. We shouldn’t assume the same myths that our enemies have in the past.”

Kendle frowned. He sounded more like Angela every day and less like the Ghost.

Marc proceeded to the RV without telling Kendle the Ghost was the anomaly. Most of the time, he preferred to be civilized. Death was ugly and so was the attitude it took to get through bloody sessions like the ones they’d shared.

Kendle and Marc settled in rear seats as Kevin took them to the small farm Marc had chosen on the way in. He pulled behind the barn and paused for Marc to finish his mental planning. They could all feel him working on it.

Marc finally glared at Adrian. “Why does she want us all teamed?”

“How would I know? She doesn’t tell me that stuff.”

Marc glanced at Kendle.

“Sorry.” She shrugged. “I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“Is it because I’m not a descendant?” Kevin hadn’t wanted to ask, but it was clear to him.

“That’s it.” Kendle’s mood brightened. “She doesn’t know if we’ll be split up, so we all have a connection to our ride. Nice.”

Adrian kept quiet and thought about Cynthia. Having Kevin here made it hard not to.

Kevin was happy he had an important job. He got the maps back out and began familiarizing himself with quick exits. “Do you think they patrol outside the wall?”

Marc shrugged. “I wouldn’t, if I were them. Unless there’s a serious problem out there, they don’t need to.”

Kendle concentrated. “If it were you, what would it take to get you to send a patrol out so we can slip someone in?”

“Interesting question. A rescue of an innocent. A team in danger.” Marc frowned. “Angela being out there.”

Kendle chuckled. “Well, I’ve met her and that could happen.”

“Yeah, she’s—”

“Anything that threatens your wall,” Adrian interrupted. “Like a stampede...”

“...or a fire.” Marc walked to the rear of the RV to examine their supplies.

Kendle followed, notebook in hand. “We can set a small fire, but it won’t burn long in this cold weather.”

“We can use a flaming car.”

“I have another suggestion.” Adrian braced, hating himself. “Instead of infiltration, make her

deal. Knock on the gate and offer me in exchange for supplies and fuel.”

Marc frowned again. “It won’t work. I think they already know who’s coming for them.”

Adrian sighed. “Angela would have accounted for that.”

Kevin was all for it. “They won’t know who you are if Kendle plays the boss and you don’t talk. That way, you don’t need them to send out a patrol to infiltrate. Angela overthought this one.”

The drawback was Angela’s unhappiness if Adrian didn’t return with them. *I’ll live with it*, Marc decided. *At least he might not.*

Adrian dropped his chin to his chest, grunting. “Why can’t I ever keep my mouth shut?”

4

“Sir, we have a mercenary at the gate demanding to speak to you.”

Lounging in his small sauna, Kobi pushed the button to stop the delightful bubble-making engine. He stood up to get a towel, letting the guards view his fit body. Kobi didn’t like the idea their bosses might get from witnessing him fat, like these men were. He also didn’t like how he looked on camera when he was overweight. He didn’t care about being healthy to fight. He had troops for that.

Some of the men glanced away, but most of them didn’t even notice the display. Kobi had picked the men for this suicide glory mission;

they'd served with him before. His oddities weren't new to them and this time, they were pillaging America instead of some shithole that had nothing to steal but misery. The sentries liked it here and they liked their excitable boss.

“Buy it, if we need it. Send him on if we don't”

“*She* says she'll only show her wares to you.”

Kobi glanced up. “A woman?”

“She has one man with her. A fighter, but nothing more.” The messenger lowered his voice. “I think it's the Black Widow.”

“Really?!” Kobi squealed in excitement. Raul wasn't the type to tell false tales. If he believed it was her, it was. “Bring her in! Put her in the viewing room so I'll have a copy for later.”

Raul left to do as ordered.

Kobi rushed off to give orders and get into something more presentable. Obsessed with films, he wasn't going to waste this chance to catch the Black Widow in action one last time. “Get the camera! I want my camera!”

I have a bad feeling about this. Adrian didn't resist as Kendle shoved him through the main door of the airport. Even with a bag over his head and hands cuffed behind him, he didn't stumble or flail around. He'd been given a glimpse of the path beforehand.

Same. Kendle stayed alert. *Run for it or fight?*

Neither. Marc overruled it despite being surrounded by hundreds of UN troops who stared in

shock or anger. It smelled like a bakery in the terminal, implying these men weren't suffering from starvation like the surrounding countryside.

That's because they took it all and enslaved the farmers. Kendle hated the openness between their minds.

We'll pay that forward. Marc didn't like it either, but the communication was useful. "I don't like this."

Kendle gave Marc a sharp look, now playing her role. "Be quiet or I'll leave you here."

The UN men in the hall and terminal were glaring at Kendle in open hostility and her prisoner in drooling greed. If she didn't cut a fast deal for Adrian, they would take him from her and then things would get ugly. The faces in here didn't resemble the slavers from Market Town. These were killers, but not the Safe Haven kind. You sent this crew to raze villages ahead of the boss. Which meant the tall, lean man hurrying toward her with a wolfish smile was a commander, not a general.

Marc hesitantly placed the man as Hungarian from the blue robe and shawl decorated in awards and commendations.

"Welcome!" The light-skinned, bald man beamed at them with white teeth and long, gleaming fingernails. His splendor stood out among the uniforms, making it clear he was their leader. Adrian admired the technique as much as he resented it. When it was being used for good, it calmed a camp. He didn't like it being used here to

remind these men if they conquered enough of America, they too would have nice things.

“Miss Roberts!” Kobi bowed low, ignoring her instant flinch for a weapon at his recognition. “Please, if you would permit me...” Kobi motioned his cinematographer closer. “Get a tight shot of them together, then pull back on her—nice and slow.”

Kendle and Marc held still, frowning when Kobi began to narrate.

“As you can see, these American fighters are just that—fighters. They possess no extraordinary skills and yet, bold as brass, they walk into enemy hands without fear. Remarkable!” Kobi gestured toward the end of the hall. “Please walk like you would if we weren’t surrounding you, preventing your escape. Don’t be alarmed. They won’t shoot until I tell them to.”

“Comforting.” Kendle gave Adrian a nudge. The narrow path between the UN sentries was streaked in dirt and stains that Kendle didn’t try to identify. She also didn’t bring her demon forward to read minds. Marc had locked them all down when he’d teamed them. Other than sharing thoughts, they were as powerless as these men believed they were. That made Kendle angry, but it would take the four hundred men here by surprise—something they needed. The signal to fight was when Marc let go of the control he’d taken over their power.

Covered by the hood and his parka, Adrian kept his hands under the edges of the sleeves, where he’d

stuffed the key. He didn't trust Marc or Kendle to get him out of here once the battle started.

Kobi stopped in front of them to push the double doors open. "Welcome to my humble abode, Miss Roberts. My name is Kobi. I have drinks waiting by a warm fire. You must be cold."

Kendle didn't ask how he knew who she was. After Market Town, it wasn't surprising that her face had become known. She'd just expected to be called by the fighting name, not the old world title.

Kobi led them to the center of a spacious room filled with couches, sofas, stools, and chairs. The dozen seats in the center were plush blue and white, declaring them for leadership by how they sat apart from the rest.

Kobi pointed toward the crystal table in the middle of the seats. "Have a drink and sit. We will relax and warm, and we will talk."

Kendle didn't want to offend the man and trigger the fight too soon by refusing. She motioned Marc forward.

Marc immediately got her a drink, taking a small sip first. As he did so, Marc was able to pinpoint the descendant in the room. Raul was short, muscular, and wore his black hair in a lengthy braid down his uniformed back. Sporting a matching braided mustache, it was clear that he was a fighter in every way. His body was covered in scars and bruises, and his green glowing orbs swept the room. *Mistake. I won't have to find you later in the crowd.*

Raul nodded at him. *I'll find you, don't worry.*

Kendle accepted the drink and sat in the best-looking chair, certain it belonged to Kobi.

Marc shoved Adrian down at her feet and stood behind her. It told everyone he was her bodyguard.

Kendle downed the shot of expensive vodka and leaned forward to place the glass on the table. She belched loudly. “Excellent.”

Kobi beamed. “I have the best here. When the Secretaries-General visits, he will be pleased.”

Kendle squirmed in the seat, trying to be offensive. “Nice chairs too. American made?”

Kobi’s brilliant smile faded for an instant. “Of course. You have many fine things here. We have shipped thousands of them home, but none are as loved as the movies I make of your people.” Kobi gestured.

Troops hurried forward to occupy the seats as the camera operator ran to the far end of the room to flip switches on the wall. A moment later, a huge projection screen deployed along the far wall.

As the lights dimmed and a projector hummed to life, Kendle felt Marc’s thumb on her gift, about to lift. He clearly wasn’t expecting this to be good.

Neither was Adrian. His hands were now free.

Kendle waited, feeling the burn of alcohol on an empty stomach and full nerves.

Kobi plopped into the seat on Kendle’s right, but he stared at her instead of the screen as the film began.

“Good day, Secretaries-General and honorable council members. I have sad news for you. Our

fledgling town on the American east coast has been destroyed by a battle we still don't understand. These are the clips we were able to salvage from the wreckage.”

Kendle's lip curled as her fight with Renda appeared in scratchy motion. “She just won't stay dead.”

Kobi chuckled at her lack of fear upon discovery. “Perhaps this next clip will be more to your liking.”

The screen switched to Kendle killing Yuri. Bathed in his blood, Marc had never found her sexier. “Nice.”

Adrian was glad he couldn't see it.

Kobi pointed excitedly as the clip switched again. “*This* is my favorite.”

Kendle and Marc both tensed as a familiar profile appeared on the screen. Angela was standing in Market Town square. Flames were spewing from her hands.

“Lights!” Kobi clapped twice.

Kendle and Marc waited for the demands as they realized this one was smarter than Dirce. Kobi had known they were coming and prepared accordingly.

We'll use plan D, Marc chose.

What's that? Kendle hadn't known they had another plan.

That's where we improvise and try not to get killed while we run naked through a minefield.

Kendle sighed. *I already hate plan D.*

Chapter Five BK9

Sky High

1

“**T**his is the one we want.” Kobi stood up as the projector stopped. The image froze on Angela’s rage.

Marc stared at it, connecting future dots. Angela was now wanted more than Adrian was. Safe Haven would never have peace.

The movie room brightened to reveal a hundred pissed troops around the team and their gleeful boss about to spring the final trap.

Adrian could feel the tension and knew what was coming, even though he couldn’t view Angela on the film. There was only one thing that could get Marc so mad this fast. The heat baking off the wolfman was enough to make Adrian glad it wasn’t directed at him.

Kobi smiled at Kendle. “In one minute after I stop speaking, we’re going to kill you. You’ll get some of us. But we’ll get *all* of you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kendle let out another belch. “You’ve done all the talking so far. May I have a turn?”

Kobi waved a hand. “Sixty seconds.”

Kendle switched to her own backup plan. “We’re better than any of your crew and we’re looking for jobs. Don’t be stupid. There’s always a deal to be made.”

Surprised, Kobi went still. “Do tell, my dear.”

Kendle scowled at him. “I’ll *dear* your ass to the wall before they get me, big man. Don’t be rude.”

Kobi blinked. Instead of the rant Kendle expected, he rotated toward the camera operator. “You get it?!”

“Yes, sir. I’m getting all of it.”

“You’d better be.” Kobi turned back to Kendle, flashing another charming smile. “We won’t count that interruption in your time. I’ll cut it out later. Fifty-two seconds.”

“I can give you Angela.”

Marc tensed at Kendle’s words.

Kobi’s smile grew. “That is what I wanted to hear. Forty-five.”

Kendle kicked the man at her feet. “I kidnapped her mate.”

“This is the Ghost?” Kobi knew it wasn’t.

“No.” Kendle snatched the hood from Adrian’s head. “This is her lover. She likes him more.”

Kobi stared at Adrian. He recognized the most wanted man in their books of people to capture. When he finally spoke, all the charm and cheer was gone. “I’ll take him from you and slit your throat. No deal. Thirty seconds.”

Kendle laughed. “You’re not a magic user, Commander. I can put up a shield that will last until Angela comes for her man.”

Kobi assumed she was bluffing, but he didn’t like it that he wasn’t positive. “Dirce told us you were a descendant.”

“How else could I have beaten Renda?” Kendle pushed harder. “Would you like a small demonstration to prove my words?”

Kobi clapped, waving for the camera operator to come closer.

The dread-locked American cinematographer didn’t look at the prisoners directly so he wouldn’t feel connected to them. Willie had already made his choice. When the UN finished taking over this country, he would have it all on film. This was the award-winning footage the world would never get to view.

“You don’t understand.” Kobi knew she was trying to trick him somehow. “None of you will matter soon. We have reinforcements on the way. Take them!”

Kendle felt Marc let go. She gathered energy to blast Kobi. Too late, she felt someone come up behind them. As she fired, so did they.

Marc slid to the ground from the blast, unprepared for the attack. He’d assumed Kobi’s men wouldn’t shoot them.

Adrian brought up his shield as chaos hit the room. Already touching Kendle, he reached out for Marc’s leg to include the groaning man. Able to

scan now, he could tell Marc had been hit by a powerful zap that had drained him of energy. Being new, Marc couldn't take many hits like that without his body shutting down.

Marc was hit again. It didn't get through the shield, but Adrian knew it was only a matter of time before he was too weak to block it.

Kendle stared in fear. *What now?*

Kobi appeared in her line of sight as he knelt near Adrian. "You can't fire unless he drops his shield and the instant he does, we'll kill the Ghost. You have no alpha to control the defense. You lose, *my dear*. Surrender and face your fate."

Adrian kept the shield as strong as he could, not sure how things had gone so wrong so fast.

"Surrender or I will tell my man to skin your boy."

Adrian stiffened as a thin teenager was dragged out to stand next to the happy commander now posing his men for up-close shots. "Brian?"

The cook from Erik's crew gave a sickly nod. It was obvious the boy had been tortured for information.

"Grandpa."

Kendle glared at Adrian. "Grandpa?"

"Shit!" Adrian didn't know what to do now.

Brian looked like a Mitchel from the blond hair to the blue eyes, and he had the same shifty stare, but he put off a vibe of being unable to care for himself because he refused to sink as low as his family had. It was awful to find someone like him

here, where he would be used, abused and disposed of. From the filthy clothes and bruises, it was clear to Marc that moment wasn't far off. Slowly recovering, he made the choice. *Surrender so we can grab the kid and then we'll arrange the slaughter of every man standing here laughing at us.*

Adrian dropped the shield. "I give up. You win."

Kobi clapped. "Cut!" He spun around, accepting shoulder slaps and stomps of respect from his men. "It was perfect! You were wonderful."

Adrian, Marc, and Kendle braced as Kobi faced them, expecting the worst.

"If there's trouble, shoot them all. They don't have to be alive now." Kobi waved a man forward. "We're going to prep you for travel. If you resist, Walter will add your names to his body."

Brian cringed, telling Marc that Walter was his abuser.

Walter came forward, flashing a sick leer at Kendle. "What's your name?"

Kendle had known a nastier man, but Walter's tattoos got under her skin as soon as she saw them. His freshest was still bleeding. Blood dripped from it. *He's marking himself with the names of his victims.* Brian was next for whatever fate those unfortunate souls had met.

Kobi felt her rage building. "Put your knife against the kid's throat until we get them secured."

Brian struggled, but he was no match for the giant who swept him up and did as Kobi ordered.

Kendle was forced to extend her arm as a man carrying a syringe came toward her. She studied Kobi to keep from showing her fear of what it was. “Killing us somewhere private for a sequel?”

Kobi laughed cruelly. “No, no, my dear. You and these two are celebrities. You’ll be disarmed, secured, and put on a plane for transport.”

Kendle almost gagged. “Plane?”

Kobi nodded, glowing with triumph. “You’re being sent to the world’s first detention center for descendants. When you wake up, America will be behind you.”

Kendle struggled to fight the drugs, but couldn’t. She slumped over onto Adrian’s leg.

Adrian regarded Marc. *Should we try anyway?* Thanks to being teamed, the adrenaline rush was doubled, as well as the nausea and the headache. It was miserable, but it was the only connection to Kevin, who might now end up being their savior.

Marc shook his head, sending his demon away like Angela had taught him. *Go to sleep for now. There’ll be time for killing when the dealing’s done.*

As Adrian chuckled and fell over, Marc sent out a wave of alpha command to the single descendant he’d picked up since entering the base.

Lurking in the far corner with a dart gun in case they tried to escape, Raul was unable to resist. He left the movie room and snuck toward the airstrip where a plane was being fueled for take-off.

Adrian flinched away as a needle was withdrawn from his skin. Swimming in the mental fog of drugs, he came up all at once, groaning and coughing.

Shut up! Raul walked over to jab the same needle into Kendle's arm, giving her half the remaining medicine. He then slid over to Marc to repeat the gesture, though he used a fresh needle for him.

Adrian realized Marc had taken an alpha hold over Kobi's protector. *We'll do our own bonds. Leave your knife.*

Adrian felt the open blade slide into his grip.

I have to go now. I have work.

Go on. Adrian didn't know what Marc had told the man to do, but he wasn't going to interfere.

Raul went toward the cockpit while Adrian cut Marc's ropes.

Forced to wait for the rest of his mental facilities to return, Adrian and Marc examined their surroundings. The plane looked like every other that they had been on during their military careers. It was American, but the two pilots weren't. They spoke a language Adrian identified as Greek. He could hear Raul keeping them occupied.

It was impossible to tell how long they'd been unconscious, but Marc doubted it had been long.

The plane wasn't in the air yet. There was still time to escape Kobi's plan.

Taking the knife, Marc scooted around so he could reach Kendle's bonds. She was awake, but not moving yet as she scanned her current situation.

Outside the plane, shouts and engines were a constant noise, but no one came up the open ramp yet. The airstrip around them was covered in men rushing more bags and crates onto other planes. Marc assumed their host had ordered it all shipped, which said Kobi was worried even though he had his prisoners tied up and drugged for transport.

Marc didn't see animals being loaded and wondered why, but not enough to spend time sorting it out. He assumed Kobi's boss wanted only luxury goods. None of the crates in this plane was labeled as to the contents, but ownership was stamped across each container in bright red letters.

UN Property! Danger!

Kendle sat up while Marc swept for weapons.

Adrian watched out for surprises, heart thumping in his chest. After the fight in Market Town, Adrian had assumed Brian would take off in the opposite direction. He'd never considered the boy would be captured by the UN and used against him.

Raul came from the cockpit, but didn't spare them a glance. Wearing a robot-like expression, he exited the plane and went to carry out the next step in the orders Marc had given him.

“Where is he going?” Kendle wasn’t sure if she should kill the enemy descendant.

“To secure our ride.”

Marc nodded in approval of Adrian’s answer. He glanced around, wondering where Kobi was storing the weapons. He didn’t care about the movies, but Safe Haven needed the guns, and he wanted to rescue any other prisoners they had here.

“Are we destroying it or are we getting the hell out of the way again?” Kendle didn’t like the odds.

Marc looked toward the cockpit, aware that the conversation up there had stopped. “Can you fly?”

Adrian shook his head in regret. “I never learned how. I’m more of a ground guy.”

Marc regarded Kendle.

Kendle had gone pale, remembering her trip from Pitcairn to America in the shitty little beater that had been traded to the all-female group led by Marsha. It was an ugly flashback. “Maybe.”

Marc got to his feet. “I’ll clear a path. Bring up the ramp.”

The sound of struggling came from the cockpit a few seconds later, but there was no shout or alarm to bring the sentries who were busy laughing about their easy victory over Adrian Mitchel, the Ghost, and the survival show woman. It angered Kendle that her stage name hadn’t been mentioned during Kobi’s production. “I want that in the film.”

Adrian snickered. “Tell it to the director.”

Marc dragged a body with a broken neck by them. He dumped it between a stack of large crates

wrapped in plastic and then went back for the other one.

Adrian hurried to the ramp as Kendle joined Marc in the front.

“They had everything ready to go.” Marc slid into the passenger seat, shifting away from the window so the troops wouldn’t recognize him.

Adrian joined them, holding out a hat for Marc to wear.

Kendle staggered, turning to vomit. Once she finished, she immediately felt better.

Marc and Adrian understood completely. They hadn’t consumed the shot of vodka, but the drugs were merciless. Both men had nasty headaches and boiling guts. Marc wasn’t enjoying being teamed with three people this way, but he assumed Angela wanted them to have the practice. It wouldn’t surprise him if it became a part of lessons in the future. Marc suspected Angela wanted an all-descendant team. He’d heard Adrian talking about it and when it came to plans, Angela and the former leader usually went in the same direction.

Kendle slid into the seat, hoping she could get them off the ground.

“This must be the detention center.” Marc held up a map. He had already memorized the location.

Adrian also noted it and then handed the map to Kendle. He wanted to have his hands free.

Kendle realized they would be going within a hundred and fifty miles of that location on their way to Pitcairn, thanks to Angela’s decision to sail

around South America instead of re-crossing this broken country to leave from the west. “Where are we going?”

Marc pointed toward the main building. “Kobi likes us ballsy Americans. Let’s say goodbye.”

Adrian grinned as he realized what Marc was planning. He hunkered between the seats and tried to brace.

Kendle swallowed the lump in her throat and started pushing buttons.

“As we hit, use your shields and give them everything you’ve got. I want the numbers cut in half by the time we roll out of here.”

Kendle and Adrian prepared themselves. It was payback time.

3

In the main hangar, Kobi glanced upward as the sound of a plane grew loud. “Are they taking off?”

Alarms begin to ring across the makeshift base. Radios crackled to life, confirming Kobi’s fear.

“They are escaping!”

“We have a breach!”

“Stop them!” Kobi stared toward the window in shock. He thought of running for his basement room. It would withstand a blast, but his pride wouldn’t let him. “Come and get me, Americans!”

Nearby, the camera operator snatched up his equipment. The boss always wanted clips, no matter the outcome.

Kobi felt their descendant come to him and bring up the shield. Bathed in protection, the commander got closer to the window for a better view.

Outside, the engines reached maximum and propelled the airship into the sky.

In the cockpit, a pale, shaking woman pulled on the stick to take it higher. “Are you sure?” Kendle was thrilled to be in the air at all; she wasn’t certain about doing what Marc wanted.

Marc nodded. “Most of the troops are in that center courtyard, near the fuel trucks. Do the best you can to hit them while Adrian shields us.”

Always willing to risk her life for Marc’s respect, Kendle didn’t argue further. She gently turned the plane and brought the nose around to line up with the terminal. Pushing on the stick, she took them back toward the ground.

“Get out of here!” Raul was no longer under Marc’s control. He was horrified to discover what he’d done. He shoved Kobi toward the exit. “I can’t protect you from that!”

“Amazing, isn’t she?!”

Raul pushed Kobi toward the basement bunker as the man cackled madly.

“This will be my best film ever!”

Raul didn’t respond. He shoved them through panicking sentries who were looking for calm, effective guidance. *That’s not what we do here,*

boys. Raul shoved the door to the bunker open and pushed Kobi in.

The man rolled roughly down the stairs.

Raul heard his boss hit the floor and jerked the door shut. Pulling up his strongest gifts, he waited for the enemy to arrive, determined to redeem himself.

Kobi got off the floor, hand sliding up the dusty wall in an effort to find the light switch. He hated the dark.

The bright glare came on to illuminate his tiny palace... The building above him shuddered. Dust fell onto Kobi's head and shoulders as he stared upward, waiting for Raul to come and tell him everything was okay.

A second explosion shook the building, knocking Kobi to his knees. The walls rained dust and debris, sending shrapnel against his fragile skin. He cringed against the wall, waiting for it to be over.

At the top of the stairs, the door was jerked open and footsteps came down.

Kobi tried to stand. "I knew you'd come for me, Raul! I will reward you for this!"

Kendle grabbed Kobi by the arm. "Good. Tell your men to stand down or I'll gut you like a pig while they watch." The musty room was already flipping Kendle's stomach. It reminded her of Ethan's cave.

Realizing who it was, Kobi screamed and ran up the stairs to escape.

Adrian let Kobi reach the top of the steps and then snaked his arm around the man's neck. Despite being in charge of 200 troops and having a variety of killing tools at his disposal, Kobi was unarmed. "Tell your men to surrender before she gets up here."

Kendle took off running up the steps.

"Stand down! Stand down!" Kobi continued to scream it at the men surrounding them with fingers on triggers.

The center of the terminal was a pile of smoking rubble. Pieces of the plane were sticking out; debris was scattered everywhere. Kobi's beautiful movie room had been erased.

Standing next to Adrian with two guns and a nasty snarl, Marc gestured at the troops waiting for orders. "Do it now!"

It was a tense moment. As the plane had crashed into the building, the three of them had bailed out the rear. Flying into the plush couches had absorbed most of the impact. The plane had cleared a path straight to where Raul's body was laying, head cut off from the plane wing. As soon as Marc viewed the body and then the door, it was obvious Kobi was there.

The sentries around them began to lay down their guns, some grumbling, some relieved.

Kobi started begging for his life.

Kendle stopped in front of the commander, hand coming up to stroke his cheek. "Tell your men to

take the loaded semis to the front gate. We'll go from there."

Marc was feeding her the plans, but Kendle almost didn't need it. She was getting good at this.

"Give them the trucks meant for the Secretaries-General! Give it to them at the gate!" Kobi was terrified she was going to slit his throat after she got what she wanted.

Kendle was considering it. Angela had told them to cut the head off the snake and this one was about as reptilian as it came. Instead, she followed orders and whispered into the man's ear.

When she finished, Kendle glanced around, hunting for the crazy camera operator who had continued to film even as the plane crashed into the terminal. She found him lying in a pool of blood in the corner, missing a leg and his life.

Kendle retrieved the camera. The light was still green as she set it on the edge of a broken window. Kendle stepped in front of the camera, giving a grin and a snappy salute. "Hi! It's the Black Widow coming to you from America. Please cease and desist all operations in this country or we will be forced to make a home visit. God bless you and God bless the United States."

Kendle stepped forward and shut the camera off. She scanned the troops, some of whom were close enough to grab her if they were feeling froggy. "How many of you want to be here?"

She hadn't expected anyone to answer her and no one did, but it was obvious they loved their jobs.

She pushed harder as Marc and Adrian took Kobi toward the exit. “Go terrorize your own lands and let the descendants there deal with you. If you’re not gone, soon, we *will* be back and this time we won’t leave anyone alive. That comes straight from Angela.”

Troops paled or grimaced at the name, understanding this was a successful infiltration and the mastermind was their number one target in this country.

Satisfied they understood the danger, Kendle joined Marc and Adrian in the triangle formation around the prisoner. They walked toward the gate, where the four trucks were already being pulled around.

“What’s in the trucks?” Marc wanted to know now, so he could decide if he wanted to clear the base. Time was the only thing making him hesitate to do that.

“Poppers and pigeons,” Kobi grumbled. “Special guns and munitions, some food stuffs. It was a gift before I asked to come home.”

“Liar.” Kendle glared. “It was a bribe to get them to let you stay here longer.”

When they’d cased this joint, they had assumed the semis were full of food and weapons, but it was gratifying to have that confirmed.

“Tell your men to put their radios and guns in the rear truck, plus all knives and vests.” Marc gave Walter a shove as he went by, remembering Brian’s

fear upon meeting him. “*You* get on your knees and stay there until we’re gone.”

With dirty hands and gnats around him in a thin cloud, the big man was intimidating even as he knelt. The bugs sucking his blood didn’t bother him at all. As far as Marc could tell, the man hadn’t noticed. *That drove me nuts in the Marines. The buzzing becomes intolerable after fifteen hours.*

UN men formed orderly lines to deposit the guns and radios in the truck. Marc and Adrian studied them for signs of rebellion, but there wasn’t any. These men wanted them gone so they could return to their jobs of stripping America.

Because there were only a couple hundred men here, the disarming process took a short five minutes. The team waited to be attacked by the guards or by Walter, who hadn’t tried to protest his kneeling position on the frozen ground.

Why aren’t they shooting?

No orders. Marc tightened his grip on Kobi’s arm. “Let’s go.”

As they proceeded to the trucks, a shadow broke away from the rear of the group and ran toward Walter.

“I’ll kill you!” Knife in hand, Brian threw himself at the bigger man.

Walter slapped the boy, sending him flying into a group of soldiers who kicked Brian until he scrambled away.

The Eagles didn’t interfere, not liking it that the boy had been about to take justice into his own

hands, but agreeing with his decision. Anyone as cruel as Walter needed to die.

Marc waved Kendle toward the last truck in line. He and Adrian kept going, leaving Brian at the third rig. As they moved on, Kendle realized Marc was giving her the duty of making sure Brian didn't take off in a truck of supplies. Obviously, Marc hadn't forgotten the boy was a Mitchel.

Marc left Adrian at the second truck, waving toward the passenger side of the rig. He looked at Kobi. "You get in. I get in. The gates open. We go out. The gates close. I stop. I let you out. We both go our own way."

Kobi nodded, dangerous mind spinning. He walked toward the open passenger door, still limping from being tossed down the stairs.

Already sure of what was coming; Marc went around the front of the truck. As soon as he hefted himself into the driver seat, he heard Kobi exit the vehicle and run into the safety of the troops who were gathering on both sides of the semis. *We stick to the plan.*

Marc was aware of the disapproval of his team at the choice. It hit in thick waves and didn't ease. To his surprise, Adrian's bothered him the most.

"Fine." Marc opened the door.

His team prepared to do battle.

Before the troops could figure out what was coming, Marc jumped onto the side of the truck and slid face-first onto the roof.

Bullets hit the truck, but only a few. Most of the men had been disarmed or killed by the plane. Marc fired his gun.

“Yes!” Brian screamed, watching Walter fall.

Marc fired again.

Kobi jerked and fell into the men around him. Blood poured from his shoulder.

It wasn't a kill shot, but Marc slid backwards and dropped into the seat.

“Thank you.” Adrian wished he'd been the one to give Brian justice.

Marc got the truck moving without closing the door or holstering. There wasn't time as the sentries rushed forward, those with weapons now firing.

Marc steered toward the wall next to the closed gate. He couldn't help the grin and shout as he drove through the weak connector spot.

Behind him, the rest of the team did the same, taking out a large portion of the wall. Even Brian joined in, enjoying causing damage to the place that had held him hostage. It had only been for a short time, but it had been ugly, forcing him to betray his own kind. He would never forget this humiliation.

“No! No! Not the wall!” Behind them, Kobi's screams filled the air.

Marc led them toward the spot where he and Kendle had done their recon, needing to see how the troops were reacting.

Gesturing wildly while bleeding, Kobi was an angry puppet in the mirrors as they drove away.

Marc was pleased. Signs of their gifts were all over the base. When the refugees arrived, they would recognize it and know Safe Haven had been here. It would whip them into a frenzy. Marc was sure there were already trackers on the way. They'd recharged during the short fight. Being a descendant had serious advantages.

4

Kevin had been observing the base from a distance, ready to provide the life-saving rescue. He was disappointed to discover the fight was already over, that his help hadn't been needed. He fired up the RV and joined them on the ridge above the UN base.

Everyone met in front of Marc's semi, feeling vulnerable without their weapons. Some of those had been left behind in Kobi's lavish movie room. Some of them were in the pile in the rear of the semi, in addition to the radios from the few guards who'd had one. The UN hadn't been doing as well here as Kobi had been pretending to his superiors in the movies.

"Thank you." Brian was grateful to be out of there and nervous about what came next. He barely considered himself a Mitchel; he didn't expect any of the free passes that usually came with the name.

Marc picked up the thought. He'd been right to rescue the boy. A quick sweep had revealed innocence and anger over wayward family. Marc

had bonded to him right away. He looked at the boy. “We can find a place for you in Safe Haven, but the mistakes your...grandfather has made will always color the name. By the time we leave, you need to have made your choice.”

That was kinder than Brian or Adrian had hoped for.

Adrian moved a few feet away, certain Brian would follow for a few minutes of family talk.

Marc let them go, reaching into the semi to pick up the mic. He had already changed the channel. “I just saw Safe Haven! They’re at Macon airport!”

Marc flipped the radio to the next channel Safe Haven had been known for using before they went quiet. “Safe Haven is in Macon, Georgia! I saw Angela!”

Marc repeated that process over ten more channels, having to stop on the last two to wait for other people who were calling in to verify the report. It was obvious everyone was still on the lookout for their camp.

When he finished, Marc ignored the responses that declared they would arrive within a few hours. He joined Kendle and Kevin in front of his truck.

“That is harsh.”

Kendle nodded at Kevin’s comment. “He learned from the best.”

Kevin understood Angela had used the technique and Marc had copied it. It made him feel better, but only by a little. He wasn’t looking

forward to hanging around to verify that the refugees did indeed breach the UN base.

Picking up his concern, Kendle shook her head. “We weren’t sent here for that. There’s no need for us to stick around.”

Kevin was glad to hear it. He stayed quiet, hoping there would be action during their next stop so he could help. Dog was still waiting for them.

Marc studied the troops below. They were repairing the missing sections of the wall. In the hours it would take the refugee wave to arrive, the sentries might finish, but the barrier wouldn’t be as sturdy and there weren’t enough troops to defend the entire wall to keep people from climbing over. It would be an awful end for those inside. They were securing their own crypt and didn’t know it.

A few feet away, Adrian and Brian were having a repeat of the conversation he’d had with nearly every one of his younger relatives. “You already know I can’t do that.”

Brian scowled in frustration. “You should come and help. You owe that to both of us.”

Adrian handed Brian a small kit with some medical supplies in it. He hated it that the boy wasn’t going to stay. Brian was fragile. He needed care.

“I need to find my mother!”

“I’m not that person anymore. Please don’t ask it of me. I can’t.”

Brian shoved away from his grandfather, snorting angrily. “Useless!”

Adrian winced. Brian didn't understand why he wouldn't throw everything away to go on a suicide run to rescue Alexa. In his place, Adrian was certain he would feel the same way, but the wisdom that had come from his mistakes told him not to interfere with his daughter's fate. Alexa would reach Safe Haven at some point in the future. Adrian was certain of that. It wouldn't be an easy trip, but fate was demanding it as payment for their crimes against humanity. Even Brian, an innocent, would be held responsible for the sins of the past. Generational curses were unbreakable. Adrian knew better than to even try.

Brian joined Marc and Kendle. "I'm going off on my own. I can't be in the same camp as him."

Marc's bond with the boy grew stronger. He clapped him on the shoulder. "You can take the RV."

Adrian hurried to clean it out, glad Brian would have a dependable ride. Adrian wouldn't miss the vehicle. There were too many memories of the vet there. He would replace it with something that used less gas and could fit into a smaller space.

Marc avoided thinking about how bad Brian smelled as the wind shifted. He handed the boy his canteen of water and ration kit. Both had been filled.

Kevin brightened as he realized he would be driving one of the semis. He hurried to get into the seat so he would be ready to go.

Arms full, Adrian also headed for a semi, leaving Kendle and Marc to sort through the RV

bags and boxes. No one was worried about the troops now. The frantic actions below told the crew the UN was terrified of being overrun by American refugees. They had recognized the threat coming their way.

Marc led the small convoy to a valley a few miles away and parked them behind a large barn with a silo that had been burnt to the ground. Side-by-side, the semis were only visible from one direction. The hills around them were littered by nervous deer slowly moving north even though it was opposite where they should be going. The rest of the landscape was still and frozen, settled in to face the harsh return of winter.

Marc watched Brian disappear over the hill toward the southwest, wishing the boy luck. Unlike the other Mitchel men he'd met, Brian was a good soul. It was nice to know there was one member of that family who didn't make him want to use his guns.

We'll stay where we are for a while. When darkness finally came, he expected the base to be surrounded, which would make it easier for them to go northwest to pick up Dog. If they went right now, they would have to kill people who were on their way to help loot the base. It was easier to wait until dark and keep their heads down. They would look like any other scavenger and be able to see lights before they were spotted.

In the rear truck, Kendle tried to get comfortable. She was eager for the rest to settle her

stomach. Between the shot of vodka and the drugs Kobi had used, her stomach was still boiling. She reclined the seat and hoped to be snoring soon.

In the truck ahead of her, Kevin was still disappointed. He fidgeted restlessly as he waited, wishing Marc would let them go on now. He didn't understand why they weren't, but he knew better than to ask or to leave his truck.

In the second semi, Adrian was making lessons for training. He was also occasionally sweeping their surroundings for problems, but Marc's demon was circling the stopped convoy continuously. Adrian didn't feel the need to draw the creature's attention. Now that the mission had been accomplished, he was once again expendable.

In the front truck, Marc concentrated on seeing everything his demon did as it made rounds of the farm. If someone tried to sneak up on them, he would know. This was the most dangerous part of the plan—when the mission was almost finished. That's when people were most likely to be sloppy and get killed. Even if it was Adrian, that would make the mission a failure. When Adrian died, Marc wanted it to be his idea, not an accident.

Marc rooted through bags, examining the supplies he hadn't time to check out before now. It was all American. The semis were also American, leading Marc to believe the UN had been sent over with bare rations and told to collect their needs from the land. It meant those troops at that base had been it. Any more would mean the UN had come over in

a ship that could track them all the way to the island. It was a relief to know that wasn't the case. Kobi and Dirce had arrived by plane.

Satisfied they were okay for the moment, Marc leaned back and closed his eyes. Angela immediately filled his thoughts, guiding him to sleep.

Outside, snow began to fall on the warm windshields and melt.

Chapter Six BK9
A Pick Me Up

1

“Oh, God.”

The team echoed Kendle’s exclamation as they stared at what remained of Athens, Georgia. The city was covered in bodies of locals and UN soldiers. There were also men wearing other uniforms, but it was hard to distinguish how many or who they had been in the snowy darkness. With eighty miles down and eighty to go, it felt like it had been much longer than three days since they’d split off from Safe Haven.

Marc took his time leading them through the maze of charred homes and roads as it got darker. The other cars and trucks had lights on, making it easier to avoid them, but some didn’t use lights as they stalked their fellow man. Gunshots and screams echoed in random blasts. Marc stayed alert and angry. In times of crisis, humanity was its own worst enemy. He’d accepted that long ago, thus his decision to become a sniper, but it was still horribly frustrating to feel souls in pain the way these were. He didn’t feel remorse for using them against the UN troops. He also didn’t feel bad for the deaths he’d caused. What bothered him was the lack of

humanity in humans. He didn't know how to fix that issue. Safe Haven's people were mostly good, but during their time in the mountain, Marc had witnessed good people go bad and bad people go good. He didn't have the energy to figure out such a confusing mess right now. Marc was just looking forward to being back with Safe Haven so he could sleep for more than four hours.

In the trucks behind, Adrian, Kendle, and Kevin were thinking the same. It was impossible to guess how many people were out here with them. The calls on the radio for help to breach the UN wall had been so continuous that all their radios were off. Despite causing the mayhem, Eagles didn't want to hear it or see it. If not for the UN being such a threat, none of them would have been okay using these methods.

Adrian was the most hurt by it. Like Angela, he had respect for every life. Even the removal of evil bothered him. His mind insisted that most people could be brought around to the Safe Haven way of life.

Adrian didn't mention that to Marc. He also didn't try to search out lost souls who might be accepted. That wasn't his job anymore. Anyone he recommended to Marc would be viewed with suspicion. He didn't want to put all of them through that just to have Marc slip a bullet into someone's brain because he drew attention to them. As angry as Marc was at yet more evidence of humanity's inhumanity, Adrian believed the few good survivors

were better off on their own. It was heartbreaking. *I hate being out here with Marc. Angela would have at least scanned them.*

As the night wore on, Kevin began to realize Marc wasn't going to pull over for a break, even though the roads were coated in a layer of white powder. Despite getting tired of the bouncing seat and a drafty truck that stuttered and shuddered under his heavy-handed touch, Kevin stayed on the bumper of the semi ahead of him and didn't complain. This was part of being accepted again. Kevin knew if he angered Marc, he was likely to lose this one chance. The waves of menace coming from their team leader were palpable enough to keep him awake and quiet. He assumed it was the same in all the trucks.

Covering the rear, Kendle pushed her truck over the rough, debris-laden roads and tried not to think about returning to Safe Haven. Unlike the others on this mission, she didn't want to go home yet. In that confined camp, Angela was boss. Out here, she only had to answer to Marc.

2

Three hours before dawn, Marc finally pulled over. He needed to pee and check maps. Marc donned his parka, pulling the hood up against the stiff wind. Light snow whipped around the small

convoy as the other drivers met him in front of his truck.

Deprived of flashlights and headlights, the four people stayed close.

“I’ll hold that for you.” Kevin hurried forward to take the map for Marc so he could examine it unhampered.

Marc allowed the sucking up, mostly because he was too tired to put Kevin in his place again. Everyone else on this team had had a tough day of dealing with Kobi and his ambush. Kevin was bright-eyed, bushytailed, and irritating.

While they waited, the cold darkness around them was broken by sounds of nature expressing displeasure to have humans here. Owls hooted in anger; animals scurried through the underbrush to warn others. Kendle took it in without reacting, but it creeped her out that nature was so aware of them. Even the cicadas had gone quiet, reacting to human presence. Kendle shined her neck light around and found dozens of the fat bugs on every tree and bush she checked.

Adrian gently forced her hand down. “Let’s not disturb the blood-suckers, okay? Shut it off.”

Kendle did, paling as she got the images of a rest stop from his chaotic thoughts. He was trying to skip over the reason for them being there, but Kendle felt Marc tense and realized it was a scene from when Angela had almost died. Kendle hadn’t been in America then. She’d been surviving her own hell, but she’d heard the stories from Eagles

who had viewed the wreckage. The men who'd been there still wouldn't talk about it.

"This is where he is." Marc pointed. "Once we have Dog, we'll find a place to sleep." Marc motioned Adrian to the map. "Dope it out and pick the spots." Marc returned to scanning for trouble.

Adrian didn't allow himself to have any hope over the reasonable tone. As soon as they were both rested, the old fighting would restart.

Marc didn't correct him.

Adrian sighed. "I believe we can camp one night here." He squinted at the map. "If we can get far enough into the warehouse, I don't think we'll even need guards."

Kendle pointed at a place on the map. "What is this?"

Marc let Kendle and Adrian beat out the location, confident they could handle it. Marc was trying to pick up word from Angela on what she wanted him to do about the refugees. It had taken the first wave a couple of hours to reach the UN base. Under attack now, by dawn, it would no longer exist. When the refugees realized they had been tricked, they would spread out again in search of Safe Haven. Marc and his team were going almost all the way back to the mountain. From the spot on the map, it appeared as though Dog had made it close to home before home had bugged out on him. He was now hunkered down, waiting for the ride. If there were still refugees in the mountain, it

was possible these trucks would be spotted and followed. Marc was hoping for advice on that.

There was silence.

Angela had said not to use magic or radios while on this mission; he knew that meant him too. He also didn't want to give any trackers a clue to her location, but it was frustrating not to be able to reach out. He couldn't wait for this run to be done. Tiring of the silence, Marc motioned toward the trucks. "We leave in three minutes. Adrian has point."

Adrian stared in shock as Marc went to the cab of his truck. He hadn't expected Marc to put him in a leadership position again, even one as minor as this. *He must be tired.*

Adrian drove his truck into place, not surprised when Marc took Kendle's rear spot in the convoy.

Kendle would have protested, but the switch put Marc directly in her mirror where she could stare at him. She kept her mouth shut.

Kevin, now moved to second vehicle in the convoy, sat up straighter and waited for everyone to be ready. He was going to be able to take credit for helping wipe out the remaining UN troops and for helping to rescue the wolf, and all he'd had to do was drive. *This is the perfect run.*

As Kevin drove by him to get in place, Marc picked up the thought and grimaced. He would much rather put Adrian in his place, but Kevin was going to be the big loser on this run. Angela had been right to send the man with them. Out here, he

would be easier to eliminate if Marc chose to go that way.

3

I want to secure our site before we get Dog. Map check. Marc sent the mental message to the other drivers, tired of watching Kendle watch him. With the snow blowing around, there was little else to look at. Marc hadn't missed the hours of driving while they were trapped in the mountain.

As the trucks pulled over, Marc sensed the relief of the drivers. Everyone wanted to use the bathroom, eat, and then sleep for a day.

"Ten minutes." Marc didn't stick around to listen to the grumbling, though most of that was silent. Kevin was the only one stupid enough to complain aloud and even he held it in until Marc walked away.

Marc climbed onto the front of his truck, fighting stiff winds and a slick hood. He wanted to see if there were vehicles moving around them. As far as he knew, they hadn't been spotted or followed. More radio calls had come as an ugly dawn broke, informing everyone that Safe Haven had fled. It had turned out even better than Marc had hoped. The refugees who attacked the UN believed Safe Haven had been there, which meant the real camp was gaining ground on that problem with every second. Their radios were off again now, but

they would continue to do checks on the situation during the rest of the run.

Marc changed directions, scanning and finding very little. The only people in this area was a small family dealing with their own crisis. Because it wasn't severe and he was tired, Marc ignored them instead of determining if they belonged in Safe Haven. He just wanted to collect Dog and go home.

His conscience immediately spoke up, denying him that callousness.

Sighing in annoyance, Marc sent his demon out to examine the family. If they were worthy, he would contact them.

A few seconds later, his demon returned. *Leave them be. They have a protector.*

Marc didn't ask questions. Unlike when he'd first started handling the demon inside, Marc now trusted that being. He understood the relationship that existed between them. One couldn't live without the other.

Marc got the convoy moving as soon as he saw everyone was in their vehicle, not waiting for them to get settled. The snow was picking up, making the roads more dangerous. It would conceal them from refugees, but it would also conceal the refugees from them. It was completely possible that they would run into a group on this very road. It was one of the main three that circled the mountain where Safe Haven had almost died.

Marc led them northwest at the fork, aiming for the small town Adrian had chosen. They hoped to

hide the trucks in the warehouse while they slept, but Marc wanted to pick Dog up first. He didn't feel good about remaining in this area. Sleep wouldn't be restful this close to danger. If there was trouble at the warehouse or it was already occupied, they would grab Dog and just keep driving.

As Marc entered the town of Ellijay, he was thrilled to detect snowdrifts in pristine condition. No one was moving here. It was easy for him to navigate to the warehouse without consulting the map. As his truck crunched over snow and debris in the road, Marc hoped the noise didn't draw threats. All the roads until now had been slushy, indicating they'd been used recently. That wasn't the case here.

Marc spotted a tall sign for the warehouse and sent his demon in for a sweep.

Empty.

Marc pulled into the parking lot and led the trucks behind the building where they would be out of sight between it and the hill.

Adrian hurried to Marc's door before Marc called the okay, wanting a minute.

When Marc rolled down the window, frowning, Adrian hurried to explain. "You can leave me here to clear this. I'll get camp set up."

Marc deliberated. "This is how you handled things before, splitting up the team?"

"Yes. I never took chances in storms like this. Whiteout conditions are impossible to predict. You need to get done and get back."

Satisfied the man wasn't trying anything stupid, Marc sent Kendle a message to come up. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "See what you can do with him."

Adrian nodded. Kevin's selfish thoughts had been blasting all of them the entire trip. The man had forgotten they were teamed, and that he was traveling with three descendants who were constantly scanning for problems. It would have been impossible to miss his attitude. "I'll do what I can."

Kendle got into Marc's passenger seat.

"We'll be one hour." Marc didn't look at her.

Adrian checked his watch. "If you're not, we'll come get you."

Marc drove the semi away before he could make Adrian swear it. He had to learn to trust the man again. Now that there were no secrets between them, it should be easier in moments like this.

"That's our support?" Kendle sneered. "I'm not impressed."

Marc grinned, but inside, he questioned her attitude. "We won't need it."

"Still."

"Yeah. Hey, listen, what's up with the flip?"

"Nothing." Kendle pouted as Marc took them down the street they'd just left. "I don't get you."

"Yeah, you do."

Kendle slumped in the seat, arms crossing defensively over her chest. "It's not fair. I was ostracized for interfering. He put a spell on her, stole

half her love, and you're rewarding him. I guess I'm jealous."

"It's not the same."

"How?"

"I was never willing to give you what you want."

"And Angela wants Adrian as much as she wants you." Kendle frowned deeper. "So if I seduce you, it's okay then?"

You can try.

Kendle flushed. "It's still wrong. I don't like it that she gets to play with your heart."

"What about you?"

"What about me what?"

"If I told you right now that I want you, while we're both committed to someone, would you tell me no?" Marc sent a wave of lust that was real. He'd been away from his mate's comforting arms for days.

Kendle's pulse quickened even though she knew it was a trap. "That's different!"

"Because it's you and me?"

"It's not right."

"Because you don't want to share."

She nodded.

"What applies to one, applies to all."

"It's wrong."

"Because of your jealousy. Let's look at another example."

"You mean Samantha and her men."

"Yes."

“But they were willing.”

Marc chuckled, remembering the fights and tense moments Samantha’s choices had brought into camp. “She was. Neither of the men wanted to.”

“I didn’t know that.” Kendle absorbed the images. “She seduced them!”

“She stated her desires and let them come around to it.”

“Which is what Angela is doing to you...”

Marc shrugged. “In some ways. She doesn’t want what Samantha had. She’s perfectly happy with my love and Adrian’s attention. He’s the one who wants more.”

“What a fucked-up mess.”

“Because of my jealousy.” Marc sighed. “We would have had peace months ago if I’d stopped fighting it. Back then, I believed she did want what Samantha had and there was no way I could handle it. Once I figured out what she really wanted, I mulled it over.”

“It’s wrong,” Kendle repeated stubbornly.

“No, it isn’t. She has the right to spend time with anyone she wants.” Marc felt his heart finally accept the situation. He grinned at the relief as some of the hatred left. “She’ll still pick me over him in almost every situation. I have nothing to be jealous of.”

Kendle wasn’t happy about his epiphany, but she was pleased to feel peace entering his heart. She didn’t like it when he was upset.

“I appreciate that.” Marc glanced over, seeing that her misery and her conscience were at war. “I

heard a rumor about you. Want to know what it was?”

Kendle grunted, not expecting anything good.

“The camp women are going to bring you in now that Tommy has an interest in you.”

She peered over in surprise. “I thought I was already in.”

Marc laughed.

“I’ll never get used to how things work in this place. I miss my island.”

“Did you feel that way while you were there?”

“No.” Kendle shuddered at the memories. “Ethan Kraft was alive then.”

Marc had heard stories of her tormentor, but he hadn’t gotten the full tale. “Maybe you could fill me in on the way home.”

Kendle hesitated, not wanting to relive it. “I have to drive one of the trucks.”

Marc pointed toward a small supermarket, where animals and human tracks coated the ground. “Dog isn’t alone.” Kendle went into alert mode, like Marc wanted. They would have time for emotions later. Right now, he had a friend to collect.

She pointed. “I see Dog! In the window!”

Marc and Kendle left the truck running as they hurried up the short steps of the market. Before they could open the door, it swung wide, revealing an excited wolf and a hunched man covered in a tarp that had been wrapped around him with tape.

Marc and Kendle scanned him, both gaping.

“Ray?”

Ray slowly lowered the hood. His sunken eyes and thin skin were haunting. He didn't speak.

Kendle wasn't sure what to say. It was obvious the Eagle hadn't found Dale, or if he had, it hadn't gone well.

"You need a lift to camp?"

Ray slowly nodded at Marc's shocked voice. There was nothing left for him here.

Both of their pickups were thin, with tired eyes that said they hadn't been certain how much longer they would have survived. Marc was certain the wolf would have made it out, but he didn't believe that was true of Ray. The store was small and moldy, telling Marc the pair hadn't found sustenance here. These cans and jars were spoiled. Marc could smell it in the air. From the water lines and dried mud on the walls, Marc also assumed it had been flooded at some point. On the walls behind the checkout counter, a wreath in almost pristine condition mocked him. *That's two months away. Will we celebrate Christmas as a holiday or the anniversary of when the world died?*

The view out the windows wasn't better. The town was rotting away from the ground up, adding to his theory of a flood. It explained the lack of people and the condition of the buildings. Even rioting didn't account for a speedboat in a park.

Kendle stayed alert as Marc took Ray's arm and led him to the truck. The wolf danced around their feet, but he didn't yap or make other noises. As soon as they got to the warehouse, the pair would be fed

and watered, and then rested. Ray wasn't capable of driving one of the trucks.

"He just needs some care." Marc patted the man's bony shoulder. "By the time we leave, he'll want to drive."

"What's that?" Kendle spun around at a crunch.

"A badger." Marc had already spotted it.

Angry animals were roaming this part of town, giving Marc and Kendle moments of heart-in-throat until they identified the shadows as non-human. They knew the wildlife could be a problem however, and kept an eye on the foraging bobcat and herd of deer that seemed to be aware of each other but not scared by it.

Ray climbed into the small bunk of the truck, followed by the wolf, who dropped onto his legs. Smothered in warmth, Ray laid his head down and closed his eyes, trying not to see Dale's bloody body again in his mind. It made sleeping hard.

Marc and Kendle got in, but they didn't brutalize him with questions. They had their own horrors to suffer through when darkness fell. They didn't want to add his to the list.

Ray was grateful. As they pulled away from the spot where he'd been sure he was going to die, Ray began to cry—not for himself, but for the future that could have been if he'd spent more time with Dale and less time trying to be one of Adrian's Eagles.

As they traveled back to the warehouse, it was obvious the storm wasn't going to let up anytime soon. Between the heavy winds and the thick sheets

of snow, it took them twice as long to make it, telling Marc they would have to stay here to let the weather pass. The other option was to try driving through it. He would have been willing if everyone drove the way he did. Adrian would make it and maybe Kendle, but there was no way Ray or Kevin would be able to keep up in these conditions. They could all pile into one or two trucks and try to hide the others, but they would have to come back to get them, and Marc didn't want to see this part of the United States again as long as he lived.

Kevin met them as they came into the warehouse, shocked at the sight of Ray. "Are you okay?! Where's Dale?"

Ray's face crumbled.

Kevin snapped his mouth shut with an audible click.

Before he could make it worse, Kendle shoved Kevin toward where Adrian was preparing a small fire, then followed him.

"That was fast."

Kendle nodded at Adrian's comment, signaling Kevin to take over the chore. "It was like they knew we were coming."

"Angela wouldn't have sent a message this far over open waves. That was all Marc and Dog."

Kendle glanced over to where Marc was securing the door. The warehouse was dusty and dirty, with a nasty draft from a ceiling that no longer sat even. They couldn't stay here long. It wasn't defensible. The wolf was out of sight.

“Dog’s doing rounds.” Adrian sparked the tinder. “Those two were the best security team in Safe Haven before things went crazy.”

“You mean before you betrayed everyone.”

Adrian peered up at her. “You’re being nastier than usual. What’s the problem?”

Kendle blinked at the tone. Adrian was hardly ever rude to her.

“You were rude to me. I just returned the favor.” Adrian stood. “Well?”

Kendle was forced to admit the truth. “I know what you did. It pisses me off.”

Adrian sighed. “Okay.” He left her standing there without defending himself.

Adrian wasn’t trying to gain sympathy to worm his way back into her good graces. He’d done wrong and he was being punished for it. That was the way of Safe Haven, the way he himself had put into place and brutally enforced on men and women alike. It was justice.

Glad Adrian wasn’t going to be a problem now that they were camped, Marc joined Dog on a round of the building. He could see where Adrian had secured the entrances and was pleased. The warehouse was mostly empty. Other than a few molded boxes and broken jars, the structure clearly hadn’t been used before the war. Ellijay didn’t have a manufacturing economy. That was obvious from the shacks and crumbling homes. After the war, this town had probably emptied quicker than most due to a lack of deliveries. It should be okay to sleep

here, but he would have Adrian put the bedrolls in the trucks instead of sleeping by the fire.

“Sorry, man.” Kevin nodded at Ray as he walked by.

Reminded yet again, Ray turned away from the rookie without replying.

Marc sighed. He had hoped Adrian might be able to talk some sense into Kevin. When they returned and told Angela about his behavior, it was possible she would eliminate him from her army. Kevin was about to be a camp member again. Marc didn’t imagine that would last long, but it was clear Kevin needed to remember how it worked in their camp. Selfish behavior would get people hurt or killed.

Dog sat at Marc’s feet, round of the building finished.

Marc knelt in front of his old friend, moving slowly. He wanted to give the wolf time to come to him. They’d been apart for so long that Dog had probably gone—

Marc was knocked over as the wolf barreled into him and began licking his face.

Laughter echoed through the warehouse.

Marc and Dog looked at each other with memories of past adventures and regret for things that hadn’t been said.

Marc waved it off. “Some other time.” He wanted to scratch the animal’s ears, but he wasn’t sure if their new relationship allowed that.

Dog peered up at him. *It's one of the best parts of having a human friend.*

Marc chuckled and let his hands go where they wanted.

That is nice! Dog moaned. *No one does me like you.*

Marc gave him a good scratch, trying to show the wolf how much he had missed him. By the time it was over, Dog was laying on his back at Marc's feet, paws in the air and tongue hanging out of his mouth.

"That's what I'm talking about." Kendle was watching them.

Not wanting to intrude, Adrian joined Kevin by the front window, where the rookie had appointed himself sentry instead of doing what Kendle told him.

Cheeks still flushed, Kevin tensed for more abuse.

"You can ride with me for scavenging runs when we get back. I always need a spotter."

Kevin's shoulders slumped. "I'm not one of them anymore. I'm trying, but it isn't working."

"I'll always be one of them and at the same time, I never have been. I understand." Adrian patted him on the shoulder as he turned to go see what Marc wanted now. "When you need a break, just tag-along. You don't need an invite."

Kendle also joined Marc, able to sense his impatience and concern growing now that he'd finished both parts of the mission.

Even Ray limped over to Marc, eager when the man silently asked if he was up for this. “You know it.”

Behind them, Kevin winced. He didn’t feel that way anymore. He would likely take Adrian up on his offer.

Marc did a last sweep of the property and then started the next step of getting them home. “I need a ten-minute inventory of the trucks. Kevin has guard duty. Ray will get a meal going. Dog will provide rounds of the doors and windows. Ten minutes. Let’s go.” Marc walked off without giving them time to question or argue. He wanted to be done.

The others hurried to do as he’d instructed, except for Ray, who wasn’t sure what to use for the meal. He’d been out of training so long that it took him a full moment of recollection before he limped to Marc’s semi, where he got their leader’s kit. It would have the extra rations and cook stove. He would collect water from each member of the team next. Ray’s stomach rumbled for the first time in days, reminding him that despite the agony of life, he wasn’t ready to die yet.

4

“How did it go?”

Dog huffed in annoyance as he sat on the cold concrete next to Adrian’s feet while the man repacked a bedroll on the front seat of his truck.

That woman was more trouble than any of us expected. She's lucky Jeff didn't leave her on the side of the road.

Adrian wasn't surprised by the revelation. His few minutes talking to Sally had convinced him of several things. One was that she was mean and sly enough to survive on her own once Jeff and Kevin got her to a better location. *Is she safe now?*

As much as any human can be. Nature's armies are gathering in the north. Come spring, everyone will be in danger.

Adrian wanted to get more updates from the wolf, but he knew Marc was serious about the amount of time they would spend here. Yawning, he motioned toward his truck. "You're welcome to bunk with me."

The wolf gazed up at him. *Not on your life.* Dog padded off in search of his master.

Adrian swallowed the sting and went to his truck. The wolf would always be Marc's. No charm could break that bond. It was a waste of time to even try.

Bumps In The Night

1

“**T**his is good.” Marc shoveled in another mouthful of rehydrated spaghetti. He wasn’t blowing smoke. After three days on dry rations and water, the spaghetti was delicious.

Ray beamed. They had given him spare clothes; he finally felt clean again for the first time in weeks. He’d used a few handfuls of hated, cherished snow to wash up before cooking. He and Dog had survived on it for days—giving Ray a love/hate complex for the fluffy precipitation.

The others paused to echo agreement and then returned to enjoying the hot meal. Even Dog was having a share, slurping the slippery noodles from a plastic jug Marc had cut in half and cleaned.

“What were you doing in the store?” Marc hadn’t been able to figure that out yet.

Ray swallowed a mouthful. “It’s in the center of town. Training taught me to clear in a circle.”

Marc had forgotten.

Ray belched, slapping his hand over his mouth when it echoed louder than he’d expected.

The others grinned, unable to help it. Ray didn’t normally make those noises.

Eating while on duty, Kevin stared resentfully at the group between sweeps of the windows, where the snow was piling up.

Marc ignored Kevin, playing the role of bad cop. Adrian was good cop for this one because Marc didn't have the patience to deal with Kevin's immaturities. He understood the grief, but he didn't have time for that either. "We're going to sleep for eight hours after we eat. Everyone will be in the cab of the truck they're driving. Every three hours, you can have heat for five minutes—after the guard on duty clears it. We'll stay dark and quiet, and hope we don't draw attention."

The group agreed without needing to discuss it. They were monitoring radio calls about the base and from the mountain, where some of the refugees were now living. They'd heard awful, familiar screams in the background of those calls. Not all of Jimmy's people were dead yet.

Some of the mission team had expected Marc to make plans for it, but he'd switched off the radio instead. They didn't have the manpower to force their way in to rescue Jimmy or his ducks. They also didn't have that much luck left. They would sleep and then get out of here before anything went wrong. This mission had gone too well, and this warehouse was still 300 miles from where Marc estimated Safe Haven to be. It was going to be a long trip home.

"Where do you want me and Dog?" Ray was getting sleepy now.

Marc gestured toward Kevin, who hadn't finished even half of his meal. "Kevin can use the company. Dog will ride where he wants to."

Everyone assumed that would be with Marc.

Ray began cleaning up the meal as soon as Marc was done, able to feel his need to be on the move. Once Ray finished, he would get the truck ready for Kevin. After standing in the cold for six hours, the man would be ready to rest. Ray planned to offer to relieve him then. He would do his share.

Marc gestured toward Kendle as she finished eating. "Go start all the trucks and put the heat on high."

Marc and Adrian were left alone as Kendle went to do as instructed. Adrian braced. He was never certain what to expect with Marc now.

"We need to drive straight through. That's twenty hours. How do we do it?"

Adrian was thrilled Marc was asking, but he didn't have an answer. "We can try to tow vehicles or just do it without stopping and probably have an accident. Twelve hours on the road used to be the max that even taxi drivers were allowed to do by law because reflexes slow so much."

"I need a solution to that by the time we roll out." Marc left Adrian standing there.

"You're not asking for much." Adrian stewed on it as he found a dark corner to use the bathroom. No one was allowed out right now, per Marc's orders. Adrian approved, but it didn't make peeing in a corner any more tolerable.

In various shadows of the warehouse, all of the mission team was doing the same. It was an ugly surprise to leave for anyone who might have to use this building for shelter after them, but there wasn't another choice if they didn't want to draw attention. They were already making too many smells and too much noise. Going outside would exacerbate that.

A wave of grief floated through the drafty building, pulling at Marc as he finished his business. He went to Ray. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Ray was glad Marc had come and not Kendle. "No, but they're all going to ask when we get back. It's better if I tell you and they get it that way."

"You don't have to answer."

Ray ignored the free pass. "They thought I was one of them. I dirtied up before I went in. They were playing with the ducks. Jimmy was hanging from the bottom ladder."

"And Dale?" Marc knew Ray needed to get it over with. The horror had to be shared or a soul would smother under the load.

"His throat was slit." Ray sobbed. "They found a way to make him stop screaming."

Marc hugged the man and tried to take half of the unbelievably heavy weight.

2

Half an hour later, the trucks were off, and the mission team was in warm cabins, trying to find comfortable positions. Some of them fell asleep

quickly, but not Marc and not Adrian. They both stewed, though on different topics.

Around the trucks, the drafty warehouse disappeared in the blizzard. Aware that it had come from the west, both men were worried about Safe Haven. Marc refused to dwell on it. He was concentrating on the trip home. He didn't expect Adrian to come up with an answer because there wasn't one. It was just busy work to keep the former leader out of trouble. Marc didn't want to shoot them up with chemicals to increase their alertness and they didn't have any of the caffeine pills left that Adrian used to keep on hand to help tired Eagles through the end of a shift. They would have to do it with stamina alone and that wasn't going to be enough.

The human brain refused to run when deprived of sleep. They had already been light on it for this trip, which meant when they woke up eight hours from now, they would feel as if they were suffering a hangover. In a way, they would be. That meant ten more hours of driving was about the most they would be able to tolerate before it became too dangerous. The weather and their surroundings would make it worse. Marc wasn't sure what to do.

In the truck next to him, Adrian was aware of Marc's discontent, but he wasn't working on a travel solution like the man thought. He had decided it was a lost cause and moved on to a way to provide alertness for everyone. The strongest motivator he knew was fear. Being surrounded by refugees and

surviving UN troops would hold them for a few hours past what Marc estimated they were good for, but at hour fourteen, they would have to stop and then they would be vulnerable. Adrian was laboring on a plan to keep them from being followed, but he had no faith in it.

On the other side of Marc, Kendle was sleeping, but not peacefully. The closer they got to leaving on the boat, the harder it was for her to rest. Beyond the constant flashes she expected to have of her sister, and everyone else on the doomed cruise ship that had stranded her on Pitcairn Island, she also expected nightmares of the plane ride and of course, Ethan. He was never far from her mind, even when she was with Marc. Ethan was a torment she doubted would ever leave her.

In the last truck, Ray *was* sleeping peacefully. It was the first time he had felt safe since leaving to rescue Dale. Unlike the last four days, where his every dozing hour had been spent reliving Dale's death, this time he rested devoid of dreams.

Moving between the doors of the warehouse, Kevin made a complete circuit every half an hour, praying for daylight. He still hated the dark and the weight of their safety was firmly on his shoulders right now. Kevin suddenly missed the other Eagles. In the darkness, the building around them was too much like a tomb.

We have trouble!

Kevin's mental warning blared through the minds of the sleeping team.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Marc jerked awake, adrenaline immediately popping through his system like a firecracker. *Danger! This is why we're teamed. Not so we can reach him, but so he can reach us!*

Marc jumped out of the truck, ignoring Kevin's words as he listened to the sounds. They were either under attack or about to be.

Marc put his fingers to his lips to ensure Kevin understood to be quiet, then gestured for the drivers to get ready. He waved Kevin into the truck with Ray, who was already behind the wheel and eager to go. Marc pointed toward the weakest wall of the warehouse, wishing they didn't have to crash through and make so much noise, but the door wide enough to accommodate the semis was currently being pried open by an unknown number of intruders. From the shouts, Marc assumed it was refugees from the mountain. There wouldn't be any negotiations once they realized members of Safe Haven were in this warehouse. They would call in help to surround the place. Marc wasn't going to let that happen. He hurried back into the driver seat of his rig and started the engine.

"Someone *is* in there!"

"Get that door open!"

"Someone go around the front!"

The refugees split up to prevent an escape.

Marc's semi crashed through the wall, hitting several intruders and shoving their vehicles over the hill.

"Take this!" Kevin smashed into the bumper of a small truck and shoved it aside.

The other drivers didn't celebrate as they rolled from the warehouse. The action wasn't over yet.

Marc was instantly on edge because of the road under his tires. Covered in half a foot of snow, the morning sun had begun to melt it in places and the wind was refreezing it. This was like driving on ice.

Kendle and the others stayed as close to Marc as they could, driving through his tracks. None of them liked the feel of the road either, but even less appealing was the sight of half a dozen vehicles giving chase in their mirrors.

Marc recognized two of the intruders, anger boiling. The men had been denied entry to Safe Haven and placed in Zone C. Everyone had hoped those people were killed during the avalanche. Marc spotted Eagle gear on thin backs and swallowed a growl of rage. The only comfort was that none of the men and women looked sick. That was also a frustration, however, because they deserved to be ill or worse after everything they'd done to innocent people.

Dog yapped from the passenger seat of Marc's truck as a dirt bike came along side.

The driver of the bike leapt and missed, falling under the truck tires. The bike crashed into the semi and disintegrated with its driver.

Marc wasn't happy to see two more bikes trying the same suicide plunge on the other semis, but only one of them was successful.

Kendle braced for noise as she pulled the trigger, shooting the man outside her passenger window in the chest.

He fell into the snow as she hit the gas, ears ringing.

He was run over by a car chasing her.

Kendle kept her gun in hand in case someone else tried that, almost enjoying the cold air coming through the bullet hole in the window. There were still three vehicles behind them—a small white truck and two dented wagons, but those drivers didn't try to come alongside the semis where they could be knocked into the tree line or sandwiched. They just watched and followed. It made them more dangerous.

“We're following Safe Haven! I see the Ghost! I see Adrian!”

Radios came alive as their stalkers reported the location.

“We're traveling southwest on 20, outside Atlanta! We need help to box them in!”

Marc flipped to another channel and was dismayed to hear the same message going across the waves. It appeared the refugees had gotten more organized.

Marc saw Adrian roll his semi into a nearby parking lot and scowled, foot easing off the gas. *What the hell are you doing?!*

Go on. I'll catch up.

Marc wanted to leave him. He was furious with Adrian for disobeying, but he also agreed with the decision, which made it hard for him to leave the man on his own. If they took out the three vehicles following, the other refugees wouldn't know where they'd gone. They could escape.

Keep going! Marc turned the semi around in the front yard of a barbershop. It crushed the birdbath and decorative wheelbarrow that was full of frozen flowers.

He passed Kendle and Kevin, aware that one was frowning as the other hit the gas. Marc didn't know which way Adrian intended to play this, but it wasn't hard to figure out. They were basically driving tanks and the other guys weren't.

Adrian laughed as Marc's rig flew by him. He shifted his vehicle into gear to catch up, forming a ramming rod that took up both lanes of the icy road.

"Look out! Look out!"

The radio went dead as Marc's rig connected.

Adrian's semi crashed into one of the cars, knocking it into the truck.

With nowhere to go, the third car crashed into the pile. The driver flew through the window. He smacked into the front of Marc's rig.

As the body slid to the slushy, bloody ground, Marc hit the gas again to take his truck overtop the wreckage. He didn't want survivors.

Adrian followed Marc, hoping this scene would make it clear that Safe Haven should be left alone.

They would leave it here, like he had at the rest stop, as a warning.

Marc quickly caught up to the convoy, trying not to consider what the front of his truck looked like. If it was damaged, they would move the supplies into the other semis as fast as they could and leave it. There wasn't time for repair. The smoke from this wreck would tell refugees exactly where to go and there wasn't enough snow on the ground to hide their tracks. Marc scanned the area, hoping for somewhere they could lay low and let the refugees go by, but it was all businesses or hills.

Marc passed Kendle on the right as Adrian passed her on the left, both of them creating new grooves they hoped might confuse the coming people. It looked as though they had all turned around here. It would buy them a little time.

As Marc took lead of the convoy again and Adrian fell into the rear, he decided not to reprimand the former leader. He checked his internal clock as the wreckage fell behind and was surprised to discover it had been almost five hours since he went to sleep. Because of the hangover feeling, it seemed like a lot less. Determined to make it through, Marc dug in his kit for a drink and tried not to get bogged down in reflections of home. He could think about it after he was there.

In Safe Haven, Angela and the Eagles had been glued to radios for days. All their past channels had stayed active with refugees asking if anyone knew where Marc and Adrian had gone after the base. That had allowed Angela to breathe, knowing the team had slipped away. When the calls had come about the new wreckage, she had been concerned, but if anyone had found a Safe Haven survivor there, it was certain they would have bragged about it.

That's what she told the Eagles, but in her heart, it was impossible not to worry. A smart hunter didn't tell everyone when he caught his prey. He sold it to the highest buyer. In that case, it would be to the surviving UN troops, who would want revenge. Angela was positive Marc had accomplished that mission. From the calls, the mission team was in the north right now, but they'd had orders to handle the UN base first. That meant they were finished. Angela was looking forward to them getting here. She was shorthanded and the storm still had them trapped. There was no driving in this for most of her people. She just hoped Marc found a place for his team to hide until the storm was over. Anyone traveling through this was risking life and limb.

5

Fifteen hours later, Marc pulled into a deserted donut shop parking lot. The late afternoon rays were

glimmering on the melting snow, making his blurry vision worse as he exited the truck and met the others in front of the wide building. “We’re going to sleep now. Four hours, then we’ll go on. Eight hours after that, we’ll be home. Hit the bathroom while I pick a campsite.”

No one argued. All of them were glad to be out from behind the wheel for a few minutes. They were also a little impressed for going so long without stopping.

Marc waved them all off to use the bathroom and then did the same himself, missing the port-potties. When you were this tired, it hurt to squat.

As the drivers got back into their trucks, groaning and popping, radios flared up again, making them jump. It had been quiet for the last hour.

“Keep your eyes out for smoke, campfires, or lights. If you find them, call it and we’ll come help you block.”

They had been hearing that commanding voice all day. Always the same, it was obviously a leader of one of the groups. Marc and Adrian both assumed the man was from the mountain.

The land around them was darkening, hiding farms that had once helped to feed over 300 million people. It was awful to be here and not hear one horse or cow, to not see a single tractor on the two-lane road annoying other motorists. Marc wondered how many of the homes had root cellars with food and water, but there wasn’t time to explore them.

Someone who did have the time might get lucky. He didn't see signs of looting here.

Half a mile from the donut shop, Marc pulled them into a dairy barn with the charred remains of a farmhouse sitting on a one-lane easement. The dairy was dotted in bodies, but not of people. Cow carcasses littered the fields, and even in November, the flies were thick. The sound of their wings was disquieting.

Marc directed his group to the far edge of the property and placed the trucks into a tight square, going nose to bumper. Thanks to the quick inventory he'd had the team do, he had a little to work with. The white tarps would be placed over the trucks. They were visible from two directions right now, but not from the road in front of the dairy. It was the best he could do.

It took them almost an hour to get the tarps up, fighting the wind and snow the entire time, but it didn't take long for the weight to hold the tarps in place so they were no longer flapping and making noise. By the time they got all the covers in place, the snow was giving them a camouflage effect. They would be almost invisible if they stayed silent and didn't use lights.

Marc got everyone in the cabs of their trucks as soon as they finished, but this time they couldn't run engines for heat. It was miserable.

As full darkness slid over the site, heavy snow began to fall in thicker sheets that whipped through

the gaps in their small den. Adrian was flashed to his ride in the rear truck during the dust storm. He wondered suddenly how Seth was doing before letting sleep claim him.

Kendle was reminded of her flight with Luke when the hurricane had threatened to send water up to his cabin. That had been the night she'd become aware of the growing attraction between her and the older pilot. As she slowly sank into sleep's comfort, Kendle saw Luke beckoning to her and smiled. *No nightmares. Awesome.*

Kevin and Ray spent a few minutes chatting lightly about topics that wouldn't disrupt the peace before both of them curled up against windows and drifted into restless slumbers.

Adrian was the only one who didn't crash. He had a bad feeling.

6

Gunfire woke Marc two hours later, bringing his weapon to hand and his head up to the frosted window.

"That's the Ghost!"

"Get him!"

Marc ducked as bullets slammed into the truck. He shoved over top the bags and boxes of supplies on the seat and in the floorboard, pinning Dog underneath him to keep the animal from being hit. As soon as there was a pause, Marc popped the

passenger door on the truck and sprang out into the cold darkness with the wolf.

More gunshots echoed.

Using the mirror, Marc spotted Kevin and Ray firing from the open windows of their truck. They were both aiming toward Kendle's vehicle. He glanced in the other direction and found Adrian running to him.

"They flushed me out as soon as I drifted off. They've got my truck." Adrian shoved Marc aside as two tall, white-coated scavengers rounded the truck behind him. Adrian shot them both, then reloaded without a pause. "I'm out after this."

Marc provided a mag for Adrian's Colt, not commenting on the change of weapon.

Adrian slammed the mag in, reminding himself to make each shot count as if he were a rookie.

Marc rushed around the truck, heading for Kendle.

On the other edge of their small camp, Ray and Kevin ran toward Adrian's rig.

Gunfire split the air again, but it came from a familiar weapon, causing all of the men to pause to make certain that they didn't enter her line of fire.

"One more, south of me!" Kendle shouted as she reloaded.

Her team ran that way.

Kendle listened for the shots to confirm they had gotten the last scavenger, then joined them while scanning for more problems. When she didn't detect any, she lifted a brow toward Marc.

Unlike their previous pursuers, these men hadn't rushed in wildly or called for help. Adrian was sure they were UN sentries who had followed them from the base. Assuming Kobi would keep his remaining men close had been a mistake, but they hadn't had enough manpower to kill them all.

"He should be dead now."

Marc nodded at Kendle's comment. She'd hit Kobi with a slow spell, one she'd found after her Market Town adventures. Kendle had learned how to kill with her mind, like Becky and Conner. She'd insisted Kobi hang himself the first time he was left alone, but to get it on camera if he could, so his obsession would help it along if the spell began to wear off before he had the opportunity to do it without being caught. "I think they followed us from the base."

Satisfied with that answer, Kendle went to examine the damage to her vehicle. Her truck had taken several shots.

Marc did a fast sweep to verify no one was injured, including Dog, then waved them toward their trucks. "We have to go."

This time they would keep rolling until they reached Safe Haven. *I can't take anymore sudden wake ups.* Marc led the small convoy out of the bloody kill zone, glad the vehicles hadn't been damaged other than windows and mirrors. It was hard to be certain about the tires, but that was a concern for later.

He pulled them back onto the main road in the middle of a weakening blizzard. Rough weather was the safer challenge. It wasn't shooting bullets at them.

In the howling wind, refugees, scavengers, Safe Haven hopefuls, and revenge-seekers around them in the darkness missed the sound of their engines. The team slipped through unnoticed.

7

“How far out are we?” Ray had to break the silent tension.

Kevin knew where Safe Haven was camped, thanks to the maps Angela had given before they left the mountain. “About two hours.”

It had been eight hours since they were attacked at the tarp campsite. Some of that material was still hanging from the trucks. Marc hadn't stopped yet to remove any of it.

Ray was happy to hear they would be arriving soon. He had spent the days praying for a lift. At that point, he had been willing to ride on a sleigh if it would eventually take him some place warm. Now, if he never saw another truck again, it would be too soon. He wanted to be still and sleeping.

All the drivers felt that way. With upset stomachs and headaches, it was hard to concentrate on the narrow strip of road in front of them while traveling without lights. Even though it was almost dawn, the blowing wind and snow made it

impossible to tell the time without a watch. Marc could sense danger creeping up on them; if they used lights or stopped for even an hour, he was positive those on their trail would catch up. This time, no one was alert enough to battle. They had to keep going.

A dark shape darted across the road in front of Marc.

He only jerked the wheel a little, not allowing the truck to fishtail. He didn't know what had run across the road.

Another dark shape ran into the road in front of him, this time staying put.

Marc hit the bear with the front left tire and felt it pop right before he heard it. Doing 40 mph on icy roads, the force of the impact jerked the wheel out of his hands and sent the truck careening to the right. Losing traction, the cab began to slide in toward the rig, jackknifing.

Something heavy slammed into the truck and cried out. Marc tried to steer as another dark shape ran by the skidding vehicle, but the ice had control.

Rubber lifted as the truck hit debris and tilted, spilling Marc from the seat. The metal shuddered, wanting to keep rolling... Held down by a foot of heavy, frozen snow it had to crunch through, the semi skidded forty feet before finally grinding to a halt.

“Damn...” In the floorboard, Marc lifted his head, groaning at new pains in his body. “This has been a long-ass trip.”

Dog licked his face in agreement. He was under Marc again.

Footsteps sounded and then paws thumped on the hood. A minute later, the cold draft hit him as the door was pried open.

“That’s a bear!”

“Don’t use your gun!”

“Stand watch while we get Marc.”

Marc took a minute to steady himself, examining his body for injuries. He had a nasty twinge in one leg and his ribs felt like a couple might be broken, but other than that, he seemed okay.

Adrian paused for Marc to take control of the situation and then realized they didn’t have time for that. “Do you want us to move the cargo or leave it?” Adrian saw a place in the tree-dotted countryside where they could squeeze around the wreck.

Marc tried to clear his head. “I think we need the supplies. Do we have time?”

“Not really, but we’ll make it if Safe Haven needs it.”

Marc regretted not sharing those sheets with Adrian because he was too dazed to remember what was on them. “In my pocket. Top jacket.” He was having trouble forming sentences. “I hit my head.”

Adrian retrieved the papers and found the one for Marc’s truck. “Blankets, medical supplies, water...” Adrian stuffed the papers into his pocket.

“We need that cargo. Someone get him into one of the other trucks and then come help carry.”

Everyone hurried.

Smoke came from the engine of Marc’s truck as Kevin shut it off. He didn’t smell leaking fuel, so he didn’t think there would be a fire. Kevin wondered if they had a siphoning kit and then remembered he did. He went to take care of it, assuming the fuel was important. It always had been to Jeff.

While Kevin siphoned the fuel into the 10-gallon canisters he’d pulled from each rig, the other three helped transfer the bags, boxes, and crates that were light enough for them. It was impossible to move everything. They were forced to pry open larger containers to remove the contents. It was slow, cold, tense labor where they twitched at noises and movements while trying to avoid the damp snowflakes that wanted to smother and drown them at the same time.

“Do you hear that?”

Everyone stilled at Adrian’s question. It allowed them to hear Marc’s boots crunching toward them.

“Get in the trucks!”

Adrian looked at Kendle. “Your job is to get the rookies in trucks and keep up.”

Kendle grabbed Ray, spinning him around. “Time to go!”

“Too late!” Kevin dropped the bag. “Headlights!”

Everyone took off running.

Above them, the storm finally abated. It had done its worst. Now it was time for nature to sit back and observe the effects.

Chapter Eight BK9
Chokepoint

1

“We need to hide the wreck!”

“We’re out of time!” Marc shoved Kevin toward the trucks, wincing at his ribs and ankle. “Get out of here now! Cut through that field!”

Marc made sure the other drivers were rolling before climbing into Adrian’s rig. Dog was in Kevin’s semi, where Marc had spent half an hour trying to recover his faculties. *Let’s go!*

Adrian got moving, aware of lights and engines getting closer. Coming from multiple directions, he didn’t think they’d gotten out in time. Staying had been a mistake. “I’m sorry.”

“We need those supplies.” Marc held on as Adrian bounced overtop debris to get them out of sight. The road they were on was cut through the center of a narrow valley with steep sides that prevented driving up them to escape. Only a few scattered homes offered hope. Marc tried to choose the correct one. Seeing a rusting horse farm sign, he pointed that way. The big animal haulers needed time and room to travel. As a result, most large farms had their own access road.

“We found another wreck!” The radio lit up, making Marc and Adrian flinch. They weren’t out of sight yet.

“I see someone moving!”

“It’s them! That’s the same truck!”

Marc groaned at the pain in his ribs as Adrian pushed the truck to dangerous speeds in hopes the men behind them would be discouraged from following.

“I’m going to take care of it and then I’m going to pass out.” Marc tightened his grip on the dashboard. “Don’t stop until you get to camp.”

“I won’t, and you’ll be with us.”

Marc didn’t let their connection close yet. He needed energy.

“Take what you need.” Adrian had never thought to say those words to Marc.

Marc drew what he needed, but it was almost too much. Adrian tasted like old death.

The powerful energy sank into Marc’s body, partially healing his ribs and fueling his anger. He opened the mental door he hadn’t had time to explore during the fight in Market Town.

Lightning flashed across the sky and arced in a vicious blast that forked down and hit two of the vehicles chasing them. One of the jeeps flew into the air and landed on top of the other. The last one burst into flames from the lightning strike.

The small wreck filled in the trench left in the snow from Adrian’s truck, blocking access.

Wanting to be sure they had enough time to get to camp, Marc used the last of his energy to send one more blast. It hit a tree and knocked it over, blocking the remaining part of the yard that a smaller vehicle could have driven through. He hadn't viewed any big rigs or tanks with the refugees yet; he hoped they would have to move the tree or the truck to be able to follow. In that time, the mission team would disappear.

“They blocked us with magic! It is Safe Haven!”

“Where?!”

“We're in Atlanta! They're going north!”

Adrian was glad north was the last direction people were going to get. As soon as he was able, the convoy would turn south. Adrian caught up to the other trucks and took the lead.

In the seat next to him, Marc slumped over.

Even though they were close to camp, Adrian couldn't leave him like that. He shifted in the seat to lay a hand on Marc's shoulder. Other hand on the wheel and concentration split into different directions, Adrian pulled energy from the storm around them and directed it into Marc's body. It was a minor gift most descendants had but didn't know about. Their kind often refused to use it once they recognized the ability. Nature fought hard when her energy was stolen.

Marc didn't react as the healing orbs swarmed through his body, mending another layer of his injuries.

Adrian was afraid to steal more. Trying to withstand nature's wrath was a bad idea right now. Safe Haven didn't need the extra trouble.

Danger!

Adrian didn't slow as mental alarms blared, showing him a threat that was terrifying.

2

Bugout! Get out of there!

Angela tensed as Adrian's message slammed into her. It was obvious from the tone of utter weariness that the mission team had had a rough trip. She assumed they'd been dodging refugees all along and hadn't been able to lose them. Relieved to know, it was still dismaying when the mental call immediately caused what she had feared.

Radios around Safe Haven lit up.

"I'm a descendant tracker. I just picked up a call from Adrian to Angela. Safe Haven is close. I'm near Talladega and the call was clear as a bell."

Radios went crazy with responses.

It's us! The danger is here! Angela rotated toward Kenn. She hadn't known trackers were sneaking up on her. "You have point. Get them in the trucks!"

Kenn ran.

The tiny town flooded with activity as word spread.

Angela went to help with the kids. She wasn't happy to have the confirmation of a descendant

tracker, but she was glad Adrian had warned her. She was also worried that Marc hadn't. It meant something had gone wrong. She wanted to demand to know what it was, but forcing the mission team to respond would give the tracker a positive location on both groups. One shot got attention. Two narrowed it down and brought danger directly to the door. That was the law of the land.

It took Safe Haven almost twenty minutes to get loaded.

The Eagles were on the verge of panic. The tracker had been close enough to reach them in thirty minutes. They were cutting it close. Many of them had wanted Angela to leave as soon as the camp rose this morning, but she'd been adamant about not making them travel through the storm. Having accidents would hold them up longer than lingering for the mission team, but Angela didn't have a choice now.

"We're all in." Kenn stuffed the paper into his pocket. "Every name."

Angela got into the truck upon hearing that, eager for the warmth. The storm wasn't completely over, but it had slacked off enough to allow them to see where they were going. The wind was still a harsh mistress that had tried to blow them off their feet as they'd helped camp members to their assigned vehicles. Thanks to Conner and Charlie working a double shift, all the cars had been fueled and checked for problems this morning.

Behind the lead rig, drivers started engines and shifted into drive with their feet on the brakes so they could get going the instant the car in front of them moved.

Kenn got the convoy rolling through the dusky twilight as Angela got her map out; Tonya huddled silently in the center with her cat.

“We’re going to have to split them up.” Angela was thinking aloud. “Right now, we can be tracked from every direction. We need to make certain we only have one direction to defend—our ass. We need...a chokepoint.”

Kenn concentrated, trying to bring up what he knew about the area.

“I always wanted to take a vacation here.” Tonya let out a deep sigh of longing for the old world. “What if we drove through a cave or a tunnel?”

Angela shoved the map at her and took the cat. “Show me.”

Waiting for Tonya to find what she was hunting for, Angela swept the landscape, but she couldn’t view much through the frosty windows between her and the apocalyptic darkness. She also couldn’t sense much, but she wasn’t sure if that was because she was weak or because this area was deserted. That wouldn’t last. The tracker had almost reached the tiny town by now. They would know on sight that Safe Haven had left in a hurry. They would realize they were within an hour of their target and the refugees would be called in, but they wouldn’t

camp and fight over tidbits this time. The tracker would keep goading them while Safe Haven's trail was hot.

Tonya used the flashlight around her neck to narrow the right location. "The Cathedral Caverns had a driving tour that lasted hours and took people into the caves. I have no idea what conditions we might find. There could already be people there or it might be blocked."

Angela traded back and scanned the map again. "The turnoff for that is three hours. I'll let you know by the time we get there."

Kenn didn't comment, still racking his brain. No one wanted to drive underground after an apocalypse, and certainly not while they were being chased by refugees. If Safe Haven got trapped there, they would all die in the dark.

"How do you feel about being a decoy?"

It was Angela's way of asking if Kenn was going to let his relationship with Tonya get in the way of their survival.

Kenn grunted. "Just tell me what you want."

"I want a small group of us to block the road and pull attention so the rest of the camp can keep going. When the mission team arrives, hopefully they'll be able to help us trap anyone we haven't picked off yet. You can choose where we set it up, so we have the advantage."

"Do you want them dead or stopped?"

"Whatever we have time for, but preferably dead—especially the tracker. He's one of us."

Kenn began to dope it out.

Angela tried to gather energy she didn't have, not sure what type of trap Kenn would devise. If it required magic, she needed to be ready.

"I can do it without that, but I'll need twenty men with all the grenade launchers we can scrape together, and you'll want everyone in the double vest setups. We have just enough to cover twenty people." Kenn glanced at Tonya. "She and the cat can protect our getaway truck."

Angela snickered, welcoming the amusement in place of the tension. "Sounds like a plan. Flash lights to notify Ivan and then pick your spot. I'll handle passing information to everyone else."

Kenn did as instructed, getting excited. He hadn't made an on-the-spot plan like this for a while, but he'd always had great luck with them in the past. Like Marc, he was quick on his feet.

Tonya held onto her cat and hoped it went well. She didn't mind being along for the action. She would mind if she got hurt.

So would I. Kenn patted her wrist. *So would I.*

3

"Are we ready?" Angela asked fifteen minutes later.

"Can't you tell?" Kenn was full of eager excitement as point man over the quick, hard attack.

"If I could, we probably wouldn't be here."

Kenn missed her mutter. He was directing the last man into place. “We’ve got it. Ten minutes from now, we’ll be ghosts and they’ll all be stuck right here.”

“Clearing the wreck and consuming the supplies we’re leaving?”

“Yes.”

“And it’s the slower version, so all of them will eat or drink before anyone notices a problem?”

“Yes. I mixed it using your instructions.”

Angela refused to tell him good. She’d been able to do that with the vet because he hadn’t had a soul left to finish corrupting.

“Put these on.” Kenn shoved a set of earplugs at her.

She flinched at the fast movement, hating that reaction, but she’d lost her edge while cowering in the mountain. It would take time to recover it.

Kenn waved at the chokepoint, where darkness and snow hid their trap. “Headlights are coming.”

“On your call.”

Kenn waited patiently as the engines grew louder, not caring about the damp flakes falling or the camp getting further away with each second. For him, there was only this moment. “Now!”

Cars began to roll through the chokepoint, forced into two racing, bumping lines because of the narrow road.

Grenades flew under the tires and into the rear of a truck. More small bombs flew through the darkness, flashing Angela back to the rest stop. She

was copying Adrian's plan. Like with the Mexicans, these refugees didn't see the grenades coming either.

Explosions filled the sky, then the screams and grinding metal noises.

I get shot after this... Angela was unable to pull out of the memory.

"Get her down!"

Morgan shoved Angela to her knees as gunfire came.

Pain brought Angela back. She stayed down so she didn't make things worse, cursing herself.

"Behind us!"

Gunfire came again, pinging off the rocks and the ground around them.

"It's the tracker!" Shawn fired.

So did the tracker.

Kenn threw himself overtop Angela, but there were too many bullets and blasts to defend against. He felt her flinch from his weight and then again as she was hit. Her silence chilled them all.

4

"Angie!" Marc snapped awake. "She needs me. She's hurt!"

Adrian's lips were thin lines across his face. "I know."

"Hurry up!"

"Wrecking won't get us there any faster. Be quiet and let me concentrate."

Marc shut up, able to feel Adrian's fear. It was as bright and nauseating as his own. Marc tried to scan what had happened, positive they were close enough for him to be able to do so even though he was tired. He didn't care about the tracker. He cared about Angie.

"I see lights. Do you have your glasses?"

Marc dug through his kit. He peered through the powerful, bent glasses as a narrow road came up in front of them. "It looks like there was a battle. I see burning cars and bodies."

Adrian slowed the truck. "Do you want to go straight in or circle around?" He already knew the answer, but he wasn't the leader of this team. He was required to ask.

"Straight through."

Adrian increased speed to get up the hill behind the chokepoint, positive the drivers behind him were aware of the situation and bracing for action. Adrian also made sure his gun was in reach, though he was out of ammunition once he emptied this mag.

"Just follow my lead. I'll do the shooting."

Adrian was aware of Marc using the small amount of energy they had both recharged over the last two hours. Adrian doubted it would be enough; he pushed the truck faster over the ice.

Ahead of them, lights flashed a code that allowed both men to breathe again. It was the all-clear signal.

“They want us to keep going and fall into the rear of the convoy.” When Marc didn’t answer, Adrian steered around Kyle and Kenn, taking him to the boss.

No one tried to stop them.

“There she is.” Marc flew from the truck as soon as it stopped.

Adrian followed Marc as he rushed to where Angela was sitting on the icy bumper of Kenn’s semi. Gritting her teeth against the pain as Neil put clumsy stitches in her calf, she was surrounded by protection and the other injured. Those men, waiting their turn, wore proud expressions that told the team they’d insisted Angela receive attention first since Neil was the only medic here.

Angela waved them toward Adrian. “He knows how to do this too. Get it done so we can get back with the camp.”

Adrian’s pleasure sent a blast of warmth through all of them.

Please?

Angela nodded at Marc’s plea.

Marc abruptly slammed the mental door between the team, cutting all lines of communication.

Not expecting it, all three team members groaned at the searing pain. Kevin got the least of it and was able to shake it off first because he wasn’t a descendant. Kendle and Adrian glared at Marc for breaking the connection without a warning.

Marc ignored their displeasure. It was another weakness in Angela's army—one he would need to fix if there really was a final battle coming for them. He was positive that fight would push all of their limits and then some.

Marc watched Kendle and Ray drive by, following Angela's orders to catch up with the convoy. He was glad to see them go. Tired and hurt, he was ready for someone else to be in charge while he recovered.

Angela curled a hand around his wrist, lending warmth and love. "Fifteen minutes."

Marc nodded. He could do that long. "Kobi said there were reinforcements on the way." He handed her a small notebook. "I wrote it all down."

"Did he say how many?"

"No, but I caught the image in his mind. He thinks it's enough to wipe out every survivor left in our country."

Angela sighed. That meant another hard choice. If they got out fast enough, they could avoid that final fight. If they gathered what they needed, the battle was inevitable.

Marc leaned in. "You have that covered, right?"

Angela stood up and dropped her pant leg.

Eager for praise, Kenn stepped forward and put his hand on Marc's shoulder. "Check this shit out."

Marc observed without comment as Kenn and the Eagles, with Angela in the center, used the High Ground technique to attack the refugees at a chokepoint. Unable to escape or go around, it had

made them sitting ducks for the grenades and snipers. Angela had gotten hurt because the snow and darkness had blinded them to the tracker sneaking up in a blind spot. On the other hand, the snow and gusting wind had destroyed his perfect shot and given her a minor leg wound. The tracker was lying in the snow nearby with five bullet wounds and a knife sticking out of his chest. Marc was satisfied as much as he could be and let it go. She had survived. That was what mattered.

Kneeling to sew Ivan's trim, Adrian echoed the thought. No matter how awkward it got, they both wanted Angela to live; despite the deals they had made, neither of them would slack in that duty.

Angela knew what both men were thinking and feeling. It was what she had experienced when the radio had gone crazy with sightings of them and the accidents. Now that they were both within sight, her heart had settled into a normal rhythm and the haze was slowly clearing from her eyes. They were home. She could breathe again.

As Neil and Adrian finished tending their wounded, Marc took charge. He could feel Angie's need to be with the camp. It matched his. She was safer there. He regarded Ivan, who was providing protection for the boss with his team. "Get to where you were assigned in line. I want everyone in their places ASAP." Marc pointed at Adrian before any of the Eagles could argue with his order. "Drive the first shift. We'll switch off at breaks."

Stunned, Adrian hurried to get the truck started.

Marc motioned to Kenn. “All of us are unsafe to drive. We need replacements.”

“I’ll handle it. No worries.”

Marc was confident Kenn would. The Marine wasn’t the same man he’d once wanted dead.

Marc scooped Angela up, so she didn’t pop the stitches before they had a chance to set. He carried her to the truck and slid her into the center, where she would be hit directly by the heat. He could hear her teeth chattering.

He closed the door and turned to sweep the scene, making certain all of their people left first. It was what Angela wanted, but it was also what a leader did and as much as he didn’t want the job anymore, Marc was good at it.

The rocky hills around them were dark, spooky icons that pretended to give protection, but actually gave ambushers the advantage if they attacked from that direction. Much like Angela had done, Safe Haven would be trapped.

Marc also sensed nature growing upset again. It was in the sharpening of the wind and the stiffening of the ground under his boots.

Angela huddled against Adrian’s shoulder for warmth as he got the heater going, shivering. She had used almost all the remaining energy she’d gathered during their days of camping in the tiny town. She’d also shielded the site during the fight with the descendant tracker, trying to keep other refugees from hearing the noise or seeing the lights. She was exhausted again.

Adrian fought the urge to put his arm around her, aware of the stares and glares from Ivan and some of the other Eagles. No one wanted him here, but he was staying until Marc told him to get lost. Adrian doubted it would be long. He and Marc only tolerated each other for short periods. This mission had already crossed that limit.

Marc got into the truck. “Wait until all of them are in line where they’re supposed to be. Angie will tell you where that is. Then take us to the front.” Final order given, Marc locked the door and slumped against the seat. The pain in his chest was almost unbearable.

Realizing he was injured, Angela began to grope him.

Marc grabbed her hand before she could touch his chest. “That’s where my broken ribs used to be. Now, it’s just bruised ribs, but the nerve endings haven’t caught up yet. They still think I’m broken.”

Angela gave Adrian a nasty frown. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Adrian shrugged. “My bad.”

“Say what?!”

Adrian let out a sound of derision in response to her annoyance. “He’d do the same for me.”

Marc chuckled, then groaned. “You know it.”
Life with you around is never boring.

Angela frowned as the men chuckled, but she didn’t complain. Any peace between the two, even amusement at her expense, was welcome.

Hating his pain, Angela used the last of her reserves to send a blast of healing energy into Marc. When she slumped against him, unable to fight the exhaustion, Marc curled her into his body and covered her with an extra jacket from his kit. He rotated the vents toward her feet and then shut his eyes, leaning against the seat.

Adrian felt it when they both dropped off. Enjoying the sensation of being in charge of their lives again, he followed Marc's instructions to the letter. Once everyone was in place in the convoy, he pulled around to lead Safe Haven for the first time in months. The feeling was indescribable.

The radio lit up again. "Who has a location?"

Adrian shut it off to keep from disturbing his passengers. Ivan and his tank were rolling in front of the convoy, clearing a path. The pushed-aside drifts created a barrier that made it difficult for a vehicle to slide out of control, allowing him to bounce along in the rut minus the tension that had accompanied most of the driving he'd done thus far. It was a relief. It also might have been a little monotonous and put him to sleep except for the woman next to him. The excitement of being with Angie, though Marc was in the truck too, kept him wide awake and eager to do a great job.

5

"How awkward do you think it is in that truck?"
Tonya snickered at her observation.

Kenn chuckled as he stayed on Adrian's bumper. "About as awkward as this one." He looked over at Kendle, who hadn't been happy to learn she was assigned with them.

She'd expected to be grilled the entire trip, but all she wanted to do was sleep. Kenn had surprised her by not asking a single question. Almost dozing now, Kendle gave them a bit of details as a reward for their patience. "This trip let them sort some stuff out. I'll bet Marc is asleep. There is no tension."

Kenn and Tonya hadn't considered that. Despite the entertainment of having the two men always at each other's throats, even they were sick of the drama.

"Good." Kenn reached over to increase the heat, then pointed the vent toward Kendle. The cold coming off her was putting an actual chill into the cabin. "Get some sleep. We'll wake you at the first break."

Kendle was surprised. She had expected the ride to be tense, but if they weren't going to harass her, it was perfect. She trusted both of them. That was another surprise. She drifted off while considering how much she'd changed since returning to her homeland.

Tonya was proud of Kenn, but she didn't want to embarrass him by saying so in front of Kendle. She settled for leaning against his arm in contentment.

Ray and Kevin didn't have an assigned spot in the convoy because they hadn't been in camp. Unsure where Angie wanted the men, but unwilling to disturb her, Kyle had directed them to the rear. Now that the tension was over, Ray was asleep in the passenger seat with Dog curled up on his feet.

Next to him, Kevin suffered through the chatter from their rookie driver, again simmering with resentment at being ignored despite participating in the run. Being placed in the rear of the convoy was a reminder that he was no one in Safe Haven.

6

"Pit stop." Adrian pulled the truck in behind the tank.

He had let them sleep for four hours, counting on Ivan and his team to know the route. Adrian was certain Angela had given them a map. When the soldiers had flashed a light at hour two, indicating a possible bathroom stop, Adrian had denied it without asking Marc or Angela. They hadn't been far enough from their last known location. At hour four, when Ivan had once again contacted him about a possible stop, Adrian hadn't pushed it. He couldn't drive any longer without it becoming unsafe. "We're making a stop for bathrooms and driver switches."

Marc yawned. "Sounds right." He stepped from the truck to supervise the stop in Angela's place.

She immediately curled up on the seat in his warm spot and went back to sleep, content they would handle it.

Adrian stayed in the truck. This was the way he and Marc would handle her security anytime they were responsible for it. He hoped the Eagles observing them would copy it.

Some camp members and Eagles waved in recognition of Adrian being in the lead rig. It made others frown unhappily, but most people were relieved. With everything Safe Haven was going through now, and might face in the future, it was a relief to know their original shepherd was nearby to offer assistance. It was obvious that he was still needed. More than a few people regretted not lifting his banishment. They were hoping this recent adventure with Marc might allow him to return to being part of the camp. It didn't feel right without him.

Adrian was catching some of those thoughts, but not many. He waited groggily for the bathroom stop to be over so he could go where Marc told him to and sleep.

Adrian flinched as the passenger door opened.

Marc leaned in. "Baby-cakes, come take a pit stop."

Angela allowed Marc to help her from the truck, barely awake.

Marc looked at Adrian. "Slide over into my spot."

As the door slammed, Adrian smiled. When Marc rewarded a man, he knew exactly how to do it. He was giving Adrian the only reward he wanted—to stay in the truck with them.

Marc was aware of Adrian's pleasure, but he didn't care. Right now, keeping Adrian in the truck was another layer of protection for Angela. The radio was telling them of small groups of refugees converging on their last known location. Soon, those people would view the wreckage and get on their trail again. Safe Haven needed to vanish.

Around the convoy, the storm had finally stopped. The wind was down too. Over the next few days, the land would begin to thaw. Marc was looking forward to that as much as he was dreading it. He hated being cold, and driving on the ice sucked, but once the ground dried up, their pursuers would be able to make better time than Safe Haven could as they repeatedly stopped to clear the path. At some point, the refugees would catch up again.

Marc assumed Angela had a plan for that, but he wasn't going to bug her about it right now. The mood wasn't great. They didn't need a delay while leadership chatted. The decaying amusement park winding around the huge parking lot for miles in the distance glistened with edges of roller-coaster tracks and faded display stands, drawing the attention of everyone, including Eagles. The cold fog covered most of the park around them, but not enough to keep people from missing their old lives.

Angela finished quickly and let Marc put her back into the truck through the driver's door. Shivering, she groaned as he pushed her over against Adrian's warmth.

"Make her comfortable." Marc couldn't help the curt tone. "Do it the way you would if I wasn't here."

Frowning, Adrian slipped an arm around Angela and pulled his jacket tight around them to create a small cocoon of warmth as Marc tilted the vents.

"Thank you." Angela tried not to shiver or move against him, but it was hard. She was cold.

"As if I wasn't here."

Stunned that Marc was ordering this, Adrian placed his jaw against her cold cheek and connected them. His warmth was hers now.

A few seconds later, they were asleep in each other's arms.

Marc led the convoy away from the amusement park, not looking at the couple in the truck with him. Of all the things he'd had to do over the last ten months, moments like this were by far the hardest. Putting his jealousy second and Angela's needs first would never come natural to him, but as long as he was in control of the situation, he wanted that. In time, it would no longer be a problem, because Adrian would be gone.

Marc was looking forward to that for the most part, but after this latest adventure, he was dismayed to discover that a part of him would miss the rivalry

with Adrian. When he'd said life with the former leader was never boring, he'd meant that in a good way this time. Even after all the misery Safe Haven had been through, Marc still needed excitement to feel alive. It had been part of what caused him to leave Angie behind for the Marines when they were young, and it was part of what might allow him to accept Adrian in her life now. There was no one else who could match him here. *If I kill Adrian, I might get too bored to stay.*

Chapter Nine BK9
Getting Gone

November 11th

1

“**A**re they supposed to be stopping yet?”

Angela roused herself from the warm spot between the two males to peer around. She slowly nodded. “It didn’t look this way on the map, but yes. We’ve been in the cars for over a full day now. Everyone needs a break.”

“For how long?” Marc didn’t like the idea of stopping yet, though they hadn’t heard from any of their followers in hours.

“I was hoping for a two-day break, but make it one. Kenn has point for the setup, with Zack on camp security, Neil over the injured, and Jennifer with the kids.”

As Marc parked behind Ivan’s tank, Adrian got his notebook out.

Angela pointed. “We’ll need a small quarantine zone set up over there.”

“Really?” Adrian’s voice went up in hope. “Is Safe Haven accepting survivors again?”

“We will always take good people. It’s up to them to approach us in a way that doesn’t trigger our defenses. It will be harder for everyone now.”

Angela stretched and yawned as Adrian wrote it down. When he caught up, she continued. “I want security up before anyone gets out of the vehicles. Pass that code now. Zack and Kyle are coming.”

As Marc did it, Adrian asked, “What do you want Kyle doing?”

“Supply run. He already knows.”

Zack came to the window and took the order from Adrian without comment, not caring. The trucker was just happy to be out of the vehicle for a while. He’d forgotten what it was like.

“The top two levels are going out on supply hunts. I want them ready in three hours. They have one day to make it to their location and do pickups, then catch up to the camp. That will put us short for security overnight. Get all the camp members involved that you can. They aren’t trained, but they can walk a shift.” She paused, aware of Marc waiting on her other side for orders. “Teams are not to have contact with anyone. No radios. We’re all on silence. Orders will be handled by code. I don’t want to hear a single transmission while we’re here.”

Adrian wasn’t certain how she was going to enforce that unless Marc refused to deliver the radios that they’d collected from the UN base.

“We’ll leave those in the truck for now.”

Adrian nodded at Marc’s choice, glad they wouldn’t have to worry about it. Only a few people in Safe Haven had a radio and those Eagles could be trusted not to use them. “Anything else?”

“As soon as camp is up, I want you out of here.”

Expecting it from her, Adrian nodded. There would be time to mourn later.

Angela wasn't concerned with his emotions. She cared about the reaction of her camp. Yesterday, when they'd been under attack, no one had cared Adrian was in the lead rig with them. Today, they were getting half curious, half hostile stares and Angela didn't have the time or patience to explain to each person what was going on. That meant Adrian had to leave.

“I'm going to overrule you until the teams come back.” Marc didn't look at her. “I need him on duty.”

Angela frowned at him. “If we make an exception, what happens a week from now when the same teams are out or we're still shorthanded?”

Marc let out a sigh of frustration. “I'm not going to lift his banishment.”

“I didn't ask you to. In fact, I just kicked him out. Let me work.”

“Not this time, Angie. He stays until I'm ready for him to go. Tell the camp to talk to me.” Marc left the truck before either of them could argue.

Angela focused on Adrian. “What happened between you two?”

Adrian shrugged, making notes in the book to hide his delight. “I have no idea, but I'll try hard to repeat it.”

With one of the biggest dramas settled for a bit, Angela lit a stale cigarette and mentally ran through

the other issues. She wanted to verify everything was covered before letting the camp out. Right now, there were 163 people in Safe Haven. They were low on food, water, and fuel. They had injuries, and they'd been forced to travel through the remains of a blizzard that had dropped two feet of snow. Radiation levels were a little high in this area and under the snow was a layer of ash from Yellowstone. The trees were covered in moldy snow and the melting drifts were turning the ground into an endless mud puddle. They had ants and refugees following, the roads were in terrible condition, and they didn't have any toilet paper left. She had enough problems. She didn't want to miss anything and add to the list.

Adrian stayed close as Angela fastened her parka and exited the truck. He could feel her deciding what part of her list was priority. Instead of helping with it, Adrian enjoyed being there while she sorted it out. Her mind was a machine few could compete with and that included him.

Eagles and camp members stared in surprise as Adrian stayed with the boss, making notes as if he were her XO. Those who had voted to lift Adrian's banishment were thrilled he was being allowed in for any length of time. Most of those who had voted to have him executed were angry he wasn't being told to leave now. They studied his every move, hoping he screwed up so they could demand a new punishment.

Marc was aware of the unrest over Adrian, but they had bigger problems than a former traitor hanging around to fill in as a warm body. Later, when those same people saw Adrian out in the bad weather, miserable, they would understand what Marc was doing. Or at least, they would think so. Marc wasn't in the mood to tell them he didn't feel like Angela was safe with both Special Forces teams leaving camp. Adrian would keep her alive no matter where she was, but he could only do that if he was able to stay close to her. Marc wanted that job himself, but he couldn't have it. He was leadership and that meant his time was already filled.

Angela waved toward the parking area, where a minor fender bender was holding them up.

Marc moved that way.

Adrian and Angela walked the perimeter the Eagles were putting up, yellow tape flashing them both back to a time when they'd done this without such atrocities between them. Having a sudden rash of conscience, Adrian thought about apologizing.

"Save it!"

Adrian did, for a time when they were alone, so he could figure out how to reach her.

"I can't wait." Angela swallowed her sarcasm. She motioned Ivan and Kendle to join them, not wanting to be alone with him.

As Adrian fell in step and Ivan took the other side, Angela felt protected for the first time since the mission team had split from camp. Adrian and

Ivan were killers; that was a comfort in her weakened condition.

Kendle was surprised to have duty over the boss at all, let alone in broad daylight with everyone watching. She didn't mind being in the rear. It helped perk her up after the horribly long ride.

Angela glanced at Adrian. "The perimeter men need a copy of these orders."

"Do you want me to translate?"

"Yes."

Adrian began delivering the orders in hand code to those on duty.

Ivan made notes to tell the team leaders.

Kendle realized she had security over the boss. She did a fast sweep for problems and then did another scan to determine if a sniper detail had been set up yet.

"They have two people headed out, but they're not in place yet." Angela gave Kendle a subtle scan over Adrian's shoulder.

Kendle tensed. A small group of people was coming to surround Angela and she wasn't sure if that was okay.

Adrian touched Kendle's wrist to calm her, but he didn't pull his attention away from Angela, who was now giving him locations on where the teams were heading for supplies.

Kendle let the people through because Adrian thought it was okay. He wouldn't risk Angela's safety. Kendle hadn't been here for Safe Haven's travel time. She didn't know how it worked yet and

she needed time to observe so she could learn the patterns.

Right now, Angela was as safe as it got. Kendle was with them so she could learn the job. Adrian assumed she would have more responsibilities later. The castaway had earned a fair shot.

Angela looked at Kyle. “There’s a water treatment plant ten miles north and another one thirty miles northwest. If neither of them have what we need, that mission team needs to keep going to the next location. I’ve marked it on this map. We have to have the water. The snow will hold us during this stop and maybe the next, but after that, we will be out. This is the one team not allowed to fail.”

Kyle was confident he and his team could handle it, but he didn’t want to offend Neil, who was also capable of doing that duty. “Either of us can.”

“Good, because fuel is our second biggest problem and it’s as dangerous as being without water. Here are the maps I have for possible fuel locations.” She handed them to Neil. “If you guys decide to change locations or run them together for more protection, that’s fine. Adrian always said when I wasn’t certain which team should do the run, to let the team make the choice. This is the first time I’ve ever done that. Be careful.”

Proud and worried, Neil and Kyle left, comparing maps to make their decision.

“I wish I had a third Special Forces team to send out for food in the morning,” Angela complained

before the next group got in earshot. “The level six team is good, but not enough yet.”

Ivan found his mouth opening before his brain thought it through. “I could take care of it.”

That was fast. Adrian stared at Angela. He hadn’t known she was working on Ivan that way.

Angela ignored Adrian’s observation and Kendle’s frown. “How about Peter, James, and two others of your choice? I’d give you Kendle too, but she has a team run.”

Kendle and Adrian hadn’t been in camp for the new rule about no women being sent out on runs, so her choice drew no reaction. It would become clear to the camp that members of the council were going to be exempt from some of the rules. Angela didn’t want to do that, but Kendle was more of a man than some of the rookies were and they needed every fighter they could get on these runs. Food and fuel was hard to get, and water took longer to procure. She needed the castaway out there fighting for them.

Kendle wasn’t sure exactly what to do or who to pick, so she waited for more details.

Angela gestured at James, who was nearby in one of the small groups. “He already has it sorted out. He’s coming for confirmation.”

Kendle lifted her brow. “Marc wanted me with you for security...or should I go find my team?”

“Your team.” Angela turned to the next group waiting for her attention.

Kendle was suddenly eager to be gone again. This mission would be like the one she had handled with Tommy and her guys.

Swallowing a smile, Adrian continued to translate, wondering what Angela had planned for him. He now had no doubt that she'd known he would be allowed to stay in camp for a while.

Angela gestured at Zack after he gave her a signal that said the perimeter security was up. Zack was changing his flab to muscle and it was noticeable. Camp females watched him walk by, not hiding their appreciation. Angela found it interesting that Zack didn't notice, though his sons did. They chuckled and tried to pick the woman they could accept in their dad's life. "I want you and your team on point for the first twelve hours. The next level down will take over as your relief to cover the twelve after that. Then you're back on duty. That schedule will alternate until Neil returns."

Zack was honored. "I'll handle it." Zack waved for people to follow him for instructions as Angela focused on the next group.

Around them, the camp watched and waited.

Before Angela could hand out the next order, Conner and Charlie appeared. Both teenagers waited impatiently for their duty, trying to hide grins.

Angela rolled her eyes. "Conner and Charlie have transportation and livestock detail."

Happy, the boys ran off.

“Brittani and Gus’s brothers said they can handle the meals for us. It’s early afternoon already, so tell them to cover a generous, early evening mess and skip lunch. I want Gus with his team.”

“You got it.” Adrian wasn’t familiar with that family, but as far as he knew, they had been taking care of Safe Haven’s meals for the last month anyway.

“All level fours will help Zack’s team. They work when he works; they sleep when he sleeps. Level twos are off duty right now, as well as level ones. Both of those teams will be back on duty in eight hours. We’ll overlap the shifts to have it all covered.” Angela drew in a breath, knowing her next order wouldn’t go over well. “Rookie level one, Ivan’s team, will have personal security over council members between their runs.” She turned to Kenn, wanting him to understand he was in charge of the next order. “Get the supplies sorted and the camp outfitted. Start with the groups leaving, then move to camp members. Take your team.”

Angela ignored the mental and verbal protests, finally getting around to Adrian. “You and Marc will map out our route of travel and breaks.” Angela gave a glare that no one was able to mistake. It said to get busy.

Adrian took a step closer, not wanting to question her openly. “Only level ones on duty tonight, and new people providing council security?”

Angela might have resented anyone else for asking, but this was her mentor. “Ivan’s team won’t be leaving until morning, but they’ll be too wound up to sleep before then. They’ll provide guidance and support overnight. He has a little bit of your problem, plus a lot of Marc’s problem. I’m as safe with him as I am with either of you.”

Swallowing his jealousy, Adrian had one more question. “How did you get two teenagers to be happy about livestock and travel duty? I’ve never been able to manage that.”

Angela smirked. “When all camp areas are set up, the boys will crash and then get up to see who has point overnight. If you notice, I didn’t assign that.”

Adrian grinned. “That’s what keeps them from bitching about transportation chores and vying for all the other shit work.”

“Of course. They’re Eagles. They need something to compete for.”

“Do you give one point and the other XO?”

“No. Neither of them has set themselves apart yet. So far, I’ve made them share.”

Adrian was impressed with Angela for being able to keep all the details straight. He shouldn’t have been after everything she’d already handled, but he was, just the same. She was made for this job.

Ivan and his team took up security posts around the camp where they would be able to view her at all times.

Angela started rounds of the camp. She would pitch in wherever she was needed.

Adrian understood he'd been dismissed, and went to Marc. He wasn't certain it was okay for him to be around anyone else. Angela had outlined his duty. Everyone who heard it assumed that as soon as he helped map the route, he would be kicked out again. As much as he knew it needed to happen, Adrian hoped Angela took her time. He was hoping to at least accompany Marc on rounds since Angela hadn't invited him.

Marc nodded to Adrian as he fell in step, busy directing vehicles into place around their half mile camp.

"Where do you want me?"

Marc gestured toward the truck Kenn had been driving. "I'd bet she has maps in the glovebox. I'm going to segregate you from the camp. If they believe you're working, they'll leave you alone."

"I will be." Adrian rotated toward the truck.

Marc spared the man one narrowed glance and then returned to directing traffic. He had no doubt Adrian would design an ideal travel plan. The Eagle was trying to re-earn his slot. Marc was going to let him, up to a point.

Marc didn't feel the usual jealousy that permeated his soul at the thought of Adrian being in the camp. The situation they were in called for every experienced hand they could get, and he wasn't petty enough to want the camp to fail just to witness Adrian suffer. In fact, leaving Adrian in America

was probably a bad idea. It would give the traitor a chance to gather a new herd without paying for the mistakes of his first command, but more than that, if Adrian were in America and Marc were on Pitcairn, he wouldn't be able to reach the man anymore. He wanted to be able to use Adrian or lash out whenever the mood struck. He couldn't do that if they were thousands of miles apart. In the end, Adrian might really end up on the boat because Marc needed the whipping boy.

Several descendants caught Marc's reflections and allowed him the moment of fantasy. Adrian's presence was temporary. Angela would throw him out if Marc didn't. They knew because she'd given her word.

Angela's sense of safety vanished as soon as Adrian left her sight. This setup was okay, but it wasn't the same as having sentries she trusted with her life. Angela hadn't been able to take the mood drop from camping around signs of their old lives like she had the amusement park. Some of her people had enjoyed fond memories, but the majority had cried themselves to sleep over lost loved ones and that was intolerable. For this break, she'd shifted them to a nature preserve. As a result, the camp would only get to see trees, but that was better than the alternative. This was supposed to be a break for peace and relaxation, but this wasn't the time for a party. Right now, they had to cover survival so they had a reason to celebrate.

Angela stopped to smell the air, taking a deep lungful that reminded her of home, but not in the bad way that it usually did. If she was wrong and she survived the final battle, Angela thought she might want to go back there and build a new home to symbolize how far she'd come. Like here, the smell of corn and cow shit would wake her each morning and the sound of crows and owls would sing her to sleep. She had no idea what the island would be like, but she knew it wouldn't be home. *I'm going to miss my homeland for four years. I don't know if I'll make it half that long.*

Across the camp, Adrian caught the thought and agreed with all his heart.

2

“Are you ready to go?”

“We're on an Eagle team together? Cool.”

Tommy realized Kendle hadn't viewed the new teams list yet. He led her to the wall of the mess truck, where a taped copy was suffering in the wind.

Kendle read it in surprise, finding her name where she'd least expected it. “But I'm not...” Kendle spun around to search for Angela. “I wasn't even a rookie.”

“You're a level four on your own. You've survived stuff none of us could. After our last run, where you brought down Market Town, you earned a nice bump.” Tommy held out his hand. “Welcome to Special Forces.”

Kendle grinned like an idiot, not caring that she wasn't on Tommy's team. "Angela knows how to make a girl happy."

Tommy draped an arm around Kendle's shoulder. "That's not all the good news." He led her toward the vehicles. "She knows you won't cut it as a den mother. You don't have to stay in camp when your team goes out. And your team is leaving soon."

"I need to get my vest." Kendle jogged off, not waiting for him.

Pleased by her enthusiasm, Tommy returned to the vehicles that were being lightly loaded. They were hoping to come back full. He got busy checking the supply sheet. Neil had told him to collect Kendle, knowing it would improve his mood. Tommy hadn't wanted to leave her behind. He hadn't known council women were exempt from the new rules.

Tommy saw Samantha lurking in the perimeter shadows with a guard and assumed her concerns were caused by fear of losing her remaining mate. Tommy understood. He also knew it wouldn't be long before Samantha was out there risking her life again too. It was in their blood. Eagles couldn't fight it any more than they could fight the weather. Trying only brought misery.

Tommy wasn't different, despite the horrors he'd been through. He and his team had gone out to collect what the thieves had stolen, including the remaining poisoned water. Those jugs were clearly marked on the bottoms—easy to see in the daytime,

but not at night while being stolen. Tommy reflected on the bodies that had been scattered around and was flashed back to arriving at Safe Haven Mountain. The entire valley had looked like that, but he was still eager to go out into the wastelands to scavenge.

Tommy felt Kendle coming and waved her toward her new team. Neil was giving instructions that she needed to hear.

As she joined them, exchanging comfortable words, Tommy felt his heart settle into a rhythm of peace. He had a soulmate and a respected place in camp. *I now have everything I need.*

3

“Neil and Kyle are leaving now. They decided to stay together.”

Sitting at the center mess table, Angela made a note on her sticky pad and handed it to Ivan.

Ivan hurried off to deliver it, hating the surroundings. The preserve didn't protest their presence. It watched suspiciously, waiting for them to be gone. If they stayed, nature would become hostile and then violent. This area hadn't hosted humans for some time. He was both relieved and horrified. He was also glad Marc was staying by the boss. This place was creepy.

Angela smiled up at Marc as they were left alone. “Another hour and you can sleep.”

Marc yawned. He was eager for it, but happy enough just to be stationary. Like the rest of the mission team, he was tired of traveling. “Anything I should know?”

“Neil and Kyle were worried about making it back in one day. I told them to take two since they’re checking for both water and fuel.” Angela was writing the next silent note. “I haven’t told the camp yet.”

“Makes sense to me. What’s next?”

Angela held up another sticky note as Kenn joined them.

The Marine took it and left the couple alone.

“This is kinda spooky,” Marc commented as Theo came to the table.

Theo delivered an approving smile to Debra as she left. Following Kenn around as a new member of that team, Debra was delighted to be observing. Theo was positive Angela would give the deaf woman more important chores as soon as she was ready. He was also dreading that. Theo read her note.

Gather your team and get in a tent. Work on engineering lists for the boat.

Theo gave her a look that said he wouldn’t come out of the tent until the list was perfect.

Angela didn’t doubt the man. It was why he was still leading a team even though his injury would prevent him from being a full member. Theo was brilliant. It astonished her that he had been happy as an engineer. Driven by his need to fix and invent, he

could have been famous. Instead, he'd been thrilled to head the engineering department at MIT. It was sweet. Theo was a good man. Once he settled things with Candy, his dramas could be marked off her list.

Marc rotated for a sweep. Other than himself, Angela didn't have personal security right now. Despite giving Ivan's team that job, there was too much to be done to have men and women standing around with their thumbs up their... Marc glanced down at Angela.

Angela held up the sticky note she'd just finished.

Marc read it, expecting a job.

The camp likes you next to me. I do have two snipers up. Stand there and look pretty.

Marc chuckled and resumed scanning. This time, he tried to find the two men. *You know I'm tired when I miss shit like that.*

Angela smiled as she wrote the next note. She would make sure he got eight hours full of rest and a few hot meals before they went back on the road. Marc was their strength now. *He's also a weakness. He didn't ask why I'm using sticky notes, didn't care except to view it as a joke. Adrian would know better.*

Angela refused to even glance in the direction of the parking area, where Adrian was still in the truck. She hadn't ordered food sent to him or given permission for him to use the showers or equipment. He needed to leave before she broke in front of the camp and gave him the hero's welcome he

deserved. Safe Haven was almost to the ocean. In a few weeks, they would reach the destination he'd chosen long before she joined. He deserved to be honored. Instead, he was alone, cold, hungry, and working to be forgiven by people who wouldn't even be alive if not for him. It was a bummer.

4

Angela was still in the mess when Conner entered at midnight. The camp was sleeping.

“I switched Adrian to the QZ.”

Angela kept eating, waiting for the rest of the updates. The slightly reheated stew wasn't as good the second time around, but Angela was pleased Brittani was stretching their food. *At least cold storage isn't a problem.*

Conner dropped a sheet of paper next to her, then went to stand in front of the stove, splaying his frozen fingers. It was impossible to take notes fast enough with gloves on.

Angela skimmed the paper, noting the boy had put everyone's messages on the same page. Angela didn't mind shorthand. It made her think of a new layer of code they could add for emergencies when the threat might be one of their own. Only senior men and women would be taught the triggers.

Conner waited while Angela made notes in her book about the notes in her hand, glad to be in the drafty mess tent. The temperature was hovering at

freezing. Not as bad as during the storm, it was still rough.

“Samantha says there’s a break coming.” Angela agreed about the miserable conditions. “Maybe we’ll have a beach party when we find the boat.”

Conner brightened, young mind immediately going to women in bikinis strolling happily through the surf. Just as fast, his fantasy vanished. “They won’t, right? The water isn’t safe.”

Angela wanted to lie, but if he was old enough to be an Eagle, he was old enough to know what the future held. “We’ll have a pool on the boat. I believe every cruise ship has them, plus gyms, game rooms, theaters.”

Conner’s mood improved so fast that Angela couldn’t resist inhaling some of his youthful energy as it smothered her.

Conner turned toward the zippered exit, hiding a grin. Now that he’d done what he came in here for, he could report it to Kenn and then fill Charlie in on all of it. Angela’s son was almost as manipulative as she was, but in the good way. Charlie knew she needed energy. Conner had bet him he could get her to take it.

Angela blocked her thoughts. It was best if people believed they were able to be a step ahead of her. If they knew the truth, she would be burned at the first stake they could whittle.

In a moment of pity, Angela dropped her chin to let a few tears flow. Despite her great act, she didn't feel remotely human anymore.

"Got a minute?" Jennifer joined her.

Angela rubbed one arm over her face as if she'd been yawning and her eyes had watered. "What's up?"

"I have a new gift. I'd like to practice it."

"What is it?"

"I can lift moods, if I'm in a good enough place." Jennifer stared pointedly. "I figured if it succeeds on you, it will be handy on the camp."

As much as she wanted to allow it, Angela shook her head. "There are people here who've lost husbands and children. Use it on them. Their happiness will feed mine."

Jennifer pouted. "I wanted to test it out first. I don't know if there are side effects."

Angela chuckled at the clever trap. "Fine. Go blast Samantha. She's crying harder than I am right now. I can't take much more of it."

Jennifer was gone an instant later, but she wasn't placated. Angela had forgotten that her happiness made the shield come to life strong enough to protect them. The camp was relaxing now, but the shield wasn't appearing because their leader wasn't certain they could make it to the boat.

Jennifer was still taking measurements, but she suspected Angela was underestimating the camp this time. Safe Haven wasn't full of users and abusers anymore. They knew they were chosen to

be the future and that would give them strength to reach new levels of success. At some point, the council would be in need and the camp would come through for them. Jennifer hadn't foreseen it, but she knew what she knew. The people here had finally changed.

Chapter Ten BK9

Spa Day

1

“**H**ey!”

Distracted by reflections on his coming tryst with Tracy, Charlie jerked around with guilt etched across his face.

“Over here.”

Charlie found Adrian at the edge of the QZ tape and went that way. He and Adrian hadn’t had much to say for a while. Glad his dad had come back alive and that his parents weren’t fighting, Charlie was tolerating Adrian’s presence. He knew the man wasn’t staying.

“Can you give your mom a message?”

Charlie’s brow puckered. He and Conner were sharing overnight point again, which meant it was his job to gather messages. “What is it?”

“Tell her I’ll be around if she needs me.” Adrian held out a notebook. “She asked for this.”

Charlie tucked the notebook under his arm to keep it dry from the light drizzle that had replaced the wind and snow they’d been driving through since fleeing the mountain. “You’re leaving?”

“Conner moved me in here this evening. Marc didn’t overrule it. That means he’s ready for me to be gone again.”

Charlie understood and agreed. “Happy trails.”

Adrian turned toward the darkness, wanting to warn Charlie not to do what he was thinking about, but he kept his mouth shut. Angela knew it was coming. If she hadn’t warned the boy, then she obviously didn’t want anyone else to either.

Adrian slid into the cold driver seat of his van and started the engine to let it warm up for a minute while he memorized the sight of the camp he was once again forced to abandon. Every time he had to do this, it ripped him open a little deeper. He suspected Marc knew that and kept doing it on purpose.

Tap-tap!

Adrian waited for Conner to slide into the seat and close the door before leaning over to give the boy the hug he had come for.

Conner held onto his dad, sad the man was leaving again but also relieved. Once Adrian was gone, the team leaders would stop being reminded of his betrayal and the guards would stop studying him as closely. If Adrian were gone for a while, people might even miss him this time. “She told me to come.”

Adrian tried to ignore the way his heart leapt. “Marc has a way to reach me.”

Conner wasn’t worried about that. “Will you be okay?”

“Better. I’ll be busy. This camp needs a lot before we get on that boat. I’m in the unique position to be able to gather it any way I see fit. Could be fun.”

Conner was glad his dad had a good attitude about it. Sensing the man wanted to be gone, Conner stepped out of the vehicle. Before he closed the door, he leaned in to hand Adrian a familiar item. “See you.”

Conner returned to making rounds of the camp.

Adrian stared at the sticky note with his heart in his throat.

Our captain is in Montgomery. His name is Cole. Go offer him a ride.

For the first time ever, Adrian was happy as he pulled out of Safe Haven’s light.

2

“We didn’t get here first.” Kyle handed the binoculars to Neil.

The Flat Rock Park Springs didn’t impress Kyle. He’d been to at least a dozen springs during their water runs for camp and for some reason, he still expected to find a botanical garden around it, complete with history scrolls and crystal rocks. He knew it was his movie-minded brain working on him, but he couldn’t help the disappointment that rose each time he found only a swimming hole or worse, a wide hole in the ground with a rickety well set over it. Flat Rock was no different. Big boulders

lined swampy gaps dotted across the barren ground. Distant trees framed the springs in isolated despair. The hills around them were still rocky, but no longer as tall as they came to the end of the mountain range. In another week, they would be in flat land and then slope toward the ocean that was gradually eroding the shore. Water was relentless and they were going to try sailing on it. Kyle shook his head. *We're nuts.*

Their teams were with the vehicles below the small ridge that the leaders had climbed to get a better view of the natural springs they were supposed to scout for water.

Neil peered through the glasses, also unhappy with what he found. The spring had owners. "Why does it always come to this?"

Kyle didn't feel like going into the philosophical side of the apocalypse. He settled for short, hard truth. "Because most people suck."

The gang was clad in thick coats, gloves, and warm boots, with small fires and tents. The armed men eyed the line of traders for items they wanted, but they also kept track of their surroundings or nursed wounds that told Neil the gang had been busy keeping what they'd claimed. From the lack of a permanent setup, he didn't think they were the first owners. "And you won't be the last."

"Let's go." Kyle was glad the snow was mostly gone as they trudged down the small incline toward their teams. They wouldn't leave footsteps to lead a patrol to their vehicles.

Neil followed Kyle, willing to let the mobster take this one. Kyle was better at ambushes and Neil didn't have as much stomach for death as he had before Jeremy's demise. He waited on Kyle's right, ready to take notes or add details. It told the rest of the team that Kyle was the leader for this run.

Kyle hadn't been concerned about Neil challenging him for leadership, but it was still a relief to know the trooper was standing down. Unlike Neil's team, Kyle and his men had stayed up on their training while in the mountain. "We have a gang of eleven men controlling the water. There are people coming in to trade. The gang is taking slaves, food, and fuel." Kyle knelt to draw a small map of the encampment, using dirty slush. "The leader is in a tent and only comes out if someone has an item of value." Kyle and Neil had studied the site for the last two hours to be certain they had an accurate count. "Like usual, if we cut the head off the snake, all the little ones will probably run."

"Maybe we could trade with them instead of killing." Kendle hadn't wanted to speak up, but like the rest of her team, she was tired.

Kyle motioned her toward the incline. "If you can find a way to do that, I'm all for it."

Cheeks flushed from the attention, Kendle went up to do her own scouting.

A few members of her Market Town team were now Special Forces. They were confident she would come up with something.

Kyle and the other men who had remained with Safe Haven for that run watched her dubiously.

Kendle returned a few minutes later, furious. “They just traded a little girl for a tank of gas. I’ve changed my mind.”

Kyle pointed to a spot on his melting map. “Three of us will take her in to trade for water. As soon as she gets the leader, the rest of us will take out the water crew. From there, we’ll handle it like we used to do.” Kyle looked around. “Does everyone remember the V?”

Both Special Forces teams nodded. Kendle didn’t, but she was aware of the efficient attack formation of the Eagles. She didn’t expect to have any problems staying in line once the action started. She paused, glancing up in confusion. “Wait a minute. What do you mean *she*?”

Kyle and Neil laughed while Tommy and Kendle frowned at them.

Kendle realized she was going to be the bait this time. Even a scarred healthy female was sure to get the leader to come out of his tent or to get her sent in. It was an overused plan that would probably succeed. The men she had observed were drinking and enjoying their supplies. They weren’t true killers.

Kyle passed out the extra mags he’d brought, then handed Kendle a knife. “Put this somewhere good.”

Kendle slid it into her bra, adrenaline flowing. “I’ll need time to evaluate the leader. Don’t rush the action because you’re worried about me.”

Kyle recognized her mood change. She was definitely one of them.

Tommy wasn’t allowed to protest. Instead, he insisted on being one of the three who would escort her in.

Kyle had been counting on that. He waved Tommy into place. “Take her other weapons.”

It hurt Tommy to disarm her. He was worried about her being hurt before they could spring the trap.

Kendle understood his hesitation, but she was a killer first and a lover when there was time. It was clear to her which one this situation called for.

Kyle gave her the nod. “We’ve got you covered. Let’s go.”

Kendle led the way up the incline at Neil’s motion, understanding it was to avoid revealing their vehicles. Heart thumping in her chest, she stumbled over the slushy ice toward the gang.

“More people coming!” one of the lookouts shouted.

“I don’t like this. Get a man on them!”

Two members of the gang hurried forward with shotguns aimed at Neil and Kyle. They ignored Kendle and Tommy, assuming he was only a slave guard by the way he kept pushing her forward.

Kyle and Neil kept their hands in sight as they came to a stop a few feet away from the two guards.

Behind them, the line of people wanting water paused to observe the show.

Kyle took the lead. “We’ll trade the woman for water—a lot of it. She’s a breeder.”

“Let’s see the goods!” One of the guards ripped Kendle’s hood from her pale face.

“She’s kinda marked up.”

Kyle shrugged. “Kids won’t be.”

“True.”

Kendle suffered the man’s roaming hands and nasty sneer as Kyle and Neil ignored her treatment. Haunted by a sudden flash of Ethan, she cringed.

Tommy almost blew his cover by stepping forward to protect her.

Neil gave a subtle shake of his head.

Tommy dropped his gaze to the ground as the gang member squeezed Kendle’s breast. *I’m going to kill him for that.*

“She does feel healthy!” The inspector grabbed Kendle’s arm and shoved her toward the pen in the front of the tent where their other slaves were being held.

“Send her in here.”

Everyone looked toward the boss’s tent at the order.

“The other ones cried too much. Tell me she’s a fighter.”

Instinctively following the role, Kendle jerked out of the inspector’s greedy hands and kned him in the balls.

Sliding to his knees, the inspector gasped. “You asked for it, Boss!”

Two other gang members laughed as the hurting man pushed to his feet and shoved Kendle into the tent. Face red, he pointed at Kyle. “Get in line. We’ll sort it out after Grayson decides what she’s worth.”

The three Eagles got in line behind a dozen civilians waiting to hear how much water they would be given for what they had brought. Around them, gang members with guns, knives, and bored expressions watched in hopes that they were troublemakers. It was clear the men didn’t like babysitting a trade line. They wanted action.

Vengeful bugs bit everyone in line, causing noisy slaps that made the Eagles flinch even when they tried not to. Their reactions told the gang they were more alert than the other survivors here, but because they had given up a scared, scarred woman, the water crew assumed they were the same as everyone else—corrupt.

Unlike most of the gangs they’d come across since the world fell, these men didn’t have identifying marks, codes, or an obvious chain of command. As Neil studied them, he realized they resembled each other. He added up the clues. A *family*. The leader was probably the father, eldest brother, or the best fighter among them.

Kyle memorized locations and patrol patterns while they waited.

Tommy studied the tent where Kendle had disappeared, hands clenched into fists to keep from following her. He couldn't help worrying. It was the worst side effect of love.

3

Kendle had staggered at the shove into the tent, almost tripping over a small rug. After the outside brightness that was magnified by piles of snow, the dim tent was disorienting.

Kendle squinted, catching stacks of goods and a small wing that was covered in a thick tarp, preventing her from viewing what was inside. The magazines stacked along one wall were all graphic, as were the paintings. It told Kendle exactly what the slaves were being used for. Fury bloomed in her heart when she thought about the young kids shivering in the roped-off pen outside.

The smell of the tent hit her next. She gagged.

A hand clamped on her shoulder and spun her around.

In moments like this, Kendle couldn't help but question her sanity. The man was a full foot taller than she was, with a short mullet and fat hands covered in scabs and scars. He looked like he'd spent his weekends boxing before the war, though she was almost certain he was more of a jailhouse fighter. He was heavier, bigger, and cursed with a mean streak. Kendle should have been terrified to

face him alone. Instead, she smiled at how alive she felt. “Thank you.”

The abusive brawler scowled. “For what?”

“For giving me moments like this.”

“What’s your name?”

Kendle grinned at the man she could barely view through her blurry eyes. “The Black Widow.”

The gangster frowned, drunken glare coming through a beaten face that said he had to fight regularly to keep command of the ragtag gang.

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

Kendle shook her head, glad she hadn’t been recognized. “It’s just what they call me.” She took a small step closer. “What’s your name?”

The man opened his mouth.

Kendle snatched the open blade from the front of her shirt and plunged it into his throat.

As he slid to a bloody mess at her feet, she gave him a tender smile. “Without change, there can be no peace.”

The man stopped gasping, slumping to the ground.

Kendle retrieved the knife and swept the tent. She froze at small eyes in the far corner. Gawking at the naked toddler, Kendle was unable to stand humans at that moment. Behind the little girl, her mother’s corpse glared in a haunting scream that Kendle could almost hear.

Kendle knelt down. “We need to get out of here, sweetheart. Can you help me?”

The little girl flung her body at Kendle, babbling. The gibberish didn't make sense, but the mental words were a stinging shout in Kendle's mind.

Kill them all! Make them dead like my mommy!

The child was a descendant.

Kendle's mind snapped a little as she held the shaking child. Leaving the girl with her mother's corpse was a control method. *I wish I could kill him again.*

Make them all dead!

"I will, sweetheart. Here's what I want you to do."

4

The silence from the tent tortured Tommy as they waited. He was glad to be distracted by the water crew as the line moved up enough to view the four gangsters in charge of disbursing the rations. The man in the front of the line—a short, braided-beard, tattooed male of undeterminable origins—held a clipboard and watched them all with dead brown eyes.

Kyle and Neil were encouraged by the silence from the tent, unlike Tommy. This gang didn't seem the type to delay gratification, which meant Kendle should have been used right away. The lack of noise implied she had already handled it. Kyle and Neil had agreed to attack as soon as they were next. Only one other refugee had gotten in line behind them so

far, which would lessen the chance of people being caught in the crossfire. In the crags and hills around them, Kyle and Neil could feel their teams also waiting for it to begin.

“What are we doing about the slaves?” Neil was studying the small pen where a number of men, women, and children had been tied up and still sat in abject desperation.

Kyle shrugged. “The adults can go their own way. The kids will come with us.”

“Shouldn’t we return them to their parents?”

“No. Angela will never sell them for water.”

With it put that way, Neil agreed.

The slaves in the pen were hard to look at, mostly because of their ages. The Eagles had spent months with kids now, learning to love and cherish them. Witnessing a five-year-old bound and crying in the slushy dirt was enough to convince the men what had to happen here. The people who came to make these trades didn’t deserve sympathy either. While their kids mourned being sold off like chattel, the parents and guardians haggled over how much water they were worth. Kyle didn’t care if Kendle protested. There was going to be killing here today. The water crew reeked of homemade alcohol, giving him hope this would be a quick takedown. Drunken reflexes were slow and inaccurate.

Confident Kendle was watching them from the dark tent, Kyle gave her a subtle nod.

The line moved again, bringing them face-to-face with the water crew.

Kyle lifted his gun.

Used to robbery attempts, all of the gang also lifted their guns.

Braided beard grinned at them. “You’ll never make it out of here. Take what we give you and be happy with it.”

Following the instincts that had made him top Eagle in Safe Haven, Kyle lowered his weapon. “Are you guys hiring?”

Caught off guard, the man stared at them, trying to work it out. “You want to join us?”

Before Kyle could answer, everyone’s attention was drawn by the sound of thumping feet. A young child toddled from the tent and disappeared into the weeds behind it.

An instant later, Kendle appeared, glowing red orbs proclaiming the start of the fight. “Kill them—all of them.”

The team felt the finality of her choice. It almost sounded as if Angela was with them, ordering the removal of more evil.

Distracted by Kendle’s appearance, Tommy was the last of his team to fire. He had the urge to run forward and check on her, but he knew that was a bad idea as long as her eyes were crimson. Instead of hugging as he reached her, Tommy finally began to shoot at the gang.

Kendle controlled herself by a hair, fighting the urge to use her gifts. If not for Angela forbidding it because it would endanger their camp, Kendle would have laid waste to this place herself while the

team watched. Unable to join the fight because she feared slipping, Kendle stayed next to Tommy and let him protect her while she shivered in fury.

On both sides of them, Eagles ran down the incline, firing.

Kyle and Neil had already shot the crew on the water hole. Their teams were picking off the rest like targets at a carnival.

Refugees who needed water stayed on the ground and waited for it to be over. This wasn't their first gunfight and the need for the precious liquid hadn't changed, no matter who controlled it.

Tommy spun around, searching for the man who had inspected Kendle upon their arrival. He found that man screaming for help as she cut his fingers off with her knife. Blood was spraying over the slaves who were holding onto the man to keep him from escaping Kendle's wrath.

Before Tommy could rush over to help, the man screamed and jerked out of their hold. A sharp stick jutted from his neck.

The woman who had jabbed it in as deep as she could stared at him with an expression of triumphant hatred before scooping up one of the children next to her. As she took off running, other slaves did the same, leaving Kendle and her team to deal with the rest.

The fight only lasted for a few minutes, but that was enough to make the Eagles nervous about how much attention it might have drawn. As they swept the camp together, removing the few wounded, the

desperate refugees grabbed some water and took off.

Five minutes after the attack began, the two teams were alone in the gang encampment with a few slaves who were too young or weak to flee on their own—including the toddler Kendle had used for their distraction. The small children stared at the Eagles in hopeful fear, but didn't speak. In their short lives, they had already learned to keep their mouths shut. It was heartbreaking.

Kyle knew the best thing to do was to load up the buckets and cans that were here, but he couldn't do it. They didn't have enough water to make it to the boat and this natural spring held more than the camp could use in a lifetime. Making a command decision, Kyle began to hand out orders. "Neil and his team will stay here and secure the site. My team and I will go find trucks and do a fuel scout."

"That means we'll be late getting back to camp."

Kyle nodded at Kendle's comment, happy with her performance. "The boss will understand."

Kendle was positive he was right and eager to help now that she wasn't in danger of losing control. There were no more targets. As a member of Kyle's team, she stayed close to him and waited for more orders.

Tommy didn't like the idea of Kendle going out, but he wasn't allowed to protest, like he hadn't been allowed to argue earlier. *This is the part that may kill me.*

Tommy went to Neil. Once they secured the campsite, they would have to get a few defenses ready in case anyone found them here before they got the trucks. It was hard to tell how long Kyle might be gone or who might show up in his absence.

Kyle and Neil were thinking the same thing.

“We’ll be back within a day. Let people have all the water they want.”

Neil nodded. “We’ll stay out of sight unless there’s trouble or someone else tries to own it.”

“Perfect.” Kyle motioned his team toward the incline and their vehicles.

Neil and his men began sorting through the supplies that were left. Most of it would be taken to camp, but some of it would be used right now to make a hot meal for the kids.

When Neil waved him toward the scared children, Tommy was glad for the distraction. He liked kids and kids liked him. Tommy’s mind slipped into future mode. *I wonder if Kendle wants babies.*

It never occurred to him that she couldn’t have them.

5

Angela pulled the stitch through with fingers that shook, unable to warm up. She was off duty and tending her injuries in the chilly camper that Ivan and his team had found and brought back a few hours ago. She planned to use it for their ambulance.

“I’m glad that’s healing.”

Angela dropped the half dissolved stitch into the garbage pail. She applied the ointment while Marc knelt to examine the wound.

“You’re going to have scars all over your body.”

Angela grunted, pressing the medicine in. “I don’t bitch about yours.”

“A man’s body should be scarred.”

“Says you.”

“Are you saying you don’t like my body?”

Angela laughed, sliding the bandage into place. “That, you’ve never heard from my lips.”

Marc would have kissed her, but the radio blared to life.

“Does anyone have a fresh sighting?”

“There hasn’t been a word from them in days. They took off again.”

“Well, keep your eyes open. They have to be here somewhere.”

Angela flipped off the radio. The calls made her stomach boil. Not wanting to panic the camp, Angela did a fast scan to determine how the news would be taken if she told them to load up now instead of in an hour like they’d planned.

Before she could complete it, Dog joined her. Angela regarded the wolf with a friendly smile and a mind braced for new problems. It was easy for her to read his mind. He didn’t like it here either.

We’re being followed.

Angela nodded as she exited the camper with Marc. *The refugees won’t give up.*

I mean animals.

Angela scanned the late morning perimeter and found ants.

Not those. Dog directed her attention to the rear of camp, where the vehicles were lined up near thin, scraggly trees. As she concentrated, a tall shadow distinguished itself from the others.

Angela recognized the stalker and relaxed on that front. It was just Jack's horse. "We have room if that's what he wants. Can you talk to him?"

I already have. He wants to be a part of camp and still free. Is that possible?

Angela shrugged. *I don't see why not. Tell him to stop by for meals and medical, and we won't lock him up at night.*

Satisfied with that answer, Dog went to join Charlie at the shower camper. Despite the awful draft in there, it had gotten a steady workout all day from people who wanted to be clean. Dog didn't understand the attraction. The layer of dirt he carried in his fur was a protection from the wind. Since the humans didn't have fur at all, a layer of dirt would be the next best option.

"People are getting worried about the Special Forces teams." Marc stayed close.

Angela sighed, enjoying the body heat he was sending to her. "I know."

"Should they be?"

Angela rubbed sanitizer on her hands.

Marc frowned. "Do you want me to go get them?"

“No. Those fourteen Eagles are the best we have. If they fail, it’s all over anyway.”

Marc wanted to argue that view, but couldn’t. She was right. He and Angela couldn’t leave camp each time they needed supplies gathered. The Eagles had to be able to handle it. “When will we know?”

“I’ve estimated three days for their return. Any longer...and we need to make other plans for the future.”

Marc refused to ask what those would be. He already knew he couldn’t stomach the answer.

“Let’s load up now. The camp will see us getting it ready and know what’s going on by the time I make the call.”

“We could just tell them we’re not feeling safe here and get going in half that time.”

Angela sighed again. *He’s never going to get it.* “No.”

Marc didn’t argue or care why she’d denied him. He was just eager to be in a warm truck.

Angela knew. Her disappointment was hard to hide. If Marc never learned how to handle the camp, he would eventually be eliminated from the council. He didn’t know it, but he was on his last chance with the Eagles. If he screwed up again, she wouldn’t be able to protect his place in the chain of command. When the army called you out, you were out, and only they could bring you back in.

Chapter Eleven BK9

Wake Up!

November 14th

1

“It’s been three days.”

Angela didn’t respond. Jennifer was worried about her mate. Angela was worried about all of them.

“We could send out a hunting party.” Jennifer wasn’t upset enough to panic, but the feeling was growing. If they went another day without hearing from Kyle, she wouldn’t be so reasonable.

Angela understood, but she had sent both Special Forces teams because they were the best. She had faith they would accomplish the missions and return to camp as soon as they were able to. Despite her confidence in that outcome, Angela did hate not being able to use her magic. It was making her short tempered and that wasn’t good for anyone.

Jennifer shoved up from the table. “You bought yourself a day.” She left before Angela got mad. Jennifer understood having faith, but she didn’t want to take chances. It was possible both teams were in trouble and needed help.

Sitting at the mess table, Angela let out a breath of frustration. Neil and Kyle were not the only ones

who were late. Not being able to check in with the crews, even over the radio, was driving her crazy. It didn't help that each day of travel took them further from their teams, but reaching the boat was her top priority now.

If she didn't keep moving, every danger following them would catch up. It was imperative the camp stayed mobile. Even these short breaks were dangerous. Safe Haven couldn't keep using parks and preserves. These frozen forests were about to be buffets where people would be snatched into the darkness by any number of creatures.

As if to prove her thought, a small flock of black birds flew over, cawing furiously.

The guards tensed, some of them remembering being attacked by birds and bats.

Angela prepared to bring up the shield even though she would probably collapse afterward.

It was a relief when the angry flock kept going.

Footsteps crunched into the mess tent, drawing attention from a few people who were there to finish lunch.

Kevin hurried to Angela. He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Someone's coming in."

Angela got up.

Aware of Zack following, Kevin escorted her to where they had built a makeshift barrier with semis and a UN tank.

Angela forced herself not to use magic to determine who it was. They were camped at another

chokepoint, making it impossible to view until the person came around the last turn.

“That’s ours!”

Everyone relaxed at the sight of trucks rolling their way with lights flashing a familiar code.

“It’s the food team!”

Angela motioned Kevin to stay and help instead of escorting her around. She couldn’t take any more of his preening.

Angela marched away to avoid having to talk to anyone. She wasn’t as patient as they all needed her to be right now. Marc, on the other hand, was a fountain of pleasantness that made the guards yearn for his shift to begin at dusk.

“What’s her problem?” Ivan joined Kenn at the front of the trucks. They were filled with nonperishable food.

Kenn frowned. “Figure it out.”

Ivan spent a moment doing just that. “She was fine until right before I left...” His eyes widened. “When Adrian left.”

“Bingo.” Kenn led the way to the rear of the trucks to help sort and unload. “She won’t admit it, but we all know. As soon as he left camp, her mood hit the ground. It will stay that way until she gets to see him again.”

“When will that be?”

“Hard to say.” Kenn motioned Ivan into the assembly line that was forming even though Ivan and his team had just brought it in. “His banishment was reinstated, so he can’t come in unless there’s a

problem. Not many people are willing to wish for new issues just so she can spend time with him.”

Ivan didn't like the personal drama leadership was going through, but he understood it a little more. After being her guard, Ivan appreciated the need to stay close to her. He still didn't believe she was worth as much trouble as Marc was willing to put himself through, but Ivan was giving her the benefit of the doubt now.

Kenn snorted. “You're like I was, not seeing the forest and all that. When it hits you, I'll have the smelling salts ready.”

Ivan chuckled at the wording, not worried. “I've got three hots and a cot. I'm good.”

Kenn remembered those days, but not with longing. He preferred the person he was now.

Around them, Eagles and camp members listened to each other's conversations, worried about the missing teams, and enjoyed being outside even though the weather still sucked. Other than Angela's mood, things were good for them for the first time in months. As far as they knew, the Special Forces teams were on their way back with water and fuel. Their injured were recovering; they didn't have any illnesses, and the refugees didn't know where they were. It allowed them to laugh and smile, sending peace and calm through the camp that had experienced very little of that emotion under Angela's leadership. Except for friends and family of their missing men, the good vibes held much longer than Angela expected.

Marc had point over camp as darkness slid across the land and evening updates were delivered. Each person brought their paper on everything that had happened while he slept. He made inquiries, but every question was met with a solid answer. Marc was almost enjoying this part of his duties as he sipped Brittani's strong coffee and read the notes.

In the mess tent around him, the evening meal was over. Most of the camp had trudged to their drafty tents to get set for the night. Angela had provided a variety of entertainments from the mountain, but people were bored. Marc was working on a way to keep them entertained for the next month while they traveled to the boat, but he was mostly worrying over the Special Forces teams who still hadn't reported in. Besides being the most important Eagles in camp, both their missions were invaluable. According to Angela's notes, they only had enough water to last three more days and fuel for half that. If the Special Forces teams were unsuccessful, Safe Haven wasn't going much further than where they were right now.

Marc skimmed notes again, trying to determine where Angela wanted to go next. He and Adrian had mapped it out, but the boss hadn't approved it yet.

The food team found rail cars. They didn't have enough men to secure the site, but it might be more food.

Marc frowned at Angela's voice in his mind.
You should be asleep.

I'm trying. I'm worried.

About the teams?

When Angela didn't answer, Marc fought the urge to go comfort her. There was nothing he could do or say.

Marc felt her try to drift off again and gently closed the door between them. If she couldn't hear his thoughts about the camp, maybe she would be able to sleep.

Marc deliberated on her choice to explore the railcars and decided that was good. It was a nice coincidence that Ivan's team had located train cars that hadn't been looted.

Marc wondered how long they would remain at that location and then remembered the fuel numbers. Safe Haven had enough gas to reach the railcars. From there, the camp would have to wait until fuel was brought to them. It was a dangerous situation.

Pushing everything else out of his mind, Marc retrieved all of the maps he had of the area and scoured them again.

3

"Oh, yeah..." Adrian groaned, rolling over so he had better access. "I love you so much. I can't tell you how much."

Harsh winter wind rocked the RV, sending a warning.

Adrian felt it, but the woman in his arms was willing and he wasn't stopping until she was his. He wanted her in ways—

Wake up! The ugly shout conveyed coming violence.

Adrian ignored it, deepening the bond. “Always love you...”

The gunshot echoed for miles in the stillness of the night, bringing a camp of people to terrified alertness in an instant.

Adrian jerked awake as a bullet slammed into the RV window and kept coming. Two inches lower and it would have plunged into his throat instead of the books on the small headboard he'd built.

A few hundred yards away from the van, Marc grabbed the rifle from Angela, amazed at the shot, but angry she'd disturbed the camp on his shift without telling him what she was doing.

Angela sent out a blast of hatred so strong that Marc took a step back even though it wasn't aimed at him.

Angela shuddered. She wanted to calm the camp and the man waiting in confused anger for her explanation, but the hatred for Adrian was so strong it blocked out everything else. She spun toward the tent where she'd been resting when Adrian's dream had connected. She hadn't been able to stand it.

Marc zeroed in on the target of her anger and quickly understood what had triggered her. He was grinning as he calmed the semi-panicked citizens. “Our traitor is too close. The boss doesn’t like it. We’ll send him further out.”

“I’ll handle it.” Jennifer had reached the couple right as Angela fired. She was sorry she hadn’t been able to stop it.

Marc snorted. “Yeah, like you could have.”

Jennifer shrugged. “Maybe not this time.” The teenager smiled. “But it was good, in ways, right? Her anger?”

Marc nodded, glad the camp and Eagles were hearing the conversation. “Yes. She’s recovering.”

“Recklessly.” Kenn joined them, flushing as Marc and Jennifer both sent sharp, silent reprimands. “Fine. I do agree it’s good she’s back.” Kenn sent his own mental message, thrilled to be able to do it with Marc too. He hadn’t been sure if he would be blocked since they hated each other. *I need to talk to you.*

“I’ll be in the mess.” Marc’s cold glance narrowed. “We can discuss you, as well.”

Kenn nodded stiffly and got out of Marc’s sight.

Jennifer chuckled. “Nice.” She went to find Angela, spreading calm with her amusement. “I’ll handle Adrian next.”

She doesn’t know, Marc realized suddenly. *Jennifer doesn’t know how strong she is yet.*

Kyle does, Marc decided. *He’s known all along.*

Marc went to the mess, where Kenn was already waiting. He didn't know what the Marine wanted and that had him on edge. He tried to sweep Kenn's mind, but the wall was too thick to view through unless he wanted to blast a hole in Kenn's mind. Marc would if he felt he needed to, but he didn't want to restart the fighting. Kenn was submissive to him. Marc needed it to stay that way.

"It will." Kenn waved at the mug of coffee he'd sat down. "Thought you'd be ready for a hot drink."

"Is it poisoned?"

Kenn laughed.

Marc sat down and held the mug between his hands to warm them. "I notice you didn't answer the question."

"Didn't need to." Kenn pushed his own cup toward Marc, still snickering. "Take mine, badass."

Marc did.

Kenn's happiness faded. "We were joking. You didn't have to do that. Now they all believe I was trying to hurt you."

"Were you?"

Kenn didn't know what to say. He'd believed they were over this.

"So did I."

"What changed?"

Marc sat the cup on the table to lean forward. "What's with the wall?"

Kenn's tension slid down with his wall. "That's against Tonya."

Marc saw what Kenn had been hiding and picked up the cup Kenn had brought for him and took a big drink to declare it okay to the few witnesses. “I didn’t even think of that. I’ll talk to the Eagles on duty so they know you’re not a new problem.”

Kenn shrugged it off. “I’ve earned that. I understand. You know what I want. Will you?”

“I’ll run it by Angela first, but probably.”

“Cool.”

“Will she agree?”

“Not a chance.” Marc smirked. He did a fast sweep of the camp and found too many of them awake for him to linger in the tepid warmth of the mess tent. “Do rounds with me?”

Kenn brightened. “You know it.”

Marc sighed, standing. He almost missed the old Kenn. This suck up reminded him too much of their time together in the Marines—time that Kenn had been living with Angela and beating on her.

Kenn got up and left the tent. Marc didn’t want his company. He’d only offered because of the mistake over the mental wall.

Marc made a quick gesture. *Can’t take a joke. No problems.*

Relieved, the sentries resumed sweeps and patrols.

“Incoming!” Guards on the gate began shouting as lights and engines came.

Fear spread through the camp, bringing Marc and Angela, plus other council members. Everyone prepared to fight.

Lights on the trucks flashed a code. It was the new one Angela had provided right before they left to ensure it wasn't a wolf in disguise. They'd been using Adrian's code for a long time. It wasn't a stretch to think some of their enemies would have learned it by now.

"The teams are back."

Harry's voice hadn't faded before cheering echoed through Safe Haven at the return of their men.

As more lights flashed across the camp, people came toward the parking area to show their support.

Marc let them. Everyone had been worried.

Bleary-eyed, Angela stayed next to Marc as their barricade was pulled aside to allow the two teams in. Angela fought to keep from crying as she realized every one of the Eagles was driving a water truck or fuel tanker. "They did it."

Angela's relief swarmed through the camp, bringing a burst of tension that everyone felt deep in their bones.

Yawns came next as the crash hit.

Marc tugged Angela into his arms and kissed the top of her head. "They're all here and we have what we need for a while. It's okay."

Angela dried her tears on his shirt, not wanting the camp to see how worried she had been, how emotional she was. It was an embarrassment that

she couldn't control herself, but also a concern for the future. If the camp saw her have too many weak moments, it might cost her leadership.

“Quarantine?”

Angela reluctantly nodded.

Marc left her with Ivan as he took charge, calling for tents to be erected in the rear of camp.

Relieved friends and mates were disappointed as the teams were herded away from them, but they understood the need for caution. Having everyone home allowed most of the camp to settle down. As soon as the tents and heaters were up in the QZ, a skeleton crew took over and lights out was called.

Marc went to the parking area, where Jennifer was slipping into the rear of the semi that contained their winter gear. She had stuck around to witness for herself that Kyle was home, then faded into the groups around the caution tape. By the way her mind was racing excitedly over details, Marc assumed she'd been bored. He hadn't been yet, but it was different when you were one of the leaders. Jennifer was set to inherit that place, of course. Marc still wasn't certain he approved the choice, but it was clear the teenager would be formidable when she was older.

“She is now. You're blinded by her youth.” Samantha, on her cane and being trailed by Greg, paused next to Marc to observe Jennifer gearing up for her run.

“You think?”

“Yes. I felt the same way about her when the boss picked our pecking order on her team. Cyn and I...” Samantha teared up and regained control with a ragged breath of icy air that hurt.

Marc waited. Angela’s hollow point scar often sent him there, but as a man, he wasn’t allowed to show it.

“I hate those stereo-typical roles for all of us, just so you know.” Samantha glanced toward Neil, who was standing outside his QZ tent, staring at her. “He still hasn’t broken down in front of me. I could never be that strong.”

“Finish what you were saying.”

Marc’s sharp tenor brought Samantha back. “Cynthia and I hated her.”

“Because she’s a descendant and Cynthia wasn’t. Youth jealousy for you?”

Samantha winced. “I’m not that old, Marine.”

Marc chuckled. “Hey, I’ve heard the stories about how catty you all are.”

Samantha realized he was joking to distract her and smiled. “We can be. In this case, it was because we both realized she already is what we’ve both tried to be all our lives and failed at.”

“What’s that?”

“She likes herself.”

“Lots of people like themselves. It doesn’t mean they should be leaders.”

“I don’t mean the vanity type of liking. I mean she *likes* who she is. She’s comfortable with being gifted and hiding it when she has to or using it when

it's needed. And she knows the difference. I never could tell when to keep my mouth shut about something I'd detected or felt. She has a skill for that. Cynthia said it was the fight with the troops for her. She was out there for all of it. She saw Jennifer take out a base by herself. After that, we had to take her seriously."

"You still think she did it alone?"

Samantha's head bobbed furiously. "I've viewed it in the minds of the men who picked her up. They found her team outside the gate. It hadn't been breached. I've also scanned her mind, the one time she let me. She was naked in a box, Marc. Conner slipped her a gun and left her there to go on with his mission, like the boss ordered. She was alone."

Marc studied the teenager who was about to vanish into the tree line before Kyle could spot her. He was standing by his QZ tent, actively searching for her. Marc could feel his concern.

"I could distract him for a minute."

Marc nodded at Samantha's offer. "Yes. We'll let her work alone and face him tomorrow if it doesn't go well."

Samantha snorted, waving for Greg to help her so she could get to Kyle faster. "I feel sorry for anyone she meets. Jennifer's happy to be going out there and she has her oil filter on."

"That's a cheap suppressor and she weighs next to nothing." Marc didn't like this. He'd assumed she

would travel in a vehicle. “Adrian isn’t worth her life.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Samantha grimaced as Greg scooped her up, next words coming out in a hiss of discomfort. “Go with her, mentally. Greg and I will tell Kyle he has point as soon as he’s cleared so he can’t go after her. If there’s a problem, you can help.”

Marc was satisfied. “Deal.”

Samantha held on as Greg carried her away.

Marc concentrated on finding Jennifer and opening a private mental line.

Jennifer felt Marc connect them as she left camp while rookies on the parking area were distracted. She’d caught all of his conversation with Samantha. He needed to know she wasn’t a lucky kid who had to be protected. She was a killer. If she ran into a threat, she would handle it.

Marc stayed in the front, not reading any deeper than her surface thoughts. He didn’t doubt Jennifer’s intelligence, loyalty, or passion for the job, and that was already more than he could say about most of the people who would be evaluated for leadership over the years. Safe Haven’s citizens were flawed humans getting a second chance. Some of the flaws were uglier than others and would always hold that person back. Kenn was one of those, as was Adrian.

Jennifer didn’t mind the hard ground under her boots that tried to send her sliding into a nasty fall,

and the icy air was a blessing that would keep her awake and let her smell anyone coming from the direction she was going. The wind was blowing directly into her face. What she minded were the critters. She could feel them hating her and hoping she revealed a weakness so they would have the courage to attack. They could sense her gifts and her youth—a double strike. If she fell, they would be on her without hesitation.

Lost in his viewing, Marc hardly felt it when a thicker coat was draped over his shoulders.

Zack continued on his rounds, hoping Marc didn't get anything bad from the search.

Jennifer was able to relax when Marc stayed still and quiet. She didn't have secrets, but he was intimidating. It was a relief to know she didn't have to defend herself from him. She wasn't certain who would win—him or Kyle after they found her body.

Marc chuckled. *I've been told you can handle your own. It would probably be a good fight.*

Jennifer snickered. *I'd hang as long as I could.* Cold, she took off running through the snowy darkness, using the moon glare to navigate. She quickly warmed and began to sweat. *This feels good. I miss being active.*

Marc knew. Leadership meant paperwork half the time. It usually sucked. Tonight had been a rare exception.

Marc knew it wasn't wise to stay away from camp this long, especially when there could be

trackers in the area, but he stayed with Jennifer anyway as she jogged to Adrian's campsite. Marc wasn't sure how she would find it, but he assumed she had picked the location from a guard's mind. He wasn't as concerned about where the information had come from, so much as he was Angela's reaction to it. *I don't remember the last time she got that upset over me.*

Jennifer didn't remark on his thought or allow an opinion to form, but Marc knew she had one. Tempted, but not crazy, he remained silent.

Jennifer was relieved. She had almost reached Adrian's camp and she wanted to practice her infiltration skills.

Impressed with her seriousness, Marc settled in to observe.

"Marc?"

Marc snapped out of the vision as a warm hand settled onto his shoulder, mind screaming as the connection was broken. He glared up at Harry, reminded that an interrupted connection hurt as it severed. "What?!"

The level two Eagle flinched at the hostile tone. "Sorry, but we need you."

Marc sighed. Jennifer would have to take care of Adrian on her own. He had work waiting.

4

"I already know why you came." Adrian was leaning against the door of his van. He had just

finished taping both sides of the window that had suffered Angela's anger. "You shouldn't be out of camp."

Disappointed that she hadn't gotten to sneak up on him, Jennifer tried to find a snarky reply. Adrian's campsite was a barren spot where cars had been parked, judging by old oil spots. His vehicle, a white cargo van, was packed and running. He was obviously on his way out.

"If she forgives me, will you be able to?"

Jennifer was surprised by the question. "I didn't know my opinion mattered to you."

"Neither did I." Adrian sighed. "I used to be better than this. I'm trying to get back there."

"Angela and the Eagles recognize that, but until Kyle forgives you, I can't." Now that she wasn't moving, the cold was sinking in, making it hard to stay angry. "And why do you care if I'll be able to forgive you?"

"Because I've disappointed you. As a leader, that bothers the hell out of me."

Jennifer liked the words, but she knew better than to trust the man they were coming from. "I'm heading back to camp now. Get lost."

Adrian stared at the teenager. "Do what you can to help her forget."

"Do you hope being away from her will break it?" Jennifer moved from foot to foot in an effort to warm her frozen toes. They were the only part of her body that wasn't okay. She hadn't been able to find a size small enough in what remained of their

cold weather gear. These boots weren't as waterproof as their manufacturers had claimed.

"No." The old Adrian she had been afraid of upon her first arrival appeared behind his bright blue eyes. "I'd like a private channel with you and updates once a week."

Jennifer scowled, hand coming to her hip. "Even if I was allowed to do that, which I'm not, why would I?"

"Because if you don't, I'll have to come and get the updates myself."

Trapped, Jennifer let out a deep grunt. "If she finds out, I'll lose her trust. You're asking a lot."

Adrian dropped his head, ashamed. "I'll be miserable without her. Isn't that payment enough?"

"No, but your life belongs to Marc and I won't interfere. Fine. I'll send you updates. Just stay away from them." Jennifer turned toward camp. "Maybe we'll all get lucky and you'll die out here."

Jennifer was acutely aware of being alone as she jogged back to Safe Haven. The excitement of being on an adventure by herself had faded into cold discomfort and an edge of nerves. The alpha had forbidden the use of magic and that included scanning while on runs.

Jennifer saw animal prints in the snow as she jogged, trying to hit bare places that wouldn't leave a trail. She had a long way to go in training, but moments like this were great practice for her. All the Eagles were eager to get into shape. They had missed a lot while in the mountain.

Jennifer breathed a sigh of relief as the yellow caution tape came into view. It was cold and dark, and she needed to warm up, but most of all, she was hoping to be able to sneak back into camp without being caught. She would deem this a successful run if she could...

Jennifer almost screamed as she slipped under the caution tape and found Kyle leaning against a nearby tree.

Kyle stared at her in reproach.

It was obvious he had determined where she would reenter camp and settled in to wait. She could view a rut line in the snow from where he'd been pacing. What she didn't see was footprints from the guards. That meant they knew he was here, and she hadn't been. *I'll do better next time.*

Kyle was trying hard not to speak. After spending all day watching Tommy control himself, the mobster wouldn't accept any less. He didn't like this constant struggle to do what was right. The few moments he and Jennifer had shared had been her idea or happened by accident during the battle with the government. Anything that happened now, he wanted to be aware of and ready for. He'd made that clear to Jennifer before they left the mountain, but as she stared at him now, covered in the success of her first quiet run, Kyle wanted her more than he ever had. In this instant, it was impossible to view her as the innocent, slaved-out teenager he had rescued. The young woman in front of him was everything he wanted in a mate and a team member.

Jennifer was impressed that Kyle wasn't reprimanding her, but his hot gaze revealed what was on his mind. Positive he wouldn't allow it, Jennifer wondered if she could push him into a private moment. She had enjoyed their short interludes.

When Jennifer took a step toward him, Kyle froze. He knew what she wanted. His hard body and the blood pounding through his veins said he would take whatever she wanted to give him right now and feel bad afterward.

Jennifer slid into his arms and tilted her chin up, not thinking about anything except the way it felt when Kyle kissed her.

Kyle wouldn't have refused in that moment even if she had asked for his life in exchange. He slowly pressed their lips together, hands coming up to her hips.

Jennifer leaned into his hard, warm body and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Doing a round, Marc spotted them and paused for a moment of observation. He had come to terms with Kyle wanting Jennifer, but this was the first sign he'd witnessed that the girl wanted Kyle.

Marc was impressed with Kyle's control when Jennifer slid a hand between his legs and the mobster only clenched his hands into tight fists against her hips.

Kyle's tortured groan rolled through the stillness, followed by Jennifer's giggle.

Marc left them alone. The updates he needed could wait. From the sound, it wouldn't be long. Kyle was already on the edge.

5

Jennifer stepped back, grinning.

Breath coming in heaving gasps, Kyle stared at her in satisfied remorse. "I don't like it when we do that."

Jennifer chuckled, straightening her shirt. It hadn't taken much to send him over the edge, not even a full minute of her rubbing. "Well, I do, so you're SOL."

Kyle wanted to insist that she stop, but it was impossible to be angry with her smell filling his nose and the happy mass of flesh twitching in his jeans. "I didn't want moments like these to happen while we're standing in the freezing cold with witnesses and no time for me to love you the way you deserve."

Jennifer's heart melted. She stepped back into his arms for a quick press of her lips to his that gave both of them a chill. "I love you."

Kyle groaned, sweeping her up against his chest. "When you say stuff like that, I forget how to breathe."

Jennifer giggled again, happy that she'd pushed. The horrors she'd suffered were fading in place of the love Kyle had been giving since they'd met in Cesar's semi. They had both played a long, hard

game, but it was almost over now. Before they left on the boat, Kyle would be allowed to have what he'd been longing for and Jennifer would be fully committed to the only male on the planet she would ever trust. It would be good for both of them.

6

“You’ll need entertainment for the kids tomorrow, especially the new ones. I won’t have time to do the nightly meeting with them and they’ll be restless. Make it good.” The twins were in their seats on the tabletop, both awake and studying Angela alertly.

Samantha thought it was odd, but didn’t say so.

“They’re learning to distinguish between edges and colors, and apparently, I have a glare they’re mesmerized by.”

“A glare?”

Angela shrugged. “More alpha stuff.”

Samantha went back to taking notes. “We’ll cover the kids.”

In the mess, the rest of the council had gravitated toward hot coffee and companionship as a buffer against the hostilities of their surroundings. As tired as everyone was, Angela didn’t think there would be problems with the youngsters yet, but she didn’t want to take that chance. Average children were temperamental. Descendant kids were the things nightmares were made of when they were bored.

Taking a break while she waited for a batch of results, Tonya was at the table with Samantha and Jennifer, while Gus and Kenn collected mugs from the line. Everyone wore relief at the return of their teams.

As Marc ducked into the mess, he wiped his mind clear by falling into plans of how to sort the railcars at the next stop. He had just gotten an update from Jennifer before ordering her to go to bed. He hadn't mentioned anything else, but he'd given Kyle's untucked shirt a glance when he'd joined them on the edge of camp. Marc didn't like keeping secrets from Angela, but she didn't need to know about the deal Jennifer had made with Adrian. If that kept the former leader away from them, Marc was all for it, and like Jennifer had told Adrian, maybe they would get lucky and he would die out there alone.

Attention seemingly on the babies in front of her, Angela acted as if she'd missed it all. She brought up a thick wall around her heart and hoped she survived the separation.

Chapter Twelve BK9

Don't Slip

1

“**T**hank you.”

Tommy held her tighter. “I’ll get better at it the more we do it.”

Kendle laughed at the double entendre. She was impressed that Tommy hadn’t tried to hold her back during their run. Even now, he wasn’t trying to convince her to quit the Eagles or follow the new rules about women not leaving camp. They were snuggled in his sleeping bag, in the rear of the tent that held the few other team members who hadn’t been cleared yet. In a few minutes, all of them would be soundly sleeping. It would take Tonya and Angela all night to finish their blood tests.

In the tent next to them, the rest of the Special Forces, and the children they’d rescued, were enjoying the one heater Safe Haven had to spare, and the hot meal that had been delivered. All of them were basking in the safety of being home. It didn’t matter that they were camped in the middle of a muddy path. They were together.

“I have to break up with you for a month.”

Kendle's good mood faded. "Yeah." Not caring about their audience, she rolled over into his arms and sealed their lips.

Tommy allowed her to have what she wanted, though he did try to keep her mouth covered as she shivered and shuddered in his arms. He made sure she was satisfied before he let her end the embrace, hoping she would hold onto it while she was single. He was worried about her still wanting him when the next adventures were done.

So was Kendle. She kissed him harder and tried to forget what she really wanted.

2

"I need a favor."

Kyle's nervous tone was a surprise. Marc had expected anger over Jennifer being allowed out of camp last night alone. "Name it."

"Give me an excuse to move out of Jennifer's tent. I want her and the baby to have it. It's a good tent." He had just been cleared and asked to be put right back on duty.

Marc didn't have to ask why. He'd watched Kyle and the girl, and respected Kyle's strength, but this was nobler.

Kyle denied Marc's approving vibe. "I'm not a good guy. You know that. Don't expect it."

It was the first time Marc had ever heard Kyle talk that way. He had to argue. "Yes, you are, or Adrian would have removed you months ago. Your

behavior isn't always good, but in this new world, you're a perfect man. Jennifer knows it and so does every other woman in this camp. They envy her. If you move out, they'll cut you to the bone in days. You'll be feeding the sharks."

Kyle hadn't considered that. "They won't want me."

Marc nodded toward the mess.

Kyle scanned the three women staring at him overtop mugs of stale hot chocolate. One of them was Pam. Kyle blanched. "Oh, hell."

"Yep." Marc slapped him on the shoulder. "Tell your fiancé you're on night shifts with me until the wedding."

Kyle sighed in relief. "Thank you. I owe you big."

"Do right by her, always, and we're even." Marc studied him. "You know she'll find out, right?"

"Not if you don't tell the boss."

Marc shrugged, amusement cooling. "Why not? There's plenty the boss hasn't told me over the last ten months."

Kyle wanted to defend Angela, but Marc was right. Kyle left with lighter steps and an aching heart. He didn't want to be away from Jenny, ever. But it was the right thing to do. "Now I just have to convince her of that."

Seeing it was 3am, Marc did a fresh round of the camp, hoping everyone was sleeping this time. He went by the community tents first, hearing conversations and complaints. He made notes for

Angela to read in the morning. She would be happy to know her plan to flush Brittani into the Eagles was working. That woman was currently nagging Gus, whose shift with Kenn had just ended. Marc doubted it would be much longer before they needed a new cook. He made a note on it as he walked by the second tent.

The children were all in this one, including the new kids the Special Forces teams had brought back. Angela had cleared them first so the den mothers could get them cleaned up and fed. They were all healthy considering what they'd gone through.

Marc listened to the cries of an infant waiting to be fed, but he wasn't sure if it was Mandy's baby or Angela's twins. They'd been in camp almost a week now. Marc hadn't tried to bond with them. Any free time he had, he spent with Charlie or Cody.

Marc passed the mess next, viewing half a dozen shadows inside. He identified two of them. Occupying tables at opposite ends, Marc was positive if he went inside, he would feel a sharp tension that implied the pair had been exchanging glances. The camp was all a buzz about the secret romance. Everyone knew except them.

Marc had already scanned their minds and found a lot of confusion. It had persuaded him not to interfere. Neither Candy nor Conner was a threat to the others or to the peace in camp. *Unlike the other people in the mess.* Kenn and Tonya were at another corner, making plans to open a lab for her

to resume oil testing on their cancer patients. The update on those people was also in the notebook in his pocket, but Marc didn't look at it. He had no faith in the experiments, except as a way to keep Tonya out of trouble.

The tunnel kids were at the table with them, enjoying a cup of warm hot chocolate with a stale cookie. Marc wondered if Kenn had proposed and decided he hadn't. If Tonya was engaged, the camp would know about it by now.

Marc returned to his rounds. The next area held tents of the people who had chosen not to be in a community canvas. One of those was Jennifer. Marc considered what had happened with her and then pushed it aside. Angela had probably been right to name Jennifer her heir. Despite being a killer, Jennifer was innocent. She wanted a good life for everyone, and she was determined to redeem her mobster in every way. After his conversation with Kyle, it was clear the teenager had already been working hard on that.

A tent on the far edge caught Marc's attention. Because of her relationship with Adrian, Nancy was being treated to coldness from the camp and the Eagles. Marc wasn't sure if someone had told Nancy to put her tent there or if she had felt it was where she should be. He made a note to find out. He liked Nancy. He didn't understand her desire for Adrian, but anything that kept the former leader away from Angela had Marc's support. If Nancy wanted Adrian, he would put them together.

The bathroom tents had a short line as Marc went by. Shawn and Missy were huddled together to avoid the wind. He was listening to her chatter while scanning the darkness. Shawn acted like any other father in camp. The thought made Marc frown and add yet another note to verify fatherly affection was all Shawn was feeling for the girl. Angela, along with every other woman in camp, was keeping track of Shawn's thoughts. And actions. If he stepped out of line in the least, he would be removed. As long as he only viewed Missy as a daughter, it would be fine.

Marc spotted two shadows slipping into the rear of a semi on the side of camp that had the least amount of sentries. Marc wanted to let them have the moment. Instead, he made a motion and sent a guard to interrupt. Charlie was on duty. Sneaking off for twenty minutes of privacy with his mate right now wasn't allowed.

Marc didn't stick around to witness the boy's embarrassment, but he was confident the Eagles would make sure Charlie was. Unlike Conner, who had been surviving it all his life, Charlie was still adjusting to being an open descendant. Also unlike Conner, Charlie was able to spend time with the focus of his desires, allowing for more distractions. It would almost be better if they broke up.

As Marc reached the other side of the parking area, Zack came to him, followed by his sons. They were helping with security.

“Everyone is settled and accounted for. The boss is back to sleep; the radio is quiet.” Zack moved off to resume his rounds of the camp.

As soon as he was out of sight, Marc detoured to the guard on the farthest edge. This was his last stop of the night and the one he wanted to concentrate on the most.

Brandon tensed as Marc came toward his post, heart thumping and adrenaline flowing. It was clear from the way Marc was zeroed in on him that the man knew his secret.

Brandon swallowed nervously and hoped he wasn't babbling like a baby by the time this was over. He wasn't dumb enough to ask how Marc had discovered his secret. He'd been lax in his thoughts since allowing his shield to come down.

Marc didn't tell the man Angela had ratted him out. Marc was just glad she had. He didn't want secrets between them and this one would have been a doozy. Marc had agreed not to tell the camp or the Eagles for now. He was here to confirm Brandon was worthy of that risk.

“What can I do to prove it?”

Marc had a hard time placing this brown-haired and eyed man with the Mitchel family. He saw them as blue-eyed, blond devils. *I didn't know they could assume other forms.*

Brandon saw Marc's weariness and his anger, but he didn't find extra hatred and that was a relief. He'd been expecting worse. Conner was protected

because of his youth. In his late twenties, Brandon didn't have that defense.

Several thoughts of payback went through Marc's mind, but he refused to lower himself to follow through with any of them. He settled for delivering a stern warning. "If you cross me or betray us, even in defense of your family, I'll let the camp tear you apart."

"I'm not like them." Brandon had rehearsed several explanations. He chose the one he felt at this moment. "If you think back to everything you've seen me do and heard me say since you've been a member of this camp, you'll know that. I'll do my job the way I'm supposed to. I expect you not to treat me differently because of who I'm related to."

It was an open challenge to Marc's fairness.

Brandon staggered backward as Marc's fist slammed into his jaw. He slipped on the slushy ice and lost his balance, landing on his ass.

"There's a little fairness for you." Marc left him sitting there to come up with his own excuse to the guards. He didn't like Brandon now, but not because he was Mitchel. The man had lied to them for so long that it was going to be almost impossible to tell when he was being deceitful.

Rubbing his sore, cold knuckles, Marc calmed as Dog joined him. He hadn't seen much of the wolf since they'd returned to camp. Dog was spending his free time with Charlie.

As the wolf and his master finished the circuit of camp, everyone who saw them was flashed to the

days of Adrian's leadership when Marc had first assumed these responsibilities. It sent a wave of peace and contentment that almost brought the shield to life. Nightmares shifted into restless dreams; uneasy slumbers became soft snores. Moments like this were so rare for them now that it woke Angela from a dead sleep.

Surrounded by children in the center of a community tent, Angela allowed the peace to feed her determination. From now on, her needs and secrets would no longer be on display to embarrass or distract. It was time to accept that her desires would never be fulfilled. As long as her people survived, that was enough. The dream was bigger than her heart.

Headed west, away from Safe Haven, Adrian felt Angela shut the connection between them.

Heart shattering, Adrian increased his speed. She'd given up on them having a future, but the charm he'd used made it impossible for her to close the barrier completely on her own.

Respecting her wishes, Adrian shut the connecting line in his mind. He felt isolated right away, but severing this link wouldn't stop the Maker's bond. Only Angela could and she didn't know how.

“Morning mess with Safe Haven. This feels like old times.”

Angela smiled at Kenn’s comment as he joined her at the center table. Surrounded by most of the camp, it really did, even to the buffet breakfast. The UN supplies had brought a lot of their levels up, maybe even enough to get them to the boat. Angela hoped the railcars would give them another chunk of what they needed to make it to the island. The numbers were so short on it that she refused to read them until they had a larger stash.

“You lied!” Brittani slapped food onto Gus’s plate. “You said you wouldn’t, but you did. Get out of here.”

The anger drew attention and caused embarrassment. Gus was smart enough not to keep trying to explain why he’d joined the Eagles. He went to the table with Nancy and Debra, who were on his team.

Given a new piece of gossip, the camp resumed eating and chatting. They were discussing a variety of topics, but the most common was the new rules. In a far corner of the mess, female Eagles were having their first run as den mothers, fueling the talk. Trying to get thirty-one kids fed was a chore for anyone, let alone for women who had adjusted to a fighting lifestyle. Even Kendle was helping with the toddler she’d rescued from the water gang. That child was happily chewing on a teething biscuit while Kendle wiped her fingers. Tonya was busy with the tunnel kids. Across from them,

Samantha was trying to occupy the boardinghouse children who had finished eating and were eager to get to their warm tents and entertainments.

Angela swept the mess and found Candy sitting in the corner with Theo. Angela assumed he was apologizing from his expression, but Candy's scowl and crossed arms said it wasn't going well.

Ignoring the soreness of her body, Angela nodded to Mandy and Pam, who were taking care of the three infants. Cody was next to them, whispering with Leeann and Missy. *That trio will become a handful.* Angela didn't assume it would be bad. It was good that the kids were going to grow up with others like themselves. *And they'll have strong role models.*

Angela scanned again and was pleased to see the teams were following orders. Some were in line for food together, while others were in line for the bathrooms or already settled at a mess table for breakfast. They were all uncomfortable, but it would ease. Throwing them together would allow them to develop the trust that usually only came over a long time.

The mood lifted as Jennifer entered the mess with Autumn on her hip and Dog at her side. It was another flash to when Safe Haven had felt safe.

Jennifer went to the coffee line. She was quickly surrounded by people who wanted to visit with the cooing child in her arms. Autumn was learning to communicate with other descendants. It was a fun time for whoever she chose to speak with.

Angela didn't put a stop to it. Jennifer had a shield around the baby to keep her thoughts from traveling very far.

In the opposite corner of the food line, their newest members were eating and observing with the intentness of people making choices. The two women and two teenage boys had come in together after being liberated from the water gang. Jennifer had made sure they were safe to add to the herd.

Movement caught Angela's attention.

Candy left the mess, stomping by Conner without acknowledging his presence. The boy had just woken from his night shift and was staring at her in concern. Angela was proud of him when he went in the opposite direction.

"Grow up!"

Daryl's shout snapped heads toward the food line.

Daryl pushed Kevin out of his way. "Idiot."

Kevin gawked. "What?"

Daryl's action told Angela the man had once again been insensitive. It wasn't hard to guess that Kevin had brought up Cynthia. No one spoke that name now for fear of upsetting half a dozen people. Shaking her head at Kevin's immaturity, Angela noticed he still had a guard. Quinn was trailing him. Wondering who had arranged that, Angela made a mental note on it and then swept for the sniper on duty. Marc had wanted three. She'd agreed to one.

Angela found Morgan in the tree in the center of camp. He was bundled up and very cold.

Everything okay?

Just checking in.

Nothing moving, Boss.

Angela withdrew from Morgan's mind and spotted Brandon near him. She was grateful to have another descendant Eagle. Angela didn't know what happened between him and Marc, but the guards from that shift swore the bruise on Brandon's jaw had come from him. Brandon had refused to tell anyone why, but Marc hadn't removed him from duty, so the Eagles couldn't add their displeasure. Angela doubted the secret would hold until they reached the boat. Several people knew Brandon's descendant status now. One slip of a thought around their kind would be all it took and then everyone would know who he was. Angela wasn't looking forward to that moment. She gestured at Kenn. "I'm ready now. Updates."

Kenn took out his notebook. "Food levels haven't changed. What we've used in the last 24-hours was the equivalent of what was brought in. We're great on fuel and water, however. We might have enough of those to last until we make it to the coast." Kenn glanced over to ask if she had figured out a solution to the fuel they would need for the return trip on the cruise ship. He paused as Tonya came around the corner of the mess, escorting one of the tunnel kids who had needed to use the bathroom.

The young boy slipped in the mud.

Tonya reached out to grab him.

Kenn saw the fall coming and realized she was going to land directly on her stomach. Without considering the consequences, he hit her with a blast of his new gift.

Tonya was held in place by an invisible force that also shoved the child back up and into her arms.

Every descendant in the mess turned to glare at Kenn.

The tent went silent.

Tonya was also staring at him. Not only had he broken the no magic rule, she hadn't known about his new ability.

Everyone expected Angela to discipline Kenn as he found the courage to look at her.

Angela laughed. "Guess you don't have to worry about that anymore."

Kenn grimaced in relief and apprehension as Tonya stomped toward him. "It might've been easier if I had let her fall, but I didn't want the baby to be hurt."

Understanding he had saved the baby, most of the descendants returned to their meal with Kenn's new gift to talk about. The few who resented him for being allowed to break the rules didn't complain about it. They were used to a boss who made exceptions.

Candy was standing at the edge of camp, fingering a piece of tape coming loose from the tree. “I was mad for a minute. Now I’m just cold.”

Conner hit her with a blast of warmth without stepping closer, aware of guards watching them. He’d gone the opposite direction, then circled back around to avoid Angela’s attention.

Candy moaned as her toes warmed and goosebumps broke out on her skin. “It’s amazing that you can do that.”

Conner had always thought his gifts made him a freak. It was nice to hear something good. Not sure what to say that wouldn’t ruin the moment, he waited for her to speak again. He could feel her unhappiness. He didn’t want to leave her alone.

Candy turned to stare at the boy, expression torn. “I told him no about being on his team again. He’s only giving it to me because the boss called him out for being unfair. I don’t want it that way.”

“You’d have to take a break soon anyway.” Conner eyed the slight bulge of her stomach.

“I know, but it makes me angry that it took Theo this long to understand he was wrong.”

“Theo seems like a good guy. I bet he tries to make it up to you.”

Candy shrugged. That wasn’t what she wanted either.

Always scanning her, Conner couldn’t help himself. “What *do* you want, baby?”

Candy refused to let her mind form the answer that often came late at night now, when loneliness was creeping over her soul.

Conner understood she didn't feel comfortable answering. He gave her a polite smile and moved away. "I'll be around if you need me."

Candy let him go, almost positive at some point she would call him. He was the only one who seemed to care if she lived or died.

5

"Safe Haven will be leaving in one hour. I repeat: we leave in one hour." Angela looked around the mess, where most of the camp was gathered. "To help get us through the next day of travel, I have two announcements. The first is we're rolling until evening and then we're taking a full two-day break at the site."

Angela waited for the cheers to pass, happy she could give them good news. When it quieted enough to be heard, she gave them a reason to cheer louder. "When we reach a quiet spot where security thinks it's okay, we're having a party to celebrate the moments we missed while in the mountain. At the same time, we'll also have a wedding. Kyle and Jennifer have decided they would like to become an official family in Safe Haven and we're going to wish them well."

Almost everyone clapped or turned to look at Kyle or Jennifer, who flushed and blushed at the attention.

Kyle's team and Neil's offered genuine congratulations, as did some of the camp, but it was mostly awkward.

"Our supplies are too low to hold celebrations for all the events we would like to, so we're going to consider this an *everything* party—from birthdays to weddings. If anyone has a stash put up, the party would be a great time to bring it out." Angela gestured toward the flap, where the vehicle crew was listening and waiting for her order to get their transportation ready. "We roll in one hour."

Angela waited at the table with Kendle, her guard now, until everyone else cleared out.

Kendle stayed alert in case Angela wanted to talk to her, but there was only silence. Hoping she hadn't done something new to offend the boss, Kendle waited for orders.

"Thank you for looking out for him." Angela was referring to the mission run. She motioned Kendle to follow as she left the mess. "I didn't assign you as one of the den mothers. It wasn't because you aren't safe around kids. You clearly are. I need you on a team."

"It's cool." Kendle was relieved not to have babysitting duties. She followed Angela across the camp that was packing with smiles and chatter. It felt surreal after the UN base.

"Ride with me until the first stop?"

“You know it.” Kendle wasn’t looking forward to any conversations they might have, but she did want to be seen helping the boss like any other Eagle. She’d caught the Safe Haven infection.

“Put your things in the lead rig and find some maps. I’d like to work on the location of the detention center and plans for it in case we drift too close to them while on the boat.”

Kendle left.

Angela heard heavier footsteps catching up, along with an annoyed male huff. She turned around, but kept walking—backwards.

Ivan glared, but didn’t comment on the challenging expression. *You’re restless.*

Angela swung back around at his astute observation. She was, but she didn’t want Marc to know.

“I won’t tell.”

Angela ignored his mind reading. It wasn’t time for revelations yet. “That’s why I replaced her with you until we leave. She and Marc will both believe it’s a goodwill gesture, like the moments he gave Adrian.”

“But you’ll have to ride with them. Marc is driving your truck.”

Angela’s cruel smile didn’t match her innocent tone. “Makes it a perfect time to pick up dangerous thoughts.”

Ivan chuckled. “I love it here.” He didn’t need to ask who she suspected of future trouble. Marc wasn’t the problem. Ivan was certain the man

wouldn't screw things up with Angela just for a tumble with Kendle. It would only happen if Angela died...or if Kendle put a charm on Marc.

“And now you know what to watch for.”

“That's why you really traded! So we could have this talk.”

“What else?”

Ivan felt the eyes on them. “So we're seen together.”

“And?”

Ivan grinned. “Because I'm a fast study?”

Yes, you are. Prove it by telling me why I would do all of that for a soldier who killed some of my people before switching sides.

Ivan paused, adding up the evidence instead of wasting time being offended. *You're teaching me... Handling people, scoring points, giving me camp secrets, keeping me by your side to observe since you don't need a guard with snipers up... Ivan remembered her words in the tiny house and stiffened. Why are you grooming me to run this camp?*

Angela kept walking.

Ivan didn't ask again. He caught up casually without drawing more attention.

His automatic caution was yet more proof to Angela that she'd made the right choice. Safe Haven had to have a leader who wasn't a descendant or she and the others could never return home. Ivan was it. He was the third person to know. Adrian had

figured it out just by observing her for a few hours. Marc wouldn't get it until someone told him.

6

“We only have an hour until the camp leaves. Can this wait?”

Jennifer's hand came to her hip. “If it could, I wouldn't be bringing it up.”

Kyle's eyes narrowed. *She's angry. I wonder why.*

“Don't you play innocent with me! I know what you did.”

Kyle yawned. “What are you talking about?”

Jennifer waved a hand. “*That's* what I'm talking about. Why are you on Marc's night shifts?”

Kyle sent her a flash of their moment in the cold darkness.

Jennifer had the grace to flush, but she didn't back down. “You like those moments. Don't lie.”

“It's not the way I want it to be, Jenny.” Kyle took a step closer. “I'll switch shifts back after the wedding.”

Jennifer glared at him. “Who says I even want to marry you now?” As she stomped off, listening to the sound of Kyle's heart shatter, Jennifer refused to relent. Kyle was doing everything he could to keep things between them, despite telling her all along that nothing ever would be. She was pissed.

Kyle started to go after her, but a scene across camp drew his attention and kept him rooted in place with the other witnesses.

“I will!” Tonya threw herself into Kenn’s arms, squealing.

The claiming kiss Kenn delivered told people what was going on and sent a small cheer through the camp in celebration of another couple making a commitment to each other.

Word quickly spread that Tonya had accepted Kenn’s proposal. The shiny ring on her finger confirmed the rumor as they entered the mess a few minutes later. They were surrounded by people offering congratulations.

Watching, Kyle grimaced. News of his wedding to Jennifer hadn’t generated excitement. Most people hadn’t been sure if it was okay to support it. As a result, Jennifer wasn’t getting the attention a young bride was supposed to. Kyle didn’t like that. He would talk to the boss about it. *I won’t tolerate her being treated unfairly in any way. She loves me—a killer—after suffering Cesar. I want her to have everything her heart desires. I’m gonna spend the rest of our lives making sure that happens.*

“What do you mean, *no*?”

Kyle turned with everyone else at Charlie’s raised voice.

“I can’t marry you. You’re just a kid.”

Dog pranced aside as Tracy came from the shower tent, wrapped in a towel and a robe. She

shoved through the small crowd, ignoring sympathetic comments from those who'd heard.

A moment later, Charlie also emerged from the shower, looking like he had been punched in the gut. He obviously hadn't expected her response.

Angela turned away from the scene before Charlie saw her, positive he wouldn't want to speak to her about it. She had considered warning him multiple times about the thoughts in Tracy's mind, but he wouldn't have listened, and she hadn't needed the extra stress. Now that Charlie knew, he would go to his father for answers.

Sorry that he was hurting, Angela went to the vehicle area. Marc had duty over it, but he now needed to spend that time helping Charlie adjust to the future.

Chapter Thirteen BK9
Riding The Rails

1

Marc didn't speak as Charlie joined him near the vehicle section of the perimeter. Marc could feel Charlie's need for a conversation. He didn't know what had happened; he pulled it from the teenager's mind.

Angela stepped into Marc's line of sight, giving him a subtle nod.

Relieved, Marc turned his post over to her and faced his son. "Have you figured out why?"

Charlie shrugged. "There are too many voices in my mind."

Marc draped an arm around the boy's shoulders and led him toward the mess that was being packed up. "Let's grab a cup of coffee if Brittani has any left and talk."

Charlie agreed. He was embarrassed so many people already knew his proposal had gone badly, but he needed to know how to get Tracy to change her answer.

Marc hated to be the one to tell him. "She isn't going to change her mind, son."

"I thought she loved me. I don't understand why she said no."

“What did she tell you?”

Charlie clenched his fists. “She said she can’t marry me because I’m just a kid!”

Marc wasn’t sure in what way Tracy meant that. “When you calm down, talk to her about it. Until then, let the camp work on her.”

Charlie snorted. “These people don’t want us together because of the age difference, like with Kyle and Jennifer. They’ll be happy if we all split up.”

“That might have been true in the beginning, but not anymore. This camp needs babies and happy endings. Maybe Tracy overlooked that in her considerations.”

Charlie wanted to have hope, but the tone Tracy had used implied it wasn’t to protect his place in camp or hers. She honestly didn’t want to marry him because she thought he was too young.

Marc took them to a corner table, skipping the coffee. He could feel Angela wanting to be on the road. “I’m sorry.”

Charlie didn’t hear surprise or condemnation, only sympathy for his pain. He realized his father had known this was going to happen. He stared reproachfully. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“For the same reason your mom didn’t.” Marc pointed at the boy. “You wouldn’t have listened.”

Charlie wanted to argue, but Tracy’s true feelings were a complete shock to him. He hadn’t realized he was being used.

“I’m not sure I would call it being used. Your relationship has caused her more problems than her assault did. People who used to be her friends have turned away from her and she’s the center of gossip every time she comes out of her tent. Maybe she’s just tired of being a circus show attraction and it has little to do with your age.”

“You think?”

“Honestly, no. That all added to it, but your age difference is a problem for her. If she can’t get over it, you guys won’t be a couple.”

Charlie was heartbroken at the revelation. He hadn’t known it was an issue.

“That’s part of why she said no, I’d guess. You recently...took your relationship to the next level, right?”

Charlie nodded, cheeks reddening.

“If I know, then the camp knows. I would imagine Tracy is being treated to bad attitudes because of it. As a female, she can’t be beaten for crossing the line, but she can still be punished. The only reason you aren’t is because you’re the leader’s son.”

The truth of that warning was in the subtle glances now coming from the members of camp still in the mess. They obviously agreed.

Furious, Charlie forced himself to listen to his father. He knew it was solid advice, though it wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

As the males worked through Charlie’s issues, the camp continued to load up, giving them privacy.

Both men were glad, but at the same time, they were unhappy someone else was able to do their jobs. Charlie had caught the Eagle virus too, and didn't understand why Tracy didn't feel the same. As long as he had her and some kind of respectable duty in his mother's army, life was perfect.

“What happened to leadership?”

“And spend every waking moment like you and mom do? No, thanks.”

Marc sighed. “Son, you need to find out what Tracy considers to be a perfect life and then decide if it's something you can handle. Without happiness on both sides, it won't work.”

Angela appeared in the flap of the tent. “We're leaving now. Let's load up.”

She vanished, not wanting to witness the tantrum she felt coming.

Marc gestured the boy toward the front of the convoy. “You can help me, and we'll keep talking.”

Angry at the interruption, Charlie shoved away from the table. “I have stuff to do!” He stormed from the mess.

Marc hoped he wasn't going to confront Tracy so soon. It was obvious he needed to cool off, but Angela wouldn't be pleased to have their departure interrupted by teenage drama either. Tracy also wouldn't be happy to be embarrassed again. If Charlie pushed this and the boss or Eagles scolded Tracy, the chance of her changing her mind would drop to nothing. Marc hadn't wanted to tell the boy

Tracy's problem was deeper than just an age difference.

Charlie wasn't satisfying her, but he was blind to it because of his youth. Tracy wanted a mate in the chain of command or at least high up in the Eagles so she would feel safe. Charlie didn't have an interest in that now. Tracy had figured out sex meant more to the boy than the future of their people. That was the real problem. Until Charlie matured, they were probably going to be spending a lot of time apart. If Charlie wasn't careful, Tracy would find someone else who cared about more than just himself and his mate.

"We leave in two minutes!"

Marc snickered at the annoyed tone and went to join her in the front truck. He had no doubt Angela was talking to him.

Jennifer and Brandon passed Marc, but neither of them approved of his attitude.

Why does he like it when she's upset?

Why don't you ask him?

Brandon opened the truck and waited for the woman and child to get settled. As he shut the door and went to his assigned ride, Brandon could feel her waiting for his denial. Using that famous Mitchel intuition, he kept her waiting.

Jennifer chuckled at the tactic, but she didn't give him what he wanted. She hadn't decided if she would mentor him, but it didn't matter. She would only do it with Kyle's permission and supervision, and that meant her man would have to be told who

Brandon really was. Angela had already forbidden it and Jennifer refused to cross her. She didn't mind keeping the secret so long as Angela was the one wielding the hammer of justice when it finally dropped. She was the shepherd that Adrian had been too corrupt to be. The boss cared about every life, no matter how small.

2

“I need help. Please!”

The radio call brought a fresh wave of tension to the lead rig. Marc glanced over to see how Angela was taking it.

Angela kept writing in her book, but the white knuckled grip she had on the pen gave her away. The caller was a child. She was trying hard to ignore it, but Marc doubted that would hold if the kid kept calling.

He switched off the radio. They'd been hearing it all day, but if Safe Haven asked for a location, mentally or over the radio, refugees would know where they were. When they camped, Marc expected her to send a team to find the wheezing child.

Kendle didn't wake up. They'd spent three hours beating around plans and scouring maps for their boat trip before she'd dropped out in the rear bunk. Marc had been able to relax then. He didn't know how Angela stood the tension when she was around him and Adrian. He'd never considered it

from her point of view before. It had been a relief when Kendle suddenly declared she needed a nap and then took one.

Angela didn't tell Marc that she was perfecting her copy of Adrian's sleep spell. She could now target a specific person in a small group.

"We'll be at the site in the next half hour. You'll stay with your security?"

Angela bobbed her head.

Marc felt her restlessness, but he didn't know what to do about it.

Angela didn't either. What she wanted, she couldn't have. "I'll be with the kids after we get camp up. We've missed our meeting the last few nights." Kyle's team had been sent ahead, along with Ivan's, to secure the site.

Marc was satisfied she would be occupied while they scouted the railcars.

Angela was relieved when Marc turned his attention to things other than her mood. He didn't understand what it was like to be under a spell that stole rational thoughts and replaced them with garbage.

Angela concentrated as a wave of tension swept the convoy. She narrowed it to a rear truck, then pinpointed it to Charlie.

"I talked to him, but he wasn't ready."

Angela sighed deeply, hating her son's pain. "Do you think she'll change her mind?"

"Not until he changes his behavior. She thought she was getting an Eagle, not a horny kid."

Angela tensed. She hadn't known the couple was consummating their relationship. "That makes it harder."

"Yep." Marc scanned the vehicles he could see, also able to feel Charlie's anger and confusion. "He has a lot of growing up to do."

Angela grunted. "That's another thing I didn't want to tell him. He's like us. He'll learn life the hard way."

Marc chuckled, reaching out to stroke her hand. "We made it through."

Angela smiled, squeezing his fingers. "Yes, we did."

It was a nice moment for both of them, but it was destroyed with thoughts of the man who was always between them now.

Angela pulled her hand away.

Marc let her withdraw, unable to help being jealous even though Adrian wasn't with them. Until the spell was broken, Adrian would always be in Angela's mind and there was nothing Marc could do to fight it other than love her when she would let him.

"We're all working on it." Angela thought about Jennifer, who was currently monitoring this conversation from her place in the kids' semi.

Marc knew. He was tolerating the teenager spying on them because he hadn't figured out why she was doing it.

"It's her job. She's learning about people, like I told her to."

Marc hadn't realized Angela had ordered the girl to become a snoop.

"I told her she didn't understand human nature. After everything she's been through, that sank in and festered. Since she isn't the type to challenge me openly, she decided to listen and see if I'm right."

"You are."

"Yes, but she's catching up fast. With so many older, wiser minds open to her now, she's able to compare opinions she didn't have before."

Marc struggled to open a private line of communication.

Angela didn't help him. He needed to sharpen those skills too.

Marc grunted as he got it. *I saw her mind. She's stronger than anyone here, except you. I almost understand why you chose her.*

Fate chose her. She's the only descendant who can keep me out for any length of time.

Angela didn't usually share details about her gifts with him. Marc knew it was because she feared his reaction, but he'd realized that was a mistake. To understand everything she'd gone through during the changes, he had to include their abilities. *Do you have as many doors as Jennifer?*

Angela's shoulders tensed. *So many I haven't opened them all yet. She has a warehouse. I have a cargo ship.*

The boat reference was Angela's way of letting him switch the topic if the knowledge she'd given him was too much.

Marc steered around an old wreck and did a fast scan in his mirrors. *Will one of them break the charm?*

My witch says no. She knows more about the doors than I do, but she has a lot of time to listen to them.

Angela had locked her demon inside the mental cage again. His own demon was too scared of him to misbehave, but Marc had restricted it so much that the grumbling in his mind was common. Most of it was about how unhappy Angela's witch was, so Marc ignored it. He wasn't going to instruct Angela on their gifts. She'd had hers for a lifetime. He'd only been using his a few months. *Why are you different from the other alphas?* Marc didn't see her flinch, but he felt it.

I'm not an alpha anymore. I'm Byzantine.

I don't know what that means.

Are you sure you want to talk about this?

Absolutely.

Angela wanted to smile at his eager tone, but couldn't. She was too worried about his reaction. She forced herself to answer. *I have all your gifts. I have everyone's gifts. The doors are all there, just locked until I have an evolution or make a copy. The matching cell snaps open and I can do it. I only need to view it once.*

Marc was stunned. *How much energy does that drain?*

Only a little, as long as I don't use any of them. Angela pushed her graying curl behind her ear. *I'll never have enough energy to use them all in the same fight.*

Is this normal...or is this for the final battle you didn't want me to know about?

If I didn't want you to know, you wouldn't. Angela's tone was calmer than her words. *Nothing about me is normal. Even Adrian isn't sure why I'm so powerful. He was hoping your scroll diving would yield results.*

Now it was Marc's turn to twitch. He hadn't thought she knew about that.

I know everything about all of you, she stated ominously, mental mood falling into desperation. *He's hurting right now. It rips me apart.*

Marc sent a blast of love and then covered her with his mental shield, hoping it might give her a little relief. Learning about her gifts wasn't bothering him. Knowing she was in pain was. The consolation was knowing that Adrian was also in agony. To distract her, Marc kept to their topic. *I found a scroll called The Blessing, but only a pure soul can do it.*

None of us are that, except maybe you.

I would have tried it already, but there's a catch. The pure soul can't be biased, or it will backfire.

Please don't, then. I've had enough of backfires.

Marc's lips twisted. *Yeah. I'll be diving again when I'm strong enough. We'll keep looking.*

We?

The demons help me hold my breath and pull me up when I get too tired to swim.

I'd like to come along.

We'll need to leave the camp in good hands.

Angela felt Jennifer prying at the corner of her mental barrier, young ego annoyed at the block. *I think I know someone who can handle it.*

Marc began to chuckle, filling their cabin with peace.

“What?”

You'll put her on nights, but Kyle switched to nights to avoid being around her until the wedding. She ambushes him with orgasms. He said he can't take it anymore.

Angela laughed so hard she started crying. “I knew she was the one we should have been watching out for!”

3

“We should wait for the call. Don't get out yet.”

Angela exited the truck, slamming the door so Kendle knew not to join them. She couldn't take being closed-up with the woman anymore.

Marc joined Angela with a frown. The guards were clearing the railcar site and he wasn't getting alarms on his grid, but she wasn't supposed to break the rules.

“Let’s get people fed early and settled. Music is fine, but no open radio channels. I don’t want them hearing the calls tonight.” Their campsite was the thawing ground along both sides of the railcars. She was declaring Safe Haven to be the owner of whatever was in them.

Marc took notes as they stood outside the truck, stretching while the guards finish taping the perimeter.

“Same schedule as last night for security, but rotate the rookies. They need to be comfortable as fill-ins on all shifts.”

Marc had made the schedules and hated every second of it. “I kept the teams together like you want.”

“Good. What we begin now will continue on the island if it works out. This will keep us from losing so many fighters if there are future problems.”

“If?”

Angela sighed. “When.”

“That’s better. What’s next?”

Angela ran through it in her mind again to be positive she’d covered it all.

The camp watched the Eagles impatiently from their vehicles.

“We may have a visitor in the night. Leave a bucket of grain and water behind the animal area.”

Marc caught her thoughts of the horse and smiled. “The kids will love that.”

“I thought so too. Dog’s working on it. Either way, we have extra animal feed until we find more livestock.”

“All clear.” Kyle and Neil joined them, providing security over the leaders until their personal guards were available. Marc and Angela weren’t supposed to be outside yet. Neil frowned at them.

Marc held up a hand. “I followed her so she wasn’t out here without a guard.”

Kyle snorted. “Sure.”

The camp relaxed as Marc’s chuckles floated over the convoy. Most of them had windows down despite the chill.

“Do you want the nightly meeting set right after mess?” Marc knew she needed more sleep. They both did. If they got the meetings out of the way early, they might get to bed sooner.

“Yes.”

The kids who were listening eagerly passed the word.

Ivan and his team surrounded the council, scanning evening shadows.

Angela stretched, getting ready for walking.

“How’s the leg?”

“Fine. Don’t even feel it.”

Marc left her alone about it. He would ask one of the den mothers to eye it for him.

“Let’s get set up.” Angela strode into the camp that was now taped off and had cans lit at the four corners. She began pointing out places for the

community tents and bathrooms first. The mess would go on the other side of the railcars. This would be a two-day stop and she wanted it right the first time. Kenn would have been able to cover it, but he and his team were on third shift again. They would eat and take over around midnight. Until then, Angela had point over the setup while Marc handled everything else.

Angela grinned as she remembered hating getting this duty under Adrian's leadership. Now, it was a relief to only concentrate on one task.

“Please, help! We're sick!”

Angela's improving mood plummeted as her radio delivered the child's misery again. Marc was right. She wasn't going to be able to ignore it, but not because she wasn't strong enough. That was the easy part. The hard part was making the choice to risk lives for just one child who was so sick he probably wouldn't live anyway. His coughs and wheezing suggested he wouldn't survive another twenty-four hours.

Walking by, Kenn caught the images in Angela's mind and detoured to go finish her outfit. He'd been working on it for days despite not receiving a confirmation that she wanted him to. He hadn't needed one. Their twelve years together allowed him to see what only Adrian would have if he'd been here. Angela needed a release. The boss was leaving camp and the herd wasn't going to be told.

“Can you deliver this to Jennifer? I need to hit the head.”

Kyle took the sticky note. He needed to find the council a more private way to communicate until they could use radios again. As Marc left, Kyle couldn't help glancing at the message.

I want Jennifer on point overnight—indefinitely. You tell her, Kyle. Do it now.

Kyle flushed, peering around to see if Angela was standing somewhere watching him. The way she could predict people's reactions was scary. She'd known he would read the note.

Kyle told himself it wouldn't be that bad. If Jennifer was in charge of the camp, she would be too busy to ambush him.

Kyle found his fiancé with the other women and kids. They were hurrying to the latrine. Kyle wasn't sure which group was doing the funniest dance as they tried to hold it in.

Jennifer snickered with him as Pam danced by with Missy, showing her the leg-cross technique that only worked some of the time. Most of the kids hadn't traveled like this in a while and some hadn't done it at all. There had been a few accidents and not all of those had been kids. The adults weren't used to it either.

Kyle handed Jennifer the note and immediately left to resume his duties.

When her blast of joy slammed into him, Kyle was able to keep walking, but the grin covered his face. It was so unusual for him that people all over the site stopped to stare.

Jennifer stayed in place for a few seconds of celebration and then planning mode took over. There was a lot she could accomplish during the nights. The boss would always be happy when she woke.

Brandon trailed Jennifer, scanning her thoughts. Assigned to protect the girl, Brandon had been relieved to get the order. It told him his secret was still safe. More importantly, it said the bosses weren't holding it against him.

Yet. Jennifer couldn't help responding as she walked ahead. If they treat you differently, people will want to know why, but your punishment for lying will come. Count on it.

Brandon's relief faded. She was right.

I can help you with that, but not for free.

Brandon frowned. *You knew.*

Jennifer smirked. *No one keeps me out, except the boss and even she has to work on it. Of course, I knew.*

Why didn't you tell her?

Why do you think Adrian released you right before we left the mountain?

Brandon was dismayed by the only answer that now made sense in context with this conversation. *He knew you were about to tell on me.*

Yep. He hopes he saved you being confronted and exposed, then banished. He's probably right. It wouldn't have gone well.

How long have you known?

I figured it out the night of the quake. You were laughing and having a memory of doing something with a cousin. I almost didn't recognize Adrian.

And then the quake hit.

Yes, we had more important problems. Then we started to recover, and I needed to tell the boss about you. Adrian felt it coming or maybe he picked up something from you. Sneaky bastard, your cousin.

They all are. Brandon locked down on his doors. Other descendants might pick up images from him.

Jennifer didn't have that problem. When she talked this way with someone, it was always on a private line.

How do I do that?

Jennifer kept walking without giving him an answer, but she was certain she would help him learn the skill. Angela didn't want the camp to know Brandon was a Mitchel and Marc agreed. Helping Brandon would help them. "I hope." Keeping a secret this big was dangerous for everyone.

5

"Tonight's lesson doesn't have new rules."
Angela was in the center of the largest community

tent, surrounded by kids of all ages. Both magic and non were here, along with their guardians. The heat from so many bodies had them all on the verge of sweating.

“I’m going to tell you a story and then we’ll talk about it while we have snacks and get set for bed.” Angela motioned to Morgan, who was in charge of security over this tent. Thirteen other Eagles were spread out in the darkness around them, ready to grab people if there was a problem. By now, everyone knew it was dangerous to put descendants in the dark. It also wasn’t wise to have all of their power in one place, but Angela needed them together for this lesson.

“There once was a princess who liked to take long walks on the beach...”

Many of the adults were able to pinpoint the story to a book called *The Princess and the Scorpion*, though few of those could remember the author or origin. They assumed this was another lesson on trust and let their minds wander as they rested. It was good to have the kids occupied.

Angela knew. She wasn’t concerned over it yet, but the adults wouldn’t like how this one ended.

She finished the short story, repeating the final line. “You knew I was a scorpion when you picked me up.”

Angela waited a minute for the kids to get it, though the younger ones wouldn’t. They were just here for safety and companionship. “I see it bothered some of you. Because she died?”

Leeann was quick to speak. “Because she was so stupid. Everyone knows not to pick up scorpions.”

The kids around her nodded. Several of them had survived stings since the war.

Angela nodded. “It is stupid. Doing something risky, when you believe bad things will happen because of it, is stupid.”

The adults were listening now, though not as enrapt as the children were. They’d been hoping for more rules or revelations.

“So, if you know and do it anyway, that’s your fault, right?”

The kids nodded solemnly.

“What if someone throws a scorpion at you and you get stung. Is that your fault?”

“No!”

Many of the kids yelled their answer, happy to be sure of that one.

Feeling the moment arrive, Angela looked through the crowd, making eye contact. “What about the war? Is it our fault? Are we responsible for the sins of our government?”

Silence fell through the tent. Some of the kids shook their heads, but the adults didn’t want to face that query. The answer was disturbing.

“I think that’s why life is so hard for us. We’ve been cursed. Not because we personally picked up the scorpion, but because we allowed someone else to and we were hit by it. It wasn’t our fault, but we’re the ones left to pay for it.” She kept glancing

at people, including them. “That has caused us to feel more pain and hatred than we ever have. What we’ve all been through isn’t fair.”

Angela took a sheet of paper from her pocket and unfolded it in the awkward silence. “This is where we’re going. I want it to be a fresh start for all of us.” Angela handed the paper to the eager kids at her feet who hadn’t viewed the island yet. “We have to leave our mistakes behind and move forward with the wisdom that came from those tragedies. It’s okay to forgive ourselves. We’re not perfect. We’re never going to be, but we are decent people who’ve earned the right to live in peace. We deserve that.” Using her red orbs to make them think magic was being used, Angela lifted her hand. “We are no longer cursed once we leave this land!”

Before she could roll her eyes at the theatrics, Angela got up and left the tent. She couldn’t take the misery in people’s minds over the errors they’d made, the mistakes and oversights that had cost so many lives. Angela didn’t want them carrying that weight at all, let alone lugging it to their paradise. Half her people would believe they had been freed from the curse and the others would act like it to keep her secret. Angela didn’t know if the placebo effect would work, but she’d had to try something.

Ivan followed, once again impressed with how she protected people. He’d finally concluded she loved them. It wasn’t their energy or to serve a power trip. Angela wanted humanity to have peace. Ivan was determined to do everything he could to

help her achieve that impossible goal. He was hers now.

Angela swung around to face him. “Prove it.”

“Name it.”

“Kenn has gear for me. I’ll need a team to provide escort.”

Ivan’s scowl took up his entire face. “You’re leaving camp. Why?”

The radio on her belt crackled.

“Please, help me. I’m in Franklin. I’m sick. ...is anyone out there?”

Angela switched off the radio.

“Okay, yeah.” Her pain was making Ivan’s stomach turn. “I’ll handle it.”

“You’ll handle what?” Marc came from the shadows behind Ivan.

Angela waved Ivan on, stepping in front of her mate. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I wish you’d just send a team.”

“We don’t have a medic who can tell what type of sickness he has. Just me. Maybe.”

“Maybe.” Marc didn’t want to agree, but she was the boss and he was delighted she even wanted to go on a run. He’d thought she was done with all of it after the mountain broke her.

“I’m recovering.”

“I’m glad.” Marc kissed the top of her head. “You’re sure Jennifer can cover a point shift?”

“For a day or two. If I’m gone longer than that, you’ll have trouble.”

Marc sent a small blast of his energy into her, trying to protect her for the trip.

Angela shot her own, wanting the same for her mate while she was gone.

Chuckling, they walked away to hide the sudden tension that sprang up from the coming separation. Neither of them expected to sleep until her run was over.

Permission Revoked

1

“Is something going on?” Tonya joined Samantha and her guard near the semis.

Annoyed at the interruption, Samantha turned to Tonya with an ugly glower.

Not easily intimidated, Tonya put her hand on her hip. “What?”

“I’m watching for something.” Samantha couldn’t help following through. “Are you able to do anything because you’re carrying a descendant baby?”

“W-what?” Tonya couldn’t lie to a descendant.

Samantha knew how to handle the camp gossip. She leaned in. “I don’t want to hear you ride Kenn’s ass anymore about not telling you he can move shit and read minds. Understand me?”

Now very intimidated, Tonya nodded and started biting her lip.

Samantha returned to studying the early morning sky around them, enjoying Tonya’s discomfort.

Tonya hurried off, now worried that Samantha would tell Angela her secret.

Around them, the camp enjoyed the show and waited for the boss to get up. They didn't like it that she was still sleeping.

The Eagles were already working. Most of them knew Angela wasn't in camp, but she wanted the railcars cleaned out. After opening them at dawn to start an inspection, the sentries understood why she'd camped around the rusting mementoes of the old world. Ivan's find was going to make him a hero.

Samantha saw Marc heading for the cars with a helper and approved Quinn being used for more than a guard on Kevin. They needed strong backs; those who weren't going to stick around needed to be used quickly. Kevin was currently helping clear room in the semis for new supplies.

Samantha nodded to Marc. She and Kendle had point over camp until Jennifer appeared. Samantha expected the teenager to be out and about before noon despite the third shift duty she'd pulled. That might buy a few hours, but Marc needed to be ready to handle an upset camp by the time he returned for lunch mess. If he didn't, it might get ugly.

“We've been airing it out for hours. The boss had teams assigned. I have all of them waiting by the correct car or already working on it.”

Marc nodded at Quinn, pleased. With his arm in a half cast, Quinn, like many of their injured, wasn't able to perform his full duties yet, but he still wanted to help. Those people were being used for messages,

spying, and paperwork. “Has anyone been in the engine car yet?”

Quinn stepped closer to deliver the answer, not wanting anyone to hear without knowing if it was okay. “We found the engineer lying on the floor of the car. It looks like he was shot from a long distance. Nothing has been touched.”

“Just shot? The cars weren’t looted?”

Quinn shook his head, voice filling with loathing for the war. “No. Someone just shot him and kept going.”

“It’s not the first time we’ve witnessed stuff like that.”

“No, but this one is a little unusual.” Quinn dug in his pocket.

“How so?”

Quinn handed Marc a moldy logbook. “Check out the destination.”

Marc scanned the page Quinn had opened it to, nose curling to avoid the smell of rot that came from the book. “Pinetucky Restoration Center.” Marc looked at the note scrawled next to it, assuming it was the engineer’s handwriting.

Richie Bunker.

Marc started to smile. “What’s in the cars?”

“You won’t believe it until I show you.”

Marc followed Quinn to the tall, rusting relics. There were seven of them. As they moved to the first, where a level four team was on guard, Marc felt an ominous chill run up his spine. Hoping it

didn't mean Angela was having problems, he tried to concentrate on the job in front of him.

"This first car has power sources, lights, and packages of medication. We checked a few of the expiration dates. Most are still good." Quinn stepped aside so Marc could enter.

Fully stacked, the great vibes of the team guarding it told Marc there was enough here to cover all of their needs for the trip to the boat and maybe even to the island. "Does she have assigned places for everything?"

"She does." Quinn handed him another sheet of paper. "This is where we're supposed to put the inventory."

Marc approved it and then gave the paper back. He made a note on his clipboard so he would know where to send other items that fell under these categories. "Carry on."

Quinn stayed with Marc as he traveled the small train, gathering notes and information. The crates of dry goods and water were the most valuable, but even the designer fashions intended for the wealthy would clothe their people now that winter was here and their gear was low. It was an almost impossible find.

It took Marc a while to travel all the cars, distracted by the amount of supplies they now had from this one stop. It would take them all of today and most of tomorrow to move everything into the semis. It was a shame they couldn't just run the train

to where they needed it. According to the location on the logbook, the train had been scheduled to arrive forty minutes after the last completed stop. That meant the bunker had to be close enough for them to explore and maybe find another stash.

As the late morning sun fought through the grit above them, Marc finally reached the rear of the train. The last two cars appeared to be for livestock. The smell coming from them, while not overpowering, wasn't pleasant.

Quinn didn't want Marc to get upset, but he assumed the man could handle it better than Angela would. "Kyle thinks they were bringing in hired help with all the supplies."

Marc took a fast look inside the cargo car and quickly stepped away. Judging from rotting clothing and bodies, he assumed the hired help had been Mexican slaves trafficked into the country. "People suck."

Quinn bobbed his head in agreement. "Where do you want to go next?"

Marc headed for camp. "I need to be seen during lunch mess and I want to wash up. Make sure everyone who works out here washes up or sanitizes."

Quinn made a note of it and stayed with Marc as they reentered camp. He would be the go-between while the man handled both sides.

Marc felt the problem coming before he reached the food area, but he didn't shy away from it. The camp knew Angela was gone.

Marc stepped inside the tent and crossed his arms over his chest.

A dozen camp members immediately came to him, clamoring for answers.

“Did you know?”

“Where is she?”

“Is she okay?”

Marc waited for them to quiet.

“Where’s the boss?!” someone in the rear of the crowd shouted, drowning out everyone else.

“She and a team left camp last night to go help with the calls we’ve been hearing on the radio.”

Marc’s fast, honest answer took a little of the fight out of the tent.

“Why did you let her go?!”

“When is she coming home?!”

Marc forced himself to grin. “Since when has she ever told me that information?” Marc waited, diffusing their anger with cynical mirth each time they fired.

“You should have told us she was gone!”

“She should have sent someone else!”

“I mentioned both of those things and she told me she was an Eagle first and our boss second.” Marc grinned again. “It felt like my Angie. I got out of her way and let her do what she wanted. Like you’re all going to.” He went to the line for coffee, hoping his next words were the truth. “If she needs us, she’ll call. Until then, we’ll make her happy by doing our jobs.”

Stated with the right amount of tolerant resignation, it doused the last flame and allowed the camp to ease away from a deadly edge. Marc didn't think it would work even once more. He felt that way because it had barely worked on him. If they didn't have Angela back in camp soon, Safe Haven would tear itself apart while he went searching for her. One reckless choice might sink them all this time.

2

“Are we getting close?” Ivan was driving the jeep. He wanted plenty of time to stop and study the situation before Angela went in.

“Less than an hour.” They had traveled until an ugly dawn and then Angela had insisted they pull over to sleep. She didn't want to go into an unknown situation without being rested. They'd been listening to refugees on the radio; the call from the sick child had come twice more. The good thing about the trip was that it had been dark for most of it and they hadn't been able to view the horrible landscape around them. Now that it was early afternoon and they were nearing their destination, they'd had their fill of the sights. This area had been hit by the draft. Even after eleven months, it was clear what had happened by the kicked-in doors and wrecked government vehicles. The people in this area had fought back. Angela applauded even as she mourned them.

Ivan concentrated on the road, still a little stunned about how they'd woken. He had insisted Angela and the three Indians on their team take the first rest. He had reluctantly gone to sleep when it was his turn because he hadn't been able to stay awake longer without being too tired to be sharp. When she'd woken him four hours later by slapping his shoulder, Ivan had snapped awake to find a body next to the jeep. When he asked Angela what happened, she said the man snuck up on her. From the way the corpse had been drained, Ivan wondered if the man had been a descendant. Angela had refused to answer, but her gray hair was once again a glossy black and there were no wrinkles showing at the corners of her eyes. Ivan had been observing their gifts and figured out descendant lifeforces gave them a full recovery.

Angela didn't care about Ivan's thoughts. She was trying to look ahead to the town and figure out how she could help them and get back with her people before nightfall. She was hoping it was something simple. She had only brought a small variety of medications to try.

Angela jumped at the sound of someone in the backseat biting their fingernails. They were all nervous. Eagles hated not knowing what to expect.

"Which way?" Ivan slowed at the intersection. They hadn't been using a map.

Angela concentrated for a minute and then pointed. "Twenty minutes down that road. Find us a place to pull over for recon."

Satisfied she wasn't going to be a problem in that area, Ivan did as instructed.

The other men in the jeep were crowded together. Angela hadn't wanted to split them up even though it would have been a more comfortable ride. The three soldiers from Tonya's hostage situation, and the three Indians from Natoli's camp who had chosen to stay with Safe Haven, didn't complain. They were honored to be chosen for a run with the boss.

Ivan had no problem locating a good spot to pull over and hide their vehicle. As everyone emerged, he waved them into the formation Kenn had been having everyone practice when there was time. They were rusty and awkward, but at least they knew the moves. Ivan was determined to get his team in shape, no matter if they were in camp or out of it.

Angela followed his lead, allowing the men to surround her with protection. As they walked, she filled them in on how she hoped things would happen. "I'll go in and tell them I'm a doctor; I heard the call. I'll examine them and try to figure out what the problem is. Hopefully, I'll figure it out quickly, give them the medications they need, and then we'll get gone. I'd like to be back with the camp by dark."

Everyone was relieved to hear that. Despite liking the adventurous lifestyle of Safe Haven, all seven men were nervous because she was along.

“I won’t be using my gifts. It’s not a good idea for these people to find out who I am. Be careful what you say.”

That was another relief for the men who hadn’t been sure about her intentions. If it had been up to them, they would have made the same choice.

Angela fell silent, picking up waves of misery from the small town ahead. She had brought a rookie crew in hopes the strangers would believe she was traveling with hired protection. She wasn’t going to tell anyone about Safe Haven, even if they were good. Once she made it back to camp, she could send a team for them.

“Hang here while I look.” Ivan didn’t get out of sight as he observed the town.

The team behind him waited with barely hidden impatience.

3

“I’m heading in.” Angela was tired of waiting for Ivan to give the signal. They’d been watching the town for a half an hour and only seen a few people the entire time—all of them ill.

Worried about their ability to keep her safe, Ivan sighed and led them in.

They were noticed right away. People came to the doors and windows to stare, but not in welcome or hope. These people expected to be robbed. Considering her team was heavily armed, Angela

understood. Hoping to minimize the fear, she waved to children and smiled at adults.

Few of them returned the overtures.

Angela hated the feel of the town. Judging from the older ages, she assumed these people hadn't been wanted for the draft. They'd banded together, but an illness had struck. Angela didn't find evil as they walked through the square, but she was picking up anger. It was obvious things were not going to go well here.

More people glared from their windows, some flashing rude gestures.

"What did we do?" Travis, one of the Indian men, moved closer to her.

"I think you guys look a little too much like what you are, and I look a little too much like what I am."

Her answer confirmed their concerns about trouble.

As they moved across the square, the team picked out details. The most obvious was the smell. In the center of town, near the barn, the odor of rotting flesh was unmistakable. The flies and insects surviving in the cold weather gave the team a good idea of what was inside.

Most of the houses in the center didn't appear to be damaged, but all of the structures on the outer edges had broken windows and doors that hung ajar. The draft had come here, but she was positive there had been problems after that.

Ivan came up with the answer. “This was the wave of family members following the trucks.”

Angela frowned. “You mean after the draft took their family, they followed and looted towns?”

“Yes.” Ivan kept his voice low as they passed a trio of townsmen who looked healthy enough to put up a fight. Their clothes were a mix of old and new, patched with pieces of cloth that appeared to have come from curtains and pillows. The variety of genetics in this camp implied out-of-towners had been stuck here after the war and done the best they could to survive. Judging from the number of graves in the small cemetery and the wrapped corpses waiting for holes, they hadn’t been successful. Around the town, sickly pine trees with black patches of mold climbing up trunks dripped rain continuously, creating a mud-coated ground that tried to trip them. “Look at the graffiti on the walls. Read it.”

Brandy, we went to Atlanta. We love you.

Ahmed went to Atlanta.

This is Terry. I missed you in Huntsville. Going to Atlanta.

Angela forced herself to stop reading the messages, believing Ivan’s theory was right. Friends and family had followed the draft in hopes of rescuing their loved ones, but they had needed to eat and survive the cold. The war had happened just days before Christmas, catching so many people on the road that waves of survivors had swamped any town near them. Angela was sure many of those had

tried to help people, but there was only so much food to go around.

“Over there.” Ivan pointed at a sign painted on the inside of a window.

Strangers come here first!

Ivan smelled a trap and waved the team closer to the boss.

Bracing, Angela stepped inside the rental office. Cramped with makeshift beds and tent shelters, the people she had sensed stared at her and her men in wary fear.

“How do they all fit in here?” Travis was horrified. The office didn’t have any furniture beyond beds. No one was well enough to use them for anything more than wood in the fireplace that was nestled in the far corner. The smell was staggering.

“When you’re cold, you do what it takes to stay warm.” Angela waited for someone to come forward to talk, listening to coughs and grunts of pain from people who were too ill to stand.

“What do you want?”

Angela turned around to find an older bald man sitting on the floor behind the door. He coughed into his hand, leaving specks of blood.

Angela knelt in front of his thin frame, ignoring the concern of her guards. “I’m a doctor. I heard your calls for help.”

The Mayor stared at her for a few seconds before letting out a sigh of mistrust and agony. “Please help us.”

“I will, in one way or another.” As Angela dug through her bag for a testing kit, she was aware of the soldiers spreading out, while the Indians stayed in a tight circle around her. It was another of Kenn’s new formations.

“Who are you?”

“Mercenaries. We won’t hurt your people as long as your people don’t try to hurt us.”

“We can’t pay.”

Angela fought to find the words that wouldn’t give her away. “We like to pay it forward. Fate’s a harsh mistress.”

“Tomas.” The Mayor wanted to hold his hand out to shake with her, but he didn’t have the strength.

“Angie. What were the first symptoms?”

“We stay exhausted all the time and we can’t get enough to drink.”

“When did it begin?”

“We’ve been suffering it since summer, but it got bad a month ago.” The Mayor coughed again.

Angela stopped asking questions so she could listen to his chest.

She was frowning as she put her stethoscope away. “It will take me a few hours to run tests. I’d like to draw blood from a few people for comparison so I can be sure before I give anyone medication. Is there some place I can work?”

“Morty will take you. We...have empty houses. You can...take your pick.” The Mayor looked up at the man who had come to stand near them. Tall and

wide, he was the only one in the room who was armed. The dented shotgun on a strap over his shoulder had obviously seen a lot of use.

Angela gave the Mayor a gentle pat on his arm, positive he would be dead before morning. "I'll do everything I can."

"You can't give them permission!" Morty's shout was loud. "As soon as you die, I'm in charge!"

"And not...a second sooner," the Mayor wheezed out.

The crowd of sick people around them nodded in agreement.

Morty pointed a hard finger toward Angela. "The minute he dies, we're throwing you out of here. He already let soldiers in and that cost us everything! We're not going to let you do it again."

Angela was careful to control her anger at the threatening tone. These people were sick and dying. They had nothing left to lose. She assumed the Mayor had been a good leader for them to be still supporting his choices while he was so weak. In most situations, the Morty of the group would have already killed him and taken over.

Aware of Morty glowering at her, Angela kept her head down and tried to ease the Mayor into his last hours.

Ivan and his team kept their hands on their guns, facing the mob. Only half a dozen of the men were healthy enough to put up a fight, but if the sick people joined them, it was enough to take the last of the ammunition in the attempt. That would leave

them dependent upon fighting skills and Angela's magic. Ivan refused to put them in that situation unless he had to. "What happened here after the war?"

Morty's big fists clenched. "People like you is what happened here! Your kind came through and said they could keep us from getting sick. Our Mayor trusted them and now we're all dying!"

"Doctors or army?"

"Both, together!" Morty spat, glaring at Ivan with hatred. "Before that, the draft and then refugees. They've wiped us out."

Angela thought of her conversation with Adrian about the government having no one to keep their experiments in check. These survivors were all lab rats with no scientists left to record the results.

"Maybe they can help us!"

Morty spun at the weak yell. "That's how we got into this mess! Every time we trust someone, they call their friends. We treat them right and they come back to destroy us. I refuse to do it anymore."

"Stop." The Mayor leaned his head against the wall, gasping for air.

Angela left the office, not wanting to witness his demise if it was happening now. She had underestimated the illness in this town. She was still hoping it was something she could treat, but rushing in this way had been a bad idea.

Morty pulled his plaid jacket together and buttoned it as he led them to the center of town. He stopped near the narrow bandstand that had been

stripped of everything burnable. He began to point. “All the houses with Xs on them are empty. All the houses with curtains have residents. Stay away from them. No one likes strangers.” With the rules laid down, he stomped off.

Ivan snorted at the rudeness, but didn’t comment. It was obvious these people had been through hell.

Angela looked around. Now that they had been cleared by the Mayor to help, the people out here were even leerier, fearing she and her crew were government stooges coming to finish them off. Several of the refugees Safe Haven had taken in since the war had told stories of escaping horrors like that. Angela had hoped never to see it, but the terrified thoughts slamming into her from all directions couldn’t be ignored. These people were terrified that the government had resurfaced.

Angela wanted to find a way to let them know that wasn’t the case, but she could also sense another form of leeriness in their thoughts. It was a fear of the unknown, of magic. These people had experienced things, probably from the dangerous landscape surrounding them. Angela had felt it as they arrived. Nature didn’t want humanity to recover. She wanted humankind gone. Because of that vendetta, the residents here were on the lookout for anything strange. If they got even the smallest hint that she was different, she and her team would be in grave danger.

Angela picked a house facing the square because it was the smallest and most defensible for her team, but also for the recon value. They could see the rental office from there.

As soon as they were inside, Ivan and his team hurried to check doors and windows, and then set up a patrol on the perimeter.

Angela went to the kitchen counter, the longest space, and cleaned it off so she could work.

Outside, people went about their routines, but they watched the home where Angela and her mercenaries were stashed, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

4

“Please! I need help!”

Angela reached down and turned off the radio on her belt. “Go find that boy. Get him to quit sending out messages.”

Ivan scanned the men and found all of them willing. He motioned toward the Indians, who had spent their entire lives being taught how to slip under the radar. Natoli had trained them well.

The Indians went out a rear window and into the small alley that limited the view from the other buildings.

Angela kept setting up her equipment on the counter, hoping the Indians didn’t find trouble.

The dusty home had been cleared of all furnishings except a bed in the rear room. The same

was true of cabinets and drawers, though it was second nature to check them anyway.

Walking through the kitchen, Peter and James explored. They weren't searching for supplies. They were looking for clues. This town had an odd feel they hadn't placed yet.

Angela let the men go. She didn't think they were looting, but she didn't care if they were. Safe Haven had been surviving on looting the dead all along. This wasn't any different as far as she was concerned. Plus, it kept them busy so she could work.

Ivan took up a post at the front door as voices echoed. He was dismayed to see half a dozen town members carrying a body. The people lugged it awkwardly to a rear building with a large red X on the window. The clues kicked in for Ivan. He turned to Angela with wide eyes and panic in his voice. "It's contagious."

Angela knew. That was the mistake she'd figured out as they met the Mayor. It had been obvious after scanning people in the room. The way these people were living, she would have given other theories a chance, except she already had a slight tickle in her throat. Whatever it was, it worked fast. "Yeah. We're not going to make it back to camp tonight."

An hour after arriving, Angela had narrowed the illness to three possibilities. Two of them were treatable. One of them was something the old world would have quarantined the town for and maybe even destroyed to keep it from spreading.

Angela moved toward the rental office that had become a bunkhouse for the most ill, subtly scanning for her Indian crewmates. The radio call from the sick child hadn't gone out again, so she had assumed they'd been successful.

Ivan held the door for her as she went in and then stood in the opening, letting the cold enter. He was hoping it might clean out some of the poison air.

Angela knelt next to the Mayor, not surprised when the man didn't respond to her touch. He wasn't dead, but he might as well be. Angela examined the rash on his neck and then the dilated pupils, trying hard to ignore the misery around her. Everyone was watching, aware that this was their fate. Even though she had come to help them, they didn't view her as a savior or a Samaritan. They were waiting to see if she was prey or a predator.

Angela didn't want to waste the small amount of medicine she had brought on the Mayor when it was obvious that he was too far gone for anyone to bring back without magic. She stood up. "I need four volunteer patients."

There was immediate activity as people rose. They didn't trust her, but they didn't want to die and

there wasn't another option. The fact that a doctor had answered their calls at all was amazing.

Angela tried not to spend any more time in the house with them than she had to, but as the tickle in her throat became a steady scratch, she knew it was too late. Whatever it was, she had it, and that meant her crew did as well. She had a limited time to figure out what the problem was before the illness zapped her strength and slowed her down. Her guards would fall quicker because they didn't have her host to put up an extra battle on their behalf. Then she would be in a strange town, sick, without protection.

Angela hurried back to her workspace with her samples, glad to find the three Indians waiting. Standing next to them was a young boy with a shaved head and small splatters of blood around his nose and mouth. A thin frame cloaked in filthy clothes trembled, telling them all how weak the small boy really was.

Angela's heart dropped. Even if she found the cure, he was too far gone to save with medicine.

She motioned Ivan to get her kit and do what he could for the little redhead. As she began to work with the samples she'd collected, tears rolled down Angela's jacket and landed on her muddy boots. If she saved the boy, she would have to destroy the town. She would lose men. Each time she was forced into a choice like this, it ripped her apart and increased the darkness in her soul. *Soon, there won't be room for anything else.*

6

The next three hours were some of the hardest Angela and her team had gone through as far as dealing with children since the war. Listening to the little boy die was torment. The team knew they would be hearing the sound of his little hacking gasps for air long after they left this place.

Angela hadn't spoken since they'd gotten back. After her tears had stopped, she and the witch had begun to plan their escape. There was no way she could let the child die, but as soon as she saved him, the town would know she was a descendant and they would be under attack. Adding to that stress, she and the men were getting tired. They shouldn't be, not so soon after having a rest this morning, but the illness was already sinking in and draining them.

Angela swallowed to keep from coughing and kept working. She had narrowed it to two possibilities now, eliminating one of the easier illnesses to treat. In the next fifteen minutes, the final test would be done, and she would know if they had the plague or influenza. Either way, it wasn't their biggest problem. She didn't have the right medication to treat either of those illnesses. Both required powerful antibiotics to have a shot. The weak kind Angela had wouldn't knock it down. She had to leave and find the medication or call someone to bring it. Either way, the risk was high that she would be discovered as a descendant or a Safe Haven member by doing so—presumably both. After

spending half a day in this place, she didn't want to expose her camp. Despite them not being evil, these survivors were a threat. This town didn't like magic.

In the house around her, Angela's team was waiting restlessly and worrying. None of them were feeling well and all of them were having trouble listening to the boy cough. Everyone hoped Angela would break her rules and help the child, but they needed it to be soon, before the illness prevented them from protecting her during the fight afterwards. They also knew trouble was coming.

"He's getting worse." Travis came out, unable to take it any longer. He regarded Angela expectantly.

Angela waved at the testing kit on the counter. "That has eleven minutes left. When it finishes, I'll have the answer. As soon as I do, I'll handle it."

Everyone in the house breathed a sigh of relief, even the little boy. Caleb wasn't a descendant, but he knew an angel when he saw one. He had faith Angela would save his life. He had prayed for help and help had come. Caleb had lost his entire family to the illness, so it was easy for him to bond with the strangers even though the rest of the town wouldn't. He was lonely, scared; he didn't want to stay here. There were too many ghosts.

Angela and the team waited impatiently for the time on the test to pass. Ivan had them repack everything they had used. He also designed a quick way to bring the boy with them. He wasn't sure if

they were going to be able to walk out of here or if they would be running.

“Make a plan for both.” Angela was scanning for problems and finding them. The town was twitching because she hadn’t come out to give them an answer yet and now, someone else had died. She assumed it was the Mayor. “Our permission to be here has just been revoked.”

The Last Thing We Needed

1

“**T**hey’re carrying a body to storage. A lot of them are armed now. Morty’s directing.” Peter was watching from the front window of the house. “I guess he’s the Mayor now.”

Angela checked the timer again. “Eight minutes.”

Tension thickened as they waited to see where the small crowd went next.

“They’ve gathered outside the barn... They’re looking this way.”

Caleb let out an awful cough that sent a chill through Angela. He didn’t have eight minutes. She moved toward the bedroom, motioning Ivan to help Peter. “I need time for that test to finish. Keep them busy.”

Ivan and Peter stepped out on the porch to talk to the townspeople as they arrived.

James hurried to cover them from the window.

The Indians stayed with Angela. Ivan had made it clear someone had to be with her at all times.

“We know who she is. Hand her over!”

“What are you talking about?” Ivan prepared to fight.

“That’s the Safe Haven woman!”

“There’s a UN reward for her!”

“We can split the reward, just grab her!”

Fury radiated from every inch of Ivan’s muscular body. “You’ll have to kill me.”

“There’s the loyalty!” someone in the crowd shouted. “It is Safe Haven. That’s Angela!”

“I told you I recognized her voice!”

Too late to do anything about that mistake, either. Angela was listening as she helped the child.

The Indians also listened, wishing time would hurry up so they would have the results. It felt bad here and that feeling was growing stronger by the second.

Angela sat on the bed next to the dying child, glad he was unconscious. She placed her hand around his wrist and allowed the last lifeforce she had taken to come back up in an attempt to be free. As it struggled out of her, she forced it into the boy, not letting the soul escape. It was exhausting.

The Indians stared in astonishment.

A gunshot brought everyone’s attention back to the problems outside.

The door swung open. Ivan dragged Peter inside. “Someone shot at us from the crowd and everyone scattered. They thought we were going to kill them all for it. Now they know better. It won’t stop them next time.”

Angela hurried to check Peter's wound even though he was walking on that leg and she didn't see a lot of blood.

"Just a trim. I'm good."

Angela quickly wrapped a bandage around his wound and then went to check the test.

"Two minutes." Angela decided to go ahead with the mental call she needed to make. At this point, it wouldn't matter. As soon as the townspeople saw the boy was healed, they would know the truth. Any descendant trackers in the area already knew what she had done, and this call would help narrow her location. Angela concentrated, opening a connection. *I need you.*

The town came to a grinding halt around them.

Angry, scared people who might have been willing to stay away until they left flipped into furious, vengeful beasts who immediately rushed back toward Angela and her crew.

"No magic here!"

"Get the woman!"

"They're coming." Angela drew her weapon and checked it like she had learned, encouraging the others to do the same. "One minute on the test."

Hoping to stall for one minute, Ivan didn't wait for the people outside to attack. He tapped the corner of the front window glass with his gun to break it and started shooting.

Angela wanted to tell him not to kill, but that was a bad example to set. If a few bodies

encouraged the mob to break up, it was a small price to pay.

Instead of breaking up, they crowded together as if they had fought this way before and ran up onto the porch.

“I can’t hold them!” Ivan got away from the door as more slugs flew into it.

Angela grabbed the test and crouched under the counter with Ivan and Peter. She heard the Indians moving to the back room to cover the boy.

A shotgun blast came through the window over their heads.

Disoriented, Angela was barely able to keep a hold of the test in her hand as people shoved into the house and grabbed them. The ringing in her ears prevented any distinction.

Angela held tight to the plastic as they were dragged out into the square, edges cutting into her palm.

The soldiers and Indians were beaten when they resisted.

Angela didn’t so the test in her hand wouldn’t be destroyed.

Coughing and curses punctuated hits as the townspeople vented rage that mirrored what they’d experienced in the mountain. The difference was that this time, Jimmy’s side had the advantage.

Praying enough time had passed, Angela doubled over to look at the test. As she saw the results, and the boot flying toward her, she was able

to give Ivan a comforting nod. “It’s not the bad one.”

The fist slammed into Angela, knocking her to the ground.

She lay there, stunned and groaning as the test was ripped from her hand and ground under a boot.

Fists and feet rained from the enraged crowd, forcing the team to curl into balls in futile attempts to protect vital areas. They weren’t allowed to use knives or remaining ammunition until she gave them the order, but Ivan was almost at his limit. She was being hit and kicked. He couldn’t stand it.

Angela fought to control the witch. These were innocent people who didn’t understand. When they delivered a punishment, they would be kicked out.

“Get her kid!”

“He’s one of ours.”

“Not anymore! Get him!”

Caleb screamed.

Angela’s eyes turned red as she brought the witch forward.

2

“You can’t leave.”

Marc ignored Samantha, stepping around her in the supply truck. He was gearing up.

“I mean it, Marc. You can’t leave. Everyone will take off if you do this.”

Marc still didn’t respond. Angela needed him and he was going.

“She called Adrian. He’ll handle it.” Forced to take drastic measures, Samantha reached out with her cane and rapped Marc on the shin.

Marc jumped, yelling.

Samantha’s guard wasn’t sure if he should try to defend her against the Ghost.

Samantha waved Greg off. She only had time for Marc. “People are watching right now. You’re scared and so are they. You have to stay and do her job. That’s why she left you here.”

Marc didn’t want to listen. Angela’s message had terrified him.

Standing under umbrellas and tarps, the camp was muttering and cursing him for not going already. Everyone had felt Angela’s call for help, but the kids had the worst of it. Unlike most of the camp members who were falling for the crocodile tears, Marc understood the children were stirring things. They wanted the alpha home and they were willing to do anything it took to get her here.

“I feel the same way every time Neil leaves camp, but you have to send someone else. You can’t go.” Before he could protest or make the choice to ignore her again, Samantha lowered her voice. “We have another storm coming.”

Marc knew she wouldn’t make it up. He swore, using curse words he’d learned during his time in the Marines.

Samantha waited for his frustration to pass, aware of guards on the parking area signaling to get his attention. “We also have company.”

Alarm finally triggered, Marc hurried from the supply truck to see who was coming into their camp. With Angela not here and Jennifer working the night shift, they didn't have a descendant capable of a deep scan to verify new people were okay.

As Marc made his way through the twitching, unhappy crowd, it was impossible to miss. Samantha was right. If he left, there was no way the rest of the council would keep these people together.

Sam frowned. "They're flashing Eagle code with the lights."

Marc knew who it was. He went to the caution tape.

Adrian glared at Marc as he came to a stop in front of him. "This is the captain she sent me to pick up. I need antibiotics—Zanamivir and Streptomycin."

Marc motioned Harry, the level two medic on his team, to go get it as a front-heavy man in a blue beanie got out of the passenger side. Marc refused to give Adrian an explanation for not calling him or for letting Angela leave camp with only a rookie guard. It wasn't Adrian's decision or business anymore.

Adrian didn't expect it from Marc, but that didn't stop his anger. When he had been in charge of Safe Haven, Angela had been safe.

Marc sneered at him. *Really? Because I remember it differently.*

Put in his place, Adrian continued to glower, but didn't say anything else. He didn't care what had happened to allow Angela out of Marc's protection. He only cared that she was. Adrian had narrowed her location by the feel of her after the first call, identifying a place in his mental map where it appeared magic had been used to heal someone. It was obvious she had gone to answer the call on the radio. Adrian had hoped Marc would do that personally to keep her from it, but he hadn't.

"She needed to get out."

Adrian understood Marc had been forced to give her freedom. If Angela had insisted, Adrian probably would have agreed too. He just would have gone with her.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Not exactly, but I'm tracking her. I won't be able to send you word or they'll trace it right to here."

Marc already knew that. "I was on my way out."

Adrian looked up at him with the face of the old leader Marc had admired for a short time.

"Why do you think I'm here? She insisted I stop you. This dream has always meant more to her than it has to you. It always will." Adrian took the kit Harry handed him and put the van in reverse. He was out of Marc's sight a minute later, increasing speed as he hurried toward the woman he loved. He hadn't told Marc that Angela's call for help had been weaker than what it should be. Adrian had a sinking suspicion she was sick.

While Marc stared after Adrian, Kyle motioned the Eagles to take the new man to the quarantine zone. It was currently empty.

Filled in on the way here, the captain didn't protest the curt behavior or lack of greeting. Adrian had told him what to expect. Cole was glad people who were civilized had found him. Having a chance to get back on the water was just icing on the cake.

As Adrian pulled away, Marc turned around to find over half the camp blocking his path. He was quick to drop both hands to the deadly Colts on his hips. "Nothing will stop him from finding her. You know that."

Pam, with Leeann not far behind, gave Marc a warning look as she delivered the decision the den mothers had reached overnight. "If we don't have the boss back in twenty-four hours, we're going to get her—with or without your permission. Don't even bother getting us ready to travel south in the morning. We aren't going."

Marc didn't know whether to be mad or cry. "If we haven't heard something by this time tomorrow, I'll lead the search party."

3

Adrian made it in half the time it had taken Angela to get here. He didn't care who noticed him and he wasn't worried about wrecking. He made record time. If he wasn't so worried, he would have been proud.

Right before the town came into view, Adrian noticed smoke coming from the tree line. Now aware of it, his nose registered the harsh smell and the feel of death. “Angie, what have you done?”

Adrian pulled down the dirt road. He spotted the child standing partially behind Angela, who was surrounded by her team, and let out a deep sigh of common misery. In moments like these, it was impossible for him to believe it was only charms and spells connecting them. The boy was almost certainly the reason the town around them had been reduced to ashes.

Adrian flipped his headlights in the code. As he came to a stop next to the sooty team, he found what he had feared. Angela was leaning against Ivan, coughing.

Ivan glared at Adrian. “She told us a ride was coming. We expected Marc.”

“Is that headlights?”

All of them squinted in the direction Boothe was staring.

“Yes. Load up.” Adrian stayed alert as the team put the boy and Angela into his vehicle and piled in. He quickly took them down a small incline behind the house and used a backyard to get out of sight.

Everyone was relieved when the radio stayed quiet.

As the town fell behind them, Adrian felt Angela’s attention settle on him. Despite her condition and the tension filling the vehicle, sparks

immediately lit up. Adrian smiled at her. “I can’t leave you alone for a minute.”

Angela chuckled, drawing the attention of Ivan. Crammed into the back, he observed them in jealous fascination.

Adrian reached over and placed his hand on Angela’s to send some of his strength. “Take what you need.”

Angela tried not to be greedy as she absorbed his energy, but it was hard. After dealing with Morty and his crew, she was empty. They were dead.

Passengers snapped up as a hum of energy filled the cabin, but all of them went right back out as soon as they verified Angela wasn’t burning anything else. Except for Ivan. He continued to observe the couple, comparing their interactions to what he’d heard about them.

Angela shut her eyes and withdrew her hand, wishing Marc had been able to come. She had no doubt he was trying to find a way to get to her despite knowing Adrian would do it. Marc wasn’t the type to stay with the camp. If she had known things would turn out this way, she wouldn’t have come.

Adrian wanted to offer comfort in that area too, but she was right. It was very likely that Marc would leave the camp to come find her. They needed a way to let him know she was okay before he threw away Safe Haven’s future.

“We have a vehicle back the way you came.” Ivan pointed.

Adrian took them to it, scanning the woman who had already leaned against the seat and started to doze. He assumed the little boy by her hip, glowing with good health, had also been the reason for the weakness that was allowing the illness to harm her.

“His name is Caleb. He’s from the radio.”

Adrian was glad to hear her voice and at the same time, his concern deepened. She sounded worse than sick. “What is it?”

Angela peered over with haunted, bloodshot eyes. “Influenza. I’m calling it a superbug because of how fast it spreads. It took less than five minutes to present.”

Adrian swallowed his fear and pulled in where Ivan directed. As half of the crew got into the jeep, Adrian consulted his map. He couldn’t take her back to Safe Haven.

Angela let exhaustion drag her into sleep. Adrian would find them a place to hide while they waited to discover if the medicine he’d brought would save them. While they waited, Adrian would get the fun of experiencing it too.

Adrian was thinking about what he and Angela had discussed in the cave while waiting for Marc to handle Sonja’s people. The biological agents that were released had included influenza. If this was the random kind, they had a chance to beat it. If it was the weaponized form, she and her team would die.

Adrian found Ivan in his mirror and instantly recognized a kindred soul. Before he could tell the man to dig out the medicine and give Angela a shot, the soldier leaned over the seat.

“Don’t mean to be rude, but she can’t wait.”

Adrian hadn’t realized how worried her team was. He scanned Angela again and groaned in frustration. Her heart was beating unevenly; her breathing was rough.

Ivan filled a syringe from the only bottle in the kit, making sure it was exactly where Angela had told them before Adrian’s arrival. She hadn’t been sure she would be alert enough to do it by the time he came. Helping the little boy had weakened her. She was succumbing faster.

Ivan slid the needle into Angela’s arm and pushed the plunger, willing it to work fast.

“What happened?” Adrian needed to know for when he contacted Marc.

Ivan stared at Angela as Peter took the kit and began dosing the others in the vehicle. “They were beating on us. One of them figured out who she was. When he grabbed the boy, Angela exploded.” Ivan sighed tiredly. “I don’t know how else to explain it. When she was done, she was on the ground looking like she was having a heart attack and the town was burning around us. We stayed there until she woke up. That was right before you arrived.” Ivan coughed and wiped bloody fingers on his pants. “Where are we going?”

“North, for the moment. I need to find a place where you can rest while the medication works.”

“You too.” Ivan coughed again. It was getting harder to breathe.

“What?” Adrian was thinking about what was around them.

“You need the meds too. This shit is highly contagious.”

Adrian suddenly understood why Angela had called for him instead of Marc. He was expendable. The wolfman wasn't. He also wasn't going to stay put without hearing from Angela, but there was no way she could make a call even if she wanted to. Adrian could feel a tracker in the area. If they sent a message over any medium, they would lead the refugees straight to wherever they holed-up. Not sure how to handle that, Adrian concentrated on finding a place to hide. First, he would get Angela tucked away and healing. Then he would figure out a way to keep Marc from joining them. The last thing Safe Haven needed right now was an outbreak.

Adrian swept the soldiers in the van, aware of the jeep behind him weaving. He needed to find a place fast. Without medication and rest, this super flu would kill them all faster than being found by the refugees.

“There.”

Angela's mutter directed Adrian into a veterinary clinic parking lot. Seeing the door had been kicked in, he approved the choice. If people

thought it had already been cleaned out, they wouldn't bother to come in.

4

Angela tried to hold onto Adrian as he carried her inside, but her arms felt like they weighed a hundred pounds. She was forced to settle for dropping her head onto his shoulder and groaning.

Those who could followed him into the dark building. They all tried to watch for trouble, but ended up leaning against the walls for support as the walk finished off their remaining energy.

Caleb tried to help Adrian get the team into the clinic. He had been completely healed by the lifeforce Angela had shoved into him.

Adrian motioned the boy to grab kits instead of people. While the boy brought in the gear he was able to carry, Adrian made repeated trips to get the people who couldn't make it on their own.

On the last trip out, he found Travis and Ivan halfway to the door, crawling on their hands and knees. Ivan had insisted the others be taken first.

Adrian got them inside, then directed Caleb to an office chair in the corner of the room, putting his finger over his lips to let the boy know he needed to be quiet.

Ivan had given the child his spare blanket while they traveled. Caleb pulled it over his lap now and laid his head on the seat to wait for instructions.

Adrian had placed Angela on the dusty couch. He waved Ivan to the floor next to her.

Ivan dropped down with a grunt and then went silent.

The other men also surrounded the boss with their sick bodies, determined to protect her no matter their condition.

Adrian was forced to leave them alone while he moved their vehicles into the mechanic shop next door. He disguised them with tarps and debris, and worried the entire time.

5

An hour later, Adrian hurried back inside the veterinary office. He was relieved to find everyone where he'd left them, but their conditions had deteriorated another level. Red cheeks said a fever had arrived. Adrian hoped it was a sign of immune systems fighting as he locked and barricaded the entrances and windows.

The office had three exam rooms, a few closets, the reception area, and a bathroom. In the reception area, a brittle Christmas tree had toppled as it dried out or maybe been shaken over from a quake. Broken ornaments and fading cards were scattered across the floor.

Adrian narrowed in on the rug under the tree and found the edge of a hatch. He slid the coffee table overtop it, then got busy seeing to the team. Only half the men had been medicated.

“Her first.” Travis groaned.

Adrian injected the man. “I already did.”

Travis tried to nod and passed out.

As soon as Adrian finished with that chore, he double-checked the barricades he’d erected, and then added to them. The animal cages contained skeletons that didn’t smell, but still screamed in rage. Adrian felt the guilt as he grabbed blankets from a cabinet and stuffed them into his drawstring bottom coat. It was made to stay snug and help carry items.

The rest of the office also held treasures he hoped to come back for later. He tried to hurry, but it was impossible to be fast and silent at the same time. It felt like hours before he made it back to the reception area.

When he saw none of them had moved, but they were all breathing, he allowed himself a minute to think. He needed a defensible area and the ground floor wasn’t going to cut it if anyone tracked them here.

The hatch.

Adrian moved the table and opened the dusty hatch in the floor.

He grimaced as his flashlight fell on corpses who appeared to have died from the same illness that was threatening the Eagles. Five rotting men and one woman stared in reproach at his late arrival.

Steeling himself, Adrian moved down the stairs to stack them in a far corner. He needed those makeshift cots. Dead people didn’t.

Adrian scooped Caleb into his arms for the first trip, knowing without being told that Angela wanted it that way. It's what he would have insisted on.

Angela didn't budge when she was moved, adding more fear to the men who staggered down when Adrian called. Dropping where he directed, it wasn't long before Adrian was the only one awake.

6

Adrian climbed out the tiny window an hour later. He didn't want to leave Angela, but he needed to be sure it didn't look like anyone was here. Throat tickling and body dragging, he went outside to secure a perimeter.

“Ah!”

Adrian ducked a lunging shadow at the last second, heaving his body around to tackle the man.

Adrian grunted, shoving his hands around the man's filthy neck. He didn't have time to get his knife and this had to be quiet. Where there was one tracker, there were more.

The man under him gasped as Adrian's thumbs crushed his windpipe.

Desperate, the tracker jerked his knife sideways.

Adrian felt the motion and rolled, knee coming up to separate them.

The suffocating tracker lunged forward to drive the blade home.

Angela opened her eyes, refusing to moan. She didn't know where she was or what was going on.

The first thing she saw was bodies.

Angela jerked up against the wall, lungs hurting as she tried to draw in breath around the horror. "I killed them."

Footsteps hurried toward her in the darkness. She identified them as Adrian's, but it didn't matter. She was overwhelmed with grief and remorse. "I got them killed."

Adrian slid onto the bunk and wrapped her up against his chest. "That's not your team, baby. Those bodies were already here. That's not your team."

Instead of being comforted, Angela cried harder, pointing.

Gut churning in dread, Adrian looked at the other bunks.

"Damn."

He scanned Boothe's body to determine how long the soldier had been gone. It couldn't have been long.

Adrian swept the rest of the team and was horrified to discover one of their Indian teammates, Magnus, had also died. Blood was dripping from one of his nostrils.

Adrian turned around to comfort Angela and fell off the side of the bed.

Unable to get up, he fought to stay conscious as weakness swarmed his body. He felt Angela come to help him and then there was only darkness.

Chapter Sixteen BK9

Straight Through

Byzantine: *extremely complex or intricate; marked by deviousness or scheming. Also, a power struggle.*

1

“I’ve never been in an ash storm.” Instead of rain, dirt was falling. Greg kept waiting for wet drops and got dust flakes instead. It was odd.

Evening had come with a wintery blast of wind that covered the camp in an inch of thick dust. They had been able to get some of the camp under cover, but the kids had refused, demanding a bugout. Because it was coming from descendant children, the guards had sent for Marc. That man was heading to handle it now.

Samantha nodded at the comment from the guard. When the storm started and Angela didn’t appear to calm people or tell them what to do, panic had spread like fire. When Marc refused to let people call her, they’d gotten angry. Marc had then made the mistake of going back to work on the railcars instead of staying to calm the herd. He’d assumed the council and Eagles had it covered. The

guards stayed on top of keeping people in the perimeter, but any more would have required physical confrontations, which the guards had refused. They might have considered it if the biggest rebels hadn't been kids. Samantha was monitoring several areas, including the coming confrontation. She hadn't been this nervous since she was on the bottom level of the cave, surrounded by people who hated her for what she could do.

Around them, rain fell in heavy sheets of brown ash, coating everything. Lightning shot across the sky, followed by a loud crack of thunder. Sam jumped. The weather certainly wasn't helping the mood.

"Let's go in now." Greg led Samantha into the shelter of the mess, where the noise from the storm pounded in their ears.

Kyle and his team, with Neil and Zack, were patrolling the camp in rotating formations. It reminded Samantha of old movies where guards tried to keep prisoners inside. The feel was ugly. If Marc didn't handle it right, the camp would take off into the storm. Adrian had been gone for ten hours. The fragile peace had been disturbed almost immediately after he left by descendant children crying for the alpha. Not allowed to use mental calls, the kids were blasting the adults here with their anguish. Sam knew Marc had intended to have extra guards on the kids tonight to be positive none of them ran off on their own, but the fragile peace wasn't going to hold that long.

Shouts echoed outside the flap, making Samantha's guard step closer to her. Unlike when they were trapped in the mountain, they now had options for an escape. It allowed Greg to keep his gun in the holster as a group of descendant children came into the mess.

"Are you with us?" The kids were covered in ash and defiance.

Samantha nodded. "So is everyone else. If you're going to do it, do it now. If the storm gets worse, our vehicles might get stuck."

Leeann and Missy led the children back out of the tent.

Greg turned to Samantha. "I can't believe you did that!"

Samantha wasn't feeling good about the decision. She was terrified that endangering the camp this way would have awful consequences, but there was no way she could deny the ache inside when she thought about Angela. The alpha was in trouble. Everyone could feel it.

Kenn appeared in the flap of the mess tent. "The kids are going to challenge Marc! What do I do?"

Samantha didn't answer. Instead, she sent him a blast of her unhappiness at being separated from the boss.

Kenn's ash-lined eyes widened. "I should have known you guys would stick together! He's the boss now. We do what he says!"

Samantha stared at Kenn with an expression saying he'd better get on their side or there was going to be trouble.

Kenn backed out of the tent. "I'm not crossing Marc." Kenn moved toward the kids now cornering Marc in the community tent. He had no idea how he would be able to help.

"We're going!" Leeann shouted at Marc, not responding to the obedience waves he was pushing over all the angry children. "That won't work on me. You're not the alpha!"

Marc winced as he pitched a stronger blast, not wanting to hurt the girl.

Leeann groaned, but she knew how to withstand it. Leeann clenched her dirty hands into fists and sent a wave of rage back at Marc.

Marc was stunned the child had fired on him. He stared at her for a long moment as his demon absorbed the hit and prepared to toss it back. Coming from him, the child would be hurt.

Marc kept his thumb on the demon, but allowed the little girl to pick up the indecision in his mind so she would understand the danger she was in.

"You'd better hit us all, then." Cody moved up next to Leeann and put his ashy hand on her wrist. "We voted. We're going."

Marc didn't know what to say as his son disobeyed him in front of a hundred camp members and fifty Eagles.

The other children crowded around Cody and Leeann to offer support and protection.

Forced into admitting how he really felt, Marc gestured angrily. “Don’t you think I want to?!”

The kids waited for more, wanting to follow him.

Marc didn’t think the truth would work, but he reminded them one more time. “If we go there, everyone in this camp could get sick. She said to stay away.”

Leeann lifted her hand to point at him. “Either take us or we’ll find her ourselves! We can track her as fast as you can, and you can’t stop us by yourself. You’re too new.”

Marc turned around to motion Eagles into place. He didn’t want to hurt the kids or get his men hurt, but he wasn’t letting their children... Marc paused, reading the expressions of the ash-dusted guards moving into position around him. He lifted a brow at Kyle, who was leading them. “Do you think you brought enough help?”

Kyle blanched at Marc’s tone. “Not even close. None of us wants to do this. Please just agree.”

Marc assumed Jennifer had been working on the mobster. As he caught sight of her stunned face in the flap, Marc realized Kyle had fallen in with the kids on his own.

Jennifer frowned at the baby in her arms. “Autumn?”

The infant pretended to be asleep.

“That explains you.” Marc knew Kyle would do anything for the baby. If Autumn insisted Kyle agree with the kids, he would. “You’re gonna lose your place over this.”

Kyle shrugged, glancing over his shoulder toward Jennifer. “She wants me to settle down anyway. I might like just being a camp member.”

Trapped, Marc turned back to the children to find they had crowded closer. Shaking, they were prepared to do their share to restrain him.

Marc broke. He dropped all pretense of doing what was right and let them view how tormented he had been all along. “Make sure you tell her I tried.” He gestured toward the parking area. “Let’s get cleaned up and then loaded up. The boss needs a ride.”

Cheers echoed, drowning out the storm for a brief moment. It spread across the camp to where Samantha was waiting in the mess tent. She let out a sigh of relief and limped toward the open flap. “We can go now. They don’t need me to help.”

Greg followed her from the tent, frowning and shaking his head. He had no idea what would happen once Angela was back with the camp, but he was certain this sort of rebellion was forbidden. He understood everyone’s need to help her, but he also knew Angela had given orders to keep rolling for a good reason. If they got sick now, they only had themselves to blame.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better.” Angela looked over Adrian’s shivering body to where Ivan had raised up on an elbow to dig in the kit next to him.

Ivan wasn’t certain what to say. He hadn’t felt this bad in his entire life, but it was better than six hours ago. When he had staggered down the stairs and collapsed in a cot that held dried blood from the previous person, he’d been positive he would stay here forever. It was such a relief to be alive that he was afraid to joke about it—especially with two of their team lying on top of a stack of corpses. Covered with a ratty curtain, it was disrespectful and morbid.

Angela and Ivan were the only ones awake. Even Caleb was out. The trip here, where he had stayed awake to listen to the adults and worry over Angela, had tired him out. It allowed Angela and Ivan uninterrupted quiet, other than the occasional snore from the soldier in the bunk above her.

“Check the office!”

Everyone snapped awake except Adrian. The town was crawling with people. They’d heard footsteps in the building above several times. Small groups had been coming and going for the last two hours.

Angela tried to keep Adrian quiet, but his fever had risen, and he was muttering. She had a syringe ready to sedate him, but she hesitated to do it. If there was a battle, he would be defenseless while knocked out and none of the team was well enough

to handle themselves, let alone cover him too. Forced to use their connection, Angela shoved into Adrian's mind and bathed him with cool images of the ocean around Pitcairn Island.

As Adrian slowly subsided into the occasional shudder and then stillness, Ivan and the other team members breathed sighs of relief. They were slowly improving. Hunger and thirst were their most pressing needs and after that, a latrine. Ivan didn't want to think about doing that down here, but they would have to at some point. They couldn't go out in their condition.

Needing the distraction, Ivan brought up a curiosity. "You called him, instead of Marc."

Angela didn't answer. It was obvious she had, or it would be Marc in her arms, maybe dying.

"It was to protect Marc, right?"

"Everything is to protect him or the camp."

Surprised she had admitted that, Ivan pressed his luck. "You love them both."

Angela ran a tender hand over Adrian's brow. "Actually, I hate this one as much as I love him. The other one, I'd slit your throat to protect."

Ivan admired that type of loyalty and found the aggressive answer attractive. He had never liked submissive women.

"You're beginning to act like Adrian did when I first joined Safe Haven. After all the stalkers I've had, Marc will kill you in your sleep if you don't stop."

Ivan had already told himself the same thing, but they were alone right now, with no guarantees of survival. He didn't see any point in pretending something that may not matter anyway.

Angela settled into the cot, trying to bring her body flush against Adrian's hard form. As soon as his fever broke, the chills would come. After that, he would need to sleep and then he should begin to recover. All of them had gone through the same pattern after getting the medication...except for the two men who had died. Both of them had been in the vehicle with her and Adrian.

Ivan stared. Her cot was illuminated by the tiny bit of dawn light coming through an upper corner of the blocked window. "Do you talk to Marc about how different you are?"

"Not usually. People don't like being reminded of it, even my kind."

"Do you have a kind?"

Angela winced. She'd been thinking the same thing. "Does it matter?"

Ivan shrugged. "Maybe. If there were others as strong as you, and they were good too, we might be able to fix the world."

Angela let out a deep sigh, thinking about the man who was on his way to rescue her even though he knew it wasn't what she wanted. "If there were others like me, we would destroy what little remains. Death walks beside us, holding us up when we can't make it on our own. We have survived on the souls of your kind for thousands of years. Your

fate will not be different.” Her voice was deep and dark as the witch blended in. “We thought you knew.”

The chill of death flew through the basement, searching for a target.

Angela staggered out of the cot, hurrying toward Travis. The man had just stopped breathing.

“Weak.” Adrian struggled to communicate through his illness. Her terror had brought him up. “Stop her. She’s too weak.”

Ivan tried to grab Angela as she hurried by him in the darkness, but she ducked under his grip and fell across Travis’s still chest. She exhaled violently, heart stuttering.

3

“I have Angela trapped in the town of Brooks! This is Kojak. I’m a descendant tracker and I have located the leader of Safe Haven. She is hiding in Brooks, GA. I need help to flush her out!”

Radios went crazy, forcing the tracker to wait for a pause before he could respond. Kojak had been tracking his kind all his life. He was almost disappointed with how easy it had been to follow Angela from the smoldering town. After seeing evidence of what her power could do, Kojak had been hoping for a fight, but it appeared Angela was all bark and no bite despite the stories and warnings he’d heard upon taking the job from Benjamin. She’d chosen to run and now he had her trapped.

The drawback was the plan. He couldn't be a part of the refugee wave that would blanket the town. Like Angela, he was a target because of his gifts.

Kojak keyed the mike on his radio. He needed to keep the refugees whipped up to get them to come out in this early morning freezer. "Angela, the leader of Safe Haven, is trapped in Brooks. I'm making this call from just out of her range. She won't know we're coming because she can't have a radio on to make noise and give away her location. I repeat: I have the leader of Safe Haven trapped..." Kojak paused, picking something up on his grid. "Hang on a minute... I've got something right here." Kojak left the mike depressed to keep the noise of responses from giving away his location. He squinted... "I don't believe it!"

Coming down the street right in front of where he had pulled over to look at the map, a semi carrying a familiar face glared at him in warning of what was to come. "That's the Ghost!"

Kojak dropped the mike to go for his gun.

The radio became a garbled blur as Kojak thumbed the safety off his weapon. *I can't hit him from here. I'm not good enough.*

I am. Marc's bullet slammed into Kojak's throat, knocking him backward onto the muddy ground.

The convoy cheered.

Safe Haven had listened to the tracker's calls for the last three hours, with many people signaling Marc to handle it. Few of them had realized he was

already headed there until the transmissions had become clear and the lead rig had slowed. Then they'd all gone silent to watch the Ghost in action.

Marc pulled his rifle through the window and set it at his feet. "How long until we get there?"

Kenn increased the speed. "Half an hour."

Marc raised the window and began to reload. "Do the best you can to protect the kids if things go south."

"They won't need it." Kenn had put the kids and weaker members of camp into the steel plated semis, along with Tonya. "Everyone is pissed right now. They want to fight."

Marc understood, but he didn't want this camp turned into wild killers who couldn't be redeemed. With every turn of the wheels that took them closer to Angela, the further his dream of building the perfect society got from reality.

4

"I'm sick. If you come here, you'll get sick too. Please turn around!"

Angela's voice on the radio was enough to convince a few of the smarter refugees to do what she was pleading for. It enraged the others, who assumed she was trying to escape the trap the tracker had set.

For everyone in Safe Haven, it brought waves of panic and rage that allowed them to battle their way into the town without the usual remorse some

of the non-Eagles usually expressed upon having to defend themselves. As vehicles were run off the road, tires were shot out, and guns blasted brains across windows, the only thing the camp could hear was the desperation in Angela's voice.

"This is the Alpha. I am ordering you to go back!"

Everyone in the convoy felt that order, but Marc and a few of the other descendants had brought up a shield around the camp to help minimize the damage as they fought the refugees. While it didn't prevent Angela's order from getting through, it allowed all of the camp a resistance. It also made them even more determined to reach her. She felt as weak as she sounded.

5

"You can't do it." Adrian was slowly recovering, but not enough to get out of the cot fast enough to stop her.

"Kill them all."

The witch flew out of the basement and began to lay waste to the refugees swarming the town. Flames and screams filled the air.

Adrian groaned. "Pull her back."

Angela opened a mental gift...and then another.

"You'll shut down! Stop!"

"Safe Haven is coming here!"

Both men flinched at her scream.

“I have to kill as many of them as I can, or we’ll lose people!”

Adrian refused to trade her for the camp. It’s why he couldn’t be their leader anymore. He flopped off the cot and crawled to her.

Ivan tensed for an attack as more screams came. Something was clearing the closest threats out there.

Adrian grabbed Angela’s shoulder and jerked her down. “Stop!”

Angela was hit with their bond. She struggled against him, but the witch was off conquering in her stead and Angela was sick. The doors slammed shut.

Adrian held her when she began to cry. “Marc will cover it. If he doesn’t, the other fighters will. Call the witch back before you pass—”

Angela slumped in his arms.

“Damn it!” Adrian gritted his teeth as he forced a connection with Angela’s witch. He wouldn’t have been able to do it without their bonds. *Come home or find a new host.*

The witch slammed into Angela’s body so fast she jerked upward, making Ivan yelp.

Adrian held her, panting. *Thank you.*

Safe Haven is coming.

“Get ready to move.”

The team tried to do as Adrian ordered. It became easier when the gunshots started and fresh adrenaline began to flow.

6

“Adrian knows we’re here. I can feel it.” Kenn spotted a blue van approaching fast on their left with a side door open and people hanging out. Kenn used his semi for a battering ram and bumped the van down the incline. It flipped repeatedly, scattering debris.

The closer they got to Brooks, the more people they were running into. A lot of refugees had gotten here ahead of them. Signs of a battle were filling the sky in the distance, layering it with so much smoke that everyone in the convoy knew Angela was responsible.

“We’re on the way! Wait for us!”

Marc switched off the radio before responses came. Refugees from all over the country were begging people not to spring the trap until they could arrive for their share of the glory. It was sickening. It was also one of the most frightening situations Marc had experienced since arriving at the rest stop. He had no idea how they were going to get to her without losing half the camp and even after that, they were likely to be infected with whatever Angela and her team had contracted from the town that was now a pile of smoldering bricks and resentful ghosts. Safe Haven had driven by it on the way, memorizing the scene.

Bodies had been in an ugly circle, some shot and stabbed, some burnt beyond recognition. From the ages, Marc made the same assumptions about the draft removing the young and able. He knew Angela

had done it, presumably to keep the illness from spreading.

Yeah, keep thinking that.

Marc ignored his demon. The homes had still been smoking, but survivors hadn't been picking through the wreckage. She'd allowed no survivors.

What does she have? Marc was terrified it was so awful she'd decided not to take a chance on letting it spread.

Marc's demon laughed at him.

Kenn pointed at the intersection coming up. "They've set a barricade of cars at the entrance to the town."

Marc motioned toward the horn. "Let the boss know we're here."

Excitement stretched across his face; Kenn shifted the truck into a faster gear and laid on the horn. They were going straight through.

"Safe Haven is coming! They're here!"

Radios across the convoy and the country echoed with the desperate cries of people in the blockade who spotted them.

Instead of moving when they realized Marc wasn't going to stop, refugees drew the weapons they'd gathered since conquering the mountain.

Marc began to fire his rifle, aware of the men and women in the cars behind him doing the same as vehicles swarmed toward them from every direction. As Kenn pushed the rig to its limit to give them the maximum amount of force during the

impact, Marc sent an apology upward. *I didn't want it to be this way. I'm sorry.*

Time seemed to slow as the response came. *This is why I left.*

Marc felt the Creator withdraw. He was filled with a stunning amount of shame at the failure, but it was much too late to stop as their truck slammed into the front bumper of a beaten Cadillac, sending debris and screams into the air.

“Safe Haven! Get them!”

Because of the tracker's plan to surround the town, the refugees were spread out to complete the trap. It allowed the convoy to plow through one area and get into the town without having to face everyone, but once there, the streets were covered by people in cars and on foot trying to determine where Angela was.

Marc reloaded in a nice blur, hearing thuds of tires crushing bodies while the guns he had ordered Kenn to give out were fired at people turned to face them and those turned away. Blood began to cover the town, along with horrible sounds of death.

Marc picked up magic use on his grid and gestured. “That way!”

Kenn led the 35-vehicle convoy of shouting, screaming, shooting camp members. The refugees around them were also shooting, but they had been unprepared for all of Safe Haven to come in defense of their leader. The refugees had numbers on their side, but they were outgunned.

The vehicles in the rear of the convoy held the toughest fighters. Hanging from the sides of their jeeps and trucks, these Eagles took care of the refugees who tried to swarm them at each intersection when the camp was forced to slow to make a turn. Several of the boldest tried to come alongside the vehicles, but Kenn had prepared people for that.

Grenades thrown by those with the most experience exploded around the convoy, removing more of the threats and keeping the others at bay. If there had been more survivors here, it wouldn't have worked, but the 300 would-be ambushers who had converged on this town so far were no match for Eagles who could empty a mag and reload in seconds. The sound of gunfire was deafening.

“She’s in the clinic!” Marc fired again. “Under the clinic!”

Kenn was already following the trail of burnt bodies and buildings. He had no doubt Angela was responsible, though he wasn't sure how she had managed it if she and her team were underground. Storing the question for later, he swerved into a dented Cadillac coming up on the left.

The impact knocked it into the brick wall of the alley and shattered every window.

Kenn spotted a cluster of vehicles trying to get into the parking lot of a strip mall and assumed the clinic was there. Instead of challenging them, Kenn made a wide circle to come around the rear. He

looked at Marc, wanting approval for what he was about to do.

Marc kept reloading his weapon. “Straight through.”

Kenn shifted into gear and headed for the back of the clinic, no longer excited. Now, he was just scared.

Next to him, Marc nodded in dread. “I know exactly how you feel.”

A few seconds later, they crashed into the building.

7

“Our ride is here! Everybody up!” Adrian had been able to provide enough energy to Angela for her to wake, but that was it. He struggled to get her to the hatch.

Travis and Ivan heaved the weaker men toward the stairs, not noticing the shower of dirt and debris raining over them as the building above protested the impact.

It hurt Angela to leave the bodies of their teammates, but there was no time to insist as the hatch to the basement was jerked open and Eagles rushed down. They came for her first.

“Get the boy,” Angela croaked.

Caleb didn’t resist as men hauled him out of the cot and handed him up the ladder in an assembly line of strange hands that grabbed wherever they

could reach. As long as he was going where Angela and her team were headed, he was happy.

Angela couldn't help as they took her up and shoved her into a semi with Kenn.

"Here they come!" Kenn was monitoring the refugees in the front of the building who were recovering from the impact to come in on foot. In a few seconds, they would be overrun.

Behind them, the rest of their convoy had veered off around the building to make a circle so they would have an exit. Refugees who had seen them were also coming.

"Time to go!"

Angela's team was dragged up and shoved into the rear of Kenn's truck in less than a minute, but in that time, the refugees from the front of the building made it inside.

Angela placed her hand on Kenn's beefy arm and let the witch loose again.

Around her, descendants began doing the same. Magic flew through the air, hitting refugees with the blasts of anger and frustration that the descendants had been storing for months. The deaths of their loved ones and the restrictions in their lives allowed many of them to draw reserve energy they wouldn't normally have been able to access.

"Stop them!" Adrian staggered to Marc, coughing and spitting blood. "Too much!"

Marc sent out an alpha command to the descendants to quit, but they only did when Angela

slid from the seat and fell onto the ground at Marc's boots.

“Oh, shit!”

Angela's hair had gone completely white. Her cheeks were sunken hollows and her eyes were the parched dunes of a desert. As she shut her eyes, unable to make a sound, the last of the refugees fled.

“We won.” Kenn was shocked.

“Yeah, but at what cost?”

Marc ignored Adrian's fearful comment as he grabbed his mate and got into the semi. He didn't want to know the answer.

“Get them loaded up!” It was hard to believe the shriveled creatures Kyle was looking at were the Safe Haven descendants. All of their hair had white patches, mirroring Angela's—though not as drastic. Even Jennifer with her boundless youth looked like a shriveled hag. It was startling.

“Come on, baby! Come on!” Marc shot energy into Angela.

Adrian slammed the door and reached over to help.

The semi jerked around them as it rolled over debris that had fallen when they crashed through, but neither man paid attention to it. Their concern was for the corpse lying across their laps.

Marc and Adrian directed their demons to use any means necessary to bring her back, not caring if it endangered their health.

Angela's body arched as the healing orbs finally begin to reach vital areas, encouraging both men to try harder.

Throughout the convoy, everyone was doing that. Non-magic users were helping exhausted descendants recover. Now, people understood why they had been told to save their energy.

Straining, the kids shielded the convoy as best they could from the few bold refugees in the town who threw bottles and curses at them as the vehicles left. The multicolored defenses were obvious, sending frustrated longing into the hearts of the refugees who had been refused admittance. It was kerosene on dying embers. These people would never stop searching, but this battle was over. The display of power had convinced them Safe Haven wasn't as weak as they'd been told. They grouped in small clusters behind buildings and cars, waiting to follow.

Kenn knew the bluffed refugees wouldn't stay that way for long. If they had arrived later, when the majority of those on their way had come, their exit wouldn't have been as easy. As it was, radios on all channels were being flooded with requests for information and warnings.

Kenn tried to keep his attention on the road and also on the few refugees who were trying to follow them, and not the magic taking place in the seat next to him. He increased speed, shifting gears as the sound of an engine filled the cabin of the rig. He wasn't sure that Adrian and Marc had enough power

between them to save her. Adrian's condition didn't look much better than hers. It was obvious all of them had been deathly ill because the glow wasn't as bright as what he was used to. Realizing he had energy to spare, Kenn slid his hand onto Angela's head.

A bright blue shine lit up the semi, causing Kenn to move his hand and use it to shield himself from the glare. He placed it back on the wheel, impressed and a little worried over Marc's reaction.

Marc didn't pay him any attention. He was still sending energy into Angela.

Adrian sat back, lungs and throat burning. "She'll be okay now."

Marc pulled Angela into his arms.

Adrian moved over to give the couple as much room as he could, stomach twisting. As the landscape blurred by, he was able to see Safe Haven in the mirror.

As if they knew he was looking at them now, lights began to flash in a welcome home code.

"That's for her, not you!"

Adrian smiled at Marc's snotty remark. "Of course, it is. I've never inspired that type of loyalty from people. Even when there were assassins in camp trying to kill me, Safe Haven wouldn't have gone to all this trouble. I'm storing the memory for her."

Marc thought of the mini-riots that had happened and the accusations that had been tossed around against various Eagles, including himself.

“Actually, they would have at one time, but you disappointed them.”

Adrian looked over at Marc with a touch of sarcasm and a lot of pity. “Like you did, by not coming to get her right away?”

Marc stared at Adrian in recognition of the truth, hating the man all over again.

Adrian leaned against the cool window and shut his eyes. “I’ll be gone as soon as I can.”

“No, you won’t.” Kenn interrupted the fight. “You go when the boss tells you to and not a second before then. If you two would stop screwing with her plans, this shit wouldn’t keep happening. At some point, the camp will have had enough of both of you.”

Kenn flipped on the music before either man could strike back, furious. How dare they fight over the spoils! Kenn had done so much changing since Angela joined Safe Haven that it was unconscionable to him that the two men he had admired for so long were actually as broken as he was, just in different ways. It was more than a disappointment. It was enough to put Kenn firmly in Angela’s corner for the first time in their lives. *None of the men in this truck deserve her.*

Chapter Seventeen BK9

Nothing Gets In The Way

1

“I want us back on the road in ten minutes.”

They’d been driving for eight hours.

Kenn approved of Marc’s curt order. They were making a fast bathroom and fuel stop, which would allow their sick and injured to be moved into the medical camper. One of the larger models, it would accommodate the entire team as long as a few of them didn’t mind being on the floor in sleeping bags.

Adrian opened the door as soon as the all clear call came. Being crammed in here with Marc was bad, but Angela’s scent made it twice as hard. Even while dirty and ill, she gave off a vanilla haze that was addictive.

Angela didn’t react as Marc carried her to the medical vehicle.

The camp stared in concern, but he couldn’t allay their fears. It was a waiting game now. The medication was working, the illness was trying to conquer, and she had used more energy than a descendant was allowed to. As a result, it had pulled the strength from her body and almost shut down every organ. If not for the healing they had done in

the truck, she would be dead. Marc believed any other descendant would have been anyway. Angela's soul just refused to die no matter how many times the Grim Reaper swung his scythe at her.

Adrian followed, trying not to cough. People were alarmed enough. He didn't want to add to it.

Neil cleared a path so Marc could take Angela into the camper. He waited impatiently for him to put her in a bunk, then cleared his throat. "Samantha wanted me to tell you preventative medicine is important."

Marc started to tell Neil to buzz off and then realized what that meant. "Yeah. Get the team medics going on it. Pick two of them to be in here with us. I want it done fast. The clock is ticking."

The trooper rushed off, waving men to help. Everyone on the senior teams was able to give injections. Before they left, the camp would have a dose of antibiotics in case Angela and her team had infected them. Samantha was brilliant. Neil planned to tell her that as soon as there was time.

Around the stopped convoy, tense Eagles and twitchy rookies stood guard. They hadn't heard anyone close to them in the last few hours of travel, but that didn't mean much if there was a tracker out there. The flat farmlands surrounding them allowed a clear line of sight, but no protection if they were attacked.

The camp hurried to use the bathrooms.

The Eagles willed them to move faster.

“We got the injured treated while we were driving. A couple of minor trims and bruises from the fender benders, but nothing major.”

Neil and Kyle were giving each other updates so they would be covered when the boss asked for them.

“We’re having food and water sent to the descendants.” Kyle’s tone revealed his concern about Jennifer.

Neil sympathized. He wasn’t as upset because Samantha hadn’t been able to get out of the vehicle to use her energy the way the other descendants had. Her previous injury had likely saved the babies. She would have drained herself to help the camp. Neil was certain of it. “We’ll keep the water and food flowing at every stop and make them rest. I don’t know what else to do.”

Thanks to his conversations with Jennifer and Adrian, Kyle already knew there wasn’t anything. He moved to the rear to check in with the guards there.

Neil headed for the front of the convoy to do the same.

In the medical camper, Marc stepped aside so the other team members could be brought in. They all looked better—even Ivan, who had been the worst of the team upon being brought out. Marc believed that was because Ivan had been feeding Angela energy while they were under attack. He would find out later, when he had time to scan her mind and view what had happened.

Marc leaned against the wall next to the bunk where he had placed Angela, waiting for Adrian to enter the camper. When the blond finally appeared, looking like he was about to fall over, Marc grabbed his arm.

Adrian let Marc help him inside.

Marc pointed at the floor by Angela.

Adrian pulled away and took a spot on the floor as far away from her as he could get. Adrian needed peace from the hostile glares of the Eagles. He was too sick to defend himself right now. Angela was alive and that would have to be enough.

“I’ve never felt anything like that.” Ivan was stunned by the battle that had taken place before Safe Haven arrived. Now that he’d rested for eight hours, he wanted to talk it out. “I mean, I saw the fight with the UN, but there was a lot of power there and it didn’t feel so...” Ivan tried to keep his voice down to keep from waking Caleb, who had crashed in one of the cots as soon as he was brought in. The child had refused to leave Angela.

“Miraculous? Terrifying?” Adrian supplied.

Ivan nodded. “Both.”

Marc was curious about their topic, but he was busy scanning the surroundings. He made a note to ask one of them about it later, preferably anyone but Adrian.

Ivan was stuck in the moment. “I didn’t know they could use their gifts over distances. When I saw the smoke out the window, I thought refugees had set the town on fire above us.”

“Only the alpha can do things like that.” Adrian sighed tiredly. “And not just any alpha. Tragedies have made her evolve faster.”

Ivan glanced toward Marc before asking his next question, not wanting to draw his ire. “So only Angela?”

Adrian knew Ivan could be trusted. He wasn’t worried about saying anything that would be repeated. “As you witnessed, it takes an extraordinary amount of energy to control gifts like that. Most people’s minds can’t handle magic as it happens. They shut down or refused to believe they’re responsible. Angela accepted her gifts as soon as she was old enough to realize she had them. She spent her life hiding it, protecting her witch. She’s Byzantine. In the labs, everyone called it the mythical stage because they’d only read old documents on it. As far as we know, the last Byzan in the world died four hundred years ago.”

Marc’s attention was snagged. “What exactly does that mean?”

Adrian didn’t have the energy to explain it. He yawned. “She already gave you the answer. I know she did.”

“Not to my satisfaction.”

Adrian snorted. “She hasn’t denied you any other type of satisfaction, so that still puts you one up on the rest of us.”

Adrian’s mind went to the basement where he hadn’t been sure if he and Angela might die together. It had been just as grave as the rest stop

where she had been shot, except this time he had been too weak to help her. After saving Travis, Angela had attacked the wave of refugees that hit the town together, burning them and two blocks of houses. As the screams filled the air, Adrian had worried over the reaction of the men with them. Even though she was fighting for them, people who couldn't accept magic often flipped out at the sight of it in its extreme form. It had been a relief to find Ivan and his team staring in awe and then a shock as Ivan offered her his life so she could escape. Instead, Angela had taken most of his energy and used it to keep fighting. When that had run out, she'd turned to Adrian.

Adrian felt Marc tense as he came to the part where Angela had slid into his arms and connected them. Adrian relived the memory as if he were a drowning man gasping for air. The way she had clutched him to absorb his energy, the feel of her underneath him, body arching against his, would live in his mind forever. When she had created this master scheme to get him and Marc to want something more than her, she'd assumed he would be a pushover as long as Safe Haven was protected. She had underestimated him and her allure. An alpha descendant was almost always male because a female had such an attraction that the men around her were incapable of resisting. Adrian had the double punch of admiring her on top of it. While they'd been connected, she had viewed the truth. He loved her as much as Marc did and he would give

up the camp for her. In fact, he had. Angela had gotten to see his decision at the rest stop while she'd been unconscious, reliving it six months later.

“So, there’s nothing we can do?”

It was a realization that the other men there had already come to accept and loathe.

Adrian didn’t answer Marc’s demand.

The witch reached out to Adrian. Will you give them up? Trade the herd for her?

Can’t I have both?

Never. Not without a small measure of pity, the witch withdrew to her fiery den instead of making him feel worse. There were always prices to be paid. Having descendants together was wonderful in the uses, but it was also heavy in the weight. Adrian would carry as much of her discomfort as he was able to ease, but in time, he would need the same favor. Heartbreak was not to be lightly dismissed. It was one of the most dangerous things that humans gave to each other.

Sure she wouldn’t be awake much longer, Angela took advantage of the respite to fulfill a promise that she’d made to herself while Adrian burned her.

Thank you for choosing us to stop the slavers. It was our honor to serve as YOUR hand of justice.

Still connected, Adrian flinched as if stung. He had turned her into a killer, and she was thanking God for it. Is there a more perfect woman anywhere? I don’t think so.

Shortly after, Adrian had begun making plans to give up leadership no matter what happened in Arkansas. Then, he'd intended to go after her openly and face failure. Before her injury, he hadn't noted a response that implied his charm had been successful. It wasn't until he took a turn warming her at the country club that he'd discovered it had. Even he had been surprised by how much. So surprised that he'd put the new plan into motion immediately, opening to her whenever she needed it, trusting her with his other secrets. Unlike Marc, he'd given Angela everything he had.

"Finish it." Marc wanted the story from the beginning.

"I'm tired." Adrian was.

"Finish it."

"Let him rest."

Marc glared at Ivan. "You're here because you were smart enough not to cross me. Has that changed?"

Ivan paused, considering it. "Actually, yes." Ivan looked up with a milder copy of Adrian's loathing. "While I was saving her life, she wasn't calling for you. Leave him alone. *You're* the one who's lucky to be here."

2

"I think it will be a long time before these people accept Marc as a leader again."

Kenn glanced at Tonya in surprise. She had just joined him in the lead truck. Kenn had wanted to refuse in case he was now contagious, but it was too late for that. He welcomed her with a kiss on the cheek instead. Their fight, for the moment, had been forgotten. “He did a good job. None of our people died.”

Kenn wasn't counting Angela's team because they hadn't been under Marc's supervision.

“He couldn't control the camp and now he's more concerned with her than he is with them. Can you imagine Angela reacting this way to anything that's happened?”

Kenn was forced to agree, but it felt disloyal to speak it. He grunted instead and started the engine on the truck.

The medical camper headlights flashed. The latrine tents were down and Marc wanted them rolling.

Tonya kept the rest of her observations to herself, but she was positive she would hear her opinions validated later by the camp. Angela would always be Marc's priority. The people here were painfully aware of that. Safe Haven had just gone back to a single leader setup and Marc would probably be the last one to know it.

As the medical camper began to move, Marc breathed a small sigh of relief. The need to be gone was slamming him in thick waves. Other refugees were still coming to the scene of the slaughter. He could feel it and view it on his grid. They had a

small window to slide through without drawing notice, mostly because it wasn't fully dark yet. By the time lights were a requirement, they should be far enough out of range to be safe for a while. Marc hoped to keep traveling for the next twenty hours, but it would depend on the camp. If people were sick, he would find a place to pull over and wait it out.

Marc scanned the team in the camper, noting their relieved expressions. Gratified to know he wasn't the only one nervous about being stationary, Marc delivered nods of approval to those awake enough to receive them, though he skipped Adrian and Ivan. Angela was alive, as was most of the team. It was clear the men had done their duty.

Glad Marc wasn't angry with them, the team settled in for the ride. Boots and jackets were removed for the first time since they'd left camp, bringing groans and grins.

Marc noticed Adrian was curled onto his side away from everyone, not removing anything or getting comfortable. As much as he wanted to toss Adrian out, Marc couldn't. It would make him look petty, something he didn't need. The unrest over his leadership was in the front of his mind, thanks to Ivan's comments. Until Angela recovered, Marc had to command obedience after being overruled by children and Eagles. He wasn't sure he could repair the damage that had been done. He also wasn't certain he was going to try.

Ivan and Peter stayed awake. Peter was allowing the medic from Kyle's team to examine his trim. He was positive it had become infected, but the doses of antibiotics were clearing it up. He just wanted a verification that it was on the mend.

Ivan was studying Marc, comparing things he had learned on this run. Thanks to the connection with Angela, Ivan understood more about their relationship now. He had questions he was hoping to get answered to confirm his theories. Among those, was that Marc and Angela were not together because of love.

Adrian snorted. "Boy, are you wrong."

Ivan flushed. He wasn't going to back down from Adrian either, but he did keep his voice lowered so the boss could rest. "Has it occurred to you that the spell backfired because she was already under one?"

Silence fell. The only person in the vehicle who had thought of it dropped his head and began to make plans for the next stop.

Adrian laughed. "I knew it!"

"And you did it anyway?"

Adrian's amusement dropped at Marc's growl. "I figured it out *after* the backfire."

Ivan scowled at them. He didn't understand.

Busy placing a bandage over Peter's wound, Brandon took pity and filled him in. "He laughed because you think Marc put a charm on her when they were kids. The opposite is true."

“Is the angel gonna be okay?” Caleb was staring at Angela.

“Yes. She just needs to rest.” Marc motioned toward the bottle of water that Brandon had put near the boy’s feet.

Caleb retrieved the bottle. After a long drink, he shut it and lay down, happy to be in a warm vehicle with Angela and people who seemed nice. It didn’t take him long to begin drowsing.

Adrian rolled over to look at Marc. *You do understand he’s the reason she did this, right?*

Marc gave a curt nod. That had just occurred to him.

I knew it the minute I saw him standing next to her as I picked them up.

Marc felt the scold, but he couldn’t help his nature. He didn’t understand why Adrian was so in tune with Angela when he wasn’t.

“How long until we know if we’ll infect everyone?” Peter was tired of the tension.

Brandon pointed to the equipment he was setting up. “I’m running tests to determine that. How long did it take before you started feeling sick?”

The next few minutes were taken by the medic asking questions and the men trying to remember. They didn’t spare any details, not sure what might help.

Marc gritted his teeth as they explained how the town had turned on them. When Ivan got to Caleb saving Angela’s life by shoving someone who was

about to shoot her, Marc studied the boy. The child wasn't a descendant, but something about him seemed important. Vowing to figure it out later, Marc turned his attention back to the medic. "So, if we go another six hours with no symptoms, we're in the clear?"

"I think so."

Marc sat near Angela and leaned against the wall. He used to think this was the hardest part, but after all the adventures in Safe Haven, he was beginning to look forward to the crash after each rush. It was the only time he wasn't stressed.

3

"It's been nine hours since the last stop. We have to let everyone use the bathroom."

Kenn knew she was right. The complaints from people with leg cramps and upset stomachs were causing an almost continuous flash of driver alerts.

Kenn motioned Tonya to get the maps out so they could pick a place, assuming Marc would approve it as soon as they stopped. As he slowed the truck, one hand helping her hold the map in place on the dashboard, lights flashed in his mirror again.

Kenn decoded the message. "There's a bowling alley just ahead. The boss wants us to stop there for ten minutes."

Neither of them was sure if that meant Marc or Angela.

Tonya narrowed it on the map and showed it to Kenn so he would know which way to go.

As he pulled in front of the bowling alley and three teams rushed out to clear it, Kenn watched his mirror, hoping for another message from the medical camper. Everyone was waiting for the test results.

Frowning when nothing came, Kenn directed Tonya toward the semi with the children and then went to help get latrines up.

In the camper, the tension was thick despite there being no signs of contagion in Marc or the medics. The team was improving—including Angela, who now looked like she had been deathly sick instead of just dead. She still hadn't woken, however, causing tension. It had been seventeen hours since they'd rescued her.

"She needs to put in an appearance." Brandon was worried about the camp now moving around them. Some of the glances were too suspicious, as if they suspected she had died.

"Let everyone know this camper is under quarantine." Marc waved at the medic. "Don't go out there." Until they were positive about the contagion, he didn't want to push their luck and it was a good excuse.

"Not a good idea." Adrian couldn't help speaking up.

"Mind your own business!" Marc hissed to keep from disturbing Angela.

“Wake her up. She has to go out.”

“Fuck off!”

“If they think she died and we’re hiding it, they’ll tear this camper apart. She’ll be hurt. *You’ll* be hung.”

“Just shut up! You don’t have the right to make these choices anymore.”

“Is that all you care about?”

“I care about *her*. She’s not going out!”

Brandon wondered if Marc wanted an excuse to avoid facing the camp about everything that had happened. Having the kids and the adults rebel was definitely an embarrassment.

A small bell on the counter dinged before Marc and Adrian could continue the hissing argument, drawing attention.

Brandon examined the test he had been waiting for. This one wasn’t related to the illness Angela and her team had suffered. Those were already finished.

Wake up, baby. Adrian forced the connection, hearing the unrest outside. *The herd needs you.*

Angela groaned.

Marc hurried to her, helping her sit up when she wasn’t strong enough to do it on her own. He glowered at Adrian. “I want you gone at the next stop.”

Angela’s face puckered, heart clenching. “No.”

Marc opened his mouth...

“I’m sorry.” Angela stared at the team, mind already switching to the two men she had lost.

Marc had planned a forgiving speech to deliver in this moment.

Adrian and Ivan had also rehearsed phrases and platitudes they thought would offer comfort.

Brandon turned around. “You shouldn’t be sorry for saving the camp.” He came over and held the test out so Angela could read it. “This is from the ash storm. Samantha asked me to check it, but there wasn’t time until a little while ago.”

Brandon tilted it toward Marc. “The storm was dropping poison on us. If we’d stayed, Safe Haven would be sick now with something more dangerous than influenza.”

Forgiveness was instant in the camper. Everyone assumed she’d done it intentionally.

Angela refused to let herself off so lightly. “I didn’t know Safe Haven was in danger from the storm. I just... I couldn’t stand listening to a little boy cry for help anymore.” That, and her need to run off restless energy, had overruled her common sense. The result had been the loss of two lives. When she’d told Ivan death walked beside her, she hadn’t been exaggerating.

Marc winced.

Adrian sighed, sorry he’d put all of this into motion, but also glad of it. “They’d all be dead if you hadn’t gotten restless. Try to let it go.” Adrian sighed. “The kids are coming.”

Marc thought of what the former leader had told him about how he spent time with the children to avoid his pain. If Adrian was already monitoring the

kids, that meant he was hurting. Marc refused to give the man a break. Adrian couldn't make up for everything he'd done, not even by saving Angela's life. Marc gestured for the door to be opened.

Angela struggled to get out of the bed.

As little faces appeared, with suspicious adults behind them, Marc let her do it herself. He wanted to help, but knew she didn't want to be viewed that way. Everyone had witnessed what she looked like with all of her energy drained. She needed to replace that memory.

Because she'd been healed by three descendants who loved her, Angela's skin had regained a youthful glow and her hair was a wild mess of beauty around her face. Other than the pale skin and sunken cheeks, it was hard to tell she had been ill until they noticed the shaking legs and hesitant steps that feared tripping.

The kids waited patiently for her to reach them, seeing everything Marc had and more. As they braced for her scold over their behavior, Marc was suddenly sure she wasn't going to do it. They'd shown an incredible loyalty.

Angela leaned against the frame of the camper as her legs threatened to give out and her lungs complained about the workout. It would be a while before she felt like herself again, but she'd been waiting for this moment since realizing the herd wasn't going to turn back. She hadn't wanted to die so far from her family. "I feel the same way about all of you. My life is nothing if we're not together."

Smiles and relief broke across the crowd that moved closer in hopes of a private word.

Marc gently pushed her down onto the cold step so she could at least sit while she talked to them.

Angela brought her hand up to cover his. A blue spark of connection flared, warming them both.

Angela smiled up at him. “Thank you for not killing any of my wayward children.”

Marc chuckled, as did the adults, who knew the kids were never in danger of true violence from Marc.

“Anything for you.”

Angela sighed in contentment at the feel of the approval and love. Coming from so many directions, it was wonderful after being sure she was lost for good this time.

Listening from his bed, Ivan was happy for them. He rolled over to get up and hit the camper bathroom... Adrian was staring at the couple. His jealousy and longing was obvious. Ivan had already made his choice. *I'm not going to be like that. I'll leave first.*

Adrian pinned the soldier with a bitter sneer. *Don't you think I tried? When she calls, you'll come. Your morals and ethics won't matter in that moment. When she calls for a man, nothing gets in the way of answering.*

Marc was forced to agree with Adrian. Everything about Angela warned men to stay away from her, but it was impossible. All it took was one

intense smile to twist a man's heart up so badly he would die for another.

Ivan headed for the bathroom.

Adrian tried to doze while he could.

Marc stayed close to Angela; fingers tapping his belt as he waited. They had one more of these short stops left and then Safe Haven would be far enough south to camp for a day. It depended on them maintaining this awkward silence with the rest of the world for another two hundred miles. It felt like a thousand.

4

“You're slowing. Are we there yet?”

“Last fuel and driver switch. I'm done.” The low fuel light in his truck, the one that used the most gas so they could keep track of the vehicles behind them, had just hit yellow.

Kenn and the truck had run out of energy at the same time. The road in front of him kept blurring and Kenn was positive the drivers behind him had noticed him weaving. All of them were exhausted. They had made the trip to rescue the boss in twenty hours, broken by one short stop. Now, they were six hours from where they had been before Angela left and it was time for the final shift of drivers to take over. He and Marc had put the hasty schedule together while Eagles were gearing up for battle and the den mothers were forcing sullen kids to wash off the ash from the storm.

“Where do you want me?” Tonya was too tired to argue about whatever he picked.

“If there’s room, we’ll use the bunk in Kendle’s truck.”

During their last switch, Kenn had given Kendle the responsibility of driving the plated semi transporting the kids. Eagles had viewed it as an honor position or making peace, but Kenn had just been concerned with putting the best person for the job in that position. Kendle was determined to stay with Marc and she could see him right in front of her. A twister wouldn’t get her off his ass. The kids were also happy with it because they were close to Angela.

Kenn pulled into the gravel lot of a flea market, hating the dark trees and houses around them. He was tempted to turn on the radio to find out if they were still being tracked by the refugees, but didn’t. He was certain others in the convoy were listening. They would fill him in. Right now, he needed to get them fueled and back on the road as fast as possible. They had lost a full day of everything, including time.

Everyone waited in their vehicles while Neil’s team secured a perimeter. As soon as they waved, people hurried out of the vehicles and began harassing the men setting up the latrines.

With the camp occupied by covering basic needs, there was a lot of noise and chaotic sounds that worried the people in the medical camper. Even

Angela came out of her drug-induced daze to stare at them with bleary eyes and wild hair.

“Fuel stop.” Marc was on the floor at her feet.

Angela did a scan of the camper and was instantly reminded of the two losses.

In the corner, Adrian stayed still and silent, but it tortured him to do so. Angela needed to be comforted, but Marc didn't see it. Adrian made a note to tell him what was going on as soon as they had a moment alone.

Taking advantage of Angela's weakness, Marc shoved into Adrian's thoughts without her knowing.
Tell me now.

Adrian stiffened. *Can she hear us?*

Maybe after more sleep. Tell me.

She's been awake twice since the battle. Would you like to guess what she was thinking every time or should I just tell you?

It took Marc a few seconds to figure out what Adrian was referring to. His first thought was that she was right to feel bad about the deaths. It would keep her in camp, where she was safe.

Adrian rolled over to glare, suddenly not caring if Angela picked up the conversation. *I would never do that to her.*

Marc glared. *No, you always do worse.*

If you keep holding her back, it's going to cost you everything. Adrian still had no idea why Angela loved Marc. *You've been told that by everyone. Why do you keep doing this?*

Marc growled. *Because you're evil. You can't be trusted.*

Adrian sat up. *For someone who can't be trusted, I sure keep saving her and the camp. Where have you been?*

Before Marc could answer, Adrian shoved to his feet. *I'll find another ride.*

"Stay!" Angela glowered at Adrian with red eyes.

Adrian paused. He wanted to, but he needed to go.

Angela understood how hard it was for him, but things needed to be said. "Thank you for coming."

"It was my honor. Please don't leave camp again."

Angela didn't smile. "I won't."

"Your word on it?"

"Yes. Jennifer will send you updates this time. I'll handle it."

Adrian's gratitude at the public support burst forth in a blinding array of orbs that slammed into Angela's chest and knocked her backward on the mattress. As she struggled to recover, groaning from the pain of his energy trying to heal her, Adrian left.

Angela gasped as another ripple ran down her hip and hit a nerve. Adrian's love was old and strong. It was digging into her remaining weaknesses and healing them.

In the bunk next to Angela, one of the Indians, Robin, had sat up. He locked eyes with Angela as

she stopped shuddering, causing her to brace. She was expecting a harsh reaction over the death of his friend.

“What you told us is not true. Death does not walk beside you or hold you up on the souls of humanity.”

Angela sensed what was coming and held her hand up to stop him.

Robin had decided Marc needed to know. “Death chases the Ghost. Others are hit by it when you interfere.”

Angela glanced up at Marc, not sure how he would handle the information.

Marc looked at her as if she had two heads. “Don’t you think I know? You’ve saved my life so many times since the war that only an idiot would be able to miss it. If I left this camp, you guys might have peace.”

Marc exited the camper, ignoring her protests. He caught sight of Adrian sliding into an abandoned vehicle and went that way.

Chapter Eighteen BK9

Not Good Enough

1

Adrian felt Marc coming, but didn't prepare for a fight like he knew he should. He felt miserable, and now that Angela would live, he just wanted to curl up somewhere to recover. It was what most of their kind did after going through an ugly battle.

"I want the full."

Adrian gestured to the cold seat next to him. He was working on wires under the dash. Even the vehicles that weren't wrecked or stripped had been damaged by nature. Rooting around in the slush piles in the bottom of a car with your bare hands for a key was a bad idea. He'd chosen to hotwire the wagon.

Marc sent a blast of heat into the car as he shut the door, aware of Adrian shivering. He could hear the man's teeth chattering. It was annoying.

"Where do you want to start?"

"From when you picked them up." Marc needed to know everything to be able to help her.

"Nothing you can do will help her, except to set her free. She's not supposed to belong to either one of us and you know that, so moments like these are incredibly tiresome."

“What’s tiresome is how you continuously pop up in our lives!” Marc punched the icy dash, not feeling the pain. “What do I have to do to get rid of you?!”

“I’ll tell you the same thing you told Charlie when you guys first came to Safe Haven. You can’t get rid of me. Only *she* can.”

“But she can’t! You made it impossible for her to get away.”

“Do you think the Maker’s Call binds her to me or my weak-ass charm?”

Marc was forced to consider it. He had forgotten about the call, other than the moments where he and his demon scroll dived. “What do you think?”

Adrian leaned back in the cold seat to shove his hands into his pockets. “My charm isn’t strong enough to do this to us. It’s the Maker’s call. *That’s* the bond you have to break.”

“How?”

“You have to get one of us to deny the bond in such a way that the Creator recognizes the dissolution of the agreement.” Before Marc could insist he do it, Adrian distracted the man. “It’s never been done.”

“I thought you told us there had never been a call?” Marc quickly pinpointed the inaccuracy.

“I said that I knew of. Since then, I’ve had reason to believe it’s been tried before, with much less success than what we had. In the past, the civilization who made the call was destroyed.”

“He let you both live.”

Adrian nodded. “Yes, and after this latest adventure with your mate, I can honestly tell you I believe she is the only reason why.”

“Because she’s fascinating or because she’s dangerous?”

Adrian was always dismayed at how fast Marc was able to put things together. This was no exception. “Both, I’d assume, though the latter seems more likely. Maybe she would be a threat to the higher power. If she can be destroyed, that kingdom would be safe from her. ...or maybe she’d make a good mate for someone stronger than either of us.”

“What do you mean by all-powerful?” Marc was remembering his recent conversation with Angela where she’d admitted she was stronger than all the other descendants in camp combined.

Adrian waved a cold hand. “That.”

“So it’s not me causing the deaths?”

“Of course, it is!” Adrian snapped. “There are two ways to break Angela—her kids and her men. If we die, so will she!”

There was silence for a moment and then Marc remembered why he was in the icy car with a man he hated. “Show me.”

Adrian didn’t want to relive it again. “Just take the memory from me. You’ve taken everything else.”

Marc did.

Guards outside the vehicle watched in concern, unable to hear what the men were saying. Unlike times in the past, the Eagles and camp weren't happy to witness Adrian being punished. If not for him, Angela would be dead, and everyone knew it this time.

“So, the boss here is a woman?”

Neil's attention was drawn to the new man walking by with his guard. Cole hadn't met Angela yet. Neil made a mental note to have the captain scanned before that happened, then returned to watching the windy landscape. As far as he could tell, they were in another abandoned part of the country, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“The boss wanted me to tell you to check the animal trailer.” Morgan joined Neil for a brief moment where they watched Marc and Adrian, and exchanged agreeing glances. Marc was on his last mistake with the Eagles.

Morgan returned to his post outside the medical camper that had been labeled with a quarantine tag to keep the camp members and kids away during this stop.

Neil motioned a rookie to take his post and went to check the trailer.

A familiar sound broke his heart as soon as he reached it. Neil hurried in.

Samantha sitting next to their new horse, crying.

As Neil went to comfort her, he sent a quick *thank you* that he knew Angela got by the way the

trailer around them warmed. While it was a relief to know the boss was improving, Neil wished she could do something for the woman now sobbing in his arms as if she would never stop. He didn't know how long a woman's grief usually lasted, but he was guessing it was a long time. Not being able to help Samantha get over Jeremy might kill him.

Safe Haven pulled out of the bowling alley a few minutes later in a 40-car convoy of hope, recovering health, and happiness.

In the rear, Adrian didn't move.

When the last car disappeared over the horizon, he finally drove out of the parking lot. He followed their path in the slush for a few minutes and then took a street that would carry him west. As much as he wanted to stay with them, he couldn't.

Angela swallowed a moan as a wave of coldness hit. She clenched her fingers into her palms to keep from reaching out. There was only one thing that had ever made her feel this way. Adrian was leaving.

Marc was aware of how hard she was fighting not to interfere. He left her alone, but he hoped she wouldn't call the traitor back.

Angela remained silent.

Adrian kept driving west.

“We’re clearing a wreck. Stay in your vehicles. We are not stopping here!” Unable to keep avoiding it, Marc had emerged to help with security during the unscheduled stop.

“Adrian’s gone.” Word had spread quickly among the Eagles. Kyle had come to let Marc know.

Marc stared back, waiting for the next update.

Positive he should leave it alone, Kyle couldn’t. “I’d like to talk to you.”

Marc allowed Kyle to lead him toward the camper where he hoped they wouldn’t be overheard, but Marc had already made up his mind before Kyle spoke. It wasn’t hard to figure out what was coming.

“We’d like to lift Adrian’s banishment to conditional.”

“Not a chance in hell.”

Kyle had been expecting the answer. “Over half the Eagles agree. If he does one more good thing for Angela or the camp, they’re going to overrule you. I’m talking to you about this because I don’t like what happened and I don’t want to see it repeated.”

Because Kyle was the main reason Marc had been forced to give in to the kids, anger flared. “There hasn’t been a punishment for that yet. Be careful.”

Despite not being afraid of much, Kyle found himself intimidated. “I’m just giving you a heads up. As long as he stays away, it’s a non-issue. When he comes back next time, it—”

“If he comes.”

“*When* he comes back, it’s going to be a problem for you. Part of my job is warning leadership when there’s going to be trouble. I can’t take this to Angela because she isn’t well, and even if she were, she wouldn’t do anything about it because she doesn’t believe she can be unbiased. That just leaves you.”

Marc hated the implication that he couldn’t be fair, but this wasn’t Brandon and he didn’t swing. Respecting Kyle for having the balls to say it to his face, Marc decided the easiest way to accomplish what he wanted was to agree so the conversation would be over. Kyle would then go help Kenn get the camp moving. “I’ll think about it.”

Kyle knew he was being blown off. It happened all the time from rookies and he was offended Marc thought it would work on him. To be positive Marc understood he was the top Eagle in camp for a reason, Kyle pushed harder. “If we can’t trust you, we’ll vote you out of leadership. There’s nothing she can do to stop it if the Eagles decide you’re not worthy of the position anymore.”

Kyle walked away, disappointed. He had always looked up to Marc and thought the man made a good XO for Angela. Kyle was also frustrated because there wasn’t anyone else who could handle the job.

Kyle immediately thought of Jennifer and forced his suspicions down. Just because she had been named heir to Safe Haven, that didn’t mean she was ready to take over now. Sure, the other

leaders were occupied, and the camp needed a familiar, firm face to keep them in line, but...

“Damn it.” Kyle began bracing himself for Angela to make that call. There was no doubt it was coming.

“Everyone will sleep in their vehicles. Driver switches are to be made now.” Eagles circled the stopped convoy, reminding people of time and rules. “This is a short stop.”

Marc and Kenn had agreed their last group of drivers could be switched out for the first, which would allow them to be back where they had been when Angela left—hopefully by dawn. Marc had instructed Kenn to find a spot uphill from where they’d been during the ash storm. He was hoping most of it had rolled into the valley below so they would have a safe place to camp, but he had also told Kenn to find them an alternate in case that wasn’t possible.

Tap-tap-tap-tap.

Radios echoing got Marc’s attention, along with everyone else who recognized the code. Doug was checking in.

Marc found Kenn leaning tiredly against the communication truck while he waited for Daryl to decipher the message.

“Have made it fifty miles. Too many storms. Everyone is fine. Will check in soon.” Daryl looked up at Marc. “That’s all there is. Should I send a reply?”

“We’re still on silence—boss’s orders.”

Daryl perked up. “Is she better?”

Marc nodded. She was. She was also ready to be out of the camper.

He turned around as a cheer sounded, sighing. Apparently, her patience for those tin walls had run out.

Marc went to the camper to provide security.

Angela wasn't pushing herself. Sitting on the steps, she enjoyed the attention of her people and the fresh air that quickly reminded her it was still winter. She was feeling stronger now, though not enough to take being jogged around in the lead rig. She was hoping to resume that place tomorrow—mostly because it would please the camp to have her back in the front. The medical camper was well guarded in the center, but it wasn't where the boss was supposed to be.

Marc came up behind the large crowd.

Angela gave a nod to let him know everything was okay. He smiled, obviously seeing something that pleased him. She had no idea what it could be in her frazzled state, but her heart pounded. No matter what happened, she would always love Marc. Nothing he or fate could do would change that.

Marc waited for the crowd to thin, occasionally reminding everyone they were due back in their vehicles soon. As it reached three minutes to go, he began to give harder stares to get people to move faster.

Hoping to help Marc repair some of the damage that had been done to him by her recklessness, Angela waved the crowd off.

Less than a minute later, they were alone other than the men in the medical camper and the guards standing nearby. Caleb had finally been moved into the semi with the other kids, against his protests. Angela had assured him they would have time together after she healed.

“You’ll have to do the nightly meetings for a while.”

Marc was glad she had brought it up. “I think that’s a great idea. Do you have material you’d like me to use?”

“No. I expect you to scare them and I have no doubt you will.”

Marc almost flushed. His first lesson was planned. It was the dangers of listening to the voice inside instead of listening to reason.

Angela knew, but the descendant kids now felt like they mattered in this camp. They had insisted on something and it had happened. Things could work out as long as Marc regained their respect. If he didn’t, there was a chance she would have to take away their gifts until the kids learned to obey authority. Angela didn’t think that would become a problem, but if it did, someone else would be chosen to handle it. After they’d come to such adamant defense of her and risked Marc’s wrath like even the Eagles wouldn’t do without support, it

would be hard to punish them. She loved the kids for it.

“We are out of here in one minute! Get in your vehicles!”

Marc and Angela shared grins as they realized they were the only people still out here now. Kenn was yelling at them.

Marc held the door for her to enter and then followed, nodding at the guards coming up in jeeps on each side. It would tell anyone where the boss was, but it would also make it the hardest spot to reach. They would travel this way until Angela was ready to be in the lead rig again. He planned to stay by her side when that happened and then beyond. They weren't going to be doing split shifts anymore. Jennifer and Kyle could handle the nights, while he and Angela covered the days. It was why they had extra hands. It was time they used them correctly.

In all the excitement, none of the camp members asked where Adrian went. Other than leadership and a few of the guards, no one noticed he was gone.

3

“Why isn't she recovering faster?” Marc was standing next to Angela's cot while they waited for the all clear call. They had finally reached their camping site.

“It's only been a full day.” Brandon and the others were also concerned, but not to Marc's extent.

“What can I do to help it along?”

Brandon tried not to sound defensive as he answered. “You sent away the only person who might have that information.”

Knock-knock!

Marc jerked the door open. “What do you need?!”

Kyle stiffened. “We want the boss to call it.”

Marc frowned. “She needs to rest.”

“The camp needs to hear her. It will only take a minute.” Kyle was prepared to keep arguing if it was necessary.

Marc stepped aside, throwing his hands in the air. It was impossible for Angela to get more than two or three hours sleep at a time. If it wasn't the kids or the Eagles, it was her nightmares.

Marc gently shook her shoulder. He knew she needed the rest because she hadn't budged in the time they'd been stationary here. “Angie?”

Angela came out of the deep slumber with a pounding headache and sore throat. Leftovers from the illness, it was still better than what she had been dealing with a day ago. She stared up at Marc and then looked at the open camper doorway where cold air was rushing in. “Give me a radio.”

Kyle had a portable set ready for her. He handed it to Marc. “We have an area secured in the parking lot of the mall. The tents are up, bathrooms are ready, and our cook is already slamming things around.”

Angela grimaced at the lack of images, unable to pick them up. The wall of exhaustion that had hit as soon as she was safe was lingering. She fumbled for the mike, not happy. She couldn't seem to get her hands to do what she wanted them to.

Marc pushed the button for her.

“Kyle has point for the setup. We're all clear.”

The shortwave radios only carried half a mile in any direction and the camp was thrilled to hear her. None of them assumed radio silence had been broken however; they didn't respond over those waves. Their happiness came in the laughter and shouts as everyone began to get out of their vehicles.

Angela enjoyed the vibes, but she was too tired to respond. She shut her eyes and let sleep have its way again. Spending time looking normal in front of the camp was exhausting when she was this weak.

Marc glanced out the window of the medical camper, approving Kenn's choice. They were in the parking lot of a large mall that had been looted. Entire sections of the building had been burnt or knocked down, and everything was littered with gunshots and bodies. The battle here was done. It would take the Eagles an hour to get the rest of it ready and then they would be hidden in three directions by the tall building that sat in a halfmoon around the parking lot. If they got lucky, they might even find a few things they needed in the debris, but Marc wasn't concerned with that. The bunker the

engineer had wrote about in his logbook was due east of here. Teams would be sent in the morning to collect whatever remained or to make contact with anyone who might be alive in there.

Marc deflected camp members as they came by the window, trying to give her a few more minutes to rest before it was time to go in. The mall was a tall, glassy shadow hiding any number of dangers. The bottom floor had already been looted and damaged by the weather. That was common of malls now, but there was also an old battlefield here. The entire place needed to be policed and stripped.

Knock-knock!

Marc jerked the door open to find Samantha and Neil standing there.

“We have a spot ready for the boss.”

Because it had come from Samantha, it stopped Marc’s nasty response and allowed them to have their way. The camp wanted Angela back as soon as possible and the Eagles were going to make sure that happened, whether Marc liked it or not.

Marc clamped down on his thoughts and got Angela ready to be moved. He was done interfering with her and the camp. In fact, he was probably done with a lot of things.

“Please give it some time.” Angela struggled to sit up.

Marc didn’t promise anything, but it was obvious by the tender way he helped her that Angela’s wishes would be considered.

The team in the medical camper with them was relieved, but also concerned about the relationship between Angela and her protector. It didn't feel healthy to them.

Ivan stared until the couple was gone, controlling his thoughts by hating himself for having them. As the door shut, he allowed his true feelings to come through. *He's not enough for her.*

Brandon nodded at the soldier's thought. When the Eagles finally handled Marc, Brandon would be with them and it had nothing to do with the family name or honor. Angela wasn't happy with Marc even though she loved him. Much like with Charlie and Tracy, things had to change or they would both end up single and bitter.

Angela enjoyed the feel of Marc carrying her inside, but not the attention it garnered. Like each time she had made an appearance since being rescued, they were surrounded by eager people who hadn't gotten the opportunity to welcome her back yet or wanted to do it again.

Marc was finally coming to realize the gloved hands that Angela and Adrian used with the camp really were necessary. For a long time, he had thought they were being coddled, but now he realized it prevented the panic that led to riots and rebellion. Marc was embarrassed at the attention for that reason. Many of the people who had stood against him were in this crowd and he wasn't certain how he felt about it. He assumed when he'd had time to process it, he would be angry. He could feel

some of them expecting that reaction from him now, but he was too tired.

Marc shoved through the people and took Angela to where the den mothers had prepared her a canvas between the two community tents. It screamed of the old setup, of leadership. Marc nodded to the half dozen men on duty and then ducked into the tent.

As the couple disappeared from view, the crowd went to their tents and posts. They had just wanted to confirm that the boss knew how happy they were to have her back. Now that she was settled, they were eager to get out of the harsh wind and drizzle still following them from Georgia.

4

“I don’t want you to do it again to anyone, for any reason. Do you understand?” Jennifer didn’t wait for the baby to respond. Until now, she had been driving, fighting, or recovering. Reprimands hadn’t been a priority. “I can’t believe you did that. Do you understand what you’ve done to Marc?”

I’m sorry. Autumn’s sad mental squeak would have been enough to get Jennifer to relent, but the children walking around them to the bathrooms started mentally telling the baby not to worry about it, that she had done the right thing by convincing Kyle to go against Marc.

“Stop it! You’ll get her banished because of who she is!”

The kids flinched, reminded that Jennifer was an enforcer.

Jennifer snapped her mouth shut as she realized she had given away a secret. She looked down at the baby and was relieved to view confusion instead of anger in the tiny mind.

I'm not bad. I helped the alpha.

Jennifer had scanned the children and discovered Angela's twins had been the driving force behind the rebellion. The infants were too young to communicate, so all they had done the entire time Angela was gone was cry for her. After a full day of it, on top of their own concern, the children had broken. Jennifer understood, but at the same time, her fears were real. Because of who Autumn's father was, she would have to walk the line to prove she was nothing like him. Angela had sent Roy and Romeo away so they wouldn't have to go through what Autumn would when she was older.

Jennifer and the kids crowded around the bathroom. The weather was dreary, she was grouchy, and they were tired. There wasn't much chatter and no laughter.

Sighing, Jennifer let go of her anger. She had made her position clear. While she was relieved Angela was back, she had been terrified the entire time they were on the way that the camp would get sick and people would die, especially her little family. It had been horrifying and she didn't want it to happen again. The kids had to learn to take no for

an answer, even when it went against everything their little hearts were crying out for. That included Angela's twins.

Jennifer caught sight of Kyle heading toward the community tents to do his hourly check in. They were sharing point duty over the camp tonight. After yelling at him, then witnessing him challenge Marc, Jennifer wasn't sure how to handle the reunion that would happen between them at some point. Deciding to play it cool, she gave him a polite nod when he caught her staring and then herded the children toward a tent.

He thinks you're mad at him too.

Jennifer frowned at the baby. *I'm not.*

He thinks you are.

Jennifer didn't keep the conversation going, but she stewed on the comment. Any time Kyle was free from duty or sleep, he was with Autumn. His chuckles and her laughter were the highlights of Jennifer's day. If Autumn had noticed something about Kyle, it was true.

"I'll let him know I'm not."

Satisfied, Autumn snuggled into her mother's arms to drowse. This was the best part of life as far as Autumn was concerned. *I love my mommy.*

As Jennifer and the kids went into the largest community tent, Charlie came out. Also on night shift with the rest of his team, Charlie was doing rounds. The tent check had been an awkward thirty seconds where he looked at everyone except the

woman sitting in the far corner talking to Pam. Charlie had forgotten how much it hurt to feel alone.

As Charlie left the tent, Dog joined him. Without speaking, the pair fell into the previous routine they'd used, enjoying the company.

Passing the leadership tent, Charlie didn't pause as he heard clothing rustle. While he doubted they were getting busy, he didn't want to take the chance. Seeing your parents bump uglies was something no kid should have to witness.

Inside the tent, Marc and Angela busted out laughing as they caught his thought.

Charlie chuckled against his will and walked faster.

"How's he doing?"

Marc dropped the pants he had just helped Angela remove and then went for the jacket she was having trouble with. After days in it, the ninja-like outfit Kenn had put together was almost crusted to her skin. Marc could swear he heard the sound of tape ripping as she pulled the shirt and coat up together.

"Not bad. They haven't spoken yet, as far as I know." Marc helped her remove the rest of her clothes, but she refused his help to wash.

Marc wished he could fill a bubble bath and let her soak. He knew women liked that. He would be just as happy swimming in the river, if it wasn't frozen.

It didn't take long for Angela to start shivering. She tried to hurry with her bath, but she was weak.

By the time she finished washing and was ready to dress, Marc's impatience had filled the tent.

Angela reluctantly relented and let him dress her.

Marc didn't comment on the yellowing bruises. Knuckles were outlined across her ribs and hips.

"I was thinking of asking Candy to just tattoo stuff all over me so you won't know when it's real."

Marc chuckled. "Mean."

Angela shoved her arms through the long-sleeved shirt and then Marc's Marine sweater.

Marc held out her Eagle jacket.

Angela pulled her hair through the shirts. "We won't need it. By dawn I'll be sweating, and you'll be opening the flap to let heat out."

Laughter at the old joke floated out of the tent and smothered Safe Haven in good vibes. It made people want to help each other.

5

"Are you going to tell us why or what?"

Tracy's chin snapped up from where it had been resting on her knees. "I came here so I wouldn't get questions like that."

Kendle and Jennifer exchanged smiles. Tracy had been riding in the semi for the kids, instead of with her new team. Jennifer wouldn't have been able to stand the semis without knowing the steel panels from the leader rigs had been welded to the

insides. The kids were rolling in a tank. Tracy had used it as a place to hide from Charlie.

Pam took one of Angela's twins over and set her in Tracy's arms. "Give it up. Why did you say no?"

Tracy stared at the infant who gazed back with such love and trust that she started crying.

"Hey!" Kendle was unable to take pain from a woman—any woman. "We were joking. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Tracy forced the sobs back, letting Kendle hug her as Pam took the baby back. "I'm too old and used."

Kendle and Jennifer instantly understood. Because they'd also been abused, they knew the feeling of being dirty and unworthy that lingered no matter what people said or how they acted. Kendle hugged the woman again, hating Angela for assigning her here overnight. Kendle had been expecting an easy shift. "You're letting the ghosts win when you have these moments."

Thanks to the one dream they'd shared, Jennifer knew Kendle was more equipped to offer advice. She listened intently. Jennifer sometimes still struggled with her own ghosts—especially when Kyle wanted to please her after she'd forced it on him. She hadn't let him yet because it felt like giving control away to Cesar again.

Kendle found it easy to defend Charlie because she wanted Tracy's tears to stop. "He loves you."

Tracy nodded. "I love him too, but you know that won't matter. When he grows up, he'll see he

saddled himself with a used whore and then I'll be crushed."

"I think you did the right thing by saying no." Nancy was burping the male twin. "He needs a chance to grow up, but he also needs to take his place with his parents. You're a distraction and many of the camp already resent you because of it. They couldn't care less about you having sex. It's the screwing around with our future that people have a problem with."

Nancy didn't duck from the glares and stares. "What? It's the truth."

Tracy's cheeks were scarlet streaks. "It's why I said no. I'm hoping he'll snap out of me and into his mom."

Chuckling at the wording, Kendle handed Tracy a tissue pack she'd kept from the UN run. "I'll bet if he knew the reasons, he'd straighten right up."

Tracy sniffled. "You think?"

The other females were hesitant to ask a personal question, but to provide an answer they had to. Pam did it. "You sleep with him yet?"

Tracy braced for more trouble. "Why?"

Pam and the other women laughed, exchanging knowing glances.

"He'll get the whisper he needs from one of us and you'll get your little man back. Try not to be sad. We need you angry for this to work."

Tracy didn't want to use sexuality, but she already knew it could work. She just hadn't wanted

to take the chance on reverting to her old self. “It’s not right.”

Even Nancy laughed. “No, but women have been controlling men that way for centuries, and men have been allowing it, while pretending they don’t have a clue about how it all works so they can have a goal to compete for. Some games never change.”

6

“They’re almost all asleep.”

Conner didn’t move from his post. He was surprised Candy had come to find him. If not for all the Eagles in the darkness around them, he would have insisted she return to the community tent. When he’d spotted her coming out, he had assumed she was making a bathroom trip, not a visit.

Candy stood next to the boy, aware of his tension at being alone with her. She just couldn’t force herself to go back into the tent. Everyone in her canvas was happy. It was hard when she couldn’t find the same peace, so she had stepped outside. Upon seeing Conner standing at the other end of camp on guard duty, she’d decided to join him in hopes he might be able to help her.

“You have to let go of your guilt.” Conner didn’t turn away from his post. “I think they call it being conflicted.”

Candy snickered. *That sounds funny.*

Conner enjoyed her amusement, but he wasn't sure if he was allowed to have visitors while on duty. He assumed it was frowned upon because it was a distraction. Conner glanced toward the Eagle on point near him, Whitney, and found the man watching.

Whitney motioned Conner to take a few minutes. Whitney had seen Candy approach the boy. Unlike the other people who were biased against it because of age or general dislike of who Conner was related to, Whitney thought they made a cute couple. He wanted them to have a chance to be happy. It was obvious they would be once they got over the things standing between them, but even more, Whitney wanted Lee's twins to be protected and a Mitchel did that for his woman. Angela and Adrian was all the proof he needed.

Conner turned to look at Candy, unable to keep from staring. *She's beautiful.*

Candy wanted to know what he was thinking, but she also didn't want to encourage him. She settled for chatting lightly about the adventure they'd had rescuing Angela.

Conner allowed her to deflect from her real emotions, understanding she still wasn't ready to talk about anything important. He was just thrilled she wanted to converse at all. Conner gazed in open adoration and hung on every word she said.

Candy soaked it up without hesitating. It was why she'd come to him.

Chapter Nineteen BK9

Considering The Mood

1

“Do you think that’s a problem?”

Donald shrugged. “If it is, the boss will handle it.” They were watching Conner and Candy from the windows of the medical camper. Donald was in here because he had stepped on a rusty spike during rounds on their last pit stop. It had gone straight through his worn boot. He would be off duty for a week while it healed. It would give him plenty of time to worry about tetanus since he’d refused the shot.

Travis dropped the curtain and went to the cot, feeling the medication kick in. As he sank down and pulled the scratchy blanket up over his shoulder, he noticed Ivan staring where Angela had slept. Empty, even the man on the floor hadn’t felt right taking it after Marc carried her out. Travis lifted a brow. “You okay?”

Ivan let out a deep sigh that said no matter what his answer, he really wasn’t.

“I miss being around her. It bothers me.” Ivan looked at his team. “I’m going to volunteer us for a lot of runs to stay away from her. Everyone okay with that?”

The team was. Donald was also relieved to hear it. With Ivan not in the boss's face all the time, their last big problems in the camp were solved for a little while.

“He tooks off! Adrian went and gone!”

The sound of Kevin's slurred anger outside the medical camper made Donald grunt. “Guess there is still one asshole we have to deal with.”

Eagles hurried to hush Kevin.

They ended up subduing him when he turned on them, swinging. If he had gone for his gun, they would have killed Kevin. Because he only tried to deliver a beating, all he got was the same.

The camper door was jerked open so Kevin could be shoved inside, bleeding and groaning.

Tim, the medic in the camper for this shift, motioned Kevin toward the bunk where Angela had been, aware it would cause the rookie more trouble.

Kevin crawled into the bunk and passed out.

Ivan met Tim's eye, snickering. *He'll get shit for that when everyone wakes up.*

I couldn't help myself. Tim also used hand code. *Never met a bigger schmo.*

Fresh amusement echoed across Safe Haven.

2

“I should go in now.” Candy didn't want to, but it was cold, and she didn't want him to get in trouble.

Conner didn't plan to turn to her and say anything personal. It just slipped out. "Can I spend some time with you?"

Candy blushed. "Doing what?"

Encouraged that she hadn't immediately shut him down, Conner took advantage of the lack of descendant supervision and stepped closer. "Let's plan a surprise wedding."

Candy recoiled.

Guards moved forward.

Conner scurried away from her to prove he hadn't done anything wrong. "I meant for Jennifer! A party for Jennifer!"

Guards waved other people away, using Eagle code to explain it was a misunderstanding.

Horrified she'd immediately thought the worst, Candy had to agree. "I'll be in the mess at dawn."

Conner nodded and returned to his duty so he wouldn't have anything in the way of their date. This was the next step in getting everyone to accept them together. He expected it to be a hard fight.

Candy returned to the community tent to get a few hours of sleep. As she moved among the snoring, mumbling camp members, she realized she was excited about something for the first time in years. It was such a wonderful sensation that she was able to ignore the anxiety from knowing the camp would see them sitting together in the morning. Even something as innocent as planning Jennifer and Kyle's wedding would cause a lot of talk and maybe problems. If it came to that, Candy

would cut off all contact with Conner. She refused to be a part of that side of Safe Haven.

Conner caught the thought and sighed. *Too late, darling. Way too late.*

3

As 2am came, most of the camp was sleeping peacefully. Everyone was relieved to be back with the boss and that no one else was sick. They would watch for symptoms for the next weeks, but it was clear they had dodged a bullet. Upon hearing how they had also accidentally avoided the toxic effects of the ash storm, even the most resentful people forgave Angela for her reckless behavior. The only one who couldn't was Angela.

The guards on duty tried to stay alert, but they were the same shift who had been watching out for the convoy while they rolled here. They searched the darkness for signs of trouble and prayed they didn't find any. To stay awake, some of the men discussed the training outlines Kenn had allowed them to pass around. Everyone expected it to be a big topic of conversation until training officially restarted. No one was sure if there would be tryouts for rookies, but several camp members had asked senior men if new people were being accepted into Angela's army.

Brandon and Morgan were on duty on the farthest side of the mall from the community tents. Now on a team together, the two men had been

cautiously feeling each other out since they met for the shift.

Morgan turned to look at Brandon. "I've never seen a Mitchel with brown hair."

Morgan thought Brandon was going to choke. He stepped back with a hand out, mouth dropping open.

Morgan laughed. He'd been guessing from the small clues he had picked up from the thoughts and conversations of leadership. He hadn't been sure. He sent that to Brandon in code so no one else would pick it up.

Brandon turned sideways so the two Eagles on duty a short distance away weren't able to follow their conversation. *What do you want?*

Morgan controlled the demon inside at the challenge and flashed a quick gesture.

Brandon paled at the threat. "I'm sorry for being rude. You caught me off guard."

Morgan sighed, realizing they were going to have to have complete privacy to talk or Brandon would give himself away by bouncing between conversation and code. Suddenly realizing Brandon was behaving like a rookie, Morgan asked the question no one else had thought to so far. "Have you been trained to use it?"

Brandon shook his head. That was his last secret. "I didn't want to turn out like them."

"Which made it easy for you to agree when Adrian told you to hide it," Morgan muttered.

“Yes. I’ve seen what Mitchels do to the world. I don’t want to be one of them, not now and not ever.”

Satisfied his partner wasn’t an assassin or another traitor, Morgan shrugged. “I think you should use the name Smith. It contains a certain ambiguity that implies you might be someone else, but still protects you enough to keep people from inquiring because it’s rude.”

Brandon gaped. *Wow. That was a lot of big words for Morgan.*

Offended, Morgan punched him in the mouth.

As Brandon fell backwards into the frozen slush, he was unable to miss the irony of this happening to him twice now. He slammed into the ground with a jarring thud. “Tell Marc.”

Morgan spun around. “Tell him what?!”

Brandon spat blood into the snow, head swimming through cold fog. “He hits like a girl compared to you.” Brandon slumped over. “Don’t leave...”

Morgan snorted and kept walking. “Sorry. I was too stupid to know you’d freeze if I left you here. My bad!”

4

“They assigned me with you? Great.” Charlie crossed his arms over his chest and turned his back to her.

Kendle flushed at the boy's rude behavior, but didn't comment as she began her post with him over the livestock trucks. The cold wind made it hard to stay angry. Despite Charlie being Marc's son, Kendle didn't have much use for him. Unlike Conner, who was always striving to prove himself, Charlie caused drama in camp that his parents didn't need. Angela had told all of them to take a camp member under their wing and help them become Eagles. Because of her affection for Marc, and her new sympathy for Tracy, Kendle had chosen his son.

Charlie spun around. "I'm already an Eagle!"

Kendle realized he hadn't bothered to look at the new teams sheet. "No, boy, you're not."

When Charlie would have stomped off to scream at his mother, Kendle stepped in front of him. "That's the last thing you want to do."

Charlie's anger almost prevented him from listening. He couldn't believe his mom hadn't assigned him to a team after all the work he'd been doing.

Kendle gestured at her team leader and received a nod.

Kyle knew what she was trying to do and approved. Safe Haven needed Charlie to take his place with his parents. Kyle understood the frustration because of his need for Jennifer, but like he had, Charlie needed to get his priorities straight. When the camp was safe somewhere, then it would be okay for him to resume his relationship with

Tracy—if she was willing. Kyle was positive she would be. Tracy had spent their time apart moping and watching Charlie. As soon as the boy demonstrated a positive change in behavior, she would be satisfied.

Kyle had also figured out Jennifer's problem. She now hated to be apart from him. If Safe Haven's situation hadn't been so dangerous, Kyle might have slacked off a little in his duty to celebrate too. That made it easy to sympathize with Charlie while Kendle continued to read him the riot act. It was the only noise.

With only the guards roaming, the camp put off almost no light or sound. It allowed them to go unnoticed by the few refugees moving through the area. Unaware of the dangers that were close, but ready to handle what came, the Eagles kept each other awake by doing rounds, telling jokes, and discussing everything that had happened. The most popular topics were not what Angela would have predicted. Instead of how she had looked, the deaths of her teammates, or even the drama between Adrian and Marc, the camp was interested in the party she had promised them.

Lying in Marc's arms, she spent a moment considering that, pleasantly surprised. As she realized most of the people dreaming around them were looking forward to just having fun, she vowed to give them a party they would never forget. They had earned it, along with more of her loyalty.

Angela allowed sleep to carry her off, content the night shift had it covered.

Jennifer felt Angela drop out. The heavy weight of leadership settled onto her young shoulders. Jennifer went to make her hourly round of the camp. Being in charge of Safe Haven was indescribable. She would never do anything to endanger her place here.

Jennifer caught sight of Kyle, who was also doing rounds, and gave him a smile, hoping he would understand she wasn't angry anymore. In fact, now that she'd had time to compare it to the behavior of the other couples in camp, she'd realized he was being honorable. Knowing their wedding was only weeks away allowed her to accept their separation and give him the right to hold his chin up as he made her his bride in front of his friends and the people who mattered most to him.

As Jennifer moved toward the mess, raised voices got her attention. There wasn't supposed to be anyone in there. She detoured with a hand dropping to the gun on her hip.

"I'm not going to, so stop it! I've had enough!" Gus stormed out, bumping into Jennifer.

He grabbed her arm, apologizing.

Jennifer waved him off. "I'm okay." She lifted a brow "Are you?"

Gus shrugged in frustration. "I'll have to give one of them up. She won't stop pushing."

Jennifer did a fast scan and didn't find any problems that would keep her from spending a few

minutes with the cook now slamming things around. If Brittani kept going, it would disturb the camp and then the boss. Jennifer waved Gus to his duties and stepped into the mess.

Brittani saw who was coming and guessed what was about to happen, but she wasn't scared of the teenage heir to Safe Haven. Only a few of the adults here inspired that behavior in her.

Jennifer got a cup of coffee, glad when the woman quieted. Instead of trying to talk to her about becoming an Eagle or leaving Gus alone, Jennifer studied Brittani and tried to figure out why the woman wouldn't become one of them yet.

When she thought she had it, Jennifer decided to get up and leave. When she did this tomorrow evening, it would catch Brittani off guard and allow a brief conversation where Jennifer hoped to allay some of the fears about Gus being injured. She would lie, of course. There was no guarantee for anyone, especially not the Eagles who were required to endanger their lives. It was something Brittani and everyone else who had a mate in Angela's army eventually had to accept.

As Jennifer left, Dog came from the shadows behind the mall.

Jennifer reached down to stroke his cold ears, wondering if they could put together some sort of boots so he didn't have to trudge through the snow and sludge in bare paws.

Dog enjoyed the attention, not in the mood to talk but still wanting company. He had listened to

Sally talk to herself so much after Jeff and Kevin had left that silence truly was golden in his opinion. Content to accompany Jennifer on her rounds, Dog kept an eye on her and enjoyed being home. When he had left after the fight with the government, Dog hadn't been certain he would return, but much like the humans he was once again protecting, Safe Haven's light had become a part of his soul. Without it, he was empty.

5

“What?!” Marc's growl would have discouraged most tent-tappers.

“Sorry to bother you. We have weather coming.”

Marc groaned. “Of course, we do. Come in.”

Neil wasn't comfortable with that, but he didn't want to disobey Marc and possibly wake the rest of the camp. He stepped inside the cool tent and tried to keep his eyes on his feet.

Marc snorted. “It's too cold for us to have skin showing. Spit it out!”

Neil couldn't help the chuckle as he realized they were covered from head to toe in clothes, jackets, and Marc's sleeping bag. The only thing showing was their faces and his hand, which was curled around hers. His gun was next to it—easy for both of them to reach.

“Samantha said roughly a day from now.”

Marc knew Angela had left instructions to be told immediately about changes in weather conditions, no matter how far away they were. Even though he was unhappy to have been woken, Marc agreed with the decision. Nature was fast. “We’ll take care of it.”

Neil started to duck out of the tent, but he was stopped by Angela’s tired voice.

“Council meeting, one hour before breakfast, in the mess. Mandatory for council members, team leaders, and punishment targets.”

“You got it.” Neil ducked out of the tent with a frown. He didn’t like Samantha being put to work already. She needed to rest and heal.

Marc tucked Angela’s hand inside his own as he realized she was getting colder. He pressed himself closer, trying to share his heat.

Angela carefully turned around in his arms and pressed her hands between them. She had been cold since the basement. It felt like she wasn’t getting full circulation, but all she could do was clench and unclench her fists. She wasn’t even strong enough to fire a gun.

Marc rubbed her shoulders, tangling their legs together. When he rested his head against hers, he felt her breathe a sigh of contentment and was ashamed of his tactics. It was the same position she had been in with Adrian in the basement and in the truck. Marc had skimmed those parts of Adrian’s memory, but he wasn’t above using the position now that he knew Angela enjoyed it so much. In

fact, there wasn't any method he wouldn't use. He had finally been convinced. He was going to do what Adrian and others had suggested, and act more like their former leader and less like the uptight man the camp was tired of. After his recent issues, it was obvious his style of team control would never work with Safe Haven.

Angela hugged him as she caught the thoughts, but she didn't push. Making big changes was hard for humans, especially when the person wasn't sure they needed to change at all. Marc didn't, as far as she was concerned, but she didn't make the rules. Fate wanted his life or his submission, and it wasn't going to stop. It was only a matter of time before Marc would be forced to choose between the two. Moments like this, where he was beginning to accept his fate, would make the choice easier. He was embarrassed over the way things had gone, but he had more support here than he thought. She needed Marc. As long as that was the case, he would always have people who were willing to die for him.

"I love you."

Angela melted. "I love you too."

She connected their minds before she went to sleep, so he could come with her while she dreamed. It was the one thing he wanted that she could give him.

It was the first good rest she'd had since leaving.

“Is everyone here?” Angela was sorting through papers, not looking at the mess of people at the tables around her. She couldn’t help the way her hands shook. This meeting was almost too much, but they needed it for more reasons than she cared to think about. This would lead them to their future.

Kenn handed the clipboard to Marc. “Yes.”

Marc sat it next to Angela. Kenn had made everyone sign their name or initial they were here for the meeting. The only people who weren’t here were on duty. Theo and his team, along with Zack’s, had security duty while the waking camp used the latrines and one shower camper. In a little while, all those people would fill this mess with expectations of breakfast, but until then, Angela was holding her meeting. Outside, voices were drowned out by an increasing wind that confirmed Samantha was right about another storm coming.

“I’d like to begin with how things are going to go for the next few days.” Angela slowly stood up, paper in hand. She was too tired to keep it all in her head like she usually did. “I’m sending a team to the boat today. I’m asking for volunteers. If anyone wants to go, let Kenn know. Other teams are going to be sent out today as well. Marc says the bunker is only an hour from here. It would be crazy of us to pass it by, considering the railcars were packed with so much of what we need. If we get lucky and find a lot of items, it will save us time when we get to the boat. I’m hoping to gather the rest on the way so we don’t have to split up again.”

Everyone liked hearing that, even the people who were considering volunteering to scout the boat location.

“We have another storm coming. Samantha will give us details.”

Everyone turned to Samantha, who was sitting at a table with Neil and other team leaders.

Samantha didn't stand up, but she did straighten her shoulders. “It feels like a tropical storm. It's coming from the south.” Samantha cleared her throat. “This is the beginning of our window.”

“You mean for leaving?” Angela clarified.

Samantha nodded. “Yes. There's a storm season on the ocean. Where we're going, it gets ugly. For the next three to four weeks, we have a window to get through.”

Angela gestured toward the flap beating against the tent. “Three weeks is our deadline for leaving. You can let everyone know, so they have time to be sure it's what they want to do.”

Angela consulted her notes. “Even without finding anything in the bunker, we're okay on food and water to make it to the coast. Kenn says if we drop five vehicles and cram everyone in, we'll make it on fuel too. Everything else is fine for now.” Angela glanced toward the mall behind the tent even though she couldn't view it through the dirty canvas. “There's a chance we'll find some supplies in there. I'm sending a team to scout. If there's anything worth scavenging, after the Eagles go through it, the camp members can have a turn to

pick out items for the party or themselves as long as they have protection. I don't want anyone going in there alone."

"I'll help sort out the teams if you like."

Angela nodded. Kenn was good at it. "I'd also like you to make sure everyone understands not to draw attention. We can't have radio calls or gunshots to give away our location. We're only going to be here for one day, but that will be too much if somebody hears us."

"I'll pass the word and so will everyone else."

Heads across the tent bobbed at Kenn. The descendants knew they were getting the order because of how weak everyone was. The camp members assumed Angela was so rough because she had been very ill, but all it took was one look at Ivan and the rest of his team to know that wasn't true. They had returned to almost full health, while Angela had limped into this tent and staggered to her seat without scanning anyone like she normally did.

The descendants had been drained repeatedly since the war, but this last battle had been the final straw for many of them. Right now, the children had more strength than the adults and that was dangerous. It was a struggle to keep those kids from knowing so they weren't tempted to take advantage. It was the same with the camp. They didn't need to know how vulnerable the descendants were.

Already shaking from the exertion of standing so long, Angela slid onto the hard bench and motioned Marc to take his moment.

Aware of the knowing and expecting stares waiting for him to make it right or screw it up further, Marc stood. He faced them without crossing his arms over his chest. He didn't need the defense. "You were wrong. Don't do it again."

Marc sat down.

Everyone felt the scold deeper than if he had shouted. Another silence went through the tent.

Angela patted his hand under the table, telling him he had handled things perfectly. She gave Kenn a nod.

Kenn put a notebook on the table. "I have shifts that need to be covered. The boss wants each team leader to divvy up chores, so all of us can make schedules or fill-in for any position we need." Kenn tapped the book. "Keep track of it here. We have shifts not being covered and we all know the situations that can lead to."

Given multiple chores, the council and team leaders were now writing things down.

"That's it. Have a good day." Angela made eye contact with two of the people as she dismissed everyone else.

Marc waited at her side as the tent cleared and her targets came forward. Kevin and Nancy had been in the back of the tent, waiting for judgment. One of them was going to get what they wanted. Marc suspected the other was going to be asked to

leave. Though he had his bets, he wasn't positive on which was which.

Suffering a nasty hangover, Kevin stepped forward first, wanting it over. Embarrassed and ashamed, he couldn't think of anything to excuse his behavior.

Angela looked up at him, letting out a deep sigh. "I can't bring them back."

Kevin winced. He hadn't expected her to go for the throat. "I know."

"I'm sorry for their deaths and for your pain."

Kevin's embarrassment grew. "I know that too."

"Then get on a team or get out of my camp. Make your choice by morning."

Kevin stared at her, wanting to tell her to go to hell while knowing she was right to treat him this way. It was a struggle to reach a new level of manhood. He made it by a hair. "Guess I'm a rookie again."

Angela waved him on. "Kenn has my wishes on that."

Kevin got out of her sight before he could change his mind.

Angela gave Marc a look.

Marc left the tent. She wanted privacy to deal with Nancy and he was more than willing to give it. He had no desire to listen to the two women fight over Adrian.

Angela waved at the bench on the other side of the table.

Nancy nervously sat, hoping she wasn't here for the reason she assumed.

"You are. Someone told me your secret."

Nancy frowned. "I haven't asked him for it. I hadn't even made up my mind if I was going to ask him. Everyone is jumping the gun here."

Angela didn't care. "You have my permission—not that you needed it."

Nancy stared, mouth half open. She had expected a jealous tirade and threats, along with reminders of how the camp would react. She had no idea what to say.

Angela stayed out of the woman's thoughts as much as she could, but it was impossible to miss the surprise and suspicion. "We need babies. I don't care who their parents are as long as they're healthy and taken care of."

Understanding that was the only answer she was going to get, Nancy stood up. "Thank you."

Angela let the woman leave without commenting further. The jealousy she felt at the idea of Nancy having Adrian's baby was because of the bonds she had been forced into with him. If not for that, she wouldn't care, which meant she needed to be fair. Ripping the woman's hair out and smashing her teeth down her throat wouldn't go over well.

Angela slowly stood up and went out to make rounds. Normally, she loved this part of her job. Today, she wanted it done so she could rest. Not

prepared to be mobbed, Angela chose to start at the livestock truck and go from there.

Marc saw her emerge. He fell in step, not speaking and trying not to think, but it was hard. He hadn't wanted to hear the catfight, but he did want to know the decision.

Angela smiled at him. "Why don't you steal a kiss and convince me to tell you?"

Marc chuckled. "Deal."

Chapter Twenty BK9
Bunker Babies

Marion, GA
November 17th

1

“**W**hy didn’t you put me on a team?”

Marc and Angela turned to find Charlie behind them in the livestock trailer. The few animals they had were fed and watered—Marc had worked while Angela watched his muscles and longed for her health back—and the couple had been stealing a moment away from prying eyes.

“Because you don’t want to be an Eagle. When you do, I’ll put you on a *rookie* team like I would anyone else who has to start over.”

Charlie ignored his dad’s headshake. Instead of listening, he got louder. “It’s not fair! I work hard on night shift to run this stupid camp while you go off and do whatever you want!”

Marc groaned. *Big mistake, boy.*

The livestock stopped eating, ears tilting in alarm.

“Aww. Is your over-experienced girlfriend unhappy with your inexperience?” Angela’s sarcasm was biting. “It has to be rough. All I have to worry about is the survival of the human race!”

She left, hoping Marc would be able to help the troubled boy. Because they were so much alike, Charlie wouldn't accept advice from her.

Marc waited until Angela was out of earshot, then rounded on the boy. "Don't you ever talk to her like that again! If you do, I'll make sure you're never an Eagle." Marc waited for Charlie to get snotty, ready to tell him he had just lost his chance.

Charlie peered at his dad in desperate confusion. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Marc motioned toward nearby stools. "Let's talk."

Passing by on a round, Kenn doubted Marc would get through to him. Kenn had been Charlie's father for twelve years. In that time, he had never once had problems with him. Granted, it had been because the child was too afraid to disobey, but still, they'd had peace. Kenn considered giving Marc some advice and quickly decided against it. Marc wouldn't accept it from him, even if he was right. He had lost the chance to be the boy's dad a long time ago, but he had a baby on the way now, a fresh start. Kenn was looking forward to the good side of parenthood that he was witnessing here. Before the war, he hadn't had support. Things were different now.

"Are we ready for the storm?"

Kenn let out a high-pitched shriek at the voice in his ear. He staggered against the trailer, almost falling.

Angela's laughter was contagious. Everyone who heard it chuckled or smiled, including Kenn, who had to fight embarrassment at the same time. He hadn't seen her come back around the side of the truck.

"That was funny."

Kenn grunted. At least he was causing her to have good moments now. The more he changed, the more regret he carried in his heart for all the things he'd done wrong in the past. He had no idea how to make it up to her and Charlie, but they deserved justice. They hadn't gotten it yet because he was still here and had a high place in the hierarchy.

"Let it go. It's the past."

Kenn didn't meet her eyes. "I'm trying. Thank you."

"Do I need to ask you again?"

Kenn realized she had asked him a question before scaring him so bad that he now needed to use the latrine but didn't want to say so. "Right after lunch mess, we'll roll the camp in. We're putting it tight up against the sturdiest part of the mall. From what the team already reported, we can go up two levels before the structure becomes unsafe."

Content that was the best they could do, Angela moved on to her slow round of the camp.

Scott and Tim, her guards, followed. Both men had been surprised to get the duty instead of Ivan and his team. Those men were going with Kyle to the mall. Shortly after lunch, the camp would be

allowed in there to explore. That, and the coming party, was all people were talking about.

Angela was glad, but she was also sad. Not one person had mentioned Adrian's absence.

It didn't occur to Angela that they were doing it to spare her feelings.

"It's the Boss!"

Eagles loading vehicles to leave came over. Unlike when the camp mobbed her, Angela didn't need to be protected. The Eagles always kept their distance, respecting her personal space. It helped that Tim was over her shoulder, glowering.

Weary, Angela sat on the bumper of the truck like Marc was silently requesting that she do. "Update me."

The next crew to leave, Zack's, waited for him to speak while the others got out notebooks. He was taking four men along from his new team. Theo and Ozzie would remain here, where Angela could use their engineering skills in making plans for the boat.

"It will take us two days to reach the location you marked on the map. We'll check in twice a day. We took enough supplies to last double that, in case we need to make it back to you." Zack looked at her for approval, almost wishing he could rescind volunteering the team to make this run. The sense of something about to go wrong was strong.

When Angela didn't warn him of trouble, Zack motioned his team to finish loading so they would be gone on time.

As the next team leader moved forward, Angela watched Zack. She had caught his thought of a bad trip and wished she had the energy to send a magical protection with them.

“They’ll be okay.”

She sighed at Marc’s comment and forced her attention to the men waiting for her to approve their travel orders.

Seeing she wasn’t herself yet, Kyle wanted her in the safety of a tent or camper while they had so much activity going on. “We have everyone leaving in intervals of an hour. My team will go last. Zack’s is headed for the boat. Neil and Ray are taking the bunker. Myself, and a rookie team, are clearing the mall. The camp will be able to go in later this evening and tomorrow morning. Kenn and his team, along with Samantha, Daryl and the other rookies, will cover camp security.”

“Jennifer has point overnight.” Angela didn’t find any resentment in the men around her at the order. She assumed Jennifer had done well on her first night. Angela hadn’t scanned those notes yet.

“Anything else, Boss?”

“No.” Angela let Marc help her to her feet. There were a lot of things she wanted to add, but she didn’t have the energy to look ahead so they would have a warning of what might be waiting. It was frustrating.

Marc waited while Angela made rounds of the men leaving. She didn’t talk to all of them, but Marc knew she was scanning with the small amount of

energy she had recharged. Knowing she couldn't afford to lose it, he directed her attention to the mess, where a large number of camp members were eating breakfast. He lifted a brow to imply there might be a problem, and was rewarded with her turning in that direction.

Around the camp, people were staring and smiling at Angela. The mood lifted with every person who saw her. The same was true of the people in the mess.

Marc was forced to make nasty gestures to keep people from pushing into each other and bumping into her as she was noticed. While he didn't like the chaotic feel of things, it was different than the conditions he had endured.

Marc suddenly realized the mess was quieter than it should be for having so many people here. He narrowed it to a rear table where Conner and Candy were sitting with notebooks.

"Does anyone want to call for a trial?" Angela wasn't in the mood to deliver platitudes or walk them through the moment. Charlie's words were still stinging.

Despite the tension of the camp from watching the pair at a table together, no one was willing to speak up and disturb their newly returned leader.

"I can't work that way." Angela was forced to finish the scold "I've told you before. If you're afraid of me, I shouldn't be your boss."

Almost no one knew what to say.

“They should mind their own business.” Candy was tired of the drama and of being responsible for Angela’s stress. “I’m an adult. I can do what I want.”

With her desires made clear, the only recourse the rest of the camp had was to point out the age difference. The great vibes of camp were rippling in unease again; the few people who might have protested decided to let it go. If she got in trouble with the boy later, they would get to say *I told you so*. Until then, she was right. She was an adult who was allowed to do what she wanted as long as it didn’t cross the age line.

People slowly resumed eating.

Angela moved into the food line. She didn’t want any of the tuna surprise, but another couple was about to enter the mess. She needed to be here in case it went badly.

Tracy cringed in embarrassment as Charlie came toward her with flowers in his hand. She had no idea where he’d found them during an apocalypse winter. It was sweet, but she was mad and now, there were ninety people observing what should have been a private moment.

“I have a double shift after this. I would have waited, but I can’t have you spend that time upset with me.” He put the flowers on the table next to her tray. “I’m sorry. I am. I didn’t realize how much I was slacking off so I could spend time with you. Please give me another chance. You know I can do better.”

Tracy wanted to agree. She missed having Charlie next to her and it wasn't just for his protection or the amazing things he could do with his mind. He genuinely cared about her. Most of their time alone was spent talking, not fooling around. Embarrassed by all the attention, she hesitated.

"Give the kid a break," a female called from the rear of the tent.

As people turned to see who it was, others added their opinion.

"That's what you get for being with a rookie!"

Laughter floated across the mess, breaking more of the tension.

"Please?"

Tracy looked up at him in a stern manner. "I won't ever do this again. You get one shot with me."

Charlie smiled as he realized she was going to give him another chance. "You won't have to. I'll be great from here."

As some of the camp let out a small cheer, Charlie pushed a jewelry box across the table so it thumped against her tray. "Hold on to that. When you think I'd make a good husband, leave it somewhere for me to find and I'll know."

As he walked away, it was clear from the expression on Tracy's face that it wouldn't be long.

Happy for them, Angela forced herself to keep a smile on when she wanted to curl up and sleep. Her body was fighting off the effects of the illness and the powerful antibiotics she'd been overdosed

with during her time in the medical camper. The medics had wanted to be sure she was on the mend. She hadn't scolded them for it, but she was tired of the diarrhea side effect.

Conner and Candy weren't happy about Charlie's problems, but they were glad to be out of the center of attention. Conner had been here twenty minutes early so everyone knew she wanted to spend time with him. When she'd walked in and sat down, silence had fallen. It hadn't restarted until Angela arrived.

Conner kept his mind on the wedding plans. He was unable to keep them a secret from Jennifer as she scanned him to verify that he wasn't a threat. He did try to keep the details from her.

Instead of snooping like she wanted to, Jennifer collected coffee for the shift of people she was about to wake up and then left. It was nice they wanted her to have a real wedding. She didn't think it mattered to Kyle, but it had been a surprise to find out she wanted the works, or at least what was still possible. She even thought it would be wonderful if they could be married in a church, but she refused to bring it up to anyone and force the camp into an unscheduled stop. Angela already had their travel route planned out from here to the boat. Jennifer stopped near Kenn. He was getting updates before he ate. "Zack's team just left."

Kenn made a note of it. He would tell Angela if something important happened, but her round of the camp had worn her out. She'd refused to take

energy. Eagles were assuming she was obeying the same rules she had set for the other descendants. As far as Kenn knew, even the council members were obeying now. He certainly was.

Passing by on a round, Brandon caught Kenn's thoughts and stopped himself from telling the man the other descendants were gathering energy for the next fight. He was confident Kenn would figure it out. That's all life seemed to be since the apocalypse—fighting and then preparing to fight some more. Brandon was looking forward to being on the boat and having a break from the constant survival cycle that was destroying their hopes for the future. Like Marc, he understood a perfect society couldn't have people who killed, but he also knew that wasn't possible here. He, along with everyone else, was hoping the island would be different.

Brandon moved away, going to check the other side of the tents before he crashed. His shift was over, but he was determined to do his duty. After being punched by two senior men, it was obvious something was going on. He was suffering through looks and questions from the other Eagles. While under such scrutiny, he had to work twice as hard to get where he wanted to be. "Now I just need to figure out where that is."

Brandon saw Kyle and his team heading toward the mall. Backing them up was Ivan and his team, along with Kevin. Kevin was going to be on the Special Forces team for the next few weeks in an

effort to get the man to shape up. Angela hadn't said she was going to leave Kevin behind if he couldn't, but Brandon knew. Apparently, so did Kevin, because he was playing the role perfectly today. It had been a while since he'd witnessed such an effort on Kevin's part.

Kyle nodded to Brandon as they passed. He didn't like leaving a team member behind for any run, but Brandon had worked overnight and needed to sleep so he could get up and do it again. With a bruise on each side of his mouth, Brandon wasn't saying much, though people were asking. Kyle hadn't grilled him yet, but the moment was coming. Marc and Morgan had both punched him. There was a reason for it and Kyle wanted to know what it was.

Brandon sighed as he caught the mobster's thought. "That's not good."

He got out of sight.

2

"I can't believe we lucked into a find like this." Ben looked over at Neil. "You know what I mean?"

Neil nodded, holding a flashlight in his mouth to view what was in the crate. They'd arrived to find the bunker untouched and unlocked—two things that were almost impossible in this situation. The bunker had too many rooms to waste time counting, but most held things they needed. Beyond the food and gear, there were also stacks of personal care items, toilet paper, and an entire room of games, books,

movies, craft supplies, and other entertainments. It really was an amazing find.

The bunker had been disguised as a power substation, complete with a flimsy gate, poor, sandy soil, scraggly pine trees, and no security. After clearing it, and finding the gruesome scene below, Neil assumed the bodyguards had taken whatever they could carry and split. He certainly had the urge to get out of this musty crypt. Neil and his team had scoured most of the bunker, expecting a trap of some sort, but all they'd found was a shelter of supplies and the corpses of fifteen well-fed bunker babies.

As if Neil's thought had transmitted, Ben's delight was replaced with a pensive frown the rest of the team mirrored. No one understood why the teenagers here had committed suicide. They'd left a note on the wall that hadn't explained anything, only said goodbye. It didn't make sense. The supplies here would have lasted them for years.

"Why do you think they did it?" Greg was staring toward the bedroom, where the bodies were waiting for burial. The longer they stayed in here, the more the question was eating at him.

"Maybe they found out their parents weren't coming." Wade wished they would visit a different topic. The generators were out of gas or not working, and Neil didn't want to waste time trying to get the power on and possibly draw attention from anyone in the area. They had orders to do a quick inventory and then get back to camp to collect

trucks and drivers if it was needed. That put them working in the dark. It was getting to Wade.

“You can wait with the vehicles if you want.” Neil was as uncomfortable as Wade was, but hiding it better.

Wade straightened his shoulders. “I’m good. Let’s get this done.”

His reasonable attitude encouraged them all to get finished. When they came back, it would be with two dozen more hands and a lot of lights. Safe Haven was now good on food for ten to twelve months. Angela would be ecstatic.

“It looks like there was a movie playing.” Quinn had gone into the bedrooms to verify there was nothing Safe Haven needed from that section of the tomb.

Neil came to the doorway.

Quinn held up the CD case. “On The Beach.”

Neil grimaced. “It figures. I hated that movie. People wouldn’t just give up after a nuclear war, and I know that for sure now.”

“Agreed.”

Neil changed topics. “We cleaned out the bathrooms first. There’s a wealth of everything except painkillers and cold medicine.”

Quinn shook his head in disgust, digging through the drawers of the cabinet next to the television. “I want to take some of these movies. Can we keep our kids from knowing where they came from?”

Neil appreciated Quinn's sensitivity. "No, and we don't try to anymore. They're wearing the clothes of their dead friends. You can't hide the apocalypse. They're living it alongside us."

The Bunker Babies had been well preserved in the cool tomb, allowing the team to see they'd been healthy. The expensive setup verified they'd also been wealthy. Neil wondered if the lack of staff had mattered to the kids and decided it had. Forced to care for themselves, they'd refused to learn how.

"Make sure we get those coats." Neil pointed to a closet in the corner, opposite the bodies sitting against the wall. Only a couple of the teens had fallen over, giving the bunker a sense of the walking dead that was sure to haunt his dreams.

Neil paused, not sure if he had heard something. They'd swept the bunker before starting their inventory, but it didn't mean someone hadn't followed them in. This bunker wasn't on any map and none of them had ever heard of it. Neil believed there were places like this all over the country that the public had been unaware of. If he had been wealthy, it's what he would have done.

"I heard something." Ben turned toward where he thought the noise was coming from. The bunker was disappointing to him. He was grateful for the supplies, and he felt sad for the teens who had taken their lives, but the rest of it was boring. He'd expected something impressive, but all they'd discovered was another hole in the ground with

stucco walls and shag carpet hiding concrete and rat shit. “It sounds like scratching.”

The teams stayed together as they followed Ben into the next room. Once a kitchen designed for a hundred people, it was now empty of everything except dust and piles of dirty dishes. The bunker babies hadn’t cared about cleaning. Neil was certain if they had come sooner, the flies and maggots would have made them gag. Because the teenagers had been dead so long, there was no odor.

Bang! The counter under the sink rattled.

Everyone jumped or grabbed weapons.

Neil waved Ben forward as he held the flashlight and prepared to fire.

Ben approached the cabinet before he could lose his nerve. He’d never been in a creepier situation.

Ben opened the cabinet.

A small, dark shape barreled out.

Wade shouted.

Neil barely stopping himself from firing. He had to force his finger off the trigger as he recognized the only living resident of the bunker. “Hold your fire!”

Determining humans were the problem, the cat stopped in the corner of the kitchen. It sat to clean itself while occasionally regarding them with annoyed yellow eyes. The cat was big and bushy, with no collar and long claws that had scratched deep furrows into the inside of the cabinet.

Greg shined his light under the counter and discovered a large hole where the cat had been getting in and out. “How did it stay alive so long?”

Ray shined his light at the counter. “There’s mouse droppings. Or rat, maybe. I don’t know which is which.”

Neil knew without being told that the teams expected him to collect the animal and take it back to Safe Haven, despite it obviously being wild enough to survive on its own. Not wanting the hassle, but eager to please the boss, Neil reluctantly waved to Ben. “Find us a box. It’ll make a nice surprise for the kids.”

The cat, not happy to discover people in its home, put a matted tail in the air and stalked off to find a place to hide.

3

“I want to go Christmas shopping.”

Tonya and Samantha looked up in confusion. Their shift ended an hour ago, but the women were still in the kids’ side of the community tent, helping the other den mothers.

“What did she say?”

Samantha smiled. “Shopping.”

“Really? That sounds fun.”

Samantha caught the images in Angela’s mind and grinned. “Our men will have a heart attack.”

Angela didn’t smile like the women expected her to. “They’re going to go with us.”

Denied a tiny rebellion, Samantha sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Whatever.”

Tonya snickered. “My man will have a heart attack even if he’s there. I say we go for it.”

Angela turned to include the other women in the room. “I think the camp men can handle the kids for a few hours while we shop, don’t you?”

The women laughed.

The men frowned. Several of them wanted to say women weren’t allowed to leave the perimeter, but the mall behind them had stores that hadn’t been looted. Everyone was allowed to go. The men had just assumed den mothers would stay here with the kids and their injured, not them.

Shift change for the rest of the den mothers was half an hour away. Angela had scheduled it that way so the men coming from runs would be ready to sit at a mess table and eat. So would the kids.

Angela looked at the children in the room, being sure to include all of them. The babies were in pumpkin seats at her feet. “There won’t be any trouble while I’m gone, right?”

Knowing she would only be a few hundred feet away wasn’t the same as if she was leaving camp again, and the kids had all heard the word Christmas. There was a loud rush to promise they would behave. They were hoping for presents even though there had been an apocalypse.

That was part of what Angela loved the most about children. They were eternally hopeful. The world couldn’t survive without that. “Marc will be

holding the nightly meeting until we get on the boat. You can feel how weak I am right now. I need a rest, but I expect you to give him the same attention you would me.”

The older kids began bracing for the first meeting, positive it would include a reprimand and possibly even punishments for their rebellion.

Angela didn't set their little minds at ease. The kids had gone from being afraid of Marc, to ignoring him, to rebelling against him. That had to change now. Angela looked at Leeann and then Cody, who was sitting next to the girl. “I expect you to take care of the younger ones if there's a problem.”

Everyone in the tent stilled. Angela usually only gave out instructions like that if she was expecting trouble.

“I'm not, but everyone here needs to be more aware of our surroundings and situations. Without being able to see what's coming for us, we're not going to be prepared for the next big hit. We'll have to run if we are found, or maybe it will be a weather issue, or even the ground falling out from under us again. It's not like we ever get a real break.”

Understanding she was just trying to cover the unknowns, the kids returned to their thoughts of presents. So did the adults.

Angela got Leeann's attention and then left the tent. She waited outside as the girl found a good moment to excuse herself.

Leeann followed Angela's line of sight to where Marc was headed into the mess. "You want me to work on him, but I'm not allowed to use magic. How am I supposed to do that?"

"He likes kids. Be cute."

Leeann's face squished up in defense. "I don't know how."

Angela chuckled. "That's exactly why you will be. Just keep him smiling. Everything else will fall into place. Tell the other kids, but not the den mothers. They'll try to help and mess it up."

Leeann didn't understand, but she was happy to be getting a job instead of a punishment. "I will. You can count on me."

Angela ran a loving hand over the orphan girl's head, giving her one of those mother-child moments that all the children needed. "I love you."

Leeann couldn't stop the tears as Angela hugged her.

Around the camp, everyone approved of the bonding except Marc. He wasn't jealous of the children; he didn't begrudge them time with Angela. His unease was caused by Adrian's words about how he handled emotional pain while away from her. Now Angela was doing it too.

An Odd Parade

1

“**T**his is weird.”

Marc, Kenn, and Kyle trailed the group of shoppers heading into the mall. A dozen Eagles led the way or covered the women from the sides, while their personal protection brought up the rear. It was an odd parade through the apocalypse.

Marc was glad Angela was feeling better, but he was unhappy she was pushing herself so hard. He was grumbling from the drag position.

Walking on either side of him, Kyle and Kenn were occasionally adding comments.

“When this is over, I’ve got an hour to put in with the rug rats. And not just the camp rug rats, who can be nice. I have to teach the demons from hell to control the evil within. God only knows what she has me on after that. All so I won’t know how much she’s doing.”

Kenn looked at Marc, tone rising. “You want to talk about an ugly evening? I have to attend that damn lecture!”

Kyle and Marc laughed as they realized Kenn had been ordered to join because Tonya was having a descendant child.

“Well, that almost makes up for it.” Marc smirked. “Never thought I’d see the day smart-ass Kenn Harrison would be taking parenting classes.”

Kenn couldn’t resist. “Me? You’re the one walking around with two kids in camp while trying to put a third in there.”

Angela smiled on the outside, but her heart squeezed. *There were others!* Kenn didn’t count dead babies.

Angela tried to be glad the men were bonding as they walked through the lower sections of the mall. She was headed for the stairs that had been checked by their engineers. Theo had assured her the second and third floors of the mall were fine for small groups of people to explore. None of them could explain why those levels hadn’t been looted, but Angela assumed the battle scene out front was responsible. The winners had been interrupted or led away from the stash of treasures. It was also possible these levels didn’t contain anything needed, but Angela thought that unlikely.

Surrounded by Special Forces and rookies, the three men in the rear of the shopping trip didn’t feel like they needed to be alert right now. The building had been cleared by Eagles and descendants. There was no one in here—at least not alive. Several bodies had been removed and stacked for burial if there was time or Angela insisted. None had been sick or had obvious traumas, providing yet another mystery Safe Haven would probably never be able to

answer. Their entire trip across this broken country had yielded the same.

Angela detoured, spotting a store she wanted. She gave Marc a curt gesture when he would have followed.

Assuming whatever she wanted in there was for him, Marc realized he hadn't found a gift for her yet. Because they had missed birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays, he wanted to get her something that would represent all of those. Marc read the signs on the stores around them and then nodded to Daryl, who had point over this trip.

As he headed for the jewelry store, Kenn and Kyle followed. Both of them needed wedding gifts for their brides. Marc had reminded them of it with his silent meditations.

While leadership and senior men enjoyed their shopping time, Daryl and his team paid attention to their surroundings even though the shops had been cleared more than once. Training was restarting soon and everyone needed to get back on their A-game, but Daryl couldn't help twitching because they were indoors. He hadn't realized he was carrying a bit of phobia from the mountain until now, but he quickly pinpointed it to losing Jeremy. He had liked the man.

Cathy's Crafts caught his attention and allowed a distraction. The store would have things Samantha and the den mothers could use for the kids. Daryl made a mental note to come back when he was off duty.

“Incoming!”

The shortwave radios crackled around Safe Haven and the group in the mall.

Before Angela or Marc could respond, Jennifer’s annoyed voice came. “Get off the line! I’ve got it covered.”

Marc recognized Kenn’s technique. Jennifer was skilled at emulating the senior men and women. Marc turned around to find Angela in the doorway of the jewelry store. Slipping his hand into his pocket, he went to her. “I’ll check them out as soon as we get back.”

They would already be hearing gunshots and more calls on the radio if the arrival was a problem. Because they weren’t, it was likely Safe Haven had just been found by the first good refugees since leaving the mountain. Violence was always the difference. Marc was relieved to know there were still some people worth taking in.

Angela returned to the chattering women in the first store. She watched them, glad she’d suggested this. Despite the extra energy it was costing, the vibes were great. Life was getting the chance to continue. She’d had too many brushes with death since joining Adrian’s camp. The Eagle fallback of absorbing good moments when they came was a blessing she couldn’t survive without. Anytime she was alone, the faces of those she’d lost haunted her—and sometimes when she wasn’t alone. The only time she got a break from it was when her mind or heart were dwelling on Adrian.

She had been trying to limit moments like that by replacing it with her joy of having so many healthy children in camp. One fifth of their population was under the age of twelve. It was wonderful, but also scary. It meant there wasn't enough protection to make sure all these children grew up safe.

They needed more people to join, good people who could be trusted. The new arrivals now being treated to a deep scan by Jennifer, and hostility from the guards on duty, were hopefully the first of another hundred or so who would be lucky enough to find the camp before they left America. Angela hoped the people hurried, wherever they were. When that boat was ready to sail, Safe Haven would go and nothing would bring them back until all the descendants agreed it was time. "Ten minutes, ladies."

The women began grabbing items.

The men found bags and got ready to carry it all back to camp.

2

"Bunker team made it back, Jennifer."

Jennifer didn't like them using her name on the radio, but she refused to answer to the codename they'd wanted to give her. While Angela had been gifted with something cool—Raven—Jennifer wasn't about to be called Tweety Bird.

She keyed the button on her mike to let them know she was on her way back to the parking area. She had just left it after clearing the small family who'd snuck up on the guards. Finished scolding them, she had been about to do her next round of the camp that was folded in against the side of the mall to be ready for the coming storm. The wind was pushing, warning that Mother Nature was once again going to inflict misery upon the survivors.

Ivan trailed Jennifer. Helping with camp security while leadership was in the mall, Ivan was a tense, intimidating presence. It made Jennifer feel safe. Kyle had picked him personally, despite objections from some of the senior men who had been left behind. Kyle had insisted Ivan wasn't being given a fair chance to prove himself even though he'd kept Angela alive on the run. Kyle's reminder that Adrian hadn't been there for the entire trip had settled people down, but it had also brought awareness to the fact that he'd left without saying anything to anyone.

Jennifer nodded to the Eagle escorting their new arrivals into the quarantine zone, but kept going without rescanning the family. All brunette and short, the family was wearing mismatched clothes and scavenged gear that only made them appear dangerous. Jennifer just thought they were desperate. The two women, two men, and one teenage boy weren't a problem as far as she could tell. They needed to be tested for illnesses like anyone else, but Jennifer hadn't sensed problems.

The adults seemed to want peace, and the teenage boy was a deaf-mute whose mind Jennifer hadn't been able to penetrate no matter how hard she tried. She'd assumed that was because there was nothing behind the endless darkness. It was horrifying and gave her a deep sympathy for the boy. She would make sure the other kids didn't pick on him.

Neil was at the edge of the caution tape as Jennifer arrived. The team behind him stretched and groaned. They'd been making trips all day to empty the bunker ahead of the storm. Samantha had predicted it would hit them in a few hours.

“Any problems?”

Neil shook his head, yawning. He handed her a list of what they had brought in on this run, glad the next set of trucks were ready to go. “We want to get in one more haul before it gets dark.”

“That's why the trucks are ready.”

Satisfied with Jennifer on point, Neil waved a hand in the air and motioned toward their vehicles.

His team loaded up, eager to have the final run underway.

As Jennifer left the parking lot again, she passed by the quarantine zone and then the bathrooms. Next to them, the supply trucks were open for camp use. She wanted to make sure no one was fighting over anything. There were guards on the trucks, but the rookies wouldn't know how to handle every situation.

Nervous, and excited to be in charge of the camp during regular business hours, Jennifer made rounds and tried hard not to miss anything.

3

“Is everyone here?” Marc had come in and sat down without looking at the children or their guardians.

Standing by the flap, Leeann nodded. “I got them all here for you, Boss.”

Marc tried not to snicker at the girl’s copy of an Eagle response. He gestured for her to take a place with the other kids.

Leeann sat next to Cody, drawing a slight frown from Marc. Those two were a lot like he and Angela had been, only they didn’t have the same restrictions.

Marc began the meeting by asking a question he already knew the answer to. “How many people in this tent want to be an Eagle?”

He paused to give everyone a chance to respond by raising their hands, but it was more than just being polite. This was the first time he had used Adrian and Angela’s methods of handling the children. He wanted to do it correctly.

With almost every hand in the air, Marc studied the hopeful faces and changed his strategy. Instead of being the fist they expected, he needed to give them an open hand. He stood up, gesturing toward the flap. “Let’s take a walk.”

Adults hurried to get the kids bundled up against the wind. They were willing to trust Marc because they assumed Angela had preapproved the lesson.

Marc didn't tell them Angela was taking a shower and hadn't delivered a single piece of advice before they split up. Staring at the faces, he had realized the kids weren't happy and it had caused problems before this—like running away and needing to be rescued. The kids had begun acting up right about the time they'd banished Adrian.

Marc held the flap so everyone could come out, then led them by the mess tent. He made sure his pace was slow enough for little feet to keep up, determined to get his point across in such a way that the kids would bond with him. He knew it was what Angela and Adrian would have done, but he now understood why it was needed.

Marc pointed at the guards. He and the group slowed, making the sentries feel like bugs under a glass jar. They stood with tense shoulders and expressions that said they were sorry for the rebellion some of them had taken part in.

“They feel the same way you do about Angela, but if the kids hadn't influenced the adults, this camp wouldn't have left. The Eagles would have sacrificed Angela to save her camp.”

Not liking that revelation, the kids frowned but held silent.

“Stealing a person's decisions is wrong. All of you know that. You owe apologies to every adult you betrayed.”

Some of the kids immediately offered those.

The guards were embarrassed, but they accepted it because they didn't know what else to do. It was obvious Marc was having a lesson. They didn't want to disrupt whatever point he was trying to make.

Marc led the kids to the quarantine zone, where a single tent housed their new members. He stayed out of hearing distance of the strangers. "New people will see you influencing the adults and they'll know we're weak. They'll take you away from us. There won't be anything we can do about it once they get you, but even if we find you, you already know it doesn't take much time alone with a bad person to be hurt." Marc hated the images now going through some of their minds, but he was satisfied with the reactions. Being out in the cold and dark, seeing how serious the Eagles were, would help the kids understand they should have followed his decisions.

Marc led them by the parking area and toward the mall, where the first floor was lit up. A dozen Eagles were inside, getting things ready in case the camp needed to take shelter from the storm. Samantha had implied it might be bad.

Marc nodded to the guards on duty and led the group into the mall. As he took them to the dead escalators, guards from the first floor hurried to provide an escort.

Excited they were getting a tour of the mall for any reason, the kids stayed together and behaved.

Marc stopped in front of a store on the second floor, aware of joy bubbling up around him. Like the other shops up here, the toy store was in pristine condition except for dust and lack of power.

He flipped the switch on the spotlight that had been rigged up for people who wanted to shop. “This is not a reward. Your behavior was bad.” Marc let out a deep sigh. “And so was mine. I should have explained to you that I wanted to go as much as you did, but I will always follow the alpha’s orders. I’m sorry. Please go have some fun.”

As the kids ran by him, letting out cries of happiness, Cody stopped to give Marc a quick hug.

Drawn by their happiness, Marc went into the store to help the smaller orphans pick something out.

For Marc, it ended up being one of the best times he’d had with the kids and convinced him to let Angela spend uninterrupted hours with them if she wanted to. He wouldn’t forget that she was using them to push aside her pain, but he would be glad the children were getting the attention they obviously needed.

“Can we watch a movie?” Missy held up a dusty Disney CD still wrapped in plastic.

The other kids clamored for him to agree.

Marc glanced at Daryl. “Can we do that right here?”

Daryl smiled. “I’ll make it happen. You hang with the rug rats.”

Marc laughed. “Thanks. I’ll do that.”

4

The guards in the mall were happy with Marc, but distracted by the noise of playing children filling the second floor that now had three levels of Eagles on duty. Most of the off duty sentries had also joined Marc and the kids for the film, or were exploring the musty stores.

In Safe Haven, the camp members listened to the noise with tolerant nervousness, hoping it didn't draw retaliation.

On duty outside the camper, Ivan wasn't paying attention to Marc, the kids, or the camp. Angela had finally emerged from the shower and he was trying to form words. Staring at dripping curls and clothes molded to damp curves, it wasn't a physical moment. Haunting loneliness sank into his soul and told him that no matter how hard he tried or what he did, he would never have a mate and especially not one like her.

The guards around them became aware of Ivan staring and then Angela's tension as she also noticed.

Distracted, none of them noticed a tall, thin shadow sneak from the quarantine zone and climb into a supply truck.

"Safe Haven has more women now than it has in a long time." Angela was only able to read Ivan's thoughts in small bursts as weariness threatened to

knock her out. “One of them might like having her own soldier.”

“They won’t want me. I can’t have kids.”

His words settled his place with the guards. He wasn’t obsessed. He was trying to carve out a respected place, the next best thing to having a woman. All the single Eagles did that, making Ivan one of them.

Angela gestured toward the mess, where a group of camp women was headed in to eat now that everyone else was finished. “Neither can they.”

Ivan hadn’t been in Safe Haven for the camp meeting on population. He hadn’t known so many of their females were sterile.

Angela left him with the new thoughts, hoping she had helped. Ivan was a dependable man who deserved a good life, but she doubted he would receive it. None of her dreams about him had been nice, despite the fact that he was.

Reaching her tent, Angela’s weariness caused her to trip. She staggered against the canvas in awkward movements, trying to avoid a fall.

Angela threw up a hand to prevent the guard on duty there from helping her or calling Marc. “I just need to sleep!”

Morgan watched her disappear into the tent, but he didn’t call anyone, respecting her wishes. As the other guard on the tent made a note of what time Angela had returned, Morgan realized having Brandon on duty with him was a comfort. Not sure

why, Morgan refused to look at the man for the hour remaining on their shift.

He didn't want Brandon to think he had been forgiven, but Morgan was aware of how different he was from the other Mitchel males. He also knew how badly Safe Haven needed good people. He didn't think the hundred and fifty something souls here were enough to survive the island, make it back to face a final battle, then repopulate the country. If they didn't get more people to go with them on the boat, there might not be any point in leaving.

5

“The last team is home!”

Jennifer lowered the volume on the radio. She had already been on her way to do another fruitless round of the parking area in hopes of viewing headlights. The relief she felt had been echoed in Kenn's tone. He'd been just as worried as she was.

Jennifer had already verified the bunker team hadn't encountered anyone. Because the bunker babies had committed suicide, they weren't a threat. She waved the exhausted team toward the showers and mess instead of the quarantine area. She needed those fourteen Eagles and eleven camp men to rest so they could get back up and work on first shift. Half the camp was pulling doubles right now.

Fresh laughter spilled out of the mall.

Marc was still up there with the kids. Teams had been going back and forth for an hour, bringing

lights and other things that made Jennifer assume the kids would be staying there until after the storm. It was a relief. The wind was whipping harder now, carrying an odd whine. Everyone would be safer inside. Someone would make that call soon. To be ready for it, Jennifer had pre-alerted the guards and camp members, refusing to let them get comfortable.

No one complained, positive she was right. Angela was in her tent. Marc was in the mall. Samantha was in the mess. One of the three would contact them when it was time.

Neil paused by Jennifer as he and Ben went by. “We need another day of gathering from the bunker.”

Jennifer made a note in her book. “It’s up to the boss.”

Neil spotted a familiar shadow in the mess and went that way. He hadn’t slacked off in his duty at all today, though he’d been in camp several times to drop off loads. Now, he was on his own time. He went where he wanted.

Samantha looked up from her map of the area as Neil entered the mess, able to feel him before he arrived. Instead of waiting, she used her cane to push off the bench and limp toward him.

The few people left in the mess were relieved that Neil and his team had returned. They could tell by his expression, and the multiple loads he’d brought in, that it had been a successful trip. They

returned to eating as Neil escorted Samantha back to the table so she would get off her leg.

More laughter echoed from the mall.

Neil looked that way, frowning. “The kids are in there?”

Samantha smiled. “Marc’s nightly descendant meeting hasn’t ended yet. He has them in the toy store.”

Neil chuckled. “That’s one way to win them over.”

Samantha had thought the same thing. She motioned toward the angry sky they could see through the flap as other people came in. “It won’t be much longer.”

“I can go get our stuff moved?”

Samantha gave him a grateful nod. She wanted to help, but she needed to be out in the open as long as she could to read the waves. Like Angela and the other descendants, Samantha was tired and recovering slowly. She wasn’t able to scan as far out as she used to.

Neil kissed her cheek and headed toward the community tent, where he had insisted that she sleep. He knew Samantha sometimes still felt self-conscious around the people she’d lied to and then forced to accept her relationships. He hoped to help her get over that. He also thought the distraction was good for both of them.

Samantha suddenly wondered where Adrian was and how he was doing. Since he’d vanished, Angela had only been seen a few times. Samantha

understood how sick Angela had been, but it also made sense that she was suffering from being away from their former leader. Today's excursion into the mall had exhausted her.

Samantha suspected that had been intentional to keep her from lying in her bedroll, tossing, turning, and worrying. Samantha applauded the effort. That was exactly the reason she was already on her leg despite the horrible pain she was in due to her refusal of more medication. Thoughts of Jeremy were never far behind the silence. Neil was right. It was easier when there were people around.

Samantha moved toward the flap as another peal of high-pitched laughter rang out, followed by a chorus of adult chuckles. She was looking forward to being inside. Despite her initial reluctance about assignment as a den mother, she had discovered it was a balm to her tortured soul. She was grateful to Angela for sharing the pain relief. It made it possible for her to get up every morning without crying. Ending the night was a different story, but she was still working on that.

Wind ripped the flap out of her hand as she exited, slapping it against the canvas. Automatically recoiling, she caught a nasty vibe to the wind.

Morgan grabbed Samantha's arm to steady her, sure of what was coming next. As she spoke, he made hand gestures to spread the order.

"Let's get everybody moved. It's time."

Morgan herded Samantha toward the mall as soon as he finished relaying the message. He was

under strict orders from the boss to get her under cover the instant her duty here was finished.

Samantha limped along as fast as she could, noting the second floor of the mall was throwing off shadows that said someone had rigged up a television. She couldn't wait to see what cartoon the kids were torturing the adults with this...

Pain slammed into Samantha's stomach, causing her to stagger and stumble.

Morgan barely kept her from falling.

Samantha groaned, doubling over.

Morgan looked around in panic for someone to help. He didn't know what to do.

Bring her inside!

Angela's voice directed Morgan to be careful as he scooped Samantha up and took off running toward the mall.

As he ran in, it drew Neil's attention. Neil hurried to catch up, recognizing the woman Morgan was carrying. "Sam!"

Instead of going upstairs to their medics, Morgan took her to a small store on the first floor. Off duty now, Conner and Brandon were clearing out the bookstore like Marc wanted them to.

As soon as Brandon saw them, he knew what was going on.

Morgan hurried to Brandon. "The boss said to bring her to you guys!"

Conner studied Brandon in surprise. He hadn't known the Eagle was a descendant.

Brandon ignored the boy as Samantha was shoved into his arms. He sat Samantha down while Conner knelt next to them. Both self-conscious but willing to help, they sent healing energy into Samantha's rigid body and ignored the witnesses.

Samantha didn't react.

Neil watched with his heart in his throat, terrified of losing her or the babies. He held her hand, hoping to comfort them.

Conner strained to find a reserve of energy. He loved kids. Angela knew from their time in the sewers in Little Rock. She knew he would give everything he had.

"He needs to stop now." Candy had been aware of Conner in the shop across the mall from her. She'd come over upon witnessing Neil and Morgan rushing in with Samantha. "He's using too much."

Neil didn't care about Conner's safety. He ignored Candy.

Brandon knew she was right and reluctantly put his hand on the boy's shoulder to control the strength of the pulse.

Power balanced between youth and wisdom, the healing energy was able to sink in deep enough to stop the cramping. Samantha's body slowly relaxed.

Now pale and breathing rough, the two men helped Neil gather her into his arms.

"Keep her off her feet." Conner controlled his boiling guts as his head spun.

"I will." Neil left to find a place for her to rest.

Morgan followed, noting the details in his memory. Any magic use had to be reported now, no matter the reason.

Sensing Candy wanted to be alone with Conner, Brandon slipped out of the room. He didn't think Conner was a threat to her, but he was also using the opportunity to avoid discovery. While he and Conner had been healing Samantha, the boy had witnessed things he shouldn't have. Brandon was hoping the moment alone with Candy would make him forget it.

Conner swayed on his feet; he slowly slid down the wall into a sitting position. He wanted to stare at Candy while they had a moment alone, but he didn't have the strength to open his eyes. He hadn't used his gifts very often even before the no-magic rule had gone into effect.

Unable to stand viewing him that way, Candy took a fast look around and didn't see anyone watching them, not even a guard. She stepped forward before she could change her mind and knelt next to the boy. "Take what you need. I give it willingly."

Conner immediately reached out and pulled her forward to seal their lips. Drawing hard and fast, it was impossible for her not to see what was in his mind and heart. As their bond strengthened, Conner was also able to see what she had been hiding from herself and everyone else.

He pushed her away to keep from drawing more energy than she could spare, gasping and groaning

at the pain and the pleasure. He was stunned that she'd done this for him.

Candy retreated to the safety of the doorway, taking another fast look around to verify no one had witnessed it. When she was satisfied they were still alone, she glanced back to find Conner in the middle of recharging.

Though she had heard about it from the Eagles and camp members, she hadn't witnessed it herself. His sunken cheeks filled out; his brittle gray hair returned to spun gold. The cloudy gray eyes became sparkling blue and a deep blush came into his cheeks. As he gazed up at her, leering as if they were both naked, Candy allowed herself to give him a smirk of acceptance. They would have the relationship Conner wanted, as long as he remembered what it took to satisfy someone like her. Lee hadn't been capable of it. Candy doubted Conner was either, but she had decided life was too short not to enjoy the ride down. *And Conner looks like a lot of fun to ride.*

Conner's laughter spilled into the hall.

Laced with a man's triumph, it sent chills over Candy's skin and need into her gut. She fled, not yet ready to face the full consequences of her choice.

Conner got up and returned to work. The bookstore was half cleaned out. Conner finished putting the musty titles into the boxes while reflecting. Candy did want him. *I was right!*

Chapter Twenty-Two BK9

Through The Middle

1

“It’s here!” Radios blared with a warning from the guards who were still escorting the few remaining camp members into the mall.

Behind the warning, a harsh gust of wind slammed against the building, making kids and adults flinch. Safe Haven had been in the mountain for nature’s displeasure during the last months. They’d forgotten how angry she could get.

Lightning flashed; torrents of rain began to hit the walls and windows.

People moved away from the glass.

On the second floor, Marc and the kids were enjoying their quality time in the toy store. He was receiving updates from the guard watching both him and the shops around them, but he didn’t want to leave the kids to check it himself. There was a sense he needed to stay here, beyond the bonding. He looked at Shawn as footsteps echoed. “What’s going on out there?”

Shawn was staring down the hall, trying to figure out the answer to that question. It took a minute for the next guard to pass the message as it was relayed to him. “Samantha had some trouble,

but Conner helped her. All the camp is inside now, including new people. We have them quarantined on the first floor, in the rear.”

Marc did a fast scan for Angela and found her coming his way. Not picking up a guard with her, he scanned for that man and found him still outside.

Marc stayed with Ivan, curious where the soldier was going. When he saw Ivan enter the livestock trailer, he realized Angela had sent her personal guard out to secure their animals. Jennifer had forgotten, but Marc wouldn't hold that against her. There was always a lot to do and this was only her second time on point.

The storm intensified, drawing mutters and yelps from camp members who rushed in through the rain. Tripping over boxes of supplies, yelling and shoving each other, they added to the unease.

Marc gestured. “Go find them something to do.”

As Shawn left, the cartoon ended. Marc looked at the children, happy to see a few of the younger ones had relaxed enough to fall asleep. “What's next?”

As kids cried out for their favorite from the stack they had gathered, Marc did another scan to see where Angela was going. She'd just passed the toy store.

While following her, Marc realized she did have a guard, though the man hadn't been assigned. Brandon was off duty now that he and Conner had cleaned out the lower level bookstore.

Marc stayed with them in case there was a problem. He hadn't trusted Brandon since he'd found out who the man really was. Because he felt that way, Marc had agreed to keep the secret so Brandon wasn't discriminated against. No one would ever fully trust a Mitchel again. Adrian had made certain of that.

Marc began to get nervous as Angela went into the small gun store at the end of the second floor hall. He would have gotten up and joined her if not for picking up her relief that the kids were well protected.

Tension flew through the toy store.

Settled at his feet, Leeann looked up. "Please don't leave us."

Chills broke out on Marc's arms. "I won't." He did get up and go to the entryway, so he could scan both the mall and the kids.

The guards in the hall looked at him and each other in confusion, not sure what the problem was.

Crash!

Everyone jumped as something slammed into the side of the mall above their vehicles and then crashed onto the semis below.

Marc waited, hoping he was jumpy for no reason. While being in the room with so many descendant children and their constantly running concerns, Marc hadn't picked up much from outside the entire time they'd been up here. *It was wonderful. I get it now.*

Marc frowned as Angela picked up a .22 from the display cabinet the Eagles had unlocked in preparation for tomorrow's loading. When she began to gather bullets, Marc realized she was arming for a fight. The gun she'd brought out of the mountain required too much effort for her to fire. She was still so weak she had trouble even lifting her leg to dress, but the .22 would be easy on her during a battle.

Around the mall, camp members moved closer to Eagles, able to feel danger rushing toward them. The storm was so loud now that people had to shout to be heard.

Angela came to where Marc was standing, eyes dazed. She wasn't supposed to use magic in her weakened condition. There was only one reason she would be. Death was coming. Marc waited to determine from which direction.

Kenn ran up the escalator and joined them, unaware there was already tension waiting. "We have a radio missing."

Angela regarded Marc with the witch glaring from her dead sockets. "Guard the kids."

Marc didn't want to, but he nodded obediently and then waved all of the Eagles in view to follow her. She had to prove she was back—to the camp and to herself—but she didn't have to do it alone.

Angela ignored her escort, tracking the thoughts of someone in camp about to betray their location. She didn't want to give the chore to anyone else for several reasons, but none of them was her ego or

image. Everyone was already busy. Marc had the kids, while Neil was with Samantha and the other injured people. Kyle and Jennifer, along with Kenn and Tonya, were supervising the camp members and rookies. The people who were free to handle this problem were already on their way to do so.

Angela suffered her body's discomfort to jog down the stairs, making a sharp turn at the bottom of the escalator to take her toward the quarantine zone that had been chosen for the new people.

Jennifer ran up to her, mentally apologizing for all the mistakes.

There wasn't time to comfort the teenager. "Tracy went in to deliver trays."

Jennifer stiffened in rage at the thought of what might be happening right now. She looked around. "Where's Charlie?"

The window next to them blew in, showering the hall with glass and rain. Both women were knocked off their feet, banging into the front of a store that still had the metal awning drawn.

Guards rushed to help Jennifer and Angela, crunching across the glass. Thick wind and rain blew through the mall.

"Everybody upstairs! Everybody up!" Kenn and Tonya stampeded the camp up the escalators as fast as they could, able to hear the roar of something that sounded like an engine but could only be one thing. Safe Haven had survived tornadoes before, but they'd hoped to never repeat it.

Angela's witch helped her as she ran toward the storage room, healing what she was able to. Blood trickled down her cheek and wrist.

Jennifer had taken most of the glass, but she'd been wearing her thick Eagle jacket. Small and large shards were embedded all along the arm and hip. She removed it carefully, but refused to let a team medic check her out as she followed the boss. Jennifer didn't tell them she also had blood running down one leg and a loud ringing in her ears.

Angela stopped at the intersection right before the storage room. She motioned the Eagles to go in openly, then slid into the other hall to access the room's rear entrance.

The Eagles were careful to keep their minds blank so they wouldn't give her away.

Daryl waved the senior men in the group to come and then rushed in, gun up and finger ready. "Drop the knife!"

"Stay back!" The teenage boy tightened the knife against Tracy's throat, holding her with one arm while fumbling with the radio in his other hand.

The new family was clustered by the stacks of boxes, scared to move or talk. The storage room held a tent, three kits, a lantern, and blankets, but nothing else. It created a very dim room where gunplay wasn't advised.

Fury came from Jennifer as she realized the boy wasn't mute.

"Hey!" Charlie's shout was loud.

“I said stay back!” The traitor spun around, using Tracy as a shield.

He’s not deaf either! Charlie was furious and terrified as Daryl confronted Tracy’s captor. *He’s not disabled!*

Yes, he is. That’s why it was so easy for someone to brainwash him, Angela corrected. *He’s mentally handicapped.*

Tracy didn’t resist as she was dragged around again, keeping her eyes on the boy in the corner with the gun. Charlie was trained on her captor, waiting for his shot. Tracy was about to pass out, not sure who would end up killing her as the knife dug deeper into her throat and drew blood.

The traitor finally found the mike button and pushed it. “They’re in the mall! Marion, Georgia Outlet Mall! I’m in Safe Haven right now! Marion, Georgia!”

An instant later, Angela’s gun barrel went against his head and fired.

The body fell to the floor as Charlie rushed forward and grabbed Tracy.

Angela stared at the radio.

“We’re coming!”

“I’m on my way!”

The calls became too garbled to understand from refugees promising to arrive as soon as they could.

She’d had to wait for the teenage spy to turn around before she could come up behind him, and

the Eagles hadn't had a clear shot without hitting Tracy or Charlie. Angela's fury filled the room.

The Eagles turned their guns on the rest of the new arrivals.

"We didn't know! Please don't shoot!"

Charlie had one arm around Tracy, who was shaking against him. His gun was now holstered. He believed the family was innocent. When the traitor had grabbed Tracy, they'd been shocked.

"We picked him up a month ago! We thought he was an orphan and needed help."

"Please don't make us leave."

"What happened?"

"She saw the radio he was trying to hide as we came in with the trays." Charlie didn't look at his mother. "I felt her concern. I guess he did too."

Harry retrieved the missing radio even though it was too late.

"Pass the word. Emergency council meeting right now, team leaders too." Angela glanced at Charlie, glad to see Tracy's injury was minor.

When he shrugged, leaving the decision to her, Angela gave the new people a warning instead of banishment. "Whether you are responsible for this or not, people will believe you were. One small mistake and you'll be run out of here, no matter what I say. Be careful..." Angela froze as coldness swept the mall. *Look out!*

Marc felt the danger coming, but he still didn't know from what direction. He could have assumed

it was from any of the dark stores around them, but he had faith those places had been cleared correctly by the Eagles. The only place danger could come from was this room—

Glass shattered as something crashed through the center window and landed on the floor in front of the kids.

Marc drew in a blur, not hesitating. He fired twice, knocking the standing shadow backward into the television.

The makeshift platform tumbled over with the weight. The TV and DVD player crashed to the floor, bringing a halt to the entertainment.

Kids screamed, scrambling to get out of the way.

“Grab the babies!” Leeann directed the older kids before the adults could do it. This was her job.

“Get over there!” Cody pointed toward his dad. The children all took cover behind Marc.

Shawn verified the intruder was dead.

Footsteps echoed as Eagles rushed toward them from all over the mall at the sound of Marc’s Colt.

The sentries found him surrounded by kids who refused to let him leave the room.

“A predator followed one of the teams back to us.” Marc fought to control his rage from picking up the evil man’s thoughts as he’d shot him. The sick bastard had climbed the outside of the mall during the storm to grab a child, any child. “What happened out there?”

“One of...the new people.” Travis had run the entire way from Angela. “Boss handled it. We’re all good.”

“Have the lower levels get our vehicles ready to go.” Marc could hear calls echoing throughout the mall, ruining everyone’s evening. “As soon as the storm passes, we’ll leave.”

Travis started to tell him Angela had called an emergency meeting... He paused, head tilting. “Do you hear that whistle?”

“Down!” Marc grabbed the closest kids and shoved them down. “Incoming! Get away from the glass!”

The tornado slammed into the ground near the parking lot and roared toward the mall. Debris whizzed outward as the twister cut a path through the abandoned vehicles and slammed into the building.

Screams filled the halls and were quickly drowned out by the roar of wind as it scattered debris in every direction. Small, the tornado twisted ferociously in an effort to take human lives like it had been instructed to do.

Descendants brought up shields, but each of them knew it was pointless. Magic couldn’t stand against a tornado.

“I agree.” Angela and the team medics had just finished treating their injured. No one had died and only a few cuts had needed stitches. Even she and Jennifer had gotten off with minor slices and didn’t need bandages. The tornado had swept in one side and out the other in a few loud seconds. It had demolished a section of the mall, but most of the camp had been in the hall outside the toy store. That area had been spared except for a bit of blowing debris and some flying glass. If the base of the tornado had been wider, they would all be dead now.

Angela was tired of having that thought after each of their encounters. She was looking forward to a time when she could say the outcome had given them a good side effect. *How about eternal life? It keeps to the whole yin and yang thing.*

Jennifer snickered. Standing next to Angela, the teen was scanning for problems from the open section. The mall was still giving out shakes and shudders, emitting groans and loud bangs. Theo’s crew wouldn’t declare this structure safe now. Jennifer hoped it would hold a bit longer. Now that their injured were treated and everyone was accounted for, they needed that fast meeting to decide if their next campsite was still viable. Jennifer didn’t think so. An open park wasn’t defensible.

“I know.” Angela collected her bag and moved toward the toy store, where the den mothers and Marc had the kids ready to travel. “Let’s have that

meeting now and see what we can come up with.” Neither woman felt good about staying here for even a few more minutes, but rushing off blindly into the darkness wasn’t smart either. She looked at Ivan. “Ten minutes. Have it ready.”

Ivan was honored to receive point over the bugout.

In the hall around them, the camp waited nervously. The storm was going to abate, but the people still responding on the radios were already on their way.

3

“What if we don’t leave at all?” Kendle was curled up in the corner with Tommy and the toddler from the springs.

“You mean stay and fight?” Neil couldn’t believe Kendle was suggesting it.

“I mean, what if they just think we left?” She waved at the missing radio Harry had collected. “Misinformation could be as dangerous now as it was before the war.”

“We make some calls and say we spotted Safe Haven somewhere else?” Kenn picked up on it.

Kendle nodded. “It’ll have to be a voice they won’t recognize.”

Marc frowned. “Some people will still come here to find a trail.”

“I don’t have an answer for that, but I assumed we could figure it out together.” Kendle looked

around the room so everyone understood she wasn't just talking about her and Marc.

Marc considered the idea, shrugging. "If we can be quiet enough to convince people the mall is abandoned, it might work for a little while, but I don't think we should do that. I think the sooner we leave, the better."

"I agree with Marc, but I want to use Kendle's idea too." Angela gestured. "We're going southwest. Let's send them north and east."

Everyone was able to agree on that.

Kenn already had the maps out, tracing the route they were supposed to take to the boat. Zack's team should arrive at that site tomorrow afternoon. Kenn assumed Safe Haven was now going to drive straight through to avoid refugees. If Angela kept to the route they'd planned, there was a chance they would arrive at the boat right after the scouting team.

"Damn it!"

Everyone looked over to find Angela staring with glassy eyes that begged for a break.

"We have to go. Now!"

Panic split the air for a brief moment and then training kicked in.

Eagles hurried the camp into vehicles the rookies had started, using Kenn's notebook copy of where people were supposed to be for travel. Several of their vehicles had been damaged in the storm, forcing them to double up.

The camp was relieved to get the order to go. After listening to the radios for the last half hour, none of them wanted to stay here. Hoping to avoid the battle, the camp members helped each other out into the darkness. The storm was still roiling over them, but the awful wind was gone and the rain was no longer slamming down as if it was trying to impale them. They were all soaked by the time everyone was loaded and accounted for.

The Eagles didn't tell them there were already refugees in the area. They slammed the doors and slid behind wheels, eager to be gone.

Marc helped with the children, carrying and directing. Eagles followed him with kids in their arms.

Kenn stuck by Angela as she also carried one of the smaller children, telling her what was in the area. "There's a prison, a military academy, and a few small warehouses. We also might be able to use a terminal, like the UN troops were doing."

"We need something with a fence you can send power through, like we did on the mountain."

Kenn searched for something that fit the criteria, automatically scooping up one of the kids who stumbled.

As they got the last of the children into the semi with the den mothers and pregnant women, Kenn found a spot on the map. "What about this?"

Angela leaned over the map as Kenn shined his flashlight and the camp finished loading around

them. “That might work. Take us east first and then cut around. No lights.”

Kenn headed for the first semi, glad Tonya was in the truck to help with the twitching children. “You need a hand?”

Neil was going by with Samantha and a bag.

“Nope. Get us rolling!” Neil carried Samantha into the medical camper and placed her on a cot, glad Tommy had slid behind the wheel. Tommy was one of the best drivers here, along with being one of the best shooters. Neil trusted him to keep up.

Drugged and scared, Samantha huddled in the bunk and tried to think good thoughts. Her twins couldn’t take clenched muscles right now.

In the process of shutting the camper, Neil paused. Conner was headed for the rear jeeps that would provide protection for the ride. Neil made a curt gesture that surprised those who didn’t know about Samantha’s problem.

Neil waited as the jeep guard directed the boy to the medical camper. When Conner ran to him, confused, Neil pulled him inside and slammed the door.

The trashed side of the mall glared balefully at Safe Haven as they pulled out of the parking lot. Forty cars had come in. Twenty-eight rolled out. The consolation was they had been for passengers and not cargo or livestock. All of the supplies and animals they had gathered were still with them, as were all the people. That included the new family who would be watched closer than any other in the

history of Safe Haven to be positive they weren't like the orphan boy they'd tried to save.

The medical camper began to roll, allowing Neil to breathe a sigh of relief. As the mall fell behind them and the wind faded, Neil took a seat on the bunk next to Samantha and held her hand. He didn't know what else to do for her, but he did know he was going to have to restrict her activities or they would lose the babies.

"Why am I here?" Conner was tired but not at Angela's level. "I'm okay."

Neil looked at Samantha, who had already fallen into a restless sleep. "She's not."

Satisfied he was here to help if needed, Conner tried to forestall the next part of the process. "I did my job. The alpha will reward me if she thinks I deserve it."

Neil didn't glance away from Samantha. "What's the one thing you need most to be happy?"

Caught in a moment of vulnerability, Conner decided to give Neil the truth. "I miss my dad. I have my entire life."

Neil had expected time with Candy to be the teenager's focus, but it didn't matter what the boy wanted. Neil was now determined he would get it.

Conner stared, uncomfortable. As much as he wanted a Special Forces man on his side, he wanted the support to be honest. "I can't accept that."

"What?"

"I want to earn it. I'm an Eagle."

Neil was proud of him. “Then I’ll help you with that. No cheating, just oversight to be sure you get a fair chance.”

Conner grinned. “That, I’ll take.” His happiness fled. “They’re here.” He looked at Neil, voice rising. “Are we out of sight yet?”

Neil didn’t answer as headlights flashed through the rainy darkness.

The Naval Station. As fast as you can.

Kenn put the big truck into a faster gear at Angela’s mental order and hoped everyone would be able to keep up. The path they were taking had been clear most of the way here so far. Kenn hoped that trend held.

Safe Haven’s last vehicle disappeared over the hill just as the first wave of incoming headlights flashed across the parking lot. They had barely gotten out of sight in time. If not for the rain, and the wind shifting things around, their engines and movement would have still given them away.

Kenn glanced in the side mirrors to determine what type of light the convoy was putting off as they traveled through the rest of the storm. He was glad when he didn’t see much. No one had their headlights on against orders and the only time they were making light was when they had to slow down. If Angela’s misinformation tactic worked, the camp might just slide through again.

Wishing there was time to comfort the scared kids around her, Angela waved. “Do it now or someone’s going to see us. This lightning is as bad as the moon.”

Lightning forked overhead again, illuminating the windows and landscape.

The three camp members and one rookie who had been chosen to provide the misinformation nervously picked up the radios as the vehicle jostled them around. Their lines were written on sticky notes for them to repeat, but they were still worried about making a mistake. Safe Haven’s survival depended on the refugees believing they had gone anywhere but the direction they were currently heading.

“I found Safe Haven!” Pam ignored the cringes of the kids at the loud shout, putting excitement into her voice. “They split up! They split up! Follow the leaders!”

James keyed his mike on cue. “I’m following Angela!”

“Wait for us!”

“North! The council all went north! They’ll meet up somewhere! Keep following!”

Pam keyed her mike once again to finish the circle. “Don’t go to the mall, you idiot! They’re headed north! Cut them off!”

As soon as Pam let off the button, there was a garbled jumble of responses.

Angela concentrated. She didn't have the strength to search far, but she didn't need to. "We still have the trackers. They're not falling for it."

As if in response to her need, a powerful signal got through on the radio.

"Safe Haven is in the west!" Adrian's mocking tone grabbed and held attention. It was obvious from the distorted transmission that he was far from Georgia.

As soon as Adrian let off the mike, another blast came through, this one a familiar voice everyone in Safe Haven was happy to hear.

"We're right on your tail, boss," Doug promised. "We'll be in Texas in an hour."

As the radio garbled up again, everyone waited to hear who would get through next. No one mentioned Adrian's name but all of them except Marc were relieved to know their former leader was still looking out for them, no matter how far away he was.

Angela wished he hadn't called. Hearing him and not being able to see him was torment.

Adrian's voice echoed again, delivering a double warning. "Make sure everyone is with us and then get off the radio."

"Copy that, boss," Doug replied.

It took a while for the radio to settle this time. When it did, it was obvious the refugees were confused about which way to go.

Angela nodded at Pam. "Go with it."

Pam hit the mike one last time. “It’s not them! Dammit! Head west! Head west!” Pam handed the radio back. Safe Haven didn’t have enough for everyone to keep them.

“Was it good?”

Angela looked at Marc with the tired eyes of the witch who was constantly in attendance now, providing support while she was weak. “We still have the trackers.”

Marc wasn’t happy to hear it, but it didn’t surprise him. The misinformation campaign had been a desperate attempt to clear their path so they could reach the boat. Trackers weren’t easy to fool, whether they were descendants or not. “We’ll be ready to handle it when we get to the station.”

Angela motioned toward the maps. “Let’s look at those.”

Marc retrieved the maps, along with her kit. Inside was food, water, her medical bag, and her old guns. He now added ammunition for the .22 on her hip.

Angela put the maps across her lap and tried to gather whatever energy she had left. The transmissions that had just gone out might be Safe Haven’s last call. They would know within a few hours.

The Big Guns

1

“We’re getting close.”

Baxter glanced at his partner and then back to the road where he was steering the hummer around rusted wrecks and signs of an old battle. “What makes you think so?”

“That sounded desperate. Every one of those calls put out panic, not excitement. We must be close.”

Baxter was willing to take her word for it. Rachel was the best tracker he’d ever worked with. They’d been together for more than ten years now, without a single problem. It was odd, considering how opposite they were. Besides being a white male and a black female, they also had opposite styles that could have caused problems. He preferred a knife, while Rachel was lethal with the Glocks she carried in four different places on her sinewy body. She preferred the plainclothes look of an old West cowboy, while Baxter liked the flashy clothes and jewelry so freely available now that the apocalypse had wiped out the need for money. Benjamin employed them and though the evil genius was gone, they’d been paid in advance to do a job and

they were going to. “Do you want to send in our decoys now?”

“Not yet.” Rachel reclined the seat. Searching for the Safe Haven descendants was the hardest job she’d ever had. Each time they had gotten close, something happened to prevent them from going in for the attack. The first time had been when the government sent troops into their way. If Benjamin had been patient, she and Baxter would have delivered Angela’s head to him like he’d requested.

After that, there had been a stone mountain surrounded by refugees and then a fight with the UN. Forced to adapt their strategies, they were now going to use the refugees against Safe Haven, but neither of them expected that to be enough unless they could get the camp pinned down somewhere. As long as the slippery descendants continued to evade them, there was little point in calling in a mob that would just as soon kill her and her partner for their tracking abilities.

Neither of them had other gifts, but they were both great with their weapons and they never quit until they got their man—which had always made up for it in the past, but Rachel knew determination wasn’t enough to get Safe Haven’s powerful leader. She was stewing on another plan. She had others already in motion, such as the capture of the team Angela had sent south. A small crew was now holding those people hostage in hopes that when Safe Haven arrived, they would be able to use them as bargaining chips. Again, Rachel wasn’t certain

that was enough. What they needed was to capture one of the leaders or their offspring. It was well known that Angela would do anything to protect her children. “Where would you go? Pull over and get the maps out. Tell me where you would go, within fifty miles.”

Baxter immediately pulled the green and black camouflaged hummer over, not caring about where they were or who might be around. This was how he and Rachel usually operated—not by throwing off the impression they were intimidating, but by actually being so. Anyone who rolled up on them would be sorry.

Baxter spread the maps out over the dashboard and began to list off locations.

Rachel stayed reclined in the seat and listened, positive it would be an obvious answer when she heard it. Safe Haven hadn’t been able to settle in the mall for long. That meant they might not have been able to form plans for where to go next, except for maybe a rudimentary choice allowing little time to find concealment. They would need some place to hold 200 people, plus vehicles.

“There’s a wildlife refuge surrounded by rivers on three sides. There’s also an old chemical factory roughly forty miles from here.” Baxter moved further south on the map. “There’s an airport and a naval station across the border in Mississippi.”

“That’s it.” Rachel sat up. “The Naval Station.”

Baxter put the maps away, not doubting her instincts, but curious how she had come to the choice. “What did I miss?”

“Remember the files we had on her friends and family? She lived with a Marine before the war. Supposedly, that same Marine is in Safe Haven with her. It makes sense he would pick a military location.”

“We were told her new man, the Ghost, is in charge. It’s in the most recent files, at least the ones we were able to salvage from the train and the bunker where Benjamin was murdered.”

Rachel nodded. “I know, but consider how many dead ends and wild goose chases we were sent on over the last seven months. Faulty intelligence sank us every time.”

“What do you mean?” Baxter wasn’t as smart as his partner.

“I mean, what if Safe Haven doesn’t have just one leader. What if they’re sharing?”

Baxter didn’t like it. “That would probably account for all the times they’ve managed to escape us. If they have that many descendant minds working together, it would explain a lot of things.”

“My thoughts exactly. Find us a place to spend a couple hours while we make plans. If we walk in there blind, we probably won’t come back out. No one else has.”

Baxter did as he was told, positive that she was right. Safe Haven didn’t like to leave survivors. Baxter respected that. *Neither do I.*

“Wow.”

Kenn and Marc were in front of the convoy, with three teams on duty around them while the rest of the Eagles cleared the site. The Naval Air Station Meridian in Lauderdale, Mississippi had been overrun, but the fence they needed was intact. Only one area of the Naval Station even had an electrified fence, where the confidential aircraft had been kept. That was where Safe Haven was going to hunker down. The hangar was large and sturdy enough to protect them for a little while. It was the only place big enough to hold everyone. The oddly shaped dome was also fireproof, earthquake-safe, and bullet resistant.

“It didn’t look like this last time we were here.”

“Yeah, that fence was a bitch for us.” Kenn remembered the quiet trip he and Marc had made during a training run. Charged with infiltrating the hangar if they could, the fence had prevented them from going through or over. They had been forced to go under, using a maintenance tunnel that hadn’t been guarded very well. It had been a fun run for them, even though they had been surrounded by Air Force pilots who only saw them as testing tools.

Angela joined the men, coming up between them to get her first look.

The station had once been a center of technology and innovation as new aircraft were

brought here for testing runs or developed here for covert programs. The main buildings had crawled with aviators—all eager to fly the planes and protect their country, but that had changed with the war. Broken windows and torched frames of jeeps were strewn across the station. The planes were charred frames or stripped carcasses. No one had been here in a long time. That was exactly what Angela had been hoping for.

The naval station was still impressive to those who hadn't viewed one before. A few of the planes weren't destroyed. Those were gawked and pointed at by both kids and adults. Angela wished there was time to tour all of the wonderful places and inventions of their country, but if they had that time, they wouldn't be in this situation.

“All clear.”

Angela waved for the security teams to set up camp, aware of the clock ticking in her mind. The trackers were closing in, but Safe Haven wasn't ready.

“What about driving through it?” Ivan could see that was a weakness.

“They can.” Kenn gestured. “We could have.”

Ivan frowned. “We'll need a big gun on all sides.”

Kenn nodded. “We have two.”

“We can use launchers on the other sides.”

“We also have descendants.”

Ivan realized the no-magic rule had been lifted.

“It’ll come in waves.” Angela tried to prepare them. “They won’t want to attack alone. We’ll probably be fighting from each side at the same time.”

Marc watched her walk away. “How long would it take Theo’s team to get the plates from the trucks and give us a small box of protection at each corner?”

Kenn estimated. “An hour, at least.”

“We have to try. Get it all set up.”

“Will we have time?” Ivan wasn’t convinced.

Marc grunted. “It’s not time we need. It’s more ammunition. The descendants are drained, the camp is fragile, and we haven’t found bullets. What we’re about to do won’t make a dent in the numbers if we’re found.”

“So why are we doing it? Why not go to another mall or a big warehouse?”

“Because it’s the only place we had the fuel left to reach that can’t be burnt down with us inside, will hold everyone and our vehicles, is out in the open enough that a storm will freeze people outside, and has bullet-proof walls—as much as any wall can be anyway.”

Ivan hated Marc’s grim tone. He realized what it all meant. “We’re not getting out of here, are we?”

“They’re watching us. Why haven’t they made contact?” Kenn didn’t care about Ivan’s question.

“Maybe they don’t want to give themselves away.” Marc was hoping for that. “There were a lot

of people on the radio. It would have drawn attention.”

Neil left it up to Marc, but made a mental note to mention it to the boss. No one trusted him to deliver all their concerns to Angela now.

Marc knew, but there wasn't time to sort that out. They needed to get the camp set up and the fences powered before the trackers called in their location to the refugee mob Jennifer had warned them was coming.

Marc moved aside as a group of women and kids came through to use the latrines. Samantha was in the center, being helped by Pam and Tracy.

Around them, teams watched the landscape with suspicion and fingers that wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger. Safe Haven had been harassed for hundreds of miles since leaving the mountain. They were sick of it.

“I want a surprise over here, like we talked about.” Marc pointed. “On the other side, do the same thing, but put it further out. We'll hit that one first and hope it buys us more time because they'll be afraid to come in close. On the third side, we'll set up the big guns and be ready with the grenade launchers we have left.”

Kenn wrote, pointed at a team, and wrote down who he'd assigned. He handled it as if they were back in the Marines. There wasn't much time for anything else.

Marc had already directed their vehicles to be brought in and lined up around the walls as another

defensive layer between the refugees and the camp. Suddenly wishing they'd picked a different location for this fight, Marc spun around at the sound of engines.

Seeing it was a group of Eagles coming around the side of the hangar in one of their jeeps, Marc forced his demon down and his hand away from his gun.

Angela's cold voice echoed next. "The best shooters should be at each of the four corners to back up the descendants. Put the children behind them to feed energy, but if the fence is breached, I want the kids moved below."

It wasn't hard to figure out what would happen from there. They would be standing overtop their camp, hoping to kill enough of the refugees before they ran out of ammunition and energy. Marc agreed with Ivan. *We're screwed.*

3

"They're here." Standing in the center of the hangar with the kids around her, Angela was trying to look into the future. Safe Haven had been here for an hour. "They're coming to the gate now."

"Incoming!"

Eagles hurried to activate the electrified fence that had only been finished for a few minutes. They'd been about to run a test on it, but there obviously wasn't time.

Eagles who were assigned to stay with the kids and weaker members of camp drew their weapons.

Everyone prepared for yet another fight.

Angela moved to the door of the hangar, walking by the men who were still welding the steel plating from the semis into small shooting booths. She paused, waiting for her presence to be necessary.

Marc had already stepped outside. As Kenn came to one side and Kyle took the other, Marc found himself comforted by the show of force they presented.

Jennifer trailed the men, staying near Morgan and Brandon, who were her protection. Angela had told them what to do when the trackers made contact, but as everyone began to play the role, the sense of it being futile filled the air.

Marc knew that was going to be the case as soon as he got a glimpse of the two trackers standing casually in front of their camouflage hummer—one smoking and the other leering. *We're going to need a new plan.*

Next to him, Kenn was already working on it. *We need to take them out before they make a call. Are we waiting to hear what they have to say or are we jumping right off?* Kenn wanted to be clear on the plan.

Marc scanned the waiting pair. *We need to buy time to keep preparing in case they do get a call out. Let's stall them as long as we can and go from there.*

Kenn thought that was a bad idea. It was only a matter of time before one of the trackers went for a radio to announce Safe Haven's location.

Rachel stepped forward as the trio of men approached. She didn't stop when they did. Instead, she walked right up to the man in the center, who she assumed was the leader. She didn't stop until their boots were almost touching. As she stared up at him, using her gifts to map out his abilities, her eyes widened.

Marc gave her one of his most evil stares, throwing alpha waves at her with every word. "You should get out of here; forget you saw us."

Rachel did take a step back, but only so she would have room to use the guns she kept in various places on her body.

Baxter came up to take her right flank, hands fingering his knives.

"We have arrest orders for Angela. Turn her over or I'm going to tell my men at the dock to kill yours. Then I'll let the refugees know where we all are."

It was obvious from the smirk on her lips that the woman wasn't lying. That's why Zack's team hadn't checked in on time.

Behind them, Jennifer relayed that information to the boss on the private channel she was keeping open with both Angela and Marc. She wasn't worried about picking up Kenn's thoughts.

"What if I just kill you right now?" Marc let his eyes glow bright red. "My snipers can take you out

before you can reach your radios to give any orders.”

Rachel laughed at the bluff. “I was told the Ghost never lies. Guess that was bullshit, like all the other myths about this refugee camp.” She looked behind him and found Angela in the doorway of the hangar.

Marc knew when Rachel spotted her target by the way her pupils dilated and her tongue came out to wet her lips. He instantly hated her.

“Angela!”

Angela stepped out of the hangar and walked toward them.

Everyone in Safe Haven knew Angela was so weak she probably couldn’t fight, but they weren’t positive. She’d done things they considered miracles.

As Angela reached Jennifer, the teenager grabbed her wrist. “Hold on.”

Angela waited for Jennifer, who was picking something up. Angela was too tired to do it. That’s why Jennifer was here.

“Another trap.” Jennifer swung to the north. “They organized a group and told them to come in quietly. They’re almost here.” Jennifer sent that to Marc.

Baxter and Rachel were aware of the mental conversation going on, but they couldn’t hear it. As Marc’s eyes turned to deep red and the two men on either side of him tensed to grab weapons, the tracking team realized they had been discovered.

The three Safe Haven men each fired a different weapon. Because of Kyle's lack of mental gifts, he relied on his gun. He hit the male tracker in the leg and then walked the next three shots up the man's chest to finish off with a shot in his head.

Kenn had been experimenting with his new gift. He used it now to prevent the woman from reaching a weapon. As he held her in place, Marc blasted her with his sonic gift.

All three men ducked as blood splattered.

Rachel's body fell, gun sliding into the mud.

"They didn't get a call out. We're good." Kenn was thrilled with the way things were going. He hadn't heard the mental warning.

"Incoming!"

The men swung around to find vehicles coming toward them from the north.

It's a trap! Jennifer's message got through to Kenn and Kyle this time. The men took off running toward the hangar so they could get it secured.

As the gates jingled shut behind them, electricity snapped on, making the fence hum.

Everyone hurried inside the hangar, where three quarters of the corner booths had been reinforced. As everyone crowded in, the sound of engines filled the air.

"It's Safe Haven!"

"Safe Haven is in the Naval Station in Lauderdale!"

The Eagles stared at each other in fear.

The kids and camp members did the same as the radios once again lit up with refugees saying they were on their way.

Kendle waved at their decoys. “Make some calls!”

Pam and the others began to send out misinformation calls, but it was obvious from the answers between their pauses that people weren’t going for it. As engines rushed closer and the radio became too garbled to understand, Angela motioned the descendants to take up a perimeter around the inside of the hangar. “This is what we’re here for.”

The descendants understood what she meant, though a few of them didn’t agree with it. Their duty of protecting the camp hadn’t changed the entire time they’d been in Safe Haven’s army.

“Can we get them out through the tunnel we used during our run here?” Kenn was hoping Marc had a better plan.

“I doubt it. Because we were able to get in so easily, I’m positive they closed it up. You can check if you want to.”

Kenn hurried. The service tunnel had led a mile down the road. Safe Haven would emerge out of sight of the hundred refugees now approaching the electrified fence.

“Open fire!”

The snipers and descendants began using power and ammo to prevent the fence from being rammed. The fence was great for anyone on foot, but not strong enough to stop anything larger than a bike.

The miracles they'd performed during the UN battle weren't possible here. They still hadn't recovered from doing it the first time.

Kenn flinched at a noise that sometimes still haunted his dreams. It had sounded like a giant bug zapper then and he had no doubt the noise was about to become a reality here.

"Everyone get your gun ready, but keep the safety on until we tell you to remove it. Keep those safeties on!" Kyle was preparing the camp for battle. Because the refugees were being held at bay by the fence for the moment, he was more concerned about one of the inexperienced camp members shooting themselves or someone else by accident. He walked through the people who were arming themselves, barking out instructions.

"Are the big guns up?"

Daryl nodded at Marc's query, slamming the last bolt into place on the .50 cal. "Load and fire when ready."

Marc motioned the men who had been chosen to handle the two large guns to get into position. Small gaps in the steel plating had been left in each corner of the hangar for the descendants and guns to work. It also allowed gaps for bullets to get through. Angela had instructed the children to use their energy to shield people standing at those gaps in hopes that only a few slugs would make it through. It was impossible to say how many refugees might show up, but there were already enough out there right now to bring down the fence.

These refugees weren't the screaming, fighting, chaotic mess that Safe Haven was used to seeing in their pursuers. This group had been organized. The Eagles could tell that by the way they didn't rush in blindly and were trying to make their shots count. The Eagles were doing the same, many of them repeating their training mantra. *Aim small, miss small.* It had worked in the old world; there was no reason it wouldn't succeed now. All they had to do was keep anyone from ramming the fence.

None of them thought they could do it for long. The supply trucks were in the hangar with them, but those items were food and water. While both were much needed, they weren't going to be able to use supplies to buy these people off when their ammunition ran out.

"There goes another truck! Get the corner!" Marc tried to direct the descendant gifts into the oncoming truck before it hit the fence.

With so many vehicles moving through the drizzle, it was impossible to tell who was doing a round to check the weakness of the fence and who was actually trying to ram it. It added another layer of terror that some of the refugees appeared to be ill. Angela thought about the warning the kids had delivered in Roma. She realized nature had tried to kill her with the illness too.

Morgan hit a truck with a grenade as Shawn sniped the driver, sending the vehicle careening toward the fence.

Everyone watched in horror as it slid toward their fragile protection.

The truck stopped short, but they didn't get any relief.

"Here they come!"

Everyone was getting tired of hearing that.

"They're already here!" Kevin shouted at Jennifer.

Jennifer shook her head, pointing. "No, them!"

The Eagles paused in their firing as a new group of cars came over the hill from the east. Screaming into radios and firing guns in the air, it was obvious whose side they were on.

"We can't fight that." Angela directed children away from the gaps, ignoring their protests that they wanted to help. "Roll us in!"

Left with her final defense plan, Safe Haven began to crowd toward the small employee tunnel. Only half the camp fit, and the tunnel had been sealed off, which would prevent an escape into the woods beyond the refugees, but it would give their weaker members a small defense as their fighters stood over top them and battled for everyone's life.

Ivan gawked. "How can there be so many?"

"First the war and then Yellowstone forced people out of the west. Our battles disturbed everyone else. This is what's left of humanity on American soil and they know it. They won't stop this time." Angela drew on her remaining energy.

All around them, descendants and Eagles were lining the perimeter of the hangar, using careful

shots to eliminate people getting out of vehicles, while grenades and magic hit those who were driving. As the lack of energy took its toll, descendants stopped firing. The same thing was happening to the Eagles, except instead of energy, they were missing bullets.

Angela dropped to her knees, unable to stand any longer as she directed her mental gift toward those outside the fence.

Men and women burned by the dozens, but it didn't make a dent in the swarm of vehicles and people on foot that had come over the horizon to blanket the land. Some of those were fighting with each other, but most of them were centered on the fence around the hangar. This wave was going to breach it.

Down in the hole, a hundred vulnerable people listened to the fight for their survival and prayed for their men and women to be victorious. Many promises were made to God as screams of rage and horror continued to echo.

Marc felt the last of his energy leave as he used a sonic blast to kill the driver of a truck about to ram a corner of the fence. Beside him, Brandon and Kendle were already on their knees, empty. None of them had felt what it was like to be drained. It was as if concrete had been poured over their bodies, making it almost impossible to even lift their heads and look around.

“I’m out!” Kyle fell back, dragging people with him toward the hole where he hoped there would be room for a few more.

A large zapping noise filled the air and then the ground shook at a small explosion.

“That was the fence.” Marc waved everyone into a tight circle around the hole where the camp was huddled.

Angela motioned. “Close the gaps and cut holes in the walls for spears!” Angela could barely talk she was so tired. Ivan was dragging her toward the hole while she gave the orders.

He didn’t glance down at her, unable to take what she looked like. “Get the axes!”

Eagles hurried to gouge baseball-sized holes in the sides of the hangar so they could jab spears through.

The sights and sounds of the refugees were intimidating to everyone, including the battle-hardened Eagles and their leader. 500 furious refugees raced toward the hangar, trying to reach the small group inside. Firing at their targets and at each other, it was obvious the refugees had gone mad.

The rat-a-tat-tat of the big guns provided a horrible background for the grenades, rifles, and handguns that fired in a symphony of death. Refugees were knocked from their vehicles and from their feet as the ground exploded in front of them, but the mob kept coming.

Daryl grunted as he swung the only .50 cal. with ammunition left toward a truck about to pierce the other side of the fence. Safe Haven's shots were also damaging that gate as they returned fire. Daryl shot again, entire body jarring with the recoil. They hadn't wasted time securing the big guns.

Click-click!

Daryl wrestled the empty gun away from the gap so Morgan could heft a steel plate over it. Bullets slammed into the side of the hangar where they were, peppering the plating.

Eagles recoiled to avoid being hit.

“Blow it!” Marc shouted.

Kenn pushed the button on the first round of explosives they had placed in the field along the hangar. As two-dozen vehicles neared the front of the fence, preparing to ram it, the ground exploded.

Thunder filled the air, and then screams and debris followed as most of the cars were caught in the explosion.

Other refugees who had been about to do the same thing hit their brakes and fishtailed away from the fence in sudden caution, but the first hole already had cars and people streaming through.

“What do we do now?!”

Most of the men turned toward Angela, though a few of them glanced at Marc. None of them was prepared for Jennifer's tired voice coming from the stairs of the hole where her guard had placed her as her energy faded.

“We reclaim them.”

Inside the hangar, silence fell.

Marc wanted to protest.

So did Angela.

Neither of them did.

Marc grunted. “Be ready when I tell you. As soon as we have a group of them against the walls, we’re going to blow one side. We already have spear holes cut. Everyone will take one of those positions and reclaim as many as they can. As soon as we have enough energy restored, we’ll bring up the bubble around the camp and wait them out.”

“No.” Angela regarded Marc with regret as the screams outside grew louder, hungrier. “We reclaim them all.”

Greedy demons and witches perked up at the thought of being allowed to take so many lifeforces.

Their hosts cringed in revulsion.

Marc nodded. “We take them all.”

Angela drew in a deep breath, sorry it had come to this. “May God forgive us. Our country never will.”

Chapter Twenty-Four BK9

Swarming

Naval Air Station Meridian, MS

November 18th

1

“Let me up there or I’ll use it on you!”

Leeann’s voice caught attention as she came up the ladder. She and the other kids were supposed to be in the tunnel where they would be protected, but she and eight others were climbing up the stairs with determined expressions. Leeann had small flames flickering along her fingers to prove how serious she was.

At the bottom of the stairs, the guards had moved aside and were now staring after the kids without knowing how to handle it.

Leeann marched to Angela and took up a spot in front of her alpha. The other kids joined them, creating a narrow circle of protection. All that was left to complete the connection was for Angela to pick two shoulders to place her hands on. Once she did, all their gifts and energy would be hers to use.

“There’s another wave coming through!”

Marc saw four-dozen screaming men and women on foot swarm through the broken part of the gate and head toward his side of the hangar.

Thankful it was a spot they had ready, he helped get the kids away from the damage area, vaguely noting they refused to break the circle around Angela as she moved with them.

Kenn flipped the last switch, triggering the detonation.

Outside the hangar, refugees reached the doors as the mines went off. Thunder rattled across the naval base, along with screams and chunks of debris that slammed against the hangar like hail.

“Other side!” Kevin screamed.

Angela placed her hand on Cody and Leeann’s shoulders, then aimed toward the gap that hadn’t been closed by the steel plates.

Angela’s wave blasted through the center of the mob about to come through the gap and then spread out into a huge fireball that encompassed the entire side of the hangar. Human torches flailed their arms and cried for help, banging into each other and the walls as they burned alive.

“Get them below!” Angela moved toward the gap. She had a tiny bit of their energy left.

As the kids were forced back down the ladder, Angela fired again, hitting refugees she had missed in the first wave. Exhausted, she let one of them make it through. He ran straight at her.

Angela grabbed the weaponless man. “I reclaim you!”

All around her, descendants did the same as more refugees entered the hangar. Blinding flashes

of light bounced off the metal walls in shadows that revealed healthy bodies becoming husks.

“One big shield up!” Angela fought to use the reclaimed energy through the pain. “Wait for my call!”

Set up with a narrow door in all four corners, and a wide entryway at each end, the only way for them to defend the tunnel was to create a square around it, with a team and a descendant in each corner. It would have been elegant if not for how ugly the fighting was.

“Down!”

Neil and his team rushed together as the shield dropped, following Angela. As she grabbed lifeforces, they did hand-to-hand combat with anyone brave enough to come close to her while she was reclaiming. Greg, Ben, and Wade stayed on one side of Angela as Neil, Tommy, and Tim took the other side, all of them swinging, throwing, or shoving. It was complete chaos only broken when Angela ordered them back.

“Shield up!”

Eagles pulled weaker descendants toward the tunnel, grateful when each recovering magic user brought up part of a shield around them. Refugees had flooded through the broken fence and were now swarming. They crowded in, shoving, cutting, and hurting each other to get to the camp in the center.

“Hold the shield!” Angela screamed, straining.

All the descendants who were capable of it, young and old, added their energy to keep out the

bullets, knives, axes, and fists trying to reach them. Even though Safe Haven had spent the last eleven months in situations like this, it was still the most awful thing many of them had ever witnessed. Because they couldn't reach their targets, the refugees took their rage out on each other. Murder after murder happened in front of them, but they couldn't stop it. Bodies fell across the hangar floor; the walls dripped crimson. Big men, little men, women, and teenagers all strangled, stabbed, and shot each other.

As more refugees crowded in, there was a series of bangs and crashes outside. The main wave had made it through the fence and was about to arrive. Safe Haven had only been able to eliminate 200 of the 700 threats. The numbers were just too high.

“Down!” Angela dropped the shield and grabbed a life.

Distracted by the noises outside, the refugees closest to them were caught off guard. Not wanting to be consumed, many of those evil souls cringed backward to avoid final justice. They shoved frantically against other people who were entering the hangar, and were killed from both sides.

As the shield dropped and Marc stepped forward, Ivan's remaining team, along with Kenn and Kevin, hurried forward to protect him. Now using their last mags, this would reduce them to hand-to-hand combat.

Ivan shoved Marc down as something metal flew through the air. He spun around, taking the hit.

Marc picked himself up as Ivan sank to the ground, not stopping to check on the man. There wasn't time.

Pam shoved into Marc's hip, knocking him aside as another metal object flew through the air toward his head. He didn't know if the refugees had been told to target him the most, but it certainly seemed that way as another knife came flying through the air. It barely missed his arm.

Everyone was grateful when Angela called them all back.

The main refugee wave hit the sides of the hangar and shoved in, allowing no room for the terrified people inside to escape.

Forced to retreat further, Angela shoved more energy into the shield. "Hold it!"

Slowly being refilled each time they took lifeforces, the descendants were able to hold the shield, but there was still nothing they could do about the awful melee occurring just outside the barrier. The stacks of bodies continue to grow.

"A blast of our deadliest gifts on the next drop!" Angela instructed.

The descendants around her began to shove energy reserves through the mental door of their choice while Eagles drew knives and prepared to do physical combat to keep the descendants alive.

"Drop!"

As soon as the shield was down, all the descendants fired.

Blasts of ice, sonic, madness, and fire flew through the hangar, hitting in waves that eliminated large bunches of the people. It cleared room for more refugees to stumble into the hangar and trip over burning, frozen bodies. Distracted for brief seconds, it also left them open to attack.

Kendle and Kyle reached targets at the same time. As she absorbed the lifeforce and Kyle repeatedly stabbed a man with his knife, a third furious refugee darted between them to get to Marc.

“Shield up!”

Kendle swung around and tackled the man. They fell to the ground, rolling into the feet of Eagles who were backing up at Angela’s order.

As the shield came up, refugees were trapped inside with them again. The descendants and Eagles hurried to slash throats or take lifeforces.

Kendle shoved the dry corpse off and allowed Marc to help her up. As she regained her feet, she saw the body of another rookie who had been hit in Marc’s place, but there was no time to grieve or scan for other losses on their side as the next wave of people reached the hangar. In a moment like this, everyone was missing Zack’s team to help fight. Safe Haven’s low numbers were going to doom them.

“Down!” Angela grabbed another lifeforce.

The refugees who had been in the center of the group were now aware of what was going on. They pushed backward toward the exits, but it was impossible for them to fight the flow as hundreds of

refugees bunched up around the hangar entrances in a squirming mass of angry bodies.

Loud engines echoed, followed by shouts and gunshots.

From a spot along one wall, some of Safe Haven's defenders were able to peer through the holes they had cut to see what was going on outside. The energy flowing through their bodies was keeping the shield up with almost no effort now. The view was best on Marc's side, where one of the steel plates had been knocked over.

Two trucks came by with a wide net stretched between them. It extended as they widened the space. Coming around the corner together in a beautiful turn, the net scooped up a few dozen refugees and dragged them along. Crunched together, they were squeezed between the vehicles for a short space and then run over when the vehicles turned.

Marc spotted a similar setup rolling around the corner from the same direction as the first. He was unable to glance away as they veered directly into the crowd of refugees on his side of the hangar. Bodies flew into the air, crunching against the walls when the truck made a sharp turn and ran parallel to the hangar.

The other vehicle put space between them to stretch out the net. They scooped up another dozen running men and women who had nowhere to go. Marc could see other vehicles patrolling the outside

of the fence, preventing refugees from escaping back through the areas they had breached.

“Who are they?”

No one could answer Kenn’s question. Their rescuers were roughly 200 men and women in handmade clothes, with homemade weapons. Double bows on motorcycles were the most interesting, but the sticky bombs they were throwing onto vehicles and into groups of refugees were the most efficient. With fuses lit before they were tossed, the sticky bombs were as good as any mines Safe Haven had made. Shrapnel exploded, embedding in faces, hands, chests, and the walls of the hangar.

Marc admired the setup the strangers were using for the sticky bombs. Four men were in the bed of a rusty blue truck, one at each corner, with supplies in a crate between them. Marc hoped they’d brought enough to cover the hundreds of refugees now running toward them, recognizing the bigger threat.

Taking advantage of the opportunity while the refugees in the hangar with them were distracted, Angela silently signaled for the descendants to drop the shield.

Lights flashed in the hangar as they grabbed refugees and then used the energy to throw vicious blasts that cleared out entire corners of the large, gory room.

Now being attacked from both sides, the refugees tried to flee.

As the hangar slowly emptied, the descendants kept collecting lifeforces of those who refused to run.

New screams echoed as the netted trucks made another pass.

A new wave of refugees pushed and shoved into the hangar for protection.

Angela stepped forward to send out a wave of fire.

Daryl jerked Angela down as a knife flew over her head.

Enraged, Marc shot a blast of sonic that was the strongest he'd used so far. He watched in stunned amazement as two dozen men in front of him dropped to their knees, bleeding from their sockets. The sonic wave traveled the walls of the hangar and bounced back.

Angela snapped the shield up just as the wave would have hit them.

It bounced off the shield and then slammed into the remaining refugees before dissipating. All of them dropped.

Alone in the hangar for a brief second, the descendants kept the shield up and tried to remember how to breathe.

Outside, the trucks made another pass.

The fighters in Safe Haven admired the inventive weapons of the men and women outside who had arrived in time to save them.

“Wasn't that in Saving Private Ryan?”

Heads craned toward Ivan in contagious amusement. The soldier was bandaging his bleeding leg.

“Who thinks of movies at a time like this?” Neil joked as Eagles chuckled.

“Yes, it was.” Kenn wiped blood from his arms. “It became so popular during World War II that it was listed in the Ranger Handbook of Field Expedient Devices.”

More chuckles came. Despite still being in danger, the lifeforces had returned the energy of the descendants and with it, their confidence.

“Drop!” Angela lunged forward with a spear, taking out a big man about to fire at them as he ran inside the hangar.

Descendants and Eagles stepped forward with their own spears or knives, and took on the next wave of refugees who crowded into the hangar.

Outside, the engines grew louder. It sounded as if the hangar was surrounded.

Dread swept over the fighters. They had naturally assumed the people were here to help, but it could be a mistake to believe that.

Marc slid over to Angela. “How do you want to handle it?”

With her energy returned, Angela was able to scan the numerous souls around them, but it was hard to determine who was who. “We’ll let them finish clearing it out and then we’ll talk.”

It wasn’t comforting, but it was better than the previous situation. Marc estimated there were less

than a hundred refugees around the hangar now. Most of those were trying to run between the netted vehicles to escape the clever trap. The strangers hadn't paused in killing yet, though small groups of refugees were stopping and holding their hands up in surrender.

The strangers didn't give mercy.

Marc was glad; he was tired of being constantly harassed. He scanned the battlefield he could view from where they were standing, horrified by the number of bodies. He was also surprised by the silence on the radios as smoke and screams drifted over the site. Calls were coming in from people still on their way, but there were no calls going out. It was eerie.

Fresh gunshots echoed from the opposite side of the hangar, telling Marc the strangers were clearing out that part of the fence line. He and the rest of Safe Haven waited tensely with the shield at maximum strength.

2

"They're stopping outside the door in front of us." Kenn was observing through the gap. "A couple dozen are getting out of their vehicles."

As the gunshots faded, it was possible to hear voices over the engines and shouts for help. Safe Haven listened intently.

"Close those gaps! Don't let any of them get out!"

“Some have already escaped. Should we chase them?”

“Yes. We don’t need those animals around here. It will cause problems later. Catch up to us on the way home.”

“What do you want done with the bodies?”

“Give me a minute on that.”

“What about the people inside?”

“I’ll handle them myself.”

“Should we...”

The voices kept asking questions and delivering orders, bringing hope to the Eagles but also more tension. Anyone so organized was sure to be a hard fight and Safe Haven had already survived their limit. Despite the descendants being full of fresh lifeforces, none of them was strong enough to have another battle so soon.

“Do not go in that hangar until I make contact!”

Marc and Angela stepped to the front of their group, but they didn’t lower the shield as footsteps approached the hangar. While they waited, Angela tried not to stare at the bodies but failed. It was impossible not to see the faces screaming at her in accusation. Of all the descendants, she had once again killed the most. It was a horrible weight to carry.

“Hello in the hangar?!”

Marc looked at Angela. “I’ve got your back.”

Angela tried to smile and managed a grimace. “I’m grateful for that.” She dropped the shield and stepped forward to meet their rescuers or new

captors, depending upon how fate wanted things to go.

Streaked with gore and blood still dripping from their hands and faces, she and Marc were an intimidating pair that made some of the new people step back in alarm. The fighting had been messy.

The strangers were wearing thick coats of leather and other animal skins many of the fighters couldn't identify. Leggings wrapped in rope caught attention, as did cloaks made of what appeared to be fish scales, but didn't glint in the dim sunlight. All of the fighters either had ponytails or braids, and breasts... Eagles gawked. Their rescuers were mostly women!

Angela liked the feel of the strangers as she came face-to-face with them. They put off a sense of fellow Americans instead of the rabid hatred of the refugees. It was a relief.

"I'm Captain Charles Grant."

Grant had the cropped, receding hair of a man who'd spent years wearing hats, and his skin was leathery from exposure to the elements. He looked like a captain. So did his scarred hands and his sun-spotted cheeks. Black haired and blue eyed, he could have fallen off her family tree. The thought made Angela both smile and grimace.

She started to extend her hand in gratitude to the man who came forward to greet her. The sound of an engine roaring toward them jerked her around instead.

Captain Grant pointed at a team of nearby women. “Handle that!”

Angela saw the headlights flash a familiar code. “That’s one of mine.”

Grant rescinded the order. “Wait.”

Everyone watched as an Army truck bounced toward them, crushing fence pieces and dead bodies under the big wheels. As soon as the vehicle was close enough for Eagles to recognize the driver, a small cheer came from Safe Haven.

Marc resented that reaction. Adrian had showed up at the end of the battle. He shouldn’t be rewarded for it. Marc ignored the fact that if not for the new people saving them, Adrian would be arriving right now in time to save their asses with whatever he had brought. Marc had hoped Adrian had finally given up his obsession and abandoned Angela.

Never! Adrian brought the truck to a screeching halt a few feet away, sending dust over the strangers. He leaned out the window. “Let Safe Haven go or I’ll blow you all up! I’ve got enough explosives in this truck to take out anyone!”

Marc snorted but secretly approved the ballsy bluff. As his eyes narrowed in on the flattened-out tires, he realized the former leader wasn’t bluffing. That vehicle was loaded to the hilt, no doubt with exactly what Adrian was threatening.

“Stand down.”

Adrian regarded Angela in confusion at the order. “What?!”

Grant looked at Marc. “He’s one of yours?”

Marc was forced to nod. “Just a guard dog. Let us feed him and then we can talk.”

Grant motioned the women sneaking up on the truck to stop and resumed their places.

Adrian stared in confusion, not understanding what was going on.

“They saved our asses.” Kyle went to Adrian’s window. He wasn’t sure if the new people were a threat; he wanted to get between them and Angela.

“Sorry for the interruption.” She extended her hand to Grant. “I’m Angela.” As soon as their skin met, she shoved into his mind to do a deep scan.

Grant stiffened. “You could have just asked.”

His being familiar with her kind didn’t stop her from exploring every door in the man’s mental hallway to verify no evil was lurking there. When she was satisfied, she withdrew, but she didn’t apologize for the invasion of his privacy. “Thank you for the help.”

“We couldn’t let you have all the fun.” Grant let go of her hand as their people exchanged uneasy smiles. “I was sent from the town of Ciemus to see if you need a place to stay for a few days.”

“Where exactly is Ciemus?”

“One hundred miles southeast.” Captain Grant bobbed his head in that direction. “Our town waits for Safe Haven with open arms and heavy security.”

Angela smiled. “It would be our honor.”

Captain Grant shook his head, serious. “No, it’s our honor and we do not take it lightly.”

He picked up his radio, making the Eagles tense. None of them knew what to expect as he keyed the mike.

“Safe Haven is dead! I have captured the leader! Angela’s head is on the front of my truck! I have Safe Haven!”

As if it was planned—Angela was positive afterwards that it had been—other new people added cheers and shouts to prove they had conquered Safe Haven.

“I have the head of the wolf!”

“I’ll trade you my rifle. All I got is the mobster’s Glock.”

As various details were spread around in open, ruthless celebration, the Eagles brought Safe Haven out of the hole. They moved the camp away from the bodies, but not up against the remaining parts of the fence in case any refugees were still lurking. With all of the shrubbery in the area, it was impossible to be sure.

Angela looked at Marc. “Would you like to spend two days inside a high wall, getting clean and resting without being attacked?”

Marc grinned. “Where do I sign up?”

Angela turned to Kenn. “I want an update and Safe Haven ready to travel.”

Kenn immediately began motioning people to help with the chores.

Angela signaled Neil. “You have the kids.”

Neil and his team hurried to provide security.

“Daryl has the rest of the camp, with two Eagle levels.”

Before Angela could direct him to a minor chore, Marc stepped closer. He wasn't leaving her side.

“Have it your way.” Angela shrugged and turned to Adrian instead. “You have point over the bugout. Get busy.”

Stunned, Adrian hopped from the truck and went to join Kenn so they could organize things.

Marc stiffened, but didn't comment. He had forced that choice by refusing to do what she wanted. Such a rookie mistake was embarrassing.

Captain Grant studied all of it, but mostly, Angela. The feel of her in his mind had been incredible and intimidating. She was the most powerful descendant he'd ever met.

Captain Grant's men and women waited in and around their vehicles for orders. While they didn't slack off, they didn't give the feel of a rigid army either. That was comforting to Safe Haven considering they were about to spend two days as guests.

Adrian didn't have problems from the Eagles or the camp as he got them into vehicles and helped with their issues, not even from those who were dismayed to see him or had voted for his banishment. Everyone trusted Adrian to do what was best for the camp. It was a relief to have him here.

Marc was aware of the thoughts, but he had to remain quiet and allow Adrian control over the camp he had betrayed.

Adrian didn't care about any of that. There were still refugees in the area and he didn't know who these new people were. He wanted to get Safe Haven on the road, then ensure their new hosts weren't as dangerous as the bodies they were leaving behind. "Run my truck into the hangar. We'll burn it. Hopefully, everyone will believe we really are dead."

Kyle's team went to handle that. After Kenn, they were the best explosives men in Safe Haven.

Adrian scanned to confirm Kendle and Jennifer were okay, taking a second to wave at the children as they were being loaded into one of the semis. Adrian gestured toward the medic outside that vehicle. *Update?*

Morgan shook his head, signing. *They're all dead. Nothing I can do for them.*

Adrian winced. *How many?*

Five. Morgan went to tell the driver it was okay to move the semi into line with the rest of the convoy.

Adrian made a mental note about the deaths and moved onto the next step of getting out of here.

All around him, the camp observed. They watched the new people, they watched Marc and Angela, but most of all, they watched Adrian. He had always made them feel safe in moments like this

and they were expecting it from him now, despite everything that had happened.

Adrian wanted to give it to them. He knew it would be disrespectful to Marc, but stares from the elderly population as they were loaded into cars and trucks were too expectant. Many of those people had been with Safe Haven the entire time it had existed.

Adrian began delivering smiles, waves, and grins at the people he knew. Pushing the vibe of celebration, he sent them signals they recognized as him being pleased with a victory.

Marc watched in disapproval as Adrian lifted the mood of the camp. As more and more of the camp responded, returning Adrian's gestures with not only politeness, but open welcome, Marc began to boil.

As the last camp members were loaded up and the final vehicle was pulled in line for the convoy, Marc left Angela's side.

Angela didn't interfere, but she did turn to watch, once again disappointed with Marc for having to handle it now, in front of strangers. He still didn't understand that leadership was half showmanship. First appearances mattered.

The Eagles who saw Marc's reaction were upset. They wanted to keep the peace, but their agreement before this battle wouldn't let them. Senior men eased closer to Adrian as Marc approached him.

Adrian was standing at the back of a jeep. Kenn had tossed him the keys to trade for his. That vehicle was about to be rammed into the hangar. Adrian expected to hear it at any moment.

In the livestock trailer, Dog yipped furiously at the sight of Adrian. Marc had refused to let the wolf help with the battle because he was so weak from his trip. Quinn had been in there with him.

Marc's anger hit the roof at Dog's welcome for Adrian. "You're not staying with us!"

Adrian hadn't thought that. "I'll be gone before you guys are."

Marc crossed his arms over his chest and tried to think of something else to express how unhappy he was that Adrian was once again among them.

"It doesn't even matter that I was going to drive the truck in and die in an attempt to save you all?"

It did to the Eagles surrounding the men.

Not to Marc. "No. All of this is your fault!"

"We'd like to talk to you." Kyle was sorry to have to interrupt. "It'll just take a minute."

Marc rounded on him, knowing what was coming. "Don't you threaten me!"

Kyle didn't back down. "I don't see any need to repeat it. And it wasn't a threat. I'm doing it right now."

Before Marc could order him to stop or maybe even swing on him, Kyle looked around to include the other Eagles. "Leadership vote?"

Marc was stunned into silence as every Eagle turned thumbs down. Their silent condemnation

rang through his mind like a hangman pulling the switch. As the rope tightened around his neck, Marc swung around and hit Adrian.

The Eagles hurried to break it up, not caring that Adrian wasn't defending himself. Every second they delayed here put Safe Haven in fresh danger.

Marc jerked away to stomp toward Angela.

"I'm calling a vote on Adrian," Kyle's voice rang out. "Do I have support for that?"

Marc turned around to deny it.

"Aye!" The chorus came from everyone who had witnessed the short fight.

It hurt Marc to know how many of the camp members agreed. "He's a traitor! How can you do this?!"

No one wanted to answer. Everyone liked Marc. The only one who would, was Adrian and he did it silently.

Because I built this. They remember that. I earned their loyalty a long time ago.

But you destroyed it by lying!

I've earned that back 10 times over.

Not with me!

No, never with you. That's why you were just booted out of leadership. You've never been able to put them first, but I always do, no matter what it costs me. Until you can do that, you aren't worthy to lead. They all know it.

Kyle tossed Adrian the keys he had lost during the struggle. He motioned toward the rear of the convoy, where most of the Eagles would be riding.

Adrian went that way, but he wasn't proud. Instead, there was nervous anger. Even though his banishment might be lifted, he wasn't going to be with Safe Haven yet. He didn't know why, but the feeling was unmistakable. For whatever reason, Marc was going to get what he wanted. Because of that, Adrian's unhappiness allowed him a humility that made Marc look even worse.

To add insult to injury, several Eagles climbed into the jeep with Adrian in an open show of support.

Marc turned around to find Angela and Captain Grant observing everything. When she stared back impassively, not reversing the choices, Marc was crushed.

If you had waited, I would have told you he isn't staying. Angela's voice in his mind was brutal, without mercy.

"The vote stands." Angela took in a breath and did what she'd hoped she would never have to. "Marc, you have been removed from the Safe Haven council and all leadership chores until such time as the Eagles change their decision. They have voted you out; only they can bring you back in."

Chapter Twenty-Five BK9

Last Call

1

Marc opened his mouth to shout.

Please don't. Cody appeared in Marc's line of sight, staring up at his father. *It's hurting her to do this. She wouldn't have if you hadn't embarrassed her in front of the new people. The Eagles didn't want to do it either.* Cody took a step closer and put a hand on his dad's wrist. *Please? For me?*

Marc stared at the boy, trying to accept his punishment. He couldn't seem to help his anger at Adrian. *Maybe they're right. Maybe I can't overlook the personal issues to see his value.*

Cody shook his head. *No, you're absolutely right about him. Adrian's dangerous.*

Marc scowled. *Then why are we letting him off scot-free?!*

Cody pointed at the camp, moving in a half circle that included everyone.

Marc hated the answer. Most of the time, doing something for the greater good only served the greater bad.

Cody's fingers tightened on Marc's wrist. *We'll have time together now. It might be fun.*

The boy slowly began to get through Marc's rage. He forced himself to give a curt nod.

The people around them assumed he was responding to Angela, but she didn't. She waited for him to look at her to be certain it was over. She didn't want to do any of this. She had no idea what this would do to their personal relationship.

"I'm sorry. I accept your decision." It was hard for Marc to say.

Angela motioned toward her empty bodyguard position. "I always need that covered."

Marc came forward to take the spot he'd had during their trip to Safe Haven. As he moved into place, Cody at his side, he heard Angela give a sigh he hadn't heard in months. It only came when she felt safe. Because of that, Marc vowed to figure out whether the Eagles were wrong or he was.

He needed to know by the time they reached the boat. If he was right, Adrian couldn't be allowed to go with them. Marc would never be able to let go of this vendetta. If the Eagles were right, then Marc needed to stay here while Adrian and Angela took care of Safe Haven or he would eventually snap and kill Adrian in front of everyone. That ending was inevitable.

Captain Grant waved toward his vehicle. "Will you ride with me?"

Angela nodded before Marc could speak up, annoyed for the embarrassment. She could already tell Grant's people didn't allow refusal of orders. She had been able to tell by the way Grant's eyes

had narrowed. Marc had cost her a small layer of respect with these people. That would have to be regained at some point.

Marc picked up the thought and was wise enough not to comment. He sent her a silent apology, but didn't get an answer. Feeling the coldness, he dropped his chin.

Captain Grant admired the silent leadership. He led the couple toward his vehicle, not filling their ears with useless chatter that would be repeated once they reached his town. It was obvious Safe Haven had been in need of a break long before they'd been trapped.

Angela appreciated the consideration. As she climbed into Grant's netted vehicle, Kenn came up in the lead Safe Haven truck, with the convoy behind him. When Captain Grant pulled out—Safe Haven's vehicles in the center and then his own people—six jeeps of strangers brought up the rear to provide an escort few refugees left from the battle were brave enough to challenge. Sticky bombs quickly dispatched those who did approach. With fresh explosions and gunfire echoing overtop the new screams, Safe Haven rolled out of the Naval Station Meridian. A few rookies had been hit in the crossfire, but the price was lower than Safe Haven had expected to pay. It was a miracle that any of them had survived.

“This doesn’t mean you’ve been forgiven.” Kyle was in the passenger seat of the jeep. “None of us have forgotten how much drama you brought into the camp or how much pain you caused Marc. We like Marc. None of us wanted to do that to him.”

Adrian sighed. “I didn’t want it to come to that either. If Safe Haven hadn’t been in danger, I wouldn’t be here now.”

“We believe that, so we supported you. For whatever reason, fate decided you’re supposed to lead Safe Haven to the Promised Land. Now, I personally don’t believe all that bullshit, but most of this camp does. You have our support as long as you walk the line, but if it comes down to it again, we’ll pick Marc over you.”

Adrian grunted. “I’d pick Marc over me too.”

“Are we going to set it up with him the way we did Conner?” Morgan was in the backseat. He didn’t like Adrian’s bitter pain. “Cause I don’t think Marc will go for that.”

Kyle had hoped this moment wouldn’t come, so he hadn’t planned any further than how to get Marc to back down. “Ideas?”

“I don’t want to cause a rebellion.” Adrian steered over a pile of bodies. “The boss will have jobs for me and I’ll do them. Other than that, I’ll stay out of sight.”

“She won’t handle things that way now.” No one had been surprised when Kendle got into the jeep, except for Adrian. “Safe Haven likes seeing you.”

“The boss will give me jobs and I’ll do them.”

“What do you think the jobs will be?” Greg ignored Adrian’s firm attempts to shut them down. Greg had piled in the rear with the other Special Forces members and Kendle. This jeep was packed with killers.

“Training, I would imagine.” Adrian followed the vehicles in front of him.

Kyle pushed. “What else?”

“Descendant classes, plans for stops along the way and people we run into. Travel routes, dangers on the island...” Adrian snapped his mouth shut as he realized what they were doing. He didn’t need the reminder of how important the information in his brain was to the survival of their camp. It was killing him not to use it, but he had rules to follow and he was going to.

Kyle and the others left Adrian alone in favor of scanning the battlefield as Safe Haven left the Naval Station.

Adrian stared at Angela in the mirror and tried hard to think of anything except for how happy he was just to be able to see her.

In the truck ahead of them, Angela did the same.

“Why is Marc flipping out?” Kendle thought they’d formed a truce before the UN run and then settled the rest of it while removing Kobi and his thugs.

“We’re not trapped in a mountain anymore.”

She frowned at Greg. “What does that mean?”

Adrian grimaced. “It means our truce is over. He wants me gone and that’s all he can see.”

“I think he figured out how she lied.” Kendle pointed. “I tried to tell you guys during the UN run, but you called me jealous.”

“Tell me again?”

“He was promised if he built a perfect society, the Creator would remove you from their lives, right?” Kendle was verifying her own theories on what Marc and Adrian had talked about between beatings in the vet’s RV.

“Yes.” Adrian knew the people here could be trusted.

Kendle shook her head. “He can’t build it, which means he can’t get rid of you—ever.”

Adrian grunted. “The killing.”

“Yep. We’re always going to be needed for this. He’s bitter beyond belief over it.”

“I think it is possible.” Kyle had already known because Jennifer told him. “The killers have to get the camp to a safe place and then leave.”

Everyone thought of Angela’s words about the return trip.

“We’re coming back from that island alone.”

Kendle nodded at Kyle’s grave tone. “Yes. Right when we’re finally learning to be peaceful again, we’ll be sent back out to act like animals. For us, the island will only be a break between fights.”

“Are you sorry you didn’t get to fight?”

“No.” Conner was surprised that Candy was talking to him. Stuffed into a van with eight other twitching camp members, Conner hadn’t been sure if she’d be okay with having a conversation right now. Daryl was driving, which meant every word would get back to Angela.

Candy swiveled her seat so they were facing, ignoring the others who observed in surprise. “Lee would have wanted to fight.”

Conner shrugged. “My job was to stay with the camp. I did. So did Charlie and a few others.”

“Were you scared?”

“Sure. Weren’t you?”

“I mean, is that why you let her put you in the hole where you couldn’t fight?”

Conner scowled. “She knows what it might do to me to take a life force. I’m not a coward.”

“She didn’t know it would be needed.”

“It’s a mistake to think the alpha didn’t know.”

Candy frowned. “If Angela knew, why would she take us there?”

“Where else could we have gone?”

“I don’t know... Someplace easier to defend or higher up, maybe?”

“I have maps in the glovebox if you want to pick the next spot.” Daryl didn’t like the disrespect.

“She doesn’t mean it toward the boss.” Conner’s tone was wounded.

“Ah.” Daryl met Candy’s eye. “He’s a Mitchel. If he takes lifeforces, he’ll become a corrupt Mitchel. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

Candy shook her head, cheeks reddening.

“That’s why the boss put him in a safe space. If the enemy had reached the camp, Conner would have repeated his actions from the UN fight at the mountain.”

“Why didn’t Angela have you use it?” Candy remembered the powerful scenes. “You have strong gifts.”

“She wants me to stay good so I can remain with Safe Haven.”

Even after the other descendants leave?

Conner looked at her in surprise. *How do you know that?*

I just got it from your mind.

Now Conner flushed. He’d left the mental door open between them during the fight so he would know if she needed help. He’d forgotten to shut it and she’d gone exploring.

I’m sorry.

Are you upset with what you found?

Candy shook her head, aware of Daryl frowning over their switch to a conversational format he couldn’t snoop on.

Conner grinned. “Cool.”

Candy returned to her previous point to keep from smiling. “If Angela knew, why would she put the camp in open danger?”

“You want to know if she was aware of the strangers coming to rescue us.”

“Yes. Did she do it this way so she didn’t have to face a vote after convincing our camp to give these people a chance?”

“It’s a mistake to assume the alpha doesn’t know anything—including the way things are changing between us.” Conner dropped his head as he shut the connection. “I promised I’d give it a month before I started chasing you openly. It’s only been sixteen days.”

Candy didn’t even flinch. “Should I stay away from you until then?”

Her reaction allowed Conner to give her the truth in front of witnesses. “It would make it easier, but no. I like you. I want the world to know you aren’t afraid of me.”

Candy pointed at a travel game stuck in the back of Daryl’s seat. “Beat me up at Battleship?”

Conner laughed. “It would be my honor.”

Daryl stopped observing the couple. They were already bonding as far as he could tell. The Eagle’s fears of Conner doing something to win Candy’s heart were well founded. It was obvious the boy was in love. If Candy developed the same affliction, it might work out. If she didn’t, life in Safe Haven might become very ugly for Conner. Daryl planned to point out this moment in time. She was playing with fire even though she knew it was likely to burn her. That wasn’t the fire’s fault. It was hers.

“Do you have descendants in your town?” It was the first words spoken since they’d left the Naval station two hours ago.

Grant didn’t take his eyes from the road. He was searching for signs that anyone had come through since he’d left this morning. “You’ll talk to the boss when we arrive.”

Angela approved the caution. She didn’t rush to assure the man that they weren’t a threat. It was obvious that they were. On a better day, Safe Haven could give anyone a run for their money.

Mindful of the boss’s orders to make them welcome, Grant pointed. “You’ll see our wall in a minute. We built it right after the war from the homes of those who died, and those who left and never returned. That area is where the boss has assigned you quarters for the duration of your stay. We’ve added a few things we thought you might need.”

“Thank you.” Instead of staring where he pointed, Angela shifted against Marc to view their driver. “Safe Haven has many descendants.”

Grant grunted at her obvious attempt to trade information. “I’d like to, but I have orders.”

“Excellent.” Angela leaned against Marc’s stiff shoulder and shut her eyes. “Men and women who can follow orders, even when they don’t want to, are a blessing.”

Captain Grant was unaccustomed to the type of approval Angela had just given. It was part of the reason their town didn't have drama. Uneasy due to the observations he'd made about Safe Haven, Grant steered onto the final road to his town. He was one of the few people who had voted against helping the harangued refugee camp, but only because of the trouble that seemed to follow them to every site. Ciemus had been monitoring the radios hourly for information.

Marc had questions, but he wasn't sure if he was allowed to ask. He made a mental list, swallowing a fresh wave of embarrassment. He couldn't believe this had happened.

Marc flushed a deep red as Angela nodded. She didn't say all of them were shocked. That was obvious.

"I'll let the boss know you have magic users. I'm sure she'll give us a day to get everyone settled before we try to introduce people."

Angela sighed. "That would probably be best."

The tone was meek enough to draw Marc's attention from his problems. He didn't like it when she sounded that way. No one did.

Angela forced more pep into her voice. "Do you allow guns?"

"Of course." Grant shifted gears on the truck, slowing the convoy for the next curve. "We don't let anyone in we can't trust, so it's not a problem."

Marc opened his mouth to ask how they verified that trust.

Angela's finger pressed into his leg.

It was a reminder of his punishment. Marc's anger rose again.

Angela sighed. *It's not always about you, Marc. I'm trying to do something here. Work with me or just watch!*

Stinging, Marc brought down his mental walls.

Angela let the silence and tension build. She was feeling Grant out, testing his loyalty by digging for small bits of information that wouldn't be possible once they were around his people. Everyone knew humans had one face they revealed to the world and a different one for when they were alone. Angela had been hoping to get the man to relax enough so he might reveal anything she needed to be concerned about.

The mirror on Marc's side glinted off the rear vehicles of the convoy, grabbing his attention. He fell into a replay of his humiliation.

Finally able to concentrate, Angela opened her eyes. Grant was stealing looks at her blood-crusted face and hair. By the way he was reacting, it was clear she could use the alpha draw to get information from him if she needed to. She hoped she didn't. It would be easier if these people were open and honest. She was tired of spending energy to scan people who had perfected such mental walls over the years that it took multiple attempts to get through and in that time, allowed the traitors to betray them.

It had happened in Safe Haven repeatedly and she was always on the lookout for a solution. So far, Jennifer was their only hope. She was the strongest mental shield the camp had, along with possessing an extra set of skills that went with being an Enforcer. When there was time for Jennifer to explore and strengthen those gifts, no one would be able to get into Safe Haven who wasn't worthy. Until then, they were doing the best they could.

A tall shadow came up on the horizon, filling in to become a wall running the length of the landscape in both directions. Moldy and covered in stains that could be dried blood or mud, the wall stood out in house-sized chunks of different patterns, shapes, and colors. As they drove closer, a wide section of the fence slid behind itself to reveal a 20-foot entrance that Grant immediately took them to.

The outside of the wall sent shivers over Safe Haven. Spotted in droppings and mud, it looked like a prison. Doubts about the decision to go in flooded the convoy.

Grant did a fast check of his mirrors to verify the rear vehicles were the same. They'd had issues in the past where refugees had tried to fall in line as they returned from a scavenging run.

The gate was fully opened by the time they reached it, allowing Grant to drive them straight in. He couldn't help feeling proud. They'd survived here for almost a year since the war. It was a big accomplishment.

Safe Haven vehicles rolled through the gate and got their first look at where they were staying. The tension faded a notch. The town was completely enclosed by the wall. Sentries on duty atop that two-foot thick barrier waved in welcome and then resumed scanning the wilderness.

The inside of the town gave a vastly different impression than the outside, allowing more people to relax as they rolled through the gate. The clean streets and smiling locals were a welcome sight, as were people coming and going without signs of fear or abuse. The streets were clean; clucking chickens echoed in the distance. There was even a *WELCOME!* banner hanging over one wall panel.

Grant took them toward an area that looked like it had been hit by the tornado Safe Haven recently survived. People quickly realized the missing houses were still here, in the wall.

Now that they understood the reason for such barrenness in one area of town, people turned to speculating on where they would be put up. When the lead truck pulled around the bare lots and went toward a four-story hotel that faced the exit, cheers broke out. It really was a rescue.

5

“Nice form.”

Grant smirked. “Thanks. I train daily.”

Angela chuckled at his joke. She’d meant the welcome setup.

Grant pulled into the front of the hotel, where people were standing under the canopies and awnings of the lavish hotel. Five smiling townsmen edged the entryway on each side of the main glass doors, with a line of at least fifty more men and women waiting to their right. A slender woman in a black suit was standing directly in front of the entryway with two men who were obviously her security.

Marc stepped from the rig, but only held the door, making it clear he was also security. As he realized the weight of the camp was now off his shoulders, Marc was able to do the job without revealing his resentment to the people watching every move he made.

Angela looked at Grant before exiting the truck, giving him a taste of what he'd been secretly hoping for—proof that she was as powerful as he'd heard. She sent a tiny blast of alpha waves to swirl around him. “As long as they're good, Safe Haven will take any of your people who want to go with us. Now, stop worrying.”

Grant gaped.

Angela resisted the urge to pat his arm as if he were one of her Eagles. He reminded her strongly of them. “We don't have such rigid leadership and rules in Safe Haven. There's nothing wrong with wanting a different life—an *open* life. You'll just have to fight for it, like the rest of us. It's our only requirement for good people.” She slid out of the truck with the first seed planted.

Grant waited for her to secure the door and then pulled the truck over to the line of waiting town drivers. As he exited the truck and fell in on Angela's flank, the movement felt so right that it was impossible not to consider her offer.

One of the waiting people in the long line hurried into the truck and drove it away so the next Safe Haven vehicle could roll forward. Carrying the women, kids, and weaker members, it took a while for the semi to be unloaded.

While Adrian and the Eagles handled it, Angela went to meet the woman who had saved their lives.

The Mayor was a tightly wired, coiffed blonde of Angela's height, but much thinner. Her prominent cheekbones and thin wrists implied the town needed more food, but the fighters were strapping specimens that made the males in Safe Haven stare in open desire. Big women with flexing muscles hurried to help close the hand-cranked gate.

Angela was able to hear some of the town's comments as more of her camp disembarked.

"That really is Safe Haven!"

"I see Adrian Mitchel!"

"And that's the Ghost!"

"How do you know?"

"He's the tallest, of course."

Angela hid a snicker.

The security in every direction was female. It led Safe Haven to assume the draft had taken the men, and the women here had stepped up to defend their town. Wearing jeans and plaid shirts, they

appeared more like lumberjacks than the fishermen they obviously were. The smell was prominent as the wind shifted, bringing attention to boats, decals about fighting, signs, and the distinctive shape of a cannery.

The Mayor had been waiting impatiently for Angela to come under the canopy, observing it all with sharp intelligence.

Marc noticed. He wasn't sensing evil in the town, but he did find their leader to be too strict. Without knowing he and Angela agreed on that, he kept his opinions to himself, not wanting to anger her more than he already had. There would be time for his observations later, in notes or messages sent through other people if she didn't want to talk to him. He wasn't certain how things would go once the camp settled for the night, but the hotel probably had a couch. He expected to be on it.

Angela held out her hand, dropping her defenses so she would be able to get a deep scan of the woman in charge of such an organized town.

The Mayor wasn't quite as willing to drop her defenses. She slid her hand against Angela's in a reluctant gesture. It told everyone she was intimidated by her guests. Since most of them were covered in drying blood, it was understandable.

Some of the men on duty around them, both Eagles and townsmen, moved closer in response to the Mayor's nerves. The Eagles assumed if the woman felt threatened, Angela might be doing something that required backup.

Angela held up a finger to let her army know there wasn't a problem.

Donna was busy adjusting to the feel of Angela in her mind and didn't react at all.

"Let the ladies talk." Grant was now standing by the front of the semi where more of Safe Haven's women and children were being unloaded.

The townspeople immediately responded to the order, some snapping salutes at Grant. It was obvious he had a well-respected place here.

I'm Angela.

Donna.

Why did you help us?

We need something from you.

What?

I don't want to talk about it now.

Pausing in the mental conversation, Angela studied the woman's deeper thoughts while waiting for her to say more.

Despite being intimidated, Donna refused to give in. She kept the locks on her secrets and stared back with practiced defiance.

Angela slowly withdrew and let go of the woman's hand. "Give me your word as Mayor of this town that we'll be protected here, and Safe Haven will consider any reasonable request you make."

The Mayor's face dissolved into aging lines of relief. "Thank God. Yes, you have my word."

Angela circled her finger in the air.

A full Eagle team immediately surrounded them.

“We’re all yours.”

The listening locals let out a cheer.

Safe Haven men responded enthusiastically.

Women smiled back and delivered hair tosses that encouraged the Eagles to flash gestures and invitations. Angela would have scolded her army for such behavior, but the Mayor was beaming at her women, telling Angela this was a planned welcome. Still, she felt the need to remind her men of their duty. Angela whistled sharply.

Eagles spun around, some even drawing guns to face the danger.

The townswomen let out oohs of admiration.

Angela rolled her eyes and let it go. She could already tell how things were going to go here.

“It doesn’t look like there will be trouble between the camps. That’s wonderful.”

Angela nodded at the Mayor’s happy comment. Safe Haven needed the break.

Donna led the way into the hotel, now babbling. “We’ve been listening to you on the radio since right after the war. All of us have been rooting for you and waiting for you to reach us. We’ve been gathering things to help, though I didn’t realize we were going to have to be fighting while traveling until recently. Captain Grant improvised many of the techniques that were used to help you today.”

Angela stored the information. Grant was a captain and a battle planner. *Awesome. I need more of those.*

“We’ll put all your vehicles right behind the hotel so you can access them. My town will stay away. They have orders not to approach you. I’m sure you’ll put up your own security, but it isn’t needed. We have people on the wall at all hours of the night and day.”

“Do you have a lot of problems?” Marc couldn’t help but ask.

“No, thankfully. Almost everyone in this town lived here before the war. We were friends and neighbors, except for about two dozen we’ve given shelter to since the apocalypse. We didn’t even have our first attempt to breach the wall until Safe Haven disappeared into the mountain...” Donna looked over her shoulder at the rag-tag groups walking in behind them, pulling a face.

She isn’t convinced we’re the legend. Angela gave Marc a subtle gesture.

Marc let his eyes glow crimson.

Dog, fresh out of the livestock trailer, trotted up to Marc and took his place.

Eagles around them searched for the threat.

Donna’s edge of worry faded. “I’m sorry. I needed to be sure.”

So far, the woman hadn’t demonstrated a descendant ability. Marc wondered if she was really the power here.

She isn’t.

Angela's voice in his mind didn't seem upset. Marc pushed aside thoughts of what might happen between them later. She didn't sound angry.

Angela mentally rolled her eyes this time and followed the Mayor into the large lobby of the hotel. It was easily big enough to hold all of them.

The hotel looked like any other Holiday Inn. The lobby had plush furniture and freshly scrubbed windows that welcomed them. Smells of hot food and cleaned rooms filled noses and brought tears to their eyes. In the old world, it had been a cheap place to spend the night. It hadn't even been on the radar for wealthier folks, but it was heaven to Safe Haven. The lights in the lobby, and the clerks behind the desk, were indescribable. Most of the camp had believed they would never experience this again.

“Sanctuary.”

The word was repeated through the crowd while they waited.

Donna waved toward the elevator, drawing attention to the fact that they had power. “We put you on the top floor, if that's okay?”

“My guards will pick my location, but thank you.”

Donna shrugged, not certain if it was an insult or normal procedure. She settled for believing what made her happy and gave another bright smile. “We have food and water in all the rooms. There's running water and electricity in half the bathrooms. It would have been all of them, but we didn't have

time. Honestly, we thought you'd died in the mountain."

"Many of us did." Angela hated to be rude, but as Eagles and camp members filled the lounge, she ended the reception. "I need to get them settled."

Donna waved at Grant. "Stay until they don't need you."

Grant had already planned on it.

"We assumed you would need a little time to yourselves." Donna ended the face-to-face. "We'll come to collect you for breakfast. Your entire camp is expected by our cooks." Donna smiled, trying to ease their dislike of her first requirement. "Breakfast here is at noon and we always have it together. It's the only good thing about the apocalypse. We get to sleep late every day."

Safe Haven's people groaned in longing at the thought. They had always been first shift people, even in the mountain.

"Thank you, for everything."

"It's our honor."

Angela watched the woman leave, wondering what she wanted. This type of generosity hadn't come free before the war and prices had doubled since then. *Whatever it is, I'll try to pay it. I hate leaving debts.*

Ciemus

1

“**G**et the floors cleared.” Angela waved at Kenn, then Adrian. “You have the vehicles and outside perimeter.”

Eagles hurried off.

Marc’s attitude improved slightly as Adrian left the lobby.

“Is there anything you need?” Grant didn’t want to intrude. He’d just realized how weary some of the people were.

“Honestly? No. You’ve given us a safe place to sleep. That’s honestly all we’ve ever needed from the survivors around us.”

Grant liked the answers he received from Angela, but he didn’t care for the personal tensions and attitudes of some of her members.

“You’re not viewing us at our best.” Angela frowned at him. “Now please, stop trying to make up your mind. I need to work.”

Grant flushed in surprised embarrassment. He hadn’t been put in his place in a long time and certainly not by a stranger he’d only known for a couple of hours. Grant looked around to see who had noticed and found her security guard smirking.

She gets all of us like that.

Grant hadn't known Marc was also a descendant. It explained more of the dynamic of Safe Haven and let him understand there would probably always be issues like these as long as they had a leader who used the alpha pull.

"What is it for, if not to be used?" Jennifer wanted to say more, but she could feel Angela's disapproval.

Grant found the owner of the voice to be a teenager walking by with a baby in one arm and a mobster on the other. While the baby was adorable, the Italian was intimidating. He was splattered with dry blood. His expression said he liked it.

Jennifer scanned Grant and nodded. *Safe Haven has room for you.* The fight had given her a new evolution. It would be impossible for anyone to keep her out now, except for the boss.

Grant stared. *So much power in one camp has to be dangerous.*

Eagles began to direct groups into elevators as other sentries cleared the floors. They were going to abide by the normal schedule and routines as much as they could, but word was flying about hot water. The thought of spending two days in a hotel, with amenities, had lifted the tension so much that people were now arguing about who was going to get on the elevators first.

Jennifer hadn't seen Safe Haven this eager to get settled since the trip they'd made to rescue the boss. It was amusing. Jennifer decided to stand next

to Angela and enjoy the feel. Safe Haven had survived. Everyone could tell by the grouching and laughing. Real life always sounded that way.

The front door opened as a townsman with no hair and huge hands entered. He came straight to Grant.

“This is Bucky. He’ll tell you anything you need to know about Ciemus.”

Kenn shook hands with the man, noting his chipped-tooth grin. “Dentists are hard to come by.”

Grant laughed. “Actually, Bucky did it himself so the ladies would stop drugging his drinks during dinner and then following him home.”

Kenn gawked. “Excuse me?”

Bucky’s cheeks had gone scarlet.

Grant answered for him. “Before the war, he was a masseuse who...made house calls. After the war, there was only one of him to go around.”

Kenn couldn’t stop his belly laugh. “You lucky bastard!”

Angela snickered with her Eagles.

Bucky shook his head, serious. “I can’t even take a dumper, man, without one of them handing me her stash of paper! It’s awful!”

“Did the chipped tooth help you avoid the attention?”

Bucky snorted. “No, but they do cook me special soup now.”

Kenn laughed harder. “Our guys are going to love it here if the bosses allow people to meet.”

“Oh, we’re counting on that,” Bucky informed him hastily. “You guys can take the load off us for a while!”

Kenn was wiping away tears as he walked over to sort the next load of elevator passengers. His good vibes helped the mood and pleased the boss.

“Mandatory camp meeting during dinner.” As the elevator took the first group up, Angela looked at Jennifer. “Make it happen.”

Jennifer had been expecting it. Everyone had. Marc tensed.

Cody ran over from the group of kids.

Marc let Cody take him to the elevators, where the father and son squeezed into the next group and went upstairs.

Cheeks once again red at being embarrassed in front of Grant, Angela let out a deep sigh. “I’ve thought about locking down on all of us, but we’d be dead. Our gifts keep us alive. That’s the only consolation when I think about all of the bullshit in this camp.” Angela motioned the next group to get in line and walked over to sort them out before Jennifer or Grant could respond.

Kenn stepped back to let her, glad the annoyance wasn’t directed at him or Tonya, who was already upstairs. She’d found the fire exits and snipped the alarm to go exploring. Kenn had spotted her entering the cafeteria as he came back. The baby was giving her a very healthy appetite.

Jennifer looked at the sleeping baby in her arms and thought about the little boy who should be in the other one. Kenn's reflections had sent her there.

As her wave of sadness expanded, it hit the man next to her and caused him to draw in a deep breath of air to steady himself. Grant wanted to grab the teenager and hug her, to tell her he was so sorry for her loss that he would do anything he could to ease her pain.

Kyle growled.

Angela pointed him toward the elevators.

2

"Have you seen this town, man?" Eagles were in the halls, about to go on duty or come off.

"I see paradise."

"It's not safe."

"Safe? I mean the women! What the hell are you talking about?"

Kevin fell silent, again being laughed at. He didn't feel bonding. He was the odd man out.

"We have five minutes until duty. Is that enough time to hit the top level with our glasses?"

"Hey! Great idea."

"Always choose the high ground," Ivan quipped as he dug in his kit. The thigh injury stung as the fresh stitches pulled, but he ignored it. "Take it all so we aren't late."

“Where are you three going?” Kyle asked from the doorway of the room, noting Kevin going in the opposite direction.

The soldiers shared grins, not sure what to say.

Ivan limped forward. “Pre-duty recon, *sir!*”

Kyle’s lips twitched. “Well, get on it then.”

The men ran by him, laughing. It was nice to have them all happy for a change. *This place might be good for us.*

“Hot water!”

“Toilet paper!”

“Light switches that work!”

Kyle grinned as a group of damp camp women in fluffy hotel towels ran by, giggling. Civilization definitely had its rewards.

“Let me look!”

Peter handed the glasses to James and took his turn guarding the end of the hallway where the exits and elevator stared in reproach. Angela wasn’t up here right now, so they’d been able to get by the guard at the opposite end who had already been doing his own recon.

“What do you see?” Ivan led his men.

“Bras hanging on wash lines, frilly curtains in most of the windows... Women on duty spots all along the wall...” James lowered the glasses to peer at his team leader. “They don’t have a lot of men.”

“Give that soldier a gold star.”

“Wow. Saved our asses and short on men. It’s like we’ve lucked into an old sci-fi show.”

“I sure hope not.”

James frowned, confused. “What?”

“Something always flipped at the end of those or the monsters came out just before the hero could leave. I’d like this to just be a nice, calm place with a lot of horny women.”

Riotous laughter filled the upper hall.

“Can we take a shower with us, along with a few of the hot tubs?”

“If you can fill ‘em.”

“Funny. I mean on the boat.”

“The ship has that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. What did you think? People were on a cruise for a week and cleaned up in the pools?”

“They have pools?”

“And saunas, hot tubs, bars, clubs. Has it all.”

“That makes me feel better about the boss’s choice.”

“Good. Now get to your post before I mark you late.”

“What about him?” James was watching the parking area now.

Ivan remembered his observations during his time with Adrian. “We’ll support whatever makes the boss happy. We can’t go wrong there.”

3

Adrian stayed outside even after security was up, not caring about the cold, early evening rain or

the stares from Eagles, camp members, and strangers. After helping get Safe Haven's vehicles parked and animals cared for, he planned to take care of anything else the camp needed. Thanks to Eagles walking by talking about it, Adrian knew Angela had called a meeting. Despite what Kyle had told Marc, lifting his banishment had to come from the camp. Adrian was full of tension about the way it would go. In a moment like this, he'd assumed whoever the Eagles supported would win, but it wasn't a guarantee when your opponent was someone like Marc. Adrian expected the vote to be close.

Also working outside, Conner nodded at his father as he went by, but he didn't stop to talk. Conner didn't want to be tagged for slacking off, but he also wanted to get back inside as soon as he could. He and Candy had made plans to finish the Battleship tournament they'd started during the ride.

"We're all done here." Greg stepped out of the last truck. He'd stayed out here to get things settled before he went in to get comfortable. With all the security and the good vibes, Greg was hoping he would be able to get a full eight hours sleep for the first time since they'd left the mountain. He expected it to be delicious. *And if one of the lonely camp or townswomen want to have sex when I wake up, that'll make it even better.*

Adrian chuckled at Greg's thought. Men were basic creatures. The surprise had been to learn that

women were too. What they considered to be basic was what a man considered to be a lot of work, however. Once he'd figured that out, it had been easy to seduce his way through a lifetime of females who had all been longing for a man who understood them. Of all the females he had loved, or allowed to love him, only two had mattered. One was dead and the other was thinking about him. He could feel it through their bond. Adrian didn't try to communicate with her. What had happened with Marc was hurting her. He wasn't going to make it worse.

Come in.

Adrian swallowed a protest and did as Marc ordered. He entered the lobby to find it empty except for a skeleton crew of guards. One from each team, the men were yawning and rubbing their eyes in an effort to stay awake. Adrian was certain Angela would call a shift change soon.

“In there.”

Adrian went where the guards pointed, finding a small bar in the rear of the lobby. Marc was sitting there waiting for him.

Adrian tensed, stopping.

Nose swarmed with the smells of fresh whiskey and old memories, Marc nudged a full shot glass with his finger. “Begin with that and we'll go from there.”

Adrian reluctantly joined him at the bar. He drank the shot with a shudder and set the glass on

the golden-edged wooden counter. “You can’t buy me.”

Marc glared at him through the mirror behind the bar, where half a dozen bottles of alcohol stared back in temptation. “They’re going to lift your banishment.”

“Maybe. It will still be conditional.”

“You and Angela would like it to be a unanimous vote.”

Adrian spotted the trap. “You got me like that with the last one. I can’t trust you now.”

“Have you ever trusted me?”

“No. I’ve only ever trusted one person on this planet.”

“Angela.”

“My mother.”

Marc snorted. He didn’t say that woman had to be Satan incarnate.

Adrian was trying to figure out Marc’s reason for this chat. They both had more important things to do. “What are you doing?”

“I want to break one of the bonds.”

Adrian had been hoping Marc would forget what he’d told him in the cold car before he left. “Mine *can’t* be broken.”

Marc swiveled on the stool and leaned against the bar to stare at Adrian. “What about the other?”

Adrian yawned. Now that the battle was over and the adrenaline rush was gone, his hip was hurting from where Marc had tackled him.

“I know it can be. I know because you told me so.”

Adrian really wished he'd kept his mouth shut. “It won't work until she's desperate.” Adrian shoved the bottle back at his nemesis. “I don't want to drink with you.”

“I don't want to live in a camp with you.” Marc poured a shot and downed it.

When he shoved the bottle this time, Adrian caught it and poured. He would have sipped, but his ego refused. He swallowed the shot and gasped for air.

“She already is desperate.”

Marc's mutter was unexpected. Adrian caught the images and replays, seeing how much time Angela had been spending either sleeping, hiding, or helping with the children. Even now, she was assisting the den mothers who were getting the kids fed and cleaned, then settled for the night so Safe Haven could have a meeting. “I don't think that's enough. She has to be on the edge of giving me what I want. You would have to trust me to do the right thing. I could get through to her right then and break the hold *you* have over her.”

Marc wasn't as concerned with that. “I trust Angie to do the right thing.”

Adrian watched Marc take the next shot. He shook his head when the bottle thumped against his hand and almost fell over. He caught it. “I'll scan her because I owe you, but it's not going to work

yet. We haven't been away from each other long enough."

"Excuse me?"

Both men turned to find Kenn in the doorway.

"I'm sorry, but the boss wants a second team sent out to secure the boat site and collect our missing men. She said for Adrian to lead it."

Marc looked at Adrian with his brow up.

Adrian shrugged. "I'll have to scan her first, but a few more days should add to it. If she's as bad off as you think, it could work."

Marc waved Kenn to go away. "Tell me how to set it up."

"I have to scan her first." Because of the debt he owed for seducing the man's woman, Adrian couldn't refuse. There were always rules to deals like these and this time, he had to pay. "The Mayor of this town is not going to open the wall now that it's dark. I won't be able to leave until morning."

Marc frowned. He didn't understand what that had to do with their conversation. "So?"

"So I want to spend tonight alone with her in exchange for this."

"Agreed."

Adrian stared at the fast answer. "What?"

Marc leaned in, sneering. "I was expecting something like that. I know what a piece of work you are. I don't have a problem with it because I trust Angela, but even if she does let you have your way, so what? The bond will be broken and you'll

be away from her while I'm holding her every night after this."

"Does it hurt to carry so much hate in your heart?"

"You know it." Marc waited for other demands Adrian might make. When there was none, he stood up, fighting the buzz he had from the alcohol. "Someone will show you to your suite."

Adrian flushed at Marc's victorious sarcasm, but he didn't rescind the request. What Marc wanted would sever the strongest bond between them and eventually lead to his hold over Angela fading so much that it didn't interfere with the couple anymore. One night of her life was a small price to pay, but Marc was going to hurt their relationship further by suggesting this. Adrian would leave on the boat run in the morning, probably after having spent all night in his vehicle while waiting for daylight.

Adrian poured himself another shot.

4

"You want me to do what?"

"You heard me." Marc handed Neil a sheet of paper he could show the others to prove the order was valid, but he didn't think it was going to be a problem. After the camp lifted Adrian's banishment, the Eagles would be so busy congratulating him that they wouldn't think anything about Adrian being sent to Angela's room.

They would assume it was for an update or reward, and that the man would leave afterward.

Neil moved off to do as ordered, confused but not willing to challenge Marc on the decision. In fact, he was a little relieved. The Eagles had been planning a way to get Adrian and Angela alone together like both of them obviously needed. This way, they wouldn't have to.

Marc walked through the first floor hall, not peering into rooms where the camp was settling in. A few of them were already asleep. The feel of the hotel was good and so was the town. If not for his personal issues, Marc would have also been getting tired now and ready to crash. As it was, he had no idea how he was going to spend the rest of the evening. The urge to spy on Angela and Adrian would be a horrible temptation, but he was a man of his word. If anything happened between the couple during the time they were alone together, he didn't want to know about it.

"Everything is secured and I'm off duty. Do you need me?" Kenn came from the room with their injured. He had just delivered supplies from the medical camper.

Marc shook his head, encouraging Kenn to hurry off. He didn't want the descendant to know what was going on and tell Tonya. If the camp found out later, they would deal with it, but for tonight, Marc was going to make sure the pair received what Adrian was asking for. He had many reasons for

doing it. One of them was a test of his own bond with Angela.

At one time, Marc had been certain nothing could come between them. He didn't think it would matter even if she did betray him tonight because love wasn't something that could be shut off, but it would certainly damage him. He needed something to do, but first, he had to get through the mandatory meeting happening in half an hour. Brittani and Gus's brothers were preparing a fast meal for people to eat while they listened. Marc assumed the meeting would end with a vote, but he wasn't sure if Angela might handle it first. If she got wind of what he and Adrian had just talked about, there may not be a vote at all. She might just tell both of them to leave.

5

“This is a mandatory meeting of Safe Haven Refugee Camp.” Standing in the center of the cafeteria, Angela rotated to include everyone. “It's the last one we will have on American soil.”

The mood immediately sobered as people thought of what they would miss.

Angela had counted on it. The vote would wind them up a little, but she was hoping it would be the only excitement of the evening. “We have almost everything we need. Like usual, we'll be stopping on the way to pick up the rest of it.” She paused. “We've had five deaths since the last meeting. All

of you know what happened.” Angela respectfully listed off the names, glad she didn’t have to include Ivan, and moved on. She wanted them sleepy, not teary. “Everything seems okay in this town. I haven’t picked up problems and neither has anyone else. We’ll know for sure over the next couple of days. If they are good, some of them may want to go with us. If so, we will evaluate them on an individual basis.” Angela turned the page in her notebook. “We’re still going to have a party, but obviously, it’s been delayed. I don’t want to do it while we’re here because we don’t have enough supplies for all of their people and it would be rude not to invite them.”

Everyone was able to understand that even though they were disappointed.

“We’re staying for two days. We’ll leave on the eighteenth, after breakfast.”

People murmured at the reminder that it was only November. Winter was just getting started. It made people grateful for the heat pouring from hotel vents.

“Unless anyone has anything they need to discuss, we’re going to finish with the vote. Does anyone have new business?” Angela scanned the crowd, giving people time to come forward. She could feel several of them wanting to ask questions and was glad when they decided to wait for a private moment. Angela waved. “Adrian Mitchel.”

Adrian had been about to slip out now that he'd eaten. He stopped as the camp turned to look at him, bringing an awkward silence.

“The Eagles have voted to have Adrian placed on conditional banishment. As leader of Safe Haven, I have the right to overrule them, but I can't be unbiased about this. I've decided to leave it to the camp. Everyone over the age of ten will vote.”

Many of the adults didn't like Safe Haven's kids being allowed to have a say. All of those children loved Adrian; it was obvious which way they would vote.

Angela didn't care if it looked unfair. It wasn't. The kids had earned the right to vote on their future.

Ready for the nod when it came, Harry and a few helpers passed out the ballots they had spent an hour making from notebook paper. Angela had insisted on an official record for this meeting.

“While people fill out their ballots, I have a few minor updates to deliver. The first one is training will restart in the morning.” She paused for the light cheers to fade. “All Eagles who are not on duty will report to the lobby at 8am.”

Team leaders wrote it down.

“Samantha hasn't detected bad weather coming, so it's okay to be outside. Do not leave Safe Haven's perimeter. We don't know these people yet and they don't know us. I don't want to offend them.”

No one wanted that. Besides saving them, everyone was delighted at the amenities. The hot water had already been enjoyed by at least half the

camp and there was music and movies blaring from almost every room. Angela made a note to remind people to conserve energy and then continued. “We tested the radiation levels in this area and they’re not registering, so we’re fine. There is ash on the ground here, however, so like when we were traveling before, don’t pick things up and just eat them or use them. They need to be sanitized first.”

Angela turned the page. “Other than the shortwave radios the Eagles and leadership are using, we are still on silence. It would be horrible of us to bring the refugees to this town. Please do not let kids play with radios and be careful not to sit on them when you get in and out of vehicles or chairs.”

As the first round of ballots were folded and passed forward to Harry, who was collecting so Tommy could count while everyone watched, Angela resisted the urge to scan the results. She also continued to fight the urge to sway the vote. She would do so the entire time she was in charge of this camp, to set an example for everyone in it and for those who would come after her. Safe Haven’s leaders had to be fair, no matter how hard it was. “That’s all I have for now. Remember to thank Brittani and her helpers for this hot meal. We’ll count the votes and then everyone will be lights out an hour after that.” Angela retrieved her bowl from the counter, not looking at Adrian.

Adrian was still by the door, now with a ballot in his hand. He crumbled it up and dropped it in the garbage can, then went outside. The rookie hadn’t

even looked at him as he handed it out, not realizing Adrian was who they were voting on, but it had given Adrian a flash of when he had been a respected, honored member of the camp. Nervous joy from the chance he was getting to have that returned was hard to contain. He left so he didn't ruin it with the wrong thought at the wrong time.

Adrian took the elevator, approving of the guard who rode with him but didn't speak.

Adrian nodded to Kevin and left. As he stepped outside, the guard on point waved toward the side entrance of the hotel. "Room 4B, top floor."

Adrian realized what was happening and went where the guard directed, not allowing himself to think.

6

"Don't do this again."

"We didn't have the votes." Kyle was humiliated.

"No. Only the camp can lift his banishment." Angela left Kyle stewing over the results, not surprised, just disappointed. So was Adrian. She could feel it, making this all worse.

They would have if you hadn't refused to vote.

Angela didn't respond to Morgan's frustrated comment as she went by his post on the first floor stairs. Adrian's banishment would be reinstated as soon as they left.

Angela spotted Marc slipping outside to avoid the grumbling and the congratulations. She found Kendle in the crowd and gave her a motion to watch out for him. They had a team on duty, but those guards would be distracted with news of the vote results.

“Excuse me?” Bucky came to Angela, accompanied by an Eagle from the crew outside. “The Mayor wanted me to check with you before we go to bed and to remind you that we’d like Safe Haven to take meals with us. We eat at noon and again at 7pm.”

Storing the ration-type schedule, Angela nodded. “We’d be honored. We have supplies to add for the meals.”

Bucky was horrified. “You’re our guests! We wouldn’t dream of that.”

“We can exchange lists, then. Maybe trade?”

“That would be wonderful.”

Kyle trailed Angela and Bucky as they discussed items for trade. He was shocked the vote had gone this way. The Eagles had tried, but they’d forgotten the herd had voted Adrian out and only they could bring him back in. He hadn’t done enough to earn their forgiveness yet.

They never will. Angela sighed. *He doesn’t deserve it and deep down, they know that. Marc has always been right.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven BK9

Sleazy, But Effective

1

Kendle joined Marc. He was standing just outside the hotel doors, unhappy even though the vote had gone his way. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yeah, that’ll happen.”

Kendle shrugged off Marc’s gruff tone. His anger wasn’t directed at her. Because of her loyalty to Marc, Kendle had voted not to lift Adrian’s banishment, but it had been a close choice for her because she believed the man deserved another chance.

“If that’s all you can think about, go find someone else to partner with.”

Kendle tried not to be offended. She locked down her stray thoughts and paid attention to the hotel around them. Neil and his team were doing rounds of the outside perimeter right now, but only because Marc had gone out. It was clear the Eagles were trying to keep leadership inside the yellow tape. Kendle applauded the effort, but they didn’t understand. It wasn’t going to work for either of Safe Haven’s bosses. Kendle still considered Marc to be Angela’s XO. A lot of the camp did. The fact

that Angela had skipped it during the meeting was causing talk.

“She didn’t bring it up because it’s not a camp decision. Most of the camp doesn’t even know it exists. It’s an Eagle rule.”

Kendle hadn’t spent a lot of time in training since joining Safe Haven. “I guess I’ll hear about it at some point.”

“Everyone level three and above gets that part of the speech. Until then, most Eagles aren’t included because they don’t have the wisdom to make a choice based on what’s best for the camp.” Reminded of why he had lost his chance, Marc fell silent. It allowed him to hear Kyle’s footsteps as he came from the stairwell next to the elevator and approached Angela.

Angela was still in the lobby, talking with a few of the women who were on their way to the dessert carts. Most of the camp was in the rooms now, enjoying luxuries the old world had considered slumming. He watched Kyle tap Angela on the arm and whisper in her ear. When Angela said goodbye to the women and followed him, Marc knew where she was going and couldn’t take it. “I’ll be around.”

Tired, Angela missed it. The elevator slid upward as she turned to Kyle. “What’s the problem?”

“You have a meeting upstairs.”

Angela frowned. She’d thought everything was covered. “With who?”

“Marc arranged it.”

Angela's eyes narrowed, but she resisted the urge to force it out of Kyle's mind. Instead, she stared, waiting for him to give it up.

Kyle held tight to the mental brick barrier Jennifer was always teasing him for using.

When the elevator finally slid open on the fourth floor, he released the breath he'd been holding and led the way.

Angela followed, unable to help dropping her hand to the gun on her hip. The hall was empty except for two guards at each end of the long hall. It was dim and creepy.

Kyle opened a door halfway down.

Two of the four guards came to take up a position on either side of the room.

Now more confused than concerned, Angela stepped by Kyle with a quizzical expression.

Kyle shut the door behind her and headed toward the elevator.

“Good evening.”

Angela stared at Adrian.

Adrian immediately gave what she needed the most. “I've never been so proud of anyone.”

Angela's smile lit up the room and made her look young again.

Adrian stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, joy bubbling. “You did it!”

Angela didn't flinch. She returned the embrace.

Looking up at exactly the wrong moment, Marc caught the shadows on the window of the hotel room and froze. He couldn't be certain of who it was, but at the same time, he knew. As he watched the couple, his heart shattered a little.

His demon spoke up. *Perhaps it's not what you think.*

Marc marched to the lead rig where he was going to spend the night in the bunk.

It wouldn't be hard to be sure...

Marc resisted the temptation. When he'd told Adrian it didn't matter because he was going to have her every night after this, he meant it.

2

"I can't believe you did it."

The two guards who were able to hear them assumed Adrian meant keeping Safe Haven alive. Adrian's next words gave them the real reason.

"You led them through every hell in my notebooks. They'll leave now."

"The price was too high."

Adrian refused to allow sorrow to ruin the short time they had together. He stepped back, arms lowering. He wanted to say so many things that he couldn't pick one. He settled for staring at her with his emotions unguarded, something he'd only been able to do a handful of times since they'd met. "I'm forever in your debt."

"So why are you ruining it this way?"

“Actually, I’m not.” Adrian let her view his plan.

Angela groaned. “I wish you hadn’t.”

The suite Ciemus had chosen for Angela was on the top floor and filled with flowers, welcome baskets, and packages of supplies that Safe Haven hadn’t seen in a long time. Angela gestured. “Add it to the camp stocks.”

“You don’t want to pick through it first?”

“Of course, I do, but we don’t handle things that way. Add it to the stocks. I’ll thank the Mayor.”

“Fine.” Adrian stepped aside so she could see behind him. “Just get in the bed.”

Angela laughed. The bed was covered in papers, notebooks, and maps. There was also a snack and a change of clothes. Angela peered toward the small, dark washroom. “Hot water?”

Adrian grinned. “I got you a towel and stuff. Take the clothes if they look okay.” Adrian hadn’t been sure if she wanted an evening in Eagle clothes.

“I don’t.” She opened her kit and dug out a pair of Marc’s sweats and one of his tops. She vanished into the bathroom without another word. Angela started to come back out for a flashlight and remembered the lights worked. She hit the switch with a silly grin.

Adrian listened to her movements for a minute, smelling her, longing for more nights like this. He smothered it as the water came on. Tonight wasn’t about him. They were a day from the ocean, from reaching the boat. A week after that, Safe Haven

would leave America and have a chance to flourish in peace under a welcoming sun. Few refugees would be able to follow them, even if they found his notes at their old campsites. Safe Haven had once left maps and directions for people to reach them, but those days were gone. Those who came after them would have to figure it out from the few clues that had been left. Adrian had even placed one on the mountain before Safe Haven had been trapped in there, but he doubted it had survived the battle with Dirce.

Adrian listened to the people below them as the smell of hot, soapy water floated from the bathroom, soul at peace for this moment. The fight at the hangar might have been the last they had to face before leaving. The relief was incredible.

3

“Damn it.” Marc was in the cold bunk of the truck, tossing. He hadn’t gone to sleep yet, though he was trying. The anger and jealousy had faded into misery at the thought of what life would be like if Angela chose Adrian, if they were already together. He believed giving her free will to do as she wanted was the right choice, but it was hard to stay in this icy truck when he—

Angie needs you.

Adrian’s tone was sated. Fury got Marc out of the truck in seconds, bootlaces dragging. It wasn’t

the first time he'd run somewhere and tied them later.

Eagles watched him storm into the hotel.

Kyle motioned Daryl to go find out what had happened. None of them wanted to be caught off guard or in the crossfire if Marc snapped.

Marc went to the elevator that was open from Ivan coming down. He didn't speak to the man.

Ivan shrugged, thinking Marc had better get with the program before the camp was forced to vote on his banishment next.

Marc missed it as the elevator took him to the fourth floor; guards met him as the doors slid open. Marc assumed the men below had notified them through code. He approved the security even as he shoved by them.

"Open the door," Adrian called.

Greg opened it, frowning as he saw Marc coming down the hall. He didn't look inside the room. After Angela had arrived and the pair had exchanged a greeting, there had been silence.

Marc entered the warm room with his hands on his guns, mouth opening.

"Shhh..." Adrian pointed. "She's on the edge."

Marc looked over to find Angela's head drooping against a pillow that had been placed behind her. Sitting up, she was covered in papers and ink marks. It was clear she'd spent the entire time right there, working.

Adrian was on the couch under the window. He yawned. “I couldn’t stand to watch her do that anymore.”

“Do what?” Angela snapped awake. “I’m sorry... What did I do?”

Marc’s lips curved into a reluctant smile. “She wouldn’t lie down?”

“Not without her guard.”

Angela yawned and tried to focus. “There you are!”

Marc felt her welcome and the peace in the room, and couldn’t bring himself to disturb it. He went over to her for the cheek kiss she wanted. Vanilla wafted up, teasing his nose.

Angela’s arms tightened around his neck for an instant before she let go, telling him she wasn’t mad anymore.

Marc sighed “Well, I am, but we’ll handle it tomorrow. Let’s get you settled, okay?”

Angela nodded obediently as Marc gathered the papers. When he held them out to Adrian, the man was there to take them or tell him where they went. They worked together without thinking.

“It was awesome of you to do this.” Angela yawned again. “I really did need time with him to go over stuff. It’s good now.”

Marc nodded, forcing a smile that wasn’t convincing but passed muster because she was so tired. While she rubbed her eyes, Marc studied Adrian. The man was still in his dirty clothes and didn’t appear to have gotten any supplies. He was

too tall for the couch and didn't have a pillow or blanket. He looked miserable.

Adrian stretched, spine cracking. *I haven't been this happy in months. Thank you.*

Marc knew that was probably true, but he couldn't let it go at that. *You didn't do this for yourself.*

No.

Why didn't you tell me that?

Would you have believed me?

Maybe... Probably not.

You wouldn't have. I did it this way to try proving to you there's nothing for you to be jealous about. You can leave her alone with anyone and this is always how it will end up. You shouldn't ever doubt her love. None of this was her fault.

Angela slid under the blankets. "A little of it was. I'm attracted to both of you and I can't help being human. There might be a seat in the front row of hell for me over that, but right now, I don't care." Angela looked at them as her body relaxed under the blankets. "Please stay. Both of you, this one time. But stop talking about this mess or I'll go to the lobby and sleep in the hotel entryway with Dog."

Adrian grinned. That was the Angie he'd missed.

Me too. Marc nodded. "We'll stay. You rest."

"And no more talking," she grumbled, lids closing.

“That’s asking too much.” Marc turned off the lamp on her side of the bed.

Angela yawned again, head sinking into the pillow. “Can’t blame a girl for try…”

Marc smiled. She was adorable in moments like this, reminding him of the little girl he’d allowed to steal his heart for all eternity.

Marc went to the minibar of the large suite.

Adrian sat up, not certain he could handle another bout of drinking with Marc while he was in a bad mood.

“I’m not anymore.”

Adrian sighed and got up. There was a stool on each side, giving them a clear view of Angela and the bathroom on one side, and the windows and room door on the other.

“I can’t ever do it. I hate you too much.”

Adrian groaned. “Oh, come on! I don’t need those images in my head.”

“I mean it. If that’s what tonight is supposed to be the start of, forget it.”

Adrian snorted. “I’ve never considered it and neither has she. I’d bet she barely tolerates sex with just you.”

“What?!”

Adrian backtracked, trying to explain. “Hold your huff, big boy. She was abused. If you weren’t considerate of her jumpiness, you’d only get near her a couple times a year. It’s not like that, right?”

Marc shook his head, thinking of the moment in the medical camper where she’d insisted that he

give her a hand-job before the others rose. Marc smirked. *Okay, so I insisted. Either way, it worked out.* He frowned as he realized that's what Adrian meant.

"You don't view her as a battered woman except when you're in bed because she can't hide it from you there, when you're so focused on her reactions to see what pleases her."

"This wasn't what we're supposed to be talking about."

"I got that, but who says we can't take a side trip into your love life? I hear there's a light at the end of every tunnel."

Marc snorted, amused when he didn't want to be. "Fine, but finish up. I can't take much more of your voice."

"Then I'll make it clear for you. Angela could never cheat on her mate. She was abused. Abused women almost always agree to physical moments to make their partner happy. In Angela's case, you've begun to show her the good side and she's adjusting, but you still can't grab her and kiss her like you could when you were young, right?"

"No. She freezes for that instant."

"That's one of a hundred signs she puts off, Marc, and right now, she's never felt more vulnerable. Thinking she would let me fuck her is insane." Adrian flipped an ashtray, making it thump softly. "Thinking I would rush it that way is an insult."

"What's your point?"

Adrian scanned to be sure Angela was sleeping, then leaned forward. “My point is when you die, she’ll be alone for the rest of her life if you still hate me when it happens. I’m the only one who might be able to finish what you’ve begun, but she won’t be able to get over the guilt.”

Since they were on the subject, Marc admitted his biggest fear. “She’ll be in your bed a month after I’m in the ground. A year after that, she won’t even mention my name anymore. You know it. You said that to me.”

“I used it to hurt you. I’m sorry for that.”

It didn’t mean much because Marc didn’t believe him. “You’re better for her.”

“Only because you hold her back or get in her way.” Adrian glanced over. “I heard you’ve been using my methods for crowd control. How does that feel?”

“Different. A little sleazy, but effective.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly.”

“I was just starting to get it.”

“Get what?”

“Why you guys have always handled the herd so carefully and hidden so much.”

“You’ll have some time to view it from her side without the weight of the choices now. That will be good for her. She doesn’t feel safe, even with the Special Forces teams. Only you make her feel that way.”

“And you.”

Adrian didn't confirm it. He didn't need to. "She needs us on her right and left. I can do that from a distance. I'll make all the trips you want to send me on and I'll stay out of your sight as much as I can." Adrian was willing to do whatever it took to give Angela and the camp peace from the drama.

"I have other plans." Marc took out his notebook and pen, refusing to take the chance that Angela was listening. He wrote quickly and then gave the pen to Adrian.

Put her on edge and then go away.

Adrian drew a question mark.

Marc jotted the next line.

I have the scroll. Put her on edge and then get ready for my call.

Adrian hated it that Marc now knew all the details, but he was also relieved. This way, the bond would be broken and Angela's love for Marc would eventually form the soulmate connection, which would erase all charms. She would be free to love Marc then and Adrian had no doubt that she would. Adrian stopped there.

Keep going or I'll dig it out of you.

Adrian sighed. *It will also mean when she comes to me after your death, it's because she does love me and it wasn't all charms and bonds.*

That was the other truth Marc hadn't wanted to face, but he also hadn't realized Adrian was worried about it. Marc almost felt sorry for him. At least he knew Angela loved him. Adrian might never have that knowledge. *How long do you think it will take?*

Adrian sighed again. *It depends on how hard you want me to hit her with it. If you want it before the boat, I'd need to swing from the hip.*

Thanks to their conversation, Marc didn't think of anything sexual first. "How about a day of it being like it was before and then you go?"

Adrian winced. He wanted that more than he was willing to admit yet. "Yeah. That would kill us both to lose so soon."

"And the camp?"

"Will love it and then hate it, like her, but if you handle their needs like I would have for a couple of days, it'll pass with them. The sheep are always easier to tend than the shepherds."

"What about the lambs?" Marc was thinking of the children now.

Adrian chuckled. "They are the hardest part of the job and the biggest joy at any given time. It gets crazy."

Marc agreed. He had enjoyed the time with the kids, but he already feared he could fall into it like Adrian and Angela did.

"You have free time now. You'll be on her security for twelve hours a day if you do doubles, but you'd still have a few hours to spend with the kids. Everyone would love that, and I'd bet you learn a lot about how to handle people from handling them."

"Maybe." Marc ended their talk as he stood up. "I'll let you know in the morning on what we've discussed. Everything's on hold until then."

“You got it.” Adrian looked at the couch.

Marc pointed at the ground on the other side of Angela. It was between her and the door.

Adrian went there with a grin that Marc loathed, but he wanted to sleep in a real bed without fear of Angela being hurt while he was out. When he’d told Captain Grant that Adrian was a guard dog, it had been absolutely true. No one would get near them tonight.

No, they won’t. Adrian bedded down where he was out of Marc’s line of sight but could still watch Angela as she slept. Moments like this were worth dying for.

Marc almost drew his gun from under the pillow and decided to go to sleep instead. *I’ll make a choice on that tomorrow too.*

4

“It’s hard to believe those are the same people you brought in.”

“More proof; as if I needed it.” Grant had no doubts. Safe Haven’s light had already spread to include parts of their town. It was magical.

“I am curious how you decided it was them.” Donna’s thin brows arched. “We’d been hearing calls and fights for weeks, and before the pause, for months.”

“I could feel the difference. I just knew.”

Donna shrugged, willing to let it go. Captain Grant's instincts were part of why he'd been given a role in her administration.

"What do you think of them?" Grant kept his distance from the woman sitting on the window ledge to eat an apple and stare at the hotel through the window.

The Mayor's office was just as nice as the banquet hall, but it lacked the expensive paintings and carpet. Most of their luxury items had been burned or stored, but William had insisted they needed to have one great place for people to meet for meals. Grant agreed. The rest of the town was barren of the finer reminders of their old lives. It was nice to have one space the war hadn't ruined.

"Interesting. Wild, though."

"They're dangerous. Trouble follows them everywhere they go."

Donna glanced over at him. "You like that."

Grant chuckled. He didn't need to confirm it. Everyone knew who he was, what he was like. Being stuck inside these walls, even though he'd helped build them, had been torture after the freedom of eight years in the Navy and two years of local fishing afterward.

"Am I making the wrong choice?" Donna tensed, bracing for his reply.

"William would say only fate knows that."

Donna snorted, cheeks reddening. "What does Captain Grant say?"

“I think they’re good, strong, and they have exactly what we need.”

Donna relaxed, turning back to the window to resume her observations. “Yes, they do.”

Grant recognized how she’d distracted him from the real concern, but didn’t push. Their Mayor was a hardened woman who was out of her league when it came to descendants. Everyone was, but Donna insisted strict adherence to town laws would keep people in line. Captain Grant had to admit that it had worked so far, but now Safe Haven was here and they didn’t have just one magic user. They had an entire camp with endless power. Grant couldn’t help his concern.

“What do you think will happen when they meet?” Donna waited for a reply. When there wasn’t one, she turned around to find the man gone.

Donna sighed, turning back. “Yeah, I couldn’t guess either.”

5

Ivan came around the corner of the parking area, finally finished with his round of the camp. He had begun on the top level and worked his way down to the men on duty outside. His team had been honored to receive third shift point over the hotel.

Shivering a little at the cold draft, Ivan decided the next time one of the Eagles insisted on giving him a winter set up, he would accept it. His men already had. They looked warm.

I love watching the sunrises.

Ivan nodded. "Same here. I always..." Ivan looked over, mouth dropping open.

Dog peered up with golden eyes flecked in amusement. *Are you okay?*

Ivan was trying to form words. "Uh, yeah. One of them?"

Dog shook his head, letting the motion run down his back to his bushy tail. *No one is like them.*

Ivan found the mental capacity and intelligence in an animal to be too much. He stared at Dog with eyes that said his mind was on the verge of blanking out.

If the boss gave you a shift by yourself, you're stronger than that. Snap out of it!

Ivan slowly came out of the daze, staring at the animal. He'd heard stories about Marc and Dog, but passed them off as tales to add to the Ghost's legend. He hadn't considered that the wolf was like his master.

This is the part of Safe Haven I missed the most.

Ivan forced himself to answer. "The sunsets?"

Watching the magic. Dog's big head turned toward the hotel. *These are the best moments here.*

Ivan would have questioned further, but a glint of light caught his attention. He tensed, hand going to his radio to alert people there was trouble.

The wolf next to him stared at the hotel without blinking. *Watch this.*

The glint of light started at the bottom of the building and slowly moved upward until it formed

a shield around the hotel. Glistening and expanding in the morning sunrise, it was the most beautiful thing Ivan had ever seen.

You should step back.

“What?”

Dog nudged his leg, forcing the fascinated soldier to move.

The shield snapped into place around the perimeter, giving them a distorted view for a few seconds that quickly cleared.

“Wow.” Ivan studied the barrier. He could see the shield around the camp in the distance, but he couldn’t feel this edge of it even though he was only standing a foot away. “How did you know where it would come up?”

It’s the same perimeter. We’ve been using it all along in Safe Haven.

Now Ivan understood why the tape was always the same distance from the center of camp. The Eagles had been doing that without discussing it since they’d left the mountain. “Cool!”

Dog’s tongue lolled out as he chuckled. *You’re definitely one of hers.*

Ivan shook his head. “It’s your master I came for.”

Has that changed?

Ivan considered, then shrugged. “Maybe a little, but it’s because of the last few days. Women screw all of us up at one point or another. He’ll recover.”

Dog rose to his feet. *I believe that too.* The wolf padded away. *I want to go watch what happens next. May your rounds be quiet and boring.*

Ivan laughed and followed the wolf. “What makes the shield come up?”

The Eagles are meeting. The boss just woke up and heard it.

“Angela causes that?”

The happiness of the humans allows her to do that.

Ivan hesitated and then pushed on. “My shift ended with sunrise. Can I hang with you?”

Dog stopped to look over his shoulder, intelligence showing in every line of fur on his beautiful face. *Why do you think we're talking?*

Ivan stuttered for a moment and then hurried to catch up.

Chapter Twenty-Eight BK9

Slaps, Hits, And Thuds

1

“**E**veryone’s here.”

“The meeting has started. Quiet!”

Dog and Ivan entered the hotel lobby and found fifty Eagles gathered in front of Kenn. They moved through the rear of the crowd to reach the elevators.

“We’re going to do a two-hour training session today, and every day from now on, when we can. While we’re here, we also are going to take advantage of the amenities. When we’re on the road, we’ll make do with whatever is available.” Kenn was delighted to be in charge. The smug vibe didn’t fade as he spoke. “If you look around, you’ll notice we’ve split you into three groups. Neil and his team are handling the Kai class. If you’re a level one, go stand with them.” Kenn paused for the slightly dismayed people to do that. None of the level ones had passed a Kai class yet.

“Jennifer and Ray are going to handle the weight room and workouts. If you’re a rookie, that’s where you belong.”

The remaining group in the room, the level twos, realized they were going to be with Kyle and

his team. Half the crew groaned, while the other half grinned. Gus and Stanley were especially nervous about training with Special Forces.

“Everyone stays with their team and goes where they’re told at the end of each lesson. Exactly an hour and thirty-five minutes from now, everyone will meet at the pool and do at least ten laps to finish their shift. After that, you’re all free to shit, shower, and shave. Then be back here at noon, right where you’re standing now.” Kenn made a gesture and got them moving.

Ivan approved the setup even while wishing he were getting to be a part of it. He was a rookie, so he would have been in the gym with Jennifer and Ray while they encouraged him to run until he puked. Getting in shape was the hardest part of being an Eagle so far. If not for his military training, and his determination to stay in good condition after that, Ivan would be one of those who couldn’t run a mile in a short time. As it was, he and his team would be able to pass a level two fitness test right now. The rest of the rookies would not. Nancy and Debra, along with Kim and a few other women, were just getting started on the pain that came with such an honored position in Safe Haven.

As Kyle took his team toward the elevator, he gave the wolf a nod.

Dog huffed. *Too soon to tell.*

Ivan looked down at Dog. “What was that about?”

He is acknowledging your attendance at this lesson.

Ivan frowned. “What lesson?”

Dog headed toward the elevator. *Let’s see if you can figure that out by the time I’m done with rounds.*

Mouth dropping open again, Ivan followed. He’d assumed he was excused from training today because he had worked the night shift. He’d been disappointed.

Senior men had also been looking forward to the lessons, mostly because they were the trainers this time. When Angela was fully recovered, she and the council would do most of this. Until then, the two Special Forces teams, along with the level fours, tried not to smirk or gloat.

Dog and Ivan took the elevator to the third floor, following the rookies. The sound of a drill sergeant barking orders and gym equipment clanking echoed before they reached the room. Ivan recognized Jennifer’s voice and pitied the people in there. She was a hardassed little thing. Kyle was a lucky man.

Ivan watched, finding it interesting how the team worked out in tandem around tables and equipment that had been set up along the walls. Ray and Jennifer both had clipboards. Ivan also recognized Conner and Pam. He didn’t know the others, but he’d seen them in Safe Haven since his arrival. The rest of the rookies now climbing onto dusty weight benches and treadmills were familiar to him. They’d already spent time together. Ivan looked at Dog, not sure why they had stopped here.

What do you see when you look at the other rookies?

Ivan concentrated on communicating silently with the wolf instead of speaking and disrupting the lesson. *Men and women who want to be stronger?*

Look again.

Ivan did as instructed, scanning leadership and then the team. Unable to figure out what the wolf wanted him to see, Ivan waited patiently for a clue. So far, that was how training was done and the wolf was his teacher for this class. Ivan wasn't sure yet if he should be amused or embarrassed.

There is no difference being shown, no matter the gender or chore.

Ivan shrugged. *Many military setups are like that.*

But there are also people in this room who are attracted to each other. Some of them also don't like each other, but they have trust.

Ivan did another fast scan, but because he didn't know the people personally, it was impossible for him to tell who was who.

Satisfied, Dog moved down the hall toward the smaller elevator at the far end. *You got that quicker than I thought you would.*

It took Ivan a few seconds to realize he had passed the first lesson. As he replayed his thoughts, he figured out the problem. He didn't know his fellow Eagles. That was something he needed to remedy.

Ivan was able to accept the lesson because all the senior Eagles had been preaching it since he'd joined Angela's army. Rookies were told if they didn't know each other, there was no way they could trust each other.

Now curious about the next lesson, Ivan followed Dog into the elevator. He hit the second button without being told.

Dog sat to wait. *She might be right about you.*

Ivan couldn't believe the praise from the animal made him feel good, but it did. He spent the ride in silence, trying to figure out what was wrong with his brain.

2

"He took my book!"

"She threw my car!"

Angry voices echoed down the hall as Ivan and Dog got off on the second floor.

Ivan mentally groaned. He had hoped this level would be empty. On his last trip through, he had stepped in something that was still making his shoe stick to the carpet every few steps. He'd tried to scrape it off outside, but failed. It was annoying.

Dog led him straight toward the running, screaming, laughing, playing children. Toys and clothes were all over the floors, with pieces of each also flying through the air.

Down!

Ivan ducked as a die cast car was thrown from one of the rooms; it slammed into the wall next to his head. *Thanks.*

Dog eased along the wall to the next room. *More coming.*

A barrage of hot wheels flew out of the room next to Ivan. As they slammed and clanked their way down the wall, naked Barbies exploded from the opposite doorway. Heads and arms popped off and rolled down the hall while laughter and screams of horror overwhelmed the few adults in the background.

Dog looked at Ivan. *I want you to distract the kids so I can go by without getting it in my fur.*

Without getting what in your fur?

Dog's snout drew up in a revolted curl. *Whatever is stuck to your shoe.*

Ivan chuckled, standing as den mothers came hurrying down the hallway with a small group of younger children. Left with only guards, the kids here had used the opportunity to have fun and fights.

Ivan saw a service caddy and rolled it over next to the wolf.

The animal looked up in haughty scorn. *What are you, the vet?*

Ivan snickered. *You didn't say you had to be comfortable.*

Dog was forced to admit the human was right. He crawled into the bottom of the service cart, muttering.

Ivan casually pushed the wolf past the rooms where adults were now delivering scolds and being ignored by children attacking the movie piles.

Ivan paused at the end of the hall and slid the cart along the opposite wall.

Dog stepped out and led the way toward the stairs, where Ivan could hear the faint clicks and clacks of weapons.

Once again, the pair stayed in the doorway so they didn't interrupt the lesson. The daycare had old, faded drawings Ivan didn't examine too closely. It was sad that the scribbles had survived when their artists probably hadn't.

“There always comes a point in Safe Haven where an Eagle is forced to shoot without being 100% certain of where that bullet will go. In some situations, there won't be anything you can do except remember your training. I know that sounds like something we used to hear in the movies, but live by it. If you can hit something by the sound of it, you might be able to save someone's life. If you can reload in the dark, you might be able to at least save your own.” Kyle pointed at the tables. “We're going to do timed break down and reassemble.” He didn't look at Kenn. “The boss has ruled that Kenn cannot be leader or XO of your team. All of you were bumped up to level two when we left the mountain, but we know you don't have a chain of command yet. Kenn is not eligible for those positions. The boss expects the rest of you to step up and do your duty. Kenn will always provide

support, no matter what team he's on." Kyle knew Angela had arranged it that way because the level two team was just as inexperienced as the level ones and the rookies. Kenn would get them into shape fast.

"Each one of us will work with each one of you. Do the best you can, and we'll repeat until the lesson ends." Kyle nodded at the team in the doorway, but didn't get distracted. He was elated to be training again, though it felt odd to be doing it indoors. The second-floor daycare had been perfect for this. "Put your blindfolds on."

Ivan watched in appreciation as the team began to break down weapons, blind. He hadn't had that lesson yet, but he was confident he would be able to do it.

"Done!"

Everyone chuckled as Kenn finished first. Ivan hadn't known about the man's experience. He glanced down to ask if that was the next part of his lesson and found Dog already padding toward the stairs closest to them.

Ivan made a mental note to get to know Kenn and his history in Safe Haven, then followed.

The third-floor gym was directly to the right as Ivan and Dog came up the stairs. There was a group of people in the hallway, though there was only one team being trained and they were already inside.

Ivan and Dog moved through the hopeful camp members who were considering becoming Eagles. Ivan had expected to see some of these people at the

other classes, but as he studied the group who winced and groaned at the sounds, he realized this was everyone's biggest fear.

Ivan and Dog had no trouble getting to the entryway as the wolf was recognized. The men and women in the hall had been with Safe Haven for a long time. They understood the wolf, once again wearing a bright red collar, was on duty. They assumed Ivan was on the same team.

Ivan was encouraged by the respect, but he didn't think many of them would follow through. The sounds coming out of the room were ugly slaps, hits, and thuds that Ivan doubted few of these people would be willing to put themselves through as long as there were others to do that dirty work. Ivan didn't resent them for it. He only wanted people in their army who were able to do the job.

Dog sat in the doorway.

"Until you can control your fear, your fear will control you." Neil's voice was loud enough for everyone in the hall to hear. "No one likes being hit or hurt. It's human nature to be afraid of anything that causes pain. We have the pain response. It's why the old world took seven to twelve weeks of a recruit's life to get them over it or convince them they couldn't cut it. As you reach each level, these classes will get harder. All of you have just had the beginning stage. Now, you'll practice with each other until the time is up."

Ivan swept the level one team, noting it had six members and he didn't know any of them. The two

women and four men were bruised and bleeding, but wore expressions that were relieved instead of angry or scared. Ivan assumed they'd just had that pivotal moment where they learned pain was only pain and it would go away. He'd had his own moment during Boot Camp, but he was still sometimes reminded of it during a rough fight—like the one they'd just had at the Naval Station.

“Between your sets, take twenty seconds to watch while we demonstrate what you're going to go through as Special Forces.” Eager, Neil turned to his team and motioned them into place.

Neil's team wasn't as enthusiastic, but they didn't hesitate to surround him on the mat. Neil was so far above everyone else in kai that the team workout had turned into the other six men trying to defeat him in the highest level each of them knew.

“Go!”

It was a brutal battle where Neil was hit so many times that Ivan expected him to fall down dead at any point, but the scrappy trooper took all of them out and was able to stand when it was over. Ivan had never been more impressed with a physical demonstration. He immediately wanted private lessons from Neil; he made a mental note to get to know the man so he would agree.

Ivan didn't catch it this time, but Dog did. *Your lesson is over. I'll let the boss know how well you've done.* Dog padded off. *I wonder if the mess is open...*

Ivan stood there, speechless, as he realized all three lessons had been the same. The wolf had

taught him he needed to get to know people in this camp and then he could become a full part of it. Ivan was thrilled.

“I could use a bite.” He trotted to the wolf’s side and tried not to look as cocky as he felt.

3

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“I promise you, it’ll be fine.”

“What if she picks the kai class?”

“Neil might get his ass kicked for the first time ever.”

“I’m serious.”

“Who says I’m not?”

Angela’s day began with the sound of Adrian and Marc half joking, half bickering. She had woken earlier, but hadn’t been ready to get up. The men had assured her most of the camp wasn’t awake yet and that had made it okay. Now, her people were up. She needed to be too.

Angela stretched, enjoying the feel of the large bed. None of their stops had been this comfortable. She could feel people already dreading the call to leave.

Not paying attention to anything except her normal wake up ritual, she was unaware of the two men now staring at her.

Marc was allowed to gawk and he did, admiring the swells of her breasts and the hard nipples he could see through the shirt. Her beautiful curls were

in disarray around her face and over her shoulders, making part of him twitch. Marc immediately thought of the Aerosmith song, Ain't that a Bitch.

Next to him, Adrian wasn't looking at her physical attributes. He was certainly aware of them and approved, but he was more interested in her waking thoughts. As they immediately went to the camp, he couldn't help but smile. He hadn't done many things right in his life, but putting her in charge had been one of them.

Marc sighed. "I can agree with that."

Adrian motioned toward Angela. "You handle her. I'll get the door."

Marc nodded, not doubting someone was about to knock.

Tap-tap-tap.

Marc went to Angela. "*Good morning.*"

Marc's tone made her blush. "Don't even think about it."

They both chuckled.

Marc helped her move the blankets when she began to climb out, certain she needed to use the bathroom. She had been in the bed for twelve hours. When half that passed, Marc had begun to worry, but Adrian insisted descendants kept different sleep patterns when they used more energy than they could afford. Marc didn't like to rely on Adrian for information, but that was why the man was here. He was forcing himself to do it.

“The camp is asking questions about the party and the pool.” Adrian grabbed his coat. “I’m going to take a walk and distract them.”

Marc didn’t feel that he had a right to interfere with the choice.

Adrian knew, but instead of gloating as he was certain Marc was expecting, Adrian gave him a sympathetic look and left without speaking.

Marc realized Adrian knew exactly how he felt because the former leader had spent the last two months ostracized from the camp he’d built.

Angela came from the bathroom. “Update me.”

Marc waved Whitney in.

Whitney cleared his throat, not staring at Angela or the mussed bed. “Zack’s boys are getting worried.”

“That took longer than I thought it would.”

“We’re keeping them entertained.”

“Entertained?”

“The Eagles donated handheld devices and some games.”

Angela smiled. “Thank you for that.”

Whitney shrugged. “We’d beaten them already. They’ll have to erase our profiles to get the high scores.”

Angela snickered. She held some of those high scores too.

“I think we can hold them for another week if we let them start official shifts. They have some jealousy over Charlie and Conner having duty.”

“That’s fine. They’re going to be Eagles. Give them a taste of what that’s like, but make sure the den mothers still include them.”

Whitney nodded. “Everyone who was injured is either on the mend or already there.”

“That’s great. Tell the medics how happy I am with them. They’ve handled things well since we left the mountain.”

“I will.”

“What about our tiny menagerie?”

“The same. Bees are building a new hive and coming back to the coffee can. Samantha has them in the garden truck so they don’t have to go far. The bigger animals are already looking better, but those damn chickens never change—they shit, eat, and have their way with the hens. All’s good there.”

“Any eggs yet?”

Whitney skimmed his notes. “No.”

“What’s the gender ratio?”

“Nine hens, four roosters.”

“Cook two of the roosters. Less competition for the females will let the other two ease up and let’s face it, the eggs will save us room on the boat. Stocking frozen meat or live birds will be a huge hassle, but the eggs will keep at room temperature for months.”

“So priority to females?”

“Yes, but only in the fowl. Once we settle on the island, we’ll build a pen for the males—for meat.”

“If they survive long enough to reach maturity.”

Whitney couldn’t help the complaint. The

Delawares they'd found and been raising were the meanest animals Whitney had ever dealt with. Even a wolf or bear could be scared off with enough light or noise, but their geese-sized flapping bastards just kept right on coming.

Angela laughed. "They really do."

"The two fish we had left died yesterday. It wasn't enough for a meal, so we fed it to the hens. I've never seen something stripped so fast."

"I can imagine."

"I mean it. The government could have them sent in place of any team and gotten good results. If you dropped them in with piranhas, you'd have sushi."

"What about the cats?"

"Better by the day. The bunker cat was healthy, just had fleas and clumps of crap in its fur. Our tabby is playing again. Tonya won't let me bring it out into the sunlight. I think she's scared of it running away before she can finish her testing, but she said something about sunlight interfering with whatever she's giving it."

"We'll let her make the rules for now." Angela chose that because they didn't have anyone else with even Tonya's basic lab skills.

"That's it." Whitney gave her a lifted brow.

"No, I'm good."

Whitney left with a polite nod at her guard.

Marc needed to fill the awkward silence as he shut the door. "So, what do you want to do today?"

Angela hesitated.

Marc sighed as he realized Adrian was going to be right yet again. “Let me guess. Eagle training?”

Angela tried to sound casual. “Among other places, maybe.”

Marc motioned to the kit Adrian had put together and placed at the foot of the bed. “Get dressed. I’ll escort you wherever you want to go.”

Angela grabbed the kit and hurried back into the bathroom, good vibes growing.

Marc went to the window to stare at the bubble around them, refusing to think about anything except that it meant Angela was happy.

Angela didn’t like how long it took her to get all the gear on. It had been a while since she’d worn the full outfit. Because of her weight loss, it didn’t fit the way it used to.

By the time she came from the bathroom, Marc was muttering and her mood had fallen. Refusing to look at him in case his expression mirrored hers as she’d stared at herself in the bathroom, Angela stomped toward the door. “Let’s go.”

“You look good to me.”

Angela snorted. She opened the door as Marc reached her. Not expecting the move, she tensed under his fingers and then relaxed as he pushed her against the wall with his body. All he wanted was a kiss. She liked those.

“I meant it.”

Afraid he had noticed her freeze up, Angela gave him a more enthusiastic response than she had

intended. It swept them up, reminding the couple it had been a bit since they'd had enough privacy to do more.

“Excuse me.”

Marc took his time ending the kiss. It felt good to do it while Adrian was watching.

Adrian forced himself to observe, trying not to think about anything that would make the moment more awkward than it already was.

“What?”

“People are nervous. She needs to get down there.”

Angela pulled out of Marc's arms, straightening the clothes that didn't fit right.

As she stepped by him, Adrian fell in on her right.

She needs a size smaller until we fatten her up.

Because Adrian had taken her discomfort seriously, Marc made a note. He didn't understand what the big deal was, but as they moved down the hall and he noticed her fidgeting, he got it. She didn't need the distraction.

Exactly. You've already seen how much there is to cover. Can you imagine being in charge of it all while having a constant wedgie?

Marc snickered. *Absolutely not!*

Adrian didn't add to it. Marc had gotten the point. It wasn't that her comfort was a priority. It was that her attention was a priority and discomfort was a distraction.

As they moved into the elevator, security on the hall came with them.

No one spoke.

Adrian was certain that was because he was here. The men were trying to be respectful. Marc had always been considered a good guy in Safe Haven and that hadn't changed.

Are you sure? Marc hated himself for asking.

Yes.

Yes.

Angela and Adrian answering at the same time made Marc bring up a mental wall. He moved to the rear of the elevator and stood there impassively.

When Angela hit the basement button, Adrian tried not to gloat. He had explained she would be more interested in laps than she would be in wrestling around on the mats with Neil. It was gratifying to know he was right.

It was another embarrassment for Marc that he refused to dwell on.

As they exited the elevator, word spread that the boss was out. Camp members appeared to verify it, but they left her alone when they saw she was surrounded by security and wearing her Eagle outfit.

Marc remained near the entryway as Angela entered the wide room with a large pool. It was a reminder that he had been removed from leadership; he suffered it with his chin up and his mind running through the training he'd received over the years. The only time the situation was able to break

through his concentration after that was when Angela and a few of the other women came from the changing room in bathing suits and dove into the water. Like the other males in Safe Haven, and some of the females, he stared at them and didn't care if he was caught.

Chapter Twenty-Nine BK9

Swallowing The Same Curses

1

Safe Haven was assembled in the lobby of the hotel exactly ten minutes before noon. Everyone had received a shower and gotten a good shift of sleep. They looked healthy and happy, despite the fidgeting and twitching.

The townspeople had placed items in the rooms, including the workout areas. The garments were so new they were uncomfortable. Because of that, Angela didn't feel so out of place as she once again moved her shirt from overtop her holster. She wasn't expecting trouble, but she didn't want her clothing to be in the way of reaching her weapon. That was a big lesson taught during the rookie level.

Near the front doors of the lobby, Captain Grant and the Mayor were already waiting. They had arrived early to observe Safe Haven for a few minutes before the two populations met.

Donna watched them nervously.

Grant was encouraged. There were 127 people in this lobby, but there were no fights or glares across the crowd, no pushing or shoving. He did acknowledge the fact that the men who had been

responsible for the drama at the Naval Station were not in attendance yet. Grant half expected one of them to be told to leave, though he didn't know the camp well enough to be sure which one. He was betting on the blond still being here. A guard dog was always needed during the apocalypse.

“Safe Haven will stay together and mind their manners.” Jennifer walked the crowd, giving reminders that were mostly for the younger population. She made eye contact with the children who had been responsible for the din in the hall during the Eagle lessons, then continued. “If you have a problem, go to the parking area behind this hotel. You do not come in here if we sound the alarms. You go straight to the trucks!”

Donna exchanged glances with Grant.

Grant shrugged, though he understood. Safe Haven wasn't sure yet if their hosts could be trusted. Grant thought that was wise. The people in this town were good, but after everything Safe Haven had gone through, if they hadn't already learned that lesson, he would have been disappointed.

Heads craned as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

Kyle and Neil came out first and did a fast scan before stepping aside to reveal Angela. As she moved forward, two men behind her became visible. All four guards were dressed in full gear and flashing expressions that warned people not to come close without permission.

Grant stared, amused and surprisingly aroused. The sight of Angela with wet hair hanging down her shoulders, dressed like one of the fighters, was something he would imprint in his brain to examine later. Noting the two troublemakers lined up behind her as if they were perfectly unreachable guards was thrilling. It appeared she had gotten them in line overnight. He was curious as to how that had happened.

“They use a lot of security.”

Grant nodded at Donna’s comment. “From the stories I’ve heard, they’re going through the same thing we did when the new people moved in.”

“They’ve had a lot of traitors.”

“I’ve been assured the people who are here now have all been vetted.” Grant grinned. “And they know how to make an entrance.”

Donna wasn’t as impressed. She preferred it when people didn’t flaunt themselves. She put on a cheerful smile as Angela reached her. “Good morning!”

“And the same to you.”

“How did you sleep?”

Angela chuckled. “Like I haven’t in months. Thank you.”

Donna beamed as she led the way out. Her people were waiting in the banquet hall; she didn’t want them to become worried.

Angela walked with her security. She wasn’t surprised when the Mayor stayed a few steps ahead of them. The woman didn’t seem the type to be

comfortable with processions like this. Angela assumed the town had insisted. That was the only way Safe Haven would have been able to get her to agree to do something like this for guests. It was awkward to be put on the spot.

Behind the boss, Safe Haven walked slowly and observed their new surroundings. It had been a long time since any of them had been in a fully functioning town.

The center held a row of business and offices that included city services and a banquet hall. On both sides of this professional row were blocks of brick homes with faces in every window. It was clear that not everyone had been invited to breakfast.

Donna noticed her slight frown. “The main banquet room only holds three hundred. We drew lots for who would join us.”

The banquet hall was a quarter mile from the hotel. As they walked, Angela and the others became aware of noises in the distance.

Angela looked at Grant instead of the Mayor.

Grant regarded the Mayor for permission, though he wanted to answer Angela’s silent request.

Donna nodded. “They’ll hear about it even if we don’t tell them.”

Grant fell in with Angela, stepping between her and Kyle without concern.

Kyle would have knocked the man out of place, but Marc reached up and tapped him on the shoulder, preventing it.

Kyle dropped back a little, silently cursing.

“We’re having attacks along the western side of the wall. Some of the refugees from the Naval base found the town. We’re handling it.”

A large explosion came from the north.

Grant looked in that direction.

A moment later, a bright glint flashed at them from the wall behind the houses.

“All good.” Grant smiled and hurried to open the glass door, where a number of their people were crowded around, staring and waving. “After you, ladies.”

Donna led the way into the banquet hall. “We have breakfast ready.”

Angela wanted to ask how the woman planned to integrate the camps, but she didn’t have to as she saw the townspeople were all on one side, at long tables with benches and chairs. The other side of the banquet hall, much like this town, was empty except for the furniture.

The hall was lavish and elegant, with tablecloths and warm ceiling lights that welcomed the weary travelers like a dream. They hadn’t seen this type of luxury in almost a year. It was so unexpected that most of Safe Haven wasn’t speaking as they crowded into the entrance, just gaping.

Angela motioned her people toward the empty side, glad the Mayor had set it up this way. It wasn’t because of diseases either side might be carrying. That ship had already sailed at the Naval Station. Safe Haven had encountered a thousand people. If

one of them had been sick, there was no avoiding it now. She'd done the best she could by insisting everyone have a shower and antibiotics. So far, no one was showing signs of illness. She liked this setup because it would allow her to observe Donna's people.

While Safe Haven squeezed into ragged lines to reach the tables, Angela read the signs on the walls, slowly rotating to get all of the literature. While she did it, she scanned the hundred souls gawking at them from the opposite side of the elegant hall.

All meals will be taken together, in two shifts. Only 1-2 days of leftovers are allowed in any home or kit unless permission was given.

Food waste is illegal. Repeated offenses will shrink portions.

If you don't work and you're ten or older, you don't eat. Exceptions are the weak or sick.

Everything is shared. If there is not enough for everyone, the item will be stored until the amount of mismatched baskets is enough for a flea market.

The after dinner curfew is in effect, except for workers and security.

Unauthorized cars, radios, gunfire, fireworks, or other attention getting objects and events are prohibited.

One gallon of water per person, per day, is the limit. Those with injuries, illnesses, or births may get more.

“I can tell you don’t approve.”

Angela let out a deep sigh as she searched for the right words. “I miss the days when those rules weren’t necessary.”

“Me too.” Once the camp was seated, Donna went toward a circular table centered between the two camps.

Angela followed, with Marc and Adrian on her heels.

Kyle remained with the camp to help the teams keep their people under control.

Donna motioned the line of servers to bring the food. The banquet hall began to ring with clanks and chatter as the two camps began to eat.

Angela looked at Adrian, and then the seat on her right.

Adrian took that position without looking at Marc.

Marc stayed behind Angela’s chair, not telling Adrian he had expected it. Ciemus wanted both legends at this meeting.

Grant took the seat next to the Mayor as servers hurried over with four steaming plates of food that smelled wonderful.

For a few minutes, there was just the sound of eating and drinking as both camps got settled. Angela enjoyed the food. Home-cooked and fresh, it was a treat she allowed herself a second helping of without being prompted.

Both of her men were pleased to see she had an appetite today. As she finished off the second plate

of fried potatoes, gravy, and scrambled eggs, she let out a belch and smiled. “Best meal I’ve had since the war.”

Servers waiting nearby passed the word so their cooks would relax about whether or not Safe Haven was enjoying the meal.

Donna had only consumed half of her portion, but she’d drunk three cups of coffee while letting everyone eat. She’d studied Angela and her companions the entire time the caffeine had been building in her system. Now, her fingers were twitching restlessly against the mug, giving away her nervousness.

Angela picked up her cup with both hands and took a sip. The coffee tasted fresh as well. “You have to tell me how you have things set up. I may be able to copy it if we have the space where we’re going.”

Given an opening, Donna jumped on it. “There are a lot of things we could teach each other. Maybe we could go somewhere private and talk?”

Angela stood, taking her cup.

Donna hurried to lead the way. “There’s a private room over here. We can leave the door open if you’re worried about being out of sight.”

“I’m not.” Angela followed the Mayor into the room, aware of two town security guards moving into the entryway behind them.

The private room was identical to the main room, only smaller, with fewer windows. There

were several employee entrances and an empty serving counter.

“You can’t go in.” The local guards crossed arms over wide chests and refused the men entry.

Adrian looked at Marc.

Marc shrugged. *I’m game if you are.*

Almost in unison, both men lifted a hand and sent the guards in front of them tumbling out of the way.

“Let them come in if it makes them feel better!” Donna hurried to settle things down, aware of both camps now staring in surprise and concern. “My people would never let me enter your camp alone. I understand.”

Angela moved toward the table near the window, noting it had been set for three people. “I’m not alone. I’m with you, and it’s *you* they’ll hold responsible for my safety.”

Marc and Adrian took up spots on either side of the entryway, replacing the Mayor’s men.

The two locals got up with embarrassed glares.

Grant’s motion of denial kept them from challenging the Eagles.

Angela calmly sat in the chair. She was interested in why Donna wanted to talk to her away from everyone. Male bravado wasn’t usually impressive to her, though she was a bit amused by the display. Eagles didn’t like being challenged, in any way.

Out in the banquet hall, silence was holding. People were returning to the meal, but the good mood had been interrupted.

Jennifer wasn't certain if Angela was okay with the way Marc and Adrian had handled things, but she was. There were several members of the town who had been eyeing Safe Haven as if they were less than what they were. She had been picking up snide thoughts from people who didn't understand the camp in front of them was special. Marc and Adrian had just proven them wrong and brought a layer of respect to the hall that Jennifer was happy to feel.

Marc scanned the private room and found two doors, along with a wall of windows. He kept his eye on them as Angela and the Mayor sat down.

Donna pushed the teapot in the center of the table toward Angela, too wound up to pour without spilling. She didn't usually allow herself so much caffeine at one time. "I'd like to tell you about our town and then ask for a favor."

Angela began to assemble the cup of tea. "You mean payment."

Donna was horrified. "We do not expect payment for helping you."

Angela hoped that was true. "I'll take you at your word."

"You can." Donna smoothed wrinkles from her stiff suit jacket. "This town is special."

“Because you have a descendant?” Angela made it clear in her tone that Donna wasn’t who she was referring to.

Donna nodded, relieved Angela knew. “We’ve always had descendants here. Ciemus has hidden your kind for centuries. Our people have accepted magic, unlike the ones you care for. I would imagine it has been a long road just to get them to where you have them.”

Angela nodded, but didn’t elaborate. It had been worse than long, but she hoped they were almost over it now.

“Our town is the opposite. We look for those who are special, and help them avoid capture. Or at least, we did until the war. After that, we just tried to hide the descendants who were here.” Donna grew pensive. “We lost all of them but one.”

Angela suspected she was going to be asked to leave someone here and began preparing a way to get out of it. Safe Haven needed the descendants and the descendants needed Safe Haven.

Donna seemed to read Angela’s mind. “Please don’t think that way about us. That’s not the favor I need.”

Angela stirred her tea without comment. She was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Have you noticed anything about this town?”

Angela picked what the woman wanted from the variety of caffeine-laced thoughts running through her mind. “You have more women than men.”

“Yes, because of the draft. After the soldiers came through, we buried our dead friends and family, then started building the wall from their homes to prevent it from ever happening again.”

Angela stared for a long moment, realizing she had been wrong in her first assumption. “Your problem isn’t too many women. It’s a shortage of *men*.”

Donna frowned. “They were right. You do figure things out fast.”

Angela ignored the praise. Coming from a stranger, it didn’t mean anything. Adrian’s approving nod made her feel great. “Ask your favor.”

“Will you take some of my people with you and leave some of your people here?”

Eagles who heard the request frowned.

Angela’s plans widened. “How many and why?” They were both important questions, but Angela was also picking up images from Grant that she found amusing. He was currently thinking about sailing away on a boat and leaving all the politics behind. If he came with Safe Haven, there would still be politics, so the joke was on him.

“You can leave as many of your people here as you want. We’ll match you person for person, or as many of my town as you’ll allow to go.”

It was as reasonable as it got. Angela sat back in her chair with the cup. “I’ll talk to my camp about it, but I don’t see why not. Everyone will have to be vetted.”

Donna was relieved to have the first part over. She drew in a breath, aware that Angela was waiting for the second part of her answer. “We’re doing it because all of our births since the war have been female and Safe Haven has good men. When our alpha suggested it, the town voted and agreed. Now that we see it might succeed, people are talking about how well it could work out. You’re about to go on the water and this town has been pulling life from the river for its entire existence. We’re going to stay here and keep learning to live off the land. Your people know how to do that. It’ll be a trade of towns.”

“The first postwar swap between cities.”

Donna chuckled at the wording. “We’re not quite big enough to be a city.”

“If Safe Haven leaves men here with you, you might be in a few years. Our men are fertile and as soon as I say you want them for population building, they’ll pick out a mate from across the room without even knowing her name. They’ve missed women.” Angela wasn’t about to pull any punches about the men in her camp. They were lonely and horny.

Donna wasn’t intimidated. She was thrilled. “The women in my town feel the same, but most of us will never leave. The solution was to find others like us and mix. When we began to hear of Safe Haven, we made preparations.”

“Such as the strict rules.”

“Yes.”

Angela leaned in, aware of Marc and Adrian listening. “Has it worked?”

Donna nodded. “We’ve had less violence every month since we began even though our population has increased.”

“With female births?”

“Yes, but also new arrivals and families returning from the grave. For the last three months, there have been no rapes or deaths that weren’t accidental or natural. We follow the alpha’s guidelines and remove those who don’t.”

“Your alpha sounds wise.”

Donna’s face lit up with an emotion Angela instantly recognized.

“Yes, William is the best!” Donna motioned for Grant.

“Why haven’t I met him yet?”

Angela saw Grant tense at the comment as he joined them. She opened her mouth to ask him about it and then froze as the strongest wave of energy she’d ever felt swept over the room in a deep scan. It brought goosebumps to her arms.

Marc and Adrian moved shoulder-to-shoulder in the doorway.

Angela looked around, trying to see who was putting off such a vibe.

“Ah! Here he is now.”

Donna’s words faded as a man appeared over Adrian’s shoulder. Of tall stature, with red and gold hair, only half of his face was visible, but Angela already knew it would be pleasing.

Marc and Adrian caught the thought and without discussing it, brought up their personal shields and combined them into one block across the entryway. Neither of them had felt that type of power either and it didn't matter that the man wasn't intimidating at all. William appeared to be a young country clubber to Adrian and a bowling geek to Marc, but both of them recognized the danger.

William chuckled, deep green eyes glowing in the obvious mark of a descendant. Without lifting a finger, he sent a wave of power that knocked Marc and Adrian out of the way—like they'd done with the Mayor's security.

William stepped by the groaning men and entered the private room. "How are we today?" He slammed the doors to the private area.

"I'm sorry for that." Donna was embarrassed. "He insisted we feed you first. He says you need to gain weight."

The doors immediately opened behind him.

When he would have turned around to fight her guards, Angela sighed. "That would anger me and strain our new trade agreement."

William gave her a charming grin as he came forward instead and slid into the seat. "I guess they can stay." His grin widened, showing beautiful white teeth. "It's sweet they both love you."

Neither Marc nor Adrian had felt the man's scan. It made them nervous that he already knew what made them tick. They stayed in the entryway,

but this time they had their guns out and were ready to use them at Angela's nod.

Angela didn't tell them to put their weapons away. She was too busy scanning the man who was staring at her in exactly the same manner. She was aware of Marc and Adrian's displeasure, but she also felt the Mayor's unhappiness and realized Donna was suffering from the same affliction as the men in the entryway.

Angela tuned them all out and concentrated on William. Within a few seconds, she knew he had inherited the position of town protector from his parents, making him the only descendant she'd met who was raised by his family. "Merovingian."

William chuckled, leaning back to cross one leg over the other. "As are you, I'd wager."

Angela delved deeper into his mind. "You love them. You won't leave them, and you won't take them anywhere else."

William nodded. "We're not safe anywhere else."

"What makes it so special here?"

"William." Donna beamed at her man. "We'd be safe anywhere he is."

Angela knew there was more to it than that, but didn't push. She could feel the man's impatience, his excitement at meeting her. Not sensing any form of animosity, she gave him what he wanted because of her own curiosity.

Marc and Adrian both stiffened as Angela dropped her mental shields and let the stranger in.

“You’ve sacrificed everything to keep them together.” William’s heart broke for her pain as he scanned her memories of the children and friends she had lost.

“You buried your parents after the war.” Angela saw the couple die in front of him on a supply run.

“You wish they would quit fighting over you. You don’t think you’re worth it.”

The men in the entryway began to pay more attention to the words.

“You’re not sure Donna and Grant have done enough for Safe Haven to agree.”

“You’re not sure you have enough people to survive on the island.”

Donna didn’t interrupt the exchange, but she had as many questions as the other witnesses.

“You know about the future of the descendants.”

“You know about the past of the descendants.”

“You’re lonely,” they echoed at the same time.

Angela didn’t withdraw from William’s mind. Nor did she force him out. It was astounding to find someone like herself.

William’s smile returned. “Yes, it is.”

Angela couldn’t help it. She leaned forward. “Prove it.”

Marc turned to Adrian. “Is that why she needs both of us? Because we can’t match him, even together?”

Adrian didn't like how it was going to feel to admit that. "We could be, if we were open to it the way she is."

Marc didn't ask anything else, but he and Adrian felt each other trying to determine if they wanted to take that route. Watching William charm Angela was making them reconsider their rivalry. It would take both of them if the man became a problem.

Out in the banquet hall, both camps were eating and trying to listen. In the far corner behind Safe Haven, Jennifer was getting all of it and letting Eagles read it by touching her arm or shoulder. As each revelation came, they were fighting not to let out *oohs* and *ahs* that would alert the boss.

Jennifer frowned as the line disconnected. "Damn, it was just getting to the good part!"

2

"Will *you* do something?"

Marc and Adrian both wanted Angela to deny William's request, but it was impossible for her to do that when she could feel the identical emotions she'd been handling alone for so long bubbling up in William's throat. "What would you like?"

William leaned forward eagerly. "Anything you want."

Angela poured his tea without moving.

Adrian listened while Marc stared. *I can't do that.*

I didn't know she could. Adrian didn't tell Marc he could move objects. It wasn't a skill that he was proficient at. He'd used others for that part of the job.

I'm not surprised, Marc commented distractedly.

While William clapped and Grant grinned, the Mayor rolled her eyes and let out a sigh that said she suffered through moments like this. They were making her uncomfortable.

William looked at Angela with a mischievous grin. "Should we stop or make it worse?"

Angela didn't want to offend her host, but like William, she was delighted to have found someone who was almost exactly like her. After so many months of being alone in these levels of abilities, she'd thought she was the only one.

"So did I." William laid his hand on hers. "You could stay."

Angela allowed it, but pulled away as soon as she felt like she could do so without being rude. She still didn't like to be touched. "No, I can't."

"I could come with you."

Marc and Adrian both shouted mental denials.

Donna tensed in the chair and then clamped her mouth shut to keep from saying anything.

"No, you won't."

"No. I would never leave them, not even for someone like you."

Angela was flattered. She gave him a smile that would have brought most men to their knees with the amount of alpha pull it had.

William simply glanced at her with knowing eyes and a kind smile. “Will we have time to talk again before you leave?”

Angela nodded immediately. “I’ll make time.”

William clapped again and then tossed his hands in the air. His happiness became a small rainbow of flower petals that settled over Angela and the table.

Marc and Adrian exchanged another glance as Angela giggled. *We’d better start working soon.*

I have been all along. Adrian grunted. *I just can’t keep up with that.*

William chuckled. “I can keep up with it and then some.”

“Safe Haven will stay an extra day.”

Angela’s announcement drew cheers from both the camps in the adjoining hall, drowning out Adrian and Marc’s protests.

Angela didn’t care. She was staring at William in delighted recognition as she finished exploring his mind. “You’re Byzantine.”

Now, William was the one to clap. *Welcome to my sanctuary, Angela. You’re safe here.* “Would you like to go for a walk?”

Before her security could protest, Angela stood.

Delighted, William hopped up with seemingly boundless energy, appearing much younger than the

40-something he was according to the wrinkles lining his eyes and hands.

“Do you want me to—”

“No, Mayor Marsh, we’ve got it.” William was quick to cut her off. “I’ll have our guest back within an hour.”

Angela nodded toward Adrian. “You have point over camp.” She didn’t tell Marc to stay here. He already knew what she wanted. Now she would see if he could give it to her.

Marc was torn. There was nothing in William’s behavior to imply that Angela was in danger in any way. He had no reason to protest letting her have privacy, except for his emotions. Swallowing the same curses Adrian was, Marc gave her a stiff nod and turned toward Safe Haven.

Everyone in that camp saw Marc’s expression and tensed.

Marc smoothed his face and went to stand guard over Adrian as the former leader assumed point duty. Marc heard Angela giggle again and then a door closed. He assumed she and William had left by one of the other exits in the private room. He immediately began planning the fastest way to reach her if she called for help.

“She doesn’t need us. The camp does.”

Marc didn’t like Adrian’s reminder, but the boss had made her wishes clear. Now, he had to be man enough to respect them.

Chapter Thirty BK9
A Mix Of Both

1

“**A**re you cold? They told me you were sick recently.” William was in the process of removing his jacket.

“No.” Angela revealed one of her innermost fears, trying to learn to trust again. “Is it really okay here, for *us*?”

Assuming she wanted to use her gifts, William hurried to offer comfort. “We’ve been protecting them for centuries. There’s nothing you can do in this town that will cause my people to rise up against us.”

Taking a deep breath to face the longtime fear, Angela brought up her personal shield. Clearly visible, it would protect her from the wind, eliminating her need for the jacket hanging over her chair in the main banquet hall.

William brought his up too. “Is that all? I thought you were going to do something shocking.”

Challenged, Angela took a fast glance around and then brought up a powerful gust of wind and hit herself in the face with it. She moved her head around to help that draft dry her hair.

Angela looked so much like old commercials that William burst out laughing.

Angela snickered. “I’ve wanted to try it since I copied this gift, but I never found time alone after a shower.”

William was still chuckling. “My parents taught me how as a kid because they were tired of me going through so many towels! My parents hated doing laundry and I used a lot of it.”

As William relived the good memory and Angela shared it with him, she realized he was innocent in ways that she wasn’t. Despite being a decade older, he seemed a decade younger. She didn’t know if that was because he had led a sheltered life here, but it was refreshing to not find darkness in him anywhere. Even the shaded areas in his mind were pranks, like the one he had played on Marc and Adrian by doing the same thing to them that they had done to his two security friends.

“Wow. You see everything.” He stared at her in longing. “Are you certain you have to go?”

Angela felt an edge of danger now. She refused to step away from that line. “I don’t want to. I love my country.”

“Then stay!”

“I can’t.”

“Because you don’t believe your people will be safe here. You don’t believe my people will be either.”

Angela's enthusiasm dampened. "I think you'll all be dead within six months of saying goodbye to us."

William hated the chill her words provided, but he didn't refute them. "Then we'll have six more months here."

Angela nodded. "Yes." She waited for him to lead her somewhere, positive he had suggested the walk for more than a few moments alone.

"I want to give you something." William got moving, stealing looks at her. He wasn't examining her because she was a woman. He was studying her because she was Byzan. "I'm surprised your lovers don't understand what's going on with you."

Angela wasn't sure she wanted to discuss that with William. She had no guarantees he wouldn't talk about it. "Only one of them is a lover."

"Ah, yes. The wolf and the guard dog. Is it okay to look?" William hadn't gone through her mind as deeply as she had his.

"I'd rather you didn't. You can get the full from anyone else."

William decided he would go straight to the sources on that. "There's a bookstore up here around the corner, next to the church. You can wait outside if you like. It will only take me a minute to grab what I want."

"I love bookstores. I'll come in with you."

"Great!"

Angela enjoyed the walk through the quiet town, aware of people in doors and windows who

were pleasantly surprised to find their descendant walking down the street with Safe Haven's leader. The fact that there were no guards in sight from either camp said a lot about how well things were going.

"These people love you. You've done a good job here."

William glowed at the praise. "That means a lot coming from you."

"You do know my guard dog built Safe Haven, right?"

William looked behind them even though the banquet hall was out of sight. "I had no idea that was the same man."

Angela sighed. *That bothers me too.*

"Please?"

Angela stopped as he opened the door to the bookstore. "If you must."

She stepped inside, letting him shove into her mind and pull out every single thought and memory she'd ever had concerning Adrian and Marc. His face tensed and emotions shifted as he explored, but he didn't speak about it even after he had examined all of them.

Angela refused to relive it, instead considering what questions she needed answers to the most before she was on the boat and the information was out of reach. She came up with three, but only asked one of those. "Why are we like this?"

William was processing everything he had viewed. He answered distractedly. “We’re what you would call team leaders.”

“What’s the level directly below?”

“Rookies.”

“Invisibles?”

“Bingo.”

“And the level above?”

“That would be your Special Forces.”

Angela concentrated for that one. “Jennifer and Leeann?”

William examined those people in her mind. “Yes.”

“After that?”

William looked upward. “The big boss.”

It was a comfort to know there was another floor between her and that level of power. She didn’t want to go any higher than she was now. In fact, she wanted to skip down a level or two.

William sighed. “I couldn’t agree more.” He took her to the center of the musty shop. “We’ve managed to print ten copies during my lifetime. I want you to have one of them.”

Angela examined the book under the glass case, assuming it was the very first edition. The intricate drawings and delicate penmanship on the cover seemed familiar to her, though she was positive she’d never viewed it before.

William took a copy of the book from underneath the podium and handed it to her. “It’s

not just a memento of your time in our town. It's your history."

2

"They don't have art or jewelry. Did you notice?"

"No, but I saw they don't have electronics. Not even a phone."

"Wow. We've got it better than they do. At least we can play games when we find batteries or use the solar chargers."

"We don't have the wall."

"We have the bubble."

"True."

Marc and Adrian paused to let camp members go by as they escorted everyone back to the hotel. The conversations around them were all about the town.

"I think we may have a problem."

Adrian and Marc were in the rear of the slowly moving, well-fed camp as Jennifer joined them.

"We know." Adrian was trying to read Angela through their bonds and failing at every attempt.

"She's thinking about staying."

"We know." Marc could feel it too. For the first time in her life, Angela was with someone who was like her. "Maybe we should."

Marc obviously didn't want to leave America, but Adrian gave him the benefit of the doubt. "Tell me why."

“I just don’t want to go.”

Adrian respected the honesty. “You know we can’t stay. These people are not going to survive.”

Marc believed that too. He had noticed several gaps in the wall that anybody with training would be able to take advantage of. This town had been lucky so far that the majority of refugees had been too busy chasing Safe Haven to find them.

“If she decides to stay, the camp will too.” Adrian lowered his voice. “I can’t get them to follow *me* onto the boat.”

“Some of them would. But I agree it’s a problem.”

“I think it’s worse than you two realize.” Jennifer made sure no one could hear her as she filled them in on something she’d discovered during Angela’s conversation with William. “This town has accepted magic in ways that Safe Haven hasn’t and may never. Right now, Angela is playing with her gifts in an alley behind the main town, with dozens of strangers watching her, and she isn’t the least bit afraid. *She* likes this place.”

Marc and Adrian exchanged another glance of concern. Adrian had always feared the herd refusing to go when the final moment came. He’d never considered that Angela might. This one would be completely up to her.

“Actually, it’s up to fate.” Jennifer increased her pace to leave them. “I’ll check in with you later.”

The men let her go, satisfied with the job she had done so far during her turns on point. Marc was

actually impressed. He hadn't believed a teenager could be mature enough to handle their camp the way Jennifer had. He now considered her a level two Eagle.

"You should tell her that."

Marc shrugged. "Okay."

"I mean it," Adrian insisted as they neared the hotel. "Everyone in Safe Haven respects you. Moments like that will help your cause."

"I'm thinking about suggesting an early lights out."

Adrian knew that was as close as Marc was willing to get when it came to asking for his advice about authority limits now. It was a sore subject. Adrian tiptoed around it. "Seems like a good idea since we're on the road tomorrow. Might also be a good idea for the boss to come back and find things ready to go."

"It also might piss her off."

Adrian nodded. "Yeah."

Marc sighed. "Mention it to her, will you?"

"I will. Are there any other observations you'd like to note?" Adrian kept his tone neutral, hoping not to trigger Marc's anger.

Marc was more concerned with the descendant behind them than he was the one walking next to him. "I've got all kinds of shit. Get your notebook out."

Adrian did.

3

“It’s the boss!” Eagles on outside duty hurried to surround Angela as she walked toward the hotel from a nearby alley, alone.

None of them openly scolded her, but they were thinking it.

Angela didn’t care. The last hour had been wonderful and she was already mourning not being able to do it again. Using her gifts without fear was an incredible rush. After they’d left the bookstore, William had taken her to his training alley, where he practiced daily while his people watched. A few town kids had shown up during her tour, begging him to make rainbows of flowers. When he’d invited her to join in, Angela hadn’t hesitated.

William’s shield over this town was dense, preventing trackers from picking up magic use. The mental walls had even prevented Jennifer from detecting the residents. Angela assumed that was why William wouldn’t take his people anywhere else. This location was special.

Angela entered the hotel with nods and smiles for people, sending good vibes that brought the shield up. It had been a great start to the—

“Look out!”

Angela and her security ducked or spun around, reaching for weapons.

Cold water splashed Angela from head to toe. “Oh!”

Her security echoed the yelp, almost reaching the same pitch as water splashed and splattered them too.

Stanley ran to them with an empty animal watering bucket dangling from his fingers. “I’m sorry! I tripped!”

Greg shoved the boy away before he could reach Angela, then wiped water from his face and arms. The boss had gotten most of it, but both of them were drenched.

Angela moved toward the elevator with stiff shoulders and lips flattened into a thin line.

Stanley followed with more apologies.

Gus’s brother, Lou, grabbed the boy’s arm and pulled him toward the kitchen. “You need more water. She doesn’t.”

As the elevator began to move upward, the people in the lobby burst into laughter.

Next to Angela, Greg also began to snicker.

“What are you laughing at?” Angela scanned the Eagle. “You’re just as wet as I am.”

Chuckles filled the elevator as the men realized she wasn’t angry.

Greg pushed the stop button. He looked at Angela as the metal box shuddered to a halt. “We’ll only have a couple minutes before the guards think something is wrong.”

Angela would have skipped this moment, but it was obvious the men were determined. “Go on, then.”

Greg dropped all pretenses and faced her with remorse. “We’re sorry for the embarrassment because the vote went the other way. We’re also sorry for handling Marc like that without giving you warning on it.”

Angela let out a sigh. “It had to happen at some point. Let it go.”

The men were relieved to hear it. Except for Daryl, who had been one of the more outspoken people supporting Kyle’s idea. “We really would like it if you’d let us make it up to you.”

Angela stiffened.

The wet team around her expected a scold for the continued groveling, but Angela didn’t speak. Assuming she was using her magic, they waited to see what was going on.

“Does everyone feel that way?”

It took them a few seconds of replaying the conversation to figure out what she meant.

“Mostly.” Daryl gave her a pointed look. “This camp doesn’t go anywhere without you.”

A grin stretched Angela’s lips. “They don’t, do they?”

Believing they had gotten her in a better mood, Greg restarted the elevator. “You just let us know what you need and we’ll help you with it—no questions asked.”

Angela smoothed her expression as they neared the floor, donning the profile of an annoyed leader who had just been soaked by the camp klutz. “Get

changed and meet me back here in ten minutes. I'll give you instructions then."

Greg understood their marker was already being called in. "Is this keep-it-low or open-ended?"

"As low as it goes, Eagle. Not even your teammates."

Greg and the other three men didn't scowl or protest. Excitement filled the air. They hurried to get changed and get back.

4

"I'm calling an emergency camp meeting."

Silence fell through the cafeteria. Everyone turned to look at Angela, who had just come to the entryway.

Greg and Daryl handed off security to Ivan and his team, who came over to take those early evening posts.

"We're doing it here. Now."

Adrian and Marc scanned her thoughts, dismayed to find their most recent fear front and center. Adrian hurried over to her. "What are you doing?"

Angela shoved by him. She went to stand in the center of the tables, aware of everyone looking at her with tension. For half a day, this camp had been happy. Now they were wondering if the bill for that peace was already coming due.

"This town found a way to live off the land and protect themselves from the effects of the war. They

have the life we're planning on building. They're so much like us it's scary. I know you've all noticed."

Heads nodded in agreement. People resumed eating as they listened.

"It's good here. You know that too." Angela scanned the camp. "Mayor Marsh has invited Safe Haven to stay—permanently."

Murmurs and mutters took the place of eating once again.

Marc and Adrian shoved mental complaints and reminders at her, but Angela refused to be swayed from the decision she'd made. "I told you we weren't going to vote on Safe Haven's destination anymore because we didn't have another choice then. That has changed."

Angela moved to the center of her people, going to stand near the kids. "How many of you noticed we didn't get to meet the town's children?"

That hadn't occurred to most people. The ones who had noticed it thought the town was wise to keep their children away from strangers.

"Ciemus has less than a dozen kids. There are families here who would adopt our orphans and give them the love and care this town is obviously good at providing, especially to descendants. It would be a horrible crime for me to keep this information from you." Angela sat backwards on one of the benches and took out the book William had gifted to her. "This town has been protecting descendants for a long time. If Safe Haven leaves, I can't see a future for us."

Before people could get distracted, Angela opened the book and began to read. *“I want to go with Safe Haven. I’m terrified of staying here, but I’m too big of a coward to leave. I can only hope when Safe Haven comes, my courage will return with it.”* She shut the book. “The date on that entry is a week after the war. The alpha here knew we were coming and in all that time, he didn’t make a single plan to force us to stay or to force us to take his people to the island. Despite having the type of power that I possess, William and his people have remained uncorrupted. If we were to stay, I don’t believe we would have trouble fitting into their routines. Nor do I believe they would have trouble adjusting to ours. The Mayor said there can be a Safe Haven side of town or we can mix.”

Angela looked toward the cafeteria, where a small, well-guarded group was arriving. “Everyone has questions, I’m sure. It’s impossible to make the right decision without information. Mayor Marsh and the other leaders of the town have agreed to join us for dinner and do what they can to satisfy concerns we have. After we eat, we’ll vote.”

“Can the people who vote to leave, still go?” Kevin asked, picking a bean from his teeth.

“Of course.” Angela didn’t look at Greg as he slid onto a bench next to Kyle with his plate and began eating. “Supplies will be divided.”

Belches and snuffles echoed, along with clinks of silverware and dull thumps of trays. It all sounded funny to them.

Sitting at the table where Angela was, Leeann asked what everyone was thinking. “What’s *your* vote?”

“There’s darkness when I look, either way.”

“That’s not an answer. Do you want to stay here?”

“Yes. Deeply.”

“Is that your vote?”

Angela sighed. “I won’t tell you that. I can’t influence this choice. I suggest we listen to the leaders here and see if we like the answers. Then you guys have to talk about what you want from the future.”

Before the girl could speak again, Angela joined the council at a long table in front as the Mayor, Captain Grant, and William were seated. She didn’t look at anyone, delving into her own mind to be certain. If she voted to stay, enough Eagles would remain with her to allow for protection and expansion of this town. Within a year, everyone could be flourishing and Ciemus might even be able to take in new refugees.

Will the Mayor give us that authority here? Adrian asked silently.

Angela nodded, but didn’t add to it. She didn’t want to embarrass the Mayor by revealing the woman’s secret. Donna wanted to have a baby before she was too old to try. If Safe Haven were to move in here, Angela would be in charge within a month.

Jennifer glared. “Is that what he bribed you with?”

Adrian and Marc glowered at the teenager, thinking if they were able to keep their mouths shut, then she should be able to as well.

Jennifer didn’t even notice. She leaned back in the chair and studied her mentor with an expression of betrayed anger. “We all know the reason. You’re scared of the ocean trip and here, you’ll be a queen.”

Silence fell at the accusation.

Distracted, none of the council saw Daryl slide over to the next table of Eagles and resume eating.

Angela slowly stood up. “I’ve been accused of holding this vote under false pretenses. Does anyone second the charge?”

Jennifer flushed, hand rising. “Wait. I didn’t ask for that.”

“It’s SOP for leadership here.” Adrian was proud of Angela for doing this even though he didn’t want Safe Haven to stay. Moments like this were why he’d chosen her as his heir.

“I don’t understand.”

“You just challenged her honesty, her fairness, and her worthiness to be called the boss.” Kyle’s tone was layered in disapproval. “You can’t just take that back. Does anyone second the charges?”

No one spoke.

Angela glanced around the cafeteria, seeing a few expressions did echo Jennifer’s thoughts. “It occurred to me earlier that this might happen because I took an hour away to enjoy myself. I’ve

given you everything—including one of my children. I would never trade Safe Haven. Not for new sheep and not for peace.” Angela moved toward the exit. “I abstain from the vote. Make your own choices. I’ll do the same.” Angela’s hard, hurt tones echoed as she left them. “Being alone might be nice for a change.”

Panic filled the air, sending thoughts to times without her to rely on.

Kyle subtly nodded at Jennifer while everyone turned to stare at her and the council.

“Well, shit just got real up in here.” Samantha grinned, trying to break the tension.

“I’m sorry for all this.” Jennifer stared at the council. “But it’s the truth.”

“You’re mistaken, Enforcer,” William informed her coldly. It was the first time he had spoken with Angela’s heir. So far, he wasn’t impressed by the girl. “You have no idea what she fears, but I promise you, it isn’t the ocean and she is not bribable.” William dropped his mental walls before Jennifer could slam through them.

Marc made a gesture for Safe Haven to go on eating. He assumed Angela wanted Adrian to handle things while she was out of the room, but he wasn’t sure. Until Jennifer had spoken up, Marc assumed she would do it.

Jennifer scowled. “I am doing it.”

“I think the camp would like something a little more open.” Kyle came to the table. He placed a

hand on her shoulder, getting her to look up at him. “Remember who we are, Jenny.”

Jennifer flushed and withdrew from the powerful descendant’s mind with only part of her curiosity satisfied. “Fine. How did you talk our leader into this when not a month ago, she said if we stay, we’ll die?”

“I don’t know how to explain that in a way you’ll understand. It isn’t whatever the guard dog did to her. She’s safe here.”

Jennifer knew that was big for Angela. “Are the rest of us safe here too or do you just want our leader?”

“Everyone is welcome in Ciemus.” Donna frowned a bit. She didn’t care for the dramatics.

Jennifer ignored the woman, still glaring at William. “I don’t trust you.”

“You’ve been through hell. I’d be surprised if you trusted anyone.”

Jennifer glanced at Kyle and then back to William. “We’ll have Safe Haven rules or yours?”

“I think we can use a mix of both.”

“What if we disagree about what the rules should be?”

“Safe Haven’s people would obey their rules and our people would obey ours.”

“That means we would have to have a split town.”

William nodded, leaning forward to draw an imaginary border on the napkin with his finger.

“Yes, we would do it like this...”

Jennifer and William began to haggle out the details, further dismaying Marc and Adrian. If William was able to convince the teenager, then it was probably a done deal. Both of them realized Angela was leaving it to Jennifer to find a loophole.

Marc and Adrian exchanged looks and then began to ask their own questions, praying they found one the man couldn't answer.

"Isn't someone going to go after her?" Grant was staring at the doorway where Angela had disappeared.

Sitting next to him, Samantha patted his wrist. "She'll come back when we're done grilling you."

Grant tried to place the blonde and barely managed to. "You're the weather girl, right?"

Samantha chuckled. "That's me."

Grant wasn't sure if he had offended her. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to call you."

Samantha leaned forward with her hand out. "A lot of people call me the weather tracker, but I'm just Samantha."

Grant shook, flashing an intent smile. "Nice to meet you, *Sammi*."

Sitting on the other side of Samantha, Neil looked over in surprise. *I thought he had the hots for Jennifer!*

Grant's grin grew. Safe Haven men were easy to screw with.

“We have a problem, Boss.” Kenn found Angela sitting on the side of the swimming pool, watching the water.

She looked up in alarm. “Our camp or their town?”

“Ours.”

Angela jumped to her feet and followed Kenn out of the pool room. “What’s the problem?”

“Safe Haven is refusing to vote.”

Angela wasn’t sure what he meant. Kenn had a wall up and that wasn’t good. “What’s going on?”

Kenn held the door to the cafeteria open and motioned her inside. “Safe Haven says there’s no reason for this meeting.”

Angela noted their guests were wearing smiles instead of alarm or fear. Angela swept her camp, able to feel the love and admiration in the room, but she had no idea why she was receiving it. She picked Leeann for a replay of what had happened.

Leeann shook her head. “We’re doing this openly. That was a camp choice.”

Angela waited impatiently, withdrawing from her scan. “Get on with it, then.” Not knowing what was happening was making her twitchy.

Everyone looked at Marc.

Marc came to where she was standing and handed her a slip of paper.

Safe Haven goes where Angie goes.

Angela looked up. “But I... It’s good here. The ocean might kill us all.”

Looking at their faces, it was obvious no one had been sold. They'd known all along she was lying about the easy trip to the island. Faced with people who were no longer blind sheep, Angela was filled with pride for how much they had grown. "You're sure this is what you want to do?"

Nearly every head nodded. A few people were going to stay, but not nearly as many as Angela had feared.

"Our future is up to you." Marc drew her attention. "We go where you go."

Angela didn't stop the tears. "Thirty-six hours from now, Safe Haven needs to be in their vehicles and ready to go south. I'll be in the front rig."

A loud cheer echoed throughout the hotel and into the darkness.

Chapter Thirty-One BK9

Teeth Out And Hungry

1

“**H**ow far ahead did you view before it all went black?”

Angela stiffened. Just for an instant, only someone looking for it would have noticed.

Kendle settled against the wall nearby, waiting for the guards to finish their patrol of the cafeteria. She and Angela, plus the cooks and security, were the only ones still here. After the meeting, Ciemus leaders had hung around for an hour, answering questions. When the camp had begun to get bored, Angela had sent their company home and ordered lights out. Kendle had come in the rear entrance and caught the boss off guard during toast and tea.

Angela chose her answer carefully, wanting to trust the castaway. “To the island and back, in short flashes.”

“Meaning you missed a lot of the between?”

“Yes.”

“And as those moments approached, you looked each time to see what had changed?”

“Of course. I also consulted other people.”

“When was the last time you could see?”

“How do you know I can’t?”

“Because we almost died in the hangar.”

“Blind spot.”

Kendle grunted. “Yeah, that’s what everyone thinks.”

“But...?”

“We were rescued and brought to sanctuary.”

“Fate.”

“Maybe...”

“If not for...?”

“If not for William. You two already knew each other. Even Marc hasn’t picked it up, but I did.”

Angela tried not to smile, glad Kendle couldn’t see her face. “How do you figure that?”

“You let him touch you.”

Angela slowly turned around on the seat. She pinned the woman with a potent wave of approval.

She let off it, allowing Kendle to breathe again.

Kendle was glad she was leaning against the wall. “What was that? And how do I get more?”

“My respect.”

“It was amazing.”

“So are you. Anyone else would have curled up and died. You’re the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

Angela didn’t need to blast Kendle again. The words did it for her. Kendle didn’t know what to say.

Angela turned back around. The evolution was finally releasing its hold on her gifts. The alpha wave was now full strength.

“Does Marc know you dream walk?”

Angela stiffened again, but this time, she didn't care if anyone noticed. Kendle had just approached a line of no return. "No one does."

"Not even Jennifer?"

"She will after this because of your thoughts. It will make her see there's another level to be monitored."

"That's where you met William?"

"I got stuck. He saved me."

Kendle wanted the full story on that. She came around to join Angela on the bench. "Will you tell me? I've wanted to do it, but I'm afraid of getting lost."

"Are we finished with the other thing?"

Kendle frowned in confusion. "What other thing?"

"You, hoping I die."

Paling, Kendle wanted to say yes. "Probably not. He's an amazing man."

"Yes."

"And you don't treat him right."

"No."

Kendle sighed. "I'm working on it. And whatever you hit me with is still ringing in my ears. That should help."

Angela chuckled. "I meant it. No one else figured that out, even though my jumpiness is what causes both of them to flood with the need to protect me."

"Even when you don't want it."

“Yes. I didn’t ask for this mess. I’m doing the best I can with it.”

“Other than personal issues, we seem to be doing okay. It’s not bad with you as boss.”

Angela’s tone immediately sank into mourning. “I wish you’d been here when Adrian led us. He’s also amazing.”

“Just not as a lover.”

“Well, he’s had enough practice. I’m certain it would get me there.”

“But not like Marc.”

“He was the first; he’ll be the last.”

“Adrian thinks he’ll get to slide right into it after we bury Marc.”

Angela liked it that Kendle didn’t pull any punches. “He also thought he was being let back into camp.”

Kendle snorted. “So he doesn’t see as far as you?”

“He only sees me. Same as Marc.”

“Marc knows what you did.”

“Marc figured out the result after my rescue, where the camp helped. Big difference between figuring it out and having a film to replay in your head.”

“Fair enough. What about when he does find out?”

“He’ll be pissed at himself for overlooking it.”

“That’s not fair to him.”

Angela slapped her arms on the table. “Let me tell you what’s not fair! I’ve got two mutts humping

my leg every time I turn around and when they take a break, their little yappers come around and bite my ankles because they're jealous *they're* not being humped. Meanwhile, we could all die at any time, but that isn't enough drama. People in this camp have to keep making more. It's like we've learned nothing from the old world or the war."

Kendle didn't want to cringe from Angela's anger, but there was no choice as heat radiated.

"And now, I've got you trying to find a way to get me to admit a weakness so when the chance comes up, you'll know how to kill me." Angela stood up, fists clenching. "You can't. None of you can. Not even William or Jennifer can. I am Byzantine!"

Kendle fell to the floor. Only one other moment in her life had given her this terror and she regressed to it now, waiting to feel the pain of Ethan's bite. Her throat closed up like the clamp was back around it. "Please!"

Angela locked down on herself, ashamed and enraged. She kept forcing herself to breathe and control the new power as Marc and Jennifer both appeared in the entryway.

Kendle was still waiting for a killing blow. She refused to move.

Jennifer swept the scene and Angela's anger, then shook her head. "Not my circus, not my monkeys."

Marc wanted to laugh at the copy of an old world meme, but he was afraid to anger Angela further. He could feel how on the edge she was.

“The next time she thinks about killing me or letting me be killed, I’ll finish this!”

Marc nodded. “I was thinking she could be a runner. We need a lot of stuff and she’s great on a team.”

Angela already knew that. “Yeah, but she’s shit as a person.”

“You know what she’s been through.”

“And that’s why she’s shuddering at my feet instead of burning.”

“Thank you for that.”

“I don’t want her dead. We need her.”

“Not if she’s planning your death.”

“She’s thought about it since Adrian told her you need someone to console you.”

“Once again, it’s *his* fault?”

“Isn’t everything?”

“You knew which way the vote would go.”

“She knew all of it,” Kendle muttered.

“Shut up!” Marc shouted. “Haven’t you done enough?!”

Angela’s red orbs slowly began to fade into the calm blue of a leader in control.

Marc breathed an inaudible sigh of relief. Kendle might not know how close she’d just come to death, but Marc did.

“Why would you care?” Angela moved toward him, tone mocking, challenging. “You have me!”

“And you have Adrian.”

“Not by my choice. I didn’t pick him. He used magic on me and in retaliation, you chose my replacement!” She refused to listen to his protests as she moved by him. “I would have let you kill him for what he did to me. But you picked out another bitch before I’d done anything wrong. That’s why Adrian is in our lives, in your face and worming his way back into this camp. You couldn’t wait for my judgement. You didn’t have faith in me and in our love. You moped and bitched, and forced me to change plans when I couldn’t count on you to do your duty.” She jerked a thumb at Kendle. “At least Adrian’s your equal. You picked a skank who still isn’t sure if she wants to live or die. Where’s *your* honor?”

Angela left before she could say anything worse. She never would have said it at all if Kendle hadn’t pushed. “I’ve been trying to make peace with her.”

Jennifer had been waiting in the hall outside the door. Despite her words, she *was* part of this circus and the ringmaster needed to vent. “We’ve all been expecting a lot more fireworks between you and her. I was impressed.”

Angela snorted. “Stop blowing smoke. You’re too young for that habit.”

Jennifer chuckled. “I’ve never liked her, but I honestly thought she was coming around.”

“So did I. She disappointed me.”

“Ah. I wondered how she angered you so fast when you’re usually ice cool with her.”

“That’s part of the problem. It gave her the confidence to think she could handle me if she caught me asleep.”

“Dream walking?”

“Yes.”

“That could work if she caught you far enough away. You wouldn’t be able to return in time to defend yourself.” Jennifer stopped. “That bitch!”

Angela kept walking. “Yep.”

“She’s the reason you still don’t feel safe.”

“I’m not.”

“I thought Tommy would make her happy.”

“He does, but she’s obsessed with Marc. They shared a kiss that reminded her of her late husband, Luke.”

“I didn’t think they were married.”

“They were as far as she’s concerned. She was innocent when she washed up on that island. He cared for her and then loved her. She misses him. When she’s around Marc, she has flashes and can’t separate the past from reality.”

“Damn. How do we help her?”

“Not we. She’s kept herself closed off from everyone here, including Tommy. Only Marc can help her now.”

Jennifer caught the tone and hurried to catch up. “She’s not going on the boat with us, is she?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not Marc can force himself to do what has to happen now.”

Jennifer didn't ask what it was. She didn't want to know.

2

“Get up.” Marc refused to help Kendle to her feet. He was furious with her and with himself.

“I'm sorry.”

Marc sighed. “Me too. You have to stop now. That was your last chance.”

“I don't know how to stop!”

Tommy appeared in the doorway, complicating things further.

Marc grunted, waving him in. “He's the one you need to talk to.”

“I know.”

“Then you'll talk with me and I'll send you out of here the first chance we get.”

“I'll go.” Kendle didn't have any anger left, but she couldn't stop from noting that she'd been right. Facing Angela head-on would be suicide. Any attack would have to be while the alpha was sleeping.

Marc's fury came out in a sonic blast that slammed into Kendle with half force.

Kendle screamed.

Tommy hurried to her, unaware that Marc was causing it.

Finish it now, while she's on the edge, Angela advised. *And I'm sorry for your pain.*

Marc threw himself forward, shoving Tommy out of his way so he could jerk Kendle to her feet. His mouth descended toward her skin, teeth out and hungry.

“Nooooo!” Kendle began to shriek. “No! No! No!”

Marc had never felt so bad in his life. As soon as the awful noise started, he handed her struggling form to Tommy so that man couldn't swing on him.

Marc watched her curl against her lover, sobbing. “Kendle, what happened to Luke?”

“He died after we landed. Their medicine didn't work!”

Marc left Tommy to comfort her, finally getting the reason for Kendle's crazy behavior. She'd been refusing to accept that with all the power she had, a lack of antibiotics had killed her mate.

Marc saw who was waiting for him as he left the cafeteria. “Get lost!”

Kenn followed Marc's stiff shoulders down the hall, not speaking. He didn't like this job either, but there was no doubt Angela was right. He could feel Marc hating himself for doing what had needed to be done.

“What?!” Marc spun around.

“Did you like it?”

“You know I didn't!”

“Then you don't need me. The boss is wrong.”

“She's never wrong.” Marc thought about that.

Kenn waited for it, bracing.

“Angie knew I’d stop. She couldn’t send you. They would have noticed the difference.”

“Yes.”

Marc scowled. “I guess she’s back to the mind games.”

Kenn gave him a funny look and walked away. “When did she stop?”

3

“How is she?”

Kyle shrugged at Marc’s whisper. “Quiet.”

Marc sighed. “That’s not good, is it?”

Kyle shook his head. “We never think so.”

“Any advice?”

Kyle grinned. “Hard and quick, like ripping off a bandaid. Then it’s all over.”

Marc was chuckling as he tapped on Angela’s hotel door.

“Come in.”

Marc entered the room, glad to see Angela was alone. He hadn’t been certain if Adrian would be here yet. It had taken them hours to do rounds and be sure people were settled enough to sleep. Safe Haven had been given a lot to think about.

“Is everything okay?”

“As much as it can be. Tommy’s got her right now.” Marc moved to the bed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know she was still a threat to you.”

Angela's face tightened. "She's also a threat to Cody and all the other kids. Adrian told you how to break me. Kendle already knew."

"Do you want her gone?"

Angela shook her head. "I want her converted."

"I don't think that's possible anymore."

Angela shrugged. "Then kill her."

Marc blanched. He hadn't thought she would give the duty to him.

Angela sighed, fingers running over the stiff book in her hands. "Keep her where she is—fighting for us and away from me."

"Why didn't you remove her?"

"You love her."

Marc clamped his mouth shut. He'd just realized that himself, while making her terrified of him.

Angela snorted. "Kendle isn't afraid of anything except *her* ghosts. She'll be back to normal as soon as she knows I'm okay to be in the same space with her."

"Are you sure?"

"Please don't ask me again or you'll find her body stuffed in someone's kit in the morning."

Marc chuckled. "Sexy."

Angela snorted again. She didn't mention his emotions, but it hung between them as if she were shouting about it.

Marc needed a distraction and he had a question that mattered. "They weren't going to go, were they?"

Angela was proud of him for figuring it out. “Not after seeing it was possible to stay alive on American soil.” She got up from the bed, leaving her papers out for later. She needed to go have a happy hour or she would never get to sleep. “I don’t want to leave sanctuary. Why would they?”

“Why did you decide to let them have the choice?”

Damn. I thought he’d figured it all out. “The book William gave me.”

Marc didn’t care about the mementos or picture book the town had put together for her. “I don’t understand.”

“The bond I have with our people is amazing. I have no idea why they love me so much, but they do. If there was something I wanted, I could get them to go my way on it.”

Marc wondered if that included Adrian’s banishment, then answered himself. *Yes, of course it would.*

“Do you get what I’m saying?”

Marc had to concentrate, pushing the emotional issues aside to study it. “You knew which way they would go because of how Adrian’s banishment went. You knew they would want to make it up to you.”

Well, he got half of it. Angela shut the book and set it on the nightstand. She went over and kissed Marc on the cheek. “Don’t think about that too much. It’ll just ruin your mood.” Angela headed for the exit. “I’m on the kids’ floor for a while.”

“Baby time?” Marc teased.

Angela nodded quickly. “They’re not awake often and I can’t steal many hours from the camp. Gotta take it where I can get it.”

“I think it’s sweet. They need a mommy.”

“They have one, Marc. They have a father, as well.”

Marc swallowed a protest of not knowing the two real sons he had yet. She was right. All the kids here needed to be loved so they didn’t grow up to be like Matt or Adrian.

Angela opened the door and paused to look expectantly over her shoulder.

Marc’s grim expression faded. “I didn’t think you’d want me around for a bit.”

“I always want you around. You’re my heart.”

Warmed, Marc hurried into the guard position and escorted her down to the floor housing their kids.

4

“I would have thought you’d be happy right now.” Grant joined William in the Mayor’s small office, both waiting for Donna to arrive. “You seemed like you were having fun.”

“We were.”

Grant understood from the curt tone. That was the problem. William didn’t want Safe Haven to leave. “Maybe one of the people who stay will be a descendant.”

William shook his head, staring morosely out the window toward the hotel. “None of her descendants are going to leave her.”

Grant didn’t think so either, but he didn’t like it when William was unhappy. No one did.

“I’ll deal with it.”

Grant didn’t doubt that was true, but he was still concerned. When William was unhappy, the town was unhappy. “What can I do?”

“Don’t leave.”

Grant frowned. “I can’t promise that.”

“We need you here.”

“Safe Haven can use me too.” Grant had almost made up his mind. There were several positions in Safe Haven that he had already figured out ways to start hunting. “In fact, it’s almost a done deal.”

William peered over at him. “Have you told the Mayor yet?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

William studied him. “Hoping she can talk you out of it or hoping she’ll let you go without a fight? I sense both.”

“That’s because I feel both. You know I love these people.”

“I do. You’ve done well by them and you’ve helped all of us. You’ve earned the right to go face your destiny. The Mayor will understand and wish you well.”

Grant knew that was true, but he wanted to do something to calm William. The storm clouds in the distance weren’t entirely Mother Nature, though

most people wouldn't know that. Grant wondered briefly if Safe Haven's powerful leader did and then pushed it out of his mind to concentrate on the problem at hand. "What can I do for you?"

"There's nothing you can do for him." Donna had been listening as she came down the hall to her office. She sank behind the desk and regarded William with a frosty demeanor. "He's going to sit here for the next hour and complain about the unfairness of his life while the rest of us would give anything to have his abilities. Oh, poor Willy."

William's lips twitched. "I didn't know you cared."

Donna snorted, pushing off her shoes. "I don't care how much power you throw over that one, you can't have her."

William laughed aloud. He wasn't used to Donna talking to him that way. It caught his interest. "Are you busy tonight?"

Donna's body came to life. "What did you have in mind?"

William swiveled his chair toward the window. "A little conversation and some wine, and if you're very nice to me, a dance."

Grant chuckled at the interaction. If anyone else heard them, they would assume William's arrogance made him dangerous to women, but exactly the opposite was true. The females in this town had been trying to get his attention for a long time, but he was incredibly picky. Donna was one of the few repeat women he'd ever been seen with

and the only one he took anywhere openly. The town had speculated they would eventually settle down as a couple. The only ones who didn't know it yet were William and Donna.

Grant stood up and left the office without being noticed.

William stared at Donna in the window, eyes sparkling. "I saw you looking at her guard dog."

Donna blushed. "Well, of course I looked at him. That's Adrian Mitchel. You've heard the stories."

Slightly jealous, William shrugged. "I wasn't impressed."

Neither was I. Donna stared at William's shoulders. It was a struggle for her not to reveal how jealous she was of the time William had spent alone with Angela. She couldn't compete with that and she knew it.

"I wouldn't try," William promised. "And she has no interest."

"Your word?"

William nodded, motioning toward her. "I promise. Come here."

As the Mayor slid into his arms, William thought about asking her if she'd changed her mind but didn't. Donna had made it clear that she liked being an Invisible and didn't want her gifts unlocked. Until she changed her mind, all they would be was lovers. It was yet another layer of loneliness. William wasn't sure he could carry much more.

“Bye-bye!” Caleb didn’t want her to go. He was settling in with the other kids and den mothers, but she had come to save him from the sickness. He was bonded strongest to her.

Angela was honored and a little intimidated by the idea of being a parent to so many kids. She eased out of the room. She enjoyed her time with the children. It was the adults she needed to hide from.

Angela moved down the hall toward the elevator. The women had been glad to have another set of hands for bedtime, especially ones the children would obey. She would have to crackdown on the rules after they left.

Enjoying the hour without a guard that she had forced from Marc by sending him to do a security walk, Angela took the elevator to the fourth floor and went toward her room. She could tell by the tension up here that Adrian had already arrived.

“Good night, Boss.” Kyle held the door so Angela could enter the room. He and his men were the only ones who had access. Not even Neil’s team had been cleared to guard Angela while they were here. None of them had kept up on their training.

“Wake me if you need me.”

“You know it.” Kyle nodded to Marc and Adrian, positive none of them would be sleeping soon. He could feel the confusion of the men and didn’t envy Angela the night ahead. They didn’t

understand what she'd done, but Kyle and the Eagles did. It was why they'd helped Greg to convince the camp not to vote. Angela had been giving them a chance to stay in a place that was almost safe, to give up living where death and chaos always visited. He respected her for trying to do that, but it wouldn't be Safe Haven anymore if they stayed here. They would become a part of Ciemus, not the other way around.

Kyle secured the door, hoping Marc and Adrian gave her a break. He had no doubt about what Angela wanted, but she was willing to sacrifice her happiness once again to please her people. Kyle didn't want the men to harass her. He wanted her to sleep.

Angela knew her men were expecting an explanation, but she wasn't sure how to tell them. So far, no one had figured it out all the way. She believed Adrian might have, but it was unconfirmed. She pointed to the book William had given her. "You should check that out."

"We need to talk." Marc still wasn't interested in William's gift.

Adrian was. He left the couple to settle their personal issues.

Angela sat in the chair next to the bed as Marc took the seat by her. Now that he had her cornered, Marc wasn't sure where to begin.

Angela only needed one thing from him, but she refused to think about it. He had to come up with it on his own.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Not trusting you.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“William.”

Angela looked at him in confusion. “How did that happen?”

“I realized if you were going to replace me, *that* would be the type of person who would be a match for you, not Adrian. For the first day we were here, it was all I could worry about. Then I decided if William was a better match for you, I would step aside. A lot like Kyle is considering doing over Grant’s interest in Jennifer.”

Angela waited, giving him time to collect his thoughts.

Marc struggled to find the right words even though he had planned what he wanted to say. “Then I figured out what you did for Safe Haven tonight. I finally get it. Every single choice you’ve made is for the good of the camp. It honestly doesn’t have anything to do with me or Adrian or your new friend.” He reached over to take her hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t see it sooner.”

Angela rested her head on his shoulder, letting out a sigh of relief, weariness, and contentment. “Thank you. I needed that.”

“I don’t know where we go from here, but I’ll do whatever it takes to earn the respect of the camp back, and to not embarrass you again.”

“What you’re doing right now will smooth things over with the Eagles and the camp. By the time we get on the boat, I think most people will have already put it out of their minds. It’s not as big a deal as you think it is.”

“Going from XO to bodyguard isn’t a big deal?”
Angela chuckled. “From XO to body man.”

A grin stretched his lips. “I’ve done that job before. I used to be good at it.”

“I know.”

“It’s going to take me some time to get used to the new you.”

“I’m still the same girl who used to sneak into the cornfield with you, Marc. I’m just a lot more on top of it.”

“Is there a way for me to become like that?”
Marc felt Adrian’s immediate attention to the conversation.

“Why would you want to be?” Angela was unable to help the bitter response. “Haven’t you seen what it does to us? There’s not one descendant who has ever found peace or happiness.” She gestured toward the book in front of Adrian. “It’s all in there. None of them have a happy-ever-after.”

“I can’t stand it that you feel this alone. And I’m jealous of the things you and William were already able to do upon a first meeting. I want that with you.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “So does your dog.”

Angela placed her hand around Marc’s wrist. “The things you would have to do to reach these

levels, the torments you would have to put yourself through, would hurt me and interfere with the camp. Once you read some of the stories in the book, you'll understand why I have to leave. There can only be one Byzan in each group."

"What happens if there's more than one?"

"Read the book." Angela headed for the bathroom, needing to remove sticky spots from her body. The kids had all gotten hugs. "I'll be in the shower for the next ten hours or so. Throw a blanket over me at some point."

Marc wanted to grin but couldn't. He went over and joined Adrian at the desk.

Adrian had frozen. "I know what she did."

"What?" Marc was reading the page Adrian had open.

"You'll figure it out."

Marc looked over his shoulder as Adrian thumbed through the stiff, glossy book that obviously hadn't been opened after printing.

Descendants who can absorb powers are a rarity, mostly because our kind doesn't survive long once captured. Hunted until we are almost extinct, a Byzantine has only been documented four times in history to have lived passed the age of forty.

Marc winced.

Byzan have more powerful gifts than alphas, who have more gifts than all other descendants. There are also enforcers, trackers, and invisibles. This chapter details each type of our kind, and what we can do. Triggers for evolution are also

mentioned, but briefly, as the list is exhaustive. Before we get into specifics, it is important to note that some alphas have the potential to become Byzantine. The odds are 1-20.

Adrian quickly counted how many descendants were in Safe Haven.

So did Marc. Then he kept reading, fascinated.

It is also worth mentioning that the only historical record of having two Byzan in the same group ended in tragedy. An entire clan of descendants turned on each other until only the two Byzan were left. The government contained them until their deaths. The lab determination was madness from proximity. Two Byzan repel each other. If forced to maintain contact, madness results. For more details, see the later chapter on lab results.

“Oh, come on! From the beginning.”

Adrian obediently flipped the book back to the first page.

The History of Descendants

Written by Amota Shalet 1580-1622, Cindrea Shalet-Thatcher 1622-1712, Oliver Dormer 1712-1755, Liza Barr-Dormer 1755-1813, Colton Abbot 1813-1886, Melissa Abbot 1886-1922 Amelia Sinclair 1922-1972, William Sinclair 1972–

This is a compilation of information gathered by the founding families of Ciemus. We are forever grateful for their sacrifices.

Chapter One: Who We Are and Why We're Hunted

Marc and Adrian sat shoulder-to-shoulder and read each page without arguing or considering their rivalry. The information was priceless.

They were still reading when Angela came out and climbed into the bed. When she fell asleep, neither of them noticed.

6

“Hey, Dog! What are you doing in here by yourself?” Charlie had just entered the pool room to find the wolf lying next to the clear water.

Dog lifted his head. *I like the sound. It's soothing.*

“Me too.” Charlie slid his gear under a chair. “Did you do your laps yet?”

Dog gave a huff. *I'm not required to do laps.*

Charlie shrugged. “Mom said everybody.”

Dog gazed toward the water, wanting to. *I'll get a lot of fur in there. I haven't had a bath in a while.*

“I think the filters will have it cleaned out by morning.” Charlie removed his sandals and jeans, and went toward the water in his swimming trunks. He hadn't had time to get in his laps earlier and he was determined not to miss any classes or requirements of the Eagles from now on. His conversation with Kendle had been enlightening.

Charlie dove in, glad he'd remembered to close the door to the room as he hit the cold water and let out a yelp.

Dog chuffed in amusement.

Charlie surfaced and wiped the droplets from his face. He swam around in the water to spot Dog. "I don't think she'd be mad at you if you don't like water or something like that."

Dog stood, tail wagging. *I love it.*

Charlie swam to the edge of the pool so he could start laps. "There's plenty of room for you. We can do them together."

Dog jumped into the pool a few seconds later, also admitting a brief yip.

Charlie pushed off the wall.

Dog stayed right next to him, paws a blur under the water.

Understanding Dog was familiar with swimming, Charlie relaxed. He hadn't been sure if he might need to help the wolf.

Dog snorted water at him.

Charlie shrugged as they reached the end of the wall, taking a moment to wipe the water from his face. "I wanted to be sure."

Dog didn't pause at the wall. He quickly spun around and headed for the other end.

Charlie hurried to catch him.

The next few minutes were spent with the pair racing. By the time they were half finished, Charlie was breathing funny and the wolf was ahead of him. "Slow down!"

Dog paddled through the water, reaching the other end. He paused, paws keeping him afloat.

Charlie reached the end of the pool and took a good look at the soaked animal. Dog seemed happy.

I am. It is good to be home.

Dog knew Charlie wanted to talk, so he began the other half of their laps. It wasn't as easy for him as the boy thought it was, but Dog's pride wouldn't let him admit that. The long trip had built him up, but it had also weakened him in ways.

Passing by, Ivan saw shadows and paused to see who was using the pool while the camp was asleep. Recognizing Charlie and Dog, Ivan was able to mark the pair off his location list. He had been charged with keeping track of the camp members while the boss slept. It was a relief to know Angela's son wasn't getting into trouble.

“Those two were a pair before Dog left.”

Ivan spun around, bumping into the wall.

Jennifer chuckled. “My bad.”

Embarrassed, Ivan forced himself not to say something nasty. Now that it was so late, the hotel was eerily quiet. The time they had spent in the mountain, and then on the road, hadn't prepared him for what it sounded like to be indoors again. He knew he wasn't the only one suffering it, but most people weren't doing double shifts in this hotel. He couldn't stop thinking about the movie *The Shining*.

Jennifer's face fell. “If the girls from that movie show up, I'll call a bugout myself.”

Ivan chuckled with her.

“I’m headed to get a snack for the pregnant women.” Jennifer looked toward the pool room. “It’s great to see those two together. Some of the camp can tell you about the adventures of Dog, and all the little side stories that go with him. He and Charlie are close.”

Ivan didn’t say anything as Jennifer moved down the hall toward the elevator, but he connected it with his earlier lesson. He didn’t know the histories of Safe Haven and it was obvious they were important. Vowing again to fix that, Ivan continued his rounds of the hotel, waiting for dawn to creep in and lighten the sky.

Chapter Thirty-Two BK9

Sanctuary

November 19th

1

“**G**ood morning!” William was waiting in the lounge as the elevator doors opened.

Angela sent out a wave of welcome.

William blasted her with one of his own, inadvertently hitting the men behind her.

Instead of jealousy or anger, Marc and Adrian sent their own blast, trying to copy the descendant greeting. Adrian had known about it, but he’d only used it a few times during his career. After reading the book, both men now understood William wasn’t a threat. The story of his parent’s love affair and the people it had hurt had resonated with Marc and Adrian. The fact that the couple had died together also concerned them. They’d spent the hours between reading and dawn talking, trying to come to terms with the issues between them. Neither man had filled Angela in when she woke. They hadn’t finished their conversation.

As Angela walked toward William with her hands out and William did the same, Adrian turned to Marc. “Are we leaving it there or do you want to

go someplace and finish? We have an hour before duty.”

Marc opened his mouth to protest, to say Angela needed to be protected and they couldn't leave her alone. He led the way toward the hotel bar instead.

Angela didn't notice. William's mental welcome was swarming over her and feeding energy banks for her trip. She was accepting it graciously and trying not to explode at the feel. It was incredibly powerful, but it didn't hurt the way all other descendant energy had so far. This was the soothing balm of a cool ocean after walking in the burning sand. It was a hot bubble bath after shoveling snow. It was chocolate during PMS. It was beautiful.

William chuckled at all the thoughts going through her mind, experiencing the same. Much of the research he'd done over his lifetime suggested the difference in energy currents was what caused the pain. Because he and Angela were on the same level, there was no need for their bodies to perform a conversion. It was a complete cycling process that continued until she finally broke it by stepping back and bringing up a mental wall.

William realized she was doing it to keep from making his loneliness worse. She had just read his memories of last night, where he hadn't slept because he had been excited about seeing her this morning and at the same time, devastated that she was going to be gone soon. She was trying to make this as easy on him as she could. The consideration

was welcome. In this town, William had become known as unshakable and unbreakable. No one ever thought to offer him comfort.

“I do have someone who does that for me.” Angela peered behind her to pinpoint Adrian and found him gone. Eagles had moved into place around her.

Angela smiled, pleased. She turned to William, motioning toward his town. “The Mayor said we could use your clinic for the blood work and vetting. Would you like to escort me?”

“I’d be honored.”

William and Angela moved off, falling into a discussion of how to get the townspeople through the process in just one day.

They left the hotel. As the door slid shut, the people left in the lobby were able to hear parts of the conversation coming from the bar.

Those who had a shift reluctantly left, hoping Kyle would tell them later. He didn’t always, especially if it was something leadership didn’t want the lower ranks to know yet.

Rookie and off duty members were waved on by Kyle. He and his team also kept their distance from the bar and tried not to eavesdrop. When the conversation became louder, it was impossible to do that.

“You already get her nights! Letting me have an hour a day isn’t asking too much.”

“It is when I know what you’ll use it for.”

“I thought you were over that. The only thing it will be used for is to get her mentally and physically in shape to lead these people.”

“I can’t trust you to only do that when you guys are alone. Even if I could, your broken spell would still be working on you both.”

“That’s not what’s bothering you. I can feel you thinking about staying in America because you think it would be easier on her and the camp. You have to stop doing that. It’s part of what gave her doubts.”

“Doubts about what?”

“About staying in Ciemus.”

“She chose to take us out of here. She didn’t have doubts.”

“You’re crazy if you believe that. Angela wouldn’t have called that meeting if she hadn’t had doubts.”

Kyle and his Eagles kept an eye out for anyone who wasn’t supposed to hear this conversation. He was glad the camp was in their rooms, enjoying the day off before they returned to traveling. Angela had insisted the town fighters would take care of any problems. Safe Haven had a skeleton crew right now, with Ivan on point. All of the descendants and other leaders were involved in vetting the new people, which meant Angela was trusting their safety to one team. Most people weren’t concerned,

but Kyle couldn't help it. He hadn't bonded with these new people the way others had. In fact, he was pretty sure he already hated one of them.

"I know it didn't work out like we planned, but I still want to try to break one of the bonds."

"I've been thinking about that. Safe Haven needs a lot of things to take to the island. I'm not sure about the timeline for departure now, but I'm going to assume it hasn't changed at all. That will require fast runs by all the teams to gather the last items we need."

Marc frowned. "So?"

"So, you have a double shot coming up. I'll be away and she'll be in a great mood because of everything that's happened, and because her new friend William is going to offer us an escort. When she feels safe, she relaxes." Adrian's voice lowered. "You need to work on the soulmate connection while I'm gone. ...I think you should talk to William about it."

Marc was speechless.

Adrian wasn't sure if he should continue, but at this point, he was already giving Marc advice about his love life. It was too late to take it back. "I'm not saying you don't have her needs covered, I'm just saying you could cover them better. I'll bet he knows things you and I wouldn't have considered."

Marc forced his mouth to work. "What makes you say that? He doesn't appear to have a female in this town."

Adrian wasn't certain that was true, but it didn't matter to his point. "I heard him wondering why neither one of us had made that connection with her. I didn't realize I could until after I had already cast the charm. Once I'd done that, there was no way the connection would work for me. With you, though, it's more than possible."

Marc struggled to remember what Adrian had told him about it. "That's the one strong enough to break all of them?"

"Yes."

"So tell me how it's done."

Adrian snorted. "If I knew how to do it, don't you think I would have done that instead?"

Marc grunted, recognizing the truth. Of course, Adrian would have gone for the easiest methods first. It was only when everything else failed that he would have tried something more dangerous and risked exposure. Even back then, Adrian had been careful to cover his ass. "What's the second hit?"

"When William leaves, and I'm already gone, she'll probably go straight to that edge we discussed. All you'd need to do is...interrupt her time with the kids a little. For a day or two, maybe."

"You're fucking evil."

Adrian sighed. "I'm going to stay here if we can't work something out."

Marc looked over, but not in surprise. "What happens in that future?"

Adrian shrugged. "Jennifer and Angela haven't been able to see it in weeks, and I've never been

able to. Every time I go between worlds, the Demon of Time senses me and chases me out.”

Marc blinked. “What?”

“It’s like when you scroll dive and run out of air, only I don’t have a demon and a witch to pull me up.”

Oddly enough, Marc understood. “So you don’t know any of it?”

Adrian sighed. “This town being here, *him* being here, changed everything. Right now, Jennifer is sitting in the middle of the bed listening to kids snore while trying to figure out what’s going to happen when we leave. Samantha is in the shower, listening for the next storm to come in and wondering what happens when we leave. The kids are not dreaming at all.”

“What does that mean?”

“Usually when there’s darkness, it means death. In this case, it might mean we don’t need to run anymore. It might actually be more dangerous for us to go, than it would be to stay. Until one of our seers picks something up or we get an answer one way or another, I’m not convinced Angela will leave tomorrow.”

“You mean that future isn’t set?”

“Exactly. She stuck with her original decision because to do anything else was too awful to contemplate for our entire journey. There wasn’t a choice. Now that there might be a different future, she’s second-guessing what she saw. None of us being able to read anything about the future comes

directly from *her* indecision and inability to see what's coming."

"What does it really mean?"

"It means she had to make the call in the blind this time."

"And she still chose to leave."

"Yes. She can't see it coming, but she still feels something. Otherwise, we'd be *unpacking* right now."

Marc began to consider their weapons and potluck ammunition.

Adrian kept pointing out things that Marc would need to enact his plan.

Everyone else left them alone.

3

"Are you sure you want to stay for more of this? It's going to take about seven hours." Angela knew he wasn't bored, but she felt like she should ask. William had watched her organize the clinic and assign Safe Haven people as they arrived for duty.

"Yes." William had placed himself in a chair next to the reception desk in the doctor's office. "You can't drag me out."

Angela chuckled, happy to have him here. She would miss him even though they had only known each other for such a short time.

Forcing her mind into work, Angela did a fast walk-through to be positive everything was in place before she let the locals in. The town clinic was

carpeted and held smells that said it had been freshly cleaned; it didn't have a doctor or staff. Angela assumed William healed people anytime they fell ill. That meant this town hadn't been forced to fight every day of their survival or just one descendant, even a powerful one, would have been drained. That wasn't the case with William. He was the peppiest person she'd met so far, spreading laughter and light as he walked by.

Tonya and the team medics were in the reception area, each with enough equipment to perform twenty blood tests. Once people were finished there, they would spend time with Charlie and Conner in the next two exam rooms. While they were doing paperwork, the boys would be doing the first mental scans and making notes.

Angela glanced in and found both teenagers leaned back in the chairs, playing handheld video games. William had gifted them a bag of batteries.

Angela moved down the white-tiled hall that smelled of antiseptic. She went by the next four exam rooms that were across from each other. She had stocked them with notebooks and pens. She and Marc, along with Adrian and Jennifer, would do the deep scans of people coming through from those four checkpoints.

Angela paused in the next doorway. They had cleared the furniture out of this larger room and brought in three small desks. Kendle, Kenn, and Samantha were seated uncomfortably at them. These three descendants were going to ask intimate,

personal questions. Because they were getting the people after Marc and the others had already grilled them, this room would reveal the most secrets if they had any. Angela nodded to Samantha, but didn't offer comfort. This was part of the duty. She didn't look at Kendle at all.

Kendle didn't breathe until Angela was out of sight. Marc had terrified her for a minute, but she still feared Angela the most.

Angela moved down the hall to the second reception area at the far end of the office. Dog and the kids, along with den mothers and Eagle teams, were in this room watching cartoons. While it would appear to be a simple introduction, the adults would observe how the locals interacted with Safe Haven children. The fact that half of these kids were also descendants would provide yet another layer of scans. Angela was confident that no one they approved today would be an assassin or a traitor. She and Adrian had come up with the plan this morning while Marc evaluated the security of the town to decide if it was okay for everyone to be away from the hotel for so long. Angela hadn't been worried about it as much as Marc, but it was good practice for when they were back on the road.

Angela moved to the lobby, where Tonya and the medics were getting bored. William still looked as excited to be here as when she had first offered to let him observe. "We're ready. Send over small groups every twenty minutes until a line forms. When the line goes down, send the next group."

“Until when?”

“Until we get them all.”

“You’re not going to set a limit on how many people you’ll take?”

“No. I also won’t set a limit on how many people can stay. Free will matters to me too.”

William delivered a smile of connection. “I’ve never done anything as hard in my life as making sure all of my choices benefit my people first. I would rather climb a mountain or return to that Naval Station without weapons.”

Once again floored by the feeling of having someone who knew exactly what she was experiencing, Angela motioned toward the first room. “After you send a group, feel free to walk the rooms and listen. When you go back, you’ll be able to let your people know what to expect so they won’t be as nervous.”

“Nothing I can tell them will ease that. Everyone fears not being good enough.”

“I’m sorry we have to be so strict, but I doubt it’s an issue. Your town has a great leadership structure.”

William’s happiness faded a little. “I need a replacement for one of them.”

“You might think about having two slots covered.”

William studied her curiously. “I thought Donna was happy.”

Angela gave him a pointed glance and tone. “She’s lonely. She’d like to have a family.”

“I’ve offered to unlock her gifts.”

People listening stored that information. If William could do it, Angela could too.

“That can also happen if she has a baby.” Angela snickered at his immediate thunderous expression. “Jealous much?”

William laughed, nodding. “Absolutely.”

“Why does it have to be someone else who fills her with life and love?”

“You know why.”

Angela’s face tightened. “It won’t be that way for you.”

“What if it is? What if I find someone later who matches better? I’ll rip her apart. You’ve read the stories. We always move on without the...”

Angela nodded at him. “Soulmates can come from different levels. It doesn’t have to be a match.”

“But it’s easier and better.”

Angela sighed. “Yes, but you can’t force her to face her destiny.” Taking pity, Angela gave him hope. “As soon as I realized my baby would have gifts, I was glad I was like him, so I could help him and know what he was going through. Talk to the pregnant women in my camp. Most of them are in the rear room with kids right now. You’ll see that the ones who don’t have it, wish they did and those who do, feel safer because of it.”

“She’ll come to it on her own?”

“I believe so, but you’d have to make the offer to give her the baby.”

William blushed.

Angela laughed. “Let her know we’re ready, then go check out the women. Who knows? Donna may get so jealous, she’ll approach you.”

“That’s what I’ve been hoping for!”

Angela’s laughter was loud and hard as she realized he had been using her to make Donna jealous. “I love this town.”

William smiled, sending great vibes that were very familiar to both their people. “So do I.”

4

“You’re forgetting some areas.”

Theo looked up with a frown as Candy stopped by the table. He barely kept himself from saying anything snotty. The last time they’d spoken, she had been sharp and stormed off. That had caused him embarrassment.

Candy leaned over the table to point at their map of the ship. “Below deck one, there’s something called a tween deck. Below that, is the tank block. That’s our machinery space.”

“How do you know?”

“That’s a Royal Caribbean ship. My brother worked on one. He said those spaces are huge, and there are other nonessential components of the ship there too. The ballast pumps and compressors, water tanks, sewage. That’s a lot more space you’ll be able to use.” Candy had been listening to them try to figure out where they were going to fit everything while she and the other women escorted

groups to breakfast, bathrooms, and entertainment. It was noisy. Flushing toilets and running showers had become a constant noise during their time here, reminding people how peaceful it was not to be in a city. The lack of civility wasn't a hindrance for some of them. Candy could feel a few people even wishing they were already back on the road. *Have we become vagabonds?*

The pool was open to the camp right now. The Mayor's people had restocked it with towels and toys. Theo knew Angela had placed adult swimmers in the room to help if it was needed. They hoped to filter enough water through the ship's system to allow this fun on the boat as well. "Are you off duty now?"

Candy nodded. "As of about five minutes ago."

Theo motioned toward the table. "Give us the information you have." He looked at Ozzie. "Make a note that we need to talk to people who've been on cruises or had family who worked on ships for other information."

Candy already had something else. She pointed. "You have it slotted for us to use the passenger cabins, but I think everyone would be more comfortable if they were closer to deck one. Employee living quarters were usually on decks 1, 2 and 3, and sometimes 4. The rooms aren't as large, but the dormitory style set up would save space and food. All the passenger cabins could then be used for storage."

The team was taking notes now, missing what was going on in the cafeteria behind them.

Candy knew about it, but she wasn't interested in getting involved. She would much rather prove to Theo that Angela had been right to put her on his team.

“It's just a cup of coffee!”

The guards looked toward the cooking area, where Brittani and Gus were once again arguing. Next in line to be served, Shawn and Missy were watching the entertainment. It was boring in the hotel with the boss gone.

“Why don't you admit you want to be one too?” Gus turned to leave. “I've never known you to be afraid of anything.”

Brittani's mouth dropped open. “I ain't afraid!”

Gus kept walking. “I'm not.”

Brittani clamped her mouth shut at the correction, clenching her hands in an effort to keep from grabbing something to throw. Gus didn't understand how dangerous the job was. He saw a bunch of men playing war and couldn't wait to join them. He'd always been like that; she'd been getting him out of trouble the entire time she'd known him. She was afraid of what would happen if she wasn't there to tell him no.

I'll bet that's part of the problem.

Brittani gasped as the wolf brushed against her leg. She hadn't had much contact with the animal, though she'd certainly heard the stories.

Dog was snickering about how easy it was to scare humans. *The boss wants you to lead a team.*

Brittani's first thought was *yes!* She refused to say it, however, fighting with herself.

That's exactly how Gus feels every time the Eagles walk by. He deserves to make his own decisions and so do you. Dog moved toward the cafeteria. *The boss wants an answer by the time we leave on the boat.*

Shawn and Missy began to serve themselves as Brittani sank down in the chair behind the counter with a stunned expression and a heart being torn in two directions.

5

“What happened to you?”

Kenn kept washing his hair. “Peanut butter.”

Daryl's brows came together. “I thought you and the boy made peace.”

“I wouldn't call it peace, but this wasn't him.”

Daryl stepped into the shower room. “Is there a new problem?”

Kenn sighed. “Just an old one coming back to haunt me.”

Daryl understood someone had found out about his past. “You want a support moment? You've earned it if you need it.”

Kenn was glad to hear that. He grunted, feeling soapy peanut butter slide under his nails in a thick glob. “I'm good.”

Daryl made a note for the next shift and then returned to rounds, trying not to trip on the carpet. It felt odd under his feet.

“Hey, got a minute?”

Daryl sighed as Kevin caught up to him. “What?”

Kevin missed the curt tone. “Can you ask Angela to send me out when we leave here?”

Glad to. Daryl nodded. “I’ll add your name to the volunteer list.”

“Cool. Listen, I’ve got a bottle. Do you want to—”

“No.”

Kevin stopped.

Daryl kept walking. Kevin wanted to get drunk and dwell on the past. Daryl wanted to stay sober and embrace the future.

Kevin shrugged it off, heading in the opposite direction. Maybe one of the younger Eagles wanted to hear some war stories.

6

“Do you like younger lovers?”

Kyle paused in the doorway of the clinic, caught by Jennifer’s suggestive tone. The sound of her being provocative had stolen his breath.

“That depends on your definition of *young*.”

Kyle’s brows came together as he realized Jennifer was talking to Captain Grant.

“Under legal age.”

“What’s the legal age in Safe Haven?”

“15, with exceptions.”

“Exceptions like you and the mobster.”

There was a pause where Kyle and everyone else listening strained to hear her answer.

“Yes!”

Jennifer’s defiant tone snapped Kyle into motion. He gave his paperwork to Tonya. The boss and council had been here for five hours now. The line of townspeople waiting to be vetted had slowly faded into random show ups, so the kids had been sent to lunch. The new people would be assigned to a camp member later. They were already being cleared, so there was no need to have a separate quarantine zone. That was in the updates he’d just delivered. He had a hundred camp names for her. They had all volunteered to help the new people adjust.

Angela scanned him. “Nothing from the boat team yet?”

“No.”

“It’s time. Make it a 4-man crew.” Angela’s voice echoed down the hall.

The next sound was the scrape of Adrian’s chair as he stood up.

Still observing everything going on in the clinic, William moved to where Angela was working. “I can have him outfitted and ready to go in an hour. I’ll take them to the gate too.”

Angela nodded, then turned her attention back to the farmer sitting in front of her with arthritic

knuckles and a blade of grass hanging from his mouth. Many post-apocalyptic settlements might have turned him away because they would assume he only had a few years of manual labor left, but Angela understood his mind was full of wisdom they would need during their time on the island. “What would you suggest as the best fruits and vegetables in a confined, rocky space?”

“Depends on the weather. For your island, I’d use berries of any kind and beans of every kind. Both of those are climbers. Put in stakes and you’re all set.”

“Excellent...”

William and Adrian moved toward the exit as Angela and the others continued to get people vetted and onto Safe Haven’s roster. Angela’s calmly bored tones hadn’t changed the entire time, leading Adrian to believe it was safe to go. This town wasn’t evil. It was sanctuary.

“What are you doing?” Kyle pulled out of Tonya’s grip. “I don’t need blood work.”

Tonya held up a slip of paper. “Boss’s orders.”

Kyle read the paper with a scowl.

Tonya jabbed the needle into his vein and began syphoning.

“Did she say why?”

“Nope.”

Kyle caught the tone. “Do *you* know why?”

“Yep.”

“Well?”

“Sorry. I have orders. Put your finger here.”

Kyle put his finger over the cotton ball and turned around to find Angela.

“In here, Kyle.” Marc’s tone was cold.

Kyle approached the room nervously; suddenly certain he knew what was going on. *I’m not ready!*

Yes, you are. Get it done.

Kyle couldn’t refuse Angela’s order. He went in and sat at the table with Marc, aware of Jennifer in the room across the hall, now staring in surprise.

Jennifer directed a townswoman to the next room, where Angela was finished with the farmer. She lingered as the older man went to the next room.

Angela and the woman shook hands. “Have a seat. This will take a minute.”

Realizing she still had it in her hand, Jennifer handed Angela the woman’s file.

Angela motioned Jennifer back to work.

Jennifer went, stomach full of butterflies. *The boss approved my request.*

Yes, I did. You’ll have my decision in a few days. You’re either being cleared for marriage or denied and split up. Please remember that you asked for this.

Teamwork

1

“I need to let the Mayor know we’re opening the gate.” William pointed toward the hotel as they stepped outside. “I’ll meet you in the lobby as soon as I’m finished.”

“I’ll hurry.” Adrian was determined that he and William would have a short conversation before he left.

“I’m looking forward to it.” William scanned him coolly. “I want to know why she hasn’t killed you yet. Giving her leadership isn’t enough to cover what you’ve done to her.”

Adrian grunted. “We’ll talk.”

The men went in separate directions, but their thoughts went to the same place—the future.

It only took Adrian a few minutes to gather a volunteer team. Angela had been specific about who was able to go and who wasn’t, narrowing it to the men who were getting bored.

Adrian and his small team made it downstairs to the lobby just as William was coming through the front doors. He waited there as Adrian approached, eyeing their clothes and weapons. “We will copy some of your fighting styles and setups. The Mayor

hopes you'll do the same if there's anything you can learn from us."

"We've been making notes."

"Good. The Mayor offered her private security bikes. We're having them fueled."

"That's very generous. It will take fifteen minutes to gather and load what we're taking. If you want to show me your weakest points of defense, I'll give you information. You can scan me while we do that. Then I'll ask a few questions and be on my way."

William was pleased with the cooperation. "Bucky will take your men to the parking garage. You and I will take the wall over to join them."

Adrian put Harry in charge. "I'll be fifteen, no more."

"You got it." The Eagle had worked with Adrian in the past and knew that's exactly when he would be ready. Adrian, like Angela, preferred punctuality.

William walked toward the wall, pointing to a ladder. "We'll begin there."

Adrian noticed William was in excellent shape as they climbed. Even in the cold breeze, he was only wearing a thin jacket that allowed everyone to see he had kept himself in shape over the years. He wasn't out of breath by the time they reached the top of the sturdy, two-person wide ladder.

Adrian was. *No more elevator trips for me. I need more stairs.*

William lifted a brow.

Adrian waved it off. “Just an old dog trying to learn new tricks.”

William let Adrian catch his breath and study the wall, aware of Angela watching them through a window of the clinic.

Adrian felt it. “We didn’t get to say goodbye again. She doesn’t like it.” Adrian knew there was no point in trying to keep secrets from William. Back when he’d tracked their kind, William would have been a four-team capture with heavy casualties.

“I would have died first. I almost did when the draft came, but these waters are special.”

Adrian was curious, but he had other priorities.

William pointed to the other side of the wall. “This is what surrounds us on three sides.”

Adrian studied the area, noting sick cypress trees and swampy patches where he had no doubt the land would give under their vehicles. There were also shapes he identified as abandoned houses and cars. Behind the isolated section of land, Adrian thought he could see the high rises of a city.

“This is the only place we go in and out, but we have two other spots with a functioning gate. If anyone is watching, they won’t know we have escape routes.”

Adrian turned around to view the inside of the wall, more interested in how that was set up than with the defenses the townspeople had created. He knew Angela was working on a list, with Marc’s help. Adrian was going to see if he could add

anything to it, while studying the town Safe Haven might end up in if they couldn't sail away in their boat.

In a far corner of the 2x2 mile town, movement caught Adrian's attention. Because there was so much of it, he dug out his field glasses and adjusted them to find a large herd of deer. Peacefully grazing along the inside of the wall, Adrian estimated there were fifty adults and half that number of fawns. "That's smart."

William brightened next to him. "It was my idea."

"Are you slaughtering yet?"

"Only the ones that die on their own. We're trying to get a full herd before we start consuming."

Adrian turned his glasses to a wide swath of farmland with plants and trees of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Overtop were canvases that had come from a carnival or circus.

"Actually, we took them from the zoo." William's tone dropped. "We ate the animals."

Adrian didn't scold the man or think badly of him. In the first months after the apocalypse, many people had starved to death because of moral lines. People had to make that decision for themselves, but in the end, life usually got its way and forced humans to do things they didn't want to.

Adrian switched to the next area and found the river. Roughly fifteen feet wide, the wall was built over it in two places, allowing a half-mile stretch that housed a large, ongoing fishing operation.

Townspople covered the area, all of them working. Nets were being stretched out and pulled in, boats were hauling, women were scaling, and two warehouses next door had constant activity. It was organized and impressive. “How long did it take to build that?”

“We’ve always been a fishing town. It took us roughly three months to shrink the operation and relocate it here. We built the wall first.”

“Where did you find the materials? The surrounding area hasn’t been stripped.”

“No, we didn’t want to give away our location. From a distance, the wall looks like trees and shadows. We have a reclamation department.” William pointed when Adrian stared in confusion.

It took Adrian a moment to figure out that the construction site had once been a gas station. Now, there were stacks of pipes, wood, wires, windows, doors. “That is brilliant.”

William smiled. “Captain Grant did most of it. Safe Haven is lucky to be getting him.”

“The boss already thinks so. She’s been working on him since he picked us up.”

“I’m not surprised. Grant has never been satisfied here. Much like your Eagles, he craves danger and adventure.”

“Speaking of danger, you’ve got a problem over there.” Adrian pointed. “You put your garbage too close. I would imagine you already can’t drink the water downstream from it, right?”

William nodded. “We realized it too late. We have plans to move it, but everything else was put on hold when we realized Safe Haven was coming.”

“Well, we’ll be gone shortly and people will need to be kept busy.”

William chuckled at the hint. “It really is too bad Safe Haven can’t stay. Between our two populations, the offspring would almost certainly be genius.”

2

“Is that all of them?” Angela was ready to be done.

“That’s all the townspeople. Tonya and the medics, along with the security team, are going to hang around and finish the blood work.” Marc was also eager to be done. It was late afternoon and they hadn’t had an update since Kyle left hours ago.

“Things are fine. Ivan has it covered.”

Marc didn’t argue, but he wasn’t as sure.

Angela didn’t have a problem with that. It was going against an order that wasn’t allowed. Over time, she and Marc would work things out in the control and rules department. Once he re-earned the approval of the Eagles, she would immediately put him back into leadership.

Angela and Marc left the clinic to find an ugly green sunset moving in on a brisk wind that made them zip their jackets.

For a brief moment, both of them considered what it would be like to stay, then pushed the thoughts down. Marc did it because he knew Angela wasn't going to change her mind. Angela did it so that she wouldn't.

“Here comes your friend.”

Angela smiled as William joined them.

“Your team just left.”

“Did he give you things that will help?”

William's head bobbed furiously. “I didn't realize there were so many gaps in the wall. We'll work on that first after you leave. We'll handle the garbage next.”

Angela was relieved. She didn't want anything to happen to this town. She extended a folder. “These are the people we're refusing to take.”

William nervously opened it and then chuckled. The folder was empty. “Everyone will be relieved.” He motioned toward the banquet hall. “The camps are supposed to meet for a meal. Are you coming?”

“I'd like to wash up first.”

William left the lovers alone with their security team and went to the Mayor's office. Donna was going to be thrilled at Safe Haven's decision. William was too, but he was also sad that so many of his own people wanted to leave. For a brief moment, he reconsidered his own decision to stay. If not for this location being so important, he probably wouldn't. Angela's light was hard to fight.

3

“It’s the boss!” Members of both camps cheered as Marc and Angela entered the banquet hall and moved toward the center table. The Mayor was already seated there, with most of the council. Angela had told Ivan to send the camp over with heavy security.

Marc gave Angela the chair next to the Mayor. It was a leadership seat, making those on either side protection.

As soon as they sat, servers hurried over to bring plates of chicken that made Angela grin. “I am so hungry!”

Marc chuckled. Being here had been good for her appetite. *It’s also been good for other things.* He mentally snickered. It had taken them half an hour longer to get cleaned up than they had estimated. Angela had insisted they shower together.

“I hope you approve of the way I set things up.” Once again, Donna had consumed too much coffee in her nervousness about Safe Haven accepting their people. Like many of them, she had been worried they would be turned away because of the things they’d been forced to do to survive, such as emptying the zoo. It had been hard, but that had provided almost six months of meat for her people.

“Safe Haven does not judge things that are not done with evil intent.” Angela tried to calm the woman. “I do like the way you set things up. It will give people a chance to get to know each other.”

Angela wasn't blowing smoke. The banquet hall now held more tables, in a slightly different setup. The people who were leaving, and the Safe Haven people who were staying, were all at a center line of tables. Happily eating and exchanging information, it was the first time the camps had directly mixed. It seemed to be going well.

"Some of the people who came to the clinic today had pieces of paper with numbers on them." Angela looked at the Mayor for an explanation.

Donna waved toward the full center tables. "We had so many people who wanted to go that we made them draw lots for who was evaluated first, just in case you changed your mind about how many you'd take."

With the last mystery solved, Angela dug into the food.

Silence fell for a minute on the Safe Haven side of the banquet hall, drawing Angela's attention. She watched as Brandon moved to the center tables. He didn't look at anyone as he sat down.

"Well, I didn't expect that." Marc was immediately suspicious and began to work on why Brandon had decided to stay.

"Isn't it obvious?" Angela frowned. "In Safe Haven, he has to hide who he is. When he's exposed, which always happens in our camp, he'll be banished like his cousin. Here, no one hates him yet. It's a second chance."

Marc hadn't thought about it like that. "Is it a good idea?"

Angela shrugged. “He’s not corrupt.”

Marc decided to leave it alone, relieved to have one less Mitchel in Safe Haven.

And that’s why he’s leaving! Angela scolded sharply. *It isn’t your fault, but you don’t have to be happy about it. We needed him to fight for us.*

Chastised, Marc fell silent to consider her words.

During the distraction, William leaned over to whisper in the Mayor’s ear. “I’d like to talk to you later. Alone.”

Donna hid the shiver that his voice drew. She nodded before returning her attention to the people in the center of the room. She was monitoring them to make sure no one angered Angela’s camp.

Seeing he wasn’t going to be able to get her focus right now, William helped her watch things. Once she was satisfied there wasn’t going to be problems, she might even relax enough to have a good time. Everyone else seemed to be, especially Safe Haven. It was easy to pick out their happiness. Smiles and laughter were echoing across the banquet hall.

William was fascinated at the way training was taking place even while everyone was supposed to be on downtime. Eagles were at rear tables giving lessons to men William assumed were rookies. They were talking about the missing team, the coming storm, and of course, Ciemus. None of the observations were bad, but many of them were informative to William. He and Captain Grant had

planned most of the defenses and they were always on the lookout for new ways to add to them. Adrian had given him several suggestions that would be put into effect.

“The same is true of Safe Haven.” Angela smiled at him. “We’ve already taught each other a lot.”

“I’ve been thinking of a communication system to allow us to reach to the island. Do you have someone who’s good with that sort of thing?”

Angela motioned Kenn toward the table.

Kenn stood up.

Angela went still, bringing Marc to his feet. “Which direction?”

“Breach! We have a breach in the wall!” Town radios throughout the crowd blared the warning. “Everyone get to your shelter! We have a breach!”

Marc reached over and took a hold of Angela’s wrist. No matter what happened next, they would chase it together.

“We have a breach in the north wall! Everyone check the wall!”

William pulled Donna to her feet and directed her toward the private room. “Stay in there.”

Grant keyed his radio. “I want a status report on all sections of the wall!”

The Eagles waited for the town to do more, but it was clear they were relying on the fighters outside to handle it.

Angela couldn’t take the chance, so she took over. “Special Forces team one, along with Jennifer,

will stay here with our people and the Mayor. The level four team will go to the breach. Kenn, Conner, and Charlie will take the level two team to the south wall for support.” Angela stood up, making motions. “Someone alert Ivan at the hotel and lock them down.”

Kyle and the other team leaders began to direct the security around the perimeter of the banquet hall without being told.

Donna waved. “We should get everyone into their basement cellars.”

Grant shook his head. “We’re safer right here with all of their security.”

Angela made another set of gestures and two teams took off running toward the hotel. There were half a dozen camp members there now, all pregnant or wounded. With only a skeleton crew on duty, they didn’t have enough manpower to protect all the ground floor entrances.

“We have a breach in south wall! South wall breach!”

Grant began putting the local fighters into positions around the entrances and exits to provide support.

“Do you think that’s it?” Donna worried. “Those gates are supposed to be secret.”

“We knew that wasn’t going to last.” William was looking at Angela, waiting to see what she was going to do next.

“We’re going to help secure your wall.”

None of the Eagles were surprised by Angela's decision and neither was her camp. The only people who thought about protesting were those who didn't want Angela to put herself in danger for strangers.

Kyle motioned Neil's team to go with the boss. Their time in this town had been mostly quiet and Kyle knew it needed to stay that way. If his team went, there was guaranteed to be gunfire. If Neil's team went, there might only be hand-to-hand combat.

Angela moved toward the exit, surrounded by security. She met Grant there, approving of the dozen hard bodies he had chosen to help. Everyone else would be left here. Hundreds of lives needed to be defended while they secured the wall.

Angela moved outside, aware of the townspeople letting Safe Haven lead them through this. It was obvious they knew the Eagles were better equipped for these moments. The fishermen had saved their lives by showing up at the naval station in time, but when it came to surprise ambushes, Safe Haven was legendary for surviving.

The teams went in opposite directions; William stayed with Angela and Marc. He was confident Grant and his men would be able to secure the wall, and he wasn't worried about Safe Haven not being able to hold up their end. He just wanted to see them in action.

The team leaders had chosen crews who were in good shape. As a result, it was the leaders who were out of breath by the time each team made it the mile

to the wall. They understood as they ran, listening to sporadic shouts of alarm, that the main town had been placed in the center so it was a quick access to any part of the wall if there was a problem.

Shadows moved as townspeople came to doors and windows. Fighters waved them back inside and kept moving.

Around the town perimeter, lights were now flickering in the darkness as security with torches ran to the wall. It was obvious from their reactions that the town had run this drill before. Everyone knew where to go without instructions.

Angela and William concentrated, searching for the evil thoughts that always came during an attack. They moved through the darkness, away from the center of town and into shadowy alleys between empty buildings. Many of the homes here were being reclaimed, lending to the atmosphere.

It took them eight minutes to reach the wall. In that time, they didn't spot anyone.

William hurried to the gate and the confused guards standing in a cold, nervous line in front of it. "Where's the problem?"

The guards pointed toward a section of the wall that had been cut away. It was obvious whoever had done it had spent hours chopping to make the body-sized hole near the ground. It would have required one swing every few minutes to keep from making too much noise.

"Whoever got in here, wanted in badly." Marc examined the wall. "Looks like an axe."

“Did you see anyone?” William questioned the guards. “Do we know how many there are?”

“We haven’t spotted anyone yet, but we’re searching.”

William sent his gift out further.

As the team stood there in the darkness, staring at each other in confusion, it hit all of them at the same time.

“They drew us away from both camps.” Angela was running before she finished the words, feeling the pain but ignoring it as her out of shape body was forced to get in gear. She didn’t hear radio calls or panic from her people yet and that was good, but if the intruders had come because of Safe Haven, other refugees would be called in. This town would be swarmed.

During the time it took to get to the banquet hall, Angela made mental contact with the others she’d sent to the wall, calling them back.

Marc stayed on her heels. He assumed the intruders were here for Safe Haven, which meant they were here for Angela. Whatever they found when they reached the hall would probably be dangerous to her. He was trying to figure out what the trap was before they triggered it.

The locals felt Angela’s concern and stayed close to her and her team, providing protection. Later, when there was time, William planned to order a complete sweep of the town to verify no one else was inside, but right now, he was positive Angela was right. They had been lured away.

“Where’s the boss?!”

“Let us out of here!”

Angela and her group arrived amid shouts and threats of violence. Everyone in the banquet hall was being kept inside by the local fighters who had been given orders from William to do so as he and Angela walked out. The townspeople were fine with that, but Safe Haven was beginning to rebel.

Angela stepped in and did a scan as camp members surged her way, calming. She quickly noticed absences. “Where’s Jennifer? And the Mayor?”

One of the rookies pointed toward the private room where Angela and the Mayor had their first discussion.

“Eagle teams to the private room!” Angela could feel the danger now, but she wasn’t picking up thoughts of hatred against Safe Haven. In fact, she wasn’t picking up any thoughts at all, only a sense of menace that worried her.

Everyone watched in concern as Neil’s team hurried into the private room.

“They’re gone!”

Angela and Marc hurried in, followed by William. They could hear the other teams returning outside.

Marc motioned Angela back toward the main hall. “You need to be in there with them.”

Angela knew it wasn't because of her injuries or her gender. Safe Haven had been on the verge of rebelling against the local security after only fifteen minutes. They needed to be able to see her. She went that way, leaving Marc to find the missing people.

Angela caught sight of William, but not Grant as she reentered the banquet hall. She motioned Neil to go support Marc and then went to stand in the center of the room to calm her people. Unlike Safe Haven, most of the locals were still seated, though they wore familiar expressions of terror. It reminded her of animals at slaughter time.

5

“Let go of her!” Kyle’s rage-filled shout echoed through the basement hallway, but the man dragging Jennifer away refused to comply.

The basement of the banquet hall was a maze of tunnels for deliveries and storage, along with office rooms for management. The lighting here was a single ceiling bulb at each intersection.

“If you keep coming, I’ll kill them both!”

With a gun in Jennifer’s ribs and the Mayor being forced to walk ahead of their captor, Kyle didn’t have a clear shot. It was only one man, but it was obvious from the way the intruder held his gun that he knew how to handle it. Kyle was worried about being able to make the shot at all down here in the dimness.

Behind Kyle, his team was in that deadly V formation with their weapons aimed on the intruder, but they were all in the same position as Kyle—no clear shot.

Kyle heard footsteps running down the hall and knew who it was. He didn't take his attention away from the man who was slowly tightening his grip around Jennifer's throat until she was having trouble breathing.

"Where do you need us?!" Marc shouted, seeing the attacker was approaching an intersection.

The attacker spun around, pulling Jennifer in front of him.

Ahead, a shadow broke away from the exit door. "Let her go, Lang!"

Jennifer's captor spun around again, jerking her along and knocking her into the wall.

Kyle's fury radiated through the hallway.

"Get out of here, Grant!"

Grant eased his way down the dim hall without a weapon. The man looked like he had done it before. Kyle was encouraged. This was a bad situation. None of them had a good shot. Jennifer's clothes were blending perfectly with the shadows, making it impossible to distinguish edges and lines.

"My truck is ten feet to the right of this exit." Grant calmly negotiated with the intruder. "I'll trade you the keys for the girl, as you go out."

The attacker obviously hadn't expected to be found so quickly. While he was trying to figure out

what to do, Donna ran out of his range and ducked behind Kyle and Marc.

Lang lifted the gun. “Get over here! You’re the one I came for!”

“That isn’t gonna happen.” Grant stopped. “It’s over. Let the girl go.”

“Down the road!” Lang knew he was trapped.

Grant shook his head. “You know me. I’m not going to let you take that girl out of here. I’ll kill you first.”

Faced with no choice, Lang dragged Jennifer toward the exit. “The keys for the girl!”

Grant held them up.

Lang shoved Jennifer down the hallway, putting space between them.

“Now!”

A team of locals came from the doorway in front of Grant at his call. They jumped on Lang, slamming him to the ground with the weight of their bodies and anger. When they began to beat on him, forcing him into submission, Grant didn’t stop it.

Kyle ran over to help Jennifer up. “Are you okay?”

Dazed from the lack of oxygen, Jennifer staggered against Kyle and waited for the shakes to go away. She had been caught off guard and unable to use her gifts because the man had threatened to kill the Mayor. He knew there was a descendant here and he had come prepared to die as long as he took the Mayor along. It had forced Jennifer to find a different solution. She’d been in the middle of

formulating a plan when Kyle arrived. She and the Mayor had only been in the bathroom for a couple of minutes, but it had been enough time for Lang to sneak through the small window and take them captive.

“Gun!”

The sound of a shot in the basement hallway was loud.

Everyone turned in horror as Grant slid to his knees.

Neil put his gun to Lang’s temple and pulled the trigger. Grant hadn’t seen the ankle holster in this dark hallway and Neil hadn’t wanted to insist on searching the man himself and angering the local team.

Blood slid down the front of Grant’s chest and fell to the carpet.

Angela appeared a second later, followed by the rest of Neil’s team.

A cold wind swept through the basement and snagged Angela’s attention away from the awful scene. She turned in the direction of the hotel, mental alarms blaring.

“What is it?” Marc could already tell from her expression that it was bad.

“Someone just took a lifeforce at the hotel.”

Marc took off running.

Everyone else stiffened in anticipation of radios lighting up with refugees or trackers recognizing magic and calling in the horde again.

Grant slumped to the floor.

William and Donna hurried to help him.

The hum of magic filled the hallway.

“Keep her here!” Marc shouted over his shoulder. He wanted Angela in the basement with Kyle and away from all the unprotected doors and windows upstairs. The gunshot had drawn the locals from their banquet hall posts, leaving Safe Haven shorthanded to cover it all.

Angela stared at the radio on the floor. If the refugees hadn’t noticed the lifeforce being taken, it was possible they might escape this without the town being overrun. She didn’t want to risk it by using magic here to heal Grant. She didn’t tell William not to however, aware that his healing gifts were inferior to hers. It was a rare descendant who could do more than the basics because they couldn’t practice it.

“I could use your help.”

Angela hurried. She had medical skills for a moment like this.

William turned to her with a deep frown. “I got him stable, but it won’t hold.”

Angela nodded to a few of her men. “Make us a stretcher.”

Eagles hurried to do it as she knelt next to Grant to examine his wound. It looked as if the bullet was still in there. “Why doesn’t this town have a doctor?”

“Because my parents died.”

“Make it a priority to find or train medical help.” Angela wrapped a curtain panel around Grant

in case he started bleeding again during the move. As she helped him, she stayed mentally connected with Marc, worried. “Why did these people attack you?”

“Lang and his group came through not long after the war.” Donna was recovering her nerves while longing for a cigarette. “We had to kick them out for repeated thefts.”

The Eagles moved Grant onto the stretcher they’d made by breaking apart chairs and tying them with rope that was always in the small pouches on their tool belts.

Donna’s face revealed her remorse. “Captain Grant wanted to put them down, but I wouldn’t let him.”

Angela met the woman’s eye. “You’ve learned that lesson?”

Donna nodded, expression morphing into the rage that Safe Haven’s people expressed daily. “There won’t be a next time.”

Sweet Hot Chocolate In A Great Wrapper

1

“Coming in!” Kyle made the call so he didn’t surprise Eagles who were supposed to be on duty at the hotel entryways.

“All clear in here!”

Marc hurried into the lobby at Ivan’s adrenaline-laced shout. Dog and Samantha were in the corner near the entry to the bar. Around the drafty lobby, there were three bodies and Eagles with victorious expressions. Marc scanned the scene from one side to the other as Kyle and his team came in.

Broken windows and overturned furniture implied the exits had been too well covered, forcing the intruders to come in a harder way. Marc saw muddy footprints on the carpet that led to the elevators, where a blurry smear implied there had been a physical struggle. He spotted mud on Peter’s knees and legs, and assumed the soldier had been responsible for stopping someone from getting onto the elevator and up to their people. Marc kept scanning as he swung around.

He saw a knife in a picture where someone had missed, and another blade protruding from a body lying on the floor under it. *Second time was the charm*, he thought, vision automatically splitting everything into a grid. He spotted blood on the wall beside the hotel desk and the edge of a shoe sticking out from behind that counter, but there wasn't an Eagle nearby. As Marc stepped closer, he realized the body had been drained. Whoever had killed this one, had taken the lifeforce.

Marc looked around and found only Samantha within range. More than surprised, he stared at her, waiting for an explanation.

Neil ran into the lobby and quickly spotted Samantha. He ran toward her.

Kyle grabbed Neil's arm, swinging the man around before he could interrupt. "Wait."

Neil jerked away and tried to go again, but was stopped by Kenn, who shoved him back toward Kyle. Kenn didn't speak. He didn't need to.

Samantha was staring at her hands. Resting them on her small stomach bulge, she didn't appear to be aware of anyone.

Marc knelt, putting up a hand to stop Dog when the wolf would have come over to him. "Samantha?"

Samantha slowly lifted her chin. She had a split lip and blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

"Tell me what happened."

Samantha responded to the alpha tone when she might not have to anything else. She was in shock.

“I decided to go to the banquet hall. Ivan was going to walk me over. We came down the elevator and someone attacked us. I... I don’t remember much after that.”

Marc looked around for Ivan and found the soldier slumped against the bar behind Samantha. He was splattered in drops of blood, as was the carpet and the doorframe.

“There was a small group in the lobby when we came down. They must have cut the glass, because we didn’t hear anything break. Dog and I did the best we could over here, but one of them got by us.” Ivan lifted an aching arm and pointed to the body behind the hotel counter. “He was headed for the elevator like the other ones. Samantha wouldn’t get out of the way and he slapped her.” Ivan stopped, not certain how to describe what happened next.

Marc didn’t need to hear it. He was currently reliving it in the minds of everyone who had witnessed it. He stood up and made a motion to Kyle and Kenn.

Glaring at all of them, Neil hurried forward to comfort Samantha.

“It was self-defense. We don’t need to talk about it again.” That was Marc’s way of telling the Eagles to keep it from the camp if they could.

The Eagles had no problem with it. In fact, they were almost glad it had happened because now Samantha’s injury would be healed. All of the council would be back to full health by the time they left.

Dog sat next to Marc's ankle like he always had in the past after moments like these, expecting the usual reward.

Marc gave it to him, spending a full minute scratching his chin and ears. Dog had blood over his muzzle and a slight limp that said he had fought hard.

"Someone should tell the boss." Kyle was anxious to verify that Jennifer was still with the rest of the camp. He had only been willing to leave because Angela was with her.

"Go provide security for the boss."

Kyle hurried off at Marc's order, grateful. Right then, he couldn't care less that Marc didn't have the authority to give it.

2

"Here they come." Jennifer and Angela were waiting at the main glass doors as Kyle and his team came in. Even though William and a double escort of local fighters was around them, both women instantly felt better when the Special Forces team stepped in and surrounded them. Safe Haven always felt that way when it came to security. They had been through too much together to trust anyone else.

"There was a minor breach at the hotel. The bad guys are dead."

"Injuries?" Angela was resisting the urge to go there.

“Bumps and bruises, but that’s about it.” Kyle didn’t mention who had taken the lifeforce or exactly what had happened. He tried hard not to think about it so the other curious descendants in the banquet hall wouldn’t pick it up. He was certain Marc’s order to keep it quiet would be echoed by Angela. “They’re cleaning the bodies out of the lobby.”

“I need an escort to the doctor’s office.”

Next to Angela, Jennifer perked up. She had been busy berating herself for getting into that situation and not being able to get out of it. Jennifer didn’t know what to do.

“I have a way for you to get rid of that restless energy.” Angela motioned Jennifer to follow.

Jennifer didn’t care what the chore was. She wanted to redeem herself immediately.

“There’s nothing to redeem.” Angela tried not to start shivering as they stepped out into the eerily silent town. “You’ve seen how many times people have gotten by the rest of us. This is a hard game we’re playing.”

Jennifer tried to let it go because she knew that’s what Angela wanted, but it bothered her.

The well-protected women walked to the doctor’s office, where Grant had been moved into an exam room. Three team medics were with him. Angela had told them more help would arrive shortly.

Jennifer caught the thought, pace increasing. “He saved my life. I have no problem with that.”

Behind them, Kyle frowned but didn't protest.

Daryl and Morgan entered the clinic first to confirm things were clear, while Shawn and Whitney stayed next to the boss. Kyle lurked in the rear, daring anyone to come near them.

Jennifer hurried into the clinic, going to the only exam room with a light on.

Seconds later, a hum of power flowed through the clinic, telling everyone magic was being used.

Angela had brought up her personal shield over the building so it wouldn't be detected. She also intended to tell William his open use of magic needed to stop or he would end up drawing trackers to the town. His shield wouldn't be enough. When she had been playing with her gifts in the alley, she had assumed there was some sort of protection that kept the town from being discovered, but she now knew that wasn't the case. This town was incredibly lucky to still be here.

"Actually, it's the water." William refused to say more or lift his mental shield because they had an audience.

"My beautiful angel."

Grant's voice came echoing down the hall to where Kyle was standing next to Angela.

"You have the most beautiful hair I've ever seen."

Kyle moved toward the room.

When Kyle's team would have interfered, Angela held up her hand. *Wait for it.*

Curious, the team paused to observe.

Kyle stopped in the entryway of the exam room. Jennifer was leaning over Grant as if she were his lover. Grant, fully recovered, had one hand wrapped in her curls and the other clasping her wrist.

“I’ve wanted to touch it since I first saw you.”

“You saved my life. I’ll cut it off and give it to you in a braid if you want it. Thank you.”

Jennifer was allowing the touch of a man other than him. Kyle barely controlled his jealousy. Bitterness flew out instead. “If you don’t stop hitting on her, you’re going to get shot again!”

Grant burst out laughing.

Jennifer turned around to yell at Kyle, but his quizzical expression stopped her. She joined Grant in amusement as the adrenaline faded.

Kyle didn’t like being laughed at. “What am I missing?”

Grant recovered enough to look at him, eyes sparkling. “She has nothing to worry about from me. *You*, on the other hand, are simply adorable.”

Kyle stared in complete confusion as everyone else chuckled. “I don’t get it.”

Jennifer snickered. “He’s gay, Kyle. He likes guys and screwing with people.”

Kyle stared in suspicion, then embarrassment. “Oh.”

Fresh laughter rolled out into the night.

Angela turned to William. “Do you need help cleaning the hallway or repairing the wall?”

William's regret was obvious. "No, please get rest before your trip. My people will handle it. I'm very sorry you were attacked here."

Angela waved it off. She was glad it hadn't been Safe Haven getting someone else attacked for a change. This time, it wasn't one of *their* loose ends. "I need to get everyone settled in the hotel. I'll be up if you need anything. Please don't hesitate to ask."

Angela stepped out into the cold night air with Kyle's team. Kyle would remain to escort Jennifer when she was ready. The town had a few injured, with no dead—matching Safe Haven. Because of that, the town was calm and again mingling in the banquet hall. It had been impossible to keep the two camps separated during the breach, but there was no reason to do so now because people were getting along.

As Angela began to close the clinic door, it was pulled out of her hand.

William's face appeared. "I forgot. Would you like an escort to the boat?"

Angela sighed. "It would be my honor to accept."

William gave her a charming grin and then shut the door.

Angela was smiling all the way to the banquet center. He was doing exactly what she would have if guests of theirs had been attacked while under her protection. That, of course, would have required Safe Haven being in their own town, like this one.

That was the hardest of all this for Angela. She really did want to stay.

Donna was in the banquet hall, comforting her people when Angela returned. The frazzled Mayor hurried over to express the same regrets that William had, pleading with Angela not to hold it against the people who wanted to go with them.

Angela spent the next half hour calming Donna, while waiting for the lobby of the hotel to be cleared so she could move her camp. She could feel their twitchiness. It mirrored hers. Despite enjoying being here and wishing she could stay, Angela found herself eager for morning. It was tiresome to pretend a civility she rarely felt anymore. It was time to go.

New sounds echoed through the town for the next three hours as the townspeople repaired the wall and swept the town to verify Lang's entire group had been removed. Every local was relieved each time a team checked in to let the Mayor know the progress of the wall and that no one else had been discovered.

Safe Haven was relieved when the radios stayed quiet. None of them knew who or what might be moving through the darkness around them and they didn't want to.

“Keep up!” Adrian increased speed on the bike. The wolves chasing them through the cold, damp woods were determined to have a meal, but Adrian didn’t want to use his gun. During the six hours they’d been gone, he had viewed several campsites that were new enough to make him certain there were refugees all over this area. What he hadn’t counted on was the wildlife. Nature hadn’t attacked them in so long that he had forgotten to watch out for it.

Staying on Adrian’s bumper, his team rode through the darkness behind him with grins of terrified excitement on their frozen faces and wild animals nipping at their muddy boots. The two drag riders used knives on the animals, while the others cleared a path through the underbrush with the once expensive bikes.

“Up here!” Adrian steered up the incline, gaining air as he reached the pavement of the highway.

A few seconds later, all five bikes were speeding over the broken concrete at speeds the wolves couldn’t match.

The pack stopped as the sound of humans faded into the distance, then padded back into the forest they were sworn to protect.

4

“All clear!”

“Everyone is accounted for.”

“Tonya and the medics too?”

Kyle gave a curt nod. “Everyone.”

Angela knew his attitude wasn't because of her question. Jennifer being attacked had reminded him that Safe Haven was still a target, even if it was just to hurt other people.

“Samantha is waiting at a cafeteria table for you.”

“I'm on my way.”

Kyle assumed Samantha would get the third degree from Angela and approved. Unlike the descendants, Kyle hadn't gotten to view what had happened, but magic use could have endangered them all.

“Mayor Marsh is shoving supplies and vehicles at us now. She feels bad we were attacked. I want to take advantage of her generosity.”

Kyle gave a grunt this time.

“I have a folder for Marc. He and William are going to take a walk around the wall now. It's been four hours since the attack; they want to verify every breach has been repaired.” She handed him the folder.

Kyle was gone a few seconds later, not in the mood to spend time talking to anyone. Jennifer had insisted on resuming work immediately, even though she'd used a lot of energy to heal Captain Grant. She and Ivan's team were escorting the few remaining Safe Haven people from the banquet hall to the hotel as they finished eating. Dinner had been interrupted and the pregnant women hadn't gotten

to free graze the way they were used to. With the threat over, the females were lingering to munch. Angela wasn't rushing them.

Kyle saw Marc and William climbing up the ladder and hurried to catch them. He shoved the folder into Marc's hand before returning to the ground. He was out of sight a few seconds later, without a glance around the wall that all the Eagles wanted to see from this angle.

William and Marc exchanged glances. They understood Kyle's attitude. Angela had been in that situation several times and Mayor Marsh had gone through it tonight. No man wanted to see his woman being threatened by a scumbag. It was hard to live with, especially when the females refused to give up the dangerous duty to stay sheltered with the camp like their men wanted them to.

William and Marc began a walk of the wall in the dark. The torches the guards used on the first sweep were now out and there were no noises coming from any of the dim homes around them. Insects and animals were making noise again and the spooky vibe was gone. It was a relief to both of them.

"We'll have the rest of the town finished within the next half hour. It's taking longer because Captain Grant usually handles this sort of thing."

"You're getting a crash course."

William chuckled at Marc's joke. "It looks that way." William paused to examine the first gate.

This is where Safe Haven would leave from in the morning.

Marc would have picked up the sadness even if he hadn't caught the thought. It was intense. "Are you going to be okay when we leave?"

"I'm not dangerous to anyone."

Marc knew that wasn't true. "We have a council. It's seven people, but we usually bring in the team leaders too. Sometimes personal dramas do get in the way, but it keeps all of us from going out of our minds. You might try that."

"Actually, we did have a similar set up before the war. Afterwards, people were so shocked by what happened that they just wanted to be taken care of. It was hard to fill Grant's position the first time."

Marc thought of how Safe Haven's people had been when he and Angela had first joined the camp. "I think it's human nature."

William sighed. "Whenever I hear that, I'm always reminded of the Laws of Nations."

"The essays by Emer Vattel?" Marc pulled it from the college education that was required of a Marine officer, glad that he could.

William nodded. "Our founders were certain this town would be the final chance for humanity to achieve a balance that doesn't come from politics. We're living his vision."

Marc thought of the name of the town. "So Ciemus means final chance?"

"It translates to Last Call or last sanctuary. From here, there's nowhere left for humanity to run."

William turned toward the hotel to pinpoint Angela's location.

Marc paused. *Last call, a sanctuary.* That's why Angela called the meeting. She'd figured out what this town was and why it was here.

"It's a relief to know there are two of us now, though you won't even officially be a village until you reach 300 people."

"The Laws of Nations. Do *you* believe that's possible?" Marc didn't believe for a minute that this town was living it in every way.

"It's become easier since the war, but yes. Politics destroys society."

"I always thought mankind's greed did."

"That part of Utopia has to succeed for everything else to work," William informed him seriously. "Once you breed a society that no longer depends upon a governing body, but rules itself, then there's no longer a reason for the greed. A society formed in that way will take care of itself without expecting anything in return."

"Civic duty."

William smiled. "Exactly, except it comes from a spiritual and moral level that simply won't allow a corrupt decision." William moved to the next gate on the wall.

The view from atop the wall was impressive, but Marc was more concerned with the wall itself. They'd done a great job of welding sections of the homes together. The wide area at the top was set up with a small shelter near each gate for the guards.

Plastic tubs painted black held their weapons and gear. It was organized, but not enough to be a true defense if the refugees found them. Marc knew there was a lot he could do here. Within a month, he could have weapons up that would allow for an almost automated protection. It was a shame they couldn't stay.

"Yes, it is. There's a lot I could help you with as well."

Marc followed, questions forming in his mind faster than he could ask them.

William cut him off. "Your lover told me you would want things like that. I've already sent my notebooks over."

Marc frowned at the term. Angela was more than that.

"I meant the island woman."

Marc's frown grew. "We're not lovers."

"That's how she views you—like lovers who've been torn apart. Be careful."

"I will. We're watching her now." Marc hated it that William knew their every secret.

"If you were open to more power, you could know my secrets." William lowered his voice. "And I do have a few, even from my mate. Don't we all?"

Marc nodded. That was also human nature. "Will you tell me how to do the things I want?"

"It's in the notebooks."

"How did you know somebody would want them?"

"I didn't. I wrote it for myself."

“I don’t think your notebooks are going to cover everything I want to know.”

“The information you seek the hardest, Marcus Brady, does not lie in any mind but yours. You already know the answer. You refuse to accept it.”

“Tell me anyway.”

William stopped and spun around so fast that Marc was forced to retreat to keep from colliding with him.

“Fine! I will.” William studied him intently, verifying his suspicions first. “You can’t accept her as anything other than what you knew as a child.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. The reason the dog’s backfire snared her so easily was because she was looking for an escape. He threw a rope down a dark hole and she grabbed it, not caring what the cost was at the time. You would have done the same.”

“She’s not trapped.”

“Really?” William turned toward the hotel, pointing. “If you had your way right now, what would she be doing?”

Marc’s first thought was *sleeping until I get there, then waiting with warm food and a clean body.*

Marc dropped his head in shame. Of course, it was the truth. He wanted Angela to perform the female roles and let him handle the man stuff. He’d never felt emasculated before they’d come to Safe Haven.

“The guard dog doesn’t feel that way. He’s empowered by her. Why can’t you be the same?”

“I’ve felt Angie ask that about a thousand times.”

“Before you go throwing yourself off my wall, I’m going to let you in on a secret your subconscious doesn’t want you to figure out. Are you ready?”

Marc gave a curt nod, now humiliated.

“It’s not because you’re a bad person. It’s because you couldn’t protect her when you were kids. You didn’t know what was going on until most of it was over and you’ve carried that guilt all your life. You don’t have any resentment for the female of our species. You hate yourself.” William placed a hand on Marc shoulder, sending comfort in his gift. “You shouldn’t. She’s right. You’re a wonderful man and when you finally accept that none of it was your fault, you’ll be able to be her soulmate. You won’t need to find a plan to break a bond or form a connection that’s based on lies and manipulation. She already feels that way about you. Once you can love yourself too, everything will work out exactly the way you want.”

“How do I do that?”

William moved toward the third gate. “Let’s keep working.”

“Adrian was certain you could help me.”

“I can. I’m just not sure I want to.”

“Why not? I’m a great guy. You just said so.”

William frowned instead of giving the laugh Marc was going for. “That’s the problem. She’s not.”

“I guess you aren’t either?”

“Not even close. I would have charmed her faster than the guard dog did. You have an amazing woman there.”

“Not you, too!”

“Yes, me too. You have to ease up and accept that you’re not the center of her universe anymore. Now, she’s yours. Face it and your problems are over.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I know you wish you could follow her into her dreams and protect her there too. That’s why I like you for her instead of the other one. He’ll get her killed.”

“Yes, he will. He doesn’t... Wait. How do you know that about me?”

William chuckled. “Would you like me to tell you how to dream walk without her knowing?”

“Depends on what I have to trade for it.”

“Just a promise, if it’s one you can keep.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t drop any more of the Mitchel family here. One of those per clan is also enough.”

Marc chuckled. “You sound like you know them.”

“I know *of* them, and that, my new friend, is quite enough. We’re only taking this one because he’s not corrupt. I have no idea how that’s possible,

but it is. I suspect Brandon will replace Grant, in time.”

Marc didn't care about that. “I've got a nightly meeting with the kids. Will you be up late? I'd like to talk more.”

William chuckled. “I don't usually go to sleep until dawn.”

Marc wondered if Angela would prefer that schedule once they settled on the island.

“Does she have nightmares? Sleeping during the day eases that.”

“Not as often anymore.”

“Are you sure?”

Marc realized he wasn't. Half their sleep times were still apart and nearly all of them had been for months before this.

William sighed. “How long until your meeting?”

“Less than an hour.”

“Okay. I'll try to hit the points that matter. Listen hard.”

“I will.” Marc wasn't feeling the cold or scanning the darkness. William had both of those covered with his powerful sweeps and thick shield. Marc just concentrated on not falling off the wall as William began to give him information and secrets about descendant mates that even Adrian didn't know.

“Hey, boss.” Neil fell in step, seeing he had her alone for the moment, except for Ivan, her guard. “I think the babies did it.”

Angela’s head went around, finding Neil behind her.

They moved into the elevator without speaking, waiting until they were alone.

As the elevator began to move up the hotel floors, Angela motioned Neil to explain.

“I’ve never seen her in shock like this over anything related to her gifts. I know she hasn’t reclaimed anyone yet, but have you ever witnessed a descendant react that way?”

Angela shook her head, waiting for the next piece of the puzzle Neil was working on.

“After it was over, I got her settled in the cafeteria because she hadn’t eaten yet. As I set a tray in front of her, she told me something that made me believe she didn’t do it.”

“What did she say?”

“They didn’t mean to. They were hungry and then scared.”

“Yes, I can see where that would make you think the babies were responsible. I’m on my way to talk to her now. Come?”

“Yes.” Neil was glad for the invitation. It was also extra security for the boss as she moved through the hotel, though it wasn’t needed at this point. All their new members had volunteered to take shifts on security duty outside the hotel so Angela would be able to sleep after the camp finally

settled down. Neil was relieved. It meant he would have time with Samantha, who obviously needed it.

Angela stopped in the hall outside the cafeteria, aware that most of the council and team leaders were already inside. She could feel them, but she could also hear them. The mood was always high after a survival victory.

The large cafeteria was busy with people waiting in line to see what Brittani had made. Mindful of supplies, the woman was still coming up with a full tray of food for everyone, for each meal. She was getting inventive here with a stove and refrigerator, and some of it had come out surprisingly good. Angela wasn't certain who would get to enjoy the powered setup on the boat, but she hoped it wouldn't be Gus's pretty mate. They needed Brittani to become an Eagle.

Neil waited, hoping Angela was able to see something.

"I haven't been able to see anything since before we got here."

Neil stared in surprise at the admission. "Neither has Samantha."

"Neither has Jennifer, Adrian, or anyone else, that I know of..." Angela's eyes widened. "We can't view anything because we're evolving. We took lifeforces. People died—a lot of people. It was an awful tragedy."

"But Samantha only took one, tonight," Neil pointed out. "Why has it been blocking her the whole time?"

“Because she was already in the middle of an evolution.” Angela didn’t want to bring up bad memories, but it was impossible to avoid it here. “Jeremy’s death scarred her. Surviving the time in the mountain affected all our gifts in one way or another.”

Neil frowned. “Is it normal for it to take so long to come back? We’ve been out of the mountain for over two weeks.”

“It hasn’t been gone for her the entire time. She predicted the storm that hit the mall.”

“Then your theory doesn’t make sense.”

“It does if there were three evolutions, instead of one.”

Neil groaned. “Because she’s pregnant, the babies went through the tragedy with her! They have to evolve too.”

Angela nodded, actually able to smile. “I thought it was something bad.” She smacked Neil on the shoulder. “Let’s go tell her what’s going on so she’ll relax and you can get some sleep.”

Neil hurried to get the cafeteria door open for her. “That would be great.”

Ivan followed, storing every detail he’d heard.

6

“Are you off duty right now?”

Neil let out a sigh as he dropped onto the bed. Angela had just left, with Samantha in the clear. The boss had even escorted them to their room,

chatting and smiling so the guards would know to relax. “Yes.” He groaned. “I love a firm mattress. This is a firm mattress.”

“When do you have to go back on?”

“Ten wonderful hours. After I love you, I thought we’d nap and then go down to enjoy the pool.”

Samantha paused on her way to the bathroom.

Neil didn’t look at her. He wasn’t sure if she was ready for that. Frankly, neither was he, but they had to move on.

Samantha went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Neil sighed, sitting up. *Why are women like that? Men at least give a clue about how we feel.*

“Get naked.”

Neil grinned. “Okay.” *There’s a clue.*

He was stripped and under the cool, soft sheets in less than a minute. But he wasn’t hard. He was nervous. Her injury was healed, but her heart wasn’t. He’d only brought it up because their goodnight kisses had gotten hotter since the rescue at the hangar, leading him to believe she was ready.

“Oh, damn!”

Neil flew from the bed and shoved into the bathroom, dangling.

Samantha was standing in front of the mirror. Also naked, she was gaping at her stomach.

Neil glanced in the mirror and froze. She was big. A basketball-sized lump under her skin was

pushing outward, forcing her to stretch. Deep purple lines crisscrossed her skin.

“Is this normal?”

“I’ll find out.” Neil headed for the bedroom to get dressed.

“Hey!”

He turned around. “What?”

“I thought we...” Her face fell. “I’m too fat now, right?”

Neil stuttered, brain frying. “I don’t. What...?”

Samantha held in tears. “I’m sorry.”

Neil pointed at the bed. “Get. In.”

Samantha frowned, hand coming up. “You can’t—”

“Now, Sammi.”

Samantha shivered at his tone. She’d last heard it as he groaned and grunted behind her before the quake. She got into the bed.

Outside the room, Ben and Wade grinned at the noises. It was good to know the couple was recovering from Jeremy’s death.

Pam came down the hall on a round of the floor, but she didn’t stop to chat. The Special Forces men were intimidating to the other Eagles, as they should be, but Pam also wanted to reach the bottom floors before the shift changed. Morgan was on duty at the kid’s meeting. Pam wanted him to see her in clean clothes, with clean hair. She was careful to block her thoughts from him by thinking about her duty to

the camp, but under that, she was hoping he might be interested in what she had to offer.

Pam smiled at the funny feeling of the elevator on her stomach as it dropped, then smoothed her expression into the calm alertness her job required. The senior men were adamant about not spooking camp members.

Morgan felt her coming. There was only one female who drew him that way. Morgan hid a smile as he smelled Green Apple shampoo. It used to be a standard for women trying to get a date. Now, it was all they had, but it still brought good memories.

Pam didn't have a reason to stop, so she slowed as she passed the room where Marc was teaching the children to control themselves.

A squeal of laughter echoed through the door.

Pam looked at Morgan, stopping.

Morgan stared back, wondering what she thought of him.

Pam felt her cheeks grow hot. "What's going on in there?"

The guard shrugged, keeping a straight face. "Nightly meeting."

Pam put a hand on her hip as another loud blast of young laughter spilled from the workout room. "Does the boss know he's not giving them real lessons?"

Morgan pinned her with a hard look. "Says who?"

His tone said not to tell anyone. She hadn't been going to, so the reminder was insulting. She lifted her chin. "I'm no snitch!"

Morgan resisted the urge to tell her he thought she was sweet, hot chocolate in a great wrapper and dropped the arrogant attitude. "She wants them to bond. Go think about that somewhere they won't catch it."

Pam left to do exactly that.

By the time she'd gotten off the elevator on the ground floor, she had figured out the puzzle. Angela wanted them to bond so the kids wouldn't be able to rebel against Marc as easily if there was a next time. Pam liked it that she was able to keep up so far. Joining the Eagles had been the right decision for her.

Angela caught the thought as she walked by and was glad. She had a lot of work for Pam if the woman continued to prove herself.

Angela scuffed her shoe on the carpet, almost tripping. Her feet hadn't adjusted to civilized foundations yet. Sadly, they wouldn't have time. "Maybe on the boat. That should be long enough to make me miss these apocalyptic roads."

Playdates

1

“**S**afe Haven doesn’t steal. Safe Haven makes their beds, cleans the rooms, and brings down their garbage!” Jennifer had to shout on this floor as den mothers fought to get everything together in time for Angela’s deadline. Safe Haven had arrived with one hundred and fifty-five people. They were leaving with two hundred and thirty-four. That would eventually allow for extra hands with the kids, but not today. “Safe Haven leaves in five hours. Make sure to bring down your garbage!”

Jennifer had already placed a thank you note in all the rooms Safe Haven had used. She was hoping at least leaving the hotel clean would make up for not having anything to give their hosts in exchange for the rescue and hospitality. When she’d mentioned that, Angela had told her it was covered but not how.

Jennifer moved toward the elevator, almost glad to be leaving. The echo of children yelling inside this narrow hallway was giving her a migraine. The Eagles were also suffering from the noise and sharing stashes of Advil, but her issue was lack of sleep. Jennifer was pulling a double even though

they had new rookies to help. She had been made to feel weak; she was afraid she still looked it. She had repairs to do on her image with the Eagles and the camp, even though she hadn't done anything wrong. She couldn't have people view her as vulnerable in any way. She also wanted to make sure everything went smoothly for the bugout. Then she would sleep in Kyle's truck. He was crashed now, along with the other drivers. They wouldn't get up until 8am, when Safe Haven was going to the banquet hall for breakfast goodbyes with the town.

“We kicked your ass!”

“You kicked me in the balls.”

Jennifer paused for the team to come out of the workout room where they'd been burning off restless energy. She knew Kenn's history. It wasn't so long ago that Kenn had been okay with beating on people in the same manner. “Everything okay here?”

“Right as rain.” Ivan grinned. He had bloody knuckles.

Jennifer understood Kenn had received the beating this time. Shaking her head, she moved down the hall. *You guys don't know you're poking a bear.* She moved into the elevator. This was the second time Ivan and his team had picked on Kenn while they'd been here. Jennifer was positive the Marine would pay them back soon. She was almost looking forward to it. If they did it again, she definitely would be. Bullying wasn't okay in Safe Haven.

The elevator opened; Jennifer was drawn to the window. There was a lot of activity in the lot around the hotel. Eagles were fueling tanks, airing tires, letting engines run to make sure their vehicles were ready for travel, and other chores. In the middle of the chaos, Jennifer spotted Marc.

She frowned. He was supposed to be sleeping, but he'd been helping William and the Mayor secure the town because Grant couldn't yet. She'd healed the worst of Grant's injury, but he still needed recovery time.

Marc had only been back for an hour and it was dawn. Jennifer saw Kevin approaching Marc. She didn't expect anything good by the way Kevin's chin was down and Marc's was up.

“Got a minute?”

Marc grunted. “Yeah, I'm not busy right now.”

Instead of flushing, Kevin got angry. “That's exactly what I need to talk to you about.”

Without sleeping yet, Marc didn't have the patience to deal with the excuses he felt coming. “I won't tell them about your drinking problem or your attitude issues. Try not to have any of either while you're here.”

Kevin stared in surprise. “How did you know? I haven't told anyone.”

“You knew Adrian had a handcuff key.”

Kevin froze.

“You betrayed me. Deep down, you knew there was going to be payment for that at some point. You

feel it coming and you're running." Marc shook his head in disgust. "And that's why you were never going to get on the boat with us anyway, Kevin. You've been a lazy, drunken coward. You'd rather start over where nobody knows your name, than to be stuck with us and have to make up for your mistakes—like we're all doing. Good luck to you and good riddance."

Marc moved by the speechless man and went to finish directing their trucks into a line in front of the hotel.

In the window upstairs, Jennifer turned away. She hadn't known Kevin was drinking too much, but she had picked up the thought about the handcuff key from Marc not long after the UN mission team had returned. She'd assumed Marc wasn't going to punish him for it. *Another one who sets time bombs to detonate weeks later. Lovely.*

Jennifer continued her rounds of the hotel. "Safe Haven does not steal. Safe Haven cleans their rooms and brings down their garbage..."

2

"I'm sorry they're going."

William looked up from the Mayor's bed. "Even after all the time you've spent jealous? You really haven't been a gracious host."

Sitting in the chair by the bed with her one daily cigarette, Donna let out a deep sigh and a cloud of smoke. "I'm sorry for that."

Donna's bedroom was a single space with a bed and a desk. She preferred to live here instead of in a home alone where it wasted resources. She'd told him it was important to lead by example. William was always impressed with her. When Donna finally faced her destiny, he would be right there to support her. "I'm not."

Keeping the sheet around her body, Donna twisted around to look at him. "Why?"

"Because the time with Safe Haven has reminded me of things. Would you like to hear them?"

Donna nodded, gently crushing out her smoke to finish later. She loved the way his mind worked. William was amazing. She cherished the time they spent together.

"The first is that we have a lot of work to do on our security."

"I agree completely. Between the information they gave us and what we come up with on our own from it, we'll double our chances of survival."

"I think so too. The next thing I've learned is that I'm too open about what I can do."

Donna was relieved to hear him admit it. That had been one of the town's biggest problems with his family. Unlike the other descendants who had come before, the Sinclair family didn't like to remain hidden.

“That’s because you can’t help anyone if you hide.”

“You’ve helped everyone in this town by remaining here.”

“I thought about going to the island with them.”

Donna smile widened. “So did I.”

They both chuckled.

“That’s part of the third thing I learned while we’ve had guests. I wouldn’t want our town to be different. If we went with Safe Haven, it would be.”

“I didn’t want to admit it, but I like how strong their women are. If they had stayed, I would have wanted to be like that too.”

“What’s wrong with being like them?”

Donna’s cheeks turned red in the dawn light. “They would find out I’m an Invisible and then I wouldn’t have you.”

William stared at her in surprised amusement. “You think I like you because no one knows you’re a descendant.”

Donna gave a quick nod. “It’s our secret.”

“Why were you so nervous?”

“I’m always fighting what I want.” Donna was glad to be able to trust him enough to tell him the truth. “I want to be like you. I’m just scared of what I might do with it.”

“Aww. Come here.” William gathered her onto his chest and kissed her. “I think this town could use a bit of naughtiness from its Mayor.”

“What if I get out of control?”

He shrugged under her. “I think I can handle you.”

“Yeah, you probably can.”

William kissed her to silence any further conversation on the topic. He hoped she would follow through, but even if she didn't, he was now able to see that forcing someone to become something they didn't want to be would never work. It was evident in many of the relationships in Safe Haven, impossible to deny. Free will had to apply to humans in every form and they had to obey moral standards that they set for themselves. Society would never keep from destroying itself until they figured that out.

William let go of his plan to get Donna pregnant so she would accept her descendant gifts to bond with their child. Thanks to Angela's arrival, and the things he'd learned while the refugee camp was here, William didn't want to be that type of person anymore. He had just set his moral line and he wasn't going to cross it.

Unless Angela calls for me...

3

“Is everyone in here ready to go?” Ray and the Eagles in charge of escorting the wounded entered the clinic with cheery smiles. All of them were ready to be back on the road.

Tonya handed him a paper with the list of names. “I'm going to the hotel now. Mark me off

the list.” She hurried out, bracing against the cold wind moving in from the northwest.

Ray motioned one of his men to go with her, then scanned the people in the clinic. He saw everyone was waiting in the lobby, but he motioned Pam to check all the rooms anyway. “When I call your name, give me a shout and then we’ll get everybody moved.” There were only three people here, making it easier. “Trinity?”

There were two women in the room, so Ray had to ask.

A stocky blonde woman with black streaks through her curls and a 9mm on her hip stood up. Her arm had been broken from a fall during the chaos in the banquet center. Her new cast was already receiving signatures.

Ray went over to her, taking his pen from his pocket. He put his name on a small corner. “I’m Ray.” He shook her good hand.

“Trinity.”

Ray pointed at an Eagle. “That’s Conner. Just stay with him.”

Trinity immediately went, giving the boy a curious smile. “Wow. You’re a young one.”

Ray and the others chuckled as Conner blushed. It wasn’t hard to decipher what that meant. Trinity was obviously single and hunting for a Safe Haven male. Ray certainly intended to go that way if his heart ever mended.

“You must be Jayda.” He held out his hand to the other woman in the room.

The dark skinned redhead gave Ray the same smile that Trinity had flashed. “Do you need a volunteer for guard duty?”

Ray grinned. “Another Eagle hopeful. That’s awesome. We need you ladies to step up.”

Jayda moved to the next Eagle in line without being told. She’d been observing Safe Haven the entire time they were here. She had always known she was going to ask to go. “As soon as my pulled muscle heals, I’ll be signing up for tryouts.”

The Eagles approved her eagerness. Running to the wall and tripping over something in the dark had injured Jayda. She’d kept herself from falling on debris, but pulled a muscle.

Ray went to the last person waiting. “Captain Grant. I’m your personal escort to breakfast and then to the vehicles.” Ray shook the man’s hand.

Ray quickly let go. The heat coming off Grant’s skin was giving him sweaty palms.

“How did you get stuck with me?” Grant stood up with the help of a cane. Jennifer hadn’t completely healed his injuries. He had refused to let her drain herself to do it.

“The boss was one short, so I volunteered. It’s an honor to welcome you to Safe Haven.”

Grant grinned and didn’t speak his dirty thought.

Ray and his team escorted the injured trio toward the banquet hall. The group moved slowly, thanks to two leg injuries and a broken arm that was busy flirting with the entire team. Ray tried to hurry

them along, but it wasn't easy. Many of Safe Haven's men had been without intimacy for a long time and the women of this town knew they were about to leave. Sexual tension was sparking in the air, making Ray miss Dale. He was glad when the team escorted the two women into the hall, leaving him with Grant.

"Over here, Captain Grant!"

Ray escorted Grant through the mixing camps to the Mayor, who was at the center tables. As Grant sat in the chair by the Mayor, Ray took up a position behind him. Angela had insisted Captain Grant be welcomed into Safe Haven with full honors for saving Jennifer.

Eagles around the room began to clap, also wanting to show their appreciation for what the man had done. Jennifer was a stern younger sister to them now.

Uncomfortable at the attention, Grant peered over his shoulder at Ray. "It's because I'm gay, right?"

Ray's sadness briefly disappeared as laughter rolled up, bubbled out of his chest, and spilled from his mouth. "Why? Did you recently come out of the closet?"

"I was never in."

Ray sobered as he realized the man was serious. "Good, because I don't recommend it. Safe Haven prefers honesty."

"Is that how you got the scars on your hands?"

Ray glanced down. "Some of them."

“Will I have to sail that shore too?”

“No.” Ray straightened his shoulders. “I paved the path. All you have to do is walk it.”

Grant flashed him a smile and turned back around.

Curious, Ray leaned down. “How did you know?”

Ray didn’t care that the man knew his sexual orientation, but it was important to not put off those vibes to strangers.

“My gaydar is spot on.”

Ray snickered against his will and resumed his post.

Grant let it go for now. They would have plenty of time for him to help Ray. The information they’d shared while Jennifer healed him had given Grant details about Safe Haven and he was determined to bring peace to their camp. It was a small price to pay in exchange for being found worthy to go with them.

4

“What are you doing here?” Tonya stopped next to Kenn. “You should be getting ready for the bugout.”

“It’s covered.” Kenn was leaning against the outside of the men’s restroom on the top floor. “Ivan’s team is inside.”

Tonya scanned his new bruises and scrapes, scowling. “What happened to you?”

“Me and the boys were playing.”

Tonya put a hand on her hip. “Who beat on you?!”

“Shhh...”

Tonya looked toward the bathroom as cries of dismay echoed from the stalls.

Kenn chuckled lowly. “I got in a lot of kidney shots.”

Tonya frowned. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I made sure they were going to need to use the bathroom soon. I didn’t want to miss it during one of our fuel stops once we get on the road.”

Confused, Tonya slid next to Kenn as the voices got louder.

“It’s blue! What the hell is it?”

“Maybe it came from the town. You know we’ve been hitting the pussy kinda hard since we got here.”

“I know. I almost fell out of the closet at the banquet last night.”

“What are we gonna do?! If the boss finds out we’re pissing blue, she’ll put us on toilet duty for a month.”

Tonya began to snicker as she realized what Kenn had done. “Let me guess. *You* brought the water canteens for the workout. You knew what they were going to do.”

Kenn nodded, blue eyes sparkling at her. “I used double the amount Charlie hit me with.”

The door opened. The men stumbled out.

“It doesn’t even hurt. What happened?”

“I can’t think of anything that does this, not even AIDs.”

“And you get sores with syphilis.”

Without noticing the couple standing behind the door, the worried team moved off down the hall, discussing the symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases.

As soon as Tonya heard the elevator ding, she let the laughter roll. “That is so mean.”

Kenn chuckled, nodding. “I agree. That’s why I did it.”

“How long are you going to let them go until you tell them it’s harmless?”

Kenn shrugged, leading the way to confirm the rest of the rooms up here were cleared. “I’m not certain yet. It depends on how many more playdates they insist on having.”

“Fair enough. Want some company for the last of your round?”

Kenn tucked her under his arm. “You know it.”

5

“Should we tell them?” Kendle and Charlie had paused to let the mumbling team of soldiers go out of the hotel as they’d come in from helping fuel vehicles.

“I think Kenn’s right this time.”

“He’s right to bully people?”

“Actually, that’s what they were doing to him. They don’t know my mom already punished him.”

Kendle frowned. “A lot of people in Safe Haven don’t feel like Kenn was punished enough. They think he should have been banished.”

“Yeah. This comes from the same people who voted to lift Adrian’s banishment after he betrayed us to the government.” Charlie smiled coldly. “It works both ways.”

“I agree. I’m just letting you know the camp liked it when you were torturing Kenn.”

“They liked it because it was funny, not because he was getting something he deserved for hurting me and my mom.” Charlie tried hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice as he explained why he thought Kenn was right. “We can’t have vigilante justice here. If the camp votes for a punishment, then we should do it, but we shouldn’t let the Eagles punish each other, because they’re not always right—like in this case.”

“I can agree, up to a point.” Kendle shrugged. “But there comes a time when the bosses have too many people to supervise and they can’t cover every situation. Then it’s up to us to handle each other.”

“Do you think Safe Haven is at that point?”

“I think Safe Haven was there before you and your mom joined.” Kendle motioned toward the cafeteria, where the women and kids, along with a few of the camp members, were having a snack. Only the people who were staying in the town or leaving were at the Mayor’s breakfast right now. It

was mostly for goodbyes. Safe Haven had eaten in the hotel cafeteria and now people were grazing on the remains Britanni wouldn't be able to store for their next meal.

Kendle was glad the Mayor had provided baskets for Safe Haven's dinner, but that meant Angela would drive through the night to reach the boat site. Kendle wasn't looking forward to another long shift of traveling, but she was ready to leave this town. The moment with Marc had ruined it for her. She was refusing to think about what had happened.

"So what's my next step?" Charlie whispered it so no one else in the lobby would hear them. Camp members were carrying things out to the vehicles, making the guards nervous as they tried to keep track of everyone. Charlie didn't want to add to it with this conversation.

"While you're in the cafeteria, eat something." Kendle reached over and squeezed his arm. "You need to have a man's body. I already think you have a man's mind. We just need to bring it out a little more."

Charlie hadn't realized that was an issue. He flushed in self-conscious embarrassment.

"You're fifteen, kid. It's unreasonable to expect yourself to have a man's body when you haven't reached a man's age. We'll work on it."

Charlie immediately began to compare his physical status to every man in sight.

Kendle sighed. "I'm not trying to give you a complex. Pay attention."

Charlie tried, cheeks bright red.

"Becoming a man is a process that takes years. It's the same way for becoming a woman. In the old world, you would have learned a lot of these things in school and from parents who had a 9-to-5 job and were able to spend time with you. In this world, we have to emulate others around us." Kendle found Marc entering the hotel. "I picked your mom."

Charlie was surprised to hear that. "I didn't think you liked her."

"I respect her, and that's a lot more important. All we're going to do is make Tracy respect you. Everything else will come on its own. At some point, pick someone to emulate physically and we'll go from there." Kendle gave him a motion to get going.

Charlie jogged off, eager to be out of her sight because of the embarrassment, but also wanting a minute alone in the elevator to consider her words. Kendle believed a good relationship depended on respect. Charlie hoped that was true, because he liked the ideas she was giving him. *I'm glad she came to Safe Haven.*

Still monitoring the boy to make sure he had taken her point the right way, Kendle got the thought and was warmed. She didn't want Charlie to worry about something as unimportant as looks, but when it came to physical strength and health, it was a priority. Their security had to be in great

shape. It was a benefit that Tracy would notice and respond to it. It was a win-win for all of them.

“Thank you for helping him.”

Kendle stiffened as Marc stopped next to her. She didn’t look at him. “He’s a good kid. I like him.”

“He likes you too or he wouldn’t listen to your advice. I wasn’t certain about putting you two together at first. I’m glad I was wrong.” He moved off before Kendle could reply, trying to form a truce.

Kendle’s eyes narrowed. She didn’t want to be his friend. She wanted his love.

Kendle stewed over Adrian’s backfired charm while she was alone on the elevator with her non-descendant guard.

Marc took the smaller elevator to the fourth floor to wake Angela. They were leaving in a few hours and she needed time to get ready for it.

Neil opened the door to the suite without speaking, about to drop. When the camp rolled out, he would be asleep in a bunk.

“Me too.” Marc saw Angela wasn’t up yet. He sat on the edge of the bed and gently rubbed her arm. “Angie?”

Angela slowly came up from her dark dreams, depressing images chased away by the sound of his voice.

“Good morning.”

Angela smiled, stretching. “Mmm.”

Marc checked his watch. “You can snooze for half an hour, but you’ll have to skip the hot shower.”

Angela woke a little, frowning. “Are you nuts?” She sat up to kiss him on the cheek, then rolled off the other side of the bed to claim the bathroom.

Laughing, Marc dropped into her warm spot and shut his eyes. “I’ll take it then.”

6

Ray checked his watch, still standing behind Captain Grant’s chair. “We should get you over to the hotel.”

They’d been here for the last three hours while the locals came to tell Grant goodbye. He was obviously the person of honor at this going away breakfast, but the town had included everyone who was leaving and recognized everyone who was staying. Despite being in an apocalypse situation, Ray didn’t have the patience for these old world processions anymore. He was glad it seemed to be over.

His team had already left to escort Trinity and Jayda to the hotel. Ray was positive it would include a short stop in a narrow alley on the way. Ray doubted the boss knew what had been going on with the Eagles and the townswomen while she’d been dealing with leadership and the wall breach.

Do you really think so?

Ray looked toward the door, where Angela was entering. He didn't answer, trying to figure it out first.

Angela waited for him to get it, not pointing out that he was currently providing protection for the man who would likely end up being his partner for the duration of his life in Safe Haven. As long as Grant didn't push Ray until he was ready to let go of Dale, they might find the sort of peace and happiness that few couples ever achieved. She was glad to have both of them in her army.

You wanted this to happen.

Angela gave Ray an approving nod. *This town needed new life and the Eagles needed a reward for their hard work.*

Do they know?

Of course. The women in this town have been very open about what they want. I insisted that our men be the same. Very few of them wanted to give up their life with Safe Haven to remain here and raise a family. Knowing this town is good, and the mothers are good and have support, allowed the Eagles to agree.

You don't think they would have anyway because they're getting sex?

Angela snickered. *Maybe before the war, but not now. Eagles always think things through. You know that.*

Ray did. He let go of Angela's attention so she could greet the Mayor, who had just realized she was here. It was time for the boss to play nice again.

Chapter Thirty-Six BK9

Close

November 21st

1

“I can’t believe you’re going already! It was so wonderful to have you here!”

Angela suffered through the Mayor’s effusive gushing without speaking, hoping that would make it go faster. There were three people here she wanted to speak with and all of them were male.

Nodding and smiling in the right places, Angela scanned the men and women sitting together at the center tables. Ten of them were camp males who hadn’t found the courage to join the Eagles, but had been considering it. This town would allow them to be guards too, but not at quite so extreme a level.

The four women who had chosen to remain here were all sterile. Faced with a constant handicap in Safe Haven because of their inability to have kids, they’d chosen to stay here, where they would be hidden in plain sight in a town that had too many women anyway. It was still going to be a struggle for them, but not as extreme—like with the camp men who were staying. Angela had spoken with each one of them over the last two days to confirm they were making the best decision for themselves.

She had wished them all well and even now, Neil was cutting their share of the supplies from Safe Haven stocks. It would be given to Donna to add to the town stores, which were shared out equally.

Angela blinked, realizing the Mayor had stopped speaking. “I’m sorry. You were saying?”

Donna gave her an understanding smile. “He’s waiting for you in the private room.”

Angela held out her hand. “I wish you all the happiness in the world.”

As her hands touched, Angela realized the woman wanted to ask a question and hadn’t found the nerve. Hating the time being wasted, Angela leaned. “I could have chased him to the ends of the earth and it wouldn’t have mattered. He only wants you.”

Angela left the grinning woman, moving to the center table. She didn’t feel bad about the lie. She did feel bad for the forlorn Eagle sitting with a townswoman who didn’t appear to be flirting the way the other women were. Angela wanted it clear to everyone that Brandon was an upstanding member of Safe Haven so he would have an honest chance here. She went toward him.

Brandon turned around, chair squeaking. “Is everything okay, Boss?”

Angela sat next to him and placed her hand on his shoulder so they could have a last private moment together. *Are you sure this is what you want to do?*

She had nodded to Kevin and received a curt copy of the gesture that had convinced her Kevin didn't need this.

Brandon was warmed that she had come to check on him. He'd made friends in Safe Haven, but he wasn't close to anyone. That had occurred to him while he was sitting here waiting for this embarrassing gathering to be over. He had promised himself he would make real friends here. *I'll miss you guys, but yes. This is the best thing I can do for everyone.*

You're stronger than all the other Mitchel men are. None of them have ever been able to walk away from an obsession.

Brandon glanced over her shoulder toward the door, where he could see the faint shadows of Safe Haven vehicles being lined up for a day of travel. *I don't think I'll ever love anyone again.*

You don't have to stop loving her.

Brandon peered up in confusion. *Of course, I do. She belongs to Billy.*

No, both of you belong to her. Angela looked at the Mayor. "Brandon might be a great replacement for Captain Grant if that slot's open."

The Mayor immediately began to study Brandon, allowing Angela to slip into the private room where William was standing at the window.

Before Angela could reach the table, there was a commotion behind her. It sounded like something had fallen over.

Donald shoved himself up off the floor in front of the closet door that had opened while he was leaning against it. He turned around to help Carina up, groaning when he saw her shirt was half buttoned.

Aware of the tense silence behind him and the fact that he was busted by the boss, Donald gave an innocent look. “We were just saying goodbye.”

Angela continued into the room as people laughed and senior Eagles moved in to deliver a reprimand.

“We leave in forty-five minutes!” Jennifer’s loud call from outside made people jump. “In thirty-five minutes, everyone must be in their assigned vehicles or they are being left here. I repeat, Safe Haven is leaving soon. Be in your vehicles early.”

William secured the door from where he sat, not turning to Angela yet. He was fascinated by how the Eagles were preparing for travel. Now that they were happy and healthy again, Safe Haven was interesting in every way to William. He was going to model his town after the mythical refugee camp.

Angela thought about the long day of travel ahead of them without having her gift to rely on. She expected to be twitchy from now until a few nights after the boat set sail. She assumed it would take her that long to stop expecting the ship to sink or blow up.

“I wish I had understood you were worrying over that. I could have told you what was going on. I knew you were in the middle of an evolution

because of how we found you. You can't take lifeforces and not be changed."

Angela sat at the table, noting he had made her a cup of hot, sweet tea that was exactly the way she liked it. She picked up the cup to warm her cold hands and found herself taking steps to avoid the conversation that had to happen now. She hated goodbyes.

"Before you began this last evolution, how far into the future did you see?"

"A little after we come back. There's a big fight, bigger than the one at the Naval Station and then there's darkness."

"Is it a long time between then and now?"

"Not as long as I would like it to be. It's going to take us months to get to the island and months to get things set up. We have a one-year hurdle to get over and then we're good for three. Right at the four year line, I start seeing doors opening and then it switches me to the boat ride back and arriving to find a country I don't recognize."

"I've heard rumors that the gates of reality were breached because of the darkness. Without power and the ability to turn on the lights to verify there's nothing in the corner waiting to jump out at us, the human brain reverts to believing in monsters." He gestured to include both of them. "Then you add in people like us and it makes it easy for them to believe in that sort of thing."

"I've always wondered if our belief in something is what makes it happen, versus there

being a grand plan where everything happens whether we believe or not.”

“As do I.” William let out a deep sigh. “Will we ever have time to sit and explore through discussions like this?” It was his way of asking if they would see each other again.

Angela was glad she was able to limit the depression that was going to hit them both as soon as the convoy pulled out. “Who do you think is going to meet us at the dock when we return?”

“You have your gifts back!”

“No, and that’s making me twitchy as hell, but I don’t need them to know we were brought here for a reason. I have every faith that Ciemus will be one of the last towns standing in this country. We’re going to need you. I would suggest you spend the time getting everyone here ready for the battle that’s to come.”

He frowned. “We can’t breed fighters in that time.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to. We didn’t have enough people to survive on Pitcairn Island until we came here. Ciemus didn’t have enough men to keep the population going until we came here. I believe all you need to do is ask for fate to send you good men and women to help defend the light. Maybe the sheer numbers will swing things in our favor and give us time.”

“Safe Haven is leaving in thirty-five! Everyone should be in their vehicles in *twenty-five* minutes!”

William glanced out the window to where Jennifer's shout was echoing across the parking lot to reach the people standing around the main door, both in and outside of the banquet hall. "Are you sure about her?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to have her here." William chuckled.

Angela laughed at the joke. It was a relief to know William hadn't spotted anything in the teenager that she may have missed. Jennifer was going to be one of the most powerful descendants ever seen, but Angela was only going to allow that to happen if the girl wasn't corrupt.

"You know there's no guarantee for any of us." William sighed gravely. "It's a daily battle we face."

Angela had to stifle a sob. "It's impossible for me to explain what it feels like to hear someone else say that!"

William gave her a sad, understanding smile. "I felt the same way when you poured my tea."

"Safe Haven is leaving in thirty-five minutes!" This time it was Kendle's shout echoing down the convoy to be mirrored by the Eagles on duty.

William noticed Angela's tension and sent a fresh layer of his light to smother her in protection. "Don't take that one with you."

Angela frowned. "I don't have a choice. It's her island we're going to."

"That's unfortunate."

"I'm going to have to kill her."

“If you don’t, she’ll kill you.”

“Yes...”

“It’s not because she knows our secret.”

Angela didn’t feel the rage this time, only the sadness that nothing would change the path Kendle had chosen. “No. She wants my life. I can either give it to her, along with Marc, or I can bury her on the island that should have killed her the first time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

Unable to take her sadness, William clapped his hands and made a rainbow of rose petals float over them.

Angela tried to pull out of it. “More please. I’ll do the same for you.”

“That’s how you want to spend our last half hour together?”

Angela smiled. “It won’t be our last. We have amazing things to do together in the future. This is just a pause.”

William clapped his hands again, bringing more flowers. “If it goes bad here...”

“Ciemus is always welcome.”

“What about me?” William stared intently. “Would you have a welcome for me...personally?”

Angela shook her head, unable to keep from the small smile even though she didn’t want to hurt William’s feelings. “It’s only him.”

“...and after?”

Angela's face went blank to hold in her agony. "I can add you to the list. All you have to do is outlive my dog. Ask anyone. That isn't easy to do."

"I'm sorry."

"You should be."

"I am."

"You ruined a very nice moment."

"I'll make it up to you."

Angela crossed her arms over her chest, pretending to be indignant when she was actually amused. "How?"

"I'll tell you about the water here."

Angela stilled. She'd been waiting for this and almost afraid of it. If they had some kind of eternal fountain, she wouldn't leave.

William sighed. "I wish." He leaned in. "But this is still incredibly valuable. The water doesn't obey Mother Nature. Water only obeys the tides and itself."

"What does that mean?"

"You can have a peaceful trip over the ocean. Just make a deal with the water."

"This sounds insane and then I remember I can read minds and throw fire at people." Angela grunted. "What do I trade?"

"The only thing that really matters in the end."

"My life."

William studied her. He didn't need to scan to know what she was doing now. "Do you really believe you're clever enough to cut a deal and still get out of honoring it?"

Angela looked at him with an expression that would have terrified Marc and Adrian. “Who says I won’t honor it?”

2

“Everyone needs to get into their assigned vehicle right now. Safe Haven is leaving in ten minutes!” Kenn had point over the bugout. He was using the plans he’d developed for leaving the mountain. Eagles with lists of names were walking the idling vehicles to verify everyone was in them. Safe Haven wouldn’t roll out until all their camp was accounted for. “Ten minutes, people!”

A few of those standing outside to continue their goodbyes got in, but most of them ignored Kenn’s words to stare at his bruises.

Kenn noted the food baskets were finally reaching the front of the convoy. Lou and Brittani were the last two members of the delivery team who still had baskets to give out. Those were going to the lead truck, where Marc and Angela were standing by the passenger door, with Dog dancing around their feet. Morgan was already in the driver seat, waiting for the order to roll. All around them were slightly annoyed Eagles who had once again been split from their mates. The only exception was for those who were sleeping during the ride.

Everyone else seemed happy with the arrangements. Each Eagle had been assigned a camp member, and each camp member had a new

Ciemus local to help with adjusting into camp life. Even though most of them were rookies, it made everything faster because there was a trio of hands.

Kenn did a fast scan and found Tonya stepping into the medical camper. All of the blood tests for new people were finally finished, freeing the equipment for other uses. The sick cat was in a carrier in her hand. It had spent most of the time in a closet in the basement. Kenn had told her it would be fine in the animal trailer with the bunker cat where it would get fresh air and sunlight, but Tonya had insisted the animal be brought in where she could check on it as much as she needed to. Kenn didn't think the cat had cared one way or the other. The tabby had gotten used to being fed and rubbed. It wasn't even protesting being in the box. *She tamed it, like me.*

As Tonya turned around to shut the door, her clothes pulled tight against her body and allowed Kenn to view the small bump of her stomach. His child was beginning to make itself known. Kenn swallowed his sudden nervousness about being a real father and forced his mind to the duty at hand. He was sleeping for the first shift of travel. He could let his mind wander as he lay in the bunk of the medical camper, trusting Shawn to keep up. Right now, he had to get them rolling.

Kenn went toward the lead truck to put Angela inside it. No one cared for her still being out in the open, especially while so many of the Eagles were

in vehicles and unable to help if there were problems.

That smells good.

Brittani smiled at Dog. “I added an extra piece of chicken in there for you.” She’d quickly adjusted to Dog since their moment in the cafeteria. She’d been giving him scraps when he came by during his guard shifts with Charlie.

Dog sat by her ankles, allowing her to hand the basket to Marc overtop him without flinching.

When she reached down to stroke the animal without showing fear, the Eagles were impressed. Very few people had the nerve to do that even though Dog was so tame for being a wild animal.

Marc stared in pleasant surprise.

Angela didn’t, but it was encouraging. The only test left for the woman was to spend time with their kids.

“I don’t want to be Safe Haven’s cook anymore.”

Angela let out a long-suffering sigh. “Finally!”

Brittani’s cheeks turned red. “What does that mean?”

“It means I was getting tired of waiting.”

“How can you know what I want? I refused to think about it around any of you.”

Angela gave her a first layer of trust. “I knew it the first time we made contact over the radio.”

Brittani didn’t know what to say.

“Well, that’s a first.” Lou chuckled when Brittani smacked his arm.

As Lou reached around her to hand the other basket to Marc, a cold wind blew across the convoy.

Birds flew up in the distance, cawing in terror.

The temperature dipped.

A loud cracking noise echoed across Ciemus and brought the deer herd to alertness. Noses tilted into the wind; they mirrored every human inside the wall.

“Do you hear that?” Brittani looked toward the gate.

Another large cracking noise came from the opposite end of town, turning almost every head in that direction.

During the distraction, something long and thick flew over the gate. Shot by the downdraft of a storm that had given no warning, a tree barreled at the front of the convoy like an arrow.

“Watch out!”

“Get down!”

There was no room for Marc to shove Angela out of the way. He lunged over her with open arms, hoping if he shielded her with his body, she would survive.

Still turning around, Angela threw a shield up, but she and her witch hadn’t been ready.

William threw a blast toward the tree, but he already knew he hadn’t reacted fast enough.

Brittani had already waved her hand. Still facing the wall, she’d been the first one to spot it. Power

slammed into the tree, ramming the pine into one of the town jeeps.

Pieces of tree and jeep exploded, slamming into other vehicles and the side of the hotel.

William's wave of force hit the ground in front of the truck.

Shouts echoed as earthy shrapnel rained over them.

"It's back!" Brittani swung to Angela, grinning ferociously. "Did you see that?! I've got it back!"

Footsteps flew toward them and shouts came from the towns, but all Angela heard was Brittani. "You have your gift?" Angela let Marc help her up, not feeling the stinging of scrapes and scratches. "All of it?"

Brittani nodded, barely resisting the urge to use it again just to prove it. She couldn't wait for the opportunity to play. She'd missed it while cooking. "It went down on me right after the earthquake. I didn't think it was coming back."

Brittani didn't have the information the other descendants and the Eagles did, because she hadn't been part of a team. That would have to change, because not all descendants were in the Eagles, but all descendants needed an education. Knowing how gifts evolved was basic knowledge all of them had to have. *I'll form another class with adult descendants once we set sail. Maybe we'll practice our gifts together. Surely, we'd be safe to do that on the ocean and our island.*

Brittani realized hundreds of people were staring at her in shock, but saving the boss was second to feeling like herself again. “What?!”

Angela chuckled, heart thumping wildly as Marc checked her for serious injuries. “You have one request.”

Angela was prepared for the woman to say she wanted Gus to be banned from the Eagles. Angela wasn’t sure how she would get Gus to agree.

Brittani smiled. “I’d rather be a rookie in your army.”

Angela smiled. “I’m going to give you that anyway. You have one request when you want it.”

More people rushed over to be certain they were okay.

Brittani took Lou by the arm and led him toward their assigned vehicle. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

She sounded so much like the other Eagles that Angela laughed. “Be at the next training lesson.”

“Will do.” Brittani led Lou to their assigned vehicle, grinning. She felt as though weights had been taken from her ankles.

While the guards verified Angela wasn’t seriously injured and her truck wasn’t damaged, William and the Mayor did the same, examining the shattered jeep that had been lined up to provide security. No one had been in it yet and no one was injured, but the vehicle was a loss.

“We’ll pull around it.”

Donna nodded. She had already picked a few of their mechanics to come and clear a path. “You can still go on time.”

William was glad. Angela wasn’t going to wait, not after being in danger again. He could see her need to go in every expression and gesture she made.

William gave Donna one last hug and then a fast, hard kiss where he moaned against her lips and sent a wave of need he hoped she felt as much as he did. He would miss her.

Instead of withdrawing like she usually did when they were in public, Donna kissed him back and tried to open her mind to whatever he wanted to give.

Around them, Ciemus people laughed and cheered.

The couple broke apart slowly, a little embarrassed at the attention. They preferred private moments for their displays of affection.

“You have the maps and the channels?”

Donna held up the folder. “We’ll get started on the improvements. You’ll only be gone for two weeks. We’ll be fine.”

William walked away before he could kiss her again. “Open the gate.”

Because everyone had been ordered to be in their vehicles and remain there, descendants throughout Safe Haven’s convoy had been forced to stay where they were instead of running to help Angela. As the story spread, magic hummed from

people regaining control over wonky gifts and new doors popping into place. Moans and groans, along with cheers and claps, echoed from nearly every vehicle.

Eagles made sharp gestures to stop children when they would have spent their energy playing with the returned abilities.

The townspeople watched in confused amusement.

William observed raptly. It was amazing to be sitting in the same convoy with Safe Haven anyway, but the story of everything that had happened during their stay in Ciemus would become part of the legend.

Morgan looked to Angela as he started the engine of the truck, waiting for the call to go.

Her dazed, faraway eyes met his.

Morgan waited patiently, glad she was searching. Everyone had missed it. The ability to look into the future for what was coming wasn't always correct when it actually happened because every event before it rippled down to make changes, but it was still better than being blind.

William didn't resist as Marc and the men on point pushed him into the truck. Angela didn't appear to notice and William was eager to have the gate secured.

Dog jumped up, landing in William's lap for a brief moment before darting into the narrow rear bunk. William leaned aside so Marc could do the same without giving him an unintentional lap dance.

Marc chuckled as he went by. “Good looking out.”

Seeing William was inside the Safe Haven truck, the fighters of the town also got into their cars and jeeps.

“Load up!” Bucky admired the way Safe Haven was double and triple checking to be positive they had everyone. The Ciemus set up didn’t allow for that. Bucky planned to bring it up to William in one of the many updates he was going to give over the next weeks.

The locals got in their vehicles, leaving only the security team on the convoy. Kenn smacked the rig to get everyone’s attention. “One minute and we’re set to roll.”

There was no reply from Angela, who was deep under the hold of her gift.

“She’ll call when she’s ready.” Marc had to answer, stopping William from doing it. The new man didn’t know they always waited in this situation. Marc knew the townspeople were used to following their own instincts, but those who signed up for the Eagles would quickly learn that didn’t work. Improvising was a bad idea unless your teammates knew about it.

“You and I are going to learn a lot from each other.” William got comfortable as Kenn and his men hurried to their own vehicles.

“You’ve already given me a lot to think about.” The man really had. Marc had no doubt his scroll diving would be put on hold for at least a few nights

while he puzzled through the suggestions William had been able to pull from his knowledge of descendants. There was a lot of it. Marc settled into the bunk, but didn't lie down yet. He wouldn't until they were rolling. Sitting in front of an open gate was making him nervous.

I just became a father.

Marc looked at the wolf who had settled at the far end of the bunk behind the driver. *What?*

Congratulations! William felt like he needed to send it. He was getting the images clearly from the wolf, mesmerized by the sight of the four pups squealing as they were cleaned by their weary mother.

She gave birth. I felt it.

Marc gave the wolf a congratulatory scratch. "You dog!"

All three of the males in the truck chuckled.

Angela didn't respond.

Why didn't you bring her with you? Marc continued the mental conversation instead of speaking so the driver would be able to concentrate.

Would you like me to butt out as well? William wasn't sure about the boundaries on these things. His town hadn't minded his mental curiosity.

Actually, yes. Marc was using it as a test of the man's ability to follow through. He wanted to know if William could be trusted.

William withdrew and turned his attention to the convoy, where Eagles were leaning out of their windows to scan for trouble.

Before Marc and Dog could continue their conversation, Angela came back to life.

“Wow.” She grinned, sounding as if she had just woken from a deep, restful sleep. “That was incredible!”

Marc and William chuckled.

Happy they had a window of opportunity, and not wanting to ruin the good mood by telling them anything she had viewed yet, Angela picked up the mike on the truck.

Silent alertness came from those who saw, slowly spreading to the rest of the convoy until everyone was staring at their vehicle radio in anticipation.

“On behalf of Safe Haven, I want to thank Ciemus for indeed being a Last Call Sanctuary. It has been our privilege to be your guests. If anyone changes their mind about going with us, you have nine days to join our light. This is a last call, one and all. Safe Haven is leaving.”

Morgan shifted the truck into gear.

William could feel the excitement build as they rolled through the gate. He waited, curious, as the truck cleared the gate.

Do it now. Thirty seconds. Angela sent the permission to all their eager descendants and camp members. They wanted a proper Safe Haven goodbye.

Magic hummed.

Both camps cheered as the protective bubble rose around Safe Haven in a shimmering shield that

followed them out of sanctuary and back into the wilderness.

In nine days, they would be on the ship, watching America fade into the distance. Only one soul in the lead rig was eager for it, but all of them were determined to make it happen. Last call had just sounded.

The End of Book 9

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes BK9

1

Ivan followed Angela to the chilly house assigned to shelter Neil, Kenn, himself, and her. Conflicted, he was unprepared for Neil to come out as the boss went in.

The door shut behind her, telling Ivan she knew this was coming. Thanks to Kenn's warning, Ivan was braced for more threats. He didn't expect Neil to walk right by him with a quick nod and nothing more. Relieved, he turned to do a scan and found Morgan standing there with his big arms crossed and a scowl on his lips.

"Got a minute?"

Ivan nodded, dismayed. He knew how to handle someone like Neil. Morgan was a mystery.

"Are you a threat to the boss?"

"No."

"She thinks you might be."

"Did she say that?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just now, when she left you out here." Morgan motioned toward the empty fuel house. "Let's have some coffee and talk."

"Sure."

Morgan nodded to Neil as he came from the icy bathroom tent. The two men escorted Ivan to where a number of senior men were waiting. Thanks to the vet, anyone who bonded so fast with the boss was now a suspect for worse things. Ivan was tired and grouchy, making it a perfect time to be interrogated by the group. Neil hadn't been satisfied with Brittani clearing the man, so he'd asked Morgan to do it. An hour from now, Ivan would either be one of them or gone.

Deleted Scene #2

1

Angela came to slowly, aware of the stopped vehicle underneath her and Adrian's musky scent surrounding her. It was an awful way to wake up, considering that her mate was in the seat next to them.

He's not in the truck right now. Adrian tightened his arms around her. *He's outside, helping clear a wreck.*

Before she could look, Adrian sighed. *The windows are fogged up right now. No one can see us.* He didn't tell her that Ivan probably could. The man had sniper watch over the truck. They had both been asleep when Marc stopped.

Allowed to be herself for one moment, Angela relaxed in his arms, delighted at the feel of waking up with him. It had happened a few times over the months she'd been in Safe Haven; she treasured the memory of each one as much as she loathed them.

Adrian dipped in against her neck, kissing her skin. *Good morning. How did you sleep?*

Angela tilted her head to allow him access. *It was beautiful. You didn't let go of me at all.*

Not unless I have to. Reminded of the precarious situation and short amount of time, Adrian place a

kiss to her cheek. Still under the charm, he couldn't help but try to seduce her. *Kiss me?*

Caught in the moment of weakness, Angela gave it a brief second of consideration before withdrawing from his arms. "You should go now."

Angie!

Angela was jolted out of the fantasy by Adrian's stiff hand on her shoulder. "Wake up before he thinks that's really happening."

Angela flushed as she realized everything she had dreamed about was true, except for Adrian making a move on her.

Adrian slid out of her embrace and then out of the truck, not about to draw Marc's anger when he hadn't done anything wrong. He slammed the door, angry that he wasn't able to take advantage of the opportunity he had just been given with her. Angela's sweet scent was all over his clothes and hands, and in the cabin of the truck. Her hair was even on his shirt. Adrian was in heaven and hell.

Left alone in the truck, Angela settled into his warm spot and was quickly back under the haze of sleep. She couldn't be held responsible for her dreams and she wasn't going to try to justify them, especially not to Adrian. All of this was his fault anyway.

Aware of her thoughts on the matter and Marc's questioning glare, Adrian detoured toward Kendle. He wanted to make sure she checked on Kevin and Ray at some point. He didn't think he'd slept enough to have the patience yet.

Marc scanned the truck. He hadn't caught Angela's dream, but he had noted Adrian's response and approved. He also worried that Angela had asked for something Adrian couldn't give now because of their deal. Stewing over it, he motioned Kenn and Kyle to take point as he returned to the truck.

Before he opened the door, flashes of Angela's dream lashed out to steal his breath. After a few seconds, he withdrew, grinning. Angie was horny. When she got like that, her dreams were full of the men around her as the witch explored everything Angela wouldn't let her do during the daytime. It didn't mean anything, but it had made Adrian uncomfortable enough to make him leave her company to avoid being accused of anything. That meant he was making progress. Pleased, Marc found Adrian across the small crowd and motioned toward the truck.

Aware that Angela had gone back to dreaming, Adrian groaned. "When am I going to get a break?"

Deleted Scene #3

1

“I assume you know now that I’m not a threat to them?”

Jennifer was surprised to realize William was speaking to her. “I’m sorry?”

William leaned closer. “To your boss’s relationship. I’m not a threat to them.”

Jennifer stared at him, finally catching the condescending vibe. Her eyes narrowed as she studied him. “You think I’m too young... Too new... Too soft...”

William frowned. Not because he didn’t want Safe Haven to be offended, but because he couldn’t close his mental barrier.

Jennifer snickered. “I’m just getting started here, big man. You might want to try harder.”

Safe Haven descendants in the room looked over.

Angela shifted in her chair to watch William’s face.

“Wow.” William strained, fighting to bring down his mental shield over a door that no longer hurt him as badly. He didn’t care if she saw what was in there. He wanted to know if he could keep her out. He hadn’t braced for her attack, hadn’t considered her a threat.

“And that’s where you made your mistake,” Jennifer informed him coldly, all pretense gone. Because Angela admired William, Jennifer’s feelings had been stung.

William grunted, unable to speak and fight her at the same time now. She’d increased the strength. His shield was a fruit rollup in the sun.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

William slumped back in the chair as Jennifer roamed his mind unchecked. She flew through his doors and crypts so fast that he couldn’t keep up with all the memory flashes.

Jennifer withdrew, satisfied she’d made her point, but still offended.

“You’re very talented.”

Jennifer frowned. She could still hear that tone. It said strong gifts didn’t mean anything without the brains to use them. She turned to face him directly. “Listen, you may have fooled the boss with your fake doors, but I know what’s in your heart and I didn’t need a gift for that. If she wasn’t already under a charm, you might have tried it.”

“You don’t know that.”

Jennifer grinned in triumph. “Neither do you.”

“No, but you couldn’t have...” William stopped, caught.

Jennifer smirked. *Let’s hear that tone now, big man.*

William couldn’t stop the chuckle. “Maybe I should have scanned *you* for charms.”

Jennifer snickered, gaze going to the frowning Special Forces man in the doorway of the banquet hall. “From the frying pan with Marc and into the fire with Kyle. It’s a good thing you aren’t going with Safe Haven.”

“Actually...” William let it hang, teasing.

“No.” Jennifer glowered at Angela. “Tell me you didn’t do that.”

Angela had been keeping track of the pair. She shrugged. “He offered and I accepted.”

Jennifer saw the joke and let out a relieved, annoyed grunt. “You could have told me it was just an escort.”

“You could have asked.”

Place a Review BK9

Reviews are one of the biggest ways that readers can help their favorite authors, or warn their fellow readers! Reviews do not have to be long. Just let the world know how the book made you feel while you were reading it, and maybe who you think would enjoy that type of story. To place one on this book, [take this link to my website page](#) and pick the store of your choice. Thank you, really. Reviews mean a lot.

Angela's Books

Life After War

(Post-Apocalyptic Fantasy)

The Bachelor Battles

(Dystopian Adventure Romance)

Bone Dust And Beginnings

(Dystopian Western Quest)

Eagle Teams After The Quake

Special Forces Team #1

Kyle, Daryl, Morgan, Shawn, Brandon, Kendle,
Whitney, Donald

Special Forces Team #2

Neil, Greg, Ben, Quinn, Wade, Tommy, Tim

Level 6: Zack, Theo, Ozzie, Ramer, Carl, Scott,
Dexter

Level 4: Ray, Conner, Pam, Randal, Gary,
Jennifer

Level 2: Kenn, Gus, Nathan, Stanley, Andrew,
Harry, Michael

Level 1: Courtney, Jonny, Kim, Ian, Rod,
Molly, Tracy

Rookie: Ivan, Peter, Boothe, James, 3 more
soldiers

Book 10



Setting Sail

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.

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.*



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